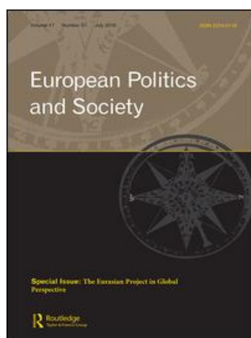

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Can a religious-niche party change – or was Kirchheimer right? Analysing the Finnish Christians' search to become a catchall electoral party

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ABSTRACT

Small-party persistence is a story in itself, especially when the party in question emerged as an entirely new party, lacked societal rootedness and did not boast any recognisable persons among its founding figures. The particular case is the Finnish Christian League SKL (from 2001 Christian Democrats KD), one of a family of post-Second World War fundamentalist Christian parties in the Nordic region which, over the six decades of its existence, has, unlike its Swedish and Danish counterparts, consistently surpassed the threshold of representation, but only once gained over 5 per cent of the national vote. This article asks firstly: What factors would account for SKL/KD's persistence as a small party? Secondly, why has SKL/KD remained a small party despite efforts to expand its electoral base? Was Kirchheimer correct that certain types of party simply cannot become catchall parties? Kirchheimer, it is argued, was essentially right: SKL/KD's 'nicheness' has been its greatest electoral strength but also the greatest barrier to electoral growth and significant party change.

KEYWORDS
Small-party persistence; niche parties; catchall parties; religion; Finland

Introduction

Whilst the religious cleavage has been relatively weak in Scandinavia (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), geographical concentrations of fundamentalist Christians, both within and outside the Evangelical Lutheran Church have, after the Second World War, had a dedicated religious-niche party vote-option in the shape of capital 'C' Christian parties advocating strict, Scripture-based policy positions (Arter, 1980; Brommesson, 2010; Hagevi, 2017; Karvonen, 1993; Madeley, 2004; Richard & Demker, 2005). One such party has been the Finnish Christian League (*Suomen kristillinen liitto – SKL*) which emerged in 1958 and became Christian Democrats (KD) in 2001. Its prospects of survival, still less institutionalisation (Harmel et al., 2018) appeared *prima facie* less than auspicious since, as an entirely new party (Hug, 2000), it lacked 'societal rootedness' – that is, a 'promoter organisation' (Bolleyer & Bytzek, 2013) – and there were no recognisable persons among its

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founding figures (Sikk, 2005). Indeed, in its embryonic years at least, SKL manifested many of the characteristics of an 'anti-party party' (Mudde, 1996).

SKL, however, has demonstrated remarkable resilience and durability having, unlike its Danish and Swedish 'sister parties', been continuously represented in the 200-seat Eduskunta since 1970, and having done so as a small party only once exceeding 5 per cent of the national poll (Table 1). The flatness of its lifespan curve (Pedersen, 1982) has testified to an extremely high level of electoral stability. Whereas the 'electoral volatility range' – the differential between a party's best and worst performance – has been 8.6 percentage points in the case of the Norwegian Christian People's Party and 7.1 percentage points for the Swedish Christian Democrats, the figure for SKL/KD has been 1.8 percentage points (Table 2). SKL/KD in short represents a classic case of small-party stability and longevity. Accordingly, our first research question asks: What factors would account for SKL/KD's persistence as a small party?

Over time small parties, however, institutionalised, may begin to experience a degree of 'mortality anxiety' (Bolleyer et al., 2019). Their core electorate may be senescent, their campaign strategies may prove unrewarding and filling a leadership gap may prove problematical. In the case of SKL, pressure to expand its electorate saw the party change its name in 2001 and seek the ideological mainstream by transplanting Christian Democracy from its origins in Catholic social theory into an overwhelmingly Lutheran and increasingly secular Finnish society. Yet despite its best efforts to become a catchall electoral party (Gunther & Diamond, 2003) KD has not widened its electoral base. Our second research question, therefore, asks: Why has KD remained a small party and not achieved a significant measure of party change? Was Kirchheimer (1990) right that, by dint of their intrinsic features, certain types of [small] party – he cites the Dutch Calvinists as an example – simply cannot become catchall parties? It is argued that in the case of SKL/KD Kirchheimer was essentially right. Its 'nicheness' has been its greatest strength in underpinning the party's persistence and electoral stability but it has also served as the greatest barrier to significant electoral renewal.

The study draws on a variety of sources that constitute what might be termed a 'total absorption' approach. These include author-conducted interviews with party office-

Table 1. The General electoral performance of the Finnish Christian Democrats, 1958–2019.

Election year	% Poll	Seats/200
1958	0.2	0
1966	0.5	0
1970	1,1	1
1972	2.5	4
1975	3.3	9
1979	4.8	9
1983	3.0	3
1987	2.6	5
1991	3.1	8
1995	3.0	7
1999	4.2	10
2003	5.3	7
2007	4.9	7
2011	4.0	6
2015	3.5	5
2019	3.9	5

Source: Vakaumuksensa välittäminen (2008, p. 136).

Table 2. Support for the Nordic Christian Parties, 1998–2021.

