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Christensen, Henrik Serup; Karjalainen, Maija; Lundell, Krister

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Democratic Innovations to the Rescue? Political Trust and Attitudes Toward Democratic Innovations in Southwest Finland

Authors

Henrik Serup Christensen, Maija Karjalainen & Krister Lundell

Abstract

It is difficult to govern when citizens are unsupportive of the political system. This problem is relevant for municipalities formed through municipal mergers since new political entities need to build political trust. Democratic innovations provide possible solutions to increase citizens' confidence, but it is unclear whether distrusting citizens demand these opportunities for involvement. This study examines the link between political trust and support for democratic innovations in Southwest Finland with a survey of 2000 respondents in 14 municipalities. The results suggest that distrusting citizens are less supportive of democratic innovations; hence it is unlikely that they increase political trust.

Keywords:

democratic innovations, local democracy, municipal mergers, municipal size, political trust

Introduction

Both local and national levels of government have experienced drops in levels of political trust in recent decades (Norris, 1999; Dalton, 2004). Although the negative sentiments do not constitute a direct threat to the survival of democracy, they can strain the representative relationship between elections (Esaïasson & Narud, 2013). Scholars have therefore worried over the consequences for democracy (Dalton, 2004; Mair, 2006; Stoker, 2006; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011). While this discussion frequently focuses on national issues, the problems may be even more acute at the local level where administrative reforms in several countries have revised the competences of municipalities and even eradicated existing municipalities through municipal mergers (Larsen, 2002; Lassen & Serritzlev, 2011; Hansen, 2014; Denters et al., 2014). The creation of new municipalities in particular produces a need to be able to quickly build political trust to ensure functioning democratic governance in the new political entities. At the same time, citizens have few reasons to trust the political authorities in an amalgamated municipality since their experience with them are limited.

A possible solution involves introducing democratic innovations to give citizens a say in the political decision-making and thereby help generate political trust in political authorities (Cain *et al.*, 2003; Zittel & Fuchs, 2007; Geissel & Newton, 2012). However, it is by no means certain that introducing new participatory practices in the form of democratic innovations alleviates the potential problems with low levels of political trust since this idea rests on the assumption that distrustful citizens want to take advantage of the new possibilities. As Font and Blanco (2007) point out, it is a prerequisite for democratic innovations to function that citizens trust the sincerity with which the innovations are introduced.

In this article, we therefore assess the link between political trust and the attitudes towards the use of democratic innovations in an amalgamated municipality formed through a potential merger of existing municipalities. Since such local reforms are frequent in many democracies, it is important to assess the potential contributions of democratic innovations in this situation. The data come from a

survey including 2000 respondents in the Turku region in Southwest Finland, which is in the midst of a process of municipal mergers and therefore can shed lights on the prospects for building political trust in an amalgamated municipality by introducing democratic innovations.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next chapter, it is explained why democratic innovations may provide a solution to the problem of low political trust and based on previous literature, we develop three hypotheses for the link between political trust and attitudes towards using democratic innovations. Following this, we present the case of the Turku region and the data used for testing our hypotheses. We examine the hypotheses in the empirical part before concluding with a discussion on the implications of the findings. The results suggest that the democratic innovations may not be able to attract distrusting citizens in an amalgamated municipality, and it is therefore doubtful whether they can help restore political support when faced with a municipal merger.

Political trust and democratic innovations

Most scholars find that citizens in established democracies are increasingly critical of the authorities at both the national and local levels of government (Inglehart, 1997; Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007). Although most citizens still support democracy as a general principle, the developments seem to indicate a pervasive shift in attitudes where the causes and consequences may be more far reaching than what has so far been realized (Dalton, 2004: 47-48). Low levels of political support or trust may erode the general support for institutions not based on the incumbents' performance (Hetherington, 1998: 806). Several studies suggest that if citizens feel that the authorities can no longer be trusted there is less reason to comply with legal and social norms (Hooghe & Zmerli, 2011: 2). This situation is aggravated when the grievances of distrusting citizens are not channeled into the political decision making. Political participation between elections should ensure that decision-makers remain responsive even after the polling stations have closed (cf. Esaiasson & Narud, 2013). While distrusting citizens are not politically apathetic, they tend to prefer non-institutionalized forms of participation

outside the formal political sphere over traditional political activities such as voting and activity in political parties (Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 1999; Marien & Christensen, 2013). Although some claim that untrusting citizens thereby keep decision-makers accountable (Rosanvallon, 2008), several scholars question whether the non-institutionalized activities can help sustain a viable representative democracy (White & Ypi, 2010; Mair, 2006; Stoker, 2006). In particular, the non-institutionalized activities cannot ensure that concerns are given adequate consideration by political decision makers. This situation could lead distrustful citizens to become even more disgruntled, thereby creating a vicious circle further eroding levels of political trust.

