How can democracies become more future-oriented?

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The presentation

- **www.paloresearch.fi** (University of Turku, Åbo Akademi University, Natural Resources Institute Finland and Tampere University)
  - Funded by the Strategic Research Council in the Academy of Finland 2017-2022
- **PALO = Participation in Long-Term Decision-Making**
  - Improving future orientation in democratic policymaking
  - Exploring the role of citizens as participants in policymaking
- **Coming up:**
  - The causes of democratic shortsightedness and solutions for improving it
  - The individual-level political future orientation
  - Attitudes towards citizen engagement in policymaking

The problem

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- **Democratic myopia, short-termism, presentist bias in policymaking = the tendency of democracies to maximize welfare in the present, at the expense of the future**
- Budgets are made for short electoral periods, with re-election in mind
- The physical world does not follow electoral periods
- Conceptual problems:
  - What is a short-term or a long-term issue?
    MacKenzie (2021): All issues are long-term
  - How far away is the future? Beyond just one electoral period or thousands of years?

The (assumed) causes

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Individual-level:

- People (often) instinctively prefer the short-term
- Lack of trust in politics drives short-termism

System-level:

- Logic of representative democracy
  - Short, competitive electoral cycles and voter demands
  - Informational problems
- Organized interests

The (proposed) solutions

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1. Introduce new institutions / legal frameworks

- Create representation for future interests and generations:
  - Committee for the future
  - Commissioner for the future
- Legislation that requires accounting for future generations
- International agreements that constrain national legislation

The (proposed) solutions

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2. Change the logic of representative democracy

- Weight the impact of the vote according to age
- Remove long-term issues from the political domain
- Make electoral cycles longer
- Offer extensive job security for electoral losers

The (proposed) solutions

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3. Improve the capacity of governance

- Enhance evidence-based policymaking
- Build governance structures specifically for long-term interests

The current state in Finland

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- The committee for the future (Eduskunta)
- The National Foresight Network (coordinated partly by the Prime Minister's Office)
- Government foresight group in the Prime Minister's Office

But what do the leading Finnish decision-makers think?

The data

1) **24 interviews** with the top-level policymakers within Finnish environmental policy

2) **Online survey** of the national policymaking elite in Finland in Nov 2018

- Target population: mid- to top-level public officials in government ministries and agencies, all MPs, parliamentary party officials and the mid- to top-level managers in the largest advocacy groups, such as trade unions = 3,500 individuals
- Sample: 675, representative in terms of gender and policymaker status

The problems (according to the Finnish policymakers)

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	Politicians	Public officials	Advocacy group representatives	All
Hectic style of politics and the ever-changing political agenda	82	80	74	80
Complex phenomena and uncertainty of future-related information	66	80	76	76
Personalized and social media focused style of politics	75	70	76	72
The temporal distance of societal problems	69	64	67	66
Performance-orientation in politics	61	67	62	65
Shortsighted voters	58	59	67	60
Commitment to the government program	47	58	54	54
Lack of collaboration between government branches	59	48	66	52
The shortness of government mandate period	48	49	55	49

The solutions (according to the Finnish policymakers)

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	Politicians	Public officials	Advocacy group representatives	All
Strengthening of evidence-based preparatory work	80	80	67	79
Increased collaboration between government and opposition	72	68	69	69
Increased intra-governmental collaboration	69	62	69	64
Strengthening of ministries' foresight activities	64	61	55	61
Strengthening preparatory work for party programs	67	36	57	45
Increased role for organized interests	50	43	38	44
Increasing power for the Committee for the Future	46	26	24	31
A commissioner for the future	32	18	19	22
Increased hearing of citizens, eg. through citizen panels	30	18	14	20

Synthesis I

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- Problems are mainly related to **lack of scientific evidence** and (social) **media pressure**
- Suggested solutions call for **more research-based knowledge** and **collaboration in governance**
- The institutions of democracy seem relatively irrelevant
- Increased citizen involvement is not desirable
- **In summary: better governance, less media-driven politics**

What about the citizens?

