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# 6 Act Your Age! Generational Differences in Political Participation in Finland 2007–2019

*Janette Huttunen and Henrik Serup Christensen*

## **Introduction**

Studies show important differences in patterns of political participation across generations whereby younger generations are found to be less active in traditional political activities such as voting and more active in demonstrating and online activities (Albacete, 2014; Dalton, 2016; Grasso, 2016; Smets & Neundorf, 2014). While similar trends have been established in several countries, the underlying mechanisms are still not well-understood. Finland here constitutes an interesting case since older generations have traditionally been fairly active in traditional forms of political participation, while younger generations have been less active in the traditional activities, opting instead for activities that are not directly connected to the formal political sphere (Albacete, 2014; Bengtsson & Christensen, 2009; Christensen et al., 2016). However, recent years have seen an upsurge in youth activism, partly because of new possibilities for taking part such as the citizens' initiative launched in 2012, but also because of new issues on the political agenda that spur youth activism (Huttunen, 2021; Huttunen & Christensen, 2020). Since much of the contemporary political discourse emphasizes increasing divisions across generations, it is instructive to examine in more detail how patterns of political participation differ across generations in Finland.

Voting continues to be the most popular form of political engagement among Finnish citizens, but alternative forms of engagement have become more popular (Raiskila & Wiberg, 2017; Bäck & Christensen, 2020; Bengtsson & Christensen, 2009; Bengtsson & Grönlund, 2005). As in other Western democracies, differences in political participation across generations entail that younger Finnish citizens participate less in traditional forms of participation, such as elections, and more in new political activities, including signing petitions, political consumerism, and online activities (Strandberg & Borg, 2020; Borg & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2017; Rapeli & Leino, 2013, see also Chapter 14 in this book). While previous studies have tried to explain differences in participation across generations (Wass, 2007), these lack a comprehensive overview of participatory differences that also include the younger generations who have only recently become politically mature. This is important since much of the contemporary discussion focus on the perceived deficiencies in the political behaviour of these age groups (Dalton, 2016; Grasso et al., 2017;

Theocharis & van Deth, 2018, Huttunen & Christensen, 2020). In this chapter, we, therefore, aim to examine generational differences in political participation. We first provide a comprehensive overview of participation 2007–2019. Second, we examine the extent to which any differences are connected to differences in key political attitudes.

Contemporary generational differences in political participation are typically explained by older generations being more conventional while the young prefer nonhierarchical and elite-challenging activities (Inglehart, 1997). Political attitudes are often assumed to play a central role in explaining differences in participation across age groups (Almond & Verba, 1963; Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Inglehart, 1997), and it is, therefore, of particular interest to examine how political attitudes are connected to political participation across generations. We do so by examining differences across generations when it comes to four forms of political participation in 2019: being active in political parties, taking part in legal demonstrations, discussing politics online and signing citizens' initiatives. These four activities constitute classical examples of specific forms of participation that, at the same, are particularly relevant to examine in a Finnish context.

### **Generations and political participation**

Established democracies have, in recent decades, witnessed several transformations in patterns of participation. Traditional political participation in political parties and elections has since the 1960s and 1970s been supplemented with, or even replaced by, protest politics, political consumerism, and, more recently, online activities and democratic innovations (Dalton, 2016; Grasso, 2016; Grasso et al., 2017; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Inglehart, 1997; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). This development is often summed up in a movement away from institutionalized participation in conventional representative activities to noninstitutionalized political participation outside of the established system (Bäck & Christensen, 2016; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Marien et al., 2010).

An influential contribution on generational differences in political participation is offered by Ronald Inglehart and his work on how shifts in social and political values are changing the political landscape (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Inglehart, 1997). According to Inglehart, the material well-being in Western democracies after the end of WW2 has led to persistent value changes among the post-war generations. These value changes toward post-materialism include a greater openness to alternative lifestyles and minority issues, but also more egalitarian and democratic values (Inglehart, 1997).