Although these difficulties are present at national and local levels of representative governments alike, the challenges may be particularly acute at the local level where several countries have seen changes in the municipal competences and structures (Larsen, 2002; Lassen & Serritzlev, 2011; Denters et al., 2014; Hansen, 2014). The potential problems with low levels of political trust become evident during times of political turmoil where it is even more pertinent that leaders are able to govern effectively. An example is provided by municipal mergers where the new political system needs to rapidly build political trust to ensure effective governance. Since inhabitants at least in the short run are likely to retain allegiances to their old municipality, it is particularly difficult to build political trust in this situation. It is therefore particularly important that the formal decision making notice all disgruntlements to be able to quickly rebuild levels of political trust.

A possible solution is the introduction of *democratic innovations* since giving citizens a more direct say in the political decisions can help channel the grievances of the untrusting citizens into political decision making (Fung, 2004; Zittel & Fuchs, 2007; Geissel & Newton, 2012). Although different definitions of democratic innovations exist, Smith (2009:1) offers a suitable characterization for the current purposes (2009: 1): *institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process*. These democratic innovations are not necessarily unique institutional solutions; inspiration often comes from similar practices in other

political systems. Instead, they are institutional modifications introduced by the authorities aiming to increase popular involvement in a particular political system (cf. Geissel, 2009: 53). By opening up the political decision-making for more direct citizen input, the hope is that the untrusting take advantage of the new opportunities and through their involvement come to view the central authorities more favorably (cf. Font & Blanco, 2007: 576).¹ Democratic innovations can support the representative structures by ensuring that elected decision makers receive sufficient input from citizens (Newton, 2012: 3-4). The introduction of democratic innovations has mainly taken place at the local level (Geissel, 2009, Smith, 2009; Geissel & Newton, 2012), and it is therefore relevant to gauge the implications in this context to understand whether democratic innovations can help sustain political trust in an amalgamated municipality. Allowing more citizen input into the decision making is particularly valuable in this situation since it creates a clear signal that the decision makers are willing to listen and may provide a way for untrusting citizens to channel their grievances into the political decision-making and thereby help break the vicious circle eroding levels of political trust.

Previous studies suggest that involvement can increase the level of political trust among the participants and other civic virtues (Grönlund *et al.*, 2010; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Fatke and Freitag (2013) find that direct democracy in Switzerland leads to a lower individual probability of attending demonstrations, which also suggests that democratic innovations ease political dissatisfaction. And while some claim citizens want responsible government without being directly involved in decision making (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002), previous studies do find that untrusting citizens support the use of various democratic innovations. Dalton (2004: 184) finds that dissatisfaction is associated with a growing preference for direct democracy and a similar result has been found in the Norway (Björklund, 2009: 131). Bowler *et al.* (2007) also find that citizens who are suspicious of government are more likely to support more opportunities for participation in affluent democracies. Hence, our first hypothesis for the link between political trust and attitudes towards democratic innovations in an amalgamated municipality is:

H1: *Political distrust increases support for the use of democratic innovations.*

It is also important to recognize the differences between democratic innovations (Geissel, 2009; Smith 2009; Font & Galais, 2011; Newton, 2012). According to Smith (2009: 12-27), democratic innovations differ according to six democratic goods: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgment, transparency, efficiency and transferability. These goods can serve as normative yardsticks against which specific innovations can be evaluated. Democratic innovations however also differ drastically in the time and efforts required for taking part in the processes, and therefore also in what kind of citizens they may help mobilize (Newton, 2012: 9-10). For example, the popularity of political participation via the Internet is often attributed to the accessibility of the virtual platforms, since it is possible for citizens to engage in their political role when they have the time and desire to do so (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Loader & Mercea, 2012). In other words, an individual supporting the use of referendums may not support e-voting via the Internet, and it is therefore important to examine attitudes towards different kinds of democratic innovations. Our second hypothesis therefore concerns differences among different kinds of democratic innovations in an amalgamated municipality:

