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## 2 What Kind of Democracy Do the People Want?

*Lauri Rapeli and Kim Strandberg*

### **Introduction and theory**

As mentioned in the Introduction, Finnish democracy can be characterized as consensus-seeking and party-centered. With a highly fragmented party system and oversized coalitions, the democratic process requires the ability to collaborate across party lines. Consequently, parties and their leading politicians, especially government ministers, are the key actors in a system that very strongly relies on party-voter ties and representation of constituents' interests.

The party-based, consensual style of democracy enjoys widespread support among the Finnish electorate. In a cross-national comparison, Finnish voters are more satisfied with how democracy works in Finland than the average electorate in other European countries (Rapeli & Koskimaa, 2020). Although general support for democracy seems relatively high in Finland, the question of what kind of democracy people really want is a different matter. How strong is support for the current, strongly representative form of democracy, when compared with alternative models for democratic governance? In this chapter, we examine what type of democracy the Finnish electorate prefers and whether the preference has fluctuated over the years. Furthermore, we study the predictors of various democracy preferences in the 2019 Finnish Parliamentary election.

We approach democratic preferences from the perspective of the vibrant scholarly debate about whether support for democracy is declining among democratic publics, even in established democracies (e.g., Foa & Mounk, 2017). While the evidence for the alleged erosion of democratic support remains inconclusive (e.g., Wuttke et al., 2020; Alexander & Welzel, 2017; Wike & Fetterolf, 2018), an adjacent literature has instead tackled the question whether democratic publics are discontent with the existing democratic processes. Perhaps support for democracy itself is not at risk, but maybe citizens are challenging the current forms of democratic decision-making? This has led scholars to examine ordinary citizens' preferences regarding the democratic process, that is, citizens' ideas about where decision-making power ultimately should be in democracy and how it should be organized. Comparatively, Finland presents a scenario, where satisfaction with democracy remains high, despite the globally declining trend, and where we can expect to find strong, continued support for representative democracy.

In mainstream research, two influential arguments have sought to explain the reasons behind the contemporary challenge to electoral democracy and the logic behind citizens' democratic process preferences (see also Goldberg et al., 2020). Firstly, people might have grown tired of representative democracy because they sense a disconnect between the established parties and their own needs (Dalton et al., 2004). In order to fix the "trust gap" between the people and their representatives, the disillusioned citizens are looking to transform democracy through more citizen participation. According to Bowler et al. (2007), many studies have found that the push for more participation, and perhaps also for a deliberative version of democracy, comes from an increasingly sophisticated citizenry, and particularly from the younger generations. In this perspective, democratic discontentment is primarily an expression of frustration among an attentive, but distrusting section of the electorate who feel efficacious enough to demand more participation opportunities.

Secondly, according to an opposite logic, a significant portion of democratic publics would instead wish to participate less in politics and let elected representatives take care of all decision-making. Expressed most prominently by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), this type of democracy would resemble the stealth fighter plane, which we know is out there somewhere, although we cannot (usually) see it. In the same manner, people might only want to know that democracy functions in the background, while they go on with their daily lives, with minimal involvement in the democratic process. Hence, scholars have focused on two fundamentally different conceptualizations of democracy, which are distinguishable from one another in terms of how much and what kind of citizen participation they advocate. To a great extent, the choice between these models of democracy becomes a choice between active or passive democratic citizenship, or alternatively, between elite-dominated or citizen-dominated democratic processes.

Previous scholarship has sought to map out the determinants of support for representative, direct, participatory and deliberative democracy (e.g., Bowler et al., 2007; Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Webb, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2020), and even expert-driven democracy (e.g., Rapeli, 2016). In this chapter, we follow this prospering field of literature and examine support for different types of democratic processes using the FNES data from 2003 to 2019. The data allow us to trace the support rates and individual-level determinants of representative, direct, deliberative and stealth democracy.

