

The 1988 Presidential Election in Finland

Jukka Paastela, University of Tampere

The article aims to describe and analyse the 1988 presidential election in Finland. The parties and candidates in the election are presented and the electoral system is discussed. For the first time a double-vote system was used in which there are two ballots, one for the direct election of the president and one for the elector of the president. If a candidate wins more than 50 percent of the vote, then that candidate is elected. If, however, no candidate receives 50 percent or more of the vote, then the electoral college elects the president. Although it was fairly certain that the incumbent president Mauno Koivisto would be re-elected, the campaign was a heated one, with the electorate very politically engaged. It is concluded that despite the fact regional differences between north and south Finland were aggravated – the candidate for the opposition, Paavo Väyrynen, received considerable support especially in northern Finland – the presidential election showed that the Finnish political system functions relatively smoothly and that its overall effect is highly legitimizing.

Before the Finnish presidential election, held on January 31–February 1, 1988, there was no doubt about the outcome: everybody knew that the incumbent president, Mauno Koivisto, would win. One might think that the campaign and the election itself in such circumstances would not be of much interest. There were, however, other factors which caught the interest of the electorate. One was the new electoral system. Voters had two ballots, one for the presidential candidate and one for the candidate for an elector. If one candidate should receive more than 50 percent of the votes then that candidate would become president, but if not the president would be elected by 301. The big question was whether Koivisto would surpass this 50 percent threshold. Another interesting factor was the struggle for second place between Prime Minister Harri Holkeri and the leader of the opposition, Paavo Väyrynen. In this situation there were a lot of people in the electoral activities of the main candidates and the voting turnout was high by Finnish standards 82.6 percent in the direct election and 81.2 percent in the election of the electoral college (in the 1987 parliamentary election the turnout was 75.9 percent).

Parties and Candidates

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Parties and Candidates

Mauno Koivisto was the candidate not only of the biggest Finnish party, the Social Democratic Party (56 seats out of 200 in parliament), but also

of the Rural Party (9 seats), originally a populist splinter party from the old Agrarian Party (now the Centre Party), and an electoral alliance formed by some representatives of the Swedish party and unpolitical, but clearly non-Socialist cultural personages for this election called Pro Koivisto. Koivisto was elected President for the first time in 1982 after old Urho Kekkonen had had to retire for health reasons. Koivisto's style of conducting the presidential tasks was quite different compared with that of Kekkonen. Kekkonen used his powers to build a strong presidency. He was active in income policy solutions and took a standpoint in many different social questions, ranging from the interest policy of Finland's Bank or the investments of state-owned firms to the problems of scientific organizations or the housing question (Nousiainen 1985, 217–228). He also created a power structure where no 'dissidency' was tolerated (Apunen 1984, 28).

Koivisto promised in 1982 that he would use the powers of the president – which are considerable (see Nousiainen 1971, 226–240) – 'most temperately'. Generally speaking this has been the case; as far as is known, for instance, he has not been greatly involved in the functioning of the state council (government), but has usually decided matters in the way proposed by the ministers (Jyränki 1987, 24). Koivisto has tried to realize the role which Kekkonen once considered ideal for the Finnish president: namely that 'he nominates the majority government on the grounds of the agreement of the parties, accepts in the state council proposals as suggested, opens agricultural exhibitions and fairs, is present in grand openings of the national and provincial festivals, makes some travel of representation abroad, etc.' (Kekkonen 1976 [1958], 64–66). There have, however, been situations when the president has been an active actor in political life. The most notable was in the formation of the government after the 1987 elections when Koivisto reportedly strongly supported the Social Democratic Party–Coalition Party (conservative) governmental coalition instead of a coalition of the Centre Party and the Coalition Party, and this presidential pressure was an important factor behind the formation of the present government.¹ Koivisto remained, with his somewhat charismatic qualities, as a favourite of the people.

The candidate of the Coalition Party (53 seats) was Harri Holkeri and the candidate of the Centre Party (40 seats) and of the Christian League (5 seats) was Paavo Väyrynen. Holkeri, now the premier, is a director of Finland's Bank. He is a former chairman of the Coalition Party but as a bank director he has not, like Koivisto in the 1970s, actively involved in party political life. He has been in the bank, again like Koivisto, just waiting for the chance to become president. His slogan in the presidential election was 'Holkeri as president after Koivisto'; everybody knew that this meant not this election but the next one in 1994. Väyrynen is the chairman of the

Centre Party. His opponents often see him as a new Kekkonen and in past years he has often been the subject of very negative reports in the press. His aim is to be elected president in 1994 and for that reason it was important for him to beat Holkeri in the 1988 election.

