Public opinions, alcohol consumption and policy changes in Finland, 1993–2013

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ABSTRACT
AIMS – This article studies trends and patterns of public opinion on alcohol policy in relation to changes in alcohol policy and total alcohol consumption in Finland during the last twenty years.
DESIGN – We first study changes in alcohol policy and total alcohol consumption, and then review and analyse data from public opinions surveys. General trends in the alcohol-policy opinion climate are studied, as well as specific questions such as opinions regarding age limits, pricing of alcoholic beverages and sales place of different alcoholic beverages. FINDINGS – The Finnish alcohol policy arena has undergone large changes during the last two decades which can also be noted as a growth in the total consumption of alcoholic beverages and related harms. In congruence with higher consumption levels of alcohol, also the share of the population in favour of more restrictive alcohol policies has risen.
KEYWORDS – alcohol policy, alcohol opinions, Finland

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Introduction
Nordic alcohol policy has traditionally relied on three cornerstones: restrictions on private profit interests in the alcohol business, restrictions on physical alcohol availability and restrictions on economic availability of alcoholic beverages (Tigerstedt, 2001; Karlsson, 2009). In Finland, these three cornerstones were to a large extent upheld by the comprehensive alcohol monopoly structure which was founded in 1932 after a period of total prohibition. For the next decades the state alcohol monopoly Alko more or less dictated the rules and the content for the national alcohol policy (Mäkelä, Österberg, & Sulkunen, 1981; Häikiö, 2007). The beginning of the 1990s, however, brought important changes to Alko’s wide-ranging regime and authorities, and marked a transition to a new, more international and market-oriented alcohol policy. This occurred especially in connection to Finland’s accession to the European Union (EU) (Alavaikko & Österberg 2000).

Finland’s adaption to EU’s Single Market and Europeanisation at large affected Finland not only in 1995, but rather as a continuous process in the 1990s. Some alcohol policy measures were harmonised and liberalised in line with the EU standards, some were liberalised on pure national motives, some were questioned and debated but left more or less intact over the years and some remained unchanged without any discussions (Tigerstedt et al., 2006). As a consequence of the large liberalisations in alcohol control and the increases in the harmful effects of alcohol,
some stricter codes of conducts have been implemented in the Finnish alcohol field during later years (Karlsson et al., 2013).

During the second half of the twentieth century there were frequent debates about how well the Finnish alcohol control system works and how a proper and improved alcohol control system should look like (Häikiö, 2007). Public opinions on these matters have been surveyed mainly through opinion polls, from which the results have been related to the alcohol policy situation in at least two ways. First of all, decision makers have been interested in knowing what people or voters think about the prevailing alcohol policy measures. Second, decision makers have used opinion polls to probe the popularity of future alcohol policy changes before implementing them. Apart from these political reasons there has also been a purely scientific interest in describing the social reality connected to people’s opinions on alcohol policies.

In the 1950s, Finnish discussions on alcohol policy focused on whether or not the alcohol control system should be liberalised and if so, by which measures, to what extent and how rapidly (Bruun, 1972). In the 1960s, alcohol policy discussions and polls dealt mostly with the favouring of light alcoholic beverages over distilled spirits and with where medium beer should be retailed (Österberg, 2012a). The opinion climate in the second half of the 1970s was influenced by the implementation of more restrictive alcohol policy measures, such as a ban on alcohol advertising in 1977, whereas policy makers in the 1980s were interested in both quantitative and qualitative liberal changes in alcohol policy (Österberg, 2002). In the 1990s, the most important controversy concerned the sales system of wine, and since the early 1990s the level of alcohol taxes has been a much-debated topic (Österberg, Lindeman, & Karlsson, 2013). Our most important research question focuses on the interplay between changes in alcohol consumption and public alcohol policy opinions in Finland since the early 1990s. Did changes in the alcohol control field affect public alcohol policy opinions, or did public opinions affect decision making? Our study period starts in 1993, two years prior to the EU membership, for some of the EU-related alcohol policy changes occurred already before the accession to the EU (Sulkunen et al., 2000).

