


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Which political outsiders do Europeans prefer as ministers?

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## Abstract

Previous research suggests that Europeans want more experts in government, but which experts do they want and why? Using survey data collected in 15 European countries, this study compared citizens' preferences for high-ranking civil servants, university professors, and business executives over traditional political actors (MPs and former ministers) as ministers in government. Overall, university professors were rated more positively than MPs or former ministers in almost all countries, whereas civil servants and business executives were only rated more positively than politicians in Poland, Italy, Spain, Greece, Ireland, and Belgium. While political distrust is a key predictor of preferring political outsiders, we also found that civil servants are not as appealing to politically distrusting individuals, depending on the country. Furthermore, while the demand for more expertise in government mainly influences preferences for university professors, the demand for more government by the people is connected to preferences for business executives and (to a lesser extent) civil servants. The latter finding challenges the common distinction between citizen and expert-oriented visions of democracy and the alleged 'elitist' underpinnings of empowering non-elected outsiders.

**Keywords:** public opinion; technocracy; experts; process preferences; leadership

## Introduction

A growing body of research suggests that citizens in contemporary democracies would rather be governed by independent experts than by elected politicians (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Bertson and Pastorella, 2016; Bertson and Caramani, 2020; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021; Hibbing *et al.*, 2021). Recent studies suggest that the demand for experts may have increased as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which put epidemiologists and public health officials to the forefront of the political debate (Lavezzolo *et al.*, 2021). This demand is paralleled by the growing presence of such experts, also referred to as 'technocrats', as ministers in European governments (Vittori *et al.*, 2021). Studies have shown that political parties often rely on technocratic ministers to help them navigate economic and political crises (Brunclík, 2015; Wratil and Pastorella, 2018; Alexiadou & Gunaydin, 2019). Technocratic ministers derive their legitimacy not only from their expertise but also from their status as supposedly disinterested and impartial political outsiders (Centeno, 1993).

However, previous research on public support for 'political outsiders', or persons without a parliamentary background in government, rarely takes into consideration the *variety* of political

outsiders in executive positions. Instead, most public opinion research has grouped them into broad categories of ‘technocrats’ or ‘independent experts’ (VanderMolen, 2017; Dommett & Pearce, 2019). A recent inventory of non-elected, non-partisan ministers in European countries over the past 20 years points to a diversity of occupational backgrounds, the most common of which are high-ranking civil servants, university professors, and business executives (Vittori *et al.*, 2021). Taking the 2021 Draghi Government of Italy as an example, can we be so sure that ministers with careers as Director-General of the Bank of Italy (Daniele Franco), Scientific Director of the Italian Institute of Technology (Roberto Cingolani), or CEO of Vodafone Italy (Vittorio Colao) share the same appeal among citizens? Therefore, in this study, we compared preferences for ministers with the three most common occupational backgrounds for political outsiders (civil servant, university professor, and business executive) over those with traditional political backgrounds (member of parliament and former minister), among citizens from 15 European countries. We also investigated to whom these three political outsiders are most appealing, by drawing from the literature on ‘technocratic attitudes’ which links the demand for independent experts to citizens who are politically dissatisfied, expertise-oriented, and elitist (or adverse to popular sovereignty).

We find that citizens in almost all countries are more likely to prefer university professors over the two traditional political profiles, while preferences for civil servants and business executives vary across countries. Furthermore, we show that while political distrust is a key predictor of preferring political outsiders in general, not all outsiders are equally appealing to politically distrusting individuals and other factors, such as the demand for more expertise in government or for a more participatory model of democracy, also play a role. Our results challenge the common distinction between citizen-oriented and expert-oriented visions of democracy by showing that individuals who value government by the people mostly prefer having alternative elites, who do not derive their legitimacy from courting voters, in ministerial positions.

Investigating whether citizens prefer leaders with different occupational backgrounds connects to the broader debate on the crisis of representative democracy. In recent years, political parties have turned to appointing outsiders with expertise to executive government positions in an attempt to boost their perceived legitimacy among an increasingly disillusioned electorate (Ignazi, 2014). In doing so, however, they run the risk of severing the chain of delegation between citizens and representatives (Strøm, 2000), especially if the outsiders they empower are not appreciated by the general public. It is therefore crucial to understand which outsiders are most appealing, to whom they are most appealing, and why.

### Previous research on public support for ‘independent experts’

Most of the literature on citizens’ attitudes towards government by non-traditional actors has employed survey questions referring to ‘experts’ more generally. For example, the European and World Values Surveys asked whether ‘having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country’ would be a good or bad way of governing the country (EVS, 2020). Studies on stealth democratic attitudes, a concept originally proposed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), asked whether ‘our government would run better if decisions were left to non-elected independent experts rather than politicians or the people’ (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009: 1034; Coffé and Michels, 2014: 5; Font *et al.*, 2015: 159; Webb, 2013: 752). More recently, studies on technocratic attitudes asked whether ‘the best political decisions are taken by experts who are not politicians’ and whether ‘the problems facing my country require experts to solve them’ (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020: 6; Fernández-Vázquez *et al.*, 2023: 10). Using the label of ‘independent experts’, studies have demonstrated widespread support for increasing the role of such non-traditional profiles in government among European publics (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2016; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021; Lavezzolo *et al.*, 2021).

When using the label of ‘independent expert’, these studies implicitly refer to technocrats. Technocrats are defined as experts with a high level of specialization derived from educational or professional qualifications, who do not have party-political experience (Caramani, 2017; Lavezzolo, *et al.* 2021). Such technocrats have increasingly been appointed as ministers in European governments over the past two decades (Vittori *et al.*, 2021). However, the independent experts or technocrats in government encompass a wide variety of individuals, some of whom might be more appealing than others (Dommert and Pearce, 2019).

Only a few studies have tried to go beyond the generic label of experts by including items on support for government by different kinds of non-traditional actors. VanderMolen’s (2017) study in the USA found that citizens are most favourable to governments run by fellow citizens or independent experts and least favourable to government run by businesspeople or bureaucrats, with elected politicians ranked in between. Another study in the USA by Hibbing and colleagues (2021) demonstrated that the desire to empower businesspeople, military generals, and religious leaders is conceptually different from the desire to empower scientists, medical doctors, and independent experts.

Building on the aforementioned studies, our approach is to compare citizens’ preferences for a realistic set of ‘political outsiders’ as government ministers, namely high-ranking civil servants, university professors, and business leaders. These three profiles are contrasted with two ‘insider’ profiles, namely members of parliament and former ministers. Our use of the outsider/insider terminology is in line with previous work distinguishing between ministers without a parliamentary career and those whose main credentials are linked to party organizations and parliamentary life (Blondel and Thiébault, 1991; Costa Pinto *et al.*, 2018). Former ministers might be considered insiders as the vast majority of government ministers are selected from the ranks of party leadership. Furthermore, our results will show that citizens’ attitudes towards MPs and former ministers are very highly correlated. Unlike Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán (2015), who distinguish between non-partisans with and without field expertise (respectively referred to as technocrats and outsiders), we refer to all profiles with non-partisan occupational backgrounds as outsiders.

However, we acknowledge that the outsider/insider categories are not mutually exclusive *per se*. For example, even among civil servants, university professors and business executives one might distinguish between insiders with experience in parliamentary and governmental circles and outsiders without any prior political experience. Nevertheless, we believe that comparing preferences for ministers from different career backgrounds represents a significant step forward in understanding citizens’ preferences for alternative profiles in government (especially in comparison to previous research which collectively refers to them as experts). Future research might build on our work by investigating how the *nature* or *extent* of an outsider’s ties to political institutions influence support for such outsiders in executive government positions.

