

Will Finland shift to the right in the general elections on 2 April?

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ANALYSIS

On 2 April, Finns are being called to the polls to renew the 200 members of the *Eduskunta/Riksdag*, the single chamber of Parliament. Voters who are resident in the country and wish to do so will be able to fulfil their civic duty in advance between 22 and 28 March, and between 22 and 25 March for those living and voting abroad. 86 polling stations are open in several countries.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Taloustutkimus Institute and published by the daily Yle on 6 March, Petteri Orpo's National Coalition Party (KOK) is in the lead with 20.8% of the vote, ahead of the Social Democratic Party of outgoing Prime Minister Sanna Marin with 19.9% and the Finns Party (*Perus S*) led by Rikka Purra with 19%. Annika Saarikko's Centre Party (KESK) is expected to get 9.5%; the Left Alliance (VAS) led by Li Andersson, 9%; the Green League (VIHR), led by Maria Ohisalo, 8.9%; the Swedish People's Party (SFP) led by Anna-Maja Henriksson, 4.4%; the Christian Democratic Party (SKL) led by Sari Essayah, 3.6% and finally the Movement Now (LN), a liberal party led by Hjallis Harkimo, 1.5%.

The first three parties are running a tight race. "*The rise of the Finns Party is due to women and abstentionists,*" said Tuomo Turja, director of the Kantar opinion institute. The Centre Party is also gaining momentum. First-time voters also favour the nationalist Finns Party: more than a quarter (28%) say they will vote for it. 23% will choose the Social Democrats and 11% the Green League according to an opinion poll conducted by Kantar.

The negotiations to form the future government could therefore be long. In Finland, government coalitions are often broad and may include a large number of parties. Consensus building is an important element of Finnish politics. According to opinion polls, the next government could be blue-red, i.e. the National Coalition Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Green League and the Swedish People's Party. It could also be blue, i.e. the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party (if the Finns

Party comes second in the election), with the Social Democrats returning to the opposition.

Many parties have ruled out an alliance with the Finns Party, including the Social Democrats, the Greens, the Left Alliance and the Swedish People's Party. The Left Alliance refuses to participate in a government with the National Coalition Party. The KOK and the Social Democratic Party are willing to govern together if necessary.

According to the Forum for Finnish Business and Politics (EVA), almost a quarter of Finns (23%) expect the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party to form the next government. A fifth (19%) would prefer a coalition formed by the KOK and the Social Democrats and 10% a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Centre Party. Finally, the two most important issues for voters are the management of public finances along with social and health issues.

Following the previous general elections on 14 April 2019, Social Democrat Antti Rinne formed a government that included, in addition to his party, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance and the Swedish People's Party. However, this coalition collapsed at the end of 2019 when it was revealed that the Minister for Local Affairs and Reforms, Sirpa Paatero (SDP), had withheld information from MPs about the postal service's plans to change the status of many of its employees, which would have contributed to the precarious nature of their work. On 3 December 2019, Antti Rinne therefore resigned. He was replaced by Sanna Marin, then Minister of Transport and Communications. At the age of 34, she became the youngest Prime Minister in Finnish history.

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The government formed by Sanna Marin at that time comprised 12 women out of 19 in the cabinet. Finally, all 5 parties in her coalition (Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance and Swedish People's Party) are led by a woman, 4 of whom are under 40 years old.

LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS ORGANISED IN A CONTEXT OF WAR

As its term of office draws to a close, this government coalition is struggling. There are many tensions between the Centre Party and the Green League, the former having refused to vote for certain points of the law on the restoration of nature, presented on 22 June 2022 by the European Commission, which obliges member states to restore forests, wetlands and other marine and terrestrial landscapes that have been degraded, damaged or destroyed by human development, and to allow for greater biodiversity on agricultural and forest land, in the marine environment as well as in urban areas.

