

# Partisan Politics in Finland

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## Abstract

Traditionally, the Finnish party system has involved a high level of fragmentation yet remarkable stability, consensual decision-making, ideologically broad government coalitions, and mostly modest levels of polarization between parties or voters. These features suggest a limited effect of the party composition of government on economic policy. However, based on studies on close local elections, parliamentary speech, and party manifestos, we argue that the link between party politics and policy outcomes likely plays a role in Finland. Most analyses have examined the extent to which the characteristics of local politicians within the parties affect policy outcomes. These studies show that occupation, education, experience, competence, and residential location of local politicians strongly affect local policies, indicating that, in general, politics matters for policy. We also discuss how consensual national politics may have contributed to the recent success of the populist challenger Finns Party. As a new major player, the party has emphasized the role of sociocultural issues and especially affective polarization, which represents a considerable paradigm shift from the catch-all party policies typical of Finland for many decades. It is thus possible that the link between politics and policy will become more pronounced in the future, motivating further research.

**Keywords:** Finland, intra-party, competition, parliamentary speech, Partisan politics, party manifestos, party system, policy outcomes, populism

## 1. Introduction

The concept of partisan politics as it is discussed in the political economy literature addresses the fundamental question of whether government ideology influences economic policymaking. Classic partisan politics theories proposed by, for instance, Hibbs (1977), Chappell and Keech (1986), and Alesina (1987), have focused on the unemployment versus inflation trade-off implied by the Phillips curve. In those models, leftist parties accept high inflation to spur economic growth and obtain lower unemployment rates since the trade-off is in the interest of their working-class voters, whereas right-wing parties do the opposite. However, European party platforms typically do not base economic policy mainly on the inflation debate; rather, the key classic difference between left-wing and right-wing parties concerns large government (high taxes to allow for generous redistribution and high levels of public services) versus small government. That said, many other policy dimensions and associated policies, such as liberal versus conservative, are also still relevant when considering the effect of government ideology on policy.

The classic partisan politics approach tends to draw from either a two-party system or a multi-party system where left-wing and right-wing parties form fixed coalitions. In this

review article, we address partisan politics in Finland, which constitutes a special case with its flexible coalition formation. In that respect, Finland differs from its Nordic neighbors (Bengtsson et al. 2014; Kärriylä 2021) as well as other countries explored in this special issue, such as Portuguese left-wing and right-wing governments (Veiga et al. 2024), the politically and territorially highly polarized Spanish system (Magre-Pont et al. 2024), and a Dutch political context characterized by pillarization and consociationalism (Laméris and Grohmann 2024), where the link between government composition and the implemented policies is more pronounced.

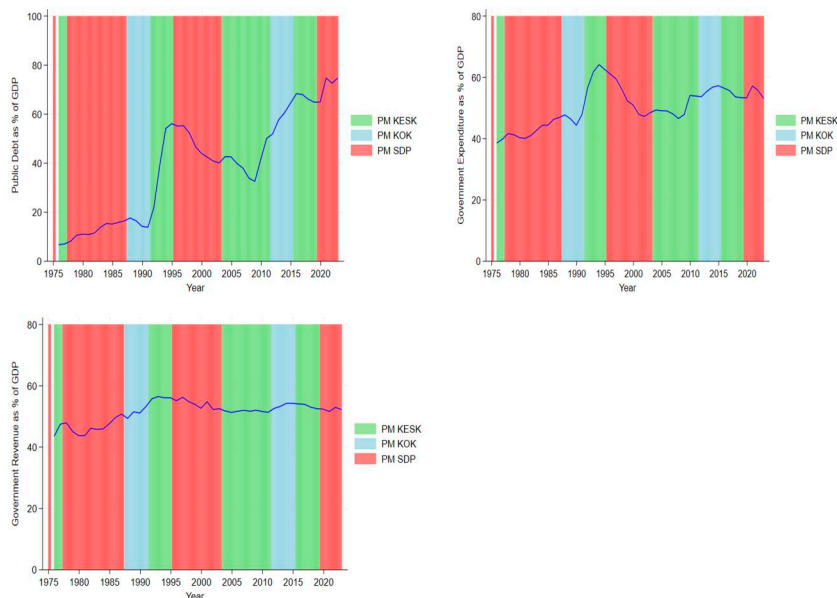
Eight specific features have contributed to the Finnish tradition of multi-party majority governments combined with a consensual and pragmatic decision-making culture. They include the following: (1) an open-list proportional representation (OLPR) electoral system with mandatory preferential voting, which facilitates a wide representation of various social groups (von Schoultz and Strandberg 2023) and enhances intraparty competition in addition to the rivalry between parties (Coffé and von Schoultz 2021; von Schoultz and Papageorgiou 2021); (2) a high degree of party fragmentation without a decisively large party vis-à-vis its competitors (Karvonen et al. 2016); (3) relatively weak leftist parties and the historical strength of the agrarian party; (4) a lack of bloc politics and the parties' reluctance to indicate their preferred coalition partners before the elections and the resulting non-transparent electoral competition culture (Raunio 2021, 169–175); (5) broad government coalitions often consisting of parties from opposite sides of the ideological spectrum (Karvonen 2014); (6) trilateral negotiations between the government, trade unions, and employers' organizations (Kärriylä 2021); (7) comparatively mild ideological polarization between voters (Casal Bértoa and Rama 2021; Dalton 2021) and parties (Simola et al. 2023); and (8) a low level of electoral volatility (Söderlund 2020).

Altogether, the eight characteristics of the Finnish political system imply a lack of clear mapping between the party composition of the government and the overall government ideology, making it more challenging to analyze partisan politics, as reflected by the lack of empirical studies. The most relevant study to date of the partisan effects of politics in Finland is by Meriläinen (2019), who found that a party gaining an absolute majority on the municipal council resulted in decreased public spending. However, no left–right variation could be exploited in such a context since almost every time absolute majorities have been achieved, it occurred in municipalities ruled by the Centre Party. Moreover, it is not possible to differentiate between whether the estimated effect can be attributed to a partisan-based explanation of the Centre party's preferences for public spending or to a common pool problem unrelated to the parties' ideological preferences. Meriläinen (2022) also found a within-party positive association between politicians' education level and a left-leaning ideology. Furthermore, within-party close election results reveal a causal effect of more educated elected municipal councils increasing spending without affecting the budget balance. In a similar fashion, our analysis does not find an association between the ideological lead of the government and public finance measures (see Figure 1) at the national level.

Therefore, we focus our review on different but related existing studies. After introducing the Finnish political context, we study polarization from several angles, given that the differences between the parties constitute the necessary pre-condition for partisan politics to emerge. Second, we review the existing literature on the intraparty composition of parties since it demonstrates more broadly the effects of political representation on policy.

## 2. Finnish Multi-Party System

During the past 100 years, Finland has experienced substantial societal transformations, shifting from an agrarian to an increasingly industrialized nation-state struggling to stay neutral despite numerous international political tensions, to a hi-tech global market



**Figure 1.** The development of national economic indicators based on the ideological lead of the government. *Source:* Yearly government finances data from the [International Monetary Fund's \(2024\)](#) Public Finances in Modern History database. KESK = the Centre Party, KOK = the National Coalition, SDP = the Social Democratic Party.

economy with memberships both in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Finland exemplifies the Nordic welfare model, with universal social benefits and public services, which has largely been the result of consensual policies after World War II and the generally high value that citizens place on such a model (Hübscher et al. 2021; Ahrens and Bandau 2023). The core principle of the Nordic model has been the attempt to build an economically and socially sustainable system that enables all citizens' full engagement in society (Hiilamo 2015) and representation by their 'own' party in negotiations for various social contracts.

In the structuring of political cleavages, Finland differs to some extent from the general West European pattern, which consists of four divisions, namely, center-periphery, state-church, land-industry, and owner-worker (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, pp. 47–50). Since Finland, like the other Nordic countries, is religiously homogeneous, the first two cleavages listed played only a minor role (Karvonen 2014, p. 23). Land-industry and owner-worker cleavages resulting from the industrial revolution have instead been highly relevant for the Finnish party structure, together with specific historical geopolitical factors. These deep-seated cleavages are the key to comprehending the character of a Finnish political landscape once defined as 'frozen' (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), although it has been in flux during the past decades with the emergence of new actors and various types of sociocultural issues now on the political agenda. Traditional left-right issues in economic and social policies have always been highly important in Finland, but the level of left-right polarization has fluctuated considerably over time. Currently, the left-right polarization is fairly low, and new issues related to the sociocultural GAL-TAN dimension (Green-Alternative-Libertarian vs. Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist; see Hooghe et al. 2002; Marks et al. 2006) have become increasingly salient. This shift largely reflects the rise of the populist Finns Party, which has placed such issues as immigration reform, secure borders, and law and order on the political agenda and also contested the role of the EU and climate-change policies (Raunio 2019; Salo 2022). In addition to the left-right and

sociocultural dimensions, a distinctive political division in Finland includes attitudes toward regional equality (Westinen 2015a, 2015b).

