

Can we represent future generations in myopic democracies? – Analyzing the design, feasibility and viability of institutional guardians of future generations

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ABSTRACT

Future generations will be affected by political decisions of today, but they do not have a voice in their making. Recognizing that short-termist perspectives shape political decision-making, several democracies created institutional guardians designed to represent the interests of future generations in present-day decision-making, facilitating a long-term view across policy areas. In doing so, they may help to mitigate democratic myopia. However, some scholars are very sceptical of the feasibility and viability of such institutional innovations, given the ubiquitous short-termists pressures in politics. To analyze their feasibility and viability claims conceptually and empirically, this study systematically compares the design features (i.e. political instruments, access to the policy process and to branches of government, legal basis, organizational structure and resources) and the conditions of institutionalization of eight institutional guardians of future generations, four of which did not survive and were dismantled. Although each case is unique, it can be concluded that it is feasible to institutionally represent future generations even under detrimental external conditions. However, guardians that can not only bark but also bite live dangerously. Guardians are most viable when they are designed to be neither too strong nor too weak, and when they have a balanced interdependence with political decision-makers.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 January 2024
Accepted 15 December 2024


KEYWORDS

Comparative politics;
democracy; democratic
short-termism; institutions
for future generations;
intergenerational justice;
sustainability governance

1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, an increasing number of national and subnational democracies have been establishing institutional proxy-representatives of future generations (abbr. “proxies”), such as the Commissioner for Environment and Sustainable Development in Canada, the Guardian of Future Generations in Malta and the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (Rose 2024). Rose (2024) distinguishes three types of proxies: (1) the Independent Guardian, (2) the Political or Administrative Advisory or

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2024.2444632>

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Coordination Body, and (3) the Sustainability Stakeholder Council or Commission. These public bodies are supposed to help political and administrative decision-makers taking into account the needs of future generations alongside the needs of current constituencies. In doing so, proxies can be considered to strengthen the long-term orientation of policy and governance and to help policy-makers tackling long-term issues such as climate change and sustainability transitions to the benefit of future generations (see, e.g. MacKenzie, Setälä, and Kyllönen 2023).

From the perspective of theory of democracy, institutional proxy representation of future generations could narrow down a representation gap inherent to democracies: While future generations will be affected by the consequences of political decisions made today, they have no voice in the democratic decision-making process, as they do not yet exist (Rose 2019). Proxies may mitigate this problem by making future generations present through introducing their construed interest in the political decision-making process (Kavka and Warren 1983; Rose 2019, 2024; Gonzalez-Ricoy and Rey 2019; Zwarthoed 2018).

By institutionalizing a voice of the future, creating proxies is often described as a potential remedy for what is known as democratic myopia – the electoral cycle-driven tendency of democracies to focus on short-term gains and discount long-term developments and the needs of young and future generations (Caney 2016; MacKenzie 2016; Boston 2021). Therefore, some scholars argue that that proxies should be operating rather independently of the electoral cycle, with relevant positions not filled with elected politicians but with politically independent experts that can represent the construed interests of future generations uncorrupted by myopic political interests (Boston 2017; Dirth 2017; Göpel and Arhelger 2011). Among the three types of proxies identified by Rose (2024), this formally applies to Type I, the Independent Guardian. Members of Guardian-type proxies are primarily selected according to their expertise, and they are usually not allowed to have parallel political functions in government or parliament, nor are their day-to-day activities steered by governmental actors (Rose 2024, 9).

Of the three proxy types, the Independent Guardian has the greatest diversity of design features and the highest proportion of proxies that have been dismantled, even though they were usually originally intended as more permanent institutions (Rose 2024). This points to the precarious relation between the creation, design and maintenance of those institutional guardians of future generations on the one hand, and democratic myopia and politicians subject to it on the other. First, to what extent institutional guardians of future generations (abbr. “guardians”, as a type and subset of proxies) are credibly intended and capacitated to mitigate democratic myopia in political decision-making, depends on how political decision-makers *design* them (Rose 2018). Second, some scholars doubt that it would even be *feasible* to create and design guardians in a way that they would have the capacity to exert any meaningful influence on politicians to counteract myopic tendencies, as political decisions to design and establish these guardians were restricted by the very same democratic myopia they are supposed to mitigate (Kates 2015; Jensen 2015). Hence, the creation of strong guardians would ideally require non-myopic political conditions in the first place. Third, others doubt that such strong guardians – even if being established against all odds – would be *viable*, as they would be perceived as illegitimate, and be dismantled in cases of conflict with elected politicians (Boston 2017; Jones, O’Brien, and Ryan 2018; Radavoi and Rayman-Bacchus 2021).

However, evidence on the design, feasibility and viability of institutional guardians of future generations is scattered and often anecdotal. In this study, I critically engage with the above claims on the design, feasibility and viability of guardians through conceptual work and systematic comparative empirical analysis. I aim to answer the questions if and under what conditions (strong) guardians can be created, which design features put them at risk, and what makes them viable in the face of democratic myopia. In Section 2, I briefly elaborate on democratic myopia and its relation to guardians' design, feasibility, and viability, and develop hypotheses from the literature, i.e. the "bootstrap objection" to the *feasibility* and the "inverted bootstrap objection" to the *viability* of strong institutional guardians of future generations. In Section 3, I conceptually prepare the testing of both hypotheses by presenting a set of guardian design features (adopted from Rose 2024) that determine the guardians' formal capacity to influence political decision-making, and with it to mitigate democratic myopia. Moreover, to address the bootstrap objection hypothesis, I develop conditions that arguably influence the degree of democratic myopia political decision-makers are faced with when they decide on the creation and design of guardians. Material and methods are explained in Section 4, and in Section 5, I present the empirical results. Answering my research question, in Section 6, I assess the hypotheses against the results and reflect on the limitations of this study.

