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4. Finland. From Agrarian to Right-Wing Populism

Ov Cristian Norocel

Introduction

Political populism has had a sustained presence in parliamentary politics in Finland since 1959, though in various guises and in varying degrees. Finnish political populism, represented by the Finnish Agrarian Party (SMP/ FLP) between 1959 and 1995, was initially characterized by an anti-elitist, agrarian-populist component exploiting the center-periphery cleavage. Its successor, the Finns Party (PS/SF, initially the True Finns), founded in 1995, appears to have progressively moved away from agrarian populism. Indeed, more recent developments indicate that the key component in Finnish political populism is a gradual concentration on the cultural cleavage, in a manner that can be similarly observed across Europe. This particularity of Finnish political populism has been, in turn, reflected by Finnish researchers' efforts to systematize and theorize populism, which initially gave rise to diverging conceptualizations.

Research on Political Populism in Finland

This section provides a historical overview of the parliamentary populist parties in Finland and an outline of research on political populism in the country, covering such issues as how populism has been defined and to what extent such definitions diverge from or overlap other theorizations of populism elsewhere in Europe. A caveat is necessary: I chose to concentrate on discussing and reviewing research that deals with those Finnish parties that have, at least formally, embraced the basic rules of representative democracy and do not officially condone political violence or advocate the overthrow of democratic government. In so doing, I make no mention of the extra-parliamentary fringe parties and extremist groups (for a detailed account of these groups, see, e.g., Pekonen, 1999).

Unlike elsewhere in Northern Europe, populist parties have maintained a constant, albeit uneven, presence in Finnish parliamentary politics since 1959. The rise of political populism in Finland was the consequence of a growing group of disenfranchised voters that could not keep pace with the country's rapid social and political transformations in the post–World War II period (Arter, 2010, p. 486; Pekonen, Hynynen, & Kalliala, 1999, pp. 46–51; Ruostetsaari, 2011, p. 108). The agrarian-populist SMP/FLP had its support base among the small farmers and unemployed. The SMP/ FLP reflected similar developments in France, where the Poujadist movement articulated the opposition of small entrepreneurs and farmers against the French political establishment (see Chapter 14 ['France'] for a more detailed description). Indeed, support for the SMP/FLP was concentrated in rural areas, particularly in eastern and central Finland, far removed from the capital region in the south. The party was closely identified with its chairman Vennamo (1959–1979), a former center-right politician known for his opposition to the political line pursued by president Kekkonen (Arter, 2010, pp. 485–487). The SMP/FLP had its best electoral results in the 1970s and in early 1980 (around 10% of the vote). It was included in a coalition government in 1983 (having received 9.7% of the vote that year) but gradually lost political support among voters after this. The SMP/FLP ceased to exist in 1995 because of serious financial difficulties. Its last chairman, Vistbacka

(the party's only member of parliament in 1995), participated in the founding of a new party, to which many of the central SMP/FLP members moved, among them Soini, who was the SMP/FLP's secretary.

Research focusing on the SMP/FLP showed how it managed to exploit politically the social transformations that marked Finland in the aftermath of the war: rapid and uneven industrialization, mass migration both internally to urban centers and to other countries such as Sweden, cultural transformations, and so on (cf. Helander, 1971; Martikainen & Wass, 2002; Pekonen et al.,1999; Sänkiaho, 1971). Indeed, researchers tend to agree that the SMP/FLP espoused a strong agrarian-populist rather than an economically neoliberal appeal (unlike similar parties in the rest of Northern Europe, as described in more detail in the chapters on Norway and Sweden). Indeed, it employed a classical populist anti-establishment theme, claiming to represent the interests of the "forgotten people"—the "common man" in the countryside and in the towns—versus a remote and detached political elite in Helsinki (Arter, 2010, p. 486; Norocel, 2009, p. 243; Ruostetsaari, 2011, p. 107).

