

# Can politicians and citizens deliberate together? Evidence from a local deliberative mini-public

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## Abstract

In a deliberative mini-public, a representative number of citizens receive information and discuss given policy topics in facilitated small groups. Typically, mini-publics are most effective politically and can have the most impact on policy-making when they are connected to democratic decision-making processes. Theorists have put forward possible mechanisms that may enhance this linkage, one of which is involving politicians within mini-publics with citizens. However, although much research to date has focussed on mini-publics with many citizen participants, there is little analysis of mini-publics with politicians as coparticipants. In this study, we ask how involving politicians in mini-publics influences both participating citizens' opinions and citizens' and politicians' perceptions of the quality of the mini-public deliberations. We organised an online mini-public, together with the City of Turku, Finland, on the topic of transport planning. The participants ( $n = 171$ ) were recruited from a random sample and discussed the topic in facilitated small groups ( $n = 21$ ). Pre- and postdeliberation surveys were collected. The effect of politicians on mini-publics was studied using an experimental intervention: in half of the groups, local politicians (two per group) participated, whereas in the other half, citizens deliberated among themselves. Although we found that the participating citizens' opinions changed, no trace of differences between the two treatment groups was reported. We conclude that politicians, at least when they are in a clear minority in the deliberating small groups, can deliberate with citizens without negatively affecting internal inclusion and the quality of deliberation within mini-publics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Deliberative mini-publics have received considerable critical attention from political scientists and governments around the world (cf. OECD, 2020). Recent debates within deliberative theory have resulted in the introduction of novel institutional designs for coupling arenas of citizen deliberation with representative decision-making institutions to increase the impact of citizen engagement (Hendriks, 2016; Mansbridge et al., 2012). One proposed method has been to invite politicians to participate in deliberations with lay citizens, with the aim of increasing politicians' commitment to apply mini-public recommendations in their legislative work (Setälä, 2017). However, one risk associated with such collaborative forums is that politicians who have more skills in argumentation and political rhetoric may dominate discussions (Setälä, 2021).

This potential for citizens to remain unheard can also negatively affect the democratic quality of the proceedings: authentic deliberation requires that individual preferences are reflected in a noncoercive fashion, ruling out domination, manipulation and expressions of mere self-interest (Dryzek, 2000, p. 2). The force of the better argument entails participants to set aside their strategic concerns, a measure that may be counterintuitive for politicians who are accustomed to strategic argumentation and persuasion.

However, although much research to date has focussed on mini-publics with many citizen participants, there is little analysis of mini-publics with politicians as coparticipants. To study how politicians' involvement affect mini-public deliberations, we organised a deliberative mini-public where politicians deliberated together with ordinary citizens. We ask whether the presence of politicians influenced citizen participants' opinion formation on the topic of transport policies and citizens' experiences of the quality of mini-public deliberations. Moreover, we study how participating politicians viewed the quality of the mini-public. The mini-public was designed as a controlled experiment where citizen participants were randomly assigned into a Citizens only or a Mixed group involving two politicians in addition to citizens. A controlled design allows us to analyse the potential causal effects of the presence of politicians.<sup>1</sup>

The *Turku deliberates* mini-public discussed transport planning in the city of Turku in May 2020. Altogether, 171 randomly selected lay citizens participated. Participants received an information leaflet on transport issues and heard an expert presentation on the topic, after which they deliberated in small groups. At the end of the discussions, participants chose between three scenarios for transport planning through an anonymous survey. Our primary data come from pre- and postdeliberation surveys completed by the citizen participants, and we also analyse qualitative interviews with local councillors who participated in the deliberations.

We begin by discussing the theoretical underpinnings of deliberative mini-publics and their relationship with representative institutions. We thereafter review existing empirical results on the effects of deliberation on citizen participants and discuss few existing studies on the effects of involving politicians in mini-publics. After describing the process of the *Turku deliberates* mini-public, we present our empirical results and discuss their implications for deliberative democracy and representative decision-making.

## **POLITICIANS IN CITIZEN DELIBERATION: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

Deliberative mini-publics are democratic innovations that aim to deepen citizen engagement in political decision-making (Smith, 2009, p. 1). In deliberative mini-publics, (quasi) randomly selected citizens first receive information and then deliberate in small groups that are facilitated by a trained moderator. Typically, the aggregated opinions or recommendations are presented publicly to the commissioning body and wider society (Setälä & Smith, 2018). Deliberative mini-publics are designed to function as institutions that realise the principles of deliberative democracy: public reasoning and reflection of collective decisions by all those affected by the decisions (Dryzek, 2000). Deliberative democracy reflects a talk-centric conception of democracy, in that it focuses on mutual justification and weighing of arguments prior to decision-making, in contrast to vote-centric accounts of democracy (Chambers, 2003).

A common concern with deliberative mini-publics is that they are not meaningfully connected to traditional arenas of power, such as parliaments (Curato & Böker, 2016). In response to this criticism, theorists have put forward novel institutional designs for coupling arenas of citizen deliberation with representative decision-making institutions (Hendriks, 2016). One proposed method has been to invite politicians into deliberations with lay citizens to enhance politicians' commitment to take up mini-public recommendations in legislative work (Setälä, 2017). For example, in the cases of the British Columbia and Ontario citizens' assemblies, the exclusion of the political parties provided them with a good excuse not to involve themselves with the referendum campaigns that followed (Fournier et al., 2011, p. 109). On the contrary, in the Irish Constitutional Convention, the politicians who participated in the convention became cheerleaders of the process during the parliamentary debates of Convention reports (Farrell et al., 2018).

