Discussion

The rise and uncertain future of the True Finns: An outsider’s reflections

Peter Kivisto
Augustana College

In the parliamentary elections that took place in April of 2011, the True Finns (PS)1 scored a surprising electoral result when it captured 19.1 percent of the vote, which increased the party’s parliamentary seats from 5 to 39. The media in Finland referred to the party as the winner of the election, despite the fact that it actually finished third behind the National Coalition (Kok) and Social Democratic (SDP) parties. I knew the True Finns for its anti-immigration and anti-EU stances, but did not know much about its history, sources of electoral support, or internal divisions. Neither did I have a clear read on how to locate it vis-à-vis any number of other right-wing populist parties in Europe. Thus, in the days after the election I contacted several people to ask for their impressions and to request that they help me better understand the discussions that were underway about whether or not to attempt to bring the party into a coalition government.

There were several themes that emerged out of those conversations. The first is that the True Finns is a classic example of a populist party. Not only does it have a prior historical referent in Veikko Vennamo’s Finnish Rural Party (SMP) that existed from the 1970s until the mid-1990s, but the leader of the True Finns, Timo Soini, was an active member of that party and no doubt had in mind creating a party that would, in effect, be the heir to that legacy—but confronting a somewhat different set of challenges, particularly those that have arisen in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland’s entry into the EU, its embrace of the euro, and the shift from being a nation of emigration to one characterized by modest but rising levels of immigration. Second, some members have leftist backgrounds, with connections to the industrial working class. This may account in part for the party’s support of the welfare state, making them di

1 During the past few years the party’s leadership has sought to change the English translation of Perussuomalaiset to other options, including Ordinary Finns, Regular Finns, Basic Finns, or simply Finns. While some commentators have begun calling it the Finns Party, I stick with the True Finns not only because some of whom I consider to be the most astute commenters have done likewise, but also because I think this designation captures well the ethnic particularism of its populist message.
I had been asked to give a talk at the Finnish Ministry of the Interior’s Seminar on Migration and Integration at the Mauno Koivisto Center in Turku on May 17, 2011, a month after the election. Moreover, I was explicitly asked to offer my thoughts as an outsider on the True Finn phenomenon. This event took place, I should point out, shortly after the True Finns had decided to remain in opposition rather than join a coalition government. This was a rather daunting request since I knew fully well that there was much that I did not understand, but nevertheless, I addressed the assembly with a talk titled, “Satisfying Labor Demand through Migration in a Period of Anti-Immigrant Populist Ascendency.” My comments on the True Finns during that talk amounted to reading the situation through the lens of the system I am part of: Finland’s multi-party parliamentary system seen in the context of America’s two-party system and Finland’s consensus culture in comparison to the more conflictual political culture of my homeland. I indicated my surprise that Finns uniformly appeared to speak about the victory of a party that received fewer than 1 in 5 votes and finished third among the parties, and that as a result the idea of bringing the True Finns into government was viewed as an appropriate course of action. I noted that around the same percentage of the American electorate revealed in several polls that they were convinced that Barack Obama was not a U.S. citizen, but was a closet Muslim.

Many of the people holding such views were affiliated or identified with the Tea Party, which is not in actuality a party, but rather a right-wing populist movement. And as a movement, it has both an Astroturf quality insofar as it has been fueled by major donors such as the billionaire Koch brothers, but it also has a genuine grassroots dimension. In any event, to the extent that the Tea Party is located as a faction within the Republican Party, it defines itself as an insurgency whose goal is to rid the party of anyone not seen as a true conservative. The Tea Party is the current incarnation of the radical right in the Republican Party, an element that historian Richard Hofstadter (1965) a half century ago argued was characterized by a “paranoid style” of political engagement. The Tea Party, despite claims of being a novel phenomenon that brought heretofore apolitical people into the political arena, is actually rooted in and emerged out of the 1980s Christian right or the longstanding libertarian wing whose patron saint is Ayn Rand.

