

Citizens in Distress: A Case Study on Public Participation During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Finland

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Submitted: 29 July 2025 **Accepted:** 9 December 2024 **Published:** 6 February 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Public Participation Amidst Hostility: When the Uninvited Shape Matters of Collective Concern” edited by Olga Zvonareva (Maastricht University) and Claudia Egger (Utrecht University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i419>

Abstract

In emergencies, public participation can perform a positive function by raising public awareness of the potential harms and injustices that may have resulted from emergency measures and policies. In this way, public participation can contribute to democratic crisis management, and also legitimise democratic institutions more broadly. However, emergency conditions can challenge these participatory practices, undermining citizens' ability to influence crisis management. To investigate this phenomenon, this article studies how ordinary citizens participated in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic. The article focuses on Finland, a critical case because its response to the pandemic is often considered successful in international comparison. In the analysis, data on various formal and informal forms of public participation are considered and their impact on emergency response is assessed. The findings show that although multiple forms of public participation were in place, the authorities used them selectively and hesitantly. Also, public participation was often diminished to an advisory role or channelled through established civil society actors, such as labour market organisations. Due to this lack of critical voices in public arenas, citizens decided to bypass formal routes of public participation to express their concerns through civic activism in informal channels. These concerns materialised in campaigns, protests, and demonstrations against emergency measures and policies. While much of the existing literature focuses on the negative effects of civic activism, such as spreading misinformation and undermining official measures, this article argues that informal public participation, such as civic activism, can complement formal decision-making measures during emergencies, thus contributing to more effective and democratic crisis governance.

Keywords

civic activism; Covid-19 pandemic; crisis management; emergency; public participation

1. Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, citizens staged large-scale global protests and demonstrations against governments and their handling of the health crisis. This public dissent towards emergency measures and policies was often channelled through pre-existing groups and movements. However, pandemic policies also initiated new social movements, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds and agendas who employed tactics that diverged from conventional social movements. For example, grassroots groups mobilised to support neighbours, elderly people, individuals with disabilities, precarious workers, and Indigenous communities (Milan & Treré, 2022). In addition, these groups engaged with different online, offline, and hybrid repertoires of contention and collective action, such as flash mobs, teach-ins, and digital blockades (cf. Chenoweth et al., 2020; Petitjean, 2022).

On the one hand, grassroots activism can play a critical role in responding effectively to an emergency. Social groups and movements can channel and legitimise emotions such as moral pain, anger, indignation, and compassion (Gravante & Poma, 2022). Moreover, localised grassroots movements in cities and neighbourhoods can build and strengthen solidarity, resilience, and resistance in communities, and also steer attention to issues that may be neglected during an acute crisis. For example, some social movements have underlined the centrality of environmental and climate justice in coping with the pandemic. Others have highlighted the potential of a solidarity economy and new sociopolitical agendas (Bringel & Pleyers, 2022, p. 8). On the other hand, however, various scholars have demonstrated how social groups and movements have provided a platform for conspiracy theories and “alternative facts” during the pandemic, which potentially hampered effective emergency responses, undermined public compliance with chosen policy measures, and decreased trust in public authorities (Gupta et al., 2022; Pummerer et al., 2022; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Soveri et al., 2021).

To mitigate these adverse tendencies, governments have applied various repertoires or strategies to cope with activists, which can be broadly classified into two approaches. The first approach refers to formal forms of public participation in which officials invite citizens to participate in crisis governance in a constructive manner, for example, by providing them a lobbying position. With this strategy, the authorities “hug extremes to death”: an approach that includes participation from even the most radical movements to undermine their untamed potential (Koskimaa et al., 2021, p. 9). The second approach refers to more hostile strategies to undermine the legitimacy of activists as a means to downplay their credibility in the public eye. In some cases, authorities have publicly denounced these activists as “corona denialists” and “anti-vaxxers” (cf. Mäkinen, 2023). For example, in Finland, a research professor at the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare called the Eeroon koronasta network, an independent group of experts, a “club of lunatics” (*hörhöjen päiväkerho*) that aims to spread conspiracy theories and decrease trust in public authorities (Vuorelma & Lehtonen, 2024).

In the aftermath of the pandemic, these findings show that the research investigating democratic governance in a crisis would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of democratic participation. An analysis of the alternative forms of public participation that emerged during the pandemic can reveal ways to revitalise democratic politics (Youngs, 2023; Youngs et al., 2021). The ultimate question that compels much of the post-pandemic research exploring this issue is: How can current democratic systems be developed to create meaningful ways for citizens to participate and get involved in emergency response

situations? This task is linked to the recent search for more experimental, reflexive, anticipatory, and responsible forms of participation in science and technology studies (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2020).