To understand how the involvement of politicians may impact deliberation in mini-public, it is important to make a distinction between deliberation in parliaments and public deliberation. For Fishkin (2009), the difference between the two is that while the former is 'deliberation on behalf of the people', the latter is 'deliberation by the people'. The difference between the types of deliberation, however, does not mean that in citizens' deliberation lay people

simply represent themselves. Rather, they may be viewed as ‘citizen representatives’ for nonparticipating citizens (Warren, 2013). The central feature of citizen representation is that participants are randomly selected or self-selected, not elected.

While involving politicians in mini-public deliberations may enhance politicians' commitment to take up mini-public recommendations in legislative work, citizens deliberating together with politicians may also bring about problems. The involvement of politicians poses a risk to two central preconditions of deliberative processes: the equality and impartiality of the deliberators. The theoretical presumption of deliberation is that it is a collective conversation among co-equals about issues of common concern (Pierce et al., 2008). Most of the proponents of deliberative democracy agree that equality among participants is necessary for deliberative democracy to work well. The involvement of politicians may pose challenges for equal deliberation. Compared to lay citizens, politicians often have more knowledge on a given matter, better material resources and superior rhetorical capacities to argue and persuade others to take their side. This may lead to politicians' intellectual domination (Vandamme et al., 2018) and an inequality of discussions (Mansbridge et al., 2010). Using Fung and Wright's (2003) terms, lay citizens can be seen as ‘weak’ participants and politicians as ‘powerful’ participants in deliberative settings.

In addition to equality, the norm of impartiality characterises ideal deliberation (Bohman, 1998; Habermas, 1990). Participants are said to be impartial when they try to follow a goal of fairness and look at the situation from a third-person perspective (Mansbridge et al., 2010). Impartiality entails participants to look for common interests and use ‘public’ rather than ‘private reasoning’ (Bohman, 1998). It is somewhat doubtful whether politicians can stay impartial during deliberation or whether they rather use the deliberative processes to promote their partisan interests (Flinders et al., 2016). Politicians might seek to establish rules of procedure that resemble parliamentary styles of operation rather than deliberative processes (Farrell et al., 2018). Furthermore, domination may take the form of narrowing the agenda for deliberative discussions to favour status quo (Fung & Wright, 2003).

To sum up, these arguments assume that the involvement of politicians may counteract the central values of the deliberative process and thus bias mini-public deliberations. However, some scholars are more optimistic about the deliberation's ‘salutary effect’ even in the presence of inequalities. Deliberation can neutralise power and equalise changes to impact collective decisions (Cohen & Rogers, 2003, p. 242). There is a widespread agreement among the deliberative democrats that the success of deliberation depends on the extent to which the participants have committed to following the deliberative norms (Bagg, 2018, p. 262). This entails participants to take a ‘deliberative stance’ toward each other to see each other ‘as equals engaged in the mutual

exchange of reasons oriented as if to reaching a shared practical judgement' (Owen & Smith, 2015, p. 228).

To alleviate the inequalities between citizens and elite participants, mini-publics can be organised with briefing materials and moderated small group discussions (Bächtiger & Beste, 2017). Indeed, it seems that there is little difference between politicians' and ordinary citizens' willingness and capacity to deliberate when the institutional context is appropriate (Bächtiger & Beste, 2017). Yet, certain differences between citizens and politicians have been observed. Politicians seem better able to justify their choices compared to ordinary citizens (Gerber & Mueller, 2018), whereas citizens seem to trust the capacity of deliberative forums to deliver good policy choices more than the political elite do (Koskimaa & Lauri Rapeli, 2020).

We will next describe evidence from cases where politicians have participated in deliberative mini-publics alongside ordinary citizens to show how well collaborative deliberation has succeeded in creating conditions for authentic deliberation.

## **CASE STUDIES OF POLITICIAN AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN MINI-PUBLICS**

Extensive empirical evidence has shown the effect of deliberative mini-publics on participants. A relatively robust observation is that participants' opinions change (Barabas, 2004; Fishkin, 2009; Hansen & Andersen, 2004) and opinions change towards a more tolerant and less polarised direction (Grönlund et al., 2015; List et al., 2012; Strandberg et al., 2019). Opinion changes also seem to happen for the right reasons: increased knowledge of the issue, increased tendency to see things from others' perspectives and deliberative reasoning (Himmelroos & Christensen, 2014; Luskin et al., 2002; Muradova, 2021).

Although considerable research has investigated mini-publics where only ordinary citizens participate, fewer studies have examined deliberative mini-publics that include politicians as coparticipants. In the Irish Constitutional Convention in 2012, politicians took part in deliberations in mixed-member groups together with lay citizens (Farrell, 2014; Farrell et al., 2020). The convention was established to support decision-making and opinion formation on a constitutional reform, and many of its recommendations have been later implemented via referendums. The experiences from the Irish Constitutional Convention suggest that the presence of politicians did not have a negative influence on deliberations (Farrell et al., 2020). Participants did not feel that politicians dominated discussions, and there was no reason to believe that they distorted the outcomes in terms of citizens' opinion formation. This was the case even though participating politicians were somewhat more liberal than nonparticipating candidates who responded to a candidate survey conducted

in connection to general elections. To avoid a biased pool of politicians, Farrell et al. (2020) recommend a random selection of politician participants.

