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EUROPE AND THE FINNISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF MARCH 2003

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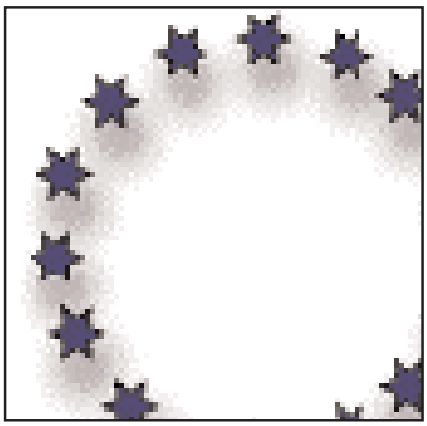

Key points:

• The Centre Party, in opposition since 1995, emerged as the largest party with 24.7% of the votes and 55 MPs. The leading government party, the Social Democrats (SDP), also increased its support, with 24.5% of the votes and 53 MPs. The main loser was the conservative National Coalition, which won only 18.6% of the votes and lost six parliamentary seats.

• Domestic issues dominated the campaign with the debates focusing primarily on the welfare state and the quality of public services. European integration was almost entirely absent from the campaign.

• The election did not produce any substantial gains for Eurosceptic parties. The only Eurosceptic party in parliament, the right-wing True Finns, won 1.6% of the vote and increased its number of seats from one to three.

• As the main parties held on to power, the election result will not lead to any policy change on either domestic or European matters. Even though the Centre Party is more in favour of intergovernmentalism than the two 'rainbow coalition' governments led by the SDP and Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, the bargaining involved in forming coalition governments and the pro-integrationist line of the Centre leaders ensures that the overall line of Finnish European policy will not be altered.

TABLE 1: THE RESULTS OF THE 1999 AND 2003 ELECTIONS IN FINLAND

	1999		2003	
PARTY	**VOTES (%)**	**SEATS[1]**	**VOTES (%)**	**SEATS[1]**
Social Democrats	612 963 (22.9)	51	683 223 (24.5)	53
Centre Party	600 592 (22.4)	48	689 391 (24.7)	55
National Coalition	563 835 (21.0)	46	517 904 (18.6)	40
Left Alliance	291 675 (10.9)	20	277 152 (9.9)	19
Green League	194 846 (7.3)	11	223 564 (8.0)	14
Swedish People's Party	137 330 (5.1)	11	128 824 (4.6)	8
Christian Democrats	111 835 (4.2)	10	148 987 (5.3)	7
True Finns	26 440 (1.0)	1	43 816 (1.6)	3
Others	141 775 (5.2)	2	78 896 (3.1)	1
Total	2 681 291 (100)	200	2 791 757 (100)	200

[1] The 'other' MP is the representative from the Åland Islands who sits with the group of the Swedish People's Party. In 1999 the Reform Group also won one seat.

Source: Statistics Finland.

Background

The parliamentary election held on 16 March 2003 was the first to be conducted under the new constitution that came into force in 2000 and brought Finland closer to a standard form of parliamentary democracy.[1] Finland used to be characterized by short-lived and unstable governments living under the shadow of the president. Under the old constitution, the fragmented party system, with no clearly dominant party emerging after the elections, strengthened the president's hand in heavily influencing and steering negotiations. Under the new constitution the president is now in the background, with the largest party having the leading role in government formation. Led by the prime ministerial candidate, parties negotiate the partisan composition of the coalition, together with the government programme and portfolio allocation. The Eduskunta, the unicameral Finnish national parliament, elects the prime minister with a simple majority of the votes cast. The president then formally appoints the prime minister as well as the other ministers in accordance with a proposal made by the prime minister. The government submits its programme to the Eduskunta in the form of a statement, which is followed by a vote of investiture. Although, in fact, the president had not exerted strong influence on government formation since 1987, it was expected that the new constitution might result in the elections focusing more than before on the prime ministerial candidates with regard to both the campaigns and citizens' voting behaviour.

