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32

AN EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS
IN FINLAND BEFORE THE FACT

Aaretti Siitonen

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AN EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS
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- Nationalist sentiment is on the rise in Finland. It is reflected not only in the popularity of the True Finns, but also in the governing Centre Party's election rhetoric.
- Nationality, however, is of secondary importance in the European Parliament. MEPs defend political rather than national interests.
- The Finnish government's White Paper on the EU proposes changes to decision-making in the European Parliament, but Finnish EP insiders propose changes to the Finnish Parliament's work instead.
- In Finnish party politics the National Coalition Party is more popular and confident than ever before and its rivalry with the Centre Party is deepening, whereas the Social Democrats stand to gain from the economic crisis only if they can offer credible alternatives to current policies. The smaller parties are struggling to gain a seat in the EP. The Green League has fielded a strong list, but the Swedish People's Party and the Left Alliance are in dire straits.
- The European elections are marked by an EU-wide struggle between the Socialist PES and the European People's Party, but they have a common goal in opposing rising Euroscepticism.
- The European Parliament represents the people in the EU superstructure and wields considerable legislative influence. Despite this, voting turnout has been low throughout the EU. Turnout remains the central variable in the 2009 elections.
- The EU is facing a crisis of confidence and legitimacy. The elections will reverse or strengthen this trend.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs
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The European Parliament building in Strasbourg. Photo: Website of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2008

Finland's European elections – open ballots, one constituency, familiar faces

Finland is to elect 13 representatives to the seventh European Parliament on 7 June 2009. In the last European elections in 2004, EU-wide voter turnout remained at 46%, the figure in Finland reaching only 41.1%. This was, however, a considerable improvement on the 1999 elections, where Finnish turnout was a meagre 31.4%.

The principal reason for low voter turnout in the European elections remains a feeling of estrangement and a lack of knowledge among the public as to the Parliament's role in decision-making. In Finland, as in the majority of EU member states, the elections tend to be viewed as mid-term votes of confidence for governments in power and are often fought over national rather than European issues.

The Finnish EP elections are based on open ballots, with the entire country forming one constituency. In the open ballot system votes are given to individuals, whose order on their specific list is determined by their number of personal votes, while the number of seats allocated to each list is decided by the total number of votes for the list. This makes the elections less party-centred than in countries with closed or ordered ballots, such as France or Sweden.

The Finnish parties do have common campaigns, but the role of individuals is emphasized. Media coverage has consequently focused on a number of interesting personalities, especially Mitro Repo, an Orthodox priest vying for a seat as a non-aligned candidate on the Social Democrat list, and Timo Soini, the controversial chair of the Eurosceptic True Finns Party.

In sharp contrast to countries with closed-ballot systems, Finnish candidates also compete within parties, adding to the expense of the campaigns, as well as the importance of personal recognizability. A number of celebrities, including former athletes, are standing for election. Nevertheless, past elections have shown that established politicians stand the greatest chance of winning seats.

A function of domestic politics?

The European elections can always be seen as a function of domestic politics. In Finland, there are four central elements: the rivalry between the two major governing parties, the crisis and opportunity of the Social Democrats, the Eurosceptic vote and, last but not least, the consequences for the smaller parties.

The elections are taking place at a time of economic hardship. Finland's open, export-driven economy has been badly hit by the global downturn, and there is mounting concern that a deep and long recession will lead to high unemployment. The projected unemployment levels of over 10% have, however, not yet materialized and the economy remains relatively stable. Unemployment is expected to rise from approximately 6.4% in 2008 to 9% in 2009, and to over 10% in 2010, but has thus far remained at below 8% of the workforce, contributing to a still moderate political climate.

The significance of the European elections for domestic politics should not be over-estimated. It is possible, but highly unlikely that the coalition government would break up before the domestic parliamentary elections in March 2011. Finnish

governments tend to be rather stable and it is more probable that the European elections will merely change the balance of power within the government and give rise to emerging trends.

The rivalry between the two major governing parties, the Centre Party and the centre-right National Coalition Party, is deepening. The Centre Party has suffered defeats in the past two elections – the national parliamentary elections in 2007 and the municipal elections in October 2008. The Coalition Party, in the meantime, has taken the lead not only in the local elections, but also in recent opinion polls, surpassing the Centre Party in popularity. It is now for the first time in its history the most popular political party in Finland. This is due in part to its charismatic and dynamic leadership and the fact that government failures have largely been attributed to the Centre Party, which holds the premiership.

Prime Minister Vanhanen's credibility is at an all-time low. Only one-third of the population is satisfied with his performance and his party has been forced on the defensive. Commentators have seen the choice of former President Kekkonen as the Centre Party's election motif as an act of desperation. The party is in effect reaching out to its core voters, hoping to maintain its position. In his May Day speech, Prime Minister Vanhanen denounced EU flags and hymns, saying that Finns are impressed rather by having a 'place at the table' where decisions are made. This is typical of the Centre Party's emphasis on the practical benefits of EU membership.