Previous research has highlighted the positive outcomes of involving both citizens and politicians in the deliberative mini-public. Strandberg and Berg (2020) show with Finnish data that both politicians' and citizens' opinions can change in organised mixed-member deliberative forums. The findings lend some support to the notion that hearing opposing viewpoints and engaging in respectful argumentation can affect opinion movement and even lead to slight opinion convergence among citizens and politicians. Sørensen and Torfing (2019) found in their study of local task committees, in which local politicians and citizens deliberate together, that citizen participants' experiences of the model were positive. Moreover, politician participants reported knowledge gains, better understanding of the problems and new insights into the issue.

Some previous studies have reported mixed or negative findings of politicians' involvement in deliberation on an equal footing with ordinary citizens. Strandberg et al. (2021) observed no changes in citizens' trust and efficacy when local politicians and citizens deliberated together on a highly polarised topic of a municipal merger. In the United States, online town hall meetings were accompanied by a process in which citizens could pose questions and comments to members of the congress, who then responded (Minozzi et al., 2015; Neblo et al., 2018). This process enabled politicians to successfully persuade participating citizens, which may be seen as problematic if the politicians used their superior knowledge and skills to swing opinions in their favour. Similarly, in Citizens' Assembly pilots in Southampton and Sheffield in the United Kingdom, mixed-member and citizens-only assemblies were formed (Flinders et al., 2016). While the presence of politicians did not seem to influence attitudes towards politicians, political institutions, or participants' political efficacy, a significant minority of citizen participants had negative attitudes towards the fact that politicians took part. Moreover, citizen participants also felt that some politicians dominated the discussions, although the experience of domination seemed to decrease towards the end of the assembly.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We do not feel confident in formulating hypotheses because both theoretical and empirical literature give basis to somewhat contrasting conclusions on politicians' influence. Instead of hypotheses, we pose research questions. We ask first *how did the presence of politicians influence citizen participants' opinion changes in the Turku deliberates mini-public?* To answer this question, we studied *whether citizens' opinions changed*, as well as *whether changes, if observed, were different in the Mixed Group and the Citizens Only group*. It is difficult to say how the presence of politicians would influence the tendency of citizen

participants to change their opinions, but if politicians dominated the small group's discussions and if they mainly represented their own partisan interests, then different types of opinion changes could be possible in the two types of discussion groups.

To study whether there are indications of politicians' impact on the quality of deliberations, we studied both citizen and politician participants' experiences of the mini-public. We ask *how citizen participants perceived the quality of the mini-public deliberations, and whether the two treatment groups were different in this respect?* The quality of deliberations was measured by asking participants directly about domination, inclusion and respect in their small group. We also asked them about the quality of the briefing material and moderator work. Their views on the quality of deliberations were also asked more indirectly by items on their own opinion changes, learning, and respect for diverse perspectives. Indirect measures also included participants' willingness to participate in similar events anew and their opinion on the need to use mini-publics in democratic decision-making. Negative responses to these questions may indicate a low quality of deliberations.

We were interested to see whether politicians dominated the mini-public discussions and, in so doing, jeopardised the quality of discussions. If this was the case, the quality would be perceived as lower in the Mixed groups. Existing evidence suggests that the involvement of politicians does not necessarily bias deliberative processes but may sometimes do so. Furthermore, since our mini-public experiment followed strict deliberative standards and created supportive conditions for good quality deliberations, the presence of politicians may not produce negative impacts on the deliberative quality of the discussions. If this was the case, we may not see large differences between the two treatment groups.

While our main interest lies in the citizen participants, we also explore *how the participating politicians viewed the quality of the mini-public deliberations*. We are interested to see whether politician participants' experiences are in line with citizen participants' perceptions of the process. If both participant types reveal similar experiences of the quality of deliberations, we can be more confident about the overall picture of the process.

## PROCEDURES

*Turku deliberates* mini-public was organised together with the city of Turku and it was connected to the political decision-making process in the new master plan for the city centre in 2029. The process started with an initial survey (T1) and an invitation to participate mailed to a random sample of 12,000 citizens of Turku. The invitation letter indicated that selected participants would receive a reward for their participation and that the city council would be informed about the results of the citizens' panel when the council decides on the city's new master

plan. The letter also informed citizens that by participating they would have the opportunity to express their views about transportation planning in the city, thus informing them of the potential impact of the citizens' panel. The first survey consisted of questions related to transport, environmental and other political values, trust, efficacy and background variables (33 items in total). Of the random sample, 370 citizens indicated their willingness to participate. A request to confirm participation and to fill in a second survey (T2) consisting mainly of knowledge questions was then sent out by mail. This survey measured both general political knowledge and issue knowledge about transport systems. At this point, volunteers were also informed that they would receive fifty euros as a reward for their participation.

