

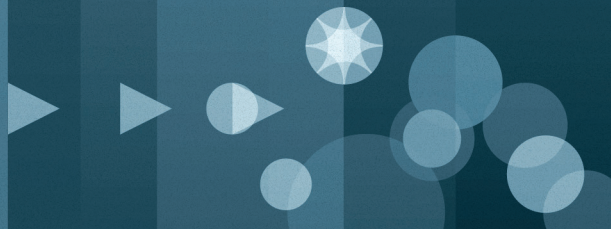
Suomen Toivo -ajatuspaja
Centre for European Studies

Erkka Railo • Vesa Vares

THE MANY FACES OF POPULISM

*The True Finns through the lens of
political history and the media*

Translation by Timo Kivistö, MA



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EMOTIONS INTO POLITICS

The Political Mobilisation of the True Finns in the Media prior to the 2011 General Election

In the parliamentary election of 2011, the True Finns party recorded an historic victory: it attracted 19.1 per cent of the vote and won 39 seats in parliament. This triumph was further sweetened by its sweeping nature. The party gained seats in every voting region of mainland Finland. In Satakunta, the party collected its biggest share of the vote with 23.6 per cent. Even the lowest, in Helsinki, amounted to 13 per cent.

The change in the balance of power between the other parties, sparked by the victory of the True Finns, is almost without equal. In 1907, Finland held its first election for a single-chamber Parliament.

In a flash, the Social Democrats (SDP) became the biggest party in the country, with 37 per cent of the vote and 80 seats. This victory was attributable to the fact that, for the first time, equal and universal suffrage brought voting rights to all the labourers, small landholders and landless people, who had previously been excluded from the polls.

Another similar event might have occurred in 1945, when the Finnish People's Democratic League (SKDL) achieved 23.5 per cent of the vote and 49 seats, rising from virtual non-existence to the status of Finland's second biggest party. The SKDL was nominally a "league" of organisations, but the main partner of the league was, in fact, the Communist Party of Finland. At that time, their breakthrough was based on the fact that the activities of communist organisations had been prohibited for several years. When people finally got the chance to vote for whomever they wanted, they duly did so, for which reason the SKDL won, while the SDP, in particular, slumped to a heavy defeat.

In both cases, however, the elections were crucially affected by exceptional circumstances (the change of the electoral system and a lost war, respectively). The people and the values they held dear had been there, but opportune circumstances provided amazing election results.

Comparison with these two historical situations only highlights the unique quality of the True Finns' 2011 electoral achievement. There had been no major changes in the Finnish electoral system or law for a long time, and neither had Finland been recuperating from a state of emergency such as war. Nor were the True Finns any prohibited movement, eligible for the first time. In the end, the best point of comparison for their recent success is arguably to be found in the party's own history. In 1970, the True Finns' predecessor, the Finnish Rural Party (SMP) won 10.5 per cent of the vote and 18 parliamentary seats, having had previously only a single MP. Another commonality between the successes of 1970 and 2011 is the fact that the political élite could not foresee either victory or its scale.

The Aim of the Essay

The purpose of this essay is to examine the True Finns' electoral success from the viewpoint of political communication. Firstly, I will analyse the True Finns' media publicity prior to the election, especially regarding reports on their attitude towards the European Union, and the global economic crisis in particular. Secondly, I will review how the True Finns' MP candidates employed blogging in their electoral

campaigns, and what kind of response they received. These two forms of political communication are linked by the result: the True Finns gained credibility as representatives for a mass of people, as well as an agent in political activity. My main argument is that the mainstream media inadvertently mobilised the 'True Finns' potential supporters, while the MP candidates of the party themselves managed to mobilise many more through social media and, in particular, by blogging. By "political mobilisation" here, I mean the capacity to reach potential supporters and convince them of the credibility of a party, as well as the political alternative it has to offer. This, in short, is what happened to the True Finns prior to the parliamentary election in April 2011. Political communication produced a self-conscious community of shared values, who are aware of their right and authority to speak for a significant mass of Finns, and whose power is recognised by other functionaries in society. In this sense, the True Finns attained considerable symbolic power: in other words, the right to define social problems and point out ways to solve them.

Cambridge sociologist John B. Thompson distinguishes four kinds of social power: economic, military, political, and symbolic power. Economic power is based on control of economic resources; military power, for its part, refers to the potential to use force – or the threat of using it – to achieve one's own goals. Political power is wielded by governmental functionaries and related interest groups. Finally, symbolic power is what actors in society assign to construct and evaluate reality and its phenomena. In this article, most attention is paid to symbolic power: in particular, the kind which is wielded through publicity. Thompson defines political publicity as a space where there is struggle for hegemony over the construction of social reality. The ability to convince an audience of a certain reality leads to the development of symbolic power into concrete power by way of, typically, an election. For example, if party A manages to convince a significant number of citizens that phenomenon B is a threat, and that the party has a viable solution to this threat, it is able to mobilise its supporters in an election, and thus transform its symbolic power into actual political power. The mobilisation of voters means, in this context, the ability to reach potential supporters and convince them of the credibility of a certain party and the political alternative this party has to offer. Fundamentally, the mobilisation of voters means an attempt at distributing social power in new terms (*Thompson 2000, 1995*).

Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells perceives social power in slightly more abstract terms. To him, the capacity to assess and evaluate reality represents the highest degree of social power, from which other sources of power emanate. In simplistic terms, an understanding of reality decides to whom economic resources rightfully belong, who has use of the government's machinery of violence, and – of course – what the structure of political power is, and how this power is contested. Castells' theory of power postulates that this power is wielded by social institutions. These institutions comprise different bodies of people which intentionally strive for goals that they have set for themselves. Such bodies include ministries, political parties, interest groups, businesses, and even different media. Different institutions possess different amounts of power. In this essay, I review power particularly in the field of political publicity, where social institutions compete over symbolic power, that is, over credibility and the privilege to define social problems, present them in a certain light, and produce possible solutions (*Castells 2009*).

From the point of view presented by Thompson and Castells, then, the increase in the True Finns' power is not simply a question of their success in the election. Rather, this result was a consequence of their ability to mobilise potential supporters and create an essentially stronger social institution, as Castells would have it, than the one they were before. What is therefore significant is what happened before the election: by what means, or for which reasons, did the True Finns attain so much symbolic power that they went on to achieve such an historical sweep of the electorate in April 2011. Following the theories of Thompson and Castells, the True Finns' triumph was not only due to the fact that their political ideology matched the ideas entertained by a certain segment of Finns. Equally momentous was their ability, as a party, to achieve a status which enabled them to credibly and rightfully publicly define problems from their own viewpoint and present their own solutions. Essential in political mobilisation is a sense of community, which yields perceived entitlement to power. According to the Loughborough sociologist Elder-Vass (*2010*), social agency comes from the concept of a group of people sharing the same values, attitudes, and goals. A notion of “us and them” arms its believers with a political identity that authorises one's own actions as well as enables purposeful political action. By the same token, political mobilisation challenges former structures of governance and forces

other institutions, such as political parties, to adjust themselves to a new balance of power.

The change in the relationship between politicians, citizens, and the media has led to a situation where mass media provide an indispensable means of mobilising supporters. Contact between citizens and politicians has become rare, while citizens absorb an increasing amount of what they know about politics through the media. Meeting face to face with potential backers is, of course, an important part of any campaign, but the possibilities afforded by the Internet and other forms of mass media are far superior to what can be achieved by actually meeting people. Political parties and their candidates simply cannot get to know all of their supporters in the streets or at shopping malls; instead, they need a channel which enables continual communication with the masses over distance. Communication also needs to be convincing, so much so that it persuades masses to vote for a certain party in any given election.