These changes have repercussions for political participation. According to Inglehart, the younger post-material generations will not let political elites make decisions without interference from ordinary citizens. They, therefore, refrain from hierarchical traditional political activities that are time-consuming and require long-standing ideological commitment. Instead, they opt for direct forms of involvement where they can make their voices directly heard without intermediaries. This means that they are more active in protest activities (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002)

and direct-democratic forms of democratic innovations (Huttunen & Christensen, 2020).

The work of Inglehart relates to other work on generational differences in political participation and values, as common themes emerge even when labels and thresholds differ. The generations born before the end of the Second World War are seen as embodying a subservient and somewhat passive citizen ideal, where involvement of ordinary citizens is limited to elections. These generations were politically socialized when the national party system functioned as an adequate expression of underlying social conflicts (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). They, therefore, believe in the functioning of the representative system and consider electoral participation a citizen duty (Dalton, 2008, 2016). Contrary to this, the generation born after WW2 was politically socialized during a period when protests and social movements grew increasingly popular (Barnes & Kaase, 1979). According to Inglehart, this was the first post-material generation, although others suggest that this generation has settled down and now espouses conventional norms of citizen duty and a preference for institutionalized forms of political engagement (Dalton, 2016).

Studies adopting Inglehart's approach often assume that later generations become more post-materialist and embody the value changes predicted by Inglehart (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002). However, some note that the younger generations may deviate from this pattern (Grasso et al., 2017). The younger generations have come of age during times when the classic mobilization networks have eroded (Putnam, 2000). The Millennials born in the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, entered the workforce amid financial turmoil (Dalton, 2016, 42) and have had a worse quality of life than previous generations (Pickard, 2019, 380). The younger generations' experiences reflect educational, technological, and media-related transformations (Dalton, 2016) that entail greater prerequisites for political participation. Studies suggest that they are more open to minority issues, display higher degrees of engaged citizenship and prefer direct and sporadic forms of participation (Dalton, 2017; Grasso, 2014; Huttunen & Christensen, 2020).

For the youngest generation, Generation Z, the increase in post-material values may be expected to continue, but their political participation may differ. Klander-mans (2015) find that young citizens still demonstrate, but they are more likely to attend gay prides or antiracism demonstrations, while older citizens are more likely to demonstrate concerning peace, workers' rights or regional issues. The popularity of the contemporary climate strike movement shows that the young use protests to raise awareness of the climate crisis (de Moor et al., 2021; Huttunen, 2021). A more fundamental challenge to Inglehart's account dismisses the idea that the young want a more participatory democracy (Huttunen, 2021). Based on in-depth interviews with young Finnish climate activists, Huttunen shows that they want a functioning representative system rather than a fundamental transformation of the democratic system. This may also entail that they are more likely to become involved in institutionalized political activities.

Although previous studies suggest that older generations prefer traditional political activities while younger generations favour noninstitutionalized political

activities, these differences should not be exaggerated. These political activities are not mutually exclusive but may instead form a positive cycle (Pickard, 2019, 397), meaning that generational differences become blurred when examining specific political activities.

Based on the above discussion, political attitudes can be expected to play a pivotal role in explaining the political participation of different generations. The younger generations are dissatisfied with the traditional political system and distrust political elites, and they, therefore, voice their political preferences in new ways. We, therefore, zoom in on the role three specific political attitudes play in explaining generational differences in political participation: Political interest, ideology (left/right ideology and GAL/TAN) and satisfaction with democracy.

Political interest is a key component in explaining political participation (Almond & Verba, 1963; Neundorf et al., 2013). The traditional ideal of democratic citizenship entails that all citizens ought to follow political matters, so they can make informed decisions on key policy issues vote and act accordingly (Almond & Verba, 1963). Empirical studies show that the political interest of citizens is largely determined during the formative years of political socialization (Neundorf et al., 2013). Hence, there may be important differences in levels of political interest across generations. Nonetheless, political interest may be associated with other political activities among younger generations since the tech-savvy youth take advantage of the Internet or social media for political purposes (Min, 2010). Finally, issue interest may be more relevant among the young, whereas general political interest is less central (Soler-i-Martí, 2015).