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- Citizens remain outside the scope
- But: demands from **shortsighted voters** are seen as a key problem (mostly) by political scientists
- Existing research has not strongly supported voter myopia
  - So just how politically short-sighted are they?
  - Could they become more involved in policymaking and **make democratic politics more future-oriented?**

Data

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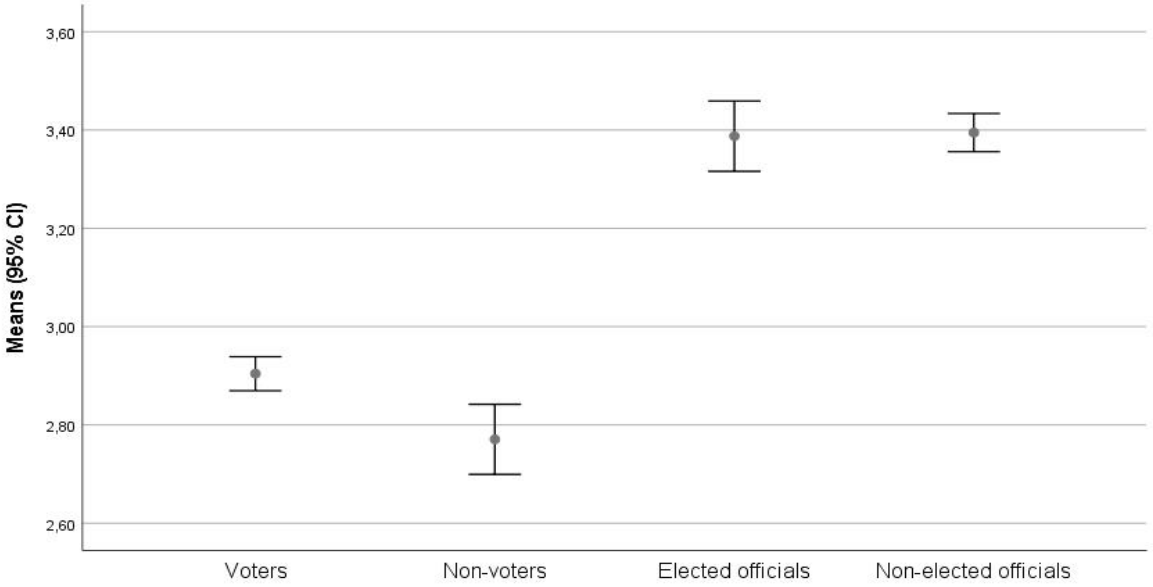
1. **Citizen survey:**
   - A representative sample (n=1,906) of the voting age population in Finland
   - Conducted online (Qualtrics) in Feb 2019
2. **Policymaker survey**

- Identical measures of individual **political future orientation** and **attitudes towards citizen participation**

Individual political future orientation (Rapeli et al. 2021 Frontiers in pol sci)

- **How strongly do citizens want democracies to focus in present or in future wellbeing?**
- Originally 12 items, but 8-item solution seemed most appropriate
- Example items:
  - *Today's voters must be prepared to reduce their standard of living, if it is necessary for the well-being of future generations.*
  - *Politics should try to solve contemporary societal problems, not future ones.*
  - *Decision-makers must invest in solving future problems, even if it means that taxpayers face costs now.*
- One-dimensional attitude structure (PCA) and high scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha) = a coherent, latent structure, which, as we argue, is 'future-oriented political thinking'

Findings: citizens vs policymakers
(Rapeli, 2022, forthcoming)



Findings: determinants (Rapeli et al., 2021)

