

# Decision-makers, advisers or educable subjects? Policymakers' perceptions of citizen participation in a Nordic democracy

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## Funding information

Åbo Akademi University Foundation; Academy of Finland, Grant/Award Numbers: 312676, 333013

## Abstract

The perceived disconnect between policymaking elites and citizens has intensified demands for citizen engagement in democracies, but we know little about policymakers' attitudes towards increased citizen involvement. This study presents an in-depth, mixed-methods analysis of participatory views of politicians, public officials, and interest group representatives in Finland. We first utilize a unique survey battery presented to representative samples of policymakers ( $n = 675$ ) and ordinary citizens ( $n = 1701$ ). We then perform a qualitative content analysis for 24 in-depth interviews of high-ranking policymakers to explore reasons for the observed attitudes. We find that while citizens strongly support participatory attitudes, policymakers are more skeptical, especially when participation threatens their control of the policy process. Elite skepticism stems mainly from low trust in citizens' capacity to deal with complexity, and to relieve the pressure to engage citizens more elites support learning-based methods. The broad citizen-elite attitude gap may require re-negotiating representative mandates in the future.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

A dominant feature in the much-discussed crisis of representative democracy is a perceived disconnect between ordinary citizens and ruling elites (e.g., Norris, 2011). Among citizens, the rise of populism, which includes the idea that ordinary citizens should have more say in politics (Canovan, 1999), has expanded participatory demands beyond traditional circles of democracy activists. Simultaneously, technocrats have called for an even narrower role for ordinary citizens, as their lack of expertise may jeopardize the sophisticated engineering of complex societal challenges (Caramani, 2020). A sizable gap appears to be emerging between elites and masses on the question of how and to what extent citizens should participate in democratic decision-making (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020).

Due to disciplinary specialization, the perceptions of citizens and elites on citizen engagement have been studied separately. Predominantly, the research has focused on citizens' views, typically showing that citizens want more inclusion and direct engagement (e.g., Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bowler et al., 2007; Webb, 2013). Only a few empirical studies have examined what policymakers think, despite their key role in developing the democratic process and the impact that broader citizen engagement would have on their power position.

Some recent studies (e.g., Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Junius et al., 2020) gauged the views of elected representatives, revealing a reserved attitude towards citizen participation. While these studies advanced our understanding of elites' attitudes, the contrast to citizen attitudes was only assumed and the studies covered only a limited and likely not the most important elite group—elected politicians. Democratic innovations seldom have substantive decision-making powers and do not directly affect politicians, giving politicians weak incentives to oppose them. Democratic innovations are typically ascribed an advisory role during policy preparation, where they are more likely to interfere with the work of civil servants and other policy experts—who typically design and implement new participatory mechanisms. Therefore, to gain a more realistic idea of the views of policymakers, studies on elite perceptions should also include non-elected policymakers. Importantly, to determine the width of the gap between citizens and elites, their views need to be compared with equal measures.

To advance these important debates, this study presents an in-depth mixed-method analysis of the participatory views of various policymaker groups in Finland. By utilizing unique quantitative and qualitative data, we study (1) how and to what extent elites want citizens to participate, (2) how elite groups differ, (3) how elites' views compare to the views of citizens, and (4) what explains the gap from the elites' side. We first use a novel survey battery that measures attitudes concerning citizens' role in a democracy. The battery was presented in identical form to both a representative sample of the Finnish policymakers ( $n = 675$ ) and a representative sample of Finnish voters ( $n = 1701$ ) allowing a genuine anchoring of elites' attitudes. Then, to gain a more nuanced understanding of elite attitudes, we perform a qualitative content analysis for 24 in-depth interviews of the leaders of Finnish environmental policy, including elected representatives and non-elected experts in parliament, ministries and major lobbies.

Due to the relatively underdeveloped state of the field and the limited empirical scope of this study, we conceive it as a “plausibility probe”; a preliminary exploration of new ideas that claims no strict empirical generalizability (Eckstein, 2000). We nonetheless consider Finland as a suitable and particularly interesting case. Nordic countries have comprehensive education systems, high civic literacy and flat social hierarchy—societal characteristics, which should foster greater capacity for deeper citizen engagement (e.g., Kangas & Kvist, 2019; Milner, 2002). In this context,

policy-makers should be generally more trusting of citizens' civic capacity, and thus elites' negative assessments would suggest that similar problems likely exist in less supportive contexts, too.

## 2 | ATTITUDES TOWARDS CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Understanding policymakers' perceptions about the appropriate role of citizens in the democratic process has significant normative and practical relevance. From a normative standpoint, the role of citizens is a key feature that distinguishes different conceptions of democracy. Participatory and elitist theories of democracy hold widely contrasting views on the extent of citizen involvement; while elitist conceptions limit the role of citizens to electing democratic leaders, in participatory models citizens participate more actively in decision-making (Held, 2006; Nylén, 2003). Citizen participation beyond voting has, perhaps most notably, been conceptualized through the "ladder of citizen participation" by Arnstein (1969), which describes different degrees of citizen influence over the policymaking process. The lowest ladders, which comprise "nonparticipation", are characterized by manipulation of the public (opinion) by the powerholders, without any meaningful citizen participation. The intermediate stage, termed "tokenism", includes three ladders: "informing", "consultation" and "placation", in this ascending order. As the word tokenism implies, at this level citizen influence over policymaking is characterized by symbolism, but also by some degree of genuine impact. Going beyond the mere act of "informing" the public, "consultation" entails a certain level of concrete participation and "placation" suggests that the elite no longer can ignore citizen involvement. The three highest ladders, collectively termed "citizen power", assign citizens different degrees of authority over policymaking. "Partnership" denotes equal influence by both groups, "delegated power" refers citizens having the dominant position, although decision-making power has been given to office-holders and, finally, "citizen control" describes a policymaking process where ordinary citizens hold ultimate power. Arnstein's ladder illustrates the forms that citizen participation in democracy can take, depending on how much formal influence citizens are given, in relation to elected and non-elected officeholders.

