

Finnish
democracy policy
in the 2020s



MINISTRY OF JUSTICE
FINLAND



Policies and proposed measures

The government resolution on Finnish democracy policy in the 2020s outlines the long-term goals for democracy policy in Finland. Published in November 2022, the resolution emphasises the importance of democracy, fundamental and human rights, and the rule of law nationally, internationally and within the European Union. It is important to obtain updated information about the state of democracy and related trends to support decision-making. This policy brief presents the key policies and proposed measures included in the resolution.

The resolution is divided into six policies, which focus on:

1. **the functioning and safety of the electoral system**
2. **equal participation rights and open government**
3. **democracy, human rights and media education**
4. **media pluralism and an inclusive culture of debate**
5. **the operating conditions of civil society**
6. **Finland's international democracy work**

Key proposals for the resolution's future implementation are discussed under each policy.

The National Democracy Programme 2025

encompassed several measures promoting the civil society and inclusiveness in the 2019–2023 parliamentary term. The Democracy Programme served as an umbrella for the democracy projects of individual ministries. The government's democracy policy and Democracy Programme were coordinated by the Democracy Network appointed by the Ministry of Justice. Promoting the policies and implementing the goals are the responsibility of each government and the relevant competent ministry.

1 The electoral system is functioning, safe and reliable. Everyone has equal opportunities and adequate capabilities to exercise their electoral rights.

According to international benchmarks, Finnish elections are among the world's most reliable. The fairness of elections is highly rated in international comparisons. However, voting activity varies quite notably among different population groups. The wealthy and highly educated are on average more active voters than other population groups.

Increasing differences can be seen in the societal influence exerted by different groups. Some citizens feel unable to influence common matters through traditional channels, such as by voting in elections. Voting activity also depends on voters understanding what

the election is about and on their having adequate access to information.

The weakness of the current parliamentary election system is that it does not achieve proportionality very well in small electoral districts. Research indicates that the system is demanding on voters, who must choose both a party and a candidate. The difficulty of choosing a candidate has been identified as a key reason for not voting, especially among young people.

Election harassment and attempts to interfere in elections have become an increasing international problem, the goal of which is to affect the functioning of elections or undermine their legitimacy. According to studies, few candidates have personally experienced election harassment so far. However, a more general examination indicates that election harassment is felt to be an increasing threat. Harassment affects citizens' interest in participating in politics.



Measures to improve the functioning of representative democracy:

- Reform the parliamentary election system to ensure that proportionality is better achieved
- Strengthen the safety of elections
- Continue the reform of the Election Information System
- Pay attention to the number, location and accessibility of polling stations and promote the use of an electronic voting register
- Develop democracy education and encourage political parties to nominate diverse candidates and adopt diverse communication practices

2 Finland offers various opportunities for participation, and an increasing number of people exercise their right to participate. Open and interactive governance bolsters trust. Decisions are made based on knowledge.

In Western democracies, traditional political participation has not only become more concentrated but also decreased in recent decades.

Some citizens no longer find value in participation. New forms of participation have emerged alongside traditional ones, and individual forms of participation are partly replacing more collective alternatives. The concentration of political participation among population groups also presents challenges to the employment of new forms of participation.

According to an OECD survey, Finland exhibits a paradox of participation. While citizens trust the country's public institutions and are very satisfied with democracy, only 40 per cent of the respondents believe they can influence political processes. In other words, despite high trust and satisfaction, the proportion who believe they can influ-

ence political processes is small (i.e. political efficacy is relatively low) compared to other high-trust countries.

It is of key importance for democracy that quality, planning and transparency are emphasised in legislative preparations. Hearing is an inherent part of legislative drafting in Finland. Nevertheless, more opportunities for influence are required especially during the early stages of preparations. For example, a need for development has been identified in the hearing of vulnerable population groups. In addition to traditional forms of participation, new methods of inclusion should be developed to ensure that stakeholders and citizens feel they are genuinely listened to.

