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# Youth support for direct versus talk-centric democratic processes in Finland

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## Abstract

Growing worries over young people's lack of engagement in institutionalized political processes have been appeased by theories of young people's political preferences for alternative, more engaged political activities. However, young people's institutionalized participation is important for the quality of participation. Democratic innovations, institutions that are designed to increase citizen participation, have been suggested as one solution to bring young people back into institutionalized politics. However, in research, different forms of democratic innovations are often treated as a bulk measure and not examined separately—depriving us of knowledge of youth support for different types of participatory processes. This paper contributes to the literature by examining youth support for a direct versus talk-centric democratic process in Finland. The results indicate that young people support both referendums and discussion forums more than older people do and that discussion forums are more popular than referendums. Additionally, democratic satisfaction has a reversed effect on support for discussion forums for young and old people.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the latest decades, there has been growing worry over the erosion of youth support for representative democracy, visible in the long-lasting trends of declining rates of engagement in institutionalized forms of politics (Bennett, 2008; Chou, 2017; Grasso et al., 2019) and in the perceived lack of democratic attitudes and support (see e.g., Denmark et al., 2016). Since institutionalized participation is important for the quality of political engagement (Stoker, 2006), young people's support for institutionalized political activities is an important

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issue. Democratic innovations are processes invented to increase citizen participation, and innovations that function within the structures of representative democracy; and channel citizens' voices into the representative decision-making processes; have been suggested as one potential solution for the youth support issue. Still, there is little research on youth support for different kinds of democratic innovations. This article aims to contribute to that literature by examining young people's support for two direct versus talk-centric democratic processes in Finland: referendums and discussion forums (introduced to complement representative democracy).<sup>1</sup> Direct democratic processes refer to decision-making processes where citizens are given a direct say on specific issues. In contrast, talk-centric democratic processes refer to processes where citizens engage in organized political discussions (with a connection to decision-making). Both concepts are discussed further in the "State of the art" section.

Typically, different democratic innovations, or such participation processes that entail more citizen participation, are viewed as a bulk measure for more "participatory preferences" or as support for more "citizen engagement"; however, empirical evidence shows that direct democracy and deliberative democracy have different supporters (Gherghina & Geissel, 2020), suggesting that different democratic processes should be examined separately.<sup>2</sup> In this article, direct democratic processes refer to decision-making processes, where citizens have a direct say in specific policy issues, while talk-centric processes refer to processes that focus on citizens' talk on political issues (Chambers, 2003). This differing focus, along with other specific features (discussed further in the section "State of the art"), make the two democratic processes fundamentally different. To our knowledge, no systemic studies have researched young people's support for these two processes separately. Thus, we do not know how support for direct versus talk-centric democratic processes differs for the young. The paper operates with the following research question:

- What differences in support for direct versus talk-centric democratic processes exist between young and older citizens in Finland?

In addition to exploring differences in support, the effect of political attitudes on support for referendums versus discussion forums is also examined. Since political attitudes can be expected to play a role in explaining different aged citizens' support for different political processes, this paper zooms in to explore the role political attitudes have in explaining differences between young and older people in support of these two democratic processes.

It is difficult to define who constitutes a young person; the transitions from childhood to adulthood are flexible (García-Albacete, 2014; Pickard, 2019), and the question is highly context-dependent. However, here "young people" are defined by data restrictions and Finnish legislation as people between 18 and 29 years of age. The findings can teach us more about young people's political

process preferences and how democratic innovations appeal to the young. Introducing new participatory opportunities can help build a better and more robust democracy by providing citizens with additional decision-making and participation channels. However, new forms of political activity can also exacerbate existing political equality gaps if they only engage those citizens who are already actively participating in politics (Hustinx & Roose, 2016, p. 97; Stolle & Hooghe, 2011). Therefore, research into different forms of democratic innovations and who supports them is necessary.

Very few empirical studies have examined general citizens' support for direct versus deliberative/talk-centric democratic processes. In one of the first contributions to this question, Gherghina and Geissel (2020) study in the United Kingdom suggests that the same general variables explain the support for both direct and deliberative democracy: political interest, efficacy, dissatisfaction with government, and contestation of parliament. However, the supporters of direct democracy are “animated by greater political interest, dissatisfaction with the government and experience with direct democracy,” while the supporters of deliberative democracy “rest more on the contestation of parliament, internal efficacy and experience with deliberative democracy” (Gherghina & Geissel, 2020). This finding suggests differences in the supporters of different types of democracy models and democratic processes, and thus, different models/processes should be analyzed separately. The second contribution of this paper is examining the support for two different participatory processes separately in another context besides the United Kingdom. Finland is an established Nordic democracy with a consensus-driven political culture, where people exhibit high levels of institutional trust and democratic satisfaction (e.g., Bäck et al., 2016; Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2016). Due to the lack of empirical studies on the subject, this article is more exploratory.

The topic is studied using data from the Finnish National Election Survey 2019 (Grönlund & Borg, 2019). By focusing on the year 2019, it is possible to explore the issue in times when the latest trends in youth participation were embodied by, for example, the Fridays for Future climate movement that mobilized millions of schoolchildren around the globe (de Moor et al., 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019), but before the Covid-19 pandemic affected societies at large.

## STATE OF THE ART

Democratic innovations are “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith, 2009, p. 1). Ranging from participatory budgeting and deliberative mini-publics to citizens' initiatives and referendums, and many more, especially institutionalized democratic innovations, innovations that

function in the structures of representative democracy are sometimes offered as a potential solution to increase citizen participation (see Smith, 2009). Democratic innovations could help bridge the gap between young people and representative institutions where the young seem to lack interest. This article examines youth support for two democratic innovations: a direct democratic process (referendums) and a talk-centric democratic process (discussion forums).

