

KARINA JUTILA - BJÖRN SUNDELL

**THE POPULISM OF
THE FINNISH
PARTY
FUN OR UGLY?**

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Prologue

Support for populism and extremist groups has increased in many European countries in the past few years. The phenomenon is also visible in Finland. In March 2011, a month before the Finnish parliamentary elections, Think Tank e2, Think Thank Magma and Think Tank Visio published a collection of articles on this topic. The aim was to awaken the attention of citizens as well as the media to those aspects of this phenomenon that threaten democracy and human rights.

A full year later the phenomenon is still alive in Europe. For this reason it is important that the topic is widely discussed in different countries and in the collective European arenas. In order to provide background for these discussions we have translated into English as well as updated the excerpt of our article that delves into the topic of *The Finns* (also known as the *True Finns*) and the Finnish context. By understanding the background factors of a phenomenon, we are able to find answers to questions and problems. ■

Helsinki, 18.10.2012

Karina Jutila Björn Sundell

The Populism of The Finns Party – Fun or Ugly?

In Finland, *The Finns Party* tripled its support base after the 2008 municipal elections. At that time the party received 5,4 percent of the vote. The polls now forecast up to a 17 percent share of the votes.

For a long time in the public debate, The Finns Party, also called the True Finns, was viewed as a refreshing phenomenon on the political scene. Many journalists and colleagues were intrigued by party leader **Timo Soini**'s "fly-away yet succinct" style of expression. He was seen as a harmless political court jester.

One factor contributing to the success of Soini and his party is his style of speaking. When the other parties are included in the analysis and the political context factors are taken into account, more factors emerge.

Supporters on all sides

Contrary to many of the parties mentioned in this publication², The Finns Party is not a party of the far-right nor is it purely a right-wing populist party³. The support base of The Finns Party can be divided into six different groups. They are:

- Male workers coming from traditional industrial towns who have traditionally been tightly linked to the social-democratic union movement.
- Voters residing in the countryside, who have become discouraged with EU politics and regional development. Formerly, these voters have usually voted for the Centre Party.
- Voters from the families of small farmers who originally supported the preceding party SMP (agrarian politics).
- Men and women who have encountered difficulties in life and whose voting percentage is usually quite low.
- Anti-immigration neo-nationalists (inclusive of opposition to Islam).
- Mobile voters, whose party choice is based on random and most often un-political factors (inclusive of those who are tired of political scandals as well as "political nomads").

2 Translator's note: This article originally appeared in a publication *Liikkeitä laidasta laitaan – Populismen nousu Euroopassa* in March 2011 by Think tank e2, Think tank Magma and Think tank Visio. In the translation of this article, original footnotes and other references have been maintained.

3 See the article by **Ann-Cathrine Jungar** and **Anders Ravik Jupskas** in the publication *Liikkeitä laidasta laitaan – Populismen nousu Euroopassa*, 2011.

Next, the socio-demographic features of The Finns Party supporters are presented. Clearly, working middle-aged men are highlighted within the supporters.

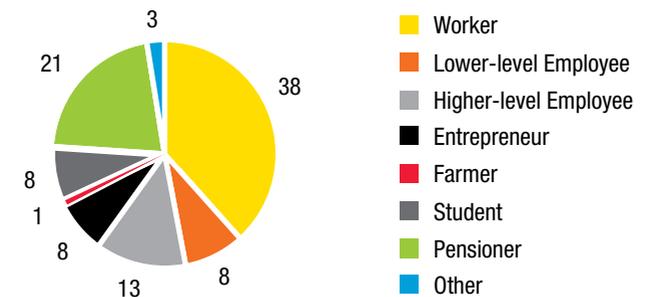
Opposition to elitism is central to the politics of The Finns Party. This is typical of populist parties. Critique is presented not only to the political elite, but also toward the academic, cultural, economic and organizational elites.