Vice versa, we also acknowledge that among the MPs and former ministers referred to as insiders, there may be some with experience outside of parliamentary and governmental circles. However, studies conducted in several European countries have shown that ministers with a parliamentary background are much less likely to have worked as civil servants, university professors, or business leaders than those from outside parliament (Blondel and Thiébault, 1991; Costa Pinto *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we are fairly confident that respondents would perceive MPs and former ministers as having less training in occupations outside of politics than the three outsider profiles.

### Previous research on *who* supports independent experts in government

Many studies have shown that the demand for independent experts in government is more prevalent among those with negative attitudes towards politics (Font *et al.*, 2015; Bertson and Pastorella, 2016; Del Río *et al.*, 2016; Bertson and Caramani, 2020; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). Bertson and Caramani’s study (2020) in nine European democracies identified a group of

'technocratic' citizens, who combine the demand for more experts with a strong elitist and anti-politics stance. Technocratic citizens are a) anti-political because they criticize the role of elected representatives as intermediaries; b) expertise-oriented because they emphasize objective evidence-based policies; and c) elitist because they seek to empower those with superior academic or professional qualifications. Building on Bertou and Caramani's work, we will argue that preferences for political outsiders are stronger among citizens who are less trusting of representative actors and institutions, demand more government by expertise and reject the idea of encouraging ordinary citizens to participate in government. We therefore use political distrust, expertise orientations, and participatory orientations as proxies for the three sub-dimensions of technocratic attitudes (anti-politics, expertise, and elitism).

The demand for political outsiders may be rooted in disappointment with the performance of political parties and elected politicians. Independent experts are appealing because they are capable of taking informed decisions without having to toe the party line or defend voters' interests. Elected politicians, on the other hand, are more concerned with securing re-election than with providing responsible solutions (Lavezzolo *et al.*, 2021). According to a pure technocratic vision of politics, for every problem there is a rational, objective solution. This vision challenges the prevailing representative model of democracy, whereby policies are the result of negotiation and compromise between political parties representing different viewpoints (Caramani, 2017). Literature on the supply side of politics has shown that politicians portray themselves as outsiders to attract disgruntled voters (Guasti and Buřtíková, 2020) and that technocratic ministers are often appointed as a face-saving tactic in the aftermath of political scandals (Wratil and Pastorella, 2018). *Therefore, we expect that the appeal of political outsiders over traditional political profiles as ministers in government is stronger among individuals who are less trusting of representative actors and institutions, namely parliament, political parties, and politicians* (H1a).

However, it is unclear whether politically distrusting individuals are open to any kind of alternative to traditional actors or whether they find some outsiders more appealing than others. University professors and business executives might be perceived as more independent from politics than high-ranking civil servants, who as public agents are employed by state apparatus. Political appointments of high-ranking civil servants are common in many western and southern European countries and while formal appointments are frowned upon in northern European countries, informal ones continue to take place, for example, through the creation of advisory bodies (Van der Meer *et al.*, 2007). Governments and civil service systems in European democracies generally suffer from a negative image and the downward trend in public confidence towards government is paralleled by a downward trend in public confidence towards the civil service (Van der Meer *et al.*, 2007). *Therefore, we expect that university professors and business leaders are more appealing to politically distrusting individuals than civil servants, who may be perceived as more connected to politics* (H1b). However, we also expect that the role of political distrust in explaining preferences for civil servants varies across countries, depending on the extent to which government administration is independent from party politics (Page and Wright, 1999; Van der Meer *et al.*, 2007).

Another reason why citizens might prefer outsiders over traditional political actors as ministers is that they want more expertise in government, which is a core component of technocratic attitudes. As explained by Bertou and Carmani (2020), expertise is about possessing superior educational and professional qualifications, taking evidence-based decisions, and acting independently of special interests. However, previous research on technocratic attitudes has asked whether citizens would prefer expertise more generally, instead of investigating whether the non-partisan profiles most often appointed to executive government positions appeal to those with expertise orientations. Our initial expectation is that civil servants, university professors, and business leaders are all the more appealing to expertise-oriented individuals than politicians. First, because these profiles are more often tied to specific fields, while politicians must legislate on a variety of topics. Second, politics might also be perceived as less meritocratic than other professions,

where leaders are primarily selected based on their ability to carry out specific tasks and duties as opposed to their relatability or likeability. Outsiders, such as Silvio Berlusconi, Andrej Babiš, and Donald Trump, attempted to convince voters that the skills they gained as business entrepreneurs would make them more capable of running the state than career politicians (Castaldo and Verzhichelli, 2020; Guasti, 2020). In his campaigns, Berlusconi projected himself as a self-made entrepreneur, promising to use his private sector managerial skills to improve the efficiency of the state (Castaldo and Verzhichelli, 2020: 489). *Therefore, we expect that the appeal of political outsiders is stronger among individuals who are more expertise-oriented (H2a).*

However, citizens who demand more expertise in government are probably most favourable towards putting university professors in charge. Survey instruments developed to capture pro-expertise orientations (see Bertou and Caramani, 2020) emphasize academic qualifications, scientific reasoning, and independence, all of which are characteristics often attributed to university professors. While it might seem obvious that citizens who value such characteristics would prefer to be governed by university professors, it is questionable whether they would find some of the other outsiders appointed to executive positions more appealing than politicians. Civil servants and business leaders might be considered experts on the basis of technical skills acquired working in government administration or the private sector, but they do not necessarily stand out as having the qualities ascribed to experts in the technocracy literature (Ganuza and Font, 2020). *Therefore, we expect that university professors are more appealing to expertise-oriented individuals than civil servants or business leaders (H2b).*

Departing from the usual observation that citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with politics, the literature on process preferences has emphasized that citizens may have different conceptions of who should govern and how. While *stealth democrats* prefer delegating more power to political outsiders such as independent experts and business leaders, *participatory democrats* demand a greater role for ordinary citizens in policymaking through instruments such as referendums and deliberative mini-publics (Webb, 2013; Coffé and Michels, 2014; Font *et al.*, 2015; Bengtsson and Christensen, 2016; Del Río *et al.*, 2016; Gherghina and Geissel, 2020). Stealth democratic and participatory orientations are assumed to be incompatible, as stealth democrats want politics to be different, but do not seek to participate themselves (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). However, while previous research has emphasized theoretical incompatibility between people-centric and expert-centric models of democracy, few studies have compared what expertise-oriented and participatory-oriented citizens think about empowering specific kinds of political outsiders.

Participatory orientations might be negatively related to preferences for political outsiders for a few reasons. First, unlike politicians, civil servants, university professors, and business leaders do not derive their legitimacy from courting voters and are therefore impervious to popular demands. Second, by virtue of their specialized knowledge and expertise, these outsiders constitute a social and economic elite whose political views may differ from those of the majority (Fernández-Vázquez *et al.*, 2023). Third, research on techno-populism during the COVID – 19 pandemic has shown how technocratic expertise is used to curb democratic freedoms. For example, in the Czech Republic, businessman-turned-prime-minister Andrej Babiš used the language of technocratic competence and public health to justify his decision to ban protests (Guasti, 2020). *Therefore, we expect that the appeal of political outsiders over traditional political actors in government is weaker among participatory-oriented individuals who demand a greater role for ordinary citizens in policymaking (H3a).*

However, participatory-oriented individuals may distinguish between different kinds of political outsiders. While this has not been tested in previous research, some studies suggest that participatory-oriented individuals and university professors share similar views. For example, individuals preferring a greater role for citizens in political decision-making are found to express greater tolerance towards minorities (Christensen and von Schoultz, 2019) and greater support for addressing economic inequalities (Rojon and Rijken, 2020). Similarly, university professors are found to be more accepting of immigrants and more in favour of reducing income differences



than other occupational groups, while the reverse is true for CEOs (van de Werfhorst, 2020). Participatory-oriented individuals might therefore perceive university professors as upholding their commitment to equality and diversity. Furthermore, participatory-oriented individuals might expect university professors to support their demand for direct citizen participation, as universities are generally regarded as incubators of civic participation and intellectuals are historically known for their role in civic movements (Dodson, 2014). *Therefore, we expect that participatory-oriented individuals are less negative about university professors as ministers than civil servants or business executives* (H3b).