When examining the impact of ideology, the focus has traditionally been on cleavages in the traditional left-right ideological dimension that mainly concerns socioeconomic issues. However, a new conflict dimension that varies between Green-Alternative-Liberal (GAL) and Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist (TAN) (Hooghe et al., 2002) may be important for the present purposes since it measures similar cultural divisions as Inglehart's post-materialism. For left-right ideology, there have been distinct ideological differences in patterns of political participation (van der Meer et al., 2009). Protests in the 1960s and 1970s were clearly left-wing (Barnes & Kaase, 1979), but even later movements have had a left-wing flavour (della Porta, 2006). Both ideological dimensions also affect attitudes to deliberative forms of democratic innovations (Christensen & von Schoultz, 2019). Some differences are nevertheless likely to exist across generations. GAL-TAN is likely to be more relevant to younger generations who cannot relate to traditional socioeconomic issues, whereas older generations are solidly entrenched within a left/right ideological spectrum.

Satisfaction with democracy measures how respondents evaluate the performance of the democratic regime rather than adherence to the democratic ideal (Linde & Ekman, 2003). It is usually believed that dissatisfied people participate in noninstitutionalized participation while the satisfied prefer traditional political activities (Stolle & Hooghe, 2011). Differences are again likely to exist across generations. Foa and Mounk (2016) show that the young are more dissatisfied with democracy, although others contest this finding (Zilinsky, 2019). Nevertheless, the

consequences of dissatisfaction may differ across generations. Dissatisfaction is usually associated with protest, but it has also been associated with preferences for direct democracy (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Dalton et al., 2001; Donovan & Karp, 2006). It may be that younger generations prefer to voice discontent through more individualized forms of engagement such as the citizens' initiative, while the post-war generations prefer protest activities.

### **Political participation in Finland**

Finland is an established Nordic democracy where citizens exhibit high levels of satisfaction with democracy and institutional trust (see Chapters 2 and 3, and also Rapeli & Koskimaa, 2020; Bäck et al., 2016; Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2016; Karvonen, 2014). The patterns of political participation are fairly conventional. Voting remains the most popular form of participation, although it is lower than in the other Nordic countries (Bengtsson et al., 2014). While still lower, than voting political participation between elections have gained popularity (Raiskila & Wiberg, 2017; Bäck & Christensen, 2020; Bengtsson & Christensen, 2009; Bengtsson & Grönlund, 2005). In a European comparison, Finland has average to high levels of participation in contacting politicians and signing petitions (Bäck & Christensen, 2020). While signing petitions and contacting politicians have traditionally been popular political activities in Finland (Borg, 2013), there was previously no way to ascertain that these efforts were considered by formal decision-makers. To give citizens more of a say between elections, an agenda-setting Citizens' Initiative (CI) was introduced at the national level in Finland in 2012. The CI gives eligible Finnish voters the right to launch and sign agenda-setting legislative initiatives on an official online platform (Christensen et al., 2017). The CI has become a very popular tool (Bäck & Christensen, 2020), especially for the younger generations (Huttunen & Christensen, 2020).

Although generational effects on election participation have been smaller in Finland than in many other advanced democracies (Nemčok & Wass, 2021), a tendency for the young to participate less has also been visible in Finland as in other democracies. The CI has boosted the involvement of the young in a country where young people foster rather traditional views on political participation (Myllyniemi, 2014). Recently, younger generations have also exhibited activity in protest movements since the Fridays for Future climate movement has been successful in mobilizing young into action – however, the participatory preferences of the active young people are unclear (see Huttunen, 2021).