*Representative democracy* is here understood as pertaining to the standard model of democracy, with a focus on elections as the mechanism for delegating power from the citizenry to elected office-holders. In the broader spectrum of democratic theory, representative democracy is an elitist form of democracy in the sense that it essentially relegates citizens into voters, whose function in democracy is to vote politicians into office, when called upon to do so in regularly arranged, competitive elections. *Direct democracy*, on the other hand, entails a model where citizens are given a chance to participate in decision-making also through referenda. In direct democracy, ordinary citizens are not only passive political subjects, but are regularly consulted in important societal questions. In a similar fashion, *deliberative*

*democracy* considers citizens as much more than just voters. Arguably, instead of voting, deliberative democracy emphasizes communication, (public) reasoning, perspective-taking and the power of the strongest argument as the proper basis for democratic decision-making. Debating – or deliberating – stands in the core of the deliberative view of democracy and it offers a very different approach to democracy than the representative model. Finally, *stealth democracy* is perhaps equally radical as it also proposes an alternative to contemporary applications of party-based, representative democracy. It is built on the idea that people do not really want to engage deeply in politics, but that they nevertheless want efficient governance. Hence, in a strict sense, the concept of stealth democracy involves technocratic government by experts, who allocate the available resources based on rationality and evidence, rather than a democracy based on party-voter dynamics and the logic of vote maximizing.

Previous research has produced many useful findings regarding both the structure of democratic process preferences and the individual drivers of those preferences. According to Webb (2013), those who are dissatisfied with the current state of democracy in the United Kingdom support more citizen participation. However, even those who could be categorized as “stealth democrats”, and therefore prefer only little citizen participation also support direct democracy. Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) reported similar results from the Finnish context, suggesting that citizens’ process preferences may sometimes seem incoherent, at least from a theoretical standpoint. Webb, on the other hand, notes that supporting referendums, while still opposing other, more demanding forms of citizen engagement, can be logically compatible and even share common ground with a populist view of democratic politics, which demands more power to the people. Certainly, it seems that citizens do not consider democratic process preferences in a one-dimensional manner, that consistently follows traditional theoretical trajectories. Font et al. (2015) investigate the structure of such preferences among democratic publics and demonstrate that people often support representative democracy but also want direct forms of engagement. Nevertheless, Font et al. show that among citizens, there is a somewhat clear distinction between supporters of representative and participatory models of democracy. This suggests that citizens’ process preferences are roughly aligned according to the choice between more, or less citizen engagement.

When it comes to the individual-level determinants of support for stealth democracy, Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) and Webb (2013) find that support is higher among the disinterested, poorly informed sections of the electorate. Moreover, Bengtsson and Mattila find a sharp ideological contrast. A rightist self-identification is linked with stealth democratic attitudes, while a leftist self-identification is linked with a stronger support for direct democracy. This is consistent with Christensen and von Schoultz (2019), who show that a leftist orientation is a significant predictor of support for deliberative democracy. Bowler et al. (2007) also found increased support for direct democracy both among politically disappointed and politically sophisticated individuals. They conclude that, overall, the most significant driver of demand for more participation opportunities is distrust of politicians. Similarly,

citizens' belief in their own ability to have a say in politics (internal efficacy) and their views on the responsiveness of the system (external efficacy) are factors that some (e.g., Christensen & von Schoultz, 2019) have considered relevant for democracy preferences.

Taken together, these key studies from the field suggest that people hold relatively coherent opinions regarding what kind of democratic processes they prefer. Although the boundaries between the theoretical models are often fluid, a rough dividing line is drawn between a desire for more or less citizen engagement. Among the citizenry, the line appears to be partly ideological, as people in the political left want more participation. Partly, the desire to change the status quo seems driven by a disillusionment with conventional democratic politics. Thus, one could say that there is an ideologically based explanation for certain democracy preferences as well as an explanation based on dissatisfaction/alienation from the current system (see Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009).

In the empirical analyses that follow, we examine both the temporal development in support for representative, direct, deliberative and stealth democracy and the determinants of support for them. As regards temporal change, previous research leads us to assume that there has occurred a shift away from support for representative democracy toward other types of democracy. The assumption is based on the dissatisfaction hypothesis, according to which a growing disenchantment with representative, electoral democracy has increased across established democracies. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the hypothesized effect could be visible in attitudes toward democratic processes, events such as the 2008 economic crisis are likely to have contributed to the increased criticism toward democracy (see, e.g., Wuttke et al., 2020).