The party sees itself to be defending the cause of the regular Finn and "small person", in opposition to those in power. The Tall Poppy Syndrome is thriving. Furthermore, the party maintains that it has the right to interpret the "will of the people" and understands "the people" to be a homogenic whole, both culturally and language-wise. The Finns Party has proclaimed itself to be a part of the Finnishness movement. *An independent and prosperous Finland is one of the greatest achievements, even if observed on a global scale. Of this we can be very proud.*⁴

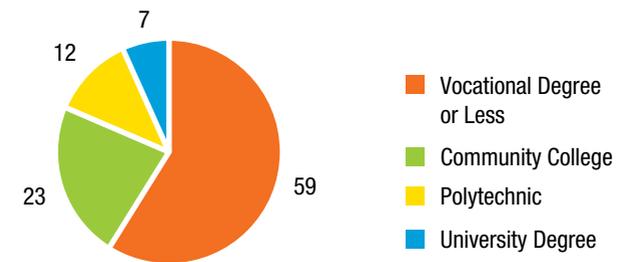
The rise of The Finns Party is greatly due to **Timo Soini**, as the rise of the SMP was due to **Veikko Vennamo**. This is a prime example of charismatic leadership, in which the leader is able to mesmerizingly unite opinions that distinctly differ from a "common man" form of expression and encounter. He inspires supporters, influencing them on an emotional level.

4 The Finns Party platform for the 2011 parliamentary elections

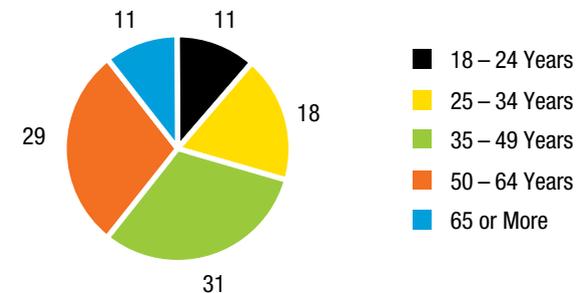
The Vocational Ratio of The Finns Party Supporters (%)



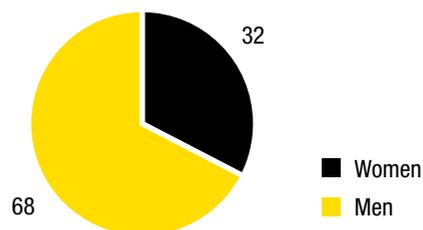
The Educational Background of The Finns Party Supporters (%)



The Age Ratio of The Finns Party Supporters (%)



**The Ratio of Men and Women
Among The Finns Party Supporters (%)**



Source: TNS Gallup⁵

Soini carries the typical ability of the charismatic leader to achieve a level of value and trust among one's group that is critique-free. His role as the party leader is strong, as is his status of an opinion leader. Although as a MEP and long-standing Member of Parliament, he belongs to the Finnish political elite, the narrative among his own is that of an anti-elitist commoner.

Soini acts as a role-model to his followers, who are looking for change. For many, it is a protest movement on a general scale, the specifics of which have not been detailed, but which Soini has come to personify. He offers a shared mission to his supporters: the party

5 The information is based on a representative sample of Finns (excluding Ahvenanmaa), collected by TNS Gallup weeks 1–7/2011, N=3912.

challenges the other older parties⁶ and is an alternative to the way things have been done in the past ("nykymeno" in Finnish). Before the parliamentary elections in early 2011 Soini even viewed it probable that he could become Prime Minister.

To The Finns Party members, change not only means opposition to "the current way of things" but also a return to the past. For example in environmental and agrarian politics the party presents views that were prevalent in Finnish politics years ago. Nostalgia works when the starting point for thought is that Finland can be kept safe from international challenges.

One's own actions and the mistakes of others

The success of The Finns can be explained by many societal situational factors. The party has taken advantage of its parliamentary role as a small party in the opposition. There has been time for the building of a populist alternative.

The Finns have benefited from the structural change of the labor market. The lessening of the number of traditional industrial jobs, the increase of short-term jobs, work mobility, as well as structural unemployment have provided populist politics with a platform for growth.

