

General Elections in Finland

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RESULTS

The general election held in Finland on 17th April saw a strong breakthrough by the «True Finns», who have now become the country's 3rd party. They collected 19% of the vote and win 39 seats, that is +34 compared to the previous general election held on 18th March 2007. The True Finns is the only party to have progressed and increased the number of its members at the Eduskunta/Riksdag, Parliament's single chamber, and is almost level with Jutta Urpilainen's Social-Democrat Party (SPD), which obtained 19.1% of the vote and won 42 seats (-3). The conservative National Coalition Party (KOK), led by the outgoing Finance Minister, Jyrki Katainen, came top with 20.44% of the vote and 44 seats (-6). This is the first time in Finnish history that the KOK has won a general election. The Centre Party (KESK) led by the outgoing Prime Minister, Mari Kiviniemi, suffered a set back with only 15.8% of the vote and 35 seats (-16). Paavo Arhinmäki's leftwing alliance (VAS) suffered too with 8.1% of the vote and 14 seats (-2), the Greens (VIHR), led by the outgoing Labour Minister, Anni Sinnemäki, are also down, on 7.2% and 10 seats (-5). The Swedish People's Party (SFP), led by Stefan Wallin retained its position with 4.3% of the vote (9 seats, =). Finally, the Christian-Democrat party (SKL), headed by Päivi Räsänen, collected 4% of the vote, winning 6 seats (-1).

Turnout was high at 70.4%, i.e. +2.5 points compared to the previous general election held in 2007.

«It's a good start! It's the victory of good sense. It's no longer realistic to continue under the governance of the old parties, year after year» declared the leader of the «True Finns», Timo Soini, when results were announced. «This is an historic change. The True Finns now have a member in every circumscription!» he added.

These elections indeed mark a real upheaval in political life where a strong culture of consensus has always held sway. The political scene has been dominated since the seventies by 3 parties of almost equal strength – on the left the Social-Democratic Party, on the right the National Coalition and the Centre Party – which were in the habit of sharing power. We are therefore witnessing a new form of power sharing due to the considerable breakthrough by the populist parties, a political force that is expanding throughout Europe. «This is a real big bang in Finnish political life, it's a big, big change. It's going to change the content of policies in Finland» un-

derlined Jan Sundberg, professor at Helsinki University. The strongly euro sceptical and nationalistic discourse of Timo Soini combined with a rather leftwing leaning socio-economic approach has convinced the people of Finland. It would appear that many traditional abstentionists came out to vote in favour of the «True Finns». «The expected success of the True Finns is due to the fact that it attracts a highly diverse electorate» said Pasi Saukkonen, a political scientist from the Helsinki Centre for Research into Ethnic Relations; he also foresees that the populist leader «could have a great deal of difficulty in keeping his troops in order after the general election.»

«I am happy to see that our message on employment and justice has been heard by the voters», declared Jutta Urpilainen, the president of the social-democrat party. The SPD did better, in fact, than opinion polls had predicted. The turnaround in his discourse, towards topics covered by the «True Finns», such as a more critical, even sceptical approach on Europe and

immigration, would appear to have borne fruit in the election. Jutta Urpilainen, who had been decried due to a poor image, can also savour a personal victory.

Finally, the outgoing Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi acknowledged her party's defeat. «*This looks like a crushing defeat for us,*» she indicated. «*It's a disappointment but the people have told us what they want and we must listen to them,*» she added.

«*My dear friends, we have written history!*» cried the leader of the National Coalition party, Jyrki Katainen. «*Responsibility, straightforwardness, our project for the future and our positive direction have won the confidence of the people*» stated the outgoing Minister of Finance.

Jyrki Katainen, who ran a pro-European campaign, particularly with regard to financial aid for the Member States most severely affected by the social-economic crisis, will now have to negotiate with the «True Finns», who made their opposition to the Portuguese rescue plan a «*non-negotiable*» topic and/or with the Social-Democrat Party which asked for further guarantees.