The Tea Party became an important constituency in the Republican Party in no small part because the mainstream leadership of that right-of-center party saw these radical right voters as critical in insuring that it would remain competitive with the Democrats. At the same time, some understood this to be either a bargain with the devil that might come to haunt it down the road or, at best, an unstable coalition. But certainly there was no desire on the part of the Democratic Party to legitimize these radical elements or to seek to pursue consensus with them. If they had, they would have been quickly disabused by the anti-liberal democratic worldview of the Tea Party, which had no intention of seeking to cooperate with or accommodate to what they define as an enemy. In this they implicitly agree with Carl Schmitt (1996 [1932], 26) that “political actions and motives can be reduced [to those] between friend and enemy” rather than as a consensual view of politics would suggest a contest between competitors or opponents. These are not merely semantic distinctions, for the political enemy, according to Schmitt, is always “the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specifically intense way existentially something different and alien…” (Schmitt 1996 [1932], 27).

After my talk, I sat next to Ritva Viljanen, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior. I asked her if she had favored bringing the True Finns into government or keeping them in opposition. Being a polished civil servant, she knew better than to answer me directly. Since Soini had decided that he would not bring his party into a ruling coalition, it was a moot point. Viljanen said simply that her work and that of the Ministry would be much easier without them in the government. The existing consensus on matters related to immigration and integration policies would likely be able to remain in force.

Locating the True Finns along a left-right continuum

What do the True Finns stand for? One way to answer this question is to examine the party’s presentation of collective self to the electorate. Perhaps the most idealized presentation appears in party platforms, which are the products of judgments by party leaders about how to best summarize the party’s stance on various issues as well as specifying in some fashion the underlying political principles from which those particular positions derive. The English-language summary of the True Finns’ 2011 program begins by stating that humans are by nature social beings whose true goal is to live a dignified life. This statement sets the stage for several more pointed assertions: (1) citizenship is rooted in the nation-state (and thus implicitly not in a supra-national entity such as the EU); (2) citizens ought to be both well-informed and active participants in decision-making—what might be construed as a republican rather than liberal perspective on the role of citizens in modern democracies; (3) the True Finns seek to protect against “an unconcerned and faceless bureaucracy”; and (4) Finns must not relinquish the right to make decisions confronting the nation. This last point is clearly aimed at the EU.

Reflecting anxiety about national identity and Finnish culture, the platform stresses the distinctiveness of Finnish culture and claims that in a multicultural world, Finnish culture should be seen as an aspect of that global culture that “should be promoted and defended.” In this regard, the Finnish language is to be privileged and the place of Swedish needs to be reduced. There appear to be two reasons for raising the Swedish question—something not on the agenda of any of the nation’s other political parties (aside from the Swedish People’s Party, of course). First, as the Fennomenal nationalists of the nineteenth century contended, the essence of Finnish culture is contained in the Finnish language, Swedish being the product of imposition due to centuries-long Swedish political hegemony. The second point is linked
to the first insofar as the True Finns’ anti-elitism is in no small part directed at the Swedish-speaking minority.

In defending Finland’s version of the Nordic welfare state, the platform is framed by trying to balance the obligations of Finnish society to its citizens with the responsibilities of citizens for their own well-being. The nationalist character of the party is most clearly revealed in the discussion of the EU. Rather than calling for severing membership, the platform promotes what it calls “active skepticism.” The EU is viewed as suffering from a democratic deficit. In this official position, as opposed to comments in interviews and political speeches, where the talk of leaving the EU is common, the True Finns’ platform seeks to reduce the EU’s role in domestic issues and Finland’s contributions to the EU. The platform writers contend that the EU’s proper role should be limited to that of a common market. The party opposes any further eastward membership expansion. It insists that EU membership should not be enshrined in the Finnish Constitution.

Whereas on topics such as same sex marriage, the platform is clear but brief, stating simply that the party supports a traditional view of the family, not only does the EU receive considerable attention, but so does immigration. The platform calls for a “more balanced and rational immigration policy,” which entails limiting immigrants to those who either have jobs or own businesses. A call for reducing the number of students in Finnish universities appears to be at least in part an attempt to reduce the number of international students studying in the country. Without spelling out what an appropriate level of immigration would look like, it is clear that the party does not want Finland’s immigrant population to grow to levels similar to, for example, Sweden. Of particular concern is constraining immigration via family reunification, speeding the processing of asylum requests, and undertaking a cost-benefit analysis in determining refugee quotas. In terms of integration policies, the guiding principle is laid out very explicitly: “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Immigrants who violate Finnish laws should be deported, and Finnish citizenship must be earned. The implicit critique of multiculturalism can be seen best in what is not said: there is no mention of valuing diversity or of respecting different cultures. Finnish culture is, by all means, to be valued, but this attitude does not appear to extend to other cultures.

