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Curtailing political short-termism in legislatures: a trade-off between influence and institutionalization?

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Abstract

Legislatures have recently started to invest in anticipatory governance. Alongside new practices, they have introduced designated future committees and organs that connect MPs to future-regarding visioning and advice. Two decades ago, only Finland had a 'future committee'; today broadly similar organs exist in 10 countries around the world. While signaling an important attempt to take expert-driven anticipatory governance closer to voters, legislative future organs may become short-lasting or remain politically weak, as their efforts to gain power typically threaten established legislative actors. To examine this emerging tension, we theoretically distinguish the unorthodox methods of future committees from traditional legislative practices and empirically compare the operation of all existing legislative future committees and similar organs. We uncover a considerable similarity between these institutions that mostly operate outside of the ordinary legislative process. To survive, they must add value to MPs without endangering the existing division of power. Finding this balance enhances the consolidation of legislative future organs, but it simultaneously limits their conventional political impact.

Keywords Legislatures, Committees, Strategic foresight, Future-regarding policymaking

Introduction

In the 1960s, systematic efforts to anticipate societal changes started to develop in companies, universities, think tanks, and international organizations. Growing awareness of global 'megatrends' like climate change also soon alerted policymakers and scholars and led to a surge of institutional designs that sought to relieve the myopic thrust of electoral democracy [8, 9, 12, 18, 22, 28, 38]. In national-level policymaking, political executives have carried out most of this activity, and expert-driven governmental foresight units can now be found on all continents [43, 46]. However, as scholars of intergenerational politics have reminded, future-regarding policymaking

should adhere to democratic principles like legitimacy [29]. To become normatively feasible and also effective in practice, far-sighted policy plans of government experts need to enjoy broad ownership among elected politicians. As only a small fraction of them serve as ministers in governments it seems highly important to also consider how the final democratic arbiters, *legislatures and legislators*, connect to national-level foresight processes. Legislatures need sufficient information to oversee governments [10] and participation in foresight activities can make legislators more aware of the long-term effects of policies [12], potentially creating positive spillover effects to other sectors.

However, it is equally important to notice that the contrast between ideals of anticipatory governance and traditional legislative practices can create formidable challenges for the emergence and institutionalization of legislative future organs. Organizationally, legislatures are very stable institutions. For decades, their work has

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revolved around government bills which are processed by party groups and sectoral committees, and new legislators are quickly socialized into the existing organizational culture. Exogenous factors may trigger reforms, but their success and survival depend ultimately on the support of legislators [32, 41]. In the realm of future-regarding institutions, a famous example is the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) that US Congress launched in 1972 to inform legislators about scientific innovations. Although the idea spread to other countries in the 1980s, a new Congress majority closed the OTA in the mid-1990s due to budget reasons and the perceived ‘politicization’ of OTAs work [49].

Interestingly, however, between the early 1990s and 2020s, 10 legislatures across the world have established future committees and similar organs that engage Members of Parliament (MP) in the development of long-term scenarios that challenge the myopic nature of legislative work and involve legislatures in discussions about societal ‘megatrends’ such as climate change and digitalization. That MPs in several countries have decided to invest significant resources in such institutions is already a major transformation in the stable world of legislatures.

Another question is what such future organs can do to lengthen political timespans—and moreover, how well they are shielded from traditional political actors with more immediate goals? Considering that the central ambition of these legislative future institutions strikes at the very heart of an essentially myopic political arena, we know surprisingly little about their activities. Except for a few case studies on the Committee for the Future of the Eduskunta, the unicameral legislature of Finland [5, 8, 25], and a comparative survey of the practices of Commonwealth parliaments [10], the functions of future-regarding legislative organs, which at least theoretically could exert a significant impact on how legislatures work, have so far escaped scholarly attention. In a recent article, Koskimaa and Raunio [26] traced the diffusion of legislature-based foresight institutions, showing the influential role of the Finnish pacesetter committee in the gradual spread of parliamentary future organs. This is also why this article investigates the Finnish case in detail—its mode of operation has clearly shaped the practices of the MP-driven parliamentary future organs established in the early twenty-first century.

Motivated by these gaps and considerations, this article examines the organization and operation of existing legislative future committees and similar organs with a designated focus on the future. We acknowledge the existence of other future-regarding legislative organs and mechanisms (TA and other parliamentary research units, focused special committees (e.g., on climate change), special monitoring and reporting methods), but focus on

the committee model and its close derivatives because through the more direct involvement, legitimacy, and resources of MPs they most clearly challenge the ordinary parliamentary working mode. We focus especially on the relationship between the political role of these institutions and their ability to institutionalize, which, we argue, is inversely correlated: a stronger political role leads to shorter existence whereas a weak political role facilitates organizational longevity. The study is guided by three interrelated research questions: (1) which factors facilitate the emergence of legislative future committees/organs, (2) what are their general features (organization, tasks, responsibilities), and (3) which factors condition their survival? We utilize a global survey of legislatures, official documents, and elite interviews from existing future committees/organs to answer these questions. In addition to specifying the features of existing future organs, we cover three short-lived experiments that provide important lessons about the survival of legislative future organs.

The article has theoretical and empirical objectives. Theoretically, we contribute to the burgeoning debates on the creation and institutionalization of future-regarding democratic practices. While previous, largely theoretical literature has suggested abstract solutions for making legislatures more future-sensitive (e.g., [13], it has not discussed the more practical challenges involved in adjoining future-oriented policymaking with the standard mode of legislative decision-making. In developing our theoretical model, we draw especially from the experience of the Finnish Committee for the Future, as it has inspired the development of other legislative future organs [26] and likely also their tasks and operating practices. Empirically, we provide the first comparison of the functioning of existing legislative future committees and similar organs. The analysis shows that combining a future-oriented approach with normal legislative business is indeed no easy task, and how the future organs operate is likely to be crucial in consolidating their position in the legislatures. We conclude that due to this inherent discrepancy, the political impact of legislative future committees and similar organs is likely to remain rather limited and thus the process of moving towards more future-regarding democratic governance has only begun.

Wedding anticipatory governance with standard legislative work: a theoretical framework

The establishment, organization, and institutionalization of a legislative future committee: lessons from the Finnish case

In seeking factors that can explain the emergence, operation, and institutionalization of legislative future

committees, the Committee for the Future (CF) in the Finnish Eduskunta is an obvious benchmark. It is the first and by far the most established such institution in the world and its example has inspired the development of most theoretical models and existing legislative future committees [8, 12, 26]. Drawing inspiration from the eclectic, visionary, and long-term-minded emphasis of academic future studies [31, 44], the broader Finnish national foresight model has often been considered as a global forerunner to be emulated.¹

The first thing to note is the system's breadth and deep roots in various societal sectors, which have also conditioned the emergence and institutionalization of the CF. The strongly interconnected multi-level structure links the government, ministries, and the parliament, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), research institutes, and regional authorities, into a coordinated process for producing foresight information [8, 21]. The early institutionalization of a broad-ranging futures studies network linking various non-state actors from universities to business and trade was an important facilitator of the foresight system. The Finnish Society for Futures Studies was established in 1980, while Tutkas, the Association of Researchers and Members of Parliament had been founded a decade earlier in 1970. Tutkas sought to educate MPs on scientific developments, especially on technological change and sustainability [31]. Already in the 1980s, Tutkas discussed the creation of a foresight institution in the Eduskunta ([5], 150).

