

# CITIZENS' INITIATIVES IN FINLAND AND ESTONIA

The journey so far

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Finland and Estonia have both established citizens' initiatives as public participation instruments whereby citizens can submit proposals to the national parliament and influence the agenda of political decision-making and public debate. In the space of a decade, citizens' initiatives have become institutionalised public participation mechanisms in both countries, which citizens regularly use and value. This working paper examines the evolution, organisation, process and digital infrastructures of citizen initiatives in Finland and Estonia. It distils the lessons learned from both countries to foster mutual learning, inspire future development and provide food for thought for other countries and actors considering setting up or developing similar participation mechanisms.

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# Summary

Finland and Estonia have both established citizens' initiatives (CIs) as public participation instruments whereby citizens can submit proposals to the national parliament and influence the agenda of political decision-making and public debate. In the space of a decade, citizens' initiatives have become institutionalised public participation mechanisms in both countries, which citizens regularly use and value.

This working paper examines the evolution, organisation, process and digital infrastructures of CIs in Finland and Estonia. It gives an overview of the legal framework and core characteristics of the participation instrument in both countries, with a particular focus on the similarities and differences in the process of submission, parliamentary discussion and follow-up of the initiatives. Despite similar goals, there are significant differences in the legislation, organisation, process, technical infrastructure and governance of CIs between Finland and Estonia.

The paper also asks what kinds of effects the initiatives and the digital platforms supporting them have had in different arenas, from the parliament's decision-making process

to the public discourse. It highlights that one should go beyond tracking changes in legislation to understand the significance, impacts and success of citizens' initiatives. The paper illustrates how CIs have not only led to legislative changes but also built awareness, lowered the threshold for public participation and shaped the political agenda and public debate. We present cases from Estonia and Finland to highlight CIs' various paths to impact, which are sometimes winding and difficult to grasp at first glance.

The CI instruments in Estonia and Finland are undergoing changes to respond to the current challenges of democracy and keep up with technological developments. The paper discusses the ideas for redesigning the instruments that have been put forward in public discussions, and presents further proposals to develop them. Based on insights from data, studies and expert opinions of insiders and observers, we seek to distil the lessons learned from the experience in both countries to foster mutual learning, inspire future development and provide food for thought for other countries and actors considering setting up or developing similar participation mechanisms.

# Tiivistelmä

Suomi ja Viro ovat molemmat luoneet kansalaisaloitejärjestelmät, joiden avulla kansalaiset voivat esittää ehdotuksia kansalliselle parlamentille ja vaikuttaa poliittisen päätöksen teon sekä julkisen keskustelun aiheisiin. Kansalaisaloitteet ovat kymmenessä vuodessa vakiintuneet osallistumisen välineiksi, joita kansalaiset arvostavat ja käyttävät säännöllisesti.

Tämä työpaperi tarkastelee kansalaisaloitejärjestelmien kehitystä, organisaatiota, prosessia ja digitaalisia infrastruktuureja Suomessa ja Virossa. Se antaa yleiskuvan molempien maiden kansalaisaloitteiden oikeudellisesta kehyksestä ja keskeisistä ominaisuuksista, keskittyen erityisesti samankaltaisuuksiin ja eroihin aloitteiden jättämisessä, parlamentaarisessa käsittelyssä sekä aloitteiden seurannassa. Huolimatta samantapaisista tavoitteista, on Suomen ja Viron kansalaisaloitteiden lainsäädännössä, organisoinnissa, prosessissa, teknisessä infrastruktuurissa ja hallinnossa merkittäviä eroja.

Työpaperi pohtii myös, millaisia vaikutuksia kansalaisaloitteilla ja niitä tukevilla digitaalisilla alustoilla on ollut eri areenoilla, eduskunnan päätöksenteosta julkiseen

keskusteluun. Kansalaisaloitteiden merkitys, vaikutukset ja menestys tulisi ymmärtää lainsäädäntövaikutuksia laajemmin. Paperi havainnollistaa, kuinka kansalaisaloitteet ovat johtaneet paitsi lainsäädäntömuutoksiin, myös madaltaneet kynnystä osallistumiselle, lisänneet tietoisuutta eri kysymyksistä sekä muokanneet politiikan asialistaa ja julkista keskustelua. Nostamme esimerkkejä Virossa ja Suomesta korostaaksemme miten erilaisin ja usein vaikeasti seurattavin ja hahmotettavin tavoin kansalaisaloitteet voivat vaikuttaa.

Viron ja Suomen kansalaisaloitteita on kehitettävä, jotta ne vastaavat nykyajan demokratian haasteisiin ja pysyvät teknologisen kehityksen tasalla. Työpaperi käsittelee julkisessa keskustelussa esitettyjä ideoita aloitejärjestelmien kehittämiseksi ja täydentää niitä. Pyrimme tiivistämään opit molempien maiden kokemuksista dataa, tutkimuksia ja asiantuntijanäkemyksiä hyödyntäen. Tavoitteena on edistää yhteistä oppimista, inspiroida tulevaa kehitystä ja tarjota ajattelemisen aihetta muille maille ja toimijoille, jotka harkitsevat vastaavien osallistumismekanismien perustamista tai kehittämistä.

# Sammanfattning

Finland och Estland har båda etablerat medborgarinitiativ som ett instrument för allmänhetens deltagande där medborgarna kan lämna förslag till det nationella parlamentet och påverka offentlig debatt och agendan för politiskt beslutsfattande. Inom loppet av ett decennium har medborgarinitiativ blivit institutionaliserade mekanismer för allmänhetens deltagande i båda länderna, något som medborgarna regelbundet använder och värdesätter.

Detta arbetsdokument undersöker utvecklingen, organisationen, processen och digitala infrastrukturer för medborgarinitiativ i Finland och Estland. Det tillhandahåller en översikt över det rättsliga ramverket och de centrala egenskaperna hos deltagande-instrumentet i båda länderna, med särskilt fokus på likheter och skillnader i processen för inlämnande, parlamentarisk diskussion och uppföljning av initiativen. Trots likartade mål finns det betydande skillnader mellan Finland och Estland vad gäller lagstiftning, organisation, process, teknisk infrastruktur och styrning av medborgarinitiativ.

Dokumentet ställer även frågan om vilken typ av effekter initiativen och de digitala plattformar som stödjer dem har haft på olika arenor, från riksdagens beslutsprocess till det

offentliga samtalet. Det understryker att man bör gå längre än att spåra förändringar i lagstiftningen för att förstå medborgarinitiativens betydelse, effekter och framgångar. Dokumentet illustrerar hur medborgarinitiativ inte bara har lett till lagändringar utan även byggt medvetenhet, sänkt tröskeln för allmänhetens deltagande och format den politiska agendan och den offentliga debatten. Vi presenterar fall från Estland och Finland för att belysa effekterna av de vägar som medborgarinitiativen tar, som vid första anblicken ofta är slingrande och svåra att förstå.

Instrumenten för medborgarinitiativ i Estland och Finland genomgår förändringar för att möta demokratins aktuella utmaningar och hänga med i den tekniska utvecklingen. Dokumentet diskuterar idéerna för att omforma de instrument som har förts fram i offentliga diskussioner och presenterar ytterligare förslag för att utveckla dessa. Baserat på insikter från data, studier och expertutlåtanden från insiders och observatörer försöker vi destillera lärdomarna från erfarenheterna i båda länderna för att främja ömsesidigt lärande, inspirera till framtida utveckling och inspirera till eftertanke för andra länder och aktörer som överväger att etablera eller utveckla liknande deltagandemekanismer.

# Authors

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# 1. Introduction

Finland and Estonia have both established citizens' initiatives (CIs) as public participation instruments whereby citizens can submit proposals to the national parliament and influence the agenda of political decision-making and public debate. In both countries, the creation of this participation mechanism has aimed to promote civic action and give people a tool to influence public decision-making and the parliament's agenda, not only during elections but also in between them. Both countries also established the instrument at around the same time – Finland in 2012 and Estonia two years later. Despite similar goals, there are significant differences in the legislation, process, technical infrastructure and governance of CIs between Finland and Estonia, which call for comparing the organisation and outcomes of CIs between the two neighbouring countries.

This paper gives a detailed account of the CI process in Estonia and Finland to build an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the two models and highlight interesting differences that provide an opportunity for mutual learning. The authors make use of the available data and studies on the usage and results of CIs, and include the expert opinions of observers and those working within the systems, to distil the lessons learned from the experience of CIs in both countries. In addition to comparing the experience of Finland and Estonia, this paper aims to inspire future development and provide food for thought for

*Despite similar goals, there are significant differences in the legislation, process, technical infrastructure and governance of citizens' initiatives between Finland and Estonia.*

*Citizens' initiatives have popularised participatory democracy by raising citizens' and policymakers' awareness of the idea that individuals can and should engage in politics beyond elections.*

other countries and actors considering setting up or developing similar participation mechanisms.

Citizens' initiatives have not only led to legislative changes but also built awareness, lowered the threshold for public participation and shaped the political agenda and public debate. Launched about a decade ago, CIs have been a groundbreaking democratic innovation and have paved the way for further interest in and development of new forms of democracy and citizen participation. CIs have popularised participatory democracy by raising citizens' and policymakers' awareness of the idea that individuals can and should engage in politics beyond elections.

The paper finds that the processes, procedures and governance structures underpinning the CIs in Finland and Estonia have had interesting implications for the development of the instrument. In Finland, the introduction of the CI was a government-steered process, and the Ministry of Justice has the ownership of the digital platform (Kansalaisaloite.fi), which citizens commonly use for collecting signatures in support of their initiatives. Quite differently from Finland, the Estonian Rahvaalgatus.ee platform is not maintained by a government institution but by an independent think tank (the Estonian Cooperation Assembly) established by the President of Estonia. The non-conventional management structure in Estonia may have allowed for more innovation and agility in



improving processes and expanding the functions of the platform, while the stronger government ownership in Finland has guaranteed resources to provide a robust, secure and accessible digital platform and could also ensure adequate integration with other government information systems.

There are also significant differences in the processes preceding and following the submission of citizens' initiatives to the parliaments in Finland and Estonia. In Estonia, a CI requires at least 1,000 supporting signatures (about 0.1% of the electorate). In Finland, the threshold is 50,000 (about 1.1% of the electorate). Unlike Finland's *Kansalaisaloite.fi*, the Estonian *Rahvaalgatus.ee* platform offers the initiators the opportunity to involve the general public in co-creating the text of initiatives.

Parliamentary procedures, which play a crucial role in the credibility and impact of CIs, also differ between the two countries. The Estonian and Finnish CIs are non-binding agenda initiatives, and policymakers can decide how to act upon them. However, the parliament's clear commitment to the processing of citizens' initiatives can strengthen public trust in the process and increase the importance of CIs as effective participation mechanisms. A challenge for the Finnish CIs is

that the public finds the parliamentary procedures difficult to grasp, and the Finnish system is missing a "single window" view and automated updates for following the whole CI process. From a citizens' point of view, the parliamentary deliberation of CIs is further undermined by the lack of a guarantee period for processing CIs and the risk of an initiative lapsing at the end of a parliamentary term. The Estonian Parliament has a six-month guarantee period for processing CIs and the parliament provides real-time open data with automated updates on the *Rahvaalgatus.ee* website.

In Finland and Estonia, the creation of citizens' initiative systems was originally justified by the national and international democratic standards of the time and developments in citizen participation. They were introduced to complement the representative system, stimulate public debate, increase citizens' influence on the decision-making agenda and prevent political alienation. Today, these arguments have by no means lost their weight or relevance, as both stable and new democracies across the world are being challenged externally and internally. On the contrary, participation mechanisms such as citizens' initiatives can be considered effective tools for strengthening democracy and standing up to the challenge.

## 2. Background and regulatory framework

A citizens' initiative (CI) is a participation instrument that allows individuals to submit proposals to government institutions to raise an issue or advocate a policy decision. As a typical procedure, an individual or a group of people come up with an initiative, they then collect other people's signatures to meet a formal threshold or demonstrate public support for the initiative, and once the requisite number of signatures has been collected, they submit the initiative to a relevant government institution. In some countries or jurisdictions, a CI can take the form of a simple non-binding initiative to ask a local, regional or national government institution to make a decision, take action or adopt a policy. However, a CI may also have the legal power of forcing the government to put an issue out to referendum.

In Estonia and Finland, people have a legal right to submit CIs to the national parliament and local governments or, in Finland, to regional authorities. In all cases, the law prescribes certain rules and procedures for the processing of citizens' initiatives, but the political decision-makers or public authorities on the receiving end have significant discretion in how to act upon these initiatives.

In Finland, the right of citizens to submit proposals to the parliament was granted in 2012 by an amendment to the Constitution of Finland. Section 53 of the constitution states that at least 50,000 Finnish citizens who are entitled to vote (that is, are at least 18 years old) have the right to submit an initiative for the enactment of an act to the parliament. The rules and procedures for exercising the right are further specified in the Citizens' Initiative Act

(Kansalaisaloitelaki 410/2015). The act states that the initiative must include a bill (a proposal for a new law) or a proposal to start drafting legislation and the justifications for the proposal, must apply to a matter that can be enacted by law, must have a title that defines its content, must not include different matters, and statements of support must be collected within six months. As an interesting requirement, the law obliges the initiators to report any financial support to the value of at least 1,500 euros received in support of the initiative. This includes contributions in the form of goods and services.

In Estonia, the right to submit "collective proposals" to the national parliament was granted to residents in 2014. In 2014, the existing Response to Memoranda and Request for Explanations Act was amended to incorporate "and Submission of Collective Proposals" in its title, and Chapter 3 was added, which allowed residents to submit collective proposals to the parliament for amending regulations or improving community life if the proposal collected at least 1,000 signatures of support. Today, the right to submit CIs not only applies to Estonian citizens but also to permanent residents who are at least 16 years old (which is also the legal voting age in local but not national elections). No requirements on financial transparency regarding the preparation of CIs are contained in Estonian law.

