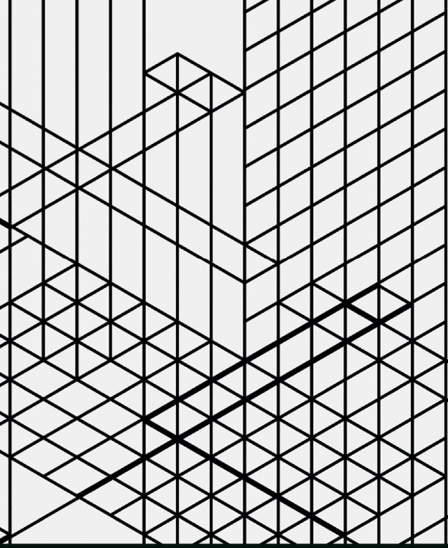




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ADVANCING FUTURE-ORIENTATION IN POLICYMAKING

INSTITUTIONS, INDIVIDUALS AND RISKS

Vesa Koskimaa and Lauri Rapeli



Advancing Future-Orientation in Policymaking

This book argues that, under certain societal and institutional conditions, party-, interest group- and bureaucracy-based elites can interact positively to extend political timeframes beyond short electoral terms and foster reasoned long-term planning for democratic decision-making.

Focusing on Finland within a broader analytic framework and comparative context, it unearths institutions and practices that give the elites capacity to curtail democratic short-sightedness and offer long-term solutions for contemporary threats such as economic globalization, climate change and geopolitical competition. The study also reveals factors that condition the operative capacity of future-regarding institutions.

This book will be of key interest to scholars, students and practitioners of political science, public policy and administration, elites and management and futures studies.

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Institutions, Individuals and Risks

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First published 2025
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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This work has received support from grants 312676 and 312671 from the Strategic Research Council of the Research Council of Finland, grants 333013 and 356446 from the Research Council of Finland and the funding for the Future of Democracy: A Centre of Excellence (FutuDem) from the Åbo Akademi University Foundation.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Koskimaa, Vesa, author. | Rapeli, Lauri, author.

Title: Advancing future-orientation in policymaking : institutions, individuals and risks / Vesa Koskimaa and Lauri Rapeli.

Other titles: Institutions, individuals and risks

Description: London ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2025. | Series: Routledge research on social and political elites | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024037745 (print) | LCCN 2024037746 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032055480 (hbk) | ISBN 9781032055510 (pbk) |

ISBN 9781003198055 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Policy sciences--Finland--Case studies. |

Democracy--Finland--Case studies. | Finland--Politics and government--Case studies.

Classification: LCC JN7395.A55 P64 2025 (print) |

LCC JN7395.A55 (ebook) | DDC 320.6.094897--dc23/eng/20241118

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024037745>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024037746>

ISBN: 978-1-032-05548-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-05551-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-19805-5 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003198055](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003198055)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

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Preface

This book represents the final word, on our part, in a large research project ‘Participation in long-term decision-making’, or simply ‘PALO’, which was financed by the Strategic Research Council of the Academy of Finland (today, the Research Council of Finland) during 2017–2023. Reflecting the topic of this book, the project represented a new way in Finnish science funding to think and organize major national research funds: by directing them to large projects that studied topics which government bodies had explicitly recognized as bearing significant strategic value. Organizationally, the project was a collaboration between the University of Turku, Tampere University, Åbo Akademi University and the Natural Resource Institute Finland. PALO was headed by Professor Maija Setälä, a world-renowned expert of democratic theory, innovations and deliberation, and engaged dozens of researchers from various academic backgrounds ranging from political science, economics, and philosophy to environmental studies and psychology. The primary purpose of the project was to increase ‘knowledge and understanding concerning the present state of long-term policymaking in Finland, as well as the time horizons of among citizens and policymakers. The project examined various solutions that can reduce short-termism and help consider future generations in democratic decision-making’ (<https://paloresearch.fi/en/>, last accessed 21 May 2024).

Our part in this effort focused predominantly on elites and was twofold. First, using interview and survey data, as well as official documentation, we mapped out the political and bureaucratic landscape regarding long-term decision-making in Finland. Second, based on this knowledge, we explored the attitudes of various Finnish policymaker groups, elected politicians, civil servants and representatives of interest group organizations, toward democracy and future-oriented policymaking. Through the combination of these efforts, and some auxiliary studies, we managed to gain a broad and deep understanding of how long-term policymaking works (or does not) in Finland, how political and bureaucratic institutions facilitate it (or do not) and how policymakers themselves are positioned in the overall picture. This rather inductive and explorative approach, which was motivated by our genuine interest to understand future-regarding governance from the viewpoint of policymakers, led to an outcome that likely differs from what would have been achieved through a more theoretically grounded and empirically rigorous effort. Due to the rather limited existing in-depth knowledge about elite-level

future-regarding institutions and practices we believed – and still believe – that this was the right choice. Empirically, the book concerns exclusively the Finnish case, but with the broad introductory and theoretical chapters and our self-consciously conceptual analytic approach, we have hopefully managed to contextualize the study in such a way that it presents theoretically meaningful distinctions for future comparative research. At least, it provides a comprehensive empirical benchmark for anyone who is interested in studying similar matters.

This book is not intended as a mere summary of several years of research. Rather, it is a presentation of how we came to understand long-term decision-making in a political system which has invested heavily in producing future-oriented policy and also, of course, a description of that understanding. Although we tried to cover the viewpoints of the main elite groups as broadly as possible and present a balanced description, we duly recognize the extremely complex nature of contemporary processes of governing and gladly welcome all new, potentially challenging accounts. Although this book signifies the end of a long research project, scientifically we consider it as a starting point, which just brings a bit more depth and nuance to previously detected themes, allowing more rigorous comparisons. For this reason, too, instead of presenting the Finnish foresight system as a static construct that just lies there and is expected to automatically maintain its form and capacities also in the future, in this book we wanted to emphasize institutional historicity, agency and change throughout the storyline. This included recognition of the risks of the system, which we noted explicitly whenever they came by. For understanding conditions for the existence and impact of a governing system knowledge of original ‘seeds and fertilizers’ have to be amended with knowledge about currently effective ‘pests’ as no governing system exists in a societal vacuum.

While much of the research in the PALO project successfully demonstrated the usefulness of citizen engagement in long-term policymaking at the local-level, our research from national-level policy-making, has a different focus. It is not, however, elitist in the sense of underestimating the capacity and promise of citizen participation. It is elitist only in the sense that it emphasizes the key role played historically by policymaking elites in Finland in creating a system that is better than most others in the world in making future-oriented policies. This book is an attempt to describe that system in detail, both in terms of its institutional character and dynamics, and also in terms of its outcomes, from the perspective of the individuals who run it. We hope that the book offers many lessons and useful insight to those who are interested in future-oriented policymaking. We base our findings on extensive survey and interview data, which provide a rare opportunity to examine the thoughts and attitudes of top-level policymakers and elected representatives, and to also compare them with the general public, whose insights we gauged with another survey. While our data sets cover an extensive range of various types of functionaries, we naturally acknowledge the possibility of observational bias that may introduce itself more easily in such a constantly evolving long-term project. For this reason, we have tried to be as clear as possible about the sources of our observations and when the observations turn into interpretation, which we wanted to

include rather generously, due to the book's theory-generating nature. We welcome all theoretical and empirical challenges.

For us, two discoveries from the analysis seem particularly important. First, the creation of durable institutions, which increase the odds that a democracy invests in future wellbeing, requires at least a few highly committed individuals with a good grasp of, and capacity to conform to, the complex 'realities' of the existing governing system, and a good amount of time and persistence. The Finnish system was not built in a day and the project is still very much ongoing although it has already taken several decades. Against our rather institutional perspective, we stress throughout the book the apparent relevance of individual agency. The system would not have been built at all if there had not been a couple of persistent individuals who got the snowball rolling. While institutions set the 'rules of the game', individuals set up, operate and eventually even change institutions, and this is why we have also emphasized the perceptions of individual policymakers also in our primary analyses. Our second central finding is that the best way to ensure the survival of a system for long-term policy-making, once it has been established, is to turn it into the 'only game in town'. Future orientation has to become the shared way of thinking and viewing the world, and this can be accomplished only if a sufficient number of relevant players participate. Even the smartest institutional design will not be enough if the policymakers do not genuinely adopt the idea that future wellbeing is an important frame through which policy needs to be made. A crucial addition to the 'only game in town' logic is that it cannot only refer to formal inclusion, i.e. that all interested parties can freely come and join when they want, it must also signify a genuine effort to close in all relevant parties, also ones that may not share some general societal preconceptions.

Our research would not have been possible without grants 312676 and 312671 from the Strategic Research Council of the Academy of Finland, grants 333013 and 356446 from the Research Council of Finland and the funding for the Future of Democracy: A Centre of Excellence (FutuDem) from the Åbo Akademi University Foundation. Many people have contributed to our research, which resulted in this book. We would specifically like to thank Professor Maija Setälä, Professor Kimmo Grönlund and Professor Tapio Raunio for their leadership in the projects, which have financed our work. We also wish to express our gratitude to the editors of the book series, Professor Patrick Dumont and Professor Keith Dowding, and Andrew Taylor and Sophie Iddamalagoda at Routledge for giving us the chance to write this book and for remaining so patient during the writing process. Finally, we want to express special gratitude for the dozens of policymaking professionals who through our research interviews lend their invaluable time and expertise for the benefit of our study.



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1 Introduction

Seeking legitimate remedies for democratic myopia

This book addresses a problem that has been around as long as democratic political systems have existed, but which has – somewhat surprisingly – gained dedicated scientific attention only during the past decade: how can we solve looming societal problems that predominantly harm future citizens, who do not yet possess democratic power, value and agency? Or, in other words: how can we raise concerns about the future among contemporary democratic publics and decision-makers?

At a first glance, the problem may seem marginal, or even unethical, because normatively speaking democratic decisions should essentially concern the interests of current voting majorities. However, many severe and well-known contemporary policy challenges like climate change, governmental debt crises, wars and global virus pandemics make it necessary to tackle the issue of future-oriented policy choices, as they demand significant *policy investments* (Jacobs, 2016).

The elusive deviousness of future-regarding governance can be reflected through three interrelated phenomena: the inherently myopic nature of democratic politics, the technocratic governing style that tries to lengthen the democratic time perspective and the populist backlash that has more recently mobilized against elite-driven governance style. As these three themes form the foundation of our argument, we will now briefly summarize them to set the scene for the book.

Myopic tendencies of democratic policymaking are more familiar than one might expect. As an example, consider the thoroughly reported and ongoing battle against climate change. Well before the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference, where the Paris Agreement was negotiated, it was obvious that practically every climate researcher in the world agreed that the climate is warming largely due to anthropogenic (i.e., human-made) causes. Researchers also agreed that we should be doing much more to slow down the warming or it will cause significant harm for the nature, human beings and societies (IPCC, 2014). However, soon after the conference scholars noted that even the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), i.e., countries' *plans* for reducing CO₂ emissions, would not decrease the rise of global warming enough (Rogelj et al., 2016). Soon scholars also discovered that advanced industrial democracies, the largest contributors of CO₂ emissions in human history and spiritual leaders of climate change mitigation, had made vague pledges they could not fulfill, largely due to political restraints (Victor et al., 2017). While the point of irreversible planetary damage looms less than a decade ahead

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(IPCC, 2018), the polarization of climate change opinions deepens among Western publics and elites (e.g., Capstick et al., 2015; Dunlap et al., 2016; Fielding et al., 2012; McCright et al., 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2011; Willis, 2017). Politicians' incapacity for decisive future-regarding environmental policy is leading to a major crisis (e.g., Hovi et al., 2009; Sprinz, 2012; Underdal, 2010).

Climate change might be the most publicly debated issue, but environmental policy is not unfortunately the only policy field where current interests clash with the well-being of future citizens. In all major policy sectors, such as healthcare, education, social welfare, security and so forth, the allocation of organizational resources over time for addressing future challenges like aging populations, changing work life demands and new military threats, necessitates that current voters invest some of their welfare for the benefit of future generations. Democratic decisions are always hard to make as everything can be evaluated from various viewpoints and authoritative decisions require cooperation, but policymaking becomes even much harder when costs and benefits clearly disperse over several electoral terms (Boston, 2017; Götz, 2014, 2017; Jacobs, 2011, 2016; MacKenzie, 2016, 2021a, 2021b).

The second key aspect of the puzzle concerns governing. A feature of democracy that is often neglected in election-centered mainstream political science is that in addition to being *responsive* to electors and stakeholders, throughout the history of representative government civil servants have also been considered *responsible* for maintaining the sustained well-being of whole societies (Mair, 2013; Manin, 1997). Contrary to simple models of electoral representation, students of public policies and policymaking have noted that long-term concerns often motivate policymakers' thinking and planning, and instead of getting constantly overturned by shifting majorities, policies often persist beyond government terms (Pierson, 2004; Pollitt, 2008; Rose, 1990). As the enactment of the Montreal Protocol (1987) demonstrates, even in the notoriously difficult realm of international environmental regulation, countries can sometimes reach binding long-term agreements (Sunstein, 2008). In short, the reality of policymaking in advanced democracies likely diverts from the simple myopia model.

However, to close the circle with our third main theme, herein also lies a danger. As Mair (2013) has noted, de-politicized governing has taken more prominence over political representation in parties' priorities during the 20th century. In the words of Mair (2009, p. 6): parties have 'moved from representing interests of the citizens to the state to representing interests of the state to the citizens'. The change relates to a societal megatrend, the internationalization, or in a more spatially limited but functionally deeper form, Europeanization of policymaking (e.g., Majone, 1997; Rhodes, 1997; Scharpf, 1999). Another way to characterize the complex and elusive megatrend where electorally determined political capacities get replaced by managing efforts of non-elected policy experts is change from government to governance (e.g., Rhodes, 1996). The past decade has witnessed a growing tension between *technocracy* that emphasizes scientific, technical, de-ideologized and expert-driven long-term planning, and *populist* ideal of democracy that challenges technocratic virtues through the daily perceptions and grievances

of the lay people (Caramani, 2017, 2020). Also in regard to the argument that is being developed in this book, it is crucial to acknowledge that while cross-national expert-driven governing apparatuses can very well enhance policymakers' strategic capacity to address various long-term challenges, in line with their original purpose (Majone, 1997), their distance to national electorates and general elitist ethos may estrange masses from policymaking and de-legitimize democratic processes. This, of course, could also reflect harmfully on the well-being of future generations and therefore the problem should be addressed alongside themes of democratic myopia and expert governance that have been more prominent in the field of future-regarding governance.

Combining these three aspects of future-regarding governance, a central theoretical and practical problem in contemporary policymaking seems to be, reflecting the analytic focus of the groundbreaking inquiry of González-Ricoy and Gosseries (2016), how the inherently myopic democratic systems should be re-designed or amended so that they could solve long-term societal challenges while maintaining their legitimacy? This was the overarching research question in the research we conducted during a 4-year project and which we now report in this book. To expand the literature of future-regarding politics that thus far has emphasized the problem's theoretical and normative aspects, especially through an election-centered viewpoint, we turn the setting around and approach the problem from the viewpoint of policymaking and in-depth empirical observation. Specifically, we examine institutions and processes through which national-level policymakers can lengthen political time perspectives while maintaining democratic legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Empirically, we focus on the Finnish national foresight system, which, especially due to the existence of the permanent parliamentary Committee for the Future, is generally considered as the most advanced such system in the world (e.g., Boston, 2017, 2021; Caney, 2016, 2019; Koskimaa, 2023; Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020, 2022; MacKenzie, 2016, 2021a, 2021b; Smith, 2021). In addition to the organizational and operational features of the actual foresight system, we describe some auxiliary institutions and mechanisms through which the Finnish governing system has enhanced its more general capacities for 'strategic leadership' during the past decade. Besides these arrangements, our effort is based on acknowledging that for decades Finland has also been a top achiever in various policy areas with an obvious long-term orientation, such as education (Chung, 2015) and environment (e.g., Jahn, 2014; Knill & Liefferink, 2007; Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010; Sommerer, 2014) – while maintaining its status as one of the most trusted political systems in the world (Söderlund, 2019). However, instead of seeking to establish a causal link between these major institutional and policy-related outcomes, our goal is, first, to demonstrate how the creation of state foresight capacities has increasingly reflected in the broader governing system. We show that especially through the growing involvement of government ministries in organized national foresight activities the system has evolved into a direction that seeks to set expert-generated 'strategic' long-term objectives into a generalized informational background canvas through which policies are weighted and

developed. Our second main goal is to assess how and to which extent Finland's rather distinct institutional context shows at the individual level. Utilizing several novel surveys and measures, we assess the political time perspectives of various national-level policymaker groups (party-, interest group- and bureaucracy-based) and compare them with elite groups which do not operate in a similar informational setting. In addition, we contrast the views of national-level elites and ordinary citizens. The surveys also illuminate policymakers' conceptions of the main hindrances and enhancers of future-regarding governance in Finland. Through these efforts, to produce a benchmark for future academic studies and developers of public administration and anticipatory governance, we explicate a set of general systemic factors (institutions, resources and processes) that facilitate the developing of a shared future-regarding understanding among various elites. To provide a robust and scientifically honest picture of such inherently historical, dynamic and precarious systems, we also explicate factors, which can jeopardize the foresight system's effectiveness and stability.

Before detailing the study's objectives and structure, we review the literature on the causes, consequences and solutions of 'democratic myopia'. While conceptualizing the problem we attempt to address in this book, we show that although the causes, ramifications and theoretical solutions of democratic myopia have already been explicated rather thoroughly, we know quite little about the operating mechanisms and effects of real-life future-regarding democratic institutions. Creating such a benchmark is the main objective and contribution of our study.

1.1 Democratic myopia: causes, consequences and solutions

For a long time, the notion of the *political business cycle*, that is, the push created by recurrent competitive elections that force policymakers who seek reelection to make good for the current voters (Downs, 1957; Nordhaus, 1975), was the dominant way to think about time in mainstream political science. During the last approximately 15 years, the timing of policymaking was explicitly problematized in a few transformative studies, especially by Pierson (2004), Pollitt (2008), Jacobs (2011), González-Ricoy and Gosseries (2016) and Boston (2017), which generated more scholarly interest in the role of timing in the democratic policy process. Through comprehensive theoretical and empirical research, these and later studies (e.g., MacKenzie, 2023; MacKenzie et al., 2023; Smith, 2021) produced a significantly more complex idea of political time, policy timing and their general determinants. Dubbed as the thesis of *democratic myopia* or *harmful political short-termism*, this line of research still considers democracy to be an essentially shortsighted governing system. However, besides the business cycle logic, this body of research recognizes various more detailed, also less electorally determined drivers of short-termism. Perhaps even more importantly, contemporary research recognizes that democratic political systems vary in regard to these drivers and political myopia, which provides a motivation to examine democratic short-termism at the institutional level.

To counter democratic myopia, we must understand what causes it. Due to the great variety of factors that can alleviate the inherent difficulty of policy choices

characterized by long distance between policy actions/costs and outcomes/benefits, there are no simple solutions. Many things need to change if political time perspectives of advanced democracies are to be prolonged (Boston, 2017; Caney, 2019; MacKenzie, 2016). To gain a firmer idea of these challenges that future-regarding democracy ought to overcome, we now review the main logic and drivers of democratic myopia.

1.1.1 *Causes of democratic myopia*

Like any political phenomenon, democratic myopia can be approached, broadly speaking, from two different angles, either by emphasizing the inherent qualities of individuals or the structural-institutional qualities of political systems. Although these perspectives can be separated analytically, in reality they interact to produce myopic outcomes. If citizens think in a very farsighted manner, a highly responsive political system will not function myopically. Or, if the system is not responsive to citizens' demands, it does not matter how short- or long-sighted citizens are; their views will more or less be neglected. The standard political business cycle/democratic myopia model thus assumes that citizens are short-sighted and the governing system is responsive.

Obviously, this is not always the case. Moreover, democratic agents and structures likely interact in a more dynamic and cyclical fashion, which has an impact on the latter's form and former's behavior. We detail these more complex dynamics in the next chapter that explains our analytic framework and position, and we now only focus on the standard assumptions, conceptions and expectations of the myopia thesis, to describe, confine and justify our research task.

To begin from the basic understanding concerning citizens' temporal focus, the main assumption driving the democratic myopia thesis is that voters are naturally inclined to prefer temporally closer outcomes (e.g., Thompson, 2010). A myriad of detailed reasons have been presented for citizens' shortsightedness (see also Chapter 5), but here it suffices to note that the foundation for myopic thinking resides in the human psyche. Over decades, psychologists have demonstrated with various experiments that humans have a tendency to choose immediate gains over delayed benefits (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 2000) and they more often try to avoid risks than maximize possible gains (Kahneman et al., 1991). As future is always less certain than the present, it makes sense to assume – *ceteris paribus* – that voters favor the present in their political choices.

A standard conception regarding the temporal perspectives of politicians is that they, too, are essentially myopic, but for different reasons. Based on the traditional idea of rational political agents, the myopic politician assumption asserts that the primary motivation of politicians, even the ones who have serious political goals in mind (Strøm, 1990), is to win a seat in the legislature. Because in democracy, a candidate's success depends on the support of (supposedly myopic) voters, candidates become strongly incentivized to follow the wishes of the (supposedly myopic) voters (Downs, 1957). Thus, in terms of individual motivations, the foundations of democratic myopia rest essentially in the minds of *voters* that politicians merely try to please. Both assumptions can be questioned (see Chapter 5).

At least equally important for myopic policies is the institution that combines the motivations and objectives of these two groups. As was already noted, without democratic elections the temporal conceptions of citizens would not influence anything. Electoral competition, which builds on the assumption that open entry to the political market creates several alternatives from which voters may choose, incentivizes elites to pay attention to the wishes of the voters. More generally, as [Sprinz \(2012, p. 68\)](#) has argued, democratic institutions typically function on a 4–5 year electoral cycle and planning horizon, directing policymakers' focus toward short-term interests and making the institutions inadequate for future-regarding policy-making. In democracy, 'policy investments' that impose costs on today's voters without guaranteeing any visible returns are always a risky bet ([Jacobs, 2016](#)).

Building on these core premises, students of long-term/future-regarding politics have explicated various detailed mechanisms that accentuate the problems of electoral cycles. Three 'master categories' are worth detailing. First, the general nature of *political information* exacerbates the myopic bias of human perception and judgment. As [Sprinz \(2012\)](#) noted, evaluations over major future challenges like climate change are characterized by deep uncertainty that builds on the extreme complexity of the challenges and the slowly developing onset of their effects. Put simply, we do not know clearly which factors will affect the outcome and how and when the outcomes will be fully recognizable. According to [Jacobs \(2016, pp. 439–440\)](#) voters are generally poorly aware of political issues, but they know more about present than future issues, and are thus likely to pay more attention to and prioritize these. While politicians probably know more about future challenges, their conduct is also affected by informational problems. The political agenda is always finite and temporally salient issues are typically prioritized over long-term problems, as their consequences have not yet materialized and they produce less attention-generating public signals.

The second institutional mechanism that accentuates the perils of short electoral cycles is the fragility of political commitments. Due to frequently held elections, democratic governments have a fixed temporal existence, which creates uncertainty, and probably even a sense of urgency to produce tangible policy benefits. Politicians know that governing majorities can and do change after elections, so they cannot be sure that the next government will also support the policies they have made. Committing to long-term policies is generally unattractive also because political resources could be invested more safely, for example, in investments that create more immediate benefits. In addition, politicians know that new issues can always emerge. If such issues are considered salient, the existing resources may have to be re-allocated ([Jacobs, 2016, p. 440](#)). As demonstrated especially in international regulation, the temporal inconsistency between selected policies and emerging challenges causes problems for nationally elected politicians to make credible commitments over electoral terms ([Majone, 1996, p. 2](#)). Even voters recognize that democratic majorities change constantly. For them, governments may lack credibility in terms of continuity and future investments, which then gives voters little incentive to believe, pay and commit to long-term policies ([Healy & Malhotra, 2009; Jacobs & Matthews, 2012](#)).

Finally, besides informational biases and frail commitments, the development of future-regarding policies is hindered by the opposition of interest groups, and other organized stakeholders, which benefit from the status quo (Jacobs, 2016, pp. 440–442). While these groups operate on a longer temporal basis than the electoral cycle, their impact essentially traverses through bureaucracies and parliamentary majorities, which they seek to persuade using resources that are often significant.

To summarize, democratic myopia builds essentially on the shortsightedness of voters, the office-seeking behavior of elected politicians and the recurrence of elections that unite these inclinations. Enforced by informational bias to favor present over future, the inherent fragility of political commitments and the resistance of powerful stakeholders, these mechanisms produce a dynamic that incentivizes elected politicians to focus on emergent salient issues with tangible consequences. Depending on the level of change in voting populations, governing majorities and organized societal stakeholders, such a dynamic should put public policy into a constant flux or stagnation, and severely hinder the making of reasoned future-regarding and long-lasting policies. Before taking a critical look at these claims (Chapter 2), we briefly review the known consequences of democratic myopia and the institutional solutions that have been proposed for curing it.

1.1.2 Consequences of myopic policymaking

In essence, the notoriousness of democratic myopia rests on the harm it is expected to cause for intergenerational justice and the living conditions of future people. Rooted in the concept of universal equality, intergenerational justice posits that subsequent human generations are connected by fundamental rights and obligations, like inter-individual relations in liberal democracies. Reminiscing Rawls (1971), the concept of justice has been considered a powerful foundation for intergenerational relations, as it avoids the partiality of changing political majorities (MacKenzie, 2013). The general idea of intergenerational justice has been presented in various grand declarations, e.g., in the UN's Sustainable development principles, noting that 'each generation of humanity should leave the planet in no worse condition than it received it and provide equitable access to its resources and benefits' (Boston, 2017). Drawing detailed inter-generational distributional claims is, however, complicated. Should we, for example, keep everything unchanged or maximize some capacities? If so, which capacities should we secure and why, and how far in the future? (Boston, 2017; Vrousalis, 2016).

Despite all complications, there are many good reasons not to only focus on the present. Although generations can be separated analytically, in practice they overlap physically and mentally (Gosseries, 2016). While assigning significant weight to the interests of future generations is not, in the strict sense of the term, rational from the viewpoint of contemporary individuals, generational interconnectedness means that generations cannot be treated as if they were individuals engaged in bargaining. As we cannot avoid our role as the only existing decision-makers, some obligations merely befall on us. According to the all-affected principle, all who

are (or will be) affected by public decisions should have some role in those decisions (MacKenzie, 2013) and our cognitive capacities – to foresee and manage the future – give us resources and also an obligation to consider those that come after us, too (Boston, 2017).

More importantly, democratic myopia also creates practical political challenges. Evidence from policy studies suggests that policymakers often confront situations where they could choose a ‘policy investment’ that might bear significant costs for current voters, but likely produce higher overall gains in the long run (Jacobs, 2016, p. 435). Yet, a common conclusion drawn from several fields is that often policymakers tend to choose the myopic option. As was noted in the beginning of the chapter, environmental policies are probably the most well-known example where that has occurred. As Caney (2019, pp. 5–6) summarizes, the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report came out over 30 years ago, but there are still no internationally binding regulations for CO₂ emissions and, in fact, the emissions have continued to rise, alongside other harmful externalities of industrialism such as plastic waste, while global biodiversity has continued to shrink. Furthermore, the problem is not confined to environmental issues, which will predominantly hit future generations. Myopic thinking also affects policy choices with more immediate consequences. For example, it has been estimated that in the US damage reparations caused by natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina have cost 15 times more than what careful preparation would have cost, but policymakers, with the solid backing of voters, usually choose the former (Healy & Malhotra, 2009). In fact, as Boston (2021) notes, immediate emergencies like financial crises, natural disasters, pandemics, etc. typically distract governments from focusing on the more slowly developing, but more certain societal challenges like population aging and crumbling infrastructure. As was already noted, citizens’ tendency to favor the present at the expense of the future primarily relates to the inherent uncertainty of the future represented by complex causal chains and frail political commitments (Jacobs & Matthews, 2012).

1.1.3 Solutions for democratic myopia

Reflecting the emerging nature of the research field, and the fact that not too many genuinely future-regarding democratic institutions exist, the majority of studies that concern possible remedies for democratic myopia deal with conceptual models. Before summarizing these, we shortly review a strand of literature, which has attempted to assess the impacts of different varieties of traditional democratic institutions for future-regarding policymaking. Based on extensive empirical comparative studies, especially on pension reforms, Jacobs (2016, pp. 443–449) has detailed mechanisms of standard democratic institutions that may alleviate the adverse effects of democratic myopia. Informational biases can be tackled by (1) obfuscating short-term costs with fragmented authority structures, such as a proportional electoral system, coalition governments, corporatism and so forth (2) increasing the certainty of long-term term investments with clear and tangible plans distributed through forums of elite deliberation

and (3) by relieving electoral pressures of decision-makers, for example, with term limits and mechanisms that favor incumbents. Fragmented authority structures can also help fix the problem of frail political commitments by enhancing the credibility of the commitments made and by making policy reversal harder, when a larger share of veto players are always needed for political agreements. In a similar vein, including organized interests more thoroughly in official negotiations through corporatism schemes allows dispersing short-term costs and long-term benefits more evenly and openly. Overall, the time-bending capacity of some varieties of traditional democratic institutions relate especially to their impact on the system-level fragmentation of political power.

A few studies have empirically assessed the capacity of traditional democratic institutions to lengthen political time perspectives. Scholars have detected notable differences in the ways that policy choices in various countries pay attention to intergenerational justice (Vanhuyse, 2013, 2014) and the track record of advanced democracies in policy investments varies considerably across different policy fields such as environment, public finance, education, pensions, etc. (Jacobs, 2008, 2011, 2016). Some democracies make more policy investments than others do and myopia is therefore not a general tendency of all democracies, but more of a type-specific feature. The extent to which these differences are tied to specific institutional choices has only been gauged in a handful of studies, with somewhat mixed results. The recent, comprehensive analysis by Caluwaerts and Vermassen (2023) confirms that traditional power-dispersing institutions, proportional elections, multiparty systems, coalition governments and high levels of inter-group public participation, indeed make democracies more future-regarding. However, the relationship between democratic ideals and the degree of future orientation in policies is not always obvious and clear. Some regimes can be very inclusive, while still failing to serve long-term interests (Bernauer et al., 2016). For example, the extremely inclusive Swiss democracy has stopped future-regarding pension reforms through popular referendums (Bello & Galasso, 2021). Certainly, while it is easy to see how a formalized need for a broad compromise enhances the credibility and persistence of agreements and hinders policy reversal, the same institutional feature can limit democracies' reaction potential. The quest for compromises may also create situations where major reforms are blocked, whenever consensus is difficult to reach.

Most existing studies that examine possible solutions to democratic myopia have dealt with institutional innovations (for a comprehensive overview, see González-Ricoy & Gosseries, 2016 and Boston, 2017, 2021). As noted by MacKenzie (2016), in one way or another all proposed models seek to address the central hardship of long-term policymaking, which is the difficult cost-benefit trade-off caused by the extensive timespan between policy actions and consequences that encourages elected politicians to focus excessively on the present and disregard the future. In essence, future-regarding democratic institutions should therefore try to constrain harmful near-term actions and motivate near-term actions with significant long-term benefits, ideally without violating the core legitimizing premise of representative democracy to have the final say when it comes to legislatures and governments that have been elected in general elections.

Future-regarding institutions can build on existing institutions or seek novel ways to lengthen political time spans, and their mandate can vary from advising on special topics to presenting binding solutions for broad-ranging problems (Gosseries, 2016). They can function through various logics. Future-regarding institutions could, for example, attempt to (1) change policymakers' 'internal drivers' (ethical values, political goals and concerns, etc.), (2) impact policymakers' 'external drivers' by emphasizing future concerns in the general policymaking context, (3) enhance policymakers' capacity to plan for the long-term, (4) constrain policymakers' decision-making capacities through, e.g., constitutional provisions and mandatory cross-party agreements, or (5) shift them to non-elected officials or (6) supranational organs (international regulatory agencies, etc.) that operate further from electoral pressures (Boston, 2021). Examples of institutions that could constrain politicians' near-term actions include public impact statements, special sub-majority rules, constitutional safeguards, budget constraints and review agencies, such as a future commissioner. Institutions for motivating near-term actions include formal representatives of the future (special agencies and committees) and ear-marked intergenerational trust funds (MacKenzie, 2016).

Perhaps the most often discussed institutional innovation has been a formalized future-regarding correspondence between the government and the legislature. Unlike most future-regarding democratic innovations, this idea did not likely originate in the minds of political theorists, but instead it emerged through practical experience (see below for details). As summarized by Caney (2016), such a system could include (1) a non-elected expert council that produces politically impartial analyses and reports regarding significant future developments, (2) a designated future manifesto where the government outlines policies that address long-term trends, challenges and opportunities recognized by the future council and (3) a special parliamentary committee that assesses the government's future manifesto and other future-regarding initiatives. In addition, the ideal system should include (4) a 'Visions for the Future' Day where opposition parties and the public could also scrutinize future-regarding activities of the government and (5) all steps would be monitored with standardized performance indicators. Such a system would make use of many different mechanisms detailed above by embedding the practices of future-regarding policymaking into standard institutions of representative government.

Various kinds of expert councils have emerged to deal with various long-term societal challenges. Most notably, alongside the IPCC, many European countries have created national expert bodies dedicated to the issues of climate change and sustainable development. More recently, deliberative organs have also been developed for engaging ordinary citizens into discussions of future challenges (Smith, 2023). As far as we know, no expert or citizen organs exist at the national level that would focus solely on the future orientation of policies in a general sense.

From the main governing institutions, executives have been much keener to invest resources into long-term governance. Governmental foresight units can now be found on all continents, and they come in various forms and varying powers. Some are centrally located at the prime minister's office, some resemble a more autonomous think tank or research institute models. The general function of these

markedly expert-driven units is to provide scenarios of long-term societal developments for political executives, to enhance their planning capacities. Countries that utilize a thoroughly established governmental foresight unit include Canada (Policy Horizons Canada), Germany (Strategic Foresight and Policy Planning Division in the Federal Chancellery), Japan (The National Institute for Science and Technology Policy), Singapore (The Centre for Strategic Futures and Strategic Foresight Unit), Spain (the National Office for Prospective and Long-Term Country Strategy), the United Arab Emirates (Future Foresight Strategy) and the United States (Center for Strategic Foresight in the Government Accountability Office) (SOIF 2021; Tönurist & Hanson, 2020). Notwithstanding a few exceptions (see below), most of these units operate autonomously, detached from expert councils and legislative committees.

The few empirical studies on actual democratic future institutions predominantly concern a system that inspired the theoretical model of Caney (2016): the nowadays permanent standing Committee for the Future in the Parliament of Finland. It was established in the early 1990s to provide a formal reply by the parliament to the government's 'future report'. During the past few decades, the Finnish 'future dialogue', and especially the Committee for the Future (CF) which remains the world's only consolidated parliamentary future committee, have been described in a couple of studies that focus on the CF's origin, organization and tasks (Arter, 2000; Groombridge, 2006), functioning and institutionalization (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c), role in parliamentary technology assessment (TA) (Miettinen et al., 1999; Nentwich, 2016; Salo & Kuusi, 2001), position in the broader Finnish foresight system (Boston, 2017; Koskimaa, 2023; Nováky & Monda, 2015; Tapio & Heinonen, 2018) and the CF's international role and influence (Heo & Seo, 2021; Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022; Smith, 2023). Apart from Arter's (2000) early effort that tracked the initial developments of the CF (that emerged in 1993) and the recent in-depth analyses of Koskimaa and Raunio (2020, 2020, 2023a, 2023b), existing studies have focused on CF's basic ideals and features. More importantly, even in studies that account for the broader 'future dialogue' (Boston, 2017; Koskimaa, 2023) the role of government has remained small and the role of government ministries, whose significance has increased, have only been assessed once (see Koskimaa, 2023).

A few studies have also examined other parliamentary future institutions, which either exist now or have existed before. Compared to the Finnish CF, these institutions have been smaller, much less institutionalized and short-lasting. They have also not connected to other formal future organs, as these units have typically originated from the efforts of individual and independent enthusiasts. The only future-regarding democratic system of institutions has existed and continues to exist in Finland. Outside of Finland, perhaps most attention has been paid to The Commission for Future Generations that was established in the Israeli parliament Knesset in 2001 and abolished already in 2006, after the first term of its sole member, Commissioner Shlomo Shoham (Boston, 2017; Rose, 2018; Shoham, 2010). The Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations in the parliament of Hungary that operated between 2008 and 2012 before its abolishment (Anderson, 2018; Rose, 2018; Tóth

Ambrusné, 2010) is another similar and well-known example. As a more recent development, in 2016 Wales established the office of the Future Generations Commissioner, whose primary task is to provide assistance and advice to policymakers. The office was created through the Well-being of Future Generations Act, which is an extensive piece of legislation aimed at ensuring that future interests are taken into account in Welsh policymaking. The Futures Forum in Scotland presents a different example. It is a parliamentary think tank that combines various societal stakeholders to future-regarding discussions. It was created in 2005 and its role was recently broadened with a more explicit parliamentary procedure (Smith, 2021, 2023).

During the 2010s, Iceland, Lithuania and Uruguay most notably, have built parliamentary future organs (standing committees or research centers). However, due to their short lifespan not much can yet be deduced from their experiences (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022, 2023b.). The only in-depth empirical study outside of the Finnish case is the recent comparative analysis of parliamentary scrutiny devices in selected Westminster democracies (Boston et al., 2019). Overall, the few existing democratic future institutions have received only little academic attention. Most research in this field has continued to revolve around theoretical models or the effects of existing standard democratic institutions. As noted above, this outcome seems rather natural due to the relative rarity of genuine future institutions.

1.2 General objectives and contribution of the study

With this focused study, we seek to fill the lack of theoretically meaningful empirical observation on future-regarding governing institutions by providing the most comprehensive examination of the structure, operation and effects of the world's most developed and wide-ranging contemporary state-level future-regarding political institution, the Finnish national foresight system. With this in-depth analysis, we add several analytic aspects and insights to the literature on the solutions for political myopia. While acknowledging the distinct history and special features of the ordinary representative institutions in Finland (see below and Chapter 3), we mostly focus on this real-life future-regarding innovation. It was originally created with an explicit objective to improve the performance of democratic institutions in issues with a special bearing on the future. As was noted above, alongside the highly networked foresight system that can nowadays be organizationally demarcated into four operative and organized arenas – i.e., the future-regarding organs in the parliament, the government, the ministries and among non-state stakeholders – recent years have witnessed the emergence of few additional mechanisms that support the more general ‘strategic leadership’ capacity of Finland’s governing system. While ‘strategy’ here refers to explicit ambition to govern across several government terms, making these mechanisms proper future-regarding institutions, they are formally separated from the organized foresight system and often do not work on the same informational premises as academic futures studies or business-oriented strategic foresight on which the national foresight system was originally created. Nonetheless, these auxiliary institutions (e.g., ministries’ long-term strategies) are now developed in close

connection with the foresight reports, spreading ideas and creating legitimacy for expert-driven long-term planning in Finnish policymaking, which in terms of preparation is controlled by the ministries. For this reason, the analyses of the forthcoming chapters also include references to these less formalized ‘additions’ to the foresight system when necessary.

With our markedly empirical focus, we seek to add some realism to the previous efforts of theorists of intergenerational justice and analysts of future-regarding democratic innovations, without forgetting their teachings, which we have reviewed thoroughly to enable reflexive comparison. To the existing scholarship on the Finnish foresight system that predominantly focuses on the Committee for the Future, we add a much more comprehensive, nuanced and politically sensitive theoretical perspective and empirical examination that allows us to track, evaluate and compare the roles and relative importance of the various institutions that comprise the system. Also for the first time, in order to assess and evaluate the general effect of the system, we analyze and compare the temporal conceptions and perspectives of various elite groups (at national and, for comparison, municipal level) and citizens regarding the temporality of political aims and processes (Chapter 5).

In Chapter 2, we describe our broad analytical framework that we utilize in the framing, assessing and interpreting our empirical findings made in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Ultimately, we seek to explicate a general theoretical perspective that has been missing from the field. Following trends in mainstream political science, analyses of democratic myopia have, as we argue, excessively focused on the rights, interests and impacts of voters and expected responses of from elected politicians. Meanwhile, the role of political elites in lengthening the time perspectives of democratic politics has been largely neglected. This emerging sub-theme of future-regarding politics that relates to political leadership has recently been recognized and discussed in a few more theoretically oriented studies (Boston, 2017; MacKenzie, 2023; Smith, 2021), but it has not yet received a thorough empirical assessment focusing on the viewpoint and actions of actual policymakers, whose work is conditioned by a designated future-regarding democratic institution. By combining a new theoretical perspective with extensive original data and careful yet explorative analysis, we aim to produce a genuinely novel, exciting and inspiring contribution to the field of future-regarding policymaking. Specifically, with our contribution we seek to support subsequent studies on elite-level future-regarding institutions and activities by offering them empirically grounded, robust, transparent and theoretically detailed benchmark against which new findings can be contrasted.

1.3 Analytic design and logic of inquiry

1.3.1 *The case of Finland: a small country with big institutions and policies*

To explicate factors that can produce durable future-oriented policies within a legitimate representative democratic system, we need to study political systems that (a) possess institutional characteristics which most plausibly lead to such outcomes and (b) have actually managed to produce future-regarding policies. Let us

now explain in more detail why Finland fits this profile and provides a very good case for an explorative in-depth analysis.

As mentioned, [Jacobs \(2016\)](#), who has studied extensively representative democratic institutions that mitigate political myopia, has underlined the relevance of institutions that are more typical outside of the Anglo-American context: institutions characterized by fragmented authority through multiparty governments and structured corporatist arrangements. Two additional factors, which are also more typical in continental/North European political systems, can be added to this list. First, in contrast to majoritarian democracies (the United States, the United Kingdom, etc.) where only a few political adversaries compete for periodical and total dominance of the executive branch with clearly different platforms, consensual political *practice* fosters harmonious and ‘kind’ policymaking by considering various viewpoints, and thus moderates the risk of severe policy turnover ([Lijphart, 2012](#)). Second, it has been observed that the role of public administration also varies between political systems. In majoritarian systems, political executives can typically nominate top civil servants whose task is then to implement the government’s policies. In consensual political systems, civil servants typically also have the role of a moderator, who, through detailed knowledge of the parties’ political positions, facilitates compromise between them that is needed for making the system operative ([Pollitt, 2008](#), p. 27). With the more thorough discussion presented in [Section 1.1.3](#), these points suggest that countries with a tradition of (a) consensual political culture, (b) fragmented political authority, (c) strongly embedded inclusion of corporatist stakeholders and (d) a public administration that possesses some independent agency should most likely be able to develop future-sensitive long-term policies.

Based on these features, contemporary Finland should in all likelihood possess a high capacity to produce the kind of elite interaction that enables the development of farseeing and lasting political commitments. However, as we will detail in [Chapter 3](#), this has not always been the case. Finland’s current political practice is the result of a few key decisions taken in the past decades that molded political institutions toward cooperation and future-sensitive practices and outcomes. Therefore, the country’s ability to make durable future-oriented policies should not be explained just as an ‘innate’ cultural or social trait that is unique for this particular country. It stems from deliberate societal and institutional engineering, which could be exercised anywhere with sufficient democratic institutional background and motivation. In related fashion, it should already be noted, the historicity of such institutions mean that they could also be dismantled over time if their supporting societal and political conditions change drastically.

As we detail in [Chapter 3](#), prior to the 1970s the Finnish political system was highly prone to conflict and known for its short-lived and turbulent governments. The party system has been very fragmented since its formation in the early 1900s, and until the 1970s the parties organized into vehemently opposing ideological camps. President Urho Kekkonen (in office 1956–1981) dominated the semi-presidential regime. Finland’s precarious relationship with the Soviet Union, often managed by

Kekkonen personally, fortified his position. He forced parties into poorly compatible governments, which provided little room for political compromises.

In 1968, central unions of workers and businesses cooperated with the government to produce the first national income policy agreement. In the agreement, which was re-negotiated several times until the 2000s, the tripartite coalition settled many issues ranging from salaries and health services to taxes, pensions and housing. With this model for making large-scale political agreements, a consensual political culture took root and begun to soothe relationships between opposing political parties. In the turn of the 1980s, the Soviet Union weakened and Finland elected a president who openly championed parliamentarism. A fundamental institutional reform, which finally resulted in a new parliamentary constitution in 2000, was put in motion in the early 1980s. Due to an emerging consensus and a weakening presidency, parties took a stronger role in government formation already in the 1980s, and soon a very flexible coalitional practice and a strong reliance on stable ‘extra-surplus’ coalitions emerged.

Until the 2010s, the system was supported by the relatively stable support of the three main parties and the lack of a dominant party. The agrarian-based Centre party balanced the competition between the main left-right forces, the Social Democratic Party and the conservative National Coalition party, who since 1987 have frequently formed coalitions together to disarm the Centre’s strategic position. Already in the 1980s, governments became very stable and since 1983, core coalitions have always served the full term. In the 1990s, party-led governments took over policy development, leaving opposition powerless and reducing parliamentary majority’s role into a largely reactive one. Since the ‘blue-red’ coalition of 1987, all parties have joined governments in frequent intervals, in almost all possible combinations. For example, the famous ‘rainbow coalition’ that governed in 1995–1999 included the Left Alliance (left-socialists), social democrats, greens, Swedish People’s Party and conservatives. Together they comprised five out of the seven parties with over five seats in the 200 seat parliament, and held a very strong legislative majority with 144 MPs. A policymaking culture that emphasizes widely accommodating interparty cooperation, stability and continuity consolidated around the now largely parliamentary constitution and ongoing cooperation between the three large parties (Arter, 2006; Karvonen, 2014; Paloheimo, 2005). In the 2010s Finland’s party system experienced a significant change with the major increase of the support of the nationalist-populist Finns party. In the 2011 parliamentary elections it pushed the Centre from the third place and since then it has finished second in all parliamentary elections (2015, 2019 and 2023). However, unlike in many other European countries, reflecting the accommodating coalitional style of Finnish politics, the Finns have also served in two governments (2015–2019 and 2023–) with Finland’s main conservative party (National Coalition). The impacts of this development for Finland’s future-regarding policy system are charted below.

