

# The European Parliament elections in Finland are unlikely to see a significant swing in support toward the Eurosceptic Finns Party

**LSE** [blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2014/03/05/the-european-parliament-elections-in-finland-are-unlikely-to-see-a-significant-swing-in-support-toward-the-eurosceptic-finns-party/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2014/03/05/the-european-parliament-elections-in-finland-are-unlikely-to-see-a-significant-swing-in-support-toward-the-eurosceptic-finns-party/)

05/03/2014

*With Finland due to hold parliamentary elections in 2015, the European elections in May will be viewed as an indicator of where the major parties stand with the electorate. **Tapio Raunio** gives an overview of the campaign, noting that European Parliament (EP) elections in Finland are traditionally highly 'candidate centred' due to the use of open party lists. Nevertheless one of the main areas of interest in the campaign is the performance of the Eurosceptic 'Finns Party', who had a breakthrough in the last parliamentary elections in 2011. He writes that while the Finns Party are still holding firm in the polls, the fact that their charismatic leader, Timo Soini, is not standing for an EP seat leaves them without a much needed leading candidate in the election.*



Finnish integration policy can be characterised as flexible and constructive and has sought to consolidate Finland's position in the inner core of the EU. Consecutive governments have constantly underlined the importance of being present where decisions that concern Finland are taken. According to the political elite, national interests can be best pursued through active and constructive participation in EU decision-making. Underlying this stance is a conviction that a strong and efficient EU can best protect the rights and interests of smaller member states, as intergovernmental processes tend to favour the larger member states.

Finland used to have a relatively broad consensus about Europe among its political parties. However, in the run-up to the 2011 Eduskunta (the unicameral national parliament) elections, the problems affecting the Eurozone triggered heated debates about the EU – or more precisely the role of Finland in the bailout measures – which became the main campaign issue. The election result was nothing short of extraordinary, producing major changes in the national party system and attracting considerable international media attention.

As shown in Table 1 below, the Eurosceptic and populist The Finns Party (previously known as True Finns) won 19.1 per cent of the votes, a staggering increase of 15 per cent from the 2007 elections and the largest ever increase in support achieved by a single party in Eduskunta elections. All the other parties represented in the Eduskunta lost votes. The election campaign also affected national EU policy. Since entering office in June 2011, the 'six pack' cabinet led by the National Coalition has taken a tougher stance on EU negotiations. The government has demanded bilateral guarantees for its bailout payments; attempted, on its own, to [reject](#) the 85 per cent decision-making majority needed in the European Stability Mechanism, demanding unanimity instead, and blocked, together with the Netherlands, the entry of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen area.

**Table 1: Vote share and seats in 2011 Finnish Parliamentary elections and change from 2007 elections**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Vote share (per cent)</i>	<i>Vote change (per cent)</i>	<i>Number of seats</i>	<i>Change in seats</i>
National Coalition Party	20.4	-1.9	44	-6
Social Democratic Party of Finland	19.1	-2.4	42	-3
Finns Party	19.1	+15.0	39	+34
Centre Party	15.8	-7.3	35	-16
Left Alliance	8.1	-0.7	14	-3
Green League	7.3	-1.2	10	-5
Swedish People's Party	4.3	-0.3	9	0
Christian Democrats	4.0	-0.9	6	-1

**Note: The Åland Coalition, which represents the Åland Islands, is not shown in the table above. The islands have a single seat in the Finnish parliament which the Åland coalition has held in every election since 1948.**

Whether this signals a more long-term change to national integration policy remains to be seen, but at least for now the government is under considerable domestic pressure not to make too many concessions in Brussels. More broadly, it appears that the emphasis on national interests and the role of smaller member states has become more pronounced in Finland in recent years. The success of The Finns Party has clearly pushed the remaining political parties in the direction of more cautious EU policies.

### **Influence of the electoral system on European Parliament elections**

Finnish European Parliament (EP) elections are strongly influenced by the open list candidate-centred system, with the programmes and discourses of political parties overshadowed by the campaigns of individual candidates. Under the open list electoral system the most efficient strategy for the candidates is to focus on their personal qualities. Indeed, as in Eduskunta elections, the electoral system leads to more competition within, rather than between, parties. Considering the focus on individual candidates, it is no surprise that it is quite difficult to identify any real topics that would have dominated the campaigns in previous EP elections. Voters seem to be more concerned about the ability of MEPs to defend national and regional interests in Brussels than about wider issues related to European integration. This is surely understandable given that only 13 MEPs are elected from Finland.

