

FINLAND



The Loss of the Populist Radical Right in the 2024 European Parliament Elections in Finland

*Juha Herkman**

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

In the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, the populist radical-right Finns Party had a disappointing result; it came sixth nationally and lost 6.2% of the vote and one seat compared to the 2019 elections. The centre-right National Coalition (NC) party won the elections with 24.8% of the vote and four seats, but the real winner was the Left Alliance, which came second (17.3%) and gained three seats. The elections revealed voters' deep distrust towards the government, in which the Finns Party supported significant austerity measures and cuts to public spending through its leader and finance minister, Riikka Purra. People's fear of the rising far right in Europe was also a salient theme in campaign debates, which diminished the Finns Party's support, alongside a low voter turnout.

Keywords: *Election campaign; populist radical right; Finns Party; antagonism; government/opposition*

* juha.herkman@helsinki.fi

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Introduction

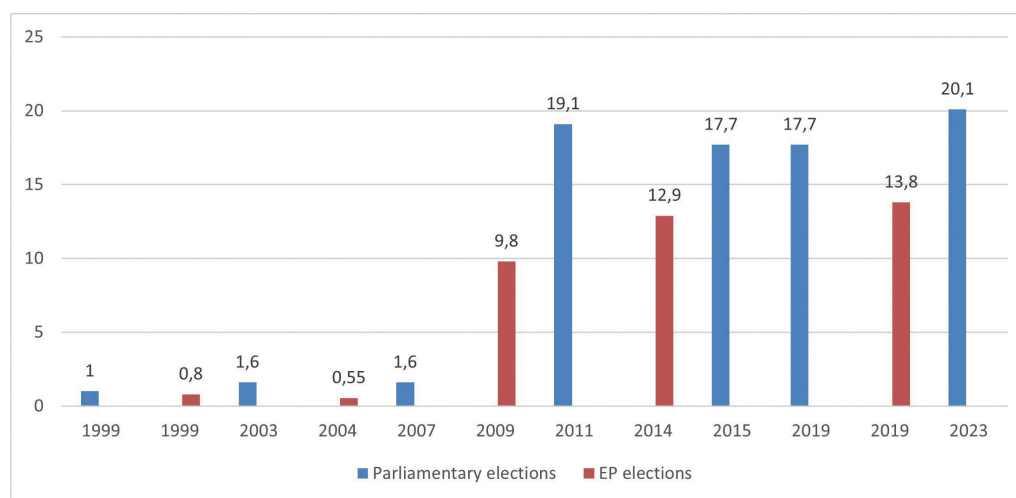
In Finland, one political party is commonly referred to as ‘populist’ – the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, which was initially called True Finns). However, depending on how populism is defined, other political parties and individual politicians may sometimes be described as being populist when they use provocative language, make unrealistic promises and encourage strong antagonisms (see Herkman, 2022). Therefore, the label ‘populist’ has occasionally been used to refer to liberal green or leftist actors and minor political parties with little or no representation in parliament. Here populism is understood as an affective process in which strong antagonisms are exploited to construct a united political group identity and movement mobilization as ‘the people’ (Laclau, 2005; Herkman, 2022). In this, no other parliamentary party than the Finns Party can be called ‘populist’ as such in Finland.

The Finns Party was established in 1995 as the successor of the Finnish Rural Party, an agrarian populist party created in 1959. The legacy of the Finnish Rural Party (SMP) has made the Finns Party a more normal political player compared to the populist parties of the Nordic countries (Herkman & Jungar, 2021). Under the leadership of Timo Soini (1997–2017), the Finns Party was a rather traditional populist party with an anti-elitist, nationalist and Eurosceptic agenda, as well as left-leaning economic policies. However, in the 2010s, Soini started flirting with actors opposed to immigration, and the party became very popular. Under the leadership of Jussi Halla-aho (2017–2021) and Riikka Purra (2021–present), the party has become a clear example of the European populist radical right, with a strong anti-immigration message and nativist ideology (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Norocel, 2016). Regarding economic policies, the party has also turned to the right. During the Soini’s period, the party followed the SMP legacy as a proponent of the disadvantaged groups as the ‘workers’ movement without socialism’, whereas the new leaders have promoted ‘welfare chauvinism’ and attacked the ‘exploiters of the welfare state as the enemy of the real hard-working people’ in the wake of immigration criticism (see Norocel, 2016).

