

## ELECTION BRIEFING No 63 EUROPE AND THE FINNISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF APRIL 17, 2011

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### Key points:

- The elections were nothing short of extraordinary, producing major changes to the national party system and attracting considerable international media attention.
- For the first time since Finland joined the EU, European matters featured strongly in the elections, with the problems facing the Eurozone and the role of Finland in the bail-out measures becoming arguably the main topic of the debates.
- The Eurosceptical True Finns won 19.1% of the votes, a staggering increase of 15% from the 2007 elections and the largest ever increase in support achieved by a single party in Eduskunta elections.
- All other Eduskunta parties lost votes, with the Centre Party ending with 15.8% of the votes and the biggest ever loss suffered by a party in the elections.
- Despite the rise of the True Finns, the election is unlikely to result in any major changes in national integration policy.

### Background/Context

The Eduskunta elections of April 2011 were arguably the most interesting parliamentary elections held in Finland since the country joined the EU in 1995 – and certainly attracted more media attention outside of Finland than previous elections. These were also the first Eduskunta elections where European matters featured prominently in the debates. This quite exceptional nature of the elections is largely explained by the developments that had unravelled since the previous Eduskunta elections held four years earlier.<sup>1</sup>

Finland had been governed since the 2007 election by a basically centre-right coalition between the Centre Party, the National Coalition, the Green League and the Swedish People's Party. As has become the norm in Finland, the four-party coalition enjoyed a comfortable majority in the parliament with 63% of the seats (126 out of 200). However, while the opposition, led by the Social Democratic Party, was numerically weak and ideologically fragmented, the cabinet found itself by

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<sup>1</sup> See Tapio Raunio, 'Europe and the Finnish Parliamentary Elections of March 2007', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 32* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-election-briefing-no-32.doc>.

mid-term in serious trouble caused mainly by domestic party finance scandals. The debate about party funding erupted in May 2008 when Timo Kalli, a senior Centre MP, announced that he had deliberately left out certain donors from the public notification of the financing of his 2007 election campaign as this was legally possible. While Mr Kalli and most of the other MPs later informed the media of their sources of election income, such behaviour only fuelled doubts and concerns about the trustworthiness of politicians and where parties were getting money from. The scandal was particularly troubling for the leading government party, the Centre, because the party had close links with and received considerable financial support from *Kehittyvien maakuntien Suomi*, an organisation explicitly set up to defend the interests of the rural constituencies and financed by wealthy businessmen with rather questionable reputations. As the Centre and National Coalition MPs were the main beneficiaries of such funds, the government was attacked strongly by the media and the opposition for its hesitant approach in dealing with the scandal. A snowball effect ensued, with the police starting investigations about the links between interest groups and several leading politicians, including Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen. While the government stayed in office, there was nonetheless an awkward sense of sleaze permeating the domestic political landscape.

Mr Vanhanen eventually stepped down in the summer of 2010 and was replaced as Centre leader by Mari Kiviniemi, who became the second female prime minister in the country's history (Anneli Jäätteenmäki, also from the Centre, had served as prime minister for two months after the 2003 election but was forced to resign on account of allegations concerning her use of secret foreign ministry documents during the 2003 Eduskunta elections). But Kiviniemi's term in office did not get an easy start owing to the problems facing the Eurozone. The decisions to save Greece from its near-bankruptcy and to establish the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism and the European Financial Stabilisation Facility in May-June 2010 had resulted in unexpectedly heated debates in the plenary of the Eduskunta during the final weeks of Mr Vanhanen's premiership, and the debates continued after the summer break.

In these debates the opposition attacked the government, with the Social Democrats adopting a high-profile position against lending money to Greece and the opposition parties in general voting against the aid measures. While the opposition parties, as well as a notable share of individual backbench MPs from governing parties, were clearly aggravated by the EU's response to the Greek crisis, it is clear that the debates were also strongly influenced by the upcoming Eduskunta elections. The support of Social Democrats had, according to public opinion surveys, declined rather drastically, and this probably explains in part the party's aggressive strategy. The opposition, led by the Left Alliance, also tabled an interpellation (confidence vote) on government positions regarding the financial stabilisation measures in March 2011. But whatever the reasons behind party behaviour, these debates were, in many ways, the first time when the government really was forced to justify and defend its EU policies in the Eduskunta plenary - and when the opposition truly attacked the cabinet publicly over the handling of EU matters. In fact, a rare piece of drama was seen in the debates held on 9 March 2011 on the stabilization of the European economy when Prime Minister Kiviniemi accused the opposition of 'regrettable and unpatriotic behaviour'. Ms Kiviniemi and her government also stressed that Finnish positions and bargaining strategies should be discussed behind the closed doors in the European Affairs Committee instead of the plenary.