The whole country forms one single constituency and the maximum number of candidates per party is 20. While the votes of candidates and elected MEPs are often regionally concentrated, parties prefer to recruit candidates that can pull votes across the country. Voters choose between individual candidates from non-ordered party lists. As most Finnish parties are internally divided over Europe, party leaders have an incentive to support the existing rules of the electoral game, as protest or dissenting opinions get channelled through individual candidates.

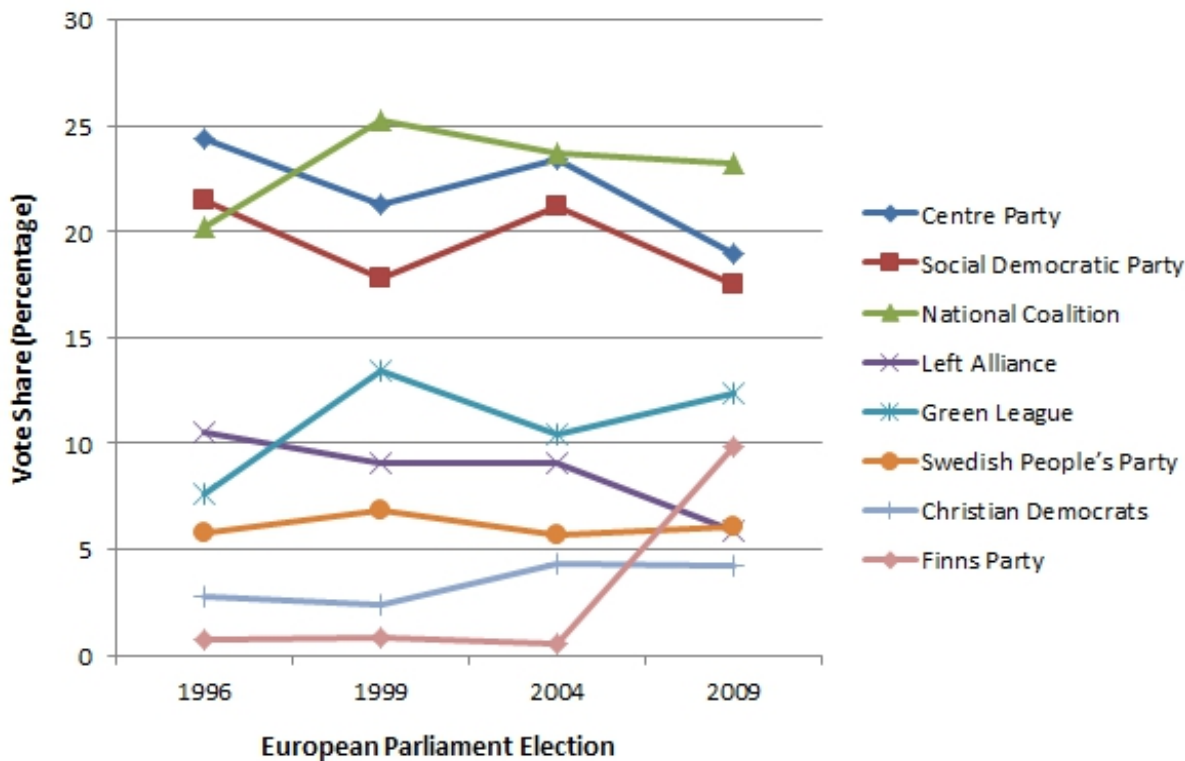
Parties also try to make sure that these internal differences are reflected in the composition of the lists. In addition to recruiting candidates from across the country, party lists also include candidates with different views on Europe. This applies particularly to parties that are less cohesive on integration, most notably the Centre and the Left Alliance. While this obviously causes problems for the party leaderships, it controls tensions within the parties and probably increases their vote totals.

### **Weak government afraid of further embarrassments**

As shown in the Chart below, in terms of party competition, the Finnish party system has in recent decades been remarkably stable, with the vote shares of the individual parties changing very little between elections. The three core parties – the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party and the National Coalition – have largely held on to

their vote shares, winning collectively around 65-70 per cent of votes. Hence, the recent rise of the Finns Party has certainly enlivened the party system, adding an element of unpredictability to elections and political discourse. It also means that the four largest parties, in particular, are already thinking ahead to the 2015 Eduskunta election, which is their main target, but parties know well enough that success in European elections can spill over into national elections.

**Chart: Vote share for major parties in Finnish European elections (1996-2009)**



**Note: As Finland joined the European Union in 1995 it held its first European Parliament election in 1996.**

The governing parties have good reason to approach the elections with considerable apprehension. It is broadly acknowledged that the cabinet – which brings together six parties, including the most right-wing and most leftist party in Eduskunta – has failed and is basically content with just surviving until the spring 2015 Eduskunta elections. However, the leading government party National Coalition has normally performed well in EP elections, and in addition to its three MEPs, two ministers are also on the list – including Alexander Stubb, a famous Europhile who was the second most popular candidate in the 2004 EP elections.