Timo Soini made the general elections a «*referendum on the euro, of which the Finns were deprived when the single currency was adopted.*» He reminded voters that he wanted to modify the terms of the Portuguese rescue plan, the 3rd country in the euro area to have needed a rescue plan, after Greece and Ireland. The «True Finns» are opposed to any increase in the effective capacity of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF). The decision on the manner by which to raise the Facility's effective loan capacity to 440 billion euros (of which Finland has agreed to guarantee 8 billion euros) should be taken by European partners at the end of June. A withdrawal from the EFSF by any one of the 17 countries in the Eurogroup would put the facility into danger. Finland has guaranteed 12.5 billion euros to the European Stability Mechanism, granted a 1.48 billion euro loan to Greece and a loan of 160 million euros to Iceland and, finally, has promised 324 million euros to Latvia.

«*It is not normal that countries which have managed their economies badly should create problems and get their debts paid by Finnish tax payers. When Greece collapsed we were told that it would be the last Member State that we would have to help. Then came Ireland and now Portugal*» declared Timo Soini.

«*Lots of people have relegated the contribution made by the European Plan into second place. From a positive approach to Europe, we now have a more sceptical, accountant-like vision*» analyses Teija Tiilikainen, director of the Finnish Institute for Foreign Affairs, who sees the rise of the «True Finns» as being directly linked to the emergency plan for saving Greece. «*The vote for the True Finns reflects the feeling that says that Finland has taken care of its own affairs whilst others in the euro area have not assumed their responsibilities, a feeling that has been to the advantage of the True Finns*» underlines Pasi Kuoppamäki, economist at the Sampo Bank. «*The Finns tightened their belts and did not receive any aid, they have never asked anyone for any money and have kept to all the European rules, whilst other countries have managed their business very badly*» says Jan Sundberg. He believes that the indignation of public opinion is deeply rooted in the major recession suffered by the country in the nineties, which saw the collapse of the national banking sector and an unemployment rate close to 20%.

After the results were announced, Jyrki Katainen was keen to minimise the prospect of seeing his country change its attitude with regard to European difficulties. «*Finland has always been a country keen to settle problems responsibly, not to cause them. This is a common European cause*» he declared. In Finland parliament is authorised to pronounce on requests for funds to finance EU rescue plans. First consequence of the results of the general elections on 17th April: the euro lost ground on 18th April against the American dollar and the Japanese yen.

«*Traditionally, political parties agree that the leader of the party with most seats forms the government,*» says Ilkka Ruostetsaari. Jyrki Katainen, leader of the conservative National Coalition party should therefore be the next Prime Minister of a country where government coalitions have always been formed after elections and beyond ideological splits. The rural party (SMP), from which the True Finns were born, was part of the Finnish governments between 1983 and 1990. «*When you ask them, most Finns say that who is in government is of no importance*», points out Lauri Korvanen, professor of political sciences at Turku University.

Jyrki Katainen, 40, is a graduate in social sciences from Tampere University. After winning several local

mandates (town councillor in Siilinjärvi and regional councillor of Northern Savonia) he has been a member of parliament since 1999. Five years later, in 2004, he became leader of the National Coalition. In 2007 he was appointed Finance Minister in the government headed

by Matti Vanhanen (KESK). He was returned to this same office by Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi in June 2010. 3 years ago The Financial Times named Jyrki Katainen best Finance Minister in Europe.

Results of the general elections held in Finland on 17th April 2011

Turnout: 70.40%

Political parties	Number of votes	Percentage of the vote	Number of seats
National Coalition (KOK)	598 369	20.4	44
Social-Democrat Party (SPD)	561 049	19.1	42
True Finns (PS)	559 342	19	39
Centre Party (KESK)	463 160	15.8	35
Leftwing Alliance (VAS)	238 473	8.1	14
Greens (VIHR)	212 837	7.2	10
Swedish People's Party (SFP)	125 865	4.3	9
Christian-Democrat Party (SKL)	118 514	4	6
Aland	8 542	0.4	1
Others	95 984	1.6	0

Source: Statistics Office of Finland website (<http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/vaa.html>)

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