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PROFILES

Does your child still vote for the Greens? The Green League and the environment in the Finnish parliamentary elections 2011

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The most striking feature of the Finnish parliamentary elections in April 2011 was the rocket-like rise of the populist *Perussuomalaiset*, the True Finns. Previously one of the smallest parliamentary parties, they shot up to be third largest. All other parties lost votes, the biggest loser being the Center Party that led the governing coalition (down from 23.1% to 15.8%). The Green League, who actively profiled themselves as the fiercest opponents of the True Finns, also declined (down from 8.5% to 7.3%). Even though the drop in the vote share was not dramatic, unluckily for the Greens the losses came in electoral districts where their seats were marginal. This resulted in a loss of one-third of their 15 seats in the parliament of 200 members in total. Here I situate the Greens on the map of political parties in Finland, look at the role of environmental issues in the electoral campaign, suggest some possible reasons for the defeat of the Greens, and discuss the consequences of the election results for the future of environmental politics in Finland.

Greens: the future big party?

The party political field in Finland has, since the 1980s, been dominated by three parties: the Social Democrats, the (formerly agrarian) Center Party and the conservative National Coalition. The share of votes for each has varied from 18% to 28%, and governments have been built on coalitions based on two of the three. The Green League has been in the parliament since 1983, increasing its share of the vote in almost every election, and growing to be the fifth largest party in 2007 with 8.5% of the vote and 15 seats.

The Greens have created an image of themselves as ‘the future big party’. Not only have they been steadily increasing their vote, but their electorate is

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younger than that of any other party. In unofficial youth elections, where high school students under the legal voting age of 18 practice voting, the Greens have long been the second largest party (after the National Coalition). Hence, they have had good reasons to campaign under the slogan 'Your child votes for the Greens'. Furthermore, Green voters are mostly urban, and they are the second or third largest party in the city councils of the six biggest cities in Finland. Thus, continuing urbanisation can also be seen as promising a brighter future for the Greens.

Placed on a two-dimensional political spectrum, the Greens fall into a position similar to that of many of their sister parties in Europe. On an axis measuring liberal vs. conservative social values (immigration, minority rights, etc.), the Greens are the most liberal party. On an axis measuring leftist vs. rightist economic and social policy positions (taxation, welfare services, etc.), the Greens fall somewhat left of the centre (Mäkinen 2011, Ylä-Anttila 2011). These results are congruent with other estimates of the positioning of the Greens (Mickelsson 2004). The True Finns are by far the most conservative party in their values, and this led them to proclaim the Greens as their worst enemy – an opposition eagerly embraced by the Greens themselves.

The environment in the electoral campaign

The rise of the True Finns in polls had a strong effect on the issue content of the electoral campaign. Together with the overwhelming preoccupation with the global financial crisis, this meant that environmental issues were mostly off the agenda. The True Finns leader, Timo Soini, declared the election a 'referendum on the Greek and Portuguese bailouts'. The media eagerly swallowed the bait. The two main parties of the ruling coalition, the Center and the National Coalition, defended the bailouts, and Soini's party opposed them. The Greens backed the government coalition to which they belonged, but were far from the centre stage. Immigration was the other big campaign issue, due to the rise of the True Finns.

In these circumstances, support for liberal and tolerant social values, such as rights of immigrants and sexual minorities, ended up being quite central in the electoral campaign of the Greens. This meant that economic and social policy and climate change got much less attention than they receive in the Greens' 2010–2014 party programme. Of course, as members of the outgoing government it was easier for the Greens to criticise the socially conservative newcomers than the economic and environmental policy of the previous administration.

The True Finns' opposition to the Greens was not limited to the battle between liberal and conservative values. They also took a strongly reactionary stand on environmental issues, in particular climate change. They presented a climate programme, found later to be a copy of a former policy document of the Metalworkers' Union, whose main argument was that participation in

global climate policy is detrimental to the competitiveness of Finnish heavy industry and results in the loss of jobs. The paper argued that carbon reduction commitments required by the Kyoto protocol are based on manipulated documents of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and called for unilateral withdrawal of Finland from these agreements. It also demanded scrapping the feed-in tariffs for renewable energy put in place by the previous government and the planned windfall taxes. While the industry lobby and many in the right-wing parties do share the opinion that ambitious climate policy is detrimental to national competitiveness (Teräväinen 2010), this proposal did not find support from other parties.

The True Finns also reiterated an earlier Center Party demand to dissolve the Ministry of Environment (often headed by a Green minister and staffed with many Green civil servants) and relegate its competences to a new Ministry of Natural Resources, which would also take on the responsibilities of the present Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

Even the Fukushima nuclear disaster, some five weeks before the election day, did not push the Greens to the centre of the pre-election debate, or bring them more voters. Having always opposed nuclear power, the Greens did try to raise the issue in their campaign, but to no avail. In Germany, Fukushima forced even a conservative government to shut down reactors. Why were the Finnish voters unshaken? Most likely because they had already learned that voting for the Greens seems to have no effect on nuclear power in Finland. In 2002, the Greens had left the government when a decision was made to give a permit for the building of Finland's fifth reactor. In 2010, when the permits for the sixth and seventh reactors were granted, the Greens were again part of the government. This time they stayed. The conclusion for the voter seems simple: the Greens may stay or go, but nuclear reactors are built all the same. The party is just too small to stop them when there is a consensus amongst the big players in favour.