The emergence of the CF is also characterized by significant personal input and engagement of MPs working in a non-partisan fashion. In 1983, Martti Tiuri, a professor at the Helsinki University of Technology was elected to Eduskunta and started to chair Tutkas. An avid supporter of technology assessment, he criticized the hectic work conditions of MPs that decreased their capacity to stay informed about scientific advances. In 1987, Eero Paloheimo, another PhD from and later a professor at Helsinki University of Technology, was elected to Eduskunta. A radical ecologist, Paloheimo had written about future issues for decades and declared that his central motivation for becoming an MP was to curb the short-termism of legislative politics [5, 27].

Already in the mid-1980s two similar initiatives—the first from citizen activists and the second from MPs—were put forth for establishing a legislative foresight unit.

After an initial lukewarm reaction, governing elites got interested in the idea, and a special expert committee was appointed to study it, eventually suggesting the development of a state-level strategic foresight unit [1, 31, 50]. In 1987–1992, Paloheimo collected 167 names (out of 200 MPs), an all-time record, for a private MP's motion about a legislative future unit [5]. However, the initiative met fierce opposition from the legislature's leading public officials and politicians, who claimed that such an institution was unnecessary, as existing committees could also do foresight, and the institution would not contribute to Eduskunta's basic legislative work. It was also noted that its cross-sectoral focus could jeopardize the work of other committees. At the same time, the broader societal context facilitated Paloheimo's project. The collapse of the Soviet Union had slumped the strongly export-driven Finnish economy into its worst recession that continued until the mid-1990s. The country also gained an opportunity to seek new international partners and it applied for a membership in the European Union (EU) already in 1992. Overall, the rapid transformation of Finland's internal and external operating context facilitated a more strategic thinking among decision-makers [50]. The turmoil of the early 1990s has been generally considered as a central driver behind the birth of the national foresight system and the CF [45].

In June 1992 Paloheimo's motion was tabled. It called for amending the constitution with an obligation for every government to issue a report on long-term challenges. The 'founding fathers' of the CF—MPs Tiuri and Paloheimo—saw that to institutionalize such a system, it had to be based on an official government document that at the same time does not step on the toes of existing legislative organs. The 'report' mechanism which had recently been developed to enhance the more informal and broad-ranging government-parliament correspondence worked well as it never led to a vote of confidence and it did not violate the competencies of other committees. On the other hand, it also did not leave much room for the CF to exert direct influence on legislation. The Constitutional Law Committee (CLC) advised the Eduskunta to discard Paloheimo's initiative, but after changing its status from a constitutional clause to a resolution the Eduskunta accepted the motion. The first government future report was issued in 1993 and to provide Eduskunta's formal reply, the Committee for the Future was established as a temporary organ. The governments formed after the 1995 and 1999 elections also committed to producing future reports and the CF was re-instituted in a similar fashion. Finally, again contrary to the views of the CLC and other leading Eduskunta officials and with considerable cross-party majority, in 2000 the Eduskunta accorded the CF the status of a permanent committee [5].

¹ For example, OECD's recent guide to better foresight emphasizes strongly the Finnish model [34]. At the 2019 GFC meeting of OECD the Finnish foresight system was presented as the 'cutting edge' of public sector foresight work. OECD, Government Foresight Community annual meeting 2019, Main takeaways of the meetings of 7 and 8 October 2019. A recent report by the European Parliament also highlighted the Finnish model [15].

As was noted, the establishment of CF was from the very beginning a markedly MP-driven process. The process was also highly untypical because political parties and the government-opposition division, which typically dominate Finnish politics, played no role whatsoever [1]). Overall, the personalized nature of the process differed significantly from the ordinary processes of Eduskunta. Support among MPs also continues to be crucial for the survival of the committee, as its existence is formally confirmed at the beginning of every electoral term when Eduskunta's standing orders are approved.

The tasks of the CF differ significantly from those of ordinary Eduskunta committees. It has 17 party-nominated members, the normal size for an Eduskunta committee, but instead of monitoring law proposals, it defines its mission as generating dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities. Specifically, it prepares the Eduskunta's response to the Government's Report on the Future, issues statements to other committees, analyses future-regarding research and methods, and serves as the legislative body responsible for assessing technological development and its societal consequences. However, as the committee proclaims on its website, 'the most important efforts are devoted to [the] Committee's own issues, its own projects. The power [to] decide its own agenda is one of the pillars of the strength of the Committee. Seventeen parliamentarians themselves stake out policy lines for the future. The time perspective is long and the scale of issues broad.'

Over the years, the CF has consolidated its role and developed distinct tasks, working practices and incentives that provide internal cohesion and external legitimacy. The 'future dialogue' has become strongly institutionalized within Eduskunta and its governmental counterpart, the prime minister's office, and is the formal-institutional backbone of the Committee for the Future [45], see also [8, 12].² The committee operates along non-partisan lines and utilizes open seminars, crowdsourcing, workshops, expert hearings, and consultations with stakeholders and the wider public to scrutinize various topics. It publishes reports on a very diverse range of themes, and in April 2021 it even interacted with artificial intelligence, inviting Muskie and Saara, two characters created by the GPT-3 artificial intelligence system, to its meeting to discuss the United Nations 2030 Agenda [16].

The CF's publications and other activities have gradually increased, a development partly explained by the

strong networks it has created with various stakeholders, not least academics. It lies low in committee hierarchy but brings a positive international reputation for the Eduskunta. Mostly, however, its political impact is considered indirect and conditional: MPs seated in the CF can take their knowledge to debates in the other sectoral committees, plenary, and party groups, and external stakeholders and especially the government can adopt insights from its outputs, but it mostly remains detached from normal legislative business. This 'harmless' outsider position has probably contributed to its longevity: it creates some good (especially for Eduskunta's reputation) while interfering little with the policy process ([5, 8]: 401–415, [25]).

Factors conditioning the emergence and institutionalization of legislative future committees

Based on the Finnish case, two mutually reinforcing conditions seem especially important for the establishment and consolidation of anticipatory governance in legislatures: the existence of a broader foresight network and support among MPs. The actors in the foresight network can provide external legitimacy and support, especially if the network contains a wide range of prominent private and public sector organizations from different policy sectors. Without such a broader supporting structure, initiatives for legislative foresight committee—whose aim and work methods significantly differ from ordinary committee practices (see below)—can become a 'bad investment' for MPs.