The Finnish party system has traditionally been dominated by three medium-sized parties, all established around the turn of the 20th century: the economically and socially conservative National Coalition Party, representing capital/business interests; the progressive Social Democratic Party, representing workers; and the moderate Centre Party, representing agriculture interests and rural areas. In addition, it includes three stable smaller parties: the Swedish People's Party, representing the Swedish-speaking minority (5%); the religious Christian Democrats, represented in parliament since 1970; and the Left Alliance, which was founded in 1990 but can be considered the successor to the Finnish People's Democratic League, an organization of communists and left-wing socialists that became a notable political force after the Second World War. Three newer parties, including an environmentalist party, the Green League, founded in 1987, a right-wing populist party, the Finns Party (founded in 1995) with roots in previous agrarian populist movements, and most recently the right-wing liberal Movement Now Party, founded in 2019, have accompanied such changes. The party system is thus highly fragmented, often requiring numerous combinations to form a government (for more details, see von Schoultz and Strandberg 2023).

Until 2023, Finland had only two levels of representative government: a unicameral parliament in which 200 members of parliament from 13 electoral districts serve 4-year terms and municipal councils for the 309 municipalities. At the beginning of 2023, 21 counties responsible for organizing health, social, and rescue services were established, although a county election had already taken place in January 2022.<sup>1</sup> All three levels of elections (parliamentary, municipal, and county) employ an open-list proportional system based on the D'Hondt seat allocation rule. Mandatory preferential vote requires that voters choose their candidate from a single list with no possibility to choose only a party. All parties and constituency associations are present on a single list, the maximum size of which is determined by the size of the district (when larger than a legally defined minimum number). This situation can result in approximately 500 candidates in a single district in parliamentary elections.<sup>2</sup> Parties can also form pre-election coalitions in the form of joint lists.<sup>3</sup>

The total number of seats for a list is determined by the total number of votes for the list, and whether a candidate appearing on the list is elected depends purely on their ranking by preference votes. Parties or constituency associations cannot guarantee the election of any candidate, and they almost always arrange the candidates in alphabetical order on the list, meaning that parties do not signal their preferences for certain candidates even on the basis of the list order. While the choice of a candidate became more important at the beginning of 2000 (Isotalo et al. 2023b), the pattern was reversed in 2011 and later culminated in the 2023 parliamentary elections, where the widest gap in favor of a party over a candidate had formed (62% vs. 31%; Isotalo et al. 2023b). These features make the Finnish system stand out from most other proportional representation systems: it is highly personalized and competitive both in its interparty (von Schoultz and Strandberg 2023) and intraparty (see, e.g., Coffé and von Schoultz 2021; von Schoultz 2018) dimensions.

Parties thus play a central role in parliamentary decision-making processes. Since the introduction of the Act on Political Parties in 1969, parties represented in parliament have

<sup>1</sup> Already before the county reform, the number of municipalities was substantially decreased, after having peaked at 550 during the post-war period. The political and economic causes and consequences of the municipal mergers have been studied extensively (see, e.g., Hyytinen et al. 2014; Saarimaa and Tukiainen 2015; Saarimaa and Tukiainen 2016; Harjunen et al. 2021).

<sup>2</sup> In local elections, the largest municipality (Helsinki) can have close to 1000 candidates.

<sup>3</sup> Such lists are fairly common in municipal elections (Hortala-Vallve et al. 2024). Researchers have shown that voters strategically target votes within pre-electoral coalitions and that the coalitions may benefit small parties in particular, for instance, by increasing the probability of getting leadership positions (Hortala-Vallve et al. 2024). Pre-electoral coalitions can thus make the representation of different views broader, with implications for the implemented policies.

been entitled to substantial public party subsidies, which already a decade later constituted at least two-thirds of party finances (Karvonen and Berglund 1980, p. 99). In that respect, the system exhibits traits of the cartel party model (Katz and Mair 1995), in which the institutionalized incumbent parties hold cutting-edge positions to keep potential new entrants out (Karvonen 2014, p. 6). Voting in parliament is characterized by a relatively high level of party discipline (Pajala 2013), although the increase in the importance of sociocultural issues of late has given Members of the Parliament (MPs) more room to vote in line with their personal moral and ethical judgments. At municipal decision-making levels, party discipline is weaker due also to the lack of a government-opposition composition.

Partisanship, as reflected in the parties' strong position in decision-making and the close historical roots between parties and various social groups, continues to be among the primary mechanisms through which Finns engage in politics. While only a small fraction of voters and MPs consider the party a primary focus of representation (von Schoultz and Wass 2015), the majority (60%) feel close to a certain party, and the share of party identifiers has only increased since the turn of the millennium (Borg and Paloheimo 2024, pp. 122–123). Class voting also remains significant (Tiihonen 2021; Tiihonen and Söderlund 2024), and electoral volatility is low by international comparison (Söderlund 2020). While this finding may seem surprising given that ideological closeness between parties and party homogenization theoretically form ideal conditions for party switching (Pedersen 1979), candidate-centeredness is one potential reason for voters' loyalty. To attract the highest possible number of voters, parties have incentives to recruit a wide variety of candidates (Arter 2013). A large pool of ideologically diverse candidates within the party list makes it easier to remain loyal to the same party, even if a voter wishes to punish the incumbent for an unsatisfactory performance (Söderlund 2020, p. 473). At the same time, such a situation makes the parties' ideological differences and policy positions more indistinguishable to voters.

Since the 1980s, stable majority governments have become a notable feature of the Finnish party system, even when the prime minister has resigned on some occasions during the electoral term. The motivations for participating even in a surplus majority government relate to the parties' opportunities to attain their policy goals and future electoral prospects, which they perceive as being easier to realize than when in opposition (Jungar 2002). Negotiations on coalition formation often involve a complex bargaining process leading to a program that combines different types of partisan objectives and policy preferences. Such complexity is further strengthened by a lack of legislative rules, as the constitution only defines the general structure of government formation. However, it does not indicate the duties of the formateur, who, in line with an unofficial code of conduct, has been the chair of the largest party, or the duties of the negotiating parties. Notably, neither the government program nor a coalition agreement are binding documents, and they can hence be revised during the term if the coalition partners agree to it.

All these features of the Finnish party system blur the link between voters' preferences, indicated by the election result, the ideological composition of the parties in government, and the implemented policies. This point becomes evident when examining the link between government composition, indicated by the party of the prime minister, and economic indicators, including public debt, government expenditure, and government revenue (Figure 1). The share of government revenues of the GDP reflect that the level of taxation has remained stable during the past 50 years, whereas the share of government expenditure has fluctuated and public debt has increased dramatically, especially during the past two decades. Yet, no systematic trend regarding the party of the prime minister can be detected, namely whether the government was led by the economically conservative National Coalition, the Social Democratic Party, or the Centre Party. The same applies when exploring the conditional correlations between government finances and a major party holding the prime minister's office (see Supplementary Figure A1 in the Appendix). Voters also

tend to reward or punish governmental parties based on their perceptions of the economy, but the magnitude of effects are small, and it seems likely that economic voting mostly applies to floating voters (Mattila 2024).

The veto player effects associated with the tradition of surplus majority coalitions, coupled with major economic fluctuations, have probably contributed to the limited effect of prime ministerial parties on economic indicators. For instance, the severe depression of the early 1990s is visible in Figure 1 in the form of steep increases in both debt and spending. The Centre Party held the prime minister's position until the 1995 electoral victory of the Social Democrats, after which a five-party 'rainbow coalition' that also included the National Coalition was able to lower the level of debt by implementing a tight fiscal policy during a time of strong economic growth. Another major increase in debt followed the financial crisis of 2007, when the Centre Party again led the government. Debt continued to grow in the early 2010s because of the Eurozone crisis and slow economic growth. Moreover, the six-party government, formed after the 2011 parliamentary elections with the National Coalition and as the main coalition partners, was often divided and found it difficult to agree on major reforms. Indeed, toward the end of the electoral term, the coalition started to disintegrate as the Left Alliance joined the opposition due to disagreements over economic policy and nuclear power, respectively.