The importance of online participation has also increased since around one-third of Finnish citizens find online participation as valuable political activity (Raiskila & Wiberg, 2017), and use of social media, following political news and expressing political views online have become more popular (see Chapter 14; Strandberg & Borg, 2020; Bäck & Christensen, 2020). With the online accessibility of the CI and the rising importance of online engagement, the Internet has established its position as an arena for political participation (Bäck & Christensen, 2020) – an arena that is especially important for the young (Strandberg & Borg, 2020).

This indicates that important developments have occurred in the popularity of various forms of political participation across time and generations. Nevertheless, a comprehensive overview of the popularity of different activities across generations in Finland is still missing. We, therefore, aim to provide such an overview in our empirical examination.

## Analyses and results

We begin our empirical part by examining how the popularity of different political activities has developed from 2007 to 2019 across generations. To explore developments over time, we present data on several forms of political participation asked in the Finnish National Election Studies 2007–2019. The activities included are *party activities*, *contacting politicians*, *associational activities*, *signing a petition*, *legal demonstrations*, *boycotting products*, *boycotting products*, *political discussions online*, and *signing citizens' initiatives* (only in 2015 and 2019). A basic discussion when it comes to generational differences in political participation is whether they are cohort-specific or should be attributed to life-cycle effects. Theories of political socialization suggest that historical events during the formative years leave a lasting impression, which entails that generations share distinct patterns of political participation (Grasso, 2016; Nemčok & Wass, 2021; Smets & Neundorf, 2014; Wass, 2007).

The life-cycle perspective instead suggests that every generation evolves, which means that the young always prefer elite-challenging, whereas older people prefer conventional political activities. We do not address this discussion here since our time perspective 2007–2019 is too limited to disentangle the relationships and examine whether the generational differences of today are different from generational differences in the past. Instead, our more modest ambition is simply to show what developments have occurred during the last decades.

The popularity of key political activities in Finland during 2007–2019 is presented in Figure 6.1. Three results are worth highlighting. First, there are considerable differences in the popularity of political activities. Easy activities such as boycotting, signing a petition or, more recently, a citizens' initiative, are among the most popular, whereas demanding activities such as party involvement or taking part in legal demonstrations are performed by a minority across generations. Second, trends across years are less clear-cut since there are few clear upward or downward trends. The most visible exception is for signing citizens' initiatives, which became possible in 2012 and in FNES2015 was among the most popular activities, and in 2019 the most popular political activity between elections. Clearly, this democratic innovation has managed to attract citizens.

Finally, concerning differences across generations, it is worth noting that differences are small for more traditional activities such as party activities and associational involvement and more pronounced for new activities such as political consumerism and signing citizens' initiatives. This shows that the individualization of politics differs markedly across generations. Older generations are more likely to engage in traditional activities, whereas younger generations find new outlets for



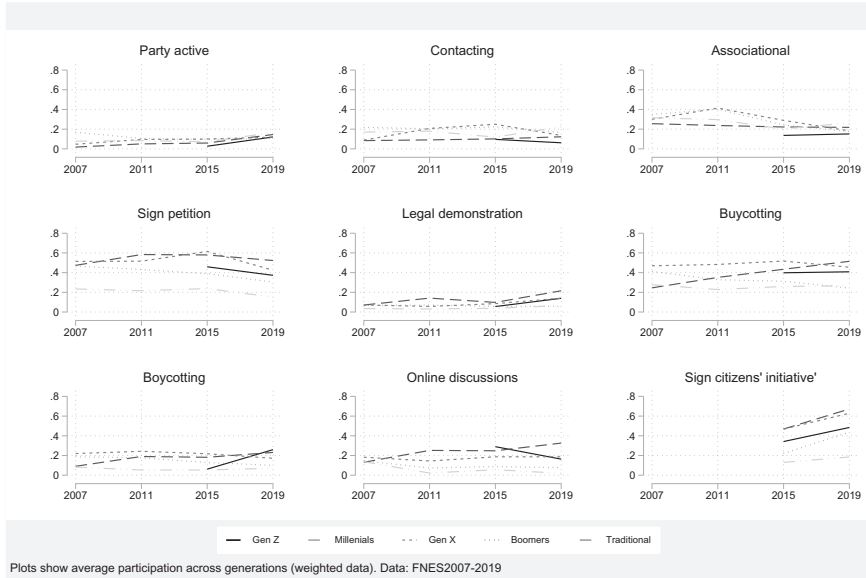


Figure 6.1 Participation across generations in nine political activities, FNES 2007–2019.

