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**CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES  
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# **VOTING FAR AWAY**

**Expats Exercising Political Rights Abroad**

**END REPORT/ JULY 2011**



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## 1) Introduction

There are an estimated 600,000 Finns living abroad. We know surprisingly little of their voting behaviour even though statistical data is available. In total, 4,292,436 Finns had the right to vote in the parliamentary election in 2007; of these were 208,887 expatriates. The expat voting turnout was low as usual, 8.6 per cent. Apart from that, little is analysed. What drives expats to vote? Tradition, duty? Genuine willingness to influence in the political life of the fatherland? Is there always a strong correlation between time spent away and non-voting? How big an issue is physical distance? Is alienation shown through non-participation? Which would be ways to activate expat voters to participate? Is national election in the old homeland less interesting than, say, local election in the country of residence? Which lessons could we learn concerning the European election? Are the expats happily assimilated or still identifying themselves clearly as Finnish – or do they end up feeling in-between?

The study did not intend to cover all these questions but rather to shed light to a notable democratic deficit. The ambition is to detect a few issues that touch the hearts of these voters far away and motivate them to take part despite the distance. In short, the purpose of the study was to examine expat Finns' voting behaviour through case studies in major expat areas, to discover factors behind political participation abroad; obstacles and driving forces, ways to activate voters and fight "expat inertia"; to identify means to activate and engage expatriates politically and to identify networks and opinion leaders among expats affecting voting activism.

In April 2011, 227 844 expatriates had the right to vote in Finnish parliamentary election. This time around, voting turnout was higher than last time, reaching over 10 %. As no technical innovations to enable distance voting have been introduced between the elections, this change in activity level was all the more welcome.

## 2) Background

In Finland, voting is not mandatory. The margins between the three biggest parties have generally been small. The exception came in the form of True Finns in the 2011 general election, when the populist party broke all records both in terms of winning percentage (+15 percentage points) and number of seats gained (39).

In the light of small margins it is surprising that parties do not seem to take the expatriate votes too seriously. Take the example of 2007 general election, when Kokoomus gained big (+3,7 percentage points) and 10 seats, and the then leading government party, Centre, lost (-1,7 percentage points) but turned out biggest with the tightest possible margin, one seat, thus

keeping its position as the prime minister's party. The expat votes could have made the difference – also in other elections, and especially for smaller parties fighting for existence.

According to the Election Law 18§ the expatriate citizen votes in the district where his residence is according to the population register. If the citizen residing abroad does not have a domicile in Finland on the 51<sup>st</sup> day before the Election Day, and the municipality where the citizen currently resides in is not located within borders of Finland, the City of Helsinki will be appointed as election district. (Source: FEP website)

In the 2011 general election there were 241 different advance voting venues in 91 states. In 2007, there were 233 venues for advance voting (Source: Ministry for Justice). However, due to reducing of embassies and cut-downs also in consular services many expat Finns are, understandably so, worried about their voting possibilities in the future – unless mail voting is allowed. (Source: Suomen Kuvalehti)

## i. Figures

The figures collected by population register centre are not accurate as such; not all citizens make an official registration upon moving abroad. That is why one needs to work with estimates and not official data alone.

**Figure 1. Statistics over Finnish citizens with voting rights residing in the member states of the European Union**

State	Men	Women	Total
040 Austria	238	581	819
056 Belgium	523	934	1457
100 Bulgaria	13	15	28
196 Cyprus	52	169	221
203 Czech Rep.	52	42	94
208 Denmark	756	1651	2407
233 Estonia	760	195	955
250 France	840	1803	2643
276 Germany	3237	7942	11179
300 Greece	194	627	821
348 Hungary	82	74	156
372 Ireland	210	478	688
380 Italy	490	1652	2142
428 Latvia	44	14	58
440 Lithuania	28	9	37
442 Luxembourg	221	309	530

470 Malta	16	24	40
528 Netherland	431	1100	1531
616 Poland	81	38	119
620 Portugal	119	148	267
642 Romania	9	6	15
703 Slovakia	10	4	14
705 Slovenia	1	15	16
724 Spain	2124	2340	4464
752 Sweden	37152	47882	85034
826 Great Britain	2230	5940	8170
Total	49913	73992	123905

In the 2007 general election the voting turnout was 65%. Low turnout abroad brought down the average percentage as within the borders of Finland, voting turnout was 67,9 %. Respective figures from 2011 were 67,4 % and 70 % (geographical Finland alone). The True Finns seem to have attracted to the polls especially those who often ignore their voting right.

