

A deeper look at party members – assessing members’ and supporters’ social structure

Teo Keipi, Ilkka Koiranen, Aki Koivula and Arttu Saarinen

Introduction

In Finland, the political map has changed during the past few decades as traditional parties have weakened due to declining party membership rates and voter decisions to change party affiliation, whereas new parties have emerged into prominence, namely the Finns party and the Green League, both of which have gained new members (Karvonen, 2014). In this respect, parties continue to be important targets for research and they have been studied quite extensively at a population level in terms of party supporters (e.g., Borg et al., 2015; Grönlund & Wass, 2016; Koivula et al., 2017a). On the other hand, little is known about party members or comparisons between members and party supporters.

Studying party members has been challenging in the past due to the lack of current representative data concerning members specifically. Even parties’ own membership registration information in terms of membership distributions has been difficult to access by researchers (Borg, 2006, 63–64). We responded to this gap in research by carrying out a survey study in cooperation with Finland’s six largest political parties. The survey took place from March to September 2016 and involved a random sampling of 50 000 party members with questions concerning their social, political and societal networks in addition to various attitudes and opinions. In February – March 2017 a similar survey was carried out for party supporters.

The aim of this article is first to present our unique dataset, and second, to assess the extent to which party members represent party supporters in contemporary Finland. Before going into the empirical analysis, we take an in-depth look at the survey settings by presenting survey samples, final responses, and weighting procedures. In the results section we first analyze the demographic composition of party members in terms of gender, age, education, residential area and main activity. Secondly, we locate members at the societal level in relation to party supporters. Thirdly, we analyze the subjective well-being of party members and supporters. Finally, we conclude the study with a discussion on the changing political party membership in Finland and its possible consequences at the societal level. We also give some interpretations about the future avenues to utilize our data in studying party members.

Material and methods

The member dataset is composed of 12,427 responses. The research team was in close cooperation with party offices for the duration of the data collection process in order to ensure members’ legal right to ano-

Keipi, Koiranen, Koivula and Saarinen (University of Turku) Corresponding author’s e-mail: teo.a.keipi@utu.fi

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nymity. Notably, parties did not participate or influence researchers' work or the development of the survey itself, though they did have the opportunity to add their own questions to the end of the survey form. The sampling method varied according to the size of party and the coverage of parties' email registers. In the case of the National Coalition Party and the Green League, the survey was carried out electronically; surveys were also mailed by post for other parties.

Sample sizes and final samples of members are presented according to party in Table 1. The weakest response rate came from the Centre Party (17.4 percent) and the highest from the Left Alliance (34.3 percent). Older party members are slightly underrepresented in the data and thus we have implemented a weighting variable to compensate for the skewed age distribution to meet the population criteria.

Table 1. Description of the members data collection.

	Time	Response mode	Population	Sample size	Sample method	Final Sample
Green League (GL)	Mar 2016	Internet	6951	6034	Total ¹	1653
Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP)	Jun 2016	Internet and mail	40,754	5000	Random ²	1541
Centre Party of Finland (CEN)	Jun 2016	Internet and mail	101,618	22,097	Random ²	3828
Left Alliance (Left)	Aug 2016	Internet and mail	10,173	6764	Random ²	2385
The Finns Party (Finns)	Sep 2016	Internet and mail	9520	6022	Random ²	1932
National Coalition Party (NCP)	Sep 2016	Internet	35,000	5000	Random ³	951

1 Total sample from email register covering 87 per cent of the population

2 Random sample from mail and email register separately

3 Random sample solely from email register covering approximately 60 percent of the population

Table 2. Distribution of party supporters.

