RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 22/07/2026 | aceito: 25/07/2026 | publicação: 28/07/2026

The Scope of the Concept of Technocracy in Public Policies With an Economic Focus From Norberto Bobbio's Perspective

A Amplitude do Conceito de Tecnocracia em Políticas Públicas de Fundo Econômico em uma Perspectiva de Norberto Bobbio

La Amplitud del Concepto de Tecnocracia en las Políticas Públicas de Carácter Económico Desde la Perspectiva de Norberto Bobbio

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Abstract: In his book The Future of Democracy, Norberto Bobbio argues that "technocracy and democracy are antithetical", for while "democracy is based on the assumption that everyone can decide on everything", technocracy, on the contrary, "assumes that only those few who possess specific knowledge should be called upon to decide".
In this context, this article aims, initially, to present a brief overview of the ideas developed by Bobbio regarding democracy, its paradoxes, obstacles, and unfulfilled promises.
From this point, to provide a more in-depth analysis of the difficulties and perspectives of technocracy in the perception of a society's democratic model, and then analyze how technocracy is present in a very intense way in public policies related to economic aspects in contemporary society and how the distance from the perception of democratic control over economic decisions can, on its own, be a threat to democracy itself.

Keywords:
Bobbio. Democracy. Technocracy. Public Policies.

Resumo: Norberto Bobbio articula em seu livro O Futuro da Democracia, que "tecnocracia e democracia são antitéticas", pois, se a "democracia sustenta-se sobre a hipótese de que todos podem decidir a respeito de tudo", a tecnocracia, ao contrário, "pretende que sejam convocados para decidir apenas aqueles poucos que detêm conhecimentos específicos".
Neste contexto, pretende-se, no presente artigo, inicialmente, apresentar uma breve contextualização das ideias desenvolvidas por Bobbio a respeito da democracia, seus paradoxos, obstáculos e promessas não cumpridas.
A partir deste ponto, contextualizar de forma mais aprofundada as dificuldades e perspectivas do aspecto da tecnocracia na percepção do modelo democrático de uma sociedade, para então analisar como a tecnocracia se apresenta de forma bastante intensa nas políticas públicas ligadas a aspectos econômicos na sociedade contemporânea e como o afastamento da percepção de controle democrático de decisões de cunho econômico pode ser, por si só, uma ameaça à própria democracia.

Palavras-chave:
Bobbio. Democracia. Tecnocracia. Políticas Públicas.

Resumen: Norberto Bobbio articula en su libro El futuro de la democracia, que "la tecnocracia y la democracia son antitéticas", porque si "la democracia se basa en la hipótesis de que todo el mundo puede decidir sobre todo", la tecnocracia, por el contrario, "pretende ser llamada a decidir solo a aquellos pocos que tienen conocimientos específicos".
En este contexto, se pretende, en este artículo, inicialmente, presentar una breve contextualización de las ideas desarrolladas por Bobbio sobre la democracia, sus paradojas, obstáculos y promesas incumplidas.

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Desde este punto, contextualizar de manera más profunda las dificultades y perspectivas del aspecto de la tecnocracia en la percepción del modelo democrático de una sociedad, para luego analizar cómo la tecnocracia se presenta de una manera muy intensa en las políticas públicas vinculadas a los aspectos económicos de la sociedad contemporánea y cómo la eliminación de la percepción del control democrático de las decisiones económicas puede ser, en sí misma, una amenaza para la democracia misma.

Palabras clave:
Bobbio. Democracia. Tecnocracia. Políticas Públicas.

1. Introduction

The Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio approached democracy analytically, highlighting throughout his production the relevance of the procedural character of this regime of government, with emphasis on his work "The Future of Democracy - A Defense of the Rules of the Game". Democracy is described as a method of government that contemplates the broad participation of those interested in the formation of collective decisions, in which Bobbio stresses the importance of principles such as universal suffrage, civil rights, decisions by majorities and protection of the rights of minorities as essential elements of democracy. However, he identified six promises not fulfilled by the democratic system, pointing to obstacles such as the increase in the demands arising from the emancipation of civil society, the growth of the bureaucratic apparatus and the emergence of political problems that require technical skills, leading to the rise of technocracy as an antithesis to democracy in contemporary society, where experts begin to have protagonism to the detriment of the ordinary citizen.

The interaction between technocracy and democracy raises crucial questions about the power of technocrats, which often influence political decisions based on a supposed depoliticized technical consultancy. This progressive shift of power from political leaders to technical experts can compromise democratic representativeness by undermining trust in the democratic system.

