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# ***Civic Mind and the Legitimacy of Finnish Democracy***

Harri Melin

In this chapter, I shall analyse the civic mind and the nature of Finnish democracy from the perspective of legitimacy. Social scientists have been discussing the legitimacy of political power since the days of Max Weber (1978). According to Claus Offe (1984, 130), the maintenance of legitimacy is still one of the main tasks of modern democracies.

The concept of civic mind is very diffuse. It covers a wide range of issues from culture to participation. When social scientists talk about civic mind, theoretical thinking dates back to the 1960s and to a classical study by Almond and Verba (1963). The concept of civic mind refers to issues related to communities' relations and civic action. It covers concepts such as public meetings, elections, the underprivileged, communities on the web and churches, among others. In the United States, the concept of civic mind refers, not only to voluntary associations and political action, but business, as well. A wide variety of economic activity is focused around civic mind, mainly related to legal issues and the media.

The concept of civic mind has not been widely explored in the literature. One can say that it is an aspect of the analysis of citizenship. Civic mind is related to citizenship duties and citizenship rights. For this purpose we may define civic mind as combination of civic skills (active participation) and civic virtues (tolerance, interest in politics etc.) (e.g. Warren 2000)

Civic mind is closely connected with civic competence, civic culture (Almond and Verba 1963), civic experience (Schudson 2006) and civic participation (Putnam 2000). In their classical study, Almond and Verba compared the civic competence in five countries. They were interested in people's subjective evaluations of the extent of their possibilities to influence political decisions. One of the major findings in the project was that civic competence increases along with the increase of political activity. In the 70's, the elements of political action were revisited by a new comparative project. According to Almond and Verba, civic culture is pluralistic, and "based on communication and persuasion, a culture of consensus and diversity, a culture that [permits] change but [moderates] it". (Almond & Verba 1963, 8. See also Barnes and Kaase 1979; Pesonen & Sänkiäho 1979).

## Civic Mind

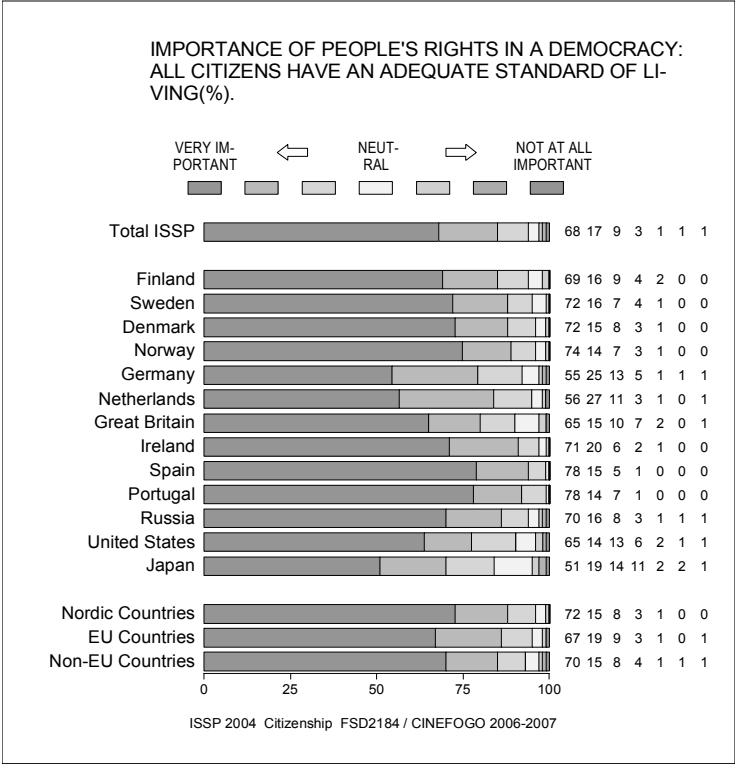
In the ISSP survey, civic mind was measured by several questions. First, how the respondents saw the importance of people's rights in a democracy. This theme was analysed with several questions, such as: should all citizens have an adequate standard of living, should government authorities respect and protect the rights of minorities, should government authorities treat everybody equally regardless of their position in society, and should politicians take into account the views of citizens before making decisions? The second set of questions dealt with the role of political parties and referendums: political parties should encourage people to become active in politics, political parties do not give voters real policy choices, referendums are a good way to decide important political questions. Thirdly, the respondents were asked to evaluate how well the democracy works in their country today, ten years ago and ten years from now. The last item dealt with views regarding the political system of the respondents' country.

Equal opportunities and material well-being are important components in democracy. It is extremely difficult to build democracy

without certain economic preconditions. In the European context, it is widely accepted that an adequate standard of living is also an important democratic right. This kind of an assumption is also dominant in the ISSP 2004 survey on citizenship.

A clear majority of all the respondents find that, in democracy, all citizens should have an adequate standard of living. More than two out of three rate it as very important. The figure is highest in Norway (74 per cent). There are only a few deviations. The figures are lower in Japan

**Figure 1.** All citizens have an adequate standard of living\*.



\*There are different opinions about people's rights in a democracy. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all important and 7 is very important, how important is it: That all citizens have an adequate standard of living.

(51 per cent), Germany (55 per cent) and the Netherlands (56 per cent). Finland represents the ISSP average in all aspects but one. None of the respondents found adequate standard of living entirely unimportant.

Minority rights are becoming an increasingly important social and political issue, but what do we mean when we talk about minorities? In the political context, minorities are most often understood as ethnic or religious minorities. However, today, we are faced with a world of minorities claiming their rights. In minority issues, Finland is an interesting example because it has no minority problems, and, yet, the political debate on minorities is lively. Historically, the Swedish speaking minority has been the only real minority in Finland. At the end of the year 2007 there were about 289 600 Swedish-speaking Finns, that is 5.46 % of the total population. International comparisons have shown that there is only one minority in the world that has no complaints about their situation and that is the Swedish-speaking Finns. More recent minority debates often deal with immigrants, Russians being the most important group, and with sexual minorities (gays and lesbians). Today there are some 40 000 people of Russian origin living in Finland. Russian minority has been growing steadily, there are two main causes: marriages and work related mobility.

