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ISSN: 2563-190X. Available Open Access at <https://criticalgamblingstudies.com>

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APA Citation: Selin, J. (2022). Parliamentary Debates on Gambling Policies as Political Action: An Interpretive Political Analysis. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 3 (1), 24–34.  
<https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs85>

### Article History:

Received 2020-10-07

Accepted 2021-10-27

Published 2022-03-07

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## Parliamentary Debates on Gambling Policies as Political Action: An Interpretive Political Analysis

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**Abstract:** The aims of this paper are twofold: first, to demonstrate the importance and relevance of interpretive political analysis to gambling research and second, to analyze from the aforementioned perspective why politicians in Finland talk about gambling harm and gambling revenue the way they do. The speeches of the representatives in the Parliament of Finland during debates on gambling policy are analysed as political action. The analysis has three levels. The first focuses on the themes of the speeches. The results show that there are four distinct thematic dimensions in the speeches: gambling harm, revenue, regulatory system, and regulation. The second level of analysis establishes the contexts where certain themes typically occur. Typically, revenue is discussed in the context of the economic aspect of gambling while gambling harm is discussed in the context of the justification of the regulatory system. The third level of analysis explains why the themes occur in the contexts they do. The representatives' acceptance of the self-evidence of the regulatory system forecloses any possibility of getting support for major changes to the system. This explains why the official policy aims of reducing and preventing gambling harm have not been realized. It is concluded that the approach introduced can help to understand the political aspects of gambling.

**Keywords:** Politics, gambling policy, qualitative research, discourse

Article History: Received October 7, 2020; Accepted October 27, 2021; Published March 7, 2022

Available Open Access from <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs85>

### Introduction

The aims of this paper are twofold. The first aim is to demonstrate the importance and relevance of interpretive political analysis to gambling research. By interpretive political analysis we mean research that is focused on the political aspects of human action and language use and which analyses language by using qualitative research methods (e.g., Fischer, 2003). The second aim is to analyze from the aforementioned perspective why politicians talk about two key dimensions of gambling policy — gambling harm and gambling revenue — the way they do.

Policy and politics are topics that have not received as much attention in gambling studies as psychologically oriented research that focuses on individuals (Cassidy et al., 2013; Nordmyr & Forsman, 2018). Both the pronounced focus on individuals and the supremacy of problem gambling surveys in gambling studies have been criticized by many commentators. The basic arguments of this line of criticism have been the following. First, in studies that focus on individuals, the negative consequences of

gambling have been explained as emanating from "individual dispositions that lead to problems, be they cognitive biases or otherwise, rather than the social circumstances which allow such dispositions to be expressed" (Livingstone et al., 2018, p. 62). Young (2013) argues that some results and approaches of gambling research have been used politically in order to legitimize and strengthen the conception that gambling problems only affect a pathological minority. Second, it has been argued that the focus on (pathological) individuals is at least partially due to the ability of the major beneficiaries of gambling, the gambling industry and governments, to influence the research agenda of gambling research (Cassidy et al., 2013; Livingstone et al., 2018; Young, 2013).

While some of the critical research has emphasized the importance of politics, politics has too often remained unthematized in gambling research. Politics is often represented as alien to gambling research, as something dangerous or a disturbing element in research (Delfabbro & King, 2017; Shaffer et al., 2020; Young, 2013). Sometimes this has reached a degree

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where even analyses of the political aspects of gambling-related practices are deemed political in themselves (Delfabbro & King, 2017, 7). It is thus obvious that politics is an important aspect of gambling research, provision of gambling, gambling regulation and consumption of gambling products (Cassidy, 2020; Matilainen, 2017). Insofar as gambling in contemporary societies is part of our everyday lives (Nicoll, 2019) there is multiplicity of gambling-related practices that can be analyzed from the perspective of politics.

Recent papers on the election campaign contributions made by the gambling industry show how the gambling industry can influence key political actors (Johnson & Livingstone, 2020; Kypri et al., 2019). Ferraiolo (2013; 2016) has studied, from the point of view of morality policy, how politicians have framed gambling in parliamentary debates in the US. Cassidy (2020) and Nicoll (2019) also offer analyses with a focus on the social, cultural, economic and political contexts of gambling, governments and the gambling industry. However, the need for political analysis that employs contemporary political theory has rarely been mentioned or adopted (e.g., Selin, 2016). It is our contention that analyses with a focus on the political aspects of social and discursive practices can enrich and elaborate the above described findings proposed by the critical commentators of gambling in contemporary societies. The next logical and necessary step in the field of gambling research is to actually analyze gambling-related practices and discourses from the perspective of politics in order to explicate how and why the political aspect in these practices matters.