2. Theoretical arguments

2.1. Democratic myopia and the design of institutional guardians of future generations

According to Runciman (2013, 295), democracies are good at coping with acute crises, but also at causing them in the long term. In the long run, the ignored long-term consequences of short-term political incrementalism account for large parts of the output of the political system (Rose 1990). MacKenzie (2016), referring to the relevant literature, summarizes the manifold sources of democratic myopia in four clusters: First, voters have a preference for the short term and tend to discount the future, while this preference is not invariant and can be influenced. Second, politicians tend to generate mostly short-term benefits and avoid near-term costs, as they need to show tangible accomplishments to be re-elected. Long-term investments that only generate benefits in later legislative terms are uncertain and endangered by factors beyond their control. Third, strong special interest groups with dominant short-term interests might lobby politicians. Fourth, future generations who are affected by today's decisions have no voice and cannot exert any influence on policy-making. Additional important factors that may mediate democratic myopia include the complexity of long-term policies (Jacobs and Matthews 2012) and investments (Jacobs 2016); the uncertainty about future economic, social, ecological, and political developments, long-term policy consequences, and the preferences of future generations (Lagerspetz 1999); and the lack of salience of future problems (Jacobs 2011).

Institutional responses to democratic myopia such as institutional guardians of future generations are expected to mitigate this issue, in particular by giving future generations a voice in political decision-making and by considering long-term developments (Boston

2021; Linehan and Lawrence 2021; MacKenzie 2016; Thompson 2010). Whether these expectations are justified is an open question. At least strong guardians might further limit the scope of politicians to meet the perceived immediate short-term needs of their electorate, e.g. by making it more difficult to shift costs into the future or to ignore pending long-term investments. Therefore, real influence may not even be intended. In this regard, creating rather weak institutions that cannot exert real influence might be a rational act to “sustain the unsustainable” (Blühdorn 2007), while demonstrating that something is done. The credibility of guardians – and of those who decide on their design – therefore hinges on the capacities and competencies with which they are formally endowed when they are created. Depending on their design features, guardians might be built as institutional innovations intended to construct and represent interests of future generations, designed to mitigate democratic myopia and promote long-term policies (whether successfully or not), or they might be democratic bells and whistles to cover a continuing myopic political decision-making.

2.2. The bootstrap objection: is the creation of strong institutional guardians of future generations infeasible?

Political philosophers such as Kates (2015) and Jensen (2015) argue that (strong) proxies probably cannot be institutionalized due to a “Münchhausen problem of motivation” – why would the current society reform democracy to represent future generations if they do not take their interests sufficiently into account in the first place, Jensen (2015, 541) asks? According to Kates’ (2015) similar *bootstrap objection*, democratic myopia would prevent any significant institutional reforms that would pose a threat to this very democratic myopia, so it would be practically infeasible to establish corresponding strong institutional innovations. Doing this would be like “pull[ing] oneself up by one’s own bootstraps” (Kates 2015, 514). According to Kates (2015) and Jensen (2015), *we may therefore hypothesize that under regular conditions of democratic myopia, the creation of strong guardians is infeasible (H1a)*.

However, the two political philosophers seem to overestimate this problem. For example, in 2001, Israel established the Knesset Commissioner for Future Generations to explicitly address the “risk of unforeseen consequences” of legislative acts and the “difficult[y] to assess its effects over the next generation or two”, as well as the occasional tendency of politicians “to seek solutions to current problems of concern to their voters, in the hope that in the long run things will work out, and in any event will become the problem of another government or another Knesset” (The Knesset 2004, 21). The Knesset document continues that this motivates the appointment of

an ombudsman to represent the as yet unborn generations before the legislative authorities, ... [who] would be given the opportunity to examine any legislative act and to appear before the relevant Knesset Committee whenever there arises any suspicion of prejudice against future generations. (The Knesset 2004, 21)

In fact, it is not unheard of for new institutions to be built for changing incentive structures for politicians in a way that would help them not to give in to short-term temptations that go against the long-term public interest. Sometimes, decision-making power is even partly delegated to external actors for this reason (Elster 1979; Levinson 2011).

Indeed, Kates (2015) leaves a back door open: He calls for “non-reformist reforms” to modify the incentive system for political actors in such a way that they would allow for the creation of (strong) proxies. As an example for such a non-reformist reform, he mentions the abolition of the filibuster in the US political system (Kates 2015, 522). Hence, we may conclude that creating strong guardians would be easier under some conditions than others. To be more precise, building on Kates (2015), *we may hypothesize that the creation of strong guardians is only feasible under exceptional conditions of low democratic myopia in the host country at the time of the creation of the guardian (H1b)*. Weak guardians, however, are not designed in a way that they would be expected to endanger democratic myopia on their own, so their creation would not necessitate special less-myopic conditions when we follow the logic of the bootstrap objection.

2.3. The inverted bootstrap objection: are strong institutional guardians of future generations unviable?

Despite – or due to – the high capacity of the Knesset Commissioner for Future Generations to influence political decision-making, this strong guardian *de facto* lasted only until 2006 when the position was not filled for the next term due to conflicts over budget and over the strong influence of the Commissioner on parliamentary work (Lavi 2014; Teschner 2013). Extrapolating the experiences from the Knesset Commissioner and the Hungarian Ombudsman for Future Generations – both of which are perceived as strong proxies in the literature and have been disbanded – some scholars argue that proxies with a high capacity to influence political decision-making will sooner or later be abolished due to a lack of perceived legitimacy of their power and a surplus of conflict with elected politicians (Boston 2017; Dirth 2017; Jones, O’Brien, and Ryan 2018; Koskimaa and Raunio 2023). We may call this an *inverted bootstrap objection*: Proxies that are perceived as being “too strong” may have trouble of staying out of the mire and will eventually sink, i.e. their longevity is threatened. Based on this literature, *we may hypothesize that strong guardians are unviable, i.e. they will be dismantled once they act on their capacity to influence political decision-making (H2a)*.

