

RESEARCH BRIEFINGS
4b/2013A blue silhouette of the Turku city skyline, including a church spire, a windmill, and houses. In the foreground, there are yellow silhouettes of people playing a game, possibly tennis or badminton, with a yellow kite flying in the sky. The entire scene is reflected in a blue horizontal line below.

Political Participation in a Potential Municipal Merger in the Turku Region

Krister Lundell

Key messages

- A large majority of the citizens in the Turku region believe that the possibilities of participation and influence will diminish if a municipal merger takes place. However, young people, students and those who live in the city of Turku have a more positive view of the prospects of democratic involvement than others.
- Apart from local elections, voting in advisory referendums was stated to be the most popular form of democratic involvement. Similarly, the citizen initiative device and new technology, for instance Internet-voting on various issues, have potential for engaging citizens.
- Local area councils, in which residents share decision-making power on locally important issues with representatives and officials, and public discussions between citizens and political actors are recommended for the small municipalities on the periphery of the region.

Municipal mergers and other reforms at the local level have been on the agenda in most Western European countries since the 1950s. For instance, in Sweden and Denmark, the total number of municipalities has been reduced to roughly one tenth. Also in Belgium and the UK, the reduction of the number of municipalities has been drastic. There are large variations between countries concerning reasons, design, implementation and the pace of the reforms. However, most of the municipal amalgamations have one thing in common: the purpose to improve local efficiency.¹

Large municipal mergers have far-reaching implications for representative democracy. They are a challenge to the organization and institutions of local democracy because political decision-making becomes more distant from the citizens, creating a perceived lack of influence on local issues.² This, in turn, may have a negative effect on democratic legitimacy. The on-going nationwide reform in municipal structures in Finland, which aims at creating strong primary municipalities, has accentuated the need for enhancing the democratic legitimacy by complementing representative democracy with various forms of participatory democratic methods. Merging urban and rural municipalities also brings the center-periphery issue to the fore; it has different implications for people living in various parts of the new municipal unit. Evaluations of the restructuring of local government in Finland (the Evaluation Research Programme ARTTU) clearly show that there is a need to improve the system of decision-making and to increase local democracy. Citizens demand improved local democratic structures

that enable more direct influence in the municipal decision-making process. Similar opinions prevail among local politicians. Findings in ARTTU also show that a majority of the local decision-makers think that municipal administration at different levels is needed in order to maintain local democracy.³

This study is part of an on-going research project about preferred methods of citizen participation at the prospect of a municipal merger. It reports initial results from a recently conducted survey in 14 municipalities in the South-West of Finland. The research was financed by Turku Urban Research Programme. The analysis provides valuable insight into how the citizens assess democratic performance in the region, how they think that the opportunities of political participation and influence will change in a municipal merger, and what kind of democratic involvement they prefer in the future. It is evident from the public debate that the attitudes among the citizenry towards municipal mergers are rather negative. Systematically, however, opinions in the Turku region have not been charted until now. This report should be of interest to policy-makers and ordinary citizens alike, particularly in the Turku region but elsewhere in Finland as well.

Mergers and the need to develop citizen participation

Between 1967 and 2013, 153 municipal mergers took place in Finland. In 2009, 32 such reforms were carried through, reducing the number of municipalities by 67, and there are currently 320 municipalities in Finland.⁴ A report on municipal mergers in the regions of Seinäjoki, Kouvola and Salo, implemented in 2009, has recently been published.^{5,6} It provides information on how the citizens experience the changes in local democracy in general and the opportunities of participation and influence in particular, with a focus on those living in rural areas. The residents in the countryside feel that their position has weakened because of the merger. However, the municipal mergers have also aroused interest in the local administration among the people, which the decision-makers should utilize. The adaptation to the new enlarged municipal unit from the viewpoint of the citizens on the periphery seems to take place in three phases. The first concerns the citizens' everyday life and involves a restructuring of local identities and power structures. In the second phase, the interaction between the residents and the local administration, as well as the countryside and the city is reorganized. There is a tendency to confrontation between the rural areas and the city centers manifested in the attitudes of the citizens on the countryside towards the merger and the central administration of the new municipal unit. The third phase

is integration and adaptation; new forms of participation and cooperation between the central administration and the citizens are eventually developed.

Several factors indicate that we are at the threshold of new era concerning citizen participation. According to Rinne-Koski, Saartenoja, Rantanen and Tantarimäki – the authors of the report – the following measures need to be taken: develop the role of local democracy, integrate the local and administrative activities, introduce more cooperation on all levels, and develop the use of social media and networks. However, the forms and channels of citizen participation have no intrinsic value. There is no uniform model for successful citizen participation; rather, it is very context-bound. The citizens must be able to make use of them in a meaningful way and feel that they are important to themselves. If the forms of citizen participation do not produce any results from the viewpoint of the citizens, the legitimacy of the administration will suffer.

Four issues need to be paid attention to in order to develop local democracy. First of all, the powers of the new participatory organs in relation to the whole municipal administration should be defined. Secondly, the actual work that these bodies are supposed to do should be discussed. The third issue concerns effectiveness. If the local participatory organs are given more influence, the authorities and the central representative organs will pay more attention to their work. Fourth, information and presentation of what has been accomplished play an important role in the development of local democracy.

The authors of the report emphasize the role of social media in developing the interaction between citizens and the administration. Hitherto, the use of the Internet in the municipalities has foremost been a one-way communication; to provide information about municipal issues to the citizens. As we are moving towards increasing use of social media, it is desirable that a two-way communication is developed where local representatives and officials act as real persons rather than as impersonal authorities, thereby making the interaction and discussion more natural. Henrik Serup Christensen has also pointed out that there are many possibilities for deepening e-democracy in the Finnish municipalities.⁷ However, while ICT will be the most important channel for this kind of interaction in the future, Rinne-Koski, Saartenoja, Rantanen and Tantarimäki emphasize that other channels are also needed.

The foremost obstacle to reforming citizen participation seems to be a deeply grounded tradition of municipal administration, where the scope of participation is solely determined from the point of view of the administra-

tion. New forms of participation need to be developed from the perspective of the citizens rather than the administration. An administration-driven process tends to focus on technical aspects and how new forms of participation may be incorporated in the administrative structure, which only widens the gap between the citizenry and the administration. It is important to make sure that the citizens have proper influence in the new local participatory bodies; otherwise they foremost become an expression of ostensible democracy rather than real democracy. Discussions about the forms of interaction between the residents and the administration should be held at an early stage of the merger process. Thereby, networks between the municipality and the citizens can be developed and the roles of the administration and the citizenry in the new political unit can be defined to the advantage of all parties involved.