It may be not fully correct to say that Finland has no minority problems, but the scope has been, at least this far, quite limited. The amount of immigrants has increased dramatically in Finland. At the beginning of the 90's there were only 26 000 foreigners in the country and last year the figure was 143 000. In less than 20 years the figure has increased more than seven times. In spite of rapid growth, only 2.6 % of the total population are of foreign origin. This far immigrant population has not been any issue. We have two ethnic minorities Roma people and Saame people. There are about 10 000 Roma people and about 8 000 Sami people in the country. Both of these minorities are integrated into the Finnish society.

From the perspective of civil society minorities in Finland do not make any big issue. Rights of Swedish-speaking Finns and Sami people are protected by laws. Both groups have their own organizations,



the respondents consider them very important. This is understandable because of reasons mentioned above.

Close to 60 per cent of all the ISSP respondents find it very important that the government authorities respect and protect the minorities' rights and close to 90 per cent find it important. Only one per cent finds the question unimportant.

The variation is considerably greater here than in the previous question. The Spanish, only one per cent, and Portuguese, about 68 per cent, respondents place more emphasis on minority rights than the other countries. Danish people are in the third place. The figure is lowest in Japan, where only 15 per cent find it important that the government should respect and protect the rights of minorities.

The Netherlands is an interesting case. We have learnt that the Netherlands is "the" tolerant society, in which minority rights are highly valued, as well as protected. The figures were the lowest in Europe. The result may partially be explained by the ethnic disputes in the country at the time when the survey was conducted.

The very idea of citizenship is a product of modern capitalism. The French revolution and the declaration of independence of the USA stressed that all people should have equal political rights and they should be treated equally regardless of their position in society. Since then, all capitalist democracies have agreed with this idea. There is a global understanding that government authorities should treat all citizens equally.

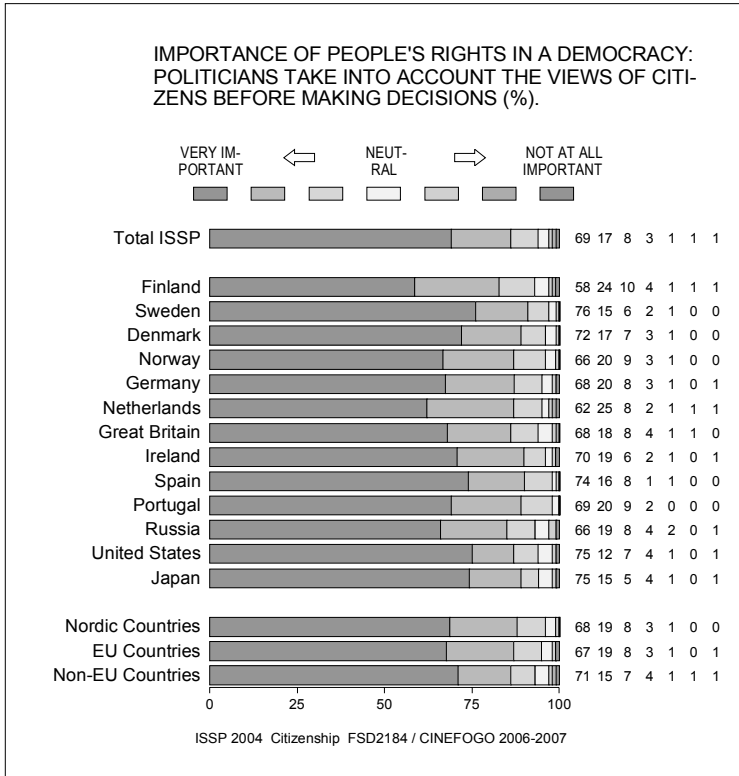
This idea is shared by the vast majority of respondents in all countries that participated in the ISSP 2004 survey on citizenship. Only three people out of 100 find the issue unimportant, while three quarters consider it very important. There is some variation between the countries. The figures are highest in Sweden (85 per cent very important) and in the USA (82 per cent) and lowest in Japan (60 per cent very important) and in Great Britain (63 per cent). In general, the idea of equal treatment is widely accepted in the Nordic countries. Among the Nordic countries, the figures were lowest in Finland.

It is said that political parties are transmitting the interests of different social forces. Political parties represent their members and





**Figure 4.** Politicians take into account the views of citizens before making decisions\*.



\*There are different opinions about people's rights in a democracy. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all important and 7 is very important, how important is it: That politicians take into account the views of citizens before making decisions.

the past few decades, this line of thinking has been heavily criticised. Nowadays, it is said that there is a growing distance between the electorate and the decision makers.

More than two thirds of all respondents find it highly important that the politicians take into account the views of the citizens before making decisions. Again, only three per cent consider it unimpor-

tant. The variation between the countries is small. The figure “very important” is highest in Japan and in the USA, 75 per cent in both countries and lowest in Finland (58 per cent). Combining the positive categories, the difference between the countries disappears entirely. We may conclude that all around the world people share the idea that, in a democratic society, politicians should take into account the views of the citizens before making decisions.

In modern democracies, citizens participate in public decision-making by voting. We vote in local and general elections. After the elections, city councils and parliaments are responsible for the actual decision-making. During the past 15 years, the public sector has adopted practices from private enterprises. New public management thinking places a lot of emphasis e.g. on efficiency and accountability. The public decision-making is becoming increasingly professional. It is often said that the problems are so complicated that ordinary people are unable to master them. What is people’s take on this, then, would they like to have more opportunities to participate in the public decision-making?

A half of the respondents consider it important that people have more opportunities for taking part in decision-making and only four per cent find it unimportant. There are interesting differences between the countries. People in the non-EU countries are more in favour of new opportunities than people in the EU countries. In the Nordic countries, the support is at the lowest level. In our sample of countries, the figures are highest in Spain and Portugal (60 per cent very important) and lowest in Finland (38 per cent) and Denmark (40 per cent).

How can this result be interpreted? One line of argument is that, in the Nordic countries, we have long traditions of political democracy and active voluntary associations. People find that the existing systems provide enough means for participation as it is. On the other hand, in countries where the democratic tradition is younger, people are more eager to gain more opportunities for participation.