The Communist Party (the moderate one) and its front organization, the Finnish People's Democratic League (16 seats) decided to form an entirely new movement for their candidate, Kalevi Kivistö, the governor of the province of Middle Finland and the former chairman of the Democratic League. For this reason they had to collect at least 20,000 names for his support, because according to the electoral law this is required if a candidate is not officially presented by any registered party. The movement, called 'Movement 88' got support from some Greens and cultural personages who were not members of any party. The 'Communist Party (Unity)' and its front organization, the Democratic Alternative (4 seats) presented Jouko Kajanoja, who was the chairman of the Communist Party before its final split in the middle of the 1980s.² The press branded him as a 'knight of sad shape' and his main problem indeed was that he was not taken seriously even by many supporters of the Democratic Alternative. One MP of the Democratic Alternative, for instance, publicly preferred Kivistö and refused to be a candidate for the electoral college in Kajanoja's list.

For the Swedish Party and the Greens the situation was quite difficult. The Swedish Party (13 seats) did not present its own candidate as it did in 1982. There were supporters of Koivisto, Holkeri and Väyrynen and members of the party were on the lists of each of them. Also the Greens (4 seats) were unable to present their own candidate and were divided between those who supported Kivistö or Koivisto and those who thought that the Greens should be indifferent as to the presidential election.³

The Question of the Electoral System

The electoral system in Finnish presidential elections had been an indirect one since the independency until the last election. The voters elected who then actually carried out the presidential election.⁴ The result of a broad consensus that this electoral system was old-fashioned and should be changed in some way was the 'double system' which many politicians and political scientists, including the present writer, see as unsatisfactory. If no candidate gets more than 50 percent of the votes in the direct election, it has all the defects of the old system. The winner can be a candidate who receives only a small number of votes from the people, in theory anybody who gets at least one elector can be elected as president.⁵ Here is an example of such a possibility. Let us imagine that candidate A gets 45 percent of the vote, candidate B 24 percent, candidate C 23 percent and

candidate D 8 percent. A is, say, a left-wing candidate and all the others right-wing candidates. It would in some situations be in the interests of the three latter candidates to prevent A from being elected by any means. If B and C could not come to an agreement as to which of them should be elected they might make a compromise and elect D. One might think that this is pure imagination and could never happen in practice. However, before the 1982 presidential election there was speculation that if the electors of the Centre Party and the Coalition Party could not reach agreement about their own candidates, they might elect the candidate of the smaller Swedish Party as president. This kind of situation, although it is not, to be sure, very plausible, could nevertheless occur and would surely be considered by most citizens as a gross violation of democracy.

The last election revealed that the double system was too complicated for many voters. In an election room the voter received two ballot papers, each of a different colour but similar shape. The result was that many people voted for the presidential candidate using the ballot paper intended for the election of the elector candidate and vice versa.

In spring 1987 the parliamentary group of both the Social Democratic Party and the Coalition Party took the initiative to change the electoral system to a direct election with two rounds. The government, however, considered that there was too little time left to prepare a bill and enact a law about this system before the 1988 presidential election. Because this system has fairly wide support, it is possible that it will be used in the 1994 election. It has its problems, however, one is that it tends to bipolarize people and it may be questioned whether it is wise to bipolarize people from the president (cf. Portelli 1980). The political scientists widely supported the system of approval voting as the best alternative in the Finnish situation. It was first suggested by Dag Anckar (for example 1984, 161–172). With this system, the electorate can vote for as many candidates as they like; one candidate if they think that only one is acceptable or even all candidates if they think that all are suitable for the presidency. The idea of the approval voting is, thus, that the electorate votes these candidates which they think they would approve as president. This alternative, however, did not receive much response from the politicians despite its obvious advantages: it is simple enough to be comprehensible to all people and probably its legitimizing effect would be high.

