

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# THE ELECTORAL BREAKTHROUGH OF THE FINNS PARTY

Reactions of Finnish Parliamentary Parties  
2011–2022

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December 2022



The radical right-wing, populist Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS) made its electoral breakthrough in the Eduskunta election in 2011, winning 19.1 per cent of the vote.



In the highly pragmatic Finnish political culture, the other parliamentary parties have broadly accepted the PS as a normal party and engaged in legislative cooperation with it.



The PS participated in a right-wing coalition government between 2015–2019. The party has affected Finnish politics by raising the salience of immigration and law-and-order issues and attempting to stretch the limits of acceptable political speech, also in parliament.



## THE FINNS PARTY: A RADICAL RIGHT-WING PARTY?

The Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset*, PS) was founded in 1995 by former activists of the Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen Maaseudun Puolue*, SMP). Hence, the Finns Party's roots are in a leftist agrarian populism that pitted left-behind rural residents against well-to-do city dwellers and a self-serving political class.

The heritage of agrarian populism endured under party chairman Timo Soini, who led the Finns Party between 1997 and 2017. Soini's Finns Party could be characterised rather as a left-wing populist than a radical right populist (RRP) party. Its agenda was socially conservative, patriotic, anti-elitist, and strongly Eurosceptic, but at the time not so strongly ethno-nationalist or xenophobic as that of some of its sister parties, notably the Sweden Democrats.

The Finns Party's profile changed in 2017, after an internal coup by the party's anti-immigration faction, led by then MEP Jussi Halla-aho, who replaced Timo Soini as party leader. In Halla-aho's time, the Finns Party's programmatic agenda has shifted noticeably to the right, both in socio-economic and socio-cultural terms. The party has become more anti-immigration and nativist, but also more market-oriented, when it comes to economic policy. The party can therefore today be classified as a typical radical right populist party.

Despite this shift in the Finns Party's profile, the party has not radicalised in the sense of abandoning its commitment to democratic institutions and procedures. Rather, it has sought to present itself as a respectable party among others, to be taken seriously as a potential partner in legislative and executive cooperation.

During the parliamentary period of 2007–2010, the Finns Party stated its aim of becoming the leading opposition party, a position which it continued to exploit in 2011–2015. After the 2015 parliamentary election the Finns Party joined a right-wing coalition government with the Centre and National Coalition Parties (2015–2019). After 2019, the Finns Party has been in opposition.

## WHO ARE THE FINNS PARTY'S VOTERS?

The Finns Party wins votes predominantly from working-class, male voters but small business owners and the unemployed are also well represented in its voter base. The party's voters are typically less educated, with vocational or secondary school training. All age groups, except the oldest (70+) are rather equally represented. Geographically, the Finns Party typically gains votes from sparsely populated rural areas and small towns. (Westinen, Pitkänen & Kestilä-Kekkonen 2020.)

As such, the Finns Party has taken voters mostly from the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Centre Party (Keskusta). With the former, it competes over working-class voters

and with the latter, over voters in rural areas and small towns. It has, however, also gained voters from the National Coalition party (Kokoomus). According to Westinen & al. (2020), Finns Party voters' attitudes in socio-economic questions shifted towards the right in the 2019 elections, which could mean even more competition with the National Coalition Party in the future.

Predominant themes in the latest, 2019 parliamentary election included social welfare and healthcare reform, elderly care, climate change, education and immigration issues. The Finns Party took up these themes in its election campaign, arguing that public spending should first and foremost be allocated to taking care of the native Finnish poor, the elderly and families with children, and only after that to secondary matters, such as immigration or integration. The Finns Party's campaign issues therefore represented a welfare chauvinist perspective, typical for RRP.

## THE FINNISH EDUSKUNTA: A CONSENSUAL, "WORKING PARLIAMENT"?

Finland has been characterised as a consensual democracy, where party-political cooperation across ideological divides is normal. The Finnish political culture is pragmatic, and cross-bloc coalitions between agrarian, bourgeois and left parties have historically not been exceptional. As Poyet & Raunio (2021) observe, in such consensual regimes, opposition parties stand a relatively good chance of influencing politics, and populist challenger parties are also likely to end up cooperating with other parties.

The Finnish Eduskunta can be characterised as a "working parliament", where legislative work performed in parliamentary committees carries greater weight than plenary debates. The Eduskunta committees work behind closed doors, making them a potential arena for constructive cross-party debate and cooperation. The practice of cross-party committee work accustoms parties across the ideological spectrum to working together. (Poyet & Raunio 2021.)

