

The 1987 Eduskunta Election in Finland*

Sten Berglund, University of Helsinki

The election to the Finnish Eduskunta which was held on 15–16 March 1987 may go down as something of a turning-point in Finnish postwar politics. It marked an end to the long-standing practice of excluding the Conservative Party from the list of potential government parties. Social Democratic Party leader Kalevi Sorsa elaborated on this topic in several campaign speeches and in such terms that there was little doubt he was more favorably disposed towards the Conservative Party than towards the Center Party. In a speech which he delivered when visiting one of the local party organizations in Helsinki in late 1986, the Social Democratic Prime Minister even suggested that the Center and Conservative parties had changed places on the Finnish left/right continuum. As a consequence there did not seem to be much hope left for the kind of red/green government coalitions to which the Social Democrats had been committed ever since the mid sixties.

The Campaign

The stage was thus set for drama, but the parties were slow or unwilling to take advantage of it. With a series of complicated government negotiations ahead of them and the presidential elections of 1988 looming in the background, they opted for a very low profile. The party leaders reconfirmed their willingness to assume government responsibility and went to great lengths not to shut any doors by refraining from imposing ideological constraints on the political debate. Issues and party platforms played a rather subordinate role until the last few weeks prior to the election; and when they finally turned up on the agenda, they did not add much fuel to the election campaign.

With the exception of nuclear energy and environment protection which had developed into an issue of national importance in Finland in the wake of the Tjernoby nuclear accident in the Soviet Union in April 1986, the issues were familiar from previous elections (Pesonen 1968). They allowed the parties to differentiate themselves from one another along the traditional left/right dimension of conflict in Finnish politics. The Social Democrats and their coalition partners in the Rural Party were on the

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defensive most of the time on account of their apparent failure to live up to old promises with respect to employment, housing and social welfare; a disadvantage the Social Democrats tried to offset by a last minute pledge to more than double the child allowance, if and when they returned to power.

The national TV debate which wrapped up the election campaign resulted in some clarifications on the budgetary implications of the Social Democratic surprise proposal, but apart from that it offered no more than the usual restatements of well known party positions which turned out to be remarkably similar to one another. The recent arrival on the electoral arena – the environmentalists, the Minority Communists and the Retired People's Party – just added a little noise to a debate with very strong consensual undercurrents.

The Results

There are as many ways of presenting the election results as there are grouping and tabulation criteria. The election reconfirmed the salience of the left/right continuum with the major parties catering to distinct social groups. The socialist parties and the small Rural Party have a clear-cut working-class profile as opposed to the traditional parties of the right, which stand out as the parties of the middle classes.

The election spelled victory for the bourgeois parties and defeat for the three socialist parties, but much more decisively on the parliamentary than on the electoral arena (Törnudd 1968, 129–134). The socialist bloc lost 2.9 percent of the vote or eight seats in the Eduskunta to the bourgeois parties. Using the government/opposition dichotomy which President

Table 1. The Finnish Political Parties by Social Class as Given by the 1987 Gallup Data. Percentages.

Social group	Soc.Dem.	Comm.	Cons.	Center	Rural	Swed.	Greens
Farmer	1	1	6	39	11	4	4
Worker	66	76	22	30	57	10	35
White collar	27	12	38	19	27	44	33
Upper middle	6	8	26	9	2	35	19
Student	1	1	7	3	2	8	10
Retired	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Housewife	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	N = 263	N = 75	N = 263	N = 129	N = 44	N = 52	N = 52

Source: Soumen Gallup Oy.

Table 2. The Elections to the Finnish Eduskunta 1987 (1983). Percent Distribution of Votes, Distribution of Seats and Percent Turnout.

	Votes %	200 seats
Social Democratic Party	24.3 (26.8)	56 (57)
Conservative Party	23.2 (22.2)	53 (44)
Center Party	17.6 (16.7)	40 (37)
Communist Party	9.4 (9.9)	16 (17)
Swedish People's Party	5.3 (4.6)	13 (11)
Rural Party	6.3 (9.7)	9 (16)
Christian Union	2.6 (3.0)	5 (3)
Minority Communists	4.3 (-)	4 (10)
Greens	4.0 (1.4)	4 (2)
Retired People's Party	1.2 (-)	- (-)
Liberal Party	1.0 (-)	- (-)

Valid votes 75.9% (81%).