The Finns Party was founded in 1995, with Vistbacka as its first chairman. In 1997, the party elected Soini as chairman and witnessed a gradual increase in political support under his leadership. The party's emergence in mainstream Finnish politics was connected to similar developments across the region, with several studies highlighting the potential for populist politics both in Finland and in Northern Europe, in general (cf. Arter, 2010; Kestilä, 2006; Widfeldt, 2000). The Finns Party started to gain attention, particularly after the 2007 parliamentary elections (when it polled four percent of the vote) and the 2008 local elections (more than five percent), in which it won support, in particular, in those areas that had traditionally been strongholds for leftist parties but that had more recently experienced significant de-industrialization and rising unemployment. In the 2009 European Union parliamentary elections, Soini had the highest personal vote share in the country. The major breakthrough, however, was marked by the 2011 parliamentary elections when the Finns Party polled over 19% of the votes and became the third-largest party, following only the center-right conservatives and the Social Democrats. The Finns Party further consolidated its presence in parliamentary politics, registering a good electoral score in the 2014 EU parliamentary elections. Two representatives were sent to Brussels, and the party was invited to become a founding member of the radical right populist party group in the European Parliament (Loch & Norocel, 2015, p. 262).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, several researchers have focused on the more extreme aspects of various Finns Party–endorsed candidates. Research has shown that despite these radical voices within the Finns Party—such as Halla- Aho, Halme, or Immonen—in general terms, the party was oftentimes regarded as centrist social conservative by its supporters (cf. Keskinen, Rastas, & Tuori, 2009; Koivunen & Lehtonen, 2011; Loch & Norocel, 2015; Norocel, 2009; Pekonen et al., 1999). These analyses notwithstanding, given that the Finns Party was generally perceived to have inherited the SMP's political legacy and its cadre, some researchers have claimed the particularity of Finnish political populism (cf. Borg, 2012a; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Pernaa & Railo, 2012; Wiberg, 2011), which is discussed in the following section.

From a Nordic perspective, the Finns Party seems to have more in common with the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP) and the Danish People's Party (DF)—with which it shares the original anti-establishment ideological profile—than with the Sweden Democrats

(SD), which initially had an extreme-right ideological profile that became more and more moderate in order to achieve political respectability and legitimacy (Borg, 2012b, p. 199; Jungar & Jupskas, 2014, p. 232; Niemi, 2012a, p. 8). However, as previously mentioned, what seems to set apart the Finns Party from its other Northern European counterparts is that it never flirted with economic neoliberalism. What positions the Finns Party among the parliamentary radical right populist parties in Europe is what researchers deem to be its ethno-nationalist view, even on matters that pertain to the welfare state (e.g., Norocel, 2009).

A significant share of recent research on populism has focused on the 2011 parliamentary elections in a few key collective projects (Borg, 2011; Pernaa & Railo, 2012; Wiberg, 2011).Much research on populism in Finland addresses overlapping issues, showing how successful populist communication coalesces electoral support for the relevant populist party and how certain Finns Party politicians stimulate the creation and consolidation of communities that are vehemently negative toward gender equality and societal out-groups (the Swedish-speaking minority, various migrant communities, the LGBTQ community, etc.) (cf. Keskinen, 2011, 2012, 2013; Keskinen et al., 2009; Norocel, 2009; Pyrhönen, 2014; Saresma, 2014; Ylä-Anttila & Ylä-Anttila, 2015). Most research is empirical rather than theoretical in nature, with an explicit focus on the Finnish context (Borg, 2012a; Wiberg, 2011). A few exceptions offer a more comparative perspective (cf. Jungar & Jupskas, 2014; Norocel, 2009; Widfeldt, 2000). The methodologies ranged widely from quantitative analyses processing large data (surveys, exit polls, etc.) to content analyses (media coverage, party manifestos, etc.) to qualitative analyses (political speeches, media presence, party manifestos, party newspapers, discussion forums, etc.).

At a very general level, the existing literature appears to agree that populism entails a polarization between the "forgotten people" and a disconnected elite (geographically through its concentration in the southern metropolitan area around the capital, and culturally by its cosmopolitan and allegedly multicultural values). In this context, the populists claim to be able to politically represent the people's interests and criticize the consensus culture that generally characterizes Finnish politics. Most authors build their theoretical frameworks of populism on key texts in the field (see Chapter 2 in this volume), but they underline the specificity of the Finnish case and its agrarian roots (cf. Borg, 2012a; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Pernaa & Railo, 2012; Wiberg, 2011).