	Survey 2017		Elections 2015–17	
	n	%	PE 2015 ¹	ME 2017 ²
Centre Party of Finland (CEN)	286	17.4	14.8	10.3
The Finns Party (Finns)	159	9.6	12.4	5.2
National Coalition Party (NCP)	254	15.4	12.8	12.1
Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP)	306	18.6	11.6	11.3
Green League (GL)	270	16.4	6.0	7.3
Left Alliance (Left)	114	6.9	5.0	5.2
Other	151	9.2	7.7	6.0
No party identification/ or no vote/ or invalid vote	108	6.6	29.7	41.5

1 Parliament elections 2015

2 Municipal elections 2017

The survey for the party supporters is based upon random samples (N=4 001) of Finns aged 18 to 84. Representative samples were drawn from the Finnish population register database. The data with a total of

1 648 respondents accounted for 41.5 per cent of the original sample. According to the research report, the data represent the Finnish population relatively well (Koivula et al., 2017b). However, in this study, minor bias in terms of age and gender were corrected with weight coefficients to meet the population criteria.

We identify the supporters of the six largest parties on the basis of respondents' party identification, which refers to the party that respondents feel to be closest to their preference. Previous literature suggests that party identification refers to more permanent and ideological choice than actual voting behaviour (e.g., Sinclair, 2012). This is practical when considering that our data have been assembled two years after the parliament election. It is also crucial that this measure enables us to include participants who were unable to vote in the parliament election due to disability. Table 2 presents the distribution of party supporters in our survey as well as the results of the Parliament Elections 2015 and the Municipal Elections 2017.

The data represent the power relations of parties in the Finnish parliament relatively well. However, we have to bear our mind that there have been notable changes in the Finnish political spectrum during the past two years after the parliament elections. According to the recent Gallup polls and municipality elections in spring 2017, the survey has captured the characteristics that have altered the Finnish political spectrum during recent years relatively well. In particular, we can see significant changes in terms of the popularity of the Greens, which has increased sharply since 2015. Conversely, support for the populist Finns party has decreased considerably. The main source of bias in the data is the distributions of the supporters of the NCP, which seems to be underestimated in our survey in relation to the results of the elections. In terms of demographic variables, we analysed a set of variables consisting of respondents' gender, age, education, economic activity and residential area. We categorised age into six categories: under 30-years, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69 and 70 year or older. Respondents' education is categorised on the basis of the ISCED classification into five groups according to whether they had completed primary, upper-secondary, tertiary, bachelor or at least master level education. We assess the effect of economic activity using a variable reporting whether respondents are employed, entrepreneurs, students, retirees or unemployed. Information on respondents' province of residence was categorized according to NUTS2-classification either as Western Finland, Helsinki-region, Southern Finland, or Northern/Eastern Finland.

In the third part of our research we turn to review how parties differ according to overall life satisfaction and satisfaction with their personal financial situation. In the original questions, participants were asked how they would describe their life situation in terms of different aspects such as their satisfaction with their financial situation and their satisfaction with life. Participants were given five different options to describe their life situation on a Likert-scale, where 1) is 'Extremely bad' and 5) is 'Extremely good'. Binary variables were developed from the questions where a value of 0 represented those participants who felt that their life situation is at most 'neither good nor bad' (options 1–3 on the original scale) and 1 represented those who felt that their situation is 'good' or 'extremely good' (options 4–5 on the original scale).

Party members' demographic and societal position

Let us first examine the demographic composition of party members (Table 3, see also Koiranen et al., 2017). Keeping in mind continuity and member quantity development, the age distribution is challenging in the case of some parties. Notably, there are significant differences in the age distribution between party members. Especially, the Social Democrats' situation is challenging, as members are quite old on average. On the other hand, members of the Green League are significantly younger than those of other parties.

Themes concerning gender and gender equality emerge differently from the practical politics of parties. According to a number of international studies, women are more likely to vote for leftist parties and to rise to the top of the political ranks of leftist parties (e.g., Hart et al., 2009). This modern so-called gender divide can be seen in Finnish political parties' gender distribution as well. Green and leftist parties strongly emphasising the importance of gender equality show a clearly higher proportion of female members. On the other hand, the Finns party is made up of close to 75 percent male members. The three traditionally largest

parties are also male dominated in terms of membership.

