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POLARIZED DEMOCRACY: HOW THE CLIMATE CRISIS RESHAPES SOCIAL MOVEMENT LANDSCAPES

Expertocracy as thin-centered ideology: theoretical concepts and empirical illustrations

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic and looming prospect of climate change have brought a debate on the role of expertise and scientific knowledge in policymaking to the fore. This debate informs the work of many scholars working on the dangers and promises of technocracy. Technocracy, however, is neither the only nor the most important ideology that calls for policymaking based on science, research, scholarship, and expertise. In the wake of the ongoing crisis of democratic regimes, it is the ideology of expertocracy that is most significantly gaining in influence. This paper proposes a conceptualization of expertocracy, while at the same time taking its flexible, promiscuous-by-design character into account and framing it as a thin-centered ideology that needs to be distinguished from technocracy and scientific policy advice. These concepts are then used to analyze the writings of Luisa Neubauer, a leading figure of the German branch of Fridays for Future. This case also helps us to understand why the thin-centered ideology of expertocracy is better adapted than technocracy and scientific policy advice both to the current polarization of democratic political life and to the context of looming climate change.

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Introduction

The looming prospect that democracies may lose legitimacy due to an inability to implement adequate (i.e., science- and evidence-based) mitigation measures to prevent the climate crisis (Blühdorn 2020; Mittiga 2022; Sconfienza 2019) or to respect scientifically determined 'planetary boundaries' (Richardson et al. 2023) has brought debates on the role of expertise and scientific knowledge for democratic policymaking (back) to the fore.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the hopes for 'democratizing science' and 'expertizing democracy' (Bader 2014) – i.e., the expectation that scientific expertise can be used benevolently for 'good governance' by incorporating expert bodies more firmly into

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(supranational) policymaking – observed in academia at the beginning of the millennium (Nowotny 2003; Vibert 2007) seem to have vanished. As a particularly illuminating testimony to this bygone spirit of the times, we can consider Sheila Jasanoff's optimistically minded prognosis according to which 'we press forward into the century of the informed, competent, and ever more emancipated global expert-citizen' (Jasanoff 2003, 162).

Today, in contrast, the split between laypeople and experts seems only to be increasing; the British former Lord Chancellor Michael Gove's often-cited phrase 'People in this country have had enough of experts!' is indicative. As a result, it seems unclear to many scholarly observers how democratic politics and expert knowledge can be better harmonized – if they can be harmonized at all. This issue is not only relevant from the perspective of theory (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2020; Holst and Molander 2019): it also has practical implications, as expertise has been discernibly politicized. One reason for this is that one form of expert rule that had increased considerably in recent decades – the rule of judges (Hirschl 2008; Hirschl 2023) – is now being challenged via populist revolt (Manow 2024), to which catchphrases like Gove's have only lent legitimacy. Another reason is that before the European debt crisis, the EU had been regarded as laudable for its combination of expertise with experimentalist policymaking (Bader 2014, 422) and for its 'lure of technocracy' (Habermas 2015). These factors, however, have come to be regarded as unappealing by scholars and citizens alike and are rather poor options for strengthening democratic legitimacy (Offe 2016). Thus, sections of the political science community have become increasingly critical toward the use of expertise. Although there is universal recognition that modern politics is impossible without this use, there is growing concern about how experts and expertise influence democratic governance.

As the above-quoted title of Habermas's book indicates, this critical discourse mainly operates with the semantics of 'technocratic' and 'technocracy.' This is also evidenced by the title of a recent volume edited by leading scholars of the field: *The Technocratic Challenge to Democracy* (Caramani 2017). In this volume, Caramani develops a comprehensive concept of technocracy, conceptualized multidimensionally as a 'type of power,' 'a source of legitimacy,' and a 'form of representation' (Caramani 2020, 3); it is also described as entailing an elitist and holistic notion of the uses of science in politics. Moreover, this concept holds that 'technocracy' can be incorporated into the state and materialize in bodies, policies, actions, and types of actors ('technocrats'). According to the given definition, it also manifests itself as a 'discourse' (Caramani 2020, 16). For Caramani, technocracy challenges democracy because the 'increasing complexity that supra-national and non-majoritarian governance involves' (Caramani 2020, 6) is high, as is 'dissatisfaction' with policy outcomes. The latter is particularly the case during crises, which trigger the demand for expertise.

Without questioning the usefulness of such comprehensive concepts, this article proposes following a deviating conceptual and semantic approach, which is on the one hand more differentiated, and on the other hand less so.

More differentiation is needed in two respects. First, there are structural triggers for the demand for expertise in politics beyond just complexity and dissatisfaction, even though these two are important factors. More specifically, what Caramani describes as 'representative democracy' has undergone significant changes in recent decades and thereby acquired novel characteristics this paper refers to as 'the opacity of democracy.'

Second, as the depth and the extent of incorporation of expertise into politics vary, it makes sense to distinguish between different utilizations of (scientific) expertise, taking as our index the depth and extent of incorporation into the political process and the respective claims to determining policy through expertise (and thereby curtailing democratic will-formation). To this end, this article proposes distinguishing between maximalist (technocracy), moderate (expertocracy), and minimalist (scientific policy advice) forms of expert-based politics. The criterion for differentiation is the extent to which democratic decision-making is to be restricted by the use of scientific expertise. This article's primary contribution is to conceptualize the moderate form of political expertise, which has not yet been adequately explored.

Less differentiation is offered when it comes to which dimension is highlighted in conceptualizing this form. In the following, the focus lies on the dimension of ideology. As Caramani observes, this is because political use of expertise has been historically fused with differing (left-wing, centrist, right-wing) political programmes. Caramani thus argues that ideas and discourses that propose incorporating expertise into politics at the expense of democracy 'can therefore be conceived of in terms of a 'thin ideology' [sic] that can be filled with different content, similarly to populism' (Caramani 2020, 8). This article builds upon this insight by developing a concept of expertocracy as a *thin-centered ideology*.