Assuming the inverted bootstrap objection is true, several scholars think about how to make proxies – including strong ones – more viable. Radavoi and Rayman-Bacchus (2021) call for the constitutional entrenchment of proxies through referenda to secure their longevity. Smith (2020) suggests the integration of deliberative mini publics into the work of proxies to increase their legitimacy and secure their survival. As factors critical for proxies’ survival, Jones, O’Brien, and Ryan (2018) claim that proxies should not be too strong, should gather public and cross-party political support to increase their legitimacy, and should balance their (in)dependence from politicians. Arguably, this may help them to survive changes in government. Based on this literature, *we may cautiously hypothesize that guardians who were not dismantled after a couple of years or a change in government may be constitutionally entrenched, may work on their perceived legitimacy through gathering public and cross-party support, may not have a very high formal capacity to influence political decision-making, and may have closer ties to government or parliament than disbanded guardians had (H2b)*.

3. Conceptualizations

3.1. Design features and the formal capacity of institutional guardians of future generations to influence political decision-making

In order to assess the hypotheses, we need to be able to distinguish between weak and strong guardian designs as regards their capacity to mitigate democratic myopia. When creating new guardians, the politicians creating them do not know yet how these institutions will perform, and in how far they really will mitigate democratic myopia or not. Nevertheless, the guardians' founders can shape the guardians' future roles by designing them accordingly, as usually codified in some formal rules of operation. The design decisions regarding the formal capacity guardians are endowed with allow insights into how they are *supposed* to work, even if they provide only limited information about how effective they will *actually* be. On the one hand, if guardians have a *high* formal capacity to influence political decision-making, this might indicate a rather high – and credible – commitment to a more far-sighted political decision-making to the benefit of future generations. On the other hand, a *low* formal capacity is not a sufficient indicator for a mere symbolic function of these institutions, or for a bad future performance. It only tells us that they are not designed in a way to comprehensively influence political decision-making for the benefit of future generations and thereby to mitigate democratic myopia, in particular when there is resistance. They could nevertheless develop into influential “soft power” institutions if they find receptiveness and goodwill toward their inputs among other major political actors. So, the question if a specific guardian turns out to be merely “bells and whistles” or an effective institutional innovation cannot be fully answered in this study but would require much deeper case study research. With analyzing their formal capacity, however, we can at least evidence the variety of guardian designs and assess the “institutionalized commitment” of the responsible politicians to listening to an institutionalized voice of future generations and to a less myopic political decision-making.

Based on previous work (in particular Rose 2024, which also draws on Rose 2018; Rose and Hoffmann 2020 and Mathis et al. 2023), I outline an analytical framework of the design features that make up the formal capacity of guardians (and proxies in general) to influence political decision-making, and I briefly explain the underlying assumptions regarding the potential influence of each dimension. By focusing on the guardians' formal capacities, I do not systematically analyze how this formal capacity actualizes in real-world impact. The framework dimensions address the triad of politics, policy and polity. The individual design features are partly built inductively, so that for every individual design feature, there is at least one empirical guardian that shows it. This avoids placing unrealizable expectations on the design of guardians. The dimensions are interdependent and partly reinforce each other. In particular, *political instruments* are related to all other dimensions in that they focus on certain *stages of the public policy process* or a particular *branch of government*, and may require a certain *legal basis* and specific *resources*. The concrete operationalization of the dimensions and the full list design features is shown in the online supplementary material (SM Table 1), which also includes brief explanations and examples.

3.1.1. Political instruments

On the *political level*, political instruments are the tools with which guardians can directly exert influence on political decision-making through accessing stages of the policy process and branches of government. One instrument can be directed at one or multiple of these stages and branches, respectively. All else being equal, the greater the variety of political instruments guardians are equipped with, the higher their capacity to influence political decision-making (Rose 2024, 5). Moreover, some political instruments can be designed as “hard power” instruments that cannot be ignored, i.e. that can force the addressees to visibly deal with the claims put forward by the guardian (Rose 2018, 143). This includes legal rights of action and suspensive vetoes, and forms of recommendations where addressees are obliged to justify any deviations from the recommendations. If one or more of a guardian’s political instruments qualify as hard power instruments, this also increases its capacity to influence political decision-making (Rose 2024, 5–6).

3.1.2. Access to the stages of the public policy process

On a *process level*, the *policy process* can be structured according to the heuristic of the policy cycle with the stages of agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation (see, e.g. Knill and Tosun 2017). In their entirety, guardians address all stages, but individual guardians usually only access specific stages (Rose and Hoffmann 2020). All else being equal, a guardian’s capacity to influence political decision-making is higher, the more stages of the policy process it can access (Rose 2024, 6).

3.1.3. Access to branches of government

On the *polity level*, different branches of government shape political decision-making. How important the executive, legislative and judicial branches are for political decision-making varies with the characteristics of the political system. While all laws have to be passed by the parliament, draft legislation might not only be prepared in parliamentary committees, but also (or even primarily) within the government ministries. Moreover, executive degrees, orders, directives, strategies, regulations and bylaws may not be approved by parliament, but are nonetheless important parts of policy-making. The executive branch is also responsible for policy implementation. The judicial branch, however, only comes into play once laws are already passed, but successful lawsuits can force parliament and/or government to adjust existing policy and regulation or create new ones. A guardian may access one or more branches of government, which may or may not be the same branch that created the guardian. All else being equal, a guardian’s capacity to influence political decision-making is greater, the more branches of government it has access to (Rose 2024, 6).

3.1.4. Legal entrenchment

A robust legal foundation of a guardian signals its political legitimacy and the credible commitment of those who created it. This should bolster the guardian’s influence on political decision-making, and make it harder to amend or revoke both the guardian and its design features (Rose 2018, 178–179). The stronger a legal basis, the higher the resilience against external pressures, such as those arising from democratic myopia (Rose 2024, 6).

Following Rose (2024, 6), I categorize the legal entrenchment of guardians into four levels, ranked from weakest to strongest: (0) no legal basis, (1) secondary law/by-law, (2) primary law, and (3) constitutional entrenchment.