The Campaign

The campaign in the 1988 election was markedly different from that of the 1982 election, because in 1982 right-wing politicians tried seriously to prevent Koivisto's election. Their tactic was to propagate that Koivisto was

a socialist; this tactic was based on the fact that the vast majority of the Finnish people have a revulsion for anything they consider to be 'socialism'.⁶ Koivisto had to explain again and again the kind of socialist he was ('Bernsteinian socialist'; this caused a small Bernstein-boom in Finland). In the 1988 election there was no significant talk about Koivisto's 'socialism'. Another difference was that there was no serious propaganda about the candidate's relations with the Soviet Union. In the 1982 election Koivisto's and especially Kivistö's supposed bad relations were questioned, above all by the minority faction of the Communist Party, but also more generally, such as in the television 'exams' of the candidates. In my opinion these phenomena mean that Finnish political culture has matured somewhat in the last six years; nobody now asks how many times the candidates have visited the Soviet Union.

Väyrynen began his campaign as early as September 1987. His position at the beginning was obviously difficult. The Centre Party had won in the parliamentary election (March 1987) but was forced into the opposition. For the Centre leaders the situation was entirely new. According to all estimations Väyrynen's campaign was energetic and successful. He presented himself and his party as an alternative to the Social Democratic-Coalition Party government. Although his opponents pointed out that it was now the president, not the parliament that was being elected and the election thus had little to do with the government, Väyrynen succeeded in making the whole electoral struggle into some kind of real one in spite of the fact that everyone knew who would win. Väyrynen presented himself as a representative of people in difficulties especially in northern and north-east Finland. Väyrynen's emphasis on regionalism was reflected in the results of the election.

Holkeri's position was also difficult but in completely different from that of Väyrynen. He was tied to the governmental coalition with Social Democrats and President Koivisto and therefore had difficulty in presenting any clear political image of his own. It was generally agreed that he was uncertain and strained in his television 'exam'. He gave only vague answers to the questions of the editors. The government is, for instance, planning a great tax reform, but there is no knowledge about its content, only wild rumours among the citizens that after the reform people will no longer be able to reduce their medical expenses through taxation. At the same time the tax reform irritates the most well-to-do people, who fear that it will reduce their privileges, also the leaders of industry and commerce are alarmed. To questions about the tax reform, Holkeri could give no concrete answer. Then, just two days before the election, he announced that should it happen in the electoral college that he had more than Väyrynen, and the Centre Party and the Communists joined forces in order to promote Väyrynen to second place in the vote, he then would ask electors to vote

for Koivisto. By this announcement he evidently gave arms to the Centre Party and Väyrynen. The Centre leaders duly declared that the Coalition Party was now merely an 'auxiliary party' of the Social Democrats. Holkeri's move might have been a grave mistake from his point of view. There were obviously traditional conservative voters who would abhor the possibility of their votes finally going to Koivisto. There are indications, I discuss them below, that some traditional Coalition Party voters voted Väyrynen in this election or, which is more probable, abstained, and one reason for this may have been Holkeri's weak campaign.

Koivisto's campaign may be considered as relatively successful. The important factor was that he stepped down from his presidential tower and behaved like a real presidential candidate. In this respect there was a big change compared with Kekkonen's last campaign in 1978, which was only a ritual. Of course, the situation now was different, because Kekkonen's rivals in 1978 were representatives of 'fringe' parties only. But Koivisto seemed also more at ease than in his first campaign in 1982, when he was, as the prime minister, an acting president. He gave much more interviews than in 1982, not only for the most widely-circulated quality papers but, for instance, for the paper of the student union of the University of Helsinki and for local radio.

During his campaign Koivisto took a standpoint in some important constitutional questions. It has been unclear whether the president has the right to dismiss a minister or the whole government if the parliament has not expressed its lack of confidence. The experts of the constitution have generally, although there have been some exceptions, held the opinion that the president has the power to dismiss a minister and government. However, no minister or government has never been dismissed without the vote of censure in the parliament (Jyränki 1981, 103–105). In spring 1981, when Koivisto was the prime minister, the Centre Party tried to influence President Kekkonen so that he would dismiss Koivisto in order to weaken his position in the coming presidential election, but this operation was not successful. Koivisto's opinion was that one should respect tradition in this regard and strengthen existing practice. He, however, did not demand any changes in the constitution which is vague on this question. Koivisto also suggested the strengthening of the position of the prime minister in relation with the president, for example by decreeing that the president can dissolve the parliament only on the proposal of the prime minister. Then Koivisto announced his support for the idea that the president could be eligible only once more for his post. He suggested that parliament should enact such a law and that this law would also apply to himself. However, Koivisto left it open as to whether he would be a candidate in 1994 if parliament did not decree the limitation law. Finally, Koivisto expressed his support of the direct electoral system in the election of the president.