Table 1 summarises the basic requirements for a CI addressed to the parliament in the two countries.

**Table 1. Basic requirements for a CI in Finland and Estonia.**

|   | Finland  | Estonia  |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Required format of an initiative</b>                                     | Legislative bill<br>Proposal to start drafting legislation | Proposal to change legislation<br>Proposal to improve community life |
| <b>Restrictions on the number of issues addressed in a CI</b>               | Must not include different matters                         | No restrictions  |
| <b>Minimum age of initiators/signatories</b>                                | 18   | 16   |
| <b>Minimum number of signatures</b>   | 50,000   | 1,000  |
| <b>Signature threshold as a share of voting-eligible population (2023)*</b> | 1.1%   | 0.1%   |
| <b>Maximum time frame for collecting signatures</b>                         | six months   | none   |

\* Sources: Statistics Finland, number of persons entitled to vote in 2023 parliamentary elections: [https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/fi/StatFin/StatFin\\_\\_\\_evaa/statfin\\_evaa\\_pxt\\_13sm.px/table/tableViewLayout1/](https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/fi/StatFin/StatFin___evaa/statfin_evaa_pxt_13sm.px/table/tableViewLayout1/); Estonian Ministry of the Interior, Population register, number of permanent residents aged 16 or more (as of October 2023).

In Finland, the introduction of the CI was a government-steered process. The need for a CI originally emerged from assessments concerning citizens' opportunities for participation and their development at the municipal, national and European Union levels. The general premise was that citizens' opportunities to influence should not be limited to representative systems alone, but that various more direct forms of participation also play a crucial role. It was argued that while modern democracies are inevitably representative in nature, the forms of direct democracy must be seen as complementary to the representative system, not as opposed to or replacing institutions (HE 60/2010 vp).

In January 2008, the Ministry of Justice established a working group to assess the functionality and the need for possible amendments to the constitution. It examined the role of direct democracy as part of the Finnish system and explored various alternatives for promoting it. The examination focused on the introduction of a citizens' initiative and the development of referendums. The working group proposed CIs as a direct means of strengthening the representative system. The Constitutional Amendment Committee appointed by the government on 30 October 2008 proposed that citizens'

participation rights at the national level be complemented by a CI. According to the proposal, 50,000 enfranchised Finnish citizens would have the right to submit an initiative to the parliament for enacting a law.

In May 2010, CIs were part of the government proposal to amend the constitution (HE 60/2010 vp). According to the proposal, CIs would be a new means of influence for citizens, complementing representative democracy, offering voters the opportunity to directly affect the political decision-making agenda and have their initiative considered by parliament.

The justifications for CIs were closely tied to the principles of the constitution. The government proposal for the constitutional amendment and the proposal for the Citizens' Initiative Act (HE 46/2011) argued that the CI was closely linked to the basic principles of the constitution regarding the democratic state order and the opportunities for citizens to participate and influence the development of society and their living conditions (§ 2). Furthermore, the proposal highlighted the public authorities' obligation to promote individuals' opportunities to participate in societal activity and influence the decisions that concern them (§ 14) and the public authorities' endeavour to guarantee for everyone the

possibility to influence the decisions that concern their own living environment (§ 20). The general objective of the proposal was “to promote and support free civic action and thereby strengthen civil society, in which various population groups participate and actively influence the development of society”. The parliament’s Constitutional Law Committee argued that a CI can also act as a channel for stimulating public debate and for raising new questions for political discussion, as well as for helping prevent political alienation (PeVM 9/2010 vp).

The argument for setting the required number of signatories at 50,000 was that it would be approximately 0.9% of the Finnish population and approximately 1.2% of those entitled to vote, which largely corresponded to the requirements for CIs adopted in some other European countries. The intention was that the legislative work would continue to be mainly based on the government proposals and that the government would bear the main responsibility for legislative drafting. (HE 60/2010 vp) The constitutional amendment entered into force on 1 March 2012.

In Estonia, the right to submit initiatives to the parliament was one of the results of the 2013 countrywide deliberative People’s Assembly process, where citizens and experts co-created proposals to the parliament to help strengthen government transparency and democratic participation. One of the People’s Assembly’s proposals suggested establishing the legal instrument of citizens’ initiatives to enable citizens and interest groups to petition the parliament. Instead of creating a new regulation, the parliament decided to amend the existing Response to Memoranda and Request for Explanations Act. The explanatory memorandum to the amendment proposal stated that the existing legislation did not foresee sufficient measures to consider the public’s opinions and attitudes in public decision-making processes in between elections. This was regarded as undermining people’s sense of being heard and being able to

participate, which in turn would erode trust in government.

Before the new participation instrument was adopted, the Estonian Parliament’s Constitutional Committee also discussed a proposal to reduce the signature requirement from 1,000 to 500 to enable initiators to focus on the substance of the initiative instead of collecting signatures. However, as there were also proposals to raise the threshold, a compromise was found at the level of 1,000 signatures.

A similar participation instrument also exists at the local level in both countries. Since its adoption in 1993, the Estonian Local Government Organisation Act (§ 32) gives at least 1% of local municipality residents the right to submit proposals to the municipality government to adopt, amend or repeal local regulations. The local municipality is obliged to debate the initiative within three months and a representative of the initiating group has the right to participate in the debate. The proposal needs to be presented in the format of a legislative draft along with the signatures of the supporters. Strict requirements on the format at the local level may constitute a challenge to initiators as they need to be able to draft proper legal text.

The Finnish Local Government Act states that any resident of a municipality, community or foundation operating in the municipality, as well as anyone who owns or controls property in the municipality, has the right to initiate proposals concerning the municipality’s activities (Kuntalaki 410/2015, § 23). The local municipality must inform the initiator of the measures taken as a result of the initiative. In addition, service users have the right to submit initiatives regarding municipal services. At least once a year, the local council must be informed of all the initiatives submitted on matters within its jurisdiction and of the actions taken as a result. Unlike the national-level CI, the local-level CI does not have a formal threshold for the number of signatures as the initiative can be submitted by one or more eligible initiators

together. The law requires all initiatives to be handled by the municipal authority in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act “without delay” (Hallintolaki 434/2003).

The recent Finnish Act on Well-being Services Counties includes a similar public participation instrument. The well-being services counties are responsible for organising health, social and emergency services in Finland. These responsibilities were transferred from the municipalities to 21 counties on 1 January 2023. According to the act, all constituents of the county have the right to submit initiatives concerning the activities of the county. This includes residents of the county, those living in a municipality within that county, a community and foundation whose registered office is in a municipality within the county, and a person who owns or controls real estate located in the county. (Laki hyvinvointialueesta 611/2011, § 30, § 3)

Similarly to the local level, the initiative can be submitted by one or more constituents of a county and there is no threshold for signatures. The law requires initiators of a CI to be notified of the measures taken as a result. When

processing the initiative, the county must provide an opportunity for the representatives of the initiators to be heard. Just as at the municipal level, users of public services offered at the county level have the right to make proposals concerning the services. Likewise, the county authorities must report the initiatives and their results to the county council at least once a year.

In Finland, residents of municipalities and counties have the right to propose advisory referendums. In the counties a proposal to hold a referendum can be made by at least 3% and in the municipalities by at least 4% of residents aged 15 and over. The county or municipal councils decide on the implementation of the referendum. (Laki hyvinvointialueesta 611/2011, § 31; Kuntalaki 410/2015, § 24, § 25)

Although the specific rules on submitting and processing them may differ, CIs in both countries and at all administrative levels only have an agenda-setting purpose. This means the law grants individuals the right to make proposals to public authorities, but the latter retain full decision-making power over the proposals.

### 3. Digital infrastructure: Kansalaisaloite.fi and Rahvaalgatus.ee

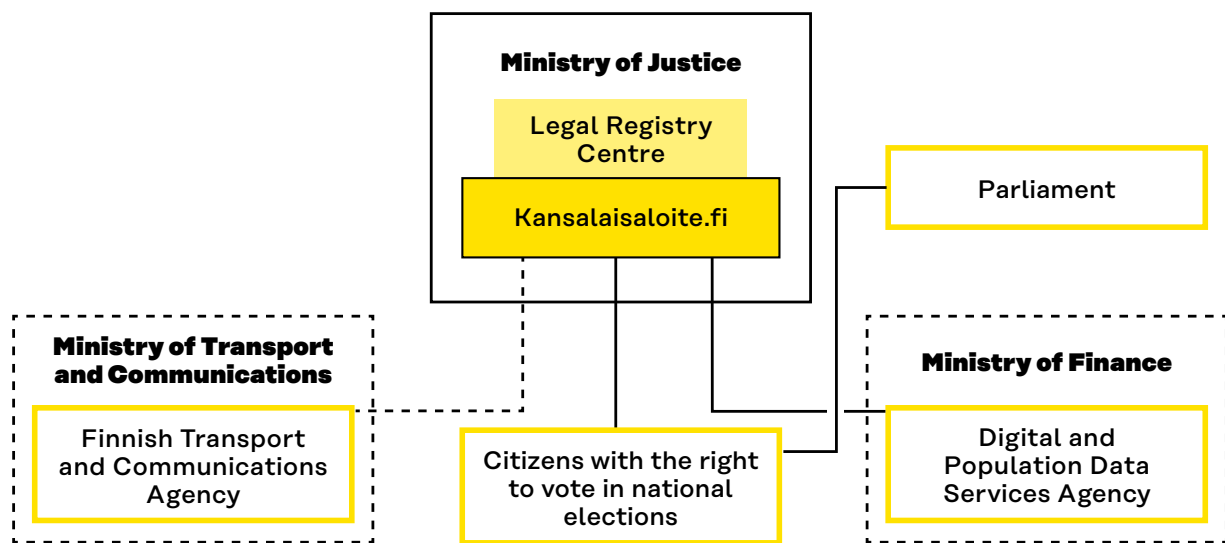
In both Estonia and Finland, dedicated digital platforms have been developed to support the collection of digital signatures and submissions of CIs. In Finland, the [Kansalaisaloite.fi](https://kansalaisaloite.fi) platform was launched in 2012 following the adoption of the Citizens' Initiatives Act, while Estonia launched its [Rahvaalgatus.ee](https://rahvaalgatus.ee) in 2016 – two years after the creation of this participation instrument at the national level. The functions of the Estonian [Rahvaalgatus.ee](https://rahvaalgatus.ee) platform were expanded in 2020 to support the submission of CIs to local authorities. In Finland, a separate digital platform, [Kuntalaisaloite.fi](https://kuntalaisaloite.fi), is used to facilitate the submission of CIs at the local level. The Ministry of Justice and the Legal Registry Centre are currently also preparing a new online service for the submission of county initiatives, due to be introduced in 2024. The new online service will enable the transfer of the national [Kansalaisaloite.fi](https://kansalaisaloite.fi) and local [Kuntalaisaloite.fi](https://kuntalaisaloite.fi) to the same platform.

The Finnish [Kansalaisaloite.fi](https://kansalaisaloite.fi) platform is managed by the [Ministry of Justice](https://www.justice.fi) with the aim of offering citizens a free online service for the online collection of statements of support. The Ministry of Justice owns the platform, but the [Legal Registry Centre](https://www.laki.fi) manages the technical part of the service together with the application provider. The Ministry of Justice advises citizens on matters related to the Citizens' Initiative Act and the use of the service, while the Legal Registry Centre provides answers to more technical questions. The Ministry of Justice, in the capacity of the service administrator, ensures that the published initiatives meet the content requirements set by the Citizens' Initiative Act and that the initiative is not contrary to the terms of use of the service; for

example, that the content does not infringe the Criminal Code and that the initiative does not contain unnecessary personal data of third parties.

The task of the [National Cyber Security Centre of the Finnish Transport and Communications Agency Traficom](https://www.kyberikauppa.fi) is to confirm that the information systems used in the online collection of statements of support meet the requirements set out in the Citizens' Initiative Act. The [Digital and Population Data Services Agency](https://www.digipalvelut.fi) checks the correctness and validity of the collected signatures and confirms their total number. The Legal Registry Centre operates visitor tracking and technical implementation of the service. The platform is funded by the Ministry of Justice. Figure 1 summarises the co-ordination structure of [Kansalaisaloite.fi](https://kansalaisaloite.fi).

The [Kansalaisaloite.fi](https://kansalaisaloite.fi) platform enables people to upload CIs and collect signatures in support. The online service is available in Finnish and Swedish, which are both national languages. The initiative is drafted in Finnish or Swedish, or in both languages. A CI will be translated by the parliament into the other national language if the initiative is submitted for parliamentary deliberation. The system requires login with strong authentication. Authentication with the service takes place using an online bank ID, a mobile certificate or a chip-based ID card. The signatures collected for a CI are kept on the system for one year if the initiative fails to collect the required minimum number of signatures. For a CI that is passed to the parliament, the signatures are kept on the system for five years.

**Figure 1. Co-ordination structure of Kansalaisaloite.fi.**

In Finland, democracy activists from the association Open Ministry had already created a digital platform for signature gathering before the government-sponsored alternative in 2012. At that time, it put pressure on the Ministry of Justice to finalise and publish its own “official” platform. This is technically still possible by the Citizens’ Initiative Act as long as the platform meets the requirements of the Act and Traficom’s National Cyber Security Centre has validated it.