Following the above aspirations, this article studies how ordinary citizens participated in the management of the pandemic in Finland. The analysis tracks different modes of participation through which citizens, civil associations, and other civic actors attempted to influence emergency measures and policies. Finland is an important research case because the existing model of participatory government already offered various routes for citizens to participate in politics outside of elections. Since these channels were functional even during the Covid-19 pandemic, decision-makers potentially had a formal model for understanding citizens' needs and concerns about the crisis response already in place. However, interestingly, the pandemic illuminated the limited extent to which citizens actually could influence emergency measures and policies, which may have contributed to the rise of more informal forms of civic activism that emerged during the pandemic.

Another reason for a single case study is that, historically, Finland has been ranked highly in international country comparisons, both with regard to democratic qualities and also pandemic response (e.g., Scheinin, 2022). One factor that contributed to the successful pandemic response was that, similarly to other Nordic countries, Finland is a high-trust society (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2022). This factor likely contributed to the efficacy of Finland's early response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as citizens complied with the emergency measures and policies. However, the situation changed after the initial phase of the pandemic, when criticism of emergency policies and measures began to surface (Ketola, 2024). The growing dissent toward the government's pandemic response over the course of the pandemic, therefore, may have been an indicator of the deficits in the democratic governance of the crisis, and thus poses an important area for further analysis.

To delineate a diversity of formal and informal participatory processes in Finland during the Covid-19 pandemic, this article adopts the following structure. The next section will draw a comparison between constructive democracy and counter-democracy. While the former refers to various formal forms of public participation, the latter is related to the more informal modes of participation, such as civic activism, protests, and demonstrations. Both forms of participation have qualities that can contribute to the democratic governance of crises. Drawing from this overarching idea, the various participatory processes in Finland are analysed, and their impact on emergency governance is assessed. The analysis was based on a multi-method research design where data from different sources was accumulated, analysed, and cross-checked. The conclusions will introduce and discuss the main findings and propose improvements for democratic systems in Finland, which may be generalised to apply elsewhere.

2. Between Constructive Democracy and Counter-Democracy

In recent years, public interest in democratic innovation has increased among scholars, policymakers, and the wider public. Democratic innovations refer to institutions “specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith, 2009, p. 1). In practice, democratic innovations can allow citizens to participate in public spending through participatory budgeting; to propose new political agendas through citizens' initiatives; and to plan proposals for decision-makers with other citizens in deliberative mini-publics. As the use of these democratic innovations in various contexts has

increased, a new field of study has emerged that explores ways of institutionalising democratic innovations to create better connections between existing and emerging political and administrative processes (Dean et al., 2020; Macq & Jacquet, 2023; Warren, 2009, 2017). One argument for further institutionalisation of citizen participation is that it would prevent authorities from ignoring the outcomes and recommendations produced by the participatory and deliberative processes.

Yet some critics have questioned the institutionalisation of public participation. According to these critical voices, top-down participatory initiatives may represent a gesture designed to create the illusion of democratic process (Fuji-Johnson, 2018) or to give the appearance of engagement without producing any meaningful change in process (Moore, 2017). For instance, public participation exercises have been described as “technologies of elicitation” (Lezaun & Soneryd, 2007). From this perspective, democratic innovations can be considered “extractive industries” that aim to generate certified “public opinion” to increase government productivity (Lezaun & Soneryd, 2007, p. 280). Further, some authors also have raised concerns about the political use of democratic innovations (Lafont, 2017) or their instrumentalisation for governmental purposes (Moore, 2017).

The most pressing criticism highlights the strength of civic activism and civic actors in democratic politics. For example, Young (2001) has criticised democratic innovations scholars for forgetting the democratic strengths of social movements. Della Porta (2020) illuminates these strengths, arguing that social movements can nurture innovative ideas, and also generate counter-expertise and new forms of knowledge. Rosanvallon (2008, p. 314) argues that a democratic system requires not only the “positive” forces of deliberation and reflection but also the “negative” power and challenge of counter-democracy. It is the role of social movements to contribute to this “constant evaluation and criticism of the actions of the government by the governed” (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 39).