When these positions on national identity, the EU, and immigration are connected to the rest of the document, the True Finns can reasonably be defined as a radical, but not extremist, right-wing party insofar as in its official positions it avoids the overt racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia evident in Europe’s extremist right-wing parties. Terms such as extremist, radical, and far-right are sometimes used in different ways by various analysts, which can lead to a certain amount of confusion. But, I think, what is at issue is whether or not a particular party is or is not a threat to constitutional democracy and to the core liberal values that shape such political systems. In the case of the True Finns, commentators have accurately portrayed the party as looking more like the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) than the British National Party (BNP), which would mean they are not seen as posing such a threat. It has often been noted, for example, that the True Finns were quite different from the Sweden Democrats. This view appears to be widely held by those in Finland’s political mainstream. Yet if one compares the party’s platform with that of other Finnish parties, certainly on the two key issues of the EU and immigration, the True Finns Party appears to have deliberately defined itself as an anti-establishment party.

Of the three major mainstream parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) is viewed as the least enthusiastic about immigration. Yet their platform clearly articulates the need for immigration, linking it to labor shortages and locating policy decisions in terms of the goal of creating an open society. Pointing to the problem of social marginalization and residential concentration of some immigrants, the call is for policies designed to rectify those concerns rather than curtailing migration flows. Likewise, while indicating concern about the bailouts of some EU member states and the need to deepen the democratic character of the EU itself, the SDP, nonetheless, offers a robust endorsement of both the euro and Finnish membership in the EU. Like the National Coalition Party (Kok) and the Centre Party (Kesk), the SDP endorses existing approaches regarding both immigration policies and Finland’s relationship with the EU, while suggesting the need to refine and revise them as circumstances dictate.

The centrality of immigration should not be underestimated. Right-wing populism is fueled by specific types of grievances. Elisabeth Ivarsflaten (2008) identified three types: (1) those associated with economic factors, which can entail support for what are perceived to be right-wing economic policies or a more general condemnation of existing economic conditions; (2) those focusing on animosity toward political elites, who are seen as unaware of and unconcerned about the problems confronting ordinary people and who are inclined to be corrupt; and (3) those concerned with migration, predicated on the view that more restrictive policies are necessary. What she discovered in her examination of seven populist right parties was that the one grievance that all shared and that served as a common mobilizer of support was immigration. This conclusion can be linked to the findings of Geertje Lucassen and Marcel Lubbers (2012), which is based on European Social Survey data for 11 European countries. The question they posed was whether what they describe as “far-right-wing preference” is motivated by economic or cultural threats posed by immigrants. They were unequivocal in concluding that “cultural threats are a much stronger predictor of far-right preference than are economic ethnic threats.” This is a reflection of the fact that right-wing populism is driven to large extent by fear and anxiety about the future of national identity—a national identity perceived to be challenged by newcomers who are different and by multiculturalism, which is viewed as promoting difference in order to undermine a common shared national identity.

The True Finns were not one of the cases in either of these studies, but the nativism that characterizes their position in the Finnish political landscape suggests that the primary factor explaining the party’s successful mobilization of new supporters in 2011 has far less to do with economic fears as-
associated with the 2008 recession and more to do with what are perceived to be longer-term trends changing the character of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity. Their anxiety is about the bases of national identity.

What makes the True Finns different from the more far right political parties in Europe is certainly not their nativism. It is constantly on display, central to the political performances of Soini and his parliamentary delegation. Nor is it their populism, for anti-elitism is a fundamental aspect of their “calling card.” In this regard, Soini is clearly the political heir of Vennamo. Yet, according to Cas Mudde (2014), Finland does not have what he defines as a “populist radical right party” (PRRP)—what others call extremist. In his 2012 Stein Rokkan lecture, he identified three central features that constitute the shared “core ideology” of PRRPs. Since nativism and populism are two of the central features, one can assume that Mudde thinks the True Finns do not fit the model because it does not embrace the third feature, which he identifies as authoritarianism. As such, it ought not to be characterized as a threat to democratic institutions or practices.

Was 2011 a watershed event?