The main beneficiary of the party finance scandals and of the Euro crisis was undoubtedly the True Finns, the only consistently Eurosceptical party represented in the Eduskunta. The party's support had more than doubled in the previous elections to the Eduskunta, from 1.6% in 2003 to 4.1% in 2007. The rise of the party had continued in the 2008 municipal elections, in which it captured 5.4% of the votes. But the real turning point came in the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections, with the True Finns capturing 9.8% of the votes and their first seat in the Parliament.<sup>2</sup> The candidacy of

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<sup>2</sup> See: Tapio Raunio, 'The European Parliament Election in Finland, June 7, 2009', *European Parties Elections and*

the highly popular party leader, Timo Soini, undoubtedly played a major part in that success. He was the unrivalled vote king of the elections with 130,715 votes. But it is probable that the victory was explained more by a combination of Soini's popularity and the electorate voting against the mainstream parties (partly due to the party finance scandals explained above) as by Euroscepticism. However, one can also argue that the voters had protested against the broad pro-EU consensus of the political elite, and this was indeed one of the main campaign themes of the True Finns. But most notably, the candidacy of Soini had contributed to Europe and particularly Euroscepticism occupying a more central role in the campaigns than before. Soini had also made clear his intention of running for a seat in the 2011 Eduskunta elections.

According to public opinion surveys the rise of True Finns showed no signs of stopping, with the three main parties in particular destined to lose votes. This predicted change should not be underestimated, for the Finnish party system has been extremely stable over the past two decades, with the vote shares of the individual parties changing very little between elections. The three core parties - the Social Democrats, the Centre and the National Coalition - have largely held on to their vote shares in recent decades, winning collectively around 65-70% of the votes. The vote shares of the smaller parties had also displayed high levels of stability. As a result of these developments, the 2011 elections promised to be more interesting than Finnish parliamentary elections had been in a long time.

## **The Campaign**

In Eduskunta elections, Finland is divided into one single-member (Åland Islands) and 14 multi-member electoral districts. Each district is a separate sub-unit and there are no national adjustment seats. The range in district magnitude in the 2011 elections (excluding the single-member constituency) was from 6 (South Savo, North Karelia) to 35 (Uusimaa). With fifteen constituencies, the average district magnitude is 13.3. Finnish voters choose in electoral districts among individual candidates who are placed on the party lists in alphabetical order (the exception are the Social Democrats who have a system where the placing of candidates on the list is determined by their success in membership ballots, with the candidate winning the most votes heading the list). Given this candidate-centred system, there is normally at least as much competition within parties as between them.

Altogether 2,315 candidates were put forward by 17 parties. 39% of these candidates were women. The average age of the candidates was 45.4 years. Nearly 73% of the candidates were nominated by parties represented in the Eduskunta: the Social Democrats, Centre, National Coalition, Left Alliance, Green League, Christian Democrats, Swedish People's Party and the True Finns. As the other parties had basically no chances of winning seats, the following analysis of campaign themes excludes these marginal parties without parliamentary seats.

The issue which attracted most attention during the campaign was undoubtedly the Eurozone crisis and Finland's contributions to the rescue operations. As explained in the previous section, the opposition used the issue to attack the government, with particularly the Social Democrats making it a central part of their campaign. The Social Democrats had been desperately searching for an issue with which to attack the cabinet, and the Euro crisis fell conveniently on their lap. Together with the Left Alliance and the True Finns, the Social Democrats voted against the stabilization measures in the Eduskunta and were in general against Finland lending money to individual Euro countries. As first Ireland, and then Portugal just before the elections, followed the path of Greece and required bail-out measures, the debate just intensified in the run-up to the elections. Obviously

the governing parties defended Finland's contributions, arguing that the stability of Euro was crucial to the domestic economy. The True Finns in particular argued that the stabilisation measures represented another significant step towards a federal Europe, with the National Coalition especially accused of compromising national interests (the party's leader Jyrki Katainen was the finance minister).