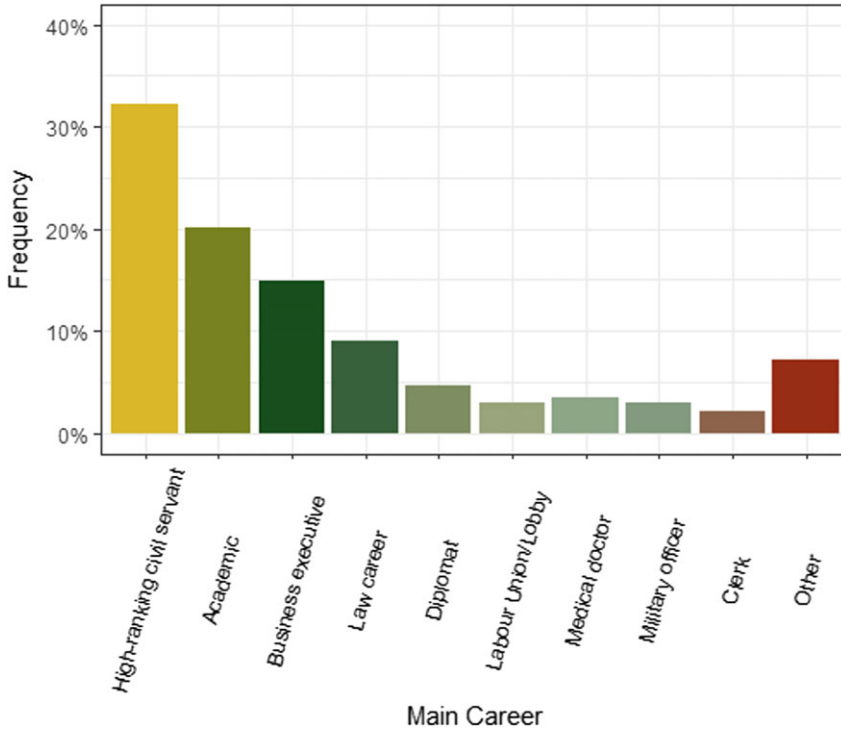
On the other hand, it could also be argued that participatory-oriented individuals are more favourable towards business leaders than university professors or civil servants as ministers. Business leaders might be perceived as more external and less instrumental to established political parties than the other two profiles. First, because business leaders are the least common type of non-partisan minister in European cabinets among the three (Vittori *et al.*, 2021). Second, because political parties have regularly co-opted civil servants and university professors to improve their image and promote their policy reforms (Boswell, 2008; Helms, 2022; Hesstvedt and Christiansen, 2022). By contrast, prominent examples of business leaders entering politics, such as Trump, Berlusconi, Babiš, or Stronach, have showcased their potential for challenging established political parties. *Therefore, we expect that participatory-oriented individuals are less negative about business leaders as ministers than university professors or civil servants* (H3c).

Finally, while the literature has pointed to groups of individuals emphasizing different visions of democracy, the common denominator is that these individuals are all disillusioned with politics as usual. This means, first and foremost, that expertise and participatory-oriented citizens who are very trusting of representative actors and institutions are probably not as keen on replacing politicians with outsiders as those who are very distrusting. Second, this means that although expertise and participatory-oriented citizens emphasize different ways of governing, the more distrusting they are, the more they will prefer any alternative to run-of-the-mill politicians. In other words, political distrust acts as a moderator of the relationship between specific visions of democracy and preferences for political outsiders. *Therefore, we expect that political distrust increases preferences for all three political outsiders among both expertise-oriented* (H4a) *and participatory-oriented* (H4b) *individuals.*

## Data

The data were collected through a CAWI survey fielded in 15 European countries during winter 2021–2022. On one hand, the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic may have encouraged more favourable attitudes towards experts (as suggested by Lavezzolo *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, the survey was administered after most of the pandemic lockdowns and vaccination rollouts in Europe, meaning epidemiologists were no longer in the spotlight. The countries were selected with the objective of variation in regions, political systems, and levels of experience with technocratic ministers in government (based on Vittori and colleagues' 2021 Technocratic Ministers Data set). A quota sampling strategy ensured sufficient representation of persons from different socio-demographic groups based on four key characteristics: age, sex, education, and region of residence. Each country sample (around 1,550 respondents) was weighted to match the distributions on these socio-demographic characteristics in the general population. The total sample includes around 24,000 respondents, after excluding trackers, speeders, and inattentive respondents who accounted for less than 5% of the raw data.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>'Speeders' refers to respondents who completed the survey, which on average took 21 minutes, in less than 5 minutes. 'Trackers' refers to respondents who gave the same answer to 10 or more consecutive questions. Inattentive respondents are those who answered the following question incorrectly: 'What is the highest number below? In order to show that you are paying attention, you should answer with the number 4'.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of non-elected, non-partisan ministers in European democracies between 2000 and 2020 by occupational background (Vittori *et al.*, 2021).

### Dependent variables: preferences for political outsiders in government

Although most studies measure preferences for political outsiders in government (rather than traditional politicians) by asking whether decisions should be taken by ‘independent experts’ as opposed to politicians, this label might encompass a variety of actors (Font *et al.*, 2015). We focus, instead, on capturing preferences for ministers from different non-political backgrounds that are commonly represented in European governments. A unique inventory of non-elected, non-partisan ministers in European democracies since 2000 (Vittori *et al.*, 2021) demonstrated that high-ranking civil servants, university professors, and business executives are the most common outsiders, respectively, accounting for 32, 20, and 15% of non-partisan ministers in Europe (see Figure 1). Therefore, we compare support for these three profiles as ministers with support for two traditional political profiles, namely MPs and former ministers.

In our original survey questions, respondents were asked how they would feel about each of the three non-political profiles as well as the two political profiles, becoming ministers in their country’s government, on a scale ranging from very negative (0) to very positive (10). By presenting respondents with five independent items, we allow them to give similar ratings to two or more profiles should they perceive them as equally (un)suitable for ministerial positions. As shown in Table 1, support for the two political profiles, MPs and former ministers, is highly correlated, which is a strong reason for combining them into a scale averaging respondents’ scores on the two items. A strong correlation between MPs and former ministers was observed in all fifteen countries (see online Appendix I).

The correlations in Table 1 show that university professors and business leaders are rated quite differently to MPs and former ministers, while high-ranking civil servants are rated somewhat similarly to the two political insiders. The slightly stronger correlations between MPs/former

**Table 1.** Correlations between each of the profile ratings in the pooled sample ( $N = 24,000$ )

	MP	Former minister	Civil servant	University professor	Business leader
MP	1.00				
Former minister	0.78	1.00			
Civil servant	0.60	0.59	1.00		
University professor	0.33	0.29	0.45	1.00	1.00
Business leader	0.31	0.30	0.42	0.36	1.00

ministers and civil servants, relative to the other outsiders, might be explained by cross-country variation in the extent to which the civil service is independent from party politics. This is supported by the finding that civil servants were rated less similarly to MPs and former ministers in countries that are known for having less politicized bureaucracies, such as Denmark, Finland, Ireland, and the UK (see online Appendix II). However, as civil servants are traditionally expected to uphold neutrality (Hojnacki, 1996) and the civil service is the most common career path for non-elected ministers in Europe (Vittori *et al.*, 2021), we decided against combining it with the two traditional political profiles.