Research evidence shows that changes in alcohol policies and especially alcohol availability affect alcohol consumption, which in turn affects alcohol-related harms (Babor et al., 2010; Anderson et al., 2012). In this article we use the total alcohol consumption as a proxy of both the strictness of alcohol policy measures and the level of alcohol-related harm. When we examine the relationship between changes in alcohol policy and changes in people’s alcohol policy opinions, we test the following hypothesis: higher per-capita alcohol consumption and higher levels of alcohol-related harms are connected to more restrictive attitudes among the general public. In other words, there is a positive correlation between the level of alcohol consumption and popular support of a more restrictive alcohol policy.

The article begins by a chronological description of changes in Finnish alcohol policy and total alcohol consumption in 1993–2013 followed by a methods chap-
ter and a portrayal of the Finnish surveys used when collecting data on alcohol policy opinions. We then study the development in the populations’ general views on prevailing alcohol policy and test our hypothesis according to which higher total alcohol consumption and related harms have a positive correlation with restrictive alcohol policy opinions. After that we examine how the Finnish opinion climate on alcohol has changed with regards to attitudes to retail sale systems of various beverage categories, age limits and price levels throughout the study period. Toward the end, we discuss the changes in alcohol policy opinions according to gender, age, place of residence and political affiliation.

**Consumption and policy changes**

At the beginning of the 1990s Finland was struck by a severe economic recession, which led to financial crisis and high levels of unemployment. Due to the decrease in purchasing power the total alcohol consumption decreased by 14% between 1990 and 1994, and landed at 8.0 litres absolute alcohol per capita in 1994, out of which 1.4 litres came from unrecorded sources (Figure 1).

Finland’s EU membership meant hefty structural changes for the alcohol monopoly system and the Finnish alcohol policy at large, as a new Alcohol Act (1994/1143) abolished the monopoly on production, import, export, wholesale and on-premise retail sale of alcoholic beverages. Alko kept, however, its monopoly on off-premise retail sales of alcoholic beverages containing over 4.7% alcohol by volume. The only exception to this monopoly right was off-premise retail sales of local berry and fruit wines and similar types of beer produced by small enterprises, containing no more than 13% of alcohol by volume and sold from the production sites (Karlsson et al., 2013).
The 1994 Alcohol Act also allowed drinking in public, and made advertising for beverages containing 1.2–22.0% alcohol by volume legal on certain terms. Grocery stores, cafés, kiosks and petrol stations were given the right to sell beverages produced by fermentation, beer, ciders and long drinks, containing at most 4.7% alcohol by volume in the same manner as grocery stores had been selling medium beer since 1969 (Österberg & Karlsson, 2002).

In 1993 the EU had decided that travellers crossing national borders within the single market were allowed to bring with them as much alcoholic beverages as they wanted without paying taxes in their home country. The only requirement was that the beverages were legally bought for their private use. When negotiating its EU membership terms, Finland got a derogation that allowed quantitative quotas for travellers’ tax-free alcohol imports for the two first membership years. In 1996 this derogation was extended to the end of 2003. In 1995, Finnish regulations concerning travellers’ alcohol imports were nevertheless slightly amended. The amount of beer travellers could import without paying excise duties in their home country was increased from two to 15 litres for EU and non-EU countries, and the amount of wine that could be imported by travellers returning to Finland from trips within the EU was increased from two to five litres (Österberg & Pehkonen, 1996).

Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union made it easier to travel both to Russia and Estonia, neighbouring countries with significantly lower alcohol prices. This combined with the increased possibilities to import alcoholic beverages duty free greatly increased travellers’ alcohol imports (Figure 1; Österberg & Pehkonen, 1996).