Thin-centered ideologies can be understood as the somewhat misshapen little siblings of full ideologies. Full ideologies are, following Michael Freeden's descriptive approach, distinct 'configurations of political concepts' (Freeden 1998, 749). Their function in political life is to fix in place the meaning of all major political concepts (such as 'freedom,' 'justice,' and 'equality') and construct a specific 'full morphology' (Freeden 1998, 750) of those concepts. Moreover, they 'need to provide reasonably broad, if not comprehensive range of answers to the political questions that societies generate' (Freeden 1998, 750). The full ideology of liberalism, for example, entails a specific definition of all political concepts and provides broad answers to most political questions. Full ideologies, therefore, are comprehensive, and they provide thorough orientation in political life. Thin-centered ideologies, in contrast, are 'limited in ideational ambitions and scope' (Freeden 1998, 750) and only have a 'restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts' (Freeden 1998, 750). For this reason, they are not viable on their own, as they must be enriched with political content and programmes. An example of a thin-centered ideology is populism, whose restricted core consists of the distinction between 'the corrupt elite' and 'the pure people' (Mudde 2004).

This conceptual approach allows for taking expertocracy's flexible and politically variable character into account. Because supporters (and protagonists) of right-wing populism may opt for expertocracy, just like left-wing political actors do, a concept of expertocracy has to recognize this promiscuous-by-design character as a characteristic feature, take it into account, and relate it to the structural change that is affecting democratic regimes.

On a semantic level, this article deviates from the language typical of the research. As mentioned, the semantics of technocracy is conventional to all normatively problematic uses of expertise in democratic politics (cf. Münkler 2020). However, it makes sense to reserve the expression *technocracy* solely for the maximalist use of expertise. Deploying the semantics of technocracy as a means to critically analyze and semantically mark all

normatively problematic instances of scientific expertise that get incorporated into politics obscures that generally, what is being proposed is the (area-specific) rule of experts and their alleged expertise – rarely is it the 'rule' of technology and technicians being put forward. I therefore argue in favour of using the semantics of technocracy only for the maximalist form, because this is the only form in which the goal is to replace politics (and policy) completely with technology, to replace the political class with technicians overseeing processes of social coordination putatively free from domination and political decision-making.

In the following, I will proceed in three steps. In the first section, I argue that the process of polarization – to which this special issue is devoted and which is transforming democratic regimes – is an important factor in understanding expertocracy. Taking it in isolation, however, obscures other significant transmutations of democracy that are equally important when it comes to understanding the appeal of expertocratic political thought. I am particularly interested in the epistemic dimension of these transmutations because focusing on this factor helps us to identify problems of policymaking and difficulties in generating democratic legitimacy, all of which constitute a breeding ground for the rise of expertocracy. The second section then conceptualizes expertocracy as a thin-centered ideology that occupies a middle position between technocracy on the one hand and scientific policy advice on the other. The third section uses an empirical case – the writings of Luisa Neubauer, a leading figure of the German branch of Fridays for Future and a public activist – to demonstrate and illustrate the usefulness of this concept. The focus is on her book *Vom Ende der Klimakrise: Eine Geschichte unserer Zukunft* (On the End of the Climate Crisis: A History of Our Future), co-authored with Alexander Repenning, in which she outlines her political thought more broadly.[1]

There are three reasons behind the case selection. Firstly, the primary aim of this section is not to draw comparisons between different uses of expertocratic ideology, but to show the usability and usefulness of the concept (which can be used for further empirical research, especially in discourse analysis). It has the function of demonstrating that the phenomenon of expertocracy as a thin-centered ideology actually exists.

Secondly, this case builds on existing research, albeit expanding it only in a rather modest way. In an illuminating study, Zulianello and Ceccobelli have shown that Greta Thunberg's political thinking during the time of her climate activism strongly reflects expertocratic ideology (Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020). The case used here as an illustration ties in with this, as Luisa Neubauer is a German counterpart to Greta Thunberg. The analysis reveals that she merges her activism and her left-wing/green political thought thoroughly with expertocratic ideology. This case also illuminates why expertocracy is, as a thin-centered ideology, better adapted than technocracy and scientific policy advice to the current state of political life in democratic regimes during polarized times and climate change. However, as I explain in the conclusion, expertocracy faces problems of its own that make a triumph for this ideology unlikely.

Thirdly, this rather unusual case was chosen because it produces counterintuitive results – one of these being that expertocratic ideology also appears in the left-liberal spectrum. While it is common knowledge that right-wing political actors draw on expertocratic ideology in certain policy fields to legitimize their policies, not enough attention has been paid so far to the fact that notions of legitimacy like these are also used on the left-liberal spectrum (to which quite a few political scientists themselves belong).

The opacity of democracy

Recent research on polarization has expanded our knowledge on the divide between communitarian and cosmopolitan ideologies (Zürn and de Wilde 2016) and asked which issues are polarized and to what degree, and which social groups play a role in this, and whether country-specific differences exist (Herold et al. 2023). As polarization is increasing, it seems plausible to interpret the rise of expertocratic ideology as a reaction to polarization. And as I will argue below, one aspect of polarization – the contestation of knowledge and information – is indeed key to understanding both the rise of expertocracy and the widely held positive attitudes toward expert rule among the citizenry (Bertsou and Caramani 2022; Bertsou and Pastorella 2017). However, I will also broaden the perspective by constructing an ideal type of structural change in which the contestation of knowledge is only one dimension among four that together form a breeding ground for expertocracy by increasing the opacity of political life in democratic regimes; the corresponding section of the article is theoretical in nature. As indicated in the introduction, the aim here is to conceptualize the transformation of democratic regimes in order to identify and expand on the associated epistemic problems and move beyond the undoubtedly correct statement that politics is complicated and therefore requires expertise.

Firstly, democratic regimes are currently being transformed by politicization (see Adam et al. 2019). This does not only mean that ever more social issues are becoming political, ever more policy areas are arising, and ever more political arenas, institutions, organizations, and actors are emerging. It also means that the construction of a common world of objective knowledge on the basis of facts as 'stubborn things', beyond deliberate choice, is becoming less plausible and is losing its legitimizing function (cf. Hausknost 2023). Due to this process, political regimes and policymakers face an intensifying contestation of claims to authoritative knowledge and factual information, which in turn leads to problems of trust and reliability vis-à-vis epistemic institutions (not only media outlets, but also academic institutions). It also generates epistemic artifacts – such as 'facts' on how costly climate change mitigation will be in specific local contexts – alongside the contestation of epistemic authority more generally (Leiter 2024).