In the case of Finland, the historically unprecedented, landslide victory in the 2011 parliamentary elections for the right-wing populist party, the Finns Party, seems symptomatic of democratic disillusionment among the Finnish electorate. Consequently, it seems plausible that support for the standard model of representative democracy would have decreased during approximately the past ten years, while alternative models have simultaneously received more support. Therefore, it seems logical to further assume that the individual-level drivers of support for other models besides representative democracy are also connected to indicators of democratic discontent, such as low political trust. Moreover, previous research strongly suggests that a leftist self-identification increases support for deliberative democracy, while a rightist self-identification increases support for stealth democracy (Christensen & von Schoultz, 2019). For direct democracy, the pattern seems more ambiguous, but following the Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) analysis of Finland, we assume leftist ideology to increase support for it.

### **Descriptive trends**

In this first part of our empirical section, we show how the democracy preferences of the Finnish electorate have developed over time. Support for each type of democracy is here measured with a signpost-indicator strategy whereby one survey

*Table 2.1* Indicators of support for each democracy type

<i>Democracy type</i>	<i>Survey item</i>
Representative	By voting people can have a say in how things are run
Direct	Important political questions should more frequently be decided by a referendum
Deliberative	Discussions for ordinary citizens should be organized to support representative democracy
Stealth	Finland's matters would be handled better if decision making were left up to independent experts instead of politicians and citizens

*Note:* All items use Likert scales regarding to what extent respondents agree with the statement: agree fully, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree completely.

item from the FNES surveys 2003–2019 is used for each type of democracy (see Technical appendix of book). The rationale for this strategy was dictated by necessity. Typically, each FNES survey only contained one or two items that indicate support for a specific democracy type. Only support for stealth democracy has several indicators since 2003. For stealth democracy, we opted to go with the indicator that has been most used in studies throughout the world, i.e., support for independent experts to widely handle decision-making instead of politicians and citizens (Bengtsson & Mattila 2009, 1040). The measures are summarized in Table 2.1:

In the literature review, we identified six potential predictors of support for various types of democracy. These were satisfaction with democracy, political interest, left-right ideology, political trust as well as internal and external efficacy.

On to the actual analyses, Table 2.2 depicts the longitudinal trends for the preferences since the 2003 Finnish parliamentary election for each democracy type. The last row in the table shows the change in percentage points between support for the democracy types in 2003 (representative and direct) or in 2007 (deliberative and stealth) and in the latest measurement in 2019.

Overall, the preferences have been stable among the Finnish electorate, and all but stealth democracy have been supported widely throughout the period. It is, thus, clear that a large share of citizens tends to support at least some features of several different types of democracy. A simple correlation analysis (Pearson's correlation) shows that there appears to be two blocks of preferences; support for representative democracy correlates positively with support for deliberative democracy, whereas positive preferences for all *but* representative democracy correlate positively with each other. In a sense, thus, citizens view the different types of democracy as complements to each other more than as supplements.

Longitudinally, representative democracy is nonetheless the most preferred type of democracy with a support ranging between 75 and 87 percent. Support for representative democracy has grown by almost 11 percentage points during 2003 and 2019, while support for direct democracy has declined by as much. Direct- and deliberative democracy are equally preferred in 2003–2015 at around 70 percent support, but the support for direct democracy declined into the 2019 election to around 60 percent. A tentative, albeit likely, explanation for this decline in support for direct democracy is the effect of the Brexit vote in 2016, which received a lot

*Table 2.2* Longitudinal development of democracy preferences 2003–2019, percentage having strong or very strong preference, as well as these collapsed, for each democracy type (n in parentheses)