In addition, Finnish governments are almost exclusively multi-party majority coalitions, with habitually at least three parties. There is no practice of pre-election alliances, where parties would rule out post-election cooperation with specific parties, but parties are in most cases open to cooperating with any other party. Hence, in the pragmatic Finnish political culture, parties are in multiple ways used to making compromises and cooperating with each other both legislatively and on the executive level.

## THE FINNS PARTY IN PARLIAMENT

The Finns party made its electoral and parliamentary breakthrough in the general election of April 2011, when it won 19.1 per cent of the vote, increasing its share by a full 15 percentage points compared to the 2007 election. The victory

came at the expense of all other parliamentary parties, each of which lost votes.

After the election, the Finns Party decided to stay in opposition. The party had campaigned with strongly Eurosceptic themes, including opposition to Finnish participation in the Eurozone's financial rescue packages. EU policy became the key dividing line between the mainstream parties and the Finns Party, as the mainstream parties could not see a way out of Finland's participation in the rescue packages. The mainstream parties then opted to form a grand coalition of six parties across the ideological spectrum, made up of the Left Alliance, Social Democrats, Greens, Christian Democrats, Swedish People's Party, and the National Coalition Party.

The Finns Party had already in the parliamentary period of 2007–2010 stated its aim of becoming the leading opposition party, a position which it continued to exploit in 2011–2015. The six-party coalition was rather dysfunctional and too ideologically disparate to pursue coherent policy. It was also bound by functional necessities, such as those binding Finland to participation in the Eurozone's controversial financial rescue measures. The Finns Party readily exploited these weaknesses while in opposition.

Yet the Finns Party largely acted as a "normal" opposition party. It was active in questioning government policies but acted within normal parliamentary procedures. Poyet & Raunio's (2021) analysis of the Finns Party's parliamentary activities reveals that its MPs were more active than MPs from other parties in delivering both plenary speeches and written questions, particularly when compared to 2011–2015. Yet Finns Party MPs did not try to challenge parliamentary procedures, such as trying to change the standing orders of the parliament.

In the 2015 parliamentary election the Finns Party received 17.7 per cent of the vote, which meant a decrease of 2.6 percentage points compared to 2011. Yet after the election, the Finns Party joined a coalition government with the Centre and National Coalition Parties. It was awarded four ministerial positions in the cabinet led by the Centre Party leader Juha Sipilä. Party leader Soini became Minister for Foreign Affairs. Moreover, Finns Party's MP Maria Lohela acted as Speaker of the Eduskunta.

One way in which the Finns Party's MPs have challenged parliamentary norms is by attempting to extend the limits of acceptable speech. This applies particularly to members of the party's anti-immigration fraction and has mostly taken place in forums such as social media, but also in parliament. A prominent example is from 2020, when the state prosecutor Raija Toivianen asked, in an exceptional gesture, permission from the Eduskunta to prosecute Finns Party MP Juha Mäenpää for inciting racist hatred in a 2019 speech in the chamber. The Eduskunta was split on the issue but eventually voted against removing the immunity Mäenpää enjoys as an MP.

However, as Poyet & Raunio (2021) observe, the shift towards a more adversarial plenary speaking culture is not

only due to the influence or actions of Finns Party MPs, but a more general trend that involves other parties, as well. Indeed, in summer 2019, there was an ongoing police investigation against four separate MPs, two from the Finns Party, one from the SDP and one from Christian Democrats, all involving suspicion of incitement to hatred. In the case of the Christian Democrat Päivi Räsänen, the target group was homosexuals; in all other cases, the target group was defined by race or ethnicity. Overall and across issues, the general speaking culture of the Eduskunta has been characterised as increasingly confrontational, borrowing elements familiar from social media.

In the party congress of summer 2017, the Finns Party split in two. In what appears to have been an orchestrated coup by the anti-immigration faction of the party, the then-MEP Jussi Halla-aho challenged Timo Soini and took over the party leadership from him. Halla-aho himself was a controversial figure, who had been convicted in court for hate speech. The Finns Party's change of leadership nearly triggered a collapse of the centre-right coalition government, as the Centre and National Coalition parties would not accept a partnership with Halla-aho's Finns Party.

