

ELECTION BRIEFING No 32 EUROPE AND THE FINNISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF MARCH 2007

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Key points:

- The election produced a major victory for the centre-right parties, with the conservative National Coalition achieving a particularly good result winning 22.3% of the vote and 50 seats.
- The leading government party, the Centre, maintained its position as the largest party, with 51 seats and 23.1 % of the vote.
- The combined vote share of the left-wing parties declined, with the Social Democrats receiving a major blow by finishing third behind the two centre-right parties.
- The populist True Finns, the only Eurosceptical party represented in the Eduskunta, more than doubled their vote share from the 2003 elections.
- Turnout fell to 67.9%, the lowest figure since the Second World War.
- The new government will be a coalition between three centre-right parties – the Centre, the National Coalition and the Swedish People's Party – and the Green League. The new government will continue its predecessor's pro-EU policies.

Background and campaign

As the parliamentary elections of March 18, 2007 approached, the situation looked favourable for the government parties. The four years since the latest election had witnessed reasonable economic growth, gradually reducing unemployment, and ratings for the government showed that the citizens were by and large pleased with the outgoing cabinet. Particularly Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen (the Centre Party) was riding on a wave of unprecedented popularity and, hence, the opinion polls were predicting that the Centre would maintain its position as the largest party in the country.

Reflecting the consensual style of Finnish politics, the individual parties campaigned fairly cautiously without really challenging or attacking their competitors. In order not to exclude themselves from government-formation negotiations, parties neither presented any pre-election alliances to the voters nor made any statements about not sharing power with a particular party. The electoral system also impacted upon campaigning once again. Finnish voters choose in electoral districts among individual candidates who are placed on the party

lists in alphabetical order.¹ During the campaign, the national party organisation and leadership act primarily as a background resource, providing the local branches with the necessary campaign material and, through the party leader, giving the party a public face. The actual work of collecting funds and spreading the message is the responsibility of candidates' support groups, with private donations being important in financing candidates' campaigns. Given this candidate-centred system, there is normally at least as much competition within parties as between them.²

No single issue really dominated the campaign. Basically all the parties were attempting to extend their support beyond their core constituencies and, hence, they all were in favour of: lower taxation, better public services, and they all promised to save the Baltic Sea. Considering the high support for the welfare state and the ageing of the population, it is not surprising that much of the debate focused on providing services to the elderly and on how to finance these services. European integration and foreign and security policy remained firmly in the background, with the parties preferring not discuss either the future of the European Union (EU) nor Finland's integration policy.³

This lack of debate on Europe was to be expected. The broad elite level partisan consensus about the overall direction of national integration policy is not replicated among the voters. Eurobarometer surveys show that support for membership and the deepening of integration is lower in Finland than in the EU as a whole. National surveys report similar findings, with Finns especially concerned about the influence of small countries in the Union. The commitment to integration that prevails among the elites is, thus, not shared to the same extent by the Finnish citizenry. In fact, according to a survey carried out just after the 2004 EP elections, Finland had one of the lowest levels of party-voter congruence on European integration matters; with only Britain, Hungary, and Luxembourg recording larger differences.⁴ Parties are also divided over Europe, with particularly the Centre, the Left Alliance, and (initially) the Greens experiencing serious divisions over EU matters. Hence it is in the interest of the parties not to engage in debates over Europe.⁵ The only party that would benefit from such debates is the Eurosceptical True Finns. Led by their energetic leader Timo Soini, the True Finns have hardened their EU-criticism in recent years, and the party did, albeit without any success, try to stimulate debate about Europe in the run-up to the elections.

Another aspect that contributed to the lack of debate on Europe was the Finnish EU presidency held in the latter half of 2006. While it is obviously very difficult to evaluate the

¹ The exception is the Social Democratic Party, which employs a system in which 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.

² For information on the electoral system, see: Jan Sundberg (2002), 'The Electoral System of Finland: Old, and Working Well', in Bernard Grofman and Arend Lijphart (eds) *The Evolution of Electoral and Party Systems in the Nordic Countries*. New York: Agathon Press, 67-99; and Tapio Raunio (2005): 'Finland: one hundred years of quietude', in Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell (eds) *The Politics of Electoral Systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 473-489.

³ Europe was a marginal issue also in the 1999 and 2003 elections. When respondents were asked after the 2003 Eduskunta elections to indicate the importance of various issues when deciding how to vote, 'EU integration/EU policy' occupied the seventeenth position. See Sami Borg and Tom Moring (2005), 'Vaalikampanja', in Heikki Paloheimo (ed.) *Vaalit ja demokratia Suomessa*. Porvoo: WSOY, p. 54.

⁴ See: Mikko Mattila and Tapio Raunio (2006), 'Cautious Voters - Supportive Parties: Opinion Congruence between Voters and Parties on the EU Dimension', *European Union Politics*, 7:4, 427-449.