The 1968 agreement also laid the groundwork for a strong corporatist practice that quickly consolidated and which has characterized Finnish policymaking ever since. The national confederate organs of trade unions and business peak organizations

hold permanent *ex officio* seats in all significant policymaking processes and engage in them constantly. In addition, during the 1970s, when coordinated planning of the welfare state accelerated, Finnish public administration that also managed the cooperative processes between various stakeholders started to develop a ‘semi-independent’ expert role that has since then also characterized Finnish policymaking processes. Politicians naturally ratify all decisions in formal organs, but civil servants, who especially after the 1990s when policymaking internationalized significantly also in Finland have possessed superior technical expertise, prepare all of them. Especially in the complex economic and EU related matters, with which most policy issues now connect, civil servants’ independent steering power seems to have become considerable (Koskimaa et al., 2021; Murto, 2014).

After this period of great transformation, since the early 1990s, Finland has also emerged as the global frontrunner in the development of state-bound future-regarding institutions. As was already noted, in 1993 the parliament (Eduskunta) commissioned the Committee for the Future to produce the parliament’s official reply to the government’s report of the future, a document that elaborates the government’s vision on some significant long-term issues. The government is obliged to present its vision every term, producing an ongoing and now strongly institutionalized ‘future dialogue’ between the government and the parliament. The Committee for the Future became a permanent standing committee in 2000 (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020). To broaden and deepen state-level foresight, in 2003 government ministries began to publish ‘future reviews’, which stated their professional understanding of the most serious future challenges in their policy field and a menu of policy instruments for addressing them. The reviews, which are still produced today, are released before general elections, with an explicit aim to ‘contextualize’ government negotiations, i.e., to help parties and interest groups develop their positions based on relevant long-term information. In mid-2000s both ministries and non-state stakeholders organized formal networks to coordinate their foresight activities and in the 2010s the coordinating of the whole system was centralized to Prime Minister’s Office. Various other administrative reforms were also introduced to enhance the governing system’s strategic capacity (Koskimaa, 2023). At least in terms of explicit institutional arrangements, as will be shown in Chapter 3, Finland now stands out as a country with exceptionally strong commitment to cross-governmental and future-oriented policymaking.

Considering all these historical developments, it thus might not be hugely surprising that in comparative perspective, during recent decades, Finland has been a consistent high-performer in making policies with distinct long-term focus. Finland is perhaps best known for its track record in educational policy. Finland’s educational system has ranked high in international comparisons for decades and has often been used as a benchmark for development in other countries. Among the key reasons for the continued success, Chung (2015) cites ‘patience’ and ‘careful implementation’, and he points out that after a massive educational reform in the 1970s, Finland waited a whole generation of students before assessing the consequences of the reform. This stands, according to Chung, in stark

contrast with educational policy in, for example, the United Kingdom, which has been traditionally characterized by quick swings across government terms. Environmental policy is another good case in point. Finland was an avid environmental protector already in the 1980s, and founded a designated Ministry of Environment already in 1983 (Sairinen, 2003). Since joining the EU in 1995, Finland has always ranked among the top countries in developing sustainable environmental policy (Jahn, 2014; Knill & Liefferink, 2007; Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010; Sommerer, 2014). Turbulent recent years with the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war have clearly demonstrated the emphasis on long-term considerations and preparedness also in the fields of healthcare and military services in Finland. Unlike most European countries, Finland continued to develop its army resources after the cold war and the country also made significant investments to nuclear power still in the late 1990s. Finland's rapid accession to NATO right after Russia attacked Ukraine also demonstrated the operative resilience of the country's functionally challenging semi-presidential executive system. In just three months' time, a leadership unit comprising of a coalition government of five parties with a left-wing anti-NATO majority and a separately elected and (very) popular president representing the country's main right-wing and leading opposition party ended the country's seven-decade long neutrality policy with almost perfect unanimity (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2024).

Finally, the general atmosphere that emphasizes future-oriented and long-term policymaking and societal preparedness seems to be working also from the viewpoint of democratic legitimacy. In international comparisons, political trust is very high in Finland (e.g., Söderlund, 2019). Whether trust is high because of future-oriented policy or in spite of it is a matter of debate that remains outside the scope of this book. What is important here is that the strongly future-regarding style of policymaking and policies have not caused the legitimacy of the governing system to deteriorate in the eyes of Finnish voters. However, as we hinted above and stress throughout the book, the recent consolidation of a status of 'large party' for Finland's nationalist-populist party the Finns, and its rise to the ranks of governing parties, has already brought up some challenges which in time may threaten the stability of the foreseeing Finnish governing system that has been, after all, backed with broad cross-party consensus. Indeed, although our analyses highlight the role of nonelected policy experts, we also pay special attention to the political conditions, which have supported the expert-driven policy system.

1.3.2 Data and methods

Our empirical analysis is based on several original datasets that were largely designed and collected for the purposes of this study. They include a plethora of official government documents, dozens of semi-structured interviews with high-ranking elected and non-elected policymakers from the highest tier of national-level decision-making in Finland, and two nationally representative surveys that include all key actors of the policy process as well as citizens. Additionally, we

use a third original survey dataset, which is a nationally representative sample of local-level elected officials, to study their perceptions of long-termism in Finnish policymaking.

Chapters 3 and 4, which deal with future-regarding institutions and processes, rely on extensive document and interview material collected from relevant government agencies and persons that are centrally involved in long-term policymaking in Finland. A total of 33 in-depth interviews with a combined duration of around 36 hours were specifically collected for the purposes of the PALO project and this study. These interviews were conducted in several waves during 2018–2023 with leading members representing three elite groups: elected/party-based elites, administrative elites and stakeholder elites. In addition to focusing on the main operative arenas of the ‘future dialogue’ – the Committee for the Future and the Prime Minister’s Office – the original dataset of 24 interviews that was collected in the spring of 2018 emphasized individuals working within the environmental policy sector. In the latter waves that added 9 new interviews (conducted in the autumn of 2021 and 2023) we expanded our focus in terms of policy sectors and interviewed representatives also from the Ministry of Finance and Foreign Affairs. Due to their very central position in the national foresight system, one individual was interviewed three times (while representing two different ministries) and two individuals were interviewed twice (representing same organizations in different time). Different parts of these interviews have also been utilized in our previous publications (Koskimaa, 2023; Koskimaa et al., 2021, 2023).

We also draw from interviews that were conducted by Vesa Koskimaa for two other research projects that ran simultaneously with the PALO project. In analyses regarding the ‘future dialogue’, we utilize interviews collected in the comparative project by Vesa Koskimaa and Tapio Raunio on parliamentary future organs, which has operated since 2019. Regarding Finland, this dataset comprises of 17 in-depth interviews from elected representatives of the Committee for the Future and nonelected experts working closely with the committee (mainly leading civil servants of Eduskunta), and the combined duration of these interviews is around 22 hours (see Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Finally, in Chapter 4 we also refer to ten interviews (combined duration around 14 hours) that were made for another parallel project by Koskimaa and Raunio (2021–2024) with the highest-ranking elected and nonelected leaders of Finnish foreign policy, including several former prime and foreign affairs ministers and foreign ministry’s general secretaries (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2024). These interviews did not focus on future-regarding policymaking per se, but they contain information about the expert-politician nexus, which we considered worthy of reporting briefly in this book. Altogether, our analyses draw from 60 interviews and 72 hours of rich interview material, most of it focusing directly and explicitly on future-regarding policymaking in Finland.

The two main surveys, which were designed based on the insights from the first wave of elite interviews, deal with political time perspectives, measuring individuals’ conceptions of their personal time spans and the time spans of Finnish politics and the factors affecting them. The first survey targeted the entire population of high-ranking national-level policymakers: members of parliament and central

intra-party decision-making organs, staffs of parliamentary parties and party central offices, the mid- to top-level civil servants from all government departments, special government bureaus and governmental research agencies, and representatives from the largest special interest groups. The survey, hereinafter even referred to as the PS (policymaker survey), is a representative sample ($n = 675$) of this population. The PS was conducted in November 2018 as a web-based survey, sent personally to the work e-mail addresses of the entire population of top policymakers in Finland. Besides providing new information about temporal perceptions, the PS is exceptional as it covers the entire spectrum of the highest level of democratic policymakers in an established Western democracy. Using identical survey measures, we also conducted a citizen survey (CS) in early 2019. Its 1,701 respondents are representative of the Finnish voting-age population in terms of age, gender and place of residence. The two surveys allow us to make comparisons across policymakers and ordinary citizens regarding temporal perceptions in democratic politics. In addition, we use a wave of the Finnish politician panel survey, administered by Åbo Akademi University, to measure future-orientation among local-level politicians. The wave was fielded in April–May 2021. To allow comparisons, it included some items that were identical with those used in the PS.¹

By combining insights from government documents, elite interviews and several surveys we are able to compile a detailed and empirically grounded picture of how the policymaking elite in an established representative democracy handles the difficult question of future-sensitivity, without losing its legitimacy. Again, however, we can already note that our results also demonstrate some of the challenges that the system might be encountering.

1.3.3 Contents of the chapters

Since our topic, the institutional conditions for future-regarding policymaking, is scarcely researched and we seek to provide a fresh theoretical understanding about it that is based on comprehensive empirical observation, our research approach is largely explorative and inductive. After developing our broad analytic framework that merely identifies potentially relevant elite groups and interactions, we only present a loose working hypothesis about our preliminary understanding of the phenomenon. In addition to not making strict theoretical assumptions or expectations, we also do not employ strict methodologies in our analysis, as they carry the risk of missing important information that stems from the rich data, which has been collected over the past 5 years in close cooperation with various policymaking elites. For our purposes, nuance and details are more important than empirical coverage and generalizations. In terms of structure, we employ a sequential and accumulative research strategy that begins with the description of the general features of the (Finnish) system and continues into its more specific characteristics, before connecting them with individual-level assessments. Instead of a controlled test of a specified model, we aim for a sufficiently focused, manageable and robust exploration that can reveal and characterize institutional and procedural factors that condition efforts for future-regarding policymaking.

In [Chapter 2](#), we present our analytic framework which describes the main institutions, actors, resources and interactions through which a democratic political system could produce enduring future-regarding policies while maintaining its legitimacy. We begin by juxtaposing the democratic myopia thesis with an alternative perspective on democratic politics, one that shifts attention from elections to policymaking. We argue that when the various realities of everyday governing are properly acknowledged, the political dynamics, which should lead to democratic myopia, look rather different. Our rather simple main point is that policymakers do not only represent voters and stakeholders directly, they also govern existing, institutionalized and complex societies and these two functions may sometimes be far apart from each other and require rather different measures. After this, we sketch a general idea of elite-driven future-regarding policymaking by drawing from theories of governance and policy networks. We hypothesize that in order to succeed in making future-regarding policies, while simultaneously maintaining legitimacy, elite networks should be carefully balanced internally, acknowledging the needs and roles of the various constitutive elite groups. We emphasize the rather neglected role of administrative elites who can provide the foundation for long-term policies by distilling information, fitting it to the political objectives of parties and stakeholders, and managing intra-elite processes where more political policy actors seek bargains. In this scenario, parties provide the democratic linkage while stakeholder elites keep non-electoral interests aboard.

In [Chapter 3](#), we begin our empirical inquiry by presenting a comprehensive historical overview of the emergence and development of institutions, actors and networks that deal with long-term policymaking in Finland. The chapter first describes the evolution of the country's ordinary political institutions and the transformative historical moments that have molded the country's political culture. The presentation demonstrates that Finland's general socio-political developments supported the creation of the national foresight system, but they did not determine its emergence, which depended on the creative agency of a few individuals who happened to be in the same place at the same time and cleverly fitted their innovations to the existing institutional framework. The second half of the chapter zooms in on these processes, i.e., the emergence and evolution of the network of various future-regarding institutions that nowadays comprise the Finnish national foresight system.

[Chapter 4](#) delves deeper into the organization and operation of the current foresight system and develops a nuanced understanding of how – i.e., through which type of resources, processes and outputs – the system seeks to enhance the future-focus of policies. While doing so, the chapter pays special attention to the system's operative pressure points, which centrally condition its effectiveness and survival. Both aspects are summarized in the book's concluding chapter. The first part of [Chapter 4](#) is organized according to the main functional arenas of the foresight system: the parliament, the government and the public administration. We detail independently all arenas' foresight-relevant tasks, organizations and processes, focusing especially on the production of the main foresight documents created in each arena, and then we assess the individual arenas' overall role and impact in the

wider foresight system. After this, the chapter connects the various future-regarding activities which over time have evolved into a generalized farseeing *modus operandi* within the Finnish state administration with more concrete issues of policymaking. We begin by charting the conceptions of some key actors of the foresight system and then summarize two case studies from temporally differing policy fields that illuminate the general role of ministry experts in contemporary Finnish policy development. We conclude the chapter by emphasizing the significance of the foresight documents produced by ministry experts which during the past decade have been increasingly connected to the ordinary policy processes. Through this merging process the experts do not only serve as framers of long-term policy challenges but also as presenters of solutions for such problems. Our overall interpretation is that herein lies the system's most important resource for lengthening the time perspectives of Finnish policymaking. At the same time, we stress that its effectiveness is strongly conditioned by political tides, which have started to turn also in Finland recently.

The final empirical chapter, [Chapter 5](#), turns to expected outcomes of future-regarding institutions by utilizing the surveys to establish and compare the 'temporal mentality' of the Finnish policymaking elite. To establish the impact of national-level future-regarding processes we first contrast the time perspectives of policymakers ($n = 675$) with the time perspectives of ordinary citizens ($n = 1,701$). Then, using similar survey measurements we contrast national-level elites with municipal policymakers who, unlike ordinary citizens, manage real policies and might have engaged with local foresight authorities, but who have not been affected by the national-level future-regarding institutions nor deal with national-level policies. The examination begins with a comparison of respondents' personal time perspectives that are measured with a standardized scale. We then proceed to compare citizens' and policymakers' individual conceptions of how far political decision-making should aim for. We utilize an 11-item scale that we developed specifically for this purpose (see [Rapeli et al., 2021](#) for details). Besides allowing us to gauge group-level differences, the surveys enable identifying the 'locations' where future-sensitivity in policymaking is produced and where it is not. After conducting the initial wave of our expert interviews, we extracted the factors that they considered to be beneficial or harmful for the future-sensitivity of Finnish policymaking and placed them into the elite survey. Overall, the findings are broadly in line with our general argument: national-level policymakers differ significantly from citizens and municipal decision-makers in terms of political time perspective. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, based on their evaluations regarding the sources of the temporal spans of Finnish policymaking they assign Finland's success in future-regarding policies to inter-elite deliberations. While the combination of these chapters obviously does not constitute a strict causal test, the intuitively aligned results clearly suggest that the Finnish policymaking system bears distinct qualities that enhance the development of future-oriented policy.

[Chapter 6](#) concludes the book by first presenting a summarizing review of the main findings. This is followed by a generalizing conceptual description of the main factors that influence the effectiveness and survival of an organized system

of future-regarding elite governance. Our findings stress the importance of an organized and legitimate system that brings together and coordinates the resources, activities and interactions of the system's constituent actors whose involvement is necessary for producing future-regarding policies. We conclude the chapter and the book with a critical discussion of potential impacts, prospects and risks of elite-driven future-regarding policymaking, putting special emphasis on the challenge posed by growing popularity of political forces that challenge the established consensus of mainstream parties, especially through the strengthening nationalistic-populist sentiment. We contend that the system can subsume these challenges, but in order to succeed, it must maintain the balance between the central elite groups and not exhaust the political side whose composition can change over time.

Note

- 1 See [Appendix](#) for detailed descriptions of all data used in this book.

2 Analytical framework

Curbing democratic myopia with elite cooperation

‘We must move forward from where we have arrived.’

–Tapani Tölli, a Finnish MP¹

As we argued in the previous chapter, when it comes to the timing and temporal focus of policies, mainstream political science research has tended to emphasize immediate circumstances that precede and follow elections. Policy initiatives have been considered to reflect the promises that governing parties made to voters prior to elections to maximize their vote share. After elections, these promises turn into ‘contracts’ against which voters can judge the performance of the government when they decide whether to retain the party in the governing position or replace it with another one. Due to the voters’ inherent short-sightedness, limited political cognition and shortness of government terms, politicians are expected to rapidly seek tangible outcomes, which are conceived to impede more general long-term objectives. This idea, which reflects the straightforward chain of delegation and accountability between voters and elected politicians in the style of the principal-agent model (e.g., [Bergman et al., 2003](#)) has been influential in political science. It emerged with the economic theory of democracy ([Downs, 1957](#)) and the political business cycle model ([Nordhaus, 1975](#)), and it has been recently elaborated in studies of political/democratic myopia (e.g., [Boston, 2017, 2021](#); [Jacobs, 2011, 2016](#); [MacKenzie, 2016, 2021a, 2021b](#)).

In contrast with this conventional perspective of democratic politics, the famous Finnish political proverb quoted above presents a slightly different idea of the situation that elected politicians face after elections. First, it notes that MPs’ must begin their work by acknowledging and accepting current societal ‘realities’. In addition to recognizing that all decision-making situations are built on and conditioned by distinct historical socio-political trajectories the statement also notes that logically the only way forward is, well, to move forward. ‘Reality check’ thus includes also a consideration of past and future, and not just an assessment of the present situation. This means that instead of being free (or forced) to serve the current interests of some specific voter and stakeholder groups, policymakers are constrained by more general socio-historical circumstances. And instead of

getting stuck with some particular past or current demands, policymakers should also think ahead, on how to *improve* the current situation.

In this chapter, contouring this basic reasoning, we develop a general theoretical position that challenges the democratic myopia thesis, which, we believe, to some extent misleads the quest for curbing democratic myopia as it over-emphasizes the voter-MP nexus. Inspired especially by the works of [Kingdon \(1984\)](#), [Pierson \(2004\)](#) and [Pollitt \(2008\)](#), our argument builds on extending the temporal space of policymaking. Instead of viewing policy choices only as formal decisions made by some group of elected politicians on some specific day to cater the interests of some special groups, we recognize that policies have a history that conditions present choices and reflect on the future. For example, party manifestos are living documents, which always seek to emphasize the current topics that are salient to parties' long-term visions and commitments. Similarly voters' preferences are molded constantly through changing personal and societal circumstances, and besides 'inheriting' policy programs from previous power-holders, governments need to stay vigilant and responsive toward emerging challenges that various socio-political actors, such as civil servants and lobbyists, push forward. Formally, policies are decided in specific temporal locations by specific actors following specific rules, but in many ways their form and timing are conditioned by complex temporal processes. The puzzle of democratic myopia, we think, is therefore much more complicated than the elections-centered approach might lead us to believe.

In the following pages, we detail our challenge to the myopia thesis and specify our own position. Our founding argument is that in order to solve the problem of democratic myopia, we need to shift attention from elections to policymaking process which operates with partially different dynamics. We juxtapose the elections-centered logic of the myopia thesis against some common theories of the policy process to produce what we think is a more realistic view of the factors that influence the time perspective and timing of politicians that design real policies. Drawing from various literatures, we then explicate institutions, actors and processes that, when organized in a certain fashion, can enhance the capacity of politicians to better consider the future in their policies.

We begin this section with a brief conceptual contemplation on what future-regarding policies are and what they assume in terms of practice and normative expectations, which are also important to consider before spending a considerable amount of resources on examining how such policies can be developed. After this, we situate policy choices into extended temporal space, first looking backwards and then forwards in time, to describe a few general characteristics of contemporary governance that should help resist policy myopia. To frame our empirical analysis and provide a conceptually sound benchmark for assessing the results, we then explicate a few general conditions that should maximize the 'time-bending' capacities of a policymaking system. While in this characterization we emphasize especially the role of professional civil servants that manage the informational basis of the interactions of 'more political' policy actors (political parties and interest groups), we stress that only a combination of expert-based, popular (elected) and private (non-elected stakeholders) policy actors can produce 'sustainable'

future-regarding policies, i.e., decisions that are considered legitimate and survive against changing times and governments.

2.1 Undressing future-regarding policies: definitions and normative considerations

Taken literally, the democratic myopia thesis suggests that the timeline from policy formation to implementation and outcomes is very rapid. As we detail below, this is likely not the case, as a typical policy cycle takes several decades (e.g., [Pierson, 2004](#); [Pollitt, 2008](#); [Sabatier, 1999](#)). This is also why the somewhat caricature-like picture of candidates who focus exclusively on some immediate sectoral interests seems a bit too straightforward and restricted. More likely, as [Majone \(1996, p. 6\)](#) has summarized, ‘legislation always concerns conduct and concerns in the future’. To some extent, then, all policies are future-regarding (see also [MacKenzie, 2021a](#)).

The literature on long-term governance has elaborated policy features that differentiate genuine future-regarding issues from ‘ordinary’ policies. In one of the most elaborate definitions, [Sprinz \(2012, p. 68\)](#) states that long-term policies are ‘public policy issues that last at least one human generation, exhibit deep uncertainty exacerbated by the depth of time, and engender public goods aspects both at the stage of problem generation as well as at the response stage’. ‘Human generation’ refers to a 25-year time period during which an issue may exert major (adverse) consequences, but also find a solution. ‘Deep uncertainty’ instead refers to the inherent causal complexity of such problems and the resulting difficulty to manage them. When concrete ramifications develop very slowly, and they might be largely invisible during the time of policy choices, it is hard to determine which factors will affect the outcome and how. Relatedly, the public goods aspect refers to the difficult intertemporal trade-offs underlying such problems. In his influential definition, [Jacobs \(2016, pp. 434–435\)](#) focuses especially on this feature of long-term governance, which is particularly pertinent in the framework of representative democracy where voters assess politicians’ propositions before and after elections and affect politicians’ careers with this information. Here, the main variable that conditions ‘policy investments’, and distinguishes these policies from ‘ordinary’ ones, is the timing of the return: significant costs are not met by tangible returns, but by grave uncertainty that postpones benefits to the unforeseeable future.

Besides such raw, scientific cost-benefit calculus, future-regarding policymaking involves various normative considerations. As normative assumptions also affect decisions, they are worth elaborating on briefly before examining factors that condition the making of long-term/future-regarding policies.

First, in the discourses of democratic myopia future-regarding policies are often viewed positively. Besides the general benevolence that comes with the caring of others (even others we cannot yet even know, i.e., the temporally distant generations), the positive emotions about future-regarding policies stem from their generally well-meaning nature, as they usually involve goals such as clean environment, economic prosperity or societal equality. What kind of a person

would oppose such nice things? However, when assessing the *political* desirability of long-term goals, we need to acknowledge other *normative* motivations too than mere care for future others. For example, a climate mitigation policy can involve so much causal complexity and uncertainty that investing significant resources into it can be seen to neglect common principles of economic responsibility. Quite often, issues of public debt are at odds with future-regarding policies, as they can require significant economic investments. All politicians need to think about the economy, too, and for some politicians these considerations may carry considerable normative weight comparable to, e.g., environmental concerns. In short, the inherent multidimensionality of values adds to the more practical hardships of long-term policies.

A second noteworthy normative aspect of future-regarding policies concerns the way in which they are made. In contrast to the policymaking situation characterized by the myopia thesis, i.e., the abruptly occurring ‘window of opportunity’ for elected politicians to accumulate sectoral benefits, the ideal process for making future-regarding policies often emphasizes citizen engagement, deliberation and cooperation (e.g., [MacKenzie, 2021b](#)). This makes sense also from a practical point of view, as the ‘surplus majority’ that broad citizen participation can produce may signal broader acceptance of the policies. A broader societal backing also prevents policies from being overturned by some future democratic majority and government. However, without denying the general desirability of broadly accepted and durable policies, we should note that considering ‘surplus majorities’ as automatically positive features of the democratic process can be also interpreted as a de-legitimization of the wishes of ordinary legislative majorities. More generally too In the discourses of future-regarding policymaking ends sometimes override means, as is also demonstrated by the sometimes evoked recommendation to shift decision-making power in some important question from elected to non-elected expert bodies. This problem, we argue, should be more explicitly acknowledged when considering practical solutions for democratic myopia.

A third noteworthy normative aspect concerning the making of future-regarding policies, which is even more important from the viewpoint of efficient governance, is the tendency to prioritize the ‘locking’ of some policies, that is, ensuring that policies remain in effect for a long time. It could even be argued that in the discourses of political myopia the capacity of policies to stay in force for a long time is considered an equally great virtue as politicians’ capacity to assign value to future generations in the decision-making phase. Of course, both aspects are indeed mandatory requirements for successful long-term policies. However, while the locking of policies arguably enhances the persistence and effectiveness of chosen policies, it also undermines democracies’ potential to react to changing societal circumstances, which is, after all, also a standard virtue of representative democracy (e.g., [Runciman, 2013](#)). The second general virtue of long-term decision-making, politicians’ ability to consider future publics, is conditioned by politicians’ capacity to change things – a feature that is hindered by the lock in of existing policies. Moreover, here too the desirability of a certain mechanism (‘lock-in’) seems to connect to the normative features of the proposed policies. Rarely one hears anyone criticizing the embedding of progressive

environmental policies deeply into administrative practices, while the successful efforts by industrial interest groups to maintain status quo that is beneficial for them is considered a central hindrance to future-regarding governance (e.g., [Jacobs, 2016](#)). Sometimes, even initiatives that were considered ‘good’ in the time of their emergence can become hindrances of future-regarding policymaking when the context changes. For example, the generally restrictive legislation on automobiles that was created before the widespread generalization of electric cars can now impede, paradoxically, the generalization of the latter, which should be better for the environment as long as personal vehicles are used. As we detail below, in many ways the impacts of policy ‘lock-in’ for future-regarding governance are more complex than the mere securing of ‘credible commitments’. Depending on the exact solution that is being sought after, and which is constantly in flux due to socio-technological changes, policies that become locked may enhance or limit the welfare of future generations.

As a caveat, we should note that with these considerations we do not wish to argue that the existing notions of future-regarding policies are somehow ethically flawed. Instead, with the explicit assessment of the normative underpinnings of future-regarding policies, we wish to highlight that in real democratic policymaking arenas, where several alternatives are valued against each other and bargained with all the time to find solutions that suit a majority, questions of ideal outcomes and processes become more complex than what the simplified voter-MP nexus model purports. We now elaborate these dynamics by locating policy choices into an intertemporal process that details the general features of contemporary governance, which in most contexts should be able to curb democratic myopia.

2.2 Policies in time: conditioned by the past, inspired by the future

Let us now situate policy choices into a temporal frame that is much longer than the campaign trail or even the mandate period. We begin by looking back in time, considering how past developments and choices condition our capacity to make future-regarding policies. Then, we arrive at the present and discuss the general temporal demands and orientations of policymakers. Finally, we look ahead and describe mechanisms through which future-regarding policies could stay in force long enough to produce the desired impacts. Combined, these considerations describe a process, which suggests that the capacity of democracy to consider future generations is likely greater than the democratic myopia thesis claims. Two factors seem particularly important in this regard. First, policy space is highly constrained by existing policy programs, which focus on societies’ long-term needs. Second, several actor groups handle the remaining policy space together, not just the elected politicians. In the final part of the chapter, we describe an ideal way to organize this network of actors so that it maximizes the potential for making future-regarding policies.

2.2.1 Past: constraints and limits but also commitment to the future

The underlying logic of the archetypal myopic model of democratic politics, the political business cycle model ([Nordhaus, 1975](#)), is strongly presentist. In essence,

The cycle involves (1) an aspiring professional politician, (2) voters who provide the politician with the power to make authoritative decisions, (3) only a little time to make a policy impact in order to secure re-election and (4) voters who are expected to be short-sighted and decide over the electoral survival of the politician. Under the logic of this cycle, doing anything else besides focusing all personal resources which are always limited on serving the interests of the voters would be self-destructive and irrational. Yet, while being perfectly intuitive and logical, this notion can be challenged with a few rather simple points.

The first concerns the capacity and limits of human cognition: is it truly realistic to expect ordinary citizens to understand and pay so much attention to policy choices that they could credibly produce an imminent and pressing threat to re-election seeking policymakers? Although we will not deeply engage in this question here, the short answer suggested by research is that it is unlikely. More or less all we know about voters' political cognition, sophistication and knowledge indicates that people are typically inattentive to politics and often rather ignorant about it (see e.g., [Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996](#) or [Rapeli, 2013](#) for more). While there is evidence suggesting that the overall performance of voters is somewhat (economically) rational (for an overview, see e.g., [Ashworth et al., 2018](#) and [Ashworth & de Mesquita, 2014](#), pp. 565–566), there is little to suggest that they would be very well aware of, for example, temporal policy trade-offs. That would demand much more attentiveness to politics than what most people are willing to invest.

A second counterargument to challenge the standard narrative of the political business cycle is that empirical accounts have not been able to find particularly impatient or shortsighted electorates. In economics, time discounting refers to the human tendency to prefer small benefits sooner instead of larger benefits later. After extensive research over a considerable time span, the evidence in support of the claim that people are shortsighted in their economic thinking is not always impressive (e.g., [Frederick et al., 2002](#); [Johnson et al., 2020](#)). Political scientists have applied the same basic idea and studied citizens' myopic tendencies in the context of politics. Typically, their findings align with the economists'. Using survey experiments with US samples, [Jacobs and Matthews \(2012, 2017\)](#) consistently found that while people do not demonstrate 'radically' myopic policy preferences, to the extent that they do, it is because of uncertainty. People (in this case in the United States) do not necessarily oppose delayed policy benefits, but they do not trust the political institutions to deliver them in the future. Interpreting their conclusion suggests that ordinary citizens are likely more future-oriented than what is often presumed, but, perhaps understandably, also distrusting of political promises, which could be the actual driver behind democratic myopia, from the citizen perspective. In a similar (conjoint) survey experiment with Finnish respondents, [Christensen and Rapeli \(2020\)](#) drew largely the same conclusions. Across different policy areas and proposals, the preference for quick policy benefits instead of future ones was not strong. Again, the likelihood of receiving the promised future benefits was, along with expected costs, the key determinant behind temporal policy choices. Most importantly, the findings once more failed to confirm the expectations of a myopic electorate and instead pointed the finger at the citizens' lack of belief in receiving

policy benefits in the distant future. Overall, empirical studies provide surprisingly little direct evidence in support of the standard account of the democratic myopia thesis (see also [Bechtel & Hainmueller, 2011](#) and [Rapeli, 2023](#); for counterevidence, see e.g., [Healy & Malhotra, 2009](#)).

A third reservation, which will be our main focus in this book, concerns the general conditions of policymaking contexts in contemporary advanced democracies. As we will show, these contexts typically differ quite considerably from the *carte blanche* situation politicians face in the pure and naked myopia model, where the underlying assumption is that elected politicians can do almost anything with their mandate. While constitutions grant such general mandates to MPs, in practice many things stand in their way in real policymaking contexts. Paul [Pierson \(2004\)](#) has criticized the ‘snapshot view’ of policymaking, which dominated the scene for decades. According to [Pierson \(2004\)](#), the temporally restricted perspective had been unable to produce convincing results on policy drivers and outcomes, because it failed to recognize that policy processes are typically put in motion long before tangible outcomes become identifiable. Besides taking a lot more time than a single electoral term, [Pierson \(2004\)](#) noted that the processes are typically also highly complex and non-linear.

The mere length of the policy cycle presents a challenge to the myopia thesis. The policy process, from detecting a problem to designing, implementing, evaluating and re-adjusting a policy solution takes a significant amount of time, usually at least a decade, but often two to even four decades ([Sabatier, 1999](#), pp. 3–4). For example, pension reforms that concern one of the largest areas of public spending in all advanced democracies can take several decades to complete. After initial decisions, it easily takes even half a century for them to produce visible outcomes ([Jacobs, 2011](#)). Although it is theoretically possible to design and implement a policy and also enjoy some of its fruits within one electoral cycle that typically lasts for around 3–5 years, the ease with which politicians are expected to push through their policies in the myopia model, especially considering how tangible their policies need to be in order to affect the average voter, seems quite unrealistic. As [Kingdon’s \(1984\)](#) classic study demonstrated, even in a relatively short temporal space, initiatives by elected officeholders have to pass several requirements. They must, for example, appear sound, salient and feasible for various policymaker groups who often act as powerful gatekeepers, standing in the way of all major policies. Obviously, elected politicians can make some authoritative decisions during their tenure, but the general slowness and complexity of the policy process often prevents them from making big policy changes suddenly.

Reflecting [Sprinz’s \(2012\)](#) definition of long-term policies, the complexity that comes with the great distance between policy initiatives and outcomes could be even more important than the extensive temporal focus of the former. Essentially, complexity grows from the simple fact that in the making of large domestic policy programs and especially international regulation such as EU legislation, even formal decision-making processes easily stretch over several government terms ([Pollitt, 2008](#)). In time, the unavoidable involvement of several governments produces a complex web of interlaced sub-projects that engage, and become dependent on, several

hundred differently motivated policy actors. Among other things, this situation creates a need for technical standards that can control the process (Sabatier, 1999, pp. 3–4). Therefore, as Pollitt (2008, pp. 15–20) has noted, a new government always finds itself very much at the mercy of past developments. In many cases, policy programs were developed to address slowly emerging societal challenges, which emanate from complex demographic and cultural changes, such as the aging of populations, work-life demands and attitudes or expectations toward the welfare state. These programs require various, immense administrative tasks, such as a reorganizing of the state bureaucracy, the training of new professionals and the creation of new technical capacity, and all of this takes a long time to plan, not to mention complete organizationally. Over time, these tasks turn into ‘legacy institutions’, and new governments find themselves responsible for developing them further, although they never asked for it.

Indeed, as Pierson (2004, pp. 34–35) has noted, large policy programs are less rigid than constitutions, but they are nevertheless ‘extremely prominent constraining features of the political environment’ in modern societies which ‘fundamentally shape the incentives and resources of political actors’. This is why Pierson considers them on par with the more traditional conception of a political institution, that is, the ‘rules of the game’. Pollitt (2008, pp. 20–21), who also compares policy programs to procedural institutions like electoral rules, concurs that the programs which ‘define and constrain a very large area of public sector activity’ are typically very hard to turn around. For example, already a quarter of a century ago when politics in advanced democracies still reminded more of the textbook model of party government based on inter-party competition, Rose (1990) and Rose and Davies (1994) demonstrated that even in the United Kingdom, where the two-party system should encourage policy turnover, public policy was more often simply inherited from the previous governments than freshly innovated.

Three important consequences follow from these rather basic notions of public policymaking. First, instead of a constant and pervasive flux that would result, supposedly, from the selfish efforts of fluctuating political elites, the policymaking environments of contemporary advanced democracies are more likely characterized by a rather constrained policy space with a high degree of overtime stability. Although elected politicians still have the formal power to make an impact and in all democratic countries they likely exert some influence to actual policies, there appears to be not enough issue space to create a constant pervasive flux. Second, besides limiting the amount of policy issues with which newly elected policymakers could interfere, the path-dependent thrust of past choices, which materialize through existing policy programs, forces politicians to spend at least some portion of their time on managing the problems and solutions that have been ‘on the table’ for a long time. Policy programs were created to solve emerging societal challenges, and until they are completely finished - which might be theoretically impossible, considering, e.g., the ever-changing conditions of national healthcare - the newly elected politicians too will become engaged in this essentially future-regarding policy process. Finally, and in more critical terms, we can also detect the foundational problem with long-term/future-regarding policies that we discussed at the beginning of the chapter: the locking of certain policies or programs necessarily

limits the scope of alternatives that are available, which then limits the reaction potential of democracies. We will return to this issue shortly.

2.2.2 *Present: focus on the future*

The second reservation we presented to the myopia thesis in the beginning of the chapter concerned its central idea that policymakers focus pronouncedly on advancing the interests of some contemporaneous voter groups. Theoretically, these interests could concern future generations, but as the myopia thesis also emphasizes the rapid materializing of the outcomes, the overall concern of policymakers seems to be on present issues. The previous section already argued why this might not be the case. The amount of genuinely ‘open’ policy issues, which could be designed to favor some voter groups but not others, is generally low, and the great majority of policies, which are already in the pipeline, are generally future-oriented due to their long-term orientation. According to Pierson (2000, 2004), MPs are more likely to focus on fixing existing policy processes and programs, because truly novel initiatives require a considerable amount of resources, and even if they turn into success, they produce dividends only in the distant future.

Another thing that pushes MPs toward a more forward-looking attitude comes from MPs’ general role expectations. Already in the early versions of the representative government system, that is, in the elitist proto-democracies of the 19th century before universal suffrage, MPs assumed, on the side of the representative function of serving their constituencies, a more general role of the responsible governor – someone who is expected to look after the interests of the whole nation when serving in the office (Manin, 1997). Instead of being mere delegates of voters, MPs were first and foremost considered as trustees, common guardians with special insight and a responsibility to use it for the common good (Pitkin, 1967). Although the representative function of parties strengthened in the 20th century along with industrialization, urbanization and secularization, which clarified, polarized and organized party camps into a fiercer battle for societal good and goods, the governing function nonetheless prevailed also through this period (Mair, 2013).

Since the mid-1900s, future-regarding ethos has become a more prominent feature in policymaking. According to Nowotny (1994 [1989], pp. 49–51) the industrial age largely continued with the ethos of Enlightenment, which considered the future a somewhat vague but generally positive and linearly approaching ‘destination’ where societal utopias become reality. Roughly in the middle of the century, due to major leaps in science, technology and organizational specialization, the future started to move closer to the present, so to speak. It became clearer and less abstract, but the clarity also made it more threatening. Consequently, it became something that requires active management to which the advanced scientific (computers) and societal (administrative organizations) tools gave a better chance. The resulting construction, in Nowotny’s (1994 [1989]) terms ‘the extended present’, was seen as a potentially controllable time-space dimension that urged ‘societal engineers’ to stay constantly aware of its various changes.

The consequences of the increased complexity of societies and the associated sophistication of the governing apparatuses were reflected in policymaking. At

least since the mid-1900s, when modern welfare states started to take shape and acquire more tasks, policymakers have been expected to invest significant resources in detecting challenges that only loom on the horizon, and to build services and resources to address them credibly. Even for tackling societal challenges that have not yet materialized, and perhaps never will, such as natural disasters, wars, etc., policymakers are expected to develop significant knowledge, expertise, routines and other resources (Pollitt, 2008, pp. 3–4). In contemporary democracies, policymaking often concerns the production of general efficiency-enhancing regulation, not just distributive policies (Majone, 1996).

In recent decades, three more specific societal developments have bolstered these dynamics. First is the internationalization of regulation that since the 1970s has guided the scope, capacities and focus of national governing institutions. Politics internationalized concurrently with the growing awareness of global megatrends such as climate change, economic globalization and migration, which by far exceeded all previous societal challenges in spatial and temporal scope. The increasing need to govern these challenges ‘credibly’ across national borders and time gradually shifted regulative capacities from national to supranational level. Most notably, in most of Europe, this development has occurred through a transfer of power from national parliaments to the organs of the European Union. Through these developments the scope, complexity and technicality of regulative actions broadened significantly, and the supranational networks of ‘non-majoritarian’ expert organizations that create shared perspectives and concepts to enhance ‘credible commitments’ developed into formidable and independent policy players (Majone, 1994, 1996, 1997). The second general societal-administrative trend that has increased future-orientation in policymaking is the growing prominence of technocracy, i.e., the rule of experts. Responding to the increasing complexity of the societal world and regulation, the contemporary style of technocracy hails from the superior expertise of governing elites. In the ideal technocratic governance style, merit-based experts, scientific, administrative or practice-based specialists of some specific policy field, define ‘objectively’ and ‘apolitically’ the common good for the long term and the right measures to reach it, while neglecting democratic responsiveness that can decrease the quality of regulation (Caramani, 2017, 2020). Finally, we expect that the capacity of national governments to drive ‘selfish’ policies on a short and hectic schedule has been limited by the so-called shift ‘from government to governance’. In essence, the complex term refers to the decreasing relevance of traditional formal and hierarchically organized political institutions and actors, such as governments, ministries, parliamentary committees, parties and interest groups, and the increasing role of problem-based, informal and ongoing deliberative processes that bring together a broad group of state and, more pronouncedly, various non-state policy experts in a spontaneous and self-organizing fashion to solve shared societal dilemmas (Rhodes, 2007).

2.2.3 Future: policy lock-in enhances long-term commitment but limits reactivity

The final step in our temporally extended policymaking framework concerns the question of how to secure long-term/future-regarding policies against governing

majorities that are bound to change occasionally under democratic rules. Due to the mutually conditioning nature of these stages, the past, present and future, the answer has been suggested already in the previous sections: chosen policies have a tendency to become frozen, or ‘lock in’. Less obvious questions are why exactly this happens and what are the broader ramifications of policy ‘lock-in’. We show below that various factors can contribute to the strength of policy ‘lock-ins’. Even more importantly, as noted above already, we stress that instead of being only a good outcome for future-regarding policymaking the policy ‘lock-in’ produces Janus-faced outcomes: while securing the persistence and ongoing effectiveness of chosen policies, policy ‘lock-in’ also restricts politicians’ capacity to react to new problems. A political system that is ideally suited for future-regarding policies should be able to satisfy both virtues simultaneously. As we will detail below, this quality relates to the capacity of policy networks to include a large number of stakeholders without allotting anyone a disproportionate weight.

As was noted above, in terms of their coverage, impact and resilience, large policy programs can almost be compared to procedural institutions: they are semi-fixed ‘rules of the game’ which significantly condition activities in any policy area (Pierson, 2004; Pollitt, 2008). For this reason, the dynamics of policy ‘lock-in’ can be understood through the concept of path dependency. Ideally, a path-dependent process begins from a so-called ‘critical juncture’, where some alternative is chosen over others. Although no alternative might be superior in the initial stage, over time the chosen one becomes dominant through a self-reinforcing dynamic where chances of repeating the previous choice increase gradually and constantly and make turning back harder and harder (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Ikenberry, 1994; Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000). Path-dependent policy ‘lock-in’ can come about through several mechanisms. Besides mere cultural reproduction (e.g., Pierson & Skocpol, 2002) institutions can ‘lock in’ via an economic mechanism, which emphasizes increasing and eventually extensive resources that have been invested into policy programs and which makes diverging from the path expensive (Pierson, 2000). Democratic-administrative mechanisms tend to reinforce economic ones. Public goods are produced in a highly restricted market where there is less natural competition and they are typically formalized into legally binding and enforced regulations. For this reason, as was noted, even purely vote-seeking MPs will likely focus their activities on existing rather than new initiatives which would take significantly more effort and provide much less certainty in terms of return (Pierson, 2000, pp. 252–261; Pierson, 2004, pp. 30–36, 41–43). Finally, the path dependence dynamic can also build on power asymmetries. As Mahoney and Thelen (2010, pp. 7–9) note, political institutions are also distributional instruments that in the initiation stage empower some actors over others and then incentivize them to accumulate more power by utilizing the initial power asymmetry. Over the course of time, as Pierson (2000, p. 259) notes, such power asymmetries can normalize into ‘realities’ that are seldom contested within the systems they govern.

From the traditional normative perspective of future-regarding policymaking a solidly ‘locked-in’ policy, for example, a thoroughly embedded and monitored climate law that regulates highly specified items in all government sectors, reflects an ideal situation, as such a law would be very hard to overturn. Meanwhile, reflecting

an aspect of future-regarding policymaking that has been discussed in the literature much less than the risk of policy reversal, we should note that firmly locking policies also prevents fast reactions to new challenges and, potentially even better policy projects and choices, inspired by societal and technological changes. For example, as was already mentioned, just a decade ago champions of sustainable development tended to push for the total abolishment of private automobiles but now that electric cars have developed dramatically and become more accessible, the same general restrictive ethos may impede their generalization and, paradoxically, support the survival of petroleum fueled cars that already exist and are cheaper. However, instead of entertainingly commenting on the seemingly myopic thinking of progressives that are stereotypically considered as more far-sighted than conservatives, with this anecdote we only wish to highlight the inherent uncertainty of socio-technological development and its ongoing challenge to long-term policies, which continue to haunt all political visionaries and decision-makers regardless of their background and ideology. As long as we cannot know for certain what will happen, and we never can, it seems that locking certain policy choices indefinitely is probably seldom a good idea. Ideally, ‘good’ policies should be easy to ‘lock in’ to secure their impact, but at the same time, they should be equally easy to re-adjust or change when circumstances change. This, we argue, likely presents a much graver problem for democratic long-term governance than policy flux, which, as we showed above, is likely a much weaker threat than what scholars of electoral politics typically have assumed.

However, it is important to also note that a constant ‘lock-in’ is not possible in democratic systems where the political agenda is always open for contestation and the democratic process guarantees a possibility for legitimate challenge and change. While the winners of policy struggles can and try to protect their creations, every struggle leaves behind losers with the motivation and the means to pursue change, and laws are always ambiguous enough to warrant re-interpretation (Mahoney, 2000, p. 523; Thelen, 2004, p. 31; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, pp. 7–14). Moreover, the passing of time and changing societal conditions also produce new challengers all the time. Reflecting these dynamics, already around half a century ago Charles Lindblom (1959, 1979) observed that instead of abrupt dramatic turns, policy development in advanced Western democracies more often seemed to happen through a slow-moving incremental process. In this process, policies are developed step by step in a piecemeal fashion, based on careful analysis of existing policies and long-term bargaining and development of political coalitions. Institutional layering, where new features are added to an existing institution without changing its central objective, is far more typical than full institutional conversion (Thelen, 2003). Based on considerable empirical evidence, Pollitt (2008, p. 48) has noted that despite the inherent rigidity of major policy programs, even today, after decades of filling the policy space, public policies and organizations also change constantly at a more detailed level. In a way, therefore, all policies are ‘locked in’ and in flux simultaneously, depending on the level of detail one is observing.