During the past 10 years, new forms of political action have rapidly increased on a global scale, including those of civil disobedience. The phenomena can be seen in connection with extensive demonstrations



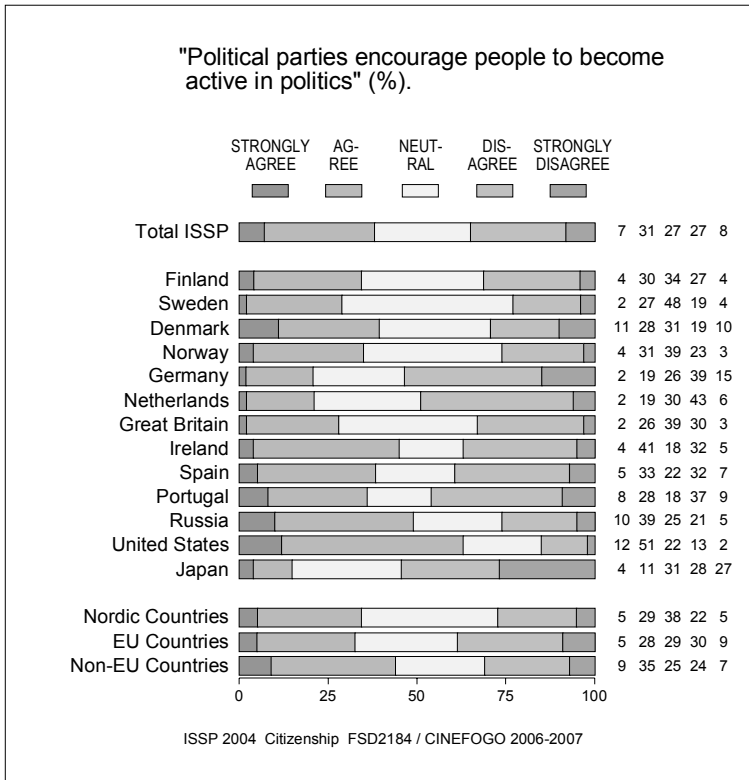


Here, the differences between countries are considerable. In Russia, (38 per cent very important) people are more than twice as often in favour of civil disobedience as in Norway (16 per cent). In Great Britain, almost a half (44 per cent) of the respondents find it unimportant, while in Portugal only 15 per cent share this opinion. All Nordic countries belong to the group in which people do not place much emphasis on civil disobedience.

The debate concerning the role of political parties since the late 1970s has been lively. In his classical study about the security state, the German sociologist Joachim Hirsch (1980) presented the idea that political parties are not collective organizers anymore as much as apparatuses of mass integration. By this Hirsch means that political parties are no more mediating the interests of social classes but trying to integrate voters to the current political system. As a consequence of this political parties do not encourage people to become active in politics anymore. Hirsch's prognosis has been quite correct at least in the Nordic context, where we have had real mass parties compared with most of the Europe. In the Nordic countries there have been real differences between the political agendas e.g. the social democratic parties and the conservative parties. Meanwhile, we have witnessed the decline in the membership figures and decline in voting rates.

Today, only very few people strongly agree with the statement that political parties encourage people to become active in politics. In fact, slightly more often people find the opposite to be true. About one quarter have a neutral opinion in this respect. Again, the differences between countries in comparison are significant. Surprisingly, people in the United States find that political parties encourage people to become active in politics more often than the rest of the world. From the Nordic perspective this is slightly strange, since the political parties in the USA are only active during elections. The figures are lowest in the Netherlands and Great Britain. In the Nordic countries, the Danes are the most optimistic in this respect, whereas the Swedes are the most pessimistic. All in all, people in the non-EU countries have a more positive attitude towards political parties than people in the European Union.

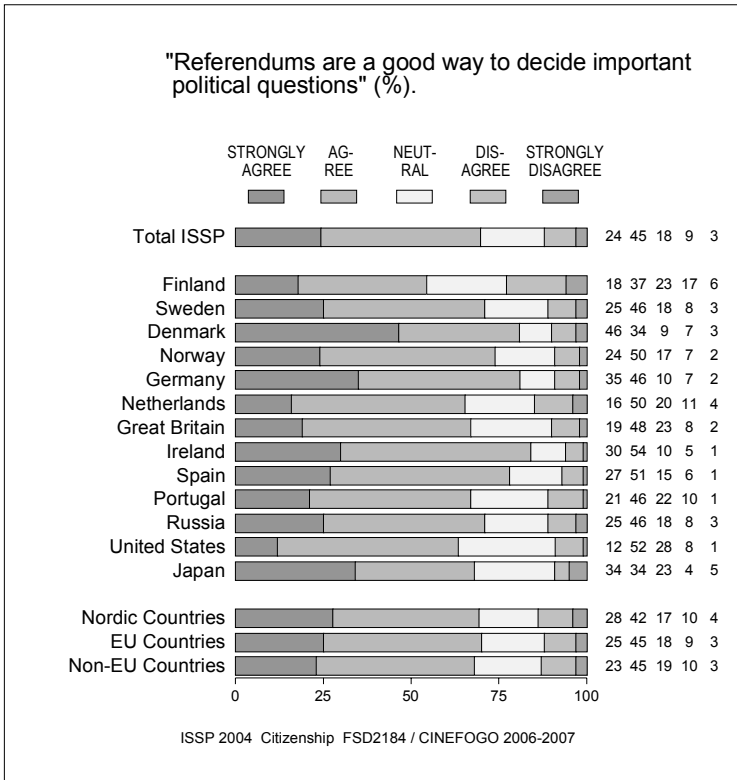
**Figure 7.** Political parties encourage people to become active in politics\*.



\*Thinking about politics in [your country], to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? a) Political parties encourage people to become active in politics

One ideal model of democracy suggests that all important political questions should be solved by referendums. However, referendums are not widely used in contemporary world. Switzerland is perhaps the best example of a country in which referendums are used on a regular basis. In the rest of the world, referendums are very rarely used. A good example is the vote on whether a country should join the European Union. Those who speak in favour of referendums are often accused of populism.