The True Finns’ delegation entered the Eduskunta in opposition. In an opinion piece in the Open Democracy online forum, journalist Johanna Korhonen (2013) contends that the 2011 election signaled “the crumbling of Finland’s consensus culture.” In her view, the consensus that links the main political parties has been achieved by repressing debate on difficult, potentially conflictual issues. Her example is immigration. She agrees with right-wing nationalists that criticism of existing immigration policies has not been tolerated. I doubt that claim can be empirically confirmed. For one thing, in Finland as elsewhere, immigration’s critics have been quite vocal, and not only those located on the political margins, but also within the ranks of the mainstream parties. What Mudde (2013, 1) says about debates over immigration throughout Europe is that right-wing populists have served as catalysts, but not as initiators of these debates. In short, disagreements about immigration policies do not only emanate from the far right, but can be seen in other sectors of society as well.

Thomas Huddleston, the Research Coordinator for the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), applied the True Finns’ manifesto on immigration to determine what would happen to Finland’s favorable ranking on the MIPEX (it ranked fourth) should their policies be implemented. He concluded that Finland’s score would drop from 70 to 59, resulting in the country nearly falling out of the Top 10. He urged the main political parties to erect a “cordon sanitaire” to keep the True Finns from influencing policy (Huddleston 2011). Finland’s policies have not changed and according to the latest MIPEX rankings, it remains in fourth place, its overall score dropping from 70 in 2011 to 69 in 2014. In short, the True Finns have not succeeded in changing the nation’s fundamental approach to immigration.

Karina Horsti and Kaarina Nikunen (2013) point to the challenges of professional journalists in an era in which online discussions, blogging, and other forms of communication made possible by technological developments have proliferated. Contrary to those who think the discursive range in Finland is constricted by a consensus culture, they see it as remarkably expansive and fragmented. In this new communicative terrain, Horsti and Nikunen believe there is a need for a new ethic of journalism to assist in evaluating and commenting on the new communicative arenas. They focus on anti-immigration virtual communities, particularly those associated with Halla-aho’s Scripta blog and the Hommaforum. Rather than calling for restrictions on free speech, they urge what they call “the ethics of hospitality” that permits inhospitable discourse while locating it within the moral framework of promoting a “multi-ethnic public sphere” (Horsti & Nikunen 2013, 489). Whether or not one agrees with the normative dimension of this article, it provides solid evidence that far from being repressed, right-wing populism’s positions on contested issues are widely disseminated and easily accessed.

Underlying these substantive issues is the question of how the True Finns managed to do so well in 2011 and what it might portend for the future. What accounts for the dramatic increase in support they received from the preceding election? As with other anti-establishment parties from both the left and the right, commentators tend to stress that the 2008 economic crisis set the conditions for a rise in protest votes by a disgruntled and disenchanted electorate. In Finland’s case, the euro crisis seemed particularly large and many—not just the populist right-wing—were unsympathetic to what were perceived to be the profligate nations of Portugal and Greece. Add to this a funding scandal tainted the National Coalition Party and Centre Party, leading to a desire among some of the electorate to punish them at the polls. This might account for a decline in support for the major mainstream parties, but there were other alternatives besides the True Finns. Why did this particular party fare so well? Mari Niemi (2012) points to Soini’s leadership skills. He came across to many as a genuine everyman, with an ability to be pointedly critical and humorous at the same time. His political performances as both a messenger for the party and as its key defender proved to be quite convincing (Niemi 2012, 15).

Shortly before the 2011 election, David Arter described the True Finns as a party that was prepared to break through as a serious political party. He characterized the evolution of the party as one entailing a shift from being merely anti-establishment to becoming right-wing populist, advancing what Soini liked to call “responsible populism” (Arter 2010, 490). Arter characterizes it as a variant of “Christian social” populism, committed to traditionalist values and increasingly hardening its line on both immigration policies and on a
monocultural version of national identity and welfare chauvinism (Arter 2010, 496-499). In regard to its embrace of the Finnish welfare state, the True Finns are unlike the Progress Party in Denmark or the Tea Party in the U.S. insofar as it does not endorse the ideology of small government, with an emphasis on an anti-tax and anti-regulation program. Arter suggested that by sharpening the party’s identity and presenting that identity to the electorate, the True Finns were shifting from a party that relied simply on broad-stroke protest to one with an ideology that might be effectively marketed in the political arena, in so doing appealing to people who do not want to “waste” their vote.