Over time, organized foresight activities can develop into a 'foresight ecosystem', a semi-permanent network composed of key governing institutions (notably the executive branch, including ministries and special public sector agencies) and external stakeholders (companies, NGOs, and academia). When there is a sufficiently large set of actors engaged in foresight work, the ecosystem—including the legislative future committee—will sustain itself through regular interaction and outputs that disperse the institutionalizing capacity wider than a single institution could [43]. If the foresight network is large, the legislative future committee has more partners that it interacts with. These partners are essential, as foresight work and the scenario-building approach rely on expert information from stakeholders. This should also improve the quality of the reports by the legislative foresight unit. Ideally, at the center of the foresight ecosystem should be the government, coordinating the national foresight activities and producing various future-related documents.

Support among MPs is crucial both for the establishment and the survival of the foresight unit. It matters because while a lot of countries have invested in foresight

² According to our interviewees, that dialogue also bound the government to strategic foresight and extended organized foresight activities to ministries and regional authorities. For example, Finland Futures Research Centre was established in 1992 at Turku School of Economics to provide expert assistance for the CF.

Table 1 Standard mode of legislative politics vs anticipatory governance

	Standard mode of legislative politics	Anticipatory governance ideal applied to legislatures
<i>Agenda-setting</i>	Government bills	Own projects
<i>Types of issues</i>	Legislation, sectoral	Non-legislative, cross-sectoral
<i>Time frame</i>	Electoral term	Several decades
<i>Role of political parties</i>	Government-opposition cleavage, party discipline	Non-existent, deliberation of independent MPs
<i>External stakeholders</i>	Structured hearings with selected interest groups	Open and reflexive dialogue with academics, NGOs, and the government
<i>Focus of meetings</i>	Detailed scrutiny of bills	Broad deliberation and scenario-building
<i>Outputs</i>	Committee statements and plenary votes	Broad studies and reports

work, such units will be located in the executive branch unless MPs specifically show interest in foresight and in having a future committee in the parliament. Only MPs can alter the status quo within legislatures. As the Finnish case demonstrates, the challenge is that MPs can have various logical reasons for objecting to the establishment of legislative foresight institutions. They may feel that foresight is the job of the executive branch. MPs might also fear that the new cross-sectoral foresight organ would interfere with the work of existing committees. Here, another good example is Germany where “the idea of creating a future-oriented full committee has been considered [twice] in the Bundestag and twice formally rejected ... In both cases, established committees prevailed over future-oriented proposals because they feared that any such body would become a “supercommittee “ capable of overriding their ‘leading’ role in their traditionally defined area of competence.’ ([24]: 34–35). In addition, legislators could feel that the foresight body would somehow be an odd, novelty element, detached from the usual, more serious legislative business, making it, as was noted, a ‘bad investment’ for busy MPs.

The Finnish case also suggests that an institutionalized legislative future organ should be rather hard to dismantle externally because its existence rests on the wills of MPs that represent the voting public. However, the survival of the legislative future organ requires that anticipatory governance practices somehow bring added value to busy MPs and legislatures. Jurisdictional reshuffles aside, sectoral legislative committees normally do not need to worry about their position. For a foresight organ, the situation is considerably more challenging, as it must prove its worth, both inside the legislature and more broadly in the whole national political system without retorting to ordinary electoral pledges that it cannot deliver. The foresight unit could offer MPs an interesting forum for discussing future challenges, with the debates also benefiting the short-term goals of parliamentarians. In the Finnish case, the future committee’s international

reputation has also been a major institutionalizing factor, but it largely rests on its global forerunner status that is impossible to replicate. In general, however, the longevity of such a committee likely enhances if it can produce benefits also for those legislative functionaries that are not directly involved in its work.

Ideal tasks and functions: two approaches to legislative policymaking

Besides paying attention to factors that condition the emergence and survival of legislative future committees, we argue it is essential to also understand how much the two approaches to legislative politics—the traditional committee mode and the anticipatory ideal—differ, and how the difference likely affects the policy impact and longevity of future committees. In essence, ordinary legislative work builds on the interplay of government and opposition parties. The government initiates legislation that is scrutinized in committees and debated and voted upon in the plenary. In addition to committee work, there are tools available for individual MPs, including questions and private member’s motions. Overall, legislatures normally take annually hundreds of decisions, adopting laws and various resolutions. Based on the Finnish case, anticipatory governance style in turn is a less partisan, looser, less structured, and more deliberative process. Agenda items are primarily chosen by MPs, timetables are flexible, and instead of definite and clear partisan ‘decisions’ the output consists of longer, less partisan, and semi-academic reports. Table 1 summarizes the two models of governance.

Starting from the beginning of the legislative policy process, the agendas of legislatures are typically dominated by bill proposals and non-legislative items such as topical debates or government reports. To the extent that time allows, parliaments can handle other matters, including those originating in the legislature itself, but MPs’ private members’ motions are seldom successful [30]. In anticipatory governance, on the other hand, the

agenda would primarily be determined by MPs themselves. Apart from reacting to potential documents from the executive or international organizations, such as government ‘future reports’, the agenda would consist of non-legislative ‘own projects’—that is, MPs would decide which issues deserve attention, with the selection of agenda items ideally driven by the interests of the future generations.

It may be unfair to claim that MPs would not consider future generations, but the majority of items processed by legislatures deal with more topical problems, annual budgets included. Laws can stay in force for decades and often have long-term implications (e.g., decisions about energy sources, see [37], but the schedule of their surfacing and the final form they take is dependent on how incumbent powerholders interpret current challenges [23]. Most laws are sectoral, prepared in a single ministry or executive department, with a particular committee having the main responsibility for the draft bill inside the legislature. On the contrary, in anticipatory governance, the timespan is much longer, with the time horizon of the issues extending several decades or even hundreds of years into the future. Most issues are also cross-sectoral, as in line with the scenario model future-regarding policymaking views societal problems as essentially multidimensional and complex, overlapping the boundaries of individual policy domains.

Turning to how politics is conducted, in the ordinary legislative process, an issue is dispatched to a committee with the final plenary vote preceded by a debate. The extent to which debates occur inside the committees or in the plenary depends on the salience of the items and national legislative cultures. In any case, the government has an incentive to ensure the smooth passage of its proposals, with various coalition management mechanisms designed to ensure that MPs toe the party line [6]. In parliamentary regimes party discipline is strong and MPs are expected not to speak against their party. Typical exceptions are certain issues of conscience, but in general party control is strong both in the committees and in the plenary [7]. Committees focus very much on detailed scrutiny of the bills, hearing evidence from various interest groups—mainly corporatist actors, businesses, and NGOs [42]. These powerful organized interests often have significant resources to defend the status quo.