Electorate 3.8 mil. (3.7 mil.).

The Communists run as part of an electoral umbrella organization, the Democratic League for the Finnish People (in Finnish: the SKDL). The minority Communists who ran on a separate ticket in 1987, but not in 1983, used the party label Democratic Alternative; The Liberal Party participated as part of the Center Party in 1983, but not in 1987.

Koivisto referred to in his opening address to the new Eduskunta, it was more like a draw. Two of the four government parties – the Social Democrats and the Rural Party – suffered substantial losses in terms of electoral and parliamentary support, while the other two government parties – the Center Party and the Swedish People's Party – had an influx of votes which almost compensated for the loss of parliamentary influence by their coalition partners.

The overall trend had been predicted by the opinion pollsters, which is not to say that the election results did not contain any surprises. The Communists, for instance, did much better than predicted. The losses which they incurred were *not* a result of large-scale defections from the Communist Party ranks, but a product of the electoral systems dynamics which worked to the disadvantage of the Communists who had split down the middle in 1986 and ran on two separate tickets in 1987. The environmentalist party, the Greens, came strengthened out of the election, but much less so than predicted by the polling institutes. An indication perhaps that Finnish electoral behavior is part and parcel of the international trend towards *decreased* class voting, *increased* issue voting and above all the kind of last minute decision-making that benefited the Liberal Party in the 1985 Swedish election. Of the 1987 Finnish vote, a substantial amount was indeed of the floating variety.

The most dramatic swing, however, was that in favor of non-voting, which in a sense came out as the single most popular party within the

Table 3. The Timing of the Voters' Decision to Vote for a Specific Party or Candidate in the 1987 Election.

	Party	Candidate
On election day	9	17
A few days prior to election day	9	18
1-2 weeks before the election	15	21
1-2 months before the election	8	16
At an even earlier stage	57	28
Can't say	1	*
	(N = 994)	(N = 994)

Source: Soumen Gallup Oy.

Finnish multi-party system. The many references by the party leaders to the strategic importance of the election clearly did *not* have a mobilizing impact on the electorate, particularly not on the young cohorts.

It is a moot question why. It has a traditional component. It is a byproduct of the swing to the right, but there is also a case to be made for blaming the increasing incidence of non-voting on the peculiarities of Finnish parliamentarism.

The Implications

In many multi-party systems, everything gets settled on election day. The voters vote; and if they are interested enough to remain tuned in to the radio or TV coverage of the counting of the votes for a few hours that night, they are almost certain to be introduced to the new Prime Minister before the night is over. Not so in Finland, however. Finland has a complicated cleavage structure and a fragmented party system. The constitution of 1906 includes provisions for qualified majorities of 2/3 or more which make minimum size parliamentary coalitions into considerably more than the 101 votes out of 200 required to carry a regular vote of confidence in the Eduskunta; and though responsible to Parliament, the government is appointed by the President who is free to interpret the election results as he sees fit.

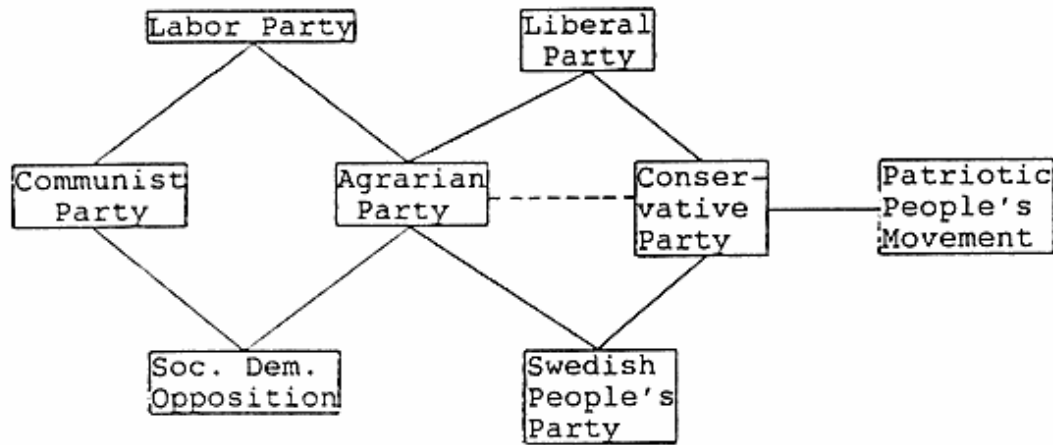
In this light, it is no wonder that the process of government formation tends to be a complicated and drawn out affair only remotely related to the developments on the electoral arena (Törnudd 1968, 129-134; Berglund & Lindström 1978, ch. 5). When making a public issue out of the prospect for a change of government without offering an alternative, the party strategists introduced an additional element of uncertainty into the voters'

