

## **The Campaign**

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As Finland was heading towards the April 2019 parliamentary elections, it seemed certain that the election campaign would be dominated by a single topic – the future of the social and health services, the top priority of the Centre Party-led cabinet that also included the National Coalition and the Blue Reform. The planned reorganization of the health and social services would have brought about a larger role for the private sector in delivering such services (a key objective for the National Coalition) and the introduction of directly-elected regional councils (a paramount objective of the Centre, which wins most of its vote in the rural provinces). By early 2019 the project had run into serious trouble in the Eduskunta, with even some backbench MPs on the governing side voicing strong criticism and indicating that they might not support the package. The final months leading up to the election saw a wave of scandals relating to nursing homes and other facilities operated by private companies: public authorities intervened, reprimanding companies for inadequate staffing and overall poor treatment of the occupants, and even enforcing the closure of some of the facilities. Finally, the project was buried on 8 March, with the prime minister, Juha Sipilä, immediately announcing the resignation of his government.

Yet the campaign revolved around several themes, with a reform of the social and health-care services in fact receiving only limited attention. It is possible that the governing parties, and particularly the National Coalition (seen as the ally of the private companies), wanted to divert attention to other topics. More surprising, however, was the strategy of the parliamentary opposition in not seeking to exploit the issue. Instead, the political left, the Social Democrats, the Green League, and the Left Alliance highlighted climate change, whilst speaking more broadly about

equality, fairness, social security, and the need to invest in education (the Sipilä government had introduced cuts to the education budget). The trio of cabinet parties primarily focused on defending the government’s track record on the economy and increasing the employment rate, whilst the Finns Party predictably emphasized immigration. The Centre and the National Coalition advocated tighter fiscal policies and warned the electorate about the perils of a big-spending Social Democratic-led cabinet. For example, in his 2018 May Day speech Antti Rinne, the chair of the Social Democrats, had promised an extra 100 euros per month for pensioners whose monthly income was below 1400 euros.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the campaign was very different from the two previous Eduskunta elections. In 2011 the Eurozone bailouts dominated the debates, whereas in 2015 the need to curb public debt and to make the economy more competitive were the central issues of the campaign.

Table 1. Support of Finnish political parties, 2015-2019 (%).

	2015 Eduskunta election	April 2017 municipal election	January 2018	July 2018	November 2018	January 2019	April 2019
Centre	21,1	17,5	17,4	17,8	17,0	15,6	14,5
National Coalition	18,2	20,7	20,8	19,8	19,1	17,3	15,9
The Finns	17,7	8,8	9,6	8,7	8,1	12,0	16,3
Social Democrats	16,5	19,4	18,7	21,2	21,5	20,1	19,0
Green League	8,5	12,5	14,0	13,6	13,9	14,6	12,2
Left Alliance	7,1	8,8	8,1	7,7	8,5	8,6	8,7
Swedish People’s Party	4,9	4,9	4,6	4,3	4,0	4,0	4,9
Christian Democrats	3,5	4,1	3,2	3,8	4,1	3,6	4,3
Blue Reform			1,6	0,8	1,5	1,4	0,8
Others	2,5	3,3	2,0	2,3	2,3	2,7	3,4

Source: Yle, puolueiden kannatus, Taloustutkimus.

The election result was a disappointment for the governing parties and the Centre in particular. For the latter the situation was reminiscent of the 2011 election when the Centre suffered a major defeat having held the position of the prime minister for eight years. In 2019, too, the burden of governing took its toll (Table 1). The Centre's support dropped below 20 % in 2016 and took a nosedive in the final six months of the electoral term. Sipilä was praised for his leadership as prime minister, but was simultaneously criticized for focusing too much on macro-economic indicators and market-friendly policies instead of issues closer to the heart of the party's rank-and-file.<sup>2</sup> For a long time it seemed that Petteri Orpo, the chair of the National Coalition, would be the next prime minister. The party finished first in the 2017 municipal elections, but support began to decline in mid-2018 before the scandals relating to the social and health services made headlines. Led by Ville Niinistö until the summer of 2017 when Touko Aalto was elected as the new party chair, the popularity of the Greens peaked in September 2017 (17,8 %). In summer 2018 the personal problems of Aalto gave the party unwelcome media coverage, not least when he was spotted dancing shirtless in a Stockholm 'gay club'.<sup>3</sup> Aalto stepped down in the autumn of 2018 on account of health issues (depression and fatigue) and the Greens elected Pekka Haavisto - one of the founding figures of the party who had served as the Greens' candidate in both the 2012 and 2018 presidential elections - as an interim leader until the June 2019 party congress. The Social Democrats were the largest party in the opinion polls from the summer of 2018 onwards, but the most notable development was nonetheless the rise of The Finns in the final months leading up to the election.