**Figure 2. Voting activity in the general elections**

Voting activity in the general elections from 1975 to 2011, %		
Year	Finnish citizens voting in Finland. %	Finnish citizens voting abroad, %
1975	79,7	7,1
1979	81,2	6,7
1983	81,0	6,7
1987	76,4	5,8
1991	72,1	5,6
1995	71,9	6,1
1999	68,3	6,5
2003	69,7	8,8
2007	67,9	8,6
2011	70,4	10,7

From the expatriate point of view, the voting turnout in 2011 election was promising. There were over 35 000 votes cast in comparison with the 27 000 from 2007; most votes were cast in Sweden, Spain and Germany. In Sweden, more than 9000 expat Finns voted, which is 3000 more than in the last election.

## **ii) Stands of the Finnish Expatriate Parliament**

The Finnish Expatriate Parliament is a forum for all expatriate Finns. It receives financial support from the state. The FEP is independent of party politics and represents all expatriate issues in Finland and is not bound to election periods.

Upon its grounding session in 1997, the Expatriate Parliament adopted a resolution in which the Finnish government is urged to examine the possibility to establish a separate voting district for expatriate Finns. The suggestion did not gain stamina, and in the first statutory session in 1998 a resolution was adopted where the idea of an expat voting district was given up. Instead, the resolution aimed at better information on election candidates for the expatriates. Similar initiatives have been made since.

The initiative of concentrating expatriate votes into one district has had the noble purpose of increasing both voting activity and political interest in the affairs concerning expatriate Finns. However, the low turnout amongst expats has not raised political will to establish a separate district. Besides, since almost half of Finnish citizens officially residing abroad live in Sweden, the expat district would thus become dominated by Finns in Sweden. It is also very unlikely that other election districts would happily grant seats from their respective quotas to a new district. (Source: FEP website) The number of seats for expats would be, thanks to proportionality, notably high: 10 in total out of 200. That is as many as now is being elected to Parliament from the district of Central Finland or Northern Savolax (Source: Suomen Kuvalehti).

Another initiative has been that all expatriates should be moved to one existing election district, that of Helsinki due to its status as the main political arena. Also all practical issues concerning pension, taxation and conscription are managed in Helsinki. In 2007 election already 19 % of expatriate Finns belonged to the Helsinki election district. If all expat voters were moved to this district, it would gain 162 000 new voters on top of the currently existing 481 000. The change would be so notable that it is unlikely not to find political support.

The Ministry for Justice is also against the proposal. The whole election system is undergoing a reform; one proposal prepared on the basis of multi-party cooperation was already rejected. A new reform plan is expected to be presented under the new government.

One of the main targets of the FEP has, however, been the adoption of mail voting for expatriate Finns. Several resolutions from 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2007 have urged the governments to act

accordingly. The government's expatriate programme increasing voting activity is one of the central points, and allowing mail voting is an essential part of this purpose.

There are several examples around the world where mail voting is a truly functioning option. Out of all EU countries only Finland, Denmark and France do not allow mail voting. The Ministry for Justice has on the basis of FEP's proposal drafted a mail voting model with Sweden as an example. The FEP has the following arguments to support its cause:

- voting abroad is often very difficult in practice
- long journeys are also a remarkable cost
- mail voting is already in use in several countries
- mail voting would increase expatriate Finns' political activity

The resolution aims at changing the Finnish Election Law so that it enables voting by mail abroad.

(Source: FEP website)

### **iii) Expat votes decisive?**

Professor Tuomo Martikainen and researcher Hanna Wass wrote as early as 2003 that the expatriate votes could be decisive in the general election. The then new possibility for Finns to obtain double citizenship – or rather, to retain the once lost Finnish citizenship – would increase the number of voters abroad. The initiative was successfully driven by the Expatriate Parliament.

According to Martikainen and Wass, the number of voters abroad (over 200 000) is notably bigger than e.g. the number of people working in agriculture and almost as big as the number of people with higher university education. Expatriate Finns have been almost completely passive in elections; between 1983 and 1999, the voting turnout abroad has been in average 6,2 %. It is indeed a resource that parties do not mobilize at all; given that in the 1999 election the difference between the two biggest parties, Social democrats and the Centre, was only 12 000 votes. Thus the expat votes could really make a difference in the power relations of the political parties.

