THE FINNISH POLITICAL SYSTEM (3 ECTS)

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**Background and objectives**

The objective of the course is to introduce students to the Finnish political system. After the course, the students should understand how the political system of Finland operates and how the Nordic model of politics differs from other democracies.

The lecture series focuses on the Finnish political system. In addition, students are expected to read an article about Nordic politics.
**Course organisation**

The dates and topics of the lectures are:

- 9.10. Introduction / Political culture
- 10.10. Voting and elections / Political parties / Parliament / Government / President
- 11.10. Corporatism and the welfare state / EU and security policies / Swedish-speaking minority / Concluding discussion

Course evaluation is based on participation in the lectures and a learning diary. The learning diary (8-10 pages, font size 12, 1½ spacing) must be submitted by email to the teacher by 3 November.
POLITICAL CULTURE

- The homogeneity of the population
- The population of Finland is 5.5 million and is projected to stay at approximately the current level in the near future
- The official languages are Finnish, spoken by 88 % of the population, and Swedish, the first language of 5.3 % of the citizens
- 72 % of Finns are Lutherans
- Culturally Finland is still homogeneous. 6.2 % of the population were of ‘foreign background’ while 4.2 % held foreign passports (2015). Estonians and Russians are the largest groups
- Nonetheless, Finland has become rapidly more multicultural since the early 1990s
Structural change

What sets Finland apart in a European comparison is the prolonged predominance of the primary sector (agriculture and forestry) in the economy. After the Second World War markets of pulp and paper industry boomed, and war reparations to Soviet Union made it necessary to expand the share of the metal industry in Finland’s industrial output. However, the secondary sector of the economy never became as important in Finland as in the UK, Germany or many other central European states.

From the 1970s onwards Finland rapidly became a post-industrial society where the tertiary sector of the economy (private and public services) engaged more than half of the labour force. In 2011 74% of the labour force worked in the tertiary sector.

The share of labour forced employed by the primary sector (basically agriculture, forestry and fishing) has shrunk from almost 70% in the 1920s to the current level of below 5%.
- **Unitary country (strong ‘centre’)**
  - Finland is a unitary country that has so far had no democratically elected regional institutions
  - The autonomous Swedish-speaking province of Åland has just below 30,000 inhabitants
  - The country is in 2017 divided into 311 municipalities (452 in 2000), the majority of which are in terms of population rather small rural municipalities
  - While municipal governments are responsible for much of the total government spending, the sub-national level does not constitute an important constraint on national government. The spending of the local governments is mainly related to implementing national legislation (primarily education, health care and social security)
  - A major reform of health and social services includes the establishment of directly-elected regional councils (‘counties’). First regional elections are (currently) scheduled for October 2018. The counties will provide many of the services previously handled by municipalities, notably health care and social services
No tradition of direct democracy

National referendums, which are consultative, have been used twice: in 1931 on the prohibition of alcohol, and in 1994 on EU membership.

The new constitutional amendment (2012) strengthened direct democracy by introducing the citizens’ initiative.

At least 50,000 signatures is needed to submit an initiative for a new law to the Eduskunta.

The mechanism has proved (surprisingly) popular and it has facilitated debates about issues that might otherwise not rise to the political agenda – same-sex marriages, ban on fur farming, Swedish as a compulsory school subject etc.

There have also been tensions, not least in the parliament: a question of how to bring together representative, electoral democracy and the citizens’ initiative as an example of new, more direct ‘between-elections’ democracy.
Centre-periphery cleavage

Territorially Finland is the eighth largest country in Europe. Eastern and northern regions are sparsely populated. The capital Helsinki together with its surrounding areas has above one million inhabitants.

Industrialization and the move to cities happened later than in most European countries.

While agriculture is not economically very important, agriculture and countryside in general have a strong sentimental value for the Finns – the strategy of ‘tying people to the land’ (small farms, forest owners).

Agrarian parties representing the periphery in the Nordic countries – the Centre Party in Finland.
Land of ‘objective’ media?
- The Nordics buy and read more newspapers than other Europeans
- A high level of trust in media
- A radical decline in the share of newspapers that are officially or publicly affiliated with political parties
- The concentration of media ownership together with the decline of party-affiliated newspapers means that the news content of traditional media (excluding the Internet) has become increasingly similar, with less alternative views offered to the citizens
- Media has become an important arena of policy-making. Policy proposals are to a large extent both presented and discussed in the media, and media have an important effect on the agenda of public political debate. As to the official agenda of political decision-making, the effect of the media remains more limited
 Citizen attitudes and participation
Nordic citizens place more trust in their national parliament, their legal system, their police force, their politicians, their government, and in democracy in their own country than Europeans on average.
High levels of trust in fellow citizens – such interpersonal trust has a positive effect on political participation.
High political trust in the Nordic countries is often explained by the Nordic welfare state model, which promotes equality and universal welfare programmes. Both these attributes are essential for building social trust, another important explanatory variable of political trust.
Furthermore, corruption in the Nordic countries is comparatively very low, and has been seen as a prerequisite for the continuously high political trust in the Nordic countries.
High levels of political participation – strong civil society based on a broad range of interest groups and citizens’ associations

Relatively high levels of turnout – but considerably lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries

Openness in administration – access to documents; very regulated society, for example concerning how political parties operate

In 2016 Finland was the third least corrupt country according to Transparency International. Denmark had the lowest corruption, Sweden was the fourth and Norway the sixth least corrupt country in the world
POLITICAL TRUST
sum variable (trust in parliament, politicians and parties),
European Social Survey 2010 (scale 0-10)
Small ‘borderland’ with a history of conflicts

- Having formed a part of the Swedish empire since the thirteenth century, in 1809 Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian empire.
- In 1860 Finland acquired her own currency, the *markka* or Finnish mark.
- The constitution adopted in 1906 established – as the first European country – universal suffrage. At the same time the old four-estate assembly was replaced by the unicameral national parliament, the Eduskunta, with the first elections held in 1907.
- Finland declared independence from Russia on 6 December 1917. A short but bitter civil war between Reds and Whites followed in 1918 and was won by the government’s forces led by General Mannerheim.
• The constitution adopted in 1919 gave Finland a republican form of government combined with strong powers for the president.
• The semi-presidential system was adopted after plans to import a monarch from Germany had failed.
• From 1917 until the 1930s Finland was a highly divided and politicized country: a civil war, a linguistic strife, a strong right-wing extremist movement (Lapua movement of the 1930s).
• First red-ochre coalition was formed in 1937 between social democratic and agrarian parties.
• During the Second World War Finland fought two wars against the Soviet Union, the Winter War (1939-40) and the Continuation War (1941-44), and in accordance with the armistice agreement with the Soviet Union, fought German forces in Lapland in 1944-45 – uniting the various camps against a common enemy.
As part of the peace settlement, Finland was forced to concede a significant amount of territory, mainly from the Karelia region, to the Soviet Union. The peace settlement also led to close economic and political ties with the eastern neighbour, consolidated in the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (FCMA) signed in 1948.

The era of ‘compulsory consensus’

The Cold War period was dominated by maintaining cordial relations with the Soviet Union. While the direct interference of the Soviet leadership in Finnish politics has often been exaggerated, the Finnish political elite nevertheless was always forced to anticipate reactions from Moscow, and this set firm limits to Finland’s cooperation with west European and Nordic countries (‘Finlandization’).
The end of the Cold War changed the situation dramatically, with the FCMA abolished in 1991.

Finland applied for European Community (EC) membership in 1992 and joined the EU in 1995.

Finland joined the third stage of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) among the first countries – and has played an active role in the further development of the EU’s foreign and security policy.

Pragmatism and adaptability have been the leading qualities of national EU policy, behavioural traits obviously influenced by Cold War era experiences.

The history of Finland as a ‘borderland’ still influences in many ways national political culture and behaviour – a small neutral borderland between the two power blocs (or between east and west), with security and even national survival as key concerns.
- **Constitutional change**
  - The Finnish political system has normally been categorised as semi-presidential, with the executive functions divided between a directly-elected president and a government that is accountable to the parliament.
  - In fact, Finland is the oldest semi-presidential regime in Europe (since 1919).
  - In the inter-war period the PM led the government and the foreign minister assumed primary responsibility for foreign policy. The rules were semi-presidential but the practice was essentially that of parliamentary government.
  - But the constitution itself left room for interpretation, which the presidents, particularly Urho Kekkonen, used to their advantage.
  - During the Cold War the balance between government and president was therefore both constitutionally and politically strongly in favour of the latter until the constitutional reforms enacted since the late 1980s, which have indeed been in part a response to the excesses of the Kekkonen era (1956-1981).
The Finnish political system has thus experienced a major change since the 1980s, with the parliament and the government emerging from the shadow of the president (and the Soviet Union) as the central political institutions.