In the modern context, direct democratic processes refer to decision-making processes where citizens are given a direct say on specific issues. Direct democratic procedures allow ordinary citizens to take part in political decision-making by either voting directly on an issue or bringing an issue to the decision-making process in other institutionalized ways (e.g., citizens' initiative) (Setälä & Schiller, 2012). As Altman (2018, p. 6) puts it, a direct democratic process is “a publicly recognized, institutionalized process by which citizens of a region or country register their choice or opinion on specific issues through a ballot with universal and secret suffrage.” The most common forms of direct democratic processes in modern democracies are referendums and citizens' initiatives.

What is in this paper called talk-centric democratic processes refer to processes where citizens participate through engaging in organized political discussions (to impact decision-making). The term “talk-centric” is often used to refer to deliberative democracy (see, e.g., Chambers, 2003). However, in this paper, the term “talk-centric” is not strictly reserved for deliberative democratic processes with strict deliberative rules of reasoned arguments used in public debates and public deliberation between free and equal citizens (Bohman, 1998). Instead, the term refers to processes where, in general, *talk* (instead of direct participation or vote) is centered. The support for talk-centric processes is measured here by support for discussion forums on policy issues to complement representative democracy. The connection to the political process is, however, important, as not all processes where citizens simply get to discuss can be defined as talk-centric processes. The *quality* and *impact* of the discussion are still essential. As the discussion forums connect to the formal decision-making process, ergo include a notion of the impact of the talk, it can be seen as a “talk-centric democratic process.” See “Research design” for more information on the measures.

The talk-centric process examined in this paper can also be understood as a deliberative mini-public defined broadly. Deliberative mini-publics are institutions designed to realize the deliberative democracy and deliberative democratic principles of, for example, public reasoning (Dryzek, 2007; Ryan & Smith, 2015). Typically, certain elements, such as random sampling, receiving of information, and structured deliberation guided by independent facilitators/moderators (Grönlund et al., 2022; Michels & Binnema, 2018), characterize mini-publics. However, there are expansive and restrictive definitions of mini-publics (see Fishkin, 2011; Fung, 2003; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Smith, 2009).

As Ryan and Smith (2015) write, mini-publics are “a class of institutions that directly engage citizens (and) promote democratic deliberation”; democratic deliberation (the careful consideration and discussion) is of the essence, as well as engaging citizens and not representatives or politicians. Both elements are present in the talk-centric process examined here, as it is about introducing a tool that can give citizens more of a voice in the decision-making process by giving them an opportunity to discuss/deliberate policy issues with a connection to the democratic decision-making process to enhance representative democracy. Following Rojon et al. (2019) argumentation, ordinary citizens also do not follow the normative debates around deliberate democracy and are not likely to be familiar with the concept. Thus, for ordinary citizens, whether a talk-centric process is fully deliberative or not is not likely pivotal for their support; rather, the distinction that the process centers around citizen talk instead of other modes is likely to be more important if the process still has a connection to the democratic process.

This article focuses on young people's support for these two participatory processes. Youth is expected to affect political participation and support for different forms of political activity. As stated in the introduction, there has been growing worry over youth support for representative democracy. Despite the vast worry, theorists have ensured that the lack of youth engagement in political institutions is not an issue, as the young merely support alternative forms of political engagement. Instead of political institutions, the young support more direct, active, elite-challenging, and engaging ways to participate in politics (Chou, 2017; Dalton, 2016; Hustinx & Roose, 2016; Inglehart, 1997). This pattern is due to different political socialization patterns at different times. Older people came of age when mass political parties and elections were fundamental to democracy and democratic government, and they were politically socialized during a time of cleaved congealment (Grasso, 2014; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Due to their political socialization, they have a stronger sense of civic duty, a strong stimulus for voting (Dalton, 2016). Younger people, on the other hand, have come of age during different times, which is why they support alternative forms of political activity.

Theories explain that rising educational levels, technological advances, and changing norms and values (Dalton, 2008; Inglehart, 1997) have led to young people having different skills, capabilities, and expectations for political participation. Young people are expected to be critical of the institutional representative system with its mediation and instead be these new type of post-materialist citizens who prefer participation in alternative, nonelectoral forms of engagement (Pickard, 2019) that are in their nature more direct, sporadic, horizontal, autonomous and issue-specific (Hustinx & Roose, 2016, p. 95; Inglehart, 1997, p. 43; Norris, 2004). Instead of political institutions, young people support single-issue movements and cause-oriented politics (Chou, 2017; Kimberlee, 2002; Pickard, 2019), ecologic consumption, the climate strike

movement (de Moor et al., 2020), and online activism—and according to empirical evidence also some democratic innovations, such as the citizens' initiative (Huttunen & Christensen, 2020). Empirical evidence from Europe suggests that newer and alternative forms of political engagement may reduce age inequalities in participation (Hustinx & Roose, 2016; Marien et al., 2010; Oser et al., 2013; Stolle & Hooghe, 2011).

Previous empirical studies and theories thus suggest that young people may support different types of newer participatory opportunities more than older people do. However, it is empirically and theoretically unclear whether young people's support for the two democratic processes differs from older people's. As the discussion above highlights, there are expectations for young people's different participatory preferences. However, the two processes (referendums and discussion forums) have a complex nature, which, on the one hand, may make them appealing to young people or, on the other hand, put the young off from supporting them. Many democratic innovations, especially direct democratic processes, focus on single issues, are sporadic, more direct, and elite-challenging by giving more power to the people. These are all features that should appeal to the young. On the other hand, institutionalized democratic innovations are, as the name suggests, institutionalized by nature: they function in connection to the representative decision-making structures and channel citizens' voices into those structures. Theories on youth participation expect young people to be less institutionally inclined, which may dampen the support for direct or talk-centric democratic processes for the young. By examining youth support for these two democratic processes separately instead of as a bulk measure, we can examine this complex issue more nuancedly.