Many of the voting obstacles are technical, as Martikainen and Wass point out. The Population Register has only a limited number of addresses for citizens abroad where the information of voting right can be sent. Mail or internet voting have been suggested, but it takes a change in legislation. Both suggestions share the problem with the principle of voters' right to express his or her will in front of an authority. According to Martikainen and Wass, the main reason for expats not to vote is however the lack of significant issues – significant to expats, as the double taxation of pensions.

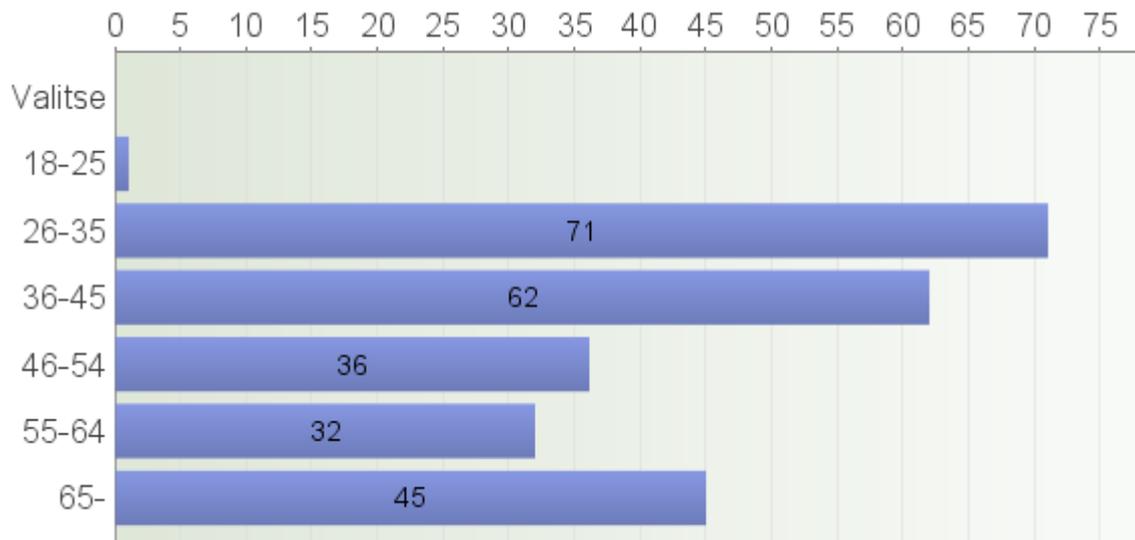
Martikainen and Wass have in their research found out that high education and high level of income relate to higher voting turnout. Hence it is more likely that the new expatriate Finns, now leaving Finland for highly-paid international jobs, would also vote more actively than the generations before. But it also requires that the parties seize the opportunity to attract these voters and understand their needs. (Source: Helsingin Sanomat 5.3.2003)