H2: *The effect of political distrust on support for democratic innovations depends on the type of democratic innovation.*

It is also important to recognize that the impact of political trust may depend on the context (Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011; Marien & Christensen, 2013). When examining the role of political trust at the municipal level, the size of the municipality becomes a particularly salient question (Denters et al., 2014; Hansen, 2014). Previous studies suggest that municipal size matters for participation in online democratic innovations (Saglie & Vabo, 2009). However, our main concern here is how the link between political trust and attitudes towards democratic innovations differ depending on the size of the current municipality rather than how the sizes of municipalities affect attitudes towards democratic innovations. Although this moderating effect has not been examined empirically, there

are good reasons to expect size to have indirect effects for political trust (cf. Denters et al., 2014: 168-172). Previous research suggests that democracy often thrives better in smaller units (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). The proximity in smaller municipalities may lead to more frequent direct contacts between authorities and citizens and higher levels of internal political efficacy among citizens (Lassen & Serritzlev, 2011), although others find few differences in citizens' political attitudes after mergers in Denmark (Larsen, 2002). When smaller municipalities are merged with a dominant large municipality, there is a particular risk that the changes create feelings of a hostile takeover, which further increases the negative attitudes towards the new political unit. This is likely to have consequences for the effect of political trust on the attitude towards the use of democratic innovations. The distrusting citizens now living in smaller municipalities may see the democratic innovations as a potential tool for ensuring that local issues are given due concern in an amalgamated municipality since they give minorities a chance to get their voice heard. The same is not necessarily true for distrusting citizens in larger municipalities, where the current situation is likely to be continued even after the merger. It is therefore likely that distrust has a stronger effect on the propensity to support democratic innovations in smaller municipalities. Consequently, the effect of political trust may differ depending on the current residence in this situation and democratic innovations may therefore present a chance to create political support for the new political unit in the smaller municipalities. Our third hypothesis therefore concerns the moderating effect of the size of the current municipality on the link between political trust and attitudes towards democratic innovations

H3: *The effect of political distrust on support for democratic innovations depends on the size of the municipality.*

Although democratic innovations are often argued to have a positive effect on levels of political trust, the link between political trust and democratic innovations has remained unexplored empirically (Font and Blanco, 2007: 558). Hence, it is far from clear whether democratic innovations can help channel feelings of discontent more directly into the political decision-making and thereby help sustain the

legitimacy of the political system. As Fung (2004: 70-71) notes, one of the key challenges when introducing democratic innovations is to mobilize citizens with an interest in the topics at hand. While attention has been paid to mobilizing disadvantaged socio-demographic groups (cf. Newton, 2012: 11-12), it is also important to mobilize untrusting citizens to build political trust through the use of democratic innovations. This is even more important when rapid changes present particular challenges to the political system. For this reason, we examine the link between political trust and support for democratic innovations in the context of a municipal merger to see whether the democratic innovations can have the purported positive effects for democracy.

The case of the Turku region, data and variables

We examine the three hypotheses on the links between political trust and support for democratic innovations in the region of *Turku* in Southwest Finland. *Turku* is the central city with 180,225 inhabitants while the 13 other municipalities have smaller populations ranging from 1959 in *Tarvasjoki* to 31,363 in *Kaarina*. As in several European countries, pressures are mounting for merging municipalities into larger administrative units in Finland to ensure that all municipalities can undertake the provision of social and health services. Possible benefits of mergers have been explored actively in the region during the last decade. Although the official negotiations between the municipalities have not yet started, the issue was put on the agenda again in 2012 following pressure from the central government. Since such situations frequently create feelings of animosity further undermining levels of political trust, the Turku region provides a particularly fertile ground for studying the links between political trust and democratic innovations.

The Turku region consisting of 14 municipalities is an interesting case for several reasons. First of all, municipalities are more likely to adopt democratic innovations since local politics is often seen as a “testing ground” for new participatory practices and local politicians face more pressure to be responsive to citizen demands (Parkinson 2006, 64). Second, local government reforms have been a

central objective for the Finnish government in recent years, making municipal mergers a highly sensitive topic and highlighting the need for involving citizens in political decision making on a more permanent basis. Thirdly, the Turku region consists of one large municipality, a few medium-sized and several small ones, enabling an analysis of the effect of municipality size with regard to political trust and interest in using democratic innovation tools. Finally, Finland has at both national and local levels traditionally been a strong representative democracy where direct democratic measures such as referenda have rarely been used (Bengtsson & Christensen, 2014: 8). This case therefore presents a stern test of the capabilities of democratic innovations to build political trust. Since several other Western democracies face similar challenges, lessons may be learned from the experiences obtained here.