The Finnish case suggests that in the anticipatory governance ideal, the operating culture of legislative committees is very different. Government-opposition dynamic is less relevant, and party discipline is weaker or even entirely absent. However, much would depend on the extent to which the issues handled by the future

committee were linked to more short-term or tangible interests of the parties and issues dealt in other committees. Ideally, though, MPs should deliberate freely on large-scale questions without expectations of party unity or supporting or opposing the government—and the breadth and complexity of issues support this perspective. Especially when the agenda consists of non-legislative ‘own projects’, the schedules would be looser, and the main form of output would be reports based on independent research and often authored by or together with various external experts. Foresight work revolves around scenario-building and horizon scanning, and that approach would be also used by MPs: the legislative foresight unit would outline various future scenarios in dialogue with external stakeholders—research institutes, think tanks, NGOs, potential government foresight units—which would then be debated by the parliamentarians and included in the studies or reports. Overall, anticipatory governance therefore emphasizes unconstrained deliberation, with the ‘committee culture’ resembling more an academic seminar instead of a party-political meeting.

Taken together, this comparison of two ideal types suggests that a legislative future committee cannot be politically influential in the traditional legislative sense and long-lasting at the same time. While such organs are established by MPs that gain mandate directly from voting publics, their emergence and survival depend on pre-existing legislative actors (including political parties) that may want to limit the political capacity of future committees as it can encroach on their own roles. An initiative that is too bold is likely to face an early demise whereas a weaker organ can survive if it is supported by MPs for whom the new organ brings added value, with external support from the broader foresight ‘ecosystem’. Overall, making parliaments more future-regarding seems to be a much slower and piecemeal effort than just establishing a designated future committee.

Data and methods

To identify the existing legislative future institutions with a distinct focus on future matters and direct involvement of MPs, we first consulted literature and official documents, and then carried out an email survey in spring 2020 addressed to all national legislatures ($N=192$), issuing separate surveys to lower and upper chambers of bicameral legislatures. Despite multiple reminders, the response rate was 16%, which is not surprising given the specific topic and language (English) of our inquiry. In the third stage, we checked the website of every parliament. With translation help from research assistants, we

Table 2 Parliamentary future institutions (2023)

Country/parliament or chamber	Foresight institution (year of establishment)	Main features
Finland/Eduskunta	Committee for the Future (1993)	Parliamentary committee consisting of legislators
Chile/Senate	Comision de Desafíos del Futuro, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación (2012)	Parliamentary committee consisting of legislators
Brazil/Senate	Comissão Senado do Futuro (2013)	Parliamentary committee consisting of legislators
Austria/Bundesrat	Ausschuss für Innovation, Technologie und Zukunft (2015)	Parliamentary committee consisting of legislators
Estonia/Riigikogu	Foresight Centre (2017)	Research institute under the Riigikogu, consists of scientific experts but involves MPs in its work
South Korea/National Assembly	National Assembly Futures Institute (2018)	Research institute under the National Assembly, consists of scientific experts
Iceland/Althingi	Prime Minister's Committee for the Future (2018)/Future Committee (2021)	Parliamentary committee consisting of legislators. From 2018–2021 it was based in the Prime Minister's Office but its members were MPs
Philippines/Senate	Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking (2019)	Parliamentary committee consisting of legislators
Lithuania/Seimas	Committee for the Future (2020)	Parliamentary committee consisting of legislators
Uruguay	Comisión Especial de Futuros (2021)	Parliamentary committee consisting of legislators

paid particular attention to those pages listing the committees and other organs of the legislatures.

We identified ten existing parliamentary institutions—eight committees and two research centers—that were specifically established to debate the ‘future’ or assess long-term challenges (Table 2). The committees are the Committee for the Future in the Finnish Eduskunta (established in 1993), the Comision de Desafíos del Futuro, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación in the Chilean Senate (2012), Comissão Senado do Futuro in the Brazilian Senate (2013), Ausschuss für Innovation, Technologie und Zukunft in the Austrian Bundesrat (2015), the Future Committee of the Icelandic Althingi (2018/2021), the Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking in the Philippines’ Senate (2019), the Committee for the Future of the Lithuanian Seimas (2020), and the Comisión de Futuro in the Uruguayan general Assembly (2021), while the two research centers are The Foresight Centre of the Estonian Riigikogu (2017) and the National Assembly Futures Institute in South Korea (2018). In four cases, the future committee is placed in the upper house, but only Austria has strongly asymmetrical bicameralism, with the Bundesrat being significantly weaker than the lower house. Chile, Brazil, and the Philippines represent more symmetrical bicameralism. We also detected three cases where a legislative future organ was erected but failed to survive. A Commissioner for Future Generations operated in the Israeli Knesset from 2001 to 2006. In Hungary, an Ombudsman for Future Generations was instituted in 2008 but merged into the more general post of Commissioner for Fundamental Rights in 2012. The Argentinian

Senate established a Future Commission in 2019 but it lasted only a few months.³

The key criteria for inclusion was that the institution should have direct involvement of MPs and the specific remit of assessing *long-term societal challenges*. The rationale for these criteria is that through membership or direct involvement, legislators develop stronger ‘ownership’ of foresight work that simultaneously contributes to the scrutiny of foresight carried out by the executive. Therefore, we omitted special committees and other units that deal with sustainable development, often related to the UN 2030 Agenda (see [11, 14, 24]), or technological development, science, and innovations, as their agendas are limited to specific policy sectors or questions and only partially deal with long-term policies. We also excluded technology assessment (TA) units that advise legislatures about new technologies.⁴ The same applies to various legislative research services and advisory bodies: they utilize scientific evidence and even foresight methods and can involve MPs in their work [3, 17], but their main function is providing advice and information to

³ We were unable to find information about a “special prospective commission” in the Chamber of Deputies of Mexico that was established in 2004, renewed in 2006, but subsequently discontinued.

⁴ The first attempt to institutionalize a more scientific approach to legislative policy development emerged in 1972 when the United States Congress created the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) to enhance addressing costs and benefits of technological developments. It was followed by several parliament-related expert-driven TA units around Europe in the 1980s [33, 39]. The European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (EPTA) brings together the various technology assessments units in European legislatures. It currently has 13 full members.

legislators.⁵ Furthermore, we excluded sub-national parliaments, as there is a huge variation in the competencies and roles of such regional assemblies. For example, the Scottish parliament has a Futures Forum attached to it.⁶

The research institutes attached to the Estonian and South Korean parliaments are admittedly borderline cases. However, they operate directly under the parliament and were specifically established to study future challenges, and their inclusion enables comparison between legislative future organs that mimic the traditional committee model and more novel innovations. We acknowledge the potential existence of other types of future-looking practices. Individual committees may have routine procedures for evaluating the long-term effects of policies, and legislatures can set up temporary ad hoc committees, or occasionally produce reports on future challenges. MPs can also establish informal cross-party groups dedicated to the interests of future generations.⁷ However, we focus on legislative institutions not only as it facilitates the reliability of our findings, but also because such units are part of the formal organizational structure of the legislatures and can thus be expected to have a stronger influence both within the legislature and vis-à-vis the executive.