### 3) Results of the survey

#### EXPAT FINNS' VOTING BEHAVIOUR

##### 1. Age groups

Number of replies: 247

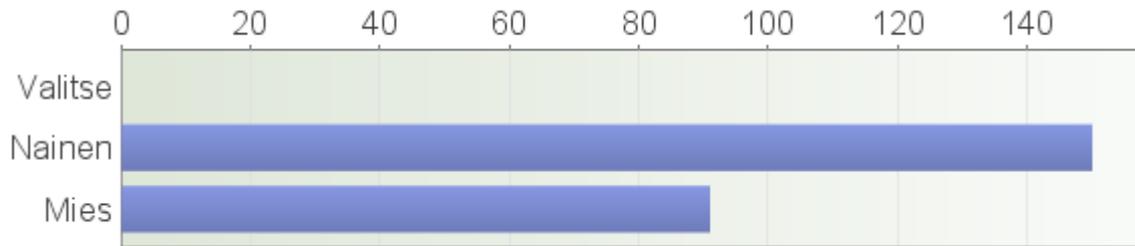


##### 2. Gender

Number of replies: 241

Woman = Nainen

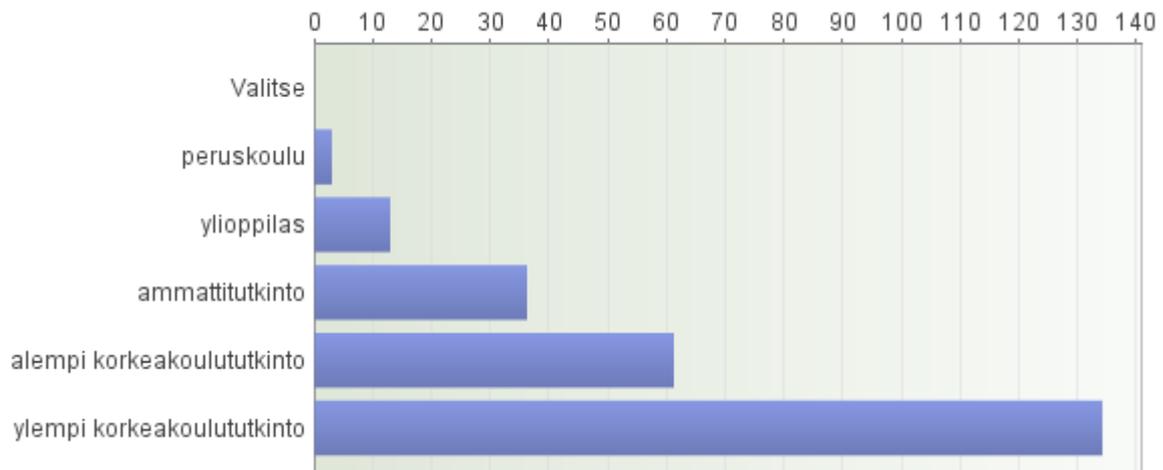
Man = Mies



### 3. Education level (according to highest)

Number of replies: 247

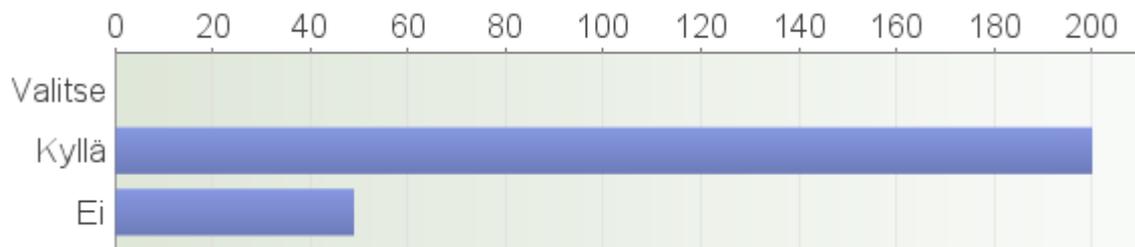
- Elementary level
- Baccalaureat/Abitur/A-level
- Professional diploma
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree



### 4. Have you voted in the Finnish general, municipal, European or presidential election abroad?

Number of replies: 249

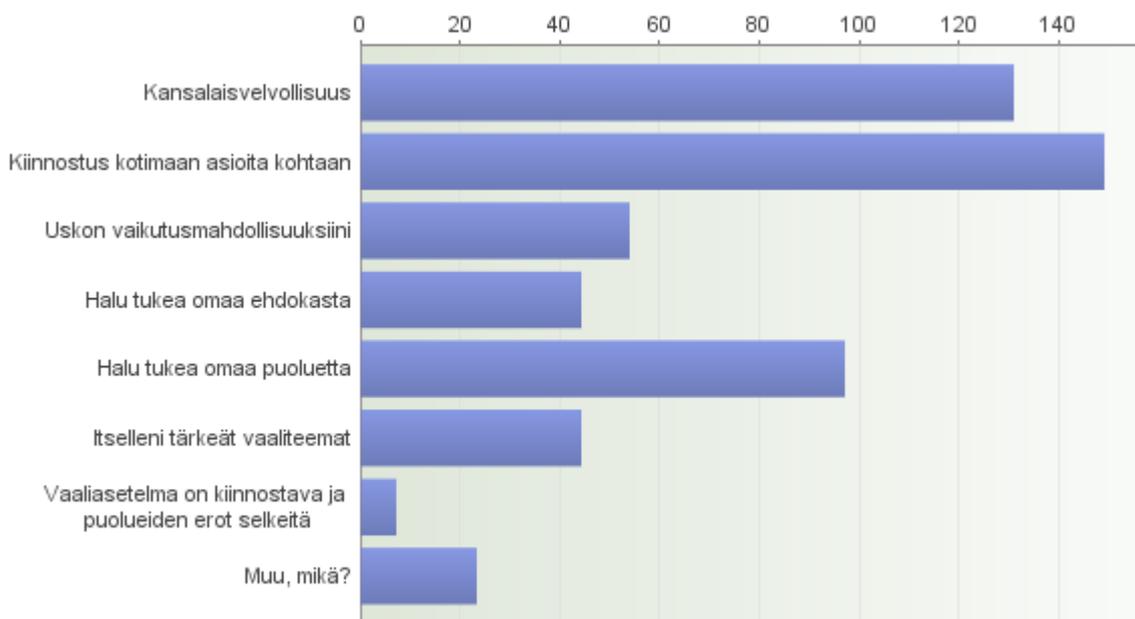
- Kyllä= yes
- Ei= no



**5. What made you vote? Several options possible.**

Number of replies: 201

- Citizens' duty
- Interest in native country's affairs
- I believe in making a difference
- Willingness to support one's own candidate
- Important election issues for me
- The setting is interesting and the differences between parties are clear
- Other, what?