Christian People's Party (Norway)	Christian Democrats (Sweden)	Christian Democrats (Finland)	Christian Democrats (Denmark)
2001 12.4	1998 11.7	1999 4.2	2001 2.3
2005 6.8	2002 9.2	2003 5.3	2005 1.7
2009 5.5	2006 6.6	2007 4. 0	2007 0.9
2013 5.6	2010 5.6	2011 4.0	2011 0.8
2017 4.2	2014 4.6	2015 3.5	2015 0.8
2021 3.8	2018 6.3	2019 3.9	2019 1.7[a]

[a]The national qualifying threshold for parliamentary seats is 4 per cent in Norway and Sweden and 2 per cent in Denmark. There is no formal threshold in Finland but district magnitude varies from 7 in Lapland to 36 in Uusimaa.

holders and parliamentarians (detailed in the References); documentary evidence including party programmes, party conference minutes, internal correspondence and back issues of the SKL organ *Kristityn Vastuu*; and survey data – a party-commissioned survey of voter-perceptions of KD following the 2019 general election and a membership survey conducted in the wake of the 2021 municipal elections. This is the first full study of SKL/KD and it adds to the limited literature on small parties and why some persist when most do not.

The article is structured as follows. The first section focuses on party origination and whether the nascent SKL emerged as an 'anti-ness party' or an 'anti-party party'. This is followed by a section reflecting on the literature on small-party persistence and the conditions sustaining it. The first of our research questions is then addressed, that is, the factors that would go to explaining SKL persistence, inter alia the particularity of party type and SKL's character as a religious-niche party. The following sections outline the party change debate and the case for party modernisation and this leads to a consideration of the second research question why, despite its concern to evolve into a catchall electoral party, KD has remained a small party. The concluding remarks pull the strings together and bring out a number of wider points on [small] party change raised by the SKL/KD case-study.

SKL's origins: an 'anti-ness party' or an anti-party party?

SKL emerged as an *anti-communist, anti-left libertarian party* in 1958 (Erävalo, 2018), the year the Communist-dominated Finnish People's Democratic League (SKDL) became the largest parliamentary grouping, and it stood out against the 'new left' Popular Front' government between 1966 and 1970 which, among other things, liberalised abortion legislation, relaxed the legislation on pornography and permitted middle-strength beer to be sold in grocers' shops. Note here that, as in Norway, Finland had a period of prohibition between 1919 and 1931 and, thereafter, the sale of alcohol was restricted to state liquor outlets.

SKL was an *anti-cartel party* in the 1970s, opposed to an Exceptional Law in 1973, promoted by a cartel of the larger parties, which temporarily set aside the constitution, and the popular elections prescribed in it, to allow parliament to extend the long-serving president Urho Kekkonen's term of office (Almgren, 1998, p. 70). It similarly opposed the proposal in 1978 from the same cartel of parties that Kekkonen should be elected unopposed for a fifth consecutive term of office. Indeed, in its early years, SKL was a 'pariah party'

(Downs, 2001; Moffitt, 2021; Van Spanje & Van Der Brug, 2007) marginalised by Kekkonen on the basis of its pro-Israeli (Steward, 2008) and by inference anti-Soviet stance.

For some party members the embryonic SKL appealed as an *anti-party party,* particularly in its eschewal of the discipline required by the established party groups. Symptomatically, in a membership survey conducted in 1979, the year of the party's first 'programme of principles' (discussed later), a professor from Lempäälä noted that he joined SKL precisely because it appeared an anti-party, whilst a retired farmer commented that 'Jesus Christ must come first, SKL a poor second' (Arter, 1980).

In the general election the same year, 1979, SKL reached the high-point of its electoral fortunes, claiming 4.8 per cent of the vote and 10 of the 200 members of parliament. They included the daughter-in-law of a revivalist preacher who had taught in the Finnish Bible College; a professor, psychiatrist and clergyman known for his anti-homosexual views; and Olavi Ronkainen, one of the founders of the Evangelical-Lutheran National Mission, who was mercilessly pilloried in the afternoon press for his opposition to pornography. It was indicative of SKL's 'moral rearmament' agenda that, when interviewed on his 50th birthday, Ronkainen recounted that he had entered politics to warn young persons of the perils of middle-strength beer, to oppose abortion, to campaign against the way [leftist] politics had entered the school classroom and to condemn the state broadcasting company YLE for ridiculing Christian standards (Kortelainen, 2018).

In short, the nascent SKL was an 'anti-ness party' – anti-communist, anti-Establishment (Abedi, 2009; Poguntke, 1996; Schedler, 1996) and anti-secular. It also appealed as an 'anti-party party' (Mudde, 1996) – more a spiritual movement than a conventional political party, charged with an Evangelical mission in a secularised and sybaritic society sadly lacking in moral backbone. It was a religious-niche party swimming against a leftist and licentious tide.