Finland used to be characterised by short-lived and unstable governments. In fact, one can argue that under the old constitution, and particularly during the long presidency of Kekkonen, governments were in practice more accountable to the president rather than to the parliament.

But the governments appointed after the era of Kekkonen have basically stayed in office for the whole four-year electoral period – a period which Nousiainen (2006) has termed the era of ‘stable majority parliamentarism’.

Foreign and defence policy excluded, Finland is now effectively a parliamentary regime.
Basic institutional structure of the semi-presidential / parliamentary system

Citizens
- elect the national parliament which in turn elects the government (responsible for domestic and EU policy)
- elect the president who co-leads foreign policy with the government

In addition, citizens can vote in
- European Parliament elections
- municipal elections (and in regional elections from 2018 onwards)
Consensus democracy / consensual style of politics?

- **Definitions of consensus:**
  - general agreement
  - the judgment arrived at by most of those concerned
  - group solidarity in sentiment and belief

- Is consensus the ‘way of the country’ or does it result from institutions?
- Nordic political culture is often categorized as having an emphasis on compromise and consensus
- “No image of modern Swedish politics is more widely celebrated than that of the rational, pragmatic Swede, studying problems carefully, consulting widely, and devising solutions that reflect centuries of practice at the art of compromise” (Anton 1980: 158)
- But: also a lot of conflicts between the organized working class and capital (a class compromise)
- Importance of the 1930s (era of the Great Depression): red-ochre coalitions were formed in all Nordic countries between social democratic and agrarian parties (hence marginalizing extreme alternatives)
Consensual features in Finnish politics

- Multiparty governments
- Partisan cooperation across the left-right dimension
- Corporatism
- Welfare state
- Decision-making in foreign and EU policies
- Deferment rule (abolished in the early 1990s)

Nordic political systems are based on a low level of transparency, with negotiations between the actors almost always taking place behind closed doors – in the government, in parliamentary committees (‘working parliament’), and in centralized labour market agreements (e.g. wage bargaining)
The Nordic model?

- Seven key features of an ‘ideal’ Nordic model of government (Arter 1999: 146-149)

1. Dominant or strong social democratic parties
2. Working multi-party systems
3. Consensual approach to policy-making
4. Consultation with pressure groups
5. Centralized collective bargaining
6. An active state
7. Close relations within political elite producing pragmatism

**Argument:** there are significant differences between the five Nordic countries, but there are also enough similarities for a Nordic model to exist
VOTING AND ELECTIONS

- The electoral system
- The 200 members of the unicameral Eduskunta are elected for a four-year term (three years until 1954)
- The country is divided into one single-member and 12 multi-member electoral districts, with the Åland Islands entitled to one seat regardless of its population
- Each district is a separate subunit and there are no national adjustment seats. The d’Hondt method is used in allocating seats to parties
- District magnitude (excluding the single-member district), from 1907 to 2011 the smallest district had between 6 and 9 seats while between 19 and 35 MPs were elected from the largest district. In the 2015 elections district magnitude ranged from 7 (Lapland) to 35 (Uusimaa). Average district magnitude is 16.7 when including only the multi-member constituencies
- There is no legal threshold, but in the 2015 elections the ’effective’ threshold ranged from 2,8 % (Uusimaa) to 12,5 % (Lapland)
Electoral districts

- 01 = Helsinki
- 02 = Uusimaa
- 03 = Varsinais-Suomi
- 04 = Satakunta
- 05 = Åland
- 06 = Häme
- 07 = Pirkanmaa
- 08 = Southeast Finland
- 09 = Savo-Karelia
- 10 = Vaasa
- 11 = Central Finland
- 12 = Oulu
- 13 = Lapland
The proportionality of the electoral system is high.

As the d’Hondt formula favours large parties, most small parties join electoral alliances, and without this option proportionality between votes and seats would be lower.

Within electoral alliances the distribution of seats is determined by the plurality principle, regardless of the total number of votes won by the respective parties forming the alliance. Hence no account is taken of the relative vote shares of the alliance partners.

For example, let us assume that an electoral alliance between party A and party B wins a total of 20,000 votes in an electoral district, and that this entitles the alliance to three MPs, with 15,000 of the votes going to candidates of party A and 5,000 to candidates of party B. However, what matters are the vote totals of the individual candidates, and hence party B can benefit from the alliance if it can concentrate its votes on one candidate in that district, as the three candidates with the most votes will be elected to the parliament.

Thus smaller parties have tended to enter electoral alliances with larger parties, with particularly the Centre Party systematically entering into alliances with smaller parties such as the Christian Democrats.
D’Hondt method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>First round</th>
<th>Second round</th>
<th>Third round</th>
<th>Fourth round</th>
<th>Fifth round</th>
<th>Total seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party A</td>
<td>12500</td>
<td>12500</td>
<td>6250</td>
<td>6250</td>
<td>6250</td>
<td>3125</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party B</td>
<td>10000</td>
<td>10000</td>
<td>10000</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party C</td>
<td>7500</td>
<td>7500</td>
<td>7500</td>
<td>7500</td>
<td>3750</td>
<td>3750</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Candidate selection**

The Electoral Act (1969) and the Election Act (1975) brought major changes to candidate selection. Until then the lack of legal regulations gave the parties a relatively free hand in making their own arrangements, and this resulted in processes that were influenced or even determined by national party executives.

An important tool for parties was the right to field the same candidate in several constituencies. However, since 1969 the same candidate can compete in only one constituency.

Since 1975, candidate selection has been based on membership balloting within electoral districts. Parties must use membership balloting in constituencies where the number of nominees exceeds the official upper limit of candidates (i.e. at most 14 candidates per electoral district or, if more than 14 representatives are elected from the district, at most the number of candidates elected).

After the balloting, the district party executive can replace a maximum of 1/4 of the candidates (1/5 in the Social Democratic Party).
The national-level party organisation is almost completely excluded from the candidate selection process. The national party leadership has thus only limited possibilities to influence candidate selection at the district level.

‘Open’ lists

- The candidates are placed on party lists in alphabetical order
- Voters choose among individual candidates
- Advance voting is very common – in the 2015 elections 46% cast their votes during the advance voting period which begins on Wednesday eleven days before election day, and ends on Tuesday five days before election day.
The ballot paper

Eduskuntavaalit 2007
Riksdagsval

N:o
This ‘open list’ system means that the electoral system is highly candidate-centred – and this is reflected in
- citizens’ voting behaviour
- campaigning
- parliamentary work

Citizens’ voting behaviour
Citizens have been asked in a survey which one, the candidate or the party, has been more important in guiding their voting behaviour (‘After all, which do you think was more important in your voting, the party or the candidate?’)

Very little change over time, with around half viewing the party as more important and the other half the candidate as more important
Campaigning

There is arguably more competition within than between parties.

Turnover of MPs is rather stable: around 170 try to renew their seats and roughly 40 fail to do so. Around 55-60% of them lose their seat to an intra-party competitor while the others fail to get re-elected due to losses to other parties.

Two levels: the national party organisation and leadership primarily focuses on the national level, with the party leader in a central role (not least through TV debates), whereas the individual candidates run their own campaigns within the electoral districts, often targeting a specific area within the constituency (‘home turf’).

Individual candidates have their own agenda and campaign organisation, with ‘support groups’ important in attracting donations, distributing information, and rallying support for the candidate (related to the decline of local party branches).
Parliamentary work
While Finnish parties can be characterised as rather centralised between elections, the decentralised candidate selection process limits the disciplinary powers of party leaders vis-à-vis MPs, as re-election seeking representatives need to cultivate support among their constituents.

Apart from the candidate selection mechanism, Finnish MPs are also otherwise strongly present in local politics. The clear majority of representatives are members of municipal councils and/or belong to the executive organs of their local/district party branches.

However, the traditionally strong role of the state, both in terms of legislative powers and of identity, means that MPs focus first and foremost on influencing national legislation.

Most party groups are quite unitary in their voting behaviour – group cohesion has been around 90% since the early 1990s.

Finnish MPs place much less value on group discipline than their colleagues in the other Nordic parliaments.
Proportionality in the 2003 Eduskunta elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTY</th>
<th>VOTES</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>SEATS¹</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centre Party</td>
<td>689 391</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democrats</td>
<td>683 223</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Coalition</td>
<td>517 904</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Alliance</td>
<td>277 152</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green League</td>
<td>223 564</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Democrats</td>
<td>148 987</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish People's Party</td>
<td>128 824</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Finns</td>
<td>43 816</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party</td>
<td>21079</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>44245</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Åland Islands</td>
<td>13572</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2 791 757</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The representative from the Åland Islands sits with the group of the Swedish People's Party.