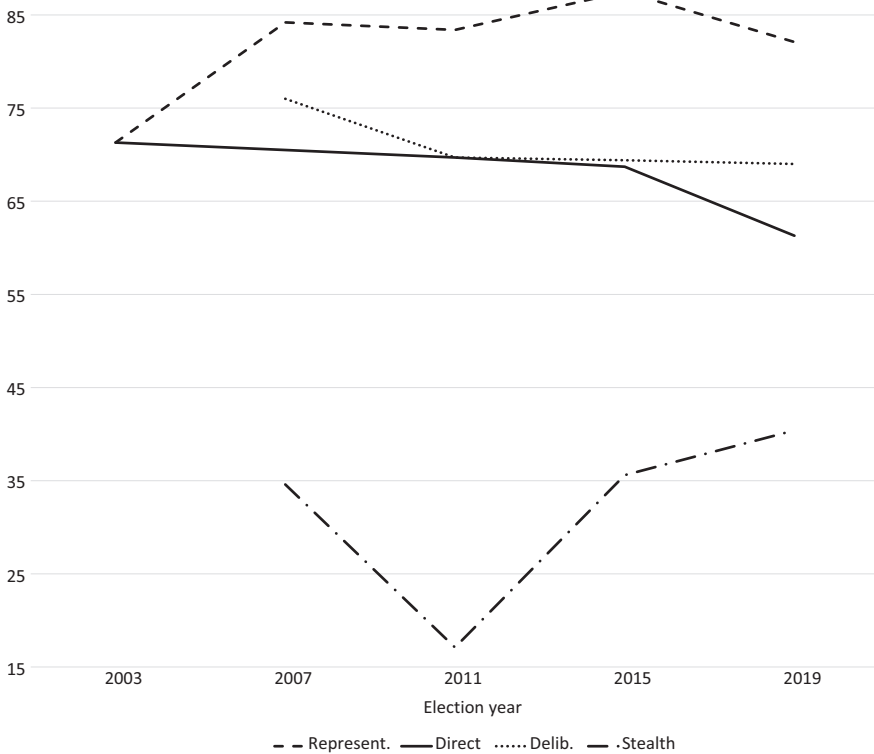
		<i>Representative</i>	<i>Direct</i>	<i>Deliberative</i>	<i>Stealth</i>
2003	Very strong	24.7	35.5	missing	missing
	Strong	46.6	35.8	missing	missing
	Total	71.3 (492)	71.3 (905)		
2007	Very strong	42.5	41.0	27.3	8.1
	Strong	41.7	29.5	48.7	26.5
	Total	84.2 (1,197)	70.5 (1,003)	76.1 (1,081)	34.6 (347)
2011	Very strong	40.8	37.1	24.5	4.1
	Strong	42.5	32.6	45.2	13.0
	Total	83.3 (585)	69.7 (904)	69.7 (905)	17.1 (199)
2015	Very strong	47.6	35.2	26.4	9.6
	Strong	39.9	33.5	43.0	26.0
	Total	87.5 (1,389)	68.7 (1,090)	69.4 (1,102)	35.6 (566)
2019	Very strong	37.5	26.1	25.5	11.0
	Strong	44.6	35.2	51.7	29.4
	Total	82.1 (1,388)	61.3 (933)	77.3 (1,103)	40.4 (566)
	Change in total support (percentage units)	+10.8	−10	+1.2	+5.8

*Note:* All data has been weighted.

of media attention in Finland (Haugevik et al., 2018). At all elections, support for stealth democracy has been the lowest with a range between 17 and 40 percent support. One could contemplate whether this is partly because there are no real-world examples of stealth democracy being used that the Finnish citizens could relate to. Interestingly, though, there has been a rise in support for stealth democracy that coincided with the decline in support for direct democracy. These longitudinal trends are summarized visually in Figure 2.1.

To summarize, support for representative democracy, at least in terms of citizens' faith in voting as a mechanism for impacting society, has increased in Finland since 2003. Given the stability of high satisfaction with democracy in Finland (see also Chapter 3 on political trust), this finding seems somewhat intuitive. Although purely speculative, we are tempted to interpret this trajectory as a reflection of developments within party politics. As the right-wing populist party, the Finns Party, became one of the largest parties in Finland in the 2011 parliamentary elections, a position they have held since then, the day-to-day party politics was reinvigorated. Their entrance provided an alternative for many voters who were dissatisfied with the existing parties. The Finns Party agenda has also forced other parties to clarify their stands on many pressing issues, which probably has made party-based representative politics more attractive to many people.

Despite these interesting aggregate-level trends, it is, however, plausible that there is significant individual-level variation in support for the various democracy types.



*Figure 2.1* Longitudinal trends in support for the different forms of democracy (share indicating very strong, or strong support).

*Source:* Compiled by authors from FNES data.