voicing their concerns. The citizen’s initiative, in particular, appeals to younger, but also online discussions and political consumerism. It is noteworthy that Generation Z from 2015 to 2019 appears to increase their engagement in most activities, with the noticeable exceptions of signing petitions and online discussions, where there are clear decreases.

We continue by exploring differences across generations in the associations among political attitudes and four forms of political participation using the FNES 2019 data (see technical appendix of the book). Since the questions on political participation were asked in the self-administered drop-off part, we only rely on these respondents ( $n = 753$ ). We here focus on four political activities that provide archetypical examples of more general categories or modes of political participation (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018): *party activities*, *legal demonstrations*, *political discussions online*, and *signing citizens’ initiatives*.

Previous studies suggest that inter-generational differences most likely exist in how popular these activities are among the Finnish population (Dalton, 2016; Grasso, 2016; Huttunen & Christensen, 2020; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002). The first two activities are an established part of the political repertoire. Party activities are a conventional political activity while demonstrations are a noninstitutionalized and elite-challenging form of participation that gained popularity among the post-war generation (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). The two latter activities are newcomers to the political toolbox. Online participation is today a popular form of engagement, particularly among younger generations (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Loader et al., 2014). Finally, signing citizens’



initiatives is a democratic innovation that offers citizens an institutionalized channel of participation between elections without party intermediaries (Christensen et al., 2017).

We measure the four activities with answers to questions asking people about their political activities during the last four years.<sup>1</sup> There were three answer options (“Have done in the last four years”, “Have not done but could do”, and “Would never do”), but since we focus on having performed the activities, they were re-coded into dichotomous variables where 1 indicates having performed the activity in question during the last four years and 0 having not.

There is no agreement on generational labels or where to draw the line between generations, but we follow the work by Brosius et al. (2021) and divide respondents into five categories of generations: Generation Z (born 1995–2002), Millennials (born 1980–1994), Generation X (born 1965–1979), Baby Boomers (born 1945–1964), and Traditionalists (born 1944 or earlier). Since the questions on political participation, as mentioned, are placed in the self-administered drop-off part of FNES2019, and the number of respondents consequently is restricted, some of the generational categories contain few respondents (39 respondents are Gen Z and 102 are Traditionalists), which means that results should be interpreted with caution.

We focus on examining how central political attitudes shape participation across generations. *Satisfaction with democracy* is measured on a four-point Likert scale (None at all – very satisfied), and *political interest* is also on a four-point Likert scale (None at all – very interested). *Left-right ideology* is measured on a 11-point scale where 0=Left, while *GAL/TAN* is measured with an index based on answers to five indicators concerning attitudes to the extent of immigration, the European Union, Christian values in society, status of sexual minorities and eco-friendliness. This index is coded so that lower scores indicate more Green/Alternative/Liberal (GAL) social values and higher scores Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist (TAN) values.<sup>2</sup>

Selecting control variables is complicated when examining differences across generations, where values on traditional characteristics such as occupation and income are influenced by life-cycle effects where younger respondents rarely have an occupation or a steady income. Controlling for such mediating variables may diminish the effect of generations on participation (Diemer et al., 2021). We, therefore, only control for sociodemographic characteristics unaffected by the life cycle. These include gender (dichotomy, male=1), language (0=Finnish, 1=Other), 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). We display regression results in coefficient plots where we do not display control variables. All control and independent variables are coded to vary between 0 and 1, and descriptive information on all variables is available in the appendix.