Åtgärder för att stödja Measures to support social participation:

- Construct a set of participation channels that is effective and easy to grasp
- Formulate a service promise for promoting equal participation
- Support the construction of regional and municipal participation systems to develop cooperation among different parties
- Ensure multi-channel influence opportunities, taking different population groups into account
- Examine the expiry and age limits of citizens' initiatives, as well as the introduction of a lighter form of initiative
- Invest in various types of digital participation and electronic democracy services
- Improve the capability of public administration to communicate clearly, accessibly and timely
- When reforming the Act on the Openness of Government Activities, ensure that the revised legislation is more understandable and functions better than currently
- Supervise the transparency register's implementation
- Develop an open legislative drafting process and extend hearing to larger groups



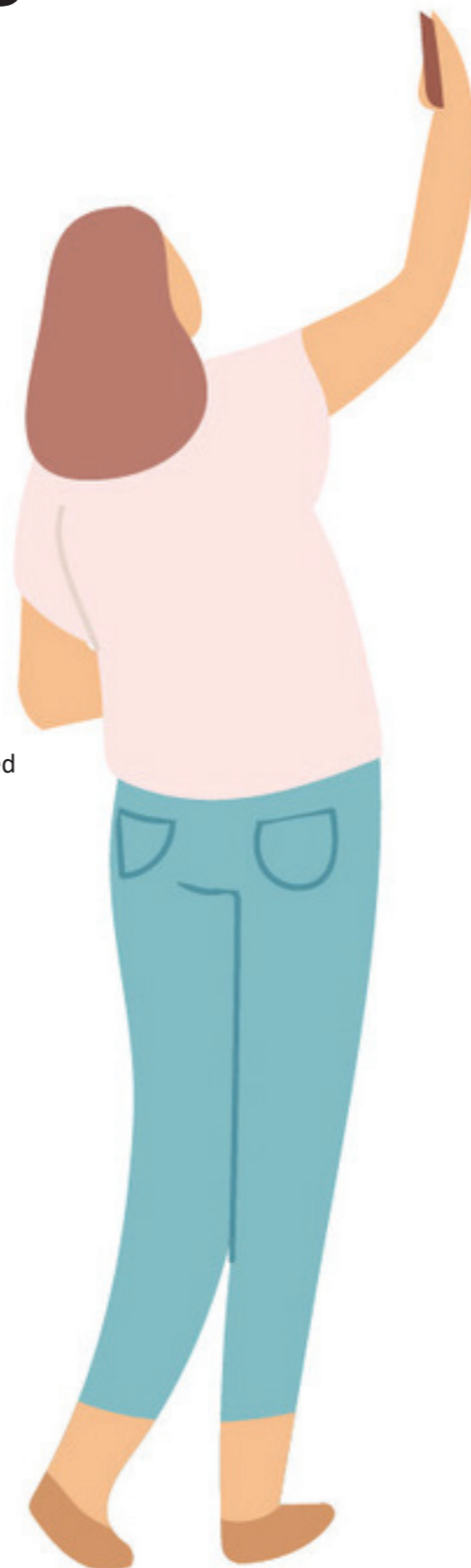
3 Democracy, human rights and media education, as well as continuous learning support the exercising of participation rights

Factors important to a functioning democracy include people's perceived social participation, interest in participating and influencing matters, as well as political efficacy.

Gender, native language, the family's perceived financial situation, and the parents' level of education and profession make a difference to how a young person believes they can influence society. It is important to bolster adolescents' belief in their capabilities before they become of voting age.

Teachers' level of competence in democracy and human rights education varies, and teaching in the themes relies on the activity of individual teachers. Development needs have been identified especially in human rights education. In addition to schools and educational institutions, democracy and human rights education is provided by a large group of social operators in municipal youth work and activities, liberal adult education, organisations, youth councils and children's parliaments, for example.

In recent years, media and information literacy has become increasingly important because of various threats to society, including the systematic and targeted distribution of disinformation and anti-democratic campaigns, more frequent harassment by means of hate speech and the media, as well as privacy violations and data protection breaches. While media education is included in many disciplines, it is hampered by the shortage of resources. Moreover, media education is not provided equally across Finland, and it may not always be systematic.



