

2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 16 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN FINLAND JUNE 13 2004

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Key points

- Turnout was 41.1 %, almost ten percentages above the dismal 31.4 % achieved in the 1999 elections. Lowest levels of turnout were recorded in rural municipalities in eastern parts of the country, areas that have a higher share of Eurosceptical voters than the country as a whole.
- As a result of the strongly candidate-centred electoral system, with citizens choosing between individual candidates from non-ordered lists, most of the campaigning was done by the candidates themselves who focused primarily on their personal qualities. Defense of “national interests” could be identified as the main theme of the elections, with the main parties and most of their candidates supportive of the pro-integrationist national EU policy pursued by successive governments since Finland joined the Union in 1995.
- Eurosceptical parties did take part in the elections, but it was clear from the outset that they had absolutely no chance of winning any seats. However, two Eurosceptical MEPs, one from the Centre Party and the other from the Left Alliance, managed to renew their mandates.
- The result brought no real surprises, with the main parties holding on to their vote and seat shares. Nor will the election have any impact on domestic politics or on national EU policy.

Background

Considering the disappointingly low turnout, 31.4 %, in 1999, the expectations were not running high in the run-up to the third Euro-elections to be held in Finland. Various public opinion surveys carried out in the months preceding the election indicated that turnout would again be low (albeit slightly higher), and, reflecting the consensual nature of Finnish politics, the main parties appeared to be in broad agreement about the future of European integration.

However, a number of factors also gave cause for optimism. Firstly, Finland had been governed since 1995 for eight years by a “rainbow coalition”, a cabinet that under the strong

leadership (particularly in EU issues) of Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen brought together five parties across the ideological spectrum and controlled around 70 % of parliamentary seats, leaving thus little room for opposition. But, after the parliamentary elections held in March 2003 a centrist coalition between the Centre Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the Swedish People's Party took office, and this new government had a much narrower majority in the legislature.¹ The first government formed by the three parties after the elections had been short-lived, as the Prime Minister Anneli Jäätteenmäki, Finland's first-ever female to hold that position, was forced to resign in June 2003 after allegations concerning the use of secret foreign ministry documents during the election campaign. The primary reason for the cabinet downfall was that the main coalition partner, the Social Democrats, demanded that Jäätteenmäki must resign. However, the same parties formed immediately thereafter a new cabinet, with Matti Vanhanen of the Centre Party being appointed as the new Prime Minister.

The broad parliamentary majority enjoyed by the Lipponen governments had stifled debate and reduced the impact of the opposition, but now the government was attacked both from the right, by the National Coalition, and from the left, by the Left Alliance and the Green League. This had contributed to livening up debates on Finland's place in Europe, with particularly the National Coalition criticizing the new government for its lack of commitment to future integration, especially in defence and foreign policy issues. Since the end of the Convention there had also been more debate about national EU policy than before. Much of this is explained by the rapid progress made in developing the EU's common foreign and security policy, including the solidarity clause in the new draft constitution, and this intensified debate in Finland, a country where security policy questions are always high on the agenda

Despite several MEPs choosing not to run again, the parties also managed to attract high-profile candidates, including two party leaders and a lot of prominent parliamentarians. Jäätteenmäki, seeking to re-establish her career after the humiliating defeat as Prime Minister, announced in spring 2004 that she will run for a seat in the Parliament. Other most notable candidates included Ville Itälä, the chairperson of the National Coalition² who had decided to step down as he no longer enjoyed sufficient support among his party. Bjarne Kallis, the chair of the Christian Democrats, also decided to run for a seat. Moreover, the reduction in the number of seats, from 16 to 14, meant that the competition was going to be even tighter than before, with small parties (particularly the Christian Democrats and the Swedish People's Party) in real danger of losing their seats. And, finally, Paavo Lipponen, the former Prime Minister (1995-2003), and the current leader of the Social Democrats, announced in the spring that he was interested in becoming the new Commission President.