⁵ See: Tapio Raunio (2005): Hesitant Voters, Committed Elite: Explaining the Lack of Eurosceptic Parties in Finland. *Journal of European Integration* 27:4, 381-395.

success of an EU presidency, it is fair to say that the Finnish government did at least a decent job. More importantly, the presidency was significant for the Centre Party, given that the majority of its supporters had voted against Finland's EU membership and continue to be very critical of European integration.⁶ In particular, Prime Minister Vanhanen rose to the occasion, displaying a solid and matter-of-fact style leadership that contributed to his increasing his popularity as both the party leader and head of the government. Overall, the presidency was, as happened in 1999, very much treated like a 'national project', with the main opposition parties not criticizing the government in EU matters during the presidency.⁷

Candidates

In Eduskunta elections Finland is divided into one single-member and 14 multi-member electoral districts, with the Åland Islands entitled to one seat regardless of its population. Each district is a separate sub-unit and there are no national adjustment seats. The range in district magnitude in the 2007 elections (excluding the single-member constituency) was from 6 (South Savo, North Karelia) to 34 (Uusimaa). With fifteen constituencies, the average district magnitude was 13.3.

At the district level, registered political parties and voters' associations with at least 100 persons have the right to nominate candidates, but only parties can enter into electoral alliances (technical coalitions that present a list of candidates containing no more names than will be chosen from the electoral district). Parties must use membership balloting to select candidates. Such balloting must be undertaken in constituencies where the number of nominees exceeds the official upper limit of candidates the party has the right to nominate (i.e. at most 14 candidates per electoral district or, if more than 14 representatives are elected from the district, at most the number of candidates elected). Membership ballots are rarely used in small parties, whereas the large parties have them in most electoral districts.

Altogether 2,004 candidates were put forward by 18 different parties. 40 % of these candidates were women. Around two-thirds of the candidates were nominated by parties represented in the Eduskunta: the Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, National Coalition, Left Alliance, Green League, Christian Democrats, Swedish People's Party and the True Finns. The number of candidates put forward by voters' associations was only 21.⁸

Results

The elections produced a rather unexpected triumph for the centre-right parties, with the National Coalition in particular achieving a highly impressive result. As Table 1 shows, the leading government party, the Centre, maintained its position as the largest party, with 51 seats and 23.1% of the vote. When compared with the 2003 elections, its support went down by 1.6 % and it lost four seats in the Eduskunta. The National Coalition gained 3.7% and ten

⁶ An interesting question is why the Eurosceptical Centre voters have not defected to other parties. The answer probably lies in the salience of the issues. As long as the Centre is perceived as the party that best protects the interests of the rural communities, the rural-based Centre supporters continue to vote for the party despite its pro-EU line. It must be remembered that the fate of the rural regions is much more important to those voters than the development of European integration. Indeed, out of all the Finnish parties, the Centre has paid most attention to EU's regional and agricultural policies, thereby signaling to their voters that the Centre is the party that safeguards the interests of the less-populated Finnish rural areas.

⁷ See: Teija Tiilikainen (2007), 'The Finnish EU Presidency – Taking Stock,' *EUSA Review*, 20:1, 1-6.

⁸ For more information on the candidates, see the election websites of the Ministry of Justice (www.vaalit.fi) and the Statistics Finland (www.tilastokeskus.fi).

seats, taking it to 50 seats and 22.3% of the votes. This positive result is at least partly explained by the presence of former party chair and presidential candidate Sauli Niinistö in the campaign. Niinistö won a staggering 60,563 votes in the Uusimaa electoral district (13% of those cast in the constituency), the all-time high won by an individual candidate in Finland. The current party chair, Jyrki Katainen, also emerged as a confident leader whose youthful and fresh image gave a healthy boost to the campaign.

Table 1: Elections to the Finnish parliament, 1945-2007 (%).

Election year	SKP	VAS ²	SDP	VIHR ³	KESK ¹	PS ⁴	LIB ⁵	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	0.8	10.9	22.9	7.3	22.4	1.0	0.2	4.2	5.1	21.0	5.0
2003	0.8	9.9	24.5	8.0	24.7	1.6	0.3	5.3	4.6	18.6	2.5
2007	0.7	8.8	21.4	8.5	23.1	4.1	0.1	4.9	4.6	22.3	1.7

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

Notes:

¹ Until 1962 the Agrarian Union, in 1983 including the Liberal Party.

² Until 1987 the Democratic League of the People of Finland; in 1987 incl. DEVA.

³ In 1987 not as a party of its own.

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

⁵ 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

The third large party, the Social Democrats, fared very poorly, winning only 21.4 % of the vote and 45 seats. The Social Democrats lost 3% of their votes and eight seats in the parliament. While the party probably suffered from the low turnout (see below), party leader Eero Heinäluoma never managed to convince the electorate, or even his own party's voters, of

his leadership abilities. Heinäluoma is also strongly associated with the trade unions, particularly the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), and the union's scare-mongering tactics, warning about the perils of a possible bourgeois coalition, probably alienated some of the party's potential voters.

