

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 26 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN FINLAND, JUNE 7, 2009

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Key points:

- The election produced a major victory for the Eurosceptical True Finns. With 9.8% of the votes, the party increased its vote share by just under six per cent compared with the 2007 Eduskunta elections and by over nine per cent compared with the 2004 EP elections.
- The leader of the True Finns, Timo Soini was the unrivalled vote king of the elections, capturing 130 715 votes. It is probable that the victory of the True Finns is explained more by a combination of Soini's popularity and the electorate voting against the mainstream parties as by Euroscepticism. However, one can also argue that the voters were protesting against the broad pro-EU consensus of the political elite, and this was indeed one of the main campaign themes of the True Finns.
- The results were a major disappointment for the left. Both the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance are internally divided about the future direction of party ideology, and these elections will undoubtedly intensify these debates.
- Turnout was 40.3 %, slightly below that achieved in 2004 (41.1 %), and 27.6 % less than in the 2007 Eduskunta elections when 67.9 % of the electorate cast their votes.
- The collective vote share of the four government parties – the Centre, National Coalition, Green League, Swedish People's Party – was 60.7 %, just over two per cent more (58.5 %) than the vote share of the four parties in the 2007 Eduskunta elections.

Background

Ever since Finland joined the Union in 1995, European integration has been a difficult issue for most political parties. Overall Finnish parties have kept a fairly low profile on integration matters, and also the rules of the national EU coordination system – based on building broad domestic consensus, including often between the government and

opposition parties – has contributed to the depoliticization of European issues.¹ This has particularly applied to major EU decisions, such as EMU membership in the late 1990s and to Treaty amendments. Given that parties are internally divided over EU, not least in terms of the parties being considerably more pro-EU than their electorates², it was not surprising that the main parties had showed little interest in submitting the Constitutional Treaty or the Lisbon Treaty to a referendum.

Previous Euroelections had also been characterized by the ‘absence’ of political parties. In addition to the strategic incentives of parties, this is also attributable to the highly candidate-centred electoral system which has enabled parties to leave the campaigning to individual candidates. As the 2009 EP elections drew closer, there was little reason to expect high turnout. Public opinion surveys carried out before the election indicated that turnout would remain low, main parties continued to be in broad agreement about the EU, and there had hardly been any domestic debate on Europe after the Convention and the subsequent domestic processing of the Constitutional Treaty.

However, there were also a number of factors that gave cause for more optimistic scenarios. The electoral calendar was empty, with the municipal elections held in the fall of 2008 and the next national parliamentary elections scheduled for 2011. Nor were there any pressing domestic issues diverting attention from the EP elections, and this resulted in quite extensive media coverage of the campaigns. While particularly the three core parties – the Centre Party, National Coalition, and Social Democrats – had serious difficulties in attracting good candidates to their lists, the reduction of seats allocated to Finland from 14 to 13 meant that especially the smaller parties, such as Left Alliance and the Swedish People’s Party, needed to take the elections seriously. But perhaps the most significant positive factor was the candidacy of Timo Soini, the highly popular leader of the Eurosceptical True Finns. Soini’s decision to run for a seat breathed life to the campaign as the other parties could not ignore the True Finns whose support had more than doubled in the previous Eduskunta elections. Indeed, it is fair to argue that Soini dominated the campaign, with the other parties and individual candidates investing a lot of time in attacking and discrediting Soini.

¹ Tapio Raunio (2005): Hesitant Voters, Committed Elite: Explaining the Lack of Eurosceptic Parties in Finland. *Journal of European Integration* 27:4, 381-395; Tapio Raunio (2008): The Difficult Task of Opposing Europe: The Finnish Party Politics of Euroscepticism. In Aleks Szczerbiak & Paul Taggart (eds) *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism: Volume I, Case Studies and Country Surveys*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 168-180.

² Mikko Mattila & Tapio Raunio (2006): Cautious Voters - Supportive Parties: Opinion Congruence between Voters and Parties on the EU Dimension. *European Union Politics* 7:4, 427-449.