The third largest party in Finland, the Social Democrats (SDP), has a rather new and young chair, Jutta Urpilainen. Her stated aim is the reform of the party into a 'new SDP'. The election list of the SDP stands in stark contrast to that of the Coalition Party, as none of its current MEPs, all senior politicians, are standing for re-election. The SDP, which has suffered a notable decline during the past five years, stands to gain from the economic downturn in terms of votes, but only if it can credibly offer an alternative to current policies.

Finland previously held 14 seats in the EP, but now, with only 13, it seems likely that at least one of the smaller parties will not attain a representative. The lack of a seat would be a setback for any of the small parties, mainly in terms of opportunity costs. Having a sitting MEP confers credibility on

the party and also makes it possible for it to better network with European colleagues and stay abreast of developments.

The Eurosceptic role in Finland is assumed mainly by the True Finns Party, a national-conservative movement, which is eating away at both SDP and Centre Party support. Campaigning mainly on amorphous criticism of the European Union, focusing on opposing the Lisbon Treaty and riding a wave of nationalist sentiments, it has continued to gain in popularity since its success in the October 2008 municipal elections. Their charismatic chair, Timo Soini, is standing as a candidate in the European elections and enjoys wide personal support. The True Finns Party has a joint list with the Christian Democrats, with each party having ten candidates.

The Green League has fielded a strong list of candidates and is set to retain its seat or even gain one. There are practically no internal contradictions between their national politics and their electoral message and their support base is growing. For the Swedish People's Party, however, the European elections present a conundrum. Their sitting MEP, Henrik Lax, is not standing for re-election and replacing him will pose a major challenge. The same holds true for the Left Alliance, whose MEP Esko Seppänen is stepping down as well.

Finnish focus on the practical

In Finland, the main point of discussion concerning the elections has been the elections themselves – technicalities, past voting figures and candidate selection. This in itself is not surprising as the campaigns tend to be costly and, as a consequence, rather short, focusing on the weeks prior to the elections. Most Finnish voters in EP elections make their voting choice at a very late stage.

The Finnish Foreign Ministry's Europe Information offices, spread across the country, recently published their figures on the issues citizens are most interested in. Freedom of movement within the EU with regard to travel, work and residence were the most usual subjects, with the Lisbon Treaty, EU financing, legislature and institutional matters also receiving a great deal of interest. Finns are actively interested in questions of governance and the institutional framework of the European Union, but primarily in practical issues.



The EP in Brussels – citizen’s opinions from across Europe are projected on a screen. Photo: Pietro Naj-Oleari

Thus, if candidates are able to articulate concrete proposals and demonstrate a good working knowledge of EU legislation and practices, they are likely to have an advantage over candidates who merely espouse generalities. Personal attributes, such as language and networking skills, are an asset both in the elections and the Parliament itself.

Government White Paper encourages attention to EP internal dynamics

The importance of MEPs’ personal attributes is demonstrated most clearly by the European Parliament’s main method of decision-making – the use of rapporteurs. This system designates individuals from the political groups in the EP to formulate the opinions and legislative amendments of committees. The process involves a great deal of bargaining and consensus-building and gives the rapporteurs a considerable amount of personal influence.

In the Finnish expert discussion, two lines of thought prevail on the system of rapporteurs. The line taken in the government’s White Paper on the European Union, published in April, expresses the desire that the European Parliament should assume a similar system of committee- and party-based decision-making as employed by the Finnish parliament. In this model, the role of individuals is not as great as in the rapporteur-based system. Finnish EP insiders, including officials and MEPs, maintain that although the rapporteur-centred approach is less predictable, it is more efficient and appropriate for the European parliament than any alternative.

In effect, EP insiders believe that assuming a system of ‘shadow rapporteurs’, emulating the European Parliament’s procedures, would increase the Finnish parliament’s influence on and understanding of Community legislation. In other words, certain MPs could be designated to follow legislation being debated within the EP, making it possible to react proactively to amendments at the preparatory phase.

The White Paper also recognizes that the political groups, which form the central divisions within the EP, are rising in importance. It expresses the hope that Finnish contacts with the groups will be intensified as this would allow Finland to attain greater influence both in the preliminary and formal phases of legislation.

Political groups and election issues in the European debate

The 2009 elections to the European Parliament (EP) are, on a European level, a rather traditional political contest. According to Professor Simon Hix of the London School of Economics, “the European Parliament elections matter. If the centre-right wins we can expect more market liberalisation, fewer environmental regulations, and more restrictive immigration policies, while if the centre-left wins, we can expect stricter environmental standards, more labour market rules and liberal immigration policies.”