Secondly, as has often been noted, the 'disruptive development' (Sørensen and Warren 2025, 8) of media digitalization is leading to an increase in the number of transmitters of information and political statements. A key novelty is that access to speaking positions is no longer scarce, as it was in the pre-digital media era: What has become scarce, however, is the available attention span of the public and the capacity of human consciousness to process information (Werner 2024).[2] As no functional equivalent to the reduction of complexity by legacy media has yet emerged (Habermas 2022), the result is an excess of complexity that is brought forward by the digitalization of communication. The political competence of elites and citizens has always been limited (Achen and Bartels 2016; Converse 2000; Zolo 1992) and, judged from the perspective of normative democratic theory, insufficient (Dahl 1992). This complexity overload, however, makes it even harder for the citizenry and policymakers to identify public problems, explain or understand their causes, and devise or recognize feasible solutions.

Thirdly, the process of differentiation, a core element of the modernization process, continues. As a result, social and political conditions have become so differentiated that it is no longer possible to describe them in the register of full ideologies. In this respect, the thesis of the end of ideologies (Bell 1960) is correct, insofar as a highly differentiated and at the same time 'liquid' (Bauman 2000) society can no longer be understood by full ideologies (that mirror the intellectual-historical constellation of the nineteenth century, during which the basic structure of those ideologies was shaped). 'Ideologies are in pieces,' Michael Freeden observes, 'dismantled, fragmented, sporadic, discontinuous, even scavenged' (Freeden 2023, 137). Hence, it becomes more difficult to reduce complexity by means of full ideologies that affirm specific political goals and values, define the meaning of political concepts, and offer comprehensive orientation. The citizenry develops a foggy and disoriented consciousness.

Fourth, democratic procedures are in the process of being devalued due to being deficient on the input/output side of the political process (Blühdorn 2020), to which the increasing polarization, volatility, and fragmentation of the party system (Emanuele and Marino 2024) contribute. Even though Little and Meng have recently correctly pointed out that there has by no means been a decline in the number of changes of government and that political competition has not decreased (Little and Meng 2024), a decline in the binding effect of democratic procedures can be observed, as these no longer generate the degree of legitimacy as in prior years. This weakening of the binding effect of formal democratic procedures and the distortion of public deliberation makes it impossible for a democratic will to form and generate valid and broadly accepted reasons for political decisions, which in turn leads to legitimization problems and triggers the rise of populism (Urbinati 2019). These legitimization problems are particularly pressing in the context of the foreseeable end of democratic capitalism, i.e., a situation in which legitimizing political rule by its output (for instance, inclusive economic growth or positive economic prospects) does not emerge to the same extent as during the post-war settlement (Conway 2020; Gordon 2016). Of course, democratic procedures generate legitimacy not only by artificially constructing formal political equality and their output, but also through their deliberative function. In a democratic context, one important function of deliberation is to generate reasons why citizens ought to obey. Due to this transformation, generating mutually acceptable reasons to conform to political rule becomes more difficult for policymakers.

The following table sums up the (epistemic) consequences of the opacity of democracy and the resulting problems for democratic politics and policymaking (Table 1):

The opacity of democracy, alongside other structural changes such as the hollowing out of party democracy (Mair 2013) and context conditions such as the intensifying climate crisis, triggers a demand for alternative modes of politics and policymaking. Expertocracy appears particularly attractive in this regard because it offers the promise

Table 1. The opacity of democracy.

Main drivers	Epistemic effects	Problems
Politicization	Contestation of knowledge	Trust and reliability
Digitalization	Complexity overload	Identification of political problems
Differentiation	Dissolution of full ideologies	Political disorientation
Devaluation of procedures	Lack of democratic legitimacy	Finding reasons to obey

of providing feasible solutions for the epistemic problems I outlined above. More specifically, it promises to improve policymaking by incorporating science-based knowledge and expertise into political life. In the next section, I will suggest how we might conceptualize it and distinguish it from technocracy and scientific policy advice.[3]

The thin-centered ideology of expertocracy

Putnam (1977) and Centeno (1993) provide a good starting point for exploring expertocracy. Their early contributions describe a specific mindset most prevalent among scientifically, academically, and technically trained political actors and politically engaged experts.[4] Building upon those authors, the phenomenological features of this mindset might be described as follows:

- The expertocratic mentality sees itself as anti-ideological and beyond left and right. It describes itself as scientific, rationalist, intellectually superior, and oriented toward the common good. It claims to have higher rationality, owing to its knowledge of scientific procedures and its professional expertise.
- It dismisses political conflict and contestation, all of which are considered irrational, narrow-minded, and/or the result of malicious intentions to distort politically relevant knowledge; it therefore seeks to depoliticize politically relevant information and knowledge.
- Regarding method, it is monistic, i.e., the expertocratic mentality opposes the pragmatic approach of 'do whatever works' or the pluralist 'muddling through,' which is the dominant policy mode in democratic regimes. Instead, it argues for the primacy of a coherent and systematic approach to politics and for applying scientific methods in political life.
- It either rejects democracy in principle (but accepts it for pragmatic reasons as an unavoidable evil) or it regards democracy as a tool that can be used (if properly guided) as an auxiliary instrument for generating legitimacy. According to this mindset, democracy, however, must be restricted at the level of will-formation so that the core principle of political equality does not interfere with scientific rationality and epistemic legitimacy.
- In expertocratic thinking, technical progress and material productivity take precedence over questions of normativity. Expertocracy justifies itself by claiming to pursue objective goals and values. To this end, it applies its procedural and effective rationality, which is considered to be measurable and does not depend on contingent normative considerations within a framework of value pluralism. As a result, expertocratic political thought is skeptical of ideological battles over values and political goals in the public sphere.

