

Becoming a ‘national’ party? The Greens in the 2019 Finnish parliamentary elections

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The Green League approached the April 2019 election to the Eduskunta, Finland’s unicameral national legislature, with a mixture of high hopes and cautious optimism. Finland had been governed since the 2015 election by a centre-right coalition that brought together the agrarian/liberal Centre Party, the conservative National Coalition, and the populist Finns Party. Led by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä, the government had introduced cuts to public sector expenditure and its main project was the reorganization of social and health services (known by its acronym SOTE in Finnish) that sought to combine directly-elected regional councils with a larger role for private companies in delivering the services. While the project ultimately failed, it nonetheless meant that the Sipilä cabinet was seen as an ‘austerity’ government almost exclusively concerned with competitiveness and reducing public debt; the government also downsized the education budget and reduced Finland’s development aid. Moreover, the government almost fell apart in the summer/autumn of 2015 when the European Union agreed to the third Greek bailout package and decided in favour of re-allocating asylum-seekers amongst the member states.

These problems provided a window of opportunity for the Greens. Under the leadership of Ville Niinistö the Green League effectively became the leading, or at least the most vocal, opposition party, criticizing the cabinet strongly for its socially conservative policies whilst calling particularly for investment in education. Greens support rose in the polls and in spring 2017 the party won 12.5% of the vote, its best-ever performance, in local elections. The victory was partly explained by the Greens’ strong opposition to the cuts to the education budget (Borg 2018). Niinistö had been widely praised for his leadership skills, so there were concerns inside the party when it was time for him to step down as party leader in summer 2017. Niinistö’s successor, Touko Aalto, got off to a positive start, with Green support peaking in September 2017 at 17.8%. Yet Aalto lacked Niinistö’s vigour and soon found himself in media headlines on account of an extramarital affair and a divorce. After Aalto was spotted dancing shirtless in a Stockholm ‘gay club’ in August 2018, the media pressure took its toll and Aalto, citing depression and exhaustion, took sick leave before announcing his resignation in October 2018.

With just six months to go to the Eduskunta elections, the Greens elected Pekka Haavisto, one of the founding figures of the green movement in Finland, who had been the party's presidential candidate in the 2012 and 2018 elections, as their interim leader until the June 2019 party congress. It is likely that by electing Haavisto the Greens hoped to regain some of the lost ground and, more importantly, to regain credibility after the scandals associated with Aalto. Yet in the final months before the elections Green support remained around 12-14%, thus promising a good result but not the kind of a victory many were hoping for. Worryingly for the Greens, the Finns Party, which had elected the head of its anti-immigration wing, Jussi Halla-aho, as its new party leader in 2017, was simultaneously rising in the polls. Halla-aho and his party did not hide their disdain for the Greens, and this mutual antagonism was very evident during the election campaign.

The campaign

By early 2019 the SOTE project had run into serious trouble in the Eduskunta and it was buried on 8 March, with Prime Minister Sipilä immediately announcing the resignation of his government. With the Centre Party appearing to head for an electoral catastrophe, in the final weeks of the campaign Sipilä did his best to connect with its supporters. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report 'Global Warming of 1.5 °C', published in October 2018, did not initially attract much attention in Finland, but that started to change as the elections approached. A key issue in the debate was forest resources and the question of how much forest harvesting was sustainable particularly in terms of increasing carbon sinks. Sipilä seemed concerned about the Centre losing its core supporters in rural areas, and so strongly defended increasing logging, and attacked the political left, particularly the Greens, for their policies which, according to Sipilä, were both detrimental to rural areas and employment but also based on misinformation. The left-wing parties, Social Democrats included, did indeed call for much bolder measures to tackle climate change. The Social Democrats' active role in the climate change debate was quite surprising, as many had expected the party to focus on its staple issues, notably the welfare state and labour market.

The National Coalition did its best to keep the debates focused on economy and sound finances; on climate change it pursued a 'realist' stance, recognising the need for a cleaner environment whilst also warning against overly radical measures. However, it was the Finns Party that stood out. The Finns did not deny climate change, but instead blamed the other parties and particularly the Greens for 'climate change hysteria'. Party chair Halla-aho saw it as futile for Finland to implement

disproportionately ambitious measures when the main polluters were far beyond Finland's borders. Hence the climate change debate found Finnish parties divided on a conservative-liberal or rural-urban axis, but the left-right dimension was also relevant as the left-leaning parties were in favour of stricter measures and a faster timetable for their implementation than the centre-right parties. Apart from climate change, campaign themes ranged from the economy and employment (with the governing parties defending their good record) to immigration, equality, and social security. European integration and foreign and security policy did not feature at all in the debates. Surprisingly, the failed SOTE package was also largely missing from the debates.