Previous scholarship has almost exclusively examined citizens' views on how the democratic process should be arranged. As Goldberg et al. (2020) summarize, dissatisfaction with current representative democracy increases citizens' desire for more participation opportunities, regardless of what those are. It is not equally clear how policymakers interpret the push for more citizen participation, which they have likely experienced through public discourse, empowerment initiatives and the consolidation of populist parties (see e.g., Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020 and Gourgues et al., 2021 for discussion). While the participatory ethos aligns with the hopes of many citizen groups, unifying "strange bedfellows" like radical democrats and populists, the situation probably seems more complex in general from the policymakers' viewpoint and their reactions are likely to vary across different elite groups. For elected politicians, who the citizens seem to blame for the democratic malaise, supporting citizen engagement at least verbally could be electorally beneficial. Administrative and other non-elected elites (lobbies, etc.) have different incentives, as their career is generally less dependent on votes. Bureaucracies and pressure groups typically consist of highly trained experts who have managed their policy field for a long time, developing a deeper "ownership" of the issues, which likely diminishes their willingness to share control with citizens.

Despite their key role in democratic governance, only a handful of recent studies properly address policymakers' attitudes toward increased citizen participation. Through interviews with 51 senior national-level ministers from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada

and the United States, Hendriks and Lees-Marshment (2019) demonstrated that politicians value citizen input. However, politicians only saw value in “informal consultations” that occur in isolated, casual contacts with citizens. They considered formalized procedures for deeper citizen engagement too rigid, suggesting it is little more than a public relations exercise. It is noteworthy that these politicians primarily represented countries with two-party dominance. Compared to multiparty systems with broad coalition governments, two-party systems offer a clearer accountability link between voters and representatives. While enhancing voters' claims for a stronger participatory role, a clear representative link may also bolster politicians' confidence to exercise their mandate and not share it.

Junius et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative survey analysis of state and regional-level representatives' attitudes towards democratic innovations in fifteen European countries. They found that representatives with a conservative or rightist ideology, and who adhered to the “trustee” model of representation, were less supportive of referenda and deliberative events, whereas a leftist position predicted more support. The findings reflect the traditional ideological divide between political parties: left-wing parties have typically favored more inclusive and membership-driven practices also within their organizations (e.g., Koskimaa, 2020).

Moreover, policymakers from different policy areas may hold different attitudes. Comparing the practices for citizen participation in foreign policy and environmental policy in Germany, Pfeifer et al. (2021) found the latter to be a more fruitful setting for citizen involvement. Using interviews, participant observations and official documents, the authors concluded that while foreign policy may require the kind of expertise that citizens seldom can possess, they are typically much better equipped to handle environmental issues. Consequently, policymaker attitudes may not only be driven by ideas about representation or a lust for power, but by practical realities of modern complex governance that in recent decades have become emphasized over group representation in party-based governing (Mair, 2013).

The question of how much influence democratic innovations exert over policymaking can also be crucial. According to conventional wisdom, the direct impact of deliberative events and similar mechanisms is relatively insignificant (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Johnson, 2015). If so, policymakers could show support for broader citizen engagement, as it might increase their legitimacy without giving away power. However, even in such cases citizen involvement might have indirect and temporally distant effects, for example, through a slow transformation of attitudes among policymakers or by triggering new policy processes (Jacquet and van der Does, 2020). Therefore, citizen engagement might weaken policymakers' control over the agenda, which gives policymakers yet another reason to oppose it.

In the only existing direct comparison of citizens' and policymakers' attitudes towards deliberative citizen forums, Koskimaa and Rapeli (2020) demonstrated a sizable gap between citizens and policymakers. Using representative samples of Finnish citizens and policymakers, they measured support for items that varied in the power given to the citizen forum. Citizens were much more trusting across all items while elites were equally unenthusiastic about giving any authority over policymaking for the forums. As deliberative citizen forums are a particular form of citizen engagement, the generalizability of these findings is limited. Still, the idea that policymaker attitudes might depend on the powers of democratic innovations is important.

One could also picture a situation where someone opposes democratic reforms that concern his/her own “jurisdiction” while supporting them elsewhere. National-level policymakers may be hesitant about giving citizens more influence on the national level policy processes that they control and where issues are typically complex, but they may find local level policy-making a more appropriate venue for deeper citizen engagement, as local issues are often simpler and

shifting responsibility there does not entail power sharing at national level. Naturally, one's preferences on varying methods and arenas of citizen participation do not necessarily have to be strictly unidirectional and mutually exclusive: a radical democrat likely supports all imaginable avenues of citizen engagement while an autocrat supports none of them.

Overall, the scarce available evidence suggests that policymakers' attitudes towards a deeper citizen engagement are less supportive than citizens' attitudes. However, the more fundamental question regarding the nature of policymakers' attitudes towards *the role* of citizens in democratic governance and especially *the reasons* behind them remains largely unexplored.

To provide answers, we firstly ask what are the elites' views regarding the nature, depth and arenas of citizen engagement in a modern democracy? (RQ1) Based on previous research and our reasoning, the guiding assumption is that the elite is more supportive of citizen engagement that does not directly and concretely interfere with the national-level policy process (H1). In Arnsteinian terms, the general expectation is that the higher up the ladder of participation we climb, the less support there is among policymakers. To increase the perceived legitimacy of the democratic process, elites can be expected to support participation, which does not limit their decision-making power or interfere with the political process controlled by the elites. In similar vein, national-level elites who comprise our empirical scope, might also be more supportive of participatory initiatives that belong to a different "jurisdiction", that is, to municipalities and other arenas of local level policymaking. That bears no costs for them personally and national policymakers could plausibly consider local-level policies to be more suitable for citizen involvement, as a contrast to the more complex issues at national-level.

Secondly, are elected or non-elected policymakers more supportive of deeper engagement? (RQ2) The expectation is that elected politicians are more positive towards deeper citizen engagement than non-elected policy experts, because only politicians directly depend on citizen support for remaining in a position of power (H2). Although severe legitimacy issues would eventually also harm public officials and lobbies, electoral support is no major concern for them. Moreover, since public officials and pressure group experts are highly trained policy professionals with in-built "ownership" over policy issues, they are likely to be skeptical towards input from lay citizens.

Thirdly, to set a proper baseline for elite attitudes, we examine how they compare with those of citizens (RQ3). Based on earlier research, we assume that policymakers, overall, hold less favorable views of citizen engagement than citizens do (H3). The voices advocating expanded citizen involvement as a countermeasure for the failures of representative democracy have grown stronger in recent years among the public, especially among progressive democrats, but also populists. Policymakers are unlikely to be equally enthusiastic, as it would reduce their power and undermine their role in policymaking. Policymakers could also be genuinely worried over citizens' capacity to grasp complex policy issues.