Small-party persistence

Mogens Pedersen (1982) noted that parties are born, parties live and parties die. Whilst some live longer than others, Pedersen observed that the lifespan of new parties tended to be relatively short. Most do not reach the threshold of representation and gain parliamentary seats and, if they do so, they struggle to renew their mandates. If, then, the persistence of new parties is the exception rather than the rule, the literature has sought explanations for the phenomenon of new-party sustainability in the 'circumstances of their formation' (Harmel & Robertson, 1985) – that is, in the process of party origination. New parties, after all, differ in the way they come into being: they may be formed by a merger of two or more existing parties; they may be a splinter party resulting from a split in an existing party; or they may be a genuinely new entity – our focus – with no links to existing parties(Arter, 2012).

As a party type, genuinely new parties, it has been argued, are likely to have unequal life chances. Bolleyer and Bytzek (2013) distinguish between 'rooted new parties' and 'entrepreneurial new parties', the former backed by 'promoter organisations' that antedate the new party's formation. They conclude (Bolleyer & Bytzek, 2013, p. 789) that 'new formations that cannot rely on ties to already organised societal groups are much less likely to maintain a national presence in the short and medium term than rooted new parties'.

Bolleyer and Bytzek's emphasis is on the organisational resources available to new parties and a contrast drawn between those with a pre-existing organisation base, and by extension funding, and the likes of 'personal vehicle parties' (Lucardie, 2000; McDonnell, 2013), which rest entirely on the personal charisma of the founder-leader. However, when viewing new parties purely from a demand-side perspective, it would seem reasonable to link party persistence to the existence of an electoral niche and to expect the niche party to exist as long as the niche exists and is protected by the party against competitor encroachment.

In the comparative literature the niche party concept (Abou-Chadi, 2014; Adams et al., 2006; Bergman & Flatt, 2020; Erlingsson et al., 2014; Ezrow, 2008; Meguid, 2005; Meyer & Miller, 2015; Bischof, 2017; Wagner, 2012) has been used to characterise Green parties (Doherty, 1992; Meguid, 2005; Rüdig, 1990; Spoon, 2009), radical rightist parties (Wagner & Meyer, 2017), ethno-territorial and even communist parties, whereas the religious-niche party (Kernecker & Wagner, 2019), our focus, has been largely neglected. Whilst the niche party label has been attached to a diverse range of parties, there has been a broad consensus in the literature that niche parties 'compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues' (Wagner, 2012, p. 848) and it is this which distinguishes them from mainstream parties. Equally, niche parties are not necessarily small parties and they are not necessarily niche parties for life – they can evolve and change. In changing they may lose some of their 'nicheness', which is a variable that is likely to vary over time. Meyer and Miller (2015) argue that a niche party necessarily marks the endpoint of a continuum of parties ranging from 'completely niche' to 'completely mainstream'. They add that 'a pure niche party does not stress any mainstream policies and only emphasises issues completely neglected by its rivals' (Meyer & Miller, 2015, p. 262).

In reality competition from mainstream parties encroaching on to niche-party territory may prompt the latter to seek to broaden its policy agenda to incorporate economic issues and, in this way, compromise its nicheness. Niche parties in short may endeavour to expand beyond their niche electorate and work to become a *catchall electoral party* (Gunther & Diamond, 2003; Kirchheimer, 1990; Krouwel, 2003).

Stripping away some of the organisational determinism and redundant assumptions associated with Kirchheimer's model, a catchall electoral party may be defined simply as one that seeks to appeal beyond its core constituency (class, region, ethnic minority or whatever) to a broader electoral base and adopts strategies designed to achieve that end. In Mair's (1997) terms, in place of a defensive electoral strategy, laying primary emphasis on the mobilisation and retention of a limited constituency, 'the party adopts an offensive strategy exchanging effectiveness in depth for a wider audience and more immediate electoral success' (Mair, 1997, p. 102).

Whilst niche parties may seek electoral expansion, Kirchheimer (1990), in his work on party change, posited that, by dint of their intrinsic features – their very nicheness – certain party types simply could not become catchall parties. In his words:

> Neither a small, strictly regional party such as the South Tyrolean People's Party; nor a party built around the espousal of harsh and limited ideological claims, like the Dutch Calvinists; or transitory group claims such as the German refugees; or a specific professional category's claims such as the Swedish Agrarians; or a limited action programme, such as the Danish single-tax Justice Party can aspire to a catchall performance. (Kirchheimer, 1990, p. 55)

This brings us nicely back to our two empirical questions: (i) Why, when *prima facie,* SKL lacked the pre-conditions for successful sustainability has it persisted as a small party? (ii) Why, notwithstanding its impressive durability, has SKL remained a small party despite efforts to expand?

Explaining SKL's persistence as a small party

In this section, three lines of explanation are proposed for understanding SKL/KD's persistence as a small party. First, the party's ability consistently to clear the threshold of representation and gain parliamentary seats, despite a relatively low poll, has been facilitated by the 'permissiveness' of the electoral system. Second, on the 'supply side', the nascent SKL offered a distinctive policy profile which, focusing on non-economic questions, defined it as a religious-niche party. Third, on the 'demand side', SKL attracted a niche electorate in the shape of a small but loyal constituency of fundamentalist Christians, largely from the so-called Fifth Revivalist Movement.