Although characterized by far looser couplings than national parties, the significance of the political groups is increasing. Common manifestos and Europe-wide campaigns, as well as increases in personnel, coupled

with the increasing influence of the EP itself, are all contributing to this trend.

The EP is roughly divided into socialists, conservatives, liberals, greens, leftists, national-conservatives, Euro-sceptics and independents. Of these, the most cohesive group, in terms of voting as a block, is the Greens/EFA (Greens/European Free Alliance), reaching 0.9 on a scale of 0-1, whereas the least cohesive group is the Euro-sceptic IND/DEM (Independence/Democracy), reaching 0.41.

The largest political groups in the EP are the PES (Group of the Party of European Socialists) and the EPP-ED (Group of the European People's Party [Christian Democrats] and European Democrats), which combined have represented over 54% of votes since the Parliament's inception. They are far from unitary, and the consensus-oriented culture of the EP prompts accommodating a large consensus, but in theory, and at times in practice, these two large groups can steer the entire Parliament.

The British Conservatives have decided to leave the EPP-ED group, giving rise to speculation as to whether the Socialists will be able to become the largest group once again. If they do, the selection of the Commission president, otherwise expected to be a foregone conclusion in favour of the current president, José Manuel Barroso, will be contested.

Another phenomenon of these elections is the Euro-sceptic vote. The Irish businessman Declan Ganley has formed a pan-European movement called Libertas, which attempts to channel frustration towards the EU into electoral support. Although expected to remain a minor force within the Parliament, the success of Euro-sceptic parties would articulate existing anti-EU sentiment. It could also potentially translate discontent previously expressed by not voting into a higher turnout. Thus, ironically, Libertas could potentially confer heightened legitimacy on the EP.

A crisis of confidence and legitimacy?

If the eastern enlargement defined the European dimension of the 2004 EP elections, the 2009 elections are clearly marked by the European Union's crisis of confidence. The economic crisis is exacerbating nationalist sentiment especially in the older member states, and the direction of the

EU project is questioned on many fronts. This is demonstrated by the difficulties faced by attempts at institutional reform and the burgeoning reluctance towards further enlargement of the Union.

A low turnout in the European elections would not be a catastrophe for the EU, but it would be likely to further hamper the perceived legitimacy, not only of the Parliament itself, but also of the supranational nature of EU decision-making. The European Parliament, after all, was originally formed to counter the problem of transferred sovereignty and a perceived democratic deficit.

The EU member states delegate part of their sovereign powers to a supranational institution and, in congruence with democratic principles of procedural legitimacy, have deemed it necessary to maintain a parliamentary organ to supervise it. Even though the EU is not a nation-state, or indeed a federal state, but instead a hybrid of an intergovernmental organization and a supranational entity, the analogy is unavoidable. If we demand representation at the national level, it is logical for us to demand it at the supranational level as well.

An unorthodox assembly

Certain attributes set the EP apart from the majority of parliamentary assemblies. No government emerges from a majority in the EP – Commissioners are nominated by the governments of the member states, rather than political groupings in the EP. Alliances between political groups are thus far more fluid than those in national parliaments, often being issue-specific in nature. The Parliament's influence stems in part from this lack of a government/opposition configuration; there is no opportunity for either the Commission or the Council to railroad decisions through an established majority, as none exists.

The European Parliament is beyond comparison when it comes to networking European politicians. In the Parliament and especially through the political groups, politicians from the various member states are in regular contact with one another. The groups have an influence on the over 140 national parties that compose them and vice versa. They are in effect vast networks, channelling opinions and information across the continent. It comes as no surprise that many prominent European politicians have been MEPs at one point or another during their careers.



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The multi-levelled and sometimes conflicting loyalties of the members of the Parliament also add a singular element to the EP's functioning. The MEPs are selected by national quotas, so as to ensure fair representation of all member states, yet within the EP they are organized according to political affiliation, not nationality, into political groups. This contributes to shifting voting patterns – most of the time an MEP will vote with her group, but sometimes an issue will be of great importance along national lines and she will vote accordingly. This latter tendency is overrepresented in most countries' EP election campaigns and Finland is no exception.

Although MEPs often vote against their national government's line, rhetoric emphasizing patriotic sentiments is rife during the elections, even within major parties. The Finnish Centre Party, for example, describes its candidates as people who "at all times defend Finland's interests and Finns". The European elections are thus still often campaigned on the mistaken assumption that the European Parliament is an arena centred on nationality rather than political affiliation. The nation-state centred view is readily accepted, mainly due to its simplicity.