In this article, I aim to analyse two forms of political communication, which together make up the framework for my essay. The first section is dedicated to the treatment of what became the number one news topic before the election – the EU efforts at dissolving the threat of bankruptcy looming in Portugal and Greece – in mainstream media, especially the newspapers. The public coverage of this topic goes a long way to revealing what kind of an image was created of the True Finns in relation to other parties. The second section focuses on social media and, in particular, the blogging exercised by the True Finn MP candidates. Several candidates who gained remarkable support had been campaigning in social media, especially by writing blogs on the *Uusi Suomi* website. Using such media, the True Finns' candidates could quickly and effectively reach masses of similar-minded people; a feat which would have been unlikely by means of the traditional mass media alone. Manuel Castells argues that emotions are a crucial part of political mobilisation: the experience of belonging to a community that shares common hopes and fears is an integral part of political identification and, thereby, the creation of an institution of social power (*Castells 2009*). For this reason, I shall examine what kinds of emotions the blogs sought to evoke, and how successful they were in view of the response they elicited.

Reasons behind the True Finns' Rise

Although barely a year has elapsed since the True Finns' triumph, the reasons for its occurrence have been fairly extensively analysed. The sociologist Timo Toivonen claims the True Finns' strong support is attributable to economic change in the structure of Finnish society. This change is a common thread running through the rise of both the SMP and the True Finns. The increase in support for the SMP followed Finland's transition from a predominantly agricultural society to an industrial one. In a similar way, Toivonen says, the True Finns have benefited from the traditional chimney-stack industry giving way to a society increasingly based on information technology. This has, above all, led to a number of Social Democrat voters moving behind the True Finns. Toivonen's observation is given credence by statistics: where there is high unemployment, support for the True Finns is the strongest. The apparent scapegoat for this structural change is the EU. The second of Toivonen's arguments is based on the SMP tradition. The localities where that party was popular 30, or even 40, years ago also provided the True Finns with the most votes. Thirdly, he believes that the increased turnout among male voters benefited the True Finns more than any other party (*Toivonen 2011, pp. 82 – 91*).

The True Finns, however, are not solely a Finnish phenomenon. Populist movements have, in recent decades, gathered a lot of support in several Western European countries. In fact, compared with their European brethren, the True Finns have been late risers. As Professor Ilkka Ruostetsaari points out, the True Finns' values are in many respects the same as those of other European populists. Their ideology is based on a notion of one common people making a stand against an estranged élite. They endorse direct democracy, such as holding referendums, as a means for crumbling the power of political élites and civil servants. The party rejects the corporate-governed market economy by siding itself with the common man against corporations and the state. In addition, European populism is ethnocentric, which means the endorsement of nationalism and the cultural unity of a nation, and opposition to supranational institutions such as the European Union. The populist ideology does, indeed, possess a strong provincial element which defends local identities to counterbalance globalisation, multiculturalism, and border-crossing economic activity. At the end of the day, populism is a socially conservative movement which supports tough policy such as opposition to the rights of

sexual minorities, strong national defence, and more severe punishment for criminals. (*Ruostetsaari 2011, pp. 94 – 115*)

This wish list helps us understand much of the popularity of the True Finns. However, they and populists in general have been criticised for a degree of nostalgia within their electoral platforms, dreaming of a return to a time which never really was. Technological advances alone have brought states increasingly dependent on each other, which in turn necessitates more international coordination. Migration around the world has increased, which inevitably accumulates multicultural interaction. In addition, societies have grown more pluralistic and diversified, all of which imposes pressure on legislators to grant minorities the rights and liberties that have heretofore been accessible to the core population alone.

On an international level, the success of populists in the 1990's and 2000's has been explained by the fading juxtaposition between the political left and right. Our understanding of the relations between the means of production and the state has been a crucial factor in determining Western political systems for centuries. The end of the Cold War and the development of the welfare state led to a situation where leftist and rightist parties in several countries found themselves drifting towards the political centre. The Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2005) believes that because of this, virtually all parties in several Western states adopted near-identical ideologies. These were claimed to represent the entire populace, but in reality championed the cause of the well-earning, internationally and liberally-minded middle and upper-middle classes. In consequence of this apparent ideological vacuity, sharp confrontations in politics became rare. Many welcomed this, but to Mouffe it meant that a number of citizens was excluded from what was considered correct politics. Certain political values, such as being opposed to globalisation, multiculturalism, or international capitalism, were deemed inappropriate themes, and their champions lost symbolic power, or the potential to identify social problems and point out their preferred solutions. Indeed, Mouffe claims that the emergence of populists in different countries has come as a consequence of the awakening of such citizens whose opinions had been excluded from political dialogue and the exercise of political power. Following his line of thought, we see a counterstroke; political views and alternatives once deemed impossible considered possible again, and the reorganisation of such views and

alternatives into political institutions in the guise of populist movements. This, however, does not mean that these citizens were right *per se*. Rather, the problem lies with the limited scope of public debate, which as such has undermined the legitimacy of the predominant political ideology. This problem may be formulated into a question: “How do we know whether or not a chosen policy is correct, if it has no alternatives?” (*Herkman 2011*)

The phenomenon described by Mouffe has been noticed in Finland, too. As the Cold War slowly abated and came to an end in the late 1980's, Finland moved into a novel era of consensus. Professor Jorma Kalela argues that the post-depression Finland of the early 1990's developed a form of political-economic ideology, which took a commanding hold on the Finnish political system. The core of this political ideology was that Finland should adapt to the globalisation of the economy as well as possible. In economic politics, this meant strict fiscal discipline, utmost openness of the national economy, and trust in export-fuelled growth. Kalela assumes that the requirement of compliance with economic globalisation did more than any other thing to turn Finland's political decision-making system on its head. Instead of representing the interests of citizens in relation to the economy, politicians started to advocate the interests of the economy over the citizens, at the same time urging the latter to comply with the “realities” of economic life, rather than vice versa. (*Kalela 2008*)

In domestic politics, the new political and economic ideology led to a further narrowing of inter-party differences, especially in the field of economic policy. Finland developed a new form of political consensus where every party, apart from the SMP and True Finns, could enter the government. The first “Rainbow Coalition” of PM Paavo Lipponen, for example, included the National Coalition Party (henceforth NCP), the Social Democrats, the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party. Over the years, different parties took part, but the basic formula remained very much the same: two of the “Big Three” formed the core of the cabinet, taking along a sufficient number of smaller parties (*Paloheimo & Raunio 2008, pp. 209 – 219*).

For its part, the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EVA), in its study on voters' predilections, found out that a significant number of Finns consistently indicated that they were after things no political party seemed to be promoting. A case in point is the Finns' attitude towards the European Union. In the referendum of 1994, 43.1

per cent of the Finns voted against Finland's entry into the European Communities, which later amalgamated into the European Union. This critical sentiment has remained consistently high to this day. An EVA poll in 1996 showed that 26 per cent of Finns were still anti-EU; prior to the general election in 2011, the corresponding figure was 30 per cent (*Haavisto & Kiljunen, p. 33*). Of course, certain "old" parties such as the Left Alliance and the Christian Democrats have at different times adopted critical stances, but at no point have they demanded that Finland be separated from the European Union – as the True Finns did in the 2007 parliamentary election – and certainly their "Euroscepticism" has proved no obstacle to joining pro-European governments (*Raunio 2011*). Nor were economic politics or the EU the only issues where little stood between different parties (apart from the True Finns). Each has, for example, embraced "green" values and declared themselves environmentalists (*Mickelsson 2007*).