Kivistö had a good campaign. The idea of collecting tens of thousands of names (they collected 40,000) was obviously a good one: its effect was mobilizing. Kajanoja's campaign pointed out that he was clearly a second class candidate.

The Results

There were some phenomena which the press considered as surprises in the election. The share of votes of the different candidates was compared with the predictions of the polls before the election. Nearly all the opinion polls before the election predicted 50 percent or more for Koivisto but when he did not attain the 50 percent limit and had to submit, by his 47.9 percent, to election in the electoral college, some columnists declared that Koivisto was the loser of the election.⁷ Koivisto himself expressed his disappointment that he had not surpassed the threshold. All the opinion polls indicated that Holkeri would beat Väyrynen but instead Väyrynen triumphed with his 20.1 percent. For Holkeri his 18.0 percent of the votes was a clear defeat; Kivistö did well with his 10.2 percent, which was more than the polls promised; for Kajanoja, 1.4 percent was a disaster. Once again the differences between the polls and the actual results somewhat distorted reality. Väyrynen was seen as the winner of the election although he got 28.1 percent units less than Koivisto. The prohibition of the publication of the polls just before the elections, which is decreed in some south European countries, would have perhaps had certain advantages. The results of the election are shown in Table 1.

If we compare the votes with the results in the 1982 election, we see that Koivisto increased his support (43.3 percent in 1982), Holkeri's position was nearly the same (18.7 percent); the candidate of the Centre Party in 1982, Johannes Virolainen, obtained 16.8 percent and Kivistö 11.0 percent. In 1982 the Communist Party was not yet organizationally split.

Regional differences in voting preferences were considerable. Väyrynen is, above all, the man of the North (Lappi, Oulu and Vaasa provinces). Here his share of the votes was 10 percent more than anywhere else: 35 percent or more; in Lappi and Oulu provinces he won more votes than Koivisto. The Centre Party increased its share everywhere but in the South and especially in the Helsinki area this was not very significant because the total number remained weak (23,168 votes or 7.1 percent in Helsinki). However, the result for Väyrynen in Helsinki indicated that some traditional conservative, well-to-do voters voted for Väyrynen as a protest against Holkeri and the Coalition Party: Väyrynen received his highest number of votes, 10–11 percent of votes, from the most affluent areas in Helsinki. Both Koivisto and Holkeri succeeded best in the provinces, where the three biggest Finnish town areas are located (Helsinki, Tampere and

Table 1. The Results of the Finnish Presidential Election.

Candidate	% in direct election	% in election to the electoral college	Number of electors
Mauno Koivisto	47.9	46.6	144
Paavo Väyrynen	20.1	21.7	68
Harri Holkeri	18.0	20.2	63
Kalevi Kivistö	10.4	9.6	26
Jouko Kajanoja	1.4	1.9	0

	Number in direct election	Number in election to the electoral college
Mauno Koivisto	1 508 357	1 386 900
Paavo Väyrynen	634 655	645 253
Harri Holkeri	567 947	602 219
Kalevi Kivistö	329 080	285 382
Jouko Kajanoja	44 249	56 354

In the direct election the percents have been calculated from all given votes. In the election of the electors the percents and the numbers of mandates have been calculated from accepted votes only.

Only the figures for the direct election are final and confirmed (source: *Valtioneuvoston kuulutus tasavallan presidentin välittömän vaalin tuloksesta*. Helsinki, Feb. 9, 1988), the figures for the indirect election are unconfirmed advance information (source: *Tasavallan presidentin ja valitsijamiesten vaalit 31.1-1.2.1988*. Helsinki: Tilastokeskus, Feb. 4, 1988).

Turku). I think it is possible that one major political cleavage between parties in the near future may be regional by nature.