Having identified the relevant legislative future institutions, we used interviews and official documents⁸ to examine the following aspects: the establishment of the institution, its membership, role and functions, accountability mechanisms, outputs, and working culture. The semi-structured interviews were carried out between the summer of 2021 and late spring of 2022. The purpose of the interviews was to gather identical information about the ten cases. Altogether, we interviewed 10 legislative civil servants and MPs who have extensive experience and knowledge of the relevant foresight organs in the 10

countries. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Zoom, with the questions focusing on the basic properties of the future institutions: their establishment, modes of operation, outputs, and links to external stakeholders and the executive branch.

Empirical analysis

Before examining the organization and functions of the existing legislative future committees and organs we describe the three short-lived experiments, as they already illuminate our main argument: the inverse connection between the political support and role of a legislative future unit and its survival prospects. The cases are presented chronologically, especially as there has been clear organizational diffusion, with newer parliamentary future institutions gaining inspiration and motivation from the experiences of their predecessors [26].

The short-lived cases

Israel was the first country after Finland to establish a genuine legislative future institution, the more limited future commissioner model, where a single person operating under a parliamentary mandate was appointed to protect the interests of future generations. The Knesset Commission for Future Generations was established in 2001 and lasted until 2006. It was headed by a Commissioner, Justice Shlomo Shoham, who was appointed for a 5-year term. After that, no new Commissioner was appointed and in 2010 the Knesset officially abolished the Commission. The Commissioner could comment on all matters except those relating to defence and foreign policy. He enjoyed a wide range of powers, including the option of attending committee meetings and the right to recommend laws and policies that consider future generations, and to delay laws if they did not. However, the impact of the Commissioner remained limited. Some of his recommendations for legislation were rejected by the executive, and there were disputes with senior MPs, many of whom questioned the Commissioner's broad powers and Shoham's active approach. Importantly, the Commissioner lacked support among the Israeli political-administrative elite and civil society. There was also no broad party-political consensus behind the position to begin with. The Commission was largely initiated by a single politician, Joseph (Tommy) Lapid, the chair of the Shinui party, whose retirement from politics in 2006 coincided with the termination of the Commission's work. [8, 40]: 324–331, [38]: 242–250).

In Hungary, the ambition to create a designated future organ into the legislature stood on firmer ground. 'Protect the Future' NGO has campaigned since the 1990s for an institution looking after the interests of future generations. According to an interviewee, a central figure in the

⁵ Acosta et al. ([3]: 21) found that horizon scanning was utilized by select legislative advisory bodies and concluded that "foresight and horizons scanning seem to be upcoming novel methodologies being implemented in legislatures for participatory future-forward thinking advisory and to set long-term priorities in agenda." However, it is not known whether such methods are employed by legislative committees or party groups.

⁶ Established in 2005 and bringing together both MPs and external experts, the Scotland Futures Forum works on a non-party basis, with the aim of looking 'beyond the electoral cycle to stimulate debate on the long-term challenges and opportunities that Scotland faces.' It was very much inspired by the Finnish Committee for the Future ([10, 20]: 121–125).

⁷ For example, in Britain the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Future Generations brings together MPs and members of the House of Lords and "aims to create space for cross-party dialogue on combating short-termism and to identify ways to internalize concern for future generations into today's policy making." See <https://www.appgfuturegenerations.com/>.

⁸ For reasons of space, we do not list the documents unless we specifically refer to them. They consisted primarily of legislative standing orders, governmental and legislative reports, press releases and background memos, and agendas and outputs of legislative foresight units.

project was Marcel Szabó, a public official who had formerly worked at the UN where he had managed to create a foresight office that funded the meetings of European parliamentary foresight activists. In 2008, an Ombudsman for Future Generations (officially the Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations) was established, with the task of ensuring the protection of the fundamental right to a healthy environment. As in Israel, the Commissioner enjoyed broad powers from monitoring policy developments and legislative proposals to submitting opinions to MPs and carrying out investigations and potentially delaying policymaking with veto-type powers. Despite active dialogue with civil society, in 2012, the Ombudsman for Future Generations was subsumed into the office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights. The Ombudsman is still elected by the parliament, but the position is much weaker than previously. Clearly, the actions of the Ombudsman, Sandor Fülöp, divided opinions among MPs, especially in terms of their economic impact. The Ombudsman failed to generate needed legitimacy among the decision-makers, and the party-political environment turned less supportive of the position following the landslide victory of Fidesz in the 2010 elections ([4, 38, 47]: 233–242).

According to an interviewee, in Argentina, there was interest to develop foresight capacity already in the 1970s. Nevertheless, it took until mid-2019 before the Argentine Senate decided to create a Future Commission. It was a consultative organ, designed to contribute to legislation through foresight work, interacting with the executive branch and stakeholders, and debating and publishing reports on future trends. Its first assignment was to study the future of work in Argentina with a perspective of between 10 and 20 years. Some of the scheduled meetings with the working groups were held, but the final report was never issued, and upon the change of government in December the Commission was discontinued ([48]: 24). Clearly, the Commission lacked the broader support of Argentine senators.

In broadly similar fashion, all short-lived cases failed to adhere to the key factors taught by the Finnish case. The institutions did not enjoy a prolonged support from central political power holders and their main functions could not generate institutionalizing traction—although for different reasons. In Israel and Hungary, the institutions were “too strong” relative to their support base while in Argentina the chosen mechanism was not embedded deeply enough to the interaction of governments and the legislature.

Comparing existing future organs

Chile is among those countries that have consistently invested resources into economic and societal

innovations and long-term decision-making (e.g., [2, 35]). The Committee on Challenges of Future, Science, Technology, and Innovation in the Chilean Senate was established in April 2012. It has five members and it operates in a more non-partisan and participatory mode to investigate long-term scientific and societal challenges, with particular attention to development models and the impact of technology. It regularly hears various academics and stakeholders, including politicians and experts from abroad. Examples of matters receiving attention include the future of the lithium industry, national space policy, food safety, neurotechnology, and education. The committee organizes annually with the government and the Chilean Academy of Sciences the Congress of the Future (‘Congreso Futuro’). The committee was also behind the establishment in 2018 of the Ministry on Science, Technology, Information, and Innovations (Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología, Conocimiento e Innovación). An interviewee noted that compared to Finland’s very comprehensive foresight system, the Chilean institution stands on a relatively narrow base. However, the long, ongoing, and widening development of the system suggests that it has created benefits for and ownership among a broader group of actors. In addition, its outputs are likely not considered very threatening among established political actors.