The very real consequence of this development has been the lessening importance of elections in determining government line-ups. At the same time, the power of the political opposition markedly declined due to the near-impossibility of toppling a government. Governments became more united, as carefully-worded platforms have minimised the risk of internal confrontation during the four years of an electoral term. This is why every party with government aspirations has tended to use only moderate rhetoric while campaigning to maximise their chances of entry. To put it in other words, it has been in the interests of a party to present their campaign message so unclearly, indistinctly, and ambiguously that their hopes of joining the government would not at least be dashed because of any intransigence in their demands. From the citizens' viewpoint, this development has done nothing to clarify the differences between parties. Instead, many have felt that voting is futile and no party at all will really pursue their interests. At the turn of the 1980's and the 1990's, this became the majority view. In 1986, an EVA poll showed that 46 per cent of those interviewed agreed with the statement "No party pursues issues that are important to me". Ten years later, no less than 55 per cent partially or wholeheartedly agreed (*Vartia 2001, p. 35*). By the end of the 1990's, when support for the True Finns languished at around one per cent, more than one in five EVA interviewees believed that no party matched their set of values. Interestingly enough, the number of these disillusioned people correlates negatively with the increase in

the True Finns' popularity. During the run-up to the 2011 election, with support for the True Finns nearing 20 per cent, only 10 cent of those interviewed still claimed that their values differed from those of any party (*Haavisto & Kiljunen, pp. 9 – 12*).

Some of these people did not vote at all; others may have voted for some party, perhaps out of a sense of duty. In any case, the Finnish uninominal voting system offered a chance to vote for candidates who were exceptional within and at odds with the mainstream of their respective parties. Professor Emeritus Pertti Suhonen noted that, in 2011, the True Finns attracted voters from virtually every party, but above all, the SDP and the Centre Party. The vital observation here, however, is that the voters backing the populist school of thought existed before the “Big Bang”, but they were dispersed between different parties or did not vote at all (*Suhonen 2011, pp. 61 – 81*). Neither can Suhonen be accused of hindsight, for as early as 2005, he wrote about a “space (that) exists on the fringes of the political spectrum”. Finnish parties, according to Suhonen” were so heterogenous in their values that they could long keep potential supporters of populism voting for them (*Suhonen 2005, pp. 678 – 683*). This being the case, the real obstacle to the True Finns' success was not a lack of support for their ideology, but rather the party's inability to convince its potential supporters of their will, ability, and interest in representing their political thinking. In the new millennium, however, this situation changed.

Media Talk on EU Rescue Packages Divides Parties into Two Camps

In the spring of 2011, the global economic crisis rose to a new zenith. The ineptitude of Portugal and Greece in pushing through required economic reforms led to a situation where their ability to manage their debts was questioned. The solvency of Greece had long been suspect, but at the end of March – three weeks before the Finnish general election – the Portuguese government collapsed following a passage of a no-confidence motion over spending cuts and tax increases, after which Portugal announced that it needed EU help to repay its debts.

The global financial crisis, rescue packages for Greece and Portugal, and the EU's struggle in bailing out its Southern member states from an acute liquidity crisis thus became headline news just as the Finns were going to the polls. Media samples compiled at the Turku

University Centre for Parliamentary Studies prove that news on this theme – more than any other – dominated domestic reportage from early January to mid-April. The data include the biggest national and regional newspapers, as well as national TV news and current affairs programmes. Had the economic and foreign news been included, the proportion of news about aid to Greece and Portugal would have been greater still. In the afternoon papers, for example, news of the EU rescue packages comprised the biggest singular news topic related to the elections.

The timing was perfect from the True Finns' point of view, not least because they had built their profile as the country's foremost Eurosceptics. The variation in support for each party has been examined here against the backdrop of what is called issue ownership theory. This means that citizens associate each party with an issue, or several issues, assuming that a party has particular competence in this or that issue. In the Finnish political system, an example of such issue ownership is the Green League and the environment. Should a "green" issue emerge on the agenda of political publicity in a convenient light and just before an election, it would probably benefit the Green League. As Professor Tapio Raunio (2011) argues, the True Finns have been cast, first and foremost, as a party opposed to the European Union. It is, therefore, fair to conclude that the True Finns benefited from news headlines which made the European Union appear a failed project, incompetent at solving the economic problems piling up at its door.

Table 1 below shows which party leaders made appearances in the news concerning the European Union. Its most interesting message is that the majority of coverage was given to Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi and Finance Minister Jyrki Katainen on the one hand, and the True Finns' chairman Timo Soini on the other. The two afternoon tabloid papers are worth a special mention in that they gave Soini just as much coverage as the Prime Minister got, with Jyrki Katainen some way behind in third place.

In the broadsheets, the order of three most visible politicians varied from one paper to another, but basically the setting was the same: Mari Kiviniemi featured the most, with Timo Soini and Jyrki Katainen alternating in second place. Equally conspicuous is the fact that, whenever there was news concerning the EU, all the other party leaders were far behind the top three. Jutta Urpilainen, the chairwoman of SDP, the biggest opposition party, got considerably less coverage than

the leader of the smallest, Timo Soini. The chairman of the Left Alliance, Paavo Arhinmäki, received some extra attention by leading the opposition to submit a motion of censure against the government's decision to join the EU rescue schemes in aid of Greece and Portugal. The interpolation was amply covered by *Helsingin Sanomat*, among others. The three remaining parties – the Greens, the Christian Democrats, and the Swedish People's Party – were almost totally sidelined from the debate on the EU and its rescue packages. Again, the afternoon papers led the way: none of the three party leaders (Anni Sinnemäki, Päivi Räsänen, Stefan Wallin) was mentioned once in the tabloids' coverage of EU affairs. Such an omission speaks volumes, keeping in mind no other political news could be deemed more important during the entire run-up to the April elections.

	Ilta-Sanomat	Iltalehti	Helsingin Sanomat	Turun Sanomat	Aamulehti
Kiviniemi	10	15	23	28	31
Katainen	11	9	20	25	21
Urpilainen	1	6	11	9	14
Arhinmäki	0	1	5	8	2
Sinnemäki	0	0	0	3	0
Wallin	0	0	1	3	1
Räsänen	0	0	1	1	1
Soini	11	17	14	13	20

TABLE 1: *The number of times each party leader was mentioned in news about the EU. Source: Ilta-Sanomat; Iltalehti; Helsingin Sanomat; Turun Sanomat; Aamulehti, January 1 to April 17, 2011)*

News about the European Union therefore conveyed the idea that these elections were about either backing or opposing the EU rescue packages. Several articles cited the “bloc division” presented by Ville Pernaa, the head of the Centre for Parliamentary Studies, where Timo Soini and Jyrki Katainen represented the extremes of these two blocs, in values diametrically opposed to each other. This set-up was repeated and reinforced in news covering the EU. A qualitative analysis of the coverage shows that, according to this basic pattern, publicity assigned different roles for different parties and their leaders.

Minister of Finance Jyrki Katainen was presented as the EU's unrivalled number one champion; Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi an inarticulate and reluctant defender of the bailout packages; SDP leader Jutta Urpilainen an inconsistent critic of the government; and finally Timo Soini, an unambiguously anti-EU figure.

Whatever the media, Timo Soini and the True Finns were portrayed as opponents of the governing parties. The stand adopted by Kiviniemi, or Urpilainen, may have appeared incoherent and obscure in the media, but that of Soini and the True Finns could be summarised neatly: Finland was not going to play cash cow to the crisis states. As the True Finns launched their electoral platform at the end of February, it was typically their criticism of the EU bailout packages which made the headlines: "Soini wants to quit Finnish funding to EU crisis states" or "Soini: EU is no loan fund". The ample visibility given to Timo Soini and the True Finns did not, of course, equal positive or uncritical publicity as such. Nevertheless, Soini got his euro-critical message through clearly, whatever one might think of it. Newspapers often noted that Soini's criticism of the EU loan packages might lead to deterioration of the economic situation. *Suomen Kuvalehti*, for example, pointed out that "Finland will become the sole stowaway (in the eurozone) if it refuses aid to Portugal". However, the main thing was that the True Finns were portrayed as a party which will stop rescue packages being allocated to Greece and Portugal, should it rise to power. For, according to one headline at the time, "True Finns: Brussels' worst nightmare. Success in election may threaten EU attempts at helping Portugal."