The second notable question mark concerned the fate of the government parties as Finland had been governed by an oversized 'rainbow coalition' since 1995, with the cabinet consisting of the Social Democrats, the conservative National Coalition, the Left Alliance, the Swedish People's Party and the Green League. The Greens had, however, left the government in 2002 after the cabinet had decided in favour of building a fifth nuclear reactor. The rainbow coalition had been highly unusual in European politics, both because of its broad spectrum and because it had commanded a strong majority in the Eduskunta. While all cabinets formed since 1987 have been surplus majority coalitions, with each government including at least four parties, the five-party rainbow governments led by Prime Minister Lipponen controlled around 70% of the parliamentary seats after the 1995 and 1999 elections. Despite their ideological heterogeneity, the governments had been surprisingly stable without any major internal conflicts. Hence the opposition led by the Centre Party had been largely powerless. After eight years of rule by essentially the same parties - and with politicians, the media, and academic commentators voicing concerns about the effects of such large coalitions - it was interesting to see whether the government parties would manage to hold on to their shares of the vote.

The results[2]

The 200 members of the Eduskunta are elected for a four-year term. The country is divided into one single-member and fourteen multi-member electoral districts, with the Åland Islands entitled to one seat regardless of their population. Each district is a separate sub-unit and there is no national pool of supplementary seats. The formula used for allocating seats to parties is the d'Hondt method.[3] As the voters have the right to choose among individual candidates, and as the candidates are placed on the party lists in alphabetical order,[4] the Finnish system is strongly candidate-centred; hence there is very strong competition even within the same parties'. Table 1 compares the parties' shares of the vote and number of seats in the Eduskunta after the 1999 and 2003 elections.

The centre-right/agrarian *Centre Party* won the elections by a narrow margin. The Centre was both the largest party after the election and the party that increased its vote share the most in comparison with the previous elections held in 1999. It won 24.7% of the votes (an increase of 2.3%) and has 55 MPs in the new parliament, seven more than after the 1999 elections. The Centre Party increased its support particularly in the southern part of Finland, gaining additional seats in the electoral districts of Helsinki, Uusimaa (an area surrounding Helsinki), Häme and Satakunta. This was quite a significant advance for the party, as it has traditionally enjoyed lower support in the more urban constituencies.

The *SDP* emerged as the second winner of the elections. It received 24.5 % of the vote, thus increasing its support by 1.6%. It has 53 seats in the new parliament, an increase of two MPs. The Centre won only 6,000 votes more than the SDP. The 'vote king' of the elections (measured in terms of absolute number of votes) came from the ranks of the Social Democrats, with Prime Minister Lipponen winning 26,415 votes in the Helsinki constituency.

The conservative *National Coalition Party* suffered a substantial defeat in these elections. Its share of the vote fell from 21.0% in 1999 to 18.6% and the party lost six seats in the Eduskunta. Its leader, Ville Itälä, argued that the poor result was explained by the fact that the attention focused on the two strongest contenders for the prime minister's post, the party chairpersons of the Centre and the Social Democrats. However, while this argument may contain an element of truth, it is undermined by the good performance of both the Green League and the Left Alliance. *The Left Alliance* won 9.9% of the vote, 1% less than four years earlier, and 19 seats, a loss of only one seat. Considering that for eight years it had been a coalition member in a pro-EU government that had included two centre-right parties (the National Coalition and the Swedish People's Party) the result was in fact quite respectable. The *Greens* won 8.0% of the vote and gained three seats, bringing its total in parliament to 14.

The election was a heavy disappointment for the *Swedish People's Party*, an ethno-regionalist liberal party established to defend the interests of Finland's Swedish-speaking minority. The party won 4.6% of the votes (against 5.1% in 1999), and returned only eight MPs (nine including the MP from the Åland Islands who sits with the party), three fewer than in the outgoing parliament. The Christian Democrats (until 2001 the Christian Union) increased their share of the vote from 4.2% in 1999 to 5.3%, but nevertheless lost three seats, and now hold only seven seats in the Eduskunta.

Finally turning to the small parties, the number of votes cast for the new parties running for parliament was very modest, as no representatives were elected from among them. The soft Eurosceptic *True Finns*[5] was the only small party to win representation in the parliament, increasing its share of the vote from 1.0% in 1999 to 1.6%, and gaining two seats, thereby bringing its total number of MPs to three. The minuscule anti-EU parties - mainly the Communist Party[6] (0.8%), Communist Worker's Party (0.1%), and Forces for Change in Finland[7] (0.4%) - received only marginal support.

