



# The Surge of the Finns Party: A Brief History

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## **The True Finns Party have surged to the forefront of Finnish politics and fundamentally turned the nation's political discourse in a more nationalist direction. What are the causes of this rise in Finnish populism?**

The populist Finns Party, formerly known in English as the True Finns party (Finnish: *Perussomalaiset*), rushed to the surface of Finnish politics in the 2011 parliamentary election, snatching a remarkable 19 per cent of the vote. Its charismatic leader Timo Soini positioned himself on the side of the ordinary man and against corrupt elites. Referring to ethno nationalism and Christian social values, Soini emphasized Finnishness and the need to protect the national culture from being contaminated by immigrants and other foreign influences. The Party's surge to the forefront of Finnish politics has fundamentally turned the political discourse in Finland towards a more nationalist direction. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the drivers behind this growth of Finnish populism, it is necessary to examine Finland's recent history.

### **A sense of suffering**

Traditionally, Finnish society was split on a double axis: urban and rural, landowners and peasants. Through history, it was the bloodiest area in the Nordic region. The Finnish national identity, including a sense of common suffering, was at least partly defined by being locked between powerful and often aggressive neighbours, Sweden and Russia, who repeatedly took turns in dominating *Suomi*, the Finnish heartland. Nationalistic movements grew strong in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, though it was rather a by-product of the Bolshevik revolution, Finland finally won its independence in

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1917. Authoritarian movements soon emerged; for example, the nationalist Lapua movement. Nationalist sentiments were growing fast in the interwar years, but this was also a period of internal conflict, spurring into a full-blown Civil War between authoritarian Nationalists and Social Democratic groups.

Surviving under constant threat from its eastern neighbour, Finland aligned with Germany for a period in the Second World War. Tensions on the Finnish–Soviet border also grew leading up to the Second World War, breaking into the Winter War between the two in autumn 1939. After showing surprising fighting resilience, Finland had still lost 12 per cent of their land in the war in Karelia. When the Germans invaded Russia in 1941, the Finns fought alongside them, in what is referred to as the Continuation War, in an attempt to regain lost territories in Karelia. They were beaten back by the Soviets once again three years later and devastated by repeated conflicts. Over the course of these repeated and prolonged conflicts a militaristic mentality developed in Finland, still evident in contemporary life.

Finland emerged humbled from the war, surely with a sense of suffering but also one of perseverance. The country was not only in dire straits economically but also firmly within the sphere of strategic influence of the Soviet Union. Finnish diplomacy revolved around appeasing their powerful eastern neighbour. The geopolitical balancing act, of constructing a Nordic liberal marked orientated welfare state while appeasing the Soviets, paid off, and Finland became a prosperous Nordic state. Crisis, however, hit once again in 1990 when the Scandinavian banking crisis coincided with loss of markets in the East when the Soviet Union dissolved in the wake of collapse of communism.

Still, Finland emerged from the crisis with a growing self-confidence in international affairs, not only by joining the EU but also by adopting the Euro

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and seeking a core position with the EU. Finland was a homogeneous country with a low level of immigration. Right-wing nationalist populist politics were thus not prominent in the latter half of the twentieth century. Still, agrarian populist versions existed since the 1960s with a noteworthy support. Right-wing populist parties like those that emerged in Denmark and Norway did not, however, gain much popular support until after the Euro crisis hit in 2009.

### **The Finnish Agrarian Party**

Although nationalist extreme-right politics similar to those on the European continent only became prominent in Finland with the surge of the True Finns party in the new millennium, agrarian populism had been present in Finnish politics ever since the beginning of the 1960s. The Finnish Agrarian Party (*Suomen Maasedun Puolue* – SMP) established in 1959 was founded in opposition to the urban elite and claimed to speak on behalf of the common man in rural Finland, those that they referred to as the ‘forgotten people’ (*unohdetun kansa*) in town and country, against the detached ruling class in the urban south.

The SMP exploited the centre-periphery divide in Finland. Its greatest electoral success came in 1970, 1972 and in 1983 when the party won approximately a tenth of the vote each time. Their main appeal was with rural workers and the unemployed, who felt alienated in the fast moving post-war society. In a rapid social structural change, Finland was transformed from being predominantly agricultural to a high-tech communication-based society. The SMP ran into serious financial difficulty and a new nationalist populist party, the True Finns Party, absorbed its remains in 1995. In 2011, the party’s English name was shortened to the Finns Party.

## Timo Soini and the True Finns

In 1997 the charismatic Timo Soini took the helm of the True Finns Party. Soon, the party found increased support, rising from 1.6 per cent in the [2003 parliamentary election](#) to 4.1 per cent in 2007. It was, though, only in wake of the international financial crisis, that the party surged, winning 19.1 per cent of the vote in the 2011 parliamentary election and becoming the third largest party in the country, behind only the right-of-centre conservative National Coalition Party (NCP) and the Social Democrats (SDP). This was also referred to as the ‘change election’ or the ‘big bomb’, when Finnish politics, to a significant degree, came to revolve around the Finns Party and its populist politics.

The party had increased its vote five fold since [the 2007 election](#), adding full 15 percentage points, which was the biggest ever increase of a party between elections in the *Eduskunta*, the Finnish Parliament. Its initial rise had, however, started two years earlier, in the European Parliament election of 2009, when the True Finns grabbed 9.8 per cent of the vote. In 2015 the party saw only limited decline in its support, clearly reaffirming its strong position in Finnish politics, and entering coalition government for the first time.