Up until 1994 Alko decided on both off- and on-premise prices of alcoholic beverages and paid a certain percentage of its total turnover to the state as alcohol tax (Holder et al., 1998). Since the monopoly had the power to decide on prices of alcoholic beverages, pricing was considered an instrument of alcohol control. For instance, by making distilled spirits more expensive than other alcoholic beverages one could encourage the consumption of milder drinks (Österberg, 2012a). The monopoly could also put extra high prices on certain brands or products if they became too popular among, for instance, heavy drinkers or young people. This practice came to an end as a non-discriminatory and transparent taxation system based on the amount of liquid or on the volume of pure alcohol in the beverage was established in 1994 (Holder et al., 1998).

Taken together, the physical availability of alcohol increased in many aspects in 1995, and alcohol consumption started to increase as the economy began to recover in the mid-1990s. The consumption grew at a steady pace over the course of the next ten years (Figure 1). At the same time also some minor alcohol-policy adjustments took place; a new rule concerning age limits for beverages containing small amounts of alcohol was added to the Alcohol Act in June 1997; in 1998 the excise duty rate on wine was decreased by 17%, and in 2003 a Public Order Act banned public drinking again. The next comprehensive change took place in early 2004 (Tigerstedt et al., 2006).

The real price index of all alcoholic bev-
erages has fluctuated in Finland, but had practically the same value in 1951, 1969 and 1980. During the 1980s the real prices of alcoholic beverages increased on average by 18%. Since the early 1990s the real price index for all alcoholic beverages changed very modestly, and in 2003 the price index was on the same level as at the beginning of the 1990s (Österberg & Karlsson, 2002).

In March 2004 a comprehensive tax reduction lowered excise duties on beer with 32%, excise duties on wine with 10%, intermediate products with 40% and distilled spirits with 44% (Mäkelä & Österberg, 2009). The cut was mostly driven by fiscal reasons, as neighbouring Estonia became a member of the EU in May 2004, and also the limits on how much alcohol a traveller could bring for private use from another EU country without paying any additional taxes were repealed in January 2004.

In 2004, both the absolute and relative price decreases were highest on distilled spirits. For vodkas the decrease in off-premise retail price was about one third and for other distilled spirits about one fourth. Beer prices decreased around ten percent while the price cut was about three percent for wine (Mäkelä & Österberg, 2009). The effect of the tax and price decrease on alcohol consumption was immediate (Österberg, 2005). By 2005 the total consumption had grown to 10.5 litres per capita, out of which 22% came from unrecorded sources. A sixth of all alcohol consumed was imported from abroad by travellers’ returning to Finland (Figure 1).

The tax reduction caused not only the total alcohol consumption to jump, but also the levels of acute and chronic alcohol-related harms quickly followed suit (Mäkelä & Österberg, 2009). As an attempt to battle the growing levels of harms, the excise duty rates were increased several times during the next years. The first increase took place in January 2008. In 2009 excise duty rates were increased twice and then once again at the beginning of 2012 (Österberg, 2012b). In the spring of 2013 the government decided to increase the excise duties on alcoholic beverages once more as of the beginning of 2014 (Karlsson et al., 2013).

Apart from excise duty increases, also other areas of alcohol policy have changed after 2004. The operating hours for off-premise sales of alcoholic beverages were adjusted and cut back with two hours in the spring of 2007, so that retail sales of alcoholic beverages could not start any earlier than 9am. The next year updated codes of conduct came into force that prohibited broadcasting of alcohol commercials on television between 7am and 9pm and also in cinemas if the film showing had a target audience under the age of 18 years. Moreover, bulk discounts were prohibited in 2008 (Karlsson, 2009).

In addition to the structural changes that the alcohol monopoly experienced in 1995, it has undergone several smaller modifications over the course of the last twenty years. For instance, the overall number of Alko shops increased from 248 in 1993 to 350 in 2013. The process of transferring all over-the-counter stores to self-service shops was completed in 1998 and also the opening hours have been extended to better serve customers’ needs. Today most monopoly shops are open 64 hours per week. On Sundays the stores are closed but fermented alcoholic beverages
at most 4.7% alcohol by volume can still be bought from ordinary grocery stores, kiosks and petrol stations every day of the week (from 9am to 9pm).