3.1.5. Organizational structure and resources

Guardians also vary in their organizational structure, i.e. the number, hierarchy, and the professional and sectoral backgrounds of their members and staff, as well as in their financial resources. I assume that more and independent financial resources and more (and more diverse) staff also lead to a higher capacity to influence political decision-making. Whether a hierarchical organizational structure with a single commissioner on top increases the capacity to influence political decision-making due to high visibility and personalization, or if a commission or a committee is more influential due to internal deliberation and diversity in member's professional competences and sectoral backgrounds, is an open question, though. Moreover, organizational structures and resources are difficult to compare across countries due to the different conditions (such as state population, state budget and political system) and restricted data availability. Hence, they will not be included in the quantified assessment of the guardians' design features, but will be compared qualitatively only.

3.2. Conditions for creating strong institutional guardians of future generations

If the bootstrap objection were true, the creation of guardians with a high formal capacity to influence political decision-making would be subjected to the very democratic myopia it is supposed to mitigate (see H1a). Kates (2015) therefore calls for “non-reformist reforms” to modify the incentive system for political actors in such a way that they would allow for the creation of strong guardians (see H1b).

Based on earlier work (Rose 2018, 199–225, 429–460), I distinguish between political-institutional, economic, and cultural conditions that may impede or enable the creation of strong guardians against the background of democratic myopia, without being sufficient for their creation. As they refer to the bootstrap objection, for analysis, the conditions will only be applied in cases where a strong guardian was created for the first time. The conditions are not applied in cases where an even stronger guardian was downgraded in such a way that this new institution is so different from the old one that it should be considered a separate guardian, as we observe in Hungary, or where only a weak guardian was created in the first place. The conditions presented below are operationalized in the online supplementary material (SM Table 2).

3.2.1. Political-institutional condition: effective number of governing parties

A high concentration of power within the government could be conducive to the creation of strong guardians, since this power concentration would allow governmental institutional entrepreneurs to enforce new policies with only little internal resistance. For example, Jacobs (2011) analyzed the effect of veto points on the enforceability of policies with long-term benefits and short-term costs in that manner. A similar relationship between concentration of power and enforceability of policies constrained by the democratic myopia was shown for the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol (Harrison and Sundstrom 2007).

The government is particularly important for the creation of guardians, as it has to initiate the process or at least not oppose the adoption of such an institutional innovation. At the same time, governing parties can be expected to be subject to the forces of democratic myopia. Inspired by Tsebelis' (2002) veto player theory, the number and strength of governing parties determine how incremental or substantial policy changes usually can be. The effective number of governing parties therefore approximates the feasibility of significant institutional reforms, including the creation of guardians with a high formal capacity to influence political decision-making.

3.2.2. Political-institutional condition: path dependency

Next to a low effective number of governing parties, a polity with only little path dependency could be expected to be conducive for institutional innovations like guardians. According to North (1990), an institution, such as a constitution, reduces uncertainty and enables fruitful cooperation, which generates increasing returns for actors subject to this institution, which, together with transaction costs and imperfect information, safeguards the institution's stability even if it does no longer fully meets its original purpose. Change is then mostly only possible incrementally, or – in case of a lock-in – not at all. Levinson (2011, 686) describes such “increasing returns” mechanisms in politics with the term “asset-specific investments”: political actors first invest resources in institutionalizing decision-making structures and processes. Once institutionalized, they invest in developing their capacities to operate successfully within the institutional arrangement. To the extent that these investments are only of value in the existing institutional arrangement, they will resist reforms: “Officials and interest groups who are empowered by existing structural arrangements will often generate strong opposition to change” (Levinson 2011, 689). The problem then is that “the people who have the power to change the rules owe whatever they possess to the very rules they are expected to change” (van Parijs 1998, 327).

As the creation of a strong guardian might change or even disrupt the existing (supposedly myopia-facilitating) institutional incentive system, political systems with strong path dependencies, lock-ins and positive feedback loops might resist any attempts of institutional reform. However, in countries where the institutional arrangement is changed more often, and these changes are still young, institutional reforms such as the creation of strong guardians may be more feasible.

3.2.3. Economic conditions: GDP growth and unemployment

As is known from the economic voting literature, the economic situation of a country strongly influences election outcomes of incumbent governing parties; an economic crisis is particularly devastating for governing parties from an electoral perspective (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2014). Moreover, such crises are usually so dominant that they push less salient issues off the political agenda (Binder 1996). At the same time, the economic situation influences tax revenue, and thereby the political scope of action. A good economic situation, however, increases the electoral security of governing parties, which has been found to be a necessary condition for policy investment, i.e. a policy choice that goes against democratic myopia by extracting resources in the short term for the benefit of the long term (Jacobs 2011). A good economic situation is therefore expected to be conducive to the creation of

guardians. The economic situation is assessed with the growth rate of the GDP and the unemployment rate, which have proved to be adequate measures of economic development regarding its impact on politics (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2014).

3.2.4. Cultural condition: dominance of post-materialistic values

Another condition that might influence the institutionalization of guardians is political culture, i.e. “the psychological dimension of political systems; it includes all politically relevant beliefs, values and attitudes” (Welzel and Inglehart 2014). In the social science classic “The Silent Revolution”, Inglehart (1977) claims that the value change from materialism to post-materialism may result in a more sustainable state. In particular, a high level of so-called emancipatory values includes values such as altruism and environmental protection and leads to a higher engagement for those values – “as emancipative values continue to increase, a sustainable future becomes more likely” (Welzel 2013, 391). In a society where emancipative values dominate, people may be supportive of the idea of considering the needs of future generations today, and might be more willing to counteract myopic tendencies in democracy.