The Finns Party has traditionally been the only openly Eurosceptic parliamentary party in Finland, although the Centre Party has also promoted Euroscepticism, especially in agricultural policies. However, compared to national elections, in which it has been the second or third largest party in Finland with 17.5–20.1% of the vote between 2011 and 2023, the Finns Party has had limited success in the EP elections (see Figure 1). In the 2019 EP election, the party obtained its best result

to date, with 13.8% of the vote, coming in fourth among Finland's parties. After these elections, the party joined the new Identity and Democracy group, but it moved to the more moderate European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in 2023 because they did not want to be identified with such political parties as France's National Rally or Italy's Lega, which were seen far too extreme in Finnish public discussions prior to the 2024 EP elections. In 2019–2024, the Finns Party had two members of the European Parliament (MEPs), Teuvo Hakkarainen and Laura Huhtasaari; as a country, Finland had 14 MEPs (as a result of Brexit, Finland now has 15 MEPs).

Figure 1. Electoral support for the Finns Party in Finnish parliamentary and EP elections (share of the vote, %)



Source: Election Statistics (2024a)

Because of geopolitics and its high dependence on European markets, Finland has been among the countries with the most favourable disposition towards the European Union (EU) in the twenty-first century. Based on the figure above, it seems that populist anti-immigration rhetoric and Euroscepticism do not take you as far in the EP elections as in national elections in Finland. In opinion polls, two-thirds of Finns have expressed positive thoughts about EU membership; however, only 22% of Finns Party supporters shared this attitude, and 58% of them were negatively disposed towards EU membership (YLE, 2023). In Finland, the voter turnout is much lower for the EP elections compared to national elections, which usually diminishes the share of the Finns Party's vote because their voters channel the general disappointment and protest at politics and are therefore unsure of voting. In the 2019 EP elections, the turnout was 42.7% of the voter population living in Finland, whereas it was 72% in the 2023 parliamentary elections and 71.6% in the first round of the 2024 presidential elections.



The 2024 EP elections were very interesting in Finland because the Finns Party has been part of the right-wing government with the NC since 2023. Also, in April 2023, Finland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since entering government, the Finns Party has diminished its populism and promoted very right-wing economic policies based on strong austerity measures and considerable cuts to public spending thanks to its leader, Riikka Purra, who is currently the finance minister. According to polls, support for the Finns Party has decreased remarkably after the parliamentary elections. In the spring of 2024, the relationship between the government and workers became very polarized, with numerous strikes taking place in response to the government's actions.

The Finns Party has traditionally been the Eurosceptic party in Finnish EP elections, promoting an agenda opposed to the EU, immigration and climate change policies. However, concerning the war in Ukraine and NATO, the party has been in line with the position of the other major parties in Finland because the population strongly supports Ukraine and criticizes Putin's Russia. On this point, the Finns Party differs from the European far right, which has often supported Putin's regime and opposed NATO. Among the parties, the NC – which usually comes first in EP elections in Finland – has been the strongest supporter of the EU and NATO. The constellation of the NC and the Finns Party in government and the liberal Greens and the Left in opposition makes the analysis of the 2024 EP elections extremely interesting from the perspective of populism.

Populist antagonism in the election campaign

EP elections are often seen as second-order elections because, in many countries, national and local issues take precedence over European ones during campaigning (see Reif & Schmitt, 1980). This is not completely true in Finland: in the EP elections, European issues are highlighted, even though they are discussed from a national angle (Herkman et al., 2024).

In total, 232 candidates registered to campaign across all Finnish political parties before the deadline of 10 May 2024. The Finns Party fielded 20 candidates, as did the other major parties. In the campaign, the opinion polls ranked the Finns Party third with an estimated 16%–17% of the vote. The time available for campaigning was rather short – no more than three or four weeks. The parties launched their election manifestos about six weeks before the election.

The Finns Party's manifesto, *Päätetään itse (Let's Make the Decisions Ourselves)*, was published on 24 April 2024. It was seen as milder compared to the past, as the party abandoned its long-term goal of withdrawing from the EU as 'unrealistic'. The manifesto recognized the benefits of the EU for Ukraine and the Common Market, even though it saw the euro as damaging for Finland. However, the document contained several familiar themes, such as a strong anti-immigration agenda, according to which asylum seekers should be sent to third countries outside Europe. The manifesto also criticized what it saw as the EU's unwise expansionism, failed income-transfer politics and eagerness to meddle in matters that are the preserve of the member states.