For this reason, this discussion provides no definitive conclusions. Threats of policy flux and stagnation depend on the scale of potential policy change, which relates to various institutional factors (e.g., Jacobs, 2016). A political system that

is ideally suited for future-regarding policymaking would simultaneously secure a ‘lock-in’ and maximize reaction potential. Because of this, as mentioned, some scholars have even suggested to rely on non-democratic practices on selected issues to maximize effectiveness in governing them (for a comprehensive review of such innovations, see [Boston, 2021](#)). In this book, we are equally concerned about the legitimacy of future-regarding policymaking in democratic systems for which the duality of ‘lock-in’ and reaction potential poses a major challenge. Depending on their basic features, such as the dispersed power system of consensual democracies or the more centralized power system of majoritarian democracies as portrayed by [Lijphart \(2012\)](#), democracies seem to be able to maximize the other but not both at the same time. Power dispersion enhances ‘lock-in’, essentially through the larger number of veto players ([Tsebelis, 2002](#)), but simultaneously makes changing direction harder, while power concentration enhances reverse virtues and difficulties. Hence, we need to dig deeper into the nuanced dynamics of inter-elite cooperation in order to find institutional solutions for political myopia.

2.3 Enhancing long-term policymaking through elite cooperation

Following [Jacobs \(2011, 2016\)](#), we believe national political systems differ in the extent to which they are able to produce ‘policy investments’, i.e., political decisions that somehow shift wellbeing from the current moment to the future. We also agree with [Jacobs \(2011, pp. 23–24\)](#) in that policy investments likely succeed only when they seem beneficial from the viewpoint of the main decision-maker groups, politicians, interest groups and voters. We believe that complementing Jacobs’ decision-making-centered perspective with three additional aspects stemming from the discussions of previous sections can add useful nuance to the analysis of long-term/future-regarding governance. These are (1) the general idea to extend the policy-making process beyond certain decision-making events, (2) the clearer acknowledgment of certain non-elected actor groups that have not traditionally been recognized as independent political agents but which may bear great relevance in the extended policymaking framework and (3) a more explicit recognition of special institutions developed for enhancing the ‘time bending’ capacities of democracies. Combined, these features of the broader policy system can enhance future-sensitivity in policy planning, the ‘lock in’ of future-regarding policies, and they can also increase the reaction potential of political systems.

First of all, as we have argued throughout this chapter, we suspect that if we look beyond the simple dynamics of electoral delegation or specific instances of legislative decision-making, other, perhaps even more important factors may emerge, which can help explain the emergence of future-oriented long-term policies and political commitments in contemporary national-level policymaking. In the terminology of the classic community power debates, we want to shift attention from the first face of power ([Dahl, 1957](#)) to its second face ([Bachrach & Baratz, 1962](#)), that is, from victors of decision-making situations to the processes of forging of political alternatives on which some formal decision-makers choose from. Here, it does not only matter who pushed the button in the final stage, so to speak. What also matters, and probably

even more so, is whose vision prevails when policy alternatives are produced. This forging stage is central to our theoretical position and it reflects strongly in the focus and weighting of our forthcoming empirical analysis, emphasizing more the elites that study and design policy alternatives than the elites that choose from them.

This brings us back to the concept of governance. In essence, it expands the meaning of the policymaking process from the actions of constitutionally mandated decision-makers such as governments and legislatures toward deliberations and negotiations between various policy agents whose interest is to solve a certain policy problem, and who possess some necessary resources for the task. In contrast with the more traditional concept of government, governance specifically acknowledges and emphasizes the greater role of various non-elected policy experts whose expertise is invaluable to the planning processes, which are organized ‘semi-spontaneously’ through the efforts of civil servants to ‘outsource’ expertise from various societal actors and groups (Rhodes, 2007). A more detailed understanding of these interactions has been presented in theories of policy networks that today play a central role in studies of the policy process. While there is no universal consensus regarding the composition, operating logic or even relevance of policy networks (see for example the exchange between Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Marsh & Smith, 2000 and Dowding, 1995, 2001), key scholars in the field have presented rather similar conceptions of their general organizational and operative features (Dowding, 1995, 2001; Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Marsh & Smith, 2000; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Thatcher, 1998). Here, we draw from the comprehensive summary by Rhodes (2008) that provides a sufficient level of detail for our purposes.

According to Rhodes (2008) policy networks, which bring together various actors to produce regulation in certain policy fields, are ‘sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared if endlessly negotiated beliefs and interests in public policy making and implementation’. An important addition is that the ‘actors are interdependent and policy emerges from the interactions between them’, highlighting the difference to the traditional hierarchic conceptions of national-level policymaking, where elected politicians (in legislative party groups, government cabinet, etc.) are conceived as ultimate leaders of policy processes. By emphasizing the necessity and strategic interaction of various policy agents, both elected and non-elected, the network perspective provides an important new aspect to our study of future-regarding policymaking. According to Rhodes (2008), relevant policy actors can come from various backgrounds, including public, private and third-sector organizations. They are, for example, policy experts of parties, ministries, interest groups, businesses, think tanks and academia. Another important feature of policy networks is their institution-like qualities. Via a certain configuration of formal rules and/or informal practices, policy networks are expected to produce an independent impact on policy outcomes by enabling, constraining, directing and coordinating how the members of the networks can use their resources to advance their special interests regarding the policy under construction. Without such coordinative force, the efforts of individual actors would disperse and not become effective. In policy networks, the policy actors engage in ‘game-like’ activities with their specific motivations and various resources (organizational,

financial, political, ideational, informational, etc.) which comprise their overall strategic capacity. In general, two ideal types of policy networks can operate in all policy areas: (1) easily accessible, broad and loosely organized *issue networks*, whose largely consultative activities have only an indirect impact on policies and (2) the exclusive, small and permanently operating *policy communities* that design policies. Although issue networks can instill future sensitivity to policies by allowing a more eclectic group of actors to present their views, for policy formation policy communities are more important as they deal with exact policy problems on a frequent and proximate basis and they also possess the formal legitimacy to solve them. Importantly, all actors that participate in these negotiations also have resources, which are necessary for producing policy outcomes.

Reflecting this general conceptual framework, we expect that future-regarding policies, as any other policies, are produced in such networks, via interactions of various elected and non-elected elite groups. Contrary to the democratic myopia thesis that emphasizes the relationship of voters and elected representatives, we expect that the capacity of democratic systems to produce future-sensitive visions and commitments has less to do with how standard electoral and governing institutions are configured and more with how inter-elite networks – where policies are made – are organized. Some studies have already touched the issue. For example, while charting general mechanisms that could impact temporal horizons of policymaking, Jacobs (2016) noted that if policymakers can find ways to obfuscate short-term costs from voters and/or highlight long-term benefits for them, politicians' activities can be insulated from electoral pressures to some extent. Although the policy network view takes a more neutral stand toward inter-elite activities by conceiving them as inevitable rather than optional, it appears to share the idea of deliberate confining of some parts of the will formation process inside these special arenas, which ordinary voters should know little about. In addition to allowing politicians to strike compromises, such secluded locations should also at least enable genuine convergence of policy views.

Undoubtedly, all policy sectors include many types of policy networks, serving distinct roles and tasks. Future-regarding policymaking, which can thematically touch on topics of any traditional policy field, should generally adhere to relatively inclusive practices as future-regarding issues are not in the exclusive remit of any specific political government and long-term commitments require broad acceptance. Foresight activities emerged and have been designed and promoted especially in characteristically non-political communities (academia, business, etc.) whose long-term interests are also at stake. However, when it comes to making of actual future-oriented policies it seems likely that more exclusive and tighter policy communities, where future-oriented insight has to penetrate in order to impact policies, bear paramount importance. While many types of actors may raise and promote future-regarding issues, under the current configuration of democratic societies and policymaking processes the future-regarding initiatives need to traverse through representative channels to become truly effective. The ongoing activity of such communities that bring together main elected political forces and societal stakeholders will also be instrumental in securing the survival

of future-regarding policies, and also in changing them swiftly if and when new information about long-term developments emerges. The binding and holding capacity of such communities should be essential for the success of future-regarding policies.

In addition to elected representatives and organized non-state stakeholders that typically possess some type of formalized capacity to influence policymaking in advanced democracies, this general framework emphasizes the role of the actor group that is often neglected in the election-centered depictions of democratic myopia: professional non-elected policy experts of public administration who study, design and coordinate policy work in all modern democracies. Earlier studies on Finnish policymaking suggest that through its ‘semi-independent’ role to plan and coordinate policy work this actor group can play a crucial role also in the making of future-regarding policies (e.g., [Aula & Koskimaa, 2023](#); [Gronow & Ylä-Anttila, 2019](#); [Murto, 2014](#)). More generally, too, we expect civil service experts to bear significant relevance at least also in other political systems where their professional position is clearly insulated from direct political pressures. If the career of a civil servant is entirely dependent on the will of elected representatives, such a role cannot exist. Significant differences exist between advanced democracies in how these relationships are defined and exercised (e.g., [Pollitt 2008](#)).

Finally, and most importantly for implanting future-regarding visions into policymaking, in the vein of [Jacobs \(2016\)](#) and [Boston \(2017\)](#), we should clearly acknowledge the role of auxiliary institutions that have been specifically designed to increase future-sensitivity in policy processes. Without institutions that deliberately seek to stretch political time perspectives, all activities of policy actors automatically focus on more short-term concerns on which traditional representative institutions have been designed for. Designated foresight institutions, especially whose ‘products’ are institutionalized and formally connected to ordinary policymaking processes, should be crucial for instilling future-regarding insight into policy preparation.

We now turn to investigate if and how the arrangements depicted in this broad general framework reflect in the operations of the Finnish national foresight system, to determine which actor groups, resources and interactions are most important for its political efficiency and survival. After assessing the evidence, we summarize the main findings in relation to these general characterizations to provide a more generalized set of factors that condition future-regarding policymaking in advanced democracies.

Note

- 1 According to an article published on August 26, 2018 in the leading Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, Tölli heard the quote (that in Finnish translates to ‘Siitä on lähdettävä että tähän on tultu’) from a friend in the 1970s and he then introduced it in 2008 in a personal blog post from where the saying spread widely.

3 Society and institutions

Forging capacities for more future-oriented governance

In this chapter, we describe the societal foundations, emergence and development of the Finnish national foresight system that provides for contemporary Finnish policymakers institutionalized capacity to build more unified visions and lasting compromises in regard to future challenges.

The chapter begins with a historical overview of the relevant features of Finnish society and its political system, which conditioned the birth of the national foresight system. As we noted in the introduction, we acknowledge the impact of various societal drivers, but we do not believe them to be unique or determinant for the creation of the system. Many East European countries have faced similar societal pressures, such as delayed economic development, serious inter-group tensions and close proximity of an expansive imperial state, and political challenges such as party system fragmentation, personalized rule, and so forth. Moreover, although a third of all legislature-based future-regarding institutions in existence today are found in this region (Estonian and Lithuanian parliaments have also developed relatively advanced future organs), similar regional clusters also exist in other continents with highly differing societal histories (e.g., South American countries like Brazil, Chile and Uruguay). Distinct societal pressures arguably contributed to the emergence of these organs, but no general societal or geographical factor explains it. The clearest unifying factor is creative individual agency that in most cases played a major role in the emergence of legislature-based future-regarding institutions (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022). For this reason, we emphasize the dynamic interplay of existing institutions, societal forces and individual agency in describing the emergence of the Finnish system.

3.1 Foundations: the changing political system of Finland

To provide a basic understanding of the socio-political context in which the Finnish national foresight system emerged and consolidated, this section presents a focused historical overview of the central features of the Finnish political system. Instead of suggesting any strict causal chains, we detail some specific socio-political developments in the recent history of Finland that according to our interpretation conditioned the emergence of the unique foresight system. We focus on party-political factors, regime dynamics and Finland's international connections. Historical factors

DOI: [10.4324/9781003198055-3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003198055-3)

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that directly concern the emergence and consolidation of state-level foresight activities are presented in the next section.

3.1.1 Disarray through establishment: the birth of Finnish parties, party system and president-centered governing regime

The origins of politically organized national-level policymaking in Finland can be traced to early 19th century, when the Grand Duchy of Finland (1809–1917) was established. An autonomous part of the Russian Empire, it was formed after the Finnish War (1808–1809) which was fought between Finland’s Western and Eastern neighbors, Sweden and Russia. Overall, both countries have had considerable impact on Finland. Prior to the era of Russian rule, for several centuries Finland belonged to the Kingdom of Sweden, which was a regional ‘superpower’. However, especially the ties to Russia have significantly molded Finnish politics in the modern era (Karvonen, 2014). Remotely located in the Easternmost corner of Europe, Finland shares over 1,000 kilometers of land border with its massive Eastern neighbor. The border with Russia is second longest in Europe after Ukraine. The sudden changes in Finland’s geopolitical ‘realities’ when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s have been considered instrumental for the formation of the Finnish national foresight system (e.g., Tiihonen, 2011).

The Diet of the Grand Duchy of Finland started to operate more permanently only in the 1860s, when a Finnish nationalist movement (the Fennomans) challenged the Swedish-speaking elite (Svecomans). The rift created the first political cleavage and party organizations, i.e., the diet factions that represented these two movements within the estates. However, the first real, and in many ways the most significant, wave of the organizing of Finnish parties and party system took place in the early 1900s, when the first period of Russification (1899–1905) – an intense effort of the Russian Empire to submit Finland under its rule – ended. Under strong nationalist spirit, the general strike of 1905 was followed by a parliamentary reform (1906) that created a modern unicameral parliament (Eduskunta) and brought universal suffrage and the first parliamentary elections (1907). At this juncture, the old diet parties needed to organize outside of the legislature. The Swedish-speaking diet faction turned into the Swedish People’s Party (SPP) (formed in 1906) and the two Finnish-speaking factions, the liberal Young Finnish Party and the conservative Finnish Party formed their own organizations. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) (formed in 1899, renamed in 1903, organized to its current form in 1906) and the Agrarian League (formed in 1908, since 1965 named as the Centre Party), which developed into Finland’s two historical major parties, also organized during this period. The second wave of organizing, which finalized a permanent cleavage structure, took place after Finland’s independence (1917) and Civil War (1918). The conservatives and monarchists within the Finnish language parties merged to form Finland’s third historical major party, the National Coalition Party (NCP, in 1918), while the liberal and republican factions established the National Progressive Party (1918–1951). By the 1920s, when the Communist Party

(1918) had splintered from the SDP, a fragmented party system that represented all major cleavages had been born (Borg, 1965; Mickelsson, 2007; Sundberg, 2008).

Still today, these parties or their direct descendants (in the case of communists) control the majority (around 2/3) of Eduskunta seats, but their form and mutual relations have significantly changed over the past century, along with societal modernization. In the early 20th century, geographically remote Finland was a backward country also in cultural and economic terms. Finnish national culture, which only a few decades earlier had institutionalized to challenge the cultural dominance of the Swedish-speaking groups, was still developing. In the 1920s, the primary sector (agriculture, forestry, fishing, etc.) employed a third of the workforce in other North European countries while in Finland around 70% worked in this sector. Still in the 1950s, when 80% of other countries' workforce worked in secondary (industry and manufacturing) and tertiary sectors (commerce, services, etc.) almost 50% of Finnish workers still worked in the primary sector (Karvonen, 2014). For the first half of the 20th century the country was rural, poor and in many ways underdeveloped. Due to the belated societal modernization, the recent organizing of the parties and the state apparatus, and the crippling Civil War, the first 50 years of operation of the Finnish party system were tainted by ideological polarization and struggle. Societal classes lived largely in separation and political parties separated into clearly demarcated 'camps'. During the 'years of danger' in the 1940s, when communists rapidly organized and were expected to annex Finland to the Soviet Union, also bourgeois parties (Centre and NCP) started to organize rapidly into a mass party format (Mickelsson, 2007; Sundberg, 1994). Until the 1970s, all key parties demonstrated strongly identified, class-based memberships and stable electoral support (Paloheimo & Raunio, 2008) and government coalitions were markedly tumultuous and relatively short-lived (Karvonen, 2014).

Various political realities, including a remote location next to imperial Russia, slow economic development and severe societal and political tensions, also reflected in the evolution of the Finnish governing regime, as a markedly pragmatist approach inspired by a quest for stability (Hallberg et al., 2009). The country's first constitution (1919) was crafted under severe turmoil caused by the falling of the Russian Empire (1917). Finnish independence (1917) and the Finnish Civil War (1918), where severe socio-economic tensions erupted into explicit violence, showed that there were strictly contrasting ideas regarding Finland's place in the world. The committee which designed the first constitution needed to find a compromise between the two sides of the Civil War: the leftist and parliament-leaning 'Reds' and the monarchic tendencies of the bourgeoisie 'Whites' who feared revolution. Consequently, reflecting the model of semi-presidential regime type, the committee balanced republican parliamentarism with a strong president that could nominate governments, dissolve parliaments, impact legislation via veto and decrees and lead the country's foreign policy (Tiihonen, 2013, pp. 16–30). Until the Second World War the president mostly moderated socio-political tensions, however. After the war, in which Finland successfully resisted Soviet invasion, President Paasikivi (in office 1946–1956) re-designed the presidency to serve as the supreme keeper of Finland's new foreign

policy doctrine based on ‘active neutrality’. The doctrine formed the basis for Finnish political practice for several decades. Paasikivi’s successor Urho Kekkonen (in office, 1956–1981) utilized his personalized relations with the Soviets to fortify presidential dominance in foreign relations and he also leveraged his special position to influence domestic politics that were formally controlled by the government, but which suffered from fragmented party system and tense inter-party relations. Due to his limited formal role in ordinary policymaking, Kekkonen’s impact to domestic affairs was sporadic and indirect (Hallberg et al., 2009, pp. 24–25; Nousiainen, 1985, pp. 273–277). Nevertheless, his personalized standing in the center of a fragmented young polity that sought unity and stability gave him informal powers, which he fully utilized. Parties’ capacity to join governments became subject to their status in the eyes of Soviet elites and Kekkonen personally managed government formation by appointing the chief negotiator and sometimes also individual ministers, whose suitability parties often assessed with the president in advance. Although Kekkonen’s haggling largely traversed through informal channels, he nonetheless exerted significant power, which thwarted the parliamentary features of the Finnish political system (Arter, 1987; Jansson, 1993; Nousiainen, 1985, 2006; Rantala, 1982). Formally and informally, he was considered as the strongest European president of the post-war era along with his French counterpart Charles De Gaulle (Duverger, 1980).

3.1.2 Soothing the strife: societal modernization, political stabilization and the ‘governmentalization’ of the regime

After the Second World War, in the latter half of the 20th century, Finland’s economical and party-political features began to change and the changes eventually reflected on regime dynamics, too. Assisted by the significant war reparations Finland was forced to pay to the Soviet Union, the industrial development was fast. 40% of jobs transferred from the primary sector to other sectors in just a few decades and Finland was the only Western European country to skip the era where secondary sector dominated the economy. The country developed quickly from ‘a poor agricultural country to a wealthy post-industrial society’ (Karvonen, 2014, pp. 24–31). Societal modernization, urbanization and gentrification also reflected in patterns of political participation. Already in the turn of the 1970s electoral turnout started to decrease (Paloheimo & Raunio, 2008) while electoral volatility began to increase (Drummond, 2006). The role and functioning of political parties changed, too. The rapid growth of party organizations and memberships that was prompted by the heated situation from mid-1940s to 1960s started to stagnate by the turn of the 1970s. Drained by the ‘overpoliticized’ atmosphere of the 1960s, and motivated by the newfound and broadly shared project to build a modern Nordic welfare state, parties started to distance themselves from polarized battles and began to focus on formal representation in the different municipal and state institutions. They gradually assumed the role of responsible and rational societal planners. The Party Act of 1969 formalized parties and connected them to the official state apparatus, providing them with member-independent resources in the form of national

party subsidy (Nousiainen, 1998; Rantala, 1982; Sundberg, 1994). In the turn of the 1980s, the amount of party members (Van Biezen et al., 2012) and local party branches (Mickelsson, 2007) started their indefinite downhill.

During this era, major changes occurred also in the party system and inter-party dynamics, imitating the general European tendencies of a waning opposition and ‘governmentalization’ of politics (Kirchheimer, 1954, 1966). Until the turn of the 1990s, parliamentary opposition possessed significant formal tools to impact policymaking, because the old constitution (of 1919) included significant qualified majority rules and suspensive veto power for minorities on several policy fields. However, opposition’s actual capacity to use these tools was hindered by party system fragmentation and a lack of coherence, and the governing ambitions of the NCP which had been kept out from governments since the mid-1960s due to the vocal anti-Soviet stance of some of its key members. By avoiding divisive action, the NCP begun to seek its way back to the governing position. Gradually, the broader acceptance of Finland’s policy of ‘active neutrality’ toward Soviet Union smoothened inter-party relations. A more consensual political culture was also enhanced by the centralizing of government coordination. It was driven by the commonly shared welfare state project and the adjoining 1968 general income policy agreement between the central unions of workers, businesses and the government. The agreement institutionalized the recognition of a common interest across all branches of the Finnish society and the method for settling of various work life-related issues, such as salaries, health services, taxes, etc., for several decades (Jansson, 1993; Nousiainen, 2006). The 1968 agreement also laid the ground for Finland’s strongly corporatist policymaking process. Since the 1970s, the national confederate organs of trade unions and business peak organizations and other major organized interests groups have held ex officio seats in all significant policy preparation processes. Another non-partisan feature of the policymaking process that started to develop during this era, and which has characterized Finnish policymaking ever since, is the proactive and semi-autonomous expert role of the Finnish state administration (Murto, 2014).

The changes in the general practices in policymaking and atmosphere also affected the operation of Finnish governments and the internal dynamics of the dual executive system. Prior to the 1980s, Finnish governments were notoriously tumultuous, volatile and short-lived, but already in the turn of the 2000s they were considered as the most stable ones in Scandinavia (Arter, 1999). For four consecutive decades, since 1983, core coalitions of Finnish governments have served full four-year terms. Despite government instability in the 1970s, the increasing cooperative capacity, ability for political initiative and the considerable resources provided by the ongoing welfare state project, made joining the government desirable for parties (Rantala, 1982). The idea of an effective government-driven majority governance started to popularize and soon the idea of ‘surplus governments’ which could override the qualified majority requirements gained ground (Arter, 1987; Elder et al., 1988; Nousiainen, 2006). The most significant change in the party realm concerned the NCP. It increased its support throughout the 1970s and the party deliberately shifted its positions to get accepted into governing coalitions (Jansson, 1993; Rantala, 1982).

In the 1980s, these various societal, economical, political and administrative changes paved way to a consensual, ideologically flexible and stable coalitional practice, where significant opposition parties or dominant parties do not exist and all parties frequently join governments that often represent both ends of the political spectrum and serve full terms. According to [Nousiainen \(2006\)](#), the new practice built on (1) increasing the relevance of election results as the chair of the largest party automatically became the chief negotiator in government formation and, if successful, the prime minister; (2) emphasizing the relations of the ‘three large’ parties (the SDP, NCP and Centre), two of which formed the base for a new coalition and one stayed in opposition, alternating these roles over time; (3) a formally codified code for cooperation among government parties; (4) the diminution of opposition through the abolishment of constitutional minority clauses (in 1992) and (5) putting political emphasis on general welfare state goals, instead of sectoral objectives.

These general principles, which were set to secure a stable operation of Finnish governments, were solidified in the 1980s and 1990s in binding inter-party agreements. The situation allowed the emergence of new government coalitions. The first coalition of the new era was erected after the 1983 elections and it was still based on the traditional cooperation of SDP and the Centre on which all Finnish governments since the mid-1960s were centered on. However, already in 1987 the NCP formed the first ‘blue-red’ coalition with SDP. In 1991, after the ‘blue-red’ government had served the whole four-year term, another rarity emerged: a pure coalition of bourgeois parties, Centre, NCP, SPP and Christian Democrats – a minor conservative party that gained its first seats in the 1970s. The two following elections, held in 1995 and 1999, continued the development toward ideologically flexible but stable coalitional practice. Alongside SDP and NCP, prime minister Paavo Lipponen’s (SDP) ‘rainbow coalitions’ included the Left Alliance that was born in 1990 from the ashes of various socialist parties including the Finnish People’s Democratic League and the Communist Party, the Green League (formed in 1988) and the liberal bourgeois SPP. Despite the very broad and fragmented ideological base, both coalitions governed seemingly fluidly for full terms under difficult societal conditions¹ ([Paloheimo, 2003, 2005](#)).

A related development, which enhanced the seemingly smooth shift from president-centered semi-presidentialism to genuine majority parliamentarism, was the gradual constitutional relegation of the Finnish presidency. In the turn of the 1980s, the negative experiences of president Kekkonen’s long reign that was few times extended through questionable measures, the de-polarization of Finnish party politics and the weakening of the Soviet Union created broad support among party elites to parliamentarize the constitution. Somewhat surprisingly, an integral figure in the parliamentarization process was Kekkonen’s successor Mauno Koivisto (SDP, in office 1982–1994) who, as an acting prime minister (1979–1982) publicly stood against Kekkonen, arguing that Eduskunta should have the final say in the process of government dismissal. Through this bold move, Koivisto gained wide popularity, which he capitalized by running successfully for the presidency. This position then gave him a mandate to start dismantling presidential

prerogatives (Jansson, 1993; Nousiainen, 1998). In line with his party's historical objective to parliamentarize the Finnish constitution, Koivisto started initiating piecemeal reforms in the late 1980s. The indirect electoral college-based selection method for the presidency was gradually changed into a direct popular vote. Additionally, the president's capacity to manage governments and dissolve the parliament were severely constrained, making the government the dominant executive institution. The process was finalized in 2000 with the introduction of a new, almost fully parliamentary constitution.

3.1.3 Toward professionalized elite cooperation in supranational policymaking space

Despite the major changes that occurred within the Finnish governing system during the four decades that followed the Second World War, up until the turn of the 1990s Finland's so-called 'second republic' was characterized by economic and cultural isolation and a state-centric character. Finnish economy was only partially connected to the global economic system from which the state tried to gain dividends through utilizing old-school protectionism and monetary policy based on occasionally devaluing the country's national currency Markka to make it more competitive. Backed by the newfound political consensus, economically 'Finland Ltd.' merely tried to survive in the global marketplace and secure a decent income for its citizens, also via new social welfare schemes, while a unity-seeking ethos of a small and distant country continued to dominate the cultural sphere (Alasuutari, 1996). In terms of politics and trade, the Soviet Union, with which Finland had formed a deep symbiosis after the war, was still by far the country's most important international partner (Karvonen, 2014; Luukkanen, 2009). The great majority of the products from Finland's heavily export-driven industry went to the Soviet Union (Kiander & Vartia, 1998).

This is why the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s became one of Finland's greatest drivers of change in the late 20th century. First, it impacted the ongoing constitutional relegation of the presidency, as the Soviet Union's demise removed a major source of president's informal power: the personalized relationship of trust with the Soviet leadership. In domestic politics, the president started to turn into a bystander. Koivisto still performed some Kekkonen-like maneuvers during his tenure, most famously by organizing the 1987 'blue-red' coalition of Social Democrats and National Coalition via his 'Manual steering' (he was nicknamed Manu), but already in the 1991 elections he removed himself from the government formation process. In 1994, SDP's Martti Ahtisaari, a professional diplomat and party outsider who avoided involvement in domestic politics (Nousiainen, 2006; Paloheimo, 2005), succeeded Koivisto. Finland's rapid accession to the European Union in the mid-1990s further constrained the president, as the parliament wanted to give the government a larger role in the monitoring of EU matters. In the new constitution (ratified in 2000), foreign policy leadership was formally split between the president and the government. This caused problems for the handling of EU matters that existed between domestic and foreign policy

issues. Thus, another constitutional amendment (2012) was devised to make all EU issues into government's exclusive prerogative and submit the final say in foreign policy disputes to the parliament (Raunio & Sedelius, 2020; Tiihonen, 2013). Meanwhile, empowered by the consolidation of the highly consensual coalitional culture, the gradual parliamentarization of the constitution gave birth to a strongly government-driven policymaking practice already in the 1990s. All successful bills come from the government whose leader, the prime minister, acts like a managing director of a major corporation. S/he forms 'the board' with the leaders of coalescing parties and the government receives support from highly coherent parliamentary groups, leaving very little room for effective opposition (Arter, 1999; Paloheimo, 2003, 2005; Paloheimo & Raunio, 2008).

The second major impact caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union was the aforementioned rapid EU membership process of Finland. In the late 1980s, no party openly advocated European integration, but as the status of the Soviet Union changed, the project advanced swiftly. Already in the autumn of 1992, Finland filed a membership application and after a referendum in 1994 the issue was ratified with significant majority in the Eduskunta. The multi-layered, supranational governing apparatus of the EU challenged old national political boundaries in many ways. EU membership decreased Finnish politicians' political leverage, as national legislation is considered inferior to EU legislation and an increasing amount of issues that used to be the prerogatives of national parliaments were now to be decided at EU level. As noted, European integration also influenced the functioning of the Finnish political system by challenging the president's strong role in Finnish foreign relations. Besides emphasizing government's role, EU membership raised the independent importance of the Eduskunta by giving it significant powers to oversee the development of Finland's EU policies. European integration also affected parties' internal power balance, as parties' leaders now had to make fast decisions far from parties' formal governing organs (Raunio, 2008; Raunio & Wiberg, 2000). Overall, Finland's EU membership professionalized policymaking.

The third major impact caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union concerns Finnish economy. Several countries experienced economical recess in the early 1990s, but the depression was exceptionally difficult for Finland (Kiander, 2002). Due to the gradual opening of trade and cheap international loans, Finnish public economy expanded rapidly in the end of the 1980s. The sudden crashing of its Eastern neighbor's economy, to which Finland's export-oriented economy was strongly tied to, decreased Finnish revenues rapidly while unemployment costs and interest rates increased substantially. Esko Aho's bourgeois government (in office, 1991–1995) executed a heavy program of cutbacks, but even with substantial saving packages the economy started to recover only in 1995 (Kiander & Vartia, 1998). To cushion itself against fluctuations of global economy, Finland also swiftly joined the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), in 1998 (Puoskari, 2012). The membership diminished the country's traditional economic leverage, independent monetary policy, and made the country subject to the EU's rigorous debt monitoring process that also limits national fiscal policies (Patomäki, 2014).

The economic turmoil of the 1990s pushed parties further in shifting focus from sectoral interests toward general policy planning (Nousiainen, 2006), normalized the inevitability of change and lack of options (Blomberg et al., 2002; Kettunen, 2002) and created ‘a permanent crisis’ that strengthened the emerging ‘de-politicized’ managerial style of political leadership (Kantola, 2002). During this era, the leading role of top level bureaucrats in policy preparation strengthened and consolidated. Especially the Ministry of Finance, whose experts now provide the overall framework for all state finances through formal budgetary spending limits, developed into a prominent power center in Finnish politics. Since the 1990s, the ministries have jointly prepared the foundation for the government’s main political document, the *government program* that coalescing parties agree on their objectives and which after this directs all policymaking in Finland, well in advance of the elections. In terms of substance, the government parties merely provide the ‘icing for the cake’ in the form of detail-level policy choices. Typically, party-based cabinet ministers have conformed to the expert view of the ministries rather routinely and the ministers’ final decisions rarely differ very much from what the civil servants propose (Murto, 2014, pp. 134–136, 291–295). Assisted by the spirit of consensus and corporatism, strongly expert-driven ‘strategic leadership’ that stands on ministries’ formal long-term strategies has gradually permeated all policy domains in Finland (Koskimaa et al., 2021).

In addition to administrative culture, the consolidation of the managerial spirit and the general capacity of Finnish governments to drive policymaking provides a favorable environment for effective future-regarding policymaking. However, we must also carefully note already at this juncture that behind the customary, seemingly managerial and expert-driven policymaking practices lies a relatively coherent political vision that has developed over decades in close cooperation between the old and established parties that were born already in the early 20th century and started a deep cooperation already decades ago. Over its century long existence, the Finnish party system has been very stable. Notwithstanding the various guises of communists, during past half century only three new parties have been able to institutionalize to the system: Christian Democrats (born in 1958, first MPs in the mid-1970s), Green League (1988) and the populist-nationalist Finns party (1995) which was created on the ruins of The Finnish Rural Party (FRP) that splintered from the Agrarian League/Centre Party in 1959. While the Greens left their radicalism to the 1980s and joined a governing coalition as a moderate and mid-sized partner already in 1995, as the first Green party in Europe, the Finns challenged the historical dominance of the ‘three large’ parties (the SDP, Centre and NCP) in the early 2010s, placing third in the 2011 parliamentary elections and second in every subsequent election (2015, 2019 and 2023). While participating in Juha Sipilä’s government (2015–2019), the party’s chair and ‘founding father’ Timo Soini who championed old-school rural populism was replaced with Finland’s most well-known immigration critic Jussi Halla-aho and the party split. The party then assumed a markedly aggressive line toward the EU, immigration and, more recently, Finland’s progressive climate policies. While Sipilä’s party (Centre)

crashed in the 2019 and 2023 elections, the refurbished Finns party continued its rise and became a major partner in Petteri Orpo's (NCP) government formed after the 2023 elections. The party still represents only around 20% of the Finnish voters and it can never govern without at least one other major parties, but its prolonged and increasing success has the potential to genuinely alter the traditional consensual dynamics of the Finnish party system (as [Arter, 2012](#) noted after the Finns 'big bang' win in the 2011 elections).

3.2 The formation of the Finnish national foresight system

Today, the Finnish national foresight system is a comprehensively institutionalized multi-level structure that connects the government, the parliament, ministries, various organized non-state actors, such as interest groups, NGOs, academic and other research organizations, and regional authorities into a coordinated production of foresight information. This information is then condensed to various official reports, mainly at the level of the government ministries, with the aim to enhance the future-orientation of Finnish policymaking. The system is widely regarded as the most developed national-level foresight system in the world and a global pacesetter for other countries and international organizations like the EU (e.g., [Boston, 2017](#); [Fernandes & Heflich, 2022](#); [OECD, 2019](#)).

However, the foresight system did not just appear one day in its full and elaborate form. Its formative institutional mechanism and 'backbone', the so-called 'future dialogue' which is an organized future-regarding communique between the government and the parliament that takes place during every government term emerged in the early 1990s. From this initial structure, which was functionally and organizationally quite restricted, the system gradually developed over the course of three decades. It progressively connected new functions, organizations and networks, broadening the system's foresight capacities and enhancing its legitimacy and formal connections to policymaking. The system's main constituent units and processes have operated in a relatively similar fashion roughly since the late-2010, but due to policymakers' ongoing efforts to connect the system more tightly to actual policymaking, it is being evaluated and developed constantly, leading to changes every now and then.

In addition to the formal foresight system, several other administrative processes, documents and tools have been developed in the governmental sphere since the turn of the millennium to provide additional capacity for Finnish policymakers to exercise 'strategic' governance, i.e., policy planning that crosses several government terms. Combined with the relatively open and organizationally heterogeneous foresight system, the interconnected operations facilitate a frame of thinking, which strongly emphasizes policy challenges, planning and solutions that extend beyond single government terms. While elected policymakers retain formal authority to make binding decisions according to priorities they choose, all decision-making is now strongly conditioned by preparative work that especially tenured civil servants control in these processes.

Below, we describe the most important developments leading to the current institutional configuration. Its detailed operation – how foresight information is

produced, condensed and directed to policymaking arenas – will be examined, explained and assessed in the next chapter.

3.2.1 *Early origins: an idea of a state-bound futures organ*

After Second World War, as the nuclear threat of Cold War and the first signs of a global environmental crisis emerged, an interest in predicting and managing the future started to increase in various arenas. In the 1960s, foresight efforts were organized in RAND corporation with their fine-grained modeling of security dilemmas, through the creation of the business-oriented World Future Society (1966), in the Mankind 2000 initiative of social scientists (1968), under the sustainability-focused Club of Rome (1969), and, finally, through the emergence of a global network of academic futures scholars, the World Futures Studies Federation (1973) (Andersson, 2018). Around the same time, various state institutions also started to develop their own capacities to foresee and anticipate future challenges. Already in 1946 France set up its General Planning Commission, which was re-named in 2006 as the Centre for Strategic Analysis and in 2013 to France Strategy, which is an advisory body where experts produce comprehensive long-term plans on various central topics like trade, economy, environment to aid government decision-making (France Stratégie 2016, <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/>). In the latter half of the 20th century, various executive branches around the world developed similar organs (SOIF, 2021; Tönurist & Hanson, 2020). In 1972, the first future-oriented legislative organ saw daylight when the US Congress erected the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), an expert body for studying and teaching congress representatives about the nature, costs and benefits of technological developments. In the 1980s, similar units emerged in several European legislatures (Salo & Kuusi, 2001; Nentwich, 2016).

Motivated by these various experiences, plans to create a science-focused and expert-driven technology assessment (TA) unit started to emerge also in Finland in the 1970s. However, despite the strong supporting role of state-bound science and technology institutions, a peculiar birth process eventually – in the early 1990s – led to the development of a state-bound foresight system that is more based on the visionary approach of academic futures studies than the natural scientific approach of strategic foresight and technology assessment (Miettinen et al., 1999; Tapio & Heinonen, 2018). According to few of our interviewees who have followed the process from a close distance, the relatively early and comparatively strong institutionalization of the Finnish futures studies network in the 1980s was an important facilitator of the later emergence of the state foresight system. By connecting various societal sectors (academic, business, etc.) and actively seeking to communicate also with decision makers, it provided a strong societal foundation for the more organized state-bound foresight system. This factor should be emphasized, as it has been considered important also for the permanence of legislature-based future organs (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). While perhaps being easier to erect, the narrowly focused and entirely expert-based parliamentary TA units that emerged especially in the 1980s can also be easier to dismantle in political disputes, as the sudden demise of the United States' founding TA institution OTA

in the mid-1990s demonstrated (Vig & Paschen, 2000). In addition to factors that cause future-regarding state institutions to emerge, the factors that make them persist are likely also present already during the formative processes, and in the long term they seem at least equally important.

Reflecting the importance of individual agency, a major impact on the early developments came from Pentti Malaska, a professor in electrical engineering at the Helsinki University of Technology and later Finland's first professor of futures studies at University of Turku. He became the first Finnish member of the Club of Rome (in 1972), and he is generally considered as the 'father' of Finnish futures studies. Somewhat atypically to the 1970s Finnish academic culture, Malaska was very well connected internationally and domestically. Lacking explicit partisan stance but strongly believing in the societal power of futures studies, he engaged actively with national and international decision makers in various high-level networks. In 1980, Malaska established the Finnish Society for Futures Studies (FSFS). Formally, the FSFS was a scientific association, but it also served as a nongovernmental organization with explicit ambition to connect stakeholders from universities, businesses and other societal sectors (Miettinen et al., 1999; Pouru et al., 2017; Tapio & Heinonen, 2018). Importantly, as our interviewees noted, due to its broad and visionary focus the FSFS also attracted policymakers, and while Malaska was not a politician, he advocated for a future-regarding perspective in formal decision-making, too. Overall, the Finnish scientific community reacted positively to the idea of a state-bound futures organ.

3.2.2 *Taking the idea to the parliament*

In the 1980s, the idea of a state-bound foresight organ reached Finnish formal governing institutions. An especially important forum was the Association of Researchers and Members of Parliament (Tutkas) founded in 1970 in the Finnish parliament Eduskunta. Through lectures and seminars curated by affiliated experts, it sought to educate MPs on scientific developments, especially regarding technological change and sustainability (Miettinen et al., 1999). During the 1980s, Tutkas also started to discuss about creating a foresight institution in Eduskunta (Arter, 2000). Although other, more government-centered initiatives also surfaced around that time (Wilenius, 2005), eventually the unit was placed at Eduskunta, reflecting an important institutional choice that significantly conditioned the birth and especially the institutionalization of the broader state foresight system (e.g., Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020). As several past examples demonstrate, the existence of purely executive-driven state-bound foresight activities tend to be heavily conditioned by the wills of changing governments, making them essentially precarious. (Koskimaa & Raunio 2022, 2023b). While the actual foresight activities nowadays usually take place in the governmental arena, the parliamentary connection continues to provide an essential legitimating bedrock for the broader system.

The birth process of the actual futures organ again highlights the importance of individual agency in the creation of such novel governing institutions. Without the deep personal involvement of two MPs, it is unlikely that the foresight system would have

materialized, at least in this specific form, or persisted through the turbulent 1990s when Finland experienced a grave resource deficit resulting from the worst economic depression it has ever faced. In 1983, Martti Tiuri who acted as a professor of radio engineering at the Helsinki University of Technology was elected to Eduskunta from the list of NCP that is known for its deep ties with business and trade sectors. Soon after his selection Tiuri, an avid supporter of technology assessment which he had studied in the United States through the experience of the OTA, started to chair Tutkas. In 1984, Tiuri published a book titled 'The future begins now' where he criticized the MPs' hectic work conditions, which according to Tiuri decreased their ability to keep informed about important advances in science and technology (Miettinen et al., 1999). According to one interviewee, Malaska and Tiuri formed an important team, although the two tech professors did not get along too well; Malaska was a long-term champion of sustainable development and Tiuri focused strongly on technological development, and e.g., nuclear energy, but despite their differences they shared a strong conviction about the importance of future. The circle of visionaries was perfected in the 1987 parliamentary elections, when Eero Paloheimo, another PhD and later also a professor (of wood construction) of the Helsinki University of Technology, was elected to Eduskunta. Although Paloheimo was a devout environmentalist, who led the radical ecologist faction of the Green League and thus represented the far end of the political spectrum, he and Tiuri shared a similar, critical approach to myopic legislative politics. For decades, Paloheimo had written extensively about the challenges of future-regarding policymaking and upon election to Eduskunta, he noted that he wanted to become an MP specifically to battle against the myopia of parliamentary politics (Arter, 2000; Kunttu, 2007). One interviewee speculated that the very different characters probably just recognized a mutual interest and opportunity, which made it possible for them to cooperate.

The idea to create a parliamentary futures unit started to materialize in 1986 when a group of 133 citizens, consisting mainly of researchers, journalists and MPs, issued an initiative to the President of Finland, the government and the Speaker's Council of Eduskunta about creating a foresight unit in Eduskunta. The initiative was re-stated a few months later in the form of an official parliamentary question signed by 136 MPs out of 200. At first, the incumbent government led by a Social Democratic prime minister Kalevi Sorsa gave a lukewarm reaction to the initiative, but in a Tutkas seminar that was organized after the 1987 election where government changed the new prime minister Harri Holkeri (of NCP) and other major coalition parties (including Social Democrats who changed their leader in 1987) took a more positive stance toward the idea of state-bound foresight unit. The government ordered a special committee to investigate organizational alternatives for enhancing the future-sensitivity of Finnish governance. In its report in 1989, an expert committee led by sociology professor Erik Allardt suggested creating a futures research institute to state's central administration, bypassing Eduskunta. Eventually, however, this initiative was reduced to two researcher positions at the Academy of Finland, the state's main coordinator of science funding (Aalto-Lassila, 2008; Miettinen et al., 1999; Wilenius, 2005). Although no formal record has proved it, it appears that a power struggle played out between various institutional actors.

According to an interviewee, the scientists probably hoped to gain control of the institution, but the MPs, now including both Tiuri and Paloheimo, ‘probably just saw their opportunity and snatched it’. Although the Finnish governing practice was already turning toward the government-centered model, the formal empowerment of the parliament that came with the rebalancing of the semi-presidential regime was also felt inside Eduskunta.

While the experts were still charting alternatives, the parliamentary actors gained momentum. Already in 1987, Paloheimo began to collect names for a private member’s initiative requesting a constitutional amendment that mandated every government to issue a report on important future challenges for the Eduskunta. This initiated the process that eventually led to the emergence of the ‘future dialogue’, which, as was noted, is a formalized exchange of extensive future reports between the government and Eduskunta, and which nowadays forms the formal-institutional backbone of the national foresight system (Tiihonen, 2011). In 1987–1992, Paloheimo collected an impressive amount of 167 names, which was an all-time record for a single-MP’s personal bill and enough to pass the 5/6 majority quota for amending the constitution (Arter, 2000). However, despite the strong backing, the process to initiate and institutionalize the ‘future dialogue’ was tough and tedious. The initiative met fierce opposition among Eduskunta’s leading civil servants and some politicians too who deemed the new institution unnecessary. The critics noted that ordinary parliamentary committees could equally well assess future developments while the new committee would not contribute to Eduskunta’s standard legislative work. The institution was also considered potentially harmful, as its cross-sectoral and cross-temporal focus could jeopardize the work of other committees (Boston et al., 2019; Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020). It was also considered problematic from the constitutional perspective to demand governments to address issues that stretch beyond their formal tenure (Arter, 2000).

At the same time, many factors in the broader societal context supported the initiative. As was already hinted, the turbulent situation caused by the downfall of the Soviet Union in the turn of the 1990s created favorable ground for new innovative ideas. Russia’s impact on Finnish society and politics had strengthened after Second World War, when Finland was ordered significant war reparations to Soviet Union, putting the countries’ economies in tight symbiosis. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union slumped Finland’s economy, which was strongly export-driven and dependent on trade with the Soviet Union. This resulted in Finland experiencing the worst economic depression in its modern history. Coincidentally, the country decided to integrate itself to the West and it rapidly sought membership in the European Community. Finland formally applied for membership already in March 1992, just a few months after the Soviet Union’s formal dissolution. Importantly, the rapid and dramatic transformation of Finland’s internal and external operating context pushed decision makers to quickly entertain a more strategic and future-oriented mindset (Wilenius, 2005). Besides creating a significant push toward a parliamentarization of the Finnish constitution that had begun already in the 1980s and was finalized in 2000 (Nousiainen, 2006; Paloheimo, 2005), the developments of the early 1990s have been considered as central drivers of the birth

of the national foresight system (Tiihonen, 2011). At a bare minimum, the situation provided a ‘window of opportunity’ for politicians to take advantage of.