There is arguably a major tension between profit seeking and harm prevention in the field of gambling (Sulkunen et al., 2019). Finland is an example of a country where this tension is deeply rooted in the regulatory system, because gambling revenue has traditionally been a major source of income for thousands of organizations in Finland (Selin et al., 2019). Finland and Norway are two remaining European countries with the previously more common regulatory framework based on a state monopoly on all forms of gambling (Selin et al., 2019). Other European countries, including Sweden who previously also had a regulatory framework quite similar to those in Finland and Norway, typically have regulatory frameworks where licenses are issued for some forms of gambling while other forms of gambling (e.g., national lotteries) are operated by monopolies (Egerer et al., 2018). Following the European Union (EU) law, Finland justifies the regulatory framework, an exception to the general rule of free trade in the EU, by the prevention and reduction of gambling harm (Selin, 2019). However, paradoxically since accession of Finland to the EU in 1995, gambling revenue has become a more and more important source of funding for thousands of civil society organizations as well as the state itself (Selin et al., 2019). The obvious tension between revenue as a secondary aim of gambling policy and harm prevention

as the primary aim of gambling policy makes Finland an excellent case for anyone interested in politics related to gambling.

### **Methods and Data: Reading the Debates on Gambling Policy Politically *Politics as Activity***

Politics is commonly understood in terms of spatial metaphors, as a specific sphere or domain of action (Wiesner et al., 2017). Conceptualizing politics as activity is an alternative to the spatial conceptualization. According to Latour (2003, p. 144) the use of the term "politics" cannot be limited "to the statements of men and women called politicians, as if there were a particular sphere or domain distinct from economics, society, law, etc". Important to this second approach is to consider politics as a potential aspect of all human action (Wiesner et al., 2017). From this point of view, one could analyze politically, for example, the debates between the proponents of responsible gambling and the advocates of public health (Shaffer et al., 2020; van Schalkwyk et al., 2019). Crucial to this kind of analysis would be bracketing the truth values of the propositions used in the debate because political discourse "differs from all the other regimes in its judgement of truth" (Latour, 2003, p. 147). If one is interested in analyzing the debate between researchers politically instead of applying scientific standards of truth, one should pay attention to the changes or new opportunities for change or action that the parties of the debate are striving for. The "truth" of political discourse could thus be determined by the success of its proponents in achieving their goals.

Moreover, the approach to politics adopted here follows the characterization provided by Wiesner and colleagues (2017): "as an activity politics is contingent and controversial" (p. 7). This is to say that in politics there is always a possibility of acting otherwise and the outcome of a confrontation between adversaries is open (see Foucault, 1983). This however does not mean that anything is possible because the specific context often precludes the realization of many possibilities even if the possibility to act differently exists (Wiesner et al., 2017).

The final piece of political theory adopted here concerns the way two performatives, politicking and politicization, are articulated. Palonen (2003) proposes politicking and politicization as additions to the traditional English vocabulary on politics that consists of a division into three nouns: policy, polity, and politics. Palonen (2003) offers quite an abstract definition of politicization, politicking, polity and policy: "Policy refers to the regulating aspect of politics, politicking alludes to a performative aspect, polity implies a metaphorical space with specific possibilities and limits, while politicization marks an opening of something as political, as 'playable'" (p. 175). In what follows, this is explicated in terms more familiar to gambling research.

A policy is the future orientated dimension of politics and it contains norms or rules that guide political action (Wiesner et al., 2017). In the field of gambling, responsible gambling is one well-known yet controversial example of policy and it is arguable that responsible gambling policies are clearly intended to guide political action and offer standards or norms to evaluate possible activities or interventions. A polity is itself a result of previous political action and it marks the limits of regulated political activity (Palonen, 2003, p. 179; Wiesner et al., 2017, p. 10). Parliament is perhaps the best-known example of a polity. Politicization is an invention, a successful disclosure of the contingency of something that has previously been considered as inevitable or natural (Palonen, 2003, p. 179). In the context of parliament, politicization can mean the successful introduction of new issues into the political agenda. For example, one could introduce the “impossible” policy of regulating online gambling through an international treaty (Sulkunen et al., 2019) or demanding a personal license from all gamblers (Nikkinen, 2019). Politicking refers to the way politics is performed in practice (Wiesner et al., 2017, p. 10). Insofar as politicization is concerned with disclosing the contingency of something, politicking is more about gaining advantage over the existing stakes of the political game (Palonen, 2003). Consequently, calls for personal gambling licenses or an international gambling treaty in parliament could in the right context also be considered politicking with an aim of gaining something important in a totally different policy field.