Figure 6.2 shows logistic regression models where separate models are run for each generation. It should be noted that the X-axis differs so comparison of effects between activities should be done with caution.

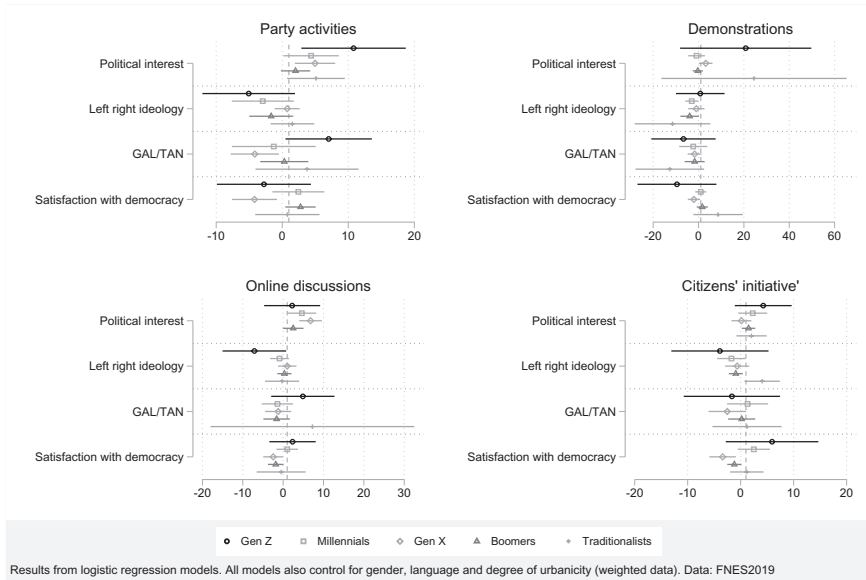


Figure 6.2 Four forms of political participation and political attitudes across generations, FNES 2019.

Political interest is associated with more participation in most activities and across generations, even if the associations often fail to reach significance. While not too much emphasis should be put on the exact figures,<sup>3</sup> it is noticeable that effects tend to be stronger for Generation Z, which shows that attitudes have strong effects among younger citizens. For ideology, there are few significant results, which may be explained by involvement being more common among the extremes at both ends of the spectrum. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that for party activities, the positive coefficient for Generation Z shows that party involvement is more common among those with more traditional social views, whereas those with more liberal attitudes tend to be more active among Millennials and Generation X. It is also interesting to note that involvement for Generation X in all four activities tends to be driven by dissatisfaction with democracy, whereas results are mixed for other generations. Finally, there is a tendency for the younger generation to be more driven by satisfaction with democracy when getting involved in online discussions and signing citizens' initiatives, whereas they use more traditional activities to voice discontent.

## Conclusions

Our findings have implications for how different generations use political activities in Finland. The generational differences were of minor importance for more traditional activities that are not widely used by most of the population regardless of age. The differences were more pronounced for newer additions to the political

repertoire such as discussing online and signing citizens' initiatives. Here, the younger generations were more likely to be active. These results confirm that it is important to consider different political activities when exploring the contemporary generations' patterns of political engagement. Furthermore, it may be important to go beyond traditional distinctions between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized participation since this distinction fails to capture important differences.

We see important differences across generations when we examine how political attitudes are linked with political activities. We usually expect that dissatisfied citizens eschew traditional political activities and prefer noninstitutionalized alternatives such as demonstrations (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; della Porta, 2006; Klandermans, 2015), or direct-democratic alternatives to the representative system (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019). Our results show that the links may be more complex than what this relatively simple association suggests. Different generations use different activities to voice discontent. Generation X stands out in our analyses as a generation of complainers, who in all forms of participation tend to be driven by dissatisfaction with democracy. The older generations use demonstrations and the citizens' initiative to voice their discontent, as the conventional story suggests. But for younger generations, the dissatisfied are using party politics to voice discontent rather than online activities and the CI, which are tied to higher levels of satisfaction. These results, thus, suggest that not only do the generations prefer different political activities, but they also use them for very different purposes.