Yet, the fact that government composition has limited effects on the aggregate does not mean that it lacks policy implications entirely. For instance, the reduction in public debt was one of the main themes in the program of the three-party coalition that entered office in 2015, and it had also featured strongly in the electoral manifestos of the Centre Party and the National Coalition, with the latter obtaining the portfolio of the minister of finance. The debt-to-GDP ratio did indeed decrease during the government's term.

### 3. Party Divides: Evidence from Parliamentary Speech Data

Given the fragmented character of the Finnish party system, the electoral winner must always look for multiple coalition partners to form a majority government. Since the parties do not compete in blocs, they can, in principle, seek partners from all sides of the ideological spectrum. In forming the government, parties negotiate with each other to find out whether their ideological positions can be reconciled to reach a compromise on a coherent program. Many partisan ideological differences have deep historical roots, manifesting themselves in various forms depending on the context and issues on the political agenda. One way to analyze this factor is look at the development of political divides on the basis of parliamentary speech as a measure of ideological divisions across and within parties.<sup>4</sup> While ideological differences between parties may become an obstacle to coalition formation, they are also a necessary condition for a politics–policy relationship. If parties largely shared the same issue positions, then forming a coalition would be easier, but it would not matter much for policy outcomes whether the country has a left-leaning or a right-leaning government or a broader coalition.

A century-long analysis of the development of left–right partisan divides in the Finnish parliament based on speeches (Simola et al. 2023) reveals that the levels of left–right difference have fluctuated considerably during the timeframe of almost 110 years. Certain periods have been marked by a high degree of polarization, while other periods have been more moderate. The current state of polarization is comparably low despite a slightly increasing recent trend. The peak in left–right polarization observed in the 1960s and 1970s

<sup>4</sup> Several sources that make use of parliamentary speeches in quantitative analysis have recently become available in addition to previous qualitative work on speeches in the Finnish Parliament (see, e.g., Pekonen 2011; Palonen and Saresma 2017). They include the cross-country dataset on parliamentary speeches (Parlspeech), which also contains Finnish parliamentary speeches (Rauh et al. 2017), the extensive data collected by Simola et al. (2023) as well as the data collected as part of the SEMPAREL (see Ristilä and Elo 2023) and ParliamentSampo projects (see Drobac et al. 2023).

reflected the presence of the far-left socialist party (SKDL) combined with information influencing by the Soviet Union. Speech patterns can also be informative in terms of the rise of populism. There are two noticeable periods in Finland, the first of which relates to the rise of the Finnish Rural Party (SMP), which received a large protest vote in the 1970 elections, and the second, and still ongoing, is the Finns Party (previously called the True Finns). While the first did not affect left–right polarization noticeably (see [Simola et al. 2023](#)), the second has contributed to an increase in more confrontational debates ([Poyet and Raunio 2021a](#)) and has politicized issues related to the EU ([Raunio 2016](#); see also [Elo 2022](#); [Simola et al. 2023](#)).

Interestingly, government-opposition divides have increased in Finnish parliamentary speech ([Simola et al. 2023](#); see also similar findings by [Nyholm \(1972\)](#) and [Pajala \(2010\)](#) regarding government-opposition voting patterns). While this observation is somewhat in contrast with the consensual decision-making and cross-ideological coalition formation culture, it might partly stem from media presence since the 1990s ([Nieminen et al. 2023a](#)), which has encouraged parties to portray their differences to voters. In addition, reforms made since the 1990s have increased the role of plenary sessions vis-à-vis committee work, which has traditionally been much more important in Finnish parliamentary work ([Arter 1999](#); [Raunio and Wiberg 2014](#); [Poyet and Raunio 2021b](#)). Opposition MPs are nowadays more likely to speak than government MPs, highlighting the importance of plenary debates as an arena for opposition MPs to publicly criticize the government ([Poyet and Raunio 2021b](#)).

Parliamentary speeches also provide a detailed view on what policy topics are considered important at a given time. From 1980 to 2010, the proportion of speech topics dealing with social benefits, social and health care, the public sector, education, energy, crime, and foreign policy have increased ([Ristilä and Elo 2023](#)). Many of them are valence issues, in which parties agree on the political ends (see [Green 2007](#)). On the other hand, speeches on topics such as commerce, regionality, pensions, legislation, traffic and transport, parliamentary factions, voting, law proposals, democracy, development cooperation, agriculture, and housing have decreased, whereas speeches on employment, administration, and taxation have been similarly common during all the years ([Ristilä and Elo 2023](#); see also [Loukasmäki and Makkonen 2019](#)). Discussions on the budget and social problems have been otherwise constant, but they peaked during the 1990s recession in Finland.

In sum, the intensity of the left–right divide has fluctuated a great deal over time, and the current level of polarization is rather low when viewed from a long-term perspective. The left–right divide is currently less pronounced than the government-opposition divide. Moreover, the rise in populism is observable, but less so along the traditional left–right divide. Next, we turn to a similar analysis of partisan divides using data on party manifestos.

#### 4. Party Divides: Evidence from Electoral Manifestos

Parties advocate their positions in several arenas, and whether the issues appear as divisive or uniting may depend on the communication platform. Electoral manifestos indicate party positions and the importance given to different issues, while the specific pledges included therein indicate the tangible implications of party ideologies (see [Thomson et al. 2017](#)). Therefore, they are also a potential constraint in government negotiations since they set certain limits on coalition bargaining ([Harmel 2018](#)).

Importantly, the contents of electoral manifestos predict policy choices, although the strength of this connection depends on the institutional setting. Parties in majority coalition governments are less likely to fulfill their election pledges, as stated in their manifestos, compared with parties in both minority and majority single-party governments ([Thomson et al. 2017](#); on the fulfillment of election promises by the Finnish government parties in 2015–2019, see [Ylisalo and Makkonen 2022](#)). The formation of and decision-making in

multi-party coalitions require bargaining and policy compromises. Voters are not necessarily ready to accept compromises made in interparty negotiations, and the probability of them accepting the compromise inversely correlates with party attachment and the importance of the issue at stake (Plescia et al. 2022; Velden and Meijers 2023).

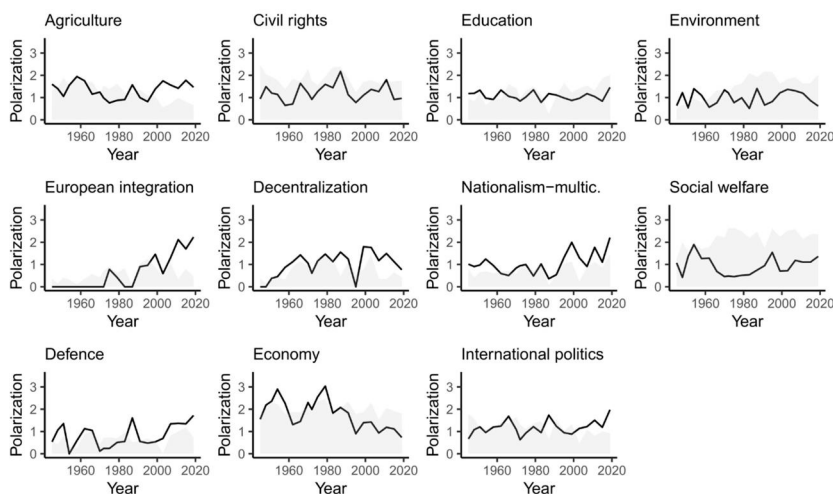
In this section, we contribute to an overall understanding of the issues that have divided the Finnish party system in the post-World War II era. Consequently, we focus on polarization, understood here as the extent to which major parties adopt positions that are far apart from each other in several issue areas (Hanretty 2022). We also consider party placements on two more general policy dimensions, the economic left–right dimension and the social liberal–conservative dimension.

Besides qualitative studies focusing on given policy issues, only a limited amount of research has been published on the manifestos of Finnish parties. Nevertheless, electoral manifestos are clearly multipurpose documents (Harmel 2018). While it is evident that few voters read them, manifestos expectedly guide the campaigns of individual candidates and convey signals about party objectives in the anticipation of negotiations on the program and composition of the government. Empirical studies have, moreover, repeatedly concluded that the contents of electoral manifestos have important policy implications since parties, when in government, tend to fulfill to a considerable extent the pledges included in their manifestos (Thomson et al. 2017; for the Finnish case, see Ylisalo and Makkonen 2022). In systems where governments are coalitions consisting of several parties, the inclusion of party objectives in the coalition agreements represents an important stage in attaining such objectives. A recent report on government formation in Finland suggests that electoral manifestos are an important point of departure in post-electoral negotiations on the government program (Heasman and Backman 2021). Many of the policy objectives specified in electoral manifestos have been included in coalition agreements, with the objectives laid down in the manifestos of government parties having a much higher probability of inclusion than the objectives of the opposition parties (Ylisalo et al. 2023).