Our original items on feelings about civil servants, professors, and business leaders becoming ministers do not capture (*dis*)preferences for political outsiders, as they do not show whether respondents rated these profiles more or less favourably than the political ones. Therefore, we created three dependent variables based on the deltas between respondents' ratings of politicians (average score for MPs and former ministers) and their ratings of civil servants, professors, and business leaders, respectively. We argue that examining differences between scores attributed to the five profiles makes sense as respondents were asked to rate the five profiles successively. Therefore, if a respondent gave a score of 4 to the first profile and a score of 7 to the second one, they were deliberately presenting themselves as more positive about the latter profile than the former.

The deltas were then recoded as categorical variables differentiating between 0) respondents who rated politicians at least one point (out of 10) higher than the outsider; (1) respondents who rated the outsider at least one point (out of 10) higher than politicians; and (2) respondents who rated both profiles similarly (less than one point difference between the two). Using deltas as opposed to raw scores means that respondents who rated political outsiders below the mid-point of the scale (but still higher than politicians) might be labelled as preferring outsiders. However, a cross-tabulation of our dependent variables with the original survey items demonstrated that only between 10 and 16% of respondents labelled as preferring a civil servant, professor, or business leader actually rated that same profile below the mid-point of the scale (5).

## Independent variables

The hypotheses were tested with three key predictors: *political distrust*, *expertise orientations*, and *participatory orientations*. *Political distrust* is a scale averaging respondents' feelings of distrust (1 = high trust/5 = no trust) in the three key organs of representative democracy: parliament, political parties, and politicians. These items formed a reliable scale in all countries, with alphas ranging between 0.8 and 0.9.

*Expertise orientations* is a scale averaging respondents' agreement (1 = strongly disagree/5 = strongly agree) with four statements from Bertou and Caramani's (2020) expertise dimension of technocratic attitudes: 'the leaders of my country should be more educated and skilled than ordinary citizens'; 'social problems should be addressed based on scientific evidence, not ideological preferences'; 'the problems facing my country require experts to solve them'; and 'our country would be better governed if important decisions were left to independent experts'. These items formed a reliable scale in all countries with alphas ranging between 0.6 and 0.8.



*Participation orientations* is a scale averaging respondents' agreement (1 = strongly disagree/ 5 = strongly agree) with three statements about citizens being able to take political decisions either through referendums, deliberative mini-publics, or more generally (see Appendix III for full wording). These items formed a reliable scale in all countries with alphas ranging between 0.6 and 0.8.

Several variables that might influence both our dependent and independent variables were included as controls, namely *age, sex, education, feelings about one's household income, political interest, and left-right economic and cultural value orientations*. Several studies demonstrated that expert preferences are stronger among younger, higher educated, and wealthier individuals who might feel that their views are more in line with those of experts (Webb, 2013; Bertou and Pastorella, 2016; Rapeli, 2016; Fernández-Martínez & Font-Fábregas, 2018; Bertou and Caramani, 2020; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). Whereas political interest is negatively correlated with stealth democratic attitudes (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Webb, 2013), it is positively correlated with technocratic attitudes (Bertou and Caramani, 2020).

Although technocracy denies the relevance of ideological debates and technocrats are idealized as 'impartial' actors (Putnam, 1977; Centeno, 1993), there is a historical overlap between technocratic cabinets and neoliberal reforms (Centeno and Silva, 1998: 4–6). This might explain why support for 'non-elected experts' is often found to be stronger among individuals identifying as right wing (Bertou and Pastorella, 2016; Del Río *et al.*, 2016; Bertou and Caramani, 2020; Lavezzolo *et al.*, 2020; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). However, because the policy space in Europe is structured by an economic and cultural dimension, the issues citizens associate with left and right may differ (Kitschelt, 2004). Therefore, the relationship between left-right value orientations and political outsiders might depend on a) which dimension citizens have in mind and b) who the outsiders are. For this reason, we include attitudes towards income redistribution and immigration as proxies for the economic and cultural dimensions, with higher values indicating more left-wing positions, as opposed to using the standard left-right self-placement scale.<sup>2</sup>

## Method of analysis

First, we begin by comparing preferences for the three political outsiders as ministers across the 15 countries, based on the distribution of respondents by preference group: prefers one of the outsiders, prefers politicians, prefers neither.

We then turn to comparing the characteristics of citizens preferring each political outsider, drawing from the literature on technocratic attitudes, which connects the demand for independent experts to anti-politics, expertise, and elitism (Bertou and Caramani, 2020; Fernández-Vázquez *et al.*, 2023). This is done by modelling the effects of *political distrust, expertise orientations, and participatory orientations* (as proxies for the three dimensions of technocratic attitudes) on membership to one of the preference groups using three separate multinomial logistic (MNL) regressions. In our analyses, we compare the effects of our predictors on the probability of preferring each political outsider versus preferring a politician, while excluding respondents who showed no preference (see Appendix IV for the full model specification including the neutral groups). The analyses presented are based on the pooled sample combining data from all 15 countries, with country-fixed effects to control for potential heterogeneity. However, we also ran the models separately for each country to check the robustness of our key predictors (see Appendix VI).

Finally, to investigate whether the effects of expertise and participatory orientations on preferences for outsiders are moderated by political distrust (H4a & H4b), we include interactions between each of these predictors and political distrust in a logistic regression analysis of the probability of preferring outsiders as opposed to politicians. Respondents with no preference are also

<sup>2</sup>The economic and cultural dimensions were not correlated with each other and therefore could be included in the models simultaneously.

excluded from the latter analyses as we did not formulate expectations for how they differ from those preferring politicians.

## Descriptive results

The stacked bar charts in Figure 2 compare the distribution of respondents by preference group (prefers outsiders/no preference/prefers politicians) between countries.

Our first observation is that citizens in all 15 countries express much stronger preferences for academics over politicians than for business leaders or high-ranking civil servants. Those preferring professors outnumber those preferring politicians in 14 out of 15 countries, while those preferring civil servants or businesspeople are only more prevalent in a few countries, namely Poland, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Belgium, and Greece. Citizens from Poland, Italy, Spain, and Ireland generally prefer all three outsiders, while citizens in the remaining countries prefer specific kinds of outsiders, e.g., academics.

Our second observation is that the group of citizens expressing no preference for either profile is much larger when it comes to civil servants. The finding that civil servants are more often rated similarly to politicians than academics or business leaders, goes in the direction of our claim for H1b, that the latter two profiles are perceived as more distant from politicians than civil servants.

Country differences in citizens' preferences for political outsiders might be explained by several country-level factors, the most obvious of which is the prevalence of political outsiders in previous governments. Therefore, for each country, we plotted the percentage of non-partisan ministers with backgrounds as civil servants, professors, and business executives for the period 2000–2021 against the percentage of respondents preferring each political outsider over a politician as minister. The three scatterplots in Figure 3 seem to suggest a slightly positive relationship, with the exception of a few outliers. For example, citizens from the Czech Republic and Bulgaria are comparatively less enthusiastic about outsiders despite having been governed by technocratic ministers more often than citizens from other European countries. Research from the Czech Republic and Bulgaria suggests that technocratic ministers struggle to present themselves as truly independent from party politics (Hanley, 2018). Disillusionment with outsiders might also play a role, for example, citizens from the Czech Republic, where businessman-turned-prime-minister Andrej Babiš was recently accused of corruption and fraud, are the least favourable towards business leaders as ministers (see Figure 2). Therefore, while our results suggest a potential 'technocracy addiction effect', the inability of political outsiders to maintain an image of disinterestedness and impartiality might contribute to certain outliers.