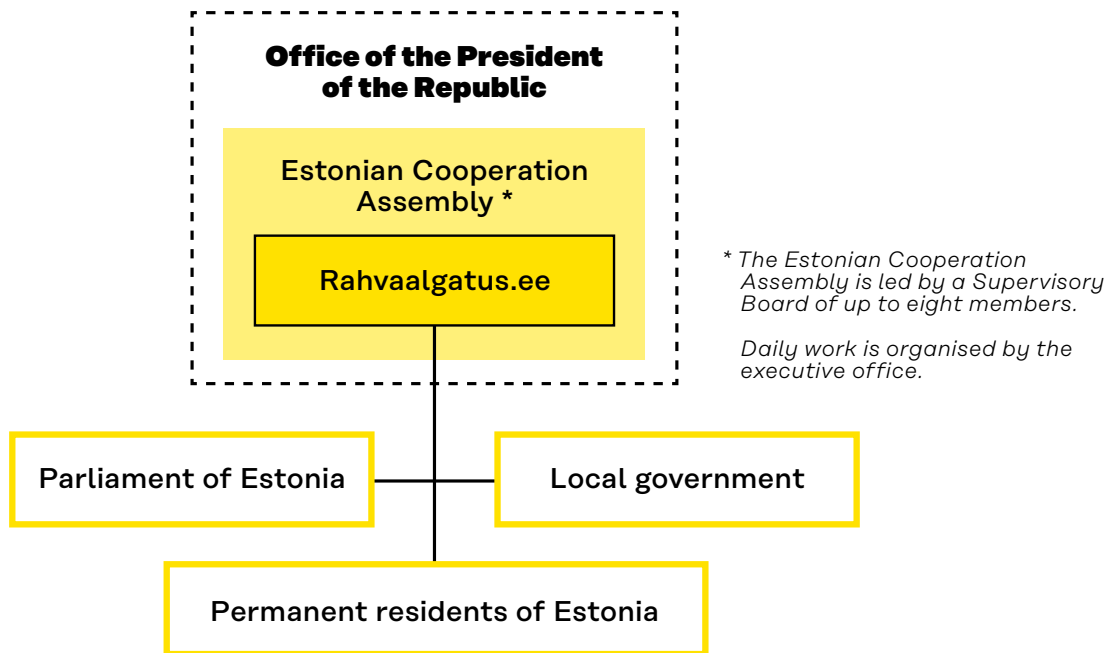
Quite differently from Finland, the Estonian Rahvaalgatus.ee platform is not maintained by a government institution but by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly (ECA), which is an independent think tank established by a decision of the President of Estonia in 2007 and funded from the budget of the Office of the President of the Republic. The ECA works to monitor social issues that affect Estonia’s long-term development, build co-operation networks across society, formulate policy recommendations, set up new initiatives and promote open governance, participatory democracy and the development of civil society. The foundation’s strategic plans are established by its Advisory Board and it has a small staff managed by a one-person Executive Board.

It was mainly due to the ECA’s role in the People’s Assembly deliberation process in 2013 that the ECA became the host institution for the Rahvaalgatus platform. Since the ECA was a key facilitator of the People’s Assembly process and provided the digital infrastructure for crowdsourcing citizens’ ideas, the organisation also took a leading role in developing a secure digital platform for citizens to exercise the newly established right of citizens’ initiative, which was one of the key outcomes of the deliberation process. As part of Estonia’s Open Government Partnership action plan for 2014-2016, the ECA partnered with the Government Office and Chancellery of the Parliament to provide such a digital platform. In its Charter for the years 2014-2017, the ECA stated its intention to work to “prevent alienation and maintain the health of Estonia’s democracy” and “find decision-making methods that would ensure the effective interaction of participatory and representative democracy”. To support these objectives, the foundation wished to continue to develop a co-creation and dialogue environment that would encourage people’s initiatives in national and local decision-making processes.

Today, the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform enables citizens to collect signatures for CIs addressed to the national parliament and local authorities as well as collectively co-create the initiatives, submit the initiatives to the

parliament and local authorities and follow the proceedings by the respective public authorities. The co-ordination structure of the platform is summarised in the figure below.

**Figure 2. Co-ordination structure of Rahvaalgatus.ee.**



Rahvaalgatus.ee is available in Estonian (national language) and in Russian and English. Although initiatives can be prepared in foreign languages, the initiative must include an Estonian translation in order to be sent to the parliament or local government. The platform requires strong authentication and allows users to give eIDAS-compatible digital signatures. It uses the national electronic identity (eID) for authentication and digital signing – according to national and EU (eIDAS) legislation, Estonia’s digital signature carries equal weight to a handwritten signature.

With the exception of the collection and publication of proceedings information from municipalities, all other processes on Rahvaalgatus.ee are fully automated. It is connected to the parliament’s website, so that information regarding the parliamentary proceedings of initiatives is automatically updated on

Rahvaalgatus.ee using the parliament’s public API (application programming interface). The source code of Rahvaalgatus.ee is public on Github and the platform also provides its own open data via a public API. The open data of the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform includes, for example, statistical data on the CIs published on the platform and status updates for the initiatives’ proceedings in the parliament.

The Rahvaalgatus.ee platform is funded from the ECA’s budget but the platform also collects microdonations from private individuals, mostly to cover the costs related to maintaining a secure infrastructure for digital signing. Occasionally, small developments in the platform have been undertaken as part of projects funded by donors such as the National Foundation of Civil Society or EEA/Norway Grants. The funding scheme for Rahvaalgatus.ee is therefore different from that



of Kansalaisaloite.fi, which is funded fully from the state budget.

Regarding the functionalities of the Rahvaalgatus.ee and Kansalaisaloite.fi platforms, the former offers citizens a full range of services related to CIs, from the interactive process of initiative co-creation with other citizens to following the parliament's proceedings. With the Kansalaisaloite.fi service, the user can only follow the progress of the numbers of signatures, but not what happens to the initiative once the signatures have been collected. It is possible to follow the progress of CIs in parliament on the parliament's website. Monitoring the progress of initiatives requires an understanding of parliamentary proceedings and procedure. An important difference also concerns the signature process. In Estonia, a user can log in and add or delete their signature any time while the initiative is still in the signature phase. In Finland, the statement of support cannot be withdrawn after it has been given on the Kansalaisaloite.fi website. In Finland, the Open Ministry's digital platform, which preceded Kansalaisaloite.fi, included a feature for co-creation.

As of the beginning of 2024, Rahvaalgatus.ee has a unique position in Estonia as it is the only working e-participation platform designed for the purpose of facilitating citizen participation in national-level decision-making. After the recent closure of the central government's public consultation and crowdsourcing platform Osale.ee, there are no Rahvaalgatus-like e-participation platforms allowing citizens to participate in central government's decision-making process, although some citizens and interest groups have made use of the government's public document exchange platform for legislative drafting (Eelnõude infosüsteem) to comment on policy drafts. The Ministry of Justice and Government Office are currently developing a government-wide policy co-creation system, which would also have public participation functions and could potentially incorporate Rahvaalgatus.ee in the future.

Nevertheless, until (if at all) the integration happens, Rahvaalgatus.ee may face serious

development challenges since the platform was created in 2016 as a lightweight prototype and has been selectively updated, focusing on maintaining its core functionality rather than consistently aligning with the very latest technological trends. The reason for this has been an expectation that the platform could potentially be integrated with other government information systems and its management taken over by a government institution. There is still no clarity about the future of the platform.

In Finland, the Ministry of Justice provides several other official e-participation platforms besides Kansalaisaloite.fi, which are all accessible through the website Demokratia.fi. In addition to the municipal-level CI platform Kuntalaisaloite.fi, these include Lausunto-palvelu.fi for requesting and giving statements (draft proposals, decrees, action plans) and the "have your say" website Otakantaa.fi that aims to facilitate interactive discussions between government officials, NGOs and members of the general public. Digiraati is an online discussion platform aimed at individuals under the age of 29. Furthermore, local and county authorities have launched their own apps and platforms for soliciting public input. As mentioned, the government is currently developing a new platform to facilitate the provision of all initiative services maintained by the Ministry of Justice, including the national-level citizens' initiative, municipal initiative and the recently established Well-being Services County initiative. The new platform will be a NextJS-based system and is expected to be launched in 2024.

In neither country does the law require the use of the main official digital platform for the collection of signatures for CIs. Signatures can also be collected on paper and using other digital platforms, as long as the collected digital signatures are legally valid. In the Finnish case, however, the law explicitly requires any online services used for the collection of digital signatures to be approved by the Finnish Transport and Communications Agency Traficom. In Estonia, no similar security or compliance checks are required.

## 4. Process

### 4.1 Initiation and signature collection

#### Finland

In Finland, initiators can prepare the initiative as they wish outside the Kansalaisaloite.fi service. The most successful CIs (see examples below) often have a broader collaboration or a loose network of participants and civil society organisations behind them and a dedicated team for communications and campaigning. Launching an initiative means that the initiative text and other information are saved in the service, other responsible persons are invited to support the initiative and the initiative is sent to the Ministry of Justice for review. According to the Citizens' Initiative Act, two types of initiatives can be launched: 1) a legislative proposal (a bill), which must contain the proposed legal text and the justifications for the proposal; 2) a proposal to start law drafting, which does not have to contain a finished legal text. The latter type is considered suitable for more complex legislative matters. Preparation of high-quality CIs, especially bills, requires legal expertise.

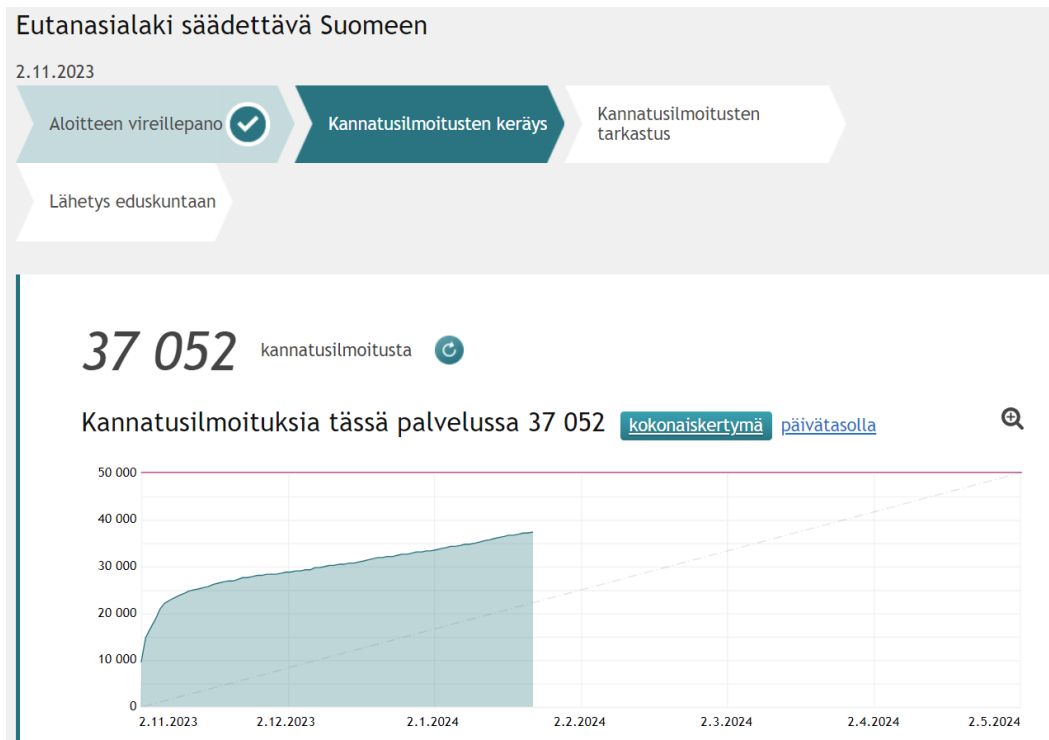
The Ministry of Justice checks that the necessary information for the initiative has been properly filled in, the initiative complies with the terms of use of the Kansalaisaloite.fi service, the published initiative meets the requirements set by the Citizens' Initiative Act and does not contain material unsuitable for online publication or violating the Criminal Code. According to the terms of use of Kansalaisaloite.fi, an initiative can be left unpublished in the service or removed if the initiative, for example, violates the honour of

another person, disseminates information concerning the privacy or confidentiality of another, agitates against a population group or incites a crime. Initiatives containing commercial messages are also not published. The content of CIs is not edited by those that maintain the service, but if necessary the initiative can be returned to the initiators for editing. The Ministry of Justice does not otherwise take a position on the content of the initiative.

The initiative's permanent data (its title, content, justifications, date and responsible persons) cannot be changed after the Ministry of Justice's review. The persons responsible for the initiative will be notified of the completion of the review by email. After the Ministry of Justice has checked the initiative, statements of support (signatures) can be collected in the Kansalaisaloite.fi service. The text of the initiative cannot be changed in any way after the collection of statements of support has started.

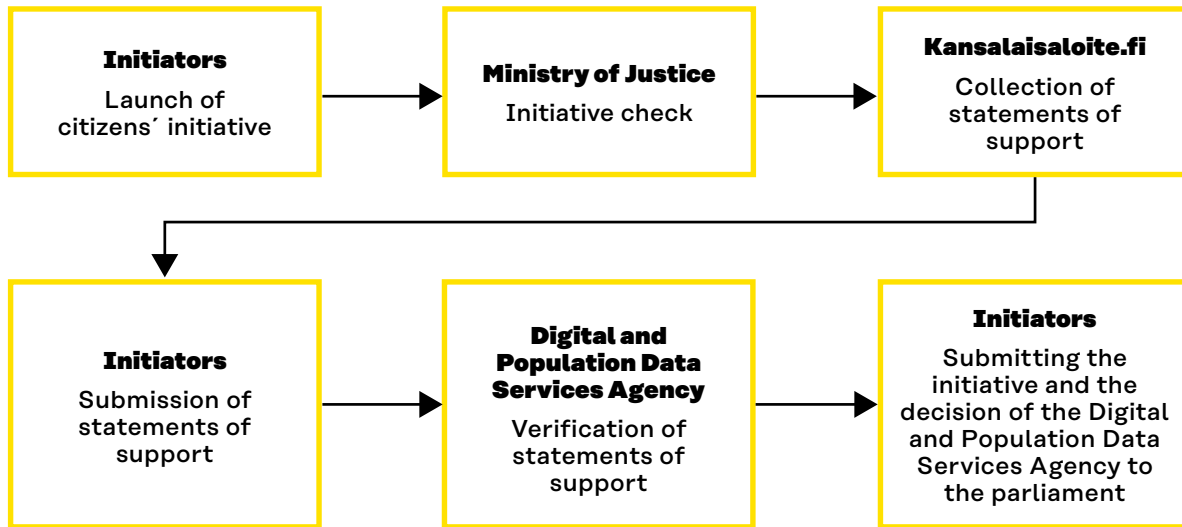
When the initiative has reached a total of at least 50,000 signatures, the initiators can submit the statements of support to the Digital and Population Data Services Agency for review. This must be done within one year of the end of the collection. In the case of Kansalaisaloite.fi, the Ministry of Justice submits the collected signatures, at the request of the responsible person, to the Digital and Population Data Services Agency for review. The Digital and Population Data Services Agency downloads the initiative's statements of support from the Kansalaisaloite.fi service onto its own information system. Submitting signatures to the agency closes the initiative in the Kansalaisaloite.fi service.