Therefore, parties have incentives to take their manifestos seriously, and electoral manifestos can be considered reasonably reliable summaries of the practical implications of party ideologies. Compared with party programs that outline the parties' general principles and objectives in more abstract terms, manifestos typically contain several tangible aims for the upcoming electoral term. Moreover, electoral manifestos reflect issues that are salient in public discussion, and parties expectedly seek to include content that appears attractive in the prevailing opinion climate. Consequently, electoral manifestos are common source materials in analyses of party competition and the links between the programmatic aims and policies of the different parties.

Here, we rely on the most recent version of the widely used Manifesto Project (MARPOR) dataset (Lehmann et al. 2023). Underlying the MARPOR dataset is the saliency theory of party competition (see Klingemann et al. 1994), according to which parties compete by selectively emphasizing and de-emphasizing issues rather than taking opposing stances on the same set of issues (see also Budge and Farlie 1983). Consequently, the scores included in the dataset (ie, MARPOR scores) are intended to measure the extent to which parties emphasize various issues in their manifestos. Scholars have demonstrated, however, that parties do take opposing stances on many issues in their manifestos (e.g., Dolezal et al. 2012). The MARPOR coding scheme implicitly acknowledges this reality (Lowe et al. 2011), as some of the categories reflect positive or negative attitudes toward a specific phenomenon or development, which makes it possible to also estimate differences in positions, not only issue emphases.<sup>5</sup> The most recent Finnish election year covered is 2019.

<sup>5</sup> The MARPOR approach to estimating issue emphases and party positions has been subject to an extensive methodological debate (e.g., Gemenis 2013) that cannot be reviewed here in detail. The log-transformation that we apply expectedly remedies some of the problems associated with raw scores, such as the effect that a small number of sentences may have on the resulting position estimates (Lowe et al. 2011). Nonetheless, the estimates



**Figure 2.** Party polarization in Finland in 11 issue areas from 1945 to 2019; the level of polarization increases with the values on the vertical axis (theoretical minimum zero, where no parties take differing stances).

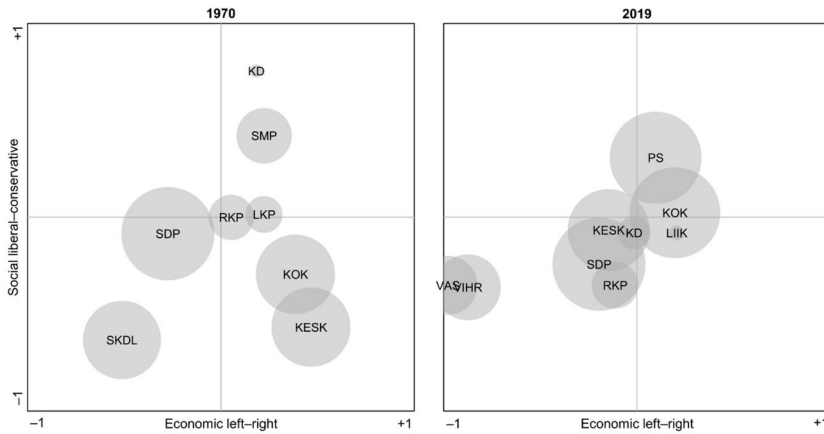
Source: Own calculations based on MARPOR data (Lehmann et al. 2023).

Since we are primarily concerned with central dimensions of conflict between parties, we will first consider those issue areas included as positional categories in the MARPOR data. Specifically, we follow the work of Klüver and Bäck (2019), who identify 11 such issue areas. We operationalize polarization in an issue area as the size-weighted standard deviations of party positions in that area (Taylor and Herman 1971; Hanretty 2022), where the parties' shares of parliamentary seats are used as weights, and a logarithmic transformation is applied to the respective MARPOR scores (Lowe et al. 2011). The issue areas are listed in Figure 2.

The solid lines in Figure 2 show the level of polarization in each issue area from 1945 to 2019. The theoretical minimum level of polarization is zero, while higher levels indicate greater polarization. The gray areas refer to the joint salience of the issue, namely the extent to which parties emphasize the issue in their manifestos, which we define as the size-weighted mean of the salience of the issue to individual parties, calculated by following the method proposed by Lowe et al. (2011). It is noteworthy that the levels of salience relative to the y-axis carry no specific meaning because they were obtained by performing a linear transformation of the weighted averages of log-transformed importance scores. Therefore, they should only be interpreted in terms of changes over time and between-issue differences.

Despite some ups and downs between election years, Figure 2 suggests that new divisive issues have emerged while some formerly divisive issues have become decreasingly polarized. As noted in the previous section, left-right differences were especially sharp in parliamentary debates during the 1960s and 1970s. Part of the explanation for such confrontations seems to be the fact that until the 1980s, parties were relatively strongly divided on economic issues at the core of the left-right conflict. Nevertheless, since then a trend toward converging positions is visible, at least among the largest parties. In contrast, the issue area that we have labeled 'nationalism and multiculturalism' has become one of the most polarizing topics, especially in the 21st century. This shift has been accompanied by similar developments in the area of European integration, which was virtually a 'non-

that we provide should be interpreted in terms of general patterns and minor differences between parties, while years should not be given excessive weight.



**Figure 3.** Finnish party positions on the left–right and liberal–conservative dimensions in 1970 and 2019.

*Source:* Own calculations based on MARPOR data (Lehmann et al. 2023). Larger values indicate more rightist and conservative positions. The sizes of the bubbles depict parties' shares of parliamentary seats, while the location of the abbreviations depicts the parties' estimated positions. KOK = the National Coalition, PS = the Finns Party, SDP = the Social Democratic Party, KESK = the Centre Party, VIHR = the Green League; VAS = the Left Alliance, RKP = the Swedish People's Party, KD = the Christian Democrats, LIIK = the Movement Now.

issue' during the Cold War era, but also in the areas of national defense and international politics, although to a smaller extent. By the time of the 2019 election, these traditionally low-key issues had become more polarizing than the economy.

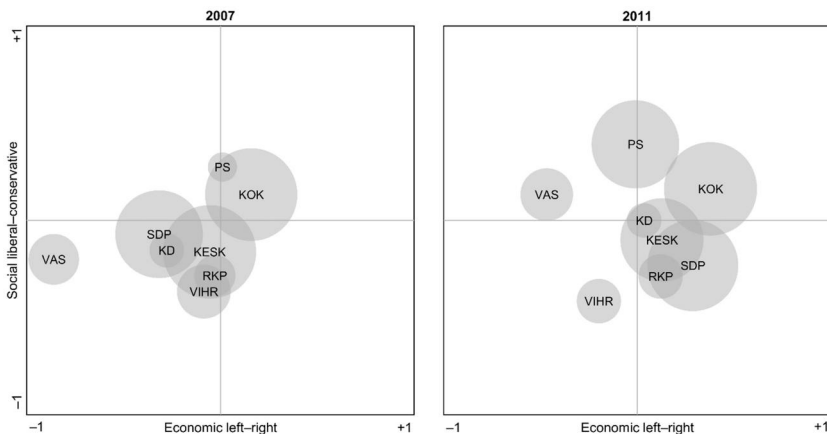
Changes in polarization have not always gone hand in hand with changes in salience. Traditional left–right issues, particularly social welfare and the economy, still tend to be salient campaign themes, in line with their centrality to parliamentary speech (see previous section). Since the level of polarization in the respective issue areas has been modest in recent election years, it is possible to say that the main parties have devoted large shares of manifesto text to advertising relatively similar positions, which has plausibly contributed to voters' willingness to 'shake up' the party system (see Borg 2012a). Similarly, the increased salience of environmental issues has not been accompanied by increased polarization at the party system level, while the joint salience of newly polarizing issues has remained modest. Insofar as political communication has become more confrontational after the 2011 landslide victory of the Finns Party, which is what some analyses of parliamentary debate have suggested (Poyet and Raunio 2021b), such an increase does not seem to reflect generally increasing differences in party objectives.