During the campaign, the Finns Party repeatedly criticized the recent regulation of plastic bottle tops as a striking example of 'stupid' EU policies, and it mocked the regulation in several comments, blog posts and YouTube videos. The previous leader and a key figure in the party, Jussi Halla-aho, argued in a campaign video that the EU makes decisions that do not consider national interests because European decision-makers are not interested in them. According to Halla-aho, a vote for the Finns Party would be a vote for the idea of Finland 'making the decisions ourselves'.

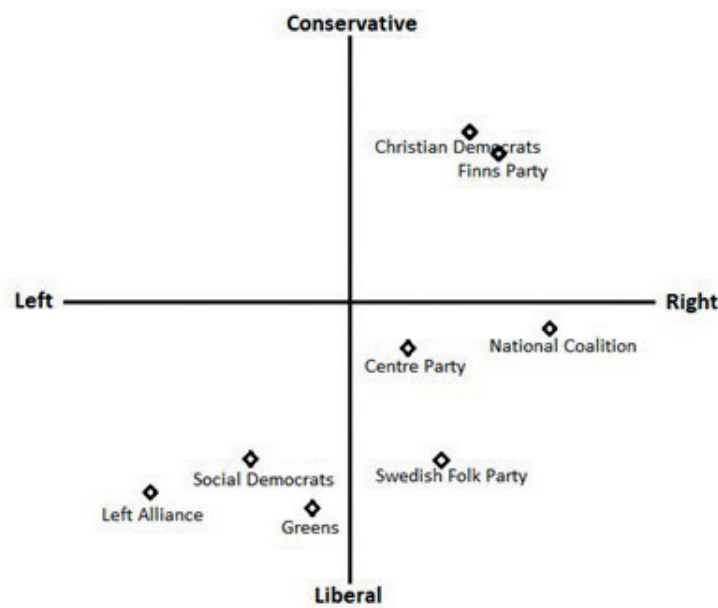
The Finns Party's status as a populist radical-right actor coloured the whole campaign of the 2024 EP elections in Finland, and an anti-populist struggle took place against them. The Social Democratic Party's (SDP) campaign slogan and manifesto title was *Jo riittää—pystymme parempaan (This Is Enough—We Can Make It Better)* in reference to the challenges to European unity, equal rights, the rule of law and the fight against climate change posed by the far right. The Left Alliance and the Greens spoke of the same issues in their campaign manifestos, underscoring their anti-populist and anti-far-right credentials. Interestingly, the NC, the party of the prime minister and one of the companions of the Finns Party in government, chose security as the most important theme in their election manifesto, entitled *Oikealla puolella Eurooppaa (On the Right Side of Europe)*, in addition to their traditional themes of the free market and innovation. In their program, security also meant strict border controls for asylum seekers that aligned with their long-standing Western orientation and support of NATO but also echoed the collaboration with the Finns Party in the governing cabinet.

Online candidate questionnaires¹ have been popular in Finland for several decades, and all major media outlets publish them during an election campaign



(Carlson & Strandberg, 2005). The most influential questionnaires are published by the public broadcaster YLE, the leading newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, the oldest national commercial television channel MTV3, and national tabloid papers. The questions posed to candidates vary across the media outlets; however, their results are generally similar to the value map of YLE's questionnaire (see Figure 2, YLE, 2024a). Even if there is some variation among the candidates in a party, the value map demonstrates the clear differences among the parties in terms of their economic (left–right axis) and value orientations (conservative–liberal axis).

Figure 2. Parties' average positions on the value map of YLE's online candidate questionnaire



Source: Compiled by the author based on YLE's data and image (YLE, 2024a)

The more a party is on the right of the map, the more it supports the free market, and vice versa. The higher a party is on the map, the more it holds conservative values, and vice versa. By looking at Figure 2, one can see that the Finns Party and the Christian Democrats are the most conservative actors in Finnish politics, as well as the strongest proponents of the free market. Only their companion in government, the NC, is more to the right economically, although this party is more moderate in terms of values, making it a traditional representative of the centre-right. In contrast, the Social Democrats and the Greens are very liberal

1. These questionnaires help voters identify which political candidates or parties align most closely with their own views and values. These selectors typically ask users a series of questions on various political, economic, and social issues, then match their responses to the positions of candidates or parties.

and economically left-wing, together with the Left Alliance, which is even more to the left regarding the economy. The figure visually demonstrates how far apart the left–green camp and the Finns Party were in the 2024 EP election.