**Picture 1. Screenshot from the Finnish Kansalaisaloite.fi platform. CI on euthanasia on 2 November 2023.**



The Digital and Population Data Services Agency checks whether the minimum number of approved statements of support (50,000) stipulated in the constitution has been met by comparing the information provided in them with the data in the population registry. The persons responsible for the initiative and the Ministry of Justice must take care of destroying the statements of support in their possession no later than six months after the decision of the Digital and Population Data Services Agency.

After the check, the representative of the CI can submit the initiative and the decision of the Digital and Population Data Services Agency to the parliament, upon agreement with the Parliamentary Office. The initiative expires if it has not been submitted to the parliament within one year after the decision of the Digital and Population Data Services Agency.

**Figure 3. CI submission process in Finland.**

The names of the signatories of statements of support will not be published at any point in the Kansalaisaloite.fi service. The persons responsible for the CI can only hand over information about the signatories to the Digital and Population Data Services Agency. If the agency confirms that the citizens' initiative has collected at least 50,000 statements of support, the names of the signatories will be made public.

The Legal Registry Centre conducts visitor tracking for the Kansalaisaloite.fi site. Visitor tracking is carried out without cookies or similar methods. Thus, no files are stored on the visitors' terminal devices for visitor tracking. The Legal Registry Centre stores visitor tracking data on the server of the government ICT centre Valtori. The server is located in TietoEvy's data centre in the European Economic Area.

The Citizens' Initiative Act was amended in 2019 to clarify the initiation of a CI and specify the regulation regarding the processing of personal data. The deadlines for submitting the initiative to the Digital and Population Data Services Agency's review and to the parliament were both extended from 6 to 12 months. This was considered to give more leeway for the initiators to prevent the lapsing of the initiative at the end of the parliamentary term.

## Estonia

In Estonia, the CI process begins with the initiator creating a new initiative on the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform. Before signatures are collected for the initiative, the platform offers the initiators the opportunity to involve the general public in co-creating, amending or commenting on the initiative text. The obligatory co-creation phase lasts a minimum of three days, during which the initiators can change the text and translations to other languages any time. The initiators can opt for a longer co-creation period at their will. However, typically, the co-creation period lasts no longer than a few weeks.

Different types of initiatives have been observed to have different practices. Professional advocacy campaigns usually prefer to co-create the initiative within the organisation or with partner organisations and publish a ready-made text for the public to sign. In the case of more spontaneous initiatives reacting to a policy situation, a lively discussion often emerges in the comment section of Rahvaalgatus.ee and the initiators take comments into account when editing the text. There have also been cases where several initiatives have been merged as a result of these discussions. This indicates the user base of Rahvaalgatus.ee has reached a level of maturity

where a more elaborate crowdsourcing mechanism could be useful. It is important to note that once the initiators close the co-creation phase and start collecting signatures for the proposal, the Estonian-language text can no longer be changed (the translations still can).

**Picture 2. Screenshot from the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform. CI on banning the sale of pets in pet stores, 6 November 2023.**

Rahvaalgatus.ee Riigikogu Local EU About Support Us DEMOKRAATIA TÖÖVIHIK

## An animal is not an object. Their place is not on the store shelf.

Anu Tensing, Farištamo Eller, Marika Nekljudova, Sirlu Spelman, Geit Karurahu, Anni-Anete Mõisamaa, Kati Sulp, 6.11.2023

6.11–15.11.2023 1764 signatures

Co-creation Signing In Riigikogu Follow-up

Estonian Russian Translation English Translation

1764 signatures collected

**SIGN INITIATIVE**

Enough signatures collected for sending to Riigikogu.  
Signing deadline: 31.12.2023 23:59.

Loomus MTÜ (Loomus NGO), Eesti Loomakaitse Selts MTÜ (Estonian Animal Protection Society NGO, ELS), Varjupaikade MTÜ (Shelter Association NGO, VMTÜ), and Rõõmsad Hüpped MTÜ (Joyful Jumps NGO) jointly condemn the sale of pets in stores for the following reasons:

Unlike the Ministry of Justice in Finland, the Estonian Cooperation Assembly (ECA) does not systematically review the initiatives posted on the site. However, the ECA has published [terms of use](#) for the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform, which include requirements such as the constitutionality of the proposal or prohibition of hate speech and offensive language. Moreover, the terms of use also encourage initiators to provide thorough arguments and explanations to justify their proposal, focus on solutions rather than problems and refrain from using the CI if they already have direct means for initiating legislative proposals – for example, as members of parliament. While the ECA does not check the form and content of each initiative, it has the right to remove initiatives and comments that violate the terms of use.

The phase of collecting signatures for the initiative lasts no more than 18 months. Once the required number of signatures is obtained, the initiators can decide to submit the initiative, along with the signatures, to the Chancellery of the Parliament through the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform. The data is sent from Rahvaalgatus.ee directly to the parliament's information system without the need to download or upload documents. If Rahvaalgatus.ee has been used for collecting signatures, the signatures cannot be downloaded or passed to the parliament by other means. From the point at which the initiative accumulates a minimum of 1,000 signatures, the initiators are free to decide when they wish to stop the signature collection and send the CI to the parliament, as long as this happens within the 18-month time frame. It is

important to note that the identities of the signatories are not public. The signatures are only shared with the public body to whom the initiative is addressed. All personal data is deleted from the Rahvaalgatus system after a CI has been submitted to the parliament or local authorities. The signatures for initiatives that do not reach the 1,000-signature threshold are archived 18 months after the publication of the initiative on the platform.

## 4.2 Proceedings in parliament

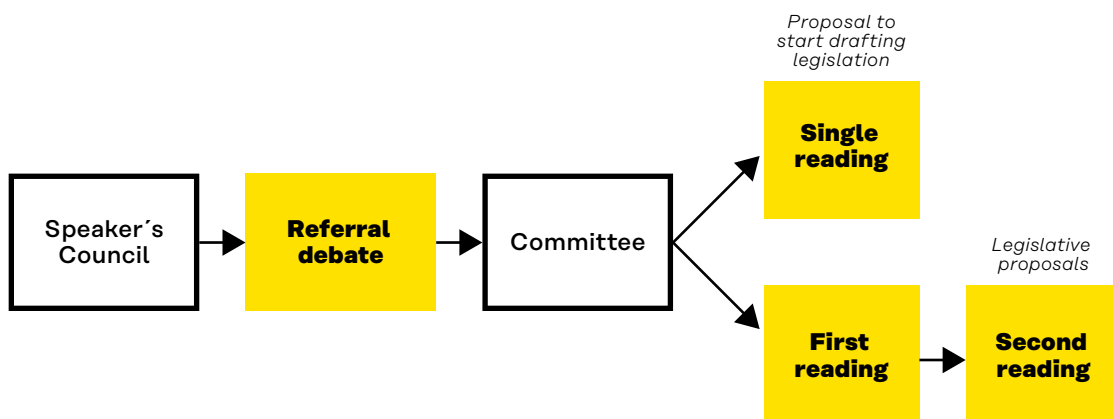
### Finland

The Finnish Parliament has an obligation to consider a citizens' initiative, but the processing schedule, approval and any possible amendments to the initiative are left to the discretion of the parliament. The constitution and the Citizens' Initiative Act do not contain provisions on how a citizens' initiative is processed in parliament. The introduction of CIs has resulted in only minor technical changes in parliamentary procedure, and their processing has mostly followed those of other legislative matters (Hidén 2019, 172).

The procedures and practices concerning CIs are regulated in the parliament's Rules of Procedure and contained in the committee guidelines (Valiokuntaopas 2023) and in the recommendations by the Speaker's Council. Parliamentary process on a CI can end with three main decision options: approved, approved as amended (legislative proposals) or rejected. In addition, a citizens' initiative containing a bill aimed at amending the constitution, in accordance with the procedure for constitutional enactment, can either be put on hold or be approved as urgent. The first such CI entered parliament when the initiative to include animal rights in the constitution was handed over to the parliament in December 2023. Furthermore, the parliament can approve a resolution or resolutions included in the CI. In contrast to Estonia, the processing of a CI lapses at the end of a parliamentary term if no decision has been made on it.

The Speaker's Council takes a position on whether a citizens' initiative falls within the competence of the parliament. If it does not, the parliament will not start processing it. The processing of the CI begins with a public referral debate in the plenary hall. Following a proposal from the Speaker's Council, the plenary session decides on which committee the matter will be sent to.

**Figure 4. Parliamentary proceedings of CIs in Finland.**



When the CI has been announced as having arrived with the committee, the committee can decide whether to accept the initiative for consideration. This requires that an MP proposes to take the initiative into consideration and another MP seconds it. This can be done at any point after a CI reaches the committee. According to a recommendation by the Speaker's Council, the committee should inform the representatives of the CI of what actions it intends to take within six months of the receipt of the initiative. However, the committee makes an independent decision on whether, how and to what schedule it will deal with the citizens' initiative. It has become a practice that the committee prepares a report on the CI.

Legislative proposals (bills) included in CIs are discussed in the committee similarly to other legislative proposals. In the preparation of legislative proposals, good legislative practice must be followed, which requires careful preparation, adequate expert hearings and investigations. The committee can propose amendments to the initiative. According to § 37 of the Rules of Procedure of Parliament during the committee hearing, an opportunity to be heard must be provided to the persons responsible for the citizens' initiative. The committee can also hear from representatives of the relevant ministries and other experts and request a statement from another committee. The experts heard are selected based on the expertise of the committee staff and the activity of the MPs.

Committees have typically also heard from representatives of various organisations, NGOs and researchers. In addition to standard closed committee sittings, committees have organised public hearings for MPs, the media and the general public, where the initiators have also been heard. Researchers (e.g. Seo 2017, 187) have expressed a wish that in order to ensure parliamentary dialogue and openness, the number of public committee hearings should be increased from the current level, also for matters other than citizens' initiatives.

If the committee prepares a report on a CI, the matter will continue to the plenary session. The parliament makes its final decision based on the committee report, which thus has a significant impact on the final outcome of the entire parliamentary process. In most cases, the plenary session reaches a similar outcome to that of the committee. A CI containing a bill is processed in two plenary readings, while an initiative that proposes to start law drafting is processed in a single reading. Decisions made in the plenary session are recorded in a parliamentary response or letter, which is also sent to the person responsible for the initiative.

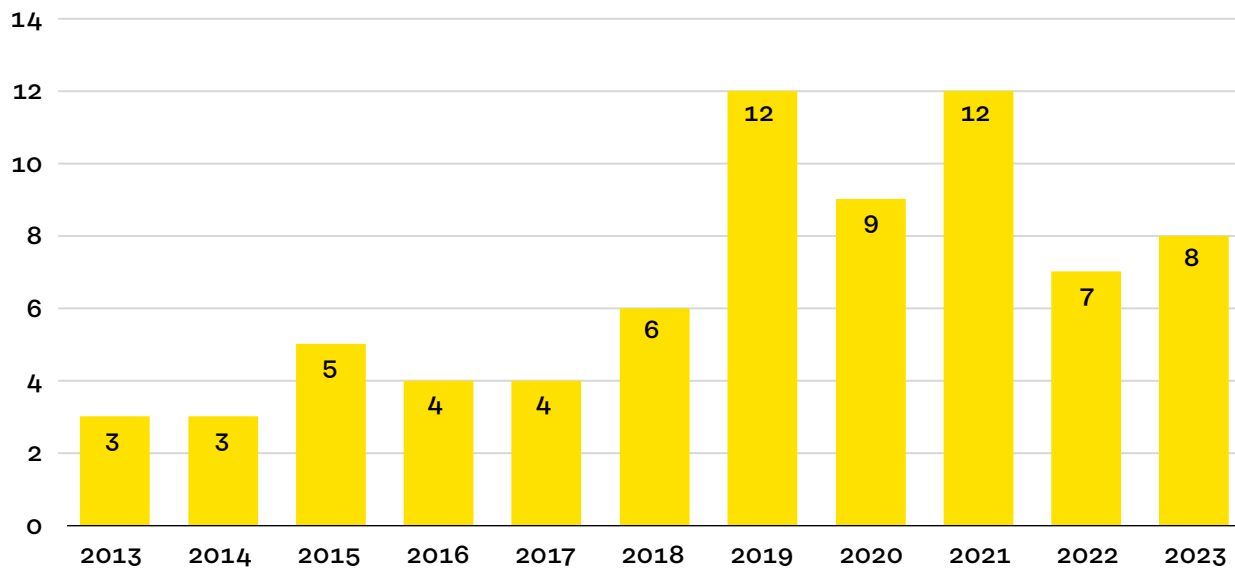
The committee can also conclude that the CI does not receive the committee's support and is rejected for further consideration. This does not mean that the matter has expired or a *de facto* decision to reject the CI has been made, but the matter remains pending for possible later measures such as a government proposal. The initiative can later be considered again in the committee or it can remain pending without further consideration. If the initiative is rejected in parliament or its processing lapses due to the end of a parliamentary term, a new initiative on the same issue can be made.