Where did the Green voters go?

The three main directions to run for those voters who abandoned the Greens may have been: first, the big parties; second, the Left Alliance; third, the True Finns. The first path was taken by those who responded to the rapid rise of the True Finns by voting strategically. So strong was their ascent that the final campaign polls suggested the True Finns might even become the biggest party. Since the leader of the biggest party usually becomes the prime minister, those voters who abhorred Soini may have voted strategically: left-leaning Greens turned to the Social Democrats and right-wing leaning ones to the National Coalition, to ensure that one of these two would remain above the new challenger.

The second path, from the Greens to the Left Alliance, may have been taken by many of those disappointed by the Greens being part of a centre-right coalition government that did little to stop the growth of economic inequality

that has taken place since the 1990s (Riihelä *et al.* 2010, p. 8). The Left rode into this election with a new young leader, Paavo Arhinmäki, who has declared that he is building a new red–green party. This new dynamism is likely to have attracted some of the Greens’ left-leaning supporters. Formerly an ageing party with declining support, the Left Alliance is now, in the eyes of many young voters, a viable alternative to the Greens.

Finally, even though the political positions of the Greens and the True Finns’ look like day and night, some voters may nevertheless have defected from the former to the latter. Based on voter surveys, Rahkonen (2009) estimates that some 5000 voters, that is, almost a quarter of the roughly 21,000 who abandoned the Greens in 2011, were already planning such a move in 2009. These voters are most likely those who have in the past supported the Greens as a protest vote, as an alternative to the ‘old parties’.

Change of government, change in environmental and energy policies?

The record of the 2007–2011 government with regard to the environment and the central political demands of the Greens is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, a bill granting subsidies to renewable energy was passed, complying with the European Union (EU) requirement for Finland to produce 38% of energy from renewable sources by 2020. On the other, this only happened after the Finnish negotiators had earlier, under pressure from the powerful lobby of energy intensive paper and metal industries, opposed the setting of these targets in the EU (Teräväinen 2010, p. 207). Also, permits for building two new nuclear power plants were granted – a decision that, according to critics, discourages the development of renewables. Taxes on non-renewable energy sources such as coal and oil, as well as on consumption generally (VAT) were increased, with corresponding cuts in income tax. While this ‘green tax reform’ was in line with the Greens’ demand for taxing consumption rather than work, it goes against their other goal of reducing after-tax income inequality. Energy and consumption are taxed at a flat rate for every consumer, while the income taxes – that were now lowered – are higher for the rich. By comparison, what does the new government look like in environmental terms?

The negotiations to form the government were the most difficult in decades. After unconventional moves and walkouts, a coalition headed by the National Coalition and including the Social Democrats, Left Alliance, The Greens, the Swedish People’s Party and the Christian Democrats emerged. The True Finns declined to participate in a coalition that was committed to the Greek and Portuguese bailouts. This left very few possible combinations for forming a majority coalition, which gave the smaller parties some leverage in the negotiations.

The Greens’ three demands were: no new permits for nuclear power plants; a law committing Finland to binding annual CO₂ reduction targets, modelled on the British Climate Change Act 2008; a €100 rise in basic welfare benefits. All these demands were, in some form, included in the government programme:

the first and third are already being realised, but for the Climate Law the agreement mentions only that its feasibility and necessity will be studied. This was a disappointment to a coalition of seven important environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), whose primary demand to the new government was the passing of such legislation. The Climate Law is also backed by the Left Alliance and the Social Democrats, which may enable some progress on the issue. The opposition from the industry lobby, however, will be hard to overcome.

A step backwards on climate friendly energy policy is the increased tax breaks for energy intensive industries. On the other hand, the taxes on the use of private cars and on the (heavily polluting) practice of using peat for energy production were increased. So was public financing for rail traffic.

If large scale policies on climate and environmentally friendly energy are not the forte of the new government, some smaller environmental concessions, particularly on biodiversity, were granted. For instance, some extra funding was allocated to conservation areas and the cuts proposed by the Ministry of Finance on funding for the Ministry of Environment and environmental NGOs were cancelled.

The future of environmental politics in Finland

The programme of the new government would have been far worse for the environment had the True Finns participated in writing it. The fact that the electoral campaign focused more on the bailouts than the environment may actually have been a good thing from an environmental point of view, for their position on the bailouts ruled out the possibility of the True Finns participating in the government. This, in turn, made the participation of the Greens necessary for the formation of a majority coalition, which gave them more leverage in the negotiations.

The Greens lost votes like all other major established parties but the loss of 1.2 percentage points must not be exaggerated. It would seem premature to declare an unstoppable rising tide of conservatism and anti-environmentalism. After the elections, many parties had the first large increases in their membership in years, in a reaction against the rise of the True Finns. The biggest gainer by far was the Greens, their membership up a massive 55% to over 7000. The Greens still have more young voters than any other party, and (to the extent that this may be a cohort effect rather than an age effect), the long-term rise in their support is likely. The kids still vote for the Greens.

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