

Finland: European Elections in the aftermath of national elections

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INTRODUCTION

The elections for the European Parliament in Finland took place in the aftermath of the national parliamentary elections that were held on 14 April 2019. In this election, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), with 17.7% of the votes, narrowly outperformed the right-wing populist Finns party (PS, 17.5%) and the conservative National Coalition Party (KOK, 17%).

Because of the proximity of these two elections, the election campaign for the European Parliament elections was rather short. The Eurosceptic PS party was in the spotlight, since it was expected to ride on the wave of Eurosceptic parties in European elections (De Vries, 2018).

The closeness of national and European elections was expected to decrease turnout in the latter, which in 2014 was 41.0% (Mattila, 2003). Finland had one of the lowest turnouts (10%) of young voters (18-24) in 2014, second only to Slovakia (6%), although there were signs that turnout in this group would increase this time around.

Due to the limited number of candidates, even major changes in vote shares were unlikely to lead to parties winning or losing more than a single seat. However, in Finland's open-list proportional system, where voters rather than party elites decide what candidates gain a seat (von Schoultz 2018), for most parties it was unclear which individual candidates would gain those seats.

PARTIES AND ISSUES

Figure 1 shows the slogan used by the SDP in the European elections campaign (*We don't Brexit. We Fixit*). This slogan clearly refers to the good result obtained by the SDP at the national parliamentary elections one month earlier, and at the same time attempts to position the party as the dominant voice in the Finnish EU Presidency which starts in July 2019.

Figure 1



WE DON'T BREXIT. WE FIX IT.

Meillä kun on tapana korjata, ei rikkoa.

However, most polls suggested that the SDP would end third or even fourth in the European elections, only getting two seats in the new European Parliament. With rare exceptions, such as the former party leader *Eero Heinäluoma*, it had few prominent candidates.

In addition to the SDP, KOK and the Centre party (KESK) are traditionally the three main parties in Finnish politics. Both KOK and KESK were expected to lose votes, although it was uncertain whether this would translate into a loss of seats. KOK was expected to lose votes but to remain the largest party. Three current MEPs for this party ran for re-election, but former Prime Minister *Alexander Stubb*, who was a popular candidate in the 2014 elections, did not run this time. The rural-liberal KESK risked losing one of three seats it had won in 2014, echoing the loss they had suffered in the national elections. Two of the current MEPs were running but were challenged by prominent party cadres.

Two parties challenged the dominance of the three main parties: the right-wing populist Finns Party (PS) and the Green League. Some polls indicated that the PS would become the second-largest party in terms of votes, thereby gaining a third seat in the EP. PS's list included several prominent candidates, including six newly elected national MPs. The Green League (VIHR) was also expected to win votes, and some polls suggested it could become the second largest party in terms of votes and win three seats in the process. The candidates included veteran MEP *Heidi Hautala* and former party leader *Ville Niinistö*.

The leftist Left Alliance (VAS) was expected to keep their only seat. They had *Merja Kyllönen* running for re-election, but she had publicly stated that if elected, she would not take up the position since she preferred to work in the national parliament, where she had recently won a seat.

RKP is a minority party that mainly represents the linguistic minority of Swedish-speaking Finns. Polls suggested they were unlikely to win a seat, and even if the party's results are consistently underestimated in pre-electoral polls, RKP needed to rally most Swedish speakers to vote for them if they were to successfully defend their seat in the EP. Current MEP *Nils Torvalds* spearheaded a list that, for the rest, included mostly young candidates.

While integration was certainly an issue in the debates, much of the campaign focused on genuine European topics rather than national issues, as is otherwise often the case (Schmitt and Toygür, 2016). Three European topics were particularly salient: economic growth, climate change and immigration policies. Table 1 shows the position of the parties.

PARTY	MAIN ISSUES
Social Democrats (SDP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic integration to ensure sustainable economic growth. - EU minimum level corporate tax.
The Finns (PS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Roll back European integration. - No binding EU measures to combat climate change.
National Coalition Party (KOK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fiscal responsibility among all member states. - Sustainable economy and deeper economic integration.
Centre Party (KESK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Common measures at EU level to combat climate change. - Support Common Agricultural Policies (CAP).
Centre Party (KESK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Common measures at EU level to combat climate change. - Cooperation to ensure respect for human rights outside of EU.
Left Alliance (VAS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Common measures at EU level to combat climate change. - Avoid harmful tax competition.
Swedish People's Party (RKP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Common measures at EU level to combat climate change. - Common EU immigration policies.