On the first point, the absence in Finland of a formal electoral threshold – that is, a minimum proportion of the national vote needed to qualify for parliamentary seats – has contributed to sustaining SKL/KD as a legislative actor. In the 14 general elections between 1970 and 2019 SKL/KD would have gained parliamentary seats in only 5 if there had been a 4 per cent qualifying threshold as in Norway and Sweden. Moreover, in contrast to the other Nordic countries, the Finnish voting system permits electoral alliances (*vaaliliitot*), enabling small parties to combine forces with other (often larger) parties and run joint lists of candidates. Whilst it is the aggregate vote for the 'allied parties' that determines the allocation of seats to the list, these are awarded in the open-list PR Finnish voting system on the basis of individual candidate preference votes. This has incentivized Christian supporters to concentrate their personal vote on the party's 'lead candidate', with the result that SKL/KD has profited more than any other Finnish party from strategic electoral alliances (Paloheimo & Sundberg, 2009). These, incidentally, are purely technical arrangements and do not involve policy substance.

On the 'supply side' a second factor in accounting for SKL's persistence has been its distinctive policy profile. SKL's early programmes defined it clearly as a religious-niche party – a party of fundamentalist Christians concerned to reverse the secular tide. SKL's first 'general [policy] programme' (*yleisohjelma*) dates back to 1969, the year before the party elected its first MP, and it proceeds from a model of an ideal-type Christian society, prioritising measures to promote and protect its ethical base. Measures of Christian socialisation are particularly evident in the sections on education, the arts and the media. The importance of religious education is dealt with in greatest detail and specific policies included: (i) morning prayers in schools should continue to be held on a Christian basis and the approach should be more challenging; (ii) two hours of religious education weekly should be built into the school curriculum. In the section on the arts, it was stated that the public needs to be educated to condemn crude, immoral and pornographic films and magazines. More specifically, the advertising of pornographic and 'otherwise immoral films' should be banned. As to the media, the transmission of radio and television programmes ridiculing God should be strenuously opposed; the new law

on middle-strength beer repealed; and alcohol and tobacco advertising in the media outlawed (SKL yleisohjelma, 1969).

SKL's nicheness, that is, its focus on a cluster of essentially non-economic issues, is succinctly brought out in the 1979 programme of principles (*periaateohjelma*).

> The secularisation of society cannot be arrested simply by religious means. Its roots extend deep into the political arena where decisions on such things as reducing the amount of religious education in schools, permitting pornography and easing access to alcoholic drinks have been made. If we want to reverse these developments, Christians must engage in politics and that is what SKL is seeking to do. (SKL periaateohjelma 1979)

The 1979 programme did cover non-ethical ground, albeit uneasily. SKL expressed support for welfare-state building, although only a welfare state grounded in Biblical values and on the economy, it sought a middle way between unbridled capitalism and state socialism in the form of a market economy with safeguards to ensure that enterprise did not involve human exploitation. But the focus in the early SKL lay on a series of moral standpoints/policies for which it could claim a Biblical mandate.

On the 'demand side', SKL mobilised a niche religious electorate that was central to its resilience as a small party, but one that was limited in size by the extensive fragmentation of Christian fundamentalism in Finland. Put another way, in understanding SKL's religious constituency, it is important to distinguish between old and new revivalist movements and to note that SKL's access to a wider body of Christian fundamentalists was limited de facto by historic patterns of religious voting behaviour. SKL in short emerged as a new party anchored in new [post-Second World War] Fifth Movement revivalism (Junkkala, 2016).

Whilst space prevents a detailed elaboration, it will suffice here to note that the various strands of 'old revivalism' had pockets of regional strength – reference in particular has been made to a northern Bible Belt (Nykänen & Linjakumpu, 2020) based on Conservative Laestadionism (*vanhalestadiolaisuus*) and an Ostrobothnian Bible Belt (Snellman, 2014) grounded in Little First Born Laestadianism (*pikkuesikoislestadiolaisuus/Rauhan Sana*) – and that at the point of the introduction of mass democracy in Finland at the beginning of the twentieth century, old revivalism influenced political participation and voting. The 'Awakening Movement' (*Herännäisyys/Körttilaisuus*) was associated first and foremost with the political right; Evangelicalism (*Evankelisuus*) with the political left and Agrarian Party; and Laestadionism, the largest indigenous revivalist movement in the Nordic countries, covering vast tracts in Lapland and northern Finland, with the Agrarians (Salomäki, 2017, p. 68).