The same chasm was evident in the election debates aired by the major national television channels. Whereas the most important topic in the 2019 EP elections was climate change, which explains the success of the Greens at the time (Herkman et al., 2024: 103), in the 2024 elections, security was the key theme. This was due to the war in Ukraine and Russia's influence on asylum seekers' crossings on Finland's eastern border. As mentioned above, the support for Ukraine in Finland has been almost unanimous among the country's parties. Stricter border controls as a result of Russian operations have been supported even by the left–green parties, even though they have made some criticism concerning human rights. The focus on security made the Finns Party the agenda setter during the 2024 EP election campaign.

Despite this, the Finns Party was forced onto the defensive in other areas. Due to the predicted victory of the far right across the continent and its consequences for the EU, the media and the left–green parties constantly discussed these issues on the air. The Social Democrats based their campaign on attacking the far right for its damaging influence on European unity, the support for Ukraine, human rights, climate change policies and the principle of the rule of law. The Left Alliance and the Greens attacked the Finns Party on immigration and environmental issues, accusing it of representing the far right. The NC supported the government's security policies, developed with the Finns Party, but it tried to keep out of the clash between the liberal opposition and the far right. In this situation, the Finns Party remained a 'fringe populist movement' (Herkman & Palonen, 2024: xxix).

The leader of the Finns Party, Riikka Purra, who is also the finance minister, had become a symbol of the government's austerity policies, which created problems for the party during the campaign debates. Even though the party leaders tried to hold back in the debates, some party members had a more aggressive stance. For example, a well-known Finns Party MP, Sebastian Tynkkynen, used much more provocative rhetoric on immigration than Purra. This division of labour, according to which the leaders appear more moderate when there is a large audience while others are more aggressive in their communications with radical supporters, is typical of the populist radical right (Herkman, 2022: 77).

The populist radical right has often been seen as the political force that benefits the

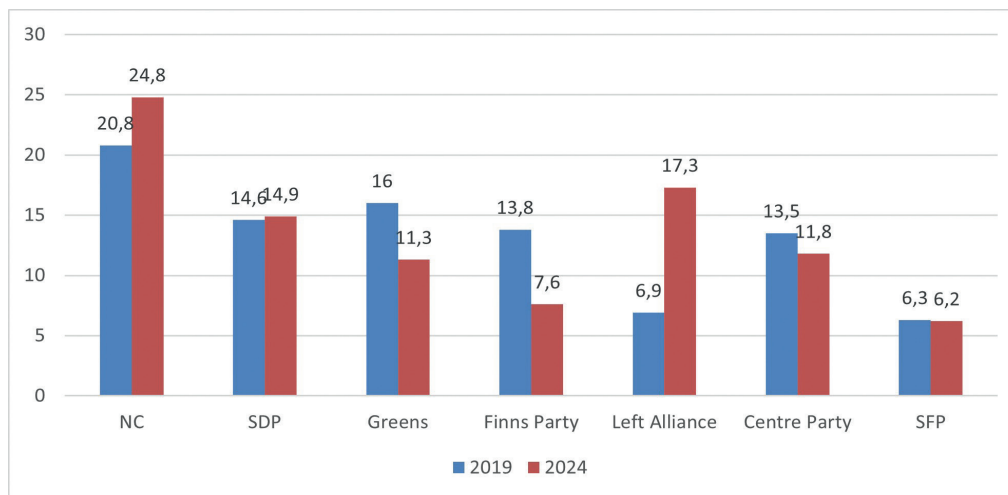
most from social media because these tools help them to use the double-speech strategy mentioned above, bypass journalistic scrutiny and appeal to hardcore far-right supporters (e.g., Krämer, 2017). The Finns Party has also been successful in its social media use, from Halla-aho's and Soini's blog posts to the more recent use of TikTok and Instagram by its MPs. Tynkkynen has a popular YouTube channel and successfully used Facebook in his campaigning. However, a study of Twitter use during the 2019 EP elections found that the most active tweeters were from the liberal, pro-EU camp and that Finns Party members mostly retweeted other people's content and commented aggressively on it (Herkman et al., 2024). During the 2024 EP elections, Palonen and Jokinen (2024) systematically monitored social media campaigns. According to them, the Finns Party was not particularly active. Social media debates focused on attacking the government, of which the Finns Party is a member.