If we apply these features, as described by Putnam (1977) and Centeno (1993), to the problems from the first section by expanding the table showing the epistemic consequences of the opacity of democracy and the related problems for democratic politics and policymaking, we can sum up the promises of expertocracy according to the way they appear to offer solutions to those problems.

Here is the expanded version of the Table 2:

Table 2. Epistemic consequences, problems, and the promises of expertocracy.

Epistemic consequences	Problem of	Expertocratic promise of
Contestation of knowledge	Trust and reliability	Depoliticizing knowledge and information
Complexity overload	Identifying political problems	Rationally and reliably defining problems and solutions
2020. the technocratic challenge to democracy. london: routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429342165 Dissolution of full ideologies	Political disorientation among the citizenry	Rationally and reliably defining goals and values
Lack of democratic legitimacy	Finding reasons to obey	Scientifically sound epistemic legitimacy

The appeal of expertocracy arises from its offer of functional equivalents to democratic politics. Thus, it responds to problems that occur in the political process: First, with the promise of incorporating politically useful but apolitical and objective knowledge into the political process, it responds to the problem of dwindling trust and doubts about the reliability of knowledge. Second, it suggests solving the problem of increasing complexity by providing rational and reliable modes of problem identification. Third, it responds to the problem of political disorientation among the citizenry by promising a method for rationally determining goals and values. Fourth, in the context of a devaluation of democratic procedures and of problems in generating legitimacy on the input/output side of the political process, it offers an alternative source of legitimacy.

The fact that for Putnam (1977), a preference for bureaucratic etatism and central planning is among the core elements of the expertocratic mentality, whereas Centeno's account of expertocracy (1993) lacks these features, is indicative of expertocracy's historical, flexible, and time-bound character. Against the background of its historical mutability, as expressed in the different reflections on the phenomenon – one of which took place in the era of social planning, the other in the neoliberal era – the additive set of characteristics given above is helpful as a phenomenological starting point. But what is needed here is a broader concept of expertocracy, one that considers the historically mutable and flexible character of the expertocratic mentality it uses to adapt to changed political circumstances. For this purpose, it is useful to understand expertocracy as a thin-centered ideology (Caramani 2020, 8).

The term *thin-centered ideology* was originally introduced by Freeden (1998), but the concept has become more widely known since Cas Mudde used it in his seminal article on populism (Mudde 2004). According to Mudde, understanding populism as a thin-centered ideology helps us to make sense of the fact that populism is prevalent across the political spectrum, as we have witnessed in neoliberal populism, right-wing populism, left-wing populism, and centrist populism. The same also applies to expertocracy: Like populism, it must be combined with political content and programmes, or else fused with ideologies such as neoliberalism, conservatism, socialism, etc., before it can become politically viable. Conceptualizing expertocracy as a thin-centered ideology thus considers the fact that historically, both the left and the right have pursued expertocratic approaches.[5]

Another advantage of conceptualizing expertocracy as a thin-centered ideology must be noted here: If we restrict expertocracy to a milieu, mindset, or vocational group, we cannot make sense of the fact that the use of expertocratic ideology is not restricted to actual experts. Similar to the ideology of populism, which can be used by members of the political class and socio-economic elites, it is an ideological instrument that can be

used by actors who are not themselves scientific experts. Conceptualizing expertocracy as a thin-centered ideology takes this fact into account.

Expertocracy as a thin-centered ideology

Thin-centered ideologies are characterized by content that is only rudimentarily developed. Nonetheless, they harbour views on the nature of political life and its determining forces and actors. They also entail normative statements on what characterizes good political practice. To become politically operative, they need to be fused with systematic content, something they do not contain at the outset.

Similar to populism – which pits corrupt elites against the people – expertocracy is dualistic and Manichean. It describes the political as being divided between two groups, embodying the 'forces of evil' and the 'forces of good.' According to expertocratic ideology, the political consists of an antagonism between the cognitively and professionally competent on the one hand and cognitively incompetent laypeople on the other. Expertocratic ideology describes these forces in a simplified and monistic manner, analogous to the image of elite corruption and popular sovereignty ('vox populi') in populism. Similarly to the populist image of popular sovereignty, according to which the vox populi can do no wrong, expertocracy suggests that 'science' offers unambiguous and simple answers, explanations, prognoses, and solutions that can be translated into good policy, without taking the conflictual path of polarized, incomprehensible, and irrational politics. In other words, expertocracy maintains that there is a 'vox scientifica' (Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020, 627) that can be more or less directly applied to political life to foster the common good.[6] Expertocracy promises to lead to expert-knowledge-led policymaking, as opposed to power/interest-based decision-making, and that the former is better suited not only to solving collective problems but also to producing outcomes that advance the common good. Related to this simplistic representation of scientific knowledge is the scientistic moralism of expertocratic ideology. The expertocratic ideology discredits as unreasonable, irresponsible, and immoral all those who do ignore, disrespect, or pay too scant regard to the vox scientifica.

According to expertocratic ideology, good policy is science-based policy. It must be determined primarily by scientific research and professional expertise, or at least has to be complemented by these. However, in contrast to populism, expertocracy usually focuses on specific policy areas, for example in climate and environmental policy or economic policy: It does not seek to fundamentally transform the polity into an expertocratic regime. But it may well opt for expertocratic institutional reform, such as the introduction of advisory boards with political authority or expertocratic second chambers with veto powers. Expertocracy stands for an epistemic and scientific rationalization of personal rule. This applies to the political class and officials, who are seen as executors of a scientifically justified, supposedly necessary political programme, but also as a helpful aid – or a necessary evil – in procuring legitimacy. This also applies to the proponents of expertocratic ideology themselves, who appear in public, in the relevant advisory bodies, or in institutional fora, where they represent expert knowledge or their capacity to give voice to the vox scientifica.