The Agrarian Party-Conservative Laestadian connection was particularly strong (Mylly, 1989). In the 9 general elections between 1919 and 1939, the Agrarians averaged 75.4 per cent in the stronghold Laestadian municipality of Kuusamo, bordering Russia (Kyllönen, 2010), and no less than 87.2 per cent in nearby Ranua, the home municipality of the long-serving Agrarian MP K.A. Lohi, a Conservative Laestadian. Indeed, until the early 1980s, the central organisation of the Conservative Laestadian movement SRK (*Suomen Rauhanyhdistysten keskusyhdistys*) issued very precise instructions on how followers should vote (Agrarian-Centre) and, more pertinently, how they should not vote (Nykänen & Linjakumpu, 2020, p. 27; Talonen, 2019, p. 26). SRK opposed SKL on the basis that it mixed party politics and religion (Isohookana-Asunmaa, 2006, p. 152).

The way old revivalism influenced voting behaviour and delimited SKL's access to a wider Christian fundamentalist community can be gained from a glance at the political geography of revivalism at the 1972 general election, the first at which SKL ran candidates in all 14 mainland constituencies. In the Swedish-speaking municipalities in north-west Finland between Kokkola and Vaasa (Snellman, 2020) making up the Ostrobothnian Bible Belt, support for the Swedish People's Party, the organ of the national language minority, in 1972 ranged from just under one-third to almost three-quarters. In the 20 municipalities with the largest Conservative Laestadian congregations forming the core of the northern Bible Belt, the Agrarian-Centre averaged 45.4 per cent, in 7 of these it gained an absolute majority and in the municipality of Perho no less than 68.1 per cent.

In 1972, SKL polled a modest 2.5 per cent of the vote and it exceeded twice its national poll in under 6 per cent of all mainland municipalities. Significantly, over half of these areas of relative local strength were located in only two constituencies in south-east Finland – Kymi and Mikkeli. In Taipalsaari municipality in Kymi SKL polled 7.6 per cent and in Heinola in Mikkeli 5.9 per cent. On the basis of the Fifth Revivalist Movement's support for SKL, Erävalo (2018) has noted references to a Bible Belt in south-east Finland although there were pockets of SKL support elsewhere, especially where spiritual leaders from groups outside the Lutheran Church, particularly Pentecostals, were instrumental in mobilising a personal vote.

Summing up, SKL's persistence as a small party was indebted to amenable institutional (electoral system) conditions; to its party type – a religious-niche party with a distinctive Bible-based policy profile; and to a niche electorate of Fifth Movement Revivalists within the Lutheran Church and a range of pietistic groups outside it. Identification with the party was strong and its support notably stable. None the less, there were those in party leadership positions who, by the 1990s, believed that SKL was not realising its full electoral potential and consequently sought to persuade grassroots' members of the case for party modernisation.

The party change debate

The case for party modernisation, which divided SKL throughout the 1990s, was triggered in part by a degree of 'mortality anxiety' (Bolleyer et al., 2019); in part by changes in leadership positions; and in part by diffusional influences from the Swedish sister party. At the 1991 general election SKL polled only 3.1 per cent of the national vote, raising the spectre of terminal decline and a slow party death. In contrast, in Sweden the same year, the Christian party gained a [then] record 7.1 per cent, suggesting the electoral expansion of a religious-niche party was eminently possible (Table 2). By the 1980s, moreover, leadership renewal had brought into SKL a number of more 'worldly' politicians – Christians but Christians with political experience – who had had prior involvement in two of the mainstream non-socialist parties and who had a different vision of SKL's future. Esko Almgren, SKL chair between 1982 and 1989, had earlier been in the National Coalition whilst Bjarne Kallis, chair between 1995 and 2004, was formerly in the Swedish People's Party. Kallis, who became an SKL MP in 1991, made the case for party change in an article in the party organ *Kristityn Vastuu* in July 1991.

Kallis (1991) argument proceeded as follows. (i) I believe there is room in Finland for a medium-sized Christian party. Finns are tired of materialism and have understood that

man cannot live on bread alone. Deep down, most Finns accept Christian values and Christian standards and want society to be based on them. (ii) SKL's credibility is weak, however, and the threshold for supporting it, let alone joining it, is sadly high. We have built this high threshold ourselves and we can lower it ourselves. (iii) A programme based on the Divine Word does not need to be, and should not be, changed but the party's profile should be 'lightened up' and appear more positive. It should be possible within the party to speak of alternatives without the fear of being branded 'misguided'. (iv) The fact is that society is changing and it is also a fact that a business or party that stands still and does not dare to change gets left behind. (v) At the outset SKL sought to mobilise Christians to assume social responsibility at a time when Christian values were under threat. It has been moderately successful in this, with SKL claiming around 85,000 voters. I believe almost half as many are frightened off by the party's current profile.

The party's profile was also a concern for a young generation of SKL activists. In August 1997, the Young Persons' Organisation sent the party leadership and parliamentary group what was described as a 'wish list' expressing particular disquiet over the party's 'internal identity problem'(SKL Nuoret, 1997). There appear to be many members, it noted, who do not view SKL as a full-fledged political party and its image has suffered accordingly. The standard of internal debate, it claimed, needs significantly to be raised in order to achieve a level of credibility and it recommended forms of political education, including dedicated courses. The candidate selection process must be undertaken with great care and only those candidates with a *clear political identity* chosen. Doubtless this was what the chair of the party's Central Finland district had in mind when writing that 'perhaps we appear dogmatic souls with tight-fitting bob-hats, so to speak, but we shouldn't simply throw the Bible at people's heads and then ask how they are doing!'