To expand on the importance of the role of civic activism in democratic politics, Rosanvallon (2008) distinguishes between constructive and constraining power invested within democracy and counter-democracy. This postulation entails that constructive and constraining powers are included in the mix of democratic governance (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 314). Whereas democratic innovations, such as deliberative mini-publics, are more strongly inclined to constructive politics, counter-democratic forces, such as social movements, can play a nonconstructive and constraining part in the democratic system’s mix (Hendriks, 2022). Thus, both constructive and constraining powers are needed in the democratic system to nourish the varied repertoires and values required for democratic legitimacy.

In recent years, a similar discussion about the constructive and constraining roles of public participation has taken place in public administration scholarship. Over the last 30 years, governments worldwide have invited private and civic actors into the governance processes to improve the effectiveness, legitimacy, and innovativeness of public governance (Peters et al., 2022, p. 969). These collaborative governance initiatives aim to establish stronger ties between public authorities and civic actors, and thus support communities and individuals to take a more prominent role in their own well-being. Whereas some consider these arrangements primarily as sources for further agency and self-authority, others see them as “technologies of community” (Rose, 1999, p. 188), where local communities are produced as close allies to authorities (Nousiainen & Pykkänen, 2013).

Due to the “collaborative turn” in public governance, government officials, as well as researchers, have begun to focus on the political and democratic implications of involving citizens in processes of public governance (Peters et al., 2022, p. 969). This new focus has stimulated interest in “political metagovernance,” which involves elected politicians making politically charged decisions, for example, about overall goal setting, the financial framework, and the exclusion of particular actors (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In the last case, social actors from collaborative governance networks who do not comply with the pre-set requirements established by public authorities may be excluded. On this account, arrangements for network collaboration, co-creation, and co-production could also be seen as practices of exclusion and domination.

Some authors claim that the excessive focus on collaborative governance has sidelined the agonistic tendencies within urban communities. Therefore, they have proposed various modes of counter-governance as a response to collaborative governance. For example, using Rosanvallon’s (2008) postulation of three democratic counter-powers as a framework, Dean (2018) explores new ways for citizens to adopt a defensive relation to institutional actors to engage in counter-governance. According to Dean, the practices of prevention, oversight, and judgment can complement the existing forms of collaborative governance and provide ways to settle and solve conflicts that often characterise contemporary urban governance.

To conclude, the participatory turn has impacted the realms of politics and public administration in recent decades. This turn has transformed the relationship between citizens, politicians, and public administrators. Whereas politicians and public administrators seek to constrain citizens within formal participatory practices, activists, and those who oppose institutionalising efforts, may consider these practices too restrictive and thus may seek alternative, informal ways to affect public policy. Moreover, due to the inefficiency of the existing participative channels, people may participate in protests and demonstrations to make their voices heard. Especially in a crisis, these modes of counter-democratic politics may be the only option for citizens to impact emergency policies and measures.

3. Public Participation During the Pandemic

Much of the research literature on the Covid-19 pandemic has focused on the centralisation of decision-making in the hands of politicians, administrators, and experts. Some assessments of the pandemic response have shed light on the ways in which governmental responses to the pandemic have further intensified democratic erosion and authoritarian tendencies in different countries (e.g., Guasti, 2020; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Poyet et al., 2023). The research has drawn attention to the political leaders who have exploited the pandemic as a stalking horse for practices that undermine the capacity of democratic institutions to monitor the executive powers (Youngs, 2023). For example, in many countries, parliamentary proceedings were temporally suspended or restricted (Chiru, 2024; Värttö, 2024).

In response to the government’s excessive use of emergency powers during the Covid-19 pandemic, a new wave of civic activism emerged. Various activists and civic groups criticised the strict emergency measures and policies implemented during the pandemic. Some observers have argued that this civic activism put critical pressure on governments, and thus helped to improve their Covid-19 strategies (Youngs, 2023). For example, in some countries, the Covid-19 pandemic-related protests intensified pressure for democratic change (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024). More critical voices, however, consider protests and demonstrations as a continuation of the rise of global far-right populism (Vieten, 2020).

Despite the fact that much of the civic activism that emerged during the pandemic embodies the characteristics of constraining power, there are also signs of more collaborative forms of civic activism that occurred during the state of emergency. In many places, new forms of citizen activism appeared, such as neighbourhood, mutual aid, voluntary, and community groups. On many occasions, these groups collaborated with public authorities to provide complementary services for people who were in need during the pandemic (Hall et al., 2021). By having established close connections with the local communities, these groups could reach vulnerable individuals who may have otherwise been left unprotected.