**Figure 8.** Referendums are a good way to decide important political questions\*.



\*Thinking about politics in [your country], to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? c) Referendums are a good way to decide important political questions.

One quarter of all respondents strongly agree with the statement that referendums are a good way to decide on important political questions. Another 45 per cent agree with the statement. Only slightly over one tenth disagrees. The Danes are the most often in favour of the idea, while people in Finland have the greatest doubts. In comparison, the differences between the different country groups are not significant.

The comparisons have shown that the elements of civic mind, such as competence, active participation and tolerance, that were already proposed in the 1960s (Almond and Verba 1963) can also be found in the contemporary world. People, for example, think that in a democratic society all citizens should have an adequate standard of living, and that, in a democracy, government authorities should respect and protect minority rights and treat everybody equally regardless of their position in the society.

There are, however, clear differences between the countries. If we wanted to name the countries where we can find “developed civic minds”, the Nordic countries would be at the top. Denmark is the best example here while Finland has a number of contradictory elements. The figures are also high in Spain and Portugal and the United States. Japan and Russia both have different political traditions and clearly deviate from the standard pattern. In Europe, the figures are in many respects critical in the Netherlands and Great Britain.

Our analyses have shown that the European Union is, by no means, a homogenous political entity. There are tangible differences between the EU countries. It seems that people in the old EU countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, are more sceptical towards the political system than other EU countries.

## Legitimacy of Finnish Democracy

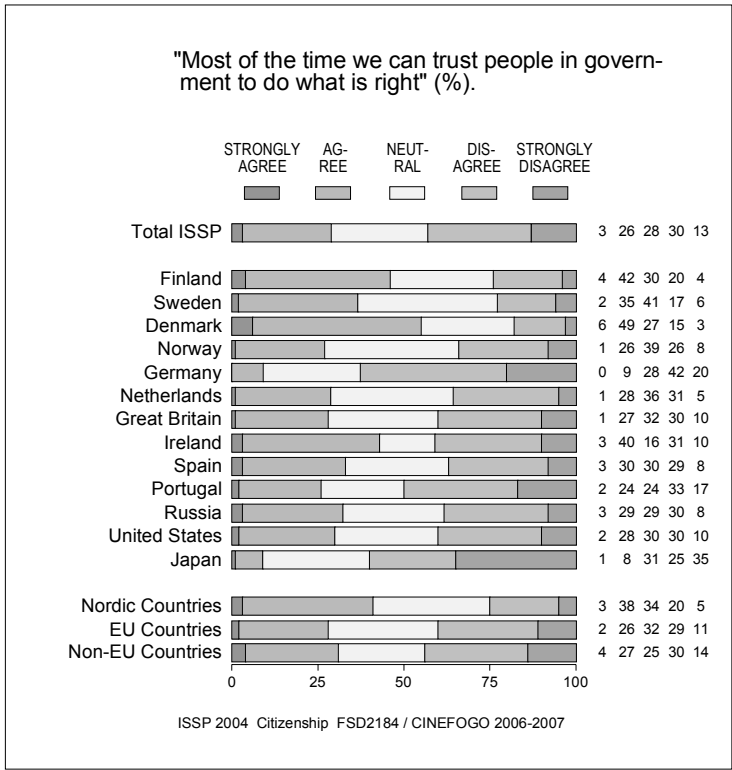
With the term legitimacy social scientists usually refer to Max Weber’s analysis on the sources of legitimate authority or power (Weber 1978). Weber talks about charismatic, traditional and rational/legal authority. The legitimacy of charismatic authority is based on the charisma of the leader. In the case of traditional authority, legitimacy is based on tradition. People accept the government because of the length of the period it has been in power. Rational authority is typical of modern societies. Legitimacy is based on the perception that the government’s



power derives from a set of procedures, principles and laws. Representative democracy is a proper example of legal authority.

Many social scientists have proposed that in the contemporary world we can see a process of the erosion of citizenship and crisis of legitimacy (Balibar 1988, Habermas 1998). The crisis is caused by the post-national world of corporate globalism, increased migration, Internet revolution and multicultural states (Scobey 2001, 13). In this respect Finland is an interesting case for analysis. Finland has long traditions of democracy, active civil society and the country has been shaped strongly by economic globalisation during the past 15 years.

**Figure 9.** Most of the time we can trust the government to do what is right.



The most common source of legitimacy today is the perception that a government is operating under democratic principles and is subject to the will of the people. Governments often claim a popular mandate to exercise power; however, how this mandate is obtained can vary greatly from regime to regime. Liberal democratic states claim democratic legitimacy on the grounds that they have regular free and fair contested elections. The Finnish democracy meets all the formal requirements mentioned above. How do the Finnish respondents in the ISSP survey perceive the state of the art at the time of the 2004 survey?

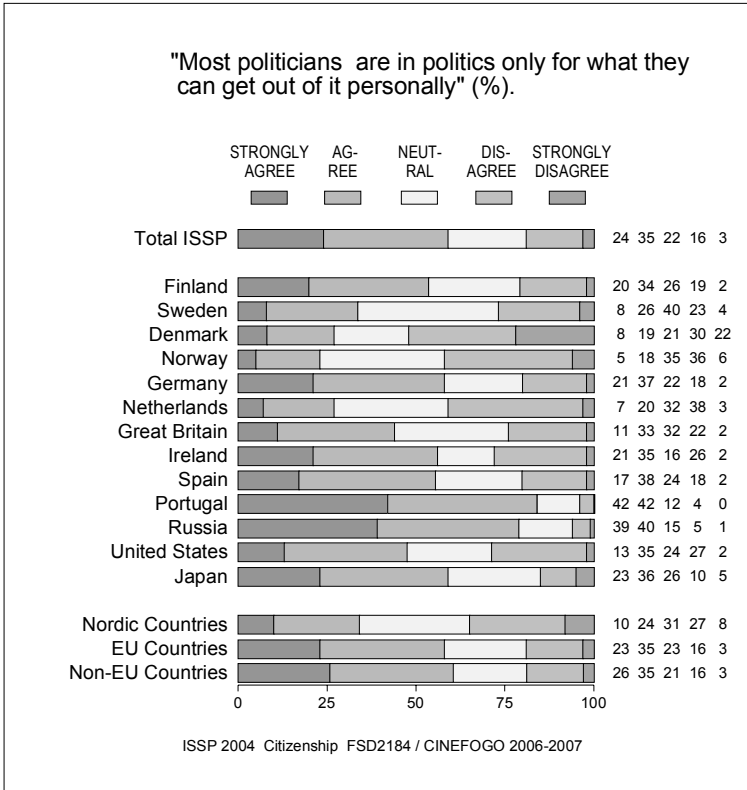
Trust in government is an important aspect of legitimacy. According to a number of surveys, for example ISSP and ESS, the Finns have high trust in political institutions. This holds true for the parliament, judiciary and the police, as well as the politicians. According to the 2000 ESS survey, 82 per cent of Finns trust the Finnish parliament and 69 per cent trust politicians. In international comparisons, the figures are rather high. However, the trust in institutions does not equal trust in that the government does what is right.