Motivation and method of the study

According to a proposal by the working group responsible for municipal administration structure at the Ministry of Finance, 14 municipalities in the South-West of Finland might be merged into one large municipal unit. The municipalities are Aura, Kaarina, Lieto, Marttila, Masku, Mynämäki, Naantali, Nousiainen, Paimio, Raisio, Rusko, Sauvo, Tarvasjoki and Turku. These 14 municipalities are in this article referred to as the Turku region. Little is known about the prospects of a municipal merger in the region so far. To fill this gap, a research team in Åbo Akademi University planned a survey on preferred participatory democracy measures at the prospect of a municipal merger in the region. Data was collected in the autumn 2012 through telephone interviews made by the survey research company Suomen Kyselytutkimus Oy. A total of 2000 individuals took part in the survey: 500 from Turku, 150 from each of the neighboring cities Kaarina, Lieto, Naantali and Raisio, and 100 from each of the remaining nine municipalities. Turku was further divided into five sub-areas: Center, East, West, North and South. In the analysis, another spatial division was also applied independently of the current municipal borders. Five different types of housing areas were distinguished: city center, suburb, municipality center, village, and sparsely-populated areas.

The survey explores citizens' attitudes and preferences with regard to various aspects of local politics as well as their political activity in the past and preferred activity in the future at the prospect of a municipal merger. The most important questions are in this regard: How do citizens believe that the possibilities of democratic involvement in local politics will change in a potential municipal merger? To what extent have the citizens participated in politics so far, and how much do they want

to be involved in politics in the future? Are there preferred methods of participation and influence in a new enlarged municipal unit, and do the preferences vary between different areas in the Turku region? To what extent do the citizens trust political actors? Do the citizens want a binding alternatively advisory referendum on a future municipal merger in the region? These are the central issues examined in this report.

Democratic innovations

Despite the triumph of democracy in the western world a long time ago, there has constantly been a need to improve the quality of democracy. This has been a particular concern during the last few decades because voter turnout and partisan alignment began to decline and political distrust started to increase during the second half of the twentieth century. Democratic innovations are of growing practical importance as a means to improve political legitimacy and to foster more effective policies. Brigitte Geissel refers to democratic innovations as "new practices consciously and purposefully introduced in order to improve the quality of democracy, independent of whether the innovation in question has already been tried out in another system."⁸ Many innovations begin as small-scale experiments in communities and neighborhoods, and if they appear successful they may rise to higher levels of local, regional and even national government.⁹ On the basis of a comprehensive literature review, Geissel identifies four main types of democratic innovations: direct democracy, co- and network governance, consultative-discursive procedures, and electoral reforms.¹⁰ Kenneth Newton treats e-democracy as a category of its own.¹¹ It cuts across all of the four categories above but, at the same time, it deserves special consideration since it attracts a great deal of attention and many believe that it has the power to transform the political world.

Electoral reforms are concerned with innovations at various stages of the electoral process; this issue is not dealt with here. However, the other four types of participatory innovations are represented in the survey and the analysis below. Direct democracy implies that individuals can decide on a policy by popular vote or exercise power and authority without the mediating influence of the elected representatives and officials of representative government. Two such methods are included: advisory referendum (original wording in Finnish: *neuvoa-antava kansanäänestys*) and citizen initiative (*kuntalaisaloite / kunnallinen kansanäänestysaloite*). Co-governance involves direct citizen involvement in the decision-making and the activities of the state or the local community. One form of participation in the study – *kylien tai kaupunginosien päätösvaltaiset lautakunnat*,

joissa päätetään alueellisesti merkittävistä kysymyksistä – fits this category, and may be translated as local area councils with decision-making power on locally important issues.

Consultative-discursive procedures are procedures where citizens discuss public policies and advice is given to the decision-making bodies. Political representatives and officials may participate but these forums lack decision-making power. Two methods of democratic involvement in the analysis are concerned with consultation and deliberation: scenario workshops and planning cells (*asiakohtaisesti perustettavat työpajat ja ideariihet*), which may be established for the purpose of dealing with certain local topics, and open discussions between inhabitants, representatives and officials on issues relevant to the community (*avoimet keskustelutilaisuudet keskeisten kuntaa koskevien kysymysten osalta*). Three modes concerning e-democracy are included: giving feedback to the local council's agenda (*kunnanvaltuuston esityslistan kommentointi*), filling in the feedback form on the municipality homepage (*kunnan kotisivujen ehdotus- ja palautelomake*), and participating in Internet surveys on various issues on the municipality homepage (*kunnan kotisivuilla toteutettava Internetkysely*).

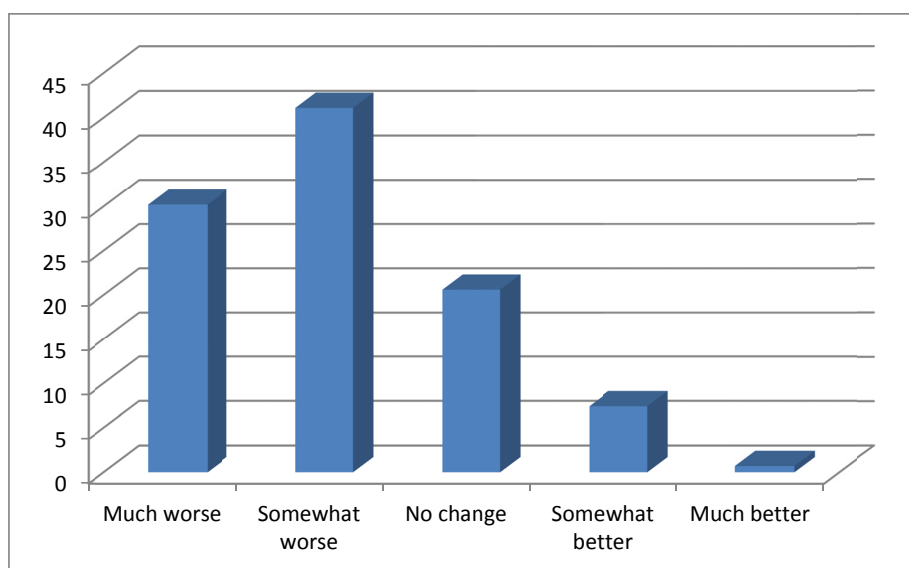
Several of these methods of democratic involvement have already been attempted in Finland and the Turku region, some are even fixed by law, which calls into question whether they should be labelled innovations. Nevertheless, the purpose is to explore whether these forms of participation have the potential of being institution-

alized and applied on a wide front, and, with regard to those already fixed by law, in case they appear beneficial, whether they should be given more attention and could thereby gather more interest among the citizenry. In this manner, then, the term innovation is appropriate.