### **Logics of Critical Explanation**

One of the key theoretical and methodological starting points of this paper is the logics of critical explanation by Glynos and Howarth (2007) whose approach is based on discourse theory, and they describe it as postpositivist or poststructural. From the perspective of the present study, the most important aspect of their work is the idea of radical contingency; that is, the ontological basis for Glynos and Howarth. Radical contingency means that social structures and social practices are not considered as ahistorical and as existing independent of the contexts in which they are enacted. Moreover, social structures and practices are characterized by incompleteness or lack, and they are thus always susceptible to change.

According to Glynos and Howarth (2007) there are four dimensions of social reality that are all connected to the radical contingency of social structures and practices. The first is the social dimension which is characterized by the ongoing functioning of social practices. This flow of events is often not graspable for the subjects and it is experienced as natural or

inevitable by them. The second dimension is the political, which refers to situations where the ongoing functioning of social practices is disturbed, the radical contingency is disclosed, and the practices become potentially available for thought to be problematized. The third dimension is the ideological, and it covers the ways subjects are complicit in maintaining the ongoing flow of social practices or even concealing the contingency of social practices and structures. The final dimension is the ethical. It alludes to the ways subjects endorse the radical contingency of social practices and as a consequence, possibilities for change can emerge. In this paper the political dimension is foregrounded, and it refers to the ways the existing ways of speaking and acting politically are either challenged or the attempts to challenge the existing practices are suppressed.

### **Parliament Debates as Data**

The analyzed data consists of minutes of the Parliament of Finland regarding five Lotteries Act (1047/2001) amendment bills between 2008 and 2019. The first two bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 were both introduced in 2008 and they were debated in tandem after the preliminary debate.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 presents the main proposals of all the five bills. Atlas.ti software version 7.1.8. (Berlin, Germany) was used in the analysis.

The gambling policy debates are approached as discursive practices. The first aspect in the analysis of discursive practices is to determine what the practice is (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Wiesner et al., 2017). In practice this meant coding the textual material and creating a coding framework that captures all the relevant themes addressed in the speeches. The basic units of analysis were the main theme and the subtheme of a speech. The main theme of a speech was the first theme addressed, a theme whose importance the speaker emphasized, or the conclusion of a speech. The subtheme of a speech was a theme that was addressed in a speech but was secondary in importance. Sometimes there were several subthemes in a speech. Creating the coding framework required several readings of the material during which the framework was elaborated and as a result most of the themes were categorized into larger thematic dimensions. Few sporadic themes did not fit into the main thematic dimensions. Every theme was included only in one thematic dimension even though this was not always straightforward because themes were often discussed in very different contexts. After the main thematic dimensions were constructed, it was possible to discern whether the contents of the dimensions changed over time.

<sup>2</sup> In the Parliament of Finland debates on bills take place in three points of the consideration process: the preliminary debate after which the bill is appointed to the appropriate committee, the first reading in which the committee report is considered and possible

amendments to the bill are approved, and the second reading in which the bill is either approved or rejected.

**Table 1.** Main proposals in the Lotteries Act amendment bills between 2008 and 2018.

| Bill        | Main proposals  |
|-------------|---|
| HE 96/2008  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a minimum age of 18 for purchasing gambling products</li> <li>• restrictions on legal marketing of gambling products</li> <li>• bans and sanctions on marketing of gambling products of illegal operators</li> </ul> |
| HE 212/2008 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• new category of gambling offence (with harsher penalties than the previously prescribed lottery offence) added to the Penal Code and Lotteries Act</li> </ul>  |
| HE 207/2010 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a transition from a license-based monopoly to a legal monopoly</li> <li>• betting on horses can be provided only by one operator (Fintoto Oy)</li> </ul>   |
| HE 132/2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• from a system of three monopoly operators to a system of a single monopoly operator</li> </ul>   |
| HE 213/2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mandatory player registration for EGMs outside arcades and casino</li> <li>• license period for non-money lotteries extended from 6 months to 12 months</li> </ul>   |

The second phase of the analysis focused on the ways *meaning is contextually constructed* (Wiesner et al., 2017). In practice this meant that the aim of the analysis was to relate the themes to the whole of a speech or debate. Moreover, patterns of co-occurrence or associations between themes and other relevant discourses were analyzed systematically. Here Foucault's (2000, 97–99) idea of "associated field" pertaining to the analysis of discourse was applied: every theme is regarded as conditioned by other themes belonging to the same speech, or by other texts<sup>3</sup> referred to in a speech, or even by themes that might occur as a consequence of the initial act of presenting a theme. In short, the context of a theme is not just the immediate context, but regular associations between a theme and other themes or texts determine what kind of context is possible for a certain theme in a discourse (Kusch, 1991).