For Greens the unexpected rise of climate change onto the agenda was surely no bad thing because the 2015 election campaign was dominated by the economy and reducing public debt, issues that clearly did not work in favour of the Greens (Arter 2015; Raunio 2015). But herein also lies a problem for the party: popular in Helsinki and other university towns, the party has found it difficult to break through in more rural parts of the country. In order to reach out to such areas and to keep the party 'coalitionable', the climate change discourse of Haavisto and other leading Green League figures was quite cautious. Indeed, exemplifying the dilemma facing the Greens, after the April election Metsä Group, one of the large companies in Finnish forestry, announced that it would invest in a large new bioproduct facility in Kemi, a northern industrial town suffering from unemployment. The Greens expressed concerns about the future of forests in Lapland as the new factory would need huge amounts of raw material, whereas other parties emphasized the economic importance of the project for the Kemi region.

The results

The Green League recorded its best-ever performance in Eduskunta elections, winning 11.5% of the vote (+3.0% compared with the 2015 election) and 20 seats (+5) (Table 1). However, the celebrations were quite muted as the polls had predicted a larger vote share for the Greens and many party activists surely hoped that the party would achieve the next step of joining the group of large parties in Finnish politics. But of great significance for the party was its performance throughout the country (Table 2). In Helsinki the Greens emerged as the largest party with almost a quarter of the vote, whilst the party won its first-ever seat in Häme district and came within nine votes of winning a first seat in the Lapland constituency where party vote increased by 7.1% compared with 2015. It thus appears that the Greens are taking important leaps forward beyond the southern cities, although their support remains strongest in towns with universities and other

institutions of higher education. Only 3 of the 20 Greens' parliamentarians are men, while 94/200 (47%) of all elected MPs are women.

TABLES 1 AND 2

The Finnish party system is very fragmented, with the largest party normally getting at most 20-25% of the votes, although this time the largest party, the Social Democrats, captured only 17.7% of the vote (turnout was 72.1%, or 68.7% when including enfranchised citizens living abroad). Finishing first means a lot to the Social Democrats and more broadly to the political left in Finland. The last time the Social Democrats won the elections was back in 1999, and hence Finland has not had a social democratic prime minister since the era of the 'rainbow coalitions' headed by Paavo Lipponen between 1995 and 2003. The Left Alliance also achieved electoral success, and hence the combined seat share of the three left-leaning parties increased from 61 seats after the 2015 elections to 76 seats (38%). Ideologically, Green League supporters are very much in the same 'red-green' or 'new left' camp with the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance (Westinen & Kestilä-Kekkonen 2015), and thereby the moderate shift to the left benefits also the Greens. There were also similarities in the election manifestos. The Greens' four priorities were environment, education, preventing poverty and inequality, and job creation, themes that were also emphasized by the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance.

Euroelection triumph and back into the government

While some had hoped for the Greens to do even better, the positive trend is obvious. The party has now broken the 10% barrier in Eduskunta elections, and it is also increasing its support in several new areas of the country. The winning streak continued in the May 2019 European Parliament elections, in which the Greens finished second with 16.0% of the vote, securing 2 seats and a third if the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

The Greens are also included in the new five-party government led by Prime Minister Antti Rinne of the Social Democrats. Bringing together the Social Democrats, the Centre, the Greens, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party, the government programme is obviously a compromise, for example regarding the use of forest resources. But the cabinet includes all three left-wing Eduskunta parties, and their influence is clearly visible in the government's programme for

‘Inclusive and Competent Finland – a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable society’. The Greens have three ministers: the foreign minister, the minister of the interior, and the minister of the environment and climate change. Considering the likely political agenda of the next few years, Greens are thus well-placed to shape Finland’s positions in European and international negotiations.

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Table 1. Distribution of votes in 2015 and 2019 Eduskunta elections (%).

Party	2015	2019	2019 seats
Centre Party	21.1	13.8	31 (-18)
National Coalition	18.2	17.0	38 (+1)
The Finns Party	17.7	17.5	39 (+1)
Social Democrats	16.5	17.7	40 (+6)
Green League	8.5	11.5	20 (+5)
Left Alliance	7.1	8.2	16 (+4)
Swedish People's Party	4.9	4.5	9
Christian Democrats	3.5	3.9	5
Others	2.5	5.9	2
TOTAL	100	100	200

Source: Ministry of Justice.

Table 2. The vote share and seats of the Greens in the electoral districts in the 2019 Eduskunta elections (excluding Åland Islands).

Electoral district	Vote share (%)	seats
Helsinki	23.5	6 (+1)
Uusimaa	13.5	5 (+2)
Varsinais-Suomi	9.2	1
Satakunta	6.0	
Häme	8.4	1 (+1)
Pirkanmaa	12.4	2
South-East Finland	9.4	2 (+1)
Savo-Karelia	9.6	1
Vaasa	4.2	
Central Finland	11.4	1
Oulu	7.9	1
Lapland	9.7	

Source: Ministry of Justice.