At the prospect of a potential municipal merger

Many studies have shown that people in Western democracies do not oppose democracy as a form of government, even though they are to a large extent dissatisfied with political actors and institutions, and they do not vote as frequently as several decades ago.¹² There is also evidence of increasing political interest over time in advanced industrial democracies.¹³ Even if we can expect that citizens are favorable towards democracy in general, it is not clear whether promises of democratic involvement are sufficient to relieve the worries.

In this section, citizens' assessment of future possibilities of democratic involvement, satisfaction with current methods of participation and influence, political trust, and the issue whether a referendum on a municipal merger should be held are examined. The first question that respondents were asked in the survey is: *how do you believe that citizen participation and influence will change in a potential enlarged municipal unit?* Responses were given on a five-point Likert scale, which captures the intensity of the feelings for a given item. Results are presented in Figure 1. More than two thirds of the respondents believe that the opportunities of political participation and influence will diminish, whereas less



Note: Columns represent percentage of respondents.

Figure 1. Citizens' assessment of how participation and influence will change in a potential municipal merger

than 10 per cent think that the possibilities of democratic involvement will improve. Hence, the attitudes among the citizenry are very negative in this respect.

Young people and students have a more positive view of the prospects of democratic involvement than the others, there are no differences between men and women in this regard, and differences concerning the level of education are small and insignificant. Likewise, differences with regard to political trust are small. Interestingly, those who trust local politicians and civil servants have a somewhat more negative view than those who do not trust these actors, whereas the opposite applies to confidence in political parties and members of parliament (MPs). Hence, a generally negative attitude towards the possibilities of democratic involvement is not a matter of whether citizens think that local actors are trustworthy or not. Another conspicuous finding is that those who are or have been active in local politics have a more negative view of future possibilities of democratic involvement than others. People living in municipality centers and sparsely-populated areas have a more pessimistic view than people living in other housing areas.

In the second column of Table 1, the degree of satisfaction (%) with current methods of political participation and influence in each municipality and Turku sub-area is given. Respondents in the survey questionnaire were given two options: yes or no. The municipalities are grouped in the following way: Turku and its five sub-areas at the top, thereafter the four neighboring municipalities, and the nine smaller municipalities at the bottom of the column. Sixty-two per cent of the citizens in the region are satisfied with the forms of participation and influence that are provided at present. There are rather large differences, both within Turku and between the municipalities. Roughly half of the citizens in Turku find the current methods sufficient, yet the level of satisfaction varies from merely 30 per cent in the north to 66 per cent in the west. In Rusko, as many as 86 per cent of the residents are satisfied, whereas less than half of the residents in Kaarina are satisfied with current opportunities of democratic involvement.

Attitudes towards possibilities of democratic involvement in a potential municipal merger are presented in the third column of Table 1. The Likert item ranging from 1 (participation and influence will diminish) to 5 (improve considerably) can be transformed into an index with a similar range, expressing mean values for a specific sample of respondents, in this case each municipality and Turku sub-area. Since the index has a maximum value of 5 and a minimum value of 1, the value of

3 constitutes the center of the scale equal to “no effect”. The mean value for the entire region is 2.07, and all municipalities are below the center of the index. Citizens in Turku have a more positive view than residents in the other municipalities, northern Turku scoring the highest mean value in the sample. The most pessimistic attitudes were found in Rusko and in the small peripheral municipalities of Sauvo, Marttila and Aura.

Table 1. Satisfaction with current methods of political participation and influence, and attitudes towards possibilities of democratic involvement in a potential enlarged municipal unit

	Satisfaction	Attitudes
Total sample	62	2.07
Turku	52	2.58
<i>Turku West</i>	66	2.56
<i>Turku South</i>	58	2.52
<i>Turku Center</i>	52	2.61
<i>Turku East</i>	47	2.49
<i>Turku North</i>	30	2.86
Naantali	67	1.80
Raisio	67	2.25
Lieto	63	1.90
Kaarina	46	1.84
Rusko	86	1.71
Sauvo	76	1.77
Marttila	74	1.67
Masku	74	1.92
Mynämäki	67	1.98
Nousiainen	67	2.10
Tarvasjoki	64	2.12
Aura	63	1.73
Paimio	55	1.91

Note: Satisfaction refers to the average percentage of citizens in each municipality and Turku sub-area finding the current forms of participation and influence sufficient. Attitudes (towards possibilities of future democratic involvement) refer to the mean values of all respondents in each municipality and Turku sub-area. The scale ranges from 1 to 5.

To some extent, the degree of satisfaction with current forms of participation inversely correlates with attitudes towards future possibilities of democratic involvement. Turku has the second lowest mean value of satisfaction and the highest value of attitudes. The lowest degree of satisfaction in the whole sample was observed in Northern Turku, yet the most positive attitudes also prevail in

this area. A similar pattern is discernible in some of the smaller municipalities as well. However, there are also some exceptions; Kaarina, for instance, has low values on both dimensions.

Concerning age and education, the oldest (66% satisfied) and those with a university degree (68%) are most satisfied with current methods of participation and influence. As for occupation, the highest level of satisfaction was observed among farmers (76%) and those in leading position (71%) whereas the lowest level prevails among business owners (55%). The level of satisfaction also varies with regard to housing area: citizens living in city centers and suburbs (58%) are considerably more dissatisfied with current forms of participation and influence than those living in other kinds of housing areas. Moreover, differences appeared with respect to ideological orientation along the traditional left-right scale (five categories): those who position themselves furthest to the left are the most satisfied (74%), whereas those who place themselves in the middle are least satisfied (57%).

In Table 2, the level of trust in political parties, MPs, local government councilors and civil servants is presented.