Another potential explanation for country differences in preferences for political outsiders might be economic and political crises. Research on the emergence of technocratic cabinets and ministers shows that they often materialize as a result of party failure, such as, for example, when governing parties are unable to form a cabinet or prevent imminent economic downturns (Brunclík, 2015; Costa Pinto *et al.*, 2018; Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019). This would explain why citizens preferring political outsiders are much more prevalent in countries like Italy, Spain, and Greece but also in Ireland, Belgium, and Austria.

A last country-level factor that might explain the differences we observe in preferences for civil servants across countries is the degree of independence of the civil service. As elaborated above, in some of the countries covered, the civil service is very independent and partisan ties do not play a role in the recruitment of civil servants. In other countries, government bureaucracy is much more politicized (see Page and Wright, 1999; Van der Meer *et al.*, 2007). At first glance, the descriptive results in Figure 2 suggest that preferences for civil servants over politicians as ministers are lower, rather than higher, in countries that are known for having a more independent government bureaucracy (i.e., Denmark, Netherlands, and Finland). By contrast, the share of respondents preferring civil servants over politicians is much greater in countries where ministerial cabinets

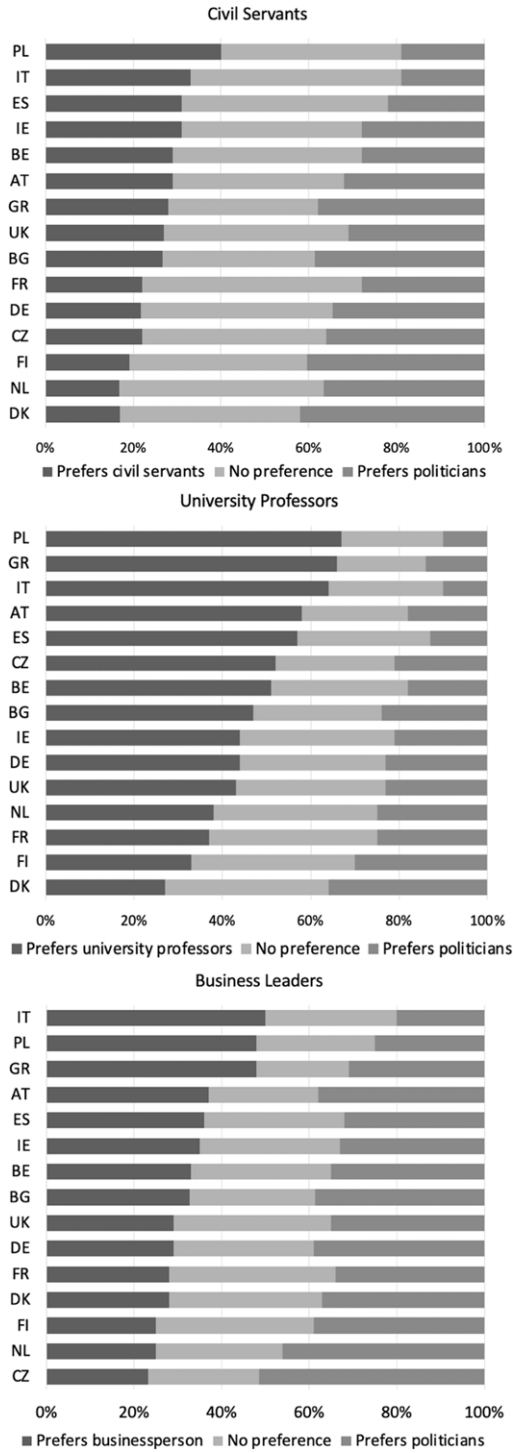
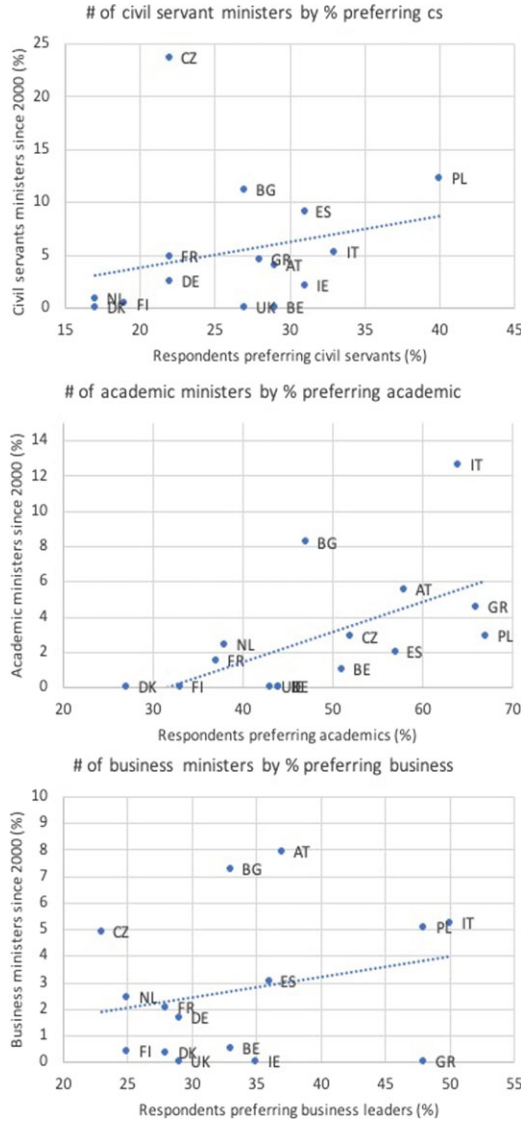


Figure 2. Distributions of preferences for political outsiders by country.



**Figure 3.** Percentage of non-partisan, non-elected ministers since 2000 (Vittori *et al.*, 2021) by percentage of respondents preferring outsiders.

appointed by the ruling parties are relatively common (i.e., Italy and Spain) (Van der Meer *et al.*, 2007).

While the descriptive results presented above shed light on cross-country differences in citizens’ preferences for political outsiders, systematically testing the role of country-level factors would require a greater number of countries. Furthermore, we found that individual-level factors play a much greater role in explaining citizens’ preferences for political outsiders. Given that the MNL regression estimates, presented in the next section, do not provide a reliable measure of explained variance (only the pseudo-R-squared), we also included the OLS regression estimates of citizens’ preferences for political outsiders in Appendix VII (based on continuous dependent variables representing the difference between outsiders and politicians prior to recoding into preference groups). Models including only country dummies explain between 3 and 6% of the

**Table 2.** Multinomial logistic regression estimates of preferences for political outsiders as ministers ( $N = 24,000$ )

Prefers politician	Model 1: Civil servants		Model 2: University professors		Model 3: Business leaders	
	<i>RRR</i> (ref)	<i>SE</i>	<i>RRR</i> (ref)	<i>SE</i>	<i>RRR</i> (ref)	<i>SE</i>
<b>Prefers outsider</b>						
<i>Key predictors</i>						
Political distrust	<b>1.38***</b>	0.03	<b>1.70***</b>	0.04	<b>1.66***</b>	0.04
Expertise orientations	<b>1.12***</b>	0.04	<b>1.43***</b>	0.05	<b>1.09**</b>	0.03
Participatory orientations	<b>1.35***</b>	0.04	<b>1.25***</b>	0.03	<b>1.52***</b>	0.04

Note: The samples are weighted to match the distributions on age, sex and education in the general population and all models include control variables and country-fixed effects.