To provide an overall picture of the programmatic profiles of the parties as well as their changes over time, Figure 3 shows the positions of the seat-winning parties in 2019 and almost half a century earlier, in 1970, along two dimensions: the economic left–right (horizontal axis) and the social liberal–conservative (vertical axis). The dimensions were constructed based on log-transformed MARPOR scores (Prosser 2014). Specifically, both dimensions draw on a sum of several scores pertinent to different issue areas that fall within more generic 'economic' and 'social' domains. The former includes, for example, market regulation, government control of the economy, and welfare-state expansion or limitation, while the latter consists of environmental protection, national way of life, and multiculturalism, among others. For illustrative purposes, the dimensions were rescaled so that their minimum and maximum values became  $-1$  and  $+1$ , respectively, with larger values indicating more rightist and conservative positions. Specifically, the value  $-1$  was assigned to the smallest value in the entire 1945–2019 dataset and  $+1$  to the largest observed value. Due to the nature of the underlying data, the dimensions shown in Figure 3

are not directly comparable to the analysis of the survey data in the next section. Moreover, due to the way in which the indices summarized in Figure 3 were constructed, positions close to the point of origin are not necessarily centrist in any universal sense but rather centrist conditional based on the positions that the Finnish parties have historically adopted. Any interpretations are, moreover, conditional based on the selection of election years.

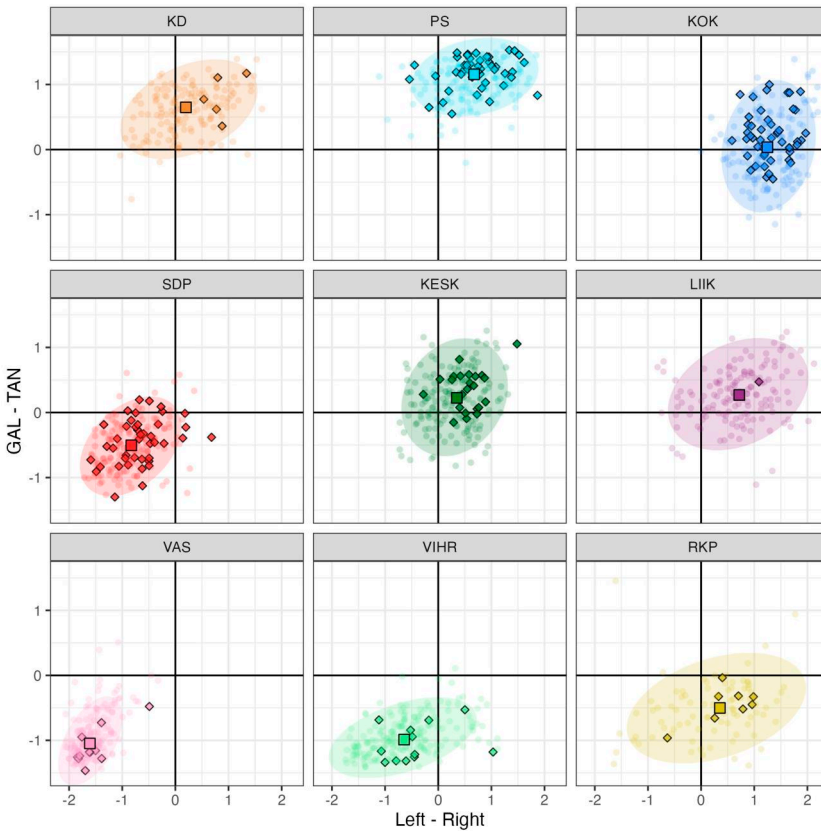
With these caveats in mind, the major parties especially tended to be closer to each other on both dimensions in 2019 than in 1970. As noted, the economy has, generally speaking, become a less divisive issue, which is consistent with the results shown in Figure 2. However, it is not the case that in recent elections, parties have failed to provide alternatives in the sense of converging to the point of sharing similar positions on the left–right axis: the Left Alliance was even further to the left in 2019 than its predecessor, the Finnish People’s Democratic League in 1970. The Finns Party shares the socially conservative profile of its predecessor, the SMP. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the Finns Party differentiated itself from the others on the liberal–conservative dimension due to its conservative stances, with the other parties being quite close to each other. For instance, the Christian Democrats had moved quite close to the center, while in 1970, it was much more conservative compared to the other parties. In any case, Figure 3 points to an increased correlation between the dimensions since the leftist parties also tend to advocate socially liberal positions. In sum, the manifesto data reveal that the party system was more centripetal in 2019 compared with 1970, despite increased polarization in some issue areas and increasingly confrontational parliamentary debates.

Populist parties (SMP and PS) have differentiated themselves from most other parties by advocating socially conservative and economically quite centrist positions, although at least since the 2023 elections (not included in the available data) PS has adopted manifestly right-wing stances on economic issues. As Figure 4 shows, the position of the Finns Party in 2011 remained remarkably similar to its position in 2007, before its landslide victory. The electoral success of the party suggests a demand for such a programmatic profile among the electorate, begging the question of why other parties have not occupied that niche in the programmatic space.



**Figure 4.** Finnish party positions on the left–right and liberal–conservative dimensions in 2007 and 2011.

Source: Own calculations based on MARPOR data (Lehmann et al. 2023). Larger values indicate more rightist and conservative positions. The sizes of the bubbles depict parties’ shares of parliamentary seats, while the location of the abbreviations depicts the parties’ estimated positions. For the abbreviations of parties, see Figure 3.



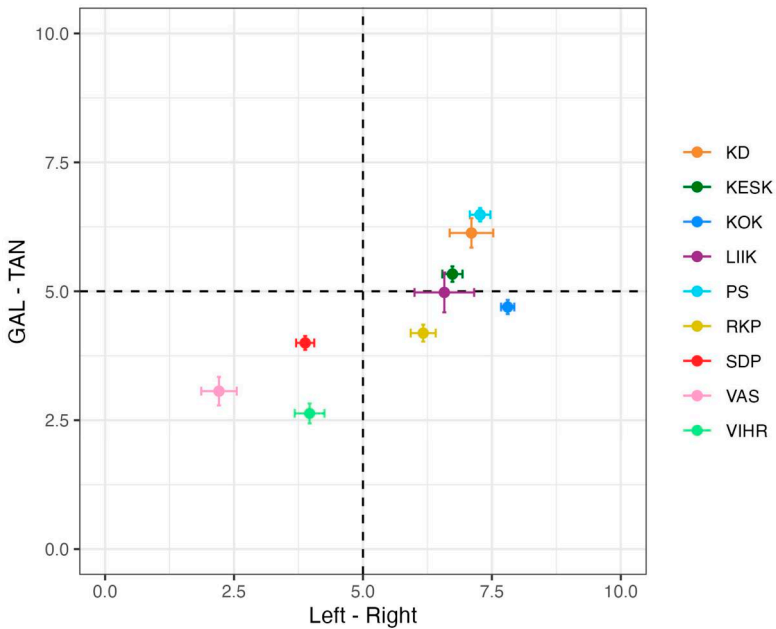
**Figure 5.** Candidate ideological positions by party based on the left–right and GAL-TAN dimensions in the 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections.

Source: *Helsingin Sanomat* voting advice application 2023. For the abbreviations of parties, see Figure 3.

## 5. Voter Responses to Partisan Divides

Voters' responses are one essential component in the process by which partisan ideological positions are transformed into policies. If there are sharp cleavages within the electorate and voters are highly polarized along partisan lines, then parties face greater pressure to deliver ideologically distinctive policies, leaving less room for coalition compromises. [Westinen \(2015a\)](#) suggests that traditional political cleavages in Finland, including those based on native language, type of residential area, and occupation, have been supplemented by gender, age, and educational differences, in line with global trends (see [Burn-Murdoch 2024](#)). This expectation is consistent with the results obtained from parliamentary speech data ([Nieminen et al. 2023b](#)), which show that speech differences by education increased substantially in the 1960s while being much more modest before that time. In a similar fashion, gender speech differences have increased, which is consistent with the interpretation that the gender cleavage became more pronounced toward the end of the 20th century ([Nieminen et al. 2023b](#)).

As a by-product of the culture of multi-party coalition governments, there is less ideological polarization among voters in Finland than in many other European countries



**Figure 6.** Average ideological positions of voters based on the left–right (self-placement) and GAL-TAN (policy positions) dimensions in the 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections.

Source: The [Finnish National Election Study 2023](#). For the abbreviations of parties, see [Figure 3](#).

([Casal Bértoa and Rama 2021](#); [Dalton 2021](#)).<sup>6</sup> The finding same applies to affective polarization, that is to say, positive feelings toward the supporters of one’s own party and negative feelings toward the supporters of other parties, although studies have reported a recent increase ([Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila 2021](#); [Kawecki 2022, 2023](#)). Furthermore, candidates’ responses in voting advice applications (VAAs) do not reveal any signs of systematic growth in ideological polarization over the years. In fact, their views on NATO membership and immigration even showed convergence between the 2011 and 2019 parliamentary elections ([Fornaro 2021](#)).