Timo Soini and the True Finns also received a large amount of criticism for their stand in EU affairs. The columnist Jouko Kurppa from the *Lapin Kansa* newspaper marvelled at Soini's opposition to the common currency (Feb. 12). He pointed out that three out of every four Finns – and indeed half the True Finns' supporters – want to retain the euro. "The people do know, but Timo Soini won't have it", Kurppa cracked. His colleague at the *Aamulehti* depicted Soini as a big baby, who has reached the "terrible twos". Despite the critical tones, Soini's standing as the opposite of "other parties" became an almost indisputable matter of fact. When *Helsingin Sanomat* devoted an entire page to the True Finns' platform, the detailed article was not – exceptionally – built around their euroscepticism, but their longing for the days of old. "True Finns believe in old ideals and

unified culture”. The readers of Finland’s biggest daily could not, however, remain ignorant of the True Finns’ attitude to the European Union. That was taken care of by a lengthy portraiture of Soini, who was found describing the EU as “the heart of darkness”.

The news of the planned aid to Portugal and Greece was based on an image of polarisation between the True Finns on the one hand and the “old” parties on the other. In this setting, the NCP and the True Finns seemed diametrically opposed, while the Social Democrats and the Centre Party appeared ambiguous and doubtful of their stand. From the viewpoint of political mobilisation, the picture rendered by mainstream media bolstered the credibility of the alternative that the True Finns had to offer. Recurrent news in which the True Finns and the “old parties” were portrayed as alternatives to each other added to an image of equivalent rivals. The mainstream media also affected matters by its uniform criticism of all parties for their management of the problems caused by the financial crisis. No party received particularly positive remarks from the media, all of which served to strengthen the challenger’s position over other parties.

Social Media Offering Ways to Reach Voters

The Internet became a part of political campaigning in the 1990’s, gaining in importance in the 2000’s. High hopes have been placed on it as a direct channel between citizens and politicians, thus improving political communication. Political parties and their candidates have, however, used the Internet in the last decade mainly to produce unidirectional communication, not far removed from traditional electioneering, whereby voters are fed information on the agenda and views of a party. In the new millennium, however, new applications have been introduced to make use of the material produced by the Internet users themselves as well as their mutual interaction. Such instruments of social media include Facebook, YouTube, and, to an extent, the blog, assuming that its true essence lies in the comments, discussions, and arguments between users. The significance of these applications in elections and politics in general, however, has hitherto remained rather small. As late as the national election in 2007 and the European Parliamentary election of 2008, researchers were able to conclude that social media had no serious part to play in the outcome of either, even though the majority of candidates did have a variety of

instruments of social media at their disposal (*Borg 2009, Strandberg 2009*). Again, in 2011, the situation was rather different.

The role of the Internet and social media as forms of political communication is important, as they – in principle, at least – afford a means to bypass the mass media and reach potential supporters directly. Analysts in media and politics have, for quite some time, paid attention to the transformation of the relationship between the media and politics, and dubbed it “functional differentiation”. This means that the media has detached itself from politics and created an independent institution of its own, observing the rest of the society from its own premises and interests, typically commercial ones. While such development is common to all Western societies, its speed has varied from one country to another. In broad terms, until the 1970’s, the Finnish media took its cue from the starting point of the institution – political or other – whose activities it sought to cover. Mass media tended to avoid open criticism of political parties or individual politicians, and nor did they try to interpret their messages. Rather, the media reported on political actors with the intention to explain their aims or actions to the public, but generally refrained from commenting on them. From the viewpoint of media relations, this meant that politicians could air their views in the media without undue difficulty, especially if it was something that influential politicians deemed important (*Kunelius, Noppari & Reunanen 2009*).

The functional differentiation of the media has led to a situation where its treatment of politics is influenced by other than just social interests. Typically, we understand these interests are essentially commercial: media companies aim to make profit for their owners, like any other commercial enterprise. Critics argue that this leads the media to only cover those issues which make interesting news. Such stories are not, however, necessarily or even very often the kind of news politicians deem important to society. This is why politicians often voice their frustration over the media dealing with “the wrong topics in the wrong way”.

Politicians, therefore, have lost their power to influence the political agenda produced by media publicity, as well as the perspective taken on it. For that reason, getting across to voters through commercial media has become difficult. The task of the True Finns was further exacerbated for two reasons. First, the party used to be very small, and small parties have a difficult time gaining visibility. The media follows

power, and small parties have little to none. A survey made by the Centre for Parliamentary Studies showed that the paramount figure in political publicity in the early 2000's was the Prime Minister. During the four-month observation period, Matti Vanhanen received as much attention as all the other party leaders and President Tarja Halonen put together – and they were by no means ignored, either. Beyond a few key ministers, the party chairmen, and the President of the Republic, the media rapidly lost interest. Even the “rank-and-file” ministers found publicity elusive, not to mention the ordinary Members of Parliament or parliamentary candidates (*Berg et al. 2009*).

The second obstacle for the True Finns was the very critical stance many newspapers held towards the party. In particular, their electoral platform drew dim reviews from several observers in the mainstream media. Launched in March 2011, it was criticised in *Helsingin Sanomat* in the following manner: “A few dozen sheets deal with probably everything that the members of the working group could come to think of. The big and the small things mix together in a happy muddle”. Veteran journalist Yrjö Rautio urged his readers in the *Apu* weekly to peruse the True Finns’ platform and asked what the supporters of that party really want. “Do they want national isolation and selfishness? Do they want a return to the moral values of the 1950's? Do they reject fundamental equality, in which one's gender, sexual orientation, origin, or cultural background does not make one worse than the other?” Even the tabloid *Iltalehti* considered Timo Soini in one of its columns a kind of “Trojan horse, who brings with him alien forces to the heart of democracy”.

However, there are indications that, in the 2011 election, the True Finns became the first political party in Finnish history to successfully exploit the opportunities offered by social media and mobilise its potential supporters. Its leading candidates in all but two of the voting regions kept a blog. More important still, the blogs of True Finns candidates elicited the highest rates of response from voters. Table 2 (below) shows that, of all the blogs appearing in the *Uusi Suomi* online daily, the most supported were those written by True Finns candidates (*Rinne 2011, p. 67*). This gives reason to assume that the True Finns, more than any other party, had cracked the enigma of the Internet and social media. They won a receptive audience, which heeded the political alternative that the party had on offer. Therefore,

although the publicity they had in mainstream media was very critical, their candidates could bypass the gatekeepers of that publicity – the media – and get through to their potential supporters directly.

	LIKES (%)	CANDIDATES ON FACEBOOK	FANS
True Finns	19,9	9	9507
Green League	13,6	17	9022
Pirate Party	11,9	1	182
Left Alliance	10,2	23	12840
SDP	10,1	15	6077
NCP	9,5	17	11464
Change 2011	8,5	4	1464
Centre Party	6,6	8	3144
SFP	4,6	3	884
Christian Democrats	3,6	2	7006
Other	1,5	1	1201

TABLE 2: Percentage of support for each party according to "Likes" on Facebook (Rinne 2011). Amounts have been calculated by counting those who clicked the "Like" button on the party web page, recommended the page, or further distributed it in their personal networks. "Liking" a party here is thus different from signing up as a "fan". On Facebook, being a fan indicates a stronger dedication than "liking" something, which is usually understood as so-called "light" activism, without any particular commitment.