The total number of licensed restaurants peaked in 1997 with over 9500 licensed premises, but the figure had gone down to some 8300 in 2012. However, the number of restaurants with licence to sell all alcoholic beverages (A licence) has grown rapidly from roughly 2800 in 1993 to a little over 5900 in 2012 at the same time as there has been a decline in the number of restaurants selling beverages containing at most 4.7% alcohol by volume (C licence). As for off-premise retail sales outside the monopoly, there was a steep increase in the number of off-premise licences in 1995 with over 8000 retail outlets, but the number has since fallen to some 5500 in 2012, due to a general concentration of grocery stores network. The explanation for the sharp increase in 1995 is that the 1994 Alcohol Act granted kiosks and petrol stations the right to sell fermented alcoholic beverages containing at most 4.7% alcohol by volume (C licence).

Since the early 1980s, people have been asked to take a stand on the prevailing alcohol policy as a whole. Since the end of the 1980s a question on whether wine should be sold exclusively in Alko stores or also in grocery stores has been regularly included. From 1995, the interviewees have been annually asked also to take a stand on the sales system of distilled spirits. In 1995 the interviewees were for the first time asked to give their opinion about the legal age limits related to alcohol sales (Ahlström & Österberg, 1997). This question has been regularly asked since 1997. The question on whether or not the price levels for beer, wine and spirits are appropriate was introduced in 1998 (Österberg, 2007).

Until the 1990s the surveys were mainly conducted by the Social Research Institute of Alcohol Studies, which was a department of Alko. In 1996 the responsibility for the survey together with social alcohol research was transferred to the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health. The National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) has been responsible for the surveys since 2009. For each annual Gallup poll conducted in January and February, a thousand respondents have been interviewed. Up until 2012 the interviews were done face to face, and since 2013 per telephone.

In addition to this research tradition the Finnish Brewery Association started to commission surveys on alcohol policy opinions in the early 1990s. Also the media have collected alcohol policy data through Gallup polls but they do not offer knowledge on any longer trends in alcohol opinions. Since 2006 also the Finnish Social and Health Association has collected data on alcohol attitudes every second year.

Alcohol attitude surveys and methods
In Finland public attitudes towards alcohol sales system were for the first time surveyed by a Gallup poll in 1953 (Mäkelä, 1987). At that time, the respondents were only asked to express their view on the sales system of medium beer. From the mid-1960s onwards surveys dealing with the sales system of medium beer have been conducted on a fairly regular basis, and from the late 1960s opinions have also been surveyed on the sales system of strong beer.
In this article we only use the TNS Gallup data which has been commissioned by THL and its predecessors, by analysing the raw data from the Gallup datasets.

**Changes and trends in alcohol attitudes**

In this part of the article we will first look at changes and trends in views on prevailing alcohol policies among the general public, after which we test our hypothesis and see how the development of the total alcohol consumption is connected to the development of alcohol attitudes. We then move on to more specific questions about support for sales of alcoholic beverages in grocery stores, age limits and price levels. In the end we discuss attitude changes within the population according to gender, age, place of residence and political affiliation.

In 1981 when Finns for the first time were asked to take a stand on the prevailing alcohol policy as a whole, about half of the interviewees supported stricter alcohol controls, 40% were content with the present alcohol control and one-tenth favoured a more liberal policy line (Ahlström & Österberg, 1992). In the mid-1980s, the corresponding figures were about 30, 50 and 20 percent, respectively (Österberg, 2007), but by the end of the decade, the number in favour of a general liberalisation had risen to nearly 40 percent. In 1993 the situation was almost the same. At that time 15% of the respondents supported stricter alcohol policy, 44% were satisfied with the current policy and 5% of the respondents did not take a stand on this question (Figure 3).