This duality (conservative agrarianism vs. right-wing radicalism) is a consequence of the Finns Party's internal division between two main political wings. For the sake of clarity, two main factions within the Finns Party can be identified, although these factions have dynamic contours and do not espouse radically different political ideas. Rather, they emphasize different aspects of political populism. One faction mainly consists of the former SMP cadre that founded the Finns Party in 1995 and is gathered around the Finns Party's long-standing chairman, Soini. This political wing is generally deemed to lean more toward the left on socioeconomic issues and maintains a more morally conservative and anti-establishment outlook, criticizing the Finnish political culture that is based on consensus. The other faction mainly attracts party members who espouse strong nationalistic and outright xenophobic views and is coalesced around Halla-aho, one of the radical voices within the Finns Party. This political wing is decidedly more inclined toward the radical right, particularly on issues concerning immigration, the Finnish national cultural heritage and multiculturalism, the status of Swedish as the co-official language of Finland, and European economic integration. Consequently, Finnish scholarship has argued that the party is not necessarily a clear-cut case of the populist radical right; scholars express reservations about how well the Finns Party fits

the right-wing label given that it seems to display a strong left-leaning political agenda on economic matters (cf. Borg, 2012b; Elmgren, 2015; Grönlund & Westinen, 2012; Palonheimo, 2012; Rahkonen, 2011; Ylä-Anttila, 2014). Additionally, the Finns Party has a conservative take on such matters as religion, morality, and law and order (Mickelsson, 2011, pp.153–158; Raunio, 2011, p. 205; Ruostetsaari, 2011, pp. 123–124). At the same time, several researchers have claimed that the Finns Party's electoral success is based on the party's growing Euroskepticism and criticism toward immigration policies (cf. Herkman, 2014; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Mickelsson, 2011; Pernaa, 2012; Railo, 2012).

In sum, the Finns Party appears to display a mixture of nationalism, traditionalism, and populism in a welfare chauvinist format (cf. Loch & Norocel, 2015; Niemi, 2012a; Norocel, 2009; Ylä-Anttila & Ylä-Anttila, 2015). These aspects notwithstanding, the Finns Party may undoubtedly be described as an example of *complete populism* (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, pp. 332–334), characterized by an adamant appeal to the "forgotten people," by a strong, anti-elitist stance and, specific to its political genealogy, by an emergent albeit not fully developed exclusionary attitude toward various out-groups.

Populist Actors as Communicators

To date, a few extensive and detailed studies of populist actors as communicators examine the different communication styles of several Finns Party front figures (which reflect the distinction between the two political factions within the party) and of the party's lesser-known parliamentary and local council candidates (cf. Elmgren, 2015; Keskinen, 2012, 2013; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Norocel, 2009; Ylä-Anttila, 2014). Consequently, some studies have concentrated on the communication style of the Finns Party chairman Soini (cf. Niemi, 2012a, 2012b; Norocel, 2009; Ylä-Anttila, 2014), while others have analyzed the communication style of Halla-aho, Immonen, and other representatives of the radical right faction (cf. Askola, 2015; Keskinen, 2012, 2013; Mickelsson, 2011; Norocel, 2009).

Several researchers claim that Finns Party chairman Soini has a particular style in his role as a communicator of populist politics (cf. Niemi, 2012a, 2012b; Norocel, 2009; Ylä-Anttila, 2014). In the Finnish context, Soini's communication style may be considered as charismatic in terms of his personal presentation, his way of addressing his audiences and possible voters, his choice of topics, and his ability to coalesce support for his views by means of speaking against the political establishment that he allegedly opposes. A rather different communication style seems to be employed by the representatives of the other political faction. Indeed, the anti-immigration front figure has constantly courted controversy—for example, by uttering xenophobic statements under the pretense of testing the acceptable boundaries of free speech and by claiming that authoritarian rule is the only solution to the Greek economic crisis (Askola, 2015; Keskinen, 2012, 2013; Mickelsson, 2011). In turn, other Finnish research has investigated the specific ideological positioning of the Finns Party candidates for the 2011 parliamentary elections and has found a specific articulation of ideological convictions along gender and spatial lines; that is, while the Finns Party, in general terms, has a populist, conservative left-leaning position, rural and women candidates tend to take more left-leaning populist stances, and the staunchly anti-immigration wing of the party (gathered around controversial candidates such as Halla-aho) differs from the rest of the party with its right economic position (Ylä-Anttila, 2014).

Another avenue of research has analyzed the communication techniques at work in the party newspaper *Perussuomalainen* and in the personal web pages maintained by the various Finns Party members (Elmgren, 2015; Keskinen, 2012, 2013; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Norocel, 2009).