Finally, we analyze what might explain elite attitudes towards citizen engagement? (RQ4) Since our answer to RQ4 will mostly follow from an explorative analysis of interview data, we do not present particular a priori assumptions.

### 3 | DATA AND METHODS

We combine survey and interview data in a sequential mixed-methods approach. This analytical strategy allows us to first document policymakers' attitudes towards citizen participation (RQ1-3) using surveys and then go beyond this mostly descriptive analysis, to tease out underlying factors behind the attitudes through a qualitative analysis of interview data (RQ4).

The first part utilizes two novel surveys. *The elite survey*, conducted in Finland in November 2018, was designed to measure elite opinion on, among other topics, citizen participation in democratic governance. The target population consisted of national-level decision-makers: members of parliament (including government ministers), the central governing organs of extra-parliamentary parties, people working in parliamentary party offices and national party headquarters, mid-to high-ranking public officials from all government departments, special government bureaus and governmental research agencies (e.g., the Finnish Environment Institute) and the largest special interest groups. The population contained 2555 individuals. They were contacted through personal work emails with an invitation to participate in a web survey. Altogether 675 respondents (26.4%) provided complete answers to the entire questionnaire. The data is highly representative of the target population as regards gender and occupational status. The data is rare in being representative of national-level, policy-making elites in an established Western democracy. A web-based *survey of the general public* was carried out in March 2019. The sample ( $n = 1701$ ) is representative of the Finnish voting-age population in terms of age, gender and place of residence. The respondents were recruited using quota sampling from a respondent pool administered by Qualtrics. The items concerning the role of ordinary citizens in democratic governance were identical in both surveys.

### 3.1 | Dependent variables

We use four survey items to measure attitudes toward citizen participation in decision-making processes:

- (i) “Citizens should have more direct and binding decision-making power at the national level (e.g., referendums, participatory budgeting)”
- (ii) “Citizens should be heard more and have more advisory power at the national level (e.g., agenda initiatives, deliberative forums)”
- (iii) “Citizen engagement (at the national level) should be strengthened by improving civic skills through education (for example), hearings, information campaigns”
- (iv) “Citizen participation should be increased in local level decision-making”

Corresponding to the “ladder of participation” framework by Arnstein, the first three represent different types of involvement by citizens in national-level politics, ranging from direct and binding decision-making powers to receiving civic education. The fourth item gauges respondents’ attitudes towards local level participation, without specifying the level of involvement.

In most analyses (except Figure 1), we use dichotomized conversions of these items. While some nuance may be lost by converting the respondents into either supporters or “non-supporters” (including those who answered “don’t know”), it makes the results convenient to interpret. We conducted a robustness check using OLS regression with the full range of responses and found no meaningful changes to the results. For variable coding and descriptive values, see Appendix A.

### 3.2 | Independent variables and covariates

The elite survey includes several variables that can help explain the elites’ attitudes. However, to guarantee respondent anonymity and maximize participation in the survey, more intrusive

questions (e.g., party choice) were not included. Our analysis focuses specifically on the occupational role of the political elite and we have divided the respondents into three groups. The first group includes party politicians and officials. By separating them from the others, we can distinguish between policymakers whose role and significance depends on electoral success, and those who remain in a position of power regardless. The second group includes public officials, and the third comprises special interest group representatives.

We also include several covariates: socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education), job tenure, how strongly the elites identify with their (unnamed) party of choice and how often they discuss politics. The education variable included in the survey only differentiates between educational orientations, not the level of education. The main reason for focusing on educational orientation rather than level is that a university degree or equivalent is extremely common among the respondents. We differentiate between those who have a social science degree, and who are probably more familiar with the topic of citizen engagement, and those with some other degree. Furthermore, we include two items measuring a general opinion of citizens' democratic capabilities and opinion of democratic innovations as a way to increase the legitimacy of democratic politics. A test for multicollinearity revealed no issues for the proposed regression models (see Appendix A for variable coding and VIF-scores).

### 3.3 | Interview data

In the second part, we analyze 24 in-depth interviews of high-ranking policymakers to get a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the observed attitudes. The questions regarding attitudes towards citizen engagement were asked in interviews, which also dealt with questions of long-term decision-making. We chose the environmental policy sector, because its general focus on long-term issues (on a transnational scale) and elite-driven science-based planning, combined with the increasing pressure on policymakers to present solutions within the institutions of electoral representative government, reflects the tension between responsiveness and responsibility that underlies all basic conceptions of democratic representation.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted during the spring of 2018 and produced around 24 h of material. All interviewees belonged to the absolute top-tier in environmental policy in Finland and they represented the most important institutions that participate in the policy process in the environmental sector. As per mutual agreement, the interviewees' names are withheld to ensure anonymity (but see Appendix B for sample details).

We performed a qualitative content analysis with Atlas.ti on the transcribed interviews. Instead of seeking a generalization based on statement frequency, we sought to capture the complexities and nuances underlying policymakers' attitudes. Therefore, all insights, regardless of frequency, were considered important in the coding process. Out of the 24 interviewees, 22 provided relevant material. The ones that did not were both corporate executives, who, unlike the others, have a distant relationship with democratic institutions (see Appendix B).

Due to the relatively unexplored nature of the theme, we followed Hendricks and Lees-Marshment (2019) and opted for an open, exploratory approach, with an inductive and data-driven coding strategy. In the first round of coding, we extracted all segments that communicated a positive or negative assessment of citizen engagement. By focusing on "both sides of the coin" we sought an understanding of the elites' perceptions, as abstract concepts like societal engagement are seldom conceived in definitive unilateral terms. The segments were also categorized according to the principal reasons that were used to explain, justify or

reflect the assessment. These include, for example, negative assessments based on the capacities of citizens or the established roles of representative institutions, while positive assessments predominantly concern varying complimentary participation methods. Overall, 14 different thematic categories were extracted in the initial coding round. Due to the generality of the initial coding criteria, and because the interviewees represent many institutions and differ in response style, the categories include varied depictions of the same principal theme. The presentation below is organized according to the main categories, which are nuanced through the detailed reasons.