The campaign

The election was held on Sunday, 13 June 2004. Advance voting took place on 2-8 June and abroad on 2-5 June. In contrast to the 1999 elections, there were no major domestic events competing for media attention. Nor was the electoral calendar full, with the previous elections

¹ See: T. Raunio, "Europe and the Finnish Parliamentary Election of March 2003", *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 10*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2003 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper10finland.pdf>.

² Itälä was the party chair until the party congress held a week before the EP elections.

to the national parliament held over a year ago and the municipal elections scheduled for October.³

According to the Finnish law on EP elections⁴ candidates can be nominated by registered parties and voters' associations. Parties can form electoral alliances with one another and voters' associations can set up joint lists. The maximum number of candidates per party or electoral alliance or a joint list is 20. The whole country forms one single constituency. Voters choose between individual candidates from non-ordered party lists. Altogether 227 candidates were nominated by fourteen parties.⁵ The Centre Party, the Social Democrats, National Coalition, Left Alliance, the Green League, the Swedish People's Party, the Communist Party, and Köyhien Asialla fielded the maximum number of candidates allowed by the electoral law. Other parties contesting the elections were: the Liberal Party (15 candidates), Pensioners for the People (12), Suomi – Isänmaa (12), and Suomen Kansan Sinivalkoiset (8). One electoral alliance was formed, between the Christian Democrats (15 candidates) and the True Finns (5 candidates). The average age of the candidates was 46 years. 38 % of the candidates were women. Ten of the sixteen Finnish MEPs were trying to renew their mandates.⁶

Eurosceptical parties and movements have remained marginalized in Finnish politics despite the fact that indifference towards the EU is widespread and people in general are far less enthusiastic about integration than politicians and key civil servants. Public opinion concerning EU membership has proved relatively stable ever since Finland joined the EU, with Finns less supportive of further integration and membership than citizens across the Union. Hence there is a clear discrepancy between public opinion and the pro-European policies of the parties represented in the national parliament and the European Parliament.⁷ The only Eurosceptical party that has won seats in the Eduskunta, the national parliament, since Finland joined the Union is the True Finns.⁸ Of the parties contesting the elections, the

³ In 1999 the timing of the election could hardly have been worse. National parliamentary elections had been held three months earlier in March, and presidential elections were scheduled for January 2000, with speculation about possible candidates and their respective chances of winning office receiving wide coverage in the media.

⁴ Untypically for Finland, there was some debate in early spring about the electoral system used in EP elections, with some key individuals such as Paavo Lipponen arguing in favour of closed lists instead of the non-ordered open list system. The move to closed lists was argued to improve the quality of the campaigns as parties would be forced to become the key players as opposed to the individual candidates under the present system. The idea of splitting the country into regional constituencies, a proposal that was discussed in the aftermath of the 1999 elections, was no longer mentioned.

⁵ In the first Euro-elections of October 1996 fourteen parties and one voters' association fielded a total of 207 candidates. In 1999 eleven parties put forward 140 candidates. For detailed analysis of the 1996 elections, see Martikainen, T. and Pekonen, K. (eds), *Eurovaalit Suomessa 1996: Vaaliumusta päätöksenteon arkeen* (Acta Politica No. 10, Yleisen valtio-opin laitos, Helsingin yliopisto, 1999). The 1999 elections are analysed in P. Pesonen (ed.), *Suomen europarlamenttivaalit* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2000); and T. Raunio, 'Finland', in J. Lodge (ed.), *The 1999 Elections to the European Parliament* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 100-16.

⁶ In addition, Ari Vatanen, the former rally world champion elected to the Parliament in 1999 from the National Coalition list, decided this time to run in France, his country of residence.

⁷ See: K.M. Johansson and T. Raunio, 'Partisan responses to Europe: comparing Finnish and Swedish political parties', *European Journal of Political Research*, 39:2 (2001), 25-49; and T. Raunio and T. Tiilikainen, *Finland in the European Union* (Frank Cass, London), 43-71.