Source: Statistics Finland.
POLITICAL PARTIES

- Party system
- A high level of fragmentation
- No party has at any point since the declaration of independence come even close to winning a majority of the seats in the parliament (the post-Second World War high is 28.3% won by SDP in the 1995 elections), and the lack of a clearly dominant party (such as the Social Democrats in Sweden) has necessitated cooperation between the main parties
- Indeed, in Finland it is rare for a single party or electoral alliance to win a majority of the votes even within a single electoral district
The years after the Second World War can be roughly divided into two periods

- First, until about 1970 the party system remained stable: class voting was high, electoral volatility was low, and practically no new parties entered the Eduskunta.
- As the class cleavage was crucial in the emergence of Finnish parties, it is not surprising that since then structural change (class dealignment) has contributed to increasing electoral instability, both in terms of party system fragmentation and electoral volatility.

However, despite the entry into the Eduskunta of new parties such as the Green League and the now defunct Rural Party, overall the party system has been remarkably stable, with the three main parties – the Social Democrats, the Centre Party and the National Coalition – and also the smaller parties largely holding on to their vote shares in recent decades.

Elections of 2011 and 2015: four ‘large’ parties (including the Finns Party)
Cleavage structure
The main cleavage is the left–right dimension
Since the 1990s a second cleavage has become more important:
- centre–periphery (urban-rural)
- liberal-conservative
Explanation: changing political agenda (e.g., EU, multiculturalism, same-sex marriages etc.) while ideological differences on the left-right dimension have become smaller
The Centre draws most of its support from the less populated areas, while the voters of the National Coalition, the Social Democrats and the Greens reside mainly in urban centers. In the 2011 and 2015 elections the Finns Party performed remarkably evenly throughout the mainland constituencies
There is also a language cleavage, as the Swedish People’s Party represents the interests of the Swedish-speaking minority
Eduskunta vote on same-sex marriages (2014, following a citizens’ initiative)

- 105 in favour, 92 against
- MPs voting in favour of the proposal (%)
  - Left Alliance 100
  - Green League 100
  - Social Democrats 95
  - Swedish People’s Party 90
  - National Coalition 64
  - The Centre 17
  - The Finns Party 3
  - Christian Democrats 0
POLITICAL MAP OF FINLAND I: MUNICIPALITIES, 2017
POLITICAL MAP OF FINLAND II: ELECTORAL DISTRICTS
- **Party membership**
  - Party membership increased until the 1980s, after which there has been a sharp decline. In the 1960s almost 20% of the electorate were party members, but by the early 21st century that share had fallen down to around 7-9%.
  - The Centre Party and the Swedish People’s Party boast higher membership figures than other parties. The grassroots organization of the Centre has traditionally been very strong. As for the Swedish People’s Party, its strong presence in Swedish-speaking municipalities makes it often difficult to draw the line between party members and non-party members.
  - Party members have become less active within their organisations, with an increasing share of party members not attending party meetings nor taking part in campaign activities.
  - Parties find it difficult to attract new members, especially young people.
  - The number of local party branches has also decreased since the early 1980s.
- **Voting and party attachment**
- Turnout has fallen fairly consistently since the 1960s. In the elections held in the 1960s, on average 85.0% of the electorate cast their votes. The figure was 80.8% in the 1970s, 78.7% in the 1980s, 70.8% in the 1990s, and 68.8% in the first decade of the 21st century (67.9% in the election held in 2007, the lowest figure after the Second World War)
- In the 2011 election turnout was 70.5% and in 2015 70.1%. The higher turnout is probably explained by the rise of the Finns Party and the associated higher level of contestation and interest in the elections
- Finland has thus fallen behind the other Nordic countries, but turnout is still higher than in Europe on average
- The share of voters that decide their party during the campaign has also increased
- There are also some signs of weakening party identification
- These findings are in line with developments in other European established democracies
Voting turnout in the Parliamentary Elections in 1908-2015
Finnish citizens resident in Finland

Voting percentage

Statistics Finland / Parliamentary elections
Parties and public office

The public funding of parties has strengthened party organisations. Political parties were first legally recognised in the 1969 Party Act, which gave them a privileged status in elections and in the allocation of public funds.

Party funding is based on the share of seats won in the most recent parliamentary election.

In addition to direct party funding, parties also receive money for other purposes (for distributing information, election campaigns, affiliated organisations etc.).

Parties without parliamentary seats do not get public funding. Hence the system offers the established parties protection against potential new rivals – in line with the cartel party thesis (Katz & Mair 1995).

Legislation about party funding and campaign expenditure has been tightened in recent years – both in terms of how much money candidates can receive from individual donors and reporting requirements about campaign expenditure. The newest legislation was enacted mainly in response to the party finance scandals that followed the 2007 elections.
Balance of power among national party organs

From the 1960s to the 1980s political parties increasingly adopted organizational models and working styles typical of mass parties. Figures on party membership displayed a marked increase, and the role of extra-parliamentary party grew at the expense of the parliamentary party. The staffs of extra-parliamentary parties increased and party bureaucracies prepared extensive policy programs for different sectors. This development coincided with the expansion of the Nordic-style welfare state.

From the 1980s onwards, the role of extra-parliamentary party organizations has declined. Membership figures have plummeted. Both the resources and power of parties in parliament have increased compared to the extra-parliamentary party organizations. This development coincided with the constitutional changes that increased the powers of both parliament and cabinet at the expense of the president. The overall importance of parliamentary party groups has increased.
The role of party leaders

Recent constitutional amendments (and EU membership) have undoubtedly strengthened the position of the prime minister, who has emerged as the real political leader of the country.

Given that government formation is no longer subject to presidential interventions, the role of party leaders has become particularly important in electoral campaigns and in forming and maintaining cabinet coalitions.

While the full plenary and the ministerial committees have a prominent place in governmental decision-making, the most important decisions are taken in discussions between the leaders of the coalition parties. This strengthens the autonomy of party leaders vis-à-vis other party organs in governing parties.

These findings are in line with developments in other established European democracies.
The ‘earthquake’ elections of 2011 and the rise of the Finns Party
The Eduskunta parliamentary elections of April 2011 were nothing short of extraordinary, producing major changes to the party system and attracting considerable international media attention.

The Eurosceptical and populist the Finns Party (known previously as the True Finns) won 19.1% of the votes, a staggering increase of 15% from the 2007 elections and the largest ever increase in support achieved by a single party in Eduskunta elections.

All other parties represented in the Eduskunta lost votes.

These were also the first Eduskunta elections where EU featured prominently in the debates, with the problems facing the eurozone and the role of Finland in the bailout measures becoming the main topic of the campaign.

The exceptional nature of the elections is largely explained by the developments that had unravelled since the previous Eduskunta elections held four years earlier.
Finland had been governed since the 2007 election by a centre-right coalition led by the Centre that found itself by mid-term in serious trouble due to party finance scandals. While the government stayed in office, there was nonetheless an awkward sense of sleaze permeating the domestic political landscape.

Economic downturn in connection with the global financial crisis (since 2008)

In spring 2010 the decisions to save Greece out of its near-bankruptcy and the related euro stabilization measures resulted in unexpectedly heated debates in the Eduskunta.

As first Ireland, and then Portugal just before the elections, followed the path of Greece and required bailout measures, the debate just intensified in the run-up to the elections.

The main beneficiary of the party finance scandals, the global financial crisis – and particularly of the euro crisis was undoubtedly the Finns Party who could attack the euro stabilization measures with more credibility than the traditional parties of government.
The real turning point came in the 2009 EP elections, with the Finns Party capturing 9.8% of the votes and their first-ever seat in the Parliament (won by party chair Timo Soini, the vote king of the elections).

Like the 2011 elections, the 2009 EP elections was strongly characterised as a clash between the Finns Party and the mainstream parties. Essentially the ‘old parties’ thus adopted a strategy of collective defence – seeking to contain the Finns by depicting them as an irresponsible and even outright dangerous political force that is all talk and no action.

Many had predicted (or hoped) that the Finns Party would fade away quickly, but such predictions proved wrong. In the 2015 elections, Soini’s party finished second with 38 seats and 17.7% of the votes – a much better result than the polls had suggested, just like four years earlier.

The Finns Party joined the government after the elections, with the cabinet including also the Centre and National Coalition.
The Finns Party: a populist party

The Finns Party is the natural successor to the populist Rural Party (SMP), having been established on the ruins of the latter in 1995. Party leader Soini, who has led the Finns Party since 1997, was the last party secretary of the SMP, wrote his master’s thesis on populism, and has openly acknowledged Veikko Vennamo, the equally charismatic and controversial leader of the SMP, to be his role model in politics.