The data come from a telephone survey administered during autumn 2012 to 2000 respondents in the 14 municipalities where plans for a municipal merger were debated. Of the respondents, 500 were from the main city of Turku, while 100-150 respondents were interviewed in each of the 13 surrounding municipalities. We used survey sampling with regard to central socio-demographic characteristics to ensure that the sample reflected the target population. The survey included a number of questions on attitudes towards a municipal merger and the use of democratic innovations in an amalgamated municipality that we use for operationalizing the variables of our study.

The dependent variable in our study is the individual's willingness to use democratic innovations. To gauge this aspect, we asked what participatory activities the inhabitants would like to use in a new municipality (*Which of the following forms of participation would you be interested in using in a future merged municipality?*). In addition to several traditional activities (e.g. voting and contacting politicians), the possible answers included 10 kinds of democratic innovations (*User surveys, Town hall meetings, Vote in advisory referendum, Survey via municipal homepage, Commenting on agenda of local council, Feedback via municipal homepage, Sign or author initiative for municipal referendum, Focus groups, Citizens' initiatives, Local area council*). All of these activities constitute democratic

innovations in the sense that they do not form part of the traditional representative democracy at the local level, but would be introduced in the new municipality to improve the quality of democracy. This approach allows us to explore attitudes towards a range of democratic innovations rather than focus on single examples or ask general questions concerning their likely involvement. The respondents indicated their answer for each alternative on five point Likert-scales (5=very interested – 1=very uninterested). Although the question concerns intended participation rather than manifest actions, it is the best available approach for examining the relationship between political trust and support for democratic innovations.

As discussed above, theoretical classifications provide yardsticks for decision-makers to design and evaluate democratic institutions (Geissel 2009; Newton 2012; Smith 2009). From the perspective of citizens, however, preferences for specific participatory practices are more likely to depend on practical reasons such as the amount of time and energy required to participate. Rather than classify the democratic innovations based on theoretical criteria, we therefore distinguished kinds of democratic innovations by examining the dimensionality of citizens' attitudes towards using democratic innovations with exploratory factor analysis (Principal component analysis with all components with eigenvalues > 1 extracted and Varimax rotation). The results in Table 1 show that the attitudes towards the use of democratic innovations are not one-dimensional, since there are two distinct dimensions corresponding to an online and offline distinction.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The offline dimension contains consultative mechanisms that give citizens the chance to discuss policy proposals and give input into political decision-making, but leave the final decisions in the hands of elected representatives (Geissel 2009; Newton, 2012). The other dimension contains online

possibilities for giving input into the political decision-making; predominantly via the municipality homepage (cf. Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Loader & Mercea, 2012). The index for offline democratic innovations includes the five types that load onto this dimension in table 1 (Mean= 0.65; SD = 0.20; Cronbach's alpha = 0.80), while the index for online democratic innovations includes four activities (Mean = 0.53; SD = 0.23; Cronbach's alpha = 0.82).² Both indexes are coded so the highest score denotes the highest level of support for democratic innovations.

The central independent variable is political trust. We here asked the respondents about their degree of trust when it comes to four central actors: trust in political parties, trust in MPs, trust in local councilors, and trust in public officials, where the respondents indicated their answers on five-point Likert scales (No trust at all-complete trust). An exploratory factor analysis suggests that the variables form a single dimension (eigenvalue 2.76) explaining 69% of the variance. We therefore measure the extent of political trust with a composite index including all four types of political trust (mean = 0.47; SD = 0.19; Cronbach's alpha = 0.85).³ The index is coded so the highest score denotes the highest level of political trust.