Most of the respondents are sceptical about the actions of the people in the government. Merely three per cent of all respondents strongly agree with the statement that most of the time we can trust the government to do what is right. One quarter agrees with the statement. About the same number have a neutral opinion. More than 40 per cent express a differentiating opinion.

There is no clear division between the countries. People in the Nordic countries have a more positive orientation than the ISSP average. People in Denmark and Finland have the highest trust in the government to do what is right. On the other hand, the German (62 per cent disagree) and Japanese (63 per cent disagree) respondents are highly critical and the Russians are somewhere in the middle.

All politics is about interests. Political parties are supposed to mediate the interests of the members and supporters. On the other hand, citizens think that politicians should act without promoting any personal interests. However, we all know that politicians are human beings, too, and they do not differ from anyone else, they have their

**Figure 10.** Most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally.



own reference groups and interests. Politicians in all countries are a part of national elites, and according to a common understanding, they, at least partially, make their decisions based on their personal interests.

More than a half of all respondents agree with the statements that most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally. One quarter of the respondents strongly agree with this

statement. Only a total of 20 per cent disagree, the same number holds a neutral opinion.

People in the non-EU countries are more willing than people in the EU to believe that the politicians are selfish. In the Nordic countries, more often than in other countries, people consider politicians to have other interests besides gaining personal benefits. Finland is an exception. Here, more than a half believes that most politicians are in politics solely for personal gain. In Norway, the corresponding figure is merely 26 per cent. In the EU context, the Portuguese are the most critical towards politicians, more than 80 per cent of the respondents believe that politicians are in politics mainly because of personal reasons.

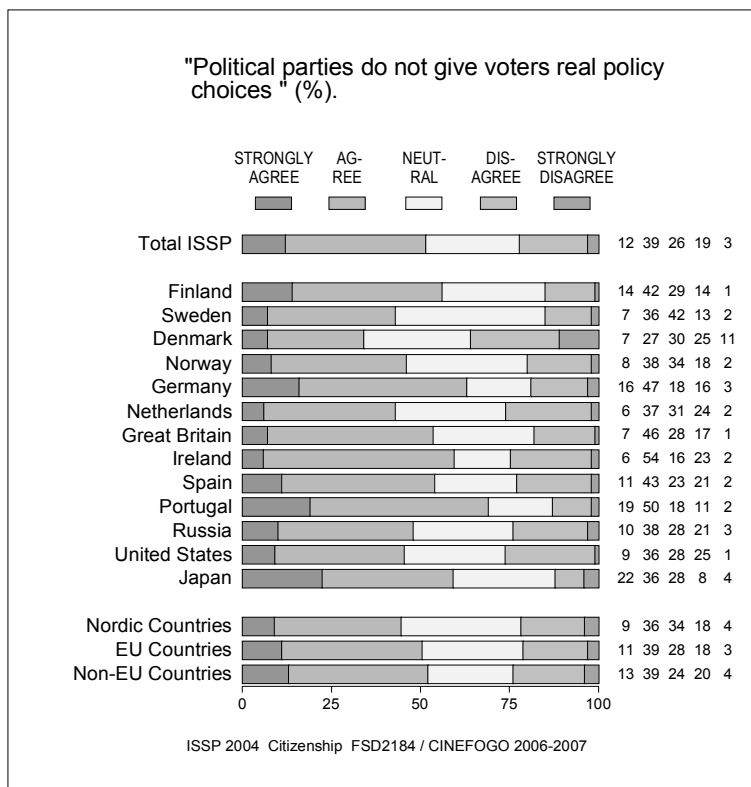
When people cast their votes in general elections, they make political choices. They choose between different parties and it is assumed that the parties promote different goals. Socialist parties support the welfare state and are critical towards unrestrained market forces. Christian parties trust the Christian values and place a lot of emphasis on family politics. Greens are concerned with environmental issues. Conservative parties, on the other hand, rely on individualism and private entrepreneurship.

The differences between political parties seem clear. However, a half of all respondents find that political parties do not provide the voters with real policy choices. Only 22 per cent disagree with this statement and one quarter is of neutral opinion.

People in Portugal and in Ireland are the most critical towards political parties in this respect. In both countries, at least 60 per cent believe that parties do not give voters real policy choices. In the Nordic countries, the Finns are the most critical ones. People in Denmark have the highest trust in politics. More than one third finds that different policy choices are available for the general population, while in Japan only 12 per cent share this opinion.