\*\*\* $P < 0.001$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \* $P < 0.05$ .

variance in preferences for the three non-partisan ministers, while models including both country dummies and individual-level predictors explain between 6 and 18% of the variance in preferences for non-partisan ministers. Therefore, the socio-demographic and attitudinal differences between citizens, elaborated in the next section, appear to offer more compelling explanations for why citizens prefer non-partisans as ministers. It is worth noting, however, that the R-squared is generally lower for models estimating preferences for civil servants, suggesting that our predictors are less useful for explaining why citizens preferred this profile over politicians.

### Results: who prefers which political outsiders as ministers

Table 2 presents the MNL regression estimates of preferences for civil servants, university professors, and business leaders over politicians as ministers in Models 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The full model specification, including the effects of our control variables and the effects of our predictors on the probability of showing no preference for either profile, is provided in Appendix IV. The relative risk ratios (RRR) in Models 1 to 3 show how the risk of preferring a political outsider over a politician as minister changes with the predictors in question. A RRR greater than 1 indicates that the risk of preferring an outsider *increases* as the predictor increases, while a RRR less than 1 indicates that the risk of preferring an outsider *decreases* as the predictor increases.

The results confirm that preferences for political outsiders over politicians as ministers are stronger among individuals who are more distrusting of representative institutions, such as parliament, political parties, and politicians (H1a). This effect is significant for all three outsiders but even stronger for university professors and business executives, providing support for our claim that high-ranking civil servants are not as appealing to politically distrusting individuals as the other two outsiders (H1b). A one unit increase in distrust is associated with a 60–70% increase in the probability of preferring professors or business executives over politicians compared to a 38% increase in the probability preferring civil servants. The coefficient plot in Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the strength of our key predictors on the probability of preferring each political outsider over politicians, based on three separate logistic regressions (coefficients provided in Appendix X). By-country analyses in Appendix VI demonstrate that distrust fails to predict preferences for civil servants in France, Germany, and The Netherlands, where respondents also rated civil servants more similarly to MPs and former ministers than in other countries (see Appendix II). By contrast, distrust increases preferences for professors and business leaders in all countries except Bulgaria, where politically distrusting individuals do not prefer these outsiders over politicians, even though they have often held ministerial roles (see Figure 3). The chi-squared tests for the by-country analyses in Appendix VI show that our independent variables have a lower

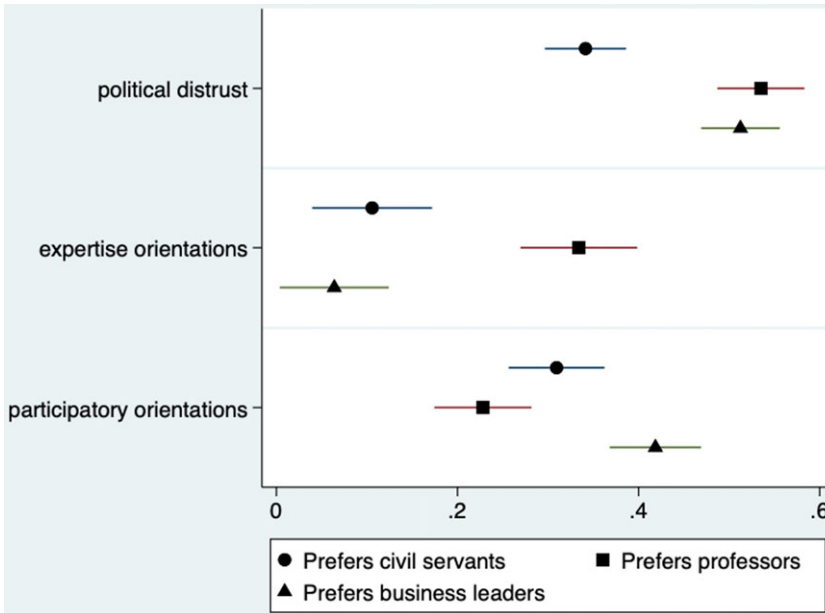


Figure 4. Coefficient plot for the logistic regression estimates of preferring each political outsider over politicians.

predictive in Bulgaria and Poland compared to other countries. Therefore, preferences for political outsiders in Bulgaria and Poland may be driven by other attitudes not accounted for in this study.

The results also confirm that preferences for political outsiders as ministers are stronger among individuals who are more positively oriented towards the use of expertise in government. Expertise orientations are significantly related to all three profiles (H2a), but even more strongly related to preferences for university professors (H2b). A one unit increase in expertise orientations is associated with a 43% increase in the probability of preferring professors over politicians but only a 12 and 9% increase in the probability of preferring civil servants and business leaders, respectively. By-country analyses in Appendix VI demonstrate that expertise orientations only increase preferences for civil servants and business leaders in a few countries. By contrast, being more positively oriented towards the use of expertise in government leads to preferences for university professors in 10 out of 15 countries.

While using a scale including items measuring support for experts to explain preferences for civil servants, professors, and business leaders might seem like an endogenous strategy, the step-wise regressions in Appendix IV show that excluding expertise orientations from the models does not affect our findings (the coefficients of our other predictors change very little). Furthermore, the Bertou and Caramani scale also includes items emphasizing scientific reasoning, academic credentials, and independence, which we show are more strongly connected to preferences for university professors as ministers. It is possible that civil servants and business leaders are associated with other qualities that are not captured by the conceptualization of expertise orientations in the technocracy literature.

Contrary to expectations (H3a), preferences for political outsiders over politicians as ministers are not weaker but stronger among individuals who are more positively oriented towards involving citizens in political decision-making. This challenges the claim that citizens who are favourable towards empowering outsiders such as civil servants, professors, and business leaders are adverse towards people sovereignty (Bertou and Caramani, 2020). A potential explanation for this is that participatory-oriented individuals perceive the appointment of non-traditional actors as a way of broadening participation in government, or of challenging the monopoly of elected politicians



over policy making. In any case, it confirms the need for further empirical research on the kinds of profiles participatory-oriented individuals would like to see in government.