Of 1,511 citizens' initiatives launched since 2012, only 73 had reached the required number of signatures and been submitted to parliament (4.8%) by the end of 2023. In fact, a large number of CIs gather little support compared to the threshold of 50,000: half of the initiatives have gained at most a thousand statements of support (Martikainen 2022), with about half of the initiatives containing legislative proposals. By the end of 2023, seven out of the 73 CIs submitted to parliament had either been approved or approved as amended. The passing of citizen initiatives is more likely if they deal with issues that are not significant for the government's agenda or when they clearly divide the opinions of the governing parties (Jäske and Setälä 2019, 101). Interestingly, party whips have been less strict or even absent for CIs, thus giving more freedom and leeway to individual MPs.

The graph below shows the number of initiatives submitted to the parliament from the beginning of the citizen initiative by the end of the year 2023. The number of popular CIs has

been on the rise. In comparison, the total number of government proposals, which the parliament mainly deliberates on, is on average around 200 per year.

**Figure 5. Number of citizens' initiatives submitted to the Finnish Parliament (2013–2023) according to the date of submission to the parliament.**



The consideration of a CI can be combined in the committee with a government proposal or an MP's motion dealing with the same topic, in which case the committee can make a joint report. Out of a total of 65 CIs (by April 2023) that had been completed, 19 were discussed together with at least one other issue.

The processing of CIs takes place in the committee in order of priority after government proposals and often after MPs' motions. Especially towards the end of a parliamentary term, the focus of parliamentary work is on government proposals. In the justifications for both the constitutional amendment and the Citizens' Initiative Act, it was suggested that a CI could be given equal weight in the parliamentary handling order with a law proposal signed by at least a hundred MPs, giving them a *de facto* precedence in committee handling over other MP motions. In practice, however, the significance of this comparison for the processing schedule of CIs may remain modest:

all government proposals have been set ahead of CIs in the committee guidelines, and these guidelines state that the committee can, if necessary, process matters in a different order (Hidén 2019, 174).

When dealing with CIs, the parliament often approves resolutions, even if the final decision is a rejected citizens' initiative. Out of the 73 CIs submitted to the parliament by the end of 2023, 23 resulted in a resolution (31,5%). The resolutions may contain a call to the government to take measures, in which case the resolution can promote the content of the citizens' initiative in other ways. An example of such a resolution is the euthanasia CI ([KAA 2/2017 vp](#)), based on which the parliament required the government to investigate the matter by appointing a group of experts.

Although other indicators for the committees' workload exist, expert hearings and consultations form an integral part of the committee work. Based on the number of



expert consultations, CIs do not occupy the committees much compared to government proposals. Less than 2% of all committee hearings and written statements are on CIs, and the percentage was nearly the same in the previous two parliamentary terms.

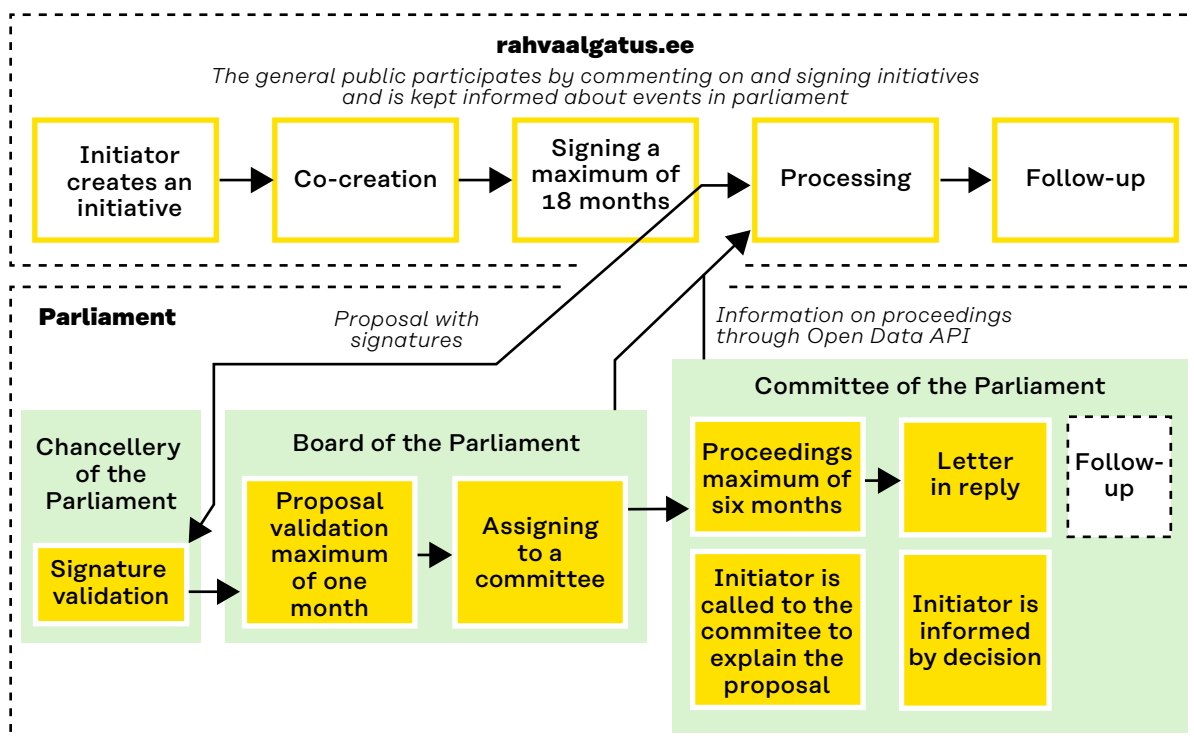
**Estonia**

In Estonia, Chapter 182 of the Riigikogu Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act stipulates the formal procedures for parliamentary proceedings on CIs in a rather detailed manner. Whereas in Finland the verification of the required number of signatures is given to an extra-parliamentary government agency, in Estonia it is the task of the parliament. Once a CI is sent to the parliament, authorised employees of the Chancellery of the Parliament check whether at least 1,000 signatures in support have been appended to the initiative. They also check the signatures against data from the population registry to validate if the digital signatures have been given by

permanent residents of Estonia who are at least 16 years old. It is also possible to submit some of the signatures digitally and some on paper, in which case the validation process also needs to make sure the same person has not signed the initiative more than once.

As the next step, the Board of the Parliament validates whether the content of the initiative complies with legal requirements. This involves inspecting whether the initiative contains proposals for amending regulations or improving community life, as well as an explanatory note explaining why the current situation needs changing and how the proposed solution would improve the situation. The Board of the Parliament ensures the validation process is completed within one month. In case the proposal is not returned to the initiators for eliminating deficiencies in the content or rejected outright as a result of having fewer than 1,000 supporting signatures, the board assigns the proposal to a relevant parliamentary committee for further examination.

**Figure 6. The citizens' initiative process in Estonia.**



The responsible committee, over the course of three months, discusses the proposal and invites the initiator to provide clarifications or insights. It is important to note that the responsible committee has the legal obligation to proceed and formulate a position on the initiative assigned to the committee. Following this deliberation, the committee forms a decision. The Riigikogu Rules of Procedure and Internal Rules Act foresees six possible decisions that the responsible committee can take:

- 1.** initiate a bill, a draft resolution or a plenary deliberation of the issue as a matter of significant national importance (a specific category of deliberation in the law);
- 2.** hold a public sitting;
- 3.** transmit the proposal to a competent institution for resolving the proposal;
- 4.** transmit the proposal to the national government for developing a position and replying to the proposal (the government needs to notify the parliamentary committee of their position);
- 5.** reject the proposal;
- 6.** resolve the problem raised in the proposal by other means.

In practice, resolution by “other means” may be selected as a decision option if the parliamentary committee is reluctant to reject the initiative because of political considerations or if the Board of the Parliament wishes to express acceptance of an initiative that is challenging to address by ordinary legislative means. This category also encompasses initiatives pertaining to issues that do not necessarily demand legislative changes but are deemed to warrant parliamentary oversight. Sometimes, this decision option is also used to initiate long-term processes towards legislative change, which require a public debate that is likely to exceed six months.

According to data from Rahvaalgatus.ee, resolution by other means has been the decision for about 30% of the CIs processed in the parliament. Slightly fewer initiatives have been

rejected and about 10% have been addressed to another competent institution for forming a position and resolving the matter.

In many cases, the responsible committees have made more than one decision during the process. One example is the CI “Climate Neutral Estonia by 2035”, which was admitted for proceedings on 8 October 2019. Thereafter, six meetings of the parliament’s Environment Committee were organised, some of them public. The Environment Committee also requested opinions from the Social Affairs, Rural Affairs and Finance Committees, who in turn discussed it in their meetings. In January 2020, the Environment Committee proposed that the Board of the Parliament deliberate on the initiative as an issue of significant national importance in the parliament’s plenary hall.

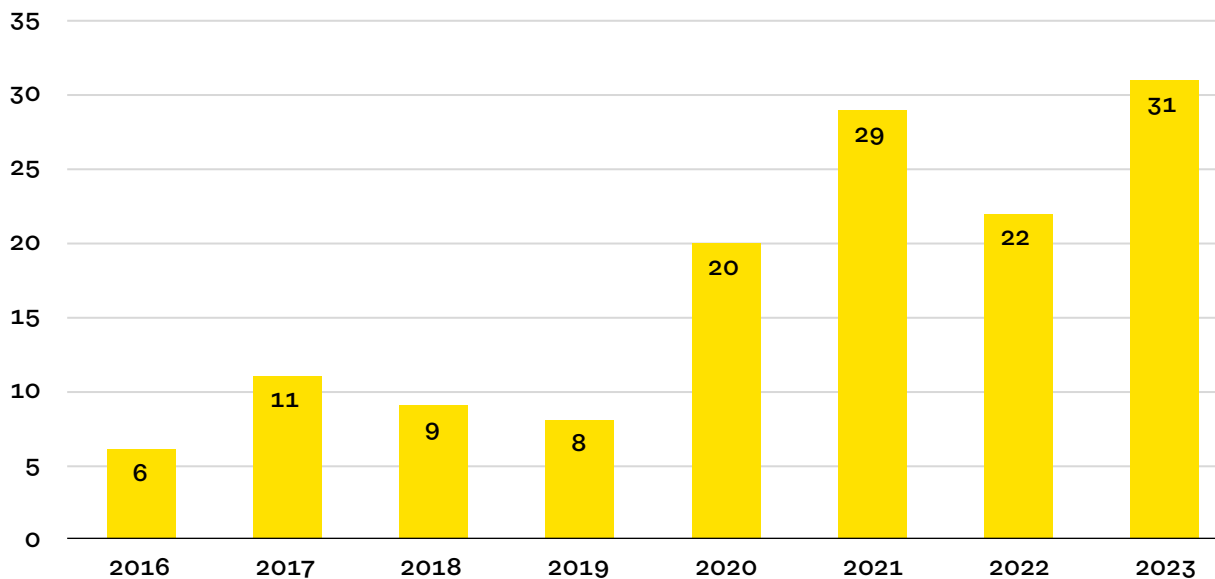
However, due to the declaration of emergency situation in Estonia in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, the deliberation was cancelled and the committee formally made a decision to resolve the CI by “other means”. The proceedings concluded on 23 March 2020, with a new decision to hold the deliberation of an issue of significant national importance, which eventually took place on 15 April 2021. At the same time, the parliament’s response to the initiative explicitly admitted that a number of national strategic documents are not in line with climate goals and the problems raised in the CI require long-term strategic solutions that go beyond a specific legislative change.

Once the responsible committee has made a final decision, it must inform the initiators about the decision. The response letters are public information. Differently from Finland, a CI cannot lapse or remain pending in the responsible committee for an indefinite period of time in Estonia. Instead, Estonian law obliges the parliament to discuss and respond to the initiative, unless there are legal grounds for rejecting the proposal without debate (if the initiative has not collected the requisite number of supporting signatures, clearly violates the constitution or international obligations, or if a similar initiative has been submitted to the parliament in the previous two years).

In Estonia, 343 initiatives had been submitted to Rahvaalgatus.ee for collecting signatures by the end of 2023. Out of these, 136 were sent to the parliament after collecting the required number of signatures. In addition to the 136 CIs submitted through Rahvaalgatus.ee,

the parliament had received 24 initiatives by the end of 2023 that had collected signatures using other means (such as signatures on paper). The graph below indicates the number of CIs submitted to the parliament annually.

**Figure 7. Number of citizens' initiatives submitted to the Estonian Parliament (2016–2023).**



The public can monitor the different steps of the parliamentary process in real time. Over the course of time, the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform has gradually developed to provide thorough follow-up information on the CIs submitted to the parliament (and local governments). The initiators and the general public can follow the status of the parliamentary proceedings on the parliament's website as well as Rahvaalgatus.ee. Since the parliament started providing proceedings data in machine-readable formats via a public API, Rahvaalgatus.ee has been able to provide automatic updates on the proceedings on its website, so that all data concerning a given initiative can be found from one place. The public can subscribe to automatic update notifications for the CIs that

interest them or create automatically updating dashboards of selected initiatives, should they wish to do so.

### Comparison

The main rules for parliamentary proceedings for citizens' initiatives in Estonia and Finland are summarised in Table 2. As the table indicates, the requirements are rather different, the main similarity being the parliament's right to reject citizens' proposals that are unconstitutional or against fundamental rights. The regulations in both countries also grant initiators the right to be heard in parliament to explain their proposals.