6 Soini uses the term "old parties" in relation to the parliamentary parties that have been in power for a longer period of time. The predecessor of The Finns Party, *Suomen Talonpoikain Puolue* (Finnish Peasant Party) was established in 1959. In 1966 the name of the party was changed to: *Suomen Maaseudun Puolue* (SMP) (The Finnish Agricultural Party). In the beginning, already the party ideology leaned upon both middle-class and socialist tendencies. The program of the SMP was directed towards peasants, independent work men and entrepreneurs (See Nousiainen Jaakko, *Suomen poliittinen järjestelmä*). The *Jungar* and *Jupskås* article provides more background information on the party.

Already in the spring campaign of 2003, The Finns had sensed the uncertainty and the space given by the Lipponen government. According to the party, the tired Left was no longer able to defend the workmen. The situation was described in the following way within the campaign program:

Politics has turned into mere cold management due to the governmental party platform crossing all boundaries and being too broad. The old parties, along with those who seek to please them, have become the representation of the state towards the people, even though the task of the Member of Parliament is to represent and defend the people and the Finnish person. The lack of political alternatives is a direct risk to authentic democracy. (...) The Finns offers the people an opportunity to vote for candidates who are familiar with the everyday grief of the Finnish people in regard to finding sufficient work, short-term jobs and unemployment.

The Finns Party has used both the old parties as well as the European Union to fuel its rise. Soini has linked nationalism, critique of immigration policy, opposition to both bureaucracy and climate change policy to EU opposition. Globalization, unemployment, recession and the Euro crisis have propelled the rise of populist movements in different parts of Europe. In Finland, Soini has taken advantage of the situation.

Also the rise of the income gap and political powerlessness explain the support of The Finns. Some citizens feel they have not shared in financial prosperity and influence. The Finns Party has provided a political community where participation has been made easier when compared to other parties. The party has been able to mobilize Finns who have been passive and disappointed. Political participation in the context of traditional and new media and the crumbling of one-party loyalty have suited The Finns.

The other parties have made many mistakes. The Leftist parties slept while the labor market changed. The same happened to the other parties in regard to immigration policy.

Politicians across party lines spoke about issues in a manner that was too difficult, using administrative language. They trusted that responsible politics were enough and the relationship between citizen and politician did not need mending. At that time, The Finns offered a populist alternative that identified both the difficult nature of politics and the citizen's powerlessness. The True Finns 2011 campaign programme describes the situation in the following way:

Populism's main idea is that the citizen should be able to either reward or punish the decision-maker with popularity or unpopularity. Here the citizen is able to locate those that wield power within the different political layers, in this way bringing political decision-makers into a place of responsibility. Unclear political systems can feed bureaucracy and power by a few. The more complicated a system is, the more undemocratic it is. The worst kind of power is faceless in form. A prerequisite of democracy is a transparent decision-making system, which is easily understood by the citizen and easy to follow.

The campaign finance scandal is the central factor behind the rise of The Finns. The party won a political lottery, so to speak, as a result of the 2010 corruption charge hunt orchestrated by the media. The "corrupted" parties got what they deserved.

The Finns Party has also benefited from the large number of elections held recently. Presidential candidacy in early 2006 gave Soini much media coverage; he became more well known around the country. Simultaneously his role as a media "favourite" was streng-

htened. In this role, he did not need to provide answers on a level equal to that of other politicians. Being different compensated any possible lack of knowledge in regard to the issues at hand. After the presidential elections, Soini developed his rhetorical expression, communication, relationships and the party field organization. A small party began to develop into a leadership-based movement.

In his political maneuvers, Soini has had the ability to cherry-pick. Typical to populist politicians, he has chosen questions that irritate, scare or create suspicion in citizens. Also, he has chosen questions that can be subjected to over-simplification. From these questions he has built tools for differentiation and increased his support base. In addition to immigration policy, such issues as development policy, the Swedish language and sexual minorities have been targets of Finns Party politics.⁷ In the recent parliamentary elections platform, the artsy postmodern experiments of the cultural sphere are frowned upon.

On the other hand, there are issues that relate to morality and human rights, which Soini does not like to talk about. The right for abortion and freedom of religion do not fit the agenda when one's own conviction does not accept abortion and there is strong opposition to Islam among supporters. Maximizing support is like walking a tightrope.