The programmes of the Finns Party identify the party as a populist movement, with the 2011 election programme in particular distinguishing the ‘populist’ version of democracy advocated by the party from the more ‘elitist’ version of democracy that characterises modern democracies.

The defence of the common man or ‘forgotten people’ and attacking the (corrupt) power elite are the cornerstone of the party’s ideology.

The Finns Party is (was?) on the left-right dimension quite centrist and even centre-left (strong defence of the welfare state).

The emphasis put on ‘Finnishness’ and protecting national culture and solidarity and traditional values also indicate that the Finns Party bear many similarities with European radical right or anti-immigration parties.
Attacking the elite consensus and ‘one truth’ politics

The Finnish polity is in many ways highly consensual. The fragmented party system, with no party winning more than around 25% of votes in elections, facilitates consensual governance and ideological convergence between parties aspiring to enter the government.

Governments are typically surplus majority coalitions that bring together parties from the left and right. Government formation has something of an ‘anything goes’ feel to it (Arter 2009), with for example the ‘six pack’ cabinet formed after the 2011 elections having six parties, leaving thus only two in the opposition.

There was until the 2011 elections also a broad partisan consensus about Europe, despite the fact that in the membership referendum held in October 1994 only 57% voted in favour of joining the EU.
• National integration policy was characterised as flexible and constructive and sought to consolidate Finland’s position in the inner core of the EU
• Also the rules of the national EU coordination system – based on building broad domestic consensus, including often between the government and opposition in the Eduskunta – contributed to the depoliticization of European issues
• Such consensual features and office-seeking tendencies in turn contributed to the lack of opinion congruence between parties and their supporters over EU. This opinion gap was most pronounced in the three ‘core’ parties of recent decades: Centre, National Coalition, and Social Democrats
• The Eduskunta and the political parties have also been more in favour of immigration than the electorate – and particularly the non-voters
Why the Finns Party is against the EU?

The Finns Party is the only party represented in the Eduskunta that has consistently been against the EU – and also the only party which has systematically used the EU as a central part of their electoral campaigns and political discourse.

The Finns Party has attacked forcefully the consensual modes of decision-making in EU affairs, demanding public debates about Europe and calling for an end to ‘one truth’ politics.

The anti-EU discourse of the party can be divided into three main themes:

- EU as an elitist bureaucracy (benefits big businesses and elites; not democratic)
- stronger defence of national interests; and
- integration as a bridge to increased immigration (threat to national solidarity and the Nordic welfare state model)
The thrust of the Finns Party’s EU discourse can be summed by the famous slogan of Soini: ‘whenever the EU is involved, you get problems’. The party underlines the ‘impossibility’ of integration, predicting that it will prove unworkable and thus inevitably disintegrate.

However, the Finns Party has at no stage demanded that Finland should exit the EU or the eurozone.

In terms of policy influence, the rise of the Finns Party has caused the ‘old parties’ to reconsider their policies concerning EU and immigration. Particularly noteworthy has been the more critical discourse about Europe, which has resulted in changes to national integration policy.

Irrespective of whatever one thinks about the policies of the Finns Party, at least the party has played a major role in forcing immigration and EU to the domestic public agenda.
Filling a gap in the party system

There was clearly a demand for a party with a more critical view of European integration – and more broadly speaking for a party that would represent those sections of the citizenry with more traditional or socially conservative and nationalist preferences.

The core voters of the party have been predominantly less-educated men, but in the 2011 elections the Finns Party clearly attracted new supporters from the ranks of the main parties – the Centre, National Coalition, and particularly the Social Democrats.

The party performed both in 2011 and 2015 remarkably evenly across the country.

According to surveys voters were drawn to supporting the party mainly because they wanted to shake established patterns of power distribution and change the direction of public policies, especially concerning immigration and European integration.

Hence it is fair to claim that the phenomenal rise of the Finns Party is explained by both protest and issue voting.
Future challenges

The support of the Finns Party decreased sharply after the party joined the government in 2015.

Soini decided voluntarily to resign as the party chair but in June 2017 the Finns Party effectively split into two after the party congress had elected MEP Jussi Halla-aho as the new party leader.

Halla-aho, who has been convicted in court for hate speech, and the new party leadership looks set to take the party economically further to the right whilst engaging in hard-line attacks on immigration and multiculturalism.

Immediately following the election of Halla-aho the more moderate or populist wing of the party left the Finns Party and established a new parliamentary group of their own, the Blue Reform. This enabled Soini and his colleagues to remain in the government, but the future of the group looks very uncertain.

The Centre Party and the National Coalition refused to work with Halla-aho’s party in the government: will the new, more radical version of the Finns Party be excluded from government formation talks?
Elections to the Finnish parliament, 1945-2015 (%)

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<th>VAS</th>
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Source: Statistics Finland (years 1948-1975 include also votes in the Åland Islands)

Notes:
KESK: Until 1965 the Agrarian League, in 1983 including the Liberal Party
VAS: Until 1987 the Democratic League of the People of Finland; in 1987 incl. DEVA.
LIB: Until 1948 the National Progressive Party, until 1966 the Finnish People’s Party, until 1999 the Liberal Party
KD: Until 2001 the Christian League

KESK: Centre Party
SDP: Social Democratic Party
KOK: National Coalition
VAS: Left Alliance
VIHR: Green League
KD: Christian Democratic Party
RKP: Swedish People’s Party
PS: The Finns Party
LIB: Liberal People’s Party
Others: Other parties
Main features of the Finnish party system

- The high degree of party system fragmentation and the large number of parties that gain parliamentary representation
- The absence of a ‘dominant’ party that is decisively larger than its main competitors
- The increased weakness of the parties on the left
- The strength of the Centre Party that is historically an agrarian party
- Recurrent waves of populist protest
THE PARLIAMENT
(Eduskunta)
Legislative work
Like the other Nordic legislatures, the Finnish Eduskunta can be categorized as a ‘working parliament’, with emphasis on work carried out in parliamentary committees.
According to Arter (1999) the three criteria of a working parliament are a division of labour among committees mirroring the jurisdictions of the respective ministries; standing orders that lift committee work above plenary sessions; and a work culture where MPs concentrate on legislative work instead of grand debates on the floor.
Plenary debates are not as central as in ‘debating parliaments’ such as the British House of Commons.
A strong committee system facilitates efficient control over government. Literature on committees has emphasized that committees provide MPs with the opportunity to specialize, and that such specialization can benefit the whole parliament.
Moreover, committees that have stable memberships and whose jurisdictions mirror the division of labour among ministries should be better equipped to control the government.
Currently Eduskunta has 16 committees
A committee has a quorum when at least 2/3 of its members are present (unless a higher quorum is specifically required)
Committee deliberation is compulsory and precedes the plenary stage. Committees must report to the plenary on all matters under consideration except on private members’ bills and motions
Committees meet behind closed doors and ministers do not hold seats on committees
The number of committees has remained quite stable, with an increase of only two committees after 1945. However, the major reform of the committee system carried out in 1991, involving the abolition of two committees, establishment of three committees, and reshuffling of the committees’ jurisdictions, produced a situation where the competencies of the individual standing committees mirror better the jurisdiction of the respective ministries
Constitutional Law Committee – performs ex ante scrutiny of the constitutionality of government bills (Finland has no real constitutional court)
New **laws** generally originate in legislative proposals from the government. Until the constitutional amendment from 2012, the president had the formal right to determine, in a plenary sitting of the government and on the latter’s recommendation, that a bill be introduced in parliament – but the president could not veto the initiative.

- First, the plenary sends the bill to a committee (or committees) for preparation.
- When scrutinising the initiative, committees often hear expert witnesses – civil servants, legal experts, academics, interest group representatives etc.
- The committees can ‘rewrite’ bills (within certain limits). The committee report can include a dissenting minority opinion.
- Once the report of the committee has been issued, the proposal is considered in two readings in the plenary.
- In the first reading the committee report is debated, and a decision on the contents of the legislative proposal is made.
- In the second reading, which at the earliest takes place on the third day after the conclusion of the first reading, the parliament decides whether the legislative proposal is accepted or rejected by simple majority.
• Until a constitutional amendment from 1987, the president could delay legislation until overridden by a newly elected parliament. Between 1987 and 2000 the president could delay legislation until the next parliamentary session. The Eduskunta had the right to override president’s veto

• According to the new constitution (Section 77), ‘An Act adopted by the Parliament shall be submitted to the President of the Republic for confirmation. The President shall decide on the confirmation within three months of the submission of the Act. … If the President does not confirm the Act, it is returned for the consideration of the Parliament. If the Parliament readopts the Act without material alterations, it enters into force without confirmation. If the Parliament does not readopt the Act, it shall be deemed to have lapsed’

• Since the proposal can become a law without the president’s approval, he or she has only a suspensive veto. In practice, presidents have not challenged cabinet proposals or parliamentary decisions
Procedure for constitutional enactment (Section 73)

“A proposal on the enactment, amendment or repeal of the Constitution or on the enactment of a limited derogation of the Constitution shall in the second reading be left in abeyance, by a majority of the votes cast, until the first parliamentary session following parliamentary elections. The proposal shall then, once the Committee has issued its report, be adopted without material alterations in one reading in a plenary session by a decision supported by at least two thirds of the votes cast.