The Finnish Prime Minister has on more than one occasion criticized Finnish MEPs, including two from his own party, for voting against his government's line on the question of the working time directive. The working time directive, agreed upon unanimously by the Council of Ministers, was not approved by the European Parliament even after employing an unusual three-round conciliation process.

This was a show of force for the Parliament and demonstrated that MEPs are not bound by nationality nor indeed by national party affiliation. They are free to weigh their loyalties and, especially in an open-

ballot system, tend to put their constituencies first. The interconnectedness and overlapping interests that cut across nationality throughout the European Union can be challenging to reconcile with rhetoric that is still rooted in the nation-state.

Trans-national, multi-lingual and difficult to popularize

The trans-national character of the EP cannot be overlooked. It is the cause of some of the greatest idiosyncrasies of the parliament. MEPs are not elected in a uniform fashion and they represent constituencies of varying sizes. A German MEP, for example, would represent 829,000 Germans, whereas an Irish MEP represents a population of 249,000. Some countries have regional, others national constituencies, and age limits for voting vary nationally.

The EP is multi-lingual. All official European languages are spoken and a great deal of translation work is required. One fourth of EP staff are employed in translating and a considerable amount of money is spent on translation work. This is a prerequisite if the EP is to function, and a colossal, constant effort, as the translation of all documents into all official languages of the EU is the norm. Consequently, documents tend to be highly condensed. Unfortunately for the EP's public image, eloquence and shades of expression are diminished – irony may be lost, directness can appear rude and subtlety turns into obscurity.

In contrast to national parliaments, which enjoy relatively unchallenged positions within their polity, the EP's standing is uncertain. The treaties laying-down the institutional framework are, after all, amendable by the member states, not the Parliament. The EP is forced to take this into consideration whenever it makes potentially controversial decisions.

The EP's constant trekking between Brussels and Strasbourg is illustrative of its standing. The majority of EU institutions are based in Brussels, but the EP is forced to assemble almost monthly in Strasbourg, symbolic of Franco-German reconciliation. It is expensive and time-consuming, but the treaties stipulate it. France has a right of veto and has so far refused to alter its position on the matter, so the EP must submit to this impractical arrangement.

It is worth noting that an active MEP can personally influence the formulation of legislative amendments which, if passed, are implemented across the EU. Individual MEPs can thus have a greater impact on citizens' lives than members of most national legislatures. The complex workings of the EP, however, especially in relation to the other EU institutions, make its work harder to comprehend on a concrete level. This is exacerbated by shifting competences due to treaty revisions and the multitude of decision-making instruments. The end result is an assembly that has an ambiguous standing in the media and with the population.

It takes a long time for laws passed by the EP to be translated into national legislation and even longer for them to be implemented. Its work can be hard to fathom and the results of its activities are often debatable, especially in areas where it has little formal competence, such as foreign affairs. Also, with no functioning juxtaposition between opposition and in-cabinet parties, the EP appears to be a milder political arena than most national parliaments.

Nevertheless, the expansion of Community competences has led to a gradual empowerment of the European Parliament. Despite its lingering reputation as a mere multilingual talking shop, it has become much more than that. In Community legislation, the European Parliament can currently be seen as the lower chamber of a bi-cameral European assembly, with the Council of Ministers representing the 'states' and the EP the 'people'. The Parliament has gained tremendously in influence during the past two decades and currently more than 50% of its proposed amendments end up as law. For a national legislature, this would not be impressive, but considering that the EP has been a true co-legislator with the Council only since the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, it is a remarkable figure.

Voting turnout as the most important variable

The personal qualities of the future MEPs are consequential – if the selected representatives are active, capable and able to adapt well to EP work, this will translate into their voters' needs being addressed better on a European level of decision-making.

The most significant variable in the upcoming elections, however, remains voting turnout. A high turnout would emphasize not only the importance and legitimacy of the European Parliament as a legislator, but also heighten the implications for domestic politics. Because the EP is viewed separately from each member state's perspective, the national turnout in the elections is, in terms of perceived legitimacy, as important as the EU-wide turnout. In Finland, even a True Finns victory, coupled with heightened turnout, could result in the institution of the European Parliament becoming more widely recognized as a representative arena.

The elections can be likened to a Cooper Test – the intensity is instrumental. Thirteen MEPs will be chosen from Finland, but if turnout remains low, their mandates will be less meaningful and the elections' implications for domestic politics lessened.

Voting turnout is expected to remain low across the EU, and thus the block's crisis of confidence and legitimacy is likely to continue. If the Lisbon Treaty is approved, the EP's powers will expand and the formal legitimacy of the EU will be heightened. For an increasingly estranged population, however, the strength of the representatives' mandate is more important than their formal powers. The paradox of the elections thus lies in popular perceptions of the Parliament's lack of importance being revocable only through a popular recognition of the assembly's potential.

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