Due to the lack of theoretical expectations and empirical evidence on the differences between young and older people in support for different democratic innovations, instead of testing hypotheses, the issue is studied with the help of two specific research questions:

**RQa:** *Do young people support referendums more than older people?*

**RQb:** *Do young people support discussion forums more than older people?*

To further examine the question of youth support for the referendums versus discussion forums, the question of which one young people are more likely to support is of the essence. Direct and deliberative processes, or in this case talk-centric processes, are two distinct processes driven by different logic and outcomes (Gherghina & Geissel, 2020). Direct democratic processes are more direct, issue-focused forms of political engagement that have a more limited level of participation (see e.g., Chou, 2017; Dalton, 2016; Hustinx & Roose, 2016; Pickard, 2019), operate with (seemingly) simpler questions, and require less time and commitment than talk-centric processes—features that are

likely to appeal to the young. However, direct democratic processes are also often institutionalized—typically, a referendum vote or a citizens' initiative is sent to the representative decision-making process for its final proceeding. Still, Gherghina and Geissel (2020) argue that since direct democratic processes transfer the decision-making power to citizens, these processes are at least less institutionalized than deliberative processes. Some direct democratic processes have also been shown to gather youth support (Huttunen & Christensen, 2020).

Regarding talk-centric processes, Gherghina and Geissel (2020) suggest that deliberative processes typically function as a mechanism for political will-formation, that is, leaving the decision-making power in the hands of the politicians, making them more institutionalized. Some studies on deliberative citizens' assemblies even suggest that politicians may co-opt these processes in some contexts (e.g., Dryzek & Tucker, 2008). This would further reduce people's power in talk-centric processes—not only is the aim of deliberation often will-formation instead of decision-making impact, but even the will-formation process may be diverted by decision-makers. However, studies in the Finnish context with deliberative experiments suggest that politicians' involvement in deliberative mini-publics has not had a negative effect on deliberation (Grönlund et al., 2022; Värttö et al., 2021). Similar logic regarding the level of institutionalization could also be applied to other talk-centric processes, especially here, where the discussion forums exist to complement representative decision-making—thus still leaving the power in the hands of the institutions. Other features of talk-centric processes are their focus on citizen discussions, which are more time-consuming processes (discussion takes longer than signing an initiative), and the requirement of more knowledge and motivation from participants (Gherghina & Geissel, 2020), which make them more consuming to participate. Even though educated and skillful young people may possess the skills to participate, all these features might make talk-centric processes less popular among the young than direct processes.

There are contrasting ideas on how this could affect youth support. However, due to the differing nature of referendums and discussion forums, and evidence on youth support for other direct democratic forms (Huttunen & Christensen, 2020), and the lack of evidence of youth support for talk-centric processes, the following hypothesis is tested:

**H1:** Young people are more supportive of referendums than discussion forums.

Political attitudes can be expected to play a role in explaining different aged citizens' support for different political processes. To build a foundation for future work and to further investigate differences in support between the two democratic processes between young and older citizens, this paper investigates whether there are differences between young and older citizens in the



associations between political attitudes and the support for referendums versus discussion forums. The aim is to test four typical factors that may be of relevance to build a better understanding of how age may affect the associations. The studied political attitudes are political interest, political trust, and satisfaction with democracy. In addition, political knowledge is examined. The following section discusses some expectations regarding age-related differences in the effects of political attitudes and knowledge. This part of the study is exploratory.

Political interest is often considered a precondition for involvement in more active forms of engagement: without interest, people are unlikely to participate (Verba et al., 1995). However, since citizens' political interest is largely determined during their formative years (Neundorf et al., 2013), political interest may be of different importance for differently aged citizens depending on when they were politically socialized. García-Albacete (2014, pp. 159–160) showed that for young people, political interest affects participation in non-institutionalized activities, while for older people, interest affects institutionalized participation. As both referendums and discussion forums are at least somewhat institutionalized by nature yet have many features associated with non-institutionalized activities, it is unclear how political interest affects support for different aged citizens.

Finland is a country where the general trust in political institutions tends to be high (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2016), also for the young (Myllyniemi, 2014). However, even in Finland, trust in political institutions is linked especially to support for representative democracy (Rapeli & von Schoultz, 2021), while distrust has been shown to have an increasing effect on direct democratic involvement (Christensen, 2018). Nevertheless, it is unclear whether distrust's effect on support is similar for talk-centric processes and different aged citizens.

Empirical studies suggest that dissatisfaction with democracy and representative institutions is connected to a preference for different participatory opportunities, especially direct democracy (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006; Gherghina & Geissel, 2017). However, with deliberative processes, Goldberg and Bächtiger (2023) found that dissatisfied citizens were more negative towards the so-called deliberative citizen forums than satisfied citizens when the issue was studied in Germany. Whether the effects are similar for young and older people is unclear. Younger generations' growing dissatisfaction with democratic performance (Foa et al., 2020) suggests that dissatisfaction may have differing effects on the young than the old.

Political resources such as political knowledge affect how much citizens *can* participate (Verba et al., 1995) but also how much they *want* to participate. When the electorate's political resources rise, the demand for and use of more participatory opportunities also increases (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009;

Donovan & Karp, 2006, p. 672). Empirical evidence has shown that young people have lower political knowledge levels compared with older people (Grönlund & Milner, 2006), which is unsurprising, since young people have often not had time to finish their formal education. However, this might mean that the effect of knowledge on participation in different political processes differs for the young versus the older. Since Finnish young people—despite having top-level political knowledge in European comparisons—have lower trust in their knowledge than young people do in most other countries (Myllyniemi, 2014) and since political knowledge is a strong predictor of political participation (Grönlund & Milner, 2006), political knowledge is likely to be especially important for all kinds of youth engagement in Finland.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Data and operationalization of the variables

The statistical analyses are conducted using cross-sectional survey data from the Finnish National Election Study (FNES) from 2019.<sup>3</sup> The FNES is a representative, national postelection study that was collected after the Finnish Parliamentary elections. The 2019 data (Grönlund & Borg, 2019) were collected through face-to-face interviews and self-administered paper questionnaires. The data involves 1598 respondents ( $n = 1598$ ).