First of all, we notice that citizens in the region have more confidence in local politicians and officials than in political parties and the MPs. It is certainly not clear in the survey whether respondents have taken stand on confidence in officials at the national or the municipal level – however, since the survey is concerned with local politics and considering that the civil servant item was asked immediately after the local government councilor item, we may assume that respondents to a greater extent have had local officials in mind. In any case, if political trust is related to a pessimistic view of a future municipal amalgamation, discontent is indeed directed towards those responsible for the implementation of the reform. Notwithstanding, the general picture of political trust is not very encouraging. Merely one sixth of the respondents trust the political parties and MPs, albeit more than two fifths have a neutral standpoint. Close to one third of the respondents trust local politicians, this at least exceeds the share of people who have little or very little confidence in them. Two fifths of the respondents trust civil servants, whereas slightly more than one fifth has little confidence in them.

Table 2. Political trust in the Turku region (%)

Political actors	Very little	Little	Neutral	Quite a lot	A lot
Political parties	10	29	43	15	2
Members of parliament	11	32	42	15	1
Local government councilors	5	19	45	28	3
Civil servants	6	16	39	35	4

Women trust local government councilors somewhat more than men do, the youngest ones (18-29) have a lower level of trust in them than those in the other age categories, and those with a university degree have the highest level of trust. Conspicuously, the longer citizens have lived in their current municipality, the lower the level of confidence. However, those who have lived 10 years or more in their current municipality constitute as much as 79 per cent of the total sample. The other two categories are: "3-9 years" and "less than 3 years". Nevertheless, the differences are significant. People living in sparsely-populated areas have a higher level of trust than people living elsewhere, yet the difference is not remarkable. Regarding occupation, the level of trust is highest among business owners and people in leading position and lowest among students and those who

identify their occupational position as workers. Citizens that ideologically place themselves to the right have a considerably higher level of confidence than those who lean to the left. The results are almost identical with regard to trust in civil servants. Using a similar index construction as in Table 1, we obtain a mean level of trust in local government councilors of 3.05. All Turku sub-areas are below the value of 3, southern Turku having the lowest level of trust in the survey: 2.48. Turku as a whole scores 2.80. Other municipalities below the center of the index are Kaarina (2.77), Raisio (2.95) and Nousiainen (2.83). The highest levels of trust in local politicians were observed in the small peripheral municipalities of Marttila (3.48), Tarvasjoki (3.33) and Sauvo (3.31) as well as in Rusko (3.53) and Naantali (3.33). Trust in civil servants follows the same pattern.

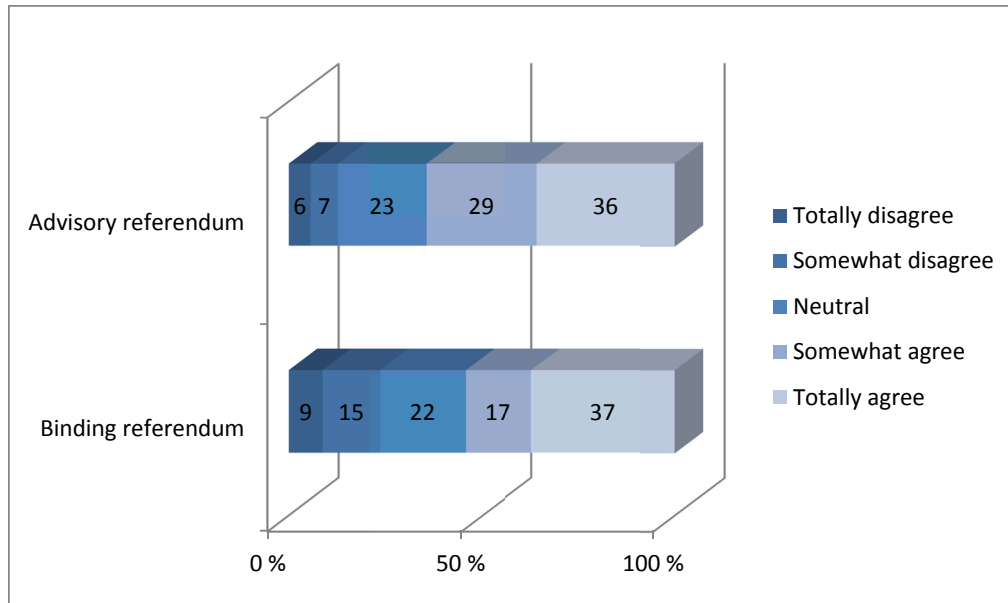


Figure 2. Binding/advisory referendum on a municipal merger

The last issue to examine before turning to political activity is attitudes towards holding local referendums on a municipal merger. Participants in the survey were asked to what extent the following statements regarding citizens' possibilities of participation and influence correspond to their own view: *a binding referendum on municipal mergers should be held; an advisory referendum on municipal mergers should be held*. Results for the whole region are presented in Figure 2. A slightly larger share of the respondents totally agree with the statement that a binding referendum should be held compared to the alternative, yet an advisory referendum gains stronger support when those who somewhat agree are taken into account.

Women are more in favor of an advisory referendum than men are. The youngest (18-29) support a referendum to a lesser extent than those in the other categories, whereas, rather surprisingly, those with only elementary school education are most in favor. There are no significant differences with regard to occupation, housing area and left-right position. The mean value for the total sample is 3.82 on the scale from 1 to 5. In Turku, support for an advisory referendum is highest in the western part of the city (3.91) and lowest in the eastern and the northern areas (3.51 and 3.55 respectively). The lowest level of support in the whole region was observed in Nousiainen (3.43). Most municipalities are close to the mean of the whole region; those municipalities most in

favor of an advisory referendum are Rusko (4.15), Sauvo (4.09) and Mynämäki (4.03).

Two additional statements may be examined in this connection. According to the Finnish Local Government Act, citizens representing at least five per cent of the local electorate may propose a municipal referendum.¹⁴ The statements read as follows: *referendum initiatives affect decision-making in the local government council; referendum initiatives affect public discussion*. A proposed initiative does not oblige the council to hold a referendum but it has to immediately consider the initiative. Therefore, both statements are relevant in this context. Concerning the first one, 42 per cent of the respondents took a neutral standpoint on this issue, and the remaining 58 per cent were equally distributed on both sides. Attitudes are more negative in Turku, whereas the opposite prevails in the small peripheral municipalities. A rather large share of the respondents (16% agreed totally and 38% agreed somewhat) believed that referendum initiatives affect public discussion. Differences between municipalities are quite small; the highest and the lowest index scores were observed in Tarvasjoki and Masku, 3.77 and 3.39 respectively. By contrast, there is a great deal of variation between different Turku sub-areas. The lowest index values were found in the western and the southern parts, whereas rather positive attitudes towards the effect of referendum initiatives on public discussion prevail in eastern Turku and the city center.