According to the ideology of expertocracy, representatives who are democratically elected – but not simultaneously democratically responsive – have the function of listening

to and executing the vox scientifica, implementing scientifically based policy programmes, and representing and justifying this approach to policy to the citizenry. According to expertocratic ideology, politicians are not dispensable, but they are auxiliary. The political class is not supposed to lead. Instead, it must 'listen to the science,' carry out what scientific experts tell it to do, and justify its decisions to the public as being scientifically sound and expertise-based. Expert knowledge should therefore not only inform, support, or adjust political decision-making: It also has to become the main driver and orienting force of political action. According to the expertocratic credo, democratic legitimacy must therefore be supplemented by epistemic legitimacy. And epistemic legitimacy grows out of the vox scientifica, which is represented by scientific experts as its mouthpiece. Hence, expertocratic ideology understands both spheres of action – that of science and that of politics – as compatible (or, more accurately, as in need of combination).

Expertocratic ideology views the existing political institutions as obstacles to rational policymaking.[7] In this regard, three properties of democratic polities are crucial: First, the short-term nature of policymaking due to frequent elections; second, the inconsistent and unsteady plebiscite-in-perpetuity on governments that takes place in the (digital) public sphere; and third, the influence of heterogeneous interest groups on policy, which interpret policy from the perspective of their particular interests, identities, everyday experience, and subjective concerns. For expertocratic ideology, these properties are obstacles to the transfer of scientific knowledge into political life. However, expertocracy sees political life as open to scientification. If science-based policymaking complements (and thereby transforms) politics as we know it, the imponderability of the political process can be minimized by employing expertocratic rationalization.

The moderate position: expertocracy mediating between technocracy and scientific policy advice

As a thin-centered ideology, expertocracy occupies a middle position between technocracy on the one hand and scientific policy advice on the other. It is less sophisticated and demanding than technocracy but goes beyond scientific policy advice.[8]

Technocracy is the utopian imaginary of a totalized scientific engineering of public affairs. It promises the abolition of politics, or else its dissolution into pure administration and social technology. This ideology can be illustrated by Helmut Schelsky's model of the technical state. Schelsky was a leading figure of German technocratic conservatism (Van Laak 2003). He is not particularly well known outside the German-speaking academic community, but his model is still the most illuminating ideal type of technocracy. In his seminal text 'Der Mensch in der wissenschaftlichen Zivilisation' (Man in scientific civilization), he predicts the transformation of the state into a totalized technical apparatus (Schelsky 1961). Politics, Schelsky argues, will be reduced to the function of 'an aid for the imperfections of the 'technical state'' (Schelsky 1961) and wither away in the long run. Technical solutions were already available for public problems such as economic control. For Schelsky, the political goals that the state has to pursue (economic growth, for instance, or employment planning) are no longer up for discussion, since they are predetermined by the inherent mechanisms of technical civilization. Politics was therefore becoming anachronistic, sinking to the level of mere rhetoric. The institutions of democracy continue to exist, but they are only facades, 'like empty shells' (Schelsky 1961, 473) in

which the 'transformation of democracy into the 'technical state'' (Schelsky 1961, 473) takes place. This emergence of a technical state ultimately renders both democracy and politics meaningless and irrelevant.

The ideal type of scientific policy advice, on the other hand, rests upon a Weberian understanding of the relation between science and politics (Weingart and Lentsch 2008). According to the Weberian account, politics and science must be separated, as they constitute different 'vocations' (Weber 1958 [1917]) and entail different ethics. In the case of politics – i.e., the struggle for power – this is a mix between *Gesinnungsethik* and *Verantwortungsethik*. In the case of science – i.e., the struggle for truth – the appropriate form of ethics is the relentless pursuit of truth, even though the results may be immoral, ugly, unpopular, or unpleasant. In this framework, scientific truth can inform politics by giving politicians 'clarity' on what their value decisions entail, informing them about the best means for solving problems, and indicating whether unwanted side-effects or unforeseen conflicts of goals may occur. As a result, advisors may exert influence, and they may also inform politicians about the emergence of specific problems, but they do not fulfil an agenda-setting function. Their work begins after the political agenda has been set and the decision regarding important public problems has already been taken. And even though scientists and experts who engage in scientific policy advice may have their own political preferences – and oftentimes are co-opted into advisory bodies on account of their political leanings – their advice has an instrumental function and a subordinate status.

Expertocracy is located between these two ideal types of technocracy and scientific policy advice. In contrast to technocracy, it does not aim at abolishing politics altogether, and in contrast to scientific policy advice, it aspires to be more than a mere advisory practice. Where scientific policy advice seeks to inform politicians, expertocracy seeks to contain and lead them. According to expertocracy, good policy is science-based. It relies on scientific findings and the professional expertise of scientists, not solely on scientific information. Moreover, it not only claims to be able to scientifically determine, forecast, and evaluate the object, scope, methods, instruments, consequences, and side-effects of governing: It also seeks to set the goals and normative standards of the latter. Expertocracy aspires to an agenda-setting role.

At the pragmatic level, however, expertocracy must mediate its ambitions with the realities of political life, for expertocracy is a thin-centered, programmatically poor ideology and expertocrats are capable neither of vocational politics nor of the daily business of governing. It is therefore not the goal of actors who employ the expertocratic ideology to replace politicians or abolish the political altogether. As Centeno puts it, they need 'someone to do their 'dirty work' for them, and to assure that their policies will be implemented without 'unproductive' resistance' (Centeno 1993, 324). This is particularly important in the context of democratic regimes, because the expertocratic distinction between the competent and the incompetent is antidemocratic. Here, expertocratic ideology relies on an additional, democracy-affirming source of legitimacy and must disguise its antidemocratic orientation (Fischer 1990, 24). As a result, expertocracy views politics with suspicion, but it does begrudgingly acknowledge the complementarity between scientific expertise and real-life politics.

This Table 3 summarizes the three ideal types:

Table 3. Technocracy, expertocracy, and scientific policy advice as ideal types.