**Open replies: Other, what?**

The most common reply: voting is experienced as a right rather than a duty (3/23)

"Citizen's right, not a duty"

Other comments:

"Belief in democracy"

"Mother taught me, that you have to vote or you lose the right to complain"

"In a global world, a vote cast in Finland also affects my life abroad"

"Potential return to native country some time in a future may be the clearest motive"

## 6. What made you refrain from voting? Several options possible.

Number of replies: 49

Finland's affairs are distant

Challenging journey to the voting venue

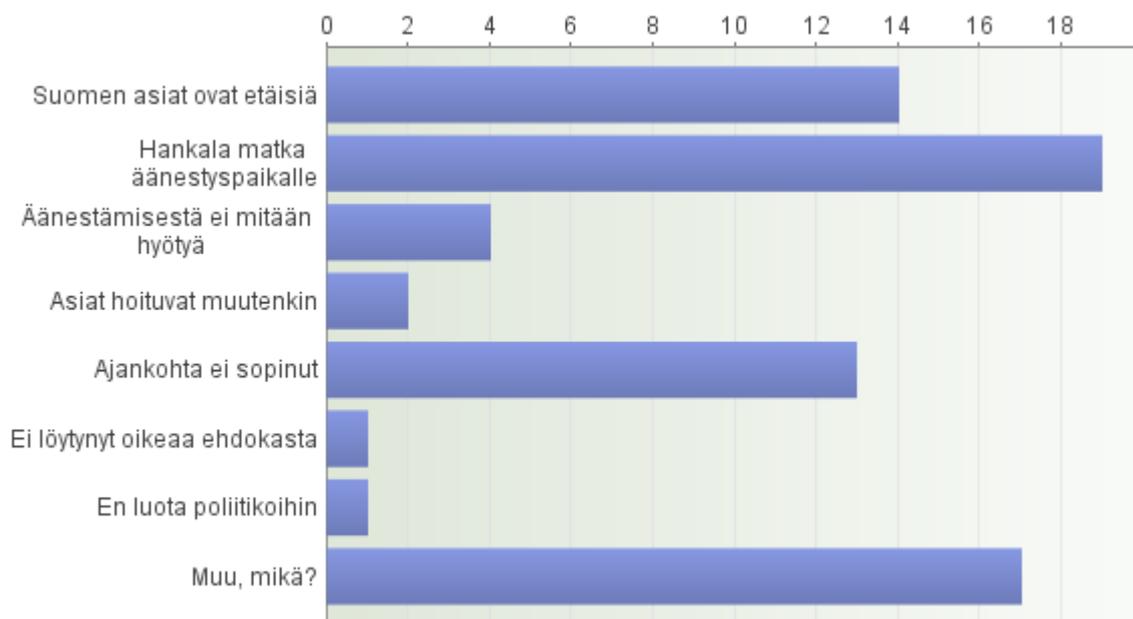
No good in voting

Issues are being taken care of even without voting

Wrong timing

I do not trust the politicians

Other, what?



### Open replies: Other, what?

Most common reply: there has not been elections as yet to participate in (7/17).

"There has not been any election in Finland while I've lived abroad"

Other comments:

"I do not know any candidates and I do not have relevant information of Finnish politics"

"If voting is possible only during the working week, I would have to take a day off without pay just to vote"

"I will not return to Finland so I do not think I have the moral right to influence Finnish affairs"

"It feels wrong to vote in issues involving others than myself!"