The case for maintaining SKL's nicheness and missionary goal was made, perhaps most strikingly, by Vesa Laukkanen who, like Kallis, became an MP in 1991. Laukkanen (1991) envisaged SKL developing as a small, cutting-edge revivalist party (*herätyspuolue*) which would be 'a voice crying out in the [secular] wilderness'. Party members would have a 'distinctive role as emissaries of Christ whose Word is the true meaning of life'. The party's general message would be: How does it help, if Finland becomes the richest nation on earth, if its citizens are plagued by divorce, crime, suicide, alcoholism and so on and end up on the road to destruction? The revivalist party *would not seek popular support*; it would be above all 'light and salt'. 'It could be called the Light and Salt Party. Initially the party's support would be modest, but it would be able to draw together all religious people to pray for the salvation of the nation'.

Laukkanen concluded that

> at best the revivalist party would contribute to a broad spiritual awakening of the nation. Individual members would be an instrument of God's blessing to the nation in a material and spiritual way, like Joseph in his time. This would allow the party to grow from a solid foundation.

Laukkanen identified himself with this model of an exclusive revivalist party of and for practising Christians. Support for the Laukkanen model was succinctly expressed by another new member of the parliamentary group, Pirkko Laakkonen, who argued that SKL had its own niche in the Finnish party system through its explicitly Christian brand.

'We should build on this. There are enough ideology-less parties in the country already' (Laakkonen, 1997).

Proponents of party change sought to position SKL within the mainstream of European Christian Democracy by (i) changing the party's name, which became Christian Democrats in 2001; (ii) revising the 1979 'programme of principles' (POP) and, by extension, pursuing a 'soft secularisation strategy' designed to appeal to non-practising 'cultural Christians'. At the 1997 party conference a resolution was passed which read: 'SKL forms part of the globally influential and diverse Christian Democratic movement' and the party secretary even depicted Helmut Kohl's CDU as a fraternal party. New POPs were approved at the party conferences in Tampere in 2005 and Seinäjoki in 2017. In the latter, it was stated that KD forms part of the wider Christian Democratic movement and works under the umbrella of the European People's Party (KD periaateohjelma, 2017). There were separate sections on subsidiarity and the value of local community, making the programme Christian Democratic in tone and content (Van Kersbergen, 2008; Bale & Szczerbrak, 2008). Whereas the 1979 POP comprised 19 sections and contained 35 express references to either God, Christ or the Ten Commandments, the 16-section 2017 POP contained only a solitary reference to the Bible and that was contested by elements in the KD leadership (Maanselkä, 2021).

It was noted earlier that niche parties are not necessarily niche parties for life and that by a strategic de-emphasis of their nicheness – that is, widening their policy agenda – they can expand their support beyond their core electorate, So why, then, has KD remained a small party? Why is the story one of small-party persistence rather than catch-all growth?

Why SKL/KD has remained a small party

The reason SKL/KD has remained a small party – to state the glaringly obvious – is because it has been unable to increase its vote-share; rather, the trend has been in the opposite direction. This final section sets out five possible explanations for the lack of electoral growth. First, the entrenched nature of historic religious voting patterns has continued to delimit KD's support among the wider Christian fundamentalist constituency and prompted the party to seek to appeal to 'cultural Christians', that is, those who are not active churchgoers but adhere to broadly Christian values and standards. Second, whilst KD has shifted its focus from 'moral policy' to social policy, it has not succeeded in identifying a vote-winning formula, and its electoral profile has been difficult to distinguish from its competitors. Third, KD's harsh public image has not attracted new support and there has been negative personalisation at the leadership level. Fourth, KD's campaign effort has not benefited from an ageing membership, a lack of grassroots unity over the direction of the party and the only weak internalisation of the basic concepts of Christian Democracy. Finally, KD has faced growing competition from a populist radical right, espousing ethnocentric Christian values.

Taking these points briefly in turn, the persistence of traditional patterns of religious voting behaviour has continued to restrict KD's access to a wider Christian fundamentalist constituency. True, some headway has been made among the older revivalist denominations. Since the 1990s, the Swedish-speaking Word of Peace Laestadians in the Ostrobothnian Bible Belt have increasingly turned to KD, doubtless reflecting a degree of

disgruntlement with the liberalisation of the dominant Swedish People's Party. Moreover, since the 1980s, the central organisation of the Conservative Laestadians SRK has no longer instructed its congregations how to vote – simply to vote – and in 2011 KD ran its first Laestadian candidate in Oulu constituency in the northern Bible Belt (Talonen, 2019). In a candidate-centred, open-list PR voting system, a candidate's personal vote-earning attributes (PVEAs) can matter as much as his/her partisanship, and for successful KD candidates, Christian fundamentalism has been a primary VEA. All five of the KD MPs in the 1919–2023 have a Christian fundamentalist background. Indeed, Laukkanen's vision of a Salt and Light Party could well have become a medium-sized reality had Christian fundamentalism in Finland not been so fragmented. In the event, ensconced religious voting patterns, long antedating SKL, have restricted KD's scope for expansion into 'old revivalist' territory.