⁸ The True Finns are for all purposes a successor to the Rural Party, albeit with somewhat less populist tendencies. The ideology of True Finns is rather nationalistic and the party wants the EU to be an

True Finns, the Communist Party, the extreme-right parties Suomi – Isänmaa and Suomen Kansan Sinivalkoiset, and, with some reservations, also Köyhien Asialla, could be categorized as Eurosceptical. It was clear from the outset that these parties had no chance of coming anywhere near winning a seat in the Parliament. As a result, more important in this respect are the Eurosceptical candidates within the main parties. Most of the Finnish parties are, to a varying extent, divided over integration, and these divisions have been particularly pronounced in the Centre Party and in the Left Alliance. The opposition to further integration within these parties in EP elections is channelled primarily via two MEPs, Paavo Väyrynen (Centre), and Esko Seppänen (Left Alliance), both of whom stood for re-election in 2004.

With the exception of the efforts of individual candidates that had started campaigning already earlier in the spring, the actual campaign period, with parties launching their campaigns and debates in the media, was quite brief. The campaigns really got under way during the week commencing on Monday 24 May, which was quite late considering that advance voting began already on 2 June.

The EP information office located in Helsinki did its best to spread information in the run-up to the elections. The election budget of the EP office was between 230,000 and 250,000 euros. The office had a series of commercials on one of the main TV channels for two weeks, a similar two-week series of commercials in movie theatres, put up 6150 posters in 53 cities, sent around 300,000 brochures altogether (half of them post cards), took part in fairs and other similar events, organised five panel debates and election quizzes, offered financial and material support to a variety of interest groups, and maintained its own web site with information on the elections.

The provincial media, including newspapers from the more Eurosceptical provinces, cannot really be blamed either, for most of them ran a series of informative stories on the EP and the candidates. Similarly the largest quality nation-wide daily, *Helsingin Sanomat*, provided fairly comprehensive coverage of the elections. The four national TV channels, including the two state-owned ones, and the radio fared much worse. One of the problems was again that the media, particularly the main TV channels, focused on selected leading candidates, giving them much free nation-wide exposure during the campaign. However, in the end it is the parties that are responsible for the quality of the campaigning, not the media or the EP's information office.

The campaign was definitely of higher quality than in the elections held five years earlier. With no competing political events diverting attention away from the elections, the parties had much more time, money and energy to spend on the elections. This applied particularly to the party leaders, who had in 1999 stayed home, leaving the campaigning to the individual candidates. Now the party leaders took part in television debates and toured the country in support of their candidates. Nevertheless, it is still fair to conclude that the party leaderships approached the election with a notable lack of enthusiasm. Such behaviour is facilitated by the open list electoral system, as the most efficient electoral strategy for individual candidates is to focus on their personal qualities (for example, international and national political experience, expertise on EU issues, language skills). Indeed, the electoral system leads to more competition within than between parties. Individual candidates from the same party list pursue personal campaigns, with party programmes almost completely in the background. Survey data show that the electoral system is reflected in citizens' voting behaviour in EP

association of independent nations and is against the deepening of integration. In the 2003 elections to the Eduskunta the party won 1.6 % of the votes.

elections. The personal qualities of candidates weigh heavily in people's minds when making their voting decisions. In two surveys carried out before the 1996 elections, 57 % and 63 % agreed with the statement that the individual candidate is more important than the party when making the voting decision.⁹ In 1999 56 % of the voters chose first their preferred party while 44 % chose their candidate irrespective of her party affiliation.¹⁰ In 2004 the situation was similar, with the majority of the respondents thinking that the party is more important than the candidate when making their voting decisions. However, again 44 % reported that the candidate is more important than the party.¹¹ Considering the potentially divisive impact of European integration on party unity, party leaders have good cause to support the existing rules of the electoral game. Protest or dissenting opinions get channelled through individual candidates, whereas in member states with closed lists organized factions often appear to contest the official party line.