The data are analyzed by using *t*-tests, logistic regression analysis, and multivariate multiple regression analysis.<sup>4</sup>

### Dependent variable

To measure the support for direct versus talk-centric democratic processes, two separate measures are used as dependent variables.

A variable that measures support for the use of referendums (“To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Important national issues should more often be decided by a referendum”) is used to measure support for direct democratic processes. In Finland, the use of referendums is rare (only two national referendums have been held throughout the country's history). Therefore, the question could be interpreted more broadly as a wish for more direct political influence than merely a wish for more active use of referendums (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009). However, the use of referendums works as a good measure of support for new forms of democracy, as introducing more referendums would mean an actual increase in the repertoire of political opportunities that citizens have.

The talk-centric process is examined by the following question “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? To complement representative democracy, public discussion forums on policy issues should be

organized for ordinary citizens.”<sup>5</sup> Due to the data restrictions, that is, there are no questions of pure deliberative processes, the only possibility of examining citizens' support for talk-centric processes is to focus on a question asking about public discussion forums. This measure also captures an addition of political opportunities for average citizens.

Both are ordinal variables with four different answer categories ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The dependent variables were recoded into dummies where 0 stands for “strongly disagree” and “somewhat disagree” and 1 for “somewhat agree” and “strongly agree” to enable of logistic regression.<sup>6</sup>

## Independent variables

The main independent variable is “youth.” It is impossible to precisely define who constitutes a young person or when a person ceases to be young as transitions from childhood to adulthood are flexible (García-Albacete, 2014; Pickard, 2019), and the question is highly context-dependent. Here, a definition provided by legislation is utilized, as legislative definitions typically reflect the social, cultural, and political judgments of the issue (Pickard, 2019, p. 29) while considering election data restrictions. Thus, along the lines of Finnish Youth Act legislation, in this study, people aged 18–29 are considered “young people” (Nuorisolaki 1285/2016, 3§). In regression analyses, age is also treated as a continuous variable, consisting of values between 18 and 90.

The rest of the independent variables measure political attitudes and political knowledge. I focus on age-related differences in the association between the two participatory processes and three central political attitudes:

- Political interest [level of political interest on a four-point Likert scale (None at all—very interested)]
- Political trust [level of political trust in five institutions<sup>7</sup> on a 0-10 scale, combined in an index]
- Satisfaction with democracy [level of satisfaction on a four-point Likert scale (None at all—very satisfied)].

Additionally, a measure of political knowledge (measured by five questions that measure respondents' actual knowledge about politics,<sup>8</sup> combined in an index) is used.

Control variables can be difficult to determine when examining differences across ages since life-cycle effects may invariably influence values on traditional characteristics such as occupation and income. Here, the opted solution is to control for some socio-demographic characteristics unaffected by the life cycle. These include gender (dichotomy, male = 1) and level of urbanity where respondents indicate the level of urbanity where they live (0 = countryside,

1 = large city with more than 100,000 inhabitants). In addition, perceived childhood class and respondent's social class are controlled, as socio-economic class is typically a factor in political engagement.

## Finland as a case

Finland is an established Nordic democracy, where citizens typically have high levels of satisfaction with democracy (Bäck et al., 2016; Karvonen, 2014; Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2016; Rapeli & Koskimaa, 2020) and multidimensional preferences for how political decision-making should be organized (Bengtsson, 2012; Bengtsson & Christensen, 2016; Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009). Finland makes use of direct democracy in the form of a legislative agenda-setting citizens' initiative that was established in 2012 in a top-down process to provide Finnish citizens with more participatory opportunities. Talk-centric processes and deliberative democracy have also become more available in Finland since many scholars have organized deliberative experiments in the form of mini-publics and citizens' assemblies both on the national and local levels (see e.g., [paloresearch.fi](http://paloresearch.fi)). However, the so-called "deliberative wave" (OECD, 2020) is still on its way to the country as deliberative or talk-centric processes are still not systematically and frequently utilized.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, referendums, the most typical direct democratic procedures, are not actively used in Finland on the national level. On the local level, 63 referendums between the years 1991 and 2019 were organized, most typically about municipal mergers.<sup>10</sup> Both a more active use of referendums and a broader use of discussion forums would entail an add-on to the participatory repertoire available for people in Finland. Studying the support for referendums and discussion forums in the Finnish context thus allows the examination of a case where both democratic processes would give citizens new opportunities for political participation. Comparing their popularity allows us to examine people's preferences in an established and institutionalized democratic system, if, and when, new participatory opportunities are introduced. With rising participatory opportunities, the question of which forms citizens support and prefer is important.

As for the young, Finnish young people have a range of opportunities for political participation outside of elections (such as the national-level citizens' initiative and local-level youth councils), and they have been active in, for example, the latest surge of climate activism. Previous studies show that the younger generations often opt for activities that are not directly connected to the formal political sphere (Christensen & von Schoultz, 2009; Christensen et al., 2017; García-Albacete, 2014). Still, studies also suggest that Finnish young people have rather traditional preferences for political participation (Huttunen, 2021; Myllyniemi, 2014). Especially considering that the erosion of youth engagement in elections has not been as steep in Finland as in many other

countries (Nemčok & Wass, 2021), even though the generational patterns regarding election participation are also visible in Finland, studying the Finnish young people's attitudes towards direct versus talk-centric democratic processes can help us gain an understanding of how such democratic innovations are viewed by young people with traditional ideas of political engagement and opportunities for broader citizen engagement, in a time when youth participation is in decline in institutionalized settings but in a rise in activism. Since Finland has a similar social and political culture as its Nordic neighbors, the findings are likely comparable to the other Nordic countries.