3.2.3 *The emergence and consolidation of the ‘future dialogue’*

In June 1992, amid severe economic and diplomatic tensions, Paloheimo’s motion to amend the constitution entered the formal legislative process. According to Koskimaa and Raunio (2020) and our interviewees, the ‘founding fathers’ had anticipated some of the criticism. In order to emerge and institutionalize, they figured that the ‘future dialogue’ had to be based on an official, permanently executed government procedure which does not, however, threaten the competencies of established parliamentary organs like standing committees, which would give them an incentive to oppose the new institution. Paloheimo based his initiative on the so-called report mechanism (in Finnish, *selonteko*) that, in contrast to the standard lawmaking process, had been developed more recently to improve the more general and informal correspondence between the government and Eduskunta. While being an official government matter that in terms of the process mimics the ordinary correspondence between ministries that prepare legislation and parliamentary committees that scrutinize and reply the bills, the exchanged reports are thematically broad and they cannot initiate a vote of confidence in any circumstances, thus securing the government from serious political challenge. Being simply a mechanism for exchanging broadly formulated statements of long-term problems and solutions, the report mechanism also did not violate the competencies of, or demanded extra work from, the established legislative committees which play a central role in the Finnish committee-based ‘working parliament’ model. Nevertheless, the official nature of the report demanded an official response from the parliament, which called for a designated organ to produce it.

In September 1992, Eduskunta’s Constitutional Law Committee (CLC), which is a permanent parliamentary standing committee comprised of MP that in the Finnish political system functionally mimics a supreme court that reviews the constitutionality of bills, advised Eduskunta to discard Paloheimo’s motion. The CLC reasoned that extending government duties and mandates over electoral terms would cause various types of problems. Besides ethical considerations relating to the temporal limitations of electoral terms, the CLC doubted governments’ capacity to produce farsighted reports in the tense post-election context. Following CLC’s recommendation, the plenary dismissed Paloheimo’s motion (by a 92–74 vote). To subvert the decision, Tiuri came up with a smart compromise, replacing the demand for a constitutional amendment with a parliamentary resolution that obliges the current government to produce a future report and, on the basis of that experience, consider later the establishing of a more permanent mechanism. The CLC recommended to also discard Tiuri’s motion, but in extraordinary fashion the Eduskunta plenary ended up supporting Tiuri’s motion (with a 96–54 vote) and forced the incumbent government led by prime minister Esko Aho (in office, 1991–1995) to produce the first future report (Aalto-Lassila, 2008; Arter, 2000). In the Finnish political system that already in the 1980s had started to develop toward its current government-centered

operating mode (Jungar, 2002; Nousiainen, 2006; Paloheimo, 2003) such independent and active agency of the parliament was a rare treat, even despite the ongoing formal empowering of the parliament.

The first government future report, which was prepared under the leadership of the Prime Minister's Office and dealt with Finland's new place in the international political arena, was presented to Eduskunta the following year, in 1993. As the report mechanism demanded a formal reply report from Eduskunta, it needed to establish a special organ to prepare it - and here saw its birth the now world-famous Committee for the Future (CF). The first CF was commissioned on an ad hoc basis, only for this limited task and term (1993–1995). Its first leader was Eero Paloheimo, the Committee's other 'founding father'. As was noted above, the institutionalization of the world's first genuine parliamentary futures organ was a long and arduous process. Despite the broad cross-party support in the build-up phase, many continued to doubt the role and utility of such an unusual organ (Arter, 2000; Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020). Despite signing Paloheimo's motion, majority of MPs followed the CLC in the initiation phase. Nevertheless, the new government that was formed after the 1995 parliamentary elections, the 'rainbow coalition' that was led by prime minister Paavo Lipponen (Social Democrats) and which included six parties with great ideological variation, committed to producing another future report. Under the strong advocacy of Lipponen's government, Finland joined the European Union in 1995, prompting the government to focus on European integration also in its future report. The issuing of the report in 1996 again raised the need for an official Eduskunta response, and thus the CF was re-instituted – again on a temporary basis and now under the lead of its other 'founding father' Tiuri. After the 1999 parliamentary elections, in which Lipponen's government renewed its mandate, the CF was instituted again. The CF still existed on a temporary basis, but it was now commissioned on the explicit request of Eduskunta's Speaker's Council (Aalto-Lassila, 2008; Arter, 2000).

The CF received a permanent status in 2000, in the process where Finland's long-prepared constitutional reform was finalized. Due to the simplified form of the new constitution, the roles of parliamentary committees had to be determined in a new ancillary document, Eduskunta's standing orders. Eduskunta's Speaker's Council supported the formalizing of the CF's status by defining it a permanent standing committee, but the CLC and various other leading Eduskunta officials opposed the motion. Reflecting the process that led to the initial emergence of the CF, the motion again received widespread cross-party support from independent MPs. Contrary to the typical operating mode of Eduskunta, which at least since the early 1990s has been based on a strict government-opposition divide supported by highly coherent party groups, MPs' positions did not follow any partisan divisions and parties apparently made no effort to affect the outcome. Tellingly, the initiative was almost equally supported and opposed inside both main government parties, the SDP and the NCP (Aalto-Lassila, 2008; Arter, 2000). In a way, the formalization of the permanent status of the CF was especially a demonstration of the formal individual mandate of MPs and the formally empowered status of the Finnish parliament which in practice was becoming subservient to the government in many ways.

Since 2000, the ‘future dialogue’, where the government first produces a broad report on a future-regarding theme of its choosing and the CF then replies to it after inspecting the report thoroughly, has been a permanent fixture of the Finnish governing system. Although the Eduskunta could technically abolish the CF in the beginning of every parliamentary term when the standing orders are formally confirmed, no such motivation exists among MPs, party groups, Eduskunta officials and government representatives (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020). We detail the process and outcomes of the ‘dialogue’ in the next chapter, after briefly describing the other state foresight actors and networks that organized around it the 2000s.

3.2.4 *Integrating the foresight activities of non-state actors*

During the three decades after the formation of the ‘future dialogue’, various organizations, including those of non-state actors that perform strategic foresight, have become more thoroughly integrated to the national foresight system. As we noted above, solid networks were established among various societal foresight actors well before any national future organs existed. Pentti Malaska and his associates established the FSFS in 1980 to connect foresight activists from all societal sectors. In 1992, alongside with the creation of the ‘future dialogue’, the Ministry of Education ordered the establishment of Finland Futures Research Centre (FFRC) at Turku School of Economics. Under Malaska’s lead, the university-level research and teaching organization set out to institutionalize futures studies as an academic field in Finland and provide methodological assistance to the CF, whose one permanent clerk has since represented the FFRC. Besides developing into a world-leading research institute that offers fixed teaching in futures studies to all Finnish universities, the FFRC has become a significant coordinator of national and international foresight networks. Despite being organized largely through universities, the FSFS and FFRC cultivated a culture of inclusion, providing an open discussion forum for all societal actors interested in futures and foresight (Tapio & Heinonen, 2018).

In the mid-1990s, when Finland finally started to revive from the economic depression and begun to enjoy rapid economic growth along with the first ICT revolution, the relevance of strategic foresight increased significantly also in the business sector, putting technological viewpoints in the center of non-state foresight activities (Dufva & Ahlqvist, 2015). During this era, the CF that had cooperated with various non-state actors since the early 1990s when preparing its future reports (Arter, 2000) introduced features of these activities to its own practices. It started to organize frequent ‘learning trips’ to other countries, especially ones that had invented new ways to succeed in a globalizing economy which Finland now also was part of. In 1998, CF’s formal tasks were extended to include the parliamentary technology assessment (PTA) that later developed into CF’s ‘own projects’, which are MP-led research actions that are nowadays considered as its central task (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020, 2022; Tiihonen, 2011).

Around the turn of the millennium, government ministries that by this time had also started to develop independent foresight capacities began to interact more systematically with non-state foresight actors that had provided sector-specific

foresight information to ministries through informal channels. To enhance the efficiency and transparency of the correspondence, the government started to organize annual foresight forums where non-state actors could more explicitly build cooperation with state institutions. In 2005, Innovation Fund Sitra, Finland's official 'state think tank' which operates under Eduskunta with substantial independent resources and was one of the main collaborators in the early foresight forums, organized a permanently operating *national foresight network* to boost the coordination of the foresight activities of non-state actors (Prime Minister's Office, 2007). Less than a decade later, after thorough evaluations, the network was integrated more tightly into the broader foresight system by re-defining its tasks and placing it under the coordination of the Prime Minister's Office (Prime Minister's Office, 2014). Despite its gradually formalizing position, however, non-state actors' foresight activities, products and their impact on Finnish policymaking have remained vague and small (Pouru et al. 2020).

3.2.5 *Organizing the intra- and inter-ministerial foresight activities*

Naturally, government ministries researched future-regarding themes long before the activity was called strategic foresight or had anything to do with organized futures initiatives. As was mentioned, in the late 1980s the executive branch participated indirectly in the building of the 'future dialogue' by ordering a report that suggested building a state-bound foresight unit inside the state administration. Although the executive eventually 'lost' the initiative to Eduskunta, which built the CF to provide a reply to government's future report that Eduskunta demanded, during this period the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) that a bit later started to direct the creation of the government's future report developed a will to build an independent foresight capacity. However, as it lacked preparatory resources, due to its mainly coordinative role, it had to rely on the expertise of sectoral ministries (Prime Minister's Office, 2011; Wilenius, 2005). Already in the 1990s, the Prime Minister's Office also 'outsourced' expertise from various non-state foresight actors by commissioning research and reports. Overall, as was also noted by our interviewees, the initial foresight processes were often created rather spontaneously on an ad hoc basis, along with the interactions of a few likeminded public officials.

In the 2000s, the role of the executive branch in national foresight strengthened considerably. Gradually, ministries took control of the organizing of research and distilling of foresight information, and the Prime Minister's Office started to coordinate the system, including the network of non-state actors that produced foresight information. According to a Prime Minister's Office evaluation report, a general turn toward a more future-oriented ethos in ministries' tasks and work practices started around the turn of the millennium, in connection with Finland's newfound EU duties. Broad sector-wide and more detailed issue-specific 'strategic' documents were developed to improve long-term planning in ministries and more stringent assessment measures were created to enable a more transparent monitoring of long-term plans that also connected to various EU initiatives (Prime Minister's Office, 2007). According to our interviewees, government ministries started to assume

more ‘think tank-like’ features in the early 2000s. Ordinary policy preparation and implementation tasks, which according to our interviewees take roughly only around half of the four-year government term, were amended with expectations to collect and analyze more open-ended insights from various stakeholders of relevant policy networks. These insights were then summarized in broad-ranging documents, such as ministerial strategies, that set a knowledge-based sectoral ‘ground narrative’ with which the detailed political interests of changing governments and EU regulation were to be fitted in the policy process. While this activity was perhaps seldom referred to as strategic foresight, the practice to ‘think a little ahead’ became the standard mindset in ministries, an interviewee noted.

In the early 2000s, also the more explicit intra- and inter-ministerial foresight activities started to organize, first around work life related issues (education, labor, human geography, technology, etc.) that were salient in the post-depression economy. In 2002, an initiative to organize ministries’ budding but still largely spontaneous and limited foresight activities emerged among the highest-ranking elected and non-elected policymakers, the party-based cabinet ministers and ministries’ leading civil servants, the general secretaries. Putting their eyes on the looming 2003 parliamentary elections, these leading policymakers urged ministries to produce sector-specific ‘future reviews’, forward-looking expert summaries of the most pressing challenges and solutions of the policy fields, to assist parties and interest groups in preparing positions for the post-election government negotiations and to also inform the public about salient challenges and alternatives (Bergman, 2011). The ministries have issued ‘future reviews’ before all general elections since 2003. In time, the preparation process and contents of the reports have gradually harmonized and in recent years the ministries’ general secretaries have also begun to produce more condensed joint reports of the most pressing long-term issues and solutions. We detail these in the next chapter.

One year after the 2003 election, the *governmental foresight network* was formed and placed under the leadership of the Ministry of Labor. It sought to improve intra- and inter-ministerial foresight capacities by (1) raising awareness within the state administration about future challenges that require foresight information; (2) developing foresight expertise inside ministries; (3) coordinating foresight-related communication between ministries and (4) producing an inter-ministerial review of inter-sectoral megatrends to be used alongside the sector-specific future reviews (Prime Minister’s Office, 2007). The network was formally conceived as a ‘soft coordination instrument’, although its ministry-level coordinators reported to the prestigious joint meeting of ministries’ general secretaries who also played a central role in originating the network (Bergman, 2011). Ministries’ general secretaries are generally considered as very powerful political actors, whose influence can exceed the impact of ordinary cabinet ministers (Murto, 2014). Already in 2007, the government foresight network’s coordination duties were transferred to the Prime Minister’s Office to bring ministries’ efforts closer to the preparation of the government future report, which by this time was still an independent mechanism (Prime Minister’s Office, 2011). While the ministries produced the first ‘future reviews’ independently, already the subsequent reports issued in 2006 and

2010 were commissioned and coordinated by the Prime Minister's Office, which utilized its resources that were specifically designated for the task (Bergman, 2011).

3.2.6 Assessing and re-structuring the foresight system for greater policy impact

With these new future-sensitive governance tools, the national foresight system that previously comprised mostly of the slow moving and thematically broad 'future dialogue' developed toward a more focused and politically ambitious construct. Although still limited in resources, the system now more explicitly and with a more institutionalized character aims at lengthening the temporal focus of Finnish policymaking. In the first decade of the 2000s the political impact of the system was likely modest, as ministerial foresight efforts were largely considered a mere curiosity that even its coordinators usually managed as a side project, alongside their actual tasks which concerned the preparation of government's policy initiatives. However, since its inception, the system has been assessed, evaluated and re-structured many times, with the explicit intention to increase its policy impact. In the 2010s, the system's structures were comprehensively refurbished to address the central flaws of the initial model. Because the system had mainly evolved spontaneously, through the sporadic interactions of likeminded individuals, it was only able to provide unfocused foresight information with little capacity to impact policies.

Officially, the system aimed at increasing the 'agility' of the government's policy work via collecting, condensing and channeling high quality foresight information to formal decision-making processes. However, especially the system's capacity to utilize the input of non-state foresight actors raised concerns. Reflecting the ethos of futures studies and perhaps also the advocates of democratic participation, broad-ranging inclusion was considered essential, but according to its evaluators the system was not inclusive enough. Meanwhile, the system was considered to produce too much unfocused 'noise' and vague 'horizontal' information, which could not affect policies in any meaningful sense. Without discarding the need for inclusion and contextualizing 'horizontal' analysis, the reformers needed to connect the foresight efforts of non-state actors to ministries foresight activities to provide more focus and relevance for the system (Dufva & Ahlqvist, 2015; Prime Minister's Office, 2007, 2011). Overall, the first decade of the broader national foresight system was plagued by similar problems that CF had faced in the 1990s. Back then, the CF was – unrealistically – expected to produce a democratically legitimate and politically meaningful contribution without agitating established policy actors. The broader foresight system's resources were clearly inadequate and the expectation to simultaneously realize various administrative ideals such as democratic inclusion and evidence-based policy planning was far from attainable. In the evaluation reports, the role and quality of ministerial foresight activities was also assessed separately. It was recognized that new foresight efforts improved the ministries' internal strategy work which outlines the main developments in the policy field and the ministries were also now more able to assist in detecting and highlighting future challenges to be addressed in upcoming government programs. However, the evaluations also mentioned serious challenges in utilizing foresight information

in more detailed governing tasks, raising a need to reform the structure, schedule and publicity of the future reviews (Prime Minister's Office, 2007, 2011, 2014). In the 2013 government future report, the system was defined as too fragmented and only able to produce unfocused information that is hard to utilize in policymaking. The detected root cause was poor coordination and it was to be improved through a three-tier hierarchy of information production: (1) non-state actors produce the 'big picture' using their own resources; (2) commissioned expert affiliates produce a more phenomenon-specific and detailed understanding and (3) ministries summarize the most relevant perspectives for policymakers in their strategic foresight reports (Ramboll, 2013). The ministries' independent role increased, and the development has continued ever since as we detail below.

Based on these basic principles, the national foresight system – including the 'future dialogue' – was thoroughly restructured in the mid-2010s. The reform was conducted under the coordination of the Prime Minister's Office and through the network of ministries' foresight experts, who had gradually started to establish a more permanent standing inside ministries. The main idea was to optimize the use of existing networks by re-fitting their tasks and by centralizing the coordination of the overall system. To improve the quality and flow of foresight information from non-state actors toward decision-makers, both expert networks, the ones of non-state actors and ministry experts, were now placed under the direct coordination of the Prime Minister's Office. It already managed the other strategic governing tools of the government, such as the 'future dialogue' and the implementation of the government program which is the detailed binding agreement of government goals agreed between coalition partners in post-election negotiations. The plan was also to put the networks closer to each other, as it could help the ministries in finding relevant information for their reports. To formalize Prime Minister's Office's leadership role and to encourage, enable and monitor the network's information needs and production, a coordinative multilevel organization comprising of a head secretary, professional secretariat and expert-based council (the Government Foresight Group) was instituted (Prime Minister's Office, 2014).

Other reforms to the Finnish governing system during this era supported a change toward more 'strategic' (that is, long-term) decision-making. In two major state administration development projects (OHRA 2014–2015 and PAKURI 2017–2018) the government program was formally divided into (1) a strategic part with objectives that reach beyond the government term and (2) an implementation part with measures that are taken during the government term (Prime Minister's Office, 2019). Although the scheme has been devised to varying degree by different governments, the aim for policymaking that extends across several government terms is clearly prominent within the state administration, as is demonstrated by several other administrative innovations we detail below. Reflecting the dualistic logic of the 'strategic government program', the 'future dialogue' was also restructured during the 2015–2019 government term by dividing the government future report into two parts. The first was set to present an overview of the studied theme and the second described potential solutions. To integrate ministries more thoroughly also to this process in which they previously consulted only informally, and to improve the overall effectiveness of the mechanism and the dialogue

between the parliament and ministries, the CF demanded that the first part of the future report should be based on the ‘continuous joint foresight work of the ministries’ (CF, 2018). The next government led first by Antti Rinne and then Sanna Marin (in office 2019–2023) started utilizing the new model immediately. According to one interviewee, the point of the reform was to harness the ministries’ expertise in a way that elected politicians could focus only on the most relevant issues when taking further decisions. The ministries thus gained new tools for impacting the agendas of Finnish policymaking. Emphasizing this dynamic, a recent evaluation report recommended connecting the ministries’ foresight activities more tightly also to ordinary policy preparation inside ministries (Prime Minister’s Office, 2019). Overall, the ministries role has strengthened considerably in the national foresight system, signaling the increasing overall relevance of these activities in national level governance, which ministries especially drive.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the emergence, development and consolidation of the Finnish national foresight system that nowadays provides a permanently operating and well-coordinated effort to systematically include a future-regarding perspective in Finnish policymaking. Established during a societally turbulent period to an administration-heavy governing culture, the system has gradually incorporated new actors and tasks, providing it more potential to lengthen the time perspectives of Finnish policies. The integration and strengthening of intra- and inter-ministerial strategic foresight has been especially important. This is evident in the evolution of future-regarding policy documents that in three decades have expanded from the broad, eclectic and cross-sectoral future reports of governments and the Committee for the Future to detailed ministry level strategies and future reviews. Moreover, the thorough embedding and institutionalization of the practice ‘to think a little ahead’ inside ministries and the gradual merging of foresight information with ordinary policy planning signals a marked change from the largely academic style of foresight of the 1990s toward genuine effort for future-oriented governance. Today, the Finnish national foresight system has the capacity to produce more future-regarding policies than before.

In the next chapter, we will look more closely at the functioning of the current system, describing the processes where its central actors produce and condense foresight information and direct it into policymaking arenas.

Note

- 1 The Greens left Paavo Lipponen’s second ‘rainbow coalition’ in 2002 after it accepted the building of a new nuclear power reactor to Finland.

4 Designing future-oriented policies

Institutional capacities and operational conditions

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines capacities through which the current Finnish national foresight system and some other ‘strategic’ governing instruments that have emerged along with it during recent decades can lengthen the temporal focus of Finnish policymaking. The chapter is divided into six sections that accumulate nuance and dynamism to the general institutional framework whose evolution was described in the previous chapter.

After this introduction, the next three sections describe in more detail the future-regarding activities taken in the system’s main constituent arenas, the parliament, the government and the public administration. Drawing from earlier studies, official government documents and interviews, the sections first describe the basic future-regarding functions and features (tasks, resources, etc.) of these arenas, and then proceed to examine processes where the arenas produce and promote foresight information. When necessary, the sections describe organizational and functional developments from the arena’s recent history to convey a sense of evolution that has been typical for the system as the previous chapter demonstrated. The sections conclude with an assessment of the overall role and impact of the particular arena within the broader foresight system. While the organized network of non-state foresight actors whose emergence we described in the previous chapter could also be conceived as a separate arena, we dismiss it here due to its subordinate role that today limits to providing a formal channel for its affiliate organizations to produce mixed foresight information for ministries. Compared to other arenas, which possess distinct and formalized tasks, resources and processes, the network of non-state foresight actors lacks cohesion and institutional strength to make a distinctive and independent impact on ‘future power’, i.e., the general conception of what is possible and desirable in the future that is presented to elected policymakers to guide their decisions. Combined, these sections portray a fine-grained processual view of how the system functions.

While doing this, the next three sections also unearth pressure points that condition the system’s legitimacy, effectiveness and survival. As will be detailed below, despite the system’s democratic appearance which builds on the existence of a permanent parliamentary future committee, its formal ‘future dialogue’ with the government,

and the formally participatory information production processes, in terms of policy-relevant outcomes the current system is strongly characterized by the role of leading ministry experts. Due to the increasing ‘strategic relevance’ of long-term planning, the ‘strategic turn’ in ministries’ operating mode and deliberate actions to increase ministries’ prominence in national foresight, the ministries now produce most main strategic policy documents, granting them significant capacity to control future-regarding policy information that is presented to elected politicians.

To illustrate how future-regarding insight can penetrate to policies, the fifth section connects ministries’ ‘hyperopic’ expert activities that turned into a standard *modus operandi* in the 2000s with more concrete practices of policymaking. We start by charting the views of various central actors of the foresight system, examining their conceptions about the capacities, mechanisms and risks that are associated with the increasing prominence of ministry-driven strategic foresight in Finnish policymaking. We then move closer to policymaking practices with two case examples that describe how ministries’ strategic expertise is utilized in policy fields that differ in terms of issues, challenges and general ‘strateginess’ and temporal focus: environmental and foreign policy. Instead of treating the cases as a representative and generalizable sample of all Finnish ministries, we consider these cases as specimens whose differences and similarities illuminate the array of strengths and limitations of the Finnish anticipatory governance model. Despite sectoral differences, both cases signal considerable capacity for administrative steering, which, due to ministries’ leading role in strategic planning, provides good chances for the making of more future-regarding policies. As we demonstrate in [Chapter 5](#), the markedly future-oriented ethos and the importance of expertise for long-term governance reflect clearly in the conceptions of individual policymakers.

We close this chapter with a brief summary of the main factors that condition the legitimacy, impact and survival of the system. While highlighting the foreseeing capacity of the expert-driven policy system, our analysis also emphasizes its political precariousness. Under stable societal conditions, where major policy lines have been negotiated and internalized by elected politicians, and also become embedded in the administrative processes managed by trusted professionals, this system bears significant capacity to lengthen political time. However, highlighting an equally important dynamic, the system that rests on decades-long socio-political cooperation and consensus among established political and administrative elites may start to brittle if the founding long-term objectives get questioned. Despite the ‘semi-autonomous’ capacity of civil servants to produce information and manage preparatory processes, the formally inclusive and, in principle, highly service-oriented administrative system cannot exclude political challengers. In the next chapter, we show that challenging political force already exists inside Finland’s political system – in the form of Finland’s nationalist-populist party, the Finns. Since 2015, the party has finished second in every parliamentary election. In the concluding chapter, we demonstrate with a few recent examples from their governing career that started in 2015 how the challenge may play out in the policymaking arenas.

Before turning to the activities and roles of the constituent arenas of the foresight system, we briefly justify the ordering and rationale of the presentation. Our

choice to proceed from parliament via government to administration reflects the system's evolutive path that was described in the previous chapter and which emphasized the move from largely formal, operationally periodical and politically general interplay of main governing institutions (government and parliament) toward more professional, consistent and likely also impactful engagement of sectoral ministries. However, without undermining this general functional hierarchy that characterizes the information production and flows within the current system, we stress already here that the Finnish system is not unique due to the pronounced role of civil servants. Instead, the system's strength lies in its institutional breadth and interconnectedness that makes the involvement of all constituent arenas necessary, albeit only through their distinct roles.

The value of the system's comprehensiveness relates to two interconnected general qualities. First concerns legitimation: without the formal engagement and acclamation of democratic actors (parliament, government) expert visions would not matter much. Second, especially today when ministries' foresight activities seem to connect more directly with the ordinary policy process, the system's comprehensiveness also accentuates the general forward-looking ethos in Finnish policymaking. As noted by our interviewees who possess decades of academic and practical experience from Finnish anticipatory governance, the Finnish state foresight system that formally stands on the 'future dialogue' and the foresight responsibilities of regions and municipalities that were set in the early 2000s now engages practically all policymakers into highly structured, ongoing and deeply institutionalized interaction that is almost impossible to avoid. Reflecting similar logic, an interviewee who represents governmental policy planning at the highest level noted that while the extent to which strategic foresight penetrates into policies always depends on various situational and political factors, the system's mere existence forces policymakers to consider temporally broader perspectives. Institutionalized strategic mindset molds the 'Overton window' of the politicians, that is, their general conception of what is politically possible and desirable. This general molding process can be conceived as the system's main impact mechanism.

As has been acknowledged elsewhere (e.g., [Boston, 2017](#); [Koskimaa, 2023](#); [Koskimaa & Raunio, 2023a](#); [MacKenzie, 2021b](#); [Smith, 2021](#)), without the legitimizing impact of the system's 'institutional backbone', the Committee for the Future which in a rare fashion engages MPs directly into processes of anticipatory governance, the system would likely not have developed into what it is today, nor it would be as resilient against external threats like changes in government composition. When anticipatory governance is operated only through the executive branch, as is more often the case, foresight activities become more precarious, as any new government can decide whether to keep or discard them ([Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022, 2023a](#)). Indeed, if anticipatory governance is to have any independent impact on policies, it must be secured organizationally from elections and day-to-day public politicking.

Finally, while influencing of politicians' 'Overton window' might not sound like a very powerful mechanism for future-regarding policymaking, we should keep in mind that at least when viewed from the traditional viewpoint of legislative politics that emphasizes elected actors' exclusive capacity to *make* binding decisions,

influencing these decision is really all that future-regarding political institutions can do within the confines of democratic norms, i.e., without violating the right of elected governments to make final binding decisions. If one wants even stronger anticipatory governance, one is forced to limit the capacities of elected officials (for a systematic review of such methods, see [Boston, 2021](#)). Below, we also detail how the Finnish foresight system's constituent arenas contribute to these fundamental tasks.

4.2 The parliamentary sphere: activities, impact and systemic role

As was described in the previous chapter, the Committee for the Future (from now on, CF) connects the parliament to the national foresight system. For CF, all of the qualities mentioned in the section title have changed quite significantly during the first three decades of its existence (i.e., since 1993). Overall, the CF's maturation process is characterized by its thrive to institutionalize, through developing a recognition and independence from its members, the parliament and the government. The effort also includes an ambition to develop political significance for the CF within the boundaries of its formal, largely advisory role. However, despite the more focused character of its more recent tasks, and considering the rather general and rigid nature of the future report with which it answers to the government in the 'future dialogue', the CF's functional role in the national foresight system has never connected directly to policy impact. Instead, it has rested on democratic legitimation that it produces through the direct involvement of MPs in national level foresight activities. As has been noted, the strongly institutionalized existence of this particular institution makes the Finnish system quite unique, although some other countries too have recently experimented with organized parliamentary foresight ([Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022](#)). Importantly, the CF has also played a central role in developing the national foresight system, as the most recent reform to the 'future dialogue' demonstrates below. Through CF's explicit demand, government ministries are now central actors also in the government-parliament exchange where they previously had no formal role.

To pinpoint these various mechanisms, we now detail CF's current main tasks and operative features. As the basic organization, functions and operating processes of the CF have been charted in several previous works, which also unanimously note the relative powerlessness of the CF to impact policies (most notably in [Arter, 2000](#); [Boston, 2017](#) and [Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020](#)), we present only a focused overview, drawing mainly from the comprehensive in-depth analysis of [Koskimaa and Raunio \(2020\)](#). We then briefly assess the traditional role of the CF and then, as a more original contribution, move on to detail the CF's more recent, above-mentioned activities which significantly advanced ministries' role in the foresight system.

4.2.1 Basics of the CF: composition, organization, work process and main tasks

As was noted in [Chapter 3](#), the CF was borne out of a need to produce the parliament's official reply to the government's future report which the parliament started to request in the early 1990s. The parliament-based initiators of the national

foresight system saw the report as a way to create a formal and more permanent mechanism for national-level strategic visioning and foresight. Besides formalizing and institutionalizing future-regarding exchange between government and parliament, the ‘future dialogue’ eventually set a structure and schedule for the state’s foresight activities. The extensive future reports, which take significant time to prepare, had to emerge in a certain order, mimicking the regular legislative process where government proposes and legislature assesses and decides. In addition, the reports had to come out within a certain period of time, i.e., during one electoral cycle, and government term which already in the early 1990s had consolidated to a four-year standard. Quite likely, with its longer, more inclusive and expert-driven preparation process and the thematically broader and more eclectic outcome, the ‘future dialogue’ also inspired the preparation method and form of the other, more recent products of Finnish state-level foresight activities (see below).

Since 2000 when it was included in the formal parliamentary standing orders, the CF has been a permanent standing committee of the Finnish parliament, Eduskunta. With this status, it is automatically formed after each general election that determines parties’ shares of legislative seats and power, which then affect the composition of committees, including the CF whose 17 members are nominated through the ordinary process of intra- and inter-party negotiations. Four permanent clerks, two of which have extensive background in and formal affiliation with the Finland Futures Research Centre (FFRC) at the University of Turku, currently assist the MP members. The committee has had a small research budget (in 2020, it was around 70,000 euros) and it has made frequent use of its wide expert networks to ‘outsource’ its various research tasks.

While the CF approximates ordinary committees in terms of formal status, composition, organization and resources, its tasks and working process differentiate substantially from those of the ordinary committees. Since its inception in the early 1990s, reflecting its spiritual roots in academic futures studies and its broad autonomy to determine its thematic focus, CF’s internal life has reminisced more a science seminar than a parliamentary committee engaged in serious matters of the state. Its general working style is markedly inclusive, international, expert-centered, non-partisan and deliberative. After organizing, the CF begins its ‘journey’, a ‘learning experience’ comprised of various stages and processes that seek to immerse the member MPs into the world of scenario building and other methods of futures research taught by the committee’s expert clerks. The initial push for CF’s activities is generated by government’s announcement of the theme of its future report, which coincides with the presentation of government’s political agenda, the government program (or agreement, to emphasize its highly coalitional nature). The announcement of the theme of the government future report is followed by CF’s rigorous mulling phase that takes even six months. It involves highly inclusive and deliberative expert hearings that analyze government’s proposal, affecting the tasks that the CF takes afterwards. The CF utilizes an atypical portfolio of external experts by putting the emphasis clearly on academic experts (Seo, 2017). After setting its agenda, the CF organizes into distinct projects and sub-committees which take on independent research tasks that prepare the CF for

its official response, which is also called the future report. In these more concrete tasks, too, the CF operates in a markedly inclusive and deliberative fashion, utilizing open seminars, workshops, hearings and other consultations to engage various experts and stakeholders into producing the committee's outputs, which generally aim to avoid political stances and voting. The CF also frequently engages ordinary citizens directly through open hearings and digital platforms, and it has been a very active international networker, contributing to its status as a global forerunner in parliamentary foresight (see also Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020, 2022, 2023a). CF's members typically value its unorthodox methods, as they give CF capacity to engage with big societal issues in non-zealous, slow-paced and relatively relaxed conversation, which is rare in the legislative domain.

Today, the CF has four principal tasks which produce distinct written reports that could impact policies. Formally, its primary task is still the preparation of the future report (*'tulevaisuusmietintö'*), Eduskunta's official reply to government's similarly named future-regarding grand statement (*'tulevaisuusselonteko'*). Historically, both reports have been quite extensive in terms of thematic scope and length, covering a wide range of topics from Finland's international position to work life conditions and sustainable development and averaging around 50–100 pages each. Although it takes several years for the government to publish its report, the CF has good time to prepare as it learns the report's theme already in the beginning of the term and organizes its various smaller activities in accordance with its grand task, as was noted above. In addition to the ongoing and eclectic nature of the preparatory processes, another atypical feature of the 'dialogue' has been the capacity of the CF to expand its reply beyond issues mentioned in the government's future report and introduce additional aspects of the theme. The CF can also leave explicit resolutions to its report, which formally bind all future governments until the CF revokes the resolution based on its assessment of government's annual report where the government reports about its actions in relation to Eduskunta's future report. Historically, CF's resolutions have been considered too vague and cross-sectional to produce focused policy effects. However, the recent reform of the 'future dialogue' in which the CF played a major role by introducing recommendations about the process (to include ministries more explicitly, see below for details) demonstrates that at least in some cases, when directed correctly and in explicit interaction with government officials, the resolution mechanism can produce significant outcomes, especially for the foresight system's internal distribution of power.

The second, and according to many committee members, the most prominent of the CF's four main tasks are its so-called 'own projects' which borne out of parliamentary technology assessment (PTA) that became CF's task in late 1990s under the leadership of Martti Tiuri who was the more technically oriented of the two 'founding fathers' of the CF. Unlike the future report, which connects directly to a formal government initiative, 'own projects' utilize CF's rare capacity to determine its thematic focus. The projects are initiated and led by the member MPs and ideally they can assess any possible topic, appointing for the CF a possibility to present its own future-regarding issues. In practice, despite formal autonomy

regarding agenda formation, ‘own projects’ too have usually more or less reflected the themes of the future report, as they allow CF to build capacity for its reply. Also, although MPs formally lead the projects, they are typically assisted by seasoned experts from whom the CF can commission reports also independently. For this reason, the themes and contents of the reports produced in these projects reflect also the vision of external experts. Over the years, these reports that now count in several dozens and typically span over 50 pages in length have covered, as noted by (Boston, 2017), a ‘remarkable range of topics’, spanning from nanotechnology via digital ethics to municipal democracy. Although often praised for their technical quality which stems from the deep involvement of seasoned professionals, the detailed and extensive reports, like the future report, have faced problems in reaching public audiences. However, according to some interviewees they are frequently read in ministries – which from the viewpoint of policymaking might be a more relevant audience than the general public or even MPs.

The third general task of the CF is to provide commissioned expert statements about resolutions prepared by other standing committees. The most traditional of CF’s tasks in relation to ordinary Eduskunta activities, the issuing of statements has traditionally been a lesser priority of the CF, often even considered a redundant formality that takes precious time from chores that are more important. Nonetheless, although still far from the level of ordinary committees, the number of statements has steadily increased over the years, reflecting the ambition of the committee leadership to enhance CF’s standing also in the sphere of ordinary parliamentary tasks and networks. Reflecting a similar ambition, as its fourth general task in 2017 the CF also started to serve as the official correspondent committee for the Agenda 2030 report, which the government issues once during the electoral term, alongside the future report (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020).

4.2.2 Assessing CF’s survival, policy impact and recent reforms

With these tasks and functions, the CF has established for itself a firmly institutionalized position within the parliament and in the broader governing system. After initially facing criticism for working with things that do not contribute to the ordinary legislative process, it has developed a clearly defined, independent and consolidated set of tasks that it operates with a distinct style, without facing significant existential challenge from anyone in the parliament and outside of it. While CF’s atypical political time span and most of its activities still do not connect with everyday legislative business very much, few policymakers nowadays would openly question the relevance of thinking about the future in such focused manner. Although CF’s limited capacity to interfere with legislation is well recognized, some MPs always find its work relevant and satisfying enough to participate in its activities. Also, the CF’s status as a global forerunner in parliamentary foresight is widely acknowledged and broadly appreciated, also inside Eduskunta. In the wider governing system, especially in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) that is CF’s official correspondent in the executive branch, CF’s existence has been generally assessed positively. With all likelihood the CF is here to stay.

Another question is, what capacity CF has to affect the time perspectives of Finnish policymaking? Overall, as also noted by [Arter \(2000\)](#) and [Boston \(2017\)](#), CF's impact on policies has been considered weak and indirect at best. Notwithstanding the occasional statements that CF produces to support the work of other committees, it has largely operated outside of the standard legislative process and thus its capacity to impact policies in any traditional sense is severely limited. CF's potential policy influence traverses mainly via dispersion of ideas that member MPs have learned during their 'journey', or if a former CF member ends in a high-ranking governing position, which happened with former Prime Ministers Jyrki Katainen (2011–2014) and Juha Sipilä (2015–2019). The CF possesses good capacity to raise future-sensitive issues that would not probably emerge through the ordinary party-political process, but the extensiveness and detail of its reports typically limits their publicity and applicability. As was noted, of all government officials CF's reports most likely impact the thinking of ministry officials, who might have the time and ambition to utilize the CF's high-quality foresight in their preparatory work. The poor timing of the future report causes another hindrance. Due to the sequential process that mimics ordinary government-legislature dialogue, Eduskunta's own future report, which is formally prepared only after the government has issued its report in the middle of the term, is typically addressed in Eduskunta at the very end of the electoral cycle, while governments often push their largest major law packages through the legislative chain. In such context a political, wide-ranging and abstract future issues do not rank the highest in terms of salience. Through the relatively open nature of the 'future dialogue' that also provides avenues for informal discussions, the CF can affect the thematic focus of the government's future report, providing it another avenue to impact 'future power'. However, the final impact of this mechanism remains at the discretion of the government that chooses the overarching theme of the dialogue.

Theoretically, the resolution mechanism could be used for exerting concrete policy impact, but thus far its directive powers have been used for vague advice and process-related matters. The actual capacity of this formally substantial mechanism is likely hindered by parties themselves, who due to the highly inclusive and accommodating Finnish coalition practice likely also sit in the government during the next couple of terms and do not want to get restricted by any cross-governmental resolutions. More generally too, a similar logic likely conditions the CF's internal determination to avoid politically divisive stances and voting. As long as elected politicians need to present tangible outcomes to voters, the same politicians will likely not diminish all independent policymaking capacities of governments.

On a broader scale, CF's most important effect has likely been the inspiration of example, which it has dispersed via its frequent international travels since the 1990s, resulting in the emergence of future committees and similar organs in few other countries around the globe ([Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022](#)). CF's status as a global forerunner is thoroughly acknowledged (e.g., [Boston, 2017](#)) and this recognition has been a central institutionalizing factor inside Eduskunta, as was noted above ([Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020](#)).

According to our more recent interviews with central functionaries of the CF, the committee's internal and external processes have been thoroughly reformed

during past decade to also increase CF's domestic impact and effectiveness. First, to enhance focus and impact of CF's work, its internal working process has been clarified, structured and made generally more explicit. CF's working schedules have been re-synchronized to match better with the 'electoral clock' that all other Eduskunta activities also follow and the committee leadership now engages more often with other Eduskunta processes and functionaries to contribute more to the Eduskunta's general proceedings. While the CF has sought to maintain its open, deliberative and slow working mode, the thorough and inclusive contemplation process that begins the work cycle has been structured more clearly on three distinct review rounds, which consider (1) the committee's past activities and outputs (especially regarding resolutions it made to the previous future report), (2) experts' open insights on the proceedings in the 'national foresight ecosystem' and (3) the personal interests and ideas of member MPs. Overall, along with the introduction of more concrete tasks, the relevance of interacting through inclusive networks has decreased to some extent.

According to the interviewees another aspect of CF's reforms concerns its outputs to which the committee has also taken a more self-conscious approach. Acknowledging the arduous nature of some past the efforts – e.g., the long and detailed reports commissioned from external experts – the CF has since the early 2010s sought to produce more output that bears more relevance in ordinary Eduskunta processes, by applying more digestible and faster formats and studying topics inspired more explicitly by general political salience. As also demonstrated by their increasing numbers, the CF has put more weight on legislative statements, which provide one such avenue. During COVID-19 CF's statements provided for other Eduskunta committees and functionaries a new and flexible way to gain more reflexive insight on various salient matters relatively rapidly, while providing for the CF a new avenue to disperse its unique long-term perspective. Another reflection of the CF's pronounced effort to increase its impact concerns the more self-conscious use of resolutions that it leaves for the government in its future report. A recent example that we detail below also opens a new way to conceive CF's changing systemic role.

4.2.3 CF's institutional impact

CF's impact can also be assessed from a more institutional viewpoint. As was noted, the CF has forged itself a strongly institutionalized role within and outside of Eduskunta. As the popularity of anticipatory governance is increasing in various, also international contexts like the European Union which during recent years has strongly invested in consolidating its own strategic foresight system (see [Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022, 2023c](#)), the benefits of CF's pacesetter status will likely stay with it or even increase. As an institutional bedrock of Finland's broader foresight system, CF provides an encouraging example for other democratic countries. Approaching parliamentary future organs from this perspective, [Koskimaa and Raunio \(2023c\)](#) developed a framework for understanding their impact in a new, less policy-oriented fashion. Instead of conceiving these institutions as direct functional equivalents of

ordinary parliamentary committees which operate very differently (for a detailed comparison, see Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022), and judging their performance based on this false equivalence, Koskimaa and Raunio (2023c) suggested focusing on the *institutional* impacts of parliamentary future organs. Such impacts can include dispersion effects on (1) government's foresight activities, (2) the breadth, firmness and role of broader 'foresight ecosystems' and (3) the overall legitimacy of national-level anticipatory governance systems. According to Koskimaa and Raunio (2023c) the CF has clearly advanced all of these aspects of anticipatory governance in Finland through its formalized 'dialogue' with the executive branch that binds various state and non-state actors into structured, national-level strategic visioning and foresight work.

This dispersion and legitimation effect can be considered as by far the greatest achievement of the CF and also the clearest presentation of CF's central role in the broader foresight system. While organized foresight activities existed in the non-state arena well before the emergence of the CF and probably at least some of the governmental and ministerial foresight activities would also have developed even without it, such a structured and consolidated system for state foresight and strategic activities would likely not have materialized and especially survived without the emergence and institutionalization of the 'future dialogue' in which the CF, with its explicit parliamentary backing, played a decisive role.

Adding to its institutional impact, the CF seems to have played a key role in the recent developing of the national foresight system, toward its current more ministry-centered incarnation. According to a newer interview, in around mid-2010s representatives of the CF took part in discussions concerning the reformation of the government side of the national foresight system which were described in Chapter 3. After reconfiguring the tasks and responsibilities of ministries and non-state actors and centering the system's coordinating duties to the PMO, some PMO functionaries raised doubts about the future of the future dialogue, noted our interviewee with long-term insider position in these processes. Critics considered the future report as too demanding and time-consuming in relation to the generally poor capacity of governments to predict even the near future. Another resource-related worry that was raised related to government's ongoing need to invest resources in 'putting out fires' that emerge unexpectedly and demand urgent attention. Yet another debate concerned the role of government ministries, which under the lead of their non-elected leaders (general secretaries) fervently defended their sectoral turfs. In the foresight system, inter-ministerial competition had led to a situation where it was impossible to combine ministries' basic future-regarding understandings into a coherent 'snapshot view' and instead of a unified picture ministries produced 12 different visions in their designated future reviews. Merging ministry views together and integrating them to other government foresight activities like the future dialogue turned into a major focus area of the Government Foresight Group, an expert body that was commissioned by the PMO in early 2015 to advice and direct the reformation of the foresight system. Alongside this process, skepticism toward the future dialogue grew also within ministries as they also considered that the report process demanded too much resources.

According to the interviewees, the CF interfered the process at this juncture. After internal negotiation it informed to the PMO that it would continue to make future reports and push CF agenda to government negotiations even if the PMO stopped producing its own future report. Although the report has been generally conceived as an unavoidable demand of the CF (e.g., in [Koskimaa & Raunio 2023a](#)), abolishing government future reports was conceived as technically possible if the government could find another way to fill its mandatory foresight responsibilities to the parliament. Apparently, CF's pledge convinced Prime Minister Juha Sipilä who had been an active member of the CF before his ascension to the chair of the Centre Party (in 2012) and to prime minister's position (in 2015) where he publicly advanced some of the initiatives that emerged during his tenure in the CF (2011–2014). Marking a significant reform into the functional and organizational ethos of the national foresight system, by CF's request the future report was now divided into two parts, first one presenting *ministries'* unguided expert insight and the second one government's more focused ambitions. Besides forcing the ministries to work together for genuinely cross-sectoral foresight, the idea was that with such a method at least the basis of the future report (the first part) reflects the objective conceptions of ministry experts on the central challenges and opportunities existing in the country's general operating environment instead of becoming tainted by political desires. While also containing predictions, ministries' views set to be conceived as an objective background canvas that is based on the best existing information undistorted by politicians. In addition, the reformers wished the ministries to produce alternative scenarios utilizing methods of futures studies. The second part of the future report was designed to be more political, emphasizing government's steering capacity and leaving its preparation to externally commissioned experts (like before). Highlighting the CF's role even more in this process that made ministries central actors also in the future dialogue in its first response report the CF formalized its demand for two-stage future report with an official resolution that bound government activities also during the next term (Antti Rinne's/Sanna Marin's government, 2019–2023).

In sum, while accepting limited direct policy impact – which reflects parliament's generally subordinate role in the executive-dominated Finnish political system – the CF appears to have increased its relevance through impacting *processes* of state level foresight. In addition to the aforementioned reforms, in the late 2010s the CF made resolutions that demanded from the government more explicit performance assessments in relation to the general societal change factors that were detailed in its reports. CF also demanded a more thorough utilization of scenario modeling in ministries when drafting alternative pathways for tackling future challenges. In these resolutions, the CF has also asked for more comprehensive utilization of the future reports in broader societal future dialogues. However, due to their more general nature, and also because of PMO's internal tensions regarding how exactly the 'increased strategic potential' of anticipatory governance should be addressed inside state administration (see below), these initiatives have not yet produced any tangible outcomes. We now turn to examine the government sphere,

putting focus on this and related developments from the late 2010s, which also changed the systemic role of the CF and state foresight activities.