During the pandemic, many countries also took advantage of democratic innovations, such as deliberative citizen assemblies, to bring together randomly selected citizens to deliberate and make recommendations on aspects of the pandemic. For example, the Climate Assembly UK and the French Citizens' Convention on Climate—both large-scale randomly selected deliberative bodies—moved online to hold special sessions to consider the Covid-19 crisis and to generate recommendations for its management (Afsahi et al., 2020). Together with collaborative and community-led approaches, these processes created innovative spaces for citizen participation, deliberation, mobilisation, and organisation (Lacelle-Webster et al., 2021).

There are inherent positive forces in democratic practices that can facilitate the management of crises, and then promote recovery based on the results. Crisis management scholars have long acknowledged that, in a state of emergency, crisis management must be both effective and democratic (Boin et al., 2016). The legitimacy of the crisis response is not only about effectiveness but also about participation, impartiality, and due process (Lægreid & Rykkja, 2019; T. Christensen et al., 2016). Thus, citizens' views of the legitimacy and acceptability of suggested measures are central preconditions in effective crisis management. When citizens consider the emergency measures justified, they are more willing to comply with the restrictions and recommendations (Fung, 2021; Smith & Hughes, 2021).

Although the benefits of public participation are well acknowledged in the research literature, the practical constraints during emergencies can pose challenges for meaningful interactions between authorities and citizens. Emergencies are exceptional situations underscored by threats, urgency, and uncertainty (Boin et al., 2016). Therefore, there might be an urgent need to respond swiftly to severe threats to citizens' health and well-being. In those circumstances, the authorities may be tempted to circumvent normal democratic procedures to prevent the most serious consequences of the crisis from materialising. To what extent these actions have been justified and also how they can affect the crisis response are central issues in post-crisis research on emergency measures and policies.

4. Data and Methods

This article aims to contribute to the research literature on the functioning of democratic institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic by studying how citizens and civic actors have influenced the pandemic response in Finland. One way to study different participatory practices is to assess their capacity to fulfil different democratic values. Democratic literature often enlists enlightened understanding, inclusion, influence, equality, and transparency among the most characteristic qualities of a democratic political system (e.g., Dahl, 2000; Fishkin, 2009). However, the norms and values of the democratic processes depend on the mode of democratic governance they represent. For example, participatory methods are designed to make public decision-making more inclusive by reaching out to groups who typically participate less in public

affairs, and also more equal by levelling opportunities to contribute and influence public policymaking (Fung, 2021). Deliberative methods, on the other hand, can inform public policies by giving an insight into an “enlightened” citizen’s opinion (Landemore, 2012). In exceptional circumstances, such as crises, adopting deliberative norms in the public domain may be crucial in reducing misinformation (Chambers, 2021).

In this article, public participation is understood in broad terms, which include an array of practices based on direct, participative, and deliberative democracy, as well as collaborative governance and civic activism. Rather than evaluating each mode of participatory practice using a single analytical framework, this study evaluates the democratic values of each practice separately and then estimates their main strengths and weaknesses in relation to democratic governance. The reason for not using a specific analytical framework is that in this article, democratic innovations are studied alongside collaborative governance and civic activism, which originate from different theoretical backgrounds. Even though these theories of democratic governance may share some broad principles, such as equality, inclusion, and freedom, they interpret these principles in different ways and promote different versions of them (Hendriks, 2022; Jäske & Setälä, 2020). Therefore, the complexity within these models makes finding common terminology that would allow building an analytical framework for studying different modes of democratic participation impractical for this research.

The analysis was based mainly on data obtained from government-sponsored websites. These data include information about the parliamentary hearings, the crowdsourced law-making processes, and citizens’ initiatives during the most critical phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. The numerical data collected from the websites were analysed using descriptive statistics. The textual media material consisted of news articles ($n = 16$) about participatory processes, protests, demonstrations, and voluntary groups, which were thematically coded to recognise different actors and their main objectives. In addition, the analysis relied on a number of official reports on emergency responses and also on scientific publications published before this article. To increase the validity of the study, information from multiple sources was then accumulated, analysed, and cross-checked. Table 1 summarises the primary data sources and methods.

5. Results

5.1. Formal Participatory Processes

Much of the Covid-19 pandemic-related public participation in Finland occurred within the framework of formal processes. Between 2020–2022, the Finnish government issued altogether 161 pandemic-related governmental proposals, which introduced new policies and measures to diminish the effect of the Covid-19 virus on public health. All pandemic-related governmental proposals were subjected to *parliamentary review in parliamentary committees* before finalising the proposals. Within these committees, the committee members could discuss the proposals and request comments from ministries, research institutes, experts, and civil associations. Altogether, 3,401 statements on emergency measures and policies were submitted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

By making the law-making process open to the public, the parliamentary committees could have ideally increased the inclusiveness and transparency of political decision-making. However, when considering the participants in the consultation rounds, the implementation of these democratic values remains limited.