The question that permeated this article is: would economic issues be even more likely to undermine democracy? The growing emphasis of the economic area on technocracy reflects the complexity of the challenges faced by contemporary societies. The emphasis on technical decisions, widely disseminated as unique and objectively correct, ends up moving away from popular scrutiny and participation, which can represent not only an obstacle, but also a threat to democracy.

The clash between the technical approach and the political sphere emphasizes the importance of reflecting on the complex relationship between economics, technocracy and

democracy, especially in the face of the significant challenges that this interaction presents in contemporary societies and in times of democratic crisis like the current ones.

2. Democracy According to Norberto Bobbio

Norberto Bobbio was an author who treated the topic of democracy in an analytical way, democracy being one of its great themes. In his work The Future of Democracy – A defense of the rules of the game, the philosopher warns that he does not intend to make any bets on the future (BOBBIO, 2023, p. 65). Its intention was to reflect on the current state and the contradictions of democratic regimes.

For him, democracy, in its essence, is a system of government that includes a set of guidelines for the elaboration of group decisions, allowing and encouraging the broad participation of the parties involved.

The text was written by Bobbio in 1984, and aimed to reflect on the transformations of democracy, given that, in his opinion, it was not a regime that enjoyed “great health”, although it was not “on the edge of the tomb” ((BOBBIO, 2023, P. 23).

While the philosopher indicates that despotism is a static regime, equal in itself, democracy presents itself as a form of dynamic government.

One aspect to be highlighted in Bobbio’s notes on democracy is the essentiality given by him to its procedural character, in which there is a minimum set of rules, which are the essence for the democratic regime to be understood as such. The most important thing is not the morality of these rules or the content of what comes from it, but rather the procedure itself, in a more behavioral than substantive description.

One can remove from his writings four main criteria that define what democracy should be (ANDERSON, 1989, p. 28), the first of them, the adult suffrage, equal and universal, in which the right to vote is as broad as possible, with all votes with equal weights; secondly, civil rights that ensure the free expression of opinions and the free organization of the currents of opinion, in which everyone is free to vote, with their opinion freely formed and possible choice between several different solutions. In addition to these, decisions taken by numerical majorities, even if there may be different types of majority (simple, qualified, for example) for the adoption of various measures and finally, the guarantee that the rights of minorities are protected from any abuse by the majority.

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According to Bobbio,

> [...] all these rules establish how to reach the political decision and not what to decide. From the point of view of what you decide, the set of rules of the democratic game does not establish anything, except the exclusion of decisions that would in any way contribute to make one or more rules of the game vain . (BOBBIO et al., 1998, p. 327)

His idea is the defense of a minimum definition of democracy, centered on a set of rules of procedure for the formation of collective decisions, in which is foreseen and facilitated the broadest possible participation of stakeholders (BOBBIO, 2023, p. 35-39).

The essential function of this democracy is to ensure the negative freedom of citizens in relation to the possible prepotence of the state. There would be an irreducible nucleus of the constitutional state, in which on the one hand, there are civil rights at the level of the individual and on the other, a representative assembly at the nation level (ANDERSON, 1989, p. 28-31).

For Bobbio, the only possible democracy would be liberal democracy representative or indirect, despite the fetish that has for direct democracy that, in the thought of the philosopher, is impractical in the face of the complexity of modern societies.

It is in this broad context that the author makes a reflection on the contrast between democratic ideals and what can be called “real democracy”, highlighting the differences between what was promised by democratic regimes and what was, effectively realized by them. The project of democracy would have been conceived as noble and high, but imagined for a much less complex society than the current one. Bobbio deals with six promises that have not been fulfilled (BOBBIO, 2023, p. 41-68).

2.1 The Paradoxes and Obstacles Faced by Democracy

The first of the unfulfilled promises, according to Bobbio was the birth of pluralistic society. If the initial idea was a society founded on the “individualistic conception of society” in which political society is an artificial product of the will of individuals, what predominates and presents a protagonism are the groups and not the individuals. The second was what he called the “rematch of interests” – there is a widespread presence of the imperative mandates, in which political representation is actually a representation of interests.

The persistence of the oligarchies is the third unfulfilled promise according to Bobbio. The inspiring principle of democratic thought was freedom as autonomy, and representative democracy was a first renunciation of this autonomy. Democratic governments today do not

have an absence of elites, but rather the presence of many elites in competition with each other for the conquest of the popular vote.

The promise of democracy was that there should be an increase not only in the number of those who have the right to participate in decisions, but also that there would be an increase in the spaces in which this right could be exercised, but what one would see today is what he called a limited space, with a decrease in the spaces in which democratic decisions could be exercised.