⁷ *The foundation of national values that have been tested and proven durable has been weakened during the rainbow coalition. The notion of family has been widened in an unnatural way and the gates have been opened for increasingly deep corruption of the moral foundation.* (The Finns Party parliamentary elections platform 2003)

Racist? And to what extent?

The rise in support of The Finns Party has taken place alongside the rise of immigration-critical and racist discussion. The central arenas for this discussion have been the Internet and social media. According to Finns Party MP candidate **Jussi Halla-aho**, *the strength of the immigration-critical movement are the ability to center votes and use the Internet to one's benefit, as evidenced in the 2008 municipal elections.*⁸

Below are examples of views held by The Finns Party candidates for parliament.

On the 6th June 2010 **Juho Eerola** wrote on the "honnaforum.org" website the following:

*What intrigues me is facism and especially Benito Mussolini's economic policies. Entrepreneurship was encouraged; it was in tight governmental control. Large corporations that were vital were not given over to foreign ownership, but were tightly held onto. Italy achieved full employment in those times (...). A lot could be learned from that model.*⁹

On his webpages, **James Hirvisaari** has the following text. It had been removed earlier from the discussions page in "Uusi Suomi", an Internet publication.

The terrorist attacks are the fault of the 'flower hat aunties'. Most likely it's only a matter of time before something

⁸ <http://www.halla-aho.com/vaalit2011/aanestysvinkkeja2.html>, 12.3.2011.

⁹ <http://www.honnaforum.org/index.php/topic,25268.msg413029.html#msg413029>, 6.7.2010.

explodes in Finland too. Those primary at fault are not the muslims (what can they do to those in their midst who are crazy), nor the 'immigration-critics' (who are easily blamed), but the multiculturalists who can't wait to see the riches and wonders of Islam also up here in the Far-North. I will say it openly and in a straight-forward manner: The multiculturalists are responsible for this attack also. They are responsible for the attacks in Finland also. It is collectively the fault of every multiculturalist. Multiculturalist, it is your fault. (...)'¹⁰

Olli Immonen writes about multiculturalism with the title *Multiculturalism Feeds Antisemitism*.

*Increasingly across Europe: anti-semitism, that is, hatred of the Jews, has been rearing its ugly head. As usual, the Finnish media has been silent in regard to a difficult topic. Apparently what makes this topic a difficult one for the media is the fact that, this time around, those sowing the seeds of hatred have not been neo-nazis, but muslims living in Europe. Personally, this development does not surprise me at all. (...) To my mind the alarm bells should now also begin to ring for the multiculturalists. Does someone really still think that multiculturalism and Europe's islamization are issues that would somehow enrich Europe?'*¹¹

In October 2008 Immonen wrote about the death of **Jörg Haider** in the following way:

This day did not begin well. Upon waking I read a text message that I had received, saying that a politician whom I

¹⁰ <http://james.hirvisaari.info/vaalit>, 12.3.2011.

¹¹ <http://www.ollimmonen.net/094.html>, 12.3.2011

very much admired – **Jörg Haider**, had died early that morning in a car crash in Klagenfurt. The former leader of Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), who had more currently been the Chairman of the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), the Governor of **Carinthia Heider** was a charismatic liberal thinker who was critical of un-controlled immigration and Islam. Just because of this (in my opinion with faulty reasoning) he was labeled right-wing by those who hold power within government and the media. Just a few weeks ago we celebrated the results of the Austrian elections, where FPÖ and BZÖ received almost 30 percent of the votes. Now happiness has turned to sadness, even though this in no way changes the good results of the election. (...) Haider is one of the politicians whom I admire the most. The representative of the BZÖ party, **Stefan Petzner**, likened the events to the world's end. This is for sure what it must feel like now. But even though Haider is gone, the ideology lives on.'¹²

A group of The Finns Party MP candidates published an electoral programme critical of immigration in the summer of 2010. It was entitled *Nuiva vaalimanifesti (The Sour Electoral Manifesto)*. Among those who have signed, was party Vice-Chairman and Soini's assistant in Finland, **Vesa-Matti Saarakkala**. The party election programme predominately copies from this publication in regard to immigration policy issues.