After the mid-1990s, public demand for a more restrictive alcohol policy has increased and the number of respondents in favour of a liberalised alcohol policy has
clearly fallen. The share of those in favour of a looser alcohol policy decreased especially after 1994, and this trend continued until 2006. Since then the share of those in favour of a more liberal alcohol policy has been fairly stable, with a slight increase during the past few years. Not surprisingly, the share of those in favour of a stricter alcohol policy has increased since 1994 but after the peak in 2007 their share has been on a slight decline. This means that the share of those satisfied with the current alcohol control has increased from 44% in 1993 to 59% in 2013. Generally speaking, the increase took place before 2005; this share has since fluctuated at around 60 percent (Figure 3).

When looking at the share of respondents wanting a stricter alcohol policy, we can notice a strong positive and statistically significant correlation (.732**) between the level of alcohol consumption and the share of those wanting stricter alcohol policy (Figure 4). This means that a higher alcohol consumption level is positively correlated with a stricter opinion climate, with more people rooting for more restrictive alcohol policies to be implemented. A possible explanation for this correlation lies in the fact that higher alcohol intake leads to more alcohol-related harm (Bruun et al., 1975). The adverse effects of drinking range from death, disease, hospitalisation, violence, accidents and injuries to lost productivity, costs for health and social services, crime and harms to others than the drinkers themselves. Higher levels of harms inevitably lead to more visibility in society and increased awareness about the scope of alcohol-related problems, which lead to opinions favouring stricter alcohol control among the public. This again causes political mobilisation in order to address the problem at hand.

In Finland’s case the alcohol excise duty reduction in 2004 led to serious public
Pearson Correlation = ,732**. Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed).

**Figure 4.** Correlation between restrictive alcohol opinions as percent of all respondents in favour of more restrictive alcohol control and total alcohol consumption in litres of 100% per capita in 1993–2012.

Source: TNS Gallup; Yearbook of Alcohol and Drug Statistics 1993–2012

Health consequences both in terms of increased alcohol consumption and many types of alcohol-related harms (Mäkelä & Österberg, 2009). The government addressed this by implementing stricter alcohol policies and introducing four excise duty increases in the 2008–2012 period, which led to a falling consumption trend and a top out of the number of people wanting stricter alcohol policies. This further supports our hypothesis, according to which higher total alcohol consumption and related harms lead to more restrictive alcohol policy opinions in the society.

As for preferred sales places of alcohol, more than half of the respondents wanted to be able to buy wine in grocery stores back in 1993, while 45% of the respondents were in favour of introducing strong beer into the grocery stores. In January 2003 the corresponding figures were 50 and 41 percent, but in 2013 they had fallen to 36 and 34 percent respectively. The number of those who wished to buy wine in groceries was at its highest in 1998 when nearly 70 percent wanted to move wine from the monopoly to ordinary grocery stores, but after this peak the share...
has decreased almost continuously (Figure 5).

Medium beer has been sold in ordinary grocery stores since 1969, and over the years there have been large fluctuations in the opinions concerning its sales system (Österberg, 2007). However, in our study period the share of those supporting the current sales system of medium beer has been between 80 and 90 percent. Since 1995 a question about the proper sales system for distilled spirits has been included in the Gallup polls. In the first year, 17 % of the respondents supported sales of strong alcoholic beverages in grocery stores, in 1999 the numbers peaked at 20% but have since then decreased to less than 10 percent (Figure 5).

Overall, with the exception of medium beer, changes in people's views of the proper sales system of alcoholic beverages seem to follow trends in the total alcohol consumption, i.e. opinions became stricter after 1994 when alcohol consumption began to grow after the recession, and in the late 2000s when consumption growth levelled off and turned to slight decrease also this trend in alcohol opinions evened out.