## ANALYSIS

The aim of this study is to examine young people's support for direct versus talk-centric democratic processes in Finland. To examine research questions RQa and RQb (RQa: Do young people support referendums more than older people? RQb: Do young people support discussion forums more than older people?), a *t*-test was conducted to examine the distribution of support for referendums versus discussion forums for young people versus the rest of the population. The results are displayed in Table 1.

The results show that younger people are more likely to support referendums than older people are. The results are statistically significant at a  $p < 0.001$  level. For direct democratic processes, the probability that young citizens (18–29) support referendums is 69%, while for the rest of the population, the percentage is 56. Young people also support discussion forums

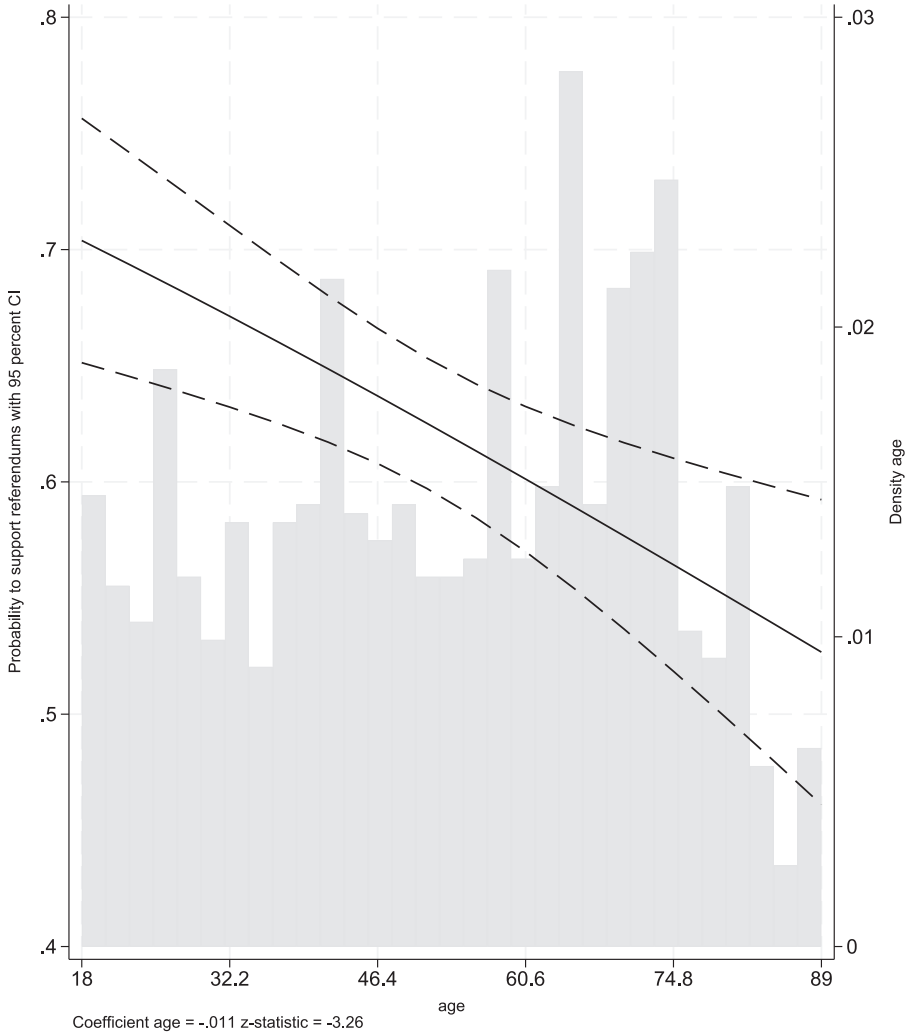
**TABLE 1** *T*-test for mean differences in supporting referendums and discussion forums between young people (18–29) and the rest of the population.

	Support for referendums (mean, 0–1)			Support for discussion forums (mean, 0–1)		
	<i>N</i>	95% CI	<i>N</i>	95% CI		
Young (18–29)	231	0.63–0.75	203	0.84–0.93		
Rest of population	1277	0.55–0.60	1228	0.74–0.79		
Total	1508		1431			
<i>T</i>	3.6952		3.8096			
Degrees of freedom	1506		1429			
<i>P</i> (H0: Young = Rest)	$p = 0.0002$		$p = 0.0001$			

Note: Unweighted data.