	Goal	Means	Status
Technocracy	Scientific engineering of public life in its entirety	Scientific social technology	Priority of science over politics
Expertocracy	Scientification of policies through scientific problem definition and solutions	Implementation of scientific expertise in policy fields. Expert institutions with veto power	Complementarity between science and politics
Scientific policy advice	Specification and solution of political problems	Scientifically sound information with instrumental value for politicians	Subordination of science to politics

Empirical illustration: *On the End of the Climate Crisis: A History of Our Future*

In this final section, I will apply the concept of expertocracy as a thin-centered ideology to an empirical case: a book by Luisa Neubauer, a leading figure of the German branch of Fridays for Future. Neubauer, oftentimes described as the German Greta Thunberg, gained popularity during the heydays of the protest movement, making frequent appearances in mass media as its central spokesperson. In her book *On the End of the Climate Crisis: A History of Our Future*, she outlines her political thought more broadly (Neubauer and Repenning 2019).[9] Even though the book is neither a programme nor a manifesto for the Fridays for Future movement, it is a political tract that emerges from this movement and builds upon its political momentum. The book is co-authored by Alexander Repenning, who is also actively involved in the climate protest movement. Both authors can be classified as being part of the 'civil society elites' (Sevelstedt and Johansson 2024).

'On the End of the Climate Crisis' is a non-fiction book written by two political activists. It combines political statements, analysis, and normative demands with personal recollections and biographical narratives that are supposed not only to highlight the authenticity and moral standing of the authors, but also to give readers a sense of the young authors' sophistication and experience in the ways of the world. The authors (Neubauer is in her twenties, Repenning in his thirties) muse on their travels around the world, their experience with different forms of life and experimental ways of living, and dwell at length on their acquaintance with important politicians, researchers, and prominent media figures.

The book's main aim, however, is not self-aggrandizement but public political impact. In this respect, the book's aspiration is far-reaching. It aims to develop a broad political diagnosis of the main ills of our society, with a view to climate change as the central problem that, according to Neubauer and Repenning, constitutes a fundamental crisis and therefore affects all areas of our lives. In this regard, climate change is the book's main subject, but the authors also seek to spell out comprehensive solutions to many other major contemporary social problems. The book envisions an image of a better, more inclusive, ecologically friendly, more just, and sustainable future of the earth, to which tackling climate change is central.

At first glance, the book's political programme can be labelled as left-liberal with a strong ecological orientation and a focus on political activism. However, the analysis also reveals that expertocratic ideology permeates the whole text. I will demonstrate this by showing how the above-mentioned features and promises of the thin-centered ideology of expertocracy appear in the book and how they are merged with the political programme the authors advocate for.

As a thin-centered ideology, expertocracy requires fusion with political content. In this case, the content is, as already intimated, a left-liberal reform programme that consists of traditional leftist issues: the reduction of working hours, intensification of market regulation, and social justice issues such as the elimination of global inequality, with particular attention paid to race and gender-related dynamics. This is merged with a focus on the importance of political activism and its methods. At the same time, the book focuses on ecological transformation toward a carbon-free and sustainable way of living. Hence, it seeks to combine a strong ecology with classical leftist and emergent social justice issues in the framework of an overarching (though reformist) great transformation.

To this end, the authors refer to real-life models and initiatives for transformation, such as small ecological and non-hierarchical cooperatives and communes; their main examples, however, stem from political reform programmes (such as the Green New Deal), sustainable corporate governance, protest movements such as Fridays for Future, ecologically conscious ways of living (eco-friendly consumption) and prefigurative politics, strategies of activist legalism, and international treaties such as the Paris Agreement.

According to Neubauer and Repenning, these real-life practices and paragons are nonetheless insufficient, because they do not address the fundamental problem. For the authors, this problem is the ignorance of the majority of the Global North's population regarding the fundamental ecological crisis and possible models for comprehensive socio-ecological change. As a result, existing transformative policies remain insular, lack popular support and political vision, and therefore fail to initiate the necessary great transformation. The main problem is, therefore, an epistemic problem. To solve this problem, the authors advocate not just for more activism but also substantiate nearly all of their statements in a way that follows the logic of expertocratic ideology.

The book's description of political life is, to a high degree, dichotomous and Manichean. Among the bad guys that constitute the forces of evil by ignoring climate science, distorting information on the threat of climate change, and neglecting possibilities for improving policy are right-wing populists, conservatives, propagandists and lobbyists of large corporations, and politicians in general (Neubauer and Repenning, 131f.). These are the 'enemies,' in an echo of Sartre's 'know the enemy, combat the enemy' (Neubauer and Repenning, 218). Among the forces of good are Neubauer and Repenning themselves, alongside engaged scientists and experts, climate activists, and courageous maverick politicians who defy the status quo-oriented policy of their colleagues.

The authors expand this Manichean image of political conflict between good and evil by introducing a third group. Unnamed in the book, I shall call them the ignoramuses. Among them are mainly ordinary citizens, but also politicians, journalists, and other public multipliers (Neubauer and Repenning, 138–140), and, in some passages, the older generations or simply 'our parents' (Neubauer and Repenning, 33). According to Neubauer and Repenning, some of them do have abstract knowledge on climate change. And they do know that climate change is dangerous (Neubauer and Repenning, 211). But for Neubauer and Repenning, they do not connect currently relevant social problems to climate change (Neubauer and Repenning, 214) because they cannot grasp the nature and severity of the climate crisis (Neubauer and Repenning, 134). In particular, the ignoramuses fail to draw the right conclusion from scientific knowledge on climate change and on the socio-ecological change that is needed to tackle its implications

(Neubauer and Repenning, 121). One central task of the forces of good is, therefore, to oppose the forces of evil and to 'school' the ignoramuses (Neubauer and Repenning, 33).

The use of expertocracy in Neubauer's and Repenning's book becomes apparent not only in the fact that the authors highlight their own experience in doing scientific 'research' (Neubauer and Repenning, 14), but also in their habit of introducing or underpinning most of their political demands as being the result of scientific expertise. This expertise is often described as being directly applicable to policy, which invokes the image of science that offers coherent, unambiguous, policy-ready problem definitions and solutions. In this regard, Neubauer's and Repenning's style of argumentation is as follows: They usually describe a major public problem or social issue by referring to an expert opinion and then present a prominent scientist who allegedly has 'the solution' for this problem. In one passage that criticizes neoliberal economic practice, they state that 'a big part of the problem' is 'our economy,' which calls for 'a new way of economic thinking' (Neubauer and Repenning, 176). They add: 'Someone who has an answer to this is the economist Kate Raworth' (Neubauer and Repenning). The authors then proceed by outlining Raworth's concept of 'doughnut economics,' a model of a sustainable economy according to which economic practice needs to balance social demands with ecological boundaries. This model is merely that – a model – but Neubauer and Repenning introduce it as a ready-made, fully operable blueprint. Large swaths of the book deploy this scheme of argumentation to countless subjects: problem description, a brief outline of 'the solution' by a prominent scientist or prestigious scientific institution or expert-led think tank, a plea for more activism, then onto the next problem.