To examine whether the effect of political trust on the propensity to support democratic innovations depends on the size of the municipality, we use two different strategies to operationalize size of the municipality. One strategy follows the bulk of the literature in using population size measured as number of inhabitants (cf. Hansen, 2014). This variable is a continuous variable measuring the logged population size. Since the municipality of Turku is clearly the dominant municipality, we also use a second strategy, where a dichotomous variable distinguishes between center (Turku) and periphery (the remaining 13 municipalities). For this dichotomous variable we distinguish between 5 different areas within Turku to enlarge the number of second level units to 18. Since there are only 14 municipalities, it is difficult to ascertain cross-level variation with any greater certainty, and by enlarging the number of second level units, we can increase our confidence in the results obtained.⁴ The distribution of the central variables across the 14 municipalities is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Our aim is to assess the link between political trust and attitudes towards democratic innovations rather than build comprehensive models that account for our dependent variables. To ensure that any findings concerning the link between political trust and support for democratic innovations are not spurious, we include a number of individual-level control variables known to affect the propensity for political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Dalton, 2004; Marien & Christensen, 2013). These include socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, education and urbanity) political attitudes (political interest, party identification, left-right ideology and social trust) and political behavior (previous political participation). We also include an indicator probing attitudes of the respondents towards the merger to ensure that the link between political trust and democratic innovations is not merely a reflection of the respondents' position on the prospect of a municipal merger.

To examine the hypotheses we use multilevel regression analysis since the respondents are nested within municipalities (Snijders & Bosker, 1999; Hox, 2010).⁵ All individual level variables were coded to vary between 0-1. To achieve stable models the relevant independent variables were centered around the grand mean (more information on the coding of the variables is in the Appendix). The analyses were performed with MLwiN 2.30 (Rasbach et al., 2009).

Empirical analysis

The first hypothesis H1 states that political distrust increases willingness to use democratic innovations. This entails that we expect a negative relationship between political trust and attitude towards using democratic innovations. This proposition is examined in Table 3, where we first examine

the fixed effect of political trust without any controls, followed by a model with all other variables for both offline and online democratic innovations.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The results clearly contradict H1 since the significant estimates found for political trust are all positive. Accordingly, it is the more trusting citizens who intend to use any democratic innovations introduced in the new municipality whereas the distrusting citizens remain skeptical. It is noteworthy that this effect persists in the second models where we introduce the control variables. The coefficient 0.231 for the effect of political trust on attitude towards offline democratic innovations means that the most trusting respondents are on average 0.23 points more positive on the scale 0-1 than the least trusting when holding other factors constant, which indicates that there is a strong effect from political trust in the opposite of the hypothesized direction. For online participation, the coefficient 0.216 entails that the differences are of a similar magnitude and direction when it comes to digital democratic innovations. This clearly shows that political distrust does not increase the support for democratic innovations.

These models also test H2 concerning differences in the effect of political distrust on different kinds of democratic innovations (cf. Newton, 2012: 9-10). Since political trust has a similar positive effect on the attitude towards both online and offline democratic innovations, this hypothesis can also be rejected. Some notable differences between the two kinds of democratic innovations do exist for other variables, suggesting that democratic innovations may help mobilize groups of citizens often found to be less active in political activities due to a lack of central socio-economic resources (cf. Fung, 2004; Newton, 2012). Most notably, we can see that lower education is associated with a stronger preference for offline democratic innovations whereas there are no significant differences when it

comes to online democratic innovations. This shows that the face-to-face participatory processes may help mobilizing less educated segments of the population who are otherwise less likely to be politically involved. For age, the online versions are more likely to attract younger citizens, while the negative significant coefficients for gender for both types of democratic innovations show that women are more likely to be positive towards using democratic innovations. All of these results suggest that the introduction of democratic innovations – and especially the digital versions – may help mobilize groups of citizens otherwise marginalized in politics. However, this does not pertain to political trust, where the effects are in the same direction and of the same magnitude regardless of the type of democratic innovation.

The final hypothesis H3 concerns the effect of political trust depending on the size of the municipality. To test this hypothesis, we examine the cross-municipality differences in the effects of political trust and whether these differences can be attributed to the size of the municipality in question with cross-level interaction effects. We first do this for the 14 municipalities to examine differences for population size before examining differences between the center (5 areas in *Turku*) and periphery (all other municipalities). The results are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

There are no discernible differences for online democratic innovations, since the interaction effects in both cases are non-significant. However, for offline democratic innovations the cross level interaction effect between political trust and population is significant, showing that the effect of political trust differs depending on population size. A similar result is obtained when examining differences between central *Turku* and the surrounding municipalities in the second offline model, where the interaction effect is also significant. Although the differences are not clear-cut, the evidence at least partly

supports H3, since the effect of political trust depends on the size or centrality of the municipality when it comes to intended use of offline innovations.

