

Sauli Niinistö wins the 1st round of the presidential election in Finland.

from **Corinne Deloy**
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RESULTS

As forecast in all of the polls, Sauli Niinistö, the Conservative Assembly's (KOK) candidate, Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen's party, easily won the first round of the presidential election that took place on 22nd January in Finland. He won 37% of the vote, ahead of ecologist Pekka Haavisto (Greens, VIHR) who won 18.8% of the vote. Paavo Väyrynen (Centre Party KESK) won 17.5%, Timo Soini, leader of the True Finns (PS) 9.4%, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), former Prime Minister (1995-2003) Paavo Lipponen 6.7%, the present Culture and Sports Minister Paavo Arhinmäki (Left Alliance, VAS) 5.5%, Eva Biaudet (The Swedish People's Party, SFP) 2.7% and Sari Essayah (Christian Democratic Party, SKL) 2.5%.

Turnout totalled 72.7% i.e. 1.2 point less than that recorded in the previous presidential election on 15th and 29th January 2006. 1,364,892 people voted early between 11th and 17th January, i.e. 32% of all of those registered – a figure that was higher than that recorded in the previous presidential election. Many Finns living abroad – around 48,000 – also voted early, i.e. a 50% increase in comparison with 2006. *"The Presidential election motivates people who are not generally interested in politics,"* said Pekka Haavisto.

The two pro-European candidates therefore came out ahead and will face each other on 5th February in the 2nd round. *"Pro-European politicians and support of the euro were approved by widely by the electorate,"* declared Sauli Niinistö after the announcement of the results. Europe, the euro zone and the debt crisis were the focus of the electoral campaign. Sauli Niinistö, like Pekka Haavisto (and Paavo Lipponen) defended the European Union and insisted on Finland's European establishment since its economy is extremely dependent on its exports. *"Finland has built itself a position in the world thanks to its membership of the EU and of the euro zone,"* repeats Sauli Niinistö. *"This presidential election is a competition between supporters of a closed Finland that wants to return to our former currency, the mark, and the supporters of greater international cooperation and a more active role in the European Union as well as in the world,"* declared Pekka Haavisto, who recalled that a wide majority of the Finns wanted to keep the euro.

Conversely centrist Paavo Väyrynen campaigned on the return of the Finnish mark. Like Timo Soini, he said he was against Helsinki lending more money to Athens,

believing that the Greek government is the only one responsible for the catastrophic situation the country finds itself in. *"The Finns, who went through a very serious crisis at the start of the 1990's and who emerged from it alone, believe that the Greeks can do the same,"* explains Jan Sundberg, political expert of the University of Helsinki.

In Finland, the President of the Republic only has limited power. The Head of State is responsible for the foreign policy and defence (together with the government) but he has no power over domestic affairs. On 21st October last he also lost the initiative over European policy to the benefit of the government after a vote in the Eduskunta/Riksdag, the only chamber in Parliament which modified his powers. The country is now represented in the EU by its Prime Minister. Moreover any possible clashes between the Head of State and government are now decided upon by Parliament. These changes will enter into force on March 1st next, when the successor to Tarja Halonen will take office.

Political analysts believe that a victory on the part of

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Sauli Niinistö will relieve the pressure placed on the Finnish government for it to adopt a firmer position over the debt crisis. *"The result of the first round is important. It affects political discussions relating to Europe's present political difficulties,"* says the political expert of the University of Helsinki, Tuomo Martikainen, who believes that the KOK candidate will win on 5th February. The Finnish government and the euro zone should agree on new rules to fund the European Stability Mechanism on 23rd January, which will run parallel to the present euro zone rescue fund – the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) – which will enjoy an initial capital of 80 billion € and immediate liquidity of 620 billion €. Helsinki is the only capital of a euro zone country to challenge the new majority voting system of 85% (rather than unanimity), designed to overcome the opposition of the "small" countries and enable the guarantee of financial support to those which have lost the confidence of the markets. An agreement will enable the launch of the European Stability Mechanism in July next.

"I am not expecting new themes to debate during the campaign in the second round," stressed Sauli Niinistö. Conversely, Pekka Haavisto said that *"this election showed that people are interested in other issues such as discrimination and inequality. These themes will also be important in the second round."*

Paavo Väyrynen did not succeed in reaching the second round. The Social Democratic Party's result is a serious setback for this party that already failed to rise above the 20% mark in the most recent general elections on 17th April 2011 (19.1% of the vote). For the first time

in the country's history *"the left will not be represented in the second round of the presidential election. Paavo Lipponen, often believed to lie on the right of the political scale, struggled to distinguish itself from Sauli Niinistö during the entire electoral campaign."*

As for the anti-Europeans, the campaign undertaken by the centrist candidate was an obstacle to Timo Soini, whose result, weak in comparison with that achieved by his party in the general elections on 17th April last, should not lead us to believe that the True Finns are on the decline, or even that the party is finished. *"It is the first time that the True Finns have failed since 2006. They are turning into a party just like any other and they need to recover support,"* declared Ville Perna, director of the Centre for Parliamentary Studies of the University of Turku. Some eurosceptics chose to give their vote to Paavo Väyrynen in order to prevent Timo Soini from reaching the second round.

The Finnish presidential election is not decided by the candidates' programmes but rather their personalities. Political analyst Olavi Borg believes that Pekka Haavisto has little chance of beating Sauli Niinistö during a second round. *"Most of the electorate finds it difficult to support a homosexual candidate,"* he said. *"Sauli Niinistö's popularity will be even greater in the second round. Many people and notably the eldest will not vote for Pekka Haavisto"* added Olavi Borg.

An opinion poll by the Taloustutkimus Institute and published by the daily Yle on 19th January last credited the Conservative Assembly's candidate with 64% of the vote and 22% for the ecologist if the second round brought the two men to run against one another.

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ANNEX

Results of the 1st round of the presidential election on 22nd January 2011 in Finland

Turnout: 72.7%

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Candidates	No. of votes won	% of votes won
Sauli Niinistö (Conservative Assembly, KOK)	1 131 127	37
Pekka Haavisto (Greens, VIHR)	573 872	18.8
Paavo Väyrynen (Centre Party, KESK)	536 731	17.5
Timo Soini (True Finns, PS)	287 405	9.4
Paavo Lipponen (Social Democratic Party, SPD)	205 020	6.7
Paavo Arhinmäki (Left Alliance, VAS)	167 359	5.5
Eva Biaudet (Swedish People's Party, SFP)	82 581	2.7
Sari Essayah (Christian Democratic Party, SKL)	75 755	2.5

Source : Finnish Justice Ministry