A second explanation of KD electoral stasis might point to the failure of its 'catchall policies' to deliver extra votes. Over the years, what might loosely be called KD's 'soft secularisation strategy' has involved a shift in emphasis from 'moral policy' to social policy – a social policy derived from a traditional Christian conception of home and family and designed to appeal to cultural Christians. But the change in policy orientation has not produced the desired electoral increment. Typical KD social policies have included tax support for young-parent families, increases in child benefits, extending paternity leave and better home care for the elderly. A number of KD's social policies have been innovative. Against the backdrop of the staple multi-income household, the party argued for financial support to enable mothers to choose to remain at home to bring up their children – the so-called 'mother's wage' (*äidin palkka*). The party also pressed the case for a Children's Ombudsman, a post that was created in 2005. KD's 2019 general election manifesto promised, by way of building a child-friendly Finland and one that respects the contribution of senior citizens, (i) an extra cash payment over and above the basic child allowance for each new baby and a tax reduction for those on low pensions; (ii) the recruitment of one-thousand new police officers and the imposition of stiffer sentences for crimes of a sexual and/or violent nature; (iii) steps towards a carbon-neutral economy and a clean environment for future generations.

The agenda was catchall in content and since 1999 KD's policies have been costed in detail in an 'alternative budget'. However, two caveats are in order. First, it is not at all clear in a multi-party market-place how much [social] policies win and lose votes (cf image, leadership, external events, etc.). Second, whilst KD's social policy premises differ – in their explicitly Christian underpinning – the policies themselves appear to differ more in nuance than substance from those of competitor parties. Moreover, whilst programmatically KD is less expressly Scripture-driven, topical questions such as abortion, gay marriage, same-sex couples' adoption rights and Pride marches have divided the party, complicating the task of escaping its niche past (image) and attracting new votes.

As a third factor holding KD back, the evidence points to the way among the public at large KD is perceived as a party of and for devout Christians characterised by a strict Bible-based stance on questions of personal morality at the leadership level& nbsp;(Simula, 2011). So much is clear from a KD-commissioned multiple-choice survey of voters conducted in March 2020 ($n = 1503$), which explored the reasons for voters not backing KD at the 2019 general election (Table 3). Over half the respondents (54 per cent) answered

Table 3. Reasons for not voting for the Finnish Christian Democrats at the 2019 general election%.

KD mixes religion and politics	54
KD has a hard line attitude towards homosexuals	37
KD's view of marriage does not correspond to ours	34
KD promotes only those matters of importance to religious persons	31
KD is not a credible party at the national level	30
There was not a suitable candidate in my constituency	15
KD is too small a player	15
KD emphasises freedom of speech/religion too much	13
KD does not defend the less well-off sufficiently	11
KD's economic policy is too right-wing	10
KD does not have an adequate environmental profile	9
KD is too sympathetic towards immigrants	8
KD is too hostile towards immigrants	6
KD speaks too little about enterprise	4
KD's economic policy is too left-wing	3
KD places too much emphasis on environmental questions	2
Other	4
None of the above relevant	11
Could not say	7

Source: Kantar KD-äänestystutkimus 20.3.2020. $N = 1053$.

that they did not vote KD because 'it mixes religion and politics'; for over one-third KD had a 'hard line attitude towards homosexuality' and its view of marriage 'does not correspond to ours'; whilst nearly one-third believed that 'KD promoted only those matters of importance to religious persons'. For most Finnish voters in short KD was 'otherworldly' and not for them.

In small parties, leaders contribute much to moulding the party's image – that is, how it is viewed by the general public – and they can be a positive or negative electoral asset. In the case of the Swedish and Norwegian Christian parties, the personalisation of the leadership prompted electoral spurts as cultural Christians and floating voters were attracted to their ranks. The long-serving Swedish Christian Democrat chair Alf Svensson caught the mood for a return to basic [Christian] values at the 1998 general election and led his party to a record 11.8 per cent (Arter, 1999). In Norway Kjell-Magne Bondevik's popularity, and that of his Christian People's Party (KrF), soared when, as prime minister in August 1998, he announced on television he was taking a period of depression-related sick leave. KrF won 12.4 per cent at the 2001 general election. In the Finnish case, however, KD has struggled to escape the burden of the negative party image associated with the former party chair Päivi Räsänen. Put bluntly, Räsänen's sincere but strict, Bible-based, highly public and extremely controversial stance on traditional niche issues such as opposition to abortion and homosexuality has entailed a level of negative personalisation that has reinforced the public image of KD as dogmatic, intolerant and simply out of touch with the modern, secular world (Keskinen, 2021).