The subjects brought up and their treatment by True Finn candidates in social media differed significantly from what they were subjected to by the commercial media in its news. Many dealt with topics which the True Finn bloggers had themselves defined as forbidden or secret. They were issues or angles which the supporters of that party thought too "hot" for the political élite or the mainstream media to treat in public. In social media, anyone could declare that immigration brought crime, development aid was pocketed by African dictators, Muslim terrorists were a threat to Western civilisation, or the

Fatherland was being sold to the Russians. The blogs were designed to imply that they were giving away the truth which the mainstream media and the élite had been deliberately hiding.

The Russians' suspect land deals and land ownership in Finland have been discussed for years, but the government has failed to tackle the problem by means of jurisdiction. The decision-makers do not seem to be taking this seriously. For instance, MEP Satu Hassi of the Green Party signed, while Minister of the Environment, a motion seeking to sweep aside all limitations on estate ownership from foreigners. On this motion she had signed herself, she commented to Ilta-Sanomat on Feb. 13 as follows: "I have no recollection whatsoever".

The significance of the True Finns presenting their ideology lay not just in an attempt to enlighten their potential supporters with the values and attitudes the party was for or against. The information was also designed to carry out political mobilisation. It was there to evoke an image of a uniform group, which was united by a certain political ideology and common enemies.

The blogs painted the True Finns' group identity based on, above all, the juxtaposition between the "people" and the "élite", where the latter comprise dignitaries and other agents of the economy, politics, media, and science. These cliques, as the blogs would have had us believe, continuously sought to undermine the True Finns' success or just attack them:

It now looks more than apparent that all the powers of these so-called "old" parties thought big are specifically aimed at beating the 13.8 % [sic!] True Finns in the election. Keeping that in mind, you'll understand why Timo Soini has been invited to take part in the TV debate that the three former PM hopefuls used to do alone. But of course, Timo can handle the concerted attack from these three, and even turn it to his advantage.

This citation also reveals that the blogs were designed to build confidence in the True Finns' election success. It stresses that Timo Soini can withstand the machinations of other parties and maintain support for the True Finns. The blogs repeatedly conveyed the idea that the True Finns had been persecuted or "defamed". Guilty of this defamation, we were told, were politicians from other parties, the media, and the authorities. Many were references to what the bloggers called "untruthful writings" in the mass media, which were brought up as proof of the persecution the True Finns were made to suffer.

The rise of the True Finns has been followed by obscene muck-throwing and a campaign of defamation, machinated by our political opponents, which started immediately after the municipal elections and, what's more, from the mouth of the Minister of Justice.

As the general election draws nearer, the game will probably get tougher and even dirtier still. One can only hope that the media can report on things fairly and justly. Even that has been open to question thus far: to give just one example, I refer to this slanderous and untruthful piece of writing against my honour.

James Hirvisaari's blog built a political identity by creating images of "us" and "them". "Us" equals patriots, who dared to defend the rights of the ordinary folk against the political élite. In his blog, Hirvisaari placed himself in the "extreme centre" and his political opponents on the "extreme left". He stressed that this extreme left had infiltrated, for example, the Green League, which sought to deter the True Finns from bringing up certain issues by "infringing freedom of speech". His view of the world had all the other political camps from Kokoomus to the "leftist élite" sharing the same goals, namely "the eradication of borders" and "the mixing up of nations". To conclude, Hirvisaari hoped that "the traitors of the nation will be court-martialled".

How strongly Hirvisaari's readers agreed with his rhetoric was evident in feedback. He received praise and encouragement, "Well said, James!" or was hailed as a good candidate for Minister of the Interior. The writers also thanked him for bringing up "the truth" which was being "kept out of view". In a string dedicated to immigration policy, the pseudonym Matti H. vented his feelings: "SHOCKING! And one cannot but look on helplessly as our homeland is being systematically destroyed". The writers considered the primary cause of this intolerable immigration policy to be private capital. "No one in Finland pushes for massive immigration more vigorously than those guardians of Swedish capital, the SFP (Swedish People's Party)". What united most of those who wrote blogs and those who replied was a notion of threat from immigration and big capital towards Finland. Conjuring up threats to the Fatherland evoked strong feelings among readers: "ONLY THE TRUE FINNS CAN HELP US IN THESE TERRIBLE GOINGS-ON!!!" cried one clearly alarmed reader.

Secondly, the blogs urged people to vote. One common way of doing this was to pick up news of pre-election polls as if to prove that support for the True Finns was no illusion, but real. True Finn

candidate Jussi Niinistö glowed over the poll results published in the *Taloussanomat* daily in March:

The old parties were rocked this week by a brushfire poll from Taloustutkimus, which showed the True Finns might win up to seven seats in the Uusimaa region. That would be more MPs than the party now has from all over the country!

The old adage is that opinion polls do not vote. This is why voter turnout is of interest to the professionals in politics. That, too, has made pleasant reading recently. The certainty of those who support the party of actually casting a vote has increased with every poll made.

At the same time, the blogs were there to remind their readers of the importance of voting: only then would the increase in support bring actual results in the election. Conversely, it looked like the True Finn candidates themselves remained unsure of how well their popularity shown by polls would last. Blog articles on opinion polls were thus designed to bolster potential supporters' confidence of a victory. It must be remembered that the candidates' blogs betray suspicion, or even hostility, towards the established parties and civil servants, as well as the media that produces the opinion polls. Under the surface lies a question: what would stop these potent forces from robbing the True Finns of their glittering prize of victory?

The True Finns' blog articles and the comments made on them betrayed a variety of strong emotions. They frightened readers with the loss of Finnish culture under unrestrained immigration, or the Finnish labourer being enslaved by international capitalism. Secondly, they betrayed anger at the political and economic élite, not forgetting the journalists, for letting the country rot due to what was seen as failed politics and one-sided public debate. Thirdly, there was a glimmer of hope that the True Finns would be able to offer a genuine alternative to the failed politics practised before. Western societies tend to idealise the thought of a rational debate, in which equal sides seek the best possible result for all parties concerned. The winning argument is the one which from an objective viewpoint is the best, and not the one which evokes the most positive feelings in an audience. Political scientists have, however, paid increasing attention to the meaning of emotion in winning people over to one side and having them desert the other. Political mobilisation, when successful, also requires an ability to evoke feelings and win citizens over on an emotional level (*Castells 2009; Mouffe 2005*).

Manuel Castells argues that political mobilisation is based on an ability to communicate with others who are similarly-minded. The aim of this communication is the reinforcement and justification of one's own opinion. Interaction with others who think alike strengthens the participants' idea of the surrounding world as well as threats and possibilities therein. At the same time, this communication raises those emotions which, according to Castells, form the basis for political mobilisation: anger, fear, and hope. Simply being concerned makes people avoid risk-taking, but when that concern grows into fear, it lowers the threshold to try something new. The blogs kept by the True Finns' MP candidates produced a picture of a real and imminent threat to Finland and the well-being of the Finnish people. Anger was directed towards the domestic élites, international institutions, and immigrants. An energising emotion, anger drives a person to look for alternatives and new ways to improve one's own position. Hope is an emotion which looks towards the future, and one which enables a person to see alternatives and grab them instead of giving up. True Finn bloggers sought to convince their audience that Finland's political course could be changed, if only they voted for the True Finns. The response to their blogs shows that the audience heeded the call.