In Brazil, the Committee for the Future in the Senate was established a year later in 2013. There had been broader interest in foresight work, with for example the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars organizing from 2011 to 2013 annual trips of Brazilian MPs to the USA and Europe to study policies and practices related to innovations [51]. The Committee has 11 senator members and a mandate to facilitate debates on important societal issues and the future of the country. It publishes reports and shorter bulletins on a range of issues such as sustainable urban development, participatory and fair education, and information technology in future legislative processes and interacts widely with various stakeholders. It also holds public hearings on future issues, such as in May 2021 on the democratization of access to digital tools in Brazil. However, dialogue with the government occurs mainly via committee hearings. Although this might be a “natural” way for a senate committee to interact with governments, a lack of a formal process—such as the Finnish Future Dialogue—limits the Committee’s foundation to the legislature.

In Austria, more encompassing TA and foresight work has been carried out since the 1980s involving the executive branch, academia, and various stakeholders. The efforts of the legislature are thus backed by a broader “foresight ecosystem.” Reminiscing the previous cases, only the upper house, Bundesrat, has a committee

dealing specifically with the future—the Committee for Innovation, Technology, and Future, while the respective committee in the Nationalrat focuses on Research, Innovation, and Digitalisation. The Bundesrat committee was established in 2015 and has 16 members. It consults external stakeholders and experts, produces reports and, reflecting its name, its emphasis is clearly on technology and innovations, with broader societal issues addressed more infrequently in the committee outputs. Although technological assessments likely rather inform than impact policies, they can be considered general enough not to cause turf wars.

In Estonia, too, a prolonged effort to gaze beyond electoral terms exists. The Strategic Initiative Centre was established in the Bank of Estonia in 2000, and in 2006 another future-looking institution, the Estonian Development Fund, was founded and remained active for a decade. The Foresight Centre at Estonian parliament became operational in 2017 and, importantly, the act of establishing the center originated in the Riigikogu itself. Initially, the government wanted to house a foresight institute, but few MPs who were eager advocates of strategic foresight managed to generate enough support for placing the institute in the legislature. According to our interviewees, a similar dynamic occurred in Finland during the formative phase of the Future Dialogue when a few MPs empowered by popular mandate “snatched” the initiative from public officials and academics. Situated within the structure of the Chancellery of Riigikogu, the tasks of the Centre are analyzing long-term developments in society, identifying new trends, and drafting development scenarios. Annually, the Centre hosts three to four research areas that have their own group of domestic and foreign experts and a ‘lead’ committee which includes MPs and other high-level policymakers, and they meet 4–5 times per year. The Centre’s output consists of reports and shorter documents and the Centre is expected to communicate actively with the broader society, also via public events. In addition, the Centre also contributes to the Estonian government’s long-term strategies. Recent items of research have covered globalization, impact of COVID-19, future of health care, shipping and maritime economy, future of mobility, future-proof tax structure, and future of long-term care, while previously also governance and labor market issues have been on the agenda. Roughly 1/3 of MPs are involved in the Centre’s work through the lead committees, but otherwise the Centre is essentially a scientific think tank attached to the legislature. According to the Centre “the interest of the Riigikogu in foresight has also increased: in 2019, the foresight results were introduced in the committees and factions of the Riigikogu

on 15 occasions’ (Foresight Centre 2020: 7). However, only around 10% of MPs are actively interested in what the center does, and hence its challenge is to maintain or increase that share while also broadening the foresight ecosystem in Estonia.

According to our interviews, at least since the late 1990s South Korea has been one of the most active developers of state foresight capacity. However, the various projects have lacked broader support, leaving them vulnerable to changes in governing majorities. Recently, Korean government had a Ministry of Science, ICT and Future Planning (2013–2017), but long-term planning posed serious challenges. In this context, in the 2010s two consecutive Speakers of the National Assembly had argued in favor of establishing a legislative future committee, but due to opposition from MPs and the Ministry of Finance a legislature-based research institute was introduced instead. Operational since spring 2018, the objective of the Futures Institute (NAFI) is to strengthen legislative policy capacity and national development through predicting and analyzing long-term changes and to draw up the national long-term development strategy. The Speaker of National Assembly can influence NAFI through the appointment of its president, selection of the research agenda, approval of the annual budget and work plan, and monitoring of its operation. While NAFI must report its results to the House Steering Committee of the Assembly, communication between the committee and NAFI seems irregular. Other legislative committees can request findings related to their policy fields from NAFI, but NAFI has no formal mandate to submit statements to Assembly’s committees. NAFI staff consists exclusively of senior-level researchers. Themes covered in NAFI reports, often written in collaboration with external experts, include the future of Korean peninsula, surveys of future values among Korean youth, measuring happiness, quality of life, governance reforms, labor market, and innovative growth. Compared to the other future organs, the Estonian Foresight Centre included, the NAFI seems more like a typical legislative research unit. However, it clearly differs from them with its explicit remit on future issues, which, if conceived relevant enough, can secure its survival.

Before 2018, foresight work in Iceland had been sporadic and ‘under the radar’, but since then there has been clearly more concerted effort to raise the profile of strategic foresight in the executive branch and the country as a whole. As resources are limited and the number of domestic NGOs and other stakeholders is small, links with international foresight actors have been important. In June 2018, in line with the government program, the prime minister appointed a Committee for the Future.

However, as placing such an institution in the legislature would have required changes to legislation, the committee was located to the prime minister's office. Nonetheless, its membership consisted of 11 MPs. Much like in all previous cases, the Committee's agenda was broad, ranging from technology and economy to major social changes affecting the future of Icelandic society, especially environmental matters and demographic changes. The committee was also committed to encouraging an open debate about the future and to act as a forum for discussions on Future Studies. This diversity of the agenda was reflected in the summary report issued in 2019 [19]. The committee did not review legislative proposals, but Althingi's committees could ask for its opinions. Involved MPs appreciated the vibrant, informal, and creative committee atmosphere, which differed from the working culture of normal legislative committees. Clearly, this attitude prevailed also more widely in the legislature, as following necessary changes to legislation, the committee moved from the prime minister's office to Althingi after the September 2021 elections. Not a standing committee that will operate until the end of the electoral period, the Future Committee has 11 MP members from which five represent opposition parties and the posts of chair and vice chair change between government and opposition parties annually. The Committee's mandate reflects that of its predecessor, and while legislative matters shall not be referred to the committee, other committees may request its opinions. The committee culture is less party-political than in normal committees. Based on the broad support among the current political elite, the Committee may continue to survive after the next elections.