4. Material and methods

The universe of cases consists of guardians at the national – and exceptionally also subnational – level in liberal democracies (at the time of the creation of the respective guardian), as the concepts of institutional proxy-representation of future generations and democratic myopia apply first and foremost to democracies. The cases are pre-selected in Rose 2024, where nine of 25 institutional proxy-representatives of future generations (proxies) are categorized as independent guardians, the proxy type focused and referred to as institutional guardians of future generations (guardians) in this study. However, I exclude one of those nine proxies – the Commissioner for Sustainable Futures (Wales, 2011–2015) – as this guardian was only intended as an interim institution (Rose 2024, 17). Members of guardians are usually not allowed to hold parallel political positions and are supposed to be selected according to their expertise (Rose 2024, 9–10), which may allow them to represent the construed interests of future generations rather uncorrupted by myopic political interests (Boston 2017; Dirth 2017; Göpel and Arhelger 2011). All guardians meet the criteria of institutional proxy-representation of future generations developed in Rose 2024 and fall under the definition of proxies, i.e. “staffed public offices or bodies with institutionalized access to government and/or parliament and the function of introducing the construed interests of future generations into the political decision-making process across policy areas” (Rose 2024, 5).

To analyze the hypotheses of the bootstrap objection on the feasibility and the inverted bootstrap objection on the viability of (strong) guardians, we need guardians that were dismantled and guardians that are (so far) viable, and we need to be able to distinguish weak and strong guardians to assess the relation between the design, feasibility and viability of guardians. To qualify as a “strong” guardian, a guardian should be entrenched in primary law and be equipped with at least one hard power instrument.

In Table 1, we see that guardians are indeed well suited to analyze this study’s hypotheses, as they are almost equally distributed across the two dimensions of strength and viability.

Table 1. Case characteristics.

Guardians	(rather) strong design	(rather) weak design	N
still active	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (GB-WLS) Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (since 2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (HU) Deputy Commissioner for Future Generations (since 2012) (CA) Commissioner for the Environment and Sustainable Development (since 1996) (MT) Guardian of Future Generations (since 2012) 	4
dismantled	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (HU) Ombudsman for Future Generations (2008–2011) (IL) Knesset Commissioner for Future Generations (2001–2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (GB) Sustainable Development Commission (2000–2011) (FR) Council for the Rights of Future Generations (1993–1995) 	4
N	3	5	8

To assess the guardians, I draw preferably on primary sources such as legal documents, written outputs of guardians such as webpages and reports, and academic literature authored by members or staff of these institutions. Secondary sources such as academic literature, databases, media articles and webpages by third parties are only used supplementally and for the assessment of the conditions of the creation of strong guardians.

The description and quantification of the design features is guided by SM Table 1, which operationalizes the analytical framework outlined in Section 3.1 by providing brief explanations, variants and anchor examples of the design features. For each guardian, each design feature is coded binarily for its absence (0) or presence (1). The codes are aggregated to sub-indices (one per dimension, i.e. political instruments, stages of the policy process, branches of government, and legal entrenchment), which are then added to a total index, with a theoretical maximum of 21, as a rough measure of the formal capacity of proxies to influence political decision-making. The codes are equivalent to those of Rose 2024. However, in the present study, I additionally provide structured case descriptions of each guardian that contain the qualitative information behind the codes and additional information on organizational structures and resources, conditions of the creation of the subset of strong guardians, as well as information on the dismantling of guardians, if applicable (see online supplementary material, SM Boxes 1–8; partly based on Rose 2018).

The description and calculation of the conditions of the creation of strong guardians follows SM Table 2, which operationalizes the conditions introduced in Section 3.2. All data sources of the guardians' design features as well as conditions are provided in the online supplemental material (SM Boxes 1–8, SM References).

5. Results

5.1. Systematic comparison of the formal capacity of institutional guardians of future generations to influence political decision-making

The following comparison includes the guardians' political instruments, their access to the stages of the public policy process and the branches of government, as well as their legal entrenchment, their aggregated formal capacity to influence political

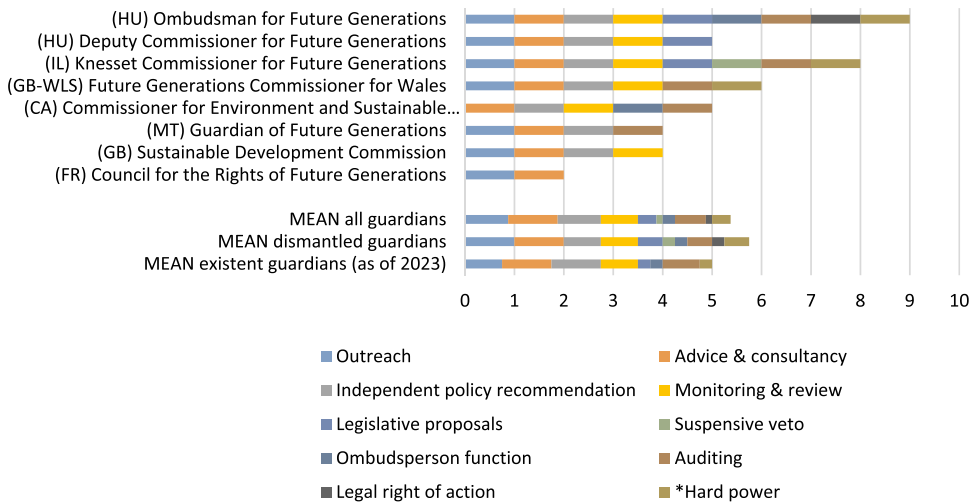


Figure 1. Types of political instrument per guardian.

decision-making, and in a non-quantified manner, their organizational structure and resources.

5.1.1. Political instruments

Almost all guardians are endowed with the rather soft political instruments of outreach, advice and consultancy, and independent policy recommendations (see Figure 1). The Hungarian Ombudsman for Future Generations and the Knesset Commissioner for Future Generations had an extraordinary variety of instruments, but both guardians were dismantled. Hence, the instruments exclusive to these institutions – suspensive veto and legal right of action – are no longer found among the guardians, and hard power instruments (Wales), legislative proposals (Hungary) and the ombudsperson function (Canada) have become quite rare. The French Council for the Rights of Future Generations stands out as the guardian with only two rather weak instruments.