The contextual analysis was the basis for the last phase of the analysis with the aim of explaining *why the meanings are constructed in the way they are* (Wiesner et al., 2017). This last phase of the analysis was the most challenging one because it required offering a credible explanation of the key features of the discourse with recourse to political intentionality. In this final phase, of utmost importance was the feature of explaining in social sciences that Glynos & Howarth (2007, p. 34) describe as the "to-and-fro movement between the phenomena investigated and the various explanations". In this phase, sensitivity to observe the moments where the contingency of the social practices was disclosed and attempts were made to politicize the regulatory system was needed, or sensitivity to those moments where politicking in the context of the existing regulatory system or policies took place.

## Results

### *The Thematic Dimensions, Main Themes and Subthemes*

Overall, the most discussed thematic dimension was 'Gambling system, its justification and its threats' (hereafter 'System') while 'Revenue & revenue distribution' (hereafter 'Revenue') and "Gambling harm" (hereafter 'Harm') were discussed less. The least discussed dimension was 'Regulation and supervision' (hereafter 'Regulation').

The thematic dimension 'Revenue' covers all themes that were linked to gambling revenue, their use or their importance to society or specific stakeholders. Themes related to the supervision and managing of the revenue distribution were also included in this dimension.

When the numbers of the main themes and the subthemes of the thematic dimension 'Revenue' are put together (Table 2) one can observe that this thematic dimension was most often mentioned in the debates over bill HE 207/2010 while in the debates over bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 themes related to this dimension were not in the foreground. It is also noteworthy that themes belonging to this dimension were never among the most commonly occurring themes. However, when the absolute numbers of speeches are considered, one can see that in the debates over three of the bills almost half of the speeches contained themes belonging to 'Revenue' (Table 3). Debates over bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 were exceptions and only in approximately a quarter of the speeches this dimension occurred. When the individual themes within the dimension are considered, there is no observable change over time apart from the emphasis on the revenue theme during the debates on bill HE 207/2010 (Tables 2).

The thematic dimension 'Harm' consists of all themes concerning gambling harm, prevention measures, causes of harm, and treatment of gambling

<sup>3</sup> Here "texts" refer loosely to all kinds of linguistic expressions or events.



addiction<sup>4</sup>. In addition, this dimension also contains discussions on the ethical aspects of the regulatory system in Finland, for example the ethics of using gambling revenue as funding source for arts and culture.

Whether absolute numbers of occurrence or ratios of different dimensions are considered, the thematic dimension ‘Harm’ was in the foreground only when bill HE 213/2018 concerning mandatory player registration

for most EGMs was under discussion (Table 2). During these debates, in three out of four of the speeches this dimension was addressed (Table 3), and over one third of the themes addressed belonged to this dimension (Table 2). The content of ‘Harm’ did not change much during the debates on the first three bills. However, the debates on bill HE 213/2018 were thematically more diverse than the previous ones.

**Table 2.** Numbers of main themes and subthemes of the MPs’ speeches, and the combined number of main themes and subthemes as a percentage of the total number of all themes by thematic dimension and by bill.

| Bill  | Revenues     | Harms        | System       | Regulation  | Total number of themes |
|-------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|------------------------|
| 2008* | 4/4** (13 %) | 8/8 (25 %)   | 14/16 (48 %) | 1/8 (14 %)  | 63                     |
| 2010  | 12/12 (34 %) | 4/9 (18 %)   | 18/15 (46 %) | 1/0 (1 %)   | 71                     |
| 2016  | 3/8 (26 %)   | 0/6 (14 %)   | 9/15 (56 %)  | 0/2 (5 %)   | 43                     |
| 2018  | 4/10 (21 %)  | 11/14 (37 %) | 6/3 (13 %)   | 1/19 (29 %) | 68                     |

\*Bills 96/2008 and 212/2008 were combined after the respective preliminary debates.