These contributions show the discursive construction of dichotomous entities: On the one hand, the vaguely defined common, native Finns (understood to narrowly overlap the Finnish-speaking majority), and on the other hand, the "othered" opponents who are presented as a threat to the Finnish identity (defined in terms of prominent social status and economic affluence, cultural cosmopolitanism, and excessive tolerance of religious and sexual diversity). There are no in-depth studies of the ideological construct behind the discourses of Finns Party chairman Soini, however, although it is widely known that he wrote his master's thesis on the topic of populism and the SMP, and later published two books on related political topics (Soini, 2008, 2014). One aspect keeps together the two political wings identified within the Finns Party, and that is the idea that a majoritarian form of democracy is the solution to ensure and defend the country's inherent Finnishness both from external threats (such as the EU bureaucracy or supposedly uncontrolled migration) and from internal threats (such as the allegedly disproportionate influence that the Swedish-speaking minority is having on cultural, political, and economic matters in Finland). The aim is thus to ensure that Finland maintains its cultural uniformity and becomes monolingually Finnish (Elmgren, 2015; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Loch & Norocel, 2015; Norocel, 2009).

Media and Populism

Some studies indicate that the Finns Party benefited from the intensive media scrutiny of party election campaign financing. From 2008 to 2011, the Finnish media focused on the main political actors, particularly on the agrarian center-right and on the conservative center-right (cf. Kantola, Vesa, & Hakala, 2011; Mattila & Sundberg, 2012; Niemi, 2012b). Two other themes emerged with the Finns Party's rise to political prominence— namely, the immigration debate and the European economic crisis (with a focus on the consequences of Finnish membership in the eurozone). Research has shown that even major parties have taken a more restrictive stance on immigration (at least in their interactions with mainstream media), favoring a more assimilationist approach; and the Finns Party has capitalized the most on the topic (e.g., Keskinen, 2009). In addition, some scholars have argued that the generally critical stance of Finnish media toward the European Union (concerning restrictive, common EU legislation, the Finnish eurozone membership, the remoteness of EU "institutions" from Finland, etc.) and the Finnish mainstream politicians' reactions to the economic crisis created a favorable environment for the growing support for the Finns Party (cf. Harjuniemi, Herkman, & Ojala, 2015; Railo, 2012).

After the parliamentary elections in 2011, the Finns Party successfully employed the issue of restrictive migration policies and maintained its critical stance on the crisis of the Eurozone to further consolidate its voter base (Elmgren, 2015; Niemi, 2012b, 2013; Pernaa, 2012). These aspects notwithstanding, the mainstream media became critical of the Finns Party at times and did not always accept the party's readily suggested solutions on these matters as politically and socially viable (cf. Herkman, 2014, 2015; Niemi, 2012a). Several studies argue that the media debate on these issues was dominated by the Finns Party in the run-up to the elections; for example, the party used the Eurozone bailouts to capitalize electoral support (Borg, 2012c, p. 250; Niemi, 2012a, pp. 12–14). Research seems to agree that the Finns Party's successful media strategy in the 2011 elections had two main components. On the one hand, the Finns Party media communication presented the political mainstream as a collection of corrupt, arrogant, and aged political cliques. On the other hand, it accused the mainstream media of being a subservient tool in the service of mainstream political parties while insisting that the Finns Party be presented objectively in the same media that it criticized (cf. Herkman, 2014; Niemi, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). By doing so, the Finns Party succeeded in consolidating the perception among the citizens that it was the political voice that went unheard and

neglected by the media—the very same media that the party was highly visible in. Put differently, the Finns Party consolidated its media visibility because it was on full view in the tabloid media, in particular, claiming to be ignored by the mainstream media, in general.

In fact, concerning the relationship between the populist party and the media, research indicates that the Finns Party and particularly media-savvy chairman Soini were able to exploit the so-called populism of the tabloid media, which has generally been critical of the political establishment (Borg, 2012c; Niemi, 2012a). A good deal of research indicated a juncture appears to exist between the political populist style and the tabloid media's populist approach, the common denominator being their claim of taking the side of the common people (cf. Heino, 2006, 2007; Herkman, 2015; Niemi, 2012a, 2013).