## Explanatory analyses

This our second part of the findings delves into how democracy preferences can be explained with a special focus to the ideology-based and disaffection-based explanations put forth earlier in the chapter. To explore this, we ran linear regressions predicting each type of democracy preference (Figure 2.2 and Table A2 in appendix):

Of the two main explanatory perspectives, the dissatisfaction-thesis receives much stronger support in Figure 2.2 than the ideology thesis does. Having a left-leaning ideology positively explains support for representative democracy, but the effect is not especially strong. Rather, strong support for representative democracy is explained essentially by being a politically interested citizen who is satisfied with democracy in general and trusts its institutions and actors. Most importantly, people who feel that the current democratic system is responsive to citizens (external efficacy) most strongly predicts strong support for representative democracy.

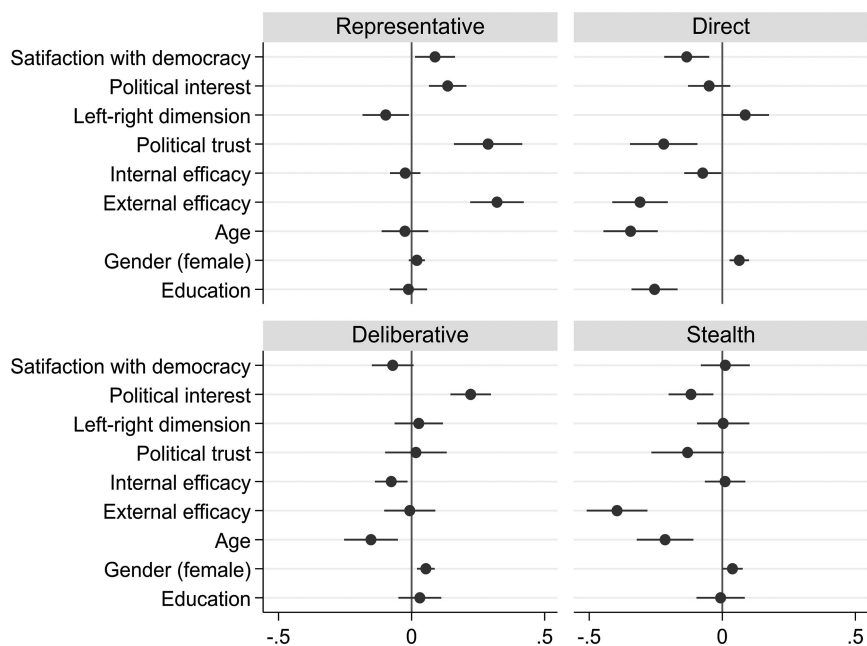


Figure 2.2 Predictors of support for different forms of democracy.

*Note:* All dependents and predictors are standardized scales between zero and one. Predictors: [Satisfaction with democracy]: scale 0–1 with five steps with 1 indicating respondent being very satisfied with democracy; [Political interest]: scale 0–1 with four steps with 1 indicating respondent having a very high interest in politics; [Left–right ideology]: scale 0–1 with 11 steps where 0 indicates a maximum left–wing position and 1 indicates a maximum right–wing position; [Political trust]: Standardized average level of trust 0–1 where 0 indicates no trust and 1 indicates full trust for three political actors/institutions: the Parliament, political parties, individual politicians. [Internal efficacy]: scale 0–1 with four steps where 1 indicates a very high internal efficacy; [External efficacy]: scale 0–1 with four steps where 1 indicates a very high external efficacy. [age]: respondent age; [gender]: 0=man, 1=woman; [education level]: scale 0–1 with eight steps where 0 indicates only compulsory level education and 1 indicates a post gradual degree at university level.

Regarding support for direct democracy, the explanatory patterns are in stark contrast to those regarding representative democracy albeit that the ideology-thesis again receives only slight support in that right-leaning voters are more supportive of direct democracy. Hence, supporters of direct democracy are citizens who appear dissatisfied with democracy, less trusting of its institutions and actors and who tend to feel that the current system is not responsive to citizens’ needs. All covariates were also strong significant predictors of which both the effect of being young and having low education level suggest that the political competence of citizens plays an important part in explaining the support for direct democracy as well.

The model for supporting deliberative democracy has rather weak explanatory power ( $R^2 = .06$ ), suggesting that the variables in the model are not particularly relevant for explaining why some people support it. The model first and foremost shows that high political interest is the most significant driver of deliberative democratic preferences followed by being dissatisfied with democracy and lower internal efficacy. Being younger and woman are also significant predictors. To some

extent, the explanations for preferring deliberative democracy resemble those of direct democracy but the strong effect of political interest, which was insignificant for direct democracy, is a clear distinction between the two democracy types. It seems that a desire for democratic deliberation is associated with an unusually high level of motivation to engage with politics.