Political Parties

According to the law on EP elections candidates can be nominated by registered parties and constituency associations.³ Parties can form electoral alliances with one another and constituency associations can set up joint lists. The maximum number of candidates per party or electoral alliance or a joint list is 20, but a single constituency association can only put forward one candidate. The whole country forms one single constituency. Voters choose between individual candidates from non-ordered party lists. Seat allocation to parties is based on the d'Hondt method. After each party, electoral alliance and joint list has been allocated the number of seats to which it is entitled, the candidates on the lists are ranked according to the number of their preference votes. This means that within electoral alliances the distribution of seats is determined by the plurality principle, regardless of the total number of votes won by the respective parties forming the alliance.

The election was held on Sunday, 7 June 2009. Advance voting took place from 27 May to 2 June. There were no restrictions concerning the length of the campaigns, opinion polls, access to media, or the funding of candidates. However, according to the law on election financing elected MEPs and those appointed as their deputies must submit within two months of the confirmation of the election result a public notification of the financing of their election campaign.⁴

Altogether 241 candidates were nominated by thirteen parties and one constituency association. The average age of the candidates was 48 years. 42 % of the candidates were women. 17 were national MPs, and seven of the fourteen MEPs stood for re-election. Parties contesting the election can be divided into two groups: those represented in the Eduskunta, the national parliament, and the minor parties without Eduskunta seats. None of the parties in the latter group had any chance of winning a seat in the EP and they were also almost completely ignored by the media. These marginal parties were For the Poor-party (20 candidates), *Suomen Työväenpuolue* (Labour Party, 20), Communist Party (20), *Suomen Senioripuolue* (Senior Citizens' Party, 20), and *Itsenäisyyspuolue* (Independence Party, 20).

With the exception of the electoral alliance between Christian Democrats and True Finns, the parties represented in the Eduskunta all put forward 20 candidates. Despite the party chair and PM Matti Vanhanen publicly appealing to senior MPs and even ministers to run

³ Election Act (714/1998). A constituency association for the nomination of one candidate may be established by at least 2000 people entitled to vote.

⁴ The Act on the Disclosure of Election Financing (414/2000). The notification must include information on the total costs of the campaign, and campaign costs itemised into the candidate's own funds; contributions received by the candidate, his/her support group and other associations established in his/her support from outside classified in terms of contributions from private persons, enterprises, party organisations, and other corresponding important donors. The value of each contribution and the name of the donor shall be stated separately if the value is at least 3400 euros. The name of the private donor may not be given without her express consent if the contribution is smaller than the above amount.

for a seat, the list of the leading government party, the Centre Party, was not that strong, at least in terms of nationally-known figures. However, two of the four Centre Party MEPs stood for re-election, and the list also contained several regionally strong candidates. All four MEPs of the National Coalition, the second large party in the cabinet, were trying to renew their seats. Another MEP, Ari Vatanen, the former rally world champion, was also on the list. Vatanen had first entered the EP in 1999 as a National Coalition candidate, but had been elected to the Parliament in France, his country of residence, in the 2004 elections. The main opposition party, the Social Democrats, had major difficulties in recruiting 'first-rate' candidates. All three Social Democrat MEPs were not in the race, and according to surveys published during the campaign the most popular candidate of the party was Father Mitro (Mitro Repo), an orthodox priest who did not carry a party membership card.

With only thirteen seats for grabs, the smaller Eduskunta parties were afraid of losing their seats in the Parliament. This applied particularly to the Left Alliance, whose long-standing (1996-) Eurosceptical MEP Esko Seppänen was not trying to renew his seat. Hence the party really lacked an attractive leading candidate. The same problem haunted the smallest party in the ruling coalition, the Swedish People's Party, as their MEP was also leaving the Parliament. The situation looked better for the Green League, the second junior party in the government. The Greens had performed well in the previous EP elections and now they put forward a very strong list that included several leading Green politicians, including MEP Satu Hassi and Heidi Hautala, who had served in the Parliament from 1995 to 2003. As in the 2004 EP elections, the Christian Democrats and the True Finns formed an electoral alliance. However, now both parties fielded ten candidates each, whereas five years earlier 15 of the 20 candidates had been Christian Democrats. The Christian Democrats were hoping to benefit from the popularity of the True Finns' leader, Timo Soini, the leading candidate of the alliance. When announcing his candidacy, Soini also stated that – if elected – he would return to the Eduskunta in the 2011 elections. Ideologically the electoral alliance was a Eurosceptical one, with the True Finns representing the harder variant of Euroscepticism whereas the Christian Democrats' European policy could perhaps best be characterized as moderate or soft opposition to integration.