Then, an information leaflet was sent out by mail. It provided information about the current traffic problems in Turku and described the three alternative scenarios for the future transport system. The scenarios varied mainly in terms of how radically they changed transport policies towards the goal of a carbon-neutral city. Written rules for the deliberative discussion were mailed out at the same time. Figure 1 describes the stages of the *Turku deliberates* process (Grönlund et al., 2020).

One hundred and seventy-one respondents agreed to participate in the group, and the online deliberations took place in May 2020. Despite the large random sample and a mailed reminder, some demographic groups were underrepresented. Most notably, participants from certain neighbourhoods and people with only basic education were underrepresented.<sup>2</sup> The participants were randomly assigned into Citizens only and Mixed groups consisting of 8 to 11 citizens. Due to attrition, the number of citizens in actual deliberations varied between 5 and 11 per group.

To form the Mixed groups, we followed roughly the procedures used by the Irish Constitutional Convention (Farrell et al., 2020; Suiter et al., 2016): political parties were represented in proportion to their share of seats in the city council, each party decided which of its councillors participated, and each small



**FIGURE 1** *Turku deliberates* process. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]



group was assigned two councillors representing different parties.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, councillors volunteered to participate. Altogether, 21 councillors from six different parties participated.<sup>4</sup>

The participants discussed the given topics online within their small groups. A trained moderator facilitated the discussions, and a technical moderator helped with possible problems with the online system. To standardise the process, moderators were trained before the event, and they received detailed written instructions describing their role as well as the timetable and steps of small group discussions.

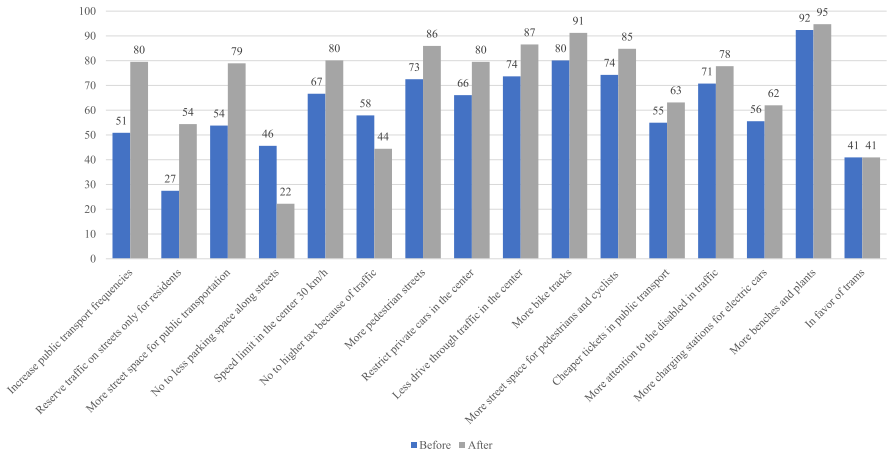
First, a recorded video with a civil servant presenting the three alternative scenarios was shown in each group. The moderator thereafter asked each participant to present a theme they wanted to discuss. The moderator's role was not to interfere if discussions went smoothly. At the end of the session, participants completed a survey (T3), which measured the main variables we expected to change in deliberation, and the participants' experiences of the process. The participants also voted for their preferred scenario after deliberation. In a way, this vote could be seen as a secret ballot that took place by selecting one of the scenarios in the T3 survey. The outcome of the vote was revealed to participants in a public debriefing webinar that took place approximately 2 weeks after the citizen's panel. The councillors filled in a postdeliberation survey enquiring about their motivations for participation and measuring their experiences of the process. They did not, however, choose between the three scenarios.

In addition to the surveys, the 11 councillors were interviewed to understand their experiences and thoughts about the mini-public. The interviews were arranged in June 2020. The interview themes were selected so that they targeted the councillors' motivations, experiences, and expectations. The themes were: reasons for participating, experiences in the group discussions and anticipated impact of the mini-public. The interviews were transformed into transcripts and analysed using thematic content analysis.

## RESULTS

We began the analysis by examining citizens' opinion changes. Our main set of questions regarding opinions on traffic and transportation in the city centre consisted of 16 items. The development of opinions is shown in Figure 2. Based on these statements, we formed an index variable consisting of several individual statements regarding traffic. The systematic comparisons between the two treatment groups were carried out with the help of the index variable using *t* tests.

With 171 participants, our study was well powered to observe conventionally medium or large effect sizes, but not small effect sizes. Unfortunately, because of the time limit set by the city of Turku, we were unable to recruit a



**FIGURE 2** Citizen participants' opinions before and after deliberations; the percent shares of participants who agree with each statement. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

larger sample. For the main effect of the difference between Citizens only and Mixed groups, in opinion change we had a power of 36.70% to detect a small (Cohen's  $d = 0.25$ ), 90.00% to detect a medium (Cohen's  $d = 0.50$ ) and 99.99% to detect a large (Cohen's  $d = 0.80$ ) effect size.

Figure 2 shows the share of people who agreed (fully or partly) with the 16 topics measuring opinions on traffic and transportation in Turku. They are ordered according to the amount of change per topic. The largest change was detected in the statements concerning the increase in public transportation frequencies and reserving traffic on streets only for residents. In both statements, almost 30% of the respondents changed their minds from disagreement to agreement during the mini-public. Overall, the citizen participants turned more in favour of improved conditions for public transportation, pedestrians, and cyclers. What is noteworthy is that citizens became less hesitant to pay higher taxes because of the traffic. However, the support for initiating tram transportation in Turku did not increase during the deliberation.