We secured the accuracy of the coding through several strategies. In the first round, we coded the full segments, which varied in length and detail, and through careful iterative reading, we reflected them internally and against the surrounding statements, to determine whether we had interpreted the meanings of the segments correctly. In the second round, all coded segments (74) were re-assessed (1) internally, to secure that their content conceptually matched the theme of the category and (2) externally, relative to the other segments that were coded into the same category. In the iterative process, some thematic categories and segments were deleted due to their unclear connection to the studied themes, or combined with other, conceptually similar categories. This produced a final classification with 60 segments coded under seven broad thematic categories. In the third round, we produced summaries of the main contents of the thematic categories, employing the summaries of the coded segments, which we developed during the previous phases to enable fast comparison of segments. Here, the segments' internal and external conceptual fit was assessed one more time, leading to some transfers. Due to space limitations, we only report the summaries, without direct quotations.

## 4 | ANALYSIS

### 4.1 | Quantitative analysis

The findings from a descriptive analysis of the elites' attitudes towards citizen engagement (RQ1) seem straightforward and logical: the higher up the ladder of participation, the less elite support there is for citizen engagement (Figure 1). Around 30% of the elite agree with the statement "Citizens should have more direct and binding decision-making power at the national level (e.g., referendums, participatory budgeting)", while 70% disagree. However, only 6% of the elites agree completely with the statement. When citizens are portrayed to have an advisory role rather than direct influence over the decision-making, support grows significantly. Almost 60% agree at least somewhat with this suggestion. Support for the suggestions that the civic skills of citizens should be improved and that citizens should have more influence over local level decision-making is even more substantive with more than 80% of the elites agreeing. In line with H1, the findings clearly show that elites are least supportive of giving citizens direct and binding control over decisions and more supportive of less influential citizen engagement, such as information campaigns or hearings. As the interview findings also show, the main threshold lies between binding and non-binding participation. The former concretely weakens the elites' hold of the policy process while the latter allows limiting citizen input to information and advice.



Next, we examine whether different elite groups view citizen engagement differently (RQ2) and how their views compare with citizens (RQ3)? We find distinctive differences between different groups, most notably for the item suggesting that citizens should have more direct and binding decision-making powers (Figure 2). Elites are only half as likely as citizens to favor more direct decision-making by citizens, but there are significant differences across elite groups. Among politicians and party group representatives almost half support more decision-making by citizens, while less than a quarter of the civil servants agree. The opinions of interest group

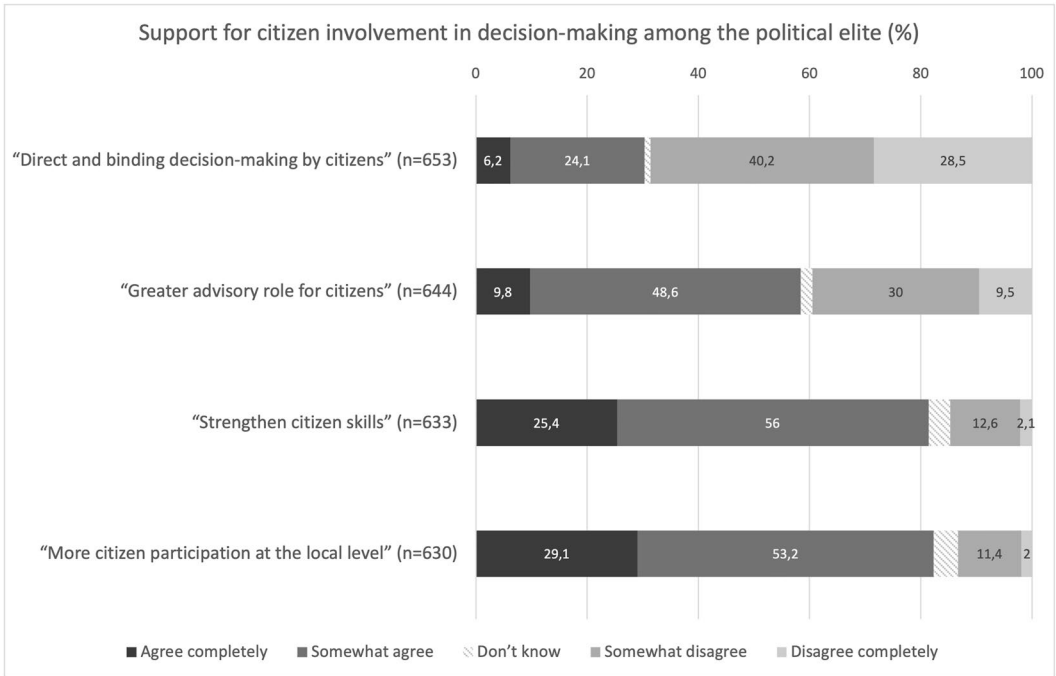


FIGURE 1 Elite attitudes towards citizen involvement in decision-making (see p. 8 for full statements).

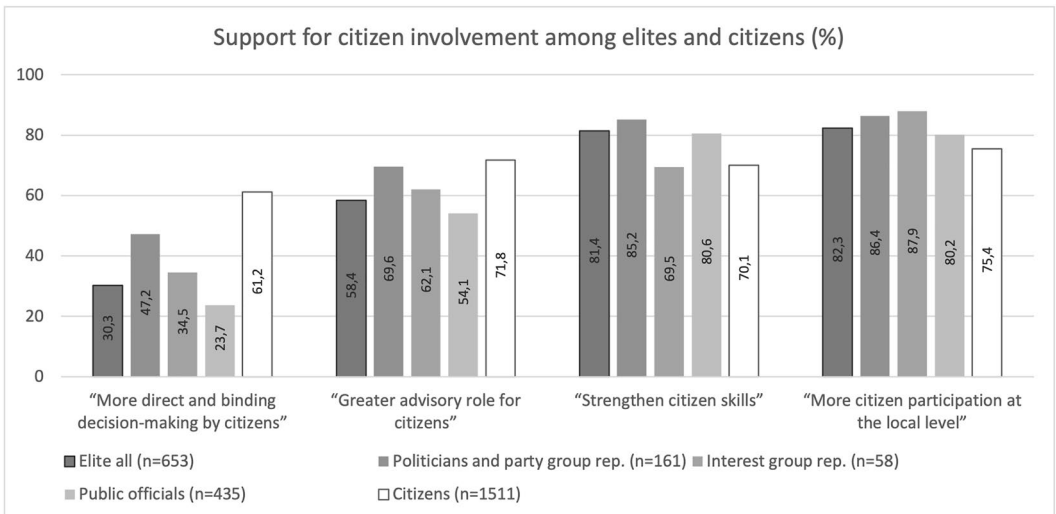


FIGURE 2 Attitudes about citizen participation in different elite groups and among citizens. Share (%) agreeing with statements regarding citizen influence (see p. 8 for full statements).

representatives are found between the two other groups, with 35% supporting more direct decision-making for citizens.