In the Finnish political landscape, the Centre party has been a strong driver of the interests of the rural population. As such, it is unsurprising that compared to other parties, membership is made up of clearly fewer capital region participants while showing higher membership rates from eastern and northern parts of the country compared to other parties. The Greens represent the other end of the spectrum. Over half of the members live in the capital region. The living area distribution of other parties is more heterogenous.

Table 3. Socio-demographic information about party members (%).

	Centre	Finns	NCP	SDP	GL	Left
Age						
Under 30 years	5.4	3.8	7.0	2.1	16.0	7.0
30–39	8.2	14.2	13.2	4.8	30.7	17.5
40–49	10.3	20.9	14.8	7.3	24.2	10.9
50–59	17.4	24.2	17.5	13.8	16.8	13.1
60–69	23.2	24.6	23.6	54.1	8.2	26.0
70 or older	35.5	12.2	24.0	17.8	4.0	25.5
Average age (in years)	59.9	53.6	55.6	61.5	42.9	55.9
Gender						
Male	58.8	74.5	61.9	60.5	36.9	57.7
Female	41.2	25.5	38.1	39.5	63.1	42.3
Province						
Western Finland	22.9	26.9	26.5	26.4	17.0	25.6
Helsinki-region	9.7	22.2	34.7	28.5	51.5	33.2
Southern Finland	20.1	24.3	24.8	25.5	19.5	19.7
Northern/Eastern Finland	47.3	26.5	14.0	19.6	12.0	21.5
Education level						
Primary	12.3	13.6	2.5	15.6	2.1	17.7
Lower secondary	24.1	37.8	10.8	26.9	15.0	31.2
Upper secondary	26.8	22.1	21.5	22.8	9.9	14.1
Bachelor degree	10.8	13.5	14.7	7.8	14.7	9.8
At least graduate degree	26.0	13.0	50.4	26.9	58.4	27.2
Main activity						
Employed	31.2	40.8	42.2	30.4	63.0	36.7
Entrepreneur	11.9	9.9	12.6	2.5	6.5	2.6
Student	3.1	3.3	5.7	1.5	14.4	6.4
Retired	51.4	35.3	36.6	63.2	8.9	46.4
Unemployed	2.4	10.8	2.9	2.3	7.2	7.9
N	3967	1932	951	1540	1653	2384

Compared to other parties, the education level of the Finns party is clearly the lowest. In terms of education level, the case of the SDP and the Left Alliance is two-pronged: on the one hand, the proportion of those with only primary education is even larger than in the case of the Finns party, yet at the same time the proportion of members with at least a graduate degree is also relatively high. While assessing income and education level, NCP and especially Green League members emerge as highly educated on average. Over half of the members of both parties have received a university degree and of Green League members, approximately 10 percent have earned a post-graduate degree.

The aging of the population as reflected in the growth of the retired population is also clearly evident in party membership. For example, in the case of SDP and Centre parties, the majority of members are al-

ready retired. The Left Alliance, National Coalition party and Finns' party also show a large proportion of retired members. In terms of labor market position, the Green League is clearly distinct from other parties in that members are far less likely to be retired while the total membership has a higher proportion of students compared to other parties. The distribution of entrepreneurs shows a clear division between the current government and the main opposition parties. When assessing all party members, entrepreneurs make up almost 12 percent of the Centre party, 13 percent of NCP and 10 percent of the Finns' party. In contrast, under 3 percent of the SDP and the Left Alliance and under 7 percent of the Greens are entrepreneurs. The share of the entrepreneurs in the ruling parties is similar overall. When comparing only those members who are in working life, the share of the entrepreneurs is between 20–30 percent in the ruling parties.