Using the 16 topics in Figure 2, we constructed an index variable with the help of factor analysis (principal component analysis with promax rotation). The index, consisting of seven topics, captures 'green' values pertaining to restrictions on the use of private cars and support for cycling and walking in the city centre.<sup>5</sup> Even though factor analysis identified three additional possible dimensions, we chose not to construct further indices due to very low Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values for the proposed factors.<sup>6</sup>

The index was created by coding the Likert scales for each statement into a scale from zero, via 0.33 and 0.66 to 1, then calculating the mean of the statements and taking a multiplication by 10. Thus, the final index varies between zero (least ‘green’) and 10 (most ‘green’). Table 1 shows the baseline (T1) and postdeliberation (T3) attitudes according to the ‘green’ index among the participants. It also includes several socio-demographic classifications, such as gender, mother tongue, age, education and their residential area. It also shows the development of attitudes according to party preference and treatment. While we are mainly interested in the effect of our experimental treatment on opinion formation, we included background variables to confirm that potential opinion transformations and treatment effects are the same in different subgroups.

We see that ‘green’ views on traffic and transportation increased clearly during deliberation. The mean increase for all citizen participants was 1.1 points. Furthermore, the increase occurred rather equally in different subgroups. However, there were some initial differences in the baseline attitudes. Table 1 shows that women, younger age groups and participants with university education more frequently held ‘green’ opinions at the beginning of the survey. By contrast, the supporters of the Finns Party and the conservative National Coalition Party showed lower baseline values on the index variable than other participants. Among the participants of these two parties; however, the increase towards ‘green’ views was larger, meaning that the differences according to party preference were less prominent after deliberation.

To trace whether the development of attitudes is statistically significant and uniform across treatments, we conducted a series of within- and between-samples *t* tests.

Table 2 shows that the development of opinions towards more ‘green’ views is significant ( $t = 12.1$ ) in the whole sample—from 6.50 on the index variable before deliberation to 7.64 after deliberation—and within both treatments. In the Citizens-only groups, the index variable increased on average from 6.63 before deliberation to 7.59 after deliberation. In the Mixed groups, the increase was somewhat larger, from 6.36 before deliberation to 7.69 after deliberation.

Although the participants were randomly assigned to the two treatment groups, the baseline mean on the index variable was slightly lower in the Mixed groups. This difference (0.28 units), as shown in Table 3, is not significant. The difference after deliberation, where the Mixed groups have a slightly higher value, is not statistically significant either.

A generalised linear regression model (Supporting Information: Appendix I) with robust standard errors controlling for treatment condition, age, sex, education, issue knowledge and increase in issue knowledge confirms the uniform increase in ‘green’ attitudes during deliberation. None of the covariates behind the change in ‘green’ attitudes is statistically significant. However, the coefficient for Mixed groups is positive and close to being statistically

**TABLE 1** Pre and post values of the index measuring ‘green’ attitudes among citizen participants.

	<b>IndexT1</b>	<b>IndexT3</b>	<b>Change (T3–T1)</b>	<b>n at T1</b>	<b>n at T3</b>
All	6.5	7.6	1.1	171	170
Gender					
Male	6.1	7.3	1.1	94	94
Female	7.0	8.1	1.1	77	76
Mother tongue					
Finnish	6.5	7.6	1.1	143	142
Swedish	6.7	7.8	1.2	22	22
Other	5.8	6.7	0.9	6	6
Age					
15–29	6.7	8.0	1.3	36	36
30–44	7.0	8.1	1.1	52	52
45–59	6.1	7.1	1.0	36	36
60–80	6.1	7.3	1.2	47	46
Education					
Basic	5.0	6.4	1.3	11	11
Medium level	5.8	7.1	1.3	63	63
University	7.1	8.2	1.0	97	96
Area of residence					
Downtown	6.8	7.8	1.0	74	74
Other areas	6.2	7.5	1.2	97	96
Treatment					
Citizens only	6.6	7.6	1.0	87	86
Mixed	6.4	7.7	1.3	84	84
Party preference					
Social Democratic Party	5.9	6.7	0.7	13	13
Finns Party	5.0	6.6	1.6	10	10
National Coalition Party	5.1	6.8	1.6	35	34

**TABLE 1** (Continued)

	IndexT1	IndexT3	Change (T3–T1)	<i>n</i> at T1	<i>n</i> at T3
Centre Party	6.8	8.1	1.3	4	4
Green League	7.8	8.8	1.0	43	43
Left Alliance	8.0	8.6	0.6	25	25
Swedish People's Party	7.0	7.8	0.8	11	11
Other/prefers not to say	5.6	6.9	1.3	30	30

**TABLE 2** The development of 'green' attitudes, within treatment-groups *t* tests.

	Before (T1)	After (T3)	Change	<i>t</i>	Sig.	<i>n</i>
Whole sample	6.50	7.64	1.14	12.1	0.000	170
Citizens only	6.63	7.59	0.95	7.6	0.000	86
Mixed (politicians)	6.36	7.69	1.33	9.6	0.000	84

