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The Finnish Parliamentary Election of March 1991

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Finnish politics has been of the consensual variety over the past two decades (cf. Karvonen & Rappe 1991). This fact goes a long way towards accounting for the low profile of political parties during recent election campaigns. But the electoral campaign of 1991 will probably go down in history as one of the most low-keyed of them all.

The major political parties – the Social Democrats, the Conservatives, the Centre Party and the Leftist Union[1] – bent over backwards in order not to jeopardize their positions in the post-election government negotiations. The Social Democrats refrained from ruling out future cooperation with the Conservatives, who likewise felt that they could not afford to alienate their Social Democratic coalition partners in the Holkeri government. Though critical of the government, the Centre Party adopted a rather low profile in order not to offend any of its potential coalition partners to the left as well as to the right. The Leftist Union, the other major opposition party, was reluctant to do anything that might disturb its relations to the Social Democratic and Centre parties without whose support it did not stand a chance in its bid for power.

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But it would be wrong to blame the lack of any electoral sparks on the political parties alone. They were fighting an uphill battle. Events in the

Persian Gulf and in the three Baltic republics of the Soviet Union in the two to three weeks prior to the election dominated the Finnish news media. These events were so dramatic that the election campaign became low priority material. As such, the strategic and tactical moves by the political parties were only commented upon towards the end of the news broadcasts. The political parties found it difficult to get their message across, a fact that was much to the regret of the voters, of whom some 40 percent felt that the election was overshadowed by the international events (Finnish Election Study 1991).

Issues promoted by the political parties were of the traditional pocketbook variety. Unemployment, inflation and taxation were among the most frequent topics in the campaign statements, but there was more to the campaign than the standard set of socio-economic issues. All of the political parties also pledged themselves to environmental protection, and some of the individual candidates focused on foreign policy to a hitherto unparalleled extent.[2]

Election Outcome

The election result was hardly surprising. It reflected wide spread dissatisfaction with the Holkeri government that had been documented by public opinion polling for well over one and a half years prior to the election. The Social Democrats and the Conservatives were the predicted losers, while the Centre Party stood out as the undisputable winner in the opinion polls.

Such predictions do not always come true, but in this particular case they did so with a vengeance. The Social Democratic and Conservative parties lost more heavily than predicted and the Centre Party scored a much more decisive victory than expected on the basis of the Gallup data. As Table 1 indicates, the net shifts were large and dramatic. With a net gain of 7.2 percent, the Centre Party became the single largest part in the *Eduskunta* (the Finnish parliament), and with net losses of 2–4 percent, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives had to brace themselves for a significant reduction of their parliamentary base.

Net shifts of this magnitude are indicative of electoral volatility. The validity of this suspicion is borne out by estimates of individual voting behaviour.[3] The transition matrix displayed in Table 2 was generated with the aid of Søren Risbjerg Thomsen's method for ecological inference (Thomsen 1987, 1990).[4] It is a new method, but it has already been tested in a number of countries, including Finland, and it stands out as most promising by virtue of the good, at times, excellent fit between the ecological and the survey data estimates of the flow of votes.[5]

Table 1. Results of the Finnish Parliamentary Elections in March 1987 and March 1991 (Changes Within Parentheses).

Party	Votes			Seats		
	% 1987	% 1987	Change	1987	1991	Change
Centre Party	17.6	24.8	(+7.2)	40	55	(+15)
Social Democratic Party	24.1	22.1	(−2.0)	56	48	(−8)
Conservative Party	23.1	19.3	(−3.8)	53	40	(−13)
Leftist Union	13.6	10.1	(−3.5)	20	19	(−1)
The Greens	4.0	6.8	(+2.8)	4	10	(+6)
Swedish People's Party	5.3	5.5	(+0.2)	13	12	(−1)
Rural Party	6.3	4.8	(−1.5)	9	7	(−2)
Christian Union	2.6	3.0	(+0.4)	5	8	(+3)
Liberal People's Party	1.0	0.8	(−0.2)	0	1	(+1)
All others	2.3	2.7	(+0.4)	—	—	—
Total	100.0	100.0		200	200	
Voter turnout	76.4%	72.1%				
Female representatives	N			63	77	
	%			32	39	

Source: Official election results.

The ecological estimates should be interpreted with the same caution as survey data, but there is little doubt that the Finnish electorate is in a state of flux. Party loyalty is on its way down, and there is a steady influx of sympathizers into the ranks of non-voters. In this context, however, the Centre Party is a deviant case. It appears to have succeeded in mobilizing an almost incredible 97.7 percent of its supporters from 1987. In addition, it seems to have successfully attracted new voters from across the entire political spectrum, particularly from the small populist Rural Party (31.5 percent), and suffers only marginal losses (1.3 percent) to the ranks of non-voters.[6]

The Holkeri government did run counter to the precepts of the conventional left/right dimension in Finnish politics, but the voters remain constrained by this dimension to a remarkable degree. The parties' traditional neighbours on the left/right dimension still play an important role in the flow of votes. The flow between the Social Democratic and Conservative parties, moreover, is *not* a recent deviation from the normal pattern, but rather a phenomenon with deep roots in modern Finnish political history.[7]

In a general sense, the election outcome reflected a profound swing to the right. Though losing heavily, the Social Democratic Party suffered only minor losses (0.5 percent) to its one and only contender on the left-hand

Table 2. The Inter-party Change of Voters, 1987–91 (Horizontal Percentages).