Finland has a number of problems, the most important of which are rising energy prices, inflation, and the increase in violence among young people, often in gangs, a phenomenon seen in neighbouring Sweden. Of course, Helsinki also has had to deal with the war in Ukraine. As soon as the Russian armed forces invaded the country, Finland, which shares 1,340 km of borders with Russia, took a firm stand against the Russian president, notably by supplying arms to the Ukrainians. This conflict has strengthened the cohesion of the population with the political classes. Indeed, the Finns, who have memories of traumatic experiences with the Russians, easily identify with the Ukrainians. Finland has indeed been the focus of many battles throughout history, particularly between Stockholm and Moscow: the country was owned by Sweden until 1809 before becoming a Russian grand duchy. The country declared its independence on 6 December 1917. After the Second World War, it narrowly escaped annexation by the USSR. Helsinki regained its independence, albeit with several territories amputated. Finland also had to pay a heavy price to the Soviets and resign itself to subordinating its foreign policy to Moscow's

in exchange for the preservation of its democratic institutions. Helsinki was forced into neutrality by the USSR, a process known as *Finlandisation*.

Finland has just announced that fences will be erected on large parts of the border it shares with Russia next spring.

Helping Kyiv, condemning Moscow, strengthening national defence forces and joining NATO are backed by all parties. Russia's invasion of Ukraine effectively ended Finland's 50 years of neutrality and 30 years of non-alignment as it applied for membership of the North Atlantic Treaty on 18 May 2022. Helsinki was invited to join NATO at the Madrid summit, as was Sweden, another previously neutral state.

Stockholm's membership is currently blocked by Türkiye and Hungary. "*We have sent a very clear signal to Türkiye and Hungary, which have not yet ratified, that we want to join NATO together,*" said the Prime Minister at the Munich Security Conference on 17-19 February. However, on 1 March, the Finnish Parliament approved Finland's entry into NATO by 184 votes to 7. In the end, the head of government preferred not to leave the possibility of a vacuum after the general elections on 2 April, the results of which could delay the accession process.

More than half of Finns (53%) are in favour of their country joining NATO as soon as possible, without waiting for Sweden.

THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

The Social Democrats have an advantage in the person of Sanna Marin, who remains extremely popular among her compatriots. The other parties therefore avoid criticising her too openly. For her part, Sanna Marin reiterates that only a Social Democratic Party victory can prevent the formation of a right-wing coalition. She said that the Finns Party is a racist movement, which justifies a clear renunciation of any collaboration with it, clear criticism on her part of the National Coalition Party, which is refusing to take a stand on this issue. The Social Democrats are fighting against cuts in social budgets and want to strengthen the Finnish economy by increasing the employment rate to 80% by the end

of the next parliamentary term in 2027, a percentage that would bring Finland into line with its northern European neighbours.

The National Coalition Party (KOK), the largest opposition party, criticises the Social Democratic Party for the lack of realism in its programme. "*Betting on both growth and tax increases is unrealistic*," said its leader Petteri Orpo, who has said that the welfare state has deteriorated under the Sanna Marin government, contributing to further increases in public debt. The KOK rejects any tax increase for the coming legislature. The most important actions, it says, are to bring public finances back into balance and to create growth. It wants half of an age group to have a university degree by 2030 and wants to achieve an employment rate of 80% of the population by that year. Petteri Orpo denies any intention of forming a coalition government with the Finns Party, but his position remains unclear and he refuses to say with which partner he would prefer to govern in case of a KOK victory.

The Finns Party is anti-elite, opposed to any deepening of the European Union and defends Finnish national culture and sovereignty. It has made public services a priority and refuses any cuts in social services. The purpose of the state is to ensure security and protect the Finnish people. Furthermore, its leader Rikka Purra wants the country's carbon neutrality to be postponed to 2050.

The Centre Party's main objective is to straighten out the country's finances, reduce the national debt, which stands at €144 billion, or €26,000 per capita, and bring Finland's budget back into balance. The outgoing Finance Minister and leader of the centrists Annika Saarikko has repeatedly warned that the government may have to borrow at least €10 billion over the next 4 years to pay the interest on the current debt alone. This is expected to increase by a further €4 billion during the next parliamentary term. The Centre Party wants to reform the housing benefit system and de-index it from price increases. It would like to see the number of people employed increase by 150,000 and for half of every age group to obtain a university degree by 2030.