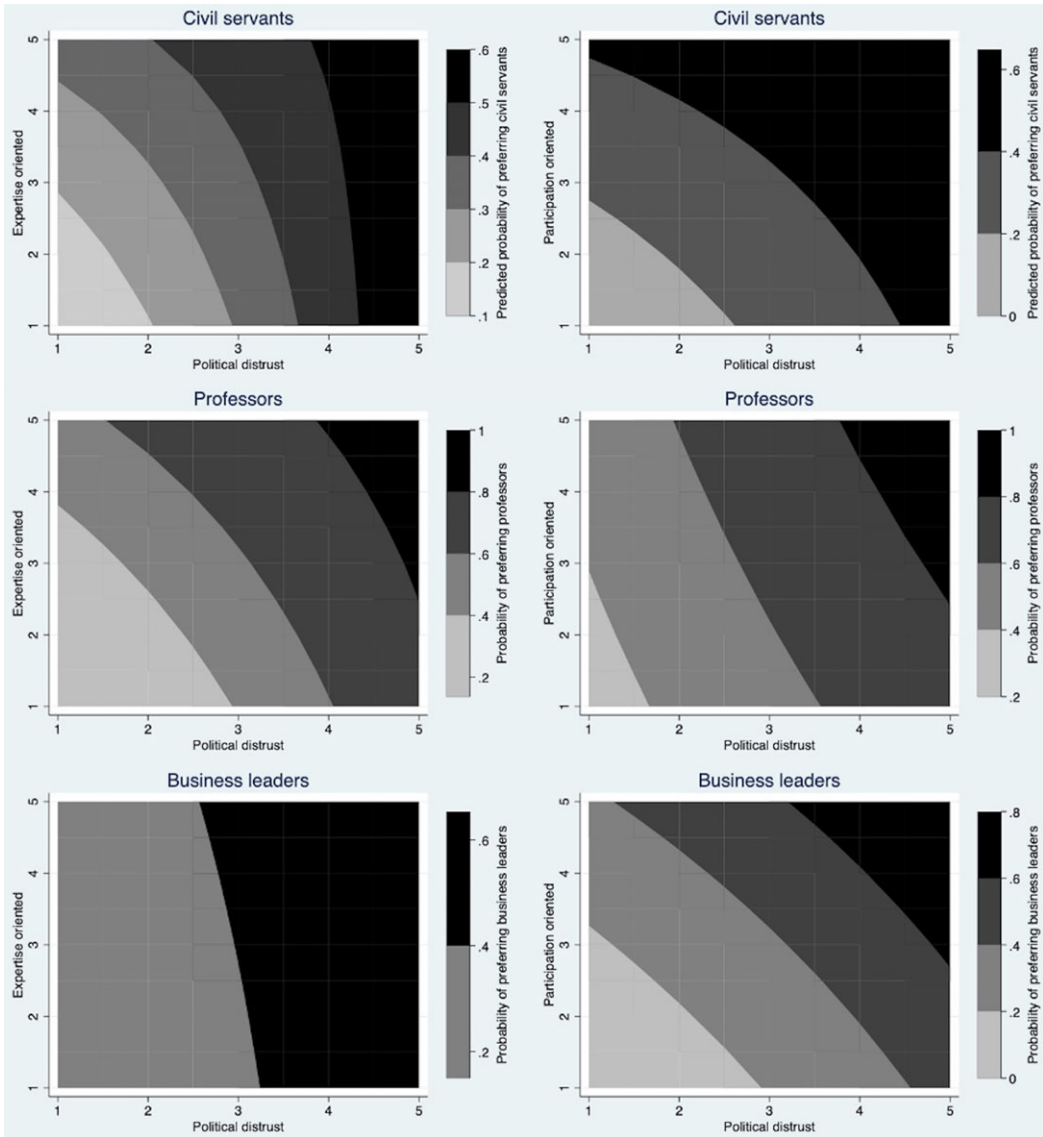
Finally, we observe that participatory orientations have the strongest association with preferring business leaders as ministers (in line with H3c) and the weakest association with preferring university professors (contrary to H3b). A one unit increase in participatory orientations is associated with a 52% increase in the probability of preferring business leaders over politicians compared to a 35 and 25% increase in the probability of preferring civil servants and professors, respectively. Claiming that participatory-oriented individuals prefer business leaders over the other outsiders based on a slightly larger coefficient might be misleading. This is because we do not know whether people who prefer business leaders differ *significantly* on participatory orientations from those who prefer civil servants over university professors. Therefore, as a robustness check, we tested the effects of participatory orientations on preferring business leaders over university professors (Appendix VIII) and over civil servants (Appendix IX). This was done by creating separate dependent variables capturing the difference between respondents' ratings of business leaders and their ratings of the other two outsiders. The results show that participatory-oriented individuals are significantly more likely to express a preference for business leaders over the other two non-partisans as ministers, confirming H3c.

By-country analyses in Appendix VI demonstrate that participatory orientations increase preferences for business leaders in most countries but only increase preferences for the other two outsiders in half of the countries (e.g., BE, DK, FR, DE, IE, IT, NL, and UK). Interestingly, participatory-oriented individuals from Bulgaria and Poland, where non-partisan ministers are more prevalent than in other countries (see Figure 3), do not find any of the three outsiders more appealing than politicians. Contrary to expectations, these findings indicate that being in favour of greater participation is complementary to, rather than incompatible with, preferring non-partisan ministers. Furthermore, they suggest that profiles that are regularly co-opted by political parties, namely university professors and business leaders, are slightly less appealing to participatory-oriented individuals than business leaders.

### Results: political distrust as a moderator of expertise and participatory orientations

We now turn to testing whether the effects of expertise and participatory orientations on preferences for political outsiders are moderated by political distrust (H4 a & b). The interaction effects are more easily interpretable through the contour plots in Figure 5 than through the regression estimates, provided in Appendix X. Using the margins command in Stata, we calculated the predicted probability of preferring each outsider over politicians for all combinations of expertise orientations and distrust (Figure 5, left-hand plots) and all combinations of participatory orientations and distrust (Figure 5, right-hand plots). Darker shades demonstrate higher probability of preferring an outsider over politicians. Curved lines demonstrate that the effects of expertise and participatory orientations differ across levels of political distrust, thereby suggesting a significant interaction effect.

Starting with the expertise by distrust interactions, the left-hand plots show that someone who is very trusting (<2 on distrust) and very expertise-oriented (>4 on expertise) has an almost 30% chance of preferring civil servants over politicians, while someone who is equally trusting but rejects expertise (<2 on expertise) has a 10% chance of preferring civil servants. Similarly, a very trusting pro-expertise individual has a 40% chance of preferring professors, while a very trusting anti-expertise individual has a 20% chance of preferring professors. This demonstrates that expertise orientations lead to preferences for civil servants and professors as ministers even among those who are confident in representative actors and institutions. By contrast, expertise orientations do not increase preferences for business leaders among politically trusting individuals.



**Figure 5.** Predicted probabilities of preferring outsiders by distrust and expertise orientations.  
 Note: the shades do not correspond to the same predicted probabilities across graphs as the effects differ in size.

The curvature of the lines in the left-hand plots for civil servants and professors suggests, in line with expectations (H4a), that political distrust boosts preferences for these outsiders among expertise-oriented individuals. Someone who scores high on both expertise orientations (>4 on expertise) and political distrust (>4 on distrust) has a 20% greater chance of preferring civil servants and a 40% greater chance of preferring professors than someone who scores equally high on expertise orientations but very low on distrust (<2 on distrust). The straight line in the left-hand plot for business leaders suggests, contrary to expectations (H4a), that the effect of expertise orientations on preferences for this outsider remains relatively stable across different levels of distrust. Indeed, the regression estimates (Appendix X) demonstrated that the expertise by distrust interaction only predicts preferences for civil servants and professors.

Turning to the participatory by distrust interactions, the right-hand plots show that someone who is very trusting ( $<2$  on distrust) and very participatory-oriented ( $>4$  on participation) has an almost 40% chance of preferring both civil servants and business leaders over politicians, while someone who is equally trusting but rejects participation ( $<2$  on participation) has a less than 20% chance of preferring these outsiders. This demonstrates that supporting an expanded role for citizens in political decision-making leads to preferences for civil servants and business leaders even among those who are confident in representative actors and institutions. By contrast, participatory orientations do not increase preferences for professors among politically trusting individuals.

The curvature of the lines in the right-hand plots for civil servants and business leaders suggests, in line with expectations (H4b), that political distrust boosts preferences for these outsiders among participatory-oriented individuals. Someone who scores high on both participatory orientations ( $>4$  on participation) and political distrust ( $>4$  on distrust) has an almost 40% greater chance of preferring civil servants and an almost 40% greater chance of preferring business leaders than someone who scores equally high on participatory orientations but very low on distrust ( $<2$  on distrust). The relatively straight lines in the right-hand plot for professors suggests, contrary to expectations (H4b), that the effect of participatory orientations on preferences for this outsider remains relatively stable across different levels of distrust. Indeed, the regression estimates (Appendix X) demonstrated that the participatory by distrust interaction only predicts preferences for civil servants and business leaders.