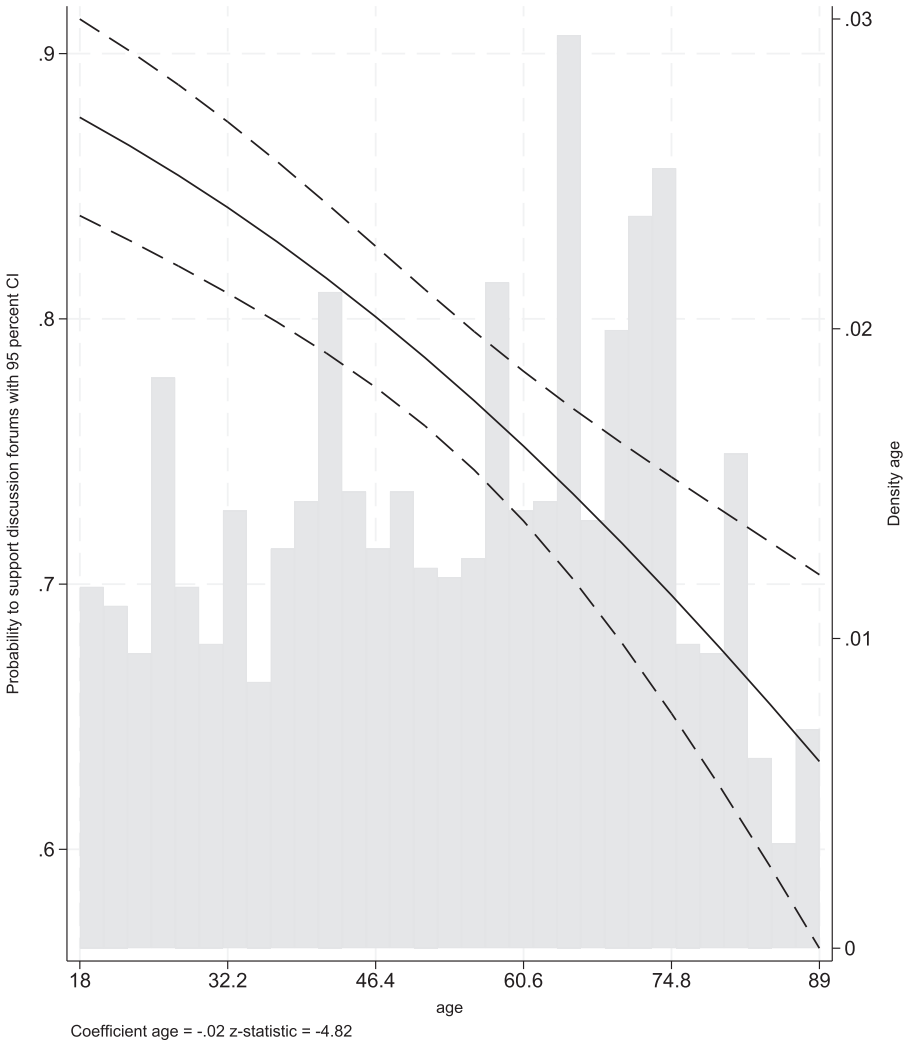
Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

more than older people do. The results are statistically significant at a  $p < 0.001$  level. For discussion forums, the probability of support is 89% for young people and 77% for the rest of the population. Regression analyses with the categorical age variable, the two processes, and control variables were conducted to confirm these results, and the results confirm these findings. The regression table can be found in the Supporting Information S1: [Appendix](#).



**FIGURE 1** Support for referendums and age. Note the differences in scale. Weighted data.

To further investigate the relationship between age and support for these two democratic processes, a logistic regression analysis with measures of support for referendums and age as a continuous variable (Figure 1) and a logistic regression analysis with support for discussion forums as the dependent variable (Figure 2) were conducted.<sup>11,12</sup> These analyses further support the



**FIGURE 2** Support for discussion forums and age. Note the differences in scale. Weighted data.

finding that young people are more supportive of both democratic processes. The analyses also suggest that support for both processes may decline with age.

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted with five different age groups (18–29, 30–44, 45–59, 60–74, 75+) and support for referendums versus discussion forums to confirm these findings. The results are visible in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that all older age groups are less supportive of both democratic processes than the young are and that the support declines with age. This notion requires more scholarly attention in the future—the potential lifecycle effect in the support for these types of processes should be further examined.

The results from all the analyses above suggest that discussion forums are more popular among the citizenry in general, whereas referendums are less popular. These findings contrast with Rojon et al. (2019) findings from the United States, which showed that citizens support vote-centric processes more than talk-centric processes: in their analyses, referendums and initiatives were more popular than public meetings. In Finland, young people also support discussion forums more than referendums. A paired *t*-test with only young people (18–29) was conducted to see whether there are differences in support for referendums versus discussion forums among the young. The results are visible in Table 3. We see a statistically significant difference between support for referendums and discussion forums. Despite the expectations that the young would be more supportive of a direct democratic process as such processes are, among other things, more sporadic, direct, and less time-consuming political activity than

**TABLE 2** One-way ANOVA for mean differences in supporting referendums and discussion forums between different age groups.

	<i>N</i>	Support for referendums (mean)	Support for discussion forums (mean)
Age			
18–29	243	0.69	0.89
30–44	316	0.59	0.81
45–59	332	0.59	0.81
60–74	473	0.54	0.76
75+	216	0.5	0.68
Total	1580	0.58	0.78

*Note:* Unweighted data. A Kruskal–Wallis *H* test confirms that the results are statistically significant at  $p < 0.000$  level.

Abbreviation: ANOVA, analysis of variance.



**TABLE 3** A paired *t*-test on young people's (18–29) support of referendums versus discussion forums.

	Mean	SE	95% CI	N
Support for referendums	0.68	0.033	0.61–0.75	199
Support for discussion forums	0.88	0.023	0.85–0.99	199
diff	–0.206	0.039	–0.28 to –0.13	
<i>T</i>	–5.2556			
Degrees of freedom	198			
<i>P</i> ( $H_0$ : Young = Rest)	$p = 0.000$			

Note: Unweighted data.

Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

deliberation, the young are more supportive of a talk-centric process. Thus, no support for hypothesis H1 was found.

Finally, to further our knowledge of potential age-related differences in the support for different democratic processes, the differences between young and older citizens in the associations between political attitudes and the support for referendums versus discussion forums were explored. First, a multivariate multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the associations between the two participatory processes and all the independent variables.<sup>13</sup> The results from the multivariate regression analysis, examining whether the independent variables can explain the support for referendums and discussion forums in general, are displayed in Table 4.