In this way, the book gives readers the impression that the scientification of politics it advocates functions something like an all-you-can-eat buffet of unusually high quality, featuring only nourishing, tasty, and much-needed foods that can be chosen and put together at will. Whatever you pick, the result will be good. In this vein, the authors assemble loosely connected political ideas and demands (neo-Keynesianism, ecological austerity, mobility, climate mitigation, distributive justice, restorative justice, higher taxation of the wealthy, ecological localism) and underpin every one of them with the statement of a popular scientist, the voice of an expert, or the reference to a scientific paper, without ever asking whether there is any scientific controversy on the topic or whether incoherencies between these ideas and their implementation might emerge. Instead, the authors speak most of the time of science as a monolithic actor with a unanimous voice. Consider, for instance, this passage on climate change mitigation:

> Why did we call this book *On the End of the Climate Crisis?* We chose this title because we know that, from a purely scientific point of view, it is possible to get this crisis under control … Science ['die Wissenschaft'] not only knows that the Paris Agreement is implementable. It also has a fairly concrete idea of how to do it (Neubauer and Repenning, 249).

It needs to be noted, however, that the book also contains several passages that warn readers against overly rationalistic hopes for technological fixes and explicitly argue against technocracy (Neubauer and Repenning, 86). In these passages, the authors call for emotionally appealing narratives and more effective propagandistic framings to reinforce ecological demands. In other passages, the authors criticize the lack of political imagination and explicitly demand more utopianism (Neubauer and Repenning, 225ff). Ironically, even in this case, some of their statements are introduced as being based on

scientific expertise from social psychologists, philosophers, and futurologists, i.e., experts on crafting narratives and devising future imaginaries (see Neubauer and Repenning, 240). The book can therefore also be interpreted as a political project that serves to mobilize hope and counteract climate anxiety by highlighting options for action. From this perspective, the main goal of the book is not only to inspire bolder visions of the future, which are often dismissed as mere daydreams, but also to lend these visions more legitimacy by describing them as scientifically sound and evidence-based.

The book's image of the vox scientifica suggests that science speaks with a unanimous voice that, if supported by more activism, can directly be translated into good policy and political life, which otherwise will continue to be dominated by ignorance and greed. This moralistic image of political life also suggests that opposition to the allegedly science-based solutions is either motivated by ignorance or egoism. The proper solution not only for climate change but also for many other social problems would be to apply scientific findings to policy – without consideration of the fact that, in most sciences, there is a plurality of perspectives and viewpoints. The direct translation of scientific findings into policy is usually impossible, because nearly all scientific disciplines methodologically isolate their subject matters from real-life political contexts. What is more, political will-formation follows a different logic than the formation of scientific theories or viewpoints; I will return to this phenomenon in the conclusion.

As a result, Neubauer and Repenning argue for a scientification of any policy that systematically neglects this problem and suggest an agenda-setting and policy programming role for science. This, they emphasize, needs to be done democratically. However, they never explain how the free and pluralist competition for political ideas – a key feature of democratic regimes – could be reconciled with their notion of the vox scientifica. At the same time, they argue for scientific methods of public relations management, framing (Neubauer and Repenning, 124ff.), and instrumental persuasion techniques such as emotionally appealing narratives (Neubauer and Repenning, 140). It is worth noting that besides these techniques of social control – accompanied by a voluntaristic rhetoric of 'let's do this!' – the procedures for forming a political will, a particularly important element of political life in democratic regimes, play only a very minor role in the book.

The book's image of political life is negative and gloomy. Ordinary politics mostly appears ignorant, egoistic, and short-sighted. But, as already indicated, professional politicians are not solely represented by bad guys: According to the book's narrative, they in fact constitute a heterogeneous group whose members can also be found among the ignoramuses as well as the forces of good. What is more, Neubauer and Repenning do not argue for de-professionalizing political life altogether or opt for a radical change of the political system as a whole: Instead, they argue for the complementarity of the vox scientifica and the existing regime of (professional) politics. To this end, and with a view to the existing institutional order, they demand reform, in particular by establishing a 'future council' with veto power on all matters of legislation and with its own legislative competence – without explaining the procedures by which the offices of this council might be filled (Neubauer and Repenning, 116, 231). The book ends with a list of practical techniques for organizing protests. Its major task is to give the findings of climate science more political leverage (Neubauer and Repenning, 261).

It needs to be noted that parts of the book gravitate more towards scientific policy advice and display rather loose appeals to science to advance political propositions. At

the same time, it makes use of all four of the above-mentioned promises of expertocracy. It suggests that it is possible to overcome the contestation of knowledge and information by applying scientific findings to policy. In the book's representation of scientific expertise and its political utilization, science speaks with a unanimous voice that not only allows for the rational and reliable definition of problems, but also contains comprehensive and coherent solutions, which can be put together at will, for all major social, economic, and ecological issues. The book's main message is that all the needed expertise and knowledge on how to create an ecological and just world is already there: We simply have to put it into practice! For Neubauer and Repenning, there is also no problem with value and goal pluralism in translating science to politics. According to the book's image of scientific expertise, this expertise also offers a rational and reliable definition of political goals and values. Science seems to offer neutral and objective solutions to objective problems. As such, scientific knowledge and expertise are the book's main source of legitimacy. This is remarkable, for this is after all a book written by two political activists from a climate protest movement. As a product of this milieu, it also pays its dues to the usual participation talk and has long passages on the need to organize protests. According to Neubauer and Repenning, without the 'pressure of the masses' (Neubauer and Repenning, 256) and a broad coalition of engaged civil society actors, businesses, and professional politicians, the necessary great transformation will not happen. Despite this statement, their approach toward climate change and social problems is dominantly epistemic and expertocratic. It draws its claim to political authority from the suggestion it has access to – and merely echoes – the vox scientifica.