5.1.2. Access to the stages of the public policy process

All guardians have access to the easily approachable stage of agenda setting, but only the Knesset Commissioner for Future Generations had access to policy adoption. Two of the three guardians that had access to policy formulation do no longer exist, so that the currently existing guardians focus on the beginning and the end of the policy process, but not the on heart of substantial policy-making. While the Ombudsman for Future Generations, when downgraded to a Deputy Commissioner, lost almost half of its instruments, it still has (limited) access to four of the five stages of the policy-process (see Figure 2).

5.1.3. Access to the branches of government

Almost all guardians have a direct access to the executive branch. Hungary's Deputy Commissioner for Future Generations needs his supervisor – the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights – to access the government. Half of all guardians can (additionally)

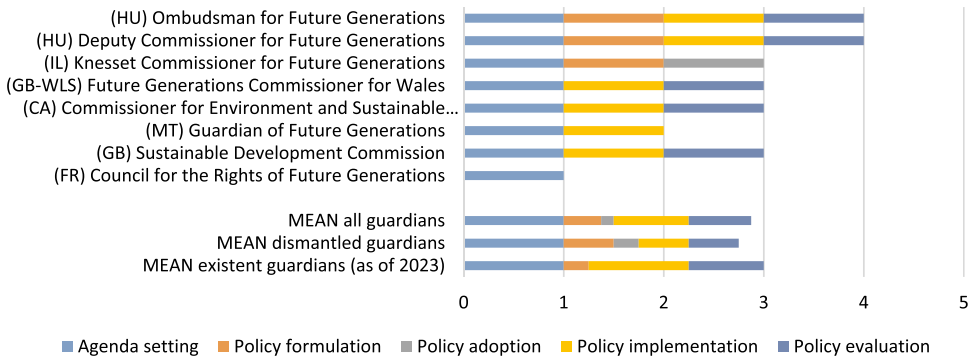


Figure 2. Access to stages of the public policy process per guardian.

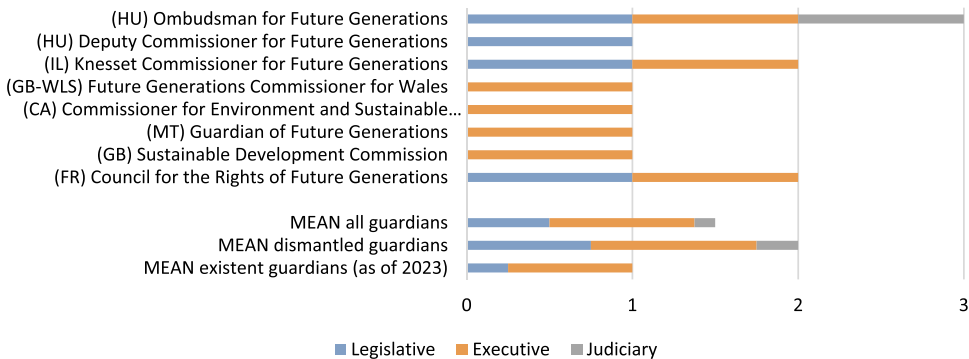


Figure 3. Access to the branches of government per guardian.

access the political decision-making process through the legislative branch. While the disbanded guardians had – on average – access to two branches of government, the guardians that are still operating have only access to one branch each (Figure 3).

5.1.4. Legal entrenchment

Two guardians are – or were – linked to their host countries' constitution, and six are/were based on primary law (among them the two linked to the constitution), i.e. a regular law as passed by the parliament. Two were only entrenched in secondary law, and they did not survive (Figure 4).

5.1.5. Organizational structures and resources

The guardians vary quite strongly in their organizational structures and resources. Of the dismantled guardians, the Hungarian Ombudsman and the Knesset Commissioner had a hierarchical structure with one man (sic!) at the top. However, the former had much more staff (34 employees, mostly lawyers, but also social and natural scientists) than the latter (four employees). The budgets seemed to be sufficient. Both were highly independent in pursuing their tasks, but the Knesset Commissioner depended on the parliament regarding his budget. The UK's Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) and

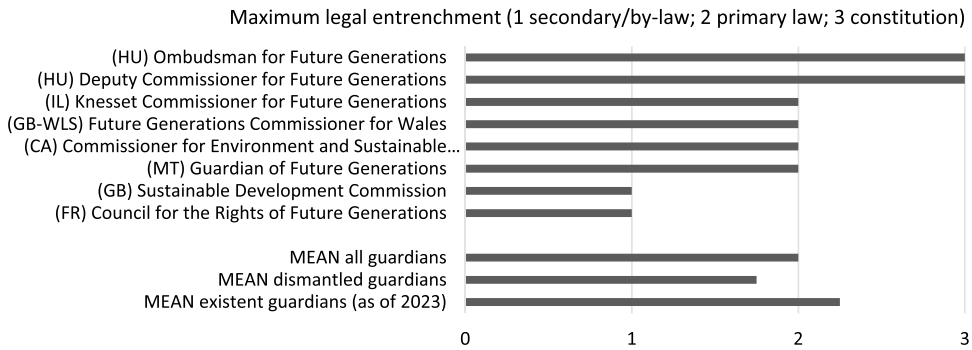


Figure 4. Strongest legal entrenchment per guardian.

the French Council for the Rights of Future Generations, however, were less hierarchically organized in their leadership. The SDC had a staff of 60 employees with heterogeneous professional backgrounds, and the French Council had a secretariat. Both were highly dependent on the government, in particular regarding their funding (SM Boxes 1, 3, 7, 8).

Of the still operating guardians, three – the ones in Hungary (Deputy Commissioner), Wales, and Canada – are hierarchically organized with one person at the top. However, the Hungarian and the Canadian Commissioners are part of larger public agencies and have a direct supervisor. Hence, in practice, they are strongly dependent on their superiors' support (e.g. for staff and budget), while legally, their specific duties are entrenched in a law and they are rather independent from government and parliament. The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, however, while being appointed by the government, has no supervisor and employs their own staff (28 employees with heterogeneous professional backgrounds). The budget needs to be approved annually by the government, the National Assembly and the Auditor General. The Maltese Guardian of Future Generations is a public body with rather non-hierarchical leadership. The five commissioners have a background in different sectors of society by law. In the first years, the Guardian's budget was so tight that its members stepped down, which led to an increase in budget and staff. In this regard, the guardian highly depends on the government (SM Boxes 2, 4, 5, 6).