Campaign

The candidacy of Soini truly galvanized the campaign. True Finns had more than doubled their vote share in the 2007 Eduskunta election (from 1.6 % in 2003 to 4.1 % in 2007), and the rise of the party had continued in the 2008 municipal elections in which it captured 5.4 % of the votes. Hence the other parties needed to take True Finns seriously. This applied particularly to the Centre and the Social Democrats, two parties whose electorates are more critical of the EU than their parties. Social Democrats were afraid that Soini would get votes from urban working class suburbs, whereas the Centre feared that Soini would be popular among Eurosceptical rural voters.

However, as indicated in the introductory section, Soini's candidacy also had the effect of the spotlight being very much on Soini, not on actual issues. Other parties did their best to discredit Soini and particularly True Finns' tough line on immigration – with the consequence that their own policy agendas were often ignored or downplayed. For example, the liberal Swedish People's Party announced that it was a counter-force to the True Finns.⁵ A media favourite, Soini basked in the attention and largely dominated the campaign. Soini clearly did not want immigration to become a key issue in the campaign, as this might have benefited the mainstream parties.⁶ Instead Soini based his campaign on the True Finns providing a genuine alternative to the pro-EU policies of the government and the main parties, calling for an end to 'one truth' politics.

Despite – or indeed partly because – of the challenge posed by Soini, the leaders of other parties appeared again quite content to leave the campaigning to the individual candidates. Such behaviour is facilitated by the open list electoral system, as the most efficient electoral strategy for the candidates is to focus on their personal qualities (for example, international and national political experience, expertise on EU issues, language skills). Indeed, as in Eduskunta elections, 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. Considering that most Finnish parties are internally divided over Europe, 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. Most parties also try to make sure that these internal differences are reflected in the composition of the lists. In addition to recruiting candidates from across the country, party lists thus include candidates with different views on Europe. While this obviously causes problems for the party leaderships, it also reduces tensions within the parties and may increase their vote totals.

As in previous EP elections, it was again difficult to identify any key themes of the elections, as party platforms were ignored and the individual candidates received most of the attention. No singular issue dominated the campaign. Defending 'national interests' was perhaps the main theme, especially as public opinion surveys showed that the citizens were more concerned about the ability of the candidates to defend Finland's national interests in the EU than about wider questions related to integration. Many candidates also based their campaigns on defending the interests of particular regions. This applied especially to candidates of the Centre Party as the party draws most of its support from the more sparsely populated rural regions. This focus on 'national interests' should not necessarily be interpreted as Euroscepticism or as pitting Finland against EU.

⁵ Pekka Vuoristo, 'Rkp otti päämaaliksi perussuomalaiset', *Helsingin Sanomat* 17.5.2009.

⁶ However, it was the National Coalition that became discredited on immigration when on 29 May one of its candidates, Kai Pöntinen, published an advert on the front page of the leading national daily, *Helsingin Sanomat*, calling for a 'stop to welfare bum immigrants'. While the chair of the National Coalition, Jyrki Katainen, was quick to denounce Pöntinen's tactics and views, the episode clearly caused embarrassment to National Coalition.

After all, it is quite natural that the electorate is concerned about the extent to which Finland's voice is heard at the European level, as Finland is a small member state, electing only 13 out of the 736 MEPs.