Before the election it was feared that the electorate would widely use the possibility to vote differently in direct and indirect elections. The electoral law rested for one-and-a-half years in a parliamentary committee because the Social Democrats especially were afraid of this phenomenon. They feared the possibility that the citizens would vote for Koivisto in the direct election but not for the candidates for this electors, and the result would be Koivisto getting just under 50 percent of the votes but receiving fewer electors, the bourgeois majority in the electoral college then electing a bourgeois president. The election proved such fears to be unfounded but as we can see from the Table 1, there were some differences. Both Koivisto and Kivistö were favoured more as persons than for the political forces behind them. The cases of Väyrynen, Holkeri and Kajanoja were just the reverse. Obviously some traditional voters of the Coalition Party and the Centre Party voted for Koivisto in the direct election. Because of Koivisto's and Kivistös personal attraction, the Left had the majority position in the electoral college (170 electors⁸ out of 301), although the Right had a clear majority in Parliament (124 seats out of 200).

Because the electoral system was too complicated for some voters, there was an exceptionally large number of rejected votes: 64,000 votes or 2.1 percent in the direct election and 150,000 votes or 4.8 percent in the indirect election. To be sure, among the rejected votes there were also void or Donald Duck-type protest votes, 2.5 percent, but 2.3 percent of the votes had to be rejected because the voters had confused the two ballots.

In the electoral college Koivisto received 45 votes from Holkeri's electors in the second round and was elected as president by 189 votes. There was only one surprise in the vote: although Holkeri requested his electors to vote for Koivisto in the second round, 18 of his electors (28 percent) did not do so, but instead again voted for Holkeri. It was known beforehand that some 10 electors would not vote for Koivisto because they publicly declared that they refused to vote for a socialist, so the number of protesters was unexpectedly high. This may partly reflect the dissatisfaction of the employers toward the Coalition Party because they think it has made too many concessions to the Social Democrats in the government. But this is only a guess because the ballot was secret and we do not know who all these electors were who voted for Holkeri. Kivistö's electors voted for Kivistö in both rounds; in 1982 they voted Koivisto in the first round and then solved the play. Their different behaviour in this election reflects the changed position of the Communist Party in Finnish society: in 1982 it was still a governmental party, now it is decisively outside the 'establishment'. Had there been a third round where Kivistö's electors could vote only Koivisto, Väyrynen or void, the situation would have been difficult for the Communists. There were sharply differing opinions on how to vote in such a situation. There were supporters of both Koivisto and void voting and it would be likely that Kivistö's electors would have been divided had there been the third round.

It may be concluded that the presidential election showed that the Finnish political system does not function as badly as is sometimes argued, because the polls show that the majority of the electorate do not trust politicians (cf. Wiberg 1986). Although the winner was predicted beforehand, the campaigns were by no means shadow ones and the debate on the questions concerning the problems of the Finnish society was lively. I think we can say that the legitimatizing effect of the whole election process was high.

NOTES

1. In his television 'exam', as it is called, Koivisto was asked whether he could, in 1987, have nominated a government in which Väyrynen would also have been a member. Koivisto answered in his ambiguous manner 'I could, but I didn't'. He was also asked whether he had compared the relationship between himself and Väyrynen with that of Hitler and Hindenburg. Koivisto answered: 'I don't confirm'. He was then asked whether he denied such a comparison. He repeated: 'I don't confirm'. He had reportedly said in private discussion that in relation to Väyrynen he was no Hindenburg.

2. For the discussion of this split, see Hyvärinen and Paastela (1988).
3. This situation reflects the internal problems of the Greens (Paastela 1987, 26–46.)
4. For details of the election procedure in the electoral college, see Nousiainen (1971, 215).
5. Not, however, a 'black horse', someone who had not been a candidate, as in the old system. In Finnish history there has only been one case when a 'black horse' was elected, Lauri Kr. Relander in 1925 (Hirvikallio 1958, 30–40).
6. In one study the question 'which one is, according to your opinion, in Finland the right aim for the future, socialist society or free economic system', was presented to a sample from the whole population. 19 percent supported socialism and 68 percent free economic system (Pesonen & Sänkiäho 1979, 41).
7. Koivisto would have needed 66,130 votes more in order to become elected in the direct election.
8. This figure also includes Koivisto's 'bourgeois' supporters elected from the lists of the Social Democratic Party, the Rural Party and the Pro Koivisto-movement.

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