The regression analysis suggests that all the independent variables, except age, can explain the support for referendums. All the statistically significant independent variables have a negative relationship with the support for referendums: politically distrusting, dissatisfied with democracy, politically less interested, and politically less knowledgeable people are more likely to support referendums. For discussion forums, only age and political interest are statistically significant explanations for support. The results suggest that younger people and people more interested in politics support citizen discussions. Gender also has a statistically significant effect on support for discussion forums, meaning that women are more likely to support discussion forums.

Finally, logistic interaction regression analyses were conducted to explore the differences between young and older citizens in the associations between political attitudes and the support for referendums and discussion forums.<sup>14</sup> All the interaction tables and figures are in the Supporting Information S1: [Appendix](#). The results suggest that overall, the effects of political attitudes and

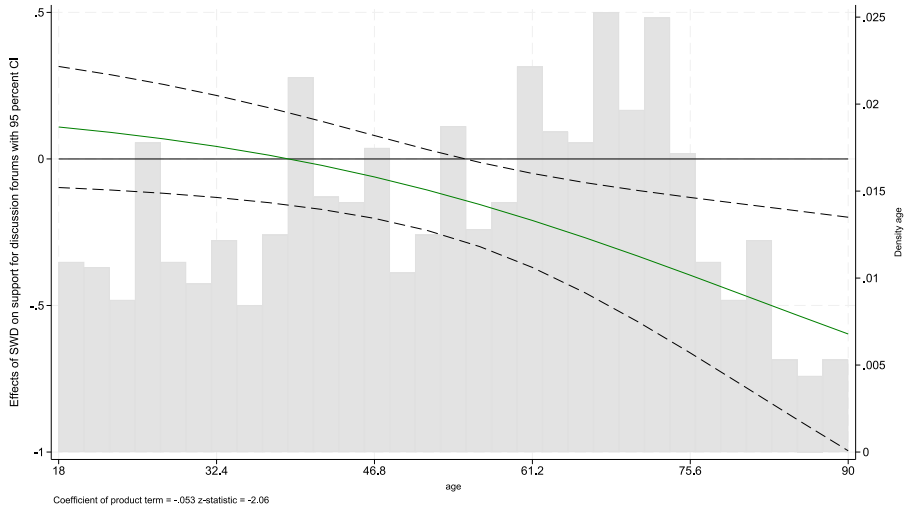
**TABLE 4** Multivariate multiple regression table of support for direct versus talk-centric processes.

	Support for referendums <i>B</i> (SE)	Support for discussion forums <i>B</i> (SE)
Age	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.001)
Political trust	-0.343*** (0.081)	0.133 (0.075)
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.258** (0.078)	-0.120 (0.070)
Political interest	-0.160** (0.057)	0.220*** (0.055)
Political knowledge	-0.326*** (0.057)	0.033 (0.052)
Gender	0.047 (0.029)	0.073** (0.027)
Urban/rural	-0.010 (0.013)	0.001 (0.011)
Employment	0.002 (0.001)	0.000 (0.002)
Own class	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Perceived childhood class	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)

*Note:* Coefficients (*B*) with robust standard errors (SE) in parenthesis. Weighted data.

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

political knowledge on the support for the two processes do not differ between young and older people—the effects are similar for the younger and the older. However, there is one interesting finding from the interaction analyses; the results suggest that the effect of democratic satisfaction (SWD) on the support for discussion forums is reversed for young versus old people. The findings from this interaction analysis are displayed in Figure 3.



**FIGURE 3** The interaction effect between age and satisfaction with democracy on support for discussion forums. Weighted data. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9471.12284)]

The interaction analyses suggest that SWD has a positive effect on support for discussion forums for young people and a negative effect for old people. However, it is worth noting that further analyses suggest that the effect is only statistically significant for 18-year-olds (in the young age cohort) and people over 63 years of age (in the older age cohort) (see the Supporting Information S1: [Appendix](#)).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest differences in young and older people's support for direct versus talk-centric democratic processes in Finland. Young people support both referendums and discussion forums more than older people do, despite some expectations that especially institutionally inclined participatory processes would not be favorable for the more post-materialistic young people (Inglehart, 1997). The support among young people is promising for the potential popularity of both participatory processes. Since there has been much worry over young people's declining levels of political participation (Grasso et al., 2019; Milner, 2010), it is a promising sign that democratic innovations can pique young people's interest.

The results show that discussion forums are more popular in Finland than referendums. Young people also support them more. Despite that direct democratic processes are, as the name suggests, a more direct, issue-focused

form of politics with limited participation, which theoretically should be preferable for the young (Chou, 2017; Dalton, 2016; Hustinx & Roose, 2016; Pickard, 2019), the Finnish young people prefer the talk-centric process, the discussion forums. This finding is especially noteworthy since talk-centric processes do not shift the decision-making power away from conventional and institutionalized politics. Instead of preferring processes where citizens have a direct say in decision-making, Finnish people prefer discussion forums with will-formation without final decision-making power—they prefer a process where the outcome depends on the representative institutions. In the Finnish context, this ties to previous findings on democratic preferences: evidence from “young radicals,” young climate activists, suggests that even people who engage in protest politics support representative democracy and do not want to change the political system; they merely want it to function better (Huttunen, 2021). Thus, stronger support for the “will-formation without decision-making power” process makes sense in the Finnish context, where young people seem to have somewhat representative and traditional preferences for politics (Myllyniemi, 2014). However, it is noteworthy that despite these traditional preferences, Finnish young people still participate less in elections than older citizens. These findings have important implications regarding the young: If young people do not participate in institutionalized forms of politics, it is not due to a lack of preferences but other barriers. Since the young appear to be more likely to support both participatory processes, perhaps democratic innovations that are linked to the existing institutions could mobilize Finnish young people into participation.