In 2012, the Philippine Center for Foresight Education and Innovation Research (PhilForesight) was established to advance future studies and strategic foresight in the country. Building on this evolving foresight work and 'ecosystem', the Philippines' Senate established in 2019 a Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking. Still a temporary committee, it brings together 15 senators to examine mainly on a more non-partisan basis 'all matters relating to the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development'. Importantly, distinguishing it from the ordinary sustainable development committees, the committee pays special attention to solving problems impacting the next generation of Filipinos—hence the 'Futures Thinking' added to the name of the committee. The Committee interacts with researchers and international organizations with the goal of broadening the 'futures' community in the Philippines and of making it a more permanent part of the political system. Much of this activity is driven by the chair of the committee, Senator Pilar Juliana

'Pia' S. Cayetano and her 'Futures Thinking' initiative.⁹ Although strong personalization was a central problem of the short-lived experiments, the Philippine initiatives seem to be based on—and especially move towards—a broader 'ecosystem'.

Moving to the most recent cases, the Committee for the Future in the Lithuanian Seimas was established in late 2020. It has 19 MP members and an objective to instill a more strategic culture into Lithuanian decision-making and to coordinate the process of preparing Lithuania's long-term vision. The competence of the committee covers all policy areas, and it can submit to the Seimas various conclusions and proposals. In particular, highlighting the Committee's special perspective, the Article 58(1) of the Statute of the Seimas obligates the committee to focus on 'future development of society and the state and its modeling; innovation and technological progress; emigration, migration, and demographic processes; and modernization of the state/state governance system'. It will also prepare the strategy *Lietuva2050* (Lithuania2050) in cooperation with the government and it has committed to holding wide-ranging consultations with the public and external stakeholders in that process. Items debated in the Committee include the European Green Deal, the future of Lithuanian science, the future of agriculture, strategic management and budget, digitalization, and transport development. The election of professor Raimundas Lopata, with a background in history and political science, as its first chair suggests that the committee aims to lean towards a more non-partisan mode of operation than other Seimas committees. The committee also hosts the online discussion platform of the informal Future Forum 'Intellectual Independence of Lithuania', where Lithuanian academics, stakeholders, and political actors exchange ideas about the long-term vision of Lithuania. The committee aims at making the other committees and the whole Seimas more aware of long-term challenges. Inside the executive branch, the main partner is the prime minister's office.

Finally, the most recent legislative foresight unit can be found in Uruguay, where the General Assembly established a Special Committee for the Future in 2021. All the committees of the General Assembly are joint committees of the two chambers. Uruguayan government

⁹ For example, 'Pia seeks inclusion of 'Futures Thinking' in national policymaking', press release, Senate of the Philippines, 15.5.2020, http://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2020/0515_cayetano3.asp; 'VSU joins Sen. Pia Cayetano's 'Futures Thinking' initiative; gets 5 million to make root crop industry future-ready', 28.1.2021, <https://www.vsu.edu.ph/articles/news/1891-vs-joins-sen-pia-cayetano-futures-thinking-initiative-gets-5-million-to-mak-root-crop-industry-future-ready>; and Ulderico B. Alviola, 'UPLB joins Futures Thinking initiative', 9.2.2021, <https://uplb.edu.ph/all-news/uplb-joins-futures-thinking-initiative/>.

had invested in foresight work already in the 1960s, but more systematic efforts began only in the 2010s, with the central government foresight agency ‘Planning Direction’ under the Office of Budget and Planning [36]. According to an interviewee, Uruguay is among the countries that have exhibited a prolonged effort to create a legislative foresight unit, with interest from MPs across the political spectrum. The new committee brings together 15 MPs, and its mandate is to construct scenarios and identify trends and societal problems. It interacts with universities, think tanks, and other stakeholders, not least through a ‘permanent advisory group’ that joins these actors with the Committee on a monthly basis. In line with law No. 19,509, an annual ‘Day of the Future’ is held on the last Monday of September of each year, and on this occasion, the General Assembly delivers an annual ‘Report on the Future’ in both chambers, that focuses on areas such as environmental sustainability, renewable energies, democracy, innovation, technological development, education and demographics. The Committee members choose the topics deserving of attention, and the main agenda item for 2022 was ‘The Future of Work and the Work of the Future.’¹⁰

Main findings and theoretical reflection

While still a relatively rare phenomenon, legislatures are increasingly investing in anticipatory governance with designated committees and other organs that tie MPs to foresight work. The past decade has witnessed the emergence of eight legislative future committees and two legislature-based future centers. Contrary to the ‘failed’ initial attempts based on the commissioner model (Israel, Hungary), particularly the future committees have adopted largely convergent practices. This is not surprising considering the importance of the Finnish ‘pacesetter’ committee in the diffusion of parliamentary foresight work [26]. However, also in line with the Finnish case, the political impact of these institutions seems so far rather limited.

Returning to our research questions, we identified through the formative Finnish case two interconnected factors which should facilitate the incorporation of anticipatory governance practices into legislative work and the survival of legislative future organ. The first is broader support among MPs. In Finland, the initiative of establishing the future committee came from MPs and gradually gained wider support within the Eduskunta, and a broadly similar dynamic emerged in the other nine cases. While we could not measure the exact level of support,

typically proponents of organized foresight work were found across different parties and on both sides of the government-opposition divide. Compared to the ‘failed’ cases, the existing institutions seem to enjoy broader support among high-ranking policymakers, and most of the institutions have already survived over elections and changing governments.

The second general factor facilitating the birth and survival of legislative future organs is the existence of a broader ‘foresight ecosystem,’ which interacts with the legislative future committee, providing demand, support, and structure for its activities. In all examined cases there is active cooperation between the future organ and a broader network of foresight actors that typically has consolidated and diversified over time. While in many of the studied countries, these communities remain rather small, clearly some investment had been made in long-term policymaking before the establishment of the legislative future organ. The short-lived cases in turn indicate the challenges involved in the heavily personalized ombudsman or commissioner models. Besides being politically ‘too strong’ relative to their initial support base, a single individual is bound to divide opinions in a partisan environment such as legislatures. In Israel and Hungary, the individuals holding these positions seemed too willing to intervene in current redistributive issues, thereby revealing trade-offs between short-term economic gains and long-term considerations.¹¹ A system initiated by a few individuals that is not able to widen its foundation also faces risk of extinction through the exit of those individuals. While creating a legislative future organ may ask for significant personal agency, the survival of the organ requires that the initiator can ‘sell’ the idea to many others, too.