### ***Climate change and the conservative-liberal cleavage***

Only Sipilä knows the true motivation behind his decision to resign as prime minister just over a month before the election, but with Centre appearing to be heading for an electoral catastrophe, in the final weeks of the campaign Sipilä did his best to connect with Centre supporters. The United

Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report 'Global Warming of 1,5 °C' was not particularly hot news in Finland on its publication in October 2018, but the situation started to change as the election approached. In Finland a crucial issue in the debate concerned forest resources and the question of how much forest harvesting was sustainable, particularly in terms of increasing carbon sinks. Sipilä seemed anxious about the Centre losing its core supporters in the rural areas, and hence he defended strongly the increasing use of logging and attacked the political left, particularly the Greens. According to Sipilä, their policies were both detrimental to rural areas and employment but were also based on getting the facts wrong.<sup>4</sup> The left-wing parties, Social Democrats included, did indeed call for much bolder measures in tackling climate change. The active role displayed by the Social Democrats in the climate change debate was quite surprising, as many had expected the party to focus more on its usual favourite topics, not least the welfare state and labour market issues, especially when considering Rinne's trade union background and the failure of the government to implement the already unpopular social and health care reform package.

For the Greens the sudden rise of climate change on the campaign agenda was surely no bad thing, but herein lay a potential problem for the party. Popular in Helsinki and other larger university towns, the party has found it difficult to break through in more rural parts. 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 in fact quite cautious. Indeed, a good example of the dilemma facing the Greens was evident after the election in late April, when the Metsä Group, one of the large companies in the Finnish forestry business, 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 be needing huge

amounts of raw material, whereas the other parties emphasized the economic importance of the project for the Kemi region.<sup>5</sup>

The National Coalition did its best to keep the election debate focused on the economy and the importance of maintaining sound finances, whilst on climate change it pursued a 'realist' stance, recognising the need for a cleaner environment but also warning against overly radical measures. For example, both the National Coalition and the Blue Reform underlined in their high-profile adverts the right of Finns to drive cars.<sup>6</sup> 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 engendering 'climate change hysteria'. The party chair Jussi Halla-aho viewed it as futile for Finland to implement disproportionately ambitious measures when the main polluters were far beyond Finland's borders. In a climate change debate on the state television YLE, Matti Putkonen, representing The Finns, defended strongly the rights of ordinary Finns to eat their 'Saturday sausage' and warned that increases in dog and cat food prices would result in little girls and boys being told by their parents that they cannot afford to keep their pets anymore.<sup>7</sup>

Hence the climate change debate found Finnish parties divided along 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 while the centre-right parties seemed not to be in a similar hurry. However, the second main cleavage that featured strongly in the campaign aligned The Finns against the 'old parties', to use an expression coined by Timo Soini, the previous leader of The Finns, to distinguish his party from its competitors.

### **Halla-aho, immigration, and the continued populist streak**

In order not to exclude themselves from cabinet formation negotiations, Finnish political parties have not presented voters with pre-election alliances, nor have they made public statements ruling out power-sharing with particular parties. However, following the hardliner 'coup' within The Finns Party and the election as new leader of Jussi Halla-aho (who was vehemently opposed to 'humanitarian immigration') in the summer of 2017. the change in party image and ideology prompted some parties, not least the Green League and the Swedish People's Party, to indicate that it would be very difficult if not impossible for them to join a government that also included the Halla-aho-led Finns. The same adversarial mindset continued during the campaign, culminating in the major television debates when the party leaders were repeatedly asked whether they could be in the same government as The Finns.

Halla-aho clearly relished the situation as it enabled him and the party's candidates to portray themselves as genuine alternatives to the 'old parties'. Here the resemblance to the Soini-led Finns is obvious. There was continuity, too, in the way in which the party sided with ordinary Finns: their right to eat meat amidst the 'climate change hysteria', their right to walk safely in their home streets, and in general the importance of putting 'Finns and Finland first'.<sup>8</sup> It is not therefore surprising that the Blue Reform – formed by the more moderate, or populist wing of The Finns after the election of Halla-aho – found it difficult to distinguish itself from the new version of The Finns. The Blue Reform received persistently low ratings (mainly between 0,5 and 2 %) in the opinion polls, and the party's campaign never really gained any media visibility or credibility.