However, the proposal may be declared urgent by a decision that has been supported by at least five sixths of the votes cast. In this event, the proposal is not left in abeyance and it can be adopted by a decision supported by at least two thirds of the votes cast.”
Controlling the government

Government versus opposition
Recent constitutional reforms have widened the gap between the ruling majority and the opposition.
Finland has traditionally been categorised among countries where the opposition parties have higher than average impact on government policy, not least through the committee system.
More specifically, the instrument of deferment rule considerably strengthened the hand of the opposition.
Until 1987, one-third of MPs (67/200) could postpone the final adoption of an ordinary law over the next election, with the proposal adopted if a majority in the new parliament supported it. In 1987 the period of postponement was shortened to until the next annual parliamentary session.
The deferment rule was finally abolished in 1992.
This deferment rule partially explained the propensity to form oversized coalitions and contributed to the practice of inclusive, consensual decision-making that reduced the gap between the government and opposition.

The rationale behind including the deferment rule in the constitution was that it would prevent tyranny by a simple parliamentary majority, offering in particular protection against potential radical socialist reforms.

Considering the abolition of the deferment rule and other constitutional changes that have strengthened the role of the Eduskunta and the government, it is not surprising that Finland has since the early 1990s become a strongly government-dominated polity (a general feature of parliamentary government)
Control instruments

For controlling the cabinet while the latter is in office, the bluntest tool is the vote of no confidence.

The decision rule is simple majority.

Interpellations are the main type of confidence vote:

- An individual MP can initiate interpellations, but they are usually put forward by party groups of the opposition parties. A minimum of 20 signatures (10% of MPs) is needed for an interpellation to be presented to the cabinet or an individual minister. The government must reply to an interpellation in the plenary within 15 days. The plenary debate is followed by a vote of confidence. The last cabinet resignation owing to a vote of no confidence following an interpellation occurred in 1958.
The main objective of the interpellations, of which there are several every year, is to raise the profile of the opposition parties and to stimulate debate on topical issues.

However, when tabling the interpellation, the opposition basically knows that it will not result in government being voted out of office.

The role of parliamentary questions has become more important.

Originally MPs could table only written questions (introduced in 1906), with oral questions introduced in 1966 and questions to the Council of State (i.e., the government) introduced in 1989.

The monthly questions to the government, televised live, were introduced in order to enable the parliament and the government to engage in a more open dialogue on topical issues.

In 1999 the oral questions and questions to the government were merged into a question time, during which MPs can spontaneously put questions to the ministers on topics of their own choice.

These question times are held on Thursdays and are shown live on the main state-owned TV channel.
Individual MPs can submit three types of initiatives: legislative bills, budget motions and petitionary motions.

These motions do not normally proceed any further than the committee stage, and it is rare for a private member’s bill to become a law.

Between 1945 and 2002 1.4 % of such legislative initiatives tabled by individual MPs were successful – new laws are thus based on government’s proposals.

Budgetary motions can be very important for MPs in terms of publicity and defence of constituency interests – even though under 1 % of them are successful.

Individual MPs have had personal assistants since the late 1990s.
Information rights and the role of the plenary

A crucial element in holding the government accountable is access to information.

According to the constitution, the parliament and its committees have access to all information in the possession of public authorities which they need in the consideration of relevant matters (Section 47) – including in international affairs, EU matters, and regarding national budget.

The rights to receive information on EU matters and on international affairs, both introduced in connection with Finland joining the EU, have improved the Eduskunta’s capacity to control the government.

The Eduskunta has attempted to make plenary debates a more central aspect of its work. The annual duration of the debates has increased from around 300 hours in the 1970s to the current level of approximately 500-600 hours.
● After the reforms carried out in the 1990s both the government and MPs (either as a group or as individual MPs) can propose debates on topical matters.

● Also the streamlining of the various reporting requirements of the government and the increase in the number of such reports has improved the quality of information received by the Eduskunta. This applies particularly to government reports and announcements by the prime ministers that have become routine tools of parliamentary debate.

● While these reforms have undoubtedly elevated the status of the plenary debates (as illustrated by the regular presence of the prime minister in the chamber), it is very difficult to evaluate whether they have contributed to control of the government. It is nonetheless positive that now the government must defend and explain its actions and policies in public to a much greater extent than before (question time, plenary debates, reports).
Dissolving the parliament

Until the 1990s the president alone had the right, without even consulting the government or the parliament, to dissolve the Eduskunta and order new elections – the president could use this threat to influence the government.

During the post-war era, the president exercised this right four times (1953, 1962, 1971 and 1975).

A constitutional amendment in 1991 altered the situation in favour of the government, by requiring explicit prime-ministerial initiative for dissolving the Eduskunta.

Section 26 of the new constitution consolidated this practice: ‘The President of the Republic, in response to a reasoned proposal by the Prime Minister, and after having heard the parliamentary groups, and while the Parliament is in session, may order that extraordinary parliamentary elections shall be held. Thereafter, the Parliament shall decide the time when it concludes its work before the elections.’
National budget

The budgetary process is based on inter-ministerial bargaining – this bargaining is led by the Ministry of Finance.

The ability of the Eduskunta to guide the negotiations in the ministries is estimated to be fairly low.

Examining the differences between the government’s proposal for the budget and the final budget approved by the parliament, since the 1960s the differences have been minimal, staying usually below 1%.

The majority of roll-call votes have in recent years dealt with the annual state budget – MPs can use these recorded votes to show how they voted and defended the interests of their constituencies.
GOVERNMENT

- When comparing with other European countries, Finnish governments are outliers in three respects: their parliamentary support, level of fragmentation, and ideological diversity.

- **Formation**
  - The Constitution Act of 1919 was virtually silent on the issue of government formation. The government was required to enjoy the confidence of the Eduskunta, and the president was ‘to appoint citizens of Finland known for their honesty and ability to serve as members of the Council of State’.
  
  - In practice, government formation was strongly influenced by the president. After the outgoing cabinet had submitted its resignation, the president invited the speaker of parliament and the representatives of the parliamentary parties to bilateral discussions.
The fragmented party system, with no clearly dominant party emerging after the elections, strengthened the president’s hand in steering the negotiations. The president then appointed a formateur whose task was to continue negotiations about which parties would form the government, the government programme and portfolio allocation. However, it was common for the president also to influence the selection of individual ministers. Finally, the president appointed the new cabinet in the last plenary meeting of the resigning cabinet.

The last case of presidential intervention occurred in 1987, when president Mauno Koivisto overruled a coalition between the Centre and the National Coalition, indicating that a coalition between the National Coalition and the Social Democrats was preferable.

If government formation negotiations failed, the president had the right to appoint a caretaker cabinet consisting of civil servants. Since 1945 Finland has had six caretaker cabinets, most recently in 1975.
The new constitution (Section 61) parliamentarised government formation:

‘The Parliament elects the Prime Minister, who is thereafter appointed to the office by the President of the Republic. The President appoints the other Ministers in accordance with a proposal made by the Prime Minister. Before the Prime Minister is elected, the groups represented in the Parliament negotiate on the political programme and composition of the Government. … The nominee is elected Prime Minister if his or her election has been supported by more than half of the votes cast in an open vote in the Parliament.’

Hence government formation is based on bargaining between political parties, with the understanding that the largest party will lead the negotiations. The Eduskunta then selects the PM and the cabinet (through the investiture vote)
Prior to a constitutional amendment in 1991, the cabinet was not obliged to present its programme in the Eduskunta.

The new vote of investiture was first used in 1995, when the rainbow coalition headed by Paavo Lipponen took office.

Under the new constitution, the government shall without delay submit its programme to the parliament which is then followed by a debate and a mandatory confidence vote. The decision rule is simple majority.