Given the candidate-centred nature of the campaigning, it was fairly difficult to pinpoint any key themes of the elections. No singular issue dominated the campaign. Defending "national interests" was perhaps the main issue. In general, voters were far more concerned about the ability of the candidates to defend Finland's national interests in the EU than about wider questions related to European integration. This was not surprising when considering that after enlargement Finland would only have 14 out of 732 seats in the Parliament. Therefore it was natural that voters would be concerned about the extent to which Finland's voice is heard at the European level, with candidates in turn advertising themselves as efficient spokespersons for Finland. Under the broad umbrella of national interests, the debate focused on familiar themes in Finnish EU policy – defence (including the decision on whether Finland should apply for NATO membership), agriculture, regional policy, and protecting the welfare state. The draft Constitution did not really feature in the debates. Some of the parties, including the Green League and the Left Alliance, campaigned in favour of putting the Constitution to a referendum, but the three main parties were opposed to consulting the people. The National Coalition and the Social Democrats tried to rally the people to vote by portraying the election as a choice between a social democratic and a bourgeois Europe. Both parties also emphasized their memberships in the two largest party groups in the Parliament, thereby signalling that voting for other parties, particularly the Centre that sits in the liberal ELDR group, would effectively mean wasting votes.

As in the 1996 and 1999 elections, the transnational manifestos of the Euro-parties were almost completely absent during the campaigns. They were available via Internet at the parties' home pages, but not really used at all in the actual election campaigns by the candidates or the parties. The only real exception was the Green League, which used the manifesto of the European Green Party in their campaign. The Finnish parties did not really make use of any visible campaign help from abroad. Some key figures of the Euro-parties did visit Finland during the campaigns, e.g., the ELDR group leader Graham Watson attending the party congress of the Swedish People's Party, but such visits hardly made the headlines and went by and large unnoticed.

⁹ See: P. Majonen, 'Kauniita ja rohkeita vai aatteellisia ammattipoliitikkoja? Suomen eurovaalien vaaliteemat ja vaalikampanjointi 1996', in T. Martikainen and K. Pekonen (eds), *Eurovaalit Suomessa 1996: Vaaliumusta päätöksenteon arkeen* (Acta Politica No. 10, Yleisen valtio-opin laitos, Helsingin yliopisto, 1999), 76.

¹⁰ See: S. Borg, 'Puolueet, ehdokkaat ja äänestäjien valinnat', in Pesonen, P. (ed.), *Suomen europarlamenttivaalit* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2000), 136.

¹¹ See: H. Miettinen, 'Eurovaalit mielletään puoluepoliittisemmiksi kuin viimeksi, *Helsingin Sanomat* 11 June 2004.

Results

The result brought few surprises, with the main parties holding on to their seat and vote shares and the Eurosceptical parties failing to gain new ground. Table 1 shows the results by parties, and Table 2 lists the elected fourteen MEPs. Turnout was in the end higher than expected, 41.1 %, almost ten percentages above the dismal 31.4 % achieved in 1999. 16.2 % of the electorate cast their votes in advance. Turnout was lowest (around or below 30 %) in rural municipalities in eastern parts of the country, areas that have a higher share of Eurosceptical voters than the country as a whole.

Table 1. Results of the 2004 European Parliament elections in Finland.

PARTY*	CANDIDATES	VOTES (%)	SEATS	SEAT CHANGE
National Coalition	20	392,771 (23,7)	4	
Centre Party	20	387,217 (23,4)	4	
Social Democratic Party	20	350,525 (21,2)	3	
Green League	20	172,844 (10,4)	1	-1
Left Alliance	20	151,291 (9,1)	1	
Swedish People's Party	20	94,421 (5,7)	1	
Christian Demorats	15	70,845 (4,3)	0	-1
Communist Party	20	10,134 (0,6)		
True Finns	5	8,900 (0,5)		
Köyhien Asialla	20	5,687 (0,3)		
Liberal Party	15	3,558 (0,2)		
Pensioners for the People	12	3,279 (0,2)		
Suomen Kansan sinivalkoiset	8	3,248 (0,2)		
Suomi – Isänmaa	12	1,864 (0,1)		

Source: Ministry of Justice.