Demographic and social differences between party supporters and members

Next we turn to the comparison of party members and supporters (see Table 4 and A1 Appendix). When comparing party members and party supporters by age, we see that party members are generally older. The most prominent difference is between members and supporters of the Left Alliance and the Finns. Supporters of these parties are on average about ten years younger than party members. The smallest differences can be found between the Green League's members and supporters.

When comparing party members' and supporters' gender, the most notable differences are formed between Social Democrats and The Left Alliance. These parties have about 16 percentage points more women in their supporters than in their members. This is not a surprise because earlier research has shown that women tend to vote for left-wing parties more often than men (Pikkala, 2016).

The regional distribution between party members and supporters is relatively constant. The most prominent difference is between proportions of Green League's supporters and members who are living in the Helsinki-region. There are almost 10 percentage points fewer party supporters in the Helsinki-region when comparing to the proportion of Green League's party members. Also the Centre and the Finns have a larger proportion of supporters living in Western Finland when comparing to the proportion of these parties' members living in this region. In addition, the Centre has relatively more party members from Northern/Eastern Finland.

Finnish party members are also relatively more highly educated compared to party supporters. In all parties there are far more members who have completed at least a master's degree in university, and far more supporters who have completed at most a lower secondary degree. The most drastic difference is between the highest educated party members and supporters in the Green League – the proportion of members with at least a master's degree is almost 28 percentage points higher when compared to the proportion of supporters with a master's degree.

There are also great differences in the main activity between party members and supporters. In the Centre, the Finns, NCP, SDP, and the Left there is a much higher proportion of employed party supporters when comparing to party members. The Green League makes the only exception here with a lesser proportion of employed party supporters. Instead, the Greens is the only party that has a higher proportion of retired supporters when compared to the proportion of retired party members.

Party members' and supporters' satisfaction with their life and financial situation

The previous sections have shown that there are clear differences in the demographic and societal positions between members and supporters of the six biggest parties. Next we focus on the well-being of members and supporters. Figure 1 shows the proportions of those who responded at least 'good' to questions pertain-

ing to their life satisfaction and financial situation.

In general, party members are more satisfied with their lives and their financial situation is better compared to supporters. In most cases there are no statistically significant differences between a party's members and supporters; yet, when these appear, party members are more often satisfied.

There are still great differences in how satisfied different parties' members are in their lives and their financial situation. Party members of the NCP are the most satisfied with their life in general. Members of the Centre, SDP, and the Greens are also quite satisfied with their lives. The most unsatisfied members are from the Finns and secondly from the Left, with the Finns showing almost 20 percentage points fewer respondents who are satisfied with their lives. The members of the NCP are also clearly the most satisfied with their financial situation, and once again the Centre's, SDP's, and Greens' members share second place. Like in satisfaction with life, the Finns' and the Left's members are the most unsatisfied with their financial situation.

Table 4. Socio-demographic differences between party members and supporters aged 18 – 84 (percentage points).