When assessing the influence of blogging and social media, it must be remembered that their efficacy as means of political mobilisation is very dependent on the surrounding circumstances. The increasing power of social media does not necessarily entail that there would be quite as radical a change in support for any party in every future election. What it does mean, however, is that social media carries the potential for radical change as long as the circumstances are right. The global financial crisis, the campaign funding scandal, the structural change of Finnish industry, and the debate on immigration all added to the air of gloom in which a significant part of the citizenry was ready to embrace any changes the True Finns set out to offer. The real magic of blogs and social media lies, however, in that they present a potent means to get hold of large crowds quickly and effectively. Castells singles out Barack Obama's win in the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primaries as an example of how to mobilise thousands of people through social media to back a relatively unknown candidate. Favourable social circumstances combined with skilfully managed web campaigning provided Obama with a chance to beat the favourite Hillary Clinton (*Castells, 2009*).

“Liquid modernity”, a term coined by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, is a good way to understand the increasing influence of social media. According to Bauman’s celebrated thesis, the passage of Western societies from “solid” to “liquid” modernity has created a new and unprecedented setting for individual life pursuits, confronting individuals with a series of challenges never before encountered. Social forms and institutions no longer have enough time to solidify and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life plans, so individuals have to find other ways to organise their lives. They no longer accept “truths” from the institutions of power as readily as before. Among others, the Church, schools, and even medical institutions have found that people are prepared to question the tenets put before them. Scepticism towards politicians has also increased, and the numbers of hardcore supporters of political parties have shrunk. Some academics have observed a shift from party democracy to “audience democracy”, where citizens do not as readily choose a political party on account of their jobs or occupations, but prior to an election, pick one with the platform most suited to them. The increase in the number of transient voters has been seen as an important reason for the rise of the populist parties in places such as Sweden. In Finland, it is easy to see how the traditional big parties have been losing their grip from their former class-based pools of supporters. The combined support of the NCP, the Centre Party, and the SDP was, in 2011, lower than it had ever been since Finland’s independence. The other side to questioning the “truths” offered by traditional institutions, however, is that people seek support and validation for their thoughts and attitudes from other people like them. When the party people have voted for in one election after another fails to deliver satisfactory answers to their problems, they seek better ones from like-minded fellows on the Internet. The blogs kept by the True Finns offer an insight into how this kind of peer support in political communication works.

A “Liquidly Modern” Election

This article has been written to examine the True Finns’ electoral success from the viewpoint of political communication. I have answered the question whether or not the rise of the True Finns can be understood in these terms. How might the way the media handled the True Finns explain their increased support, and could their candidates’ blogs, with their massive response, offer a fruitful insight into the political mobilisation of their supporters which took place in 2010 – 2011?

First of all, one must concede that the apparent support shown for the True Finns in the parliamentary election of spring 2011 is likely to produce a distorted picture of the development of ideological tendencies in Finnish society. Several sources suggest that there had, for quite some time, been a remarkable number of people in Finland with populist sympathies. Researchers had for years paid attention to the incompatibility of the voters’ wishes and inclinations with the relative support or ideology of existing political parties. A significant number of voters have gone to the polls either simply out of a sense of duty, or force of habit, to vote for the “wrong” party, or not gone at all. An important factor behind the True Finns’ rapid rise was the existence of a notable core of supporters of populist ideology. Therefore, these people did not have to change their opinions; the crucial thing was the emergence of a viable political alternative for them. Equally important was the True Finns’ success in mobilising these people, the creation of a unifying identity, and their encouragement that these people actually cast a vote. If we should afterwards examine Finland’s political history from the fall of the SMP in the early 1990’s to the rise of the True Finns in the late 2000’s, we might well end up finding that period as exceptional in the absence of a strong populist party. If this were the case, then the entry of a strong or middleweight populist party into parliament must only have been a matter of time. All it took was the existence of a sufficiently credible political movement and a backdrop of propitious circumstances. Such circumstances included, among other factors, the disappointment with politicians and the established parties following the campaign funding scandal, the economic crisis with its adherent rescue schemes for Greece and Portugal, and the debate on immigration that flared up in the 2000’s.

If the values and attitudes of the True Finns have been such that they have enjoyed popular support for quite some time, why then

was the party not able to mobilise its potential supporters earlier? One reason is that voting for a small party is always a big step. The voters assume that their vote counts for less when their candidate is unlikely to be elected, for which reason the step to casting a vote becomes higher. Then again, the populist ideology of the True Finns involves suspicion towards organisations. Characteristic of Western-style populism is the strong position of a leader: The leader is a symbol to the party, more so than its organisation. However, no leader is born overnight. Veikko Vennamo led the Small Peasants' Party of Finland and its successor the Finnish Rural Party for over a decade before its breakthrough in the 1970 election. Timo Soini became chairman of the True Finns in 1997. The party attracted only very scant support until 2007, when it won 4 per cent of the vote and 5 seats. The voters of a populist party do not support it so much as an organisation as they support its leader, which in turn necessitates that the leader develop a personal legitimacy to power. This, it seems, can take up to ten years. However, the strengthening of Timo Soini's position does not quite explain the meteoric rise in support for the True Finns prior to the 2011 election.

After the collapse of the Rural Party, the Finnish supporters of populism voted for other parties or failed to vote altogether. However, certain recent circumstances contributed to the True Finns achieving integrity in the eyes of potential supporters. Firstly, the abatement and the end of the Cold War saw the major parties in Finland form a version of ideological consensus which excluded the supporters of a populist ideology. A primary element in consensus was the integration of Finland into the global economy and the adjustment of Finnish industry to the challenges of international competition. Amidst this broad political agreement, any party from the left to the right could fit into the same government, which created the impression that voting in an election was meaningless.

At the end of the 2000's, the right of mainstream political parties to power began to diminish. The campaign funding scandal that emerged in 2008 created a strong impression of a corrupt political élite. The controversy over work-related immigration began to make its mark at about the same time. Even so, the most important issues were monetary: the global financial crisis combined with the need to bail out Greece and Portugal, as well as the apparent incapacity of the European Union at solving such problems. These social, economic

and political developments paved the way for political mobilisation through political communication, resulting in a near landslide result for the True Finns. The catalyst for this political mobilisation was the development of a consciousness and collective identity among voters who warmed to a conservative-nationalist ideology. The potential supporters of the True Finns came to understand that the populist ideology of this party corresponded to their values better than that of any other party, and that the True Finns' outlook on reality was both credible and justified.

News coverage of the aid packages for Greece and Portugal suggests that the Finnish media – apparently unwittingly – helped mobilise the supporters of populist ideology to vote for the True Finns. Prior to the elections, the global economic crisis and the EU's struggle with Greece and Portugal made by far the weightiest headline news. News of the European Union created an impression of the True Finns as a real and clear option to the EU policy of all the other parties. This set-up was based on the fact that the True Finns were the only party to have fairly consistently opposed the European Union for as long as Finland had been its member. News, columns, and editorials could naturally also include criticism of the the True Finns and their chairman Timo Soini. Crucially, however, Soini got at least as much visibility as the leaders of the other big parties (the NCP, the SDP, the Centre Party), while those of the smaller movements were almost entirely ignored. This visibility gave the thoughts of Soini and his party a certain integrity. Over and over again, the image of Timo Soini and the True Finns as relentless opponents of the EU was repeated and reinforced.

The True Finns' parliamentary candidates made much use of blogs and social media in their campaigns, and also got more responses than similar efforts from other MP candidates. Blogging and social media became an effective means of bypassing the critical mass media and addressing potential supporters directly. The blogs were employed to create an image of a united group whose members shared the same ideals. These included nationalism, hostility to immigration, social conservatism, and the veneration of ordinary folk. Group identity was constructed by presenting other agents – politicians and journalists – as unwilling to let the “truth” uttered by the True Finns become public. To an extent, the True Finns appeared as a group per-

secuted by the élites, but finally, about to make its voice heard.