Table 1. Summary of data and methods.

Participatory process	Data	Methods
Formal		
Public hearings in parliamentary committees	3,401 statements issued on 161 governmental acts; data obtained from the official website of the Finnish parliament	Descriptive statistics
Crowdsourced law-making	30 drafts of governmental acts issued on the crowdsourcing platform Lausuntopalvelu.fi; data obtained from the official website of the Finnish parliament and Lausuntopalvelu.fi	Descriptive statistics
Citizens' initiative	10 pandemic-related citizens' initiatives, data obtained from Kansalaisaloite.fi; media material	Descriptive statistics; content analysis
Deliberative mini-public (regarding the Covid-19 pandemic)	Previous research, main source Leino et al. (2022)	Literature review
Lockdown Dialogues	Previous research, main source Henttonen (2022)	Literature review
The Citizens' Pulse survey (<i>Kansalaispulssi</i>)	30 survey rounds between 2020–2021; data obtained from Statistics Finland	Descriptive statistics
Communication measures for information sharing	Previous research, main source Hakala and Ruggiero (2022)	Literature review
Collaborative projects	Previous literature, main source Hakala and Ruggiero (2022)	Literature review
Informal		
Voluntary work	Media material	Content analysis
Protests and demonstrations	Carnegie Global Protest Tracker (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024); media material	Descriptive statistics; content analysis
Information campaigns	Previous research, main sources Mäkinen (2023) and Vuorelma and Lehtonen (2024)	Literature review

The review of the statements shows that the consultation rounds tended to favour public organisations, such as ministries and research institutions. Of all the statements, only roughly one-third (1,046) were written by non-governmental actors. Of these actors, the majority of the statements were from well-established interest groups, such as labour market organisations. It could be regarded as symptomatic that the Finnish National Youth Council, perhaps the only voice for the future generation, was heard only three times by the parliamentary committees during the pandemic. This finding aligns with previous research by Vesa and Kantola (2016), who claim that organisations representing established institutions, companies, and employers are involved most closely in policy preparation.

Some Covid-19 pandemic-related laws were also subjected to public feedback through the *crowdsourced law-making* platform Lausuntopalvelu.fi, where citizens and civic actors could read and comment on the drafts. Crowdsourced platforms can have the capacity to bring a greater diversity of voices to the table than more traditional procedures, such as parliamentary hearings. However, the analysis showed that this opportunity was underutilised. Altogether, only 30 of 161 pandemic-related drafts were issued on the platform. This observation shows that only under 20 percent of pandemic-related governmental proposals

were submitted for public scrutiny. This difference between Covid-19-based legislative drafting and other legislative projects is considerable and statistically significant (Jukka et al., 2022).

Two of the drafts issued on the Lausuntopalvelu.fi platform concerned the government's proposal for a corona certificate (*koronapassi*) that would have made it possible to restrict the lives of those citizens who had decided not to receive the vaccines. These proposals were highly controversial and gained more comments than any previous drafts in the history of crowdsourced law-making. The review of the comments showed that although some of the commentators wrote on behalf of their company or association, most of the commentators were ordinary citizens who were speaking for themselves. The preliminary analysis also indicated that most comments criticised the initiative for various reasons, such as ineffectiveness, social consequences, discrimination, and violation of basic human rights. It could be suspected that the public criticism of the corona certificate was partly responsible for the eventual abandonment of the initiative. Still, the actual impact is difficult to assess and remains unclear.

Other participatory procedures also remained functional during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of these, the *citizens' initiative*, entails that every initiative that reaches the threshold of 50,000 signatures will receive a parliamentary proceeding. Ten pandemic-related citizens' initiatives were made, of which three reached the required 50,000 signatures to proceed to the Finnish parliament. However, only one of these initiatives—regarding a rise in nurses' salaries—eventually proceeded to parliament. This initiative did not directly influence the nurses' income, since politicians cannot influence salary negotiations. Nevertheless, the initiative was discussed in the media and likely put pressure on future negotiations (Tanner & Pikkarainen, 2020). This observation aligns with previous research indicating that, despite their limited impact on the legislature, citizens' initiatives can often change the media agenda and bring attention to issues that citizens consider important yet remain underrepresented in parliament (e.g., H. S. Christensen et al., 2017). The other two initiatives regarding the corona certificate never proceeded to the parliament because the government withdrew its proposal.