Previously, the True Finns had been widely dismissed as a joke, a harmless protest movement, and a nuisance on the fringe of Finnish politics. Their discourse was aggressive and rude and the media mostly only saw entertainment value in them. After the 2011 election, however, it had surely become a force to be reckoned with. During the election campaign, they had clashed with the mainstream parties and called for ending of the one-truth cosy consensus politics of the established three parties. The Finns Party had now become a forceful channel for the underclass.

Contrarily to most similar parties elsewhere, the Finns Party accepted being branded as populist. Soini, however, refused to accept that his party was extreme-right. Contrary to the progressive parties of Denmark and Norway, the Finnish populists never flirted with neo-liberal economic policies. Rather, the Finns Party inherited the centrist economic policy of the SMP. Its right wing populism was thus never socio-economic, but rather socio-cultural.

Three themes emerged as the main political platform of the Finns Party:

- First to resurrect the ‘forgotten people’, the ordinary man, to prominence and speaking in their name against the elite;
- second, to fight against immigration and multiculturalism;
- thirdly, to stem the Europeanization of Finland.

### **The forgotten people**

Finland has been historically prone to polarization; for example between East/West; Socialism/Nationalism; Urban-rich/Rural-poor; Cosmopolitan/Local. Building on the SMP’s politics, the Finns Party kept exploiting the centre-periphery divide, effectively exchanging the agrarian focused populism for a more general cultural divide based on a more ethno-nationalist program. Timo Soini, for example, adopted the phrase of the ‘forgotten people’, which refers to the underprivileged ordinary man, which, he argued, the political elite had neglected.

The political elite was continuously presented as corrupt and arrogant, having suppressed the ordinary blue-collar man. Positioning themselves against the urban Helsinki-based cosmopolitan political elite consolidated around the

south coast, the Finns Party representatives claimed to speak in the name of the ‘forgotten people’, mainly working in rural areas.

Drawing on traditional Christian values the ‘forgotten people’ were discursively depicted as pure and morally superior to the privileged elite. This sort of moralist stance was widely found in the party’s 2011 election manifesto, including claims of basing their politics on ‘honesty’, ‘fairness’, ‘humaneness’, ‘equality’, ‘respect for work and entrepreneurship’ and ‘spiritual’ concerns.

The Finns Party was also staunchly socially-conservative on matters such as religion, morality, crime, corruption, law and order. It is thus more authoritarian than libertarian. They are surely anti-elite, but not anti-system. Indeed, it firmly supports the Finnish state, its institutions and democratic processes, including keeping the relatively strong powers of the president to name but one example.

### **Finnish ethno-nationalism**

Timo Soini and his followers have offered a clear ethno-nationalist focus, strongly emphasising Finnish national cultural heritage. It was suspicious of Swedish influence, dismissive of the indigenous Sami’s heritage in Suomi – often referred to as Lapps in English – and outright suppressive in regard to the small gypsy population. In a classical populist ‘us’ versus ‘them’ style a running theme of the Finns Party’s discourse was to emphasise Finnishness by distinguishing Finns from others.

The Finns Party promoted patriotism, strength and the unselfishness of the Finnish people and argued that the Finnish miracle should be taught in school in an heroic depiction; that is, how this poor and peripheral country suppressed by expansionist and powerful neighbours was, through internal strength and

endurance, able to fight their way from under their oppressors to become a globally recognised nation of progress and wealth.

More radical and outright xenophobic factions have also thrived within the party. Jussi Halla-aho, who became perhaps Finland's most forceful critic of immigration and multiculturalism, led the anti-immigrant faction. He has referred to Islam as a 'totalitarian fascist ideology' and for example wrote on his blog in 2008 that, 'since rapes will increase in any case [with inflow of immigrants], the appropriate people should be raped: in other words, green-leftist do-gooders and their supporters' He went on to write that prophet Muhammad was a paedophile and that Islam as a religion sanctified paedophilia.

Many similar examples exist. A well-known party representative, Olli Immonen, for example, posted on Facebook that he was 'dreaming of a strong, brave nation that will defeat this nightmare called multiculturalism. This ugly bubble that our enemies live in, will soon enough burst into a million little'.

Many other prominent populist and extreme-right associations also existed in Finland, some including semi-fascist groupings. Indeed, a few MP's of the Finns Party belonged to the xenophobic organisation Suomen Sisu. In early 2016, in wake of the refugee crisis hitting Europe, mainly from Syria, a group calling themselves Soldiers of Odin took to patrolling the street of several Finnish towns. Dressed in black jackets, decorated with Viking symbolism and the Finnish flag, they claimed to be protecting native Finns from potential violent acts of the foreigners.

## **Riding the Euro-crisis**



Finns Party's rise was helped significantly by their opposition to the EU and the European Central Bank, who seemed powerless in dealing with the Euro-crisis. They depicted the EU as unworkable and claiming that democracy cannot work in the context of supranational EU governance, and that it favoured elites over ordinary citizens in the European countries. There was a clear demand for a EU critical party, a void the Finns Party was happy to fill because the mainstream parties then held a pro-EU stance.

Leading up to the 2011 elections the Finns Party turned opposition to bailouts for debt-ridden Euro countries into their main issue. That also helped in securing good results in European Parliament elections in 2014, after which they joined the radical-right European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) in the EP.

After coming into government in 2015 the Finns Party found diminished support in opinion polls. Still, their influence had steadily grown and they had found much greater acceptance than before. They clearly led in the growing anti-EU discourse in the country. Soon, many of the previously pro-EU mainstream parties began to adopt their anti-EU rhetoric, and some, subsequently, also became increasingly anti-immigrant.

Image credit: [OSCE Parliamentary Assembly/Flickr](#).

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