Overall, the five guardians with a hierarchical leadership structure (i.e. one commissioner at the top) also seem to be the guardians with the highest overall formal capacity to influence political decision-making (see [Figure 5](#), next paragraph). At the same time, the organizationally and politically most independent guardians (i.e. the Hungarian Ombudsman and the Knesset Commissioner) were dismantled.

5.1.6. Overall formal capacity of guardians to influence political decision-making

As regards the overall formal capacity to influence political decision-making (without organizational structure and resources), the no longer existent Hungarian Ombudsman (19 out of 21 design features) and Knesset Commissioner (15 out of 21) had the highest, while among the currently existing guardians, the Hungarian Deputy Commissioner (13) and Wales' Future Generations Commissioner (12) lead. On the lower end of the spectrum, we have – with a significant distance – the dismantled French Council for the Rights of Future

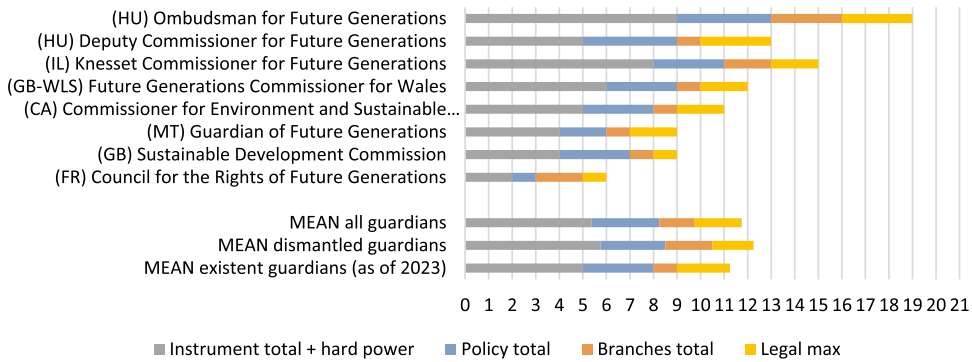


Figure 5. Total formal capacity of guardians to influence political decision-making, unweighted on an additive scale.

Generations (6), as well – on equal footing with the Maltese Guardian – the disbanded UK Sustainable Development Commission. It is noticeable that the guardians at both ends of the spectrum were dismantled, while the guardians with a rather medium formal capacity to influence political decision-making are usually still active (Figure 5).

5.2. Institutionalization and de-institutionalization of institutional guardians of future generations from a comparative perspective

Looking at the political-institutional, economic, and cultural *conditions of the creation of strong guardians* (i.e. guardians that meet the criteria outlined in Section 4, i.e. the Hungarian Ombudsman for Future Generations (SM Box 1), the Knesset Commissioner for Future Generations (SM Box 3) and the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (SM Box 4)), we see a surprisingly mixed picture (Table 2).

The conditions that were expected to be conducive to the creation of strong guardians against the background of the bootstrap objection can only be found in the case of Wales. The strongest guardians (in Israel and Hungary) were established under circumstances that were expected to be rather detrimental, such as a high path dependency, a below-average GDP growth rate combined with an above-average unemployment rate, and, for Israel, also a high effective number of governing parties.

Which factors then were eventually relevant for the *institutionalization of guardians in general*? The qualitative data available is inconclusive (see SM Boxes 1–8). For the Hungarian Ombudsman, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, and the Canadian

Table 2. Conditions of institutionalization of guardians with a high formal capacity to influence political decision-making.

Condition / Country (year)	Low number of effective governing parties	Low path dependency	High GDP growth	Low unemployment rate	Prevalence of high emancipative values
Hungary (2008)	✓	x	x	x	–
Israel (2001)	X	x	x	x	–
Wales (2015)	–	✓	✓	✓	✓

Legend: ✓ = true (high value in this condition), x = false (low value in this condition), – = unincisive (medium value in this condition). For cut-off points, see SM Table 2. For data sources, see SM Boxes 1, 3 & 4 and SM References.

Commissioner for the Environment and Sustainable Development, strong pressure from both civil society and political actors combined with – at least in Wales – participatory processes, played a major role for the creation and design of these guardians. However, this was not particularly relevant for the Knesset Commissioner or the Maltese Guardian for Future Generations. In Israel, the case for institutionalization was made by a single member of parliament, and in the Maltese case, the Green Party played a major role. The UK Sustainable Development Commission was created by the Labour government (and the subnational governments) and replaced previous sustainability bodies. The Hungarian Deputy Commissioner was created as a downgrade of the former Hungarian Ombudsman by a right-wing super-majority. For the French case, there is no conclusive information available.

Regarding *de-institutionalization*, all of the guardians concerned were abolished close in time to a change of government. Otherwise, there is considerable heterogeneity. In contrast to the average lifespan of the current guardians of 15 years (as of 12/2023), the average lifespan of disbanded guardians was only 5.5 years, ranging between three and ten years (see Table 1). Only the dismantled Hungarian Ombudsman has a successor guardian (i.e. the Deputy Commissioner), which has a considerably lower formal capacity to influence political decision-making than its predecessor did. With two guardians – in Israel and France – the positions were not filled again after the first term, even though the respective guardians continued to exist on paper for a couple of years. The president of the (rather weak) French Council resigned in protest to the government's decision to conduct nuclear weapons tests. The argument of necessary budget cuts played a role in Israel and the UK. While the abolished guardians on average score clearly higher than the still active ones at political instruments and branches of government, they score slightly lower on stages of the policy process and legal entrenchment. However, the average is a bit misleading, as both the two strongest and the weakest guardians were dismantled. The two strongest guardians were disbanded reportedly due to political conflicts as regards their politically independent strength. So far, guardians with a rather medium capacity to influence political decision-making seem to be most viable (SM Boxes 1–8).