Table 4. Finnish Voters by Party and Age Brackets in 1987. Percentages.

Age	Soc. Dem.	Comm. Party	Cons. Party	Cent. Party	Rural Party	Swed. P. P.	Greens	All vot.	All n. vot.
-20	3	3	6	8	7	2	13	4	16
20-24	7	3	21	16	9	10	15	11	23
25-29	10	11	13	16	11	10	31	13	19
30-34	14	21	10	9	14	15	21	13	15
35-39	14	17	9	7	9	15	6	11	8
40-49	18	16	12	16	20	8	8	15	6
50-64	21	19	16	17	27	12	—	19	8
65-	14	9	11	12	2	27	4	13	5
	N = 263	N = 75	N = 263	N = 129	N = 44	N = 52	N = 52	N = 994	N = 155

Source: Suomen Gallup Oy.

Fig. 1. Government Coalition Patterns (1919-).



It may be noted that the Social Democrats ran on two separate tickets during the 1960s and that the People's Patriotic Movement (in Finnish: The IKL) was outlawed after WW II. The Rural Party, which is a government party of recent vintage, may be thought of as occupying the slot vacated by the Liberal Party, which has now almost disappeared from the political stage (see Table 1).

Source: Törnudd (1969, 65).

calculus which may go towards accounting for the increasing popularity of the non-voting party.

The kind of equilibrium in which the election resulted would have produced a bourgeois majority government anywhere else in Scandinavia. But not so in Finland. As the President defined the agenda, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives were called on to form a coalition of government which may have a lot to say for itself but that clearly defies the logic of the conventional left/right continuum.

This move by President Koivisto with his ties to social democracy was designed to serve several ends all at once: to reduce the level of tensions and preserve social peace and to remove the Center Party from its pivotal position in Finnish politics by forcing it into opposition. It may be viewed as the logical continuation of the successful cooperation between the two parties on the local level, in Parliament and even during presidential elections. But the fact remains that it runs counter to the very foundation of some seventy years of coalition-making.

The new coalition of Social Democrats and Conservatives at the expense of the Center Party is a potential realignment force in Finnish politics, but it is yet too early to assess its impact on actual or perceived party distances in Finland.

Summary

The Finnish general elections of 15–16 March 1987 were held in a climate of change and uncertainty. There was general agreement that the new government did not have to be another version of the old center/left theme, but the party leaders took great care not to commit themselves in advance. The election campaign, which was low key, was also designed not to scare away potential coalition partners.

The swing which had been accurately predicted by the pollsters gave the bourgeois parties an edge of almost 3 percent over the socialist parties, which lost eight parliamentary seats altogether. The most remarkable swing, however, was that in favor of the non-voting party, which increased its share of the electorate by almost 6 percent compared to 1983 (from 81% in 1983 to 75.9% in 1987). An indication perhaps that the new element of uncertainty which the party leaders introduced when making a public issue out of the principles of cabinet formation may have been a little bit too much to handle for the voters.

A series of circumstances that are unique to Finland, including the strong presidency, finally provided an unorthodox solution to the government question – a coalition joining Conservatives and Social Democrats, but excluding the Center Party. It is not entirely without precedent in Finnish politics, but it is definitely new on the government level, where it runs counter to the well defined left/right cleavage. This is a re-aligning force of no minor importance, but it remains to be seen what it will do to the perceived party distances in Finland.

APPENDIX

The elections to the Finnish Eduskunta 1987 (1983). Percent distribution of votes, distribution of seats and percent turnout.

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