Whereas participatory initiatives and crowdsourced law-making could be considered examples of participatory democracy, more deliberative processes also occurred in Finland during the pandemic. For instance, *deliberative mini-publics*, institutions where a "diverse body of citizens is selected randomly to reason together about an issue of public concern" (Smith & Setälä, 2018), were organised. In Finland in 2021, a mini-public was formed with the objective of evaluating the existing emergency policies regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and the different health and social impacts. Even though the mini-public was primarily experimental and had no direct policy impact, the research shows that mini-publics can provide productive circumstances for citizens to scrutinise emergency policy proposals produced by the authorities (Leino et al., 2022).

Another citizen-focused experiment in Finland consisted of 296 *Lockdown Dialogues* to increase the policymakers' understanding of everyday life during the pandemic. These dialogues were organised in 2020–2021, and provided a platform for over 2,000 citizens to share their experiences of the pandemic (Henttonen, 2022). Public authorities received summaries of the dialogues, but it is questionable whether they affected the crisis management response. Also, the dialogues did not follow the basic requirements of deliberative processes regarding participant selection and information sharing. For example, the participants were selected through an open call, and no prior information was given to the participants before the

event. Therefore, the dialogues functioned more as a platform for peer support rather than as a form of political participation.

To map citizens' opinions and feelings about the pandemic measures, the government launched the *Citizens' Pulse survey (Kansalaispulsssi)* in the first year of the pandemic. The survey was repeated every three weeks during the pandemic, and provided a means for citizens to give feedback on pandemic policies to authorities. It included questions about trust in different authorities, perceptions of crisis communication, and emergency policies and measures. Therefore, the survey allowed the authorities to assess how the citizens perceived the measures taken during the pandemic. However, there is limited evidence that the survey results influenced the actual emergency response. Only one of the government's policy proposals referred to the survey results (HE 74/2022), which may indicate general indifference or dismissal of the feedback. On the other hand, some findings from the survey were widely discussed in the media, demonstrating some impact on the media agenda (e.g., Hyytinen, 2022).

To disseminate information about pandemic situations and emergency measures, the government applied a number of *communication measures*. Approximately 100 press releases were published during the early stage of the corona crisis (12.3.2020–31.1.2021). Ministries published approximately 1,500 coronavirus-related bulletins and online news articles. Government briefings and weekly joint meetings of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the National Institute for Health and Welfare were held a total of 140 times, and were live-streamed by the national broadcast company. Also, video clips and news were shared through the government's social media accounts (Hakala & Ruggiero, 2022). Information sharing is essential in crisis management because it prevents rumours from spreading that can undermine collective efforts to manage an emergency. However, from the perspective of public participation, it is considered the weakest form of participation, as it only allows citizens to access information determined by the authorities (Fung, 2006). It is also uncertain how centralised crisis communication functions effectively in the current fragmented media environment (Uutela & Väliverronen, 2023).

In addition to democratic innovations and other participatory processes, more *collaborative efforts* emerged in Finland during the pandemic. In 2020, the Finnish government launched a collaborative project called Finland Works (*Suomi toimii*). The project aimed to produce a series of communication campaigns, videos, podcasts, events, and other collaborative projects in cooperation with civil society actors. Between 2020 and 2021, over 180 non-governmental actors, churches, media, municipalities, private companies, and social media influencers participated in the project. This strategy positioned civic actors, local communities, and private companies as intimate allies of the public authorities in the fight against the coronavirus. However, despite the extensive resources spent on the project, it failed to receive widespread public attention and remained mainly an information sharing channel for public authorities (Hakala & Ruggiero, 2022). It also allowed authorities to exclude those actors from the project who did not follow the public authorities' values or who deviated from the official emergency policies and measures.

5.2. Informal Participatory Processes

Outside the formal participatory procedures and collaborative governance, which rely on cooperation between public authorities and citizens, a new wave of civic activism emerged in Finland during the pandemic, which took shape in many informal arrangements. Similarly to other European countries, a myriad

of *voluntary groups* appeared in Finland after the Covid-19 outbreak (Tillaeus, 2020). These groups comprised a loose network of individuals who already often organised through social media. In many cases, the voluntary work was organised through church organisations or humanitarian aid organisations such as the Red Cross, which has extensive experience coordinating large numbers of volunteers in emergencies (Osmala, 2021).