Political activity in a potential municipal merger

Concerning political activity, respondents in the survey were asked in what ways they have participated in local politics so far, listing a total of 15 modes. Thereafter, using the same list with one addition, they were asked how they would like to participate in a potential enlarged municipality. In Table 3, results for this question are listed first, because it is the most important issue with regard to the purpose of the study. Methods of participation and influence are listed in descending order (from the most to the least popular) based on this question. General attitudes towards these forms

of participation and influence were also asked because many people may feel that the possibility of democratic involvement is important, although they do not necessarily want to participate themselves. Village and community councils with decision-making power on locally important issues have not been used anywhere in the Turku region. As for the other forms of participation, the extent to which they are available and have been used in different municipalities varies considerably. Therefore, concerning former participation, they are not comparable. Attitudes towards municipal referendum initiatives were not asked because it was considered as overlapping with attitudes towards advisory referendums and citizen initiatives.

Table 3. Political activity and attitudes towards methods of participation and influence

	Would like to participate in	How important?	Have done before
Local elections	4.19	4.49	92
Advisory referendum	3.77	3.90	23
Citizen survey (telephone or form)	3.30	3.13	33
Public discussions with politicians and officials	3.26	3.72	31
Contacting a civil servant	3.25	3.73	47
Signing a petition	3.16	3.52	44
Contacting a local government councilor	3.13	3.70	34
Local area council	2.93	3.62	
Bee / voluntary community work	2.92	3.24	42
Internet surveys on the municipal website	2.82	3.11	12
Citizen initiative	2.80	3.61	5
Feedback form on the municipal website	2.72	3.17	11
Municipal referendum initiative	2.67		9
Feedback to the local council's agenda	2.64	3.13	12
Scenario workshops and planning cells	2.63	3.22	9
Act as a trustee	2.16	2.80	14

Note: Table entries are, in the second column, mean index values (scale: 1-5) on how interested respondents are in using these methods in a potential municipal merger; in the third column, mean index values (scale: 1-5) on how important respondents think that these methods are as part of political decision-making; in the fourth column, percentage of those who previously have used these modes of participation.

As for preferred methods in the future (the second column from the left), voting in local elections is the most popular form of participation. Kaarina, Turku, Paimio and Masku have the highest index values, whereas voting in local elections is least popular in Tarvasjoki. Almost 60 per cent of the citizens are very interested and another 20 per cent are quite interested in voting in a future enlarged municipality, whereas 11 per cent declare that they are not interested. Considering that voting is the foremost method of political participation, this result comes as no surprise. It should be pointed out that the purpose of participatory innovations is not to replace electoral democracy but rather to serve as a complement and to cure possible malaises of representative democracy. Therefore, more attention is given to other forms of democratic involvement.

In Table 4, mean values on future interest in three democratic innovations are given: advisory referendum, citizen initiative and local area councils. Municipalities and Turku sub-areas are listed in the same way as in Table 1. Quite a large share of the citizens are interested in voting in municipal referendums. To be precise, 36 per cent of the respondents stated that they are very interested and another 26 per cent stated that they are somewhat interested in participating in advisory referendums. The

greatest support was observed in the center and the southern part of Turku, Mynämäki and Paimio. Interest among the youngest is considerably lower than in the other age categories, those with a university degree are most interested, yet differences with regard to the level of education are rather small.

The other form of direct democracy – citizen and municipal referendum initiative – does not arouse as much interest as voting in an advisory referendum. The mean value for citizen initiative is somewhat higher and therefore included in Table 4. However, one cannot expect that citizens are as interested in proposing initiatives on various issues as in voting on these issues because the former takes much more of an effort. The same four municipalities are at the top of both lists: Aura, Sauvo, Tarvasjoki and Naantali, of which all but the last mentioned are small peripheral municipalities. In general, citizens living in city centers and suburbs are less interested than those living elsewhere. Those between the age of 30 and 64 are more interested, small differences prevail with regard to education, and people that position themselves to the right are more interested in proposing initiatives than those on the left of the ideological spectrum.

Table 4. Interest in advisory referendums, citizen initiatives and local area councils

Advisory referendum		Citizen initiative		Village/community councils	
Total sample	3.77	Total sample	2.80	Total sample	2.93
Turku	3.76	Turku	2.55	Turku	2.63
<i>Turku Center</i>	4.05	<i>Turku North</i>	2.88	<i>Turku North</i>	2.98
<i>Turku South</i>	4.02	<i>Turku East</i>	2.85	<i>Turku East</i>	2.85
<i>Turku West</i>	3.77	<i>Turku South</i>	2.56	<i>Turku South</i>	2.56
<i>Turku East</i>	3.56	<i>Turku Center</i>	2.35	<i>Turku Center</i>	2.55
<i>Turku North</i>	3.16	<i>Turku West</i>	2.21	<i>Turku West</i>	2.28
Kaarina	3.91	Naantali	3.19	Naantali	3.27
Raisio	3.87	Lieto	2.86	Lieto	2.95
Naantali	3.78	Kaarina	2.83	Raisio	2.91
Lieto	3.65	Raisio	2.52	Kaarina	2.80
Mynämäki	4.02	Aura	3.24	Marttila	3.31

Paimio	3.99	Sauvo	3.15	Aura	3.29
Masku	3.85	Tarvasjoki	3.11	Sauvo	3.26
Aura	3.80	Marttila	3.07	Tarvasjoki	3.21
Marttila	3.75	Paimio	3.01	Paimio	3.13
Sauvo	3.71	Nousiainen	2.93	Nousiainen	3.03
Tarvasjoki	3.61	Mynämäki	2.69	Mynämäki	2.99
Rusko	3.55	Rusko	2.53	Masku	2.71
Nousiainen	3.46	Masku	2.47	Rusko	2.60

Note: Table entries are mean values (scale: 1-5).

Participating in local area councils with decision-making power on locally important issues is of special interest, because such a forum has not been used anywhere in the region. Moreover, it has the potential of providing the citizens with a great deal of political influence. As can be seen in Table 4, citizens in Naantali and in the smallest municipalities Marttila, Aura, Sauvo and Tarvasjoki are most interested in this kind of participation. The same pattern as above concerning housing area and age prevails.