4.3 The government sphere: activities, impact and systemic role

As was noted in the previous chapter, the government first got involved with more future-oriented policymaking around the mid-1980s when the first motions for building a parliamentary foresight unit surfaced through the initiatives of a citizen movement and MPs. While the newfound parliamentary CF stole much of the attention in the early 1990s when the future dialogue was initiated, foresight capacities developed also in the PMO, which started to coordinate the externally commissioned preparation of the government's future report. Since the turn of the 2010s, the PMO has also coordinated the work of the organized foresight networks of ministries and non-state actors, and in mid-2010s it took the lead in designing and coordinating the activities of the entire national foresight system.

This section starts with charting the general characteristics and role of the future report from the government's viewpoint. It then focuses on the system's most recent reforms from the perspective of the PMO and follows with a description of the PMO's current foresight activities. The section concludes with an overall assessment of the PMO's current systemic role and the challenges to this role caused by PMO's internal tensions and ongoing rivalry with sector ministries for the possession of 'future power', whose general strategic relevance has increased in recent years. Alongside professional civil servants, the section considers the role of politically appointed government functionaries, the Prime Minister and his/her government that PMO formally serves. The section adds many new interview insights to the preliminary study of [Koskimaa \(2023\)](#).

4.3.1 Anticipatory governance at the PMO: seeking a more centralized leadership role

As was described in [Chapter 3](#), the executive branch joined the future dialogue that set foundations for the Finnish national foresight system somewhat unexpectedly, when Eduskunta demanded a special future report through which it sought to erect and institutionalize a state-bound future organ in the parliament. Lacking extant foresight resources, the PMO, for whom the duty to lead the government-side of the project landed, utilized commissioned external professionals, network-based 'crowdsourcing' and some ad hoc assistance from random ministry experts to produce government's first future report ([Arter, 2000](#); [Prime Minister's Office, 2011](#); [Wilenius, 2005](#), interviews). From the very beginning, the working process of the PMO thus reflected CF's relatively inclusive and eclectic methods, also because the PMO did not have to produce a formal, detailed and politically binding document, but only a broad and non-binding grand vision of some future challenges. Still, compared to present-day reality where the general thinking mode and also some practices of anticipatory governance have thoroughly penetrated and institutionalized within the entire governing system, the early national-level foresight activities, at least

those that adhered to concepts and methods of futures studies, now seem somewhat hobbyist although, as noted by Wilenius (2005), the *need* for long-term thinking was broadly recognized already in the turbulent times of the early 1990s. From the government's perspective, too, the organization and process of the future dialogue has become a much more serious and professionalized effort over the years.

Thematically, government's future report reflects the concerns of the incumbent government. While Eduskunta initiated the process, it appears that in the initial phases of the dialogue it did not try to influence government's topic very much – like in the later phases, through its own future reports (Arter, 2000). Also, despite the rather eclectic, diverse and largely expert-driven preparation process, formally and traditionally the government's future report has been conceived as the *government's* declaration of some thematically distinct but conceptually general future-regarding issue, which is chosen and announced by the prime minister alongside the government's official political manifesto that is negotiated and agreed on after elections (Prime Minister's Office, 2007). The topics and scope of the reports have varied, but the themes have always connected to some topical major societal challenges (Boston, 2017), reflecting the reports' political foundations which differentiate the reports from academic futures studies that may openly scan and image general societal uncertainties. Reflecting Finland's international role that changed profoundly in the early 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed and Finland rapidly became a member of the European Union, the first reports from the 1990s (1993, 1997) focused on Finland's external environment and international role. Reflecting the country's efforts to climb back up economically from the great depression of the 1990s, the future reports from the early 2000s (2001, 2004) instead focused on population dynamics of a rapidly aging country, and also on more general work life issues. Also reflecting international developments, around the turn of the 2010s the government's focus shifted toward sustainable development (2009, 2013) and in the toughening economic atmosphere set by the financial crisis governments reverted back to work life issues (2017, 2018). Latest reports (both published in 2023) focused on more procedural issues, examining, for example, how to connect future-sensitivity into actual law-making.

To understand the attempts to centralize the national foresight system in the mid-2010s which were introduced in the previous chapter, we need to acknowledge the profound change in the government's political role. To recap, roughly since the mid-1980s, alongside Finland's constitutional reform from president-centered semi-presidentialism to an almost fully parliamentary political system that was finalized with a completely new constitution in 2000, the leadership role of the Finnish government has changed quite extensively. In the earlier era, which was characterized by deep political polarization and strong president that frequently meddled in domestic affairs, Finnish governments were politically incoherent, functionally turbulent and organizationally rather short-lived. In the new era which started in early 1980s the government has developed into Finland's *de facto* and more recently also *de jure* (that is. since the constitutional reform of 2000) political and operative leadership organ. The change reflects in governments' official political manifestos, government programs or agreements, which have evolved from general summaries of few pages into

highly detailed documents with dozens of pages. They now detail all political compromises and aims of the coalescing parties, which are then strictly followed and monitored by the parties and public administration after the agreement has been reached (e.g., [Nousiainen, 2006](#)). In the center, the PMO coordinates all activities, monitors the execution of the government agreement and it also organizes the settling of disputes between the coalition partners. At the same time, despite ambition for even more centralized and ‘strategic’ government practice, government ministries which are politically led by party-appointed and elected ministers have tended to stand firmly on their ground which they have traditionally monitored rather autonomously (e.g., [Backman & Hyssälä, 2018](#)).

At the same time, as was noted already in [Chapter 3](#), government’s interest and activity in the realm of anticipatory governance has developed considerably. In the early 2010s a series of focused evaluations revealed that the highly inclusive system that broadly engaged non-state actors and provided broad autonomy for the ministries to organize their own foresight efforts tended to produce strongly mixed foresight information that could not serve the practical demands of policymaking ([Prime Minister’s Office, 2007, 2011, 2014](#)). The inclusion of non-state foresight actors, which in part helped to legitimize the system and gather input with small resources, also encased a more conceptual basis. For futures scholars, who had been centrally involved in the creation of the system and also participated in the evaluation processes, broad inclusion and mixed results seemed natural because in this field foresight information has been generally conceived as inherently value-laden, partial and uncertain, and thus inclusion is seen as an essential feature of democratic visioning that produces ‘future power’ (see [Ahvenharju et al., 2020](#); [Dufva & Ahlqvist, 2015](#); [Pouru et al., 2020](#)). A similar view also emerged from our interviews. Characterizing especially the network of non-state actors, the interviewees noted the inherent messiness of the open, extensive, pluralist and self-organizing ‘buzzing hotpot-style ecosystem’, which produces massive amounts of information from which policymakers cannot make sense. For this reason, as was noted in the introduction of this chapter, non-state foresight actors could not and cannot directly influence policies in any meaningful sense. This was also the verdict of the stakeholders: 92% reported low impact of activities that were generally considered vague and disconnected from the decision-making apparatus ([Pouru et al., 2020](#)). This conceptual discrepancy between, and the mixing of, formally objective information used in ministries’ traditional policy planning and the more subjective, uncertain and visionary foresight information is a key factor for understanding the system’s reformation where ministries’ role has increased all the time (see below for details).

For the central executive, which apparently was looking to gain a more solid control of all governing processes, it made sense to seek firmer control also of the national-level foresight activities whose general relevance was rising. This ambition did not only cover the control of politically harmless non-state actors, but also, and more importantly, it related to the role of government ministries that had started to produce their own foresight in the beginning of the new millennium. As was noted in the previous chapter... In the first half of the 2010s, a reform was initiated to increase the foresight system’s policy-relevance by centralizing coordination to the PMO and

re-defining responsibilities between non-state and state foresight actors regarding information production. In essence, non-state actors were subordinated to mere producers of partial insight while ministries were put in charge of commissioning and combining more exact outputs. The PMO's role evolved from a commissioner of formal, periodical and politically general future reports into a bona fide lead unit of the national foresight system (Prime Minister's Office, 2007, 2011, 2014).

While the exact motivations of the reformers remain unknown, it appears the PMO had a genuine ambition to create a structured, institutionalized and also centralized system for producing policy-relevant strategic foresight that can steer cross-governmental policymaking. After the initial reform, the main obstacle for PMO's plan were the ministries, whose independence provided them political and organizational strength and administrative incentives, which distorted unified future visions that the PMO was seeking. The ministries were not ready to submit under the control of the central executive, as it would have decreased their impact on 'future power', which later would have also reflected in their future organizational resources. Our interviewees provided several reasons for the tension that built between the ambitions of the PMO and sectoral ministries.

First, while in the mid-2010s the PMO gained a formal leadership role of the foresight system which grew on the future dialogue where ministries had had no formal role, ministries' foresight activities and network had developed rather independently since the early 2000s, over ad hoc cooperation between a few ministry officials and an explicit demand of ministries' general secretaries. Second, as noted by another interviewee, already due to their main tasks the ministries were thematically and functionally separated from each other, or 'siloe'd', and due to sector-related differences their foresight competencies also varied. Some took the issue more seriously, some less so. Third, according to another interviewee, functional differentiation and differences in foresight competencies led to '12 different approaches to current challenges'. Thus, fourth, as noted by two other interviewees, to narrow the differences in perspective and interpretation and to streamline the general output of national-level foresight activities, the PMO wanted to bring ministries that were fighting for resources and power under the same process and conceptual umbrella. However, as many interviewees noted, the ministries fervently opposed this idea.

According to the interviewees, the central idea of the working group that included all main developers of the Finnish foresight system and in the early 2015 formalized into the Government Foresight Group was to increase the system's political impact, which was hindered by the aforementioned 'buzz', lack of focus, outdated formal tasks and poor timing, which disconnected organize state-level foresight from main political processes, especially government negotiations and the formation of the country's main policy document, the government manifesto. Leaning onto its newfound formal leader status and increased foresight resources (that came with the new intra-ministerial foresight secretariat), the PMO introduced another organizational initiative, *ministries' joint foresight activities*, which sought to unify ministries' foresight tasks and organizations and connect them more tightly under the lead of the PMO, whose new foresight experts also started to educate ministries to produce methodologically better foresight and

scenarios. Eventually, as was already noted, the rising prominence of ministries in national foresight activities led to an idea to develop the government's future report in two phases, starting with the ministries' joint expert assessment and followed by the government's more focused declaration.

As noted by our interviewees, from the perspective of the PMO the purpose of assigning the first phase of the future report to ministries was to bring the separated entities together to detect and define the most important common societal challenges and drivers in genuinely cross-sectoral manner. Ministries' 'objective and non-political future conception' was intended to inspire elected officials and confine thematically the range of issues they could focus on in the second part. The two-stage design postponed the making of political choices after the publicly presented expert insight in order to make the system more 'future wise' and enhance its capacity 'to actually get something done' – unlike old future reports that mainly described common developments.

According to our interpretation, the most important change at this juncture was that while the reform amplified the political nature of the future report mechanism by clearly differentiating choices of politicians from the insights of experts, it simultaneously made politicians more dependent on ministry experts who could now confine, define and frame the future challenges and solutions which were presented in the public before entering the political decision-making process. This logic conforms to the ideal of an 'objective and non-political' proactive civil service, which is commonly applied in Finland. The main idea is that although elected politicians ultimately make the choices, it is typically quite hard for them to divert very far from the propositions of civil servants which they prepare 'semi-autonomously' (Koskimaa et al., 2021; Murto, 2014). However, it should be noted already, too, that in the case of the future report the problem is not very harmful for democratic control, as despite the two-stage design the reports have continued to present rather general developments. An interviewee noted that, in the latest round the ministries made a push to produce a joint view, but it led to unclear results due to the need to include 'something from everyone'. A more troubling development concerns the ministries' independent future reports, which we deal with below, after briefly assessing the current systemic role and challenges of the PMO/government foresight.

4.3.2 PMO's systemic role, internal division and increasing competition for 'future power'

The PMO has arguably gained capacity and formal recognition to coordinate the ministries' joint foresight efforts and the information flows between non-state foresight actors and the rest of the national foresight system. In somewhat similar vein as the CF, the PMO has consolidated its position as one of the institutional bedrocks of the system. This was not the case in the 1990s, despite the occasional production of government future reports, a task that apparently rather befall on the PMO rather than was deliberately pursued by it. Even amid the increasing independence of foresight activities of sectoral ministries (see below), or perhaps just because of it, it is rather hard to see how the national foresight system could operate and survive without the

coordinating and stabilizing role of the PMO, which brings sectoral expert insights into a more general level, enabling genuine cross-sectorial and cross-governmental governance. Like the CF, the PMO also served as a legitimating force, justifying future-oriented initiatives from the government's side, which today is the formally dominant actor also in more ordinary legislative activities.

That said, the government sphere also faces several obstacles that limit its *independent capacity* to lengthen the time perspectives of Finnish policymaking. To start with the most obvious one, the essentially political nature of a government coalition automatically casts some doubt over its attempts to make generally future-oriented policies, because such attempts, by definition, would also affect the choices of forthcoming governments, which are likely to be politically different. An exclusive right of government to advance its policies during its office term – and only then – is a fundamental democratic norm, which most governments likely adhere to. In line with this thinking, the principal task of the PMO is to coordinate and monitor the execution of the government program, which automatically puts it under the surveillance of the parliamentary opposition and also, in the context of a coalition government, all coalition partners. The PMO's independent policymaking role thus faces inherent *political* obstacles. Second, in a similar vein, the government sphere also lacks *organizational* resources to become an *independent* producer of 'future power'. Not being in charge of any specific policy sector, it does not possess a general political 'direction' or preparatory resources to make detailed recommendations. While the PMO formally coordinates the foresight activities of ministries and non-state actors, neither is dependent on the PMO in terms of preparatory resources or even interaction, as ministries frequently interact with each other and also with the non-state actors to source foresight information.

Another, less obvious factor that hinders the PMO/government's independent capacity to produce future-oriented policies, as pointed out by our interviewees, is the intensifying competition over 'future power' within state administration caused by the generally increasing strategic relevance of foresight in policymaking. The 'increased awareness' of the political relevance of being able to show convincingly a future aim and vision has become a central driver of actors who seek a societal leadership position. That is why such a position and recognition is now being constantly fought over within the Finnish political system and public administration. In these battles the PMO faces at least two formidable challengers. The first and more obvious one comes from sectoral ministries, which possess a clearer 'direction', ample resources and, as will be shown in the next section, increasingly also the legitimacy to push forth their long-term visions. While ministries' visions are now more often placed under the label of strategic leadership and foresight, their typically coherent, linear and rather deterministic views that mimic the style of standard evidence-based and legalistic language of policy preparation divert quite far from the multifariousness and eclecticism of the ideals of genuine scenario modeling that continue to motivate the foresight activities of the PMO. The interviewees specifically noted the increasing role of the Ministry of Finance (MoF), a 'super ministry' that controls all national financial flows, including ones between ministries. Alongside growing strategic relevance of 'future power', the MoF has

wanted to brand itself as the ‘ministry of sustainability’, utilizing another popular term that has been used colloquially to refer to long-term strategic policies.

Finally, and more surprisingly, another less obvious factor hindering the PMO’s independent efforts to lengthen Finnish political time perspectives comes from within. According to one interviewee, the increased awareness of the relevance of ‘future power’ has ignited struggles also inside the PMO, which, as another interviewee noted, includes also many other departments than the foresight unit which also somehow engage in long-term planning. According to the first noted interviewee, the PMO now includes several groups that fight over the possession of ‘this “secret” information concerning future affairs, about who can determine these things’. These battles reflected in the recent reforming of the future dialogue, as some PMO officials wanted to replace the report mechanism with the PMO’s own scenario analysis and monitoring. Interestingly, the motion was not objected only by the CF, but also by sector ministries who noted their own enhanced capacity for joint foresight activities, which diminishes the need for PMO’s own monitoring and scenario-building efforts. We now turn to examine these capacities which, based on our analysis and interpretation, have clearly become the most important foresight capacities within the national foresight system and the only ones with real ability to impact the time perspectives of policies.

4.4 The administrative sphere: the foresight activities and systemic role of government ministries

Through few interlinked changes made to their responsibilities in the 2000s, government ministries attained a central role in the national foresight system after mid-2010s, as has already been hinted. In this section, we detail how this happened and what it means for the foresight system’s time-bending capacity and general operational ethos. We start with a brief overview of the most important developments from the 2000s and then zoom in to the ministries’ current activities before closing the section with an assessment of the ministries’ current systemic role.

In general, ministries’ leading role in the current state-bound foresight activities stems from the increasing relevance and gradual generalization of ‘strategic thinking’ inside the Finnish governing apparatus since the turn of millennium. Alongside the late 1990s mental shift from government term-based planning and execution of policies to more long-term scanning and preparing, which reminisces the shift from government to governance (e.g., [Rhodes, 2007](#)), future-regarding responsibilities gained more prominence in all state affairs, slowly shifting them from parliament and non-state actors to government and ministries’ tenured experts. Meanwhile, the ‘future power’ of various future-regarding documents, i.e., their capacity to picture convincingly to decision-makers what will happen in the future and how should we prepare for it, has likely increased. The reason is that in time the production and contents of the documents seem to have become more tied to standard ministry work, whose outputs are used also in ordinary policy planning. In the work profile of ministry experts, traditional linear past-regarding analysis seems to have given way for expectation and attempt for more future-regarding visioning,

reflecting the technocratic ideal of ‘extended present’ where better information and analysis provides stronger control over future matters (Nowotny, 1994). The increasing use of temporally extended frames in policy planning increases the chances of policy outcomes that anticipate the future in some way.

However, with this final word we already want to emphasize that a stronger role of tenured ministry experts in state’s strategic and foresight activities and the likely increasing use of this information in policy planning does not automatically lead to policies that are better for the future. Despite the informational superiority and confidence of ministry experts, their foresight efforts that are still predominantly based on rather traditional policy analysis are just attempts to predict the future from something that has happened in the past. Such efforts, as anyone with any experience of strategic foresight can tell, are inherently laden with uncertainties. The conceptual merging of the processes of ordinary policy planning and strategic foresight may even lead to bad outcomes if the inherently uncertain nature of predictions is not sufficiently acknowledged, and policymakers attempt to govern the future with similar conviction and vigor that is directed at more short-term objectives. We return to this potential hazard in the next section that analyzes the mechanisms of policy influence of expert insight.

4.4.1 The rise of ministries to the central position in the national foresight system

Although some individual ministry officials started to experiment with strategic foresight after the mid-1990s when the general idea of strategic policymaking arrived in Finland and some government sectors required more radical thinking, ministries’ independent role in and resources for anticipatory governance really started to develop only after the turn of the 2000s. An important feature of this process, as some interviewees noted and which reflects the above-mentioned problem of merging different levels of policy analysis and preparation, is that that ministries’ now-generalized tendency to ‘think a little ahead’ was and still is not always recognized explicitly as an act of anticipatory governance. While some ministries applied genuine futures methods already in the relatively early phases of this developmental path, some ministries still do not apply them very rigorously, even though they may have utilized sophisticated mathematical simulation models to predict key societal dynamics like economic development since the 1990s. An important lesson here is that the production of ‘future power’ is not always conceived or called strategic foresight, but when such activities are executed under a more ‘objective’ outlook, especially in a generally trusted domain like economy or some other easily measurable entity, it can become most effective. In any case, as another interviewee noted, a clear general change occurred in the temporal focus of state activities along with the growing pressure for strategic planning – simply because the planning horizon was now more self-consciously extended over current government terms.

According to an assessment report that sought to assist government’s efforts to streamline and centralize its strategic capacities (Aula, 2014), both aspects – the generalization of strategic thinking and the varied terms for describing

future-regarding activities – reflected clearly in ministries’ early long-term documents, which came in many forms. In the early 2000s ministries started to produce many types of documents that were either called strategies or possessed some strategic qualities. In addition to ministry-wide strategies that described long-term objectives and functions for whole policy sectors, ministries created documents for organizational and administrative strategies, as well as for more policy-specific issues ranging from research projects to detailed planning schemes. Differences in ministries’ policy field and regulative capacities reflected in their ability to produce and follow up their strategies, leading to varying outcomes and impacts. As these documents possessed no directly binding regulative authority like laws, their impact depended on the level of authorization that ranged in an ascending order from ministry departments to their leadership, the government, and finally the parliament. The relative weight of strategic documents also depended on the location where they were produced, descending from grand ministerial strategies directed by leading ministry officials to narrower issue-specific visions prepared independently by ministerial departments. Tangible changes to major ministerial strategies required solid political connection and blessing, but the strategic efforts of the ministries were more often disconnected from political steering mechanisms, meaning that they were prepared at departmental level (Aula, 2014). As our interviews also indicate, during this transitional era the work of ministry experts departed to some extent from the daily ambitions of the elected government, giving ministry officials a chance to develop independent interests and agendas.

Another, related reflection of this growing tendency to emphasize strategic thinking in state affairs, which has a more direct bearing on state-level foresight activities, was the emergence of ministerial future reviews in the early 2000s. As was described in [Chapter 3](#), alongside a major public administration reform a group of elected and non-elected lead officers of several ministries met to discuss about ministry-level strategic foresight. They drafted a formal proposition to advance the ministries’ budding foresight efforts with a periodically structured production of ‘future reviews’, ministries’ official expert assessments of their most pressing long-term challenges directed to parties and other societal stakeholders that were preparing for government negotiations ([Bergman, 2011](#)). According to an interviewee who has followed this reform closely from the beginning, the initial aim was to enhance the effectiveness of ministerial foresight by connecting it more explicitly to the standard policymaking processes. Already in the early 2000s, these processes rested heavily on the government program that coalescing parties agreed on after elections, explaining the desired timing of the reports. Although these documents that have been produced before every general election since 2003 did not initially cause much attention, their emergence marked the beginning of ministries organized foresight activities, which in time molded the foresight system significantly.

As has been noted, the first attempt to organize intra- and inter-ministerial foresight activities in the early 2000s led to a highly dispersed system. Our interviewees noted various reasons for such an outcome. First, depending on how well strategic thinking fit together with ministry’s traditional tasks and whether a ministry possessed

some other tools to create ‘future power’, the amount of effort that ministries put into their initial foresight activities varied a lot. As an example of the latter, the forecasts and ‘expert advices’ of the MoF that Finnish politicians have traditionally followed closely (e.g., [Murto, 2014](#)) were frequently mentioned in the interviews. Reflecting ministry’s ‘natural tendency’ to think ahead, the interviewees also noted the defense sector which was already well accustomed to long-term thinking due to sheer nature of its tasks and commitments. Secondly, and even more importantly, ministries’ foresight efforts often tended to reflect their broad sectoral autonomy and deeply embedded interests and resources. As a combined effect of these motivations and the very limited resources for enhancing intra-ministerial foresight, the initial foresight reports were often created by the same experts who were in charge of ordinary policy preparation within the ministries. In addition to first ministry-level reports (produced for 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections), the first version of the government foresight network that operated in 2004–2014 produced summaries of the general societal situation to develop a joint perspective among ministries and to educate actors with more limited foresight capacities, but the reports were too broad and imprecise to make any focused impact ([Koskimaa, 2023](#)).

The incapacity of the initial incarnation of the national foresight system to produce policy-relevant foresight led to its re-structuring and centralization ([Prime Minister’s Office, 2007, 2011, 2014; Ramboll, 2013](#)). A few of our interviewees followed closely the work of the group which united foresight actors from all central branches and later evolved into the Government Foresight Group. Initially, the reformers sought to reduce the unfocused ‘buzz’ caused by highly dispersed, poorly coordinated and vaguely scheduled foresight activities. In addition to putting ministries more clearly in charge of the production of foresight information, via granting them explicit role to commission and outsource foresight information from expert organizations and non-state actors that were relegated to mere information producers (as noted in [Ramboll, 2013](#)), the developers of the system wanted to increase the system’s political effectiveness. Ideally, as was noted, this was to be achieved by unifying the contents of the main outputs of the foresight system and, ideally, this was to be accomplished by bringing ministries together to scan and vision societal developments. The reformers also sought to adjust the timing of the main publications, targeting them even more explicitly toward the production process of Finland’s main political document, the government program. Here, as also noted by few of our interviewees, we can detect interesting collusion of political agents representing all spheres of the state apparatus, including the parliament and government which should theoretically compete with each other. Perhaps even more interestingly, the aim of this group seems to have been the forming of a system for genuine long-term governance which could remedy standard ills of election-based representative democracy, i.e., temporally confined and particularistic policy ambitions, with more general and temporally extensive idea of the common good, ideally determined through joint foresight efforts of high-ranking civil servants. While operating under the formal auspices of democratic institutions, such endeavor would take us closer to the less democratic end of governing institutions for long-term governance (see [Boston 2021](#)).

On that same note, it should also be noted that while such an ambition has existed among the central developers of the foresight system, ministries' foresight activities have not really seem to have centralized that much. While ministries' systemic role in state-level strategic foresight has strengthened significantly and they can now be considered as the most important players in governmental foresight networks, ministries seem to have continued to work in a relatively autonomous fashion, emphasizing their distinct interests and resources first. As ministries' extant foresight resources have not increased much, their foresight continues to lean mainly on their ordinary preparatory staff and processes, producing considerable variation to ministries' future reports. Reflecting these aspects, a recent development report also noted that for a long time many have hoped to see ministries evolve into 'compact and agile strategic cabinets', but their traditional role as 'operative expert administrators of detailed issues' has actually only strengthened. For ministries, the 'siloing' of administrative branches is a positive thing, as it allows them to control their own policy fields without the need to engage in excessive reporting and coordinating that comes with the cross-sectorial phenomenon-based model of public administration (Backman & Hyssälä, 2018). Also in the light of the increasing strategic relevance of 'future power' this is not very surprising.

4.4.2 Ministries' foresight activities and outputs

In general, as noted by our interviewees who have worked in the hard core of the Finnish foresight system in various ministries, the ethos to 'think a little ahead' has penetrated all layers of the governing system and become a standard mode of operation. While this work is still not necessarily recognized as anticipatory governance, most intra-ministerial activities are clearly motivated by long-term challenges and also their planned solutions stretch over several government terms, noted the interviewees. Moreover, even though such activity challenges the periodical nature of representative democracy, the interviewees, while emphasizing civil servants' primary task to serve the current elected government, seem to accept long-term perspective, because these leading officials generally consider cross-governmental action mandatory for tackling contemporary 'wicked problems'. The apparent contradiction between expert-driven long-term governing and the essential primacy of elected officials to draw political lines is typically solved by the interviewees, as we will detail below, by referring to the responsibility of civil service experts to study best existing information and 'educate' elected politicians with it. In other words, the objectives of civil servants and elected politicians do not likely contradict much eventually, as Murto (2014) has also noted, and in this sense nothing undemocratic really happens. The mechanism has more to do with the realities of contemporary governance where issues are simply very complex. We return to these mechanisms of influence after we have detailed the nature and preparation of ministries' central future-regarding documents.

In line with these general characterizations, contemporary Finnish ministries can be conceived as research agencies that, in addition to their traditional law preparation tasks, produce a wide array of strategic documents that in a way or another

and with varying political competencies (Aula, 2014) characterize ministries' professional understanding of the long-term developments of their respective policy fields. According to an interviewee, the four-year government term can now be roughly divided into half based on these general orientations. Naturally, these times differ in regard to specific ministry and civil servant, but it seems that most of them engage with both tasks to some extent. While all strategic documents have capacity to lengthen the temporal focus of Finnish policymaking, we focus here on the documents that were deliberately created for instilling ministry-level foresight into political decision-making. At the same time, we should note that while different documents are produced through different formal intra-ministerial pipelines, their contents tend to merge and align, because the documents are produced using the same informational and often also staffing resources, side by side with ordinary ministerial preparatory processes. In addition to reflecting a participatory motivation to engage all ministry departments in the creation of ministries' independent future-regarding expert insight, sharing of foresight and ordinary tasks results simply also from ministries' limited foresight resources. The governmental foresight network emerged and has existed mainly through the semi-voluntary work of a few dedicated ministry officials who apparently just happened to take on the task. According to one interviewee who has held a central coordinating role in the system, still in the mid-2010 ministries' dedicated foresight officials who coordinate intra-ministerial foresight activities worked part-time, using only around 5% of their work time for these tasks. Although designated intra-ministerial foresight resources have increased to some extent, the majority of ministries still have no full-time foresight professionals, although various experts may work under some related functional concept, like sustainability. Another reason for engaging 'ordinary' staff to foresight processes is that it allows ministries to control that their 'future vision' is in line with the ministries' other, sometimes much more particularistic views and interests, which are generally expected to affect ministries' incomes through budgetary considerations. While such arrangements undoubtedly hinder the ideal of seeking and serving common good through foresight, the merging of future-regarding and ordinary ministry work likely lengthens the temporal perspectives within policy sectors and increases capacity for more future-regarding policies in this more confined manner.

The main future-oriented policy document of ministries has been the future review, which was produced for the first time for the 2003 parliamentary elections. The report, which our interviewees characterized with many illustrative descriptions like 'ministries' independent strategic collection of advice for the next government' and 'an expert summary of the operational environment of policy sectors', formalize the ministries' long-term vision and efforts. Although the introduction of the mechanism was probably partially inspired by the future dialogue that consolidated a few years earlier with the formal recognition of the CF's permanent status, in terms of production and results ministries' future review mechanism differed from 'the dialogue' in all possible ways. The general nature, objectives and impact potential of future reviews can be described through these differences.

First, there are significant difference in the origins of these two now-adjacent mechanisms of anticipatory governance. Compared to future dialogue's

grassroots origin where few outsider MPs and scholars played a key role, future reviews were commissioned from the very highest echelons of state leadership, by elected cabinet ministers and ministries' general secretaries (Bergman, 2011). The latter, who have continued to play a very central role in the development of the national foresight system (see below) are generally considered as very powerful figures whose influence in policymaking can often exceed that of elected ministers (Murto, 2014). Such an origin signals a rather clear interest and intention of the ministries to engage with, and spend sparse resources on, state foresight activities. In conjunction with ministries' 'strategic turn' that also occurred around the turn of the millennium, this was an expected move.

Second, even a more important difference between the future dialogue and the ministries' future review concerns the preparation process of these documents. In stark contrast to the markedly eclectic, externally oriented and inclusive preparation of future reports, ministries' future reviews were specifically designed to give ministry officials an opportunity to present their independent expert view of sector-specific future developments (Bergman, 2011). Our interviewees, who have worked closely in these processes in various ministries for several years, detailed their various aspects that highlight the processes importance for the foresight system's time-bending capacities. As has been noted, ministries initially developed their foresight activities in rather ad hoc fashion, reflecting the varying importance of such issues in their field. In policy sectors where long-term focus comes with the basic nature of their issues and outputs (e.g., defense, environment), relatively advanced foresight processes were developed a long time ago. Contrarily, in sectors dominated by more day-to-day matters and which typically already included some informational tools for impacting 'future power' (e.g., finance and foreign policy) appreciation of and tools for future reviews grew more gradually, sometimes though the deliberate efforts of forerunner ministries to educate the latecomers. Importantly for the generalization of ministerial foresight activities, as noted by an interviewee representing the MoF, even the MoF that used to pay little attention to organized foresight activities while relying on its established status and prediction models now takes the foresight exercises more seriously and utilizes a more self-conscious preparation approach that has begun to standardize across ministries. According to the same interviewee, the MoF's change of heart resulted from the increasing attention given to the ministries' foresight activities, especially among the ministries' general secretaries whose independent future-regarding advice has gained prominence during past decade (see below for details).

Over time, the process for producing future reviews has assumed a relatively similar structure and schedule that all ministries follow. After starting to coordinate the system around the turn of the 2010s, the PMO has actively tried to develop and harmonize intra-ministerial processes and outputs, which, as was noted, still in 2015 presented '12 different pictures of the same environment'. The review process is now formally initiated and coordinated by the PMO in accordance with a more fixed schedule that conforms to other state foresight activities like the future dialogue. Still, however, the PMO or even the political cabinet is not allowed to direct the focus or contents of the ministerial reviews, whose preparation is confined

strictly inside ministries to secure the delivery of their unbiased expert opinion. However, inside ministries a relatively fixed organizational hierarchy seem to prevail. As in all intra-ministerial activities, general secretaries hold the highest formal authority and besides blessing the finished product they may clarify some specific issues. More concretely, however, the task of producing the future reviews is overseen by a lead organ consisting of the heads of ministry departments. The actual preparation process, which aligns thematically and procedurally with many other intra-ministerial preparatory processes as was noted, is coordinated by a designated group of ministry officials comprising of the corresponding foresight official and assisting clerks. Instead of producing information and ministry positions independently, the group collects them from ministry departments in participatory fashion. While this maneuver greatly increases the actual resources of intra-ministerial foresight, it also emphasizes the alignment of strategic foresight with ordinary ministry information that most officials deal with. In their ongoing information collecting efforts, the departments also connect with various external information sources like various expert organizations and organized societal stakeholders. Importantly, however, these interactions do not follow any formalized mechanism or bind ministries. Ministry officials bear full responsibility and right to utilize and interpret the often massive information flows as they please.

While relegating non-state actors to consultants with no independent agency or influence, the review mechanism seeks to remove any political interference by confining the preparation process strictly to the discretion of ministry officials. Based on our interviews, the ministry officials seem to hold on to this right adamantly. It is considered mandatory that when selecting, condensing and presenting information to elected politicians, the choices fit to the ministries' general narrative, reflecting only the ministry's view of how the world is standing and where it is heading. According to our interviewees, the process cannot be legitimately interfered externally even by elected ministers, because it would jeopardize the integrity and the impartiality of ministry officials. Another reason that was mentioned for strictly confining the future reviews as ministries' independent visions is that they are predominantly focused on upcoming governments, which the incumbent government should not direct. Of course.

This brings us to the markedly different objectives of the various state-generated future documents. In general, future dialogue exists in order to allow for electorally accountable politicians an opportunity to raise and discuss matters that exceed temporal and spatial boundaries of parliamentary terms and exchange. On the contrary, as noted by our interviewees, the objective of future reviews is to impact policies of governments. This feature was already present during the genesis of the review mechanism. The formative high-level meetings commissioned the reviews specifically for government negotiations, to serve as an informational background canvas against which coalescing political parties and organized societal stakeholders could negotiate the government program (Bergman, 2011). Our interviewees confirmed the ministries' aim to influence these choices by framing challenges and solutions with their independently produced expert insight. The interviewees offered a twofold justification for this position. First, reflecting the spirit of the 'strategic

turn', ministry experts noted that their responsibility as public servants is not limited only to preparing and implementing some pre-proposed political initiatives. Their role also includes a responsibility to stay aware of sector-relevant developments and to keep politicians informed about them. Besides improving informational equality between elected politicians, which originally motivated the introduction of the reviews (Bergman, 2011), efforts to mold politicians' perceptions have been considered legitimate because elected politicians always have the final say and they may thus choose against the recommendations of civil servants. As one interviewee summarized, through their expertise and in accordance with sectoral strategies, ministry officials are obliged to describe to politicians what 'staying on track' requires, and it is then the responsibility of elected politicians to assess the relevance of these notions against other societal interests, which they also need to balance. The second justification for civil servants' exclusive control of the future review process is that it defends the information-production system against the influence of interest groups that could infiltrate a more inclusive preparatory system. Overall, the interviewees' descriptions reflect a rather objectivist ideal of science-based governance that has been connected to technocratic ideals of policymaking (Caramani, 2017).

This ethos has been visible also in the contents of ministries' future reviews. Unlike the future reports of the government and the CF that portray a general vision of some grand, often markedly international societal trajectory, ministerial future reviews describe concrete sectoral challenges and 'realities', often in rather serious and deterministic tone. In general, the reviews describe (1) the general developmental trajectory of the policy sector, (2) its most significant future challenges, and (3) alternative policy choices through which the challenges could be addressed. According to Bergman (2011), the 2006 and 2010 reviews, which were prepared for the 2007 and 2011 parliamentary elections, refrained from making explicit policy recommendations, but their argumentative logic and rhetoric diverged from the diverse and open-ended style of traditional products of strategic foresight by describing a relatively narrow societal 'destination' strictly from the ministry's perspective and supporting it with simple causal statements in a suggestive tone. In their comprehensive review, Pouru et al. (2020) made similar observations when assessing the nature of foresight information that the government had received from ministries over the years. In these characterizations the aforementioned discrepancy between 'genuine' foresight information and more rigid and one-sided ministerial analysis becomes apparent.

The future review mechanism has been reformed over the years to some extent, alongside with the development of ministries' foresight capacities. Although ministries' responsibilities were clarified already in the first major reform (PMO, 2014), most notable changes have occurred after 2015 when the Government Foresight Group was erected to oversee and develop further the national-level foresight activities. In line with the PMO's general ambition to centralize and harmonize the various foresight processes and outputs and increase their political impact, new methods were also applied to the ministries' future reviews which used to portray various different depictions of the same operating environment. A more practical reason for emphasizing ministries' joint understanding was that

many contemporary so-called ‘wicked problems’ are essentially cross-sectoral and thus their solving requires inter-ministerial cooperation. In addition to harmonizing the general structure and publication schedule of the reviews, PMO-based experts started educating ministry experts to perform scenario modeling. As a result of these efforts, in the latter half of the 2010s ministries detected 15 common societal change factors and produced fitting scenarios for ministries’ internal strategic planning. Based on this material, the next reviews (published in 2018, prior to 2019 parliamentary elections) began with summaries of sector-relevant change factors. These factors were also utilized in the government’s future report, to publicize the views that all ministries share, in order to develop common perspectives on the most pressing challenges, which no ministry can neglect. The latest future reviews (published in 2022) were combined to a single volume, tying the ministries’ expert insights even closer to each other. However, as was already noted, it appears that despite these harmonizing efforts the ministries have not really given up on their historically structured perspectives, interests and resources (Backman & Hyssälä, 2018).

The late 2010s witnessed the emergence of another, politically even more weighty future-regarding document, which highlights ministries’ independent interests and capacities. In January 2019, few months before the general election, ministries’ general secretaries published their joint expert view of the most pressing future developments. As was noted above, these non-elected government officials who are typically selected for a 5-year term (that exceeds the 4-year electoral term) are the country’s highest-ranking civil servants and generally considered as very powerful political actors (Murto, 2014). Ministries’ general secretaries played an integral role in erecting the future review mechanism and the governmental foresight network, which formalized ministries’ role in the national foresight system (Bergman, 2011; Koskimaa, 2023). According to our interviews, general secretaries have also played a central role in emphasizing the ministries’ autonomy and special interests, hindering efforts to harmonize ministries’ foresight activities. At the same time, however, as for example the gradual integration of the MoF into governmental foresight network demonstrates, general secretaries’ positive stance toward national foresight activities also seems to have supported the development of the system, albeit toward a direction where especially the role of ministries has strengthened. While general secretaries’ joint statement can be conceived as a counter measure for the centralizing efforts of the Government Foresight Group and the PMO, as it is markedly a list of ministry visions, it also reflects the Group’s general ambitions by pushing foresight-based expert insight into a distinct, generally very important decision-making event.

General secretaries’ ‘strategic insights’ were presented in a widely publicized document, aptly named as ‘Opportunities for Finland’.¹ According to the formal description, the proposed ‘advices’ were drawn from, in this order, the experiences of general secretaries, government’s joint preparation efforts, ministries’ future reviews and the adjoining intra-ministerial discussions. In this more condensed report (compared to ministerial future reviews and the reports of the future dialogue), ministry heads wanted to state their ‘joint professional understanding’

of the ‘key challenges and opportunities’ of the new government, also demanding ‘hard decisions’ and ‘significant reforms’ in relation to several major long-term issues like climate change and public debt. Overall, the report was written in a distinctively straightforward and suggestive manner and tone, which demonstrates the strong self-conviction of the authors that had managed to climb to the highest ladder of the Finnish bureaucracy. Besides defining ‘key questions’ with almost scientific certainty, the report provided well-defined policy instruments as solutions. While avoiding direct explicit recommendations, these instruments, in conjunction with the societal developmental trajectories that were characterized as ‘inevitable’, communicated a rather clear message to elected politicians. At the level of details, some leeway was left to cater for different coalitions, which could emerge after the elections in the Finnish political system, but especially regarding the main aims the ministry heads’ points left no room for guessing. In some cases, the report made surprisingly unambiguous and direct proposals, for example, by recommending increasing work-based immigration to salvage Finland’s public economy that was struggling with an aging population and a diminishing labor supply (Finnish Government, 2019).

A similar report was issued before the 2023 election. While being clearer with its long-term ambition, stating that reported challenges and solutions concern two coming governments, the introduction also stated explicitly that the report is targeted to the upcoming government negotiations. The report presented similar, often even same major societal challenges with equally straightforward and pressing tone: need for rapid green transition, the balancing of public economy and creation of sustainable economic growth, echoing the MoF’s traditional grievances. This time the list of main objectives, or, in the terminology of the report, the general secretaries’ ‘central proposals for the directions of solutions’, was presented already in the introduction, as a numbered list of more concrete and detailed suggestions which quite often included clear numerical objectives² (Finnish Government, 2023).

One of our interviewees has followed closely the development of this new mechanism. Based on the interviewee’s description, the ‘hybrid tool’ that the PMO also formally coordinates but which in reality leaves broad autonomy for ministries, seems to have become an established feature of the Finnish ‘strategic’ governing system. According to this interviewee, the discussions where the contents of these reports were forged demonstrated a clear and widely shared belief held by general secretaries that problems such as climate change are indeed ‘compulsive drivers’ that inevitably force politicians to take action, thus creating a need and push within state administration for the next few decades to ‘orchestrate’ some advancement in these matters. According to the interviewee this capacity of Finnish tenured civil servants to present visions which may differ from the views of elected politicians who lead governments after elections have raised some astonishment in international networks of civil servants.

Another interviewee, who is also very familiar with the system but approaches it from a more foresight-centered viewpoint and emphasizing the parliamentary sphere, noted that this new mechanism of ministries’ general secretaries is a ‘clearly political’ attempt to define the general operating environment, sectorial trends and

what should be done about them. The interviewee traced the mechanism's development to the changing role of ministries in future-oriented state activities which have continued to increase their 'strategic relevance'. According to the interviewee ministries' newfound interest for foresight and other future-regarding activities stems from the increased expected policy impact of the activities. The interviewee also noted that the new mechanism is an attempt of ministries to re-introduce their special independent viewpoint on discussions of 'future power', which was previously partly lost due to the PMO-led efforts to harmonize ministries' foresight activities and outputs. The problem of the new mechanism is, the interviewee concluded, that it mixes the foresight-based ideal of anticipatory governance with traditional fact-based law preparation work of ministries, extending the latter mode also over cross-governmental planning activities. We discuss this essentially epistemological challenge more thoroughly in the concluding section.

4.4.3 The systemic role of ministries' foresight activities

Our analysis clearly indicates that the relative weight of government ministries in Finnish national-level foresight activities has increased considerably during the past few decades. In the 1990s, only few ministry officials performed ad hoc foresight tasks, usually in regard to some topical matters, and occasionally civil servants assisted in the preparation of the government's future report. In the early 2000s, ministries assumed a more forward-looking operating paradigm that was considered necessary for enabling long-term governance. By the orders of leading ministry officials, organized foresight activities were introduced to intra- and inter-ministerial level, leading to new, more politically self-conscious outputs (the future reviews), increasing foresight capacities and resources (however, mainly due to cross-departmental 'outsourcing'), and enhanced coordination and deepening co-operation, which eventually led ministries to a central information-producing role also in the government's and parliament's future dialogue.

Due to their clearer connection to electoral politics, one could assume that the other main arenas of anticipatory governance, the government and the parliament, stand above ministries in terms of 'future power' and policy impact. However, as has been noted, without tools to make genuine binding future-oriented decisions, the elections-bound institutional arenas possess very limited capacity to affect Finnish political time perspectives through the traditional lawmaking process. As noted by one interviewee, while elected politicians may conceive future reports as real policy initiatives, in reality they mainly facilitate ongoing future-regarding discussion. Capacities for binding cross-governmental policymaking are impossible to provide, even to elected officials, without rigging the foundational principles of representative democracy. In the Finnish model, CF's resolution mechanism comes closest to such mechanism, but as has been noted several times, it has not and probably will never be applied rigorously, as this would endanger policymaking capacities – and thus existential foundation – of elected politicians. Therefore, to re-iterate the main reason for highlighting ministries' activities, all we can do to increase future-orientation of policies, really, is to influence the views of elected policymakers.

Exactly for this reason ministries should now be conceived of as the leading architects of Finnish future-regarding policymaking. First of all, compared to parliaments and governments that essentially originate, operate and survive (or perish) through elections, the professional position of most Finnish ministry officials is secured by formal tenure, i.e., they cannot be removed with political reasons. In terms of expertise they are highly regarded professionals in their field of specialization. Because of these differences, ministries almost naturally possess longer temporal perspectives compared to politically selected functionaries. Moreover, compared to government coalitions that start producing their future reports only after elections, ministries produce their future reviews specifically for the pre-election situation, to condition parties' objectives in government negotiations. Due to this scheduling and the ongoing nature of their 'strategic' activities, ministries are always first in the playfield, so to speak, and they also remain there to look after made decisions long after specific political coalitions have disbanded.

Ministry experts prepared all policies already before any future-oriented political institutions existed, but it seems like the gradual increasing of the 'strategic relevance' of long-term planning and ministries more self-conscious effort to impact it have further increased ministries' capacity to impact policies. The 'strategic turn' in Finnish public administration in the turn of the millennium increased ministries' foresight tasks, capacities and presence in the national foresight system. While the formal integration of ministries to the foresight system enhanced the system's general connection to policymaking, the system's special mandate to think more openly about long-term developments and cross-governmental governing also radiated over ministries, expanding the time horizon and scope of arenas where ministries' newfound 'strategic' insight could be applied. Ministries transformed from reactive implementers to organizations with explicit expectation and capacity to 'think a little ahead'. Through the conceptual and processual merging of standard ministerial policy preparation and ministries' future-regarding visioning ministries' long-term strategic visions now likely reflect more also in the ordinary policy processes, as the CF and the PMO have explicitly wished ([Prime Minister's Office, 2019](#)). In the brief history of ministerial foresight, a new high point was the recent introduction of the 'GS messages', the public pre-election advices of ministries' general secretaries to the forthcoming government. The new mechanism, which according to our interviewees is here to stay, backs future-oriented policy initiatives with ministries' semi-autonomous expert role and professional prestige of Finland's highest-ranking civil servants, and can thus be considered a major undertaking. We finish this chapter by examining in more detail through which types of mechanisms future-regarding insights can penetrate to actual policymaking processes.