\*\* In each cell the number of main themes is the first figure and the number of subthemes is the second figure.

**Table 3.** The numbers of MPs’ speeches that include a particular thematic dimension as absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total number of speeches by bill.

| Bill  | Revenues    | Harms     | System     | Regulation | In total |
|-------|-------------|-----------|------------|------------|----------|
| 2008* | 6 (23 %)**) | 13 (50 %) | 18 (69 %)  | 7 (27 %)   | 26       |
| 2010  | 17 (46 %)   | 11 (30 %) | 20 (54 %)  | 1 (3 %)    | 37       |
| 2016  | 7 (54 %)    | 5 (38 %)  | 13 (100 %) | 2 (15 %)   | 13       |
| 2018  | 11 (46 %)   | 18 (75 %) | 9 (38 %)   | 9 (38 %)   | 24       |

\*Bills 96/2008 and 212/2008 were combined after the respective preliminary debates.

\*\* Note: the percentages do not add up to 100 because a single speech can cover several thematic dimensions.

The thematic dimension ‘System’ consists of a variety of themes that are related to the threats, defects, development, functioning, justification, and alternatives of the regulatory system. A specific aspect of this dimension was a theme concerning the autonomous island of Åland and the gambling operator (PAF) functioning outside the jurisdiction of mainland Finland. The question of Åland was related to the marketing of PAF products in mainland Finland but it was also a constitutional question and question of international law because the autonomy of Åland is guaranteed in the Finnish constitution as well as in an old international treaty.

The thematic dimension ‘System’ was the most discussed dimension in three out of four debates, the only exception being the debates on bill HE 213/2018 (Table 2). In the debates on bill HE 132/2016 the theme

occurred in every single speech (Table 3). There were no major thematic changes within this dimension. During the debates on bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 the theme on Åland islands was pronounced.

The fourth thematic dimension is ‘Regulation’ and it consists of themes that deal with the regulations in the bill under debate and their implementation, need for further regulations, corporate governance of the state-controlled operators, supervision of gambling, and the actions of the gambling regulators. Themes belonging to this dimension were usually not at the heart of the debates as can be seen in Tables 2 and 3. Only on three occasions in the debates was a theme belonging to ‘Regulation’ the main theme of a speech (Table 2).

Themes belonging to the thematic dimension ‘Regulation’ did not often occur in three of the four debates, the only exception being the debates on bill

<sup>4</sup> Treatment of gamblers suffering from negative consequences of gambling was on every occurrence discussed in terms of addiction.

HE 213/2018 when nearly one third of all themes mentioned belonged to this dimension and the dimension occurred in more than one third of the speeches (Table 2; Table 3). There were considerable changes in the themes belonging to this dimension making it the most heterogeneous of the dimensions.

### Themes in Context

When the occurrence of themes is considered from the perspective of the relations they have with other texts, it becomes evident that a mere occurrence of a theme in a speech is not a manifestation of a negative or positive attitude towards the topic nor is it even a manifestation of interest in a theme. In what follows, the focus is on elaboration of how the themes acquire different meaning in relation to other texts or speeches or to the whole of a single speech. The main topic of this article, discourse on harm and revenue is accentuated in the analysis. It is also noteworthy to mention an observation that characterizes the whole material: it is not possible to discern the traditional division between government and opposition in any of the debates, that is, all the bills enjoyed large interparty support in the parliament.

### Revenue in Context

The main themes on revenue were associated with several other texts in the debates on bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008. In the following speech that was a response to a motion to abandon the existing regulatory framework and to introduce a license-based system several related texts occurred:

If we consider what this monopoly contributes to society, we know that the national debt of Finland has increased by 13 billion euro this year and the annual gambling revenue from Veikkaus, Finnish Slot Machine Associations and Fintoto is almost one billion euro, almost 900 million euro. Where would the supporters of this sort of free gambling market take such money which could then be channelled to war veterans who now get 100 million euro, to the building of sites for outdoor activities and sports arenas, to the maintenance of culture and creative arts? .... On the other hand, when people become addicted to these games, also the costs are paid by the municipalities and the state. (Kaltioikumpu, 2010)

In the quoted passage references are made implicitly to the global financial crisis taking place in 2008 and to a comparison between the monopoly system and a licensing system as proposed by representative Nautiler previously; explicit references are made to the calculus concerning the social costs and benefits of gambling as well as to the interests of the beneficiaries of the revenue.