Lastly, we turn our focus to explaining support for stealth democracy, the one type of democracy preference that the descriptive analysis showed had the least support of all types. Here, the model explains 12 percent of the variation ( $R^2$ ) and points to the dissatisfaction thesis as the driver of stealth democracy preferences. Thus, being uninterested in politics, having low political trust and feeling that the system is unresponsive to citizens' needs (low external efficacy) are significant predictors. Younger age and being woman again retain some explanatory power.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, support for representative democracy in Finland is higher than for other types of democracy and it seems to have increased during the past couple of decades. From the perspective of the crisis of democracy debate, at least in terms of support for a standard form of electoral, party-based democracy, there is no cause for particular concern in Finland.

It is, however, obvious that dissatisfaction with democracy increases support for alternatives to representative democracy, particularly direct democracy. Although on population-level support for direct democracy has declined by 10 percentage points since 2003, individual-level support for direct democracy is driven by exactly those factors that are associated with disappointment with representative democracy: democratic dissatisfaction, lack of political trust and low external efficacy. A desire to reform representative democracy through an increased use of referenda is clearly linked to a sense of disillusionment with democracy, also in Finland.

However, in addition to direct democracy, disillusionment may also lead to increased support for deliberative democracy, depending on the level of political attachment. While the politically disinterested and distrusting want more direct democracy, the politically interested prefer deliberative democracy. In other words, disappointment with how the democracy works has different outcomes depending on how politically aware and interested a person is. Moreover, the politically disengaged to a lesser extent show even some support for stealth democracy, but this pattern is much less prominent.

Women and younger people are more likely to support alternatives to representative democracy. In broad terms, this aligns well with the democratic dissatisfaction hypothesis because women and youth are typically underprivileged even in democratic societies. Although we rely on a minimalistic measurement of support for different democracy types, the findings consistently point toward support for precisely this; the desire for democratic reform among the disadvantaged.

In the case of Finland, it is nevertheless important not to overdramatize the magnitude of the impact of democratic dissatisfaction. Although we find support for the dissatisfaction hypothesis, we also find plenty of stability in democratic preferences and widespread backing for the current form of representative democracy.

However, Finland could be a sobering reminder that underneath the seemingly calm surface, there can be genuine disappointment with democracy, both among the politically active and aware and the politically unattached citizens.

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Appendix

Table 2.A1 Descriptive data for predictors in explanatory analysis 2019 (n = 1,597)

<i>Predictors (0–1)</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.dev.</i>
Satisfaction with democracy	.62	.26
Political interest	.62	.29
Left-right ideology (0=Left 1=Right)	.36	.20
Political trust	.55	.19
External efficacy	.55	.22
Age	.51	.19
Gender (0=Man 1=Woman)	.51	.50
Education level	.48	.23

Table 2.A2 Linear regression predicting preferences for each type of democracy (2019)

	<i>Representative</i>		<i>Direct</i>		<i>Deliberative</i>		<i>Stealth</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Satisfaction with democracy	*,088	.038	**,134	.043	–.071	.040	.011	.047
Political interest	***,136	.036	–.049	.040	***,222	.039	**–,118	.043
Left-right ideology	**–,097	.044	.086	.046	.027	.046	.003	.050
Political trust	***,287	.065	**–,220	.065	.016	.059	–.130	.069
Internal efficacy	–.024	.029	*,074	.035	*,076	.031	.010	.039
External efficacy	***,321	.051	***,309	.053	–.007	.049	***,396	.058
Age	–.025	.045	***,345	.052	***,153	.052	***,215	.054
Gender (Woman)	.020	.015	*,064	.019	*,054	.017	.038	.020
Education level	–.019	.036	***,255	.044	.031	.041	–.006	.046
Constant	***,329	.051	***1,224	.054	***,611	.058	***,832	.060
N	1,349		1,310		1,249		1,231	1,349
R <sup>2</sup>	.224		.213		.070		.124	.224
F	***24.93		***37.56		***7.20		***14.64	***24.93

\**p*<.05, \*\**p*<.01, \*\*\**p*<.001.