In the item measuring whether citizens should have a greater advisory role in the political process, we again see more support among citizens than elites. However, the difference is much smaller than for the suggestion that citizens should be involved in making the actual decisions, again underlining that the main threshold is between binding and non-binding forms of participation. Policymakers find this suggestion almost as acceptable as citizens. Public officials are again more skeptical and only half of them support giving citizens a greater advisory role. This largely aligns with H2 since elected politicians are generally more positive towards deeper citizen engagement than non-elected policy experts. However, the difference is most notable regarding citizens' having more direct and binding influence over decision-making.

Interestingly, regarding the suggestion about strengthening citizens' skills, citizens are more skeptical than the elite: 85% of policymakers support strengthening civic skills, while 80% of citizens share this opinion. The suggestion that there should be more citizen participation at the local level is the most popular overall and there are no dramatic differences between the groups, although even here public officials are least supportive. It is easy to see why national level policymakers and citizens can find common ground here: compared to the current representative institutions at municipal level, citizens would gain more power without forcing the national level elite to give away power.

Overall, elite attitudes fluctuate more than citizen attitudes across the levels of citizen engagement. For citizens, there is only a nine percentage point difference in support for more direct and binding decision-making powers and strengthening citizen skills, whereas the gap for public officials is almost 60% points. Citizens seem to be equally interested in all types of engagement, while elites favor less intrusive changes to the policy process. As expected, civil servants are most disapproving of citizen demands. They are much more skeptical of giving citizens influence over policies and more eager to strengthen citizens' skills, compared with citizens themselves. Hence, in line with H3, elites hold less favorable views of citizen engagement than citizens, but only when it concerns more substantive citizen participation at the high-end of the ladder. The gap between citizen and elite attitudes also depends greatly on which elite group is compared to the citizens.

The final part of the quantitative analysis reports a regression analysis, which includes multiple determinants explaining elite attitudes toward citizen engagement (Table 1). The regression analysis serves primarily as a more advanced test of H2, according to which we expect politicians to have a more positive attitude toward including citizens in the decision-making process.

We ran two separate regression models (A and B) for each of the items measuring attitudes toward citizen participation. The B models include two covariates missing from the A models, "Innovations to increase legitimacy" and "Believe in citizens capacity". We decided to run two separate models for each type of citizen engagement since these variables have significant explanatory power, but they could also be associated with the dependent variables. Although we cannot here adequately address the possible linkages between the covariates and the dependent variables, their prominent role in the qualitative analysis (see below) makes it, as we argue, important to run models that also include these variables. VIF-scores suggest multicollinearity is no apparent cause for concern. Additionally, we ran all models using logistic regression (see online Appendix) as a robustness check since the dependent variables used in the OLS models are based on four categories. The outcome of these models closely resembled that of the OLS models.

In models 1A, 2A and 4A, we identify a significant effect for occupational role. Civil servants are substantially less likely than politicians to think that citizens should have influence over decision-making or even an advisory role. The B models indicate that the occupational role is less

TABLE 1 OLS regression models for each of form of citizen participation

	Model 1 "Direct and binding"		Model 2 "Advisory role"		Model 3 "Citizen skills"		Model 4 "Local participation"	
	1A	1B	2A	2B	3A	3B	4A	4B
Independent variables								
Public officials (reference group = politicians)	<b>-0.42 (0.09)</b>	<b>-0.23 (0.08)</b>	<b>-0.26 (0.08)</b>	-0.08 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)	<b>0.17 (0.07)</b>	-0.09 (0.07)
Interest group rep. (ref group = politicians)	<b>-0.30 (0.13)</b>	-0.11 (0.12)	-0.24 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.10)	0.17 (0.11)	-0.11 (0.10)	<b>0.20 (0.11)</b>	-0.10 (0.10)
Covariates								
Age	0.28 (0.38)	0.52 (0.34)	0.00 (0.35)	0.46 (0.29)	<b>-0.95 (0.30)</b>	<b>-0.65 (0.29)</b>	-0.26 (0.30)	-0.11 (0.29)
Gender	<b>0.17 (0.07)</b>	0.08 (0.06)	0.12 (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)	<b>0.12 (0.05)</b>	0.06 (0.05)	0.12 (0.06)	0.04 (0.05)
Social science degree	<b>0.21 (0.08)</b>	0.13 (0.07)	0.13 (0.07)	0.07 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	<b>0.15 (0.06)</b>	<b>0.13 (0.06)</b>
Discuss politics regularly	0.07 (0.07)	0.02 (0.08)	0.07 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)	0.08 (0.06)	0.02 (0.07)	<b>0.06 (0.06)</b>	<b>-0.16 (0.07)</b>
Party identification	0.05 (0.09)	0.16 (0.11)	0.00 (0.08)	0.03 (0.10)	0.01 (0.07)	0.08 (0.10)	0.12 (0.07)	0.16 (0.10)
Job tenure	0.22 (0.13)	-0.01 (0.07)	0.12 (0.12)	-0.04 (0.06)	0.09 (0.10)	0.04 (0.06)	0.16 (0.10)	0.01 (0.06)
Innovations to increase legitimacy	<b>0.95 (0.14)</b>	<b>0.95 (0.14)</b>	<b>0.95 (0.14)</b>	<b>1.22 (0.12)</b>	<b>0.91 (0.12)</b>	<b>0.91 (0.12)</b>	<b>0.77 (0.12)</b>	<b>0.77 (0.12)</b>
Believe in citizens capacity	<b>1.14 (0.12)</b>	<b>1.14 (0.12)</b>	<b>1.03 (0.10)</b>	<b>1.03 (0.10)</b>	<b>0.24 (0.10)</b>	<b>0.24 (0.10)</b>	<b>0.51 (0.10)</b>	<b>0.51 (0.10)</b>
Adj r <sup>2</sup>	0.06	.31	0.02	.37	0.03	.15	0.03	.17
N	643	602	635	596	624	589	619	582