Moving to the smaller parties, the Left Alliance saw its vote share decline, ending up with 8.8% and 17 MPs. The Greens won 8.5% and 15 seats, but, significantly, their party leader, Tarja Cronberg, failed to hold her seat in the North Karelia electoral district. The Christian Democrats (4.9%, 7 MPs) and the Swedish People's Party (4.6%, 10 MPs including the representative from the Åland Islands) by and large held on to their seat and vote shares. The True Finns, on the other hand, won 4.1% and 5 MPs, an increase of 2.4 % from the 2003 elections. The party chair, Timo Soini, is a very charismatic figure with excellent debating skills that clearly benefited the True Finns' campaign.

Overall, the results repeated the pattern established during the recent decades. On the one hand, the party system has become more fragmented as a result of the entry into the Eduskunta of new parties such as the Green League, the Christian Democrats, and the Rural Party/True Finns. On the other hand, the three main parties – the Social Democrats, the Centre, and the National Coalition – have consolidated their positions and once again captured approximately two-thirds of the votes and 146 (73%) of the 200 seats.⁹ Table 1 shows the vote shares of the parties after the Second World War.

The new government and the future of Finland's EU policy

Immediately after the election result became clear, it seemed that the likeliest coalition alternative was a centre-right cabinet formed by the Centre, the National Coalition and the Swedish People's Party. Should that have happened, Finnish parliamentary politics might have become a bit livelier and more interesting than before, as the opposition would have been ideologically more cohesive than has been the case at any time since the 1995 elections.

However, the day after the elections Prime Minister Vanhanen, who would - as the leader of the largest party – been responsible for forming the new government, announced that his new cabinet should control around 120 of the seats (60%). Vanhanen justified this by referring to the need to ensure the smooth functioning of the government. On April 4, Vanhanen declared that the new government would be a coalition between the Centre, the National Coalition, the Swedish People's Party, and the Green League. Hence the government will have a comfortable majority in the Eduskunta with 126 seats (63%).

This continues the recent pattern of forming over-sized cross-bloc coalitions in Finland that have all controlled broad majorities in the Eduskunta. The two 'rainbow' governments headed by Paavo Lipponen (Social Democrat) between 1995 and 2003 even controlled 72.5 % and 70 % of the seats respectively. Of the two 'surplus' parties in the new government, the Swedish People's Party has participated in all cabinets formed after 1979. The People's Party's near-permanent government status can be interpreted as a mechanism for protecting minority rights, although the party's centrist and flexible ideology is also an important explanatory

⁹ See: Jan Sundberg (1999), 'The Enduring Scandinavian Party System' *Scandinavian Political Studies* 22:2, 221-241; and David Arter (2007), 'From a Contingent Party System to Party System Implosion? Party System Change in Finland, 1945-2007,' Paper presented at the 57th Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Bath, 11-13 April 2007.

factor.¹⁰ The inclusion of the Greens will probably turn out to be a wise move from Vanhanen. While the Greens are the only centre-left party in an otherwise bourgeois government, their participation in the cabinet means that, yet again, the opposition will be ideologically fragmented. As recent Finnish cabinets have, with the exception of the centre-right coalition between 1991-1995, brought together both parties from the left and the right, the opposition has been both numerically weak and ideologically incoherent.

It is safe to predict that the new government will continue the pro-EU policies of previous Finnish cabinets. In all the Intergovernmental Conferences (IGC) held since joining the EU, Finland has supported further transfers of competencies from the national level to the Union, together with the extension of majority voting in the Council, and a stronger role for the Commission and the European Parliament. Moreover, Finland was among the first countries that joined the third stage of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and has played an active role in the further development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Finnish integration policy can, thus, with good reason be characterised as flexible and constructive and has sought to consolidate Finland's position in the inner core of the Union. Underlying this approach is a powerful conviction that a strong and efficient Union can best protect the rights and interests of smaller member states, as intergovernmental processes tend to favour larger member states.

Of the individual parties joining the new government, the Centre was badly divided over EU membership and was also against Finland joining the EMU, but has since then displayed solid support for national EU policy. The National Coalition and the Swedish People's Party have pursued broadly similar pro-integrationist policies since Finland joined the Union. The Green League was also initially quite badly divided over membership, but opposition to European integration within the party has declined, and hence the Greens are supportive of further integration. The new government will probably be in favour of ratifying the Constitutional Treaty and, in general, will champion reforms that enhance the efficiency of the Union.

The bad news for Finnish democracy was the turnout of only 67.9% (65% if one includes Finns residing abroad), the lowest since the Second World War. Turnout has fallen fairly consistently since the 1960s. In the elections held in the 1960s, on average 85.0% of the electorate cast their votes. The figure was 80.8 % in the 1970s, 78.7 % in the 1980s and only 70.8 % in the 1990s. Considering that the Eduskunta is currently celebrating its centenary, this steadily declining turnout (with the exception of the 2003 elections) casts a long shadow over these celebrations. However, at least the women candidates proved successful: the new Eduskunta has 84 female MPs (42%), the highest share recorded in the history of the Finnish parliament.

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

¹⁰ See: Tapio Raunio (2006), 'The Svenska Folkpartiet: the Gradual Decline of a Language Party,' in Lieven De Winter, Marga Gómez-Reino and Peter Lynch (eds) *Autonomist Parties in Europe: Identity Politics and the Revival of the Territorial Cleavage*. Barcelona: ICPS, 123-139.

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