Otherwise the campaign focused on a mixture of familiar themes. The National Coalition called for a responsible economic policy, stating that lean times required sound and competent management of finances - both domestically and at the European level. The Centre had held the position of prime minister since 2003 and this, together with the party finance scandals, was working against the party. Prime Minister Kiviniemi played a central role in the Centre campaign, but she and her party clearly had difficulties in finding a message that would resonate beyond their core rural electorate - and even in the rural areas the True Finns with their harder, more uncompromising and nationalist vision were destined to get votes from the people disappointed with the ability of the Centre to defend the interests of their constituents. The Social Democrats and the Left Alliance emphasised typical left-wing matters such as employment and protection of welfare state services. The Greens were caught in a difficult position. The party had been a junior partner in a centre-right government that had invested resources in nuclear energy, an issue over which the Greens had previously left the government for in 2002. In general, the party leader Anni Sinnemäki found herself arguing in favour of the economic policies of the government, which included further plans for privatising or externalising key welfare state services, mainly in health care. The party chair of the Christian Democrats, Päivi Räsänen, had caused a major stir in October 2010 with her anti-gay rhetoric in a television debate, and hence the party tried to focus on other issues such as welfare state services. The Swedish People's Party predictably focused on safeguarding the rights of Swedish speakers. This time bilingualism actually acquired broader relevance in the debates due to contestation over whether Swedish should be a compulsory subject in schools throughout the country, as public opinion and many leading politicians were arguing in favour of flexibility, especially so that children could study Russian in Eastern parts of the country. Other themes that popped up during the debates were constitutional reform (with the opposition against and the governing parties in favour of reducing the President's powers) and pensions policy. Overall the debates about economic policy and the welfare state were quite cautious, as the economic uncertainties and the generally accepted need to introduce cuts to the national budget impacted on party discourses.

However, just as in the 2009 EP elections, the campaign was strongly characterised as a clash between the True Finns and the mainstream parties. The governing parties in particular, often backed by the Social Democrats, did their best to discredit Mr Soini and his party, with the consequence that their own policy agendas were often ignored or downplayed. A media favourite, Mr Soini largely dominated the campaign. He was also clearly concerned about his party's image, especially as its election programme was, in many ways, quite nationalistic and many of the True Finns' candidates had expressed rather racist views. While the True Finns had been able to push immigration on to the domestic political agenda, Mr Soini obviously did not want it to become a key issue in the campaign. Ensuring that immigration did not become a major theme in the elections was also in the interests of the main parties as their electorates were also against more liberal immigration policies. The True Finns' ideology was explicitly populist and quite centre-left on socio-economic issues, with the party presenting itself as an alternative to the corrupt power cartel and a champion of the common man - themes which were in tune with the mood of the electorate.

## **Results**

As Table 1 shows, the election result was nothing short of extraordinary. The True Finns were the only party represented in the Eduskunta that actually gained votes - all other parties, with the exception of the Swedish People's Party whose number of seats stayed the same, lost both votes and

seats. The governing parties in particular performed badly, with the Centre recording the biggest ever election loss in the history of Eduskunta elections.

**Table 1: Elections to the Finnish parliament, 1945-2011 (%).**

Election year	VAS <sup>2</sup>	SDP	VIHR <sup>3</sup>	KESK <sup>1</sup>	PS <sup>4</sup>	LIB <sup>5</sup>	KD	SFP	KOK	Others
1945	23.5	25.1	-	21.3	-	5.2	-	7.9	15.0	2.0
1948	20.0	26.3	-	24.2	-	3.9	-	7.7	17.1	0.8
1951	21.6	26.5	-	23.2	-	5.7	-	7.6	14.6	0.8
1954	21.6	26.2	-	24.1	-	7.9	-	7.0	12.8	0.4
1958	23.2	23.2	-	23.1	-	5.9	-	6.8	15.3	2.5
1962	22.0	19.5	-	23.0	2.2	6.3	-	6.4	15.0	5.6
1966	21.1	27.2	-	21.2	1.0	6.5	0.5	6.0	13.8	2.7
1970	16.6	23.4	-	17.1	10.5	6.0	1.1	5.7	18.0	1.6
1972	17.0	25.8	-	16.4	9.2	5.2	2.5	5.4	17.6	0.9
1975	18.9	24.9	-	17.6	3.6	4.3	3.3	4.7	18.4	4.3
1979	17.9	23.9	-	17.3	4.6	3.7	4.8	4.2	21.7	1.9
1983	13.5	26.7	-	17.6	9.7	-	3.0	4.6	22.1	2.8
1987	13.6	24.1	4.0	17.6	6.3	1.0	2.6	5.3	23.1	2.4
1991	10.1	22.1	6.8	24.8	4.8	0.8	3.1	5.5	19.3	2.7
1995	11.2	28.3	6.5	19.8	1.3	0.6	3.0	5.1	17.9	6.3
1999	10.9	22.9	7.3	22.4	1.0	0.2	4.2	5.1	21.0	5.8
2003	9.9	24.5	8.0	24.7	1.6	0.3	5.3	4.6	18.6	3.3
2007	8.8	21.4	8.5	23.1	4.1	0.1	4.9	4.6	22.3	2.4
2011	8.1	19.1	7.3	15.8	19.1	-	4.0	4.3	20.4	2.0