Note: Bolded values =  $p < 0.05$ , standard errors in brackets. Dependent variables coded on a four-step scale 1–4. All independent variables standardized to vary between 0 and –1. Max VIF for all models: 1.6 (occupational role). Min VIF for all models: 1.01 (gender). Mean VIF for all models: 1.25. Coding and descriptive statistics for each variable in Appendix A.

important if we account for the respondents' attitudes toward democratic innovations and the capabilities of ordinary citizens. However, even under these circumstances, public officials display significantly more negative views than politicians toward the suggestion that citizens should be able to engage in direct and binding decision-making. Overall, however, the impact of occupational role seems to largely align with the findings from the descriptive part of the analysis. Hence, despite some variation between the different modes of engagement, there appears to be substantial support for H2.

While the main purpose of the covariates is to test the robustness of the differences in elite attitudes, some findings deserve highlighting. In the B models, which include the two additional variables, we find that general attitudes about democratic innovations and citizen capacity play an important role when explaining attitudes toward citizen participation among policymakers. There is a remarkably strong positive relationship between thinking that democratic innovations can be useful for increasing legitimacy of democratic decision-making and attitudes toward involving citizens in the decision-making process across all four models. A similar, and equally expected, finding is the positive relationship between believing in the democratic capacities of citizens and the attitudes towards involving citizens in decision-making process. However, this relationship is strongest for the more demanding forms of citizen participation (direct participation and advisory role) and a little less pronounced, albeit still statistically significant, in the two other models. In other words, policymakers who do not believe in citizens want to educate them and policymakers who believe in citizens, think that citizens should have more influence.

Overall, quantitative analysis shows that elites become considerably more reserved towards deeper citizen engagement when the question turns to national level participatory methods, which interfere with policymakers' work in a more obligatory fashion. In the following, elite interviews provide a more nuanced explanation of why the elites feel this way.

## 4.2 | Qualitative analysis

Although our method is not based on quantitative inference, for the overall interpretation of the results it is important to note that the final coding scheme includes a nearly equal number of negative (29) and positive (31) segments and both types existed in almost all interviews. Indeed, a critical evaluation was often followed by an examination of possibilities, or vice versa. Together with the survey findings, this observation demonstrates that the general attitude among policymakers towards citizen engagement is not a unilateral for/against dichotomy. In general, policymakers reject binding citizen participation at national level politics, but they feel rather positive about non-decisive engagement at subnational level. Combined, the positive and negative assessments portray a multilayered conception of ideal citizen engagement, which, as we interpret, seems reasonable and coherent from the perspective of the sampled policymakers. We now describe the main categories through the more detailed reasons given, beginning from those that emphasize negative assessments.

In general, policymakers' skepticism towards citizen engagement relates to two broad factors: citizens' low personal qualities that make them unable to self-govern, and a belief in the traditional organization of representative democracy, where elected decision-makers produce policies. In the interviewees' accounts, these attitudes usually related to national-level decision-making, often connected in a mutually reinforcing fashion.

We coded the segments concerning the qualities of citizens into two categories: one relating to citizens' capacities to process information and the other relating to citizens' motivations to engage. Combined, policymakers see them as leading to procedural challenges that endanger

democratic equality. In detailed reasoning, the interviewees questioned citizens' (1) *informational capacity* to deal with complex and abstract issues like climate change mitigation or social welfare system reform, which could be challenging even for experts; (2) *determination and procedural skills* to manage long and tedious preparatory processes; (3) *lack of a sense of proportion*, as citizens might over-emphasize minor details at the expense of crucial interests; and (4) *inability to make "tough choices"*. Regarding the citizens' motivations, the interviewees noted (1) citizens' *lack of broader governing responsibility* as they typically get involved only when they want something specific and (2) the general *human tendency to support particularistic and often personal interests*, challenging the normative notion that broader citizen engagement would automatically lead to more objective or better decisions. Combining skill- and motivation-based reasons, the interviewees voiced skepticism towards the ideal of equal representation, which more inclusive participation methods sometimes claim to enhance. Referring to a famous experiment in participatory policy preparation, where individual citizens were invited to prepare a revision of the off-road traffic law (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2013), it was noted how the highly educated urban professionals had much more impact on the result than rural residents, who were more affected by the law, because the former possessed more relevant resources, especially information processing and procedural skills. The interviewees also noted a related risk that emerges if organized interest groups "infiltrate" the participatory process to advance their own goals.

In the two other negative main categories, perils of citizen participation relate to both the normative and practical qualities of democratic systems. Overall, the interviewees adamantly maintained that in a modern democracy, public decision-making is not a task for citizens, but for representative institutions. They provided several reasons to clarify this position: (1) *layered representation* through elections is simply the established order of things, making independent, non-partisan representation seem "unnatural"; (2) allotting power to non-institutional actors breaches the *constitutional responsibility of representative organs* to serve the public exclusively; and, again, (3) distributing power beyond the formal decision-making apparatus would open a *possibility for organized interests to "hijack" the representative process*, leading to uneven representation of interests. In a more technical sense, the interviewees noted that (4) *a modern information-intensive policy process* would simply not work without the expertise and assistance of ministerial branches and experts, which the interviewees consider as a part of the governing machine, in the vein of the core executive model (Rhodes, 1995). Furthermore, the interviewees pointed out that (5) *connecting new participatory mechanisms to established decision-making processes* would be difficult, expensive and likely lead to ineffective outcomes. Finally, reflecting a traditional theoretical argument in very practical way, it was also noted that (6) *new participatory avenues would limit the powers of established institutions*.