The general acceptance of the current age limits for selling alcoholic beverages has been on a very high level since the mid-1990s. In 1995 the 18-year limit for buying beer and wine was supported by 87% of the respondents whereas 7% said it could be even higher. In 2013 a striking 98% of the respondents thought that the 18-year limit is just right, or too low. The 20-year age limit for buying distilled spirits was backed up by 74% of the respondents in 1995, while 5% found it too low. Meanwhile, in 2013 as many as 94% of the respondents were either satisfied with the current limit, or wished for it to be even higher.

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents in favour of selling medium beer, strong beer, wine or distilled spirits in grocery stores according to Gallup polls in 1993–2013. Source: TNS Gallup
Finnish alcohol excise duties have for a long time been among the highest in Europe (Holder et al., 1998). However, a real demand for lower levels of alcohol excise duties and alcohol prices only got rooted among Finnish citizens in the mid-1990s in connection with the discussions of a possible EU membership and its predicted effects on alcohol excise duty rates.

In 1998 when Finns were asked about their opinions on the price level of beer, wine and distilled spirit very few respondents, only between three and five percent said that prices of alcoholic beverages were too low. A majority of respondents thought that alcohol was too expensive: 59% wanted cheaper beer, 64% thought the prices of distilled spirits were too high and 48% wished for cheaper wine. The significantly lower percentage for wine can partly be explained by a 17-percent cut in excise duties on wine only undertaken at the beginning of 1998. About one fourth or one third of all respondents were happy with the prices of alcoholic beverages at this time (Figure 6).

At the beginning of 2004, just before the tax decrease in Finland, the situation was quite similar as it had been in 1998. By the beginning of 2005 public opinions had however changed dramatically. The share of those thinking that prices of distilled spirits were too high had dropped from 55 to 21 percent and those who were satisfied with the prices of distilled spirits had increased from 28 to 54 percent. Almost one fifth was of the opinion that prices of distilled spirits were too low. The changes in opinions with regard to wine and beer prices were also large, even if a little bit less dramatic than with regard to distilled spirits (Figure 6).

The amount of respondents thinking that prices of alcoholic beverages are too high reached their nadir in 2007–2008. After the three tax and price increases in 2008 and 2009 the share of those thinking that alcohol prices were too high had clearly increased but not reached the level which prevailed the pre-2004 tax decreases. Consequently, the number of those thinking that prices of alcoholic beverages are too low increased after 2004 and started to decrease again after 2007. This increase was strongest with regard to distilled spirits and weakest with regard to wine, which corresponds with the amount of tax decreases in different beverage categories. The share of those satisfied with the current prices has been remarkable stable after the year 2004, as it has been about 50 percent for beer, wine and distilled spirits.

When asked about the price level of any commodity, it could be expected that the most common answer would always be that prices are too high, because it is in the interests of consumers to claim that especially prices including high excise duties are too high. Given this, it can be argued that there have been surprisingly many Finns claiming to be satisfied with the prevailing prices of alcoholic beverages after 2004.

Finnish men have had more liberal attitudes towards alcohol policies than women throughout the years, according to the Gallup Polls. Prior to the EU accession, in 1993, one fifth of the women wanted stricter alcohol regulation. During the next years the number fluctuated somewhat until reaching its peak of 39% in 2007, shortly after the large excise duty reduction. Today one fourth of Finnish women are in favour of stricter policies. The trend
Figure 6. Percentage of respondents thinking that prices of beer, wine or distilled spirits are too high or too low or who are satisfied with current prices according to Gallup polls in 1998–2013. Source: TNS Gallup

displaying the attitudes of Finnish men who feel that alcohol regulation should be tightened follows the same pattern as the previously described trend among women, but is on a lower level. One tenth of the male respondents wanted stricter policies in 1993; it then fluctuated between 8 and 22 percent before reaching its highest
point in 2007 when 26% felt the need for more regulation. Today 17% of the male interviewees are in favour of stricter alcohol control.