To convince voters, each party tries to build a distinctive profile by highlighting issues over which they claim the strongest ‘ownership’ ([Banda 2021](#)). Traditionally, an emphasis on themes related to religion and morality, law and order, and national unity has united right-wing parties, while income redistribution and welfare-state programs have been characteristics of left-wing parties ([Budge and Farlie 1983](#)). However, the Finnish practice of forming ideologically diverse ‘oversized’ government coalitions easily blurs the positioning of parties in relation to each other ([Raunio 2021](#)). During electoral campaigns, parties are inclined to differentiate themselves from their competitors to attract potential supporters, but then immediately after the elections, unifying themes become prominent in coalition negotiations ([Raunio 2021](#)). Reflecting this tendency, ideological assimilation among voters has taken place in recent years ([Isotalo et al. 2020b](#)).

It is also noteworthy that voters tend to prefer candidates who are aligned with their parties’ position on both the left–right and liberal–conservative dimensions ([Isotalo et al.](#)

<sup>6</sup> Both studies examine electoral polarization, measured as voters’ positioning of parties on the left–right scale ([Dalton 2021](#)) or the percentage of votes obtained by anti-establishment parties ([Casal Bértoa and Rama 2021](#)).

2020a), contributing to a more moderate political culture. A fragmented party system with a large pool of candidates makes the act of choosing an ideology-driven, issue-based party and candidate a cognitively demanding task for a voter, incentivizing them to apply cues, such as VAAs (Isotalo et al. 2020a; Christensen et al. 2021), a candidate's appearance (Berggren et al. 2017; Bahamonde and Sarpila 2024), political experience (Isotalo and von Schoultz 2024), and their personal connections to the candidate (Järvi et al. 2021). Similarly, when the supply of more established and recognizable 'household' names on the party list is limited, the effect of ideology on candidate preference vote share is greatest (Isotalo et al. 2023a).

Figures 5 and 6 show candidates' and voters' positions on the socioeconomic dimension in the 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections, which captures the tension between labor and capital and the sociocultural liberal-conservative dimension (e.g., Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos 2020). The sociocultural dimension encompasses issues related to values and social identities, often examined using the GAL-TAN scale (Hooghe et al. 2002; Marks et al. 2006; for more on Finland, see Isotalo et al. 2020b). The most noteworthy observation relates to the fragmentation of parties as well as their voters. The ideological proximity of center-right parties on the one hand and left-green parties on the other on socioeconomic issues also stands out. The red-green parties are rather close to each other on the sociocultural GAL-TAN dimension when measured by their adherence to Christian values, recognition of gender diversity, attitudes toward climate change and biodiversity loss, support for work-related immigration and multiculturalism, regional equality, and endorsement of a strong leader. There is a much greater internal divide within the current government coalition, with the Finns Party and the Christian Democrats positioned toward the national-conservative end and the Swedish People's Party candidates being quite close to the Social Democrats.

Yet, it is important to note that the voter-party relationship is not just a one-way street in the sense that parties would only accommodate themselves to the opinions of voters. Conversely, parties also shape the preferences of their voters. Nemčok et al. (2023a, 2023b) refer to two theoretical mechanisms affecting the relationship: the cost faced by voters to acquire information in a complex environment by themselves and the 'motivated reasoning' used by voters to align their preferences with the supported party. The former refers to cases where voters use party cues to form or change their preferences in order to avoid the cost of participating in a complex information acquisition process. The latter mechanism describes situations where party supporters, whose social identity is dependent on the party, shift their preferences together with the party in order to follow the party line. Using a panel survey, the authors found empirical support for preference shaping as a result of two policies implemented by the Finnish government in 2020. Such ideological flexibility from the voters' side provides parties with room for maneuver in coalition governments without the constant fear of electoral punishment.

## 6. Populism as a Challenger of Finnish Partisan Consensus

Unlike spatial models on party competition, at least in their most basic form, empirical research suggests that parties tend to be hesitant to change their programmatic profiles according to changing voter preferences (O'Grady and Abou-Chadi 2019). In addition to the credibility problems resulting from constant changes in policy orientation, most of the Finnish parties have strong programmatic traditions (see Mickelsson 2021), which make such changes unlikely at least in the short term. Based on an analysis of electoral results in Western European countries after the Second World War, scholars have concluded that 'parroting' a challenger party tends to weaken the challenger only if it is simultaneously ostracized by the other parties, meaning that collaborating with it is categorically ruled out (van Spanje and de Graaf 2018). Otherwise, the supporters of the challenger have no

policy-related reasons to switch to an established party whose commitment to its changed platform is questionable. Drawing on individual-level survey data from six countries, [Spoon and Klüver \(2020\)](#) concluded that ‘going tough on immigration’, or the adoption of more hostile stances toward immigration, does little to prevent vote drift from mainstream parties to right-wing populist challengers. A partial exception to this pattern consists of mainstream leftist parties that compete with populist parties for working-class votes. Since Finnish mainstream parties have a long history of accommodating new political forces, including the Finnish People’s Democratic League since the 1940s and the Green League since the 1980s, they have plausibly been aware of such effects. The fact that other parties adopted economic planning ideas in the post-war period did little to prevent the establishment of the communist and left-wing socialist movement, while the Green League became an established member of the party system despite the widespread adoption of environmental themes.

The most recent challenger to the established party structure is the Finns Party. Criticizing political elites and the EU, the Finns Party became the third largest party in the 2011 breakthrough elections. It won voters from all sides of the left–right spectrum, while the Centre Party experienced the largest defeat. Since the Finns Party remained ambivalent in its ideological position, it was able to collect protest votes from various sources. Several reasons contributed to the party’s electoral victory ([Mickelsson 2021](#), p. 358). After the 2007 parliamentary elections, evidence suggested that many parties had circumvented campaign-funding regulations, and particularly the Centre Party, the prime ministerial party at the time, was at the center of the scandal. The Finns Party also benefited electorally from the highly controversial measures taken to support some of the Eurozone countries in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Like elsewhere in Europe, the costs of the financial crisis and austerity measures were distributed unequally in Finland, much like the benefits and costs of globalization in general. While immigration was not the Finns Party’s top priority at the time, some MPs with an anti-immigration profile had already been elected from its list. It is plausible that this legitimized the theme in political discourse (see [Valentim 2021](#)) and, beginning in 2011, helped the party benefit from voters’ anti-immigration sentiments.

The success of the Finns Party can be interpreted against the distinct features of the Finnish party system and political culture. The primary motivation for voters to support the Finns Party in the 2011 elections was the desire to ‘shake up’ a party system they perceived as overly stable ([Borg 2012b](#), pp. 203–204). For decades, all governments consisted of two of the three largest parties (the National Coalition, the Social Democratic Party, and the Center Party) and one or more smaller parties ([Karvonen 2014](#); [Karvonen et al. 2016](#)), which led to deficits in representation regarding certain policy issues. During the early 2000s, the gap between party supply and voter demand began to gradually increase. All established parties were strongly organized along the left–right dimension; with respect to more recent issues, the major parties eventually took positive stances toward European integration due to party competition and government formation, the influence of party elites, and ideological convergence ([Raunio and Tiilikainen 2023](#), pp. 47, 53–54). The issue of immigration, in turn, remained for long non-politicized, regardless of the fact that the need for a foreign labor force to maintain the balance between system contributors (tax revenue) and beneficiaries was already then widely recognized by experts. A number of voters, though, were expressing both dissatisfaction with the political system and anti-immigration attitudes, providing a favorable setting for right-wing populism ([Kestilä 2006](#)). With respect to opinion congruence, a discrepancy between citizens and elites was identified both in attitudes toward the EU ([Mattila and Raunio 2006, 2009](#)) and work-related immigration, in which the gap in congruence was particularly apparent when comparing MPs with non-voters ([Kestilä-Kekkonen and Wass 2008](#)).

The Finns Party decided to remain in opposition after the 2011 election and was able to renew its electoral success 4 years later. After entering the government coalition with the

National Coalition Party and the Centre Party, the Finns Party underwent a transformation, becoming a European-style radical right party focusing mostly on anti-immigration sentiment and supporting right-wing economic policies. This shift was cemented in 2017, with an internal split and the party leadership being taken over by an anti-immigration faction. The splinter party, the Blue Reform, retained its role in government as well as most of the experienced political personnel, yet it failed in the next election while the rump party remained popular (for related reasons, see [Dehdari et al. 2022](#)). Despite the split, in 2019, the Finns Party succeeded in replicating the electoral success of 2011 and 2015. At the same time, the moderate faction that split from the party was eliminated as political force. In 2023, the party retained its popularity and joined the ruling coalition together with the National Coalition, the Christian Democrats, and the Swedish People's Party.