In addition to voluntary groups, more contestatory forms of activism emerged in Finland during the pandemic. In a global comparison, Finland stands out among the countries least affected by anti-government *protests and demonstrations*. The Carnegie Global Protest Tracker lists 51 large-scale Covid-19-related demonstrations globally (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024). In Finland, demonstrations against pandemic policies and measures were rare. Only a few of these demonstrations, including Convoy Finland, a national adaptation of the global Freedom Convoy protests, gathered more than 2,000 participants. Two demonstrations were organised by actors in the cultural sector who criticised the focus of the government's measures on the cultural sector in particular (Jaulimo, 2022; "Pysäyttävät kuvat," 2021).

Although there was no society-wide social movement against the pandemic response in Finland, various pop-up groups and networks emerged soon after the pandemic outbreak. These groups share similar characteristics: They are internationally oriented and they use social media as an essential recruitment and information sharing platform. During the Covid-19 pandemic, activists organised *information campaigns* to contest the emergency response. These activists criticised the public authorities and provided alternative information on Covid-19-related issues, mainly through social media (Väliverronen et al., 2020). In this manner, the activists tried to pressure the government to change its crisis management approach.

One of the groups that emerged during the pandemic was the Getting Rid of Corona (*Eroon koronasta*) network, a group consisting of "worried physicians, scientists, and experts who found each other on social media" (Eroon koronasta, 2020). The network contested the pandemic measures to some extent by pushing the government to adopt more drastic measures to suppress the pandemic. For example, the network gained publicity for its report highlighting the benefits of face masks, which undermined the official policy of the health authorities. However, after the initial phase of the pandemic, public authorities, researchers, and journalists began to criticise the network and its communication style, and to question its role as a pandemic authority (Vuorelma & Lehtonen, 2024).

In summary, the modes of public participation during the Covid-19 pandemic included both formal and informal participation. In the analysis, the main strengths and weaknesses of the participatory processes were identified. Table 2 summarises the modes of public participation during the pandemic. It shows that informal forms of participation complemented the formal participatory processes by engaging citizens outside the reach of formal processes. In addition, by giving a platform for more critical voices and alternative information, civil society actors may have increased the epistemic capacity of the democratic political system.

Table 2. Summary of modes of public participation during the pandemic.

Participatory process	Strengths	Weaknesses
Formal		
Public hearings in parliamentary committees	Direct interaction between civil society actors and authorities. Clear connection to decision-making.	Favours well-connected and organised groups.
Crowdsourced law-making	Provides a means for direct participation in law-making processes.	Uncertain and unclear impact on decision-making. Used selectively by the authorities.
Citizens' initiative	Chance to impact political agenda-setting and bring attention to issues that citizens consider important.	Initiatives do not proceed to the parliament.
Deliberative mini-public (regarding the Covid-19 pandemic)	Provides good circumstances for the scrutiny of policy proposals.	No connection to decision-making processes.
Lockdown Dialogues	Provide a platform for exchanging information and sharing experiences.	Uncertain and unclear impact on decision-making.
The Citizens' Pulse survey (<i>Kansalaispulssi</i>)	Provides feedback to authorities.	Used in an advisory role. No clear impact on decision-making.
Communication measures for information sharing	Spreading information and counteracting misinformation.	Information may not reach all groups of people.
Collaborative projects	Building connections between civil society actors and authorities.	Exclusion of civil society actors who do not share the values of the authorities.
Informal		
Voluntary work	Complementing public services. Providing meaning and peer support for participants.	No direct connection to decision-making processes.
Protests and demonstrations	Bringing attention to issues that citizens consider important.	May be subject to mis- and disinformation. Lack of direct impact.
Information campaigns	Broadening the scope of alternatives, questioning the authorities, and scrutinising the public policies.	May be subject to mis- and disinformation. Lack of direct impact.

6. Conclusion

Previous literature on public participation during the Covid-19 pandemic has been extensive; however, few contributions have systematically mapped and assessed the participatory processes. To provide a more comprehensive analysis of public participation during the pandemic, this article studied the various *formal and informal forms of public participation* that coexisted in Finland after the Covid-19 outbreak. These practices allowed citizens to have a say in emergency policies, participate in implementing them, and help society recover from these exceptional circumstances. The results of the analysis can be summarised in four main findings.

Firstly, the analysis of formal forms of public participation shows that many modes of public participation were in place in Finland that allowed citizens and civil society actors to influence emergency measures

and policies. These processes have the potential to strengthen the democratic governance of pandemic politics if used in a timely and appropriate fashion. However, this potential was not fully realised, and therefore the participatory practices were only partially utilised. For example, only a small percentage of the pandemic-related governmental proposals were subjected to public scrutiny and feedback on crowdsourced platforms.