These findings also have important implications for political process preferences, as they contrast previous findings from the United States, which suggest that citizens support talk-centric processes less (in comparison to vote-centric processes, such as referendums) (Rojon et al., 2019). Since Rojon et al. (2019) speculate that one reason for the results may be that respondents did not view decisions made by a small selection of citizens as legitimate, perhaps some contextual factors can explain this difference. Finland is a small country with a small population; talk-centric processes can engage proportionally more citizens than in large countries such as the United States. Finland is also a considerably less polarized and heterogeneous country, which may affect people's willingness to see decisions made by citizen forums more legitimate. Additionally, since the proposed discussion forums would entail an addition to the political repertoire, their popularity may be due to their novelty in Finland. Despite only being used twice at the national level, referendums are still, at least, a concept probably more familiar to people as they have been used on the local level in recent years than discussion forums used to complement representative decision-making.

These contrasting findings speak to the importance of conducting research in different contexts to deepen our knowledge regarding support for different political forms in different parts of the world. This point is further supported by

comparing the findings from this study with Gherghina and Geissel (2020) single case study in the United Kingdom. Although the question differs somewhat (direct versus deliberative democracy in Gherghina and Geissel's work, direct versus talk-centric democratic processes in this article), there are similarities and differences in the findings. Generally, both studies suggest differences in the supporters of different participatory processes. In Finland, direct democratic processes gather support from those more democratically dissatisfied and less skillful. The supporters of talk-centric processes in Finland are likely to be younger, but in contrast to the supporters of direct procedures, talk-centric processes are supported by those who are politically interested. These findings are in contrast to Gherghina and Geissel's (2020) findings from the United Kingdom, where it was the supporters of direct democracy that were animated by greater political interest (alongside dissatisfaction, which is in line with the findings from Finland).

In addition to examining differences between young and older citizens, the difference in effects of political attitudes and political knowledge on support were examined. An interesting interaction was found between democratic satisfaction and age on support for discussion forums; the results suggest that the effect of democratic satisfaction is reversed for young and old people, and SWD has a positive effect on youth support and a negative effect for old people. This finding indicates that democratic satisfaction may function differently for young people in different forms of engagement (since the same pattern was not visible in direct democratic processes). This finding is especially noteworthy since recent evidence suggests that young people are less democratically satisfied (Foa et al., 2020)—learning about the age effects on how satisfaction affects support for different political activities can help us understand better the potential consequences of youth dissatisfaction. However, the results were only statistically significant to the youngest respondents (18-year-olds); further studies are needed to confirm these findings. In general, the findings from the association between political attitudes/knowledge and support for referendums versus discussion forums suggest no notable differences in effect between young and older people.

There are limitations to the study. Using election survey data (FNES2019; Grönlund & Borg, 2019) may affect the results since politically interested people tend to respond more frequently to election surveys. Using only referendums and discussion forums as measures for direct and talk-centric democratic processes also comes with limitations. Due to data restrictions, it was not possible to use multiple indicators for these two processes—yet they are rich concepts that should be measured with more than two indicators. Especially since previous studies suggest that different kinds of people support different direct democratic procedures (Grotz & Lewandowsky, 2020). Similarly, more studies with different measures of talk-centric processes that consider the quality of discussion are needed.

The findings are important for future research in the field. The results suggest that despite the declining youth participation in elections (Grasso et al., 2019), it is incorrect to say that young people, in general, would not also be supportive of institutionalized forms of politics—they do support direct and talk-centric processes. Perhaps these types of democratic innovations can increase youth participation and channel young people's voices into political decision-making. However, as Rojon et al. (2019) highlight, support and participation are not necessarily the same. People may support democratic processes on paper but fail to engage in them—or be unsupportive of processes but still participate to ensure their voices are heard.

The data used in this article are available at <https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/en/>.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Here, I use the terms “direct and talk-centric democratic processes” or “participatory processes” or “democratic processes” interchangeably to refer to these two types of democratic processes that are two different types of democratic innovations. Here, all these terms refer to the studied direct and talk-centric processes (referendums and discussion forums) that exist in the representative setting and are connected to political institutions—they provide citizens a broader role in the political decision-making processes, thus, these processes can channel citizens’ voices into the formal political structures.
- <sup>2</sup> It should be noted that some innovations, such as the participatory budgeting, mix elements from direct and talk-centric democracy.
- <sup>3</sup> For more information: <https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/fnesdata/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Due to the Brant test being significant, ordinal logistic regression cannot be used in the analyses. Instead, the analyses are conducted by using logistic regression.
- <sup>5</sup> Translation from Finnish by the author.
- <sup>6</sup> See footnote 4.
- <sup>7</sup> The five political institutions were the president, political parties, parliament, the government, and politicians.
- <sup>8</sup> The questions were: Who of the following was the Finnish Minister of Finance right before the recent parliamentary elections? What was the unemployment rate in Finland in February 2019 according to Statistics Finland? Which of the following parties has the second largest number of

seats in the newly elected Parliament? Who is the current President of the European Commission? What do you think is meant by a parliamentary system of government?

<sup>9</sup> Many deliberative experiments have been organized after 2019 when the data were collected.

<sup>10</sup> <https://vaalit.fi/alueelliset-kansanaanestykset>.

<sup>11</sup> Regression analyses show that the relationships are not curvilinear for either referendums and age or talk-centric processes and age.

<sup>12</sup> The regression table for both regressions can be found in the Supporting Information S1: [Appendix](#). The results are statistically significant at a  $p = 0.001$  level (referendums) and  $p < 0.000$  level (discussion forums).

<sup>13</sup> Age is here treated as a continuous variable (between 18 and 90). The multivariate multiple regression allows for regression analysis with two dependent variables with the same independent variables.

<sup>14</sup> Age is here treated as a continuous variable (between 18 and 90). The data are weighted.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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