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'Populists suffer most from taking government responsibility'

Ahead of the Finnish elections this Sunday, Jussi Westinen assesses the nationalists' and social democrats' electoral chances

In recent polls before the parliamentary election this Sunday, the nationalist-populist Finns Party (PS) comes second with 16.3 per cent. The Social Democrats (SDP) are leading with 19 per cent. Is the Finns Party again receiving a lot of support from blue collar workers who have previously voted for the Social Democrats?

Actually, the Finns Party is gaining voters particularly from those who did not vote in 2015. It's typical for the party to have a highly fluctuating support because its sympathizers are insecure voters. In the 2011 election, with the "big bang" result for the Finns Party, every fifth of their voters came from the Social Democrats. This is the biggest voter shift between two parties in 21st century elections in Finland. In the 2015 elections, the Finns Party also drew voters from the SDP.

But now, the blue-collar voters go to both directions. Some have returned to SDP, as they were disappointed with PS-government policies from 2015 to 2017, in particular with labour market reforms and trade unions issues. On the other hand, some blue-collar workers seem to be fed up with the red-green image of the Social Democrats – climate, environment, food, vehicles et cetera – and choose the Finns Party instead.

How can the Social Democrats win back more voters from the right?

The SDP has already won back part of its blue-collar voters and those from lower professional occupations. While in opposition, it has heavily criticised the government's labour and economic policies. For instance, many people were angry about a contract that required employees to work for 6 minutes longer a day in order to increase the Finnish economy's competitiveness. According to surveys, a

substantial number of voters are keen to keep their "acquired benefits". SDP has been the party number one to defend those acquired benefits.

In the 2015 election, the Finns Party won 17.7 per cent of the votes and became part of the coalition government until 2017. How did the strategy to include them in the government and have them take responsibility unfold?

The support of PS declined heavily since they entered government. Already in November 2015, the support of PS had gone down under 10 per cent. It was even under 8 per cent at one point. As it often goes, populist parties suffer most from taking government responsibility.

The support for the Finns Party did not go up much despite their advantage of being in opposition since 2017. Still in December 2018, the support of PS was around 10 per cent. However, immigration and security has risen as an election topic in recent months, and the support of PS has surged rapidly. Moreover, climate debates have also contributed: PS is the only party to criticise climate actions in Finland, saying Finns have a right to eat meat, drink milk, drive a car et cetera, since stopping those doesn't save the globe.

In 2017 the Finns Party split in two, which broke the coalition government. Has the party fully recovered from the split?

For a long time, an inner fraction had been making things complicated for the Finns Party. One side defended the traditions of the predecessor party, the Finnish Rural Party (SMP), and its anti-elite heritage defending "the little guy". The other side was far more orientated towards immigration questions and taking harsh anti-immigrant positions. At the end of the day, this fraction proved to be too much to handle for the long time party leader Timo Soini who decided to step down. The leader of the anti-immigrant segment, Jussi Halla-aho, was chosen as the party chairperson in June 2017 and the party split in two. The ones loyal to Soini decided to form a new party, Blue Reform. It managed to stay in government and the Finns Party was pushed into opposition.

In a way, both sides seem to be happy with the split. The PS-camp is satisfied with Soini no longer dictating every decision and reproaching the party activists on their actions and anti-immigrant statements. They have a clear party identity, one that now resembles more clearly the other European nationalist-populist parties.

Blue Reform is low on support and perhaps gaining only one seat in parliament, while having with 17 now. The politicians in Blue Reform are still deeply disappointed and perhaps bitter about "losing their

party" to harsh anti-immigrant forces. However, on moral grounds they seem to be satisfied with "doing the right thing" after the 2017 party congress. Many of them had felt that the heritage of SMP was altered or even ruined with the harsh anti-immigrant stands inside the party.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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