

The Citizens' Parliament

November 4 – 5 & 11 – 12, 2023

Finland

The Citizens' Parliament took place in November 2023 in Finland. The Citizens' Parliament was a deliberative democratic experiment aimed at developing Finnish democracy and public discourse and supporting the Parliament in the processing of citizen initiatives.

In September 2023, invitations to the Citizens' Parliament were sent out to 30,000 randomly selected Finns with the aim of obtaining a sample representative of the Finnish population in terms of gender, age, language, education, and electoral district. The interest to participate was high and in the end 671 Finns took part in the event.

The participants gathered for two days to engage in discussions in groups of around ten people and listen to experts in three expert hearings on four themes related to **citizen initiatives**. These discussions followed the principles of deliberative democracy and utilized the deliberative opinion polling method, Deliberative Poll®, developed by Professor James Fishkin at Stanford University. Each participant was randomly selected to participate in one of the following three discussion environments: face-to-face moderated discussions in Helsinki, online moderated discussions on Zoom, and online discussions with an automated moderator on Stanford University's Online Deliberation Platform. The discussions were held in either Finnish or Swedish, and all materials were available in both languages.

The themes of the citizen initiatives concerned **legislative changes to allow the trial of drug consumption rooms, the legalization of cannabis, the lowering of fuel tax, and the removal of the diesel fuel tax**. The citizens' initiatives discussed by the Citizens' Parliament were chosen because they had succeeded in gathering the required number of signatures and were either under consideration or about to be submitted for consideration in the Finnish Parliament. The themes were also expected to interest different societal groups. Participants received in advance an information package containing balanced facts about the four initiatives being discussed, along with arguments for and against them.

In the expert hearings, two types of experts were consulted. In each hearing, one expert was considered 'neutral', meaning they were public officials or researchers from various organizations (such as ministries and expert or research institutions) and neutral concerning the citizens' initiatives. The two additional experts in each hearing were considered advocates for the topic (either for or against) and represented various interest groups, such as organizations or political parties. The representatives of the interest groups had been selected impartially to ensure an equal number of proponents and opponents of the initiatives.

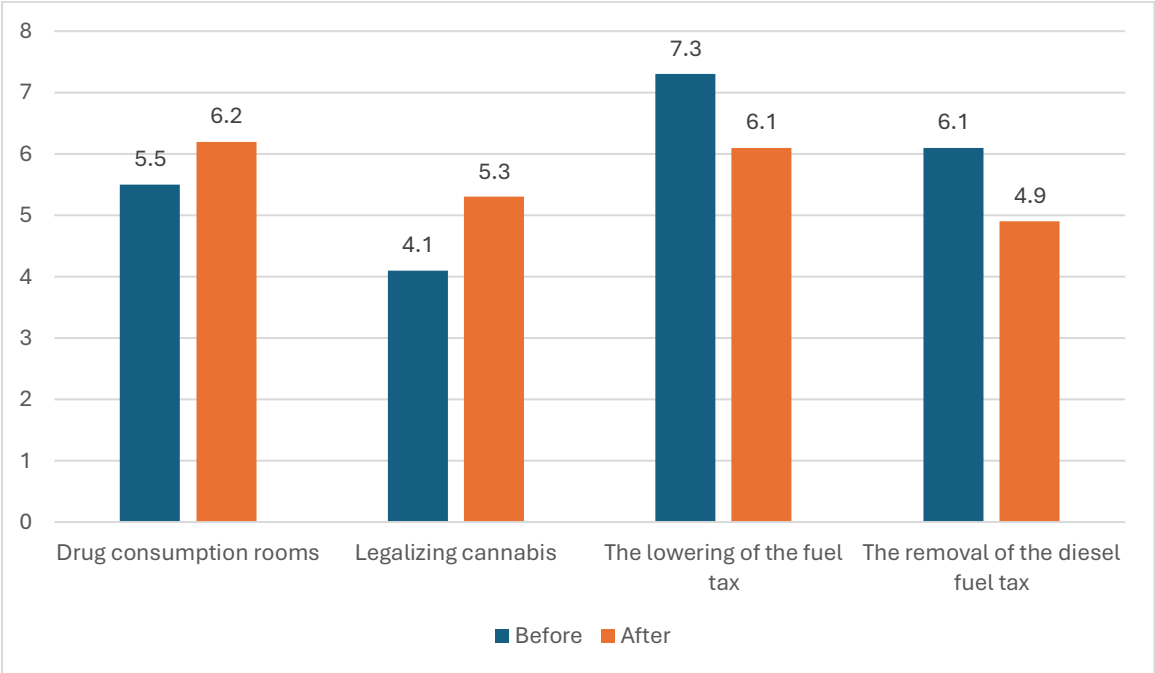
The Citizens' Parliament was organized by Åbo Akademi University and Tampere University in collaboration with Sitra, the Finnish Parliament, and Stanford University. The implementation of the Citizens' Parliament places Finland among the countries where citizen panels are combined with parliamentary work at the national level.

Results

Each participant filled out three surveys before the discussion session and one survey afterward. The pre- and post-event surveys allowed the analysis of whether the participants' opinions and knowledge changed, as well as how they experienced their participation. The participants' knowledge of the themes discussed increased significantly. Overall, the percentage of correct answers (on eight knowledge questions) increased from 30 percent to 56 percent. Particularly, the level of knowledge about drug-related issues was high after the citizens' parliament.

We measured the participants' opinions of the citizen initiatives on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means completely disagree and 10 means completely agree. Overall, participants became more positively inclined towards the legalization of cannabis and the allowance of drug consumption rooms. At the same time, support for both citizen initiatives regarding fuel decreased.

In the figure below are the opinions before and after the Citizens' Parliament.



A large majority, around 90 percent, of the participants were satisfied with the Citizens' Parliament. However, there were some differences between the discussion environments. Of those who discussed in person in Helsinki, 95 percent were very or quite satisfied. Of those who discussed online with a moderator, 93 percent were very or quite satisfied, while the corresponding figure for those who discussed online with the help of an automated moderator was 83 percent. Participation in the Citizens' Parliament helped participants understand other people's perspectives and opinions and to empathize with others, even those who did not share their opinion. They also felt that they heard new arguments and gained new viewpoints.