**TABLE 3** Differences in 'green' attitudes before and after deliberation, *t* tests between treatment groups.<sup>7</sup>

	Before (T1)	After (T3)	<i>n</i> (T1)	<i>n</i> (T3)
Citizens only	6.65	7.59	87	86
Mixed (politicians)	6.36	7.69	84	84
Difference	0.28	–0.10		
<i>t</i>	0.75	–0.32		
Sig.	0.45	0.75		

significant (0.055). This is in line with the visual observations in both Tables 2 and 3. Nevertheless, we conclude that the development of attitudes within the mini-publics was rather uniform. Especially a comparison of the two group types shows that opinions developed in a similar manner towards 'green' views on traffic and transportation.

Next, we turn to the analysis of the effect of politicians' involvement on the perceived quality of deliberation. Using between-treatments *t* tests, we compared the means of variables from the postdeliberation survey. We measured citizens' perceptions of the process and small group deliberations using a 4-point Likert scale where 1 = *completely agree* and 4 = *completely*

disagree plus a ‘don't know’ option. For the analyses, the data were reverse recoded into a 5-point Likert scale so that 1 = *completely disagree* and 5 = *completely agree*, and ‘don't know’ answers are in the middle as option 3.

Table 4 reveals that politicians' involvement had no effect on citizens' subjective evaluations of discussion dynamics, inclusiveness of discussions or overall assessments of the mini-public. There are no significant differences between our treatments in terms of how well others' opinions were listened to and respected in small groups, or whether some participants dominated the discussions. Since we conduct multiple *t* tests, we use Bonferroni correction to avoid declaring false positives (VanderWeele & Mathur, 2019). With our original  $\alpha = 0.05$  and 15 tests we must thus set our target *p* value to 0.003. In other words, only *p* values smaller than this are considered statistically significant. None of the reported *p* values in Table 4 fall below this threshold. The two items that appear to have the largest differences in means between the treatment and control groups are related to knowledge, that is, subjective evaluation of knowledge gain on the issue and neutrality of the background material given to participants. The differences are, however, not significant with the corrected (and fairly conservative) level of  $p < 0.003$ .

In addition, we asked citizen participants in Mixed groups ( $N = 84$ ) to evaluate politicians' involvement in a post-deliberation survey. In line with the findings of *t* tests, participants explicitly expressed that politicians did not distort the discussions, as 88% of the respondents disagreed with the statement ‘Discussion in my small group was too partisan’ and 87% disagreed with the statement ‘It would have been better to organise the deliberation without politicians’. Furthermore, 77% of the participants in Mixed groups agreed with the statement ‘The presence of local councillors in the small group helped me understand the topic at hand’, showing that politicians' involvement may affect the way participants process and obtain new knowledge, and not so much on their political preferences.

Since subjective judgements of a fair or equal deliberative process might not always be accurate (Himmelroos et al., 2017), we complemented the subjective measure with a volume of speech. We counted the relative measure of the talk by counting the number of times each individual spoke during discussions and divided it by the total number of utterances.<sup>8</sup> Our analysis shows that politicians were slightly more active in discussions compared to citizens. On average, politicians covered 13.5% of the discussion in the Mixed groups, while the citizen participants covered 10%. In the Citizens-only groups, the share of each citizen was on average 11.5%. Differences between politicians were also notable (max: 40 speeches; min: 8 speeches; SD: 10).

## POLITICIANS' VIEWS ON THE MINI-PUBLIC

Politicians' views on the mini-public were revealed in their answers in a postdeliberation survey and in interviews conducted after the mini-public. In the survey, politicians were asked how they felt about the mini-public

**TABLE 4** Citizens' perceptions of the quality of deliberation, between treatments *t* tests.

	<b>Citizens only (<i>n</i> = 86)</b>	<b>Mixed (<i>n</i> = 84)</b>	
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Mean difference (<i>p</i>)</b>
My opinion on transport policy changed during the mini-public	2.50	2.64	-0.143 (0.426)
My knowledge of transport planning increased	4.14	4.50	-0.359 (0.010)
My readiness for collective action increased	4.23	4.24	-0.006 (0.967)
Participation in small group discussions was a pleasant experience	4.79	4.80	-0.007 (0.920)
Deliberation showed that opinions different from my own can be well justified	4.42	4.55	-0.129 (0.246)
Discussion helped me understand the everyday lives of different citizens	4.36	4.32	0.043 (0.714)
I learned enough to make an informed choice between three traffic scenarios	3.70	3.93	-0.231 (0.156)
Small group moderator was unbiased	4.90	4.94	-0.045 (0.404)
Information package to participants was unbiased	4.00	4.36	-0.361 (0.029)
Video shown in small group discussions was unbiased	4.08	4.25	-0.169 (0.296)
Others' opinions were listened to and respected in small group discussions	4.92	4.93	-0.010 (0.808)
Some participants dominated the discussions too much	1.72	1.85	-0.124 (0.390)
Nobody was excluded from the discussions	4.74	4.69	0.053 (0.560)
I would be happy to participate in a similar mini-public again	4.72	4.81	-0.089 (0.334)
Similar types of mini-publics should be used in political decision-making to engage citizens	4.58	4.67	-0.085 (0.380)

(1–5, where 1 = *completely disagree*,  
5 = *completely agree*)

deliberations and their reasons for participation. Most of the politicians indicated that they participated because they were interested in traffic and urban planning ( $n = 16$ ) and wanted to hear citizens' thoughts about the issue ( $n = 15$ ). Many of the politicians also indicated that they were interested in developing new forms of direct public engagement ( $n = 13$ ). Less than half of the respondents stated that they participated to advance the interests of their party ( $n = 8$ ) or electorate ( $n = 5$ ).