	1991 Vote										
1987 Vote	Soc. Dem.	Cons.	Cent.	Left. Union	Rural Party	Swed. P.P.	Christ. Union	Greens	Other	Non-Voters	Total
Soc. Democrats	71.6	2.0	1.7	0.5	0.5	0.2	1.2	1.9	0.6	19.8	100
Conservative	2.8	66.7	2.2	0.4	1.1	0.5	1.1	5.4	2.3	17.5	100
Centre	0.1	0.1	97.7	0.1	0.5	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	1.3	100
Leftist Union	4.0	1.6	4.3	63.9	1.4	1.4	0.6	2.0	1.3	19.5	100
Rural Party	1.4	0.8	31.5	0.3	45.9	0.1	1.5	0.6	0.3	17.6	100
Swedish P.P.	0.9	0.6	0.3	0.7	0.2	71.1	0.6	4.9	2.2	18.6	100
Christian Union	3.3	3.6	9.8	0.5	2.5	0.3	39.6	3.1	1.5	35.8	100
Greens	4.2	6.2	0.8	0.8	0.8	1.7	1.2	49.3	10.6	24.5	100
Others	4.0	7.3	1.0	1.1	1.7	4.0	1.7	22.9	22.0	34.4	100
Non-voters	5.1	3.4	7.3	1-1	2.6	2.4	3.0	4.1	2.4	68.6	100
Total	15.7	13.6	17.8	7.2	3.5	3.8	2.2	4.8	2.2	29.1	100

side of the political continuum. The Leftist Union – itself on a losing track – suffered substantial losses (4 percent) to its socialist neighbour to the right, but it lost even more heavily to the Centre Party (4.3 percent) and to other non-socialist parties, including the Conservative and Christian parties (1.6 and 0.6 percent respectively) which are located even further to the right on the socio-economically defined left/right scale.

The successful performance of the Greens, who increased their parliamentary representation from 4 to 10 seats and who broke through the defence lines of the parties of the left and the right with much more ease than the Centre Party, testifies to the presence of an ecological dimension of conflict in Finnish politics. It has become more and more salient over time, but it is still far from overshadowing the traditional cleavages such as left/right and urban/rural.

A New Government

Of the 200 seats in the Finnish *Eduskunta*, the Conservative and Centre parties now control a total of 95 seats (40 and 55 seats respectively). The Swedish People's Party and the Christian Union, have yet another 20 seats between them (12 and 8 seats respectively) which provides a bourgeois majority of at least 115 seats,[8] while the two socialist parties, the Leftist Union and the Social Democratic Party, account for a total of only 67 seats (19 and 48 seats respectively). This was a more solid bourgeois or non-socialist parliamentary majority than Finland has traditionally had, and as a result, the foreign news media immediately started speculating about the formation of a non-socialist government in Finland.

In Finland, however, coalition building is *not* as straightforward as in the other Nordic countries. Though predominantly non-socialist, Finland has only rarely been run by bourgeois or non-socialist governments. The election of 1987 had also resulted in a solid non-socialist majority which had *not* been translated into a non-socialist coalition government, of which the most recent experience dates back to 1966. As a result, the Finnish news media were somewhat more cautious when interpreting the election results.

There were in fact at least three possible outcomes of the inter-party negotiations in the wake of the general elections:

(1) the previous red–blue coalition might remain in power. With the support of the Swedish People's Party, it did after all control 50 percent of the seats in the newly elected *Eduskunta*.
(2) the pre-1987 coalition between the Social Democratic and Centre parties, with or without the support of minor parties like the Swedish People's Party and the Leftist Union, might be revived.

(3) a non-socialist or bourgeois coalition of the kind last experienced in 1966 might be tried. On the face of it, it would command something approaching the crucial two-thirds majority normally required for legislation in the Finnish parliamentary context (cf. Nousiainen 1986).

It was the decision by the Social Democratic Party to go into opposition that paved the way for the bourgeois coalition cabinet of Centre Party leader Esko Aho. It was a perfectly rational decision given the electoral realities, and President Koivisto apparently did not try to persuade the SDP leadership to make a bid for power to preserve the direct links between the president and the political party that had once nominated him.[9]

Realignment?