4.5 Instilling future-orientation into policymaking: general mechanisms and conditions

In this final section we examine in more detail an aspect of Finnish future-oriented governance that according to our interpretation forms the primary interface through which temporal scope of policies can be impacted in a representative democracy

which reserves the right to make binding decision to elected politicians and not technocratic elites: the intersection of expertise and politics. We aim to create an understanding of how especially ministries' long-term objectives can impact the temporal focus of policies chosen eventually by elected party-based governments that generally operate with much shorter and temporary mandates. To assess the system's strengths and capacity to persist over time, we also raise conditions and risks, which are associated with the mechanisms for future-oriented governance.

As we explained in the introduction, we have no intention to test and prove any specific policy fluctuations and impacts. This choice was primarily motivated by our inductive and explorative research design that has sought explanations for outcomes we knew that exist: Finland's relative success in long-term policymaking. The second reason to refrain from policy-specific analysis stems from our theoretical approach, which focuses on the capacity of future-oriented political institutions to influence temporal perspectives of policymakers, something we will assess in the next chapter. When primary focus is on individual level interactions, focusing on some extant policies would lead us astray. Third, and perhaps most importantly, our approach – to focus on institutions and individuals rather than some distinct policies – can be considered as methodologically safer. Efforts to trace individual policy ideas and outcomes are essentially plagued by the complexity of the densely networked policy systems. Assessing detailed policy impacts of independent political players such as organized foresight actors is very difficult because even at elite level Finland's policy system is very inclusive and typically engages high amounts of influence-seeking actors – politicians, interest group representatives, civil servants and so forth – to its internal processes. In addition to problems caused by the sheer number of potential influencers, tracing impacts of individual policy ideas is challenging due to the temporal structure of policymaking processes. In any given moment, only a limited number of issues and alternatives fit the daily agenda and compete for breakthrough (e.g., Kingdon, 1984). For this rather simple reason, as also noted by our interviewees, influence-seeking policy actors often tend to talk roughly about the same themes at the same time, offering their distinct and detailed position for the general and topical topic. Without very detailed process tracing, we cannot determine where some idea originated and found its final form. Even if we could gather enough cases to make our analysis statistically viable, we would still be faced with the problem of formalism, i.e., that in all advanced democracies eventually it is the elected politicians who push the button. For these various reasons, we opted for a more descriptive and interpretative analytic approach, drawing insight mainly from the several dozen interviews we made in our various sub-projects to understand these dynamics.

To put the discussion on the mechanisms and conditions of policy influence into a proper context, we begin with a summary of the detailed descriptions given by our interviewees concerning the intersection of ministry-produced foresight information and political decisions. Based on this data, the first sub-section below shows that these insiders of the foresight system – who mostly can also be considered as its advocates – recognize clearly the increasingly political nature of especially ministries' outputs. As was hinted already when detailing with the recent efforts of the Government Foresight Group to centralize state-level strategic foresight and increase its policy impact, especially the interviewed civil servants with a

background in ‘genuine’ strategic foresight activities (in academia, business sector, international organizations, think tanks, etc.), would not mind if strategic foresight in general had a significant impact on policymaking. However, they quite strongly object to the ministries’ one-sided, over-coherent and objectivistic perspective, which presents an antithesis to ideal foresight information that is essentially heterogeneous and uncertain. To add concreteness to these general descriptions, the second sub-section describes ministry experts’ role in policymaking in two policy sectors, environmental and foreign policy, which have been considered as polar opposites in terms of strategic leaning (Aula, 2014). Despite the major differences in the nature of issues and general temporal frames in these fields, we find rather clear commonalities in the ways in which expertise conditions policymaking. We finish the chapter by extracting a few general mechanisms and conditions from these analyses, which according to our interpretation uphold the Finnish national foresight system and allow it to influence the time perspectives of Finnish policymaking.

4.5.1 Anticipatory governance and policy impacts: the views of foresight actors

As was noted, the future dialogue between the parliament and the government was never meant to produce tangible policy effects. It was designed to formalize an ongoing and, from the perspective of potentially debilitating political turf wars, sufficiently general future-oriented political discussion at the highest level of national politics, which it still does. Ministries’ strategic efforts were instead directed at politicians from the very beginning, deliberately and explicitly. Even still, over the years the nature of this work and its expected impact seems to have changed to some extent. To use a school metaphor, a library-centered model based on voluntary studying of accessible learning materials (ministries produce reliable background information for elected politicians) has evolved into a more self-conscious effort by the teachers (the ministries) to instill some fundamental teachings to the pupils (elected politicians).

According to one interviewee, who has followed the development of the national foresight system at ministry level since its inception in the early 2000s, the initial idea of future reviews was to advance informational equality between politicians by maximizing the quality and extent of future-regarding information for all political competitors before and after elections. Besides leveling out variation in informational resources of different parties and interest groups, the mechanism aimed at evening out information asymmetry between government and opposition parties, as the four-year government term provides a significant advantage in informational resources for the former which prepares almost all policy initiatives. At ministry level, the review mechanism sought to incentivize the organizing and streamlining of intra-ministerial strategic and foresight work.

Based on our analysis and overall interpretation, it seems like these functions that reflect the library model mentioned above were not enough eventually, because the national foresight system was thoroughly reformed in the 2010s specifically to enhance its policy impact. As was noted already above, besides integrating

ministries more tightly to organized, coordinated and harmonized governmental foresight work, the system's developers attempted to optimize the *schedules* of the various foresight outputs in order to more effectively target the most important decision-making events, especially government negotiations.

To characterize these efforts, our interviewees detailed the main stages of the current system: (1) The first part of the reformed future report that ministries' now jointly craft and which presents a '360 degree perspective' of the general operating environment is published about 2 years before the elections. (2) The ministries' future reviews that now connect more directly with the future report's common 'situational picture' and present sectoral insights side-by-side in one publication are published in autumn, around half a year before next year's elections and government negotiations, (3) ideally impacting parties' political priorities which they state in their electoral manifestos. (4) The more detailed 'messages' of the ministries' general secretaries that also build on intra-ministerial foresight and outline the ministries' views are published a few months before the elections that take place in April, presenting for the parties a much more concentrated list of issues that, as one interviewee described, 'will face all parties that enter the government'. Finally, (5) after the government agreement has been negotiated, the concrete policy initiatives will only change little, even when they enter the parliamentary arena, which is typically dominated by the substantial majority of coherently operating government parties. As summarized by one interviewee representing the government sphere, although different foresight reports build on varying historical aims and processes, now even the future report, when dealing with issues of how to build future societal resilience, corresponds closely in terms of substance with the more condensed advices – just as it was intended, added the interviewee. Overall, the tighter scheduling around the electoral cycle and the gradually unifying contents of various future-oriented policy reports clearly signal a more self-conscious ambition of foresight actors to impact policies.

The merging of the contents of various *foresight reports* into a kind of generalized long-term vision is not too surprising when we consider what is happening in the intra-ministerial arena. Based on the interviews of ministry experts, ministries' all future-regarding or strategic insight, which includes everything from condensed organizational analyses to broad future scenarios and detailed authoritative expert advice, builds essentially on the work of the same individuals and raw materials which ministry experts source from their networks. The contents of the various reports also reflect the established interests of the ministries, although the clarity of positions depend on the level of the political authority of the documents: free-form departmental scenarios present a more open picture than 'GS messages', which present a strongly edited, condensed and more authoritative version of the ministries' political ambitions. Nonetheless, as the interviewees noted, in terms of general objectives, all strategic or long-term ministry documents typically present a rather coherent picture of the ministries' perceptions and interests, as they are prepared by same individuals and processes to serve the same organization.

Through a similar logic, the interviewees also connected the ministries' strategic reports to their more traditional political documents. According to one interviewee

who has represented the powerful MoF, the MoF's future review is 'painted with a broad brush' while the MoF's official expert review that it offers before elections and its direct consultations at government negotiations concerning the country's economic situation present a more detailed picture of essentially the same thing. Another interviewee, representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, noted that the ministry's recent key policy report, the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy, included very similar themes and leanings as the ministry's latest future review and more generally too the government's foreign policy line has closely resembled the future review. The simple reason for the thematic correspondence is that although the preparation of these reports is coordinated by different departments and the processes are not explicitly harmonized, essentially the same people using the same sources produce the information that is used in most reports. An interviewee representing the government sphere confirmed that an underlying ambition of the PMO foresight operatives has been to enhance the spreading of foresight information across ministry departments in order to increase their policy impact.

Quite naturally and also tellingly, ministry experts also clearly recognized the risks of 'stepping over the line', i.e., extending their role of policy advisers to policy directors, while still defending their right to inform politicians. According to two interviewees from the government sphere ministry experts' responsibility to inform politicians relates to the simple fact that decisions are always made with some informational background and thus it is best that ministries' tenured experts control that resource. However, as was noted above, the nature and expected impact of this information seems to have changed over the years to some extent. According to one interviewee, the initial purpose of the future reviews was only to raise the most important questions to which 'the government must respond', without 'saying anything about the answers' that were considered to sit on the remit of elected politicians. The same interviewee continued that especially with the 'GS messages', the ministries have sometimes clearly crossed the line, raising concerns even among ministry officials. According to another interviewee representing the parliamentary sphere, the 'GS messages' moved clearly further from traditional foresight, presenting clear political objectives in the electoral context. Interestingly and in differently critical fashion, this interviewee qualified the message by also noting that perhaps the mechanism exists merely to assist political parties and politicians that do not have the guts to say these necessary things openly. Indeed, it is very important to keep in mind that instead of grabbing power from elected officials who always bear right to make final decisions, it is also possible – and perhaps more likely – that elected politicians merely submit to, and even benefit from, the expert-driven ethos of modern policymaking that can effectively de-politicize essentially political decisions.

Another interviewee gave a subtle and detailed description of the fine line between impacting general conceptions that concern the political operating environment, which is what ministries' should do, and telling politicians what to do, which is what civil servants should never do according to this interviewee. In purely formal terms, describing challenges of the operating environment, and perhaps even

some alternative ‘pathways’ for addressing them, can be delineated from suggestions that concern certain paths or tools, because elected politicians can always make choices between different alternatives. In practice, as the interviewee explained, in the tense, dynamic and proximate advising processes some alternatives may become subtly suggested over others, even completely unintentionally. In addition, the interviewee noted, some grand ‘advice’ like that of the messages of the general secretaries are likely ‘hard to avoid’ by politicians. Since the 1990s the Finnish political practice started to emphasize credibility, which in this context connected to politicians’ capacity to conform to the various ‘realities’ of governing, especially in regard to economic matters (e.g., [Kantola, 2002](#)).

From our interviews, analysis and interpretation emerges three general factors that affect the extent to which expert advice is perceived as being political. The first one, which we have already mentioned, concerns the number of alternative ‘pathways’ that are presented to elected politicians: put simply, more alternatives mean more autonomy for the politician and less administrative steering. The second factor concerns the clarity and detail of the proposed solutions. As one interviewee emphasized, even the relatively straightforward ‘GS messages’ do not typically mention exact policy details, such as how money should be distributed between ministries and departments. This leaves for politicians the possibility and capacity to make ‘real’ decisions in regard to, for example, moving money between budget categories. Here, as a critical caveat, we can note however that while this technical perspective sounds intuitive and understandable for a civil service professional who has worked years in the hard core of the governing system and knows intricately the details of various policy programs and budgets, for someone who is less familiar with such details – probably at least 95% of the Finnish population – might seem much less obvious. In other words, although the availability of such intricate possibilities is firmly embedded to the system, to secure that both civil servants and elected politicians can play their distinctive roles without breaking the rules of democracy, it is not too obvious that ordinary voters see things similarly and can differentiate the various sources of policy impacts. We return to this pressing challenge for democratic legitimacy with more detail in the concluding chapter.

Third, from the perspective of this chapter’s principal narrative which emphasizes the gradual merging of ordinary and future-oriented policy planning and preparation, the most significant factor that conditions the political power of experts concerns the nature of information. Due to the merging of the informational base and governing ambitions of various ministry reports, the problem of ‘stepping over the line’ involves a significant *epistemological dilemma*. More specifically, the problem is that due to the merging of these functionally different processes and products, there is a risk that methods of ministries’ traditional policy planning that lean on backtracking empirical evidence and constructing coherent linear models become also used for creating long-term visions which should fundamentally carry a clear recognition of considerable uncertainty. The problem is amplified by the previously described centralization of information production within the national foresight system that now limits the sources of legitimate future information to the ministries, turning their vision into the ‘only game in town’.

Based on our interviews, the general contention of Finnish civil servants seems to be that it is their duty to maximize their awareness of things that happen in their policy field and then to channel this information to elected policymakers who make political decisions. In addition to this general point, our interviewees clearly indicated a belief that civil service indeed possesses the best available information and with this resource it naturally forms also scientifically informational background canvass against which issues are reflected in the policy process, in addition to being free from partial external influence like the information provided by lobbies, as was noted above. According to one interviewee, such a role is especially important in the current 'post-truth' era, where populists deliberately haze the border between science and personal experience.

However, without questioning the feasibility of preparing ordinary policies from such a predisposition, the interviewees noted challenges in extending the method to more future-oriented visioning. In general, applying 'best available information' also for such visioning can seem intuitive and natural, as the visions have to base on something, of course. For this reason, the constant need to 'think a little ahead' has become so deeply embedded in Finnish governance and today, as noted by one interviewee, all policy work is generally future-oriented. However, a problem emerges when the informational standard and empirical certainty that is applied in traditional policy planning and which builds on known facts and ambition to produce lasting general rules is extended on long-term issues of which we cannot know as much. The interviewees noted that approaching future issues with a similar bureaucratic mindset and method can trap future visioning into 'linear continuity assumption' that is typical for public administration. As an example, the interviewees raised the possibility that is seldom considered explicitly inside bureaucracy, which is that green transition may also fail due to several political and other reasons. According to the interviewees no one even at the highest leadership expects this to happen and if it did it would create a massive crisis for the whole policy system which is now centrally organized to tackle such problems. As was noted, this belief was clearly evident also in the 'GS messages'.

Our interviewees examined the problem of mixing facts and visions further by contrasting the various future-oriented reports that have been defined in the previous pages. In developing ministerial future reviews and the future dialogue in which the ministries now also contribute significantly, a central ambition of the Finnish Foresight Group was to improve the ministries' foresight capacities and genuine scenario modeling. This would allow ministries to describe more systematic paths to presented outcomes. These methods, which have been suggested by actors of the Government Foresight Group with a background in genuine foresight work, have been applied to thematically general future reports and even into some ministries' future reviews. In the future, the same actors would like to see these methods applied to the more concrete future-regarding documents as well.

However, here the ministries' approach to these methods changes. Ordinary ministry officials have generally not been too adept with futures-style scenario modeling. Their primary work, which is to prepare policy initiatives from the government program, continues to build on analyzing existing laws and measurable

factors and trends. This work forms the foundation of the ministries' work culture. Instead of providing alternative scenarios, the more concrete and policy-relevant documents like the 'GS messages' have portrayed 'scenario-independent trends' to which politicians are expected to answer, as the trends are considered as pressing contextual realities. However, while trends like the aging of the Finnish population is a well-founded fact that likely, without a major disruption, continues in the future as well, its various societal ramifications (e.g., for labor and economy) and also the solutions are more varied and much less certain. According to an interviewee a certain distillation process characterizes the system. It proceeds from the more general, open and politically less relevant documents such as the future report which still today may utilize even direct input from non-state actors and citizens toward the more detailed, condensed and policy-relevant products like the future reviews and GS messages, which are more heavily processed by various administrative stakeholders. In this process, the complexity and breadth of ministry vision and uncertainty regarding the future gradually decreases. As the same interviewee further explained, the further the process develops, the more ministries' general secretaries make sure that the ministries' special viewpoints and interests, especially regarding state resources whose distribution is connected in the way in which societal problems are defined, are taken into consideration. Through the process, ministries' future-regarding visions become to look more like their ordinary day-to-day conceptions.

In sum, along with this 'distillation process' the foreseeing capacities and input from various societal actors operating in the formally inclusive and broad foresight system essentially condense into the expert views of ministries which, when fitted properly with the wishes of elected governments, can make a genuine future-regarding policy impact. Such sequential process that combines technocratic and democratic features of policymaking without exhausting the latter should be more explicitly acknowledged between the polar ends on which the discussion of future governance often appears to circulate.

The final issue to consider is, then, what is the relationship between these 'messages' and political decisions? Although the chapter has thus far focused predominantly on the capacity of experts to direct policymaking, it is also possible that politicians hope for clear statements from leading civil servants in order to hide behind them as civil servants' professional careers are secured by formal tenure. Theoretically, political governments could also try to steer ministries' foresight activities for their own benefit, in order to avoid political accountability and impact the choices of future governments, too. However, instead of mentioning such a possibility, at least our interviewees, who at this stage of the research project represented the civil service, underlined several times that intra-ministerial foresight activities cannot be politically interfered with, at least formally. If true, this means that if ministries' insights really impact policies, the impact grows from non-partisan expertise and not on political-partisan guidance of parties and governments. In line with this interpretation is another, perhaps more probable option concerning the seeming coherence of views of various elites: that many elected politicians in fact genuinely want to leave tough choices to leading civil servants and focus on the more electoral aspects of their profession. As one interviewee put it, contemporary politicians have no real

policymaking resources through their parties anymore and due to the political risks associated with novel proposals they might become easily tempted to leave the problems to be solved by ‘evidence’ and experts.

However, to close the section off with a balancing view, our interviews also clearly indicated that even ‘strategic policymaking’ is never devoid of political choices made by elected politicians, although the choices are probably filtered through the above-mentioned mechanisms. All interviewees recognized the limited role of public administration to offer input for politicians to choose from. As noted by an interviewee representing the generally farseeing Ministry of Environment, while ministerial strategies can determine the general informational ‘backbone’ for policy sectors, short-term political changes and ambitions are always considered in the detailed operationalization of the strategies, especially concerning the various regulative alternatives. The extent to which a strategy conforms to political ambitions is partly determined by the nature of the policy sector. The interviewee mentioned population and climate issues as fields with less leeway, due to the more ‘natural’ existence of these phenomena, whereas for example innovation policy can offer much more leeway for politicians due to its less stringent and pressing nature. Elected politicians face these various ‘realities’ in the government negotiations to which the ministries prepare all base materials. While such ‘realities’ undoubtedly condition parties’ ability to steer policymaking, here meaning the act of diverting from the long-term path of the ministries, in addition to choosing the spearheads to the government program the parties also affect the internal weighting of ministerial strategies, which are formally ‘inspected’ and ratified always when a new government takes office. In addition, and more increasingly, party-based special advisers participate at least in the most important intra-ministerial decision-making processes, effectively limiting civil servants’ motivation and capacity to divert from the government line even though in the Finnish political system civil servants cannot be fired on political grounds.

These descriptions, too, emphasize the essential difference of intra-ministerial ‘deep tide’ that is formed and maintained in a much longer temporal span than the electoral term and the detail-level choices that are made within these terms. The distinction is crucial when considering policy impacts of various political actors.

4.5.2 Strategic expertise and policymaking: insights from two policy sectors

To close off the analysis of the capacities and conditions for more future-oriented policymaking in Finland, this section briefly illustrates expert-politician dynamics in two policy sectors, which present opposite qualities in terms of their strategic nature: environmental and foreign policy (Aula, 2014). To simplify, the former represents a policy field which attempts to tackle a slowly and gradually developing global megatrend while the latter focuses more on issues that may change very rapidly. As noted in the introduction, we do not treat these cases as a representative sample of the practices of all Finnish ministries, but instead consider them as interesting and illuminating specimens whose differences and similarities illustrate the strengths and limitations of the Finnish expert-driven system of anticipatory governance and the varying roles that political institutions and actors can take in varying sectoral contexts.

According to one interviewee from the government sphere, ministries' general capacity to produce strategic foresight and utilize it in policymaking differs for several reasons. First, although preparatory processes are long, laborious and costly in all sectors, and thus instill a natural long-term ethos to all preparatory work in modern democracies, policy sectors differ in terms of general strategic orientation. For some ministries, long-term planning comes very naturally, through the nature of issues they are dealing with while the issues of some other ministries are inherently more situational, as was noted above. An illuminating example of the former is the Ministry of Defence, whose strategic environment is strongly characterized by severe and ongoing competition and very tangible and drastic ramifications for success and failure. Put bluntly, If Finland fails to keep up with the demands of international warfare, the country might face extinction. For this reason, also the kind of strategic planning that we have discussed in this chapter is strongly developed in the defense sector. In many other sectors policy planning is typically more 'monopolistic', akin to more national demands. Another factor that creates variation to ministries' strategic capacities is the amount and quality of officials who work extensively with strategic planning. The extent to which these individuals' efforts traverse to policymaking depends a great deal on how well foresight and strategic efforts have been institutionalized inside the ministry. Sometimes, no institutionalized channels exist, making the distillation of foresight information into policymaking a highly personalized affair where interpersonal relationships have great significance. In cases where personal ambitions and capacities coincide with formalized input channels, a ministry can exercise strong and impactful mechanisms for future-regarding policymaking. In general, the less institutionalized model appears to be still more prominent, but the general change in administrative ethos increasingly favor the latter model.

Quite likely, as the detailed experiences of the environmental policy sector also demonstrate below, strongly institutionalized future-regarding mechanisms develop more easily in sectors with a special strategic bearing, of course. Also, reflecting on the previous comment on staff resources, it seems rather reasonable to assume that such fields attract experts who share similar, more future-regarding interest and convictions. Therefore, despite the over decade-long ambition of the PMO to equalize foresight capacities across ministries via inter-ministerial teaching and learning, significant differences continue to exist in how well ministries perform and utilize future-oriented activities, at least using these extant labels and methods. Indeed, we also must not forget that for example economists often seek to predict economic developments, but very likely they would never admit in engaging with futurology. The MoF which is by far the most powerful ministry and a clear latecomer in organized foresight activities produced highly authoritative predictions and expert advice already in the 1990s, which significantly molded the Finnish national economy (e.g., [Kantola, 2002](#); [Murto, 2014](#); [Patomäki, 2014](#)).

According to our newer interviews, unsurprisingly, the Ministry of Environment (MoE) is one of the ministries where a future-regarding spirit and activities have been taken seriously. As explained by a leading ministry official, besides offering

an institutionalized channel for all ministry officials to partake in the preparations of the ministry's various strategic documents, the unit that coordinates the processes makes deliberate and significant efforts to streamline the ministry's vision across various strategic documents. The ministry also pushes forward its strategic vision in various governmental arenas with explicit strategy for maximizing its policy impact. Naturally, also the MoE has to consider the changing political and economic tides, which can affect the 'operationalizing' of ministerial strategies, as was noted few pages ago. Every new government checks the ministerial strategy after taking office to fine-tune it according to its priorities. However, introducing another kind of external pressure aside of international competition that was mentioned with the defense sector, the MoE's long-term objectives have been molded and advanced also by the ambitious environmental policy of the European Union, whose demands now need to be considered in all preparatory processes, noted the interviewee. In addition to lifting the highest decision-making authority to supra-national level, the EU's independent and distinctive policymaking process and schedule detaches Finnish environmental policy to some extent from domestic political pressures. Changes in the EU's policy lines are relevant also for the ways in which Finnish governments can advance their potentially diverging ambitions inside the ministry. We detail this important mechanism below.

According to our interviewees, another general factor that limits political turbulence and rapid movements inside the Ministry of Environment, and even other ministries, is the fact that existing policy programs, including those that relate to EU's common regulatory schemes, tend to be tightly embedded also in the national budget frame after they have been decided upon. Importantly, the budget frame is almost exclusively controlled by the MoF. Illustrating yet another important conditioning factor for the operating capacities of the national foresight system, the general significance of the MoF's ability to control inter-ministerial finances was mentioned much more often by the interviewees from the various arenas of the foresight system than, e.g., the significance of the PMO's coordinative efforts. In addition to the obvious fact that the MoF indeed controls the state-level financial flows, the MoF has been recently dubbed as the 'sustainability ministry' due to its seemingly independent ambition to steer national economy in a certain fashion. Relatedly, the interviews also revealed a tension between the MoF and the PMO relating to the latter's attempts to centralize government's strategic activities. The significance of this observation lies in the PMO's incapacity to coordinate various political entities efficiently. Indeed, although a distinct unit of the PMO formally coordinates the national foresight system, we must not forget that the PMO's primary task is to oversee the execution of the government program and this task crucially connects to the work of the MoF. Formally, the MoF is a politically directed bureau, but it possesses notorious independent capacity to impact Finnish economy (e.g., [Murto 2014](#)). If a ministry's strategic ambition aligns with the long-term ambitions of the 'sustainability ministry', the strategic powers of both actors should increase while limiting PMO's centralizing influence.

The major research project whose results we summarize in this book started with a more focused study on long-term policymaking in the Finnish environmental

policy sector. The study detailed the conceptions of 24 leading elected and non-elected policymakers representing various arenas of this policy field (ministries, parliament, major stakeholders) about factors that enhance long-term policies (Koskimaa et al., 2021). The study noted similar organizational and field-specific characteristics that were made by our newer interviewees. To bolster the more general argument of this book we now summarize the main insights from this study.

First, already in this more limited study we noted the prominent conditioning impact of international agreements, especially EU's regulation. The interviewees estimated that international regulations now affect around 90% of all Finnish environmental regulation. Due to the binding and non-transferrable character of these agreements and the careful monitoring and enforcing of the agreements at EU level combined with Finland's general diligence to comply with such commitments, EU regulation provides a strong backrest for ministry experts who are formally responsible for monitoring Finland's international commitments across government terms. Again reflecting the insights gathered also from the newer interviews, these earlier interviewees also noted the significance of the EU's slow multistage policy process. It effectively detaches environmental policy issues from national-level policy processes and divides political burdens and 'ownership' across several government terms, contouring the idea of blame obfuscation strategies (see Jacobs, 2016). However, the study also importantly reported that even with such a strongly embedded international framework the Finnish environmental policy is not devoid of political influence. Although the relatively progressive Finnish long-term environmental policy has been strongly conditioned by broad political compromise and consensus, all Finnish governments continue to participate in the preparation of EU level policy, which typically attracts resistance from various societal stakeholders and incentivize governments to leave their mark during the implementation phase. Political challenges occur also after the agreements have been made, but they are then typically limited to detail-level changes. A more significant change requires a major change in the long established political coalitions.

Second, and most importantly, this earlier study also emphasized the very prominent independent role of civil servants in preparing policy initiatives and coordinating preparatory and decision-making processes within the state administration. The interviewees provided several detailed reasons for the emergence of such role. First, unlike in some Anglo-Saxon models where leading civil servants are changed when a new government takes office, in Finland civil servants are secured from direct electoral pressures with formal tenure. Second, these interviews, too, acknowledged the various professional and proactive features of Finland's contemporary governing system. In their day-to-day work, Finnish civil servants 'semi-autonomously' manage existing policy programs and develop new ones. With their historical knowledge civil servants condition the preparation of government programs that happens exclusively in ministries. As also noted above, the contemporary operating role of civil servants also includes many more independent, strategic functions than mere execution of government policy. Through the obligation to gather information, top-level civil servants develop for themselves

a level of expertise in their field of specialization that no elected politician can challenge. Besides developing prestige, over time such a position likely also affects personal political convictions, making some alternatives look better than others. Third and relatedly, Finnish civil servants gain power from coordinating all intra-governmental affairs from policy preparation to decisions, implementation and monitoring. They manage the scheduling and composition of preparatory meetings, and they monitor the lawfulness of the processes. Finally, as also noted by [Murto \(2014\)](#), Finnish civil servants' expertise-bound influence in preparatory processes has strengthened during Finland's EU membership. Our interviewees explained that EU's complex multilevel and multistage policy process raises the profile of civil servants also through a kind of technocratic imperative. The highly complex and broad-ranging policy programs of the EU, which are prepared for years, typically stretch over several government terms and comprise the bedrock for all environmental legislation, giving the civil servants the kind of informational expertise that is very hard for elected politicians to topple, as they typically work simultaneously with several issues, on an essentially temporary basis. While these interviews also noted political turbulence, they emphasized that in this sector elected politicians have typically merely 'iced the cake', by influencing details of the means of environmental policy rather than its ends.

Reflecting the efforts to engage non-state actors to the national foresight system, the third main factor that has enhanced Finland's success in long-term environmental policy concerns the inclusiveness of the preparatory processes. In line with traditional ethos of Finnish policy preparation, environmental policy sector has endorsed a formally inclusive and transparent preparation process. The varying types of consultative hearings that include broad and inclusive assemblies and exclusive intra-ministerial preparatory committees, and the broad circulation of draft laws across this broad spectrum of formally recognized participants, characterizes the process ([Vesa & Kantola, 2016](#)). While some participants mostly serve to legitimize the system ([Hiedanpää & Bromley, 2013](#)), it is considered very important that powerful stakeholders participate in order to secure the smooth passing and survival of policies. In general, industrial lobbies bear significantly more weight than environmental NGO's ([Paloniemi et al., 2015](#); [Ruostetsaari, 2010](#)), but due to the consolidation of the preparatory system that is also firmly managed by ministry officials it has developed into the 'only game in town', delegitimizing the relevance of external players and processes ([Teräviäinen et al., 2011](#)). In other words, the environmental NGO's have nowhere else to go. A good example of the various virtues of inclusive preparation is the direct involvement of business organizations, which has been conceived mandatory for successful long-term policy due to their significant resources and vested interests relating to long-term investments. However, instead of gaining a dominant position, business lobbies also heed to the 'only game in town' logic where they gain a chance to impact policies and best information regarding regulative initiatives. Through their vast resources and ambition to maximize societal stability the businesses can stabilize the short-term ambitions of elected politicians and they can also develop solutions for which

official state institutions have no political, technical or economic capacity. Overall, committing varying special interests to a formal policymaking process enhances the system's legitimacy, stability and, through increased coalition potential, also its effectiveness. Such ethos and supportive institutions seem centrally important for the Finnish strategic governance more generally, too.

Our detailed case study on Finnish long-term environmental policy already revealed many of the key mechanisms that were also detected and clarified in our further analyses. The mechanisms explained in more detail through which kind of logics and dynamics ministry experts succeed in feeding future-regarding insight into policymaking. To summarize, through their respected role as the highest experts in the policy field that is secured from political interference by formal tenure leading civil servants gain powerful tools to sell long-term ambitions to politicians, especially when they connect with the EU's long-term policy initiatives that civil servants also monitor. However, we again also need to underline that the strength of these mechanisms does not make politicians redundant in Finnish environmental governance or other sectors. We know from even more detailed analyses of environmental policy that political parties have played an integral role in key decision moments. On one such example is the 'nuclear coalition' of main political parties that responded to the Kyoto Protocol's challenge with a new nuclear reactor, setting the tone for Finnish climate policy for decades (e.g., [Gronow & Ylä-Anttila, 2019](#)). Although the coalition also included leading ministry officials who directed the process, and also major industrial lobbies whose interests had to be fitted into the scheme, the project would not have succeeded without the participation of major political parties. For this reason, the well-documented case provides a great example of the capacity of the Finnish expert-driven and inclusive policy preparation system to produce genuinely future-regarding and long-lasting policies. Meanwhile, we must also keep in mind that more often the influence of elected politicians in the environmental policy sector traverses through smaller detail-level changes made to government agreements and ministerial strategies, which the civil servants prepare and plate for parties deliberately to keep them satisfied. Capacity to accommodate fluctuating political leanings has likely been a major contributor to the system's longevity.

In this earlier study we also discovered factors that can risk the policy system's capacity to generate long-term policies, and perhaps even threaten its survival. As we noted in the introduction of this chapter, such factors are equally important to recognize as factors which conditioned the birth of such. Signifying the rather rigid legalistic administrative culture of Finland, our interviewees noted that most of the above-mentioned roles and capacities of civil servants are codified into formal rules and are strictly followed in practice. However, reflecting the same general understanding, the interviewees also clarified that if elected politicians wanted to choose something even contrary to official proposals, civil servants possess no legitimate tools to stop them. While they have been able to maintain Finland's current, relatively future-oriented position in environmental policy with broad support from established political parties and major organized interest groups who all see the EU in positive terms, changing political circumstances and circumstances and coalitions can alter

the balance as long as the system acknowledges the role of elected politicians, as has been noted many times. We return to this challenge in the two last chapters.

Before closing the section, we briefly raise a few additional points from another, very different policy field. Compared to environmental policy that concerns relatively well and broadly acknowledged and understood, slow-developing and border-crossing processes which governments seek to govern through comprehensive international regulation, foreign policy issues are characterized by almost opposite qualities: higher uncertainty, potentially abrupt major changes and strong national autonomy. Of course, national governments make significant efforts to control their international status, cooperation and commitments through organized information exchange and treaties, but the continuing preponderance of nation states and the lack of sovereign and politically effective international governing apparatuses makes foreign policy domain inherently, if not anarchic, at least much more unstable and always suspect to rapid changes. On top of the generally precarious nature of this policy field, in Finland foreign policy governance operates under a particularly challenging regime type: a semi-presidential constitution that despite the significant weakening of the presidency during past few decades continues to share executive powers in foreign and security policy between a directly elected and typically very popular president and a broad parliament-backed coalition government which holds all major preparatory resources through ministries.

Interestingly, as was already noted above in regard to our interviews of the foresight specialists, including the ones having worked with foreign affairs it appears that despite this rather challenging decision-making environment the experts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been able to develop institutionalized practices for creating long-term visions (future reviews) which often seem to reflect also in the more political statements. Interviews that were made for an adjacent project (Koskimaa & Raunio 2024) also quite clearly suggest that ministry experts seem to play a major directive role in all preparatory processes of this policy field, too. For this reason we briefly summarize their main findings below.

Largely due to the peculiar features of the semi-presidential regime the Finnish foreign policy leadership system can be regarded as distinctively precarious and carefully managed – another major feature to which civil servants seem to contribute significantly. All formal policy outputs are ratified by government parties and the president in a designated joint leadership organ, the Ministerial Committee on Foreign and Security Policy, which was designed specifically for managing the shared foreign policy leadership that emerged along Finland's constitutional reform in 2000. Although formally a ministerial committee, to satisfy the constitutional demand for shared leadership the president holds a permanent *ex officio* seat and even chairs the committee's meetings. In addition to deciding on topical foreign policy issues, the committee decides on more general statements and reports, which are all prepared by ministry officials. A good example is the previously mentioned Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy, which describes the country's international operation environment and central political stances toward it. To make things even more complex, since 2012 the parliament has held a constitutional right to ratify all

major changes to Finland's foreign and security policy line, extending cooperation to all main political institutions including the legislature. While the system appears as fragmented and fragile, conflicts have been rare and the system largely operates smoothly. A recent demonstration of the operative capacities of the Finnish foreign policy system was the country's swift decision to apply for NATO membership right after Russia attacked Ukraine in early 2022. This decision, which ended Finland's seven-decade long neutrality policy, was carved and decided on in just few months' time through a sequential committing process encasing all main institutions and actors (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2024).

Besides reflecting the long-standing pragmatic tradition of the Finnish state leadership practices (e.g., Hallberg et al., 2009), the foreign policy system also reflects the significant capacity of public administration experts in collecting, sieving and presenting information and also in the managing and coordinating of all intra-executive processes where president and government parties fit together their views. This general contention emerged clearly from a set of interviews that comprise of ten of the highest-ranking makers of Finnish foreign policy, including several former prime and foreign affairs ministers and general secretaries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to these interviews both central tasks of the foreign policy domain, careful long-term planning and capacity for fast reactions, are profoundly conditioned by the expert work of ministries' tenured non-elected professionals. Moreover, compared to experts in other policy fields, these civil servants may even enjoy of a broader autonomy, as foreign and security policy are not typically central issues areas of many politicians and governments and the issues also tend to be less politically contested due to the rather existential and pragmatic nature of the field.

According to these top policymakers, ministry professionals prepare all relevant information used in intra-executive decision-making. Although the processes end with a formal ratification by elected officials, these events only form the apex of a long and laborious preparation process during which ministry experts meet frequently to hone positions and smoothen out disagreements between central political actors. All political actions are strongly dependent on the analysis of several dozen highly trained and trusted ministry professionals, which molds the general conception concerning Finland's international operating environment and the more issue-specific recommendations. These interviewees also noted that the vastness and complexity of information and processes in the foreign policy domain makes part of the work of civil servants 'semi-autonomous', much like in the environmental policy domain. While most elected politicians, perhaps with the exception of the president whose work now centrally revolves around foreign policy matters, work with such matters only part time if at all, the ministry experts spend all of their work time on such issues. Another aspect in the foreign policy sector that enhances experts' leverage for more independent policy impact is the often dangerous and topical nature of issues this sector deals with. Succeeding in this field requires predictability and ability for fast reactions. In addition to preparing policies, ministry experts coordinate intra-governmental cooperation, where working communication is key for preventing turf wars and creating efficient solutions.

With these brief descriptions we simply wanted to demonstrate that despite this policy field's potentially unpredictable and fast-changing nature the ministry experts play a key role in all preparative and coordinative functions that condition political decisions. As was noted, we could even argue that administrative steering and impact may become even particularly emphasized in this field due to the uncertain nature of issues it deals with, as it is quite intuitive to think that sudden and pressing challenges accentuate the power of competence. As was already noted, according to our newer interviews the ministry experts also have a significant role in the creation of the field's more future-regarding and strategic products, which, as our interviewee noted, tend to reflect in the more political documents. Although these cross-sectoral similarities do not, of course, prove the primacy of future-oriented expert steering in all policy fields, they do suggest that the tendency to 'think a little ahead' has generalized inside the Finnish governing system and it quite likely radiates to more political documents, too.

4.6 Conclusion: capacities and conditions for future-oriented policymaking

Earlier, we noted that while the Finnish foresight system does not have the capacity to make binding future-regarding decisions across several government terms, it possesses qualities through which it can affect 'future power' and the 'Overton window' of policymakers, i.e., what is conceived as desirable and possible in regard to future matters under current socio-political realities. We also noted, as a qualifying caveat, that although this might not sound very much, it is actually more or less all that future-oriented political institution can do to lengthen political horizons without violating fundamental democratic norms, i.e., the exclusive ability of elected majorities to decide on policies. From this follows that the only reasonable way to judge the performance of future-regarding political institutions is to look at how well they perform this function, that is, enable the influencing of politicians' views. As measuring impact of new information on policymakers' 'Overton windows' is an overly demanding task, much like an attempt to trace impacts of distinct policy ideas, in this presentation we have limited to describing carefully the arenas and processes through which the system attempts to deliver its impact. Our guiding basic assumption has been that the closer the organized foresight activities get to ordinary policymaking processes, the higher is their potential to affect the informational basis of policies.

Based on the analysis presented in this chapter, since its inception in the early 1990s the Finnish national foresight system, fortified with some additional strategic components, has steadily moved closer and closer to actual policy processes. While the direct policy impact of the 1990s system which largely comprised of the eclectic, visionary and general level 'future dialogue' was likely very low, the creation and institutionalization of the dialogue probably was a significant factor in paving way for and legitimizing the extension of the system to government ministries, which prepare all policies. Alongside state administration's general 'strategic turn' which in the turn of the millennium introduced and later

generalized strategic, markedly long-term and cross-governmental thinking into all ministries' work routines, ministries gradually rose to a leading role also within the national foresight system, taking control of the production of all most significant foresight documents. Despite the attempts of the Prime Minister's Office to control the inter-ministerial foresight system from the middle and develop it toward a more unified and methodologically orthodox scenario-building machine, the ministries seem to have maintained their 'semi-autonomous' and 'siloed' role that now extends over processes of anticipatory governance, whose 'strategic relevance' within the Finnish state administration has generally increased over the years.

In recent years ministries' more self-conscious efforts to impact 'future power' – i.e., the general conception among elected politicians of what is desirable and possible in the future – have taken more explicit guises, especially through the recent introduction of the public long-term policy advices of ministries' highest-ranking non-elected officials, the general secretaries, which are presented for elected politicians shortly prior to elections with the explicit aim to impact the subsequent government negotiation and the government program which will largely mandate the proceeding of Finnish policymaking for the next four years. The now institutionalized electorally of these politically independent, in terms of expertise highest-ranking, and also publicly highly esteemed civil servants to present their personal convictions concerning Finland's most important future challenges and ways to solve them publicly before elections signifies a dramatic change from the early 1990s situation. Back then, national level foresight activities were mainly at the discretion of a 'motley crew' of few future-oriented MPs and academic futures scholars, taken seriously by few others. Such ability of highest-ranking civil servants – that are sometimes considered as more powerful than ordinary cabinet ministers – to present public advices on central political choices is likely rather rare globally, too.

In more procedural and conceptual terms, the increasing of ministries' capacity to impact 'future power' rests on the gradual merging of resources and processes through which ministries' ordinary and future-oriented policy documents are produced. In lack of major extant foresight resources, the ministries whose relative share of the foresight responsibilities has continued to grow for over two decades have had to source workforce and materials from their standard departments that predominantly focus on ordinary policy preparation. Reflecting the traditional role of Finnish ministries as autonomous and large expert organizations with distinct priorities and interests, the overlapping of preparatory resources and processes has likely contributed also to the merging of policy details across various documents, both ordinary and future-oriented. For example, the above-mentioned 'GS messages' which formally draw also from ministries' foresight activities and are generally regarded as future-oriented policy documents with their explicit focus on cross-governmental governance have recently demonstrated a style, tone and content that have little to do with traditional foresight information which should be, by definition, laden with uncertainty and several alternative viewpoints. Instead, the ministries' future-oriented policy reports increasingly present a relatively one-sided, deterministic and linear predictions that stylistically and methodologically

follow ministries' traditional backtracking analysis for developing general regulations. While the system may nowadays possess even significant capacity to impact 'future power' as it meshes with all main informational arenas of the Finnish policy system, it can be considered as methodologically rudimentary and organizationally limited system, as it limits state level strategic foresight largely to intra-ministerial arenas, which may not automatically provide best solutions for long-term problems as these arenas are also conditioned by embedded interests and centripetal discourses that haunt all major organizations.

Before moving to individual-level conceptions of policymakers which these mechanisms may have impacted, we should already briefly note the main conditioning factors that helped to create and maintain Finland's administration-heavy and potentially impactful foresight system. As the examples from the few examined policy fields show, ministry experts indeed seem to play a crucial role in preparing policies, but as we have stressed through this chapter it is equally important to see that nothing will happen to the preparations without at least the formal approval of elected political elites and coalitions, which may change over time. To assess such risks, in the following chapter we examine the support for future-regarding processes and policies across various political actors groups and find evidence of a potentially major challenge for the broader future-oriented policy system: the increasing legislative support and consolidating governing role of a nationalist-populist party whose representatives score significantly lower than other elites in measures of political time orientation.

Notes

- 1 Link to the publication: <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/161388>
- 2 Link to publication (only in Finnish): <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/mahdollisuudet-suomelle-2023#/>

5 The personal time orientations of policymakers

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters exclusively focused on institutions and processes, which serve the purpose of lengthening the time perspectives of Finnish policymaking. In this chapter, we turn our focus to the individuals who design and execute policies within these processes. While emphasizing institutional impact, we also acknowledge that not all forces that affect the temporal dimension of democratic policymaking stem from the impersonal influence of institutional traditions or designs. Even if research tends to consider policymakers in the context of their formal role in the democratic process, we must not forget that they are also individuals whose behavior reflects their personality. Their actions are regulated by laws, procedural rules, norms and institutional boundaries, but policymakers are people too and their actions are also affected by their personal experiences and characters. Within all norms, processes and legal boundaries, there is space for personality traits to influence policy as well – at least when it comes to personal choices of key decision-makers.

In this chapter, we look at policymakers as individuals. Using survey data, we probe their personal understanding of time and orientation toward the future in political decision-making. As a psychological concept, orientation toward time is not a new invention. For decades, psychologists have been aware of individual differences in how people approach the notion of time in their lives, and the future in particular. Scholars have typically used ‘future orientation’ to describe different dimensions of how individuals relate to the future. This involves, for example, studying how far into the future individuals think, their sense of connection between the past, present and future, and their more general attitudes toward the future (Seginer, 2009, p. 2). According to [Seginer \(2009\)](#), there are altogether six sub-fields in psychology, all of which have an interest in individuals’ relationship with the future. As an example, research focusing on the motivational aspect of human behavior sees the future as the ‘location’ of our goals and aspirations ([Nuttin & Lens, 1985](#)). ‘Self theorists’ study the ways in which we see ourselves in the future and how those projections affect our current behavior ([Oyserman & Markus, 1990](#)). This aspect has arguably not been a priority in the mainstream of policy-making research, or in the field of political attitudes and behavior. Nevertheless, the way people conceive of time has great significance for how they act and what choices they make.

In this chapter, we apply this approach, regularly used in personality research, which considers the individual's relationship with the future as an enduring feature of personality. According to this view, we are all different regarding the extent to which we are 'centred in the present, or anticipate the future' (Lennings, 2000, p. 40) and this characteristic fundamentally affects our behavior. Unsurprisingly, there is plenty of variation between people in terms of how much they think about the future and how much emphasis they place on it, versus the present (e.g., Strathman et al., 1994). We make choices all the time in everyday life, and those choices are connected to our personal ideas about time and our relationship with the (anticipated) future. Health-related behaviors are one obvious example of a domain where future-oriented thinking plays a significant role (Seginer, 2009). Health-promoting behavior, such as physical exercise, is linked to a more future-oriented general outlook on life (Kahana et al., 2005). People who look further into the future are more often willing to make present sacrifices, even at the cost of some physical discomfort. Of course, in a more general sense these personal convictions do not develop in a vacuum, they are molded by the person's various life experiences, e.g., through the characteristics of the individual's working environment.