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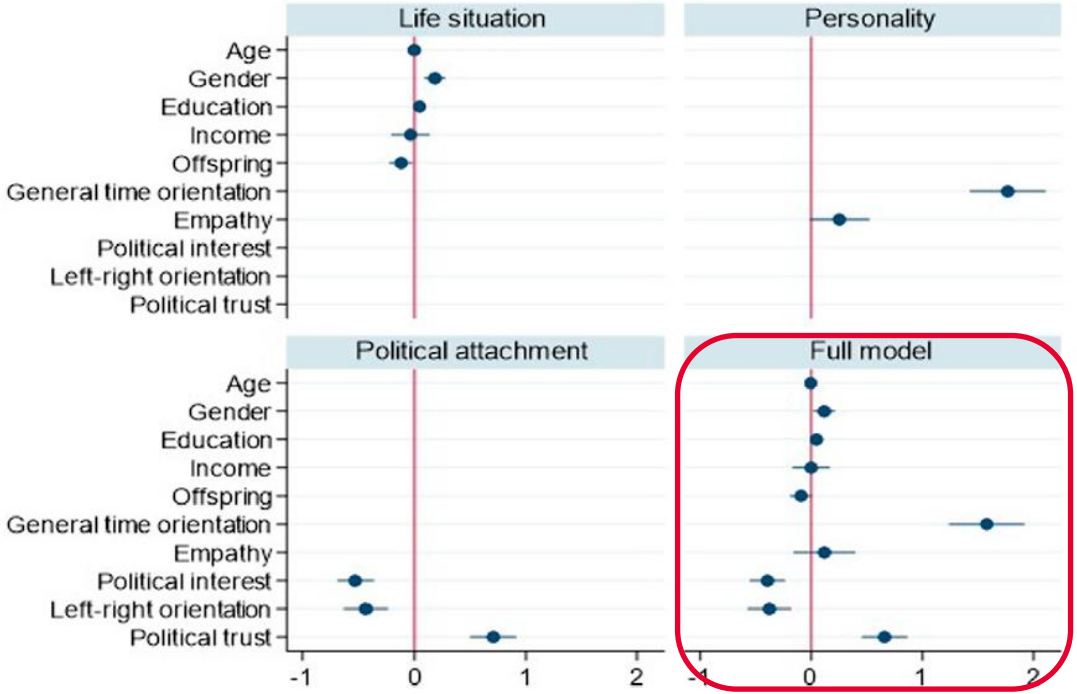

Attitudes towards citizen participation

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The survey items:

1. *Citizens should have more **direct and binding decision-making power at the national level** (e.g. referendums, participatory budgeting)*
2. *Citizens should be **heard more** and have more **advisory power at the national level** (e.g. agenda initiatives, deliberative forums)*
3. *Citizen engagement (at the national level) should be strengthened by **improving civic skills through education** (e.g. hearings, information campaigns*
4. *Citizen participation should be **increased in local level** decision-making*

Findings

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	Elite all (n=663)	Politicians and party group rep. (n=163)	Interest group rep. (n=58)	Civil servants (n=442)	Citizens (n=1715)
"More direct and binding decision-making by citizens"	30.3%	47.2%	34.5%	23.7%	61.2%
"Greater advisory role for citizens"	58.4	69.6	62.1	54.1	71.8
"Strengthen citizen skills"	81.4	85.2	69.5	80.6	70.1
"More citizen participation at the local level"	82.3	86.4	87.9	80.2	75.4

Synthesis II

- People hold **stable and consistent** views about where the emphasis of democratic policies should be – and a **majority want to invest** in future wellbeing
- Citizens are more shortsighted than policymakers – but **everyone is (surprisingly) future-oriented**
- **Policymaker skepticism** is likely to constrain development towards more citizen participation
- The sizable gap between citizen and policymaker attitudes towards citizen participation could lead to (increased) **disappointment with democracy**
- Policymakers focus on **governance-related improvements**, citizens desire more influence

The way forward

- **Policymakers** call for more research, less political posturing and social media impact
- **Citizens** call for more voice

- Should we **remove politics** from future-oriented policy choices?
- **Replace politics** with better governance and citizen participation?
- **Save democracy** by reducing it?

Thank you!

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PALO RESEARCH

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