Surprising election results

In Finland, the 2024 EP elections were held on 9 June, but there was an advance voting period between 29 May and 4 June. The electoral district was the whole country for the 15 MEPs elected from Finland, who were chosen with the d'Hondt method. Some hoped the turnout would increase from the previous elections, and there was a significant increase in advance voting. However, in the end, the turnout was just below that of 2019, with 42.4% of those eligible in Finland casting their votes. The results surprised everyone because they differed radically from the polls, which are usually very reliable in Finland (see Figure 3).

As predicted, the NC took first place in the elections with 24.8% of the vote, gaining a couple of percentage points more than the polls had predicted and increasing its seats from three to four. The biggest surprise was the Left Alliance, which came in second with 17.3% of the vote and three seats (previously, they had only one). The Social Democrats were third (14.9%). The Finns Party was the most obvious loser, coming in sixth (7.6%), having taken 13.8% of the vote and fourth place in the 2019 elections.

Figure 3. Electoral support in the 2019 and 2024 EP elections in Finland by political party (% vote share)



Source: Election Statistics (2024b)

Overall, it seems that the government/opposition divide remarkably affected the election results. Although the prime minister's party (the NC) came first, the opposition was arguably much more successful. The Left Alliance, SDP, Centre Party and Greens gained nine seats combined, whereas the NC, Finns Party and Swedish Folk Party obtained only six. Therefore, the 2024 EP elections in Finland reflected the voters' dissatisfaction with the government's policies. This dissatisfaction was evident not only in the decline of the Finns Party but also in the success of the liberal left-green bloc.

The media made sense of these surprising results in several ways. The main explanation for the victory of the Left Alliance was the remarkable success of its leader, Li Andersson, a 37-year-old female politician who had already attracted positive attention during Finland's presidential elections in early 2024. Andersson has been a popular figure beyond party lines. In the EP elections, she alone received an astonishing 13.5% of the vote, and she brought two other party members to the EP with their relatively modest percentages. The defeat of the Finns Party was explained by their participation in government, especially that of their leader, Purra, who has become a symbol of painful cuts to public spending. Also, the low voter turnout may harm the Finns Party, whose voters are unsure about voting and prefer voting in the parliamentary and local elections – an effect of the Euroscepticism promoted by the party.

The Finns Party did not have previous MEPs as candidates because Laura Huhtasaari moved from the European to the national parliament after the 2023 parliamentary elections. Also, the party did not accept its previous MEP, Teuvo Hakkarainen, as their candidate for 2024 because he had received significant



negative attention for being very passive and incompetent. However, Hakkarainen campaigned as an unaffiliated candidate, and he received a significant number of votes, which also diminished the Finns Party's share. Interestingly, the party's most-voted candidate and only MEP for 2024–2029 was Sebastian Tynkkynen, who adopted a more provocative stance during the campaign compared to party leaders.

Finns Party voters' social and demographic characteristics have changed over the years. Initially, the party was supported by blue-collar workers, the unemployed and the disadvantaged. Today, its voters are mostly middle-class individuals and small entrepreneurs. This change has been due to the party's shift from the left to the right. In recent elections, its voters have come from average socioeconomic backgrounds, with a clear male preponderance (Isotalo et al., 2024). In the 2024 EP elections, the party received votes from all parts of Finland, but it lost its position as the most popular party in the northern and eastern parts of the country to the Centre Party. Traditionally, the latter dominated these provinces, but it lost them to the Finns Party in the 2023 parliamentary elections (YLE, 2024b).

Conclusion

The 2024 EP elections were surprising in Finland. Despite the predictions, there was no victory for the populist radical right. The Finns Party obtained about half of the votes they won in the 2019 EP elections and only a third of those they received in the 2023 parliamentary election. The real winner was the Left Alliance with its leader, Li Andersson. This result revealed the people's dissatisfaction towards the government and the Finns Party's leader and finance minister, Riikka Purra, who has become a symbol of strict austerity and cuts to public spending.

However, even though the populist radical right failed, the overall context of the election was populist due to the strong antagonism between the Finns Party and the liberal left–green bloc (Herkman & Palonen, 2024, p. xxx). The Finns Party was backed into a corner due to its role in government, which all the opposition parties challenged. The most successful Finns Party candidate, Sebastian Tynkkynen, represented the provocative and radical faction of the party. Therefore, it seems that populism lives on in the anti-hegemonic challenger, whose approach did not help the Finns Party in the 2024 EP elections. Tynkkynen will join the ECR group in EP and continue critical activity on his social media channels. He announced that he would recruit assistants for social media campaigns during his MEP career to make the Finns Party voters aware of what is going on in the EU (YLE, 2024c).

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