Another element of continuity was the leader-centrism that had characterized the party under Soini. Halla-aho took the blows from the media and the rival parties whilst engaging in very active campaigning across the country. It is also evident that he was strongly involved in writing the various

party documents. Yet the campaign also revealed clear differences with the Soini era. Whilst the Finns Party remains Eurosceptical, the European Union was hardly mentioned in the campaign which focused almost exclusively on immigration. Under Halla-aho the party has adopted more conservative economic policies, emphasizing the virtues of fiscal discipline (and so moving closer to the National Coalition and the Centre and further away from the leftist parties), but even when discussing the economy or taxation Halla-aho was quick to draw a link to the financial burden of immigration. The Finns released a provocative video that was also screened in Finnkino movie theatres for a short period of time. The video features ordinary citizens, a power elite wearing masks that welcome refugees into the country, and towards the end a monster appears as the incarnation of people's anger, kidnapping an unnamed corrupt, mask-wearing leader. Finally, Halla-aho himself addresses the audience, saying that if you want change, you must vote for change.<sup>9</sup> The Finns also benefited from multiple abuse cases involving immigrants, particularly in the northern city of Oulu, with the victims including under-age girls.

All in all, the 2019 Finnish election campaign followed a broader trend in modern elections in so much as socio-cultural questions have become perhaps even more important than traditional socio-economic issues. At least in the campaign debates climate change, and values broadly defined, occupied a central role. In these debates the political left tried to position itself as a more liberal, future-oriented alternative to the centre-right parties that appeared less willing to compromise existing interests. The latter camp also included the 'new version' of The Finns, but whether it finds, or wants to find, any common ground with the 'old parties' remains to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> Marko Junkkari, 'Antti Rinteen vappusatanen on tyypistymässä helatorstain viisikymppiseksi', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 19.5.2019 (<https://www.hs.fi/sunnuntai/art-2000006109244.html>).

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Jukka Koivula, 'Sisäpiiri kertoo pelon ilmapiiristä Juha Sipilän keskustassa: "Ryhmässä joutui sivuraiteelle, jos uskalsi esittää pientäkään arvostelua"', *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*, 22.5.2019 (<https://www.maaseuduntulevaisuus.fi/politiikka/artikkeli-1.433053>); Marjukka Liiten, 'Sipilä jättää puheenjohtajuuden – HS kysyi keskusta-vaikuttajilta, miten hän onnistui tehtävässään', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 16.4.2019 (<https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006074628.html>).

<sup>3</sup> 'Kuvat Touko Aallosta läiskimässä juhlijaa takapuolelle homoklubilla levisivät somessa – "Ainoa päihde siinä vaiheessa oli hyvä tunnelma"', *Yle*, 3.8.2018 (<https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10336936>).

<sup>4</sup> See for example 'PM Sipilä defends Centre Party stand on continued logging', *Yle*, 3.3.2019 ([https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/pm\\_sipila\\_defends\\_centre\\_party\\_stand\\_on\\_continued\\_logging/10671289](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/pm_sipila_defends_centre_party_stand_on_continued_logging/10671289)). Kimmo Tiilikainen, Minister of the Environment, Energy and Housing in the Sipilä government, went even further by declaring in one of his adverts that "when younger I was first in the Greens, but then I started to think." Jussi Pullinen, 'Mainokset todistavat: ministerit taistelevat nyt itse keksimiään örkkejä vastaan, ja se tietää Suomeen likaisia vaaleja', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 4.3.2019 (<https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006022804.html>).

<sup>5</sup> Jarno Hartikainen, 'Kemin sellutehdas nousi poliitikkojen vappupuheisiin: Vihreitä ja vasemmistoliittoa vaaditaan selventämään linjaansa hakkuisiin', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 1.5.2019 (<https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006090251.html>).

<sup>6</sup> See Pullinen, note 4 above.

<sup>7</sup> Annette Blencowe, 'Keskustelu turpeesta nosti kierroksia Ylen ilmastotentissä: kiivaimmat väittelyt Sanna Marinin ja Matti Putkosen välillä – Lue kooste liveanalyysistä', *Yle*, 4.4.2019 (<https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10714925>).

<sup>8</sup> The title of The Finns' election manifesto was 'Vote Finland back', available at <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Eduskuntavaaliohjelma-2019.pdf>.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Finnish nationalists defend campaign video after man threatens foreign minister', Reuters, 25.3.2019 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-finland-politics/finnish-nationalists-defend-campaign-video-after-man-threatens-foreign-minister-idUSKCN1R62ED>); The video, titled 'V niin kuin ketutus' is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzCK4tTu2nE> and <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/videot/v-niin-kuin-ketutus/>.