Despite some variation, overall these observations present a cohesive view, which helps us understand the lukewarm feelings among policymakers towards deeper citizen engagement, which especially concerns the policymaking capacity of citizens at the national level. Underpinning these reasons, we detected a general sense of uncertainty, which we interpreted as signifying a fear of losing control over the policy process. It seems to originate from deep skepticism towards citizens' decision-making ability and the potentially dangerous outcomes that a more open process ensues. Policymakers seem confident that there is a significant gap between the capacities and resources of policymakers and citizens, and deficiencies among citizens make them incapable of making informed decisions. The other side of the equation seems equally important. Policymakers are worried about what unequal distribution of capacities and resources among citizens could entail for the policy process. Here, a significant additional factor is the possibility that organized interests fill the vacuum by "infiltrating"

the participatory process, by “overtaking” it and using it for their own benefit. These worries reflect policymakers’ “ownership”—or “custodianship”—of the process, which they see as legitimate.

The positive assessments deepen the multilayered perspective of the interviewees that were already visible in the survey. They show what type of engagement policymakers consider favorable, thus helping to explain why policymakers conceive citizen engagement as they do. In the positive comments, the interviewees typically referred to various participatory roles, styles and methods through which citizen participation could be conceived positively. We classified them according to the Arnsteinian ladder, from the most impactful to the least effective. Compared to the categories of negative assessments, which reflected a qualitative difference in the sense of a nominal scale, the boundaries of the negative categories were hazier, creating a sense of quantitative, rather than qualitative, difference akin to an ordinal scale. However, a nuanced analysis reveals important differences in policymakers’ conceptions, which also reflect qualitative differences.

Importantly, none of the positive assessments suggested that citizens should make political decisions, even at subnational level, to which the positive assessments mostly related. Theoretically, the most impactful method that emerged was to hear and consult citizens more. The general attitude among the interviewees was that citizens can provide valuable advice and information. The various ways in which hearings can be organized give varying weight to citizen input: (1) through traditional (telephone, mail, etc.) and non-traditional (citizen initiatives and movements) communicative mediums, citizens and groups can try to impact agendas and policies, simultaneously fostering ownership and commitment; (2) by partaking in the preparatory processes, citizens with personal insight on the matter can realize personal ambitions, while assisting policymakers with in-depth information; (3) through designated citizen juries, citizens’ attitudes and sentiments on specific topics could be gauged in a more reliable fashion, as direct contacts raise biased and potentially minor grievances; and finally (4) public officials could submit policy proposals to public websites for citizens’ review, allowing a more detailed, but also more controlled, assessment, compared to citizen juries, as the issues are more tied to specific policies.

This perspective gives weight to citizens’ views, by at least acknowledging, the possibility that they can influence policymaking, albeit to varying extent. The two other main categories instead reflect a perspective where citizens’ views are unimportant: citizens change from senders to receivers of information. The difference between these categories is much smaller than their difference to the first category, but it signifies a crucial principle regarding citizens’ role in a democracy: whether an individual is actively engaged in learning processes, or (s)he is just a passive pupil. However, the difference is largely a conceptual one. Little difference exists in organizational manifestations.

The segments coded to the second category describe situations where citizens engage in directed action that is closely related to their everyday life, ranging from open communal processes, like participatory landscaping projects, to more personal activities, like consumption. The projects are facilitated by, and largely depend on, public officials. The aim of the projects is to educate citizens about their connections to societal phenomena, and to foster ownership and commitment through active participation. Instead, in the segments coded to the third and final category, citizens turn into passive receivers who are being taught by various institutions (schools, universities, citizen juries, the media, etc.) to conceive a certain problem in a certain way, ideally to motivate them to act in certain way. Citizens regress to educable subjects, without even nominal agency.

Three points summarize the message: (1) policymakers do not conceive citizens as decision-makers, even at municipal level; (2) their non-decisional roles are largely managed by the governing apparatus; (3) whose interests citizens' participatory activities are mostly hoped to serve. Not a single interviewee mentioned the possibility of letting citizens decide, beyond traditional citizen initiatives noted by a few interviewees. All positive mentions of engagement involved state-organized activities, for receiving and utilizing expert advice or reliable data on public attitudes, or for educating citizens. Elites consider citizen engagement beneficial when it produces policy-relevant information, issue ownership and commitment to policymakers' projects.

Together, the negative and positive assessments of citizens' participatory role describe a complex and multidimensional system of perceptions, which at the same time seems coherent and reasonable—at least from policymakers' viewpoint. Beyond the usual “institutional conservatism” and fear of losing power, policymakers conceive themselves as “custodians” of the representative process and fear that citizens' inadequate capacities to govern themselves results in unequal representation, which is particularly dangerous if organized interest groups become too influential. Therefore, while citizen engagement is important, it should be done so that the final say of established representative institutions is not jeopardized.

Although this analysis does not claim to be able to offer a universal explanation, we conclude with some comments concerning the operating context of the interviewees. First, as they exclusively represent top-level national policymakers, their general objection against national initiatives and the adjoining support for local initiatives is unsurprising. The views of municipal policymakers could have differed to some degree. Second, while the sample includes elected and non-elected policymakers whose attitudes did not differ much, as the survey results confirm, a majority represents the latter group. They are experts with detailed policy experience, which perhaps accentuated the technical nature in the observed reason-giving. Despite only minor differences between the groups, and their shared defense of representative institutions, a more “political” sample could have expressed somewhat different views, or at least underplayed the technical aspects of policymaking. Thirdly, the technical emphasis of commenting probably also relates to the policymakers' conviction that citizens lack capacity to self-govern. For policy professionals, spending decades in detailed policy work likely increases the perceived informational gap to lay citizens and in the Finnish committee-driven parliament, even MPs are likely to acknowledge it. In any case, considering the low levels of knowledge citizens possess even regarding elementary political facts (e.g., Rapeli, 2013), policymakers' fears are not unwarranted. Fourth, the fear of excessive influence of interest groups likely also relates, paradoxically, to the corporatist character of Finnish policymaking, where established interest groups enjoy formal *ex officio* representation. Operating outside of the controlled environment would grant unequal access and violate these rules, which, fifth, are closely monitored in the Finnish law-abiding administrative culture. Sixth, as any Nordic welfare state, the Finnish society emphasizes questions of equality, and policymakers' claim for “custodianship” could have special legitimacy there.