THE FINNISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The *Eduskunta/Riksdag* comprises 200 deputies elected every 4 years in 12 constituencies designating between 7 and 36 representatives according to their population (except for the Åland Islands which elect only one deputy). An archipelago located between Finland and Sweden, the Åland Islands are home to a population of 25,000 Swedish-speaking people who have enjoyed the special administrative status of a Free-Associated State since 12 October 1951. The islands' institutions legislate in the fields of education, social and health affairs, security and culture. In 1995, the European Union granted the demilitarised territory of Åland a derogation to remain outside the European Customs Union. Since 1922, the islands have had their own government and parliament (*Ålands lagting* or *Lagtinget*) comprising 30 members.

In each general election, the number of citizens in each constituency is divided by the total population of the country and the result is multiplied by 199 to obtain the number of seats to be filled per constituency.

General elections are held under the d'Hondt proportional representation system (first-past-the-post in the Åland Islands). The electorate votes for both a party and a candidate. They can cast a preferential vote for a candidate on the list for which they are voting. A Finnish peculiarity is that there is no electoral threshold to enter the Parliament. Such a threshold would have made it difficult to represent the Swedish-speaking minority in the country, or even deprived the Swedish People's Party of any members.

Candidates for MP are nominated by political parties or by voters' associations. To participate in the election, a party must collect the signatures of at least 5,000 citizens to be registered with the Ministry of the Interior. Voters' associations wishing to compete must have a minimum of 100 members.

Between 1981 and the early 2010s, three parties shared two-thirds of the vote in general elections. This situation came to an end in the 17 April 2011 election, when the True Finns (PS) secured almost the same number of votes as the Social Democratic Party.

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Finally, there are 94 women in the *Eduskunta/Riksdag*, i.e. 47% of the total number of members. In terms of the number of women in parliament, Finland is the European leader.

9 political parties are represented in the *Eduskunta/Riksdag* since the general elections on 14 April 2019:

- the Social Democratic Party (SDP), founded in 1899 as the Workers' Party and led by outgoing Prime Minister Sanna Marin, has 40 MPs;
- the Finns Party (PS), a right-wing populist, nationalist and Eurosceptic party, formed in 1995 from the Rural Party (SMP), itself formed in 1959. Led by Rikka Purra since August 2021, it has 39 seats;
- the National Coalition Party (KOK), a centre-right party founded in 1918 and led by Petteri Orpo, has 38 seats;
- the Centre Party (KESK), successor of the liberal Agrarian Party founded in 1906 led by outgoing Finance Minister Annika Saarikko, has 31 seats;
- the Green League (VIHR), founded in 1987 and the first European green party to obtain a ministry (in 1995). Led by outgoing Interior Minister Maria Ohisalo, it has 20 seats;

- The Alliance of the Lefts (VAS), a radical left-wing party founded in 1990, formed from the People's Democratic League (SKDL), the Women's Democratic League (SNDL) and the Communist Party (SKP). Led by outgoing Education Minister Li Andersson, it has 16 seats;

- the Swedish People's Party (SFP), a liberal party founded in 1906, representing the interests of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland and led by outgoing Minister of Justice Anna-Maja Henriksson, has 9 seats;

- the Christian Democratic Party (SKL), founded in 1958 and led by Sari Essayah, has 5 seats;

- the Movement Now (LN), founded in 2018 by Hjalles Harkimo after he left the National Coalition Party, has only one seat.

In Finland, the President of the Republic is elected by direct universal suffrage every 6 years. Sauli Niinistö (KOK) was re-elected on 28 January 2018 for a second term in the first round, winning 62.7% of the vote.

Recap of the results of the 14 April 2019 general elections in Finland

Turnout: 68.73%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes cast	Number of seats
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	546 471	17.73	40
True Finns (PS)	538 805	17.48	39
National Coalition Party (KOK)	523 957	17.00	38
Centre Party (KESK)	423 920	13.76	31
Green League (VIHR)	354 194	11.49	20
Alliance of the Lefts (VAS)	251 808	8.17	16
Swedish People's Party (SFP)	139 640	4.53	9
Christian Democratic Party (SKL)	120 144	3.90	5
Movement Now (LN)	69 427	2.25	1
Others	106 938	3.47	1
Independents	6 612	0.21	0

Source : https://tulospalvelu.vaalit.fi/EKV-2019/en/tulos_kokomaa.html
and https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/taysistunto/Documents/SALI_istumajarjestys_vaalikausi_2019_2022.pdf

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