On his webpages, **Jussi Halla-aho** guides voters in choosing a compatible candidate from The Finns Party list. The starting point is: *So that sour candidates can be elected, sour voters must vote for them*. According to Halla-aho:

¹² <http://www.ollimmonen.net/028.html>, 12.3.2011. **Lisa Bjurwald** writes about FPÖ and its leader **Jörg Haider** in her article.

The Finns Party will be achieving a huge victory in the spring 2011 parliamentary elections. To the voter who is critical of immigration, voting for The Finns Party is safe in the sense that statistics affirm this party to be the least divided as related to questions of immigration. (...) The risk that a vote given to a immigration critical candidate would actually aid in supporting a "flower hat auntie or uncle" into parliament is marginally small. This is not the case with other parties.¹³

Some of the candidates of The Finns Party have been members of the nationalistic "Suomen Sisu" association. Party candidate **Teemu Lahtinen** describes the encounter between "Suomen Sisu" and The Finns Party in the early 2000s in the following way:¹⁴

The idea of organizing "Sisu" into a party had been discussed and kept alive by the members, but our view in the leadership was that there was a place for such a non-aligned civil society organization. At first the formation of a new national party was discussed, but in the end the conclusion was that the battlefield needed to be broad, with influence extending across party lines. To achieve this end, a pressure party was needed; the threat imposed by it would cause change in the other parties also.

Timo Soini, who was quite a fresh new chairperson then, had two years previously publicly conveyed his view that there was a need

¹³ <http://www.halla-aho.com/vaalit2011/aanestysvinkkeja.html>, 12.3.2011.

¹⁴ See *Aamulehti* 11.3.2011 and *Helsingin Sanomat* 12.3.2011. On his web-pages, **Teemu Lahtinen** also writes about his political background and activity in the nationalistic *Isänmaallinen Kansallis-Liitto* (IKL) association. (<http://www.teemulahtinen.fi/2011/01/04/poliittinen-historiani-vaan-ei-taisteluni/> 12.3.2011.

to establish a Finnish 'right-wing populist' party. Also, the small but tenacious party seemed suitable for gearing towards this purpose."

At the end of 2011, **Jussi Halla-aho** ends his text entitled Scattered Notes on Muslims:

I thank all readers, supporters and partners for the past year, which was a better year for both myself and the immigration critical movement than the year 2009, which was a year of confusion and disappointment. We are advancing towards perhaps the greatest change within Finnish history during a time of peace. In five months nothing will be the same.¹⁵

Soini separated himself from racism in a vivid way in parliament in the context of the Aliens Act in February of 2009. According to him, neither he nor The Finns Party are racists. He emphasized that no kind of hatred or xenophobia, which could even lead to violence, would be tolerated within the party.

This was three years and ten percentage points ago.

Conclusions

The Finns Party members acknowledge the Finnish political system, want to participate in elections and act within and according to the parliamentary processes. Soini has said the party is ready to take on governmental responsibility.

People with very different values and backgrounds have joined The Finns Party. Those who view Soini as their leader project expecta-

¹⁵ http://www.halla-aho.com/scripta/hajahuomioita_muslimista.html, 12.3.2011.

tions towards him and the party. Demands, sometimes very strong demands, are also made, as these members hold perspectives on what political power means in practice. If hopes are not fulfilled and appeasing positive experience are not born, what comes is disappointment, frustration and finally the questioning of Soini's leadership, alongside the weakening of group cohesion.¹⁶

This weakening provides glimpses into the inner workings of the party: the culture, usage of power and differences of opinion. Until now the party has been tightly led, and there is not much information on the decision-making processes. The democracy of the party, advocating democracy begins to be analysed.

If The Finns Party participates in government negotiations, Soini's leadership and skill in making policy is for the first time measured. The transfer from being a populist leader to having a position of power in government necessitates a change in the way of doing politics; playing with threats and opposites will not work in a coalition government. Soini knows this, but it is unclear whether the support base does.