Research has shown that in the Soviet Union, close to 100 per cent of the electorate always voted in the general elections and candidates nominated by the communist party were always elected to the parliament and various councils. Social scientists were highly critical towards

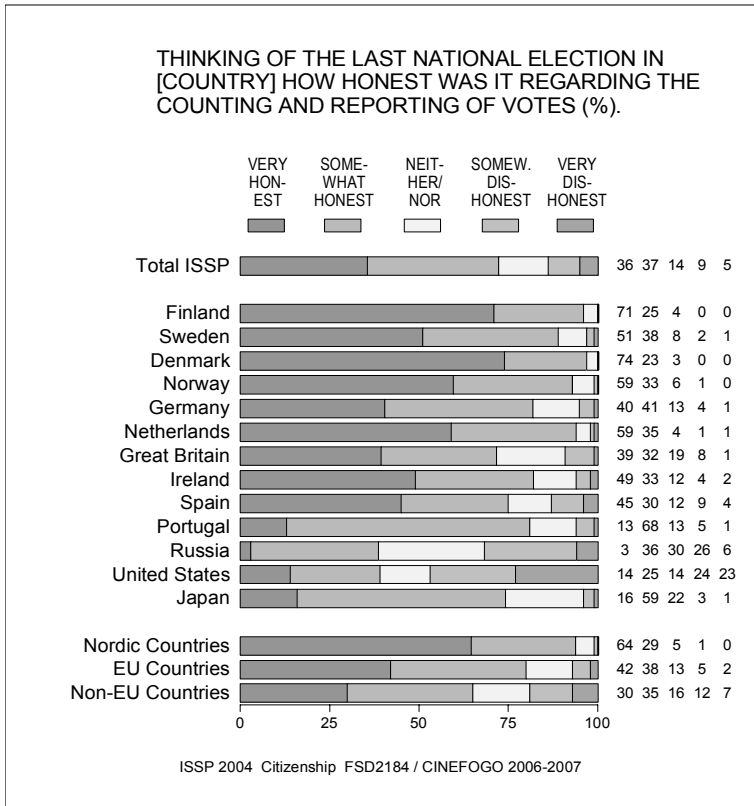
**Figure 11.** Political parties do not give voters real policy choices.



these results. The results were, without a doubt manipulated. Today, we closely follow the elections around the world. Independent monitor reports on how honest the counting and reporting of votes is.

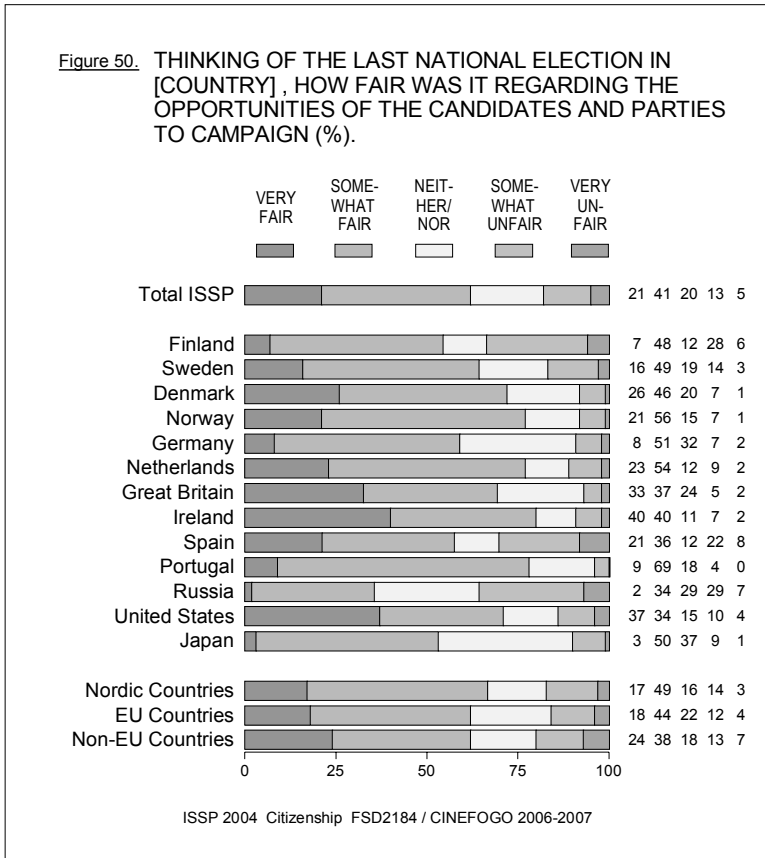
Three quarters of the respondents believe that the counting and reporting of votes in the last national elections in their country was honest and 14 per cent believe the opposite to be true. In the Nordic countries, most of the respondents consider the elections to have been honest. In Finland and Denmark, none of the respondents believed in

**Figure 12.** Thinking of last national election in Finland, how honest was it regarding the counting and reporting of votes.



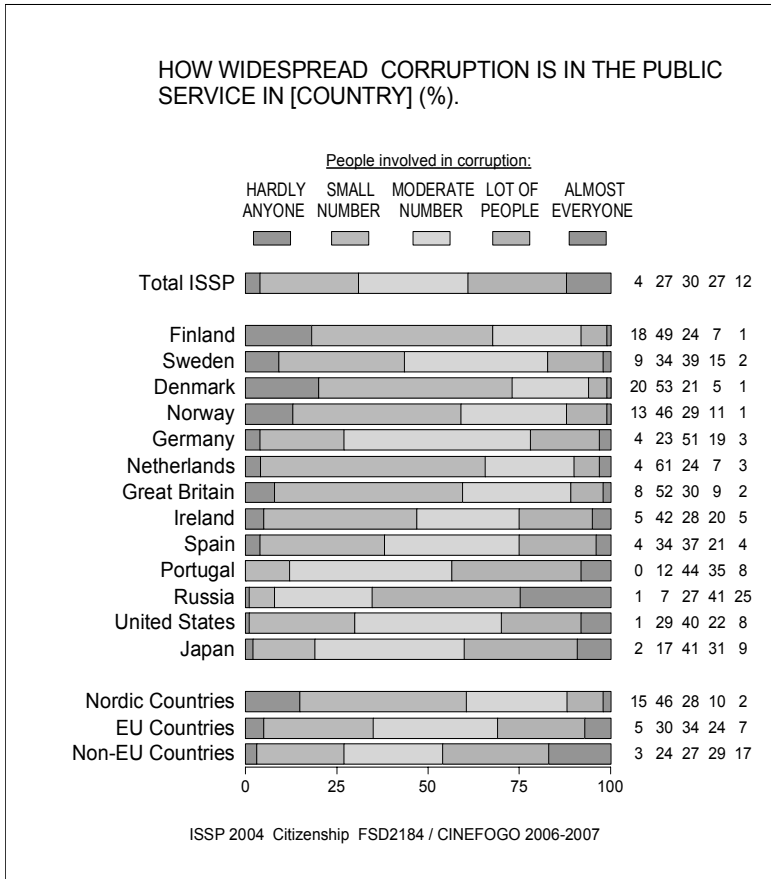
dishonest practices and in Sweden and Norway only a few believed in dishonesty. The United States, on the other hand, is the other extreme. More than a half of Americans are of the opinion that the counting and reporting of votes in the last national election was dishonest, and a quarter believes it was highly dishonest. On the other hand, in Russia, with the Soviet traditions still alive, 39 per cent consider the election to have been honest and one third considers them dishonest.