**Table 2. Main requirements for CI proceedings in parliament.**

|  | Finland  | Estonia   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Time frame for decision to open proceedings on CI</b>                 | Recommendation for the committees to inform the initiators within six months   | Within 30 days  |
| <b>Time frame for taking a decision on a CI</b>                          | No time limit  | Within six months   |
| <b>Legal grounds for refusal to take into parliamentary deliberation</b> | Matters outside parliament's legislative powers (e.g. international obligations)<br><br>Initiatives are unconstitutional or go against basic and human rights  | 1,000 signature threshold not met<br><br>Proposal is unconstitutional or incompatible with international obligations<br><br>Same/similar proposal submitted in last two years   |
| <b>Possible decisions</b>  | Approve<br><br>Approve as amended (legislative proposals)<br><br>Reject<br><br>Reject, but approve a resolution/resolutions<br><br>No final decision: lapses at the end of parliamentary term<br><br>Leave in abeyance until after the next parliamentary elections (CIs including a bill aiming to amend the constitution not declared as urgent) | Initiate a bill, draft resolution or plenary deliberation of a "matter of significant national importance"<br><br>Hold a public sitting<br><br>Transmit to other competent institution<br><br>Transmit to government<br><br>Resolve by "other" (e.g. non-legislative) means<br><br>Reject |
| <b>Initiators' right of hearing</b>                                      | Yes  | Yes   |
| <b>Requirement of reasoned response</b>                                  | Not required in the law  | Yes, in the case of rejection or refusal to proceed   |

One of the main differences between CIs in Estonia and Finland is the time frame for the parliamentary proceedings. In Estonia, the parliament must process the CI relatively quickly – in one month – and take a final decision on the initiative in six months. In Finland, there is only a recommendation to inform the CI's representatives within six months of how the committee plans to proceed, and no time limit on taking a decision on the CI. As described above, this can also mean leaving the issue pending. Estonian law also prescribes the course of the proceedings and the possible decisions on the initiatives in a more detailed and clear manner. In both countries, initiators have the right to be heard in the parliament to argue for their proposal and answer any questions. Only in Estonia the law obliges the parliament to substantiate their decisions in their response to the initiators

(although this requirement is only explicitly outlined in the law in relation to a decision to reject or a refusal to proceed the CI because of technical shortcomings).

In Finland, the actual processing times for citizens' initiatives are often long compared to, for example, Estonia and the European Union. As of the end of October 2023, the Estonian Parliament had processed 155 initiatives. The average time for processing the CIs has been about 130 days (between four and five months), of which 112 days were given over to discussions in the responsible parliamentary committee. In Finland, the parliament has processed 65 initiatives by the end of October 2023, with an average processing time of 15 months (451 days). Only about 10% of citizens' initiatives are processed in parliament within six months of their arrival. (Eduskunta 2024; QPR 2024).

## 5. Outcomes and impacts

In both Estonia and Finland, the CI has become a well-established public participation mechanism, which citizens use regularly to drive issues onto the parliament's agenda. According to a survey from 2023, more than 60% of Finnish citizens report having signed CIs, while 31% have signed at least three. The share of those who have signed at least one CI increased from 35% to 61% between 2015 and 2023. (Jäske 2023) The citizens' initiative has become the most popular institutionalised way to influence political decision-making outside of elections. In Estonia, the number of signatures given yearly on [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee) is beginning to approximate the number of electronic votes cast in national elections. In the 2023 parliamentary elections, 312,181 votes were cast electronically. In the same year, citizens provided 289,496 digital signatures on [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee) to support CIs addressed to the parliament (in addition to 25,076 signatures supporting local citizens' initiatives).

Table 3 indicates a steady increase of signatures given to CIs on the [Kansalaisaloite.fi](http://Kansalaisaloite.fi) and [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee) platforms over the years. It needs to be noted that since the users of [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee) are able to withdraw their signature at any time before a CI is submitted to the parliament, there may be slight changes in the total number of signatures for 2022 and 2023 due to pending initiatives on the platform. According to the managers of [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee), the share of changes in signatures typically remains below 0.1%.

**Table 3. The usage dynamics (annual number of signatures) for Estonia and Finland.**

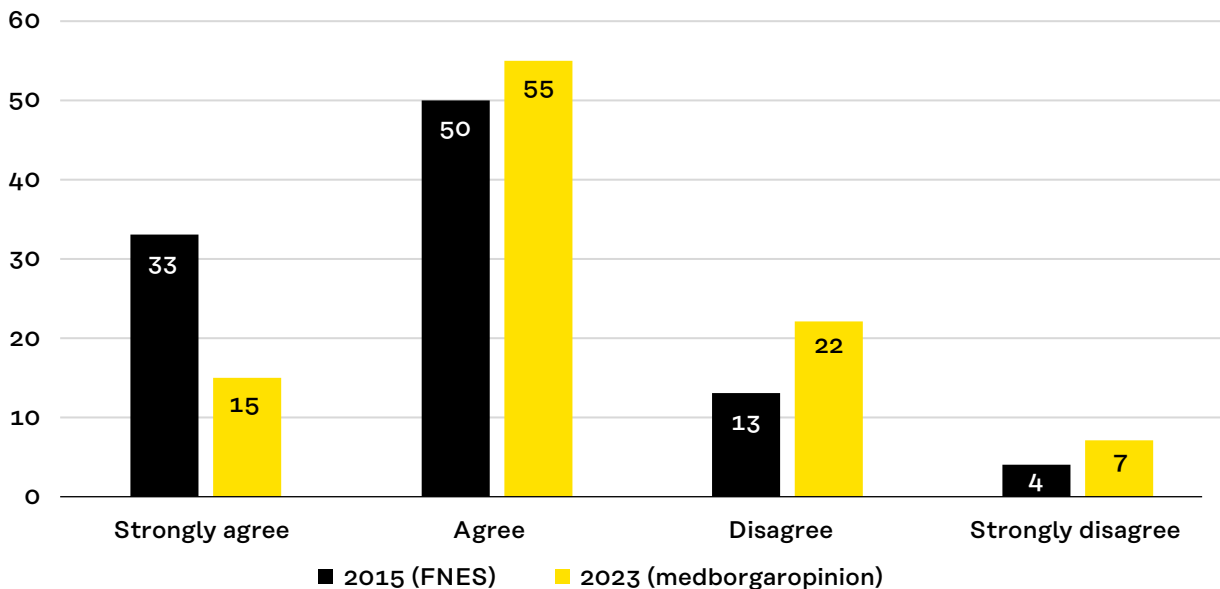
| Year | Signatures<br><a href="http://Kansalaisaloite.fi">Kansalaisaloite.fi</a> | Signatures<br><a href="http://Rahvaalgatus.ee">Rahvaalgatus.ee</a> |
|------|--|--|
| 2013 | 344,352  | -  |
| 2014 | 253,551  | -  |
| 2015 | 370,037  | -  |
| 2016 | 411,829  | 11,573   |
| 2017 | 314,882  | 20,816   |
| 2018 | 1,079,693  | 12,141   |
| 2019 | 962,434  | 19,844   |
| 2020 | 1,062,942  | 102,869  |
| 2021 | 1,488,935  | 100,228  |
| 2022 | 1,073,088  | 99,724   |
| 2023 | 694,995  | 289,496  |

In Finland, the most common issues for CIs that have been initiated concern criminal punishment, the actions of the parliament and government, and animals. Also, the benefits of MPs, traffic rules, elections and intoxicants are topics that have motivated a significant number of initiatives. There is also overlap in the initiatives: for example, there have been several overlapping citizens' initiatives on wolf hunting, the legalisation of cannabis, abandoning daylight saving time, banning telemarketing and the establishment of a constitutional court. (Martikainen 2022) In Estonia, social affairs and the environment are the most common topics.

In both Finland and Estonia, almost all parliamentary committees have been responsible for processing at least one citizens' initiative, meaning that in more than 10 years, the instrument has been used to force a variety of topics onto the parliamentary agenda. In both countries, the greatest number of initiatives (12 in Finland and 26 in Estonia) have been assigned to parliamentary social affairs committees. Committees dealing with economic and financial issues have also discussed a number of initiatives in both countries. However, there are a few notable differences – for example, in Estonia, the cultural committee is among the more frequent addressees of citizens' initiatives, which is not the case in Finland. At the same time, in Finland, more initiatives have concerned foreign affairs than in Estonia.

According to survey data, the CI enjoys widespread support in Finland. Approximately 19% of citizens claim they have supported campaigns by collecting signatures, donating money or sharing campaigns on social media. About 70% of people feel that it has improved democracy. (Jäske 2023) The number has been higher among those who have signed CIs (Laitinen and Setälä 2016, 4). However, the initial excitement about CIs has partly evaporated, as the share of those with a critical attitude has increased from 17% in 2015 to 29% in 2023. At the same time, people in Finland are not very well informed about the details of CIs. For example, only 28% knew that the initiatives expire at the end of the parliamentary term. (Jäske 2023)

**Figure 8. Satisfaction with citizens' initiatives in Finland (%). Agreement with the statement: "The citizens' initiative has improved the functioning of Finnish democracy".**



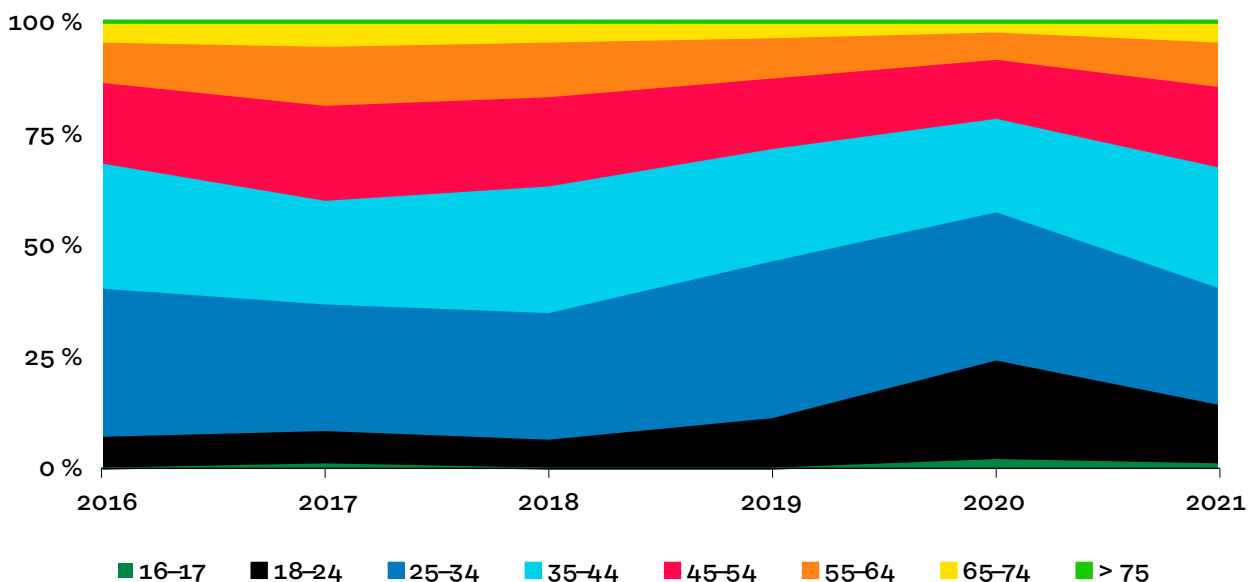
Based on the survey data, CIs have served as a channel to mobilise younger generations in particular (Christensen et al. 2017; Jäske 2023). Finnish citizens in the age group 25 to 34 have been the most active, with as many as 87% having signed at least one initiative. On the other hand, in the oldest age group (aged 65 or more), less than half have signed CIs and 10% state that they would not sign one. The highly educated are slightly more active CI users, but the differences between educational groups are small, while previous research points to a curvilinear relationship, meaning that those who are lower educated and dissatisfied and those that are highly educated and active tend to use CIs as a means of influence. Signing is slightly more common in cities than in rural areas. (Jäske 2023) The CIs reach groups

otherwise marginalised in political participation, such as the unemployed and the sick (Laitinen and Setälä 2016; Mattila et al. 2016, 426-9). Signing a citizens' initiative online does not take much time. This way, it is possible to overcome one of the key barriers to participation for Finns, namely the lack of time in the current life situation (Hantula et al. 2024, 22). The existence of an online system also affects the initiation phase, making it a low-threshold activity.

In Estonia, no comparable population surveys have been conducted to allow research into CIs as a whole. However, data from the [Rahvaalgatus.ee](https://rahvaalgatus.ee) platform indicates that, as in Finland, people in the 25 to 34 age group are the most active signers of CIs, whereas only a fraction of the users are aged 65 or more.