The Finns Party is the successor of *the Finnish Rural Party* and its populist leader, **Veikko Vennamo**. Yet there is one distinct difference between the two parties. Vennamo was supported by minorities in his quest for power. The Finns Party seeks support by opposing minorities and being portrayed as the representative of the majority of the people. It remains to be seen what kind of discussion on minority

16 Signs of this were seen two months prior to the elections, when three candidates of the Oulu electoral district were disappointed with the decision of the parliamentary group which supported the standpoint of the committee for constitutional law in the Vanhanen legal disqualification matter. These three candidates suspected that the MPs of their party were forming good relations with the MPs of the large parties in this way in order to be able to enter government later. Restlessness has also been observed in the candidates with a *Suomen Sisu* background.

rights is formed, if The Finns Party is among those parties forming the government. In the practical legislative work of the day-to-day, the party then has to show who are "the we" on behalf of whom action is taken and if there still exists "the others", who are opposed.

In Finland, for a long time there have been three strong parties that have been the central players in the political arena. The rise of The Finns Party has elements that are constructive for democracy. The political participation of citizens has increased and new people and ideas are now involved. Also the differences of the parties are now more vivid.

The other parties must choose their strategy.¹⁷ In Finland it can already be seen that some of the parties or at least their candidates have absorbed The Finns Party points of emphasis or rhetoric, for example, as related to immigration or EU policy. There also is experience on Participation as a strategic option. The Finnish Rural Party participated in government in the 1980s and this responsibility quickly lessened its support.

Not much interest seems to be evident for the use of the Isolation strategy in Finland. The experience of the Swedish elections showed that attempts to isolate the *Sweden Democrats* only increased sympathies towards them and their support.

In the Finnish political debates other parties have challenged The Finns Party. They are challenged to provide concrete and detailed policy suggestions. Open debate will bring to light what exactly "Soini's alternative" is and will also result in lessening the party's space for maneuver. Responsibility towards what has been said also concerns the populists and life after elections. ■

17 In their article, **Jungar** and **Jupskås** present four strategies: isolating, challenging, adopting and participating.

Epilogue 17.10.2012

In the 2011 April parliamentary elections, The Finns Party (also called the True Finns) received 19,1 percent of the votes. The party was the only one that received more votes in this election than in the previous one. The increase in support was an exceptional 15 percentage points. The Centre party, the party of the Prime Minister, lost a total of 7,4 percentage points of support.

From those mentioned in this article, those elected into parliament, in addition to **Timo Soini** were: **Juho Eerola**, **Jussi Halla-aho**, **James Hirvisaari**, **Olli Immonen** and **Vesa-Matti Saarakkala**.

Despite the win, The Finns decided to remain outside of government. According to **Timo Soini**, this was because of EU politics. The party could not commit itself to Finnish EU policy or management of the euro crisis.

The Finns Party received the task of chairing the parliamentary Administration Committee, a committee that handles immigration issues as well as domestic security matters. This decision was supported by the main ruling parties. With the blessing of **Timo Soini**,

Jussi Halla-aho, who is critical of immigration, was chosen as Chairperson.

Just a little more than a year afterwards, Halla-aho had to resign from his role as the Chairperson of the committee due to receiving a Supreme Court verdict violating the free exercise of worship and for incitement against an ethnic group.

The Finns Party has been in the tabloids for other issues as well. These have been related to the use of alcohol and to statements deemed improper for MPs, for example.

Member of Parliament **James Hirvisaari** was found guilty of incitement against an ethnic group and fined. The court ruling determined his blog entry to be insulting of Muslims.

Within The Finns Party parliamentary group, there are also moderate politicians who, in their work, focus on social politics, for example. In light of the public discussion, their role in the party is not a visible one.

Municipal elections will be held in Finland on the last Sunday of October. The Gallup polls forecast a 15–17 percent share of the votes in support of The Finns. In Finland, it looks like the wave of populism has not waned yet. ■

Karina Jutila has studied Political Science at the University of Tampere, receiving her doctorate in Social Sciences in 2003. She has written on the participation of citizens, power-play within political parties as well as social attitudes. At the moment, she is working as a Director at Think Tank e2.

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