On the other side of the coin, when it comes to women wanting more relaxed alcohol policies the number fell from the peak of 33% in 1994 to 13% in the year 2000. During the last decade the share has been fairly stable at around 10 percent. The male pattern is once again similar but on a higher level, as the number of men rooting for more relaxed policies dropped from 50% during the 1990s, to around 20 percent at the beginning of the 2000s followed by a further drop to around 15 percent after 2005. The latest poll showed that 19% of the male respondents were in favour of more relaxed policies.

In general women are more restrictive in their views on alcohol policy than men. For instance, regarding the question on where to be able to buy different types of alcoholic beverages, men are much more in favour of being able to buy all kinds of alcoholic beverages in ordinary grocery stores. In comparison to women, more men think that the prevailing age limits are too high and more women than men think that the age limits are too low. Also regarding the price level of alcoholic beverages, women think that the prices are too low whereas more men are prone to think the opposite.

Apart from the clear differences between the genders, there are also some notable changes between age groups. The oldest segment of the population (65+) are least satisfied with prevailing policies. During the last decade the percentage of those satisfied with current alcohol control has varied between 43 and 57 percent. The explanation for the fairly low level of support lies in that between 30 and 49 percent have felt that the policies should be even stricter.

Middle-aged people (50–64) are slightly more satisfied with prevailing alcohol policies than their older peers. The satisfaction rate among 35–49-year-old Finns varied between 53 and 69 percent, and for people aged 25–34 between 57 and 72 percent. The youngest respondents (15–24) are in fact those most satisfied with prevailing alcohol policies – the share has varied between 62 and 80 percent during the last nine years. The youngest segments of the population are also strongly in favour of the current age limits. In 2013, 97% of the respondents aged 15 to 24 either agreed with the age limit of 18 years for wine and beer, or thought that this age limit was too low. The 20-year limit was either supported, or regarded as too low by 89% of respondents aged 15 to 24 years.

Place of residence affects alcohol attitudes to some extent, but is not quite as important a contextual factor as age and gender. Residents in the capital area are most prone to think that the control should be liberalised and residents of Northern and Eastern Finland have shown to be slightly more conservative according to the Gallup polls. Alcohol policy attitudes differ also with regard to education with the basic rule that a higher education equals a more liberal attitude towards alcohol policy.

The gap between attitudes for men, women and people in different ages can be understood by differences in alcohol use and drinking habits. Drinking habits among Finnish women have changed quite a bit during the last few decades and the consumption is now sixfold from the
1960s. However, Finnish men still consume roughly two thirds of all the alcohol (Mäkelä, Mustonen, & Huhtanen, 2010) and it seems that women suffer more from other people’s drinking than men, which could at least partly explain the more restrictive attitudes among women. For example, in the 2008 Drinking Habit Survey, almost half of the female respondents said they had been afraid of drunken people’s behaviour in public places during the past twelve months, whereas roughly one fourth of the men had had similar experiences. Every fourth woman and every sixth man also said that they had been harassed by intoxicated people in public places. Especially younger women aged 20–29 suffered from fear (over 70%) and had been victims of aggressive behaviour (almost 50%) to a large extent (Tigerstedt & Huhtanen, 2013).

The large satisfaction rate for prevailing policies among the youngest segment of the population, and the fact that fewer than 15 percent have wanted more liberal policies since the year 2004, could also be clarified when looking at drinking habits within this age group. The proportion of young abstainers decreased and drinking for the purpose of intoxication became more common in the 1980s and 1990s, but there was a clear change in this trend at the turn of the millennium. During the 2000s youth abstinence has become much more common, while drinking frequency and drinking for the purpose of intoxication has also decreased (Kinnunen et al., 2013).

As to political affiliation, the majority of the supporters of all political parties were satisfied with the current alcohol policy restrictions according to the 2103 poll. Supporters of the right-wing National Coalition party were most in favour of a more liberal alcohol policy, whereas the largest support for stricter policies was found in the Centre Party.