### Figure 9. Signatures given to CIs on the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform by age group.

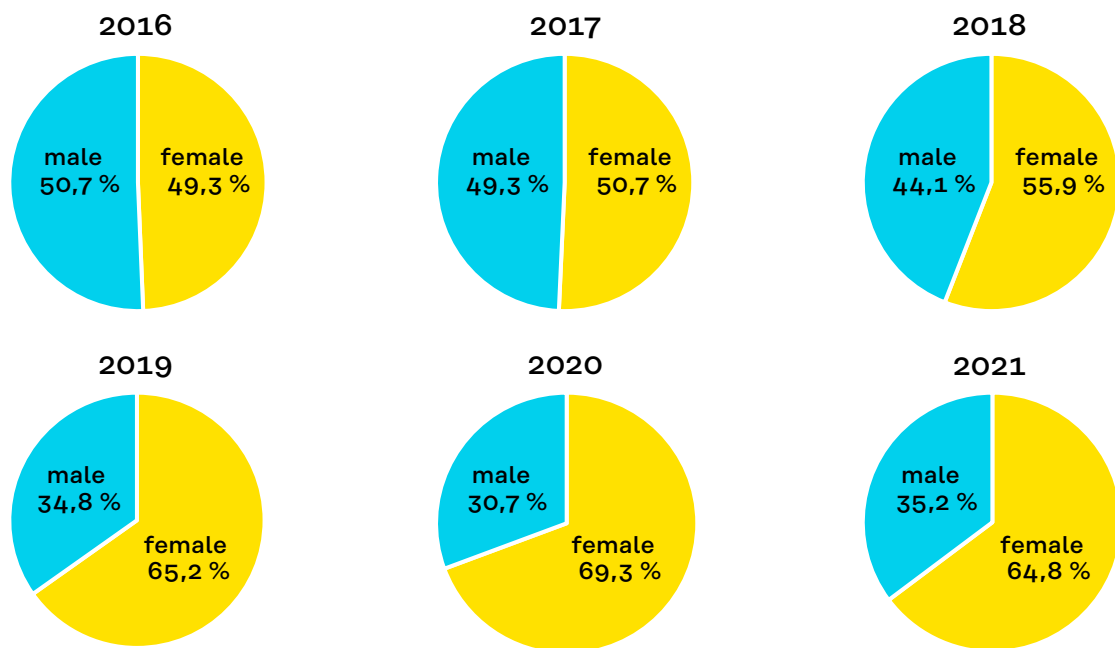
Note: the age and gender data for Rahvaalgatus.ee do not represent unique individuals but the number of signatures provided on Rahvaalgatus.ee (one person can sign multiple initiatives).



At the same time, an interesting trend can be noted in the gender dynamics. Until 2019, the Rahvaalgatus.ee user base was relatively balanced in terms of gender. However, since 2019, women have been significantly more active users than men, with 65.2% of signatures provided by women compared to 34.8% by

men. The ratio of men and women has remained the same in the subsequent years. This is different from Finland, where no gender differences have been observed in the use of CIs. The reasons for the spike in women's interest in CIs in Estonia warrant further research.

**Figure 10. Gender of Rahvaalgatus.ee users 2016-2021.**



According to a survey study, the initiators of CIs have varying attitudes towards the parliamentary handling of their initiatives in Finland (Anomaa 2023). Generally speaking, those whose initiatives have been approved by the parliament, and that have had an impact on legislation, are more satisfied. Parliament's communication about the processing of a CI, appropriate and careful committee examination, quality of discussion in plenary and in committee, and the length of the processing times are critical in determining initiators' satisfaction. The initiators were especially dissatisfied with long processing times, the lapse of the initiative at the end of an electoral term and, to some extent, the dismissive attitude of MPs.

Yet, the success of CIs in parliament does not tell the whole story of the impact or how the goals of the initiators have been reached. The Finnish initiators of CIs see it essentially as an agenda-setting instrument, but not all have aimed at legislative change. According to the survey conducted among the initiators of CIs submitted to the Finnish Parliament (Anomaa 2023), the majority of CIs aimed at changing legislation (92%), while almost half aimed for parliamentary consideration of the subject of the initiative (47%). Many also sought to influence public discussion on the subject of the initiative (63%) and increase knowledge on the subject of the initiative (45%). This indicates that one should go beyond tracking changes in legislation to understand the significance, impacts and success of citizens' initiatives.



## 5.1 Impacts of citizens' initiatives

The following section examines the results of selected CIs in Finland and Estonia, which help illustrate the variety of political and social outcomes they have generated so far. While their impact warrants further and systematic research, these selected cases suggest that the influence of citizens' initiatives may extend to the following key areas:

- legislative or policy change;
- setting the parliament's agenda (even if this does not lead to immediate legislative change);
- shaping public discussion.

In addition to the impacts of specific initiatives, the very existence of the CI as a participation instrument is likely to exert its own longer-term impacts on society and policymaking (in particular in conjunction with the digital platforms designed to facilitate the preparation or submission of the initiatives). Based on the Finnish and Estonian experience, such impacts could concern:

- a lowered threshold for public participation for diverse societal groups;
- strengthened public trust in democracy and the political system;
- increased transparency of the parliamentary process.

### Legislative change

In practice in both Estonia and Finland, direct legislative change (which is one of the key objectives of citizens' initiatives) does not seem to occur very often as a result of CIs. Nevertheless, some examples exist.

In Estonia, most of the CIs that have led to legislative change relate to the environment and the well-being of animals, including the fur farming ban, hunting of birds and a cluster initiative with 33 proposals, many of which were adopted by the parliament. As a recent interesting case, the initiative "Please Help Students Stay in Estonia!" requested an

exception from sanctions against Russia to Russian citizens studying at Estonian universities, so that their residence permits could be renewed. The Foreign Affairs Committee supported making a narrowly defined exception for those meeting these conditions and deemed it necessary to immediately resolve the situation, forwarding their viewpoint to the government. The government approved the exception.

In Finland, seven CIs had been approved or approved as amended by the parliament by the end of 2023. One of the four approved requested a start to the drafting of a law on banning female genital mutilation, one on preventing the privatisation of water supply, one on enabling the wildlife management hunting of wolves and one on making psychotherapy education free of charge. One of the three approved as amended proposed laws to allow same-sex couples to marry, one proposed a new Maternity Act and one amended the Abortion Act. Parliament's approval of a CI that proposes the drafting of a law is of course no guarantee for any legislative change. For example, the CI on banning female genital mutilation was approved in 2020 but no law proposals based on it have yet been brought to parliament.

The CI "Water is ours – a citizens' initiative to prevent the privatisation of water supply", launched on 31 January 2020, collected 89,345 statements of support, 166 of which were collected outside Kansalaisaloite.fi. The CI proposed initiating preparations to create legislation that prevents the sale of publicly owned water supply utilities to commercial private operators and retaining the current ownership in the hands of the public sector. The CI was submitted to the parliament on 23 March 2020 and approved on 8 September 2021. The parliament requested the government to immediately prepare legislation that ensures publicly owned water supply utilities within the scope of municipal responsibilities remain in municipal ownership and control. In addition, the parliament approved a resolution proposal included in the Agriculture and Forestry

Committee's report. It required the government to extensively investigate different regulatory options and pay special attention to municipal autonomy and fundamental rights when preparing the regulation on water services. The resolution also required the government to report progress on the reform to the

Agriculture and Forestry Committee by the end of 2022.

At the same time, the CI proposing to change the Maternity Act led to legislative changes that had been in fact drafted by the government but had not been submitted to parliament (see the text box below).

### **CASE: CI on the Maternity Act: how a CI helped government draft proposals make it to parliament**

The initiative received 55,707 statements of support, of which 4,593 were collected outside Kansalaisaloite.fi. The CI was announced in parliament on 13 September 2016. The initiative included a proposal for a maternity act and for certain laws related to it. The maternity law proposal had provisions on the determination of maternity. According to the bill, the mother of the child was the one who had given birth to the child. The law also had provisions on confirming the maternity of the female partner of the childbearing mother when the child was obtained jointly through fertility treatments. In addition, the initiative proposed amending the law on fertility treatments so that female couples could receive fertility treatment together.

What made this citizens' initiative particular was that the initiative brought to the parliament legislative proposals that had been prepared by the government's usual legislative drafting process but had not made it as government proposals and thus had not been submitted to parliament. The initiative proposed that the Maternity Act and certain laws related to it be enacted in accordance with the draft proposal prepared by the Ministry of Justice. The initiative stated that both the proposals and their justifications corresponded word for word with the draft proposal of the Ministry of Justice dated 2 February 2015. In its report, the Law Committee proposed the adoption of the legislative proposals made in the initiative, partly with modifications, and also changes to the Nationality Act. The parliament approved the proposals in accordance with the report on 28 February 2018.

Even if no immediate, direct legislative change takes place, a number of CIs eventually still lead to modifications in existing law by shaping public and political debates and demonstrating the need for changes. In Estonia, a 2017 CI to legalise the production and use of cannabis for medical purposes was formally rejected by the parliament – instead, the parliament requested

the Ministry of Social Affairs to analyse the possibilities and implications of simplifying access to medical cannabis. As a result, the government adopted a regulation in 2018 whereby cannabis-based medicinal products became treated as any other type of medicine regarding prescription and sales rights.

A Finnish CI from 2013 that called for amending laws to allow same-sex couples to marry presents an interesting case of an

initiative that was approved as amended a couple of years after it was submitted to parliament.

### **CASE: CI on Marriage Act: a winding road to legislative change**

The citizens' initiative on the amendment of the Marriage Act, the Act on Registered Partnerships and the Act on Affirming the Gender of a Transsexual (KAA 3/2013 vp) contained legislative proposals to amend these laws to allow same-sex couples to marry. It received 166,851 confirmed statements of support, of which 10,617 were collected outside Kansalaisaloite.fi. The CI was approved as amended. The initiative was received on 13 December 2013 and sent to the Law Committee. After an extensive hearing round, the committee gave a detailed report on the matter that proposed rejecting the legislative proposals included in the initiative. The main reasons were related to the objectives of the initiative, but there were also references to the fact that, according to clarifications received from the ministries, the legislative proposals would require legal-technical preparation, in addition to which it would still need to be clarified what changes the proposals might require to other legislation.

The report was preceded by a tight vote. In a broadly justified protest by eight members, it was proposed to approve the amendment to the Marriage Act with changes so that the amendment would come into effect on 1 March 2017, reject two other legislative proposals and approve one resolution. According to the resolution, the parliament would expect the government to promptly start preparing a proposal for the changes required by the gender-neutral Marriage Act to other necessary laws and to submit the proposal to parliament by 31 December 2015.

In the first reading of the report, the parliament approved the first legislative proposal of the initiative in accordance with the protest and agreed to the committee's proposal to reject the second and third legislative proposals. Since the parliament did not approve the committee's proposal as it was, the matter was sent to the Grand Committee. The Grand Committee stated in its report (SuVM 2/2014 vp), referring to a clarification received from the Ministry of Justice, that the proposed amendment to the Marriage Act requires that consequential amendments to several different laws be prepared and approved before the amendment comes into effect. After the Grand Committee agreed to the parliament's decision in the matter, the parliament in the second reading on 12 December 2014 approved the first legislative proposal decided in the first reading in terms of content and agreed to the Grand Committee's proposal to reject the second and third legislative proposals. In addition, the parliament approved the resolution proposal included in the protest against the report. The amendment to the Marriage Act was confirmed on 20 February 2015.

## Indirect policy impacts

More frequently than achieving immediate legislative change, CIs have shaped the government or parliament's agenda and political discourse on particular topics. In Finland, the parliament narrowly approved a resolution on regional language experimentation while processing an otherwise rejected CI on making Swedish language an optional subject at all levels of education (KAA 2/2014). The language experiment was included in the following government programme. In another example, a CI that proposed that the use of fireworks be restricted to professionals only was rejected in parliament in 2022, but the parliament required in its resolution that the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment thoroughly investigate various alternatives to improve fireworks safety and reduce fireworks-related harm, and as a result of the investigations, takes necessary actions and provides the Finance Committee with a report on the results of the review.

The 2020 Estonian CI on climate-neutrality is likely to have contributed to an increased political priority of climate issues, which was demonstrated in the prominence of the issue in political parties' programmes for the 2023 parliamentary elections. Over the years, the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform has also seen a number of initiatives related to marriage law, often with diametrically opposed goals, most of which have been passed to the parliament. One of them was launched by the Green Party in 2020 (not represented in parliament at the time), which proposed to change the family law to legalise same-sex marriages. Until that time, the prevailing discourse around the rights of same-sex couples had been limited to discussing the technical details of civil partnership (with the exception of the Conservative People's Party, who planned a public referendum to prevent possible future changes of the marriage law). The Green Party's CI collected a

record number of 35,805 signatures and shifted the public debate from discussing civil partnership to changing the legal definition of marriage. This is likely to have played a role in the next parliament's decision to amend the family law in 2023 to establish marriage equality.

Since the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform in Estonia supports CIs targeted at parliament and at local government, the data on the platform provides unique insights into how the same issues have entered both local and national-level initiatives. For instance, local authority plans to close down small community schools as part of the national school network reform have created a wave of local-level CIs protesting against the decisions in recent years. In some municipalities, these have resulted in reconsideration of the decisions and more time dedicated to engaging the local community in discussions. In others, the initiatives were rejected or ignored, eventually leading local communities to address a CI to the parliament, which resulted in prompt government action (see the text box on the next page).

The case of the school network reform provides several lessons. First, in cases where local municipalities are not responsive to citizens' concerns, the national-level CI may provide an alternative route to help resolve at least some aspects of the issues of concern. Second, complex policy issues may require measures to be taken at several government levels at once, and citizens' initiatives may provide an impetus to accelerate the adoption of necessary policy measures. Third, there are benefits to having a shared digital platform for both national and local-level citizens' initiatives, as such platforms may become "one-stop shops" for data and information on key societal issues (such as education or regional development). This allows citizens to observe and effectively take part in policy processes that span several government levels.

## **CASE: School network reform: the power of combining local and national citizens' initiatives**

Economic and socio-demographic pressures caused by a declining population have led a number of Estonian local governments to reorganise the local school network for the sake of efficiency gains and meeting national policy objectives. However, decisions on closing down or reorganising local schools have often been taken without extensive consultations with local residents. This has led to a wave of local citizens' initiatives, which culminated in 2023 with more than 10 initiatives protesting against decisions to close down local schools (sometimes also community centres and libraries). In one municipality, local residents had submitted seven initiatives to the municipal government during the period 2020-2023, requesting the municipality to reconsider decisions to reorganise or close local schools and kindergartens. All of them remained either pending or were rejected by the municipality.

Against this backdrop, the local community put together a nationwide initiative with a broader scope in April 2023 that requested the parliament to consider a range of measures to support the preservation of rural community schools. The initiative received 2,116 signatures of support and was submitted to the parliament. The parliament decided to deliberate on the issue as a matter of significant national importance, and requested the Ministry of Education to develop a policy measure to support the survival of small rural schools within the current school system's financing scheme. As a result, the Ministry of Education created a measure to subsidise rural municipalities that are willing to maintain small six-grade primary schools close to residential areas.