One can only speculate how many of the 2011 voters have remained in the current party. The emergence of the Finns Party has also influenced the other parties and their voters: the emergence of the Finns Party has contributed to an increase in affective polarization. The developments mean that vote switching no longer occurs across the ideological divide but instead takes place between parties that are ideologically proximate and part of the same bloc. It is noteworthy that while the Finns Party is still popular among manual laborers, it has hardly gained any votes from the Social Democratic Party or the Left Alliance since the 2011 election ([Isotalo et al. 2023b](#)). This failure implies that any attempt to 'win back' voters by compromising on their issue positions would not be an optimal strategy for the leftist parties (see [Krause et al. 2023](#)). The Finns Party is also highly popular among young voters, which can be attributed to its use of TikTok and the fact that young people have less trust in societal institutions than the older generations ([Tukiainen et al. 2023](#)). Policy preferences among young Finns Party supporters are quite similar to those of other parties' supporters, except that they oppose increasing work-based immigration. Hence, it seems that aside from its anti-immigration views, young people may be attracted to the Finns Party because of the channels and style of political communication it uses rather than just its policy preferences ([Tukiainen et al. 2023](#)).

A similar episode of populism also occurred in earlier decades in Finland. Despite their similar positions, the SMP was never as electorally successful as its present-day successor, and its popularity fluctuated considerably. For the most part, the SMP remained a protest movement that revolved around its charismatic leaders. The SMP split from the Centre Party in the 1950s and had its roots in the post-war agricultural and housing policy, which, in hindsight, was unsuccessful since it led to a proliferation of small, unviable farms ([Mickelsson 2021](#)). The so-called field reservation policy, which involved paying farmers to stop farming in the 1970s, was one of the key factors that contributed to the rise of SMP ([Stenhammar 2024](#)). The party achieved its peak success in the elections of the early 1970s, when it was able to draw on the discontent among small farmers as a result of structural changes and emigration to cities and abroad. Nonetheless, its support base remained relatively narrow, consisting mostly of small farmers and other low-income people in peripheral areas. Corruption scandals in the early 1980s contributed to its second wave of popularity, when it also succeeded at attracting support in more urban areas. [Mickelsson \(2021\)](#) also points out that, as an agrarian-based protest movement, the SMP was unlike the anti-taxation populist movements that emerged in many other countries. Instead, it remained a leader-centered movement that eventually split apart in the 1970s largely because of conflicts between its leader and newly elected MPs.

## 7. The Link between Politics and Policy

Most research on Finland concerning the policy effects of politics has focused on the intra-party rather than interparty dimension, that is, studies have largely focused on how the characteristics of politicians within the parties affect policy outcomes rather than on how increasing the seat share of a given party affects policy. Moreover, the focus has been on

local rather than national elections and policies. As already noted, the first regional elections took place in January 2022, with county politicians assuming office at the beginning of 2023. Systematic analyses of the policy effects of the partisan composition of regional councils have not yet been published. Yet, it is reasonable to expect that such effects will be limited, especially regarding aggregate measures, like spending levels, because the counties receive their funding entirely from the state based on a set of legally defined criteria, including indicators of a demand for social and healthcare services. Counties have room for maneuver when it comes to the ways in which they use the received funding, but simultaneously they must ensure that statutory services are provided. It is thus difficult to draw any far-reaching conclusions about the impact that parties have on the regional level for the time being, especially because the funding scheme is subject to ongoing debates.

There are several reasons for the intraparty focus in the study of policy effects. First, the Finnish OLPR election system implies that voters are more oriented toward a candidate than a party, as is usually the case in more party-centered political systems, such as the closed-list PR system. Second, as opposed to parliamentary politics, party discipline is not so strong in local Finnish politics. Moreover, typically no stable ruling coalition or opposition exist in local politics, which implies more case-by-case bargaining and voting, where coalitions may change. These types of institutions make local Finnish politics a fertile ground for individual candidates to influence policy. Third, the Finnish OLPR system results in many close elections, even to the extent that many council seats are decided by a lottery because some candidates receive the same number of personal votes for the last seats. Scholars can therefore use lotteries for a randomized controlled trial to detect causal identification whereas for other very close elections, they can use regression discontinuity designs that exploit as-good-as-random variation.<sup>7</sup> However, since the method only assesses within-party variation, partisan effects cannot be identified. Contrary to some other countries, close election designs between parties cannot be used to study partisan effects since party support in Finland is so fragmented that elections are not races for an absolute majority between left-leaning and right-leaning parties. In addition, municipalities do not feature left–right election blocks, which might otherwise be leveraged to explore partisan effects.

Studies addressing the connections between the characteristics of local councils and policy outcomes have produced results that are rather weak or, in some cases, run counter to expectations derived from established theories. [Pettersson-Lidbom \(2012\)](#) employed a regression-discontinuity design, based on data from both Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking municipalities, to test the applicability of the ‘law of 1/n’, finding that spending tends to increase with the number of decision-makers. Contrary to expectations, the results suggest that municipalities with a larger number of local councilors tend to spend *less* on a per capita basis. As a potential explanation, the author mentions the possibility that larger councils are better at monitoring the administration, which has an incentive to maximize its budget. [Ylisalo \(2020\)](#) used panel regression analyses to study the connections between a series of political variables (measuring the fragmentation of the local party system, electoral volatility, voter turnout, and the vote share of center-left parties) and two financial indicators (spending and the annual margin). At least during the given study period (2001–2014), the vote share of the center-left was associated with somewhat *lower* levels of spending per capita, despite there being reasons to expect that support for leftist parties correlates with popular support for higher spending. Moreover, the relationship between party system fragmentation and spending resembled a U-curve, whereby both highly concentrated and highly fragmented party systems were associated with higher spending levels.

<sup>7</sup> Pivotal votes within and between parties are quite common, and voters tend to respond to expectations of close elections by turning out in greater numbers ([Lyytikäinen and Tukiainen 2019](#)). Evidence also exists of strategic voting among Finns. Especially those voting for smaller parties or factions know how to pool their votes in order to compete against the larger factions in intraparty contests within the context of municipal mergers or pre-electoral alliances ([Saarimaa and Tukiainen 2016](#); [Hortala-Vallve et al. 2024](#)).

In contrast, the level of electoral volatility (net shifts of votes between parties) or turnout had no discernible connection with spending. Instead, municipalities where turnout was higher tended to have somewhat higher positive annual margins, or surpluses after current spending, while the association between the other political variables and financial indicators proved statistically insignificant. Ylisalo only studied short-term associations, and the unexpected connection between the ideological composition of local councils and spending may result from longer-term dynamics, for instance, those related to the local industrial structure.

Most Finnish municipalities do not have mayors. Instead, the local administration is typically led by a municipal manager who is employed by the municipality. Since 2006, legislation has allowed for a model in which the chair of the municipal executive board replaces the municipal manager. However, the model is rarely applied in practice, despite the fact that some of the largest cities have adopted it. Therefore, the possible policy consequences of mayors' partisan backgrounds, especially beyond the level of individual municipalities, are difficult to establish.

Scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that who gets elected within a party has important policy effects. They have achieved causal identification by comparing municipalities where municipal employees succeeded in a lottery, followed by a close election, to those municipalities where they did not. The results indicate that a larger number of municipal employees on the municipal council substantially increases public spending (Hyytinen et al. 2018a). Moreover, the increase in spending takes place in the same employment sector where the councilors work. Furthermore, the findings mainly pertain to the largest party in the municipality, suggesting that individual councilors can influence intraparty negotiations, especially regarding topics where they possess expertise, which is reflected in policy outcomes if the party is large enough. The observation also has important implications for studies done outside Finland since in most countries local politicians are non-professionals who have another day job, and if they work for the municipality, they may have conflicts of interest. On the other hand, they may also have valuable expertise.

Others have used a corresponding within-party identification strategy when studying the policy effects of the electing of competent politicians, as measured by education level, income, Mincer wage residuals, and incumbency status (e.g., Meriläinen 2022). The results show that a higher number of highly educated politicians increases public spending, without a reduction in fiscal sustainability. Other competence measures increase fiscal sustainability without leading to changes in spending. Furthermore, having a higher education degree correlates with a more left-leaning ideology, as measured by VAA responses when party fixed effects are controlled for and other competence measures are correlated with a right-leaning ideology. Altogether, competence seems to matter for policy making in a positive way, but it is also in line with the ideological position of the politicians: left-leaning, highly educated politicians increase municipal spending without it resulting in budget unbalances, whereas right-leaning, experienced politicians are able to increase budget balances without decreasing spending.