While the proportions of votes for the various political parties remained constant, turnout increased for the first time since 1979. Turnout in Finland has fallen below the West European average, with a fairly consistent decline since the 1960s. Whereas 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. Only 68.3% voted in the 1999 election, but in 2003 69.7% of the electorate actually voted (excluding Finnish citizens living abroad).

The campaign and the European dimension

The election campaign was almost completely dominated by domestic issues. Overall the election was a lacklustre affair, with party leaders preferring to play it safe instead of taking any risks. This cautiousness typical of modern Finnish politics is explained by the logic of building coalition governments, with party leaders careful not to antagonize their colleagues in order to maintain their chances of getting into government. The election debates centred on traditional Finnish election themes such as the ability of the municipalities and the state to provide adequate public services (particularly health care) and the overall effectiveness of the welfare state. As the clear majority of the electorate is in favour of the welfare state, it is not surprising that it was quite difficult to notice any real differences between the parties on this issue. The National Coalition was the only party that argued strongly in favour of tax cuts. The image of the Greens was somewhat marred by one of their candidates from the Helsinki constituency, who spoke publicly in favour of legalizing drugs and smoked cannabis at one of his party's campaign premises in the centre of Helsinki. The National Coalition in particular tried to capitalize on this, emphasizing the necessity of ensuring a secure environment for citizens through a more effective fight against crime and drugs. During the final two weeks of the campaign media attention was increasingly focusing on who would be the future prime minister, and this arguably benefited the two largest parties, the Centre and the Social Democrats.

Europe was nowhere to be seen or heard during the campaign. No party emphasized the European issue, despite the fact that in the months preceding the election the EU had constantly been on the political agenda, owing to impending enlargement and the work of the Convention on the Future of Europe. This was not really surprising as nearly all parties had deliberately kept a low profile in EU matters before the two previous Eduskunta elections held in 1995 and 1999. In the final two weeks of the campaign the chair of the Centre Party, Mrs Anneli Jäätteenmäki, criticized Prime Minister Lipponen and his government for being too supportive of the US-led coalition that was about to attack Iraq. While this issue became a central part of the main televised election debates, even here the European connection remained in the background; the

role of the EU in the conflict and the problems relating to the Common Foreign and Security Policy did not really feature in the discussions.

The reason why the EU did not feature is primarily twofold. First, all parties are more or less divided over European integration.[8] Secondly, party leaders and MPs are more pro-integration than their voters. Thus probably no party would have benefited from highlighting its European policies. Moreover, in order to be considered as realistic and trustworthy coalition partners, parties have adopted positions that have been at odds with the mood among their voters. In the case of the Left Alliance, Green League and to a certain extent also the Social Democrats the policy moderation and ideological compromises implied by multi-party coalition governments, not least in European integration matters, have gradually reduced the influence of more radical or left-wing sections of their parties that also opposed EU membership and remain more sceptical about the benefits of integration. Within the Centre Party this has resulted in the marginalization of the EU-critical section of the party, a section that arguably represents the views of the majority of the party's voters.[9] These Eurocritical individuals or minority groups likewise kept a low profile on European matters before the elections, choosing to focus their campaigns on safer domestic issues instead.

It is also worth noting another factor that enhanced inter-party bargaining and thereby de-politicized and ensured policy continuity on the issue of European integration, namely the system established for formulating and coordinating national EU policy. The goal is to manufacture broad elite-level backing for national positions, including the parliament, relevant interest groups and government representatives. In important matters the permanent representative in Brussels also often informs all Finnish MEPs of the national government's position. In the Eduskunta the emphasis is on pragmatic examination of the EU's legislative initiatives in the committees, with hardly any partisan ideological debates about national integration policy or the overall development of integration. As the opposition parties are involved in forming national policies, this defuses party competition over integration and reduces the likelihood of the main features of Finnish integration policy being altered after each parliamentary election.