6. Reassessing the (inverted) bootstrap objection: how to create and design institutional guardians of future generations, and how to sustain them

The results show a considerable *variety of guardian designs* along the different dimensions. Guardians in Hungary, Israel and Wales were designed and equipped in such a way that it is unlikely that they were only intended as democratic bells and whistles. Through their strong legal anchoring, their hard-power instruments, their independence and partly their resources, they seem(ed) to have (had) a fair chance to mitigate democratic myopia and promote the interests of future generations.

This questions the *bootstrap objection* (Jensen 2015; Kates 2015), according to which the creation of strong guardians is infeasible (H1a), in particular when the conditions of the host country are conducive to democratic myopia (H1b). The two strongest guardians were institutionalized in a context with rather detrimental political-institutional, economic and cultural conditions, which comes much unexpected from a bootstrap

objection view. The absolute number of (strong) guardians is still quite low, though, and we do not know how many initiatives to establish similar institutions may have failed due to democratic myopia. Having said that, this study shows that in principle it is feasible to institutionally represent future generations in seemingly myopic democracies. For two of the three strong guardians, combined societal and political efforts led to the success of institutionalization, while for one (Israel), a convincing idea of an individual member of parliament seemed to be a sufficient starting point (SM Boxes 1, 3, 4).

The *inverted bootstrap objection*, however, seems more plausible given the results of this study. According to this hypothesis (H2a), strong guardians are not viable because they will be in conflict with political interests sooner or later (Boston 2017; Dirth 2017; Jones, O'Brien, and Ryan 2018; Koskimaa and Raunio 2023). To put it another way, watchdogs that do not only bark but can also bite are put to sleep. At least, this could be argued for the Hungarian Ombudsman and the Israeli Commissioner. The third (yet weakest) of the strong guardians, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, continues to exist and is already in its second term, though.

At the same time, the weakest guardians were also disbanded even though they heavily depended on the government, and despite disagreements between the guardians and the respective government, they were not designed to pose a serious political threat. This observation is not covered by the inverted bootstrap objection and the relevant literature.

To make guardians *viable*, literature suggests constitutional entrenchment, participation, an only medium or low capacity to influence political decision-making, public and cross-party political support, and a balance between dependence and independence on/from parliament and/or government (Jones, O'Brien, and Ryan 2018; Radavoi and Rayman-Bacchus 2021; Smith 2020). Regarding these factors – and with them hypothesis 2b – the study shows mixed results (see Section 5 and SM Boxes 1–8): *Constitutional entrenchment* of guardians is rare, but in the case of Hungary, it did not protect the guardian from being downgraded to a less powerful institution, due to a right-wing supermajority. It is notable, though, that guardians that were not founded on primary law did not survive. *Participation* and *public support* seem to be important (though not necessary) for the creation of a guardian. However, they do not guarantee a guardians' survival, as we see with the Hungarian Ombudsman. For the Israeli Knesset Commissioner, public support only increased after the guardian was established, but it did not stop its dissolution. While a very high *formal capacity to influence political decision-making* might indeed destabilize a guardian due to power and legitimacy conflicts, a (very) low formal capacity also seems to be detrimental to the long-term survival of a guardian. Broad *cross-party political* support at the time of the creation of a guardian does not ensure its survival, as the examples of the strong guardians from Hungary and Israel show, but continuing cross-party support certainly may be helpful, given the fact that the dissolution of guardians always occurred close in time to a change in government. *Balancing independence and dependence* might be a key factor for guardians' viability, as it characterizes all the guardians that continue to exist so far (see SM Boxes 1–8).

There are *limitations* to the systematic comparative analysis of guardians provided in this study. To assess the design and strength of guardians, I focused on the institutions' formal capacities to influence political decision-making. Both this formal capacity and the conditions of the institutionalization of strong guardians were assessed with the help of documents and data accessed via desk research. While this seems sufficient to evaluate the bootstrap objection, going beyond the rough measure of formal capacity and the structured

case descriptions would allow for an even more nuanced assessment of the strength and viability of guardians in light of democratic myopia. Future research could aim to assess both the actual impact and the viability of guardians with extended document analyses and interviews. Moreover, I only analyzed institutional guardians of future generations, a sub-set of institutional proxy-representatives of future generations (Rose 2024). Both sets of institutions do not cover all mechanisms that could counteract democratic myopia and facilitate a long-term orientation in certain areas (MacKenzie 2016; Boston 2021). Due to the moderate number of cases, individual guardians have a major influence on the results, which may limit the generalizability of the results beyond the guardians.

Despite these limitations, this study offers substantial insights into the feasibility, heterogeneous design features, and viability of institutional guardians of future generations, based on a systematic comparative analysis. Contradicting the bootstrap objection, it shows that strong guardians can be created even under detrimental conditions, even though they continue to be a rare phenomenon. In line with parts of the previous literature, for survival, it seems to be important to provide them with a medium (in contrast to very high or very low) formal capacity to influence political decision-making, a strong legal basis, and with somewhat interdependent relations with parliament and/or government.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Michael Rose is an administrative professor for governance and sustainability and a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer (on leave) at the Institute of Sustainability Governance at Leuphana University Lüneburg in Germany. He holds a Dr. phil. (equivalent to PhD) from the University of Düsseldorf and a diploma (equivalent to master's degree) from the University of Bamberg, both in Political Science. Moreover, he is associate editor of the *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*. Before he joined Leuphana University, he worked as a researcher and scientific coordinator of the Center for Transformation Research and Sustainability at the University of Wuppertal. Adopting a broad political science perspective, Michael's research is mostly comparative in nature and analyzes how political systems adapt to the demands of sustainable development. He covers research topics such as the political representation of future generations, intergenerational equity, democratic myopia and institutions for future generations, as well as national sustainability institutions. At the same time, he engages in interdisciplinary research to analyze selected developments in the area of sustainability science more broadly, focusing on real-world laboratories as a format of transformative research, and the cumulation of knowledge in environmental governance research.

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