5.2 Conceptualizing future orientation

In precisely the same fashion, individual differences among policymakers in future orientation are likely to have consequences for the future of democratic societies. The significance of analyzing policymakers' temporal orientations is that it offers a direct linkage between the individual-level and the systemic-level of future orientation. By examining future orientation also at the individual-level, it is possible to see whether it aligns with future orientation at the institutional-level or not. Through a comparison between national-level policymakers and ordinary citizens, it is possible to see whether decision-makers in general are more future-oriented than citizens who have not been affected by the rather confined and specialized arenas of professional policy development.

Even more importantly, the available survey data allows us to compare future orientation between national and local-level policymakers. National-level policymakers are embedded in institutions that in many ways facilitate future-oriented policymaking at national level. While Finnish regions and municipalities have also faced a legal obligation to develop practices of anticipatory governance since the early 2000s, in terms of aims, resources and ambition these efforts lack lag far behind the national level. More importantly, these organs are operated almost exclusively by various regional bureaucratic authorities, without bearing formal and explicit connections to the political side of municipal politics, which, compared to the national level, is also more concerned with practical issues of everyday living. There are no similar institutional arrangements in the Finnish municipalities that have been designed to accommodate future-oriented policymaking at the national-level. Through these analyses, it becomes possible for us to gauge, at least partly, where the future orientation in Finnish policymaking might come from – popular will, the designated institutional environment or the personalities of elected officials.

In the vast conceptual universe around the overarching topic of temporal orientation, it is possible to distinguish between two closely related approaches. First, personality researchers have introduced several ways to theorize about and measure the various aspects related to *general time orientation* (GTO). These include, among others, the length of people's planning horizons (Lynch et al., 2010), how they think about time in general (Gjesme, 1975) and how people perceive of the future consequences of their own actions (Strathman et al., 1994). Psychologists dominate this strand of the literature. They are mainly concerned with understanding the developmental origins of temporal orientations and how these affect the behavior of individuals.

Second, there is a vibrant scholarly debate around the concept of *future orientation*. While temporal orientation, in general terms, refers to the manner in which people divide their lives into the past, the present and the future (Zimbardo et al., 1997), future orientation focuses specifically on looking forward, while ignoring other temporal dimensions. In addition to psychology, the concept is widely used in futures studies, where scholars have sought to measure future-oriented thinking. In this literature, one key concept is 'future consciousness', which refers to the extent that a person is aware of what 'could or should happen in the future' or is cognitively engaged in linking the present with the future (Ahvenharju et al., 2018, p. 2). Scholars in futures studies have linked future orientation to a wide variety of personality characteristics, such as optimism, courage and risk-taking (Ahvenharju et al., 2018, p. 6), but none of them bears a direct relevance to political attitudes. Also, at least an implicit expectation in these studies is that individuals' future-orientation can be affected through distinct future-regarding institutions and processes.

We borrow from both approaches to examine individual-level future orientation in the context of democratic policy-making. In the first part of the empirical analysis, we compare (1) *GTO* and (2) *future time orientation related to politics* among policymakers and the public. For GTO, we rely on a commonly used measure by Gjesme (1975). It consists of six statements, which are combined to form an additive scale, where higher values indicate a more future-oriented outlook. The items are:

- I have been thinking a lot about what I am going to do in the future.
 - I am not so very much concerned about things a little ahead in time.
 - I think about the future only to a very small extent.
 - Half a year seems to me a long time.
 - I reflect a great deal about the future, and I feel it is rapidly approaching.
 - Usually I feel time is going too fast.
- (Completely disagree; Partly disagree; Somewhat agree;
Completely agree)

The items in the GTO measure are formulated in a rather abstract way, as they aim to capture the respondent's orientation toward the future in a very general sense. The six-item battery is concise, which is an advantage in the context of surveys. Moreover, the abstract nature of the measure has the advantage of being

understandable and easy to respond to for anyone, policymaker and ordinary citizen alike. Face validity is high, as all the items tap into aspects of GTO in a very intuitive manner. Overall, the items measure whether the respondent thinks or worries about the future and how they feel about the progress of time. Together they provide a sound measure that reveals personality differences among the respondents in the two samples in terms of how they perceive of time and the future in a general sense.

But what about politics more specifically? Will GTO reliably predict future orientation when it comes to attitudes toward democratic decision-making as well? We set out to test (1) whether GTO and political future orientation (PFO) are empirically distinct and (2) whether the general public and policymakers hold consistent views in terms of the temporal dimension of democratic decision-making?¹

5.3 Measuring political future orientation

Since there is no extant measure of future orientation that is directly applicable to the study of political attitudes, we attempted to develop one of our own. Our conceptual point of departure was the idea that unlike measures of GTO that are primarily significant for individuals on a personal, everyday level, PFO has relevance for entire democratic publics. If, for example, voters score low on PFO, and consequently typically reward politicians for short-term policy benefits, political leaders who do not prioritize climate change action are likely to be more successful. Another reason why we did not only want to rely on GTO measures is the fact that decades of research in political attitudes has demonstrated that the personal is not always political. The canon of scholarship has concluded that people are often surprisingly altruistic in their political reasoning and that they do not necessarily construct their political opinions based on personal circumstances (e.g., [Egan & Mullin, 2012](#); [Lewis-Beck & Whitten, 2013](#)). Hence, it seems plausible that even in terms of future orientation people might reason differently when it comes to politics and life in general.

In broad terms, we argue that an individual's PFO refers to the extent to which an individual thinks democratic decision-making should also account for the future and not only be concerned with the present. With this idea in mind, we attempted to measure PFO through survey items regarding what, in a normative sense, people think should be the temporal focus of democratic decision-making. We are therefore not trying to measure public attitudes toward specific policy questions that, for example, involve a particularly significant temporal trade-off. Our approach concerns procedural, not issue-specific preferences.

From a methodological viewpoint, the topic is rather demanding. Designing survey items that are simple and understandable is vital for the validity of the scale, but it is a difficult task when the object of inquiry is as abstract as in the case of temporal orientations (about politics). With a particular emphasis on clarity, we designed a survey battery with 12 items (see below the translated items from Finnish by the authors). We used existing research literature and 24 interviews with experts of environmental policy (explained in detail elsewhere in this book) to create an understanding of what the attitudes concerning future orientation in democratic decision-making could consist of.

We settled on three different aspects. First, statements 1, 4, 8 and 11 (see below) tap into the basic question of whether the respondent thinks that the future should be considered in present political decision-making in the first place. These items represent a very straightforward style of measuring support for the idea that democratic policies should also address future well-being. Second, statements 3, 5, 7 and 10 go beyond the simple idea of investing in future well-being, and measure whether the respondents are also prepared to bear costs now for policies, which might produce benefits in the future. These items touch upon what is perhaps the most fundamental dilemma in future-oriented policymaking, i.e., the willingness to pay for uncertain future rewards (see also Jacobs, 2016). Third, statements 2, 6, 9 and 12 also deal with the practical realities of future-oriented policymaking. They measure support for the actual procedures of decision-making that are necessary for successful long-term policy-making. These procedures typically also involve a trade-off between careful, evidence-based planning and a quicker, more efficient policy process. Although it may seem that the procedural items are only indirectly related to PFO, the significance of the preparatory work that lies behind future-oriented policies became obvious in the expert interviews. Given that the same question battery would also be presented to policymakers, and not only a citizen sample, it was important to include the procedural component in the measure because of the significance of this dimension for the policymakers. Consequently, besides measuring the respondents' normative ideas about the appropriate temporal focus of democratic policymaking, the questions even measure their willingness to carry procedural costs to reach the goal of a future-oriented style of policymaking.

After several rounds of development, we ran one test round on a sample ($n = 184$) that consisted primarily of university students. The high internal scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha .705, average inter-item covariance .144) suggested that the items formed an internally coherent and one-dimensional measure of PFO. The items were the following:

The following statements describe politics on a general level. What do you think about them? (Completely agree; partly agree; partly disagree; completely disagree; cannot say)

- 1 *Decision-makers must try to solve problems now that are still decades away in the future.*
- 2 *Decisions should be based on the will expressed by voters in an election, not on expert reports and hearings regarding the future.*
- 3 *Today's voters must be prepared to reduce their standard of living, if it is necessary for the well-being of future generations.*
- 4 *The world changes so fast that it does not pay to make political decisions that reach far into the future.*
- 5 *Voters' demands are binding for decision-makers even when they might threaten the well-being of those who come after us.*
- 6 *In making decisions, politicians must primarily rely on expert information regarding the future.*
- 7 *Politics should try to solve contemporary societal problems, not future ones.*

- 8 *Future living conditions must be taken into account carefully in decisions made today.*
- 9 *In politics, decisions must be made quickly even when there is not enough time to investigate long-term consequences properly.*
- 10 *Decision-makers must invest in solving future problems, even if it means that taxpayers face costs now.*
- 11 *Time will solve future problems, regardless of political decisions made today.*
- 12 *Decisions must be based on open and careful strategizing across all political cleavages, not just on the opinions of current office-holders.*

Each of the three aspects was measured with two positive and two negative statements. Following the reaffirming pre-test, we included the battery in both the general population survey ($n = 1,906$) and the policymaker survey ($n = 675$). Both surveys were conducted online.²

In both surveys, the question battery produced similarly encouraging results. In the case of the general population survey, only the last one of the statements did not load on a single factor (eigenvalue ≥ 1 and a cut-off $\geq .500$ for factor loadings). Based on this, we decided to exclude item number 12 from further analyses. The remaining 11 items form a highly reliable scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .878 and average inter-item correlation at .456. In the policymaker survey, Cronbach's alpha is .679, suggesting a slightly lower, but nonetheless good scale reliability. Consequently, we use the 11-item solution in the analyses that follow.

Despite the rather good scale reliability and face validity, we are not claiming that our 11-item scale is a universally valid and robust measure of PFO across all conceivable political contexts and populations. It has not undergone meticulous psychometric testing and its conceptual foundations are, of course, always debatable. The scale is, nonetheless, arguably an internally consistent measure of what we here call the 'political future orientation'. We feel confident in claiming that the measure captures reasonably well the respondents' thoughts concerning the extent to which democratic policymaking should be future-oriented – or not. Importantly, we believe that the measure succeeds in capturing that particular attitude among both policymakers and ordinary citizens. This makes it possible to do comparisons across these groups, which have distinct roles in the process of democratic policy-making. The next section conducts such comparisons, using both the GTO and the PFO measures.

5.4 Comparing general and political future orientations

Answering the first of our primary research questions is somewhat uncomplicated. As could be anticipated, GTO and PFO are not strongly correlated. For policymakers, the Pearson correlation coefficient is .286, which in a conventional interpretation is considered as a weak correlation. For citizens, the correlation is even slightly weaker, .270. The lack of a solid correlation between the two suggests that GTO and PFO are distinct phenomena, although there is, unsurprisingly, some degree of overlapping (see also [Rapeli et al., 2021](#)). The weak correlation justifies

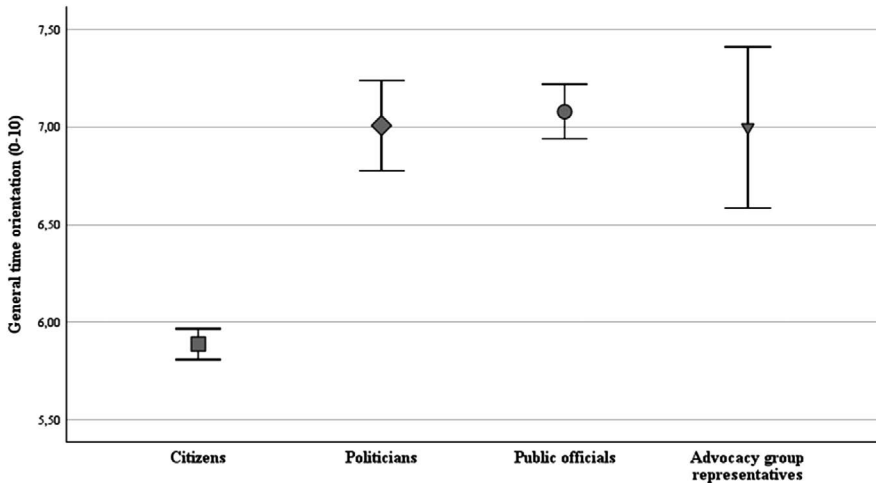


Figure 5.1 General time orientation among citizens and policymakers

Note: Original scale range (7–24) rescaled into 0–10. Whiskers indicate 95% confidence interval for group means. Citizens $n = 1,906$; Politicians $n = 164$; Civil servants $n = 442$; Advocacy group representatives $n = 58$.

distinguishing between the measures and demonstrates (once again) that political attitudes are often separate from orientations, which pertain to non-political objects. For many people, being future-oriented in everyday life does not mean being future-oriented in politics, and vice versa. On this point, policymakers and the public are very similar. However, once we start comparing them in terms of their future orientations, differences become visible (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 shows the group means of citizens and the different policymaker groups regarding GTO. On a scale ranging between 0 and 10, where higher value indicates more future orientation, average GTO among policymakers is 7 while it is 5.9 among citizens. The difference is statistically significant at the .001-level (t-test). This means that compared with the general population, policymakers are, on average, more future-oriented than ordinary citizens. Although there is more internal variation within the policymaker groups, there is only statistically insignificant variation between the policymaker groups. This suggests that in terms of GTO, policymakers form a rather homogenous group. The dividing line is found between policymakers and the citizens, not among policymakers.

If we interpret Figure 5.1 from the perspective that combines the basic tenets of personality research and the fundamental logic of representative democracy, the message is as simple as it is powerful: there is a temporal mismatch at the level of personalities between democratic policymakers and ordinary citizens.

The pattern is very similar in the case of PFO (Figure 5.2). There is again a gap between citizens and the policymakers and it is in fact larger than in the case of GTO (Figure 5.1). On a scale from 0 to 10, where a higher value is a politically more future-oriented outlook, the mean for all policymaker groups is 7.2, while it

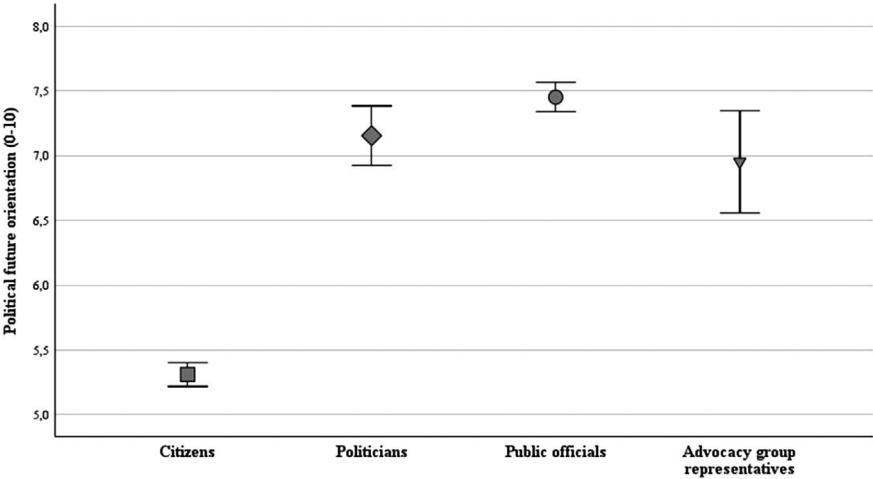


Figure 5.2 Political future orientation among citizens and policymakers

Note: Original scale range (14–43) rescaled into 0–10. Whiskers indicate 95% confidence interval for group means. Citizens $n = 1,906$; Politicians $n = 164$; Civil servants $n = 442$; Advocacy group representatives $n = 58$.

is only 5.3 for citizens. The difference in means is quite sizable and statistically significant at the .001-level (t-test). Thus, policymakers across all sub-groups are clearly more future-oriented even in terms of how they think about the temporal focus of democratic policymaking. This only seems to make the discrepancy already found regarding GTO stronger.

Table 5.1 illustrates in more detail what lies behind these differences. It shows for each item the extent to which citizens and policymakers diverge in terms of PFO. The entries in Table 5.1 are the percentages of respondents in each group who agree (strongly or somewhat) to the statements that comprise our PFO measure.

Points of agreement between citizens and policymakers are few in Table 5.1. Only in the item calling for quick decisions *even when there is not enough time to investigate long-term consequences properly*, the groups are close to each other. There is also a high degree of agreement in the first item, which states that *decision-makers must try to solve future problems now that are still decades away in the future*, but in the remaining nine questions citizens and policymakers disagree substantially. Citizens do not demonstrate higher PFO in any of the questions. Perhaps most notably, the difference in opinion is around 30 percentage points in the two questions regarding the willingness of current taxpayers and voters to carry costs for solving future problems today. This is a major concern for future-oriented policymaking, which inevitably involves preparedness to pay for future investments that restrict possibilities for more immediate benefits.

A close inspection of the group differences in Table 5.1 reveals some additional, interesting details. Although the policymaker groups are very similar in almost all items, politicians stand out in the case of *Decisions should be based on the will expressed by voters in an election, not on expert reports and hearings regarding*

Table 5.1 Political future orientation across respondent groups

	Citizens (n = 1,906)	Politicians (n = 164)	Civil servants (n = 442)	Advocacy group representatives (n = 58)
<i>Decision-makers must try to solve future problems now that are still decades away in the future</i>	80	96	99	98
<i>Decisions should be based on the will expressed by voters in an election, not on expert reports and hearings regarding the future</i>	57	42	22	28
<i>Today's voters must be prepared to reduce their standard of living, if it is necessary for the well-being of future generations</i>	55	87	90	91
<i>The world changes so fast that it does not pay to make political decisions that reach far into the future</i>	34	11	10	9
<i>Voters' demands are binding for decision-makers even when they might threaten the well-being of those who come after us</i>	41	10	10	14
<i>In making decisions, politicians must primarily rely on expert information regarding the future</i>	56	80	81	74
<i>Politics should try to solve contemporary societal problems, not future ones</i>	55	31	21	30
<i>Future living conditions must be taken into account carefully in decisions made today</i>	70	94	92	88
<i>In politics, decisions must be made quickly even when there is not enough time to investigate long-term consequences properly</i>	37	35	33	28
<i>Decision-makers must invest in solving future problems, even if it means that taxpayers face costs now</i>	53	86	91	90
<i>Time will solve future problems, regardless of political decisions made today</i>	30	8	7	17

the future. With 42% of politicians agreeing, they are much closer to public opinion than the other policymaker groups, civil servants and interest group representatives. The two latter groups seem much less concerned with the popular will, as expressed through elections, and would obviously be prepared to let policy be guided more by expert opinion. Civil servants, on the other hand, display much more PFO than the two other policymaker groups in the item *Politics should try to solve contemporary*

societal problems, not future ones. The difference is ten percentage points, which suggests that civil servants have a particularly strong future focus in policymaking.

To summarize, policymakers are overall much more future-oriented than ordinary citizens, regardless of how these groups are compared. In a more detailed analysis, civil servants seem to be not only the most future-oriented, but also expert-oriented, policymaker group. This likely has consequences for the functioning of representative democracy, as the findings strongly suggest that policymakers and the public have different views concerning the extent to which democracy should focus on future versus present-day. Since democracies are always forced to make policy choices that require considering the temporal dimension of policy returns, we sense potential for a conflict.

5.5 Comparing national and local-level policymakers

But if policymakers are more future oriented, than the typical citizen, both in terms of personality and their attitudes toward politics, what role do the institutional arrangements play? Is future orientation in policymaking simply a reflection of policymakers' future-oriented personalities and their forward-looking attitudes toward policymaking or does the institutional setting genuinely push policymaking toward future-regarding choices?

A comparison between policymakers across national and local levels provides a possibility to address this dilemma. In the Finnish context, the two policymaking levels differ in important ways. First, as we have seen, national-level policymaking is supported by an administrative structure, and even an institution based on political representation, which continuously nudge policy toward accounting for the long-term and offer expert knowledge to facilitate it. The local-level lacks such institutional arrangements. While municipalities are to some extent able to utilize experts and engage in future-oriented planning of the local communities, the crucial difference is that local-level policymaking is not similarly embedded in an environment, where future orientation has been integrated into policymaking, already for decades. Second, the political dynamic is different. At the national-level, politicians not only seek re-election, but also a place in the government for the party they represent. Given that Finland is run by majority coalitions, all policymaking is dictated by parties in government. The political opposition lacks the ability to block policy, unless a considerable number of members of some government party turns their back on their own government. This happens extremely rarely. In practice, national-level parties and individual politicians who represent government parties have significant incentives to try to produce short-term policy benefits in order to stay in power. When in opposition, there are similarly strong incentives to promise immediate rewards in hope of electoral payoffs to gain a place in government. Hence, even if national-level policymakers evidently demonstrate a high degree of future orientation at the individual-level, the political realities often drive them toward short-termism.

Although essentially the same parties compete for power also at the local-level in Finnish municipal elections, there is no similar power constellation between government and opposition. The members of the municipal council select

the municipal executive board, based on the distribution of seats among parties in the council. Therefore, the executive board, which resembles the national-level government, is not arranged along a government-opposition divide, but as a reflection of all parties' relative strength in the council. In this dynamic, the executive board is more about implementing the will of the council, rather than the instigator and generator of all policies, as the government is on the national level. In terms of prospects for re-election, local-level politicians do not need to worry as much about holding onto their position in the governing body, because their own party is in most cases certain to win at least representation in the local executive board, even if they lost some seats. This likely allows for more maneuvering space for individual politicians, when it comes to the tension between delivering quick policy benefits to secure re-election and investing in uncertain future benefits.

To summarize, while the political dynamics drive policymaking toward short-termism at the national level, but to a lesser extent at the local level, the policy preparation processes do precisely the opposite. At the national-level, policy preparation is geared toward the future, whereas at the local-level it is much less so. Consequently, by comparing the degree of future oriented political thinking among policymakers from the national and the local levels, it is possible to get at least some idea of what the real impact of future-regarding institutions at the national level is.

Conducting such a comparison is possible by introducing one more survey to this analysis. The politician panel, administered by the Finnish infrastructure for public opinion research (www.firipo.fi) at Åbo Akademi University, consists of approximately 1,000 local-level politicians, who have been invited to volunteer as respondents. The respondents represent reasonably well the entire population of local-level politicians in the country in terms of party affiliation, gender and region (see [Appendix](#) for details).

The panel wave, which included two items from the question battery used in the preceding table, was conducted in April–May 2021. The items were (1) *Politics should try to solve contemporary societal problems, not future ones* and (2) *Decision-makers must invest in solving future problems, even if it means that taxpayers face costs now*. By combining the previously used elite survey data with this panel wave data, the two groups of politicians can be compared with identical measures. Although there are only two questions that allow a comparison, the items tap into the core attitudes regarding future orientation in policymaking ([Table 5.2](#)).

The difference in percentage points in the last column is calculated so that it indicates how much lower support for future-oriented policymaking is among local-level politicians. The difference between national and local-level politicians in (lack of) future orientation is nine percentage points in the first item and twelve percentage points in the second item. The differences are sizable, statistically very significant and they support the main argument of this book: although the political dynamics are against such an outlook, national-level politicians are more future oriented than local-level politicians. To the extent that the responses are driven by social desirability bias, both groups are equally likely to suffer from it.

The same data even allows us to see whether and how politicians from different parties differ in terms of future orientation. Using the same two questions, and

Table 5.2 Comparison of future-orientation between national and local-level politicians (% of respondents who agree with the statement)

	<i>National-level politicians (n = 164)</i>	<i>Local-level politicians (n = 622)</i>	<i>Difference (percentage points)</i>
<i>Politics should try to solve contemporary societal problems, not future ones</i>	31	40	–9
<i>Decision-makers must invest in solving future problems, even if it means that taxpayers face costs now</i>	86	74	–12

Note: For better comparability, other policymaker groups were excluded from the national-level survey data.

combining the ‘fully agree’ and ‘somewhat agree’ categories, [Table 5.3](#) shows how partisanship relates to future-oriented political thinking.

In terms of partisanship, the picture seems clear. While the majority of other parties’ politicians demonstrate a future-oriented perspective of policymaking in both items, politicians representing the nationalist-populist party, the Finns party, are strongly focused on the present instead of the future. In the first item, almost three-quarters of them agree that politics should focus on present-day problems and not future ones. In the second item, only a little over 20% of them agree that politicians should make future investments even if that meant costs for current taxpayers. Politicians from all other parties representing various political orientations are heavily committed to future-oriented policymaking.

As we will further argue in the concluding chapter of the book, the strong resistance from right-wing populists is potentially a highly significant, recent development in the elections Finnish policymaking and increasingly also in policymaking of Western democracies. Portraying themselves as the newcomers and critical outsiders and challengers of the political establishment, populists such

Table 5.3 Future orientation and partisanship among local-level politicians (% of respondents who agree with the statement)

	<i>Politics should try to solve contemporary societal problems, not future ones</i>	<i>Decision-makers must invest in solving future problems, even if it means that taxpayers face costs now</i>
Center party (n = 146)	48	78
National Coalition (112)	32	69
SDP (108)	38	81
Finns party (52)	73	23
Left alliance (60)	38	87
Green league (52)	12	98
Swedish people’s party (53)	30	76

Note: Christian democrats were excluded due to small n of observations (21).

as the Finns party in Finland, do not necessarily share the same commitment to future-oriented processes and policies as the other, older parties, which have matured along with the developing system. While the rest have become used to the future-oriented way of preparing major policies in Finland, the Finns party, if it does not get co-opted to the established practices through joining governments, may not join this consensus, but instead it might challenge it and openly advocate a re-focus into present-day problems. The scarce empirical evidence consistently and strongly suggests this (see also [Rapeli & Lindell, 2020](#)).

Returning to the discussion about the institutionalization of future-oriented policymaking, it seems plausible that the institutionalized character of future orientation in national-level policymaking is connected to the attitudes of national-level policymakers, although excluding all conceivable alternative explanations is not possible and we make no claim to have discovered a robust causality. All constituent elements of the equation – institutions, policies, parties and individuals – have matured simultaneously inside a distinctive historical process where all things interact in one way or another. Nonetheless, we can argue with good confidence that these politicians have first-hand experience of policy preparation in that environment, where both representative and administrative institutions consistently include an explicit future-oriented component and ‘frame of mind’. Thus we firmly believe that the context has had an impact on the way that these policymakers think, unlike the local ones who have not been subjected to similar treatment.

Given our interest in the national-level policymakers’ own experience and personal involvement in the future-oriented policymaking process in Finland, we conclude this chapter by devoting the last section to analyzing what the policymakers think about the system itself. This adds another perspective into our assessment of the impact of institutional and procedural arrangements on future-oriented policymaking. When we contrast policymakers’ perceptions of systemic future orientation with their personal future orientation, we can get an idea of the interplay between policymakers’ personalities and the institutions that they occupy.

5.6 Perceptions of future orientation in policymaking

The same policymaker survey conducted in 2018 also included items, which were designed to measure perceptions of how the democratic policy process actually works according to the individuals who have the most intimate and detailed knowledge about it. This offers many interesting findings regarding the manner in which a system of representative democracy is able to facilitate future-oriented policymaking.

In the survey, we presented the respondents with a 12-item question battery regarding evaluations of national-level policymaking. It started with an introduction asking the respondent to consider national-level decision-making in Finland during the 2010s, and say how well they thought the following statements describe it. By anchoring the questions to the ongoing decade ensured that the responses would be based on a similar consideration of what has been going on in government policymaking. Given that all respondents represented the national government, restricting the responses to the national-level was an obvious choice.

Table 5.4 Perceptions of the temporal focus of the policy process (% who agree to the statement)

	<i>Politicians</i> (n = 164)	<i>Civil servants</i> (n = 442)	<i>Advocacy group</i> <i>representatives</i> (n = 58)
<i>Temporal focus of policymakers</i>			
Decision-makers primarily focus on contemporary problems of the current mandate period	79	86	86
Politicians are prepared to exert costs on current voters to secure well-being of future generations	50	40	34
Politicians try to make farsighted decisions instead of only pursuing quick benefits for their supporters	43	26	33
<i>Temporal focus of the democratic system</i>			
Future problems are taken well into account in decision-making	19	12	7
Future-oriented policies are made even when it requires economic stringency in the present	55	36	48
The program of the government is primarily a reflection of political goals in the short-term, rather than of the country's long-term strategy	63	75	66
Policy investments that reach far into the future are usually considered too expensive	90	86	81
Political and economic resources are typically directed into contemporary political issues	84	87	83
<i>Style of policymaking</i>			
In decision-making, group interests, rather than careful consideration based on expert knowledge, is decisive	74	88	75
Expert knowledge concerning future challenges and development is carefully taken into account in decision-making	33	20	29
Policy planning and preparation is hasty	78	85	76
Hearings, working groups and other methods for ensuring inclusiveness are key features of policy preparation	74	72	62

Table 5.4 presents the percentages among the different policymaker groups who agreed to each statement. The statements are organized into three thematic groups, which represent different aspects of policymakers' perceptions of future orientation in national-level decision-making. The themes roughly correspond with those in the individual-level PFO measure presented earlier in this chapter. *Temporal focus of policymakers* includes items that tap into perceptions of policymakers' PFO, while *Temporal focus of the democratic system* refers to perceptions of future orientation at the system-level. *Style of policymaking* does not pertain directly to future orientation, but examines instead policymakers'

perceptions of how the preparatory work in policymaking is conducted, from the perspective of future orientation. The broader issue of how the groundwork for policies is laid has particular significance for future-oriented policy due to the uncertainties it involves. The future is by nature unknown and therefore also uncertain, which arguably increases the need for evidence-based preparatory work and policy expertise, as opposed to a purely political process that is determined by partisan goals and normative debate. With this topic, we seek to capture perceptions of the policy process from this angle.

Table 5.4 demonstrates a widespread agreement that policymakers tend to focus on solving current problems within the scope of the ongoing mandate period. Agreement varies between 79 and 86%, providing strong evidence in support of the claim that the temporal emphasis of policymaking is dictated by the electoral cycle. The finding that only 43% of politicians, and much fewer among the other groups, think that *politicians try to make farsighted decisions instead of only pursuing quick benefits for their supporters*, adds more evidence of the same. Interestingly, half of politicians nevertheless think that politicians would be prepared to impose costs on today's voters in order to promote future well-being. Much fewer civil servants and advocacy group representatives think alike, inviting the speculation that perhaps politicians are slightly exaggerating their willingness to invest in the future at the cost of risking electoral success.

Policymaker evaluations of future orientation at the system-level offer further evidence of democratic shortsightedness. Only 19% of politicians, 12% of civil servants and 7% of advocacy group representatives thought that *future problems are taken well into account in decision-making*. Over 80% of respondents in all groups feel that *policy investments that reach far into the future are usually considered too expensive* and that *political and economic resources are typically directed into contemporary political issues*. Moreover, a large majority also thinks that *the program of the government is primarily a reflection of political goals in the short-term, rather than of the country's long-term strategy*. Politicians differ from the two non-elected policymaker groups in one respect. A majority of politicians is of the opinion that *future-oriented policies are made even when it requires economic stringency in the present*. Civil servants in particular are much less likely to agree.

Finally, there are further indications of democratic shortsightedness even regarding the style of policymaking. At the most, a third of politicians think that *expert knowledge concerning future challenges and development is carefully taken into account in decision-making*. Although it is commonly understood that there is plenty of inclusiveness in the preparatory work of policies, the preparation of policies is, according to more than 75% of all policymakers, characterized by haste. The rather bleak picture is made complete by the widespread consensus that *in decision-making, group interests, rather than careful consideration based on expert knowledge, is decisive*.

Taken together, there is little to suggest that policymakers consider the style of policymaking in Finland particularly future-oriented. There is extensive agreement across policymaker groups that policymaking is overwhelmingly driven by group-based or partisan interests, rather than by formal policy expertise. It is important to note that also politicians admit this, although it might be in their interest to claim otherwise.

It is not only the style and conventions of policy planning and preparation that do not seem to support future-oriented policymaking. The same ethos is apparent both in the perceptions of policymakers' future orientation and the future orientation of the system as a whole. Although politicians in some respects offer a slightly more optimistic account, the big picture unmistakably demonstrates that according to policymakers themselves, the behavior of policymakers, the dynamic of the system and the style of policy preparation are all characterized by short-term benefit seeking, rather than future orientation.

This seems to be at odds with the self-evaluated temporal orientations of the policymakers, as we presented earlier. If we assume that the policymakers' GTO and PFO values are a true reflection of their personalities and values, policymakers' perceptions of future orientation in the actual policy process suggest a conflict: although the policymakers as individuals are very future-oriented, they do not perceive the environment in which they conduct policy as being similarly forward-looking.

This discrepancy, as well as the seeming contradiction with the aims of the national foresight activities and policymakers' conceptions of the temporal perspective of Finnish policymaking, invites a few possible interpretations. First, it may very well be that despite future orientation at the systemic and individual-level, the logic of electoral competition makes it largely impossible for policymakers to act out their future-oriented personal preferences. In this scenario, perhaps due to the impact of the foresight system, everyone would like to take the future better into account, even if it meant imposing costs on present-day voters, but since promoting such policies would risk ruining political careers, no one is willing to throw themselves behind such initiatives. Although these survey items have not been asked from a citizen sample, we should keep in mind that the democratic governing model has a strong normative obligation for policymakers to serve the voters according to the electoral cycle. If these explanations hold, the somewhat unexpected discrepancy would simply imply disappointment; despite the built-in future orientation in the policy process, the institutions do not sufficiently support future-oriented policymaking to meet the (high) expectations of the policymakers. This, however, can turn to the benefit of the system at some point, which is of course also designed by these same people.

Second, it could be that electoral politics is, at most, only partly to blame. An inclusive democratic process, such as that in Finland, gives ample room for several different voices, besides the voters. In fact, many would argue that some organized special interests, non-governmental organizations and businesses, which possess a lot of policy expertise and economic resources, are much more powerful influencers of policy than voters or public opinion. In this scenario, the reasons for the mismatch would be primarily found in factors that exist outside the immediate reach of representative democracy. The pressure from influential actors in society could seriously hamper policymakers' ability to conduct future-oriented policy, even if the institutional arrangements would facilitate it.

A third option is imprecise measurement. Policymakers may have exaggerated their personal future orientation, or they may have overestimated the lack of future orientation at system-level – something that would support the idea of 'disappointed

futurists'. In other words, the responses could be overly optimistic about policymakers' future orientation, overly negative about that of the system, or a bit of both. As any empirical inquiry, survey research involves uncertainty and measurement problems are likely to be part of the explanation here as well. When it comes to assessing the future orientation of the policy process, the question wordings may have elicited reactions that were critical of how the system works, rather than reflecting the relative success of Finnish policy in terms of future orientation, which was not, of course, compared here in any way, subjectively or objectively.

5.7 Drivers of future orientation in policymaking

Based on the previous section there seems to be good reason to dig deeper into what policymakers think of the way policy is formulated. We did so by also asking the policymakers to evaluate the extent to which various factors influence the temporal dimension of national-level policymaking in Finland during the 2010s. The objective was straightforward. We wanted to go beyond the general statements analyzed in the previous section about long-term policymaking. By asking about specific actors and political phenomena, it was possible to get closer to what, in concrete terms, affects the temporal perspective of policymaking, and what does not.

We relied on two sources as we designed this battery of questions. First, we drew heavily on the extensive overviews by Jacobs (2016) and MacKenzie (2013, 2021b), both of which provide excellent discussions on the institutional factors that affect the temporal dimension of policymaking. Second, we analyzed the 24 interviews made with top policymakers working close to the environmental policy sector to find out what factors, practices and phenomena they felt affected the temporal dimension of policymaking (in Finland). Although the interviews only represented one policy sector, they provided a detailed understanding from the viewpoint of experienced practitioners of how precisely future-oriented policy is made and that presumably reflected the more general situation among the Finnish politico-administrative elite that works under similar processes and practices. From these sources, we compiled a set of political actors and descriptions of circumstances, which could plausibly impact future orientation in policymaking.

To ensure comparability across individual respondents and the items, we again asked the respondents to think about national-level policymaking in Finland in the 2010s. In the first set of questions, we listed a number of institutions and democratic actors, and asked the respondents to say for each of them, if they thought it had (1) prolonged the temporal dimension in policymaking, (2) shortened it or (3) not had any real effect at all. [Table 5.5](#) displays the results. The entries are the combined percentages of respondents who said that the factor had prolonged/shortened the temporal dimension significantly or somewhat. The items have been arranged in a descending order according to the percentages for 'all' respondents.

To some degree, the findings lend support to the standard narrative within political science, most notably described by [Jacobs \(2016\)](#) and MacKenzie (2013, 2021a, 2021b) and that was also clearly reflected in our interviews. According to this account, politicians, parties and the government, whose existence is defined

Table 5.5 The impact of institutions and actors on the temporal dimension of policymaking (% of respondents)

	<i>Politicians</i> (n = 164)	<i>Civil servants</i> (n = 442)	<i>Advocacy group</i> <i>representatives</i> (n = 58)	<i>All</i> (n = 664)
<i>Institutions and actors that have prolonged the temporal dimension of policymaking</i>				
International organizations and agreements	73	74	62	73
EU	68	75	65	72
The research community	65	65	67	65
Public administration	46	58	46	54
<i>Institutions and actors that have shortened the temporal dimension of policymaking</i>				
Politicians and parties	69	80	73	77
The government	70	69	62	69
(Social) media	75	67	69	69
Trade unions	61	65	62	64
Big corporations	66	62	53	62
Voters	60	58	54	58

by the short-term logic of electoral democracy, are considered as the primary sources of democratic myopia by policymakers. It is telling that 70% of politicians themselves say that politicians and parties shorten the temporal dimension of policymaking, while only 60% of them say the same about voters. Although politicians and parties of course represent the voters in a representative democracy, this finding suggests that the role of voters as a cause for democratic short-sightedness is maybe sometimes overemphasized in the literature (see also [Rapeli, 2023](#)). The relatively low percentage for voters stands in a bit of contrast to the standard narrative and suggests that blaming voters for democratic myopia may be misguided. That trade unions and big companies are among those forces that shorten democratic horizons is, however, also compatible with the standard picture. Both represent actors who are powerful enough to affect policies that might be harmful to their interests, which is a commonly cited obstacle to long-term decisions. Also, their connection to any voting publics is indirect at best.

The importance of media, including social media, as something that severely shortens the temporal dimension is, on the other hand, a significant addition to the existing scholarly understanding. This point came out loud and clear already in our interviews. It seems that policymakers feel the heat from the ever-present pressure of the media, especially the social media, and handling this publicity requires a great deal of their attention. Reacting to demands articulated through the media constantly puts the policymakers to the test and this undoubtedly makes it more difficult for them to keep a very future-oriented focus. It is impossible to plan ahead, if it constantly feels like the house is on fire.

Regarding institutions and actors who prolong the time span of policymaking, the findings suggest several other additions to the standard narrative. There is a widespread consensus among policymakers that international organizations,

such as the UN or the EU, and also international agreements, lengthen the temporal dimension. The boundaries they set for national-level decisions diminish the maneuvering space for policymakers and effectively restrict quick policy changes, as was also very clearly pointed out in our interviews. This creates longevity, which might not, of course, be the same as future-oriented policy, as was elaborated in [Chapter 2](#). However, even if it might sometimes be unintentional, the end result contributes to stability that exceeds electoral cycles, which is a central feature of long-term policies. Despite the election-based formation of the European Parliament and the deep involvement of national governments in creating the policies of executive EU organs, these institutions can be considered to function to some extent outside the scope of national representative mechanisms, yet they seem to exert considerable influence over the national-level policymaking process, for which elected office-holders will be held accountable. Hence, it looks like some of the most significant sources working against democratic myopia are in some sense ‘undemocratic’, or at least not based on the simple and straightforward ideas of nationally based democratic representation and accountability. At the same time, these findings strongly reflect the observations made in the previous chapter.

The role of the scholarly community as another, similar force is equally important. It is a clear indication that, in the minds of policymakers, scientific input in the policymaking process serves the purpose of prolonging the democratic horizon. This could be interpreted as support for the idea that future-oriented policymaking should be evidence-based and as such, the finding gives weight to our central argument that the lengthening of political time perspectives in democracies should be and apparently is predominantly about influencing the ways how elected politicians perceive and value societies they govern. From this point of view, it makes sense to handle the uncertainties of the future demands to policy expertise that can only be found through research, despite the inherent uncertainties of strategic foresight. Curiously, although the public administration also possesses a great deal of scientific expertise and as the previous chapter showed, good capacity to control the ways in which information is presented within the administration, it is only among public servants themselves that a majority considers public administration to facilitate future orientation. Although support is relatively high, only minorities among politicians and advocacy group representatives consider public administration as a force that prolongs the temporal horizon, suggesting that there might be some friction between the various policymaker groups when it comes to the role played by civil servants. If the normative aspects of representative democracy are considered, it is not that surprising if especially elected politicians do not want to highlight the power of civil servants.

Using a similar question format, two follow-up questions specifically addressed the obstacles and the facilitators of future-oriented policymaking in a more detailed manner. While the first question tapped into the more general perceptions of factors that affect the temporal dimension of policymaking, the two other ones probe future orientation even more concretely. [Tables 5.6](#) and [5.7](#) present the combined percentages of respondents who have agreed (strongly or somewhat) to the

Table 5.6 Obstacles of future-oriented policymaking (% of respondents who agree)

	<i>Politicians (n = 164)</i>	<i>Civil servants (n = 442)</i>	<i>Advocacy group representatives (n = 58)</i>	<i>All (n = 664)</i>
Hectic style of politics and the ever-changing political agenda	82	80	74	80
Complex phenomena and uncertainty of future-related information	66	80	76	76
Personalized and social media focused style of politics	75	70	76	72
The temporal distance of societal problems	69	64	67	66
Performance-orientation in politics	61	67	62	65
Shortsighted voters	58	59	67	60
Commitment to the government program	47	58	54	54
Lack of collaboration between government branches	59	48	66	52
The shortness of government mandate period	48	49	55	49

Table 5.7 Facilitators of future-oriented policymaking (% of respondents who agree)

	<i>Politicians (n = 164)</i>	<i>Civil servants (n = 442)</i>	<i>Advocacy group representatives (n = 58)</i>	<i>All (n = 664)</i>
Strengthening of evidence-based preparatory work	80	80	67	79
Increased collaboration between government and opposition	72	68	69	69
Increased intra-governmental collaboration	69	62	69	64
Strengthening of ministries' foresight activities	64	61	55	61
Strengthening preparatory work for party programs	67	36	57	45
Increased role for organized interests	50	43	38	44
Increasing power for the Committee for the Future	46	26	24	31
A commissioner for the future	32	18	19	22
Increased hearing of citizens, e.g., through citizen panels	30	18	14	20

statements. The order of the statements declines according to the percentage of agreement among all respondents.

Although all the included items receive considerable support from all policymaker groups, some stand out above the rest. The hectic style of daily politics in combination with the pressures from (social) media seem to be the most important obstacles to future-oriented policy. Uncertainties regarding future-related information, which is also a major concern, can also be seen as linked to this same cluster of problems. Working under a constant media surveillance that requires significant time and energy, policymakers feel that they have insufficient capacity to engage in the complexities of the actual substance of policies. Publicity management and fear of negative (social) media attention impedes future-oriented policy by strengthening policymakers' incentives to focus on less risky, short-term policies.

It is, however, interesting that civil servants, who are leading experts in their respective policy fields, say much more often than politicians that informational uncertainties are a problem. Part of the explanation is of course that they do not operate under the public eye nearly as much as elected politicians. However, it also seems that policy expertise can be linked to a higher awareness of information uncertainty. Politicians, on the other hand, consider the mediatization of politics as a bigger issue than civil servants, which seems like an intuitive finding. It looks as if civil servants, who are responsible for preparatory work, suffer from information deficiencies, while politicians feel pressured by public scrutiny. Again, short-sighted voters do not seem like a particularly significant obstacle to future-oriented policy. What is perhaps more surprising is that the shortness of the electoral cycle ranks well below the other items. This suggests that electoral pressures, which have been widely considered as the primary drivers behind democratic myopia, are not quite as important, at least according to policymakers themselves. It is interesting to speculate whether this reflects the low demands of voters (as felt by policymakers), or a widespread conviction among policymakers that the voters' wishes do not really matter that much in actual, detail-level policymaking.

It is equally important to also establish possible ways to enhance future orientation in policymaking. [Table 5.7](#) shows, in a declining order, the various factors that could facilitate future orientation, according to the policymakers.

The clear number one on the list is the strengthening of evidence-based preparatory work – a finding that is clearly in line with our earlier observations. Although advocacy group representatives diverge somewhat, for reasons that seem quite understandable, there is a strong consensus on this point between politicians and civil servants. Considering that objectivity of evidence contradicts the subjectivity, normativity and multiplicity of political opinions, the view of elected politicians seems somewhat curious, albeit in line with our previous findings that emphasize the general expert-driven ethos of Finnish democracy. Consistent with this idea, large majorities of policymakers even support strengthening the future-oriented foresight activities of all the government ministries. The foresight activities described in [Chapter 4](#) present a forum where evidence-based preparatory work can be given more breathing space. Collaboration between the different government branches, as well as between the government and the parliamentary opposition, could also work

in favor of future-oriented policy according to this survey. Here the policymaker opinion converges with mainstream political science theories, as it seems that building commitment to future-oriented policy across the lines of political competition would help overcome some fundamental obstacles. The observation is also in line with the findings presented in [Chapters 3 and 4](#) that detail the various auxiliary mechanisms developed within the Finnish governing system during the past decade. They strongly emphasize policy steering across governments and between the government and the parliament. The relative lack of support for an increased role of organized interests is also in line with the conventional understanding, which portrays interest groups as an obstacle rather than a facilitator for long-term policies. However, as we have mentioned several times, in the Finnish strongly neo-corporatist policy system, interest groups already enjoy a very prominent role, which is generally appreciated due to the capacity of major interest groups to bring in knowledge and produce legitimacy for the overall process. Hence, this finding may simply reflect the policymakers' wish not to increase their role any further.