The National Coalition, the winner of the 1999 EP election with 25,3 % of the votes and in opposition since the 2003 national parliamentary elections, emerged again as the largest party, with 23.7 % of the votes and four MEPs. This was the same number of seats as the party won in 1999, but effectively it lost one seat, as MEP Eija-Riitta Korhola had defected from the Christian Democrats to the National Coalition towards the end of the parliamentary term. In addition to Korhola, the MEPs of the National Coalition are Ville Itälä, the former party chair, Alexander Stubb, a high-profile civil servant that has worked for both the Finnish government and for the Commission President Romano Prodi, and Piia-Noora Kauppi.

Table 2. The 14 Finnish MEPs elected to the Parliament.

CANDIDATE*	PARTY	EP PARTY GROUP	VOTES
Anneli Jäätteenmäki	Centre Party	ELDR	149,646
Alexander Stubb	National Coalition	EPP	115,224
Satu Hassi	Green League	Greens	74,714
Esko Seppänen*	Left Alliance	EUL-NGL	72,401
Ville Itälä	National Coalition	EPP	65,439
Reino Paasilinna*	Social Democrats	PES	64,305
Piia-Noora Kauppi*	National Coalition	EPP	62,995
Riitta Myller*	Social Democrats	PES	55,133
Kyösti Virrankoski*	Centre Party	ELDR	51,415
Lasse Lehtinen	Social Democrats	PES	47,186
Paavo Väyrynen*	Centre Party	ELDR	44,123
Eija-Riitta Korhola*	National Coalition	EPP	35,285
Hannu Takkula	Centre Party	ELDR	32,739
Henrik Lax	Swedish People's Party	ELDR	32,707

*Re-elected MEP.

Source: Ministry of Justice.

The Centre Party won 23.4 % of the votes and also held on to its four seats. The vote queen of the elections was the former Prime Minister Anneli Jäätteenmäki who won 149,646 votes. Her popularity was at least in part due to the fact that many Centre voters felt that she was treated unfairly by the Social Democrats and the media the previous year when she was forced to resign as the PM. The other Centre MEPs are Kyösti Virrankoski, Paavo Väyrynen, and Hannu Takkula. The Social Democrats were hoping to win also four seats, but could only manage three with 21.2 % of the votes. The party's MEPs are Riitta Myller, Reino Paasilinna and Lasse Lehtinen, with the former two renewing their seats.

Given the reduction in the number of seats, the smaller parties were struggling to maintain their seats. The Green League lost its second seat, and the decline in its vote share (10.4 %) in comparison with the 1999 elections (13.4 %) is partially explained by the fact that Heidi Hautala, the former co-chair of the Green group in the EP, had entered the national parliament in the 2003 elections. The new Green MEP is Satu Hassi, former party leader and minister for the environment. The Left Alliance won 9.1 % of the votes, exactly the same percentage as in 1999, with Esko Seppänen, the strongly Eurosceptical MEP, holding on to his seat. The Swedish People's Party also managed to recapture its only seat with 5.7 % of the votes. Henrik Lax is the new MEP for the party. The Christian Democrats had won one seat in 1999 with 2.4 % of the votes, thanks to a productive electoral alliance with the Centre, but now failed to win any with 4.3 % of the votes. Each of the remaining parties won less than one percent of the votes.

Conclusion

The results indicate that the overall direction of Finnish integration policy and the European policies of the parties that gained representation in the European Parliament will not undergo any major changes. The factors that led Finland to apply for EU membership – trade dependence, security concerns, and consolidating Finland's place in the west – remain by and large unaltered. The main Finnish parties are solidly pro-EU, and emphasize that a strong Union is in the interests of Finland (and other small member states). The media has only paid very sporadic attention to what the Parliament does, and hence it is expected that there will not really be any debate or good coverage of the items that are on the EP's agenda. National EU debates will continue to focus on defence and foreign policy, agriculture and regional policy, and more specifically on the broader question of Finland's role and place in the process of European integration.

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/1-4-2.html>