## **i) Summary of open replies**

### **7. What kind of expatriate themes you would wish the parties and the candidates in general election to bring forward? And 8. Other potential comments**

Replies 179/ themes and 77/ other potential comments

*Points are united due to grouping of and similarities in replies.*

#### **REPLIES DIVIDED INTO GROUPS (excluding the group miscellaneous)**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Mentions</b>
Pension issues and social security, elderly care	55
Tax issues	41
Internationality of Finland, EU, NATO	40
"Does not matter": No need for a specific expat agenda	35
Technical issues regarding voting, voting by mail	24
Immigration, tolerance, the "mental state" of Finland	23
Childrens' education and education of the Finnish language, Suomi-schools	22
Return to Finland, status of spouse	20
Passport and citizenship issues, consular services	12
Economy and employment	11
Internal market, mobility	7

**Observation:** The issues of taxation and social security were the theme that gained most open replies. But second came the question of Finland's international status globally, within the EU and in relation to NATO, the openness of the country towards the outside world. There were replies related to these almost as many as those regarding taxation, a perpetual point in any expat agenda.

From the expat angle the international status of Finland, together with its attitude towards internationalism, seem especially important. Also tolerance and attitude vis-à-vis immigrants collected mentions. Many expats realize the allegory between their own status abroad and that of immigrants in their native country, and expressed worry about potentially strengthening signs of xenophobia.

Out of separate issues mentioned the support for Finnish language and education, mail voting and environmental policy gathered most mentions.

### **Some examples of open replies by category:**

#### **PENSION ISSUES AND SOCIAL SECURITY, ELDERLY CARE**

"I want the Finnish government to send an inquiry to the Swedish government on the Finns' affairs in Sweden. How will Sweden guarantee appropriate care for the elderly Finns in their own mother tongue and how to ensure education for children with immigrant background in their own language".

"Keeping social security abroad"

"High-quality service homes for the elderly"

#### **TAXATION ISSUES**

"The taxation of the expatriates: why should a person living abroad and paying tax to Finland be charged 19 % municipal tax even if he has not been in any municipality for years and thus has not used local services either"

"The taxation agreement between Spain and Finland is OK. Do not try to change it."

"Tax agreements between countries – for instance, inheritance often subject to double taxation."

"Taxation more lucrative to those returning back to the native country (e.g. Denmark)"

"A reasonable reform in car taxation. The Finnish State loses every court case concerning the import of used cars. Citizens have no rights until they take the case to the EU court of justice."

#### **INTERNATIONALITY OF FINLAND, EU, NATO**

"The relations between Finland and rest of the world. No country manages alone anymore, we live in an international

context, whether we like it or not. All kinds of introvert movements, True Finns and the like, are simply ridiculous. The world where Finland lived and prospered alone does not exist anymore. No country can imagine being independent of others. How will this interdependence between countries and dependence on global economic trends reflect in the Finnish politics? How will the Finnish economy manage in the new situation or will even Finland slow down like the rest of European countries? What can the EU do to enhance the economy in this continent and to guarantee the social security we have got used to?"

"To keep Finland international, to participate actively in international politics and to foster the international reputation of both Finland and the Finns"

"Clear support for Finnish participation in EU politics (to underline the difference towards some populists' opinions on secession from the EU, to put it simply)"

"EU-politics and NATO"

"Foreign and development policy, global citizens' activity, that we are not just Finns but the whole world is ours, which means global responsibility"

"The status of Finland and Nordic countries in the EU"

#### **"DOES NOT MATTER": NO NEED FOR A SPECIFIC EXPAT AGENDA**

"None at all; expats are an insignificant group in the general election in Finland, we are few and the legislation involves us little"

"I find that approximately the same themes are important to me as an expat as when living in Finland"

"Nothing special, it's enough that the issues in one's own town/county/region/country are well taken care of in Finland, and their future are being developed and pondered upon"

#### **TECHNICAL ISSUES REGARDING VOTING, MAIL VOTING**

"Potential reforms in means to vote"

"Expats' own candidates residing in Sweden"

"I hope that the expats would not automatically vote in the Helsinki election district"

"Mail voting would be helpful abroad, no need to make long journeys for voting!"

#### **IMMIGRATION, TOLERANCE, THE "MENTAL STATE" OF FINLAND"**

"The more you live abroad the less interesting becomes the native country's politics. Finnish politics is also very introvert and the Finns have an odd belief in that everything is better in Finland than elsewhere. I hope that the Finnish politicians tried to open up their viewpoints a bit broader and to question common ....habits and opinions"

"We all expats are foreigners and immigrants in the country where we reside in. This way of thinking could be useful to change the negative attitudes of the Finns residing in Finland towards immigrants there."

"As an immigrant in Germany I am worried about the immigrants' status in Finland. Their treatment should be reciprocally appropriate as myself I can enjoy the German hospitality."