By approving the programme, the party groups of the government parties commit themselves to abiding by that document. However, one can also argue that the introduction of the investiture vote strengthens the parliament, as it enables the party groups of the government parties to at least set certain ex ante limits or guidelines to government behaviour.
The role of party leaders has become particularly important in electoral campaigns, with Eduskunta elections seen more as elections about the future prime minister. The largest party will lead government formation talks and will have the position of the PM (informal rule).

Each party seeks to present its leader as the most suitable next prime minister.

This constrains party leaders from adopting strong political stances or engaging in confrontational discourse, privileging instead the quality of ‘statesmanship’ and the (perceived) ability to manage a coalition government.

There is some evidence to suggest that leadership effects have generally become more important for Finnish voters, especially after the 1995 elections.
- **Types of government**
- In terms of cabinet duration, Finland used to be characterised by short-lived and unstable governments living under the shadow of the president.
- Among the West European countries, only Italy had more cabinets between 1945 and 2000 than Finland.
- Of the 44 cabinets formed between 1945 and 1999, nearly half (46%) were surplus majority coalitions, 23% were minority governments, 16% were minimal winning coalitions and 16% were caretaker cabinets.
- The governments appointed after the era of president Kekkonen have basically stayed in office for the whole four-year electoral period – ‘stable majority parliamentarism’.
- After 1983, the oversized coalitions have controlled safe majorities in the Eduskunta. The centre-right cabinet led by PM Esko Aho (1991-95) had the narrowest majority with 57,5% of the seats (although the National Coalition-led cabinet was down to 50,5% in 2014 after the Left Alliance and the Greens had left the government), while the first rainbow coalition led by PM Lipponen controlled as many as 72,5% of the seats. The government formed after the 2015 election controlled 62% of seats (following the split of the Finns Party it controls 53% of the seats).
Reflecting the fragmentation of the party system and the tradition of forming majority governments, the mean number of cabinet parties between 1945 and 2000 was 3.5, the highest figure among West European countries.

The overwhelming majority of Finnish governments have been cross-bloc coalitions, bringing together parties from the left and the right (the first red-ochre coalition was formed in 1937).

An oversized coalition government, bringing together the Social Democrats, the National Coalition, the Left Alliance, the Swedish People’s Party and the Green League, took office after the 1995 election, and this so-called ‘rainbow government’ renewed its mandate in the 1999 elections.

Recent governments have as a rule included two of the three main parties, the Social Democrats, the Centre and the National Coalition.

The ‘six pack’ government, formed after the 2011 elections, had six (!!!) political parties, with only two parties in the parliamentary opposition.
The Centre Party has occupied the position of the median legislator, and this together with strong backing from presidents, has facilitated both its inclusion in the majority of post-war cabinets and the formation of cross-bloc coalitions.

The Swedish People’s Party has participated in most governments, including all cabinets formed between 1979 and 2015. The near-permanent government status of the party can be interpreted as a mechanism for protecting minority rights, but it is also explained by the centrist and flexible ideology of the party.

Despite their size and ideological heterogeneity, the governments formed since 1983 have been surprisingly stable, without any major internal conflicts.

The only real exception was the short-lived coalition between the Centre, Social Democrats and the Swedish People’s Party that took office after the elections held in March 2003. Prime minister Anneli Jäätteenmäki was forced to resign in June of that year after allegations concerning her use of secret foreign ministry documents during the election campaign. The same three parties formed a new cabinet immediately after Jäätteenmäki had resigned.
In addition, small coalition partners have left the governments: the Rural Party in 1990 over budgetary disagreements, the Christian Democrats in 1994 owing to the government’s pro-EU stance, the Green League in 2002 and in 2014 over disputes concerning nuclear energy, and the Left Alliance in 2014 over disagreements about economic policy. But these defections did not threaten the overall stability of the cabinets.

In June 2017 the government survived the split in the Finns Party when the Blue Reform continued in the cabinet.

Not surprisingly, the oversized coalitions have since 1983 ruled without much effective opposition from the Eduskunta.

Particularly important has been the fragmented nature of the opposition.

As the cabinets have, with the exception of the current (2015-) coalition and the centre-right cabinet of 1991-1995, brought together parties from both the left and the right, the opposition has been both numerically weak and ideologically fragmented.
- **Coalition elasticity**
- From the 1960s onwards a more consensus-prone culture emerged in the party system. The cleavage between left-wing and bourgeois parties diminished when more radical socialists too committed themselves to parliamentary democracy, and right-wing parties became more tolerant towards a benevolent, relatively large welfare state. As a result, both the coalition capacity and coalition elasticity of political parties increased.
- From the early years of independence to the 1980s, cabinets were essentially closed coalitions on the left-right dimension – that is, parties in office were adjacent to each other on the left-right dimension.
- In 1987 Finland had her first coalition government (the Holkeri cabinet) based on co-operation between the National Coalition and the Social Democrats, while the Centre Party remained in opposition. This was the first majority cabinet in Finland without the participation of the Centre Party. After that governments have mainly been ‘open’ coalitions on the left-right dimension.
The prevalence of oversized (surplus) majority coalitions in Finland is explained by several factors:

- the fragmented party system and the ensuing need to build workable coalitions (building ‘safe’ majorities)
- the lack of a (centrist) dominant party
- the Centre Party has held the position of the median legislator, forming coalitions with both parties to its left and its right
- the deferment rule that until 1992 allowed 1/3 of MPs to postpone the adoption of a proposal

Putting together large coalitions has become the ‘standard’ approach to government formation
Example: government formation after the 2007 elections

A good example of how oversized coalitions have become the dominant pattern

After the election result became clear, it seemed that the likeliest coalition alternative was a centre-right cabinet formed by the Centre, the National Coalition and the Swedish People’s Party

However, immediately after the elections PM Vanhanen, who would as the leader of the largest party be responsible for forming the new government, announced that his new cabinet should control around 120 of the 200 seats. Vanhanen justified this by referring to the need to ensure the smooth functioning of the government. Soon afterwards Vanhanen declared that the new government would be a coalition between the Centre, the National Coalition, the Swedish People’s Party, and the Green League, commanding a comfortable majority in the Eduskunta with 126 seats (63 %)
The impact of multiparty governments:

- Parties and their leaders are engaged in an almost constant process of negotiation and the art of building compromises and package deals is an essential feature of daily politics.
- In order not to exclude themselves from government formation negotiations, parties neither present to the voters any pre-election alliances nor make any statements about not sharing power with a particular party.
- Finnish parties are highly office-seeking in their behaviour. No Finnish party is non-coalitionable, and practically any coalition is imaginable before the elections.
- While partisan cooperation in multiparty governments and in the Eduskunta may enhance parties’ ability to defend the interests of their constituents, it simultaneously makes it harder for the voters to assess the performance of their representatives, particularly considering the lack of transparency which characterises coalition government decision-making.
Number of ministers

There are no constitutional regulations about the number of ministers or how they are to be selected.

The constitution states that ‘The Government consists of the Prime Minister and the necessary number of Ministers. The Ministers shall be Finnish citizens known to be honest and competent’ (Section 60).

The number of ministers has stayed fairly constant since the Second World War, but there has been a slight increase over the decades.

The government formed after the 2007 elections had an all-time high of 20 ministers. The Sipilä cabinet appointed in 2015 had only 14 ministers, the lowest number since the 1950s and five less than in the cabinet appointed after the 2011 elections – but currently there are 17 ministers.

The number of ministries has also stayed about the same, with the current number being 12.
Prime minister

Recent constitutional and political developments have undoubtedly strengthened the position of the PM

With the partial exception of the finance minister, the PM is the only person in the government whose jurisdiction covers all policy areas

According to Section 66 of the constitution ‘The Prime Minister directs the activities of the Government and oversees the preparation and consideration of matters that come within the mandate of the Government’

However, the bargaining involved in forming coalition cabinets and keeping them together act as significant constraints on the executive powers of the PM

Apart from ministers from her or his own party, the PM has little influence on the selection of ministers, the coalition partners being responsible for choosing them

The same applies to dismissal powers. Since 1991 the PM has had the right to ask the president to fire an individual minister
According to Section 64 of the constitution ‘The President of the Republic grants, upon request, the resignation of the Government or a Minister. The President may also grant the resignation of a Minister on the proposal of the Prime Minister. The President shall in any event dismiss the Government or a Minister, if either no longer enjoys the confidence of Parliament, even if no request is made’

Although the PM can certainly put pressure on coalition partners, he or she cannot in practice dismiss an individual ministers from another party without the consent of that party’s leader

If the PM resigns, the whole cabinet is dissolved. For example, the resignation of PM Katainen in the summer of 2014 and the appointment of Alexander Stubb (the new National Coalition party leader) as the new PM required both the resignation of the Katainen government and the appointment by the president of the new cabinet led by Stubb

The PM’s Office has risen in stature and in size in recent decades. It coordinates decision-making in the ministries and operates as a broker in the case of disputes within or between ministries.
Working methods and decision-making

There are two kinds of government plenaries, those chaired by the PM and those chaired by the president. In the latter there is no voting, as the president alone takes the decision (potentially even against a unanimous government). In plenaries chaired by the PM voting is used (decision rule being simple majority), but decisions are taken collegially.