The composition of decision-makers also affects the allocation of public goods. Affluent areas are overrepresented on the municipal councils, reflecting the higher turnout rates among voters who are more affluent as well as voters' overall tendency to vote for candidates from their own neighborhoods. A study based on within-party lotteries suggests that the probability of school closings during the 4-year council term is halved, from approximately 20% to 10%, when a candidate living close to the school is randomly elected. If the school is closed, affluent voters tend to move away from the neighborhood, which in turn reinforces spatial sorting (Harjunen et al. 2023).

The only study on causal policy effects in Finland conducted at the party level thus far is based on a comparison of municipalities where one party barely gained an absolute majority to those where one party barely failed to obtain a majority (Meriläinen 2019). The

analyses are based on a regression discontinuity design, exploiting as-good-as-random variation in close elections. The results show that one-party rule decreases public spending quite significantly, by almost 500 euros per capita. However, such a design cannot distinguish between two different explanations for the effect, namely between party ideology based on a partisan-related mechanism and a common pool problem unrelated to the ideology of the majority party. The latter theory suggests that when multiple parties form a coalition, common pool problems occur since each party aims to deliver something to their voters. The results could thus be interpreted as suggesting that one-party rule decreases municipal spending, presumably because there are fewer parties to accommodate in negotiations and when voting on the budget. However, it is not possible to determine whether the effects would be different for left-wing and right-wing parties. On the other hand, most of the majority-ruled municipalities are ruled by the Centre Party, which means that the results may also reflect the effect of the Centre Party rule instead of showing the effect of majority rule. The author of the study argues that a likely counterfactual to the Centre Party majority would likely be a coalition involving left-wing parties working together with the Centre Party, which may then favor higher spending. The proposed alternative is a partisan-based explanation for the observed negative effect on spending when one party (often the Centre Party) obtains a majority.

Local election outcomes also affect more than just the composition of the council. [Meriläinen and Tukiainen \(2022\)](#) used a regression discontinuity design, exploiting within-party close elections in Finland, to document an incumbency advantage to the executive both at the individual and the party level. Their results suggest that when a party has more incumbents as candidates in close elections, it tends to obtain more seats on the municipal board. This finding suggests that experienced politicians can navigate the interparty negotiations better. On the other hand, researchers have not discovered a standard incumbency advantage in local elections ([Hyytinen et al. 2018b](#)), indicating that seniority is more valuable to the party than to the voters.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, [Meriläinen and Tukiainen \(2018\)](#) used Finnish municipal election data and regression discontinuity design to show that election results also matter in terms of party leadership. The results show that in instances where a party's top two candidates have a very close vote tally, the candidate who receives more votes, even if only a few more than the runner-up, has a much higher probability of being nominated as the chair of the municipal board.

All these prior studies demonstrate that, at least in local Finnish politics, the intraparty dimension is highly relevant for policy outcomes, being perhaps even more important than the interparty dimension, although the finding is speculative given the limited amount of evidence on the latter. Moreover, it is likely that both dimensions matter on the basis of results obtained using party manifestos (see previous section) as well as the fact that politics in general matter. The importance of the intraparty dimension also shows that Finnish voters got it right when many of them put more focus on the candidate selection vis-à-vis prioritizing the party: within parties, it is more likely that a single vote affects the election outcome, especially in municipal elections, and that outcome is quite likely to affect policies.

Finnish voters are seemingly performing their role remarkably well from the perspective of political selection, despite the complex information requirements of the electoral system. A study conducted by the Finnish Defense Forces on most of the male population revealed that electoral candidates nominated by political parties fare better than the office-eligible population on multi-dimensional tests of cognitive and non-cognitive ability ([Jokela et al. 2023](#)). The politicians elected by voters demonstrate even higher levels of ability. In Finland, a competent, motivated, and honest political class has emerged despite the complex decision-making environment. In addition, political selection matters for the economic

<sup>8</sup> The incumbency advantage, however, applies to parliamentary elections ([Kotakorpi and Poutvaara 2011](#)).

performance of local governments, while positive selection regarding competence is not at odds with equal descriptive representation (Jokela et al. 2023).

## 8. Conclusions and Current Directions

Finland, with a sociopolitical system based on the Nordic welfare model, is one of the most egalitarian countries in the world, characterized by high levels of social trust, social cohesion, sense of intergroup solidarity, and feelings of affinity (e.g., Hall 2017; Pontusson 2021). In many respects, Finland is still a showcase example of one of the Nordic ‘happy democracies’ (Tingsten 1966). Traditional land–industry and owner–worker cleavages have been highly relevant, contributing to a remarkably stable party system. Politics has not been structured as bloc-based electoral competition, like in other Nordic countries, which are often referred to as an alternative to the Finnish way of conducting elections and government negotiations.

In Finland, the labor market tripartite cooperation between employer organizations, labor unions, and the government has curbed the emergence of competing left-wing and right-wing blocs, but at the same time, it has strengthened hegemonic majority blocs and consensus. In other Nordic countries, tripartite cooperation has mainly moderated political blocs but has not prevented their formation (Kärriylä 2021). The effort to find compromises acceptable to all parties through negotiations has formed the conditions for cooperation and enabled a long-term economic policy program. Such consensus politics does have a downside, however, with the political landscape from time to time appearing too consensual and lacking genuine options. A lack of viable alternatives has also decreased voters’ incentives to participate in elections, reflected in a lower level of turnout compared to other Nordic countries (Helimäki and Wass 2024). This environment formed fertile ground for the Finns Party landslide victory in the 2011 parliamentary elections, which stimulated the mainstream parties to streamline their policy stands and sharpened divisions along ideological lines (Salo 2022).

Based on analyses of speeches in the Finnish Parliament, the degree of left–right difference has fluctuated considerably over time, including both high levels of polarization as well as periods characterized by more moderate levels (Simola et al. 2023). The highest level of polarization, in the 1960s and 1970s, can be traced to Soviet influences (Simola et al. 2023), suggesting that external threats to democracy should be taken seriously. Current ideological left–right polarization is comparably fairly low despite a slight increasing trend of late, especially in affective polarization. Based on the manifesto data, traditional left–right issues relating to social policy and the economy have always been highly important. However, the issues exhibit different patterns of polarization over time. Left–right differences were especially sharp in parliamentary debates in the 1960s and 1970s, similar to the speech data results. Since the 1980s, a convergence among the largest parties has been visible, paving the way for voters’ desire to ‘shake up’ the party system.

While arguable, the manifesto dataset is also indicative of actual policy outcomes since manifestos form the basis for government negotiations and, when successful, the official programs of the coalition governments. We did not, however, find direct causal evidence on the effects of partisan politics on policy in Finland. Quasi-experimental research has focused on the intraparty rather than interparty dimension, that is, on an analysis of how the characteristics of politicians within the parties affect policy outcomes. Furthermore, the focus has been on local rather than national elections and policies. Prior studies show that the occupation, education, experience, competence, and residential location of local politicians strongly affect local policies. While the importance of the intraparty dimension is logical in the Finnish open-list electoral system, it is also likely that partisan politics affects policy.

Our review of the existing literature and the manifesto data suggests that large government coalitions and a consensual decision-making culture formed fertile ground for the populist challenger Finns Party to increase its popularity in the aftermath of the financial crisis in the early 2010s. Many scholars have argued that voters turn to the radical right for answers because mainstream parties have adopted overly centrist positions and seem unable to produce effective solutions to prevailing societal problems (for more discussion, see Krause et al. 2023). Yet, such anti-establishment and protest attitudes do not seem to be behind the party's current success, which is more related to a genuine demand by voters for anti-immigration policies. Voters thus support the Finns Party mostly on its own terms, not as a reaction to something other parties have done or left undone (see Dehdari et al. 2022; Borg and Paloheimo 2024).

The rise of the Finns Party has introduced new issues to the political agenda and reinforced competition and polarization on the liberal–conservative sociocultural dimension regarding such issues as migration, the environment, and minority rights (Westinen 2015a, 2015b; Salo 2022; Isotalo et al. 2023b). In addition, the Finns Party has had a significant impact on the government program when included in the governing coalition (Poyet and Raunio 2021a). As a result, consensual politics have shifted toward liberal left and conservative right bloc politics both on socioeconomic and sociocultural issues, with no party adequately representing either side of the spectrum. This shift is also visible in the manifesto data, as the issue area labeled ‘nationalism and multiculturalism’ has become one of the most polarizing issues recently. Altogether, the latest developments represent a considerable paradigm shift from the catch-all parties and centrist-seeking policies typical of Finland for many decades. Hence, it is possible that the link between politics and policy will become more pronounced in the future, motivating even more research on the subject.

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