This picture is confirmed by the findings of a membership survey which KD conducted in June 2021, shortly after the party's disappointing municipal election when it polled 3.6 per cent, a drop of half a percentage point when compared with four years earlier. 55.7 per cent of respondents ($n = 352$) were men, 44.3 per cent women, almost half (49.7 per cent) were aged over 60 and only 8.6 per cent were under 40. KD has an increasingly senescent membership. However, given that almost two-thirds of respondents (65.1 per cent) were also municipal councillors, the survey may be regarded as an accurate reflection of the views of active party members.

They were asked inter alia: What factors do you think held KD back at the 2021 municipal election? No less than 18.3 per cent of respondents made express reference to the way Räsänen was viewed by voters as a strongly negative electoral asset. Typical comments included: 'KD will suffer electorally as long as the Räsänen situation remains unresolved. We are for many [voters] too Christian and too narrow-minded a party'; 'Päivi Räsänen should be urged to stop her Bible-driven comments about homosexuals'; 'the party is suffering from living in her [Räsänen's] shadow. A good candidate in my locality left for another party because there is such an unsavoury 'feel' about KD'. A female candidate summed up – 'people will not vote for the Räsänen Party'.

It is important here to note that Räsänen's views were not out of touch with the Christian fundamentalist views of a not insignificant minority of party members and probably served to consolidate KD's support among the party's core electorate. Whilst the quantification of open-ended survey responses is inevitably hazardous, in the order of two-thirds of KD members appear to favour the catchall electoral party model (*yleispuolue*) and one-third the religious-niche party model (*uskontopuolue*). Typical of the latter, was the remark of an elderly KD member that

> the Christian's perspective should come through in an altogether stronger 'macho' manner. Only the Christian faith can save Finnish morality. All the rest [of the parties] promote the cause [needs] of the poor and campaign on economic themes. We should hammer home the moral decay of the Finnish nation and do so outside our comfort zone in the manner of the apostle Paul.

Another commented that

> instead of concentrating on being a catchall electoral party, we should voice only Christian themes which, in my opinion, is why we exist. I believe there are too many catchall electoral parties in Finland and KD should not go in that direction.

Whilst the significance of the bifurcation of the party into contrasting and competing 'fundi-realo' *tendencies* (Boucek, 2009; Köllner & Basedau, 2005; Rose, 1964) should not be exaggerated, the lack of unity among members over KD's direction has hardly facilitated the internalisation of the basic concepts of Christian Democracy (Kalyvas & Van Kersbergen, 2010) and, by extension, selling the party 'on the stump'. Indeed, the division is not new and for a minority of members the name-change project in 2001 was viewed as a foreign import – there were too many non-Finnish terms such as individualism, transparency and subsidiarity.

This raises an intriguing question about the stability of the core fundamentalist electorate. The recent revival of research interest in religion and voting behaviour – the 'religious gap' literature – has proposed that a large Christian Democratic party will 'immunise' its supporters against a populist radical right encroaching onto its terrain by 'preaching' traditional Christian, ethnocentric values (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Cremer, 2021; Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville, 2021; Montgomery & Winter, 2015; Schwörer & Romero-Vidal, 2020; Siegers & Jedinger, 2021; Haynes, 2021). The Finnish KD is not a large Christian Democratic party and it would thus seem vulnerable to the challenge of the radical right Finns Party (PS). There is at least the risk of a lack of a 'vaccination effect' and seepage from KD's 'fundi wing' to PS.

Concluding remarks

Small parties remain generally under-researched in the parties' literature and there are few case-studies of small parties that survive as small parties. Given the circumstances of its formation, SKL/KD's persistence as a small parliamentary party for over half a century has been remarkable, not least because only once has it exceeded 5 per cent of the national vote. This article proceeded from two closely-related questions: Why has SKL/KD persisted as a small party and why has it not expanded its electoral base? Kirchheimer, it seems, was broadly right in that, by dint of their intrinsic features, certain types of party will struggle to become catchall parties. In essence the argument runs that SKL/KD has persisted as a small party because it has been a religious-niche party drawing on a stable, albeit limited core of fundamentalist Christians primarily from the Fifth Revivalist Movement. It has remained a small party because of a broad public perception among voters that, despite a 'soft secularisation' strategy, it remains a religious-niche party *of* and *for* devout Christians. In sum, KD has not resolved the classical conundrum of how to balance *constituency representation* – keeping its faithful and faith-driven core of voters – with *electoral competition* and widening its support base. Moreover, whilst the historic fragmentation of Christian fundamentalism has delimited KD's core constituency, there appears very limited demand in a liberal and secular Finnish society for a Christian Democratic ideology imported from the wider European continent.

This is not by way of an early obituary notice for KD; rather, the main narrative has focused on the way a niche religious electorate has underpinned small-party persistence and it will do so for some time yet. Whilst parties, it is said, die in different ways and for different reasons (Bolleyer et al., 2019), KD is not threatened with imminent demise. None the less, the conditions for small-party sustainability in the longer term, rest on electoral renewal as mortality reduces the party's core vote and 'new blood' proves hard to find.

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