The invisible power would be the fifth unfulfilled promise, since next to a visible state there would always be an invisible state, which would oppose the promise of the transparency of power. According to Bobbio, the current danger would be in the fact that “computer crastry” would allow the ruler to have control of the governed.

Finally, the sixth unfulfilled promise would be in the existence of the uneducated citizen. The promise is that education for democracy would arise in the very exercise of democratic practice, but rulers prefer passive citizens. Today, the phenomenon of political apathy, which involves about half of those who are entitled to vote, would be increasingly common.

All these promises were not fulfilled because of unforeseen obstacles or arising from the transformations of civil society. The first of these obstacles was a certain emancipation of civil society from the political system, which brought to tow an inexhaustible source of demands for which the government must give an adequate response. The speed and quantity of these demands makes with a constant mismatch between expectations and attendance, generating a permanent “social conflictuality” (CADERMARTORI, 2017, p.28). Democratic power tends to be fragmented and difficult to compose, and this conflict is generally greater in democratic regimes than in autocratic regimes.

A second obstacle pointed out by Bobbio is those arising from the vast bureaucratic apparatus, which is ordered hierarchically in the opposite direction to the democratic system of power. This obstacle is almost a consequence of the first obstacle described above. The increase in demands on the part of civil society makes the state, in an attempt to serve them, have to increase its bureaucratic apparatus. In other words, in order for the State to execute and realize the “will of the people”, there is a need to set up an autocratic organization, with specialized agents and appointed by power.

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Then the third obstacle passes, upon which we will stop in more detail. The emergence of political problems that require technical skills, which they call by experts, the experts who are the only ones capable of making the decisions. Then there is the technocracy, the government of technicians, the real antithesis to democracy. In the words of Bobbio:

> Technocracy and democracy are antithetical: if the protagonism of industrial society is the expert, it is impossible for it to become the ordinary citizen. Democracy holds on the hypothesis that everyone can decide on everything. Technocracy, on the contrary, intends to be called upon to decide only those few who hold specific knowledge. (BOBBIO, 2023, p. 59)

3. Technocracy – Difficulties and Perceptions

At this point, it is essential to deepen ourselves in the details of the significance of technocracy in contemporary democratic societies. A crucial aspect to consider is the growth and relevance attributed to technical decisions.

With the expansion of universal suffrage and the inevitable increase in social demands, there is a consequent hypertrophy of the state apparatus to meet such demands, seeking to promote social well-being and security, which, ironically, seem to distance themselves as new demands arise. Although we do not delve deeper here into the paradox of the unreassuability of social demands as democracy progresses, it is undeniable that the democratic state tends to expand in the quest to meet such demands.

In contemporary societies, more and more problems arise with solutions that always seem to require a technical expertise, and this need is often transferred to the state level. One of the main challenges of these societies is that they would become excessively complex to be governed exclusively by the direct participation of the people, which sometimes causes the act of governing to approach a technocracy. In this context and in a society in which technological advances make state functions increasingly complex and specialized, a gap arises between the alleged incompetence of most citizens and the skills of the few who have the necessary technical knowledge to deal with these issues. Effective management of these societies requires a combination of a "political class" and a class of technical and scientific experts who possess the knowledge necessary to manage an increasingly diverse and interconnected state machine, which means that in modern societies we have an elite formed predominantly by technicians. The risk here is that this administration dominated exclusively by experts represents the exclusion of the voice and interests of the majority, resulting in a population detachment from the decisions that impact their lives.

One of the ramifications arising from this imbalance is an isolation of technocrats, in which the majority of the population, realizing that this gap results in their inability to effectively influence decision-making, can put itself in a position of certain political disinterest and distrust in the system. The general perception that public administration constitutes a large, hierarchical, bureaucratic bloc - something almost inevitable in a complex society - nurtures the idea that there is no possibility of democratic control over that administration. The belief that only experts have the capacity to participate in this administration arises as a huge challenge to the participation and democratic legitimacy of a society.

This dynamic can fuel a sense of civic disengagement among ordinary citizens, who find themselves turned away from the decisions that impact their lives. The distance between technocrats and the majority of the population can not only undermine the feeling of belonging and representativeness, but also erode trust in the democratic system itself.

It is precisely at this point that the obstacle foreseen by Bobbio arises, when confronting technocracy, which perhaps has an inevitable part in modern society, with democracy, which advocates decision-making based on experience and not strictly on knowledge - going to the limit of the idea that everything must be decided by the collective. There is a perception that as decisions become more technical, they also become less political, progressively moving away from popular sovereignty.