"Residing in the EU area should in the future be as easy as it is now for Finns. How far can the anti-EU sentiment go in Finland? Will it be more difficult to work and live abroad of certain groups "close" Finland up and at the same time set

the expats outside Finland in an unpleasant position?

### **CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AND EDUCATION OF THE FINNISH LANGUAGE, SUOMI SCHOOLS**

"Supporting families in teaching the Finnish culture and language lies way too often on the lonely shoulders of mothers"

"Young people grown up abroad should have better possibilities to return to Finland to study"

"Supporting the language education of the Finnish expat children. Keeping the obtained language skills"

"Supporting the work of Suomi Schools and potential culture workshops"

### **RETURN TO FINLAND, STATUS OF SPOUSE**

"The status of the returning expat – often the living standard is crumbled"

"The real issues of returnees are so detailed that they only irritate the big masses"

"Support for expat spouses (language etc)"

### **PASSPORT AND CITIZENSHIP ISSUES, CONSULAR SERVICES**

"Double citizenship"

"Guaranteeing consular services in regions with a lot of expatriate Finns, e.g. the Costa del Sol area in Spain"

### **ECONOMY AND EMPLOYMENT**

"The deficit of the public economy and solutions to that problem"

"Fixing the Finnish economy so that one can get proper jobs again and can possibly return"

### **INTERNAL MARKET AND MOBILITY**

"Issues related to workers moving in the EU. For instance, basis of pension if one has worked in several EU countries. Duties should be the same as for any Finnish citizen even if one lives outside Finland."

"Free movement. Genuinely functioning internal market"

### **MISCALLENEOUS**

"The limitations for distribution of radio and TV broadcasts via the internet. This makes it hard to follow the life in Finland and is useless as legislation. Finland seems to be the only country restricting the radio and TV broadcasts this

much.”

“Issues I pay attention to are important also for others than just expats. For me the most important thing is that the party/candidate I vote for respects the nature, natural resources, other people and sustainable development”

“From the Swedish-speaking Finn’s point of view it would have been nice to have this inquiry also available in Swedish. Finland is still, at least according to the Constitution, a bilingual country even if certain people belonging to the linguistic minority try their best to undermine the Swedish language (some sort of lingo-political cleansing is underway by the majority).

## **ii) One-on-one interviews**

Name: Ville Itälä  
Expatriate since: 2004  
Country of residence: Belgium

### **Is the expatriate agenda relevant?**

The world has changed greatly – we live in an international world, there are no “Finnish” jobs. Many workers are sent abroad for some years. This all changes the landscape – has already done so, but both the structures and the attitudes have been left in the 1970’s. A typical view on the emigrated Finn is a “golddigger in America”. Not much has been done for the change in working life and globalization, the social security is not transferrable, no voting rights etc... In ten years the situation will look different, and actions should be taken now, Itälä says and refers to his wife ,who falls between the social security systems in two countries.

According to Itälä envy is a factor. There is no agenda for returnees, Finland has not thought about how to accommodate returnees. Latent racism prevails, and Finland does not really care about its citizens abroad. Itälä refers to a comment from the Left Alliance: the expats need no rights since they do not pay any taxes to Finland.

### **How could the expats be activated politically?**

That they were given a true voting right – voting by mail. Finland has been the leading country regarding voting rights; women were given full voting rights amongst the first countries in the world. Now we are lagging behind. It would activate people politically; the feeling that you can make a difference. Also parties should be activated vis-à-vis the expats and show their interest towards their cause.

### **What do you think could be the best technical solution for voting abroad?**

Voting by mail.

### **How do you find the suggestion of being able to vote in national election in the new country of residence after 10 years’ time?**

Double citizenship should be made as easy as possible. It is only useful for us! Expat Finns, double citizens are our best export assets abroad. Now the process has been made really difficult.

\*\*\*

Name: Emmi Vartiainen  
Expat since: 2010  
Country of residence: Sweden

**Is the expatriate agenda relevant?**

I don't find it necessary for the parties to have a separate political agenda for expats.

**How could the expats be activated politically?**

A candidate in one's own election district; it would be good to meet candidates in person, many follow the campaigns directed to expat Finns. I got the right to vote ticket and a list of candidates in my own election district, but not much more.

**What do you think could be the best technical solution for voting abroad?**

Internet voting could be the solution. This time around I didn't have time to vote, the venue was far away. I would definitely have voted had electric voting been possible. And also by mail, I'm quite sure, states Emmi Vartiainen.