Finally, as our interviews were drawn from one policy field, which is perhaps characterized by an expert-driven ethos coupled with a need to engage citizens, the responses could be partly sector-specific. However, in the Finnish context, environmental policymakers are unlikely to have a unique administrative orientation. While other policy fields do not enjoy similar public recognition, there is no obvious reason to believe that their “custodians” would have widely contrasting ideas. In the highly technical, regulated and expert-dominated administrative culture in Finland the same ethos likely exists across policy fields. In political cultures that are more

driven by partisan divisions, like the two-party systems of the US and the UK, such “ownership” could be weaker.

Compared to other policy fields, the complexity of environmental issues that is hard to govern with simple regulative measures, and their strongly lifestyle-related framing, might accentuate the personal aspects of engagement to some extent. While sectors like healthcare and education also promote individual choice, they probably do so in a more abstract fashion. Thus, the variety of possible engagement methods is probably narrower in other policy fields. Nonetheless, we feel convinced that also in other fields, policymakers will defend their decision-making capacities and support non-decisive solutions to deal with demands for citizen engagement.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study makes three contributions to the growing literature on elite perceptions towards citizen engagement.

Firstly, using rare survey data, which allowed direct comparisons with representative samples of top-level policymakers and ordinary citizens, the analysis provided robust findings to demonstrate significant disconnects between elite and citizen attitudes. In Arnsteinian terms, our results show that citizens clearly want more control of the policy process, but elites are only willing to offer tokenism, and sometimes only nonparticipation. Elites support an advisory role and, perhaps even more importantly, emphasize the need to engage citizens through organized learning processes, which transform citizens from senders to receivers of information. Citizens want direct engagement, and the gap is considerable.

Secondly, expanding previous recent scholarship that focused on elected representatives (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Junius et al., 2020), our data included all relevant groups of non-elected policymakers (public administrators and major lobbies). This allowed us to distinguish between the attitudes of different elite groups and to provide a more complete picture of various policymaking elites think of citizen engagement and why. Contrary to expectations, we found little differences between elected and non-elected policymakers. The only significant difference is the particularly strong aversion towards direct citizen decision-making powers among public officials, who are the most skeptical of the elite groups.

Thirdly, in-depth interviews with a selection of top-tier policymakers allowed us to reach beyond survey responses, to the reasons elites give to explain their positions. The interviews revealed that elite skepticism is primarily based on concerns about the competence of citizens to engage in meaningful fashion (see also Rangoni et al., 2021), and the expected harmful consequences that low competence has on policymaking, especially to the equality of democratic representation. Elites believe that policymaking requires special expertise, which, they argue, citizens lack. The technical superiority of especially politicians can be questioned, as the formal training of its members does not likely differ much from citizens' education. Politicians often have a background in administration, political science and law, which have little connection with for example, environmental engineering. However, due to their involvement in the policy processes, also elected politicians possess extensive insight on policies compared to even highly trained ordinary citizens. Additionally, elites tend to see citizen involvement as a challenge and infringement to the traditional functioning of representative democracy, including their own gatekeeping position. Elites reject the idea that citizens could act as decision-makers, as it would jeopardize the established control mechanisms of the policy process, whose “custodianship” the policymakers claim for themselves.



Policymakers' attitudes towards procedural matters are, however, closely tied to policy outcome favorability (Esaiaasson & Öhberg, 2020). Consequently, their support for citizen participation in the policy process likely also depends on expected outcomes in specific policy questions. Moreover, although our results reflect strong self-confidence among citizens, on closer inspection, citizens could also be skeptical of their own capacities (Fernandez-Martinez et al., 2022). Also, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) demonstrated, even the process preferences of citizens might not necessarily differ substantially from elites' claim to "custodianship", as citizens, too, might want to be governed by experts who know better what is going on. However, as our results and the global populist surge emphasize, a widespread dissatisfaction towards the established technocratic elites clearly exists among citizens and this, we believe, is the key message here.

It is nevertheless important to note that elites are not unilaterally against deeper citizen engagement. Quite the contrary. Almost every interview also presented a positive assessment. In the spirit of Arnstein's tokenism, elites welcome citizen input when it contributes with policy-relevant information. Elites are positive about those modes of engagement where information flows from administration to citizens, to educate, inspire and commit them. Overall, elite perceptions of citizen participation contour the contemporary ideals of technocratic governance, where the subjects of governance become actively engaged in the process, but only so that they do not challenge the superior capacity of the governing elite. The problem is that these views seem to differ considerably from the participatory wishes of a large, and perhaps increasing, population of voters.

Despite the skepticism, as reflected in the positive assessments, policymakers clearly seem to sense the rising sentiment among citizens that party-based representation has become inadequate. The rapid societal change from industrial to information age, which has widened the gap between citizens and policymakers, is evident in our findings and the situation urges policymakers to re-negotiate their mandates. While protecting the traditional policy process, elites have designed methods of inclusion that allow citizens to feel important without direct policy input. As Gourgues et al. (2021, 13) conclude their study of French public administrators' attitudes towards participatory democracy: "Administrations have not only accepted the participatory imperative; they have integrated, absorbed and diluted it. Participatory democracy has been bureaucratized." Our findings seem compatible with this general sense of acceptance, coupled with a strategy that seeks to maintain control. However, as our results indicate, citizens may demand genuine capacity to voice out opinions and to make decisions in the future. If policymakers continue to refrain from redistributing power and control, they should offer better explanations to citizens why they should remain as legitimate owners of the policy process, as they clearly see themselves.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland (grant numbers: 312676 and 333013); and Future of Democracy: A Centre of Excellence funded by the Åbo Akademi University Foundation.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest surfaced during the execution of this research.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


The data presented in this study was collected under the auspices of the research project "Participation in long-term decision-making" (PALO) that was funded by the Academy of Finland in 2017–2022 (<https://paloresearch.fi/en/>; grant number: 312676). The surveys and the interviews are the property of The Social Science Research Institute at Åbo Akademi University, which was

one of the constituent partners of the PALO project. The surveys are made publicly available later through the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (<https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/en/>). Due to a mutual agreement that is based on the regulations on informed consent of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (<https://tenk.fi/en>) the interviews will not be made publicly available or stored for further use.

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**How to cite this article:** Koskimaa, V., Rapeli, L., & Himmelroos, S. (2023). Decision-makers, advisers or educable subjects? Policymakers' perceptions of citizen participation in a Nordic democracy. *Governance*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12762>