Secondly, the blogs targeted and stirred just the right emotions needed to turn the election into a protest vote and a True Finn triumph. They incited anger against national élites and international institutions, especially the European Union. They inspired fear by dwelling on uncontrolled immigration, the disappearance of Finnish culture, and the ill effects of the global financial crisis and globalisation on Finland. Simultaneously, they sought to raise hope among potential supporters by inspiring confidence in the True Finns' forthcoming victory. The blogs continuously referred to opinion polls which showed a marked rise in the popularity of the True Finns. At the same time, they postulated that "opinion polls do not vote" and urged citizens to exercise their right to do so on election day. The blogs often carried news of successful campaign events to large audiences. They were eager to refer to the media which witnessed these events, as though to gain credibility and outside recognition through authenticated interest and support of the party and its populist ideology.

The juxtaposition in mainstream media of the True Finns on the one hand and the National Coalition Party, the Social Democrats, and the Centre Party on the other, combined with favourable political communication through social media, resulted in a crucial political mobilisation which helped the True Finns to increase their symbolic social power prior to the 2011 parliamentary election. The election itself transformed this symbolic power into concrete political power. An aura of interaction prevails between symbolic and political power: the electoral achievement of the True Finns added to the symbolic power exerted by the party by giving it increased legitimacy in assessing and defining reality. This change in the distribution of symbolic power, incarnated in the True Finns' success, has fundamentally changed the dynamics of Finnish domestic politics. Illustrative of the magnitude of this change, among other things, is that the True Finns have sought to monopolise the term "Finnish people", as their adoption of the new official English translation of the party name – "the Finns" – testifies. This is a rather bold move, keeping in mind that, as the Turku-based professor Matti Wiberg (2011) remarked, 87.2 per cent of Finns of voting age did not vote for the True Finns. In any case, the fundamentals of symbolic power have been shaken to the extent that it has forced the other parties on the defensive

and to think about how to reply to the challenge of the True Finns. The strength of the True Finns lies not only in winning 19.1 per cent of the vote, but equally in the state of disarray the other parties now find themselves in. The current composition of the government proves that the other parties are actually closer to each other than the True Finns, and that Finland has now seen the emergence of the two political blocs outlined by Ville Perna: the True Finns versus the others. From this viewpoint, the amount of symbolic power attained by the True Finns may be considered surprising and can be explained only by insufficient cooperation between other parties, for example, before an election. If they consider the True Finns a menace, political discussion during the recent parliamentary election does indeed present the other parties with two clear messages. Firstly, they must cooperate better and dare to accept the challenge issued by the True Finns. Secondly, they too must learn those emotion-inducing means of political argumentation and mobilisation which they will need to win back their lost supporters.



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WHAT IS POPULISM?

Definition of the Term

Populism is not a mainstream “ism” like conservatism, liberalism, or socialism. It is an awkward term, too, because it is used in a variety of ways – to label an ideology, a general disposition, or a means – and usually in a manner which makes those to whom the tag is applied frown at the appellation.

Then again, populism is usually thought to embody certain phenomena and psychological constructs. These seldom lead to the creation of any ideology or produce planned regular action, but do exist as patterns of reaction. Indeed, there is common consent on certain characteristics of populism. When disagreement occurs, it is mostly over where to recognise – or fail to recognise – such characteristics, and whether there is any question of a universal pattern of behaviour or merely temporary political means.

Common features may be seen to include:

- A clear polarisation between “us” and “them”
- Nationalism or xenophobia of some other kind
- Perceived enemies in society include, among others, extreme left-ists and trade union magnates, but also exploitative capitalists. Intellectuals are enemies as well
- Drawing on phobias at the grass-roots level and sensationalising injustice
- Strong time variance and often by nature a “one-issue movement”. The aims and the propaganda of a populist vary constantly
- Provides very simple answers to complex problems
- Often confined to one charismatic leader and his/her authority over followers

Distorting the image further is the fact that populists are often bundled together under the label “Extreme Right”, itself a term now largely devoid of any analytical meaning.

	POPULISM	CONSERVATIVES
Archetypal supporter	Lower class, lower middle class	Middle class, upper class
Relationship with the system	Against institutions One-issue movement, particularism Leader-centred	Conservation of society Emphasis on the whole The leader and the machinery
Way of making politics	Demagogic rhetoric	Requirement of correctness
Propaganda	Directed also to the Left	Traditional supporters
Economic policy	Criticism of capitalism	Market economy
Religion	Indifferent	Safeguarding
Morals	Marriage for demographic reasons	Marriage for family morals
Education	“Man of the Street”, common sense	Educated, sophisticated
Integration	Anti-EU	Pro-EU
The United States	Threat	Ally

Table: Aspects separating right-wing populism and conservatism



POPULIST MOVEMENTS IN FINLAND BEFORE THE TRUE FINNS

The history of Finnish political culture is largely élite-driven. This tradition has been conspicuously “missionary” in nature due to the obsession with educating and civilising the people. Common folk needed to be indoctrinated into the right religion, then through national awakening, into middle-class morality and the labour movement. In all this, populism found little fertile ground.

The Fennomans Movement as Populism?

The starting point to the Fennomans movement, as devised by J.W. Snellman and Y.S. Yrjö-Koskinen, can be seen as largely populist. After all, the Fennomans yearned to defend the Finnish common people. The movement, as it perceived itself, was to counter the old élite, the “High & Mighty”; the confrontation being all the more apparent when combined with a nationalistic viewpoint. Yet the Fennomans

movement and, later, the Old Finnish movement, sit uneasily with the concept of populism at its purest. Even when appealing to the masses, the Fennoman movement remained ultimately an élitist one.

The Agrarian League and Agrarian Populism

One of the movements which the supporters of the Old Finns and the National Coalition Party were eager to label populist by nature was the Agrarian League, founded in 1908. To its critics, it represented a combination of political demagoguery and a lack of education.

The Agrarian League had humble origins: it appealed to the scrupulous morality of the Finnish yeoman, pursued his rights, and made a clear distinction between the establishment and ordinary folk. This political party distanced itself from the old Fennoman movement in that the former shunned all forms of meritocracy. The infusion of members of the élite was, in fact, considered dangerous. In any case, the Agrarian League became such an enduring and widespread movement – virtually a permanent government party – that it is troublesome to regard it as populist. In order to make genuinely populist politics, politicians would have to detach themselves from the Agrarian League, just as the so-called “famine” parties of the 1920s and 1930s did, and later, the Rural Party leader Veikko Vennamo followed suit in the 1950s.

The Famine Parties – One-Issue Local Movements

Rather than in the Agrarian League, the true antecedents of today’s left-wing populism might be found among these famine parties. They emerged as early as 1928 as a reaction to the economic depression sparked by the failure of crops and centred around the regions of Middle and Northern Bothnia. The famine parties also took a stand against the Agrarian League for “forgetting” the plight of small farmers. Two parties, the Smallholders’ Party of Finland and the People’s Party, made it to Parliament, and at their height, held five seats altogether.

The Lapua Movement, IKL, and Right-Wing Populism

Since right-wing populism is often thought synonymous with extreme rightism, it is logical to ask whether or not the most popular movements classified as “extreme right” could be assessed from this point of view. These movements include the Lapua Movement and the Patriotic People’s Movement (IKL), active from 1933 to 1945. The Lapua Movement was, by birth, a genuine one-issue movement, which never strived for the creation of a permanent political platform or organisation. It lost its striking power when that solitary issue – the struggle against communism – was brought to an end. Like so many populist movements, the Lapua Movement had its roots in the countryside.

The Lapua Movement can, in many ways, be considered a populist phenomenon. The IKL was different: it was never a one-issue movement. If the IKL could be dubbed fascist, it must have been a “diet” version of its peers all across Europe.