Besides plenary meetings, the work of the cabinet is coordinated through four statutory ministerial committees: the Cabinet Committee on Foreign and Security Policy, the Cabinet Finance Committee, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Policy and, since 1995, the Cabinet Committee on European Union Affairs. All committees are chaired by the PM.

The full plenary is seldom the place where decisions are in reality taken, and hence the work carried out in the ministerial committees or at the level of individual ministers has become increasingly relevant in terms of understanding where power lies within the cabinet.
Individual ministers have become more autonomous actors in recent decades, and they wield stronger influence in their fields of competence than before.

Since 1970, ministers have had their own special assistants, distinct from the civil servants in the ministries. As of 2005, ministers can also have their own state secretaries. The number of such political advisors has increased over the years.

This delegation of authority from the PM and the cabinet to the individual ministers is primarily explained by the increasing workload of the government, and the resulting need to divide labour and delegate power to the line ministers.

Nevertheless, individual action by ministers is strongly constrained by the government programme and the agreements between the leaders of the coalition parties – even to the extent that, in European comparison, the autonomy of Finnish line ministers has been argued to be minimal.
However, the most important decisions are often taken in discussions between the leaders of the coalition parties. The same applies to planning the government’s agenda.

Since Finnish governments are broad coalition cabinets, the PM needs good bargaining skills because decisions are usually based on deals between the coalition partners.

**Government programme**

- In addition to meetings of the coalition leaders, an increasingly important conflict-resolution mechanism – or a way to pre-empt conflicts – is the government programme.

- These programmes have become longer and more detailed over the decades (especially since the early 1980s), with the coalition partners investing a lot of resources in bargaining over the programme. The length of the programmes is primarily explained by the high number of parties forming the government and the need to commit them (and their party groups) to established rules and policies.
- The programme of the Sorsa VI government, appointed in 1983, contained 1788 words. There was a major leap at the turn of the millennium: while the programme of the Lipponen II government from 1999 had 6711 words, the governments appointed since then have drafted programmes in excess of 12000 words.
- The programme of the ‘six pack’ government, formed after the 2011 elections, had 90 pages and 26,689 words!!!
- The ‘strategic’ programme of the Sipilä government formed in 2015 has 13,534 words (without the annexes).
- It is commonly accepted among the government parties that the programme forms the backbone of the cabinet and that it is binding on all the parties.
- The government parties also monitor that their party groups support the programmes. The cooperation rules between the governing parties’ parliamentary groups that have been in use since the early 1980s effectively prevent any disagreements or public conflicts between the government and the party groups. The only exceptions are matters that are clearly ‘local’ by nature and certain questions of conscience.
Cabinet termination

The constitutional reforms impact on cabinet termination. With the president and the Kremlin no longer intervening in government work, recent cabinets have stayed in office for the whole four-year period, and changes in cabinet composition have been explained by disputes between the government parties (as opposed to disputes between the government and the president).

It was customary for the government to resign when a presidential election was held, but the last time this happened was in 1982.

In fact, one can argue that under the old constitution, and particularly during the reign of Kekkonen, governments were more accountable to the president than to the parliament.

Foreign policy imperatives have brought the government down twice – in 1959 and in 1962. In both cases a crisis in the relationship with Soviet Union led to government resignation.
Government and civil servants

The public administration is divided into three levels: national, regional and municipal. The national-level administration consists of ministries and other central state agencies.

Since the preparation of issues and actual decision-making is often delegated downwards from the minister to the civil servants, the leading bureaucrats in the ministries are especially influential players.

Ministers control directly the agencies under their jurisdiction, but the steering authority of the ministers is constrained by the lack of effective appointment and dismissal powers, and the legalistic tradition of the state bureaucracy. The civil servants are career bureaucrats and it is very difficult for any minister to get rid of bureaucrats he or she for some reason does not like.

The leading civil servants in the ministries, the permanent secretaries (kansliapääällikkö), were appointed by the president until 2012.

However, party politics does penetrate most levels of administration. Party membership can facilitate access to influential, well-paid positions. This applies particularly to top jobs in state-owned companies, central state agencies and ministries, but also to regional and local levels.
Patronage is therefore not unknown, but it is not a core element of the political system.

Traditionally, legislation and public policy reforms were prepared within ministries in committees where both politicians and civil servants (and perhaps representatives of interest groups and other experts) were represented. However, the number of such committees has dwindled since their heyday in the 1970s.

These committees have been replaced by reports produced by non-partisan policy advisors (*selvitysmies*), or by working groups consisting primarily of civil servants appointed by the ministries.

Finnish governments have in recent years invested resources in improving coordination and strategic planning inside the cabinet and the entire executive branch. Hence the governments appointed since 2003 have tried to improve horizontal coordination inside the government, mainly through government’s intersectoral policy programmes (that were used from 2003 to 2011) and other coordination instruments such as various government strategy documents.
THE PRESIDENT

- **Semi-presidentialism**
  - The Finnish political system has normally been categorised as semi-presidential, with the executive functions divided between an elected president and a government that is accountable to the parliament.
  - Finland is the oldest semi-presidential regime in Europe (since 1919).
  - Until 2000, Finland had a notably strong form of semi-presidentialism. For example, Duverger (1980) ranked Finland highest among the West European semi-presidential systems in terms of the formal powers of the head of state and second only to France in respect of the actual exercise of presidential power.
  - Section 3 of the constitution: ‘The legislative powers are exercised by the Parliament, which shall also decide on State finances. The governmental powers are exercised by the President of the Republic and the Government, the members of which shall have the confidence of the Parliament.’
  - Under the old constitution the president was recognised as the supreme executive power: ‘Supreme executive power shall be vested in the President of the Republic.’
In the inter-war period the PM was the political leader and the foreign minister assumed primary responsibility for foreign policy. The rules were semi-presidential but the practice was essentially that of parliamentary government, although in the 1930s president Svinhufvud used the authority of the presidential office successfully to meet the challenge of the neo-fascist Lapua movement.

But the constitution itself left room for interpretation, which the presidents, particularly Kekkonen, used to their advantage. Two presidential powers in particular, cabinet formation and the dissolution of Eduskunta followed by premature elections, gave the president basically unlimited power over political parties.

During the Cold War the balance between government and president was both constitutionally and politically strongly in favour of the latter until the constitutional reforms enacted in the 1990s, which were indeed in part a response to the excesses of the Kekkonen era.

A period of parliamentarisation started in 1982, when Mauno Koivisto took office after a quarter of century of politics dominated by Kekkonen. President Koivisto and the political elite in general favoured strengthening parliamentarism and curtailing the powers of the president.
Legacy of the Kekkonen era
The significantly greater *de facto* power of the president between the Second World War and the early 1980s was not the consequence of a change in the constitutional rules. Rather, it was the product of three main factors:

- a fragmented party system that did not facilitate stable government;
- the pivotal role of the president in maintaining amicable relations with Moscow; and
- the absence of presidential term limits, which enabled Kekkonen to build up a considerable power base.

Kekkonen gained widespread respect as a ‘crisis manager’ – especially in defusing crises in Finno-Soviet relations – and as a ‘consensus builder’ – building broad-based governments, which included the communists.

Kekkonen also presided over a period of strong economic growth and the establishment of the welfare state.

For a lot of Finns, Kekkonen’s authoritarian presidency, and, in the 1970s in particular the stultifying intellectual climate associated with ‘Finlandization’, were far less important than the fact that he was seen to deliver security and prosperity.
Foreign policy leadership

Apart from constitutional regulations, the widely acknowledged priority of maintaining amicable relations with the Soviet Union concentrated power in the hands of the president.

A further impetus for downgrading presidential powers came thus from the end of the Cold War, since the dissolution of the Soviet bloc reduced the importance of personalised foreign policy leadership (‘sauna summity’).

Without constitutional change, the president would have led national EU policy and would have represented Finland in the EU.

Under the old constitution, foreign policy was the exclusive domain of the president: ‘The relations of Finland with foreign powers shall be determined by the President. …’
Section 93 of the new constitution:

‘The foreign policy of Finland is directed by the President of the Republic in co-operation with the Government. However, the Parliament accepts Finland’s international obligations and their denouncement and decides on the bringing into force of Finland’s international obligations in so far as provided in this Constitution. The President decides on matters of war and peace, with the consent of the Parliament.