**How do you find the suggestion of being able to vote in the national election in the new country of residence after 10 years' time?**

It would make sense – and it would be nice to have a say. Double citizenship would solve the issue, then one could vote in both countries.

\*\*\*

Name: Hanna Salminen  
Expat since: 2002  
Country of residence: Great Britain

**Is the expatriate agenda relevant?**

No, not at least within the EU. People living outside the EU may think differently. In principle I am interested in all the same issues and I make my choices on the basis on the same values as upon living in Finland. Maybe all discussions related to the internationalism of Finland are even more interesting than at the time I lived in Finland.

**How could the expats be activated politically?**

As for me, the reason for non-activity has either been logistical (hard to vote/where to go/what papers to carry along/voting time over) or that I have not had a good reason to vote; on the one hand, things are fairly well in Finland and on the other hand, the programmes of political parties seem unclear and similar to each other. It feels like it does not matter that much which one of the main parties wins.

Timely information about issues in Finland is important. When living abroad, one does not follow that closely the Finnish news and politics, so when the election is due I do not have a clear picture of the agendas of each party or candidate, or the mental state and political atmosphere in Finland. Greetings to the parties: differentiate or die. If you want my vote, give me a reason to vote and tell clearly what I give my vote for. The True Finns phenomenon and the fear regarding the future of Finland in the hands of narrow-minded, uneducated racists is the best motivator in 2011 election. The reason to vote is to make a statement against True Finns – not for any particular party or candidate, because it is difficult to see the difference between National Coalition Party Kokoomus, Social Democrats or the Centre.

#### **What do you think could be the best technical solution for voting abroad?**

As for the mere voting itself, it would work best through the internet (or SMS). Mail voting would be second best. If voting in the Embassy is the only option, many expat outside the capital skips the voting altogether. The information on the means to vote and voting dates would be important. It would also be a good opportunity to contact the expats and send information about or links to their programmes and candidates.

#### **How do you find the suggestion of being able to vote in the national election in the new country of residence after 10 years' time?**

I would be interested in that! I get to vote in local elections and of course in the European election, but it would also be interesting to vote in parliamentary election.

Only the Tax Office in Finland keeps in touch with me, so the contact to the native country is only in the hands of the expat. But maybe it's supposed to be that way. Maybe there would be an opportunity for state organizations, companies and parties to proactively contact the expats, many are highly educated and possess vital experience of multicultural environment and big international corporations; that experience could be very useful to Finland.

## **4) Conclusions**

Voting abroad is clearly considered a right, not a duty. However, the technical obstacles – long distance to voting venues, restricted and varying voting time – seem to set a constant barrier for a proper rise in voting turnout. However, the increased dynamism in Finnish politics in spring 2011 - mainly the prominent media role of the True Finns - seems to have influenced the rise in turnout. The reflections of the survey also support this: surprisingly many expats clearly expressed their concern for the future of Finland and its international status in the light of strengthening support for the True Finns.

There are a few conclusions to make on the basis of this limited survey. First, free movement of people enabled by the membership in the European Union is experienced as a clear advantage. However, there is a lot of developing work yet to be done in order to complete the true internal market including transferrable social security. Countries of origin, like Finland, should better prepare itself for accommodating EU citizens and also to enable an easy return for expat Finns willing to reside in Finland.

Second, taxation and pension issues are growing in importance, especially in the light of the demographic development both in Finland and in Europe as a whole. People can reside in and need services in two or several countries, mobility is not going to diminish.

Third, voting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should not be bound to physical places. Mail voting, despite its risks concerning privacy, would imply true democracy abroad and make all expats equally able to cast their vote regardless of their domicile. In the future, voting through the internet and/or mobile phone should be made possible.

Fourth: expatriates are an unused, forgotten resource; not only for political parties but for the society as a whole. Expats are an asset that Finland should take better notice of; their cultural and language skills should be utilized in a way broader extent than what is the case today. Out of sight, out of mind does not – should not! – apply anymore, not in the age of technology and social media. Many expats intend to return in some years' time. They should not be looked upon as the prodigal sons, but rather long lost friends that get to feel welcome already at the porch.

Survey by Webropol and Suomen Toivo Think Tank

Author: Maria-Elena Cowell

Sources:

*Statistics Finland*

*Helsingin Sanomat*

*Suomen Kuvalehti*

*The Forum for Expatriate Finns*

*Ministry of Justice*

*Institute of Migration*