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The parliamentary election in Finland April 19, 2015



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The 2015 parliamentary election in Finland resulted in a big victory of KESK (the Finnish Centre) and a smaller one of VIHR (the Greens) as well as of SFP (the Swedish People's Party). The parties on the left side of the left-right continuum, SDP (Social Democratic Party) and VAS (the Left Alliance) were losers as was KOK (National Coalition Party), the Prime Minister party after the 2011 election.

1. Background

Jyrki Katainen's 6-party government ('six-pack') that took office after the 2011 parliamentary election underwent major changes over the parliamentary term that ended in April, 2015. It originally consisted of all but two parties represented in *Eduskunta* (the parliament of Finland). In addition to Katainen's own KOK, SDP, VIHR, VAS, SFP and KD (the Christian Democratic Party) became government parties, while the by far biggest election winner in terms of seats won, PS (the Finns Party), and the biggest loser in terms of seats lost, KESK, were left in the opposition. The

exceptionally long coalition formation period (six weeks) already hinted at difficulties in finding adequate common ground for governing the country. After all, in the traditional left-right continuum the parties representing polar ends – VAS at the left end and KOK at the right one – were present in the government. On the other hand, the ones located roughly in the middle of the continuum, KESK and PS, were in the opposition. And so it was that at the end of the parliamentary term only four parties remained in the government once VAS and VIHR had made their sortie as a result of major disagreements on government policy. There was also significant turnover in the composition of the collegium of ministers. Even Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen left to become a member of the European Commission. He was replaced by the new KOK leader, Alexander Stubb. The VAS Minister of Transport, Merja Kyllönen, ran successfully for European Parliament and left her post in the government in 2014. The SDP leader, Jutta Urpilainen, was deposed of her office in the party conference. Her successor in the party leadership, Antti Rinne, took over the office of the Minister of Finance, formerly held by Urpilainen.

The work of the government had been riddled with difficulties from the beginning. Arguably some of these were a result of the very ambitious government program. In particular, the aim to fundamentally redesign the Finnish social and healthcare ('sote') system turned out to be too much for this government to handle. The differences in views regarding the cuts in public sector spending and the arrangements for securing energy supply, were the main reasons for the VAS and VIHR exodus, respectively. In the summer of 2014 a long time VIHR parliamentarian Osmo Soiniavaara published an article where he suggested that the then present government might well be the worst Finland has ever had (Soiniavaara, 2014). Similar opinion was expressed by the recently retired long-time civil servant and most senior official in the Ministry of Finance, Sailas (2015). Overall, the April 2015 parliamentary election took place against the strange backdrop of a debate on whether the Katainen–Stubb government had been the worst or next to worst government in the nearly 100-year history of Finland. Unexpectedly enough, even Prime Minister Stubb admitted in a

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radio broadcast that he thought his government had largely failed (Kaleva, 2015). The criteria of government failure were not spelled out in the broadcast, but they no doubt had to do with the general observation that none of the main goals set out in the 2011 government manifesto had been achieved. Moreover, two central actors – the SDP leader and Minister of Finance Jutta Urpilainen and the KOK's Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen – were replaced about a year before the end of the mandate period and two parties – VAS and Greens – left the government.

2. Electoral system

One of the oldest parliaments elected by universal suffrage, *Eduskunta* is a unicameral institution consisting of 200 members. These are apportioned by the Ministry of Justice to 12 districts on the basis of the population of Finnish nationals residing in each district six months prior to the election according to the official population data base. The rule used by the Ministry is the largest remainder's (a.k.a. Hamilton's) formula. The number of districts is smaller than in the 2011 election as a result of two district mergers: the former North Savo and North Karelia districts now constitute the Savo- Karelia district and the former districts of Kymi and South Savo now form the district of South East Finland. In the apportionment, when compared with the 2011 election, the districts of Satakunta, South East Finland and Vaasa lost one seat each, while Helsinki, Pirkanmaa and Savo-Karelia gained one seat each. The 13th district, Åland, is entitled to one MP regardless of the size of its population (Election Act, 1998, § 6). The number of MP's returned from the 12 mainland districts range from 7 (Lapland) to 35 (Uusimaa). The threshold of representation, thus, varies from 2.78% to 12.5% of the votes cast in a district. Due to the district mergers the range of variation thus shrank somewhat from the preceding election (Nurmi and Nurmi, 2012).