In an innovative solution, the ousted party leader Timo Soini and a handful of MPs loyal to him, including all the other cabinet ministers, broke away from the Finns to establish a splinter party, which they named the Blue Future. The Blue Future was allowed to stay in the coalition, thus maintaining a parliamentary majority for Sipilä's government. Halla-aho took over the Finns Party, which went into opposition. Under Halla-aho, the Finns Party transformed into a proper radical right-wing populist party, with immigration and law-and-order as its core themes. Halla-aho willingly remained in opposition even after the 2019 election. In 2021, he was replaced by Riikka Purra as party leader. Purra is, like Halla-aho, part of the party's anti-immigration core, but has sought to maintain a respectable image for the party and would likely not rule out future coalition participation after the 2023 Eduskunta election.

## MAINSTREAM PARTY RESPONSES TO THE FINNS PARTY

As is clear from the discussion above, the responses to the Finns Party from the mainstream parties have been pragmatic and moderate. They have not, at any point, established a cordon sanitaire around the party and have included it in normal parliamentary cooperation. This does not mean that the other parties' relationship to the Finns Party would have always been easy or unproblematic. On the contrary, the party's landslide victory in the 2011 elections caused an uproar among the Finnish political elite and public at large. The fact that a populist party now had 39 seats in the 200-seat Eduskunta marked a watershed in Finnish politics.

Since then, the Left Alliance, the SDP, the Greens, and the Swedish People's Party have publicly observed that it would be impossible or at least very difficult for them to think about

cooperation with the Finns. The Social Democrats' position on this issue seems to have shifted somewhat over time, however. Initially, after the 2011 election, the SDP appeared ready to consider coalition-formation with the Finns, albeit on the condition that government policies could not reflect any kind of racism or xenophobia. Yet the Finns' path to government was at the time blocked by disagreements in EU policy, as the mainstream parties could not accept the Finns' steadfast opposition to Finland's participation in the EU's financial rescue packages. Similarly, in summer 2022, the SDP's current party leader, Prime Minister Sanna Marin observed that forming a coalition with the Finns after the 2023 Eduskunta election would be hard to conceive, particularly because of fundamental differences in the parties' EU policy stances.

In essence, however, the Finnish mainstream parties have accepted the results of democratic elections and treated the Finns Party as a "normal" party from the beginning. Hence, the Finns Party has achieved parliamentary positions of trust, such as committee chairmanships or the position of the Speaker of Eduskunta, according to its share of the vote. In terms of interpellations to governments, the Finns Party has issued them mostly alone, but also together with the other right-wing parties and occasionally even together with the Social Democrats.

While the mainstream parties have not formally attempted to isolate the Finns Party and most of them have even opted to cooperate with it, it should be noted that acrimony between the Finns Party's supporters and those of other parties has been rising in recent years, a phenomenon political scientists refer to as "affective polarisation" (Westinen, Pitkänen & Kestilä-Kekkonen 2020). This is especially true for the Finns Party's and the Green and Left/Social Democratic parties' supporters and reflects the new importance of the socio-cultural dividing line running between authoritarian-conservative and progressive-liberal poles.

## THE FINNS PARTY'S INFLUENCE ON FINNISH POLITICS AND OTHER PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES

Generally, one of the main ways in which radical right populist parties influence politics is by influencing the substance and tone of political debate, including the positions of other parties. This is also true for the Finns Party, whose presence has arguably pushed so-called socio-cultural political issues, including immigration, borders and law-and-order, up in the Finnish political agenda. As Raunio (2019) has observed, in the latest 2019 parliamentary election these themes were perhaps even more salient than socio-economic issues such as taxation and spending. In addition to immigration, a socio-cultural issue that the Finns Party has helped politicise is, counter-intuitively, climate change, as it has attempted to portray the mainstream – especially leftist and Green parties – as possessed by climate change hysteria.

Poyet & Raunio (2021) argue that the Finns Party also managed to significantly influence the programme of Juha Sip-

ilä's government, particularly on the issues of the EU and immigration. In practice, Finland was at the time a highly critical EU member state, both when it came to deciding on further financial assistance to the Eurozone's crisis-ridden countries as well as the plan of relocating asylum seekers across the EU in the 2015–2016 migration crisis.