Otherwise, the fragmented debate focused on a mixture of themes, with perhaps environment, agriculture and regional policy, and the overall state of the EU getting most coverage. The focus on environment was understandable as such questions, especially the fate of the Baltic Sea, had also a prominent role in domestic debates. Agriculture and regional policy featured less in national debates, but often dominated the campaigns in the rural areas. Interestingly, much of the debate centred on the EU, and especially on the gap or distance between Brussels and the citizens. Party leaders and the candidates spoke of the need to bring the EU closer to the citizens, and some of the candidates and the media tried to illustrate the influence of the Parliament through referring to individual EU directives, but as the low turnout shows, such efforts came too late. Overall the leftist parties emphasized employment and the development of a social Europe, whereas the centre-right parties put more stress on the sound management of economy, the internal market, and competitiveness. The National Coalition and the Social Democrats also reminded the electorate that their MEPs sat in the two largest EP groups. Especially the National Coalition was keen to highlight its membership in EPP, the largest of the EP groups.

Europarty manifestos were again almost completely absent during the campaigns. They were available at the parties' home pages, but were not used at all in the actual election campaigns by the candidates or the parties. The only real exception was again the Green League, which used the manifesto of the European Green Party as its election programme. Nor did the Finnish parties make any real use of campaign help from the other EU countries or from EP groups.

Results

Turnout was 40.3 %, or 38.6 % when also those enfranchised citizens residing abroad are taken into account. Hence turnout was slightly below that achieved in 2004 (41.1 %), and 27.6 % less than in the 2007 Eduskunta elections when 67.9 % of the electorate cast their votes (itself the lowest figure since the Second World War). Six of the seven MEPs (excluding Vatanen) that had stood for re-election renewed their seats.

The collective vote share of the four government parties – the Centre, National Coalition, Green League, Swedish People's Party – was 60.7 %. This was in fact just over two per cent more (58.5 %) than the vote share of the four parties in the 2007 Eduskunta elections. The leading government party, the Centre, saw its vote share (19.0 %) decline by more than four per cent in comparison with both the 2004 EP and the 2007 Eduskunta elections, with the Centre losing one its seats in the Parliament. However, considering the economic downturn and the low popularity ratings of PM Vanhanen, the outcome was nonetheless quite satisfactory for the party. Reflecting internal divisions within the party over integration, the attitudes of two of the three Centre MEPs (Hannu Takkula and

Riikka Manner) towards the EU are more critical than the official party line. This continues the pattern set in previous EP elections, where one or more Centre MEPs are more Eurosceptical than the party leadership.

Table 1. Results of the 2009 European Parliament elections in Finland.

PARTY	VOTES (%)	SEATS (SEAT CHANGE)	CHANGE FROM 2004 EP ELECTION (%)	CHANGE FROM 2007 EDUSKUNTA ELECTION (%)
National Coalition	23.2	3 (-1)	-0.5	+0.9
Centre Party	19.0	3 (-1)	-4.4	-4.1
Social Democratic Party	17.5	2 (-1)	-3.7	-3.9
Green League	12.4	2 (+1)	+2.0	+3.9
True Finns	9.8	1 (+1)	+9.3	+5.7
Swedish People's Party	6.1	1	+0.4	+1.5
Left Alliance	5.9	0 (-1)	-3.2	-2.9
Christian Democrats	4.2	1 (+1)	-0.1	-0.7
Others	1.9	0	-0.2	-0.2
TOTAL				

Source: Ministry of Justice.

The National Coalition had performed well in previous EP elections, and while the party won half a per cent less votes than in the 2004 EP elections, it emerged as the biggest party by a comfortable margin, winning 23.2 % of the votes. Nonetheless, the National Coalition lost one seat, with its three seats going to re-elected MEPs (Ville Itälä, Eija-Riitta Korhola, Sirpa Pietikäinen). Turning to the junior partners in the coalition, the Green league has also fared better in previous EP elections than in national parliamentary elections. Now the Greens won 12.4 % of the votes, two per cent more than in the 2004 elections and nearly four per cent above that achieved in the latest Eduskunta elections. As indicated above, the Greens had a very strong list, and both of their MEPs (Heidi Hautala and Satu Hassi) have previous experience from the Parliament. The Swedish People's Party has traditionally benefited from the higher turnout among Swedish-speakers (that comprise currently 5.4 % of the population), and that contributed to the party holding on to its seat in the Parliament with 6.1 % of the votes.