In Table 5, mean values on future interest in another three forms of political participation and influence are presented. Of the two methods concerned with consultation and deliberation – public discussions with politicians and officials / scenario workshops and planning cells – the former is considerably more popular, and therefore included in the table. One explanation may be that it is more difficult to conceive what scenario workshops and planning cells are. As for the latter mentioned participation mode, Marttila is the only municipality with an index value above the center of the scale. Looking closer at public discussions, once again most interest prevails among citizens in the smallest municipalities. Kaarina is also close to the top of the list. The youngest are less interested in engaging themselves in

discussions with politicians and officials, there are only small differences between different kinds of education, and those who ideologically lean to the right are more interested. There is a similar pattern with regard to scenario workshops and planning cells.

Three methods of participation and influence are concerned with e-democracy: providing feedback to the local council's agenda, filling in the feedback form on the municipal website, and taking part in Internet surveys on the municipal website. The last mentioned is included in Table 5 because it is somewhat more popular than the other two. Yet, it should be pointed out that the pattern concerning Internet surveys is quite representative of the other forms of e-democracy as well. Those who live in sparsely-populated areas are more interested in e-democracy than citizens in other areas. As for socio-demographic characteristics, the level of interest is somewhat higher among women and those with a university degree. Naturally, older people are less interested in e-democracy than younger ones partly because they do not use the Internet to the same extent. Quite surprisingly, however, the youngest ones are clearly less interested in using these forms of influence than those between the age of 30 and 64.

Table 5. Interest in public discussions, Internet surveys and contacting civil servants

Public discussions		Internet surveys		Contacting civil servants	
Total sample	3.26	Total sample	2.82	Total sample	3.25
Turku	2.97	Turku	2.70	Turku	2.93
<i>Turku East</i>	3.42	<i>Turku South</i>	3.40	<i>Turku East</i>	3.38
<i>Turku North</i>	3.36	<i>Turku Center</i>	2.82	<i>Turku North</i>	3.27
<i>Turku South</i>	2.92	<i>Turku West</i>	2.64	<i>Turku Center</i>	2.86
<i>Turku Center</i>	2.81	<i>Turku East</i>	2.56	<i>Turku South</i>	2.82
<i>Turku West</i>	2.37	<i>Turku North</i>	2.22	<i>Turku West</i>	2.23
Kaarina	3.56	Naantali	3.18	Naantali	3.53
Naantali	3.37	Raisio	3.04	Lieto	3.46
Lieto	3.31	Kaarina	2.73	Kaarina	3.35
Raisio	3.10	Lieto	2.67	Raisio	2.67
Sauvo	3.65	Aura	3.10	Paimio	3.70
Marttila	3.63	Sauvo	3.03	Rusko	3.56
Tarvasjoki	3.55	Marttila	2.89	Aura	3.54
Aura	3.52	Nousiainen	2.89	Sauvo	3.50
Nousiainen	3.47	Tarvasjoki	2.80	Marttila	3.48
Paimio	3.44	Masku	2.79	Nousiainen	3.34
Mynämäki	3.25	Paimio	2.70	Tarvasjoki	3.33
Rusko	3.00	Mynämäki	2.65	Masku	3.23
Masku	2.91	Rusko	2.56	Mynämäki	3.08

Note: Table entries are mean values (scale: 1-5).

Lastly, future interest in contacting local politicians and civil servants as a means of political influence is analyzed. Again, the more popular alternative is included in Table 5, and the overall picture is quite similar for both. People living in rural areas are more interested in direct contact with local politicians and civil servants than those who live in city centers and suburbs. A higher level of interest prevails among citizens with a university degree, those who ideologically lean more to the right, and among farmers. Younger citizens (age 18-29) are considerably less interested in contacting politicians and officials than those in the other age categories.

When looking at particular municipalities and Turku sub-areas, it may be pointed out that western Turku has the lowest index value of 11 of a total of 16 methods of participation and influence. Gratifyingly enough, participation in advisory referendums – the most popular method in the whole region besides voting in local elections – is not one of them. In fact, the index value for this item for western Turku is the same as the mean of the total sample, 3.77. As for the rest, voting in local elections is the only form of democratic involvement that the residents in western Turku are clearly interested in. This pattern is discernible in other Turku sub-areas as well,

notably in the city center, although to a lesser extent. However, there are also considerable variations between different sub-areas. In addition to e-democracy, citizens in southern Turku show interest in citizen surveys and signing petitions. Concerning public discussions with local politicians and officials, the eastern and the northern sub-areas show some interest, by contrast with the rest of the municipality.

In general, citizens in Turku seem to be rather unconcerned: they are less pessimistic regarding future prospects of democratic involvement than citizens in other municipalities and they are not very much interested in alternative forms of participation and influence. Citizens outside of Turku have more pessimistic views but they show more interest in democratic innovations. However, this pattern is in glaring contrast to the results regarding satisfaction with current methods of participation. Citizens in Turku are on average less satisfied with the current situation than citizens elsewhere but they, nonetheless, show little interest in participatory innovations. The citizens in the small municipalities are certainly pessimistic with regard to future involvement but, at the same time, they are concerned and committed. They feel that a municipal merger will bring about changes, which calls for action. By contrast, citizens in Turku are less concerned, even indifferent because a municipal merger does not imply changes to the same extent as in smaller municipalities.

Attitudes towards methods of participation and influence

As mentioned earlier, not all citizens are interested in participating themselves, yet many of them may feel that the possibility of democratic involvement is important. Therefore, we need to look at attitudes towards various methods of participation and influence, and evaluate how important citizens think that these are. As can be seen in the third column of Table 3, voting in local elections is regarded as the most important method of participation and influence. As many as two thirds of the respondents stated that voting in local elections is very important, and one fifth considered it quite important. Mean index values on attitudes are higher than those on future interest in participation regarding all modes except for citizen surveys. To a large extent, they follow a similar pattern: the most popular methods concerning participation in a future enlarged municipal unit are also regarded as the most important.

There are, however, some interesting exceptions. Although the interest in proposing citizen initiatives is rather low, a large share of the respondents believe that

it is important that the possibility of proposing initiatives exist. Taking into consideration that participation in advisory referendums is the second most popular form of democratic involvement, it may be concluded that there is a considerable level of support for direct democracy in the Turku region. Another exception concerns local area councils with decision-making power on locally important issues. Fifty-six per cent of the respondents regarded such decision-making bodies as important, whereas only 14 per cent attached little or no importance to them. Differences between municipalities and Turku sub-areas are relatively small; the highest level was observed in Tarvasjoki (index value: 3.82) and the lowest level was found in the western part of Turku (3.18). In Turku, local area councils are regarded as most important in the northern sub-area (3.71).