To see what these significant differences entail, we plotted the predicted probabilities for attitudes towards using democratic offline innovations depending on the level of political trust and population size. The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The figures tell a similar story about the effect of political trust on offline innovations depending on the size, regardless of whether we compare the largest municipality of *Turku* to the smallest municipality of *Tarvasjoki* or the center to the periphery. The predicted willingness to use offline innovations is initially higher in the smaller municipalities, but since political trust has a stronger positive effect in *Turku*, the willingness surpasses the peripheral areas as people become more trusting of the authorities. Hence, it is especially in more populous areas that it is the trusting citizens who are willing to use offline innovations. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that under no circumstances is there a negative effect, since the effect of political trust is (weakly) positive even in the smaller municipalities. Hence, although the effect of political trust depends on the context, it is under no circumstances in the predicted negative direction.

Discussion of the results

The findings have a number of important implications for the prospects of restoring legitimacy after a municipal merger with the help of democratic innovations, since the results suggest that the introduction of new ways of participation may not help bring untrusting citizens back into the political sphere.

Contrary to our first hypothesis, a higher level of political trust is connected to greater willingness to use democratic innovations in a new municipality. This contradicts the previous findings suggesting that citizens with low levels of trust are more likely to support new possibilities for participation (Cain *et al.*, 2003; Dalton, 2004; Bowler *et al.*, 2007; Björklund, 2009). In the Turku region, it is not the untrusting citizens who are most supportive of the use of democratic innovations in a new municipality, but instead those who already have a high level of political trust in the current political system. While this result may partly reflect opposition to the prospect of a municipal merger, it nonetheless shows that the introduction of democratic innovations may not suffice to convince the most skeptical citizens of the good intentions of the authorities. In this sense, it is doubtful whether amalgamated municipalities can use democratic innovations to build stocks of political trust.

The results also contradicted the second hypothesis, since political trust had a positive link to the attitude towards the use of both online and offline democratic innovations despite the notable differences that otherwise existed for those who supported the two kinds of democratic innovations. Instead, citizens with low levels of trust remain skeptical towards the use of both of them. Even the accessibility of online innovations (cf. Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Loader & Mercea, 2012) does not attract the support of more skeptical citizens. This finding may suggest that the skepticism towards democratic innovations are rooted in more deeply-held reservations towards them being able to alter existing power structures rather than merely being a question of not being willing to spend the necessary time on political involvement. This suggests that considerable efforts are required on behalf

of authorities to convince the skeptical citizens that the democratic innovations really can empower them in the political decision-making.

For the third hypothesis, the effect of political trust was found to differ depending on the size of the municipalities for offline democratic innovations. Even if there was no significant direct effect, thereby contradicting the findings of Saglie and Vabo (2009), the effect of political trust was significantly stronger in the current Turku municipality. This finding entails that citizens with low levels of trust from smaller municipalities are more likely to support offline democratic innovations than citizens with similar attitudes in the Turku region. This finding is understandable since several of the offline innovations, such as *town hall meetings* and *local area councils*, specifically aim to further local issues within the amalgamated municipality. In this sense, the untrusting inhabitants can see these as a way to decrease the potential negative effects from the municipal merger and even retain a sense of local autonomy and control of local issues in the peripheral areas. The best chance of attracting distrusting citizens from the surrounding municipalities therefore comes from introducing offline innovations. Nevertheless, the effect of political trust is under all circumstances positive, meaning the trusting are more willing to use democratic innovations than the skeptical citizens. It is therefore most likely that the democratic innovations will under all circumstances mainly help mobilize the trusting citizens.

All of this shows that democratic innovations do not necessarily mobilize the untrusting citizens and thereby create positive attitudes towards the political entity created through a pending municipal merger. Hence, introducing such mechanisms is unlikely to suffice for building legitimacy for the new political unit, since those most skeptical are unlikely to be converted by such efforts. While our results do suggest that democratic innovations can help alleviate other biases in participation when it comes to socio-demographic differences, this does not pertain to the least trusting citizens. It is therefore uncertain whether democratic innovations can help create higher levels of political trust, which has been a central argument for why they are needed in the first place (Zittel & Fuchs, 2007; Geissel & Newton, 2012). It would seem like Font and Blanco (2007) were right in highlighting the importance

of initial levels of political trust for the democratic innovations to function as intended. The untrusting citizens are more likely to continue using non-institutionalized activities, where they can be involved in the topics that matter to them on their own terms, rather than having to accommodate themselves to the authorities (Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 1999; Marien & Christensen, 2013). While this gives them voice, it may not suffice to give them influence (cf. White & Ypi 2010; Mair, 2006; Stoker, 2006).

