

Technocracy within Representative Democracy

Technocratic Reasoning and Justification among Bureaucrats and Politicians

Christina Ribbhagen

Göteborg Studies in Politics 130

2013



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
DEPT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Avhandlingen baseras på följande delstudier:

Ribbhagen, C. 'What Makes a Technocrat? Explaining Variation in Technocratic Thinking among Elite Bureaucrats', *Public Policy and Administration*, 2011, 26(1): 21–44, originally published online 15 November 2010.

Ribbhagen, C. 'Public Policy-Making in the Minds of Technocratic Elite Bureaucrats: Preferred and Assessed Importance of Different Decision-Making Criteria', *International Political Science Review* (revise and resubmit January 2013).

Ribbhagen, C. 'Science on Tap: The Use of Expert Knowledge in Parliamentary Debate', *Scandinavian Political Studies* (resubmitted January 2013).

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i statsvetenskap som med tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsnämnden vid Göteborgs universitet framlägges till offentlig granskning fredagen den 24 maj 2013, kl. 13.15 i sal 10, Universitetsbyggnaden, Vasaparken, Göteborg.

Ribbighan, Christina (2013) *Technocracy Within Representative Democracy. Technocratic Reasoning and Justification Among Bureaucrats and Politicians*. Göteborg Studies in Politics 130, edited by Bo Rothstein, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 711, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden. 218 pages. ISBN: 978-91-89246-56-0 ISSN: 0346-5942, e-published version: <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/32363>

Abstract

The terms 'technocracy' and 'technocrat' are becoming part of common usage and it is frequently argued that technocratic decision-making is increasing due to the growing complexity of political matters. However, there is a lack of research into this matter and the concept is underdeveloped. The thesis departs from a more subtle interpretation of technocracy suggesting that technocracy is not equal to government by (technically trained) experts. The crucial issue for the definition of technocracy then is not who governs, rather it lies in the mode of politics. With this as a point of departure the overall aim of this thesis is to challenge the largely unproven assumption that technocrats can be defined by personal attributes (as educational background), as well as the traditional and commonly used measurements to identify technocratic thinking, arguing that they are likely to produce a too simplistic picture of reality. Departing from the literature on technocracy an analytical framework is developed for exploring the presence of a technocratic as well as a democratic mode of reasoning and justification that allows for detecting possible nuances. Further, in order to understand variations in the mode of reasoning and justification I throughout the thesis suggest we need to consider the possible importance of different institutional contexts. Overall the thesis wishes to contribute to the old, but with continued centrality, discussion on the tension between technocracy and democracy. Resting on the claim that the degree of technocratic reasoning and justification among policy makers is one powerful determinant of the extent to which technocracy can be made compatible with (representative) democracy, I direct the search light towards two actors at the heart of policy-making – top civil servants and politicians.

The thesis consists of two parts *The introduction to the thesis* and *The Essays*. There are three Essays. In Essay 1 I search for explanations to variation in technocratic thinking among bureaucrats. Contrary to previous findings, I argue that type of higher education is not a key determinant for explaining variations, instead I suggest, post-socialization, as politicisation, provides a better explanation. These suggestions are tested empirically by both re-analysing Putnam's data from the late 1970s and analysing data from a total survey of elite bureaucrats working in the Government Offices of Sweden. Essay 2 seeks to explore the importance of different decision criteria in the minds of technocratic bureaucrats. Departing from the developed framework a questionnaire using hypothetical scenarios, each containing a different policy proposition, is designed. For each of the five scenarios technocratic bureaucrats are asked to rate the importance of ten different decision making criteria, each representing a different element of the two modes of reasoning. In Essay 3 I investigate the use of knowledge in parliamentary debate in the Swedish parliament (Riksdagen) searching for explanations for when politicians are likely to use knowledge to underpin their policy positions. The study presents empirical findings based on the analysis of the contents of 142 parliamentary debates testing a number of different hypotheses.

The thesis reports several interesting findings and identifies important gaps in the field. In relation to the overall aim of the thesis the most important findings are that we need to continue to make the question of who is a technocrat into an empirical one and not base our definition on a largely unproven assumption that technocrats can be defined by personal attributes as educational background. Further, the results in this thesis suggest that technocratic and democratic modes of reasoning are not to be viewed as opposing sides of the same single dimension. Therefore, in future studies we ought to use measurements that allow the respondents to express nuances. Finally, the findings of politicians' use of knowledge in the parliamentary debate jointly indicate that, despite the relatively favourable conditions for knowledge utilization in the Swedish case, the debate is not likely to be largely de-politicized.

Key words: de-politicisation, politicisation, attitudes, political communication, expertise, knowledge utilization, policy type, institutional context, Government Offices, parliamentary debate, survey, hypothetical scenarios, content analysis; risk; values; interests; economic and social steering