Still another encouraging finding is that public discussions with politicians and civil servants are regarded as important by a large share of the citizenry: 29 per cent of the respondents considered them very important and 33 per cent rather important. Contacting local politicians and officials appeared more important than providing feedback to the local council's agenda and on the municipal website. However, there is considerable support for Internet-voting in the future among the citizens. One statement in the survey was: *new technology, e.g. Internet-voting should be used regularly*. Thirty per cent of the respondents totally agreed with the statement, 17 per cent somewhat agreed, and 30 per cent had a neutral standpoint. All in all, the thesis that many people consider the possibility of participation in various ways as important, even though they are not necessarily interested in participating themselves, is largely supported by these findings.

Political activity in the past

Citizens' experience of political participation is illustrated in the last column of Table 3. As many as 92 per cent of the respondents have, according to their own statement, voted in local elections, which is a very large share considering that nationwide turnout in the last two local elections in 2008 and 2012 was around 60 per cent. However, two remarks need to be made here. First of all, respondents did not necessarily refer to the last elections but to any local elections in the past. Moreover, many respondents in surveys tend to declare that they have voted even though they have not because they do not remember exactly, or, more presumably, because of societal expectations on active political engagement.¹⁵ Concerning other forms of political activity, the ones that have been most widely used among the citizenry are contacting a civil servant, signing petitions and vol-

untary community work, albeit the last mentioned activity is not necessarily political. One third of the people have contacted a local politician and taken part in various citizen surveys.¹⁶ The opportunity of proposing citizen initiatives is fixed by law. A single citizen can propose an initiative, and that person has to be informed of the measures taken regarding the initiative. If 2 per cent of the citizens in a municipality propose an initiative, the issue has to be put on the local government council's agenda within six months. Only 5 per cent of the respondents have proposed a citizen initiative, whereas 9 per cent have been involved in municipal referendum initiatives. Participation in an advisory referendum is the other form of direct democracy available. Twenty-three per cent of the citizens in the Turku region have voted in municipal referendums. However, the extent to which referendums have been held varies. This is also true of deliberative forms of democracy such as taking part in public discussions with politicians and officials and engaging in scenario workshops and planning cells. The activity rate amounts to 31 and 9 per cent, respectively. As for the methods related to e-democracy, the activity rate for each of them is just over 10 per cent.

To a considerable extent, former experience of political participation correlates with future interest in these methods and attitudes towards them. However, two exceptions may be highlighted. Almost half of the citizens have signed petitions, yet signing petitions is not regarded as one of the foremost methods of participation and exerting influence on politics. Advisory referendum, by contrast, arouses much more interest as a future method of participation and influence than it has in the past.

Summary

It comes as no surprise that a large share of the citizenry in the Turku region is pessimistic concerning the prospects of participation and influence in a future potential municipal merger. Relatively speaking, citizens in the municipality of Turku have a more optimistic view than citizens elsewhere. Presumably, the citizens in Turku do not believe that the consequences of a merger will be very far-reaching in this respect, compared to the public opinion in other municipalities. The most pessimistic opinions prevail in small municipalities on the periphery of the region. However, citizens in these areas are also more concerned and committed, because, on the whole, they show more interest in alternative methods of participation and influence than citizens in the other municipalities. They are certainly more satisfied with current methods of participation and influence but, on

the other hand, they to a large extent think that these methods will be insufficient in a larger municipal unit. Particularly, citizens in the small peripheral areas show more interest in proposing citizen initiatives, participating in local area councils with decision-making power and engaging themselves in public discussions with politicians and officials than citizens in other municipalities do. A large part of the citizenry appreciates the possibility of political participation and citizen influence on decision-making. Several forms of democratic involvement are viewed as important, notably voting in local elections and referendums, proposing citizen initiatives, participating in local area councils, contacting local government councilors and civil servants as well as taking part in public discussions with these actors.

Before a municipal amalgamation comes into existence, a majority of the citizens in the region demands a referendum on the issue. Advisory referendum garners somewhat more support than a binding one. Almost two thirds of the respondents in the survey agreed with the statement that an advisory referendum on a municipal merger should be held. The level of political trust is rather low in the whole region. There is, however, a difference between trust in political parties and MPs, on the one hand, and trust in local politicians and civil servants, on the other. The citizens in the Turku region have considerably more trust in the latter than in the former.

Young people and students have a more positive view in general of the prospects of democratic involvement than the others, there are no differences between men and women in this regard, and differences concerning the level of education are small and insignificant. Older people are more satisfied with current forms of democratic involvement than young and middle-aged ones. A higher level of satisfaction also prevails among those with a university degree, and those who are furthest to the left on the ideological scale are most satisfied with current methods of participation and influence.

Rather surprisingly, considering future participation in a potential municipal merger, the youngest (18-29) are less interested than those between the age of 30 and 64 in all methods that have been analyzed more closely: referendums, citizen initiatives, village/community councils, public discussions, e-democracy and direct contact with politicians and officials. This is in glaring contrast to the general opinion on future prospects of democratic involvement. A plausible explanation may be that the youngest are not as interested in politics as older generations but they are not that worried either, whereas many older people feel that these kinds of things were better before. Women are somewhat more interested in

e-democracy – otherwise, there are no significant differences between men and women. There are surprisingly small differences concerning the level of education. Most notably, those with a university degree are more interested in e-democracy and direct contact with politicians and officials than the others. Those who position themselves to the right on the ideological spectrum are more interested in democratic innovations; significant differences prevail with regard to citizen initiatives, local area councils, public discussions and direct contact with politicians and officials. By contrast, those who lean to the left are somewhat more interested in voting in local elections.

Previous evaluations have shown that the restructuring of local government creates a demand for increased local democracy; citizens want more direct influence in the municipal decision-making process. Notably in rural areas, people feel that their position has weakened because of municipal mergers. Simultaneously, amalgamations arouse interest in the local administration among the citizens, which the policy-makers should utilize. Similarly, the findings in this study show that people demand improved local democratic structures and a direct say in the decision-making process; the demand is more emphasized in smaller municipalities than in larger ones. First of all, citizens generally show a great deal of interest in advisory referendums, which is a form of direct democracy. In small peripheral municipalities, people are interested in co- and network governance, where citizens share decision-making power with politicians, and consultative-discursive procedures in the form of public discussions.