Source: Statistics Finland (years 1948-1975 include also votes in the Åland Islands).

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Until 1962 the Agrarian Union, in 1983 including the Liberal Party.

<sup>2</sup> Until 1987 the Democratic League of the People of Finland; in 1987 incl. DEVA.

<sup>3</sup> In 1987 not as a party of its own.

<sup>4</sup> In 1962 and 1966 the Small Holders Party and until 1995 the Finnish Rural Party (SMP).

<sup>5</sup> Until 1948 the National Progressive Party, until 1966 the Finnish People's Party, until 1999 the Liberal Party.

Parties:

KESK	Centre Party
SDP	Social Democratic Party
KOK	National Coalition
VAS	Left Alliance
VIHR	Green League
KD	Christian Democratic Party (Before 2001 the Christian League/Union)
SFP	Swedish People's Party
PS	True Finns
SKP	Communist Party
LIB	Liberal People's Party
Others	Other parties

According to surveys, National Coalition had been the most popular party for most of the time since the 2007 elections, and the party held on to its top position, winning 20.4% of the votes and 44 seats. This was the lowest ever seat share for the largest party. Compared with the 2007 elections, the National Coalition lost 1.9 % of its support and six seats. The support of the main governing party, the Centre, declined by 7.3% to 15.8%. This was the biggest ever loss by a single party in Eduskunta elections and the worst electoral result of the Centre after the Second World War. The party also lost 16 seats, another all-time record, and only secured 35 seats in the new Eduskunta. Turning to junior partners in the coalition, the Greens suffered a major setback, winning 7.3% of the votes (1.2% less than in 2007) and ten seats (down five). The Swedish People's Party finished with 4.3% of the votes (down 0.3% compared with the 2007 elections) and nine seats. Put together, the

governing parties lost 10.7% of their votes and 27 seats.

The main opposition party, the Social Democrats, had performed badly in both the 2007 Eduskunta and 2009 European Parliament elections, and public opinion surveys had been indicating that this poor run would continue. The party leader Jutta Urpilainen had received strong criticism, with even her own party comrades doubting her leadership qualities. However, the party finished second with 19.1% of the votes and 42 seats. Whilst this was 2.3% less than in 2007 and the party lost three seats, the result was, in the end, at least respectable and in fact largely hailed as a victory by party activists. However, one needs to bear in mind that it was also the Social Democrats' worst electoral performance since the Second World War. The Left Alliance, on the other hand, managed to avoid a major loss, winning 8.1% of the votes (only 0.7 % less than in 2007) and 14 seats (down three). The Christian Democrats became the smallest party in the Eduskunta, with 4% of the votes (-0.9% compared with the 2007 elections) and six seats (down one).

But the main winner of the elections was of course the True Finns, capturing a staggering 19.1% of the votes and 39 seats (up 34). The party increased its vote share by 15 %, the largest ever such increase for an individual party in Eduskunta elections. The previous record was held by the True Finns' predecessor, the Rural Party, which gained 9.5% of votes in the 'earthquake' elections of 1970. The success of the True Finns is probably explained by a combination of factors. The party's rise coincided with the party finance scandals, while the problems of the Eurozone also benefited the True Finns. It is very likely that many Eurosceptical Centre voters defected to the True Finns as the Centre found itself in the difficult position of having to defend loans to bankrupt Euro countries. It is also notable that while the party chair Timo Soini deserves much of the credit for raising the profile of the party (he also received most votes of any of the individual candidates, 43,437 in the Uusimaa constituency), the support of the True Finns was quite stable across the constituencies. Finally, the emergence of the True Finns and the associated higher level of contestation and interest probably also explain the rise in turnout to 70.5%. This was a welcome development given that the turnout in 2007, 67.9%, had been the lowest since the Second World War and that turnout had declined fairly consistently since the 1960s.