The economic debate focused on tax evasion and business competition. SDP, VAS and VIHR argued that corporate tax competition constituted a threat to the welfare state and a minimum community tax would address the problem. The other parties argued that the EU should not take decisions in matter of tax policy.

The role of the EU in fighting climate change was also a heated topic during the campaign, with the PS taking issue with all other parties. PS adopted the same strategy as in the national elections by questioning the need for immediate actions, and especially the need for Finland to lead the way. While there were differences in how much it was emphasised, all other parties were in principle in favour of coordinated European measures to address climate change.

The debate on immigration revolved mostly around a compulsory quota system for member states. Most parties (SFP, KOK, VIHR, VAS, RKP) were in favour of the

Table 2 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Finland

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)
National Coalition Party (KOK)	EPP	380,460	20.8
Green League (VIHR)	G-EFA	292,892	16.0
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	S&D	267,603	14.6
Finns Party (PS)	ECR	253,176	13.8
Centre Party (KESK)	ALDE	247,477	13.5
Left Alliance (VAS)	GUE-NGL	126,063	6.9
Swedish People's Party (RKP)	ALDE	115,962	6.3
Christian Democrats (KD)	EPP	89,204	4.9
Others		57,208	3.1
Total		1,830,045	100
Turnout (%)			42.7
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			<i>none</i>

	SEATS	SEATS IN CASE OF BREXIT	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 IN CASE OF BREXIT
	3	3	-1.8		
	2	3	+6.7	+1	+2
	2	2	+2.3		
	2	2	+1.0		
	2	2	-6.1	-1	-1
	1	1	-2.4		
	1	1	-0.4		
			-0.4		
	13	14			+1

quota system, while KESK argued that this proposal was irrelevant since it would never be accepted by other member states. PS opposed it.

The debate among the top candidates for the European Commission Presidency held in Brussels on May 15th gathered some attention by national media. Several major media outlets provided a commentary and it was generally perceived to have been a quiet event where no major disagreements emerged.

RESULTS

Advance voting is popular in Finland. As about 21% of all registered voters had voted by May 21st, it became clear that the turnout would have been about the same as in 2014. In the end, the turnout slightly increased, by 1.6 percent, compared to 2014. In 2019 42.7% of all eligible voters cast their vote.

When the results of the advance voting were announced, it appeared clear that pre-election expectations would largely be fulfilled. Three hours after the closing of the polling stations, the preliminary results were available for the whole country. In the end, the outcome confirmed the expectations that KOK would remain the first party with 20.8% of the votes (three seats). However, even more successful were the greens (VIHR), which became the second largest party with 16.0%, a 6.7 percentage points increase in comparison to 2014, gaining a second seat. SDP also gained votes in comparison to 2014 (+2.3%) and received 14.6% of all votes (two seats), however, this result was below the one they obtained in national elections. PS gained 1 percentage point compared to 2014, but the 13.8% result was disappointing for them, considering the 18% forecasted before the elections. KESK was the major loser, as it only received 13.5% of the votes, 6.1 percentage points less than in 2014 (and losing one of its previous two seats). VAS gained 6.9% of the votes and kept their only seat. The most important development during election night was that RKP increased their share of the votes to 6.3% and climbed the list to cling on to the thirteenth seat.

The battle for the fourteenth seat that will become available when UK leaves the EU was very close, and the prediction of which party would win the reserve seat changed several times. In the end, it went to the Greens.

CONCLUSION

Considering the pre-electoral poles, the result may be considered a cautious win for the pro-EU side. Although a turnout of 42.7% is by no means impressive, it is satisfactory considering the context and the proximity to national elections.

Furthermore, the widely-projected win for the Eurosceptic forces did not occur in Finland, where the most successful parties all championed pro-integration agendas for ensuring economic growth, and preventing climate change. Although PS gained votes, they failed to win an additional seat and clearly underperformed compared to the predictions. By contrast, Finland contribute to the European wave of support for green parties, as voters seemed to expect European institutions to engage in clear efforts to fight climate change.

The final results are similar to those in the national elections. Therefore, the Finnish electoral landscape now has several mid-sized parties, instead of three big parties and several small ones. The 2019 European election was one of the rare occasions where most parties found reasons to be satisfied with the outcome. Even KESK, the only party that lost a seat, was relieved that the loss was not even more pronounced.

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