But where does the power of technocrats come from? Technocrats hold the power to influence political decisions from a technical consulting place, which would supposedly be emancipated from political issues, prioritizing depoliticized decision-making and based solely on competence. In this context, technocracy leads to an emptying of the role of leaders in public administration in favor of experts, since they take up the space of politicians. Decisions of a political nature, which are naturally subjective and discretionary, yield ground to an approach that is theoretically grounded in scientific calculations and predictions, free from any discretionary bias.

This point, especially when it comes to aspects related to public policies related to the economy tend to tension, as it will be seen, very much democracy.

4. The Scope of the Notion of Technocracy in Economic Public Policy Areas

In this scenario, the economic area assumes an increasingly prominent role in relation to technocracy. Complexity arises largely due to the constant, and always camouflaged, influence of the ideological view on the critical and scientific perspective. Those who put the

economy in the spotlight tend to view technocracy as an alternative to power, in which efficiency and competence dominate to the detriment of the political sphere, seen by them as a center of incompetence and ineffectiveness. This dynamic reveals an apparent conflict between the technical approach and the political arena, suggesting a tension between different forms of governance and decision-making.

As highlighted by Bobbio, democracy arises when social problems can be addressed by freely elected governments. In this context, it is very clear the importance that political life, which is permeated by conflicts, has flexible and adaptable mechanisms to deal with the diversity of interests and opinions present in society (CADERMARTORI, 2017, p. 39-40).

On the other hand, it is intriguing to observe how Bobbio, throughout his work, pondered the possibility of extending democratic principles to the economic sphere of society. He has often demonstrated a pessimistic tone in relation to the viability and effectiveness of democracy in this specific context, by the complexity of economic relations, but also by the concentration of power and resources, and by the very dynamics inherent in the capitalist model. (BRANDÃO, 2013, p. 172)

Bobbio's reflections, presented in this article, extracted from his work "The Future of Democracy – a Defense of the Rules of the Game", were largely elaborated in the 80's, a period marked by a significant transformation in economic theories driven by neoliberalism. At that time, ideas such as efficiency, meritocracy, individualism, balance and others had not yet been distorted by the way we see today in various spheres of contemporary life, from labor and political relations to the most common aspects of everyday life. The technocratic principles have also not escaped this transformation, in which many decisions considered as techniques are increasingly approaching a uniquely neoliberal vision.

The influence of neoliberalism has shaped not only economic practices, but also the perception and application of fundamental concepts in various areas of society. The exacerbated appreciation of efficiency and competition, the emphasis on the search for profit and the maximization of individual interests to the detriment of the common good, are clear reflections of this neoliberal context. These transformations echoed in the technocratic sphere, where technical decisions often reflect a perspective aligned with the neoliberal market pillars and deregulation.

However, in the economic sphere in particular, it is common to find a technocratic garment that emphasizes the need for the prevalence of a supposed technical and neutral aspect. For technocracy, it is crucial to maintain an image of impartiality and untying of any ideology, however paradoxical this claim may seem. Technocrats seek the justification that their primary

goal is to seek "systemic efficiency." Miguel Angel Centeno, in his article The New Leviathan: the Dynamics and limits of Technocracy states that

Can we define a technocratic ideology? Probably technocrats would deny any loyalty to a specific dogma beyond the pursuit of systemic efficiency. They would state that their recommendations deal only with the means to achieve ends that are defined in political arenas outside their control. If technocrats recognize and support an ideology, it is a rejection of ideological constraints. (CENTENO, 1993, p. 311)

This belief is held by the (false) premise that there is a purely scientific method behind the choice of solutions to economic problems, and that this method is realistic, rational, and efficient. The underlying belief is that in the face of certain challenges, there is only one answer - the best possible solution. This mentality seeks to legitimize the authority of technocrats and their ability to make decisions based on a supposed objectivity and technical expertise, disregarding, in many cases, the multidimensionality and complexity intrinsic to economic problems.

The search for efficiency and the solution considered optimal, eligible from a technical perspective, often obscures the political, social and ethical nuances involved in economic decisions. The apparent neutrality of technocracy can therefore mask choices that reflect specific interests, power hierarchies, and certain worldviews, opposing the ideal of objectivity. Understanding these dynamics is essential to question and re-evaluate the role of technocracy in the formulation of economic policies and their impact on society as a whole.