As mentioned above, the Finns Party's popularity has generally strengthened the so-called GAL-TAN (e.g., Hooghe & Marks 2009) divide as a cleavage in Finnish politics. Rather than pitting the socio-economic left and right against each other, this division contrasts authoritarian-conservative (the Finns Party, the Christian Democrats and the National Coalition party) against progressive-liberal (Left Party, Social Democrats, Swedish People's Party and the Greens) parties. The Finns Party has actively endorsed the salience of this dividing line by, for example, coining the term "green-left" in Finnish politics – a term that may not entirely adequately capture the ideological position of the Finnish Greens, in contrast to some other European Green parties. It has, however, found its way into common political parlance in Finland.

## FINNS PARTY SUCCESS: THANKS TO POWERFUL ENABLERS?

The Finns Party's landslide victory in 2011 was at least partly due to favourable circumstances. First, the Eurozone crisis was at its peak and Finland was subject to participating in the highly unpopular financial rescue measures for the Southern Member States. Here, the Finns Party could readily exploit its long tradition of Euroscepticism, which resonated with the public. Second, the financial crisis came on top of structural transformation in the Finnish economy, which had resulted in plant closures and mass lay-offs in the forestry sector and the decline of the telecom giant Nokia, also leading to massive job losses in some towns. These developments fuelled discontent which the Finns Party exploited. Finally, the 2011 elections were preceded by a large-scale party financing scandal, which implicated particularly the then leading party of the coalition, the Centre Party. This gave the Finns Party leverage to employ its populist "common people vs. corrupt elites" rhetoric.

At the same time, the Finns Party's anti-immigration faction was laying the groundwork, particularly on social media, for the politicisation of the thus far marginal issue of immigration in Finland, a strategy which gradually succeeded. While the main parties for the most part held on to moderate rhetoric on both the EU and immigration, individuals in the Centre, Social Democratic and National Coalition parties endorsed tougher positions, mimicking the Finns Party's rhetoric. In some instances, this also influenced Finland's official policy. For example, Finland was the only EU Member State to demand "collateral" from Greece in exchange for accepting participation in its financial rescue packages. This was arguably a populist move from the then incumbent Social Democrats, done to respond to what was perceived as an increasingly Eurosceptic national mood.

Taken together, it can be argued that the main way in which the mainstream parties have enabled the Finns Party's electoral success is by accepting and in some cases endorsing its narratives. This has had the effect of legitimising the Finns Party's version of reality. Moreover, the right-wing Centre and National Coalition parties further legitimised the Finns Party by accepting it into a government coalition in 2015. This was, however, not directly beneficial for the party, but in fact resulted in a massive drop in its popularity and an eventual party split. Hence, in general, mainstream parties may help radical right-wing parties more by endorsing their way of framing societal problems than by allowing them into formal positions of power either in the legislative or executive arenas.

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## Reactions of Finnish Parliamentary Parties 2011–2022



The Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS) is a radical right-wing populist party that is widely accepted as a normalised element of the Finnish political landscape. Under its longtime chairman Timo Soini, the party's profile was rather left populist than radical right, which may have helped its acceptance among the other Finnish parliamentary parties. Yet even after the Finns Party in 2017 transformed into a proper radical right-wing party, the other parties continued to engage in parliamentary cooperation with it.



The Finns Party made its electoral breakthrough in the 2011 Eduskunta election, when it received 19.1 per cent of the vote. The party has taken votes from all parties, but most notably it has competed over working-class voters with the Social Democrats (Sosiaalidemokraatit, SDP) and rural voters with the Centre Party (Keskusta, Kesk). As the party's profile has shifted to the right both on socio-economic and socio-cultural questions, more competition with the conservative National Coalition Party is to be expected.

In Finland's highly pragmatic political culture, multi-party cross-bloc coalitions are normal, and all parliamentary parties routinely engage in legislative cooperation, particularly in parliamentary committees. The other parties have not built a cordon sanitaire against the Finns Party, and the party was part of a right-wing coalition government from 2015–2019. The Finns Party has also not actively tried to change parliamentary rules or procedures.



Yet the Finns Party's politicians have challenged parliamentary norms by attempting to change the limits of acceptable language, both in the chamber as well as on social media. Several Finns Party MPs have faced criminal prosecution, and some have been convicted for inciting racial hatred. Generally, the Finns Party has affected Finnish politics and the other parties' agendas by amplifying issues such as immigration, borders and law-and-order, and strengthening the socio-cultural division between authoritarianism and liberalism as a new dividing line in Finnish politics.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://nordics.fes.de/>