Once the votes are cast, the result in each district is determined on the basis of d'Hondt's formula. Electoral alliances are allowed. Since each district forms a separate electoral entity, the alliances between parties may vary from one district to another. In the computation of the results, each alliance is treated as a party in its district. The voters vote for individual candidates. These are listed under the party or alliance lists. The votes given to the candidates of each list determine, in accordance with d'Hondt's formula, the number of seats allocated to each party or alliance in the district. The order of vote sums of individual candidates, in turn, determines the order of priority of the candidates in each list (Election Act, 1998, § 89).

Rather few electoral alliances were formed in the 2015 election: KOK joined SFP in Varsinais-Suomi; KD joined PS in Lapland and KA (For the Poor Party) in Helsinki; the Finnish Communist Party (SKP) and the Communist Labor Party (KTP) joined in four districts. No candidates from the KA, SKP or KTP were elected.

3. The campaign

All parties ran a relatively cautious campaign. The economic realities at the end of 2014 were not encouraging: there was no growth in the economy, the unemployment figures were rising above 9%, the EU sanctions against Russia and Russia's counter-sanctions were hitting the Finnish export sector hard, especially the food and dairy product industry, the ratio of public debt to GDP was approaching the critical 60% level, the public health care expenditure was rising and so on (Statistics Finland, 2014; Statistics Finland, 2015; Helsingin Sanomat, 2015; Pinomaa, 2015; WHO, 2014). In this climate, public sector cuts became the main theme in electoral campaigning. There seemed to be a nearly

Table 1
The distribution of support for the parties in Finnish parliamentary election 2015.

Party	Finland	Change (2011 –2015)	Helsinki	Uusimaa	Varsinais- Suomi	Satakunta	Åland	Häme	Pirkanmaa	South- East Finland	Savo- Karelia	Vaasa	Central Finland	Oulu	Lapland	Electorate (absolute size)
KOK	18.2	-2.2	26.0	24.0	21.0	15.0	–	21.5	19.7	15.9	11.5	11.9	13.1	10.9	10.1	540212
SDP	16.5	-2.6	15.5	16.6	15.5	22.6	–	22.1	19.5	22.2	16.0	11.8	19.0	9.0	10.8	490102
PS	17.7	-1.4	11.3	18.0	19.3	25.0	–	19.5	17.8	21.1	19.7	15.9	19.3	16.2	16.5	524054
KESK	21.1	5.3	7.2	11.5	16.2	20.6	–	17.8	16.6	25.2	32.5	27.4	26.9	42.7	42.9	626218
VAS	7.1	-1.0	9.8	4.4	10.3	9.6	–	6.0	7.8	3.0	5.9	2.9	6.7	11.8	13.7	211702
VIHR	8.5	1.3	18.8	10.0	8.7	2.7	–	5.1	10.3	6.4	6.7	2.5	9.0	6.2	2.6	253102
SFP	4.9	0.6	6.8	10.2	5.0	0.3	–	–	–	0.3	–	20.7	–	0.6	0.5	144802
KD	3.5	-0.5	1.8	2.6	2.4	2.9	–	6.1	4.9	4.5	6.3	5.7	4.4	1.1	1.1	105134
STP	–	0.0	0.1	–	0.1	–	–	–	–	–	0.1	–	–	–	–	984
IPU	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4	–	0.4	0.8	0.7	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.4	13638
KA	–	0.0	0.1	0.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	623
PIR	0.8	0.3	1.4	1.1	0.8	0.3	–	0.8	1.1	0.4	0.6	0.4	0.8	0.6	0.8	25086
M11	0.3	0.0	0.1	0.7	0.1	0.3	–	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.2	7442
SKP	0.3	-0.1	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.1	–	0.1	0.4	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.3	7529
KTP	–	0.0	–	0.1	–	0.1	–	0.1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1100
Other	0.6	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	–	100.0	–	0.9	0.1	–	0.1	–	–	–	16731
Invalid votes	0.5	-0.1	0.7	0.4	0.5	0.5	2.5	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.6	15397

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