Conclusion

The election result displays quite remarkable stability and continuity, with the established parties holding on to their vote shares. The Social Democrats, the Centre Party and the National Coalition have together captured between 57% and 68% of the votes in national parliamentary elections since 1945.[10] While electoral volatility has increased and the party system has become more fragmented, the three core parties have consolidated their positions during recent decades, with the other parties failing to emerge as strong contenders. The Green League did, however, reach its all-time high, winning 8.0 % of the votes. The Finnish Eduskunta will continue to have one of the most fragmented party systems in Europe, with inter-party bargaining both in government and parliament essential for building winning coalitions. This means that Finland will continue to be characterized by policy stability.

The new government is a coalition between the Centre, the Social Democrats and the Swedish People's Party. The Prime Minister is Mrs Jäätteenmäki, the first woman to hold that position in Finnish history. Even though the Centre Party is more in favour of intergovernmentalism than the two rainbow governments led by the SDP and Prime Minister Lipponen, the bargaining involved in forming coalition governments and the pro-integrationist line of the Centre leaders ensure that the overall Finnish European policy will most likely not be altered in the near future.

While strategic considerations (the need to maintain party unity and the lack of congruence between the views of citizens and MPs) probably explain why party leaders chose to keep quiet about the EU, the unwillingness to engage in discussions about European matters is perhaps also a signal of the inability of the political parties to say anything meaningful about Europe. An additional reason for the lack of EU debate may be the fairly broad pro-integrationist consensus that prevails among the main parties and is sustained by the system of coordinating national EU policies. The lack of any debate about the development of integration or national EU policies is nevertheless a cause for concern, with politicians behaving as if national policy choices were made completely independently of what happens at the European level, which of course they cannot be.

Endnotes

1 For a full text of the constitution, see *www.om.fi/constitution*. The process of government formation is regulated in Sections 61 and 62.

2 For information about electoral legislation and election results, see *www.vaalit.fi.* Detailed statistics concerning both candidates and election results is available at the home page of Statistics Finland (*www.tilastokeskus.fi/tk/he/vaalit2003/index_en.html*).

3 The method is named after the 19th-century Belgian mathematician. It involves dividing each party's total vote share by divisors 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc. Then the quotients are tabulated, and seats are awarded first to the party with the single largest quotient, then to the party with the second largest quotient, and so on until all seats in the electoral district are allocated. In other words, when the party is competing for its first seat, its vote share is divided by 1, when competing for its second seat by 2, and so on.

4 The only exception is the SDP, which employs a system in which the placing of the candidates on the list is determined by their success in the district primaries, with the candidate winning the most votes heading the list.

5 Formed from the ruins of its populist predecessor, the Rural Party, the True Finns have adopted its Eurosceptical stance primarily in order to distance itself from the mainstream parties.

[6] In its programme for the 2003 parliamentary elections, the Communist Party demanded that the future constitution of the EU should be subject to a referendum in which Finnish citizens would have the opportunity to vote in favour of withdrawing from the Union.

[7] Forces for Change was established in October 2002 by the League for a Free Finland, an anti-EU movement established prior to the 1994 membership referendum, by another registered party, *Vaihtoehtoväki*, and by three civic organizations. The party aims to offer a home to all those who are against the EU. However, its leadership and supporters are primarily left-wingers who are disappointed with the pro-market and pro-EU policies of the Eduskunta parties.

[8] See Karl Magnus Johansson and Tapio Raunio, 'Partisan responses to Europe: comparing Finnish and Swedish political parties', *European Journal of Political Research* (2001), 39:2, pp. 225-49, and Tapio Raunio and Teija Tiilikainen, *Finland in the European Union* (Frank Cass, London, 2003), chapter 3.

[9] A nice illustration of the impact of government formation occurred in December 2001 when the council of the Centre Party adopted the party's new European programme. The then vice-chair and current party leader Anneli Jäätteenmäki explicitly stated that the party 'must have such an EU policy that it can be either in the opposition or in the government'. See Marjo Ollikainen, 'Keskusta: Suomi vahvasti mukaan EU:n kehittämiseen', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 26 November 2001.

[10] See Jan Sundberg, 'The Enduring Scandinavian Party System', *Scandinavian Political Studies* (1999) 22:2, pp. 221-41.

Convened from the Sussex European Institute, the Opposing European Research Network is a group of academic researchers studying party politics within the European Union and candidate countries and seeking to understand in particular why Euroscepticism exists in some states and not in others. Like the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Network itself retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. The views presented are those of the authors.

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