These differences are not captured by the traditional institutionalized/noninstitutionalized distinction that is frequently made in studies on political participation. If we only focus on the distinction between institutional and noninstitutional, we are unable to discern the generational differences that do exist in how popular different activities are among different generations (see Koc, 2021). Instead of the degree of institutionalization, the ease of use and online availability appear to be important for the younger generations. Both signing citizens' initiatives and discussing online are sporadic and accessible online, which lends support for theories on young generations' participatory preferences that emphasize these aspects (Dalton, 2017; Grasso, 2014; Huttunen & Christensen, 2020). This seems to be a stronger driving force than post-material values, which does not appear to be a particularly strong predictor of participation, even among the younger generations.

Although the limited number of respondents entails that we are unable to settle the associations unequivocally, political participation in Finland seems to be a complex puzzle where generational differences are not only expressed in what activities different age groups are active in, but also why they are active. The findings may be distorted using election data since the focus on the traditional representative system may affect younger generations to a greater extent. The 2019 elections also took place during a time where younger generations were unusually politically active due to the popularity of the Fridays for Future climate strike movement. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that it is important to be aware of generational differences in political participation to understand the implications for democracy in Finland.

**Notes**

- 1 Offline participation: Which of the following political activities have you done during the last four years, or could do if you felt an issue is important. Discussing online: Which of the following have you done on the Internet during the last four years, or could do if you felt an issue is important, answer option: Participate in political discussions by writing comments on social media, blogs, or other networks.
- 2 An exploratory factor analysis indicates that the indicators form two separate dimensions, but we nonetheless proceed with a one-dimensional measure in line with the work of Grönlund & Söderlund in Chapter 8 in this book since we believe the two-dimensional solution to be an artifact due to reverse-coded questions (van Sonderen et al., 2013).
- 3 The remarkable large coefficients for political interest when it comes to Generation Z's involvement in party activities and demonstrations are due to the low number of respondents, which entails that very few with low interest have performed either activity.

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# Appendix

Table 6.A1 Descriptive information for FNES2019

| <i>Variable</i>            | <i>Obs</i> | <i>Mean/%</i> | <i>Std. Dev.</i> | <i>Min</i> | <i>Max</i> |
|----------------------------|------------|---------------|------------------|------------|------------|
| Political participation    |            |               |                  |            |            |
| Party activities           | 745        | 0.12          | 0.32             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Legal demonstrations       | 746        | 0.13          | 0.33             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Discuss politics online    | 730        | 0.19          | 0.40             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Sign citizens' initiatives | 747        | 0.55          | 0.50             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Generations                |            |               |                  |            |            |
| Gen Z                      | 39         | 5.21%         |                  | 1.00       | 5.00       |
| Millennials                | 108        | 14.4%         |                  | 1.00       | 1.00       |
| Gen X                      | 157        | 21.0%         |                  | 2.00       | 2.00       |
| Boomer                     | 343        | 45.8%         |                  | 3.00       | 3.00       |
| Traditionalist             | 102        | 13.6%         |                  | 4.00       | 4.00       |
| Political attitudes        |            |               |                  |            |            |
| Political Interest         | 752        | 0.69          | 0.26             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Left/right ideology        | 669        | 0.51          | 0.25             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| GAL/TAN                    | 753        | 0.45          | 0.16             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Satisfaction w. democracy  | 730        | 0.60          | 0.20             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Sociodemographics          |            |               |                  |            |            |
| Gender                     | 752        | 0.46          | 0.50             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Language                   | 753        | 0.06          | 0.23             | 0.00       | 1.00       |
| Urbanicity                 | 749        | 0.53          | 0.29             | 0.00       | 1.00       |

Note: Unweighted data.