	Centre	Finns	NCP	SDP	GL	Left
Age						
Under 30 years	-8.9	-21.6	-9.3	-6.1	-12.5	-21.5
30–39	-3.5	-4.7	-7.6	-8.6	7.1	5.4
40–49	-4.6	-0.2	-2.7	-6.6	10.0	-1.2
50–59	-3.7	10.4	-1.0	-8.0	0.4	-10.3
60–69	3.2	12.6	11.8	31.4	-3.9	15.7
70 or older	17.5	3.4	8.9	-2.2	-1.1	11.9
Average age in years	7.8	9.9	7.6	7.0	1.1	9.5
Gender						
Male	9.7	7.8	2.7	16.2	5.4	15.4
Female	-9.7	-7.8	-2.7	-16.2	-5.4	-15.4
Province						
Western Finland	-6.4	-7.3	2.6	-4.1	-4.5	1.6
Helsinki-region	-4.9	0.9	-1.7	2.2	10.0	0.9
Southern Finland	4.2	6.2	4.8	1.3	-1.9	2.7
Northern/Eastern Finland	7.1	0.3	-5.7	0.6	-3.6	-5.3
Education level						
Primary	-6.9	-2.2	-5.0	-4.9	-5.2	-1.4
Lower secondary	-13.7	-15.9	-14.3	-16.7	-14.3	-9.6
Upper secondary	5.2	5.8	1.0	8.9	-3.3	-1.8
Bachelor degree	-1.1	3.5	-1.2	-2.8	-4.9	1.4
At least graduate degree	16.5	8.7	19.5	15.5	27.7	11.5
Main activity						
Employed	-15.1	-14.8	-12.7	-16.7	9.2	-6.6
Entrepreneur	5.3	5.0	4.7	1.5	0.9	0.9
Student	-6.0	-0.7	0.1	-2.6	-1.2	-7.6
Retired	18.3	12.3	11.7	23.2	-4.7	20.2
Unemployed	-2.5	-1.7	-3.7	-5.3	-4.2	-6.8
Members, aged 18–84 (N)	3773	1869	929	1495	1619	2294
Supporters, aged 18–84 (N)	299	147	245	341	253	113

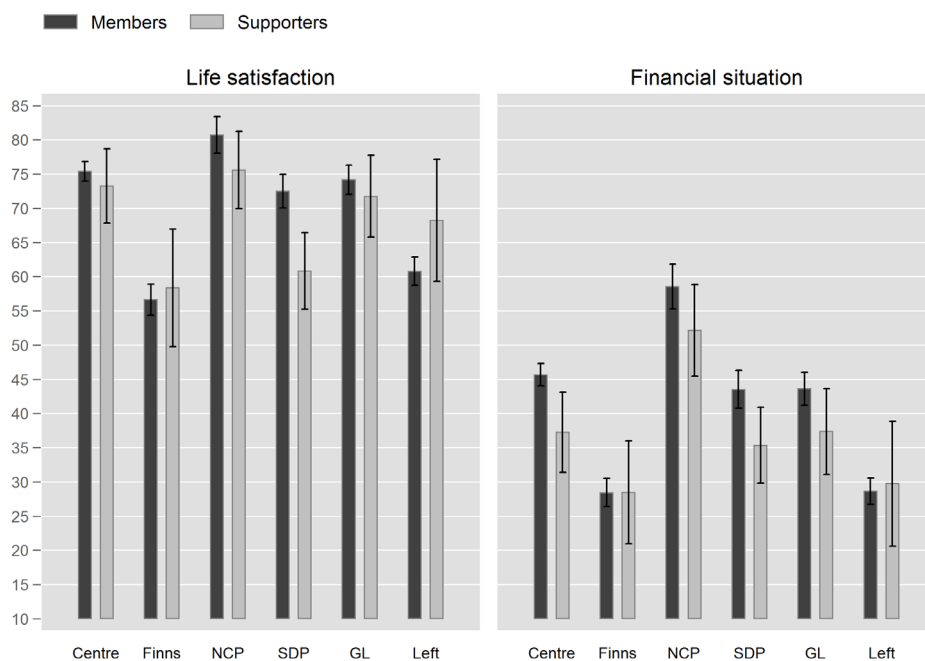


Figure 1. Proportions of party members and supporters who feel satisfied with their life and satisfied with their financial situation (% and 95% confidence intervals).

When comparing parties' supporters with each other, the results are very similar to those between party members. The most notable differences with party members are in how SDP's and the Left's supporters differ from party members. Supporters of the Left are statistically more often satisfied with their lives, and supporters of the SDP are statistically more often unsatisfied with their lives. Also supporters of the Centre, NCP, SDP and the Greens are more rarely satisfied with their financial situation when comparing to party members of the parties in question.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented party members' and supporters' social structure. In the past it has been thought that in Nordic countries, different parties push the interests of certain economic interest groups. According to the classic three divisions (e.g., Valen & Rokkan, 1974) the left represents working class interests, the Centre rural and agricultural interests, and the right entrepreneurs' interests. According to the results on party members and supporters, this tripartite division continues in Finland.