The reluctance on behalf of the untrusting citizens to engage in democratic innovations is likely to rest on a belief that these mechanisms will do little to alter the existing power structures (cf. Blaug, 2002). It is paramount that these citizens can be convinced that the new tools really do empower citizens in the political decision-making, since tokenistic gestures will at best have no effects and may well amplify the problems with trust in the authorities. For this reason, just introducing democratic innovations will not do much to alter the negative perceptions of the authorities. It is also necessary that the authorities put efforts into convincing these citizens about the advantages of these new tools of participation. This does not suggest that it is only the untrusting citizens who should be part of the participatory processes, but it is important that these citizens are also part of the democratic dialogue that takes place here if the innovations are to help rebuild political trust.

It should also be noted that introducing democratic innovations may still indirectly increase political trust. As Font and Blanco (2007: 577) note, non-participants may also be affected by the introduction of democratic innovations, as the political system appears more responsive to the demands of citizens and thereby reassure citizens that their grievances are given adequate consideration. Even if the distrusting citizens are not the first to take advantage of the possibilities, their attitudes may become moderated over time when they see that citizens are engaged more in the decision-making. Nevertheless, this effect can at this point only be assumed, and needs to be addressed in future research as more data on the use of democratic innovations become available.

The findings also have implications for research on democratic innovations and attitudes by highlighting the need to study the political trust as a condition for the introduction of new

participatory instruments - not only as their consequences. As Weatherford and McDonnell (2007) noticed when comparing three deliberative forums on school policy in the US, democratic innovations may have to be organized quite independently from representative bodies and administration for citizens, or even whole communities, with low political trust.

The results may also pose a methodological challenge for those who study the effects of involvement in democratic innovations through field experiments or other forms of experiments involving studying participation in democratic innovations (e.g. Grönlund *et al.*, 2010; Michels & De Graaf 2010). As Font and Galais (2011) note, studies often examine successful experiences because of their promising characteristics and disregard unsuccessful ones, which can lead to faulty conclusions. In a similar vein, studies of the development of political trust in participatory processes may rely on a skewed population if the participants are predominantly people with higher initial levels of political trust, while people with low initial levels of trust do not take part. These studies may lead to faulty conclusions on the possibilities of affecting levels of political trust, since it cannot be ascertained that the introduction of democratic innovations also raise the levels of trust among low-trusting citizens. It is therefore of particular relevance for these studies to ensure that their populations reflect the full range of possible values on the variables under scrutiny.

It has to be acknowledged that these findings come with some uncertainty. For one, the findings may be idiosyncratic for the Turku region or even Finland, meaning they are not generalizable outside of this specific context. Furthermore, we measure attitudes towards using democratic innovations in the future rather than actual involvement. It may be that the untrusting citizens do participate even if they are skeptical. It may also be that municipal mergers – which pose a stern test of the use of democratic innovations – pose particular difficulties that democratic innovations cannot help resolve, meaning democratic innovations may still be helpful in other situations. Finally, the validity of the findings may be compromised by the relatively few municipalities under scrutiny, especially concerning the (lack

of) differences across contexts. Hence, future research should examine the replicability of the results in different contexts and with more groups.

However, the results at the very least suggest that positive effects from introducing democratic innovations cannot be taken for granted and that there are limits to what democratic innovations can achieve. This does not entail that democratic innovations are irrelevant for sustaining political support in an amalgamated municipality, or elsewhere for that matter. Nevertheless, it shows the importance of creating credible participatory instruments that are accessible for all citizens. In this sense, democratic innovations cannot be assumed to be a cure-all for the democratic malaise.