In the words of sociologist Miguel Angel Centeno:

> This belief is accompanied by the assumption that rationality is beyond dogmatism and that scientific analysis knows no ideology. The adjective preferred by technocratic leaders and administrators is "pragmatic" (...). The technocratic legitimacy is based on the appeal to scientific knowledge. This statement accompanies an implicit and often explicit rejection of “politics” as something inefficient and possibly corrupted. (CENTENO, 1993, p. 313)

The American sociologist brings up an intriguing comparison between technocracy and theocracy, suggesting that, in a way, both have similarities. While theocracy relies on a dominant and explicit ideology, with its loyalty to the regime grounded in religious precepts, technocracy, according to the definition presented, involves the administrative and political domination of a society by a state elite and allied institutions that seek to impose a single exclusive political paradigm based on the application of rationally instrumental techniques. (CENTENO, 1993, p. 314)

Although it is undeniable that contemporary society has become more complex and that the expertise of technicians and experts is fundamental in the formulation of public policies, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that the definition of problems and the perception of complexity are not strictly objective, but rather influenced by political considerations. By adopting the belief that the technical solution is neutral and devoid of bias, in reality, one is making a political choice by favoring a certain approach to the detriment of other possible ones. The apparent neutrality of technocracy may, in a way, mask the political bias underlying technical decisions.

Again, we bring the conclusion of Miguel Centeno:

> The transformation of a "political" decision into a "technical" decision may have less to do with the inherent complexity of the matter and more to do with the interests of those who benefit from the exclusion of those who are no longer able to participate. While technical influence will increase in response to technological change, technocratic control will be a function of an elite's ability or a set of institutions to limit participation to those fluent in specialized languages. (CENTENO, 1993, p. 318)

The apparent objectivity and unquestionability of technical decisions tend to move them away from broader debates and make them virtually immune to large-scale popular participation. By proclaiming themselves as legitimate, objective and distant solutions from the uncertainty inherent in the political sphere, technical approaches end up detaching themselves from the democratic control inherent in political decisions.

Economic issues are especially captured by technocracy. They are usually complex and arid themes for most people, full of technical terminology and elaborate concepts. Moreover, the economic sphere is of paramount importance to the elites, since control in this context is essential for the maintenance of power, after all, it is where "money is".

However, although the majority of the population may consider economic discussions to be difficult, technical and inaccessible, the reality is that the economy intensely affects people's daily lives. Issues like wages, food prices, inflation, pensions, taxes - all of these have direct impacts on everyone's daily life. Even if the technical aspect of these decisions escapes the understanding of the general public, the effects of the measures adopted by the experts are certainly felt in practice by people.

The alleged neutrality of technocrats in the economic sphere, together with the notion of a supposed single answer, rational, correct and efficient, hides behind concepts such as fiscal balance, reckoning, interest rates, budget law, independence of the Central Bank, monetary policy, foreign exchange policy, just to name a few. These terms are often presented as holders

of the only technical and certain solution, while any other perspective on their application is disqualified as biased, irresponsible, incorrect and motivated by interests, ignoring that even the supposed uniqueness of these concepts is shaped by interests, often those of the great economic elites.

This approach reminds us of the beginning of this article, a central point raised by Bobbio: the distance of technicians from democratic control, evidencing an obstacle to democracy. And in our view, not only an obstacle, but also a threat. Economic difficulties are perceived as a great source of discontent and helplessness, especially when the decisions that shape them are not subject to discussion and democratic participation. This scenario of exclusion can result in a sense of frustration that can easily be exploited by populist leaders who promise simplistic solutions and present themselves as "against everything that is there", further driving people who find themselves in a state of apathy to a place far from democracy.

Final Considerations

Given the current context that has been observed of democratic fragility, it is essential to rethink the role of technical experts in the formulation of economic policies, promoting greater transparency, inclusion and dialogue with society. The guarantee that economic decisions are subject to democratic scrutiny and that the multiple perspectives are considered is essential to strengthen the legitimacy of public policies and preserve democratic principles in the face of contemporary economic complexities

Bobbio’s writings on the minimal concept of democracy, its paradoxes and obstacles served as a substrate for reflecting on the complex relationship between technocracy, democracy and power interests in contemporary society. The apparent objectivity and neutrality of technical decisions often reveal themselves as veiled tactics to ward off democratic control and perpetuate specific interests, disregarding the diversity of perspectives and the effective participation of society. The rise of technocracy as an antithesis to democracy highlights the importance of questioning and rethinking the role of technical experts in policymaking, ensuring transparency, inclusion and genuine dialogue with the population to preserve democratic principles amid current economic and political complexities. This critical analysis highlights the need to overcome the identified obstacles, such as the distance of technicians from democratic control, the capture of the economic sphere by technocracy and the exclusion of popular participation in decisions that directly impact the daily life and well-being of society.

The need for active engagement of citizens, through the promotion of a more transparent and inclusive policy, ensuring that public policies truly meet the needs and interests of the community, thus strengthening the foundations of democracy.

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