For example, the majority of Centre party members and supporters still live in less urban areas in Northern or Eastern Finland. Similarly, NCP members and supporters still have a relatively strong link to entrepreneurship by their own occupational status. According to party member and supporter comparisons, traditional leftist parties can continue to be considered workers' parties because they are still made up of lower educated people (see also Koironen et al., 2017).

Categorization according to the three divisions is less clear in the case of the Green League and Finns' party. The majority of GL members and supporters are highly educated and have a relatively high income, while also living in the capital region and being relatively young (see Koironen et al., 2016). The GL seems to distinguish itself from traditional divisions, which are mostly based on permanent employment positions in a growing economy. In this sense it is unsurprising that GL politics increasingly resonate with younger

people, which is a growing trend according to the latest gallup polls.

Based on educational position, the Finns' party seems to be more clearly a working class party. The party clearly has the highest proportion of working class members with relatively low levels of education and unstable labour market position (for more information, see Koironen et al., 2017). This research shows that the party's members' and supporters' relatively weak labor market position is connected to ongoing structural changes. Many of them are industrial sector workers whose employment prospects have significantly diminished during the past decade. This precariat situation can also be detected from the Finns' party members' and supporters' satisfaction in their financial situation and in life in general: they are the least satisfied with their lives according to these two indicators.

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Author information

Teo Keipi is a Senior researcher in Economic Sociology at the University of Turku, Finland.

Ilkka Koiranen is a Doctoral student in Economic Sociology at the University of Turku, Finland.

Aki Koivula is a Doctoral student in Economic Sociology at the University of Turku, Finland.

Arttu Saarinen is a University teacher in Economic Sociology at the University of Turku, Finland.

Appendix

Table A1. Socio-demographic information about party supporters (%).

	Centre	Finns	NCP	SDP	GL	Left
Age						
Under 30 years	13.9	25.4	16.1	8.0	26.7	28.6
30–39	11.9	19.0	20.9	13.4	24.3	12.6
40–49	15.0	21.3	17.6	13.9	14.8	12.4
50–59	21.5	14.0	18.7	21.9	16.8	23.7
60–69	20.4	12.2	11.9	22.8	12.3	10.9
70 or older	17.3	8.2	14.8	20.0	5.1	11.9
Average age (years)	51.8	43.5	48.0	54.5	41.9	45.7
Gender						
Male	49.0	66.5	59.2	44.4	31.7	42.3
Female	51.1	33.5	40.8	55.6	68.3	57.7
Province						
Western Finland	29.5	34.1	24.1	30.6	21.6	23.7
Helsinki-region	14.8	21.5	36.1	26.6	41.7	33.3
Southern Finland	16.1	18.3	20.0	23.9	21.3	16.7
Northern/Eastern Finland	39.7	26.1	19.8	19.0	15.4	26.4
Education level						
Primary	18.2	15.4	7.2	20.4	6.8	17.7
Lower secondary	37.7	54.0	25.0	43.6	29.4	41.2
Upper secondary	21.8	16.1	20.8	14.1	13.2	15.8
Bachelor degree	12.3	10.2	16.3	10.6	19.8	8.7
At least graduate degree	10.1	4.4	30.8	11.3	30.8	16.6
Main activity						
Employed	47.2	56.2	55.5	47.2	54.3	44.3
Entrepreneur	6.7	5.1	8.0	1.1	5.6	1.8
Student	8.8	4.0	5.6	4.0	15.3	14.2
Retired	32.3	22.0	24.3	40.1	13.3	24.8
Unemployed	4.9	12.7	6.7	7.6	11.5	14.9
N	299	147	245	341	253	113