References were made also to the interest of different beneficiaries in all debates. The association

between the thematic dimension 'Revenue' and the interests of various beneficiaries occurred regularly in all debates. Moreover, without the exception of the debates on bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 'Revenue' was also associated with the economic benefits of gambling revenue to society more generally. This is a key finding and it indicates stability in the associated field. This interpretation is further confirmed when themes in 'System' and 'Regulation' are considered as part of the associated field of 'Revenue'. From this perspective it is possible to see that 'System' was associated with beneficiaries and with the economic benefits of gambling revenue to society in the debates on bills HE 207/2010, HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008. Similar association did not occur in the case of 'Regulation'. Thus, it seems that rather unsurprisingly the most common context where themes related to 'Revenue' occurred concerned the economic aspect of gambling.

However, revenue was also discussed more ambivalently in the debates on bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008. The gambling revenue was associated with criticism towards the dependence of society and specifically social and health care on gambling revenue:

But the fact is in any case that Veikkaus, and in this case now RAY's operating requirements, as a monopoly need to be safeguarded because the third sector associations are decisively dependent on this money. Still, one can of course ask whether this should be the case? Shouldn't the goal be such that the necessary social and health care services could be funded directly by taxes, for example? (Virtanen, 2010)

This was not the only time in the same debates when 'Revenue' was associated with the dependency of society on gambling revenue. The same association was made later in the debate over bill HE 213/2018, but this time a subtheme on harm was associated with revenue dependency (Karimäki, 2018). Another wider cultural and scientific discussion related to the disease conception of addiction. This discussion only occurred in tandem with 'Revenue' when bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 were debated: "It cannot be possible that the Finnish social and health care is dependent on the pathological desire of people to gamble" (Kankaanniemi, 2008). These two associations (dependency on revenue and addiction as disease) were unique and never occurred again in the debates.

Two final observations concern the way 'Revenue' was related to EU law and the justification of gambling monopolies within the EU. This association was in the foreground in the debates on bill HE 207/2010 and it was emphasized that revenue could not justify the monopoly. The background to this was the infringement process initiated by the European commission against Finland. However, a shift seems to have taken place after the infringement process ended

in 2013 (Selin, 2019). In tension with the harm-based justifications of the monopoly, several MPs speaking from an institutional position (presenters of either bills or committee reports) started to highlight the importance of the revenue to society in the debates on bills HE 132/2016 and HE 213/2018. The minister of interior associated the revenue with the interests of the beneficiaries:

Think about where would we get money for this kind of social well-being, physical education, science, art, youth work, where would we take the money, and then of course horse breeding, horse racing, in which I know that the chairman is very interested in, and then we all here have common interests, in which the chairman is also interested, that I know. A great thing I think. (Risikko, 2016).

### **Harm in Context**

In all the debates, when the context of gambling harm was considered, the talk on harm regularly occurred when the official gambling policy aims (e.g., the reduction and prevention of economic, social and health harm related to gambling) were mentioned or when a bill was supported. Both policy aims and support for a bill represent the normal and almost habitual way of talking about gambling policy. On one hand, to mention gambling harm in connection with the official policy aims is related to the justification of the monopoly in the EU. On the other hand, as noted above, all the bills were endorsed by both the government and the opposition and it is clear that the regulatory framework has enjoyed extensive support in the parliament. The following quotation exemplifies this kind of talk:

The government has recognized problem gambling and prepared a bill with an aim to reduce the economic, social and health harm and problems related to gambling. You need to identify yourself when you play for example the gambling machines placed in shops and kiosks... The government has again made a good bill and I support it warmly. (Hongisto, 2018).

The first context of the talk on gambling harm, then, is the justification of the regulatory system. This interpretation is also supported by several implicit or explicit references to the EU when harm was discussed.

Harm was nevertheless discussed also by referring to several other discussions: addiction as a disease, gambling as a form of regressive taxation, the dependence of society on gambling revenue, excessive indebtedness, and risks of online gambling. But 'Harm' was not regularly associated with any of the discussions above. Talk within "Harm" was contextually dispersed.

Nevertheless, references to addiction as a disease were made in all debates except those on bill HE 132/2016:

I know many cases of people who have been in this kind of gambling addiction treatment and been clean for a while and then relapsed and it is really a big deal. This is why I would like to hear some discussion on how to limit these long lines of gambling machines. Do they belong to the hallways of shops because they create an image of high acceptability and ease? (Lahtela, 2010).