Measures to support democracy, human rights and media education:

- Tackle the divergence trend observed in young people's perceived political efficacy
- Ensure that general and vocational education provide an adequate understanding of democracy and human rights, as well as participation capabilities
- Create accessible educational materials dealing with democracy and human rights for various target groups and put the results and operating models obtained from pilot projects into practice nationwide
- Teach dialogue, mediation and conflict resolution skills more extensively at different levels of education
- Strengthen aspects related to democracy and human rights education in the training of teachers and other personnel
- Strengthen civic skills and open dialogue to identify and combat disinformation
- Improve critical digital and media literacy among all age groups
- Strengthen the role of the library and museum network in boosting social participation and media literacy
- Ensure that themes related to democracy, human rights and media literacy are taught in integration training and multilingual civic orientation
- Ensure that non-governmental organisations and liberal adult education institutions have adequate resources for providing teaching in democracy, human rights and media literacy
- Improve the opportunities of non-governmental organisations to introduce themselves at schools and educational institutions

4 The media environment is pluralist and diverse, and the culture of social debate enables everyone to participate

Trust in the media plays a central role in a well-functioning democracy. The rise of social media can be seen as a positive development, as it has made the media environment increasingly pluralist and diverse.

However, social media is also a more effective channel for spreading disinformation, misinformation, anti-democratic attitudes and hate speech. In a democracy, everyone must be able to participate in social debate without fear of hate speech. Eliminating hate speech is also about the limits to freedom of expression.

Changes have been seen in both the earnings logic of media and media consumption. Advertisers' choices are channelling the largest revenue to transnational technology companies instead of traditional media operators, which is eroding the financial standing of the media. For democracy to be realised, diversity is a key value not only in terms of content but also of content providers. From a financial perspective, the diversity of providers promotes competition and improves the operating conditions of media businesses.

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Measures to secure a pluralist and diverse media environment and develop an inclusive culture of social debate:

- Recognise the key role played by multiparty dialogue and cooperation spanning party lines in creating a culture of constructive social debate
- Organise dialogue that promotes understanding and genuine interaction to improve relations among the population
- Bolster the ability of different operators to intervene in and react to hate speech, and increase citizens' awareness of the different forms of hate speech and harassment
- Promote the responsible use of freedom of expression and secure the operating conditions of the media

5 An active and thriving civil society is a key element of a well-functioning democracy

Civil society is of key significance to democracy, resilience and trust. Organisational activities and voluntary work help to actively promote a sense of community and social peace, reduce prejudice and increase interaction between generations.

The Finnish NGO sector is active. According to studies, the sector is becoming more professional, and its operations are increasingly governed by the operating logics of the private and public sectors. If the logics of the market and public sector replace activities based on voluntary work and member democracy, associations may lose some of their civil society characteristics.

Digitalisation enables various types of operations, but may also be a hindrance due to the different skills of operators. Competence gaps related to digitalisation are a challenge. Experience also shows that organisational activities and voluntary work are not always easily accessible to people from different backgrounds. Immigrant associations' role as democracy educators is not adequately identified and supported. Culture, especially art, contributes to securing a democratic and open society, and studies indicate that culture promotes integration and social cohesion.



Measures to support the operating conditions of civil society and participation:

- Formulate a shared understanding of the role of civil society in a democratic welfare society
- Improve cooperation between government and the civil society
- Monitor changes affecting civil society and assess their overall impact
- Promote informed decision-making, research on the civil society and the better utilisation of research results
- Improve the civil society competence and knowledge of public officials
- Support the financing of non-governmental organisations and activities and promote the incentives and fund-raising of voluntary work
- Promote the identification and recognition of competence obtained through voluntary work and determine young people's opinions about civil society activities
- Strengthen the role of cultural institutions, sports clubs and liberal adult education in promoting integration and present operating methods that increase diversity
- Develop low threshold cultural services

6 Finland actively participates in the EU's democracy efforts and supports international democracy development

The international strengthening of democracy promotes sustainable development worldwide, and international democratic influencing contributes to the stable democratic development of Finnish society.

International tensions and the rise of autocratic leadership affect the content and operating methods of international democracy efforts. In its democracy activities, Finland emphasises non-discrimination and gender equality, and the participation opportunities of women, disabled people and indigenous peoples, as well as the Roma in the European context.

Finland's development policy promotes the worldwide goal of sustainable poverty reduction and realisation of fundamental rights, the rules-based multilateral system, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in the UN. Development cooperation is based on a long-term approach, focusing on five key target areas that are based on Finland's values and strengths: strengthening the status and rights of women and girls; education; sustainable economy and decent work; climate change and natural resources; and peaceful, democratic societies.

There is a continued need for additional financial support to democracy and rule of law development, taking into account the challenges to democracy and the rule of law, as well as the level of Finland's funding compared to peer countries.



Read the entire government resolution:

The Government Resolution on Finnish Democracy Policy in the 2020s. Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Memorandums and statements 2022:40.

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