In the interviews, politicians (marked as P1–P11) had the opportunity to explain their motivations to participate and their experiences in the mini-public deliberations. Except for one, all the politicians (P7) considered the discussions very good spirited and undivided. Some of the politicians stated that they were surprised by how well-informed the citizens were and how well they could present their arguments (P1, P3). According to the politicians, participating with citizens in the mini-publics differed from their usual interactions with citizens, whereas meetings during election campaigns were often heated and citizens' feedback was, at times, harsh, in the mini-public discussion this did not happen (P1 and P6). As one politician stated:

I was surprised by how well the deliberations succeeded. Even though people had different political ideologies, the discussions remained calm and civilised. (P1)

The politicians did not receive much new information during the opening presentations because they had already discussed the scenarios in the city council (P1, P3, P6 and P8). One of the politicians stated in the interviews that the politicians could correct the citizens' misunderstandings about discussed issues (P5). In one of the groups, the citizens started to use politicians as an information source for clarifying certain issues (P3).

Some of the interviewees stated that they focused on listening to what the citizens were saying instead of trying to make their own opinions heard. Many of the interviewees reported that they avoided making too strong statements about the discussed issues (P3, P6, P9 and P10). The interviews suggest that the politicians were able to generate a *deliberative stance* towards the discussions and consider the other participants as their equals.

## DISCUSSION

We compared two small group types in a local deliberative mini-public. Participants were randomly assigned into Citizens only or Mixed, that is, citizens plus politicians, groups. Our results show that both opinion formation and experiences were overall very similar in the two types of groups. All citizen participants' opinions changed in a 'green' direction, and these changes were not different in the two types of groups. A similar change in opinions in both types



of groups indicates that the presence of politicians had no influence on the tendency of citizen participants to change their opinions.

Furthermore, citizen participants' survey responses indicate that their experiences of the quality of mini-public deliberations were overall very positive, and there were no signs that politicians would have dominated the discussions nor created an unequal discussion environment. Politicians' answers to survey and interview questions further support this finding. One politician characterised the discussions as 'civilised' and some of the politicians reported having been surprised about the ability of ordinary citizens for qualified discussion.

Our findings are juxtaposed with previous literature that has shown that generally elites tend to be sceptical about new participatory channels (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Koskimaa & Lauri Rapeli, 2020). Elites consider formal participatory channels too staged and antagonistic to produce constructive interactions (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019), doubt citizens' capacity to debate complex policy issues, and fear harmful delays (Royo et al., 2011). However, in our interviews, politicians were very positive towards increasing civic participation and involving citizens. Our findings suggest that politicians' perceptions towards democratic innovations and civic engagement can be changed for the better when the politicians are given a chance to deliberate together with citizens under supportive conditions.

The volume of speech indicates that the politicians were taking different roles in discussions. Whereas some of the politicians were considerably taking part in the discussions, others were behaving as 'one of the citizens' or withdrew to let the citizens to discuss. Although some of the politicians were considerably more active during the discussions than other participants, only 10 out of 84 citizens in the Mixed groups considered discussions too partisan and eight out of 84 felt that the discussion would have been better without politicians. Our observations from a controlled experiment are therefore in line with previous studies, in which no indications of politicians' domination have been seen (Farrell et al., 2020; Sørensen & Torfing, 2019), whereas Flinders et al.'s (2016) observations about politicians' domination were not replicated in our study.

Citizen participants' perceptions of the mini-public and quality of deliberation give further support to our findings that the presence of politicians has very little effect on opinions or deliberation. The citizen participants' responses to the post deliberation survey indicate that those citizens who deliberated together with politicians considered deliberation as inclusive as in citizens-only groups. No significant differences were found in participants' self-evaluations of opinion change and knowledge gains, either. In terms of knowledge, we have shown elsewhere that participants indeed learned to the same extent in both types of groups (Grönlund et al., 2020).

In the *Turku deliberates* mini-public, the concerns in the literature about politicians' domination (Fung & Wright, 2003; Vandamme et al., 2018) did not

become realised. It rather seems that the mini-public neutralised power between the participants (Cohen & Rogers, 2003). This observation gives further support to the view that organised deliberative forums succeed in creating supportive conditions for good quality deliberations (Bächtiger & Beste, 2017). However, we acknowledge that our measures of discussion equality are based on a rather limited definition of domination. In addition to direct forms of domination, such as talking out of turn, ignoring and excluding, deliberation can reinforce subtle forms of domination, which are carried by certain discourses and narratives (Hendriks, 2009). Further analysis should therefore put more emphasis on the possible framing strategies and manipulative rhetoric that may take place during deliberation, but remain undetected by other participants and impact their opinion formation.