**Figure 13.** Considering the latest national election in your own country, how fair was it regarding the opportunities of the candidates and parties to campaign.



The nature of political campaigns varies from country to country. The variation between the campaigns is also great between the political parties and between the candidates in a given country. In some countries, the political opposition is more or less forbidden. In some countries, there are strong restrictions for the opposition. In some countries,

**Figure 14.** How widespread corruption is in the public service in Finland.



room for operation for the opposition parties is limited, for example, by media. In many countries elections are, thus, highly unfair.

How do the respondents perceive the situation in their own country? A clear majority find that the campaigning opportunities for the candidates and parties were at least somewhat fair. One fifth believes



that the election was fair in this respect. Another one fifth finds that the elections were at least somewhat unfair. In Ireland, 80 per cent of the respondents consider that the candidates and parties had fair chances in the last national election. Meanwhile, only a third of the Russians share this opinion.

In this respect, Finland is an interesting case. People in the Nordic countries typically consider the political system fair for all the parties and candidates. Figures are high especially in Norway and Denmark. In Finland, only 55 per cent believe that the system is fair and one third finds the system at least somewhat unfair. This figure is clearly the highest among the EU countries. In principle, the Finnish system is fair and all parties have equal opportunities, though there is an ongoing debate concerning the economic opportunities, voting districts ect. It is possible that respondents in Finland have taken into account the economic resources of the candidates. As it turns out, the differences in Finland are, indeed, considerable in this respect.

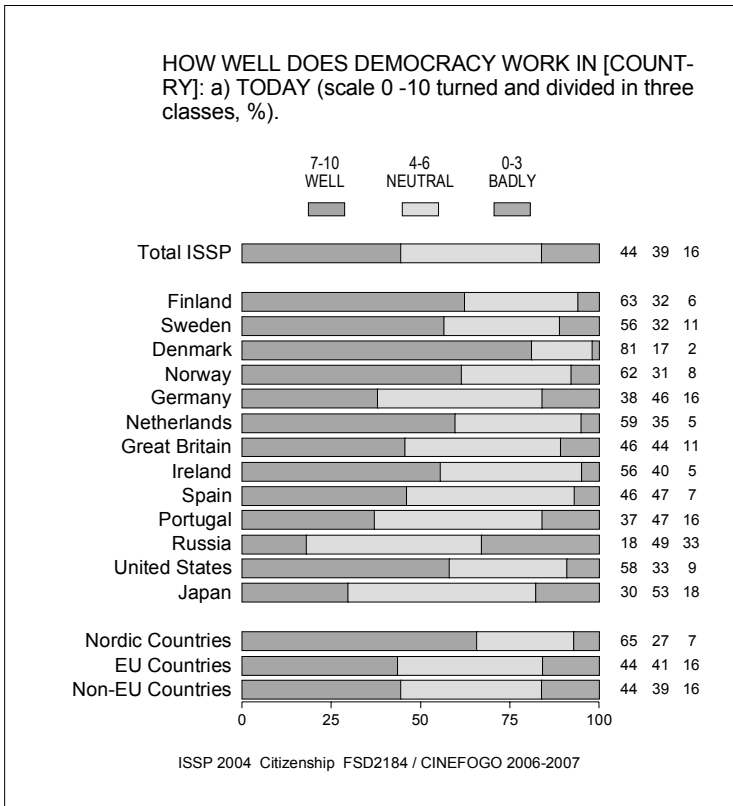
Thus, we have to remember that even if the elections are formally and in practice as fair as possible, the economic possibilities to run the campaign are not equal. The parties and candidates with considerable economic resources at their disposal have considerably better opportunities than those with limited resources.

Transparency International (see [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)) has monitored corruption on a global scale for years. According to the 2006 data, the five least corrupt countries in the world are Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Denmark and Singapore. On the other hand, the three most corrupt countries are Haiti, Myanmar and Iraq.

A third (31 per cent) of all respondents believe that only a small number of people working in the public sector are engaged in corruption in their country. At the same time, 39 per cent claim that a considerable number of people in the public sector are corrupt.

Differences between the countries are great. In Russia, less than ten per cent of the respondents believe that only a small number of people are not involved in corruption whereas more than two thirds are. In the neighbouring Finland, the situation is the other way around. Two