In a follow-up article that analyzed the 2011 electoral results, Arter (2013) concluded that the predicated breakthrough had in fact happened and that it occurred to large extent because of the successful strategies it employed in creating its candidate lists, stressing its ability to optimize intra-party competition. Be that as it may, the question is whether support for the True Finns was geographically concentrated. Related to that question is determining which of the major parties suffered the most as a result of the success of the True Finns. In his assessment of voting patterns throughout the country, Jussi Westinen (2014) found that rather than a particular regional concentration of support, the True Finns elicited support—which he describes as “a political protest”—across the entire nation. Moreover, all three of the largest parties—Kok, Kesk, and SDP—experienced declining support. That being said, for Kok, the decline was 1.9% points and 2.3% points for the SDP. The biggest loser was Kesk, with a 7.3% points reduction in support, which is not surprising given that it is the heir of the Agrarian League and thus its voters may likely be more attuned to the appeal of the successor party to the Finnish Rural Party.

While these studies are helpful in partially accounting for 2011, they do not address the factionalized nature of the party. During the years between 2003, when the party received only 1.6% of the total vote, and 2011 the ranks of the party grew, as noted at the outset, in no small part because of the entry of more radical elements associated with organizations such as Suomen Sisu. In short, there was a wing of the party, under the nominal leadership of Halla-aho that made it difficult for Soini to project the True Finns as the representation of responsible populism. Ann-Cathrine Jun gar (2013) estimated that about a third of the True Finns elected to the Eduskunta came from this wing of the party. Indeed, the uncivil racism, xenophobia, sexism, and bigotry of many True Finn spokespeople, including members of the Eduskunta forced Soini to continually respond to questions about why he tolerated such conduct. What did not happen after the election or anytime thereafter was a purge of those extremist elements—something, recall that one of the people I spoke with soon after the election predicted would happen.

A revealing exchange occurred on February 20, 2013, when Soini was interviewed by Stephen Sackur on the BBC’s “HARDtalk.” Midway through the interview, he was asked about the racists in the party, given his earlier pledges to have a zero-tolerance for racism. His response was disingenuous, for he started by saying that he was not a racist, indeed could not be a racist, because he was a Catholic. He then attempted to deflect questions about racists in the party to himself, the effect being rather like proclaiming “le parti, c’est moi.” Thus, in response to the question, “Is there a strand of racism in the party,” he replied “No, I don’t hate anyone.” This rhetorical strategy clearly unnerved Sackur, who asked pointedly and repeatedly why recurring embarrassing racist comments had gone unpunished. When asked why Soini had not forced racist and Islamophobic provocateurs out of the party, he curtly replied, “Why should I?”

Jungar (2013, 7) pointed out that at least up to 2013, the mainstream parties, with the exception of the Greens and Swedish People’s Party, had not attempted to marginalize the True Finns as political pariahs, which she attributed to the fact that insofar as it was perceived to be a successor party, it functioned with a “reputational shield.” One might reasonably assume that the gloves would come off should the True Finns increase their share of the vote and begin to look, as Arter predicts, like a party with staying power, and should Soini continue to operate with the assumption that he cannot afford to purge the Halla-aho faction. The mainstream parties would likely attack the extremist elements in the party, thereby challenging the legitimacy of Soini’s claims to advance a responsible populism.

But at the moment it appears that something else is happening, namely that the level of support for the True Finns is actually declining. In his interview with Soini, Sackur suggested as much by asking whether the 2011 election was actually the high water mark for the party, and moreover questioned whether the decision to remain in opposition was a mistake. While Soini of course disagreed with the idea that their moment had passed, he did seem to imply that he may have regretted the decision not to participate in a coalition government. Which brings us to the most recent electoral test, the European Parliament elections in Spring 2014. In March, just before voters went to the polls, Mudde (2014) predicted that the far right, anti-European populists were unlikely to achieve a major victory. While what he calls the “motley crew” of parties in some countries might do well, in others they would not. One can rightly claim, as the True Finns did, that they had a successful election insofar as their percentage rose from 9.8% in the 2009 European elections to 12.9% five years later and their number of seats increased from 1 to 2. On the other hand, this means that not only do they hold a mere 2 of 13 seats, but their percentage of the vote was down from an earlier 21% polling figure and from the results in 2011. This might lend credence to the idea that the party’s zenith of electoral appeal was reached three years earlier, when the full brunt of the recession was being felt and anxiety about national identity was most intense. Soini clearly believes he is in it for the long term, but one presumes he frequently looks over his shoulder at the fate of Vennamo’s Finnish Rural Party, hoping to learn how to avoid a similar fate.

References
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