Policy advice and recommendations

Apart from voting in local elections, advisory referendum is the most popular method of participation and influence, and it could be used on a wider scale as a means of involving the citizens in the democratic process in a potential enlarged municipal unit. It is a fairly easy and straightforward form of political participation that poses few demands on citizens in terms of time and effort.

The smallest municipalities (foremost Tarvasjoki, Marttila, Sauvo and Aura) located on the periphery of the region distinguish themselves in several respects. The citizens in these municipalities are less interested in voting in local elections than citizens in most of the other municipalities. By contrast, they are more interested in participating in local area councils, if such forums are established, and public discussions with politicians and

officials. By establishing such councils, and by frequently arranging discussions with these actors in the rural-type areas, citizens could still have influence on issues that are important to them and maintain a sense of municipal autonomy even in the case of a municipal merger.

Citizen initiatives are also more popular in small rural-type municipalities (and in Naantali) than elsewhere. However, the attitudes towards the opportunity of using citizen initiatives are rather positive in the whole region. There are probably many people who do not know that the citizen initiative device exists and even more people who do not know how to propose an initiative. Notwithstanding, as the analysis shows, the initiative device clearly has potential, and it could therefore be given more visibility and promotion as a means of citizen influence on local politics.

The low level of satisfaction with current methods of participation and influence in Kaarina, Paimio and Turku calls for attention. The level of trust in local politicians and officials in Kaarina is also the lowest in the region. Public meetings where residents discuss locally important issues with politicians and officials is recommended for Kaarina and Paimio, because they both have rather high values on this form of democratic involvement. In addition, a large share of the citizenry in Kaarina, Paimio and Turku show interest in advisory referendums. Participating in referendums is actually the only political activity, besides voting in local elections, that arouses considerable interest in Turku. On the other hand, the citizens in Turku are not as worried about the future as they are in the other municipalities regarding political participation and influence.

Political actors in all parts of the region could also ponder upon how the Internet might be used more effectively as a means of citizen influence. Even though the existing forms of exerting influence through the Internet do not arouse very much interest in general, there is potential for engaging citizens to a greater extent by means of new technology, for instance through social media and Internet-voting on various issues.

As for democratic legitimacy, a municipal merger in the Turku region is not doomed to failure, although the attitudes towards a merger in general are rather negative. There are some preferred methods of participation and influence in various parts of the region, the opportunity for democratic involvement is widely appreciated, and there is potential for vitalizing citizen participation through participatory reforms.

References

- 1 Vetter, A. and Kersting, N. (2003) *Reforming Local Government in Europe: Closing the Gap between Democracy and Efficiency*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich. De Ceuninck, K., Reynaert, H., Steyvers, K. and Valcke, T. (2010) "Municipal Amalgamations in the Low Countries: Same Problems, Different Solutions", *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 6, 803-22.
- 2 Rinne-Koski, K., Saartenoja, A., Rantanen, M. and Tantarimäki, S. (2012) *Kuntaliitos ja maaseutualueiden asukasosallistuminen Kouvolan, Salon ja Seinäjoen kaupungeissa*. Raportteja 79. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto, Ruralia-Instituutti.
- 3 Pekola-Sjöblom, M. (2011) *Kuntalaiset uudistuvissa kunnissa*, Acta nro 229. Helsinki: Suomen kuntaliitto. Sandberg, S. (2012) *Paras-uudistus kuntapäätäjän silmin*, Acta nro 235. Helsinki: Suomen kuntaliitto.
- 4 Kunnat (www.kunnat.net)
- 5 Rinne-Koski, K., Saartenoja, A., Rantanen, M. and Tantarimäki, S. (2012) *Kuntaliitos ja maaseutualueiden asukasosallistuminen Kouvolan, Salon ja Seinäjoen kaupungeissa*. Raportteja 79. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto, Ruralia-Instituutti.
- 6 Nurmi and Ylästaro were merged with Seinäjoki; Anjalankoski, Elimäki, Jaala, Kuusankoski and Valkeala were merged with Kouvola; Halikko, Kiikala, Kisko, Kuusjoki, Muurla, Perniö, Pertteli, Suomusjärvi and Särkisalo were merged with Salo.
- 7 Christensen, H.S. (2012) "E-democracy in Finnish Municipalities", Research Briefings 4b/2012. City of Turku: Urban Research and Statistics.
- 8 Geissel, B. (2009) "How to Improve the Quality of Democracy? Experiences with Participatory Innovations at the Local Level in Germany", *German Politics and Society* 93, Vol. 27, No. 4, 51-71, p. 53.
- 9 Newton, K. (2012) "Curing the Democratic Malaise with Democratic Innovations", in B. Geissel and Newton, K. (eds), *Evaluating Democratic Innovations*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 3-20, p. 5.
- 10 Geissel, B. (2009) "How to Improve the Quality of Democracy? Experiences with Participatory Innovations at the Local Level in Germany", *German Politics and Society* 93, Vol. 27, No. 4, 51-71.
- 11 Newton, K. (2012) "Curing the Democratic Malaise with Democratic Innovations", in B. Geissel and Newton, K. (eds), *Evaluating Democratic Innovations*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 3-20.
- 12 Klingemann, H-D. (1999) "Mapping Political Support in the 1990s", in Norris, P. (ed.), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 31-56. Dalton, R.J. (2008) *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Washington: CQ Press.
- 13 Dalton, R.J., McAllister, I. and Wattenberg, M.P. (2000) "The Consequences of Partisan Dealignment", in Dalton, R.J. and Wattenberg, M.P. (eds.), *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 37-63.
- 14 Finlex (www.finlex.fi)
- 15 Cassel, C.S. (2003) "Overreporting and Electoral Participation Research", *American Politics Research* 31(1), 81-92.
- 16 Participating in citizen surveys explicitly concerns the time period before this survey was conducted; otherwise the percentage would be 100.

Research Briefings (Tutkimuskatsauksia) is Turku Urban Research Programme's publication. It is published regularly in Finnish and occasionally in English or other languages. The briefings reflect the views of their author(s) and these are not necessarily those of the City of Turku.

Dr (Pol.Sc.) Krister Lundell is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science in Åbo Akademi University.

Editor:

Sampo Ruoppila, Research Director
sampo.ruoppila@turku.fi

Publisher:

The City of Turku Administration
City Development Group
P.O.Box 355 (Yliopistonkatu 27a), FI-20101 Turku