Conclusion

I have argued that expertocracy should be conceptualized as a thin-centered ideology. This ideology reacts and has adapted to recent transformations of democracy and responds to specific contextual conditions, such as the looming climate crisis. Furthermore, its flexible character allows it to be opened up to application in heterogeneous domains, without recourse to full ideological commitments that do not match the increasingly fluid character of political affairs in 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000). However, this does not mean that it remains unchallenged or is becoming a hegemonic ideology. Rather, expertocracy may itself be confronted with fundamental problems that make its triumph unlikely. These problems are fundamental because they cannot be solved.

Its first fundamental problem is that although the ideology of expertocracy is less obviously antidemocratic than technocracy, it nevertheless based on the preference for competent experts over incompetent laypeople. Unlike in scientific policy advice, knowledge claims of experts take precedence, and experts are entrusted with setting the political agenda. This has antidemocratic implications, because democracy is relativistic on the input side of the political process, i.e., it does not prejudge the validity of knowledge claims prior to deliberation and will formation, which also applies to existential threats such as climate change (Arias-Maldonado 2022). Any use of the ideology of expertocracy must therefore disguise its antidemocratic orientation and cover it up with a rhetoric that is affirming democracy and democratic politics. Therefore, any expertocratic discourse always runs the risk of being exposed as hypocritical and is confronted with a fundamental *coherence problem*.

The second problem arises at the level of implementation. In any social science, it is necessary to isolate the issue of study methodologically; to narrow it down analytically and thereby construct it as an object (Jasanoff 2005). In this respect, all objects of research are artificial constructs, and the respective research interest, the research question, and how the object is constructed result from the value decisions that researchers base their research on. This is unproblematic when it comes to research. But because democratic politics has to deal with value pluralism, problems arise if the results of research are to be applied in policy. While in research it is possible to establish a stringent relationship between a goal determined by a value decision (climate mitigation, for example) and a policy that achieves this goal, this is not possible in real-life policy, as compromises have to be made between conflicting goals and values. And that is why research can ignore the interference of its object of study with other policy areas, but practical policy cannot. For this reason, in the context of democracy it is impossible to translate scientific findings directly into any form of social engineering. Therefore, if the ideology of expertocracy is not only used for the purpose of politics but also for policy, it is confronted with a fundamental *implementation problem*.

Lastly, any use of the ideology of expertocracy relies on a deceptive depiction of science. As social heterogeneity is also reflected in science (Nowotny 2000, 20), science is pluralistic in that not all scientists make the same value choices and on many politically salient issues, there is no research consensus. Even in an area where there is a very high degree of unanimity, namely climate research, there is no agreement on which models should be used to forecast climate futures, nor about what measures should be taken or what policy instruments should be chosen based on the consensus surrounding the anthropogenic causes of climate change. Against this backdrop, it is important to note that the IPCC is a 'hybrid science-policy body whose reports are both scientific documents and agreed outcome of an intergovernmental process' (Beck and Oomen 2021, 172). Its ability 'to speak with one voice' (Beck and Oomen, 272) is a consequence of its institutional structure, which is designed to build consensus and highlights its embeddedness in normative-political contexts. As a result, its proposals for ways to mitigate climate change are part of a 'politics of anticipation' (Beck and Oomen 2021) that legitimizes specific policy options and invisibilizes others.

The extent of this disagreement increases when it comes to scientific disciplines that are closer to politics, such as the social sciences. Here, disagreement is the norm. The ideology of expertocracy, however, pretends that 'science' speaks with one voice: the vox scientifica, of which the expertocratic ideologue is the mouthpiece. But as soon as scientific findings, research, and expert opinions enter the political arena and are used for political purposes, resulting in their exposure to public scrutiny and confrontation with counter-expertise, the image of a unanimous 'science' crumbles and the fundamental problem of inflated expectations arises. In the end, the imaginary of a supposedly unanimous vox scientifica then becomes like the Wizard of Oz. It makes quite an impression from a distance, but the closer you get, the more obvious it becomes that there is not much behind the curtain.

Notes

1. All translations from German into English by the author.

2. The widely held belief that 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' have led to a more parochial media use and a restriction of political viewpoints that users of social media are confronted with does not withstand empirical scrutiny (Bruns 2019). In fact, social media use has increased viewpoint diversity.
3. The following section is based on Selk 2023, 114–133.
4. Similar to contemporary analyses, Putnam and Centeno use the umbrella term 'technocratic' for this mindset, whereas I argue that we should distinguish between technocracy, scientific policy advice, and expertocracy. What Putnam and Centeno are describing is close to the ideal type of expertocracy I describe.
5. See, for instance, Dargent 2015; Etzemüller 2009, 2010; Huneeus 2000; Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020. The authors use the terms 'technocracy' and 'social engineering' to describe what I refer to as expertocracy. On the overlaps between populist and technocratic political thought see Bickerton and Ivernizzi Accetti 2015.
6. The concept of vox scientifica was introduced by Zulianello and Ceccobelli (2020).
7. See the descriptions of democracy documented by Hendriks from experts involved with the Dutch energy transition program: 'democratic institutions are viewed as myopic and interest-based,' 'they create instabilities and inconsistencies' (Hendriks 2009, 350).
8. A fourth type is epistocracy. Epistocrats are critics of democracy for whom the knowledgeable (i.e., the well-educated) should rule (Brennan 2017; Willke 2016). Unsurprisingly, this critique is almost exclusively brought forward by academics. For a critique see Bagg 2018 and Kiik 2024. For a concept of epistocracy as an umbrella term for 'knowledge-based rule' and its various sub-dimensions, see Holst 2012.
9. I am aware that publishers who aim at mass markets employ professional editors and journalists who heavily edit, and sometimes in fact co-author, the books that are written by prominent figures who appear on the book's cover.

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