In terms of our second main research question, regarding the organization and operation of legislative foresight organs, we identified similar general features across all cases. The legislative future organs essentially decide their own agenda, with MPs choosing what to focus on. Predominantly, chosen issues are cross-sectoral and the outcomes are broad reports normally prepared with various external stakeholders that provide long-term scenarios about complex issues. Interactions with academics, NGOs, and government officials are more about open discussion and exchange of ideas than detailed scrutiny or lobbying. Future committees’ meeting culture in general leans towards academic seminar style, with weak or non-existent party discipline and emphasis on independent, reflexive deliberation. Overall, legislative future

¹⁰ La Comisión Especial de Futuros presentó su agenda 2022, <https://www.undp.org/es/uruguay/news/la-comisi%C3%B3n-especial-de-futuros-present%C3%B3-su-agenda-2022>.

¹¹ The Hungarian and Argentine cases also suggest that the rise of populist parties works against more future-looking institutions, with such parties often attempting to delegitimize ‘experts’.

organs operate much more consensually than typical legislative organs—a style that is also reflected in their relatively ‘non-political’ outputs.

Combined, these factors suggest an inverse relationship between the political impact and longevity of these organs. Essentially, their existence rests on the will of MPs. Due to their unorthodox working methods and outputs, parliamentary future organs operate in the margins of legislative business and thus bear little capacity to impact the timespans of policies directly. Simultaneously, the unique features of future organs likely enhance their longevity, as their activities pose no direct threat to normal legislative actors. Busy MPs have many good reasons and sometimes also motivation to oppose even a weak future organ. Still, as the ‘failed’ efforts in Israel and Hungary demonstrated especially a ‘too strong’ legislative future organ faces a risk of an early demise. Based on the accelerating diffusion of state-level strategic foresight activities that are openly supported by major international organizations like the OECD and the EU, legislative future committees will soon likely emerge also in other countries. However, due to the above-mentioned dynamics of origin, institutionalization, and survival, their direct policy impact is likely to remain rather low. But as we argue in the concluding section, there are also grounds for a more positive outlook regarding parliamentary contribution to foresight work.

Concluding remarks

This study’s central motivation and contribution was to provide a grounded and realistic assessment of the challenges involved in fitting ideals of anticipatory governance to the essentially myopic world of legislatures. More specifically, we examined the operation and institutionalization of parliamentary future committees and similar organs that tie MPs more directly into future-regarding policymaking. Through a careful analysis of the formative case of Finland, we theoretically outlined the functional discrepancy between the two ideal modes and compared all existing legislative future organs through this lens. Despite the general and explorative nature of our empirical analysis, the study demonstrates clearly that combining future-oriented methods with standard legislative work is hard. The differences are fundamental and concern practically every aspect of how parliaments function. Therefore, as we detailed in the previous section, legislative future organs are in danger of remaining weak or short-lived.

Nonetheless, we still firmly contend that state-level foresight work should not be left to civil servants and the executive branch. The direct involvement of MPs in foresight work strengthens both the democratic legitimacy of anticipatory governance and the ownership of ‘the future’

among legislators. The parliamentary committee model adopted by eight legislatures also facilitates a dialogue about the future between the parliament and the government, a dialogue that can result in the executive branch investing more resources in foresight work. The cases studied in this article clearly suggest that including legislatures in future-regarding governance broadens “foresight ecosystems” that increase the plurality of essentially partial and uncertain future visions and help to consolidate organized state-level foresight activities through ongoing demands and processes.

This article has specifically focused on legislative institutions, with an emphasis on parliamentary committees and largely similar organs. It has been shown through the cases of Israel and Hungary that the commissioner model proved fragile and failed to generate legitimacy among MPs, while there are question marks over the survival of the research centers adopted in Estonia and South Korea. We also want to acknowledge that parliamentary toolbox is not limited to these institutions, either. Not every committee or legislature needs to emulate the Finnish model, given its relatively arduous building process and organization, and its so far limited policy impact. For example, parliamentary research services can facilitate future-regarding policymaking through reports and studies, as for example is increasingly the practice in the European Parliament. It is also possible that new legislative institutions are not even needed. ‘Future’ can be turned into a part of standard legislative scrutiny by demanding that each government draft bill also includes an assessment of its potential long-term effects, thus making a more forward-oriented thinking a routine part of the legislative process ([10]: 147). Alternatively, existing sectoral committees could each devote part of their annual schedule to future-oriented scenarios. Overall, despite the seemingly uniform appearances of the existing institutions, we must be careful to notice the context-dependent intricacies that developers of new future organs and practices need to overcome and the varied outcomes these hurdles are likely to produce to the exact form and functioning of these institutions. In any case, the introduction of new methods will always face the main force behind political myopia, short electoral cycles.

Returning to the themes raised in the introductory section, various societal ‘megatrends’ and crisis from digitalization to climate change are bound to continue to raise awareness of the need to study long-term scenarios. Executives are taking long-time planning more seriously, and so are legislatures. In the end, what matters is that national policymaking becomes more anticipatory—and the wider the range of actors involved in the process or the ‘foresight ecosystem,’ the stronger its policy impact, at least theoretically. Our analysis has

been very much an exploratory exercise, and subsequent research should therefore examine more in-depth the performance and influence of these institutions. Future research should also seek to illuminate various other mechanisms through which elected politicians engage in foresight work. Probably there are country-specific innovations that deserve recognition and scrutiny. Another line of inquiry concerns the role of democratic innovations. Several of the parliamentary committees examined in this article have already engaged in crowdsourcing or broader citizen consultations. As indicated by our theoretical framework, these mechanisms could be better suited to anticipatory governance than to traditional patterns of parliamentary politics, as inclusive practices allow the surfacing of a broader scope of political challenges and alternatives and strengthen the legitimacy of political representation". And as we have underlined the importance of the direct involvement of MPs in foresight work, scholars should investigate whether our argument is valid—does parliamentary input make a difference when compared with countries where foresight is left to the executive?

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Authors' contributions

Both authors (VK and TR) have contributed in every step of the research process and should thus be considered as equal contributors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The study draws from various qualitative and quantified data sources, which have been collected during the long—and still ongoing—research project. Some of the materials (official reports, webpages, etc.) are public and they have been thoroughly referenced to allow replication. However, most materials have been obtained from individuals that are in a position of trust and due to reasons of confidentiality no public datasets have been or will be created based on this data. Due to mutual agreements with the informants, the authors are also not allowed to share the data with third parties. However, due to the public nature of the studied institutions (parliamentary committees and other official organs) similar data should be easily accessible for scholars wishing to replicate our analyses.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study utilized expert interviews as research data. In collecting, processing, analyzing, and storing the data the study applied the principles of ethical self-assessment for the study of human subjects of the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (TENK) and the guidelines presented in All European

Academies' (ALLEA) 'European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity'. Before conducting the interviews, all interviewees were informed about the objective, privacy, use and storing of the collected insights, and an explicit informed consent was asked from the interviewees before executing the interviews. Based on mutual agreements, some of the names of the interviewees have been mentioned in this manuscript, some not. The private data is not distributed further in any circumstances.

Consent for publication

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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