With a turnout of 72.1 percent, the 1991 election represents a continuation of a downward trend that had made itself felt over a number of consecutive elections. The national turnout was more than 4 percent lower than the 76.4 percent recorded in 1987. It was yet another indication of the volatility of the Finnish electorate and a possible by-product of a number of factors, including a pronounced loss of trust and efficacy by the Finnish voters over time[10] and the possible impact of an electoral reform that had deprived the undecided voters of the second day of polling. Pesonen (1991) has raised the latter possibly in a speech at the Tokai University European Centre in Copenhagen, 27–28 March 1991, and survey data would seem to corrobotate his suspicion. Of those who did not turn out on election day, some 22 percent say they would definitely (8.1 percent) or probably (14.2 percent) have voted, if the election had been carried over into the following day.

The election of 1987 had been a *de-aligning* election in the sense that it resulted in a government coalition of Social Democrats and Conservatives which ran counter to the logic of the traditional left/right continuum in Finnish politics. Against this background the election of 1991 stands out as a *re-aligning* election. It spelled the defeat of the ruling red/blue coalition, and it resulted in a non-socialist parliamentary majority which paved the way for the first bourgeois coalition government in Finland in 25 years.

The left/right cleavage, in short, appears to be alive and well in Finnish politics. The Finnish voters seems to have many of the attributes associated with the Downsian pocketbook voter (Downs 1957). He or she votes in order to promote his/her own economic well-being and/or that of his/her own social class.[11] But this is not all there is to it. The Finnish voter is also swayed by many other considerations, including the competence and knowledgeability of individual candidates, the sex of candidates, and last, but not least, by standpoints taken by individual candidates on a number

of relevant political issues such as environmental protection and what was perceived by some as an influx of refugees in late 1990 and early 1991.[12]

It is, furthermore, premature to proclaim the demise of so-called secondary dimensions of conflict in Finnish politics, dimensions involving religion and the centre/periphery axis. The successful election performance of the Greens and the Christian Union testify to the continued importance of these dimensions. The election of March 1991 did produce a solid non-socialist or bourgeois parliamentary majority. It paved the way for the bourgeois coalition cabinet of Centre Party leader Esko Aho, but he also owed his sudden promotion to Prime Minister to the decision of the Social Democrats to go into opposition. It may, therefore, be a somewhat moot question as to whether and to what extent there was a genuine re-alignment at the 1991 election. The election does, however, serve as a reminder that there are few long-term constraints on Finnish government coalition-making.

NOTES

1. Though technically a new party, the Leftist Union fills the gap left by the pro-communist Finnish People's Democratic League (SKDL) which was formally dissolved in April 1990 in the wake of political upheaval in Eastern Europe and the USSR in 1989/1990.
2. The Finnish electoral system combines PR with an element of personal choice. The voters cast their votes for the parties by selecting one out of many candidates running under the relevant party label. There is competition among the candidates, many of whom stage American-style electoral campaigns.
3. The estimates were generated by the author and his electoral research group at the University of Helsinki in cooperation with the Swedish unit of the Finnish broadcasting system (YLE) which presented them as part and parcel of its election night coverage 17 March 1991.
4. It is a new technique that is in the process of being refined. It is a correlational technique based on tetrachoric correlation coefficients and *not* on the Pearson product-moment correlation with which Robinson (1950) took issue, when issuing his warning against the indiscriminate use of aggregate level correlations as a substitute for individual level data.
5. The statement is made on the basis of a systematic comparison between ecological and survey estimates from previous elections (Thomsen et al. 1990). Similar validity tests will be performed on the 1991 survey data, when they are released by the Finnish election study group. The survey results are to be reported in a number of articles by Pertti Pesonen, Risto Sänkiaho, Sten Berglund and Sammi Borg to be published by the Finnish Bureau of Statistics in the autumn of 1991.
6. The Rural Party was founded in the 1960s as part of a rural revolt against the Centre Party which was felt to have compromised the interests of the countryside (cf. Berglund & Lindström 1978).
7. The two parties represent the same urban and industrial pole on the centre/periphery dimension, and they have a long history of cooperation on the local and regional levels.
8. These four parties are not the only parties to consider themselves bourgeois or non-socialist. The Rural Party (currently 7 seats) has also traditionally thought of itself as a non-socialist party. Similar comments apply to the Liberal People's Party (currently 1 seat) and to some extent to the Greens (currently 10 seats).

9. This is the motive attributed to Kovisto, who is often described as the main architect behind the coalition between Social Democrats and Conservatives in 1987. The president and the other key actors in the negotiations in 1987, however, have repeatedly and consistently denied the validity of such allegations.
10. A comparison between voter responses to traditional trust and efficacy items in the form of statements such as 'people like me have no influence on what the government is doing in 1975 (Personen & Sänkiaho 1979) and 1991 (data by courtesy of the 1991 Finnish election study) respectively reveals a pronounced increase in the number of respondents who agree more or less strongly with such statements.
11. When prodded for the reasons why they voted in March 1991, from 47.8 to 62.7 percent of the respondents expressed themselves in materialistic terms of this sort.
12. The number of refugees seeking asylum in Finland had increased dramatically, but Finland was by no means a net recipient of political refugees in the same magnitude as was, say, Sweden.

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