While in the quotation above 'Harm' is clearly associated affirmatively with the disease conception of addiction, this was not always the case and on occasion themes belonging to 'Harm' occurred when for example the interests of beneficiaries were discussed. The debates on bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 were indeed the only ones where 'Harm' was not associated with the interests of the beneficiaries or the economic benefits of gambling.

All in all, the justification of the regulatory system was the clearest context for the thematic dimension "Harm" to occur. Tellingly, 'Harm' was not a main theme in a single speech in debates on bill HE 132/2016 concerning the merging of three gambling operators. While this could be taken as an indication of the way the content of a bill dictates the themes of a debate, the political reading of the debates can shed light as to why the themes occurred (or did not occur) in specific contexts.

### **Reading the Debates Politically**

In this final phase of the analysis, the focus is on the motions, understood here as all kinds of political initiatives made by the MPs during the debates. These political moves, typical of parliamentary debates, will be considered either as politicking or politicization depending on the details of each case. They will hereby be called just "motions" for the sake of terminological clarity. There were ten motions when bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 were debated, three motions when HE 207/2010 was debated, two motions when HE 132/2016 was debated, and six motions when bill HE 213/2018 was debated.

When the bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 were debated the motions can be grouped into two: the first is a motion demanding a transition to a licensing system that is repeated thrice, and the rest are related to the reduction and prevention of harm.

The motion to abolish the monopoly system is first proposed by Elisabeth Nauc ler, a Swedish-speaking representative of the autonomous island of  land: "My opinion is that Finland should consider a such [licensing] model because it is a natural consequence of development and experience shows that national companies are doing fine in such competition" (Nauc ler, 2008).



We cannot know whether this was a serious attempt to politicize the existing system or a rhetorical vehicle for getting the attention of the other MPs and revise the bill in a way that would not affect Åland. But what we know is that the three MPs in the first reading took it seriously when Naulér repeated it. So at least it was considered a serious attempt to politicize the existing system. The response by representative Kaltiokumpu (2010) has already been cited above. The following is another example of the responses:

All other means, all other *liberalizations* that are made will worsen the harm. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to hold on to a monopoly. Neither do I consider it sensible in any case in the future that we strive to do away with the monopoly. We should rather strengthen it in every possible way. (Leppä, 2010, emphasis by author).

During the preliminary debate on bill HE 207/2010 a market liberal representative Ukkola (2010) makes a similar motion, and she too gets a negative response. Despite the fact that in the second reading of bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008 Kimmo Sasi (2010), the chairman of the constitutional committee, supports Naulér's motion, it is clear that these motions did not have a chance to succeed. They are still important because they indicate *the limits of possible political action* in gambling policy in Finland; attempts to politicize the self-evidence of the regulatory system are to be silenced.

There was one motion concerning the system that did gain ground little by little. This was a motion to merge all three monopoly operators made by representative Ahde (2010), the former CEO of the national lottery company Veikkaus, when bill HE 207/2010 was debated. Bill HE 132/2016 can in fact be considered as, at least partially, a result of this motion.

Ahde's motion is politicking in two alternative ways. The first interpretation is that the safeguarding of the regulatory system by introducing legal monopolies as proposed in the bill offered Ahde an opportunity to introduce the idea of safeguarding the system in an even better way by establishing a single monopoly operator. To say the least, Ahde was successful in setting the agenda for the preliminary debate on the bill. The second interpretation is that the real aim of the motion was to strengthen the relative position of Veikkaus, its beneficiaries, politicians close to Veikkaus and to direct gambling policy in a way favourable to them. The start of the speech by representative Manninen (2010), the chairman of the board of RAY at that moment, indicates that he represented this line of interpretation when he opposed the motion: 'I had no intention to speak but because these representatives of brother Veikkaus are using the chance to speak so busily I thought that I also would speak shortly' (Manninen, 2010).

An important observation is that it was possible to gain support for a motion that concerned the system insofar as the nucleus of the system remained intact. Moreover, the way Ahde's motion was debated indicates that the real front line between opposing political forces was not related to parties, but interest groups connected to gambling. The fact that there were no clear interparty differences on gambling policy supports this interpretation. Politicking could take place only within the "metaphorical space" (Palonen, 2003, 171) of the *regulatory system* understood as a polity here.

The motions related to gambling harm are examined next. Five motions were introduced in the debates on bills HE 96/2008 and HE 212/2008. Two of the motions were propositions to introduce a maximum age limit instead of the age limit of 18 the bill contained. These motions were not seconded nor opposed.