On the outset it might seem even striking how little support the existing parliamentary Committee for the Future and a proposed commissioner for the future receive in this regard. The Committee is by now a well-established part of parliamentary work in Finland and a unique institution even in a global comparison. Policymakers do not, however, think that increasing its role in policymaking would enhance future orientation. The idea receives the support of almost half of the politicians in the sample, but a much lower share of other policymakers, reflecting a reluctance among non-elected policymakers to give elected politicians more power over future-oriented policy. As is well known, in its current form the Committee for the Future bears very little traditional impact on policies, as it almost exclusively operates outside of the standard legislative process (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020). Considering what has been established previously in this book, it might not seem very surprising if nonelected policy actors feel that the Committee, which in the end is composed of elected politicians, already plays an optimal role in facilitating future-oriented policy in Finland. As was noted in [Chapter 4](#), the main contribution of the CF has been the legitimation and institutionalization of the national foresight system that in terms of policy substance has developed into a strongly expert-dominated institution. Quite probably, especially nonelected policymakers do not think that an expansion of the powers of the Committee would be the appropriate or most efficient way to increase future orientation in Finnish policymaking. From their perspective, a more powerful Committee would only give partisan dynamics more possibilities to hinder future-oriented policies. For them, future-oriented policy can be better achieved through non-representative mechanisms, by affecting elected politicians indirectly.

Another, similar suggestion is that in addition to the Committee, a commissioner should be appointed, whose responsibility it would be to ensure that the future is duly considered in all policymaking. Such a commissioner currently exists in Wales. Finland has such a commissioner for, e.g., safeguarding the rights of children, but in the case of the future policymakers are not very enthusiastic. This may also be rather understandable: whereas the rights of children can be described in an

almost universal fashion, without much debate, assessing alternative futures is a far more contentious field and more clearly in the traditional competence of competing elected politicians. Policymakers are also not excited by the prospect of involving ordinary citizens more in future-related policymaking. For us, this clearly reflects the deep skepticism among policymakers regarding the political competence of ordinary citizens, which has been determined in earlier studies as the foremost reason for not supporting more participatory practices in national-level decision-making (Koskimaa et al., 2023). Also regarding these two suggestions, politicians are clearly more welcoming than the two other, non-elected, policymaker groups. While the possibility of mere lip service cannot be rejected, it seems that politicians are much more open to establishing entirely new institutions to safeguard future interests in policymaking. For the non-elected policymaker groups, it is more a question of increasing the role of formal expertise in the preparatory processes, a feature of the system that civil servants already dominate.

It is nevertheless clear that introducing new institutions or even increasing the role of the existing Committee for the Future, are not attractive to most policymakers. Institutional arrangements currently in place are enough, according to the majority view among all policymaker groups. They would instead improve the information base in preparatory work and change the political dynamics to de-incentivize short-termism. In other words, policymakers would like to reform the logic of partisan competition and at least partly replace it with an apolitical solution that builds on scientific expertise and intra-parliamentary collaboration. This, too, clearly and strongly supports the findings made in the earlier chapters.

5.8 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have examined the policymakers as individuals in the context of future-oriented policymaking. Using various survey data from Finland, we have assessed their individual future orientations, as well as their perceptions of future orientation in the Finnish policymaking process, even according to partisanship. Unlike in the other chapters, which are based on interviews of a few selected and exclusive elite groups, the survey data in this chapter covers the entire national-level policymaking elite in Finland, across all branches and policy domains of the government, and even elected civil servants at the local-level. By comparing the personal future orientations of policymakers with those of the general public, we have been able to present evidence that is quite unique.

By looking at the individual characteristics of policymakers, we have amended the approach of the previous chapters that describe the institutional contexts where the interviewees and survey respondents operate. The rationale of this chapter has been to acknowledge that the behavior of policymakers is conditioned not only by institutions, rules and conventions, but also by their personalities and their perceptions of the institutional reality where they work. People are different and despite institutional boundaries, those individual differences significantly affect how people behave within institutions.

In this particular case, we have been interested in policymakers' perceptions of time, and especially the future. In psychology, temporal perception is widely

considered as a stable part of a person's character. This suggests that the extent to which policymakers are future-oriented people is likely to have consequences for how future-oriented policymaking in a democracy is.

From this viewpoint, the key messages that emerged from the analysis are clear. Policymakers seem to express more future orientation than ordinary citizens, regardless of whether that orientation is measured as a general character trait or as a normative understanding of future-orientation specifically in the political domain. This supports the general idea that the policymaking elite plays a decisive role if democracies are to make future-oriented policy. Compared with the public, policymakers are more likely to value future well-being and be prepared to invest in it, due to their more future-oriented personalities. This is particularly true when it comes to national-level policymakers, rather than local-level policymakers. The findings also show that citizens, performing their democratic role as voters, are probably more prepared to accept future-oriented policy investments, than what is often assumed.

Consequently, although citizens are not quite as future-oriented as policymakers, it is not clear whether that translates into a problem for representative democracy. Reverting to the speculation made a few pages ago whether policymakers' low regard for the impact that voters have on political short-termism is caused by the mild demands of voters or the lack of necessity to consider their views in policymaking, the fact that voters are clearly more short-termed seems to point toward the latter explanation. At least from the viewpoint of democratic representation, the mismatch might be a bit concerning. It seems that policymakers and citizens do not quite share the same understanding of where the temporal focus of democratic policymaking should be and, if our interpretation of policymakers' perceptions is correct, they might not care about that too much. This could become a major concern from the perspective of representative democracy, whose legitimacy builds to a great extent on the idea that the policy output is responsive to the people's wishes and demands. When it comes to the trade-offs between investing in present or in future well-being, there is an obvious risk that representative democracy is not able to strike the appropriate balance between policy benefits for the present and the future and policymaking elites place more weight to future demands than what voters would like them to do. Given that the perception of the future is an essential component of our personalities, policymakers should consider future orientation also in terms of democratic responsiveness. That does not mean, however, that democratic leaders and policymakers should respond to the myopic demands from the less future-oriented citizenry. Public opinion often follows elite cues and in terms of future orientation, it seems that the policymaking elite might need to engage in providing the necessary cues to build public support for long-term policies.

To the extent that such 'campaigning' for future-oriented policy is needed, our findings give cause for optimism. Despite being less future-oriented, we do not find much evidence suggesting that ordinary citizens would be a very significant obstacle to future-oriented policies. This view is, in fact, shared by several empirical studies, which have examined voters' policy preferences in a temporal perspective (e.g., [Busemeyer, 2023](#); [Christensen & Rapeli, 2020](#); [Jamróz-Dolińska et al., 2023](#);

Rapeli, 2023). Instead, we find that in addition to publicity issues, short and highly competitive electoral cycles and insufficient informational foundations are the primary drivers of democratic myopia. This raises the possibility that perhaps the forces that mediate the interactions of citizens and elites, especially the media, both traditional and social, could be the real culprit.

Although direct comparisons between measures of personal future orientation and perceptions of systemic future orientation are difficult to make, the presented evidence demonstrates a discrepancy. While policymakers seem to be future-oriented, they do not perceive the system in which they operate as equally future-oriented. Intense and constant outside pressure from social media and fast-paced web journalism exhausts the energy resources of policymakers and incentivizes them to seek quick policy returns by highlighting the drastic consequences of ‘forgetting the voters’. The need for more expert knowledge to support policy formulation is another obstacle that most policymakers identify. It reflects a feeling of uncertainty in the face of complicated policy choices, which calls for more expertise rather than partisan ambitions. This, as we have noted several times, almost perfectly reflects the observations made in the previous chapter regarding the general expert-driven spirit of the Finnish policymaking system.

Consistent with the obstacles they identified, the solutions that the policymakers suggested addressed very similar points. These include lowering the threshold for collaboration between political competitors and giving scientific expertise a more prominent role in policymaking. This would obviously move representative democracy toward a technocratic, and seemingly less political, model of democracy, and considering that these features characterize already the current operating environment, which has faced some new challenges recently, one might question the rationale of these wishes. After all, choosing between possible courses of future-related action are not purely technical matters, but also essentially value-laden. Hence, in order for representative democracy to maintain legitimacy while making future-oriented policy, it will have to navigate between politically motivated competition and a technocratic style of policymaking. Based on the evidence presented in this chapter, striking this balance and steering democratic policymaking toward future-oriented decisions, will be the responsibility of the policymaking elite who may need to find new ways to accommodate the more presentist ambitions of ordinary citizens. This is due to two fundamental reasons, as demonstrated in this chapter. First, policymakers are simply more future-oriented people than the public and that orientation guides their behavior, as has been demonstrated in this and earlier chapters. Second, the institutional obstacles that need to be removed to facilitate future-oriented policy are in the hands of the policymakers, beyond the direct control of voters. Indeed, the role of ordinary citizens who participate in policymaking through voting seems marginal in the story told by our data. They exert some influence as they either reward or punish incumbents, but overall, their significance is secondary. As the evidence above shows, for elected and non-elected policymakers alike, the factors that are decisive for future-oriented policymaking exist outside the institutions of political representation. The situation is perhaps reminiscent of stealth democracy, as described by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002). Instead of

citizens accepting an invisible form of democracy, which they nevertheless know exists somewhere in the background, in this case it seems that it is the policymaking elites who only vaguely notice the existence of representative democracy and voters somewhere out there, while they formulate policy regardless. In their bubble, the policy process is primarily about international agreements, institutional constraints, (lack of) expertise – and only a little bit of electoral democracy. Put crudely, these observations, which align well with the findings made from our interviews, seem also to suggest a kind of technocratic hubris that has emerged among Finnish governing elites during past few decades while the Finnish governing system has clearly experienced a shift ‘from government to governance’.

Based on evidence presented in this and earlier studies (especially Koskimaa et al., 2023), at least in the current societal reality it seems rather unlikely that established Finnish policymaking elites would enthusiastically start to develop new methods of effective citizen engagement. Therefore another, more probable and from the viewpoint of future-regarding policymaking more worrying solution is an emergence of a new political force that challenges the expert-driven ethos and methods of Finnish policymaking.

In this vein, as a concluding reflection, it seems important to highlight the association between partisanship and future orientation in policymaking observed in this study. Put simply: the comparison between politicians from different parties showed a remarkable difference between politicians representing the rightwing populists the Finns party and all the others. The anti-establishment ethos of the Finns party, which is a typical example of the currently popular nationalistic rightwing parties in Western Europe, has a good chance to become the challenger of the current system that disrupts the broad agreement among all other parties regarding the necessity to make future-oriented policy. Since the evidence so far only comes from a single country it is impossible to say if rightwing populists in other countries are similarly present-day focused as the Finns party, but all things considered this seems a plausible assumption. As far as Finland is concerned, we return to this theme shortly, in the concluding chapter that follows. There, we discuss and speculate a bit more openly and in general terms the likely impact of nationalistic rightwing populism on the institutionalized character of future-oriented policymaking.

Notes

- 1 The measure used here is similar to the one we have presented elsewhere (see [Rapeli et al., 2021](#)). For linguistic symmetry we use here the term ‘political future orientation’, although the measure in Rapeli et al. is called ‘future-oriented political thinking’.
- 2 See the [Appendix](#) for more detailed descriptions of the surveys.

6 Main findings, conclusions and discussion

On a general level, the rather simple message in the preceding chapters has been that in order for democracies to be able to make future-regarding policies, the institutional arrangements for policymaking should be designed to support that objective. By emphasizing the role of policymaking elites and institutions in the making of future-regarding policy, we adopt a somewhat different approach from most of previous research, which has revolved around the democratic myopia thesis that builds on the theoretically turbulent nexus between short-sighted voters and office-seeking legislators. Although previous empirical inquiry has not found unequivocal support for the claim that democratic myopia is driven by voters' shortsighted interests, which incentivize politicians to ignore the future, the idea has continued to guide discussions for improving democratic institutions. Also for this reason, our primary interest here has been to introduce an alternative perspective.

With this comprehensive analysis on the roles of political elites in advancing future-sensitive democracy, we want to argue that future-regarding policymaking may thrive by being more driven by public administration experts. At the same time, we fully acknowledge that at least for scholars focusing on traditional political science topics like elections and parties this might sound rather elitist and even undemocratic. However, as democracies struggle to make policies for the long-term, in a world where many problems would require such solutions, we suggest looking more closely at elite collaboration, finding ways to couple the expert component with democratic elements more fluidly.

Our argument, supported by the evidence reported in the preceding chapters, can be condensed into two major points. First, the institutions where policy is prepared can take different forms and when designed in a particular way they can play a decisive role in constantly pushing policymakers away from the magnetism of democratic myopia, toward future orientation. As our comprehensive analysis on the building and operation of the Finnish national foresight system demonstrates, designing durable future-regarding institutions that integrate to more general policymaking apparatus is possible, and probably worth the effort. Although proving detailed policy effects of single mechanisms in highly complex systems where everything interacts is almost impossible, based on our analysis we are rather confident that over time, such institutions can create a commonly acknowledged way

of thinking, both at the level of individuals and collectively, which makes future orientation a natural part of all policymaking. This, we believe, shows in our second main analytic contribution. The rather unique survey data demonstrates clearly that Finnish policymakers as individuals are indeed more future-oriented than the average citizen and municipal councilors. Everyone's behavior and choice making is connected to personality and policymakers' personalities are well suited for making future-oriented policies.

Our argument is, of course, intimately linked to the country context, from which we derive all empirical material. Instead of trying to hide this fact behind some cherry picked 'variables' that could produce 'generalizability' for this single case, we have wanted to be upfront with even the most unique details of our case – not to claim that such things need to exist in order to get where Finland is now, but to be rigorous and sincere with all potentially contributing factors. Regarding practical applications, which at least some of the readers will be interested in, our understanding is that a too simplified model will likely lead only to organizing attempts that fit poorly with different socio-political contexts. Efforts to institutionalize the Finnish future committee model around the world demonstrate this rather unmistakably (see Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022, 2023b). In the Finnish case, the general societal development and more situational individual-level and political factors have clearly supported the prolonged and relatively consistent historical effort to construct such institutions and practices, and according to several measures contemporary Finland is indeed one of the leading democracies in future-oriented policymaking. Consequently, Finland is a case, which illustrates the point(s) we wish to make, rather than present an average or typical case among many similar countries. Our key arguments about the key role of a consensus-seeking, pragmatic and competent policymaking elite are very compatible with the empirical reality we are observing. While this is quite convenient for the intents and purposes of our argumentation, it may call into question what is the more general contribution of our effort. Let us raise two points in defense of our case and study.

First and foremost, we are not only making empirical observations. Our underlying main objective has been to introduce an alternative viewpoint on future-regarding politics and from that perspective make additions to the theoretical framework that scholars use in the study of future-oriented policymaking. Also, although the system-level factors we highlight – the significance of a consensus-seeking political culture, a relatively independent public administration that can semi-autonomously manage this consensus, an elite-driven yet collaborative policy preparation and so on – are particularly pronounced in the Finnish context, they could theoretically exist in and are applicable to any democratic political context. In other words, we also do not draw from a case whose characteristics are so unique that they could never exist anywhere. Instead of thinking about a comprehensive and complete reform, which might be typical for theoretically oriented students of institutional reforms, we remind that reforms can also be piecemeal and gradual, and they likely are as classic (Lindblom, 1959, 1979) and more recent studies (e.g., Thelen, 2004) and the Finnish case also demonstrates.

With a comprehensive in-depth analysis of a single theoretically relevant case, we have wanted to be candid about the various details, which might contribute to such reforms. Merely wishing that things would be simple and easy in the socio-political realm does not probably make them such, although their relative importance may vary across contexts.

Second, while not making any generalizing claims we want to note that Finland is not by any means the only democratic country, which has at least some of those institutional features that we have highlighted in this book. There are many other countries, such as the other Nordic countries, Germany and the Netherlands, to name a few, which encase the type of configuration of basic democratic institutions that should be conducive for farsighted policymaking (professional administration, multiparty governments, consensual political culture, etc.) and also consistently perform very well in future-oriented policymaking in various policy fields. Adjacent, we can find several countries from the Baltics, East Asia and South America which have attempted to establish future-regarding institutions in their parliaments to arrest some negative societal developments (see [Koskimaa & Raunio, 2022, 2023b](#)). However, all things considered, even among these countries Finland is the clearest case for demonstrating how the deliberate and comprehensive designing of the policy process and inclusive elite cooperation can facilitate success in strategic thinking and long-term policy. The Finnish foresight system and its permanent parliamentary future committee are still rather unique constructs even on a global scale and concrete examples of ‘Finnish exceptionalism’ in this regard. However, to justify the in-depth study of our single country case we again want to highlight that Finland is not completely different from other European democracies and similar developments are undoubtedly possible in many other countries.

In this concluding chapter, we now proceed to discuss what an elite-driven process for future-regarding policies is and what it might entail for modern representative democracy more generally. After briefly summarizing the main factors that condition the operative capacity and survival of the Finnish system, we discuss the legitimacy problems that such rather technocratic and elitist policy preparation could lead to, especially when it is coupled with the current wave of populism that is sweeping across many European democracies. Before turning to these debates, let us first briefly recap what we have found in this study.

6.1 Policymaking elites and future-regarding policymaking

A large part of the preceding chapters has been devoted to describing the historical development and the current functioning of the national-level foresight system and policymaking process in Finland. In addition to the well-known Committee of the Future in the Finnish parliament, which is often considered as the most notable example of institutionalizing future orientation as part of representative democracy, Finland has developed extensive and firmly institutionalized professional foresight mechanisms alongside the ordinary policy preparatory system for including future orientation in regulation and legislative work. Overall, much of the preparatory

work done in the Finnish ministries takes the future perspective into account as an integral part of its day-to-day functioning.

In essence, the current national foresight system, including the various auxiliary institutions that have been introduced during the recent few decades, operates through the various processes for producing different kinds of long-term/future-regarding political documents. The system originated with the 'future dialogue' where the government and the parliament exchange visionary and broad-ranging 'future reports' in slow-moving but formal and periodical fashion. It was joined in the early 2000s by government ministries that were included in the process with their more concrete, practical and also more clearly politically motivated 'future reviews', ministries' professional conceptions of their most pressing future challenges and the various ways through which they could be tackled politically, designed to be presented right before general elections, in order to frame government negotiations that take place after elections. In the 2010s, the foresight system was thoroughly reformed, and the role of ministries strengthened considerably. Since 2008, the Prime Minister's Office that serves as the official government correspondent in the future dialogue has coordinated the work of the wider foresight system, which since the 2000s has included the organized foresight activities of ministries and non-state stakeholders. During the 2000s and especially in 2010s the 'strategic relevance' of anticipatory governance increased and ministries sought a more prominent role in the system to which they were inducted via deliberate efforts of ministries' general secretaries, the PMO and the CF. In the current system, the politically most important future-regarding document is the joint declaration of the general secretaries of ministries (the leading non-elected professional operatives), which utilize ministries' foresight and other research to condense Finland's most pressing challenges and solutions for various societal problems, before elections, explicitly to 'nudge' elected representatives toward the 'pressing realities' that will face them if and when they take governing office after elections. Based on the several explicit assessments of our interviewees that have followed the development and execution of these processes for a long time, it seems reasonable to expect that these insights reflect strongly in the choices of elected politicians and thus provide significant potential for cross-governmental future-regarding policymaking.

In general, the lengthening of the time horizons of Finnish policymaking appears to stem largely from the 'semi-autonomous' involvement of ministries' policy experts in producing, condensing and reporting policy information and coordinating the policymaking processes. Through the gradual merging of resources and processes through which ministries produce their ordinary preparatory work and future-regarding documents, which rests on the dual impact of ministries' growing relative role in state-level foresight and low extant foresight resources, ministry insights can now spread to various arenas and present also for future-regarding visioning a perspective that compared to standard foresight is more cohesive and linear, and also more responsive to ministries' traditional priorities and interests. While much of the work of ministries is still not termed as

strategic foresight, their tendency to ‘think a little ahead’ generalized already two decades ago. In all of their doings, ministries conceive policy planning in a much wider temporal frame than the electoral cycle. Recently, some have suggested to apply the perspective more explicitly to ordinary policy planning. Interestingly, the CF seems to have played a major role in developing the system toward the current ministry-centered model. It has demanded in its resolutions that futures thinking and foresight should be included more firmly to all government activities and it has asked a central role for ministries in the future dialogue where ministries previously had no formal role at all.

In its current form, the expert-driven strategic and foresight activities have good capacity to impact policymaking. However, the risks of the system seem equally clear. Both the system’s historical roots and its current operations are characterized by certain elitism. We use the term in a neutral sense in this context to emphasize that the future-regarding style of policymaking in the Finnish system has always been a project led by national-level policymakers and not for example distinct parties or as a result of demands from ordinary citizens. Also, it has always been somewhat of a collaborative effort, which has included elected politicians as well as non-elected experts from public administration and, especially in the formative phases, various non-state stakeholder organizations, too. However, as these latter groups mainly consisted of foresight experts from academia and business circles, they hardly reflected the ‘voice of the streets’ in any meaningful sense. Yet, the high rates of democratic satisfaction and trust in Finland have implied that the exclusive, elite-led system has produced widely accepted policies and therefore it seems like the system’s democratic component – elites of established political parties – have thus far managed to justify the system below to parties’ members, activists and other stakeholders.

While it seems unlikely that citizens are very aware of the future-regarding nature of Finnish policymaking, or more concretely of, e.g., the relatively large formal foresight network in Finland, the system appears to enjoy widespread legitimacy among policymakers. Although at least in the context of our survey and interview responses many are critical of the shortcomings in future orientation in policymaking, policymakers widely share the view that it is important to consider future well-being in present-day policies. As we have demonstrated empirically, Finnish policymakers hold very future-oriented views about policymaking and they display more future-oriented attitudes even more generally than the population at large. In our interpretation, these findings suggest that Finnish policymakers have become deeply socialized into the future-oriented framework of policymaking, where considering the future is a natural way of doing things. While this spirit enhances the system’s capacity to produce farsighted thinking, it also carries the risk of hubris that cause policymakers to lose contact with voters. From the viewpoint of democratic legitimacy and stability, which are connected, it is necessary to consider where ordinary citizens stand in the bigger picture. Thus, it seems appropriate to conclude the book by considering at length the risks that are associated with the current form of the Finnish system.

6.2 What about the people?

If a democratic system has a very elite-driven and technocratic policy process, it almost by definition means that citizens and public opinion becomes sidelined to some extent. If policy is mainly formed by an exclusive group of high-ranking policy experts and politicians, it cannot simultaneously be determined by popular will, so to speak, although public opinion might happen to concur with the opinions of policymakers sometimes. To a certain degree, this is of course the case always in modern advanced democracies, but variation exist and it matters.

From the standpoint of citizens, or more narrowly voters, the acceptance of future-oriented policies is mostly a question of outcome favorability, regardless of what the specific policy is about. Although many will consider participatory policy processes as more legitimate than processes that are based on the delegation of power (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020; Werner & Marien, 2022), it seems that ultimately people care more about the outcome (Esaiaasson et al., 2019). Of course, people will always have widely differing normative expectations regarding the democratic policy process, but being satisfied with the results of a policy process nevertheless usually trumps the perception of fairness of the process itself. For us, this makes sense, as it would seem unrealistic if significant amounts of people were very interested in the normative principles and functional processes of democracy.

Consequently, even if an elite-driven policy process, which is not very open or responsive to citizens' opinions, produces outcomes that the citizens support, legitimacy issues might not be raised by the citizens (as long as they are happy). So the key question becomes how to convince citizens that the elite-driven policy process produces outcomes that they should support – especially if these decisions mainly benefit some future citizens? At a general level, conventional wisdom says that the legitimacy of policy output depends a great deal on the overall levels of public trust in political institutions (e.g., Gibson et al., 2005). However, the development of institutional trust is a complex matter, which, among many things, depends on historical forces that have shaped it within any given political context. At the level of specific policies, on the other hand, the interplay between elite cues and public opinion formation is decisive. Scholars have studied extensively whether decision-makers are constrained by public opinion or if public opinion is simply a reflection of elite opinion.

Overall, research suggests that public opinion is heavily based on cue taking from elites (e.g., Clayton et al., 2021; Druckman et al., 2013), but it is unclear whether it occurs through persuasion or adoption. Persuasion refers to a situation where policymakers need to convince citizens of their policy positions, which the citizens then accept. In this scenario, elites are not entirely free to conduct policy, because the citizens require convincing. Position adoption, on the other hand, is a process whereby citizens adopt the policy positions of the policymaking elite rather than genuinely forming their own opinions. In this view, public opinion is essentially just an echo of elite opinion (Broockman & Butler, 2017).

Recent findings suggest that the empirical reality has much in common with the policy adoption model (see e.g., Broockman & Butler, 2017; Lenz, 2009), which

implies that policymaking elites have considerable influence over what the general public thinks about politics and policies. If this is true, public opinion could surprisingly easily follow the policymakers' lead, also when it comes to difficult, future-regarding policy questions. Perhaps policymakers have been too hesitant to pursue future-regarding policies, out of an unnecessary fear for electoral losses, without realizing that the public actually listens closely to policymakers' opinions, and even adopts their positions (cf. [Sheffer et al., 2023](#)). Here too, one cannot avoid considering the role of the forces that mediate the communication and interactions between politicians and citizens.

In a related fashion, in their comparative study across four European countries and over 10,000 estimates of policy support, Walgrave et al. (2023) demonstrate that politicians 'are quite inaccurate estimators of people's preferences'. In fact, they find that politicians are not better at estimating the public's policy positions than the public itself, and that politicians do very poorly even when estimating the preferences of their own party supporters. Other recent advances have shown, with large samples of politicians from both the United States and European countries, that politicians' misperceptions of the public's policy positions are not only inaccurate, but also biased in a particular direction. Politicians consistently falsely assume people's preferences to be more conservative than what they really are ([Broockman & Skovron, 2018](#); [Pilet et al., 2023](#); see also [Sheffer et al., 2023](#)). In addition to the common perception biases, such as a sense of false consensus, it is possible that the conservative bias results from the information environment, in which politicians find themselves. On average, they likely have more contact with the higher social strata who are more affluent and conservative, at least economically. Moreover, as Pilet et al. (2023) speculate, conservatives might be more aggressive in their expressions of policy positions, and even more generally in the way they make themselves heard through various communication channels. This could lead to inaccurate perceptions among politicians about what the public wants. Here too, the framings and emphasis of the media can likely accentuate or dampen the dynamics.

In any case, the conservative perception bias among politicians is compatible with our findings, as well as those by others, which demonstrate that citizens are not as shortsighted in their policy preferences as politicians probably assume. Admittedly, citizens do demonstrate a slight preference for more immediate policy benefits and as we have ourselves shown, they do not come across as equally future-oriented in terms of climate change attitudes as policymakers ([Rapeli & Koskimaa, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, citizens seem more open toward future-oriented policy with prolonged policy rewards than traditionally presumed. Based on the recent findings reported above, policymakers likely have not fully grasped this (see especially [Sheffer et al., 2023](#)). Policymakers may not either be fully aware of the extent to which they apparently lead the formation of public opinion.

Taken together, our reading of the recent research on the links between public and elite opinion and the findings presented in this study suggest to us that the policymaking elite has the opportunity to genuinely lead democracies toward making more future-regarding policies. The (majority of) citizens, it seems, would

embrace elite opinion as their own and support policies that are forward-looking, even if it means they must wait for benefits to materialize. The dominant view of the public among policymakers seems too pessimistic when it comes to future-oriented policy. It may be symptomatic of a more general elite skepticism toward citizens' ability to participate in policymaking (Koskimaa et al., 2023), but maybe ordinary citizens deserve more credit for their democratic competence. At the least, the elites should never position themselves in a way that they become unable to detect the views of citizens. Something like this may have happened in the Finnish governing system.

6.2.1 *Populism as a game-changer*

As Caramani (2017, 2020) has emphasized, the kind of quantitatively and qualitatively highly exclusive governing dynamics that have also been detected in this study have been challenged especially by the so-called populists. Populist parties, especially rightwing and nationalistic, have significantly increased their vote shares even in established and affluent democracies in recent years (Leininger & Meijers, 2021). In many countries, including Finland at the moment, (rightwing) populists finished second in the general election of 2023 and are now in government, where they continue to enjoy the position of the second or third most popular party in terms of voter support, depending on the poll. This development, which culminates in government position with power over the policy process, may have serious consequences for the future-regarding policy preparation model that Finland has developed, and which forms the backbone of our argumentation.

For decades, there has been a fundamental consensus over the general rules of the game in policymaking in Finland. Obviously, there have been political clashes, and rival parties have always sought to maximize their own advantage in policy choices, but only within certain limits that everyone has respected and which have been mandatory due to the fragmentation of the party system and the resulting need to govern through broad and colorful coalitions. It is this consensual style of thinking that has made it possible to develop and sustain an extensive and inclusive structure to support future-regarding policy preparation; despite issue disagreement, all political actors have accepted, and sometimes undoubtedly also praised, the existence of the foresight system itself. The system, including the policy programs that have been developed with its support, are also crafted by these same parties and therefore it is only natural that struggles over policy choices have succumbed to the level of details where major lines are not really challenged.

The widespread consensus could soon be seriously disrupted, because it is a markedly elitist construction of and by the political establishment; it was built by the policymaking elite, for making policy without the public's interference and it directly serves its benefits in many ways. Populism is in essence anti-elitism. Its definitions are many, but the idea, expressed most noticeably by Mudde (2004) that populism is about the pure people standing up against a corrupt elite, is essentially shared by all of them. This basic premise is not very compatible with the idea that policy experts and other members of the policymaking elite should be given

plenty of freedom in deciding future-oriented policy. Besides objecting to elitism, nationalist populists are unlikely to support the future-regarding policy goals, which in spatial terms often extend also far beyond national borders. Analyzing the future-oriented attitudes of political candidates in Finland, [Rapeli and Lindell \(2020\)](#) found that candidates representing the rightwing populists the Finns party were the outliers among the Finnish parties. A strikingly low percentage (35%) of them agreed that politicians should bear responsibility for future well-being. For the other parliamentary parties, the percentage varied between 73 and 98.¹ In this book, we presented very similar numbers of low support for future-oriented policy among elected politicians from the Finns party, while politicians from all other parties were strongly in favor of future-oriented choices. As these respondents likely realize they are also part of the future in some sense, a reasonable interpretation is that they oppose the kind of future that is proposed by the established elites, which also control the process where it is crafted.

The fact that the style of policy preparation we have propagated is elite-centered and very expert-driven does not make it attractive, or perhaps acceptable at all, to populists. Theoretically, the relationship between a technocratic model of democratic policymaking and a populist one is curious. As [Caramani \(2017\)](#) explains in his excellent presentation, technocratic and populist versions of democracy have both commonalities and differences. Both are fueled by a criticism of the conventional, party-based representative democracy. While technocrats do not like the responsive features of party democracy (i.e., the idea that parties also should listen to voters), populists see it as a failure, because in their mind contemporary parties have ceased to represent the people and have instead become part of the state machinery ruled by technocrats. Hence, as populists argue, party-based democracy no longer represents the true will of the people. Technocrats, as was noted, see parties as only focused on winning elections, which makes them too shortsighted and particularistic to be able to produce policies for the common good.

Although both sides are disillusioned with the inability of parties to realize what is best for the society, populists and technocrats have opposing conceptions about responsiveness and responsibility (see especially [Caramani, 2017](#), p. 62). Populists make the claim of extremely high responsiveness, as they insist to represent the unmediated, true will of the (uncorrupted) people. Technocrats make no such claim, but instead say that scientific knowledge defines the common good and by adhering to the strict trustee model of representation, they claim legitimacy based on formal competence, which produces the optimal policy output. In a way, the policymaking system that has been characterized in this book conforms more to the latter model, although this is partially explained by our narrow analytic focus.

The disagreement regarding the space that should be given to policy expertise is, therefore, quite fundamental between populists and technocrats. Those who do not represent either mode of thinking, and who are likely to constitute a majority in any demos, fall somewhere in-between these extremes. Hence, as emphasized also by [Mair \(2013\)](#), it seems likely that in practice, democracies need to find a balance between maintaining representation and accountability, while allowing policymaking to also be steered by expertise.

The current wave of populist electoral success will undoubtedly make this conflict more tangible in democratic policymaking. The consensual style of policymaking, which has made it possible for Finland to create future-regarding policy institutions, mechanisms and outcomes, is being tested heavily by the rightwing populist Finns party, which is currently one of two major coalition parties in government. One of the first decisions made by the government, where the Finns hold, among others, the position of the finance minister, which is generally considered as the most important position in the government, was to cut the funding for the government's *analysis, assessment and research activities*, which were initiated in mid-2010s to support government's initiative for 'strategic leadership' (cross-sectoral governance). Coordinated by the Prime Minister's office, the significance of these activities for policy preparation have been motivated in the following way on the home page:

With the world in constant flux, society's information needs also change rapidly and are linked to ever larger contexts and phenomena. The preparation and implementation of policies in society, and the related decision making, should be based on well-researched information. By using research, foresight, assessment and monitoring data more effectively, the knowledge base underlying policy decisions becomes more solid which in turn leads to better quality and effectiveness. To utilise information efficiently, interaction between the producers and users of the data needs to be close.

(<https://vnk.fi/en/government-s-analysis-assessment-and-research-activities>, last access February 8, 2024)

Pulling the funding for these research activities removes one key component of the system we have described throughout the book. The decision cuts directly into the future-oriented and evidence-based tradition of policy preparation, which has made Finland one of the leading nations in that area. For any observer of Finnish politics, it is difficult not to see the decision as a statement, not simply a way to make cutbacks in a tough economic situation. From a populist perspective, the government's future-oriented research activities may look precisely like the kind of waste of resources they often blame the political establishment of engaging in, or better yet, as was hinted above, a scheme to de-politicize certain crucial state functions by hiding them behind evidence-based processes in an attempt to govern across government terms. In the Finnish context, the foresight research activities undoubtedly symbolize the kind of consensus-seeking and elitist way of doing policy, which the populists wish to challenge – and even to remove. The Finnish case shows that despite a decades-long history of building a future-oriented policymaking process, the value of which has been widely shared across party and policy area lines, populists are not afraid to dismantle it, and even in a strongly established, stable and generally cautious democracy such as Finland, this can happen relatively fast.

However, even without a populist challenge, shifting policymaking power away from democratically elected institutions to non-representational technocratic

institutions means reducing popular control, making it normatively susceptible. For many populists, this spells nightmare. For moderates, it less dramatically means that there could be a legitimacy problem. We also believe that a heavily elitist policy process, even if it only addresses future-oriented questions, runs the risk of legitimacy issues in the eyes of a democratic public. It would also be difficult to justify such a system based on successful policy output, if policy benefits do not materialize until maybe decades into the future.

However, it is precisely here that we arrive at one of the reasons why this book was written. Along with some other countries, Finland is a very good case for demonstrating that it is possible to maintain a high level of systemic legitimacy while at the same time conducting future-regarding policy with a markedly elite-led preparatory system. But which came first – the future-regarding policy-making ethos or a high trust in political institutions and public administration? In the absence of time series that stretches back several decades it is not possible to conclusively answer the question with hard evidence. It is nevertheless clear that political trust has been consistently high in Finland at least since the early 2000s (Söderlund, 2019). It is quite plausible that the high levels go further back in time, suggesting that from a legitimacy perspective, the ground has been fertile for the future-oriented policy process to develop and gain acceptance in Finland. However, from a comparative perspective, the most interesting question is why some countries develop higher rates of political trust than others in the first place. As it would be too much to dive deeply into this question here, it is perhaps sufficient to suggest that fundamentally, it seems to be a matter of historical forces, such as religion and geopolitical location, which have shaped the cultural and societal profiles of all countries. In the Finnish case, this genealogy seems to have given rise to a political culture, which is conducive for, for example, future-regarding thinking. A small nation in an insecure geographical position, seeking to establish itself among wealthy Western democracies, could not afford to make bad choices – so it decided to make good ones instead. Preparing for the future was seen as a way to create security, predictability and control over an unpredictable world. In the same way as we humans have the choice of fighting our genes when they push us in an undesired direction, political systems too can deliberately choose a certain path, even if cultural factors do not make it easier. As we try to demonstrate in this book, institutions matter in this regard and political systems can design them to be more future-oriented. When they do so, the rest of the society will follow. Over time, institutional environments will have an impact even on how individual policymakers think and at that stage, future regarding policymaking has become *the* way of doing things, rather than a goal that remains allusive.

6.2.2 *Bringing citizens back in?*

Final question to consider is that, in order to avoid a dynamic where elite distances itself too far from the people and harms the political process, should citizens be somehow made more engaged with the contemporary expert-driven

policy process? This position has been strongly put forth especially by theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy, whose instinctive reaction would most likely be hostile to our suggestion of an elite-led project to make future-regarding policy. Referring not only to theoretical constructions, but also to a considerable amount of empirical inquiry, proponents of the more citizen-centered ideas behind deliberative democracy would probably argue that we should approach the formation of public will differently. Instead of imitating elite opinion, ordinary citizens should use deliberation to form their own, considered opinions, which empirical evidence shows they are well capable of doing (see e.g., [Dryzek et al., 2019](#); [Grönlund et al., 2010](#)). There are, of course, different real-life methods through which a citizen opinion produced through deliberation could subsequently be coupled with actual policy. It might be just one among many opinions that policymakers consider as they prepare policy. Alternatively, the result of citizen deliberation could be used to inform the broader public, who can use it as a cue to form their own opinions, rather than copycatting the elite. The latter example has been used with success in Ireland, where citizen deliberation is becoming an institutionalized part of particularly significant, national policy choices (e.g., [Farrell et al., 2019](#)).

Although our emphasis on the role of the policymaking elite is seemingly at odds with the key features of deliberative democracy, we, in fact, argue that both views can be included in the policymaking process. As most deliberative democrats would undoubtedly agree, the usefulness of deliberation, or any form of citizen engagement in the policy process, is a question of precisely when and how it is done. We are not suggesting that citizen engagement should be abandoned altogether to make way for an exclusively elite-led policy process, in some extreme version of power delegation. There are many benefits to citizen participation through deliberation, as Ireland and several other cases testify. In the context of future-oriented policy, the non-partisan nature of citizen deliberation could serve as a way to navigate political tensions and to create legitimacy in the eyes of the public in particularly difficult policy issues. Moreover, as research shows, participating in deliberation increases the understanding among participants that policymaking is demanding and complex (e.g., [Grönlund et al., 2010](#)), which is especially relevant in future-oriented policy. From the perspective of policymakers, citizen deliberation provides an opportunity to allow ordinary citizens a glimpse of just how difficult it is to solve difficult policy questions.

Hence, we do not see our suggestion as ruling out more citizen-centered approaches. In fact, we see great value in the various forms of citizen deliberation, which produce coherent and thoroughly considered citizen opinions, as a contrast to the hastily drawn and poorly informed opinions that citizens all too often hold, due to (an understandable) lack of interest in public policy. However, what we are suggesting is that policymakers, based on their policy expertise, remain in charge of the policy process. We therefore suggest that they should boldly guide future-regarding policymaking, because they are best equipped to do so,

both in terms of their personal qualities and, in the Finnish case, in terms of their institutional surroundings.

6.3 The future

Given that this book is devoted to the idea of advancing future-oriented policy-making in democracies, it seems only natural to end it with a future-oriented outlook of what coming research in the field should examine. First, we call for more empirical evidence regarding the actual preparatory processes of future-relevant policies from other political systems and contexts. We see this book as providing a suitable point of reference for further inquiry from other countries and hope to see comparable analyses. Are explicitly future-oriented systems, such as the Finnish one, genuinely markedly different from systems, which have not been designed with as much focus on the future? Is the policy output significantly different across systems that vary in terms of future orientation? Second, future scholarship should address questions of democratic myopia and future-oriented policymaking empirically, not only theoretically. As we have argued, one of the basic assumptions about democratic myopia, the alleged shortsightedness of ordinary citizens, is not firmly established by empirical studies. In fact, many empirical accounts find evidence that portrays voters as somewhat future-oriented. In order to advance the current state of the literature, we suggest that researchers should revisit the key assumptions made in the theories regarding democratic policymaking in relation to future orientation and put the relevant theoretical propositions through proper empirical testing. Third, what will be unsurprising by now, we hope to see more scholarly focus on the behavior and impact of policymakers, including both elected and non-elected actors, as well as all other actors who participate in the policy process. Among other things, this requires digging deeper into how policymakers think about the major challenges that lie ahead many democratic societies. It requires a hands-on approach, where members of the policymaking elite are interviewed and surveyed in detail about their perceptions of future-oriented policy. We believe a focus on elite attitudes is becoming increasingly important due to the challenge from rightwing populists regarding formal scientific expertise and emphasis on the future at the expense of present-day well-being. Fourth, empirical inquiry should be taken to the level of actual policies. The method of process tracing (e.g., [Collier, 2011](#); [Kay & Baker, 2015](#)) could be very useful in creating an understanding of precisely how (un)successful future-oriented policies come about – and when they do not. There seems to be somewhat of a lacuna in this area in contemporary research and many valuable and novel lessons could be learnt by zooming in on concrete policies from a future perspective.

Finally, we also want to encourage scholars to empirically address the significance of both non-political actors, such as companies and researchers, and non-representational institutions, such as international treaties and agreements, regarding the capacity of democracies to make future-oriented policy. As our analysis showed, both types of (f)actors are important for future-oriented

policymaking, yet they are often ignored by researchers, especially within political science. Consequently, widening the scope in this direction could be particularly beneficial for mainstream political science, which tends to emphasize institutions of political representation while discounting other phenomena that also affect democratic output. By extending the research agenda toward actors that work outside democratic politics, and which may even in some sense be ‘undemocratic’ such as big corporations, could provide completely new insights into the realities of the democratic policy process.

Note

- 1 Comparative Candidate Survey data.

Data appendix

In this Appendix, we provide basic information about the primary data used in the analyses. The data consists of custom designed surveys and interviews, which we describe below. We also utilized various official government and ministry documents whose bibliographic information can be found from the main text and the list of references.

0.1 Survey data

0.1.1 *Finnish Citizens' Civic Attitudes 2019*

The survey measured civic attitudes and views on politics among the Finnish voting age population. The primary themes of the survey were voting behavior, civic participation, political decision-making and trust in institutions and other people.

The sample ($n = 1,701$) was drawn from a Qualtrics respondent panel, which is representative of the adult population in mainland Finland (excl. the Åland Islands). The sampling was based on quotas to ensure that the proportions of different age groups and the proportions of men and women included in the sample corresponded to the target population (= persons over 18 years of age living in mainland Finland). The data was collected through a web-based questionnaire between 12 and 19 February 2019.

The data is available through the Finnish Social Science Data Archive. Data identifier: FSD3528. Permanent link: <https://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:fsd:T-FSD3528>

0.1.1.1 *Sustainable Policy-Making: Finnish Policy-Maker Survey 2018*

The survey studied Finnish policymakers' views on political and governmental decision-making, the present state of long-term policymaking in Finland, and civic participation.

The target population consisted of members of parliament, staff of parliamentary party offices and party councilors, middle and senior management of ministries, middle and senior management of sector research institutes and middle and senior management of labor organizations in mainland Finland. The whole

population (2,556 people) received an invitation to their work e-mail to participate in the survey. From these, 675 respondents complied, resulting in a response rate of 26.4%. The data was collected during 7 and 22 November 2018.

The data is available through the Finnish Social Science Data Archive. Data identifier: FSD3546. Permanent link: <https://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:fsd:T-FSD3546>

0.1.2 Wave 2 of the Finnish Politician Panel of the Finnish Infrastructure for Public Opinion (FIRIPO)

The survey asked about Finnish local-level politicians' opinions about the upcoming municipal elections and also included some items measuring their attitudes toward democracy.

The respondents ($n = 629$) are all politicians elected to a local council in a Finnish municipality. They are all part of the Finnish Politician Panel ($n = 1,019$), which belongs to the FIRIPO (www.firipo.fi) research infrastructure. The survey was conducted by FIRIPO through a web-based questionnaire between 22 April and 17 May 2021.

The data will be available through the Finnish Social Science Data Archive. The date of the release is still unknown. Until then, contact lauri.rapeli@abo.fi for the data.

0.2 Interview data

- 1 The first wave of the semi-structured interviews were conducted in the spring of 2018 by Vesa Koskimaa. The interview protocol was created by Vesa Koskimaa and Lauri Rapeli. Thematically, the interviews focused on future-regarding policymaking in Finland, placing emphasis on two analytic perspectives: factors that hinder and enhance future-regarding policymaking. The 24 interviewees represented, first in more general fashion, the two main arenas of the “future dialogue” – leading operatives of the Committee for the Future (2) and Prime Minister’s Office (2) – and, then in more focused fashion, the top-tier of experts in Finnish environmental policy across all relevant organizations (a total of 20 individuals): elected and expert members of the parliamentary Environment Committee (4), the leadership of the central units of the Ministry of Environment (7), leaders of the various units of the Finnish Environment Institute (3), and leaders of key environmental NGOs (2), industrial associations (2) and businesses with special link to environmental policy (2). The first wave of interviews produced around 24 hours of material. The interviews were transcribed by externally commissioned professionals, adhering to highest standards of secrecy and care.
- 2 The nine additional interviews for the main interview data set were collected in two waves – in the autumn of 2021 and in the autumn of 2023 – by Vesa Koskimaa. Compared to the first wave, these interviews were more focused on confirming and deepening our understanding of the previous findings, and thus they employed no strict protocol. In addition to re-covering the main arenas of the

“future dialogue” – leading operatives of the Committee for the Future (1) and Prime Minister’s Office (1) – the first additional wave expanded from foresight leaders of environmental policy (1) to other sectors, the Ministry of Finance (1) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and an interview (1) was also conducted with a leading futures expert of Finland’s “state think tank” Sitra. The final wave (Autumn 2023) comprised of three long interviews, again focusing on the main participants of the “future dialogue”, leading operatives of the Committee for the Future (1) and Prime Minister’s Office (2). These additional waves of interviews produced around 12 hours of new material that was transcribed by externally commissioned professionals.

Due to their very central position in the national foresight system, one individual was interviewed three times (while representing two different ministries) and two individuals were interviewed twice (representing same organizations in different time).

Per mutual agreement that was established with the interviewees when obtaining their informed consent to collect and use these interviews for research purposes, the data was defined to be used only in completely anonymized form and without making direct quotes from the interviews. Due to the same agreement, this data cannot be released for the use of third parties even in anonymized form from where the interviewees can be recognized due to their high-ranking roles in public/semi-public positions.

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