Vennamo and the SMP

The brainchild of Mr. Veikko Vennamo, the Small Peasants Party of Finland (later SMP), was unashamedly a populist addition to the political spectrum. This much the party itself would recognise and concede. However, its status was constantly in flux: sometimes it would be small, then its support would rise dramatically; it would disband and re-emerge; it would shoot down everything said by the opposition, and then it would join the government. Its history in the 1980s appears to bear testimony to the old adage that a populist party cannot sustain government responsibility.

Also, the political call that the SMP answered did change with the years. In the 1960s, there was a slow waning of agriculture, the depopulation of the countryside, and the inevitable urbanisation, much the same as in the 1980s. In the later period, there was a counter-reaction to the overt politicisation of the 1970s, and a rekindling of that old hatred against the “high and mighty” of society. The “Vennamohood” always combined social radicalism, conservative values, and nationalism.

Although populists had, before they knew it, a fully laden table before them, they could not take advantage of it. In 1995, the SMP deliberately disbanded, and no one in their right minds could predict a rosy future for their successors, the True Finns.



The True Finns

The future of the new True Finns party in the 1990s looked even less rosy than that of the SMP in its death throes. The new party seemed patently unable to exploit the economic plight of the state, let alone the question of immigrants and refugees which emerged at the time. Even when it boiled down to resisting Finland's entry to the EU, scarcely anybody was interested in the opinions of the True Finns: their support languished between one and two percentage points at that time.

The real ascendancy of the True Finns started only in the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century. Even their chairman Timo Soini needed several attempts before he finally became an MP. In his autobiography "Maisterisjätkä" (The Farm Boy with a Master's Degree), published in 2007, Soini found a major triumph in an election where support for the True Finns rose above 3 per cent, and dreamt of a time when they would have a backing of 10 per cent. The current situation

– following the “Big Bang” (Finnish: “jytky”) of 19 per cent support in the general election and an opinion poll showing them to be the biggest party in Finland – is well known to everyone. In Finland, that is.

Soini wrote his thesis paper on populism, and for his own part, has openly conceded to being one of that persuasion. His party simultaneously built on two ideas: the Vennamo tradition on one side, and being the herald of a new society on the other. It combined that with typically populist features: a strong man at the helm, centre-leftist economic and social policies, conservative values, and nostalgia. The latter has even led to a situation where, paradoxically, the “Vennamohood” which was once built against the semi-dictator President Kekkonen (1956 – 1981), is now the basis on which many years after a strong leader like the former president.

The Electoral Platform of 2009: against the New World Order

In the True Finns’ European election platform, euroscepticism is defined as both a critical and negative attitude towards the EU, but not negative against Europe: “Yes to Europe – No to the EU”. Here, the perceived threat is indeed the federal development of the EU.

No references to immigration policy in their platform are justified with nationalistic arguments. The subtitle “when in Rome...” underlines that immigration policy must be “nationally responsible”, and newcomers need to have an active desire to find employment.

The Nordic welfare state, now believed to be in jeopardy, is portrayed as the most valuable accomplishment. Whereas many populist parties have at least a neoliberal phase in their background, there is no support for that line of thinking in the True Finns’ electoral platforms. In his study *A Thorn in the Side of European Elites: The New Euroscepticism* (2011) Florian Hartleb divides the eurosceptics into populists and extremists. As hard liners or extremists, Hartleb classifies, amongst others, the Jobbik in Hungary, the NPD in Germany, the LPR (Union of Polish Families) in Poland and the National Party in Great Britain. He does not find Timo Soini indicating racist or radical features, but classifies him in the same group with Geert Wilders in Holland and Heinz-Christian Strache in Austria. The True Finns are positioned, on the Hartleb scale, in the class of “soft” eurocritics and populists

The Recipe of the Big Bang: The General Election Platform 2011

The True Finns naturally defined their political character in the 2011 general election. They are a “nationalistic and Christian-social party”, which neither believes in the “right-wing power of money” nor the “left-wing power of organisation”. The official platform bluntly admits to the populist character of the movement, but offers a somewhat different meaning for the term:

The True Finns support a populist view on democracy, i.e. a view based on popularity, instead of an elitist, or in other words, bureaucratic view. According to the populist view, citizens wish to choose as their representatives men and women sharing the same ideas or opinions and who can manage to unite the people under the pressure of different interest groups with different ambitions.

Regarding economic and social policy, their platform is mostly centre-left and reveals an extremely positive attitude towards the Nordic welfare state model. Conservative values are reflected in their refusal to permit same-sex marriages or give adoption rights to couples of the same gender.

Marginal Groups of the Extreme Right and Right-Wing Populism

In addition to the True Finns, there have been a number of other groups using the same kind of rhetoric over the past 20 years. The only difference is that they have been much more outspoken in their approach. Those groups have, however, remained marginal. The greatest difference between them and the True Finns – or any other populist mainstream – has been the multiple overstatement and exaggeration of themes.



Conclusions: Continuum and Uniqueness

If one is to compare the True Finns today to earlier populist phenomena in the political history of Finland, they are by far the most successful populist movement (unless one measures influence by entering into government – which was done by SMP in the 1980s – instead of popular support). Other movements have been more marginalised and have not come close to the figures of “jytky”.

The best explanation behind the current success of right-wing populism is changes in society. It is much easier to change party affiliation nowadays – in large part due to a blurred understanding of party policies, especially amongst the younger generation. In 2011, some opinion polls implied that many respondents could not position the Finnish political parties on a left/right axis. Many had erroneous ideas of their favoured party’s participation in the government. In the eyes of the public, parties have become more and more similar and an ad hoc issue or general dissatisfaction can strongly influence voting behaviour. In Germany this increase in fluctuation has also been labelled “tantrum democracy”. The phenomenon is pan-European.

The True Finns have declared themselves as successors to the SMP line, and the old “Vennamohood” features can be found in them.

Then again, if some characteristics of the IKL are defined as populist rather than conservative or fascist, some similar traits can be found: a strong patriotism, faith in national defence, criticism of high finance and capitalism. And if politically “genuine Finnishness” against the Swedish language is to be found anywhere in Finland, it would most likely be amongst the True Finns.

Nevertheless, there is no intention to make an analogy between the True Finns and earlier populists – not to mention the IKL. Instead, the idea is to point out that the “political hunting grounds” of the IKL were in similar places to the True Finns – and also that of the National Coalition Party for a period of a few years at around the same time.

What it comes to populism, variation between countries is, in this respect, bigger than with other ideologies. The political cultures of Southern or Eastern Europe are completely different from that of the Nordic countries, and even in the policies of the True Finns and the Norwegian Progress Party, it is more the differences than the similarities that stick out. In the True Finns there are centre-left elements and conservative values; on the contrary, neoliberal features and a market economy spirit are stressed in the Progress Party. The Progress Party in Norway and the Danish People’s Party believe in NATO membership but the True Finns reject it. Differences from other European populist parties may be even greater. It would border on the ridiculous to expect Timo Soini to give out such declarations as Geert Wilders from the Dutch Freedom Party, referring to Islam as the fascism and the Koran as the Mein Kampf of our time.

In Finland, there is actually a long tradition of “embracing to death” groups that are seen as radical with positions in government in order to tame them with real political responsibility. One simply has to remember what happened after the general election in spring 2011: different coalitions attempted to coax the True Finns to join them. First they were encouraged to link hands with the National Coalition Party and SDP, and then to be part of a centre-right government. Choosing to stay out was more due to their own decision than to that of others. Only the Greens have completely refused to share government responsibility with the True Finns. The future can still produce a number of different coalitions, and the political tradition sets a lot less obstacles for such options in Finland than in many other countries.