### **Public discussion**

CIs have also had a visible influence on the public debate on certain issues. Finnish studies have shown that citizens' initiatives raise important issues for discussion both in the media and in people's daily conversations (Laitinen and Setälä 2016). CIs have been frequently covered in the media in the news and opinion pieces. They have generated new democratic interaction and increased individuals' understanding of issues being discussed in parliament (Christensen et al. 2016). Furthermore, CIs have sparked discussion on topics that would have remained underrepresented without the initiative system (Christensen et al. 2017). An example of such issues are big value questions that no political

party or parliamentary group dares to place on the agenda or take a public stand for or against. CIs are also initiated as a protest or as a result of disappointment in government policies. In Estonia, there is a peak in CI activity after the publication of government programmes. In Finland, CIs have been accompanied by mass demonstrations, for example the CI on same-sex marriages gathered around 5,000 people near the parliament building during its parliamentary vote in 2014. Anecdotal evidence from Estonia and Finland suggests that organising CIs has served as a tool for individuals' self-training on politics and civic activity.

In both Estonia and Finland, animal welfare organisations have used the CI as an instrument in their campaigns to end fur

farming, using the publicity around the CI to create a public debate and affect the political discourse on the topic. In both countries, the initiatives have also managed to surpass the required threshold signature. In Finland, the CI “Fur Free Finland” was the first ever CI to be submitted to the parliament in 2013. Ten years later in 2023, an initiative on the same topic collected 102,600 signatures (but as of January 2024 had not yet been submitted to parliament). In Estonia, an initiative to ban fur farming was launched by the advocacy group Nähtamatud Loomad (Invisible Animals), collected 6,161 signatures and was submitted to the parliament in January 2020. The Estonian Parliament’s official response to the CI was to resolve the issue “by other means” because a group of MPs had already initiated a similar bill at the time the citizens’ initiative campaign was running. In 2021, the parliament approved a legislative change as a response to the MP-initiated bill; however, the parliamentary initiative and debates explicitly referenced the advocacy group’s initiative and arguments.

In Estonia, some initiatives have managed to stimulate public debate on an issue during the signature collection campaign, in particular if the CI has emerged as a public reaction to political discussions such as coalition talks. Several such initiatives have protested against or called for tax changes (such as the petition against the introduction of a car tax or initiatives advocating changes to the child benefit system). Both topics attracted high numbers of signatures and various new citizens’ initiatives were thereafter published in support of different viewpoints.

## 5.2 Impacts of CIs as instruments of participation

### Lowered threshold for public participation

As the initiators of the Finnish and Estonian CI systems have argued, one of the key objectives of this type of public participation instrument is to expand the opportunities to participate for a wider range of societal groups and to prevent alienation. Based on studies on population surveys from 2015 and 2023 in Finland (Christensen et al. 2017; Jäske 2023), there is evidence that the CIs in Finland have managed to increase the political participation of young people and other societal groups that have commonly been more passive in using traditional methods of political participation. In Estonia, there is no data to indicate whether youth participation has increased as a result of CIs; however, data from [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee) shows that young people are active users of the platform. The rapidly growing number of supporting signatures on the [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee) platform also indicates that it provides a new and convenient participation channel for a large proportion of the public, who may not have had similar access to public decision-making before.

In Estonia, there are also signs of the increasing diversity of the people initiating CIs. Compared to the early days of the [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee) platform, the number of initiators of CIs on the platform has substantially increased and the user base has become more diverse in terms of age and gender. Judging by the organisational affiliations of initiators, the users of [Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://Rahvaalgatus.ee) represent a wide variety of sectors and fields of life. CIs in Estonia have also served as a platform for political parties not represented in the parliament to influence the parliament’s agenda. The Estonian Green Party, which has not had a seat in parliament since 2011, has launched several successful initiatives, including the marriage equality and medical cannabis initiatives discussed above. In Finland, the profile of initiators is slightly different, possibly due to the format requirements of

Finnish CIs, which demand a higher level of legal knowledge from initiators.

### **Trust and satisfaction with democracy**

The way CIs are handled has an effect on citizens' trust and their views on whether the participation tool strengthens democracy. According to the Finnish population survey from 2023 (Jäske 2023), 70% of citizens view CIs as having improved democracy. Positive experiences with CIs that have received a serious examination and response from the parliament or generated public debate can enforce trust in the political system and its institutions. On the other hand, during the processing of the first citizens' initiatives, it was observed that CIs that were not approved by the parliament decreased their supporters' trust in political institutions, for example in the case of the CI on fur farming in 2013 (Christensen et al. 2015). Similar indications have been highlighted in recent studies (e.g. Anomaa 2023).

### **Increased parliamentary transparency**

In addition to the legal right to CIs and their role as instruments of participation, certain impacts have emanated from the design and process of the digital platforms facilitating the preparation and/or submission of citizens' initiatives. In Estonia, the ambition to make the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform a "one-stop shop" for information on citizens' initiatives has resulted in improved public access to information on the parliament's decision-making processes. In order to reduce the work needed to follow up on the status of CIs submitted to the parliament, the managers of Rahvaalgatus.ee have exerted pressure on the parliament to publish information on parliamentary proceedings as machine-readable open data. As a result, the parliament now publishes real-time open data, along with an API, which enables public access and automated updates on the Rahvaalgatus.ee website.

## 6. Conclusions and Future Prospects

Citizens' initiatives have been a groundbreaking democratic innovation in both Finland and Estonia and have paved the way for further interest in, development of and experimentation on new forms of democracy and citizen participation. CIs have popularised participatory democracy by raising citizens' and policymakers' awareness of the idea that individuals can, and should, engage in the democratic process not only during elections but also in between them. This paper sought to capture and compare the evolution of this participation instrument in Estonia and Finland throughout the last decade. We found that despite similar drivers and objectives, the legislation, processes, technical infrastructure and governance of CIs exhibit significant differences between the two countries.

### 6.1 Key observations

- In Finland, the number of supporting signatures required for an initiative to reach the parliament is 50 times higher than in Estonia. The formal requirements for CIs are also stricter in Finland. The Finnish CIs must include a bill (a proposal for a new law) or a proposal to start drafting legislation. In Estonia, initiatives may include proposals to change legislation, but also more general ideas to improve community life, without restrictions on the format.
- Parliamentary procedures play a crucial role in the credibility and impact of citizens' initiatives. While Estonian law obliges the parliament to discuss and respond to the initiatives within six months, Finnish legislation gives the parliament more freedom to decide whether, how and when a CI is addressed. In Finland, a CI can lapse at the end of a parliamentary term, if left pending. The lapsing of the initiatives has been criticised in public. A change would require a constitutional amendment. Public trust in the instrument could also be increased by introducing a guarantee period for processing CIs.
- Despite the popularity of CIs in Finland, the parliament's procedural details are complex and difficult to grasp for the general public (Jäske 2023, 119). There is an evident lack of understanding of and visibility to the proceedings, practices and procedures of parliament. This makes it difficult for organisers of CIs to plan and time the submission of CIs to parliament. A "single window" view for following the whole CI process should be provided.
- The governance structure of the CI system differs considerably in Finland and Estonia. In Finland, the Ministry of Justice owns the platform [Kansalaisaloite.fi](https://kansalaisaloite.fi), which most initiators use to collect signatures and submit initiatives to the parliament. The Estonian equivalent [Rahvaalgatus.ee](https://rahvaalgatus.ee) is not managed by a public authority but by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly (ECA) – an independent publicly funded think tank. Our study suggests that this unconventional management structure may have allowed for more innovation and agility in improving processes and expanding the functions of the [Rahvaalgatus.ee](https://rahvaalgatus.ee) platform. By putting pressure on the parliament to publish proceedings information as machine-readable open data, the ECA has substantially improved the transparency of the CI process in Estonia. The Finnish system would also benefit from data integration between [Kansalaisaloite.fi](https://kansalaisaloite.fi) and the parliament. For example, [Kansalaisaloite.fi](https://kansalaisaloite.fi) could offer automated updates for initiators and signatories on the processing of CIs in parliament.



- In Estonia, the Rahvaalgatus.ee platform has gradually grown from a lightweight prototype to a one-stop shop for information and services related to submitting CIs to both the parliament and local governments. The experience of Rahvaalgatus.ee implies the consolidation of the digital infrastructure for CI-type instruments at different administrative levels simplifies public access to information and creates synergies between local and national initiatives. A similar consolidation process is currently ongoing in Finland.
- At the same time, the Finnish experience demonstrates that the sustainability of the digital infrastructures supporting CIs can benefit from clear ownership by a government institution, which could dedicate resources to provide a robust, secure and accessible digital platform and ensure adequate integration with other government information systems and participation platforms.
- The strength of citizens' initiatives is their clear connection to decision-making processes, offering people the possibility to drive their ideas and concerns onto the parliament's agenda. However, the success of CIs in parliament does not tell the whole story of their impact. Often, citizens' initiatives result in parliamentary resolutions, even when rejected. The processing of CIs may have been combined with other legislative or government proposals. Furthermore, the goals of rejected initiatives or initiatives that did not meet the signature threshold could have been reached by stimulating public debate or shaping political discourse.

*One of the possibilities would be to create points for interaction between initiators and the parliament before submission of the final text.*

## 6.2 Future prospects

The evidence discussed in this working paper indicates a high level of institutionalisation of citizens' initiatives as instruments of public participation in Estonia and Finland. Yet, in both countries, experts and MPs have proposed ideas to refine or reform the instrument. In Finland, citizens' initiatives have been the subject of criticism, especially within the parliament, because of their uneven quality. When a CI includes a legislative proposal, the handling of the proposal cannot compromise the quality requirements generally set for laws approved by parliament. It is also evident that initiators of CIs may not have the specialised legislative drafting skills and resources that professional policymakers do and low-quality proposals are often regarded as creating an extra burden on parliament. There is also a general fear that too many citizens' initiatives may emerge and overload the parliament. Furthermore, it is claimed that CIs sidetrack parliament from its main business of deliberating and deciding on government proposals.

As possible remedies, in Finland, some have suggested raising the signature threshold even higher – possibly to 100,000 instead of 50,000 – to make sure only initiatives with a very high level of public support enter the parliament. However, since increasing the threshold could pose barriers to the use of CIs by less experienced or poorer resourced initiators, alternative measures have also been proposed. One of the possibilities would be to create points for interaction between initiators and the parliament before submission of the final text to better integrate the initiative into the parliament's work process. Alternatively or in addition to that, a space could be provided for the co-creation of initiatives with other citizens and experts before starting the collection of signatures.

One of the ideas discussed in Estonia has been that of creating multiple levels for the signature threshold and differentiating the CI process accordingly. In practice, this could

mean that if an initiative manages to accumulate 1,000 supporting signatures, it would be processed in one way in the parliament, whereas if it manages to collect several times more – say, 40,000 or 50,000 – another process would follow (for example a direct path to plenary debate or declaration of a deliberation of significant national importance). Initiatives that manage to mobilise extremely high levels of public support (perhaps more than 50,000 signatures) could be qualified as deserving even more thorough treatment, for instance through inviting small-scale citizens' panels to deliberate the initiative jointly with the responsible parliamentary committee. In Finland, other forms of initiative have been proposed to complement the citizens' initiative. Instead of a legislative bill or a proposal to start drafting legislation, a debate initiative, for example, would offer citizens the opportunity to have an issue or question immediately debated by the decision-makers, while an initiative in the form of a written question would require a written response from the government.

The increasing number of CIs points to an increasing need for expert advice in the drafting stage of the initiatives. This would help with the formal requirements and quality of the initiatives and in ensuring the constitutionality of the proposals before submission to parliament. Furthermore, it would help initiators navigate the complex procedural details of CIs. The managers of *Rahvaalgatus.ee* are currently working on designing a more specific structure for the text of citizens' initiatives to stimulate initiators to contemplate all important aspects when drafting the initiative. In the future, legal assistance may also become necessary to analyse the legal implications of the initiatives before submission and enable more efficient proceedings in the parliament. Furthermore, the rapidly increasing popularity of CIs may also mean that multiple digital platforms could emerge in the future that provide a secure environment to prepare and collect digital signatures for CIs.

CIs do not fundamentally challenge the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, but can

improve the democratic aspects of parliamentary deliberation and bring people closer to representative decision-making. In Finland, this aspect was further developed by experimenting with a *Citizens' Parliament* in 2023. The Citizens' Parliament was a deliberative citizens' assembly (deliberative poll) that discussed four citizens' initiatives on drug and fuel taxation policies, both online and face-to-face. The results will be considered during committee readings in the Finnish Parliament when discussing these CIs. Citizens' assemblies, and other democratic innovations, such as more lightweight digital platforms, could be also used when designing and developing CIs before the collection of signatures.

In Finland and Estonia, the creation of citizens' initiative systems was originally justified by the standards of the time and national and international developments in democracy and participation. These arguments have by no means lost their weight or relevance, as both stable and new democracies across the world are being challenged by anti-democratic forces, both externally and internally (Papada et al. 2023 and IDEA 2023). The 2023 V-Dem report reveals that in Estonia political polarisation has risen significantly over the past decade, and despite being a well-consolidated electoral democracy, the participatory and deliberative aspects of Estonian democracy are still relatively less developed (Papada et al. 2023, 26, 44). People in Finland have high trust in public institutions, but at the same time they have a comparatively low perception of their opportunities and ability to participate in political processes. Participatory inequality is challenging Finnish democracy and citizens are increasingly divided into those who are active and those who are alienated from political participation. There are significant regional and demographic differences in trust and participation: both are weaker for people living in rural areas and among people with lower levels of education and income (OECD 2021; Bäck and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2019). Effective participation mechanisms, such as citizens' initiatives, have been highlighted as effective tools for fighting such negative tendencies.

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