Secondly, the analysis shows that formal modes of public participation have remained mostly in an advisory role in Finland. This finding may manifest the dominant position of public administration in Finnish society, where the politicians and administrators hold a position of authority and citizens typically take a backseat in public affairs. Finnish public administration is characterised by an attitude where the administrators often doubt the capacities of lay citizens to participate in collective decision-making on complex issues (Värttö, 2022). This attitude may become compounded in turbulent times when the urgency and uncertainty of emergency policies and measures becomes imminent. Thus, the hesitance to involve citizens may indicate the prevalence of the myth that citizens panic easily in a disaster. However, studies have consistently shown that citizens tend to act quite rationally, even in the most extreme of circumstances (e.g., Boin et al., 2016, p. 85).

Thirdly, the analysis of formal modes of public participation highlights the prevalence of Finnish corporatism, where labour market organisations have an intimate relationship with the public authorities (Koskimaa et al., 2021). Most organisations that participated in drafting the emergency measures and policies during the pandemic were labour market organisations or other well-established civil society actors. This finding indicates that, from the perspective of the public authorities, the issues of economic recovery tend to surpass other issues related to a variety of long-term societal, moral, and ethical concerns. The attention to quick economic recovery may explain why the long-term impact of the emergency measures on the welfare of young people, for example, was not anticipated.

Finally, due to the lack of critical voices in public arenas, some groups emerged in Finland throughout the pandemic who contested government measures. These groups engaged in informal counter-democracy practices, such as information campaigns, protests, and demonstrations. Contestatory forms of public participation allowed citizens to scrutinise and to challenge public policies by illuminating the injustices and inequalities created by these policies. For example, in an attempt to draw attention to the impact of the coronavirus restrictions on the cultural sector, the cultural workers organised large-scale demonstrations. In this manner, these groups could address the concerns of the unorganised workers and not only the demands of the most organised and privileged groups. The research shows that the activists impacted pandemic measures and policies to some extent (Vuorelma & Lehtonen, 2024).

Social media platforms are often utilized by activists as a tool to implement modes of counter-democracy to challenge public authority. Social media allow activists independence from mainstream media platforms by providing them with the means to make their concerns public and also to recruit new members. In the face of multiple voices on different platforms, controlling media space during emergencies and sharing information with citizens becomes a difficult task for authorities. Moreover, social media also allow misinformation to spread more easily among the public, which can undermine the chosen emergency measures and policies. In response to this challenge, authorities may try to control media space by shutting down harmful social media accounts or discredit the activists by publicly undermining their credibility (Mäkinen, 2023). Through

these strategies, the authorities attempt to delegitimise the activists and downplay their impact on public opinion on the emergency response.

Seeking alternative means to connect forms of counter-democracy to the arenas of public policymaking could serve as a more constructive way to react to activists' and other social groups' demands. The coupling of formal with informal participation could lead to more encompassing "ecologies of public participation," where diverse forms of participation can function as a part of a wider system (Chilvers et al., 2018). The first step in this direction would be for public authorities to recognise the value of the "untamed force" of activism that can emerge outside formal participatory processes. Even if activists obdurately hold onto the positions they should reasonably give up, they may benefit collective decision-making by demanding that authorities provide better justifications for their decisions (Moore, 2017, p. 181). A more transparent and inclusive democratic system would create the opportunity for citizens to scrutinise and to challenge public policies, while public authorities would be required to respond to citizens' concerns and justify their decisions to the wider public.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and recommendations. An early version of this article was presented in the workshop Public Participation Amidst Hostility. The author is grateful to the organisers and participants of the workshop for their warm hospitality and supportive feedback.

Funding

This work was funded by the Strategic Research Council established within the Research Council of Finland (Just Recovery From Covid-19? Fundamental Rights, Legitimate Governance and Lessons Learnt – JuRe, grant numbers 345950 and 345951) and by the Finnish Government (The Lessons of the Pandemic Crisis – PAKO).

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The written statements issued in public hearings of parliamentary committees are available from the official website of the Finnish parliament: <https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/Pages/default.aspx>

The statements on governmental acts are available in the government-sponsored crowdsourcing platform Lausuntopalvelu (only in Finnish or Swedish): <https://www.lausuntopalvelu.fi/FI>

The citizens' initiatives are available on the government-sponsored website Kansalaisaloite (only in Finnish or Swedish): <https://www.kansalaisaloite.fi/fi>

The data from the Citizens' Pulse survey have been archived at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive from the beginning of 2021 onwards: <https://services.fsd.tuni.fi/catalogue/series/86?lang=en>

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