Appendix – Coding of variables and descriptive statistics

Dependent variables	Coding	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.	
Online innovations	Index composed of attitudes towards using four online democratic innovations all scored on five point Likert-scale (very interested-very uninterested; Cronbach's alpha = 0.82): - Survey on municipal homepage; - Feedback form on municipal homepage; - Commenting on local council agenda via Internet; - Survey via phone or mail See table 1 for more information.	1980	0.00	1.00	0.53	0.23	
Offline innovations	Index composed of attitude towards using five types of offline democratic innovation all scored on five point Likert-scale (very interested-very uninterested; Cronbach's alpha = 0.80): - Focus groups - Citizens' initiative - Town hall meetings - Initiative for local advisory referendum - Local area council See table 1 for more information.	1981	0.00	1.00	0.65	0.20	
Independent variables	Coding	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.	VIF
Political trust	<i>To what extent do you trust the following? Political parties, MP's, local politicians, and public officials</i> , each scored on 4-point scale: No trust at all -complete trust. Composite index (Cronbach's alpha=0.85), coded 0-1, 1 = highest extent of trust	1987	0.00	1.00	0.47	0.19	1.32
Age	Age in years divided by 100.	2000	0.18	0.93	0.53	0.17	1.21
Gender	0/1, Female = 0, Male = 1	2000	0.00	1.00	0.47	0.50	1.02
Education	Highest level of education completed, 5 categories, coded 0-1 (1 highest level).	1992	0.00	1.00	0.50	0.35	1.13
Urbanity	<i>How would you describe your area of living?</i> 5 categories coded 0-1 (1=highest urbanity).	1992	0.00	1.00	0.60	0.36	1.15
Political interest	How interested are you in politics? 5 categories, coded 0-1 (1=highest interest).	1994	0.00	1.00	0.56	0.27	1.47
Party identification	<i>How strongly do you identify with a political party?</i> 5 categories, coded 0-1 (1=highest party identification).	1989	0.00	1.00	0.64	0.31	1.48
Left-right ideology	<i>Societal views in the public discussion are often illustrated on a traditional left-right scale. How would you illustrate your views using this scale?</i> 5 categories coded 0-1 (1='Right').	1959	0.00	1.00	0.51	0.27	1.16
Social trust	<i>To what extent do you trust the following? People in general</i> , scored on 4-point scale 'No trust at all'-'Complete trust'. Coded 0-1 (1='Complete trust').	1989	0.00	1.00	0.74	0.19	1.04
Previous participation	<i>How have you previously participated in municipal decision-making or brought issues to the municipal agenda?:</i> Voted local elections; Contacting local politicians; Contacting locals officials; Voluntary work; Active elected official/trustee; Signed petition, coded 0-1 (1=highest participation; Cronbach's Alpha=0.64).	2000	0.00	1.00	0.46	0.26	1.41
Attitude to merger	<i>How do you believe that citizen participation and influence will change in a potential enlarged municipal unit?</i> Coded 0-1 (1=much better).	1993	0.00	1.00	0.27	0.23	1.19
Population (1000)	Population of municipality in 1000s. Source: Statistics Finland.	14	1.96	180.23	54.44	73.11	1.29
Central/Peripheral municipality	Whether living in Turku area (0) or surrounding municipality (1).	18	0.00	1.00	0.75	0.43	1.25

Note: The VIF scores for Population and peripheral municipality are valid when excluding the other variable.

Notes

¹ An additional assumption is that the involvement will help alleviate the negative sentiments rather than leave them unchanged or even aggravate them. This assumption is not examined here where the emphasis is on attitudes towards democratic innovations before involvement.

² *Advisory referendum* is excluded since this activity does not load unequivocally onto either dimension.

³ An exploratory factor analysis showed that these trust items formed a single coherent dimension. Although it could be expected that any effects would mainly pertain to trust in local councilors, test runs including only trust in local councilors suggest similar substantial results. We only present the results where the index of political trust was used.

⁴ The units of analysis are strictly speaking no longer municipalities when dividing Turku into five areas. However, since all these areas are considered to be part of the center with the center/periphery variable this is a viable approach to enlarging the number of units.

⁵ Empty models without any explanatory variables (not shown) show fairly low intra class correlations of 0.03 for offline innovations and 0.04 for online innovations. However, even when a limited share of the variation is at the group level, this can still cause faulty inferences when the number of individual within groups is relatively large (cf. Barcikowski, 1981). Ignoring the nesting in municipalities would entail that more estimates are incorrectly considered significant and the multilevel approach therefore increases the confidence in any significant findings (Hox, 2010: 4-5).

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