The main opposition party, the Social Democrats, suffered a major defeat. Capturing only 17.5 % of the votes, it lost one seat and nearly four per cent of the votes in comparison with both the 2004 EP and the 2007 Eduskunta elections. The leading SDP candidate, Father Mitro, was the only 'celebrity' candidate elected to the Parliament from Finland. The Left Alliance finished as the seventh largest party with 5.9 % of the votes, its worst election result since the party was founded in 1990. The party lost its only seat, and three days after the election the party chair, Martti Korhonen, announced his resignation. Hence with the partial exception of the Greens, who have refused to be classified as

either a leftist or centre-right party, the elections were a major disappointment for the left in Finland.

Table 2. The 13 Finnish MEPs elected to the Parliament.

MEP*	PARTY	EP PARTY GROUP**	VOTES
Timo Soini	True Finns	?	130715
Anneli Jäätteenmäki*	Centre Party	ALDE	80156
Mitro Repo	Social Democrats	PES	71829
Ville Itälä*	National Coalition	EPP	66033
Heidi Hautala	Green League	Greens/EFA	58926
Satu Hassi*	Green League	Greens/EFA	57032
Sari Essayah	Christian Democrats	EPP	53803
Eija-Riitta Korhola*	National Coalition	EPP	51508
Sirpa Pietikäinen*	National Coalition	EPP	51493
Liisa Jaakonsaari	Social Democrats	PES	45325
Hannu Takkula*	Centre Party	ALDE	39444
Riikka Manner	Centre Party	ALDE	37330
Carl Haglund	Swedish People's Party	ALDE	16887

*Re-elected MEP.

** At the time of writing (June 2009) it is unknown which group Soini shall join.

Source: Ministry of Justice.

The main winner of the election was undoubtedly the True Finns. With 9.8 % of the votes, the party increased its vote share by just under six per cent compared with the 2007 Eduskunta elections and by over nine per cent compared with the 2004 EP elections. Hence the rise of the True Finns continued in the elections, with the candidacy of party chair Soini probably playing a major part in the success. Soini was the unrivalled vote king of the elections, capturing 130 715 votes. It is also probable that the victory is explained more by a combination of Soini's popularity and the electorate voting against the mainstream parties as by Euroscepticism. However, one can also argue that the voters were protesting against the broad pro-EU consensus of the political elite, and this was indeed one of the main campaign themes of the True Finns. Christian Democrats have benefited from electoral alliances in Eduskunta elections, with 2/3 of all the seats won by the party attributable to electoral alliances.⁷ Also in these elections this strategy paid off, with the party winning a seat in the Parliament thanks to the popularity of Soini and to the Christian Democratic voters concentrating their votes to their leading candidate, Sari Essayah.

⁷ Heikki Paloheimo and Jan Sundberg (2009): *Vaaliliitot eduskuntavaaleissa 1945-2007*. In Sami Borg and Heikki Paloheimo (eds) *Vaalit yleisdemokratiassa: Eduskuntavaalitutkimus 2007*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 206-242.

To conclude, the results were a major disappointment for the left. Both the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance are internally divided about the future direction of party ideology, and these Euroelections will no doubt intensify these debates. The result will have no major impact on the government. As anticipated, the Centre saw its vote share decline, but given the difficult economic conditions and the candidacy of Soini, the outcome could be seen as an honourable defeat. In terms of domestic politics, the main question mark concerns the future of the True Finns. The party probably benefited from the second-order nature of EP elections, and hence the True Finns may find it very difficult to achieve a similar victory in the next Eduskunta elections scheduled for 2011. In terms of national EU policy, even the triumph of the True Finns is unlikely to shake the pro-EU consensus of the main parties. With the exception of the True Finns and the Christian Democrats, all parties represented in the Eduskunta basically support the national integration policy which can 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.⁸ The 2009 EP elections will not change this pro-EU consensus.

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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>.

⁸ See for example the new Government Report on EU Policy, published in April 2009, available at <http://www.vnk.fi/julkaisut/listaus/julkaisu/fi.jsp?oid=259933>.