The Finnish party system had been known for its remarkable stability, high fragmentation, and cross-bloc party cooperation. The election certainly brought an end to the stability that had characterised the party system for the past two decades. But the new government was also likely to bring together parties from both the right and left. And the Eduskunta became even more fragmented than before, with this being the first time that the largest party had fewer than 50 seats (National Coalition, 44). Moreover, the True Finns' victory also meant that there were more MPs than before with no previous parliamentary experience. It was, in many ways, difficult to predict both how the new True Finns' MPs would settle into Eduskunta's norms and rules and the group's ideological cohesion.

## **Impact of European issues**

As discussed above, Europe, or more precisely the Euro stabilization measures and Finland's participation in the bail-outs, was perhaps the main theme of the elections, dominating the debates and resulting in sharp exchanges between the government and opposition. The debates benefited the True Finns and probably also the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance that had attacked the cabinet ferociously over this issue. This was the first time that the EU as an issue occupied a central role in the Eduskunta elections, and it is interesting to see what lessons parties draw from this experience. While most of the parties would probably like to see EU issues debated primarily in the safety of Grand Committee (the EU committee) and other Eduskunta committees, the True Finns MPs may demand and initiate plenary and public debates around the topic of European integration.

However, otherwise Europe was basically absent from the campaigns. Wider questions related to integration were not on the agenda, but interestingly the discourse and argumentation of the political parties suggested some changes to national EU policy, or at least discourse on Europe. The decisions to participate in the bail-out operations were justified by their positive effects on domestic economy and growth, and in general the defence of national interests was emphasized by all parties. Overall it appeared that such an emphasis on national interests and on the role and rights of smaller member states had become more pronounced in Finland in recent years. Moreover, according to public opinion surveys citizens were particularly worried about whether the EU was dominated by its larger member countries. In many ways such discourse was understandable and should perhaps be seen as normal 'constituency' politics. Finland is a small, Northern member state, and thus citizens had good reason to be concerned about the influence of Finland in EU governance and whether vital national interests could realistically be defended in an enlarged Union. Whilst Finland's solidly pro-integrationist EU policy was not likely to change, it could be expected that the new government would at least pay more attention to protecting national interests in Brussels.

## **Conclusions and Future Prospects**

The Eduskunta elections coincided with the EU's third bail-out operation, that of lending money to Portugal. This meant that foreign media was suddenly keeping a close eye on the Finnish elections - and the outcome resulted in widespread speculation about Finland's involvement in the Euro stabilization measures. Foreign commentators were also speculating whether the triumph of the True Finns would produce any changes to the so-far consistently pro-EU national integration policy. But, as discussed above, Finland's basic stance towards the EU was unlikely to change. However, in this climate of opinion parties probably needed to be more prepared to discuss Europe in public - and this was certainly a highly positive development. Irrespective of what one thinks about the policies of the True Finns, at least the party played a major role in forcing immigration and EU on to the domestic public agenda.

At the time of finalising this report, government formation talks were about to begin between the National Coalition, the Social Democrats, the Swedish People's Party, the Green League and the Christian Democrats. Government formation was likely to take longer than normal as the five parties had different objectives regarding both the welfare state and economic policy, and to a lesser extent Europe. The new surplus majority government would most likely continue the Finnish tradition of having a comfortable majority in the Eduskunta. This means that the True Finns will be the main opposition party in the Eduskunta. It is a safe bet that Soini and the True Finns' group will use every opportunity they can to provoke debates about EU, and this may cause frictions in the other main parties that are internally divided over integration.

Interestingly, it was in the end an electoral promise about the EU which kept the True Finns out of the government. During the campaign, the True Finns had vowed not to approve bail-out measures to Portugal or other Euro countries, and despite some initial post-election signs of willing to moderate this stance, Mr Soini and his party respected their election promise. It is also probable that the government formateur and future prime minister, Jyrki Katainen, feared the unpredictability of the True Finns as the new government will most likely have to deal with subsequent bail-out and Euro stabilization measures. Hence this process of government formation provides an interesting example of how the EU impacts on a key aspect of national politics.

**Published: 12 May 2011**

*This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is*

*an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/research/europeanpartieselectionsreferendumsnetwork>.*