There may be certain factors that limit the possibilities to generalise from a single case study. The finding that politicians did not dominate discussions may not hold under different conditions. First, it may be that the self-selection of participating politicians led those who support citizen engagement to participate, whereas more critical politicians were left out. Second, our participant pool was not entirely representative; in particular, highly educated citizens were overrepresented. Educated citizen participants may not be that different from local council members in terms of their status. With a more representative participant pool and by including more prominent politicians, for example, MPs or ministers, the difference between ordinary citizens and politicians might have been larger.

It is also noteworthy that we cannot rule out the possibility that the influence of politicians could have been different in a face-to-face environment. The mini-public was originally aimed to be organised face-to-face but because of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the event was moved online. It is possible that the online mode yields different results compared to a face-to-face mode. While there is evidence that face-to-face and online deliberations generate rather similar results (Grönlund et al., 2009; Strandberg et al., 2019), whether the presence of politicians has different effects in online and face-to-face environments could be examined in future research.

Further research could study whether the duration of the mini-public has an effect on the quality of deliberation. The length of *Turku deliberates* mini-public was 3 h, whereas citizen juries and citizens' assemblies often meet over several days. The perceived domination of politicians can diminish over time (Flinders et al., 2016); however, whether there is a tipping point where politicians actually become more prone to pursue their own interests is still unknown.

It is noteworthy that we did not study how the public at large perceived the mini-public. Existing evidence suggests that a deliberative body can be regarded as a trusted source of information (Setälä et al., 2021). Future research could examine whether the trust would be seen among the public at large when politicians take part in deliberations along with citizens.

As an overall conclusion, we can say that the presence of politicians in mini-publics may have positive consequences in creating a closer connection between the representative system and direct citizen engagement. In the local mini-public on public transport, the presence of politicians did not have a substantial effect on opinion change, and citizen participants' survey responses did not indicate that politicians would have dominated discussions. Moreover, politicians felt very positive about their participation and emphasised a two-way learning process between citizens and politicians, as well as an opportunity to hear the views of those citizens that do not usually contact politicians.

What are the implications of our study for coupling citizen engagement with electoral democracy (Hendriks, 2016; Setälä, 2017, 2021)? Based on the *Turku deliberates* process, we can say that if politicians are involved in a mini-public, there are few things to be considered. First, the selection methods of politicians should include random, semirandom and self-selection methods. If the participating politicians were appointed by the party organisation, the politicians could be inclined to represent party interests during the deliberation. Moreover, the deliberative mini-public should be organised before the party has publicly revealed its stance on the topic of the mini-public. This gives more freedom to participating politicians to be influenced by opinions and justifications that arise in the mini-public deliberations. Taking these issues into consideration and following good practices of organising deliberative mini-publics gives the basis for a successful coupling of direct citizen engagement to electoral democracy.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The survey data will be made available through the Finnish Social Science Data Archive.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> To our knowledge, we are the first to use a design where citizen participants are randomly allocated to Citizens-only groups or to Mixed groups. Such a controlled experiment is needed to detect the causal effects of politicians' presence.
- <sup>2</sup> The participants of the mini-public were also slightly biased in terms of their baseline attitudes towards transport policy. Of the 2432 respondents to our recruitment survey T1, 171 participated in the mini-public, while 2261 did not because they wanted to express their opinions only through the questionnaire. We compared the means of our main dependent variable, 'green attitudes index', in these two subgroups. The results of independent-samples *t* tests show that for nonparticipants the mean was 0.581 and for participants 0.650, and the difference is significant at  $p = 0.000$  level. Participants in the mini-public were thus slightly more in favour of 'green' transport policies than the average Turku resident.
- <sup>3</sup> One group consisted of only one councillor.
- <sup>4</sup> National Coalition Party (6 councillors in the mini-public), Green League (5), Social Democratic Party (4), Left Alliance (3), Finns Party (2) and Swedish People's Party (1).
- <sup>5</sup> The items in the index are: the speed limit for cars in the city centre should be 30 km/h; the use of private cars should be restricted in the city centre; more bicycle roads and bicycle paths should be built in the city centre; a larger portion of the streets should be reserved solely for pedestrians and cyclists; the number of street parking spaces cannot be decreased (reversed); the amount of pedestrian-only streets should be increased in the city centre; the transit traffic in the city centre must be decreased. Green is in citation marks because participants may have supported the policies in the index for reasons other than environmental.
- <sup>6</sup> The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value for the seven-item 'green' index was 0.89. The  $\alpha$  values of the additional possible indexes as suggested by the factor analysis were 0.59, 0.39 and 0.54.
- <sup>8</sup> The volume of speech can be seen as a critical factor in equal participation (Han et al., 2015; Karpowitz, Mendelberg & Shaker, 2012; Sanders, 1997). There are different approaches to calculate the volume of speech. Karpowitz et al. (2012) count the length of each individual's talk during discussions and divide it by the total length of time. By contrast, Han et al. (2015) measure the proportion of words uttered by each participant within the total number of words uttered in a given discussion.
- <sup>7</sup> One participant did not respond to these survey topics after deliberation. This is the reason why the before deliberation mean for the index variable is slightly higher within the Citizens-only treatment compared to Table 2.

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