In Finland, statements of principles and measures of alcohol policy are often mentioned in the party programmes, but members of parliament are not tied to them and are allowed to vote freely in alcohol policy questions. This means that there is no clear right–left axis in alcohol policy questions. Moreover, the party pictures are affected by the gender compositions of the supporters, as men on average have more liberal alcohol policy attitudes than women. For instance, the supporters of True Finns are more male-dominated than the supporters for the Green Party, which partly explains why the share of those willing to have a more liberal alcohol policy is slightly higher among the supporters of True Finns than among the supporters of the Green party, even though the Greens generally have more liberal ideas about alcohol policy than the True Finns.

Summary and discussion

During the last few decades the cornerstones of the Nordic alcohol control – strict physical alcohol availability, high taxes and prices of alcoholic beverages, and the comprehensive alcohol monopoly system – have all been weakened. Because of the reorganisation of the Finnish alcohol policy and its infrastructure in 1993–2005, total alcohol consumption grew significantly, which also was the case for a variety of alcohol-related harms. One must, however, remember that although the Gallup questions remain the same throughout most of the study period, the opinions have to be contextualised to the prevailing
alcohol policy situation in the society. For instance, in 2003 the public took a stand towards prevailing alcohol prices which at that point were significantly higher than in 2005.

As the severity of different alcohol-related problems grew and their negative effects became more visible, also the general public became more positive regarding stricter alcohol policy in the society. The year 2004 could be regarded as pivotal, for the attitudes for a restrictive alcohol policy increased substantially when the general public became aware of the increased alcohol-related harms rates. Since then, more restrictive policies have been implemented as an attempt to reduce harms and consumption, after which the opinions have taken a more liberal turn.

Hence, we could confirm our hypothesis that higher per-capita alcohol consumption and higher levels of alcohol-related harms are connected to more restrictive attitudes among the general public. In other words, there is a positive correlation between the level of alcohol consumption and public support for a more restrictive alcohol policy. The interplay between decision making and public opinion seems to be stronger from decision making towards public opinion than vice versa. For instance, a decrease in alcohol excise duty levels and prices of alcoholic beverages has changed public opinion of the appropriate level of alcohol taxes, but the reason for the tax decrease in 2004 stemmed from fiscal reasons and not from public opinion on excessively high taxes of alcoholic beverages as the polls had showed prior to the tax decrease.

Changes in the overall opinion climate are also evident in the discussions and answers in Gallup polls about where customers are, or should be allowed to purchase different categories of alcoholic beverages. When Finland joined the EU and even some years after this, a substantial part of the respondents wanted wine to be sold in ordinary grocery stores, but for the time being, allowing wine sales in grocery stores is not a much-debated issue in Finland, and the political elite is not actively pursuing a liberalisation of wine sales. Hence, the majority’s wishes of having wine and strong beer sold in grocery stores did not affect political decision making in the mid-1990s and did not lead to any changes in the retailing system.

There are at least two plausible explanations for not taking the majority’s opinions in account, as sales places for wine is a crucial question for the future of alcohol monopolies in the Nordic countries. If wine is allowed to be sold in ordinary grocery stores, the monopolies cannot maintain their present retail store network based solely on the monopoly of spirits sales. Second, decision makers are aware that allowing wine sales in grocery stores is a political decision, which cannot easily be reversed, even if public opinion on the matter changed again.

The Gallup polls have clearly shown that men’s alcohol policy opinions are more liberal than those of women. Apart from the clear gender differences, there are also differences between age groups. Middle-aged people are slightly more satisfied with prevailing alcohol policies than their older peers, and the youngest respondents are the most satisfied with prevailing alcohol policies. Alcohol policy attitudes differ also with regard to education with the basic rule that a higher education equals
a more liberal attitude towards alcohol policy. Place of residence affects alcohol attitudes to some extent, but it is not as important a contextual factor as age and gender.

**Declaration of Interest** None

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