Citizens and Populism

Several studies attempted to sketch the Finns Party voters profile and provide evidence of some of the underlying factors that make them decide to vote for a populist party (Borg, 2012b; Grönlund & Westinen, 2012; Rahkonen, 2011; Suhonen 2011). Once again focusing on the 2011 elections, the most important findings are that the voters identify the Finns Party as a radical challenger to traditional Finnish consensus politics (Grönlund & Westinen, 2012; Loch & Norocel, 2015). The analysis of the survey data on the Finns Party voters indicated that blue-collar workers and entrepreneurs constituted the largest group of supporters (Grönlund & Westinen, 2012), particularly in areas with high unemployment rates and large percentages of industrial workers. Voters were fairly evenly distributed across age groups. It seems that the Finns Party managed to take over the loyal SMP/FLP voters and also activated previously demobilized voters (Borg, 2012b). The division between wealthy, urban Finland and the relatively economically deprived peri-urban and rural areas of the country was evident, with the Finns Party polling strongest in the predominantly monolingual Finnish, sparsely populated, rural areas and in small urban centers (Grönlund & Westinen, 2012). The party positioned itself more toward the left on socioeconomic issues (Borg, 2012b). Another important aspect was that more men supported the Finns Party than women (Loch & Norocel, 2015). Consequently, in the Nordic context, the Finns Party appears to display several resemblances with the FrP in Norway.

Several studies examine how populist actors and populist communications resonate in non-journalistic, online-media such as blogs, forums, and social networks, and the effects of such communication on citizens' knowledge and perceptions of the contemporary challenges encountered by the Finnish society (e.g., Askola, 2015; Keskinen, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013; Keskinen et al., 2009; Norocel, 2009; Pyrhönen, 2013, 2014; Raittila, 2009; Saresma, 2014). These studies generally indicate that successful populist communication in these contexts consolidates the party's electoral support and that specific Finns Party politicians mobilize communities against gender equality, openness, and diverse, vulnerable social groups (the Swedish-speaking minority, various migrant communities, the LGBTQ community, etc.).

Summary and Recent Developments

In regard to the topic of populist manifestations in Finland after 1995, this chapter provides a review of the authoritative research on populism and populist communication. Most research seems to generally examine the ideological components of populism, populist party organization, and the relationship between populist parties and the media (both traditional and social media), with significantly fewer studies dealing explicitly with citizens' perceptions of the populist message. Besides a great deal of research in Finnish and Swedish, studies in English have significantly increased, focusing either solely on populism generally in Finland

or on the Finns Party (the only populist party in the Finnish parliament) and other similar parties from across Europe in a few comparative studies.

Researchers continue to analyze in greater detail the Finns Party political communication while the party appears to further consolidate its position in mainstream politics. The Finns Party recorded strong support in the 2014 EU parliamentary elections, polling close to 13% of the vote, which in turn translated into two members of the European Parliament. Despite insistent invitations from the French radical-right populists, the National Front (FN), the Finns Party chose a more center-right, conservative position in the EU parliament, close to the British Conservatives and the Danish radical right, the Danish People's Party (DF). In addition, in the Finnish parliamentary elections in 2015, the Finns Party came in second, with close to 18% of the vote. Echoing similar developments in Norway, the Finns Party eventually joined the center-right cabinet of Sipilä, whose assumed task is to lead Finland out of the recession by means of a series of drastic cuts in public spending and a significant shrinking of the welfare state. The Finns Party received several important portfolios in the Sipilä cabinet, such as foreign affairs and EU matters, defense, the social care and health ministry, and the work and justice ministry. These centrist moves notwithstanding, several developments suggest that the anti-immigration radical right wing of the party is also very active (cf. Askola, 2015; Jungar & Jupskas, 2014; Keskinen, 2013; Loch & Norocel, 2015). Illustratively, in 2015, Immonen, a prominent member of the radical right wing, appeared in photographs together with members of a well-known extremist group and subsequently published a comment on his Facebook profile, committing himself to give his life in the battle against multiculturalism. Immonen's actions were quickly dismissed by Soini and other front figures within the party as a simple personal choice and an unfair media smear campaign, but they did not answer deeper concerns about the Finns Party moving toward a more obvious exclusionary stance toward social out-groups, particularly the Swedish-speaking minority and migrant communities, and last but not least, the LGBTQ community.

Clearly, detailed analyses of the effects of the Finns Party participation in government have yet to be undertaken. Areas to consider are populism's impact on mainstream parliamentary parties and on policy in general, and populist voters' and activists' anti-establishment attitudes and levels of trust.

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