Two motions introduced the idea of removing all EGMs from convenience locations to arcades or otherwise limiting the availability of EGMs. The motion of placing the EGMs in arcades was seconded but it did not occur in any of the later debates again. Representative Koski who was behind the motion even supported a contrary view when bill HE 207/2010 was debated (Koski, 2011). Here again it seems that the habitual endorsement of the regulatory framework on the part of Koski foreclosed the possibility of effectively politicizing even a part of the system.

It is also telling that the only recurring motion and the only one that resulted in legislative changes in Finland was not strictly speaking even a matter of gambling policy. These motions were calls for limiting the availability of payday loans that occurred in debates on all bills apart from debates on bill HE 207/2010. The following quotation is a representative example:

...scaling down payday loans into a reasonable instrument so that it does not lead to catastrophe should be realized by imposing an interest rate on the payday loan companies that is similar to the current interest on overdue payments. (Lehti, 2019)

On the basis of the analysis above there is sufficient evidence to make the interpretation that the habitual acceptance of the self-evidence of the regulatory system forecloses effectively any possibility of politicizing the system. Politicking related to harm prevention or reduction policies has typically been concerned with either making adjustments to the existing policy instruments or introducing new instruments with consideration.

## Discussion

The results showed that there were some differences in the way certain aspects of gambling policy were discussed and that there were also some changes over time. When absolute numbers of

speeches are considered, in the debates over three of the bills almost half of the speeches contained themes belonging to 'Revenue'. When the individual themes within the dimension were considered, there was no change over time. The thematic dimension 'Harm' was rarely in the foreground in the debates. Themes in 'Harm' did not change much during the debates on the first three bills. The thematic dimension 'System' was the most discussed dimension in three out of four debates. 'Regulation' was in the forefront only in one of the cases.

When the way meaning was constructed in discourse on gambling policy was analyzed, it was found that the association between 'Revenue' and the interests of various beneficiaries occurred regularly in all the debates. The most common context where themes related to 'Revenue' occurred concerned the economy. The justification of the regulatory system was the clearest context for the thematic dimension 'Harm' to occur.

As to the why revenue and harm were discussed in certain contexts it seems that an almost habitual or ideological acceptance of the self-evidence of the regulatory system forecloses effectively any possibility of politicizing the system. This explains why the official policy aims of reducing and preventing gambling harm have not been realized. Only politicking related either to the development of the regulatory system or refining harm prevention or reduction policies in modest ways has been possible. Moreover, the almost unanimous support for the national gambling monopoly is also an indication of the larger consensual political culture of Finland and other Nordic countries (Götz & Marklund, 2015). Political culture and type of government are thus among the factors that can significantly influence political debates on gambling and can help to explain why gambling harm is not effectively prevented.

Due to the limitations of the material analyzed here conclusions that are too far-reaching need to be avoided: the material does not represent everything Finnish politicians have said about gambling policy during the investigated period. Moreover, the minutes of the committees of the parliament are not public and thus not included here. The preparation process of the bills with their distinct backgrounds was not analyzed here either. Analyses based on such data could shed light to the ways the ideological endorsement of the existing policies makes it difficult to include more effective harm prevention measures into legislation in Finland. The possibilities for interpretive political analyses are thus multiple even within the parliamentary context discussed here. Therefore, we encourage researchers to apply the ideas presented in this paper to qualitative data that covers the relevant, be they controversial or self-evident, political aspects of gambling in different jurisdictions.

The conclusions that are made on the basis of the results are threefold. First, in so far as the tension between revenue and harm characterizes gambling

policy, detailed analyses of politics can offer possibilities to critically engage the existing policies and improve the enactment of gambling policies with a focus on harm prevention instead of revenue or individual pathology. Second, for those engaged in gambling research from a social scientific perspective detailed interpretive political analyses can offer one way to understand the political aspects of acting on or talking about gambling in different contexts. Moreover, together with other systematic analyses that focus on the cultural, social and regulatory aspects of gambling, interpretive political analysis can enrich our understanding of gambling as something that consists of and is connected to a multiplicity of practices and phenomena. Third, if politics is understood as an aspect of human action that is always at least potentially present, this understanding of politics can contribute to gambling research that is not afraid of disagreement and confrontation, that is, the politicization of issues, but instead approaches them enthusiastically as chances for something new.

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### **Funding and Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Helsinki, Finland, funded the study (appropriation under section 52 of the Lotteries Act).

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