In striking contrast, the Social Democrats are in severe turmoil. The party is doing extremely badly in the polls, and the leader and finance minister Jutta Urpilainen is facing a leadership contest in the party congress to be held just two weeks before the European elections. Whilst the Social Democratic list contains a rather strong slate of names, including many senior party figures, the party has a history of defeats in previous EP elections. Much of the discussion at European level has in recent years focused on the need to make the EU more competitive, and when this discourse is combined with Finnish domestic measures aiming at making the public sector and the national economy in general more cost efficient and competitive, it is understandable that leftist voters may find it hard to identify themselves with European integration. In short, the left and particularly the Social Democrats may like to portray Europe as a possibility, but large sections of the leftist electorate view integration as a threat.

There are only 13 seats up for grabs, and hence the smaller parties in the coalition need to do well in order to win

seats. The Green League and the Swedish People's Party have clearly benefited from the second-order nature of the EP elections in the past, and the Greens, in particular, have put together a balanced list. The Left Alliance is hoping to win back the seat it lost in 2009, and this may not be an unrealistic goal. The Christian Democrats won a seat the last time around thanks to the electoral alliance with The Finns Party, but now the party would need a small miracle to hold on to their only MEP. Table 2 below shows predicted vote shares and seats based on polls up to the end of January.

**Table 2: Predicted vote share and seats in the 2014 Finnish European elections**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Parliamentary group</i>	<i>Predicted vote share (%)</i>	<i>Predicted seats</i>
<b>Centre Party</b>	ALDE	21	3
<b>National Coalition Party</b>	EPP	21	3
<b>Social Democratic Party of Finland</b>	S&D	18	3
<b>Finns Party</b>	EFD	16	2
<b>Green League</b>	Greens/EFA	9	1
<b>Left Alliance</b>	GUE-NGL	7	1
<b>Swedish People's Party</b>	ALDE	4	0

**Note: Predictions are from [Pollwatch2014](#) based on polls up to the end of January 2014.**

### **Divided opposition parties**

All eyes, however, are on the opposition – which currently comprises only two Eduskunta parties. The Centre suffered a humiliating defeat in the 2011 Eduskunta elections, but according to opinion polls the party has been the largest political party in Finland for about a year now. This revival is in no small measure thanks to the Laestadian IT-millionaire Juha Sipilä who was elected as the party chair in 2012. But Sipilä has been facing health issues of late and may feel some further unease about his party's candidate list.

The Centre is internally badly divided over integration, and the party leadership has always taken this into account when putting together its team of candidates. This time around the competition inside the party can turn unusually interesting, with the Eurosceptic former MEP and long-standing minister Paavo Väyrynen, and the Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs Olli Rehn, representing different views on Europe. While Rehn's candidacy has not been confirmed yet, ALDE decided in early February that the federalist Guy Verhofstadt and Rehn would be its 'lead' candidates for major EU posts. Rehn has only once before served as a candidate in EP elections – in 1996 when he failed to get elected.

European media has speculated for some time about the breakthrough of populist or nationalist parties in the May elections, and the Finns Party is certainly still going strong in the polls. Timo Soini, the charismatic party leader who has steered the party from basically zero support to its present position as the third largest party in Finland, announced that he would concentrate on domestic politics and will not try to re-enter the European Parliament where he served from 2009 to 2011. Soini was the clear vote king of the 2009 EP elections and his candidacy both boosted turnout and brought at least some excitement to the campaign. Without Soini, the Finns Party lacks an attractive lead candidate and, in fact, the party list is a very diverse mix of people representing the centre-leftist and moderate side as well as the more xenophobic camp of the party.

In terms of European policy, The Finns Party offers a clear choice to Finnish voters. Not content with simply

criticising the bailout measures, Soini and his party claim to provide a genuine alternative to the pro-EU policies of the government and the main parties, calling for an end to 'one truth' politics. As the party name implies, The Finns emphasise very much the value of 'Finnishness' and national ways of doing things, including the protection of the Nordic welfare state.

At the European level, Soini is happy to rub shoulders with UKIP leader Nigel Farage whilst distancing his party from the more outright nationalist parties. The Finns Party does not call for Finland's exit from the EU or the Eurozone, believing instead that in the long run the EU will prove unworkable and will thus inevitably disintegrate. At least the rising fortunes of The Finns Party have resulted in a larger debate about Europe, as the mainstream parties have needed to explain and defend their more pro-EU policies. This is certainly a highly positive development when considering that Europe as an issue that had remained depoliticised in Finland for such a long time.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

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