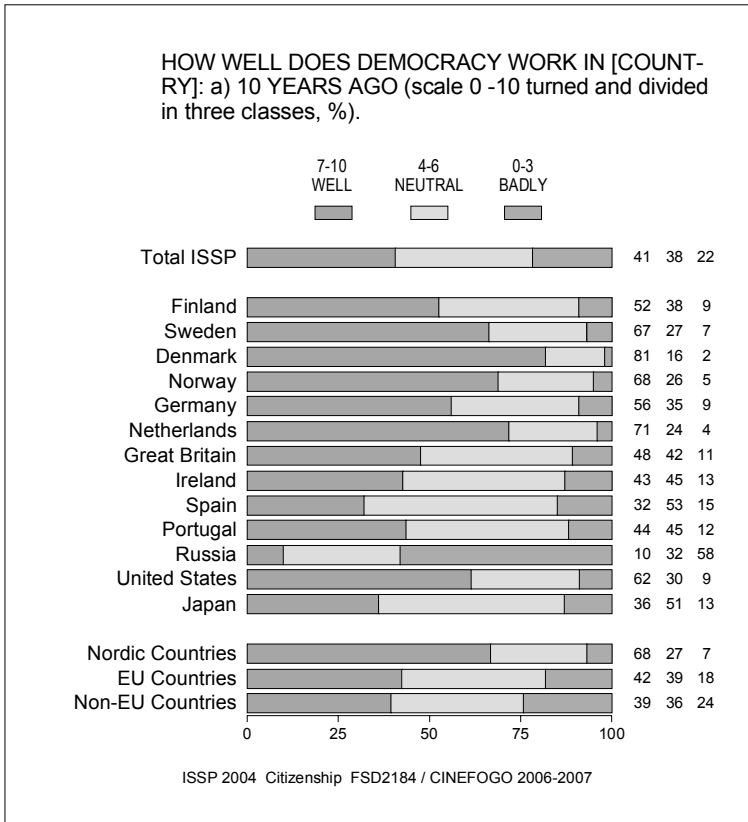
**Figure 15.** How well does democracy work in Finland today.



thirds say that only a small number of people is corrupt and less than ten per cent claim the opposite to be true. In general, people in the non-EU countries perceive corruption as more common than people in the EU. In the Nordic countries, corruption appears to be at the lowest level.

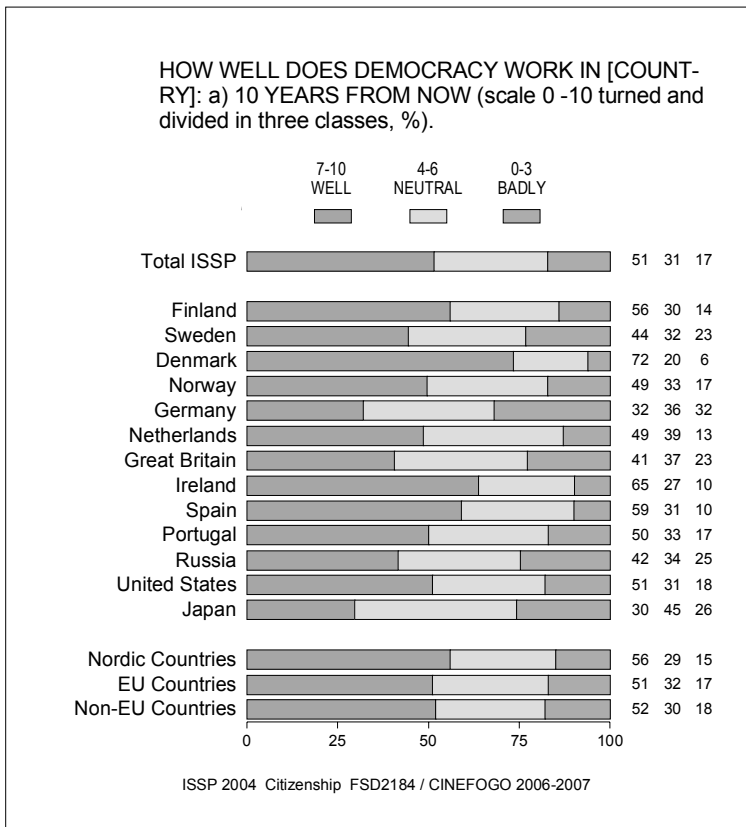
In the ISSP survey there was a three item scale measuring how well the democracy is perceived as working in different countries. The first

**Figure 16.** How well did democracy work in Finland 10 years ago.



question dealt with how well the democracy works today, how well it worked 10 years ago and how well the respondents estimate it to work ten years from now. The respondents were asked to use a scale from 0 to 10 and locate their own country on the scale. In the tables, we have divided the answers into three classes indicating whether the democracy is perceived as working well, whether the respondents' opinion is neutral or if whether it is perceived as working poorly.

**Figure 17.** How well does democracy work in Finland 10 years from now.



The figures show that the respondents have a positive opinion about the development of the democracy in general. In the following table, we have the figures – democracy works well and poorly – for Finland, Russia and the ISSP as a whole:

**Table 1.** Views on the development of Democracy in Finland, Russia and all ISSP countries.

	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>ISSP</b>
<b>10 years ago</b>	Well 52 Poorly 9	Well 10 Poorly 68	Well 41 Poorly 22
<b>Today</b>	Well 53 Poorly 6	Well 18 Poorly 33	Well 44 Poorly 16
<b>10 years from now</b>	Well 55 Poorly 14	Well 42 Poorly 25	Well 51 Poorly 17

We can assume that Finland represents a country with long democratic traditions and the Finnish democracy works considerably well in international comparisons. On the other hand, Russia has experienced rapid social changes and a deep socio-economic transition. The roots of the current Russian democracy are not deep grown.

Slightly more than a half of the Finns find that the Finnish democracy has been working well so far, currently works well and will be working well in the future, as well. It is, however, interesting that the future expectations in Finland are at the same time more critical. A growing number believes that in the future, democracy will not work as well as today. People's perceptions of the development of the Russian democracy are highly positive. If everything continues as expected, Russia is likely to take a giant leap towards democracy within the next 10 years.

What can, then, be said about the legitimacy of the Finnish democracy on the basis of the previous empirical analysis? In international comparisons, Finland belongs to highly functional parliamentary democracies, the Nordic welfare state model, social corporatist countries and the least corrupt countries in the world. The image that the respondents have of their country in the Finnish ISSP survey on citizenship is, however, more critical. The respondents believe that the Finnish political system does not encourage people to take initiative in political matters, that too many politicians act only in order to gain personal benefit, and that there are no real choices between the political parties.

Democracy is not an easy and simple concept. Peoples' perception of democracy varies greatly. On one hand, the political elite may be under the impression that the status quo in our country is as it should be. On the other hand, the general population is highly critical towards the political practices. At least from the perspective of active citizenship and strong civil society, the results indicate that, in Finland, there is still room for improvement in many respects. The results indicate that when government authorities treat everybody equally, when politicians take into account the views of citizens and when citizens have fair opportunities to participate the legitimacy increases.

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