Therefore, our results show that expertise-oriented individuals are even more likely to prefer civil servants and professors over politicians as ministers when they are distrusting of representative actors and institutions. Furthermore, participatory-oriented individuals are even more likely to prefer civil servants and business leaders when they are distrusting of representative actors and institutions. However, political distrust is not a prerequisite; politically trusting expertise-oriented individuals also express preferences for civil servants and professors, while politically trusting participatory-oriented individuals also express preferences for civil servants and business leaders.

## Conclusion

Previous research demonstrated that many citizens would rather be governed by independent experts than by politicians and that some citizens hold ‘technocratic attitudes’ (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2016; Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021; Lavezzolo *et al.*, 2021). The involvement of experts in government may take various forms, from independent agencies to central banks or advisory boards (Gilardi, 2008; Christensen and Hesstvedt, 2019). In this article, we focussed on the role of experts as ministers, one of the most visible high-level political functions in government that does not require a parliamentary background. While technocratic ministers are found in governing cabinets across Europe, they may hail from very different career backgrounds, such as academia, government administration, or the private sector (Vittori *et al.*, 2021). Our goal in this study was to examine whether the different types of independent experts were equally attractive to citizens across European countries, and whether the different profiles were more appealing to some groups of citizens. In particular, we engaged with the growing literature on technocratic attitudes by investigating whether preferences for different political outsiders (over traditional political actors) comes from citizens who a) lack confidence in representative actors and institutions; b) demand more expertise in government; and c) reject people sovereignty.

Our first key finding is that the extent to which Europeans prefer outsiders in leading government positions depends on who the outsiders are and in which countries. Citizens in all 15 countries express much stronger preferences for academics over politicians than for business leaders or civil servants. Future research might investigate which qualities make university professors more desirable for high-level government positions than civil servants or business leaders: is it their

perceived knowledge, independence, or integrity? Or is it just that there are fewer negative stereotypes of academics than bureaucrats or business executives?

A second key finding is the cross-national variation. Preferences for political outsiders are the strongest in Poland, Italy, Spain, and Ireland, where all three outsiders were rated more favourably than politicians, but lowest in Denmark, Finland, and The Netherlands, where only university professors were somewhat preferred. At first glance, our results might suggest that country differences are related both to the historical presence of non-partisan outsiders in government and the economic and political consequences of party failure. Preferences for political outsiders are generally higher in countries where these outsiders were more often appointed to government and in countries that have experienced a major economic or political crisis in the last 20 years (e.g., Italy, Spain, Greece, and to a lesser extent Ireland, Belgium, and Austria). However, there are some outliers such as the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, where citizens are comparatively *unfavourable* to political outsiders even though they are among the countries with the most non-elected bureaucrats, professors, and business leaders in ministerial positions. Previous research suggests that political outsiders in these countries have struggled to maintain an image of disinterestedness and impartiality (Hanley, 2018), which might explain why we also find that politically distrusting individuals did not prefer professors over politicians in Bulgaria. All this points towards the need to investigate more qualitatively how specific government cabinets have affected citizens' attitudes towards empowering political outsiders.

Another key finding is that the role of political distrust, expertise orientations, and participatory orientations in predicting preferences for political outsiders depend on who the outsiders are. First, while distrust in representative actors and institutions increases preferences for all three outsiders, politically distrusting individuals are not as keen on civil servants, especially in countries with highly or increasingly politicized bureaucracies, such as France, Germany, and The Netherlands. The strong correlations between civil servants' ratings and those of MPs and former ministers in these three countries support the claim that civil servants are not as appealing to politically distrusting individuals because they are perceived as less independent from politics. These findings may suggest that the extent to which involving civil servants in government can address the concerns of politically distrusting individuals would depend on whether the civil service can portray itself as independent from politics.

The literature on technocratic attitudes has emphasized that some citizens, who are also dissatisfied with politics, want more government by expertise, meaning government by leaders with superior educational and professional qualifications who take decisions based on facts and evidence rather than morals and values. The demand for expertise has been connected to the idea of empowering political outsiders such as business executives, most notably in the literature on stealth democracy. In recent years, candidates for executive government positions such as Trump, Berlusconi, and Babiš have attempted to convince voters that they are more worthy of office than run-of-the-mill politicians because of the skills and knowledge they acquired in their corporate careers. However, our results show that of the three political outsiders most commonly appointed to ministerial positions in European democracies, only those with an academic background are consistently valued by expertise-oriented citizens. Preferences for civil servants and business leaders, on the other hand, are more strongly linked to the demand for government by the people.

Our initial assumption, based on the centrality of elitism to technocratic attitudes, was that preferences for political outsiders are weaker among participatory-oriented individuals. Contrary to expectations, we found that preferences for all three outsiders, but especially business leaders, are stronger among those who demand more say in political decision-making. The finding that participatory-oriented individuals are much more likely to prefer business leaders than university professors, who are historically known for advocating social and political change (Dodson, 2014), is quite surprising and might be further investigated in future research. Is it that business leaders are perceived as more external and less instrumental to political parties than university

professors or civil servants who, being regularly co-opted by governing parties, might represent an extension of politics as usual?

Most importantly, our results challenge the common distinction between citizen-oriented and expert-oriented visions of democracy by showing that participatory-oriented individuals mostly prefer having alternative elites in ministerial positions (Webb, 2013; Coffé and Michels, 2014; Bengtsson and Christensen, 2016). A recent study from Spain also found that expert-centric technocratic attitudes were positively correlated items emphasizing the need for politics to reflect the general will, suggesting that what people want is ‘government for the people by the best’ (Fernández Vázquez *et al.*, 2023: 20).

However, an important question for future research is whether citizens are genuinely interested in combining citizen and expert-oriented alternatives, or whether they are merely expressing support for any alternative to politics as usual. Our interaction effects offer some insight by showing that political distrust is not a prerequisite for preferring political outsiders: expertise and participatory orientations also drive preferences for political outsiders among those who are fairly confident in representative actors and institutions. At the same time, there might still be an undercurrent of anti-politics connecting these different conceptions of who should govern that is not sufficiently captured by our variable measures.

Our study goes beyond previous research on public support for experts by comparing citizens’ preferences for specific, realistic examples of political outsiders as government ministers. However, future research might expand on our study in a few general directions. First, by determining whether citizens who are more positive about political outsiders as ministers want them to replace politicians entirely or to play a greater role in government, alongside politicians. A mixed-methods study from Spain demonstrated that while people would like to see more experts in government (primarily because of their knowledge and technical skills), they still think experts should play a supporting role (Ganuza and Font, 2020). Similarly, an experimental study in eight European countries found that people prefer experts to be involved in the policy development stages (Bertsou, 2021). Another consideration is whether some experts are more suitable for a specific part of the policy-making process than others. For example, academics might be more useful to politicians in the policy-development stages, while civil servants might be more useful in the implementation stages.

Second, by diversifying the career backgrounds of potential ministers. For example, by including other profiles active within parliamentary circles, that might be perceived as closer to the people or less careerist than MPs or former ministers, such as mayors, union heads, political activists, or NGO representatives. Or by including examples of more unconventional profiles that might fit the label of ‘political outsiders’ even better, such as actors or athletes.

Third, by pinpointing the qualities (e.g., non-partisanship, expertise, or closeness to the people) that make these profiles more attractive for ministerial positions than MPs or former ministers. Nonetheless, our results show that experience in government is not necessarily an asset, as MPs and former ministers are often rated less favourably depending on the country and the outsider they are compared with.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773923000048>.

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