The Government is responsible for the national preparation of the decisions to be made in the European Union, and decides on the concomitant Finnish measures, unless the decision requires the approval of the Parliament. The Parliament participates in the national preparation of decisions to be made in the European Union, as provided in this Constitution.

The communication of important foreign policy positions to foreign States and international organisations is the responsibility of the Minister with competence in foreign affairs.’
The president therefore directs foreign policy, but does so together with the government (the president meets both the PM and the foreign minister on a regular basis) and through the government’s ministerial committee (Cabinet Committee on Foreign and Security Policy).

But: the constitution remained silent about what happened if cooperation between the president and the government did not work. Hence the new constitutional amendment (2012) introduced a conflict-resolution mechanism, with the position of the Eduskunta decisive in cases of disagreements between the president and the government. This mechanism applies only to a small share of foreign policy matters, basically those necessitating formal decision-making such as the ratification of certain international agreements.

However, through underscoring the position of the Eduskunta, it further consolidates the government’s authority in foreign policy.
• Membership of the EU has contributed to the parliamentarisation of foreign policy by further narrowing the jurisdiction of the president (EU policy falls under the competence of the government)

• Often it is very difficult to draw a clear line between EU matters (government’s competence) and ‘other’ foreign policy questions (requiring co-leadership), and this may cause jurisdictional disputes between the president and the government – this applies in particular to the development of the EU’s foreign and security policy (CFSP)

• National foreign and security policies are increasingly influenced by European level coordination processes and policy choices

• A good example is relations with Russia – always a salient issue for Finland. The EU has its own policy towards Russia, and hence Finland’s bilateral relations with Russia are strongly linked to and influenced by EU’s policies vis-à-vis Russia. The government likes to emphasize EU’s Russian policy, while the president stresses bilateral talks!

• A logical division of labour seems to have emerged: the government is responsible for those issues handled through the European Union, whereas the president focuses on bilateral ties with non-EU countries, especially those led by presidents, notably Russia
The PM is the primary representative of Finland in the EU, but the president participated in most European Council meetings until the Lisbon Treaty entered into force (late 2009) – the policy of ‘two plates’.

According to the new constitutional amendment from 2012 (Section 66) ‘The Prime Minister represents Finland on the European Council. Unless the Government exceptionally decides otherwise, the Prime Minister also represents Finland in other activities of the European Union requiring the participation of the highest level of State.’

Thus the PM represents Finland in the European Council and in other EU meetings where the political leaders of the member states are represented (such as informal meetings between the leaders of member states and summits between the EU and third countries). However, to the extent that this is possible within the EU framework, the government could in exceptional circumstances decide that also the president represents Finland in EU meetings.

The president is the commander-in-chief of the defence forces (Section 128).

Hence the president decides on Finland’s participation in crisis management operations.
Contextual factors have clearly favoured the current incumbent, Sauli Niinistö.

The war in Ukraine and the overall aggressive foreign policy of Russia have increased tensions in the area, with these circumstances facilitating presidential activism. Bilateral ties with Russia have become more important, with Niinistö’s high-profile meetings with Putin receiving extensive media coverage.

The current cabinet has also concentrated on its big projects in domestic politics, particularly the reorganization of social and health services, with the government seemingly happy to allow Niinistö to lead foreign and security policy – or at least relations with non-EU countries.

Niinistö has consistently reminded the voters that we are living in unstable and turbulent times, and whether the use of such discourse is strategic or not, the heightened tensions have indeed highlighted the role of the president.

Here one needs to remember that Finns are used to seeing the president as the guarantor of national security or even survival, a role associated especially with president Kekkonen.
- **Legislative and appointment powers**
- Suspensive veto in legislation (delaying power; parliament can override presidential veto)
- The president may, after obtaining a statement from the Supreme Court, grant full or partial pardon
- The president enjoyed very strong appointment powers until the new constitution entered into force. Until 1998 the president even appointed university professors. The constitution of 2000 reduced the list of persons the president appoints and the constitutional amendment from 2012 further continued this trend, primarily through giving the government the right to appoint permanent secretaries (the leading civil servants in the ministries)
- This latest change is at least partially explained by the fact that president Tarja Halonen (2000-2012) vetoed several times government’s candidates, appointing instead persons of her own choice
- The president decides on these appointments in the plenary of the government, on the recommendation of the government
Potential for conflict

Conflicts between the president and the government are seen as the weakness of semi-presidential regimes.

Disagreements are more probable when president and prime minister have different partisan backgrounds. During the presidency of Halonen (2000-2012), who had a Social Democratic background, there were tensions between her and the cabinets led by prime ministers representing the Centre Party and the National Coalition.

The present incumbent Sauli Niinistö (National Coalition, 2012-) has cohabitated with governments led by centre-right parties, and similar disagreements have not occurred.

Note: overall rather little (public) conflict
Elections

The president is elected for no more than two consecutive six-year terms (since 1988)

Until 1982, the president was elected by an electoral college of 300 members (301 in 1982), elected by the same proportional system as MPs

A one-time experiment was conducted in the 1988 election, involving a mixed two-ticket system of direct and indirect voting. To be elected by a direct vote, a candidate needed to receive 50% of the votes. As no candidate reached this share, the election was passed on to a simultaneously elected electoral college

A new electoral system for choosing the president was first used in 1994. If a candidate receives more than half of the votes, he or she is elected president. If none of the candidates receives the majority of the votes, a new election is held on the third Sunday after the first election. In the second round, the two persons who received the most votes in the first round run against each other, with the candidate receiving the majority of votes elected as the new president
In the direct elections held so far (1994, 2000, 2006, 2012), basically all candidates emphasised that, if elected, they would exercise the powers vested in the presidency, signalling that they had no plans to remain in the background.

Turnout has been higher in presidential elections than in Eduskunta elections – in 2006 73.9 % voted in the first round and 77.2 % in the second round; in 2012 the respective figures were 72.8 % and 68.9 %

Elites versus citizens
- citizens are in favour of keeping the powers of the president intact (or even increasing them)
- political elite is more in favour of further reducing the powers of the president
The desire for ‘strong leaders’?

The president has commanded levels of public confidence and support not enjoyed by PMs, governments, parliament, or political parties – this is common in basically all semi-presidential regimes.

Indeed, there has arguably been an authoritarian element in the Finnish political culture – a deference to [those in] authority (alamaiskulttuuri).

The president is understood to be above party politics, looking after the interests of the whole country as opposed to the narrower interests of the governing parties – again this is a rather common perception in semi-presidential countries. Interestingly, Niinistö announced last May that he would seek re-election as an independent candidate.

The president as a guarantor of national security.

Obviously one can also argue that the opinions of the citizens are biased by history or political culture: as particularly older Finns are used to living in a president-led system, they show less affinity or understanding towards parliamentary democracy.

The president enjoys a lot of (friendly) media coverage. His speeches and interviews are widely reported on, but whether they influence public opinion or the government is difficult to assess.
CORPORATISM AND THE WELFARE STATE

- Both can be interpreted as consensus-building mechanisms

- **Nordic (and Finnish) corporatism**
  - Finnish (and Nordic) corporatism is distinguished by the generally cooperative practices and conduct permeating state/interest group relations and by interest groups’ relatively good access to policy-making processes
  - Some experts propose that the contractual, cooperative brand of corporatism found in the Nordic countries is determined by demographics and culture
  - The Nordic countries are relatively small and ethnically homogenous. Nordic peoples exhibit strong preferences for income equality, generous and universal welfare state benefits, and consensual bargaining in relations among state, capital, and labour interests
  - Corporatism is strongly associated with social democracy that grew in tandem with trade unions – ‘welfare state capitalism’, ‘social democratic state’
Main features of corporatism (compare with pluralism)

- **Collective wage bargaining** (including often also other labour market issues)
- Tripartite system: labour – capital – state
- Produces arguably macroeconomic stability, effective labour allocation, and ‘optimal’ wage levels (both sides modify their claims) – makes outcomes more predictable
- Are collective wage agreements, and corporatism more broadly speaking, advantageous for small countries that face increasing competition in global economy?

**Administrative corporatism**
- Interest groups (‘stakeholders’) are represented, or at least have access to, various committees that prepare public policy or give advice to the government
• Development of Finnish corporatism
  • In comparative studies on corporatism Finland is usually ranked as having one of the most corporatist systems of governance.
  • In 1968 the first comprehensive incomes policy agreement was concluded. Many labour market and social policy reforms have been introduced in connection with incomes policy agreements.
  • Corporatism was particularly prevalent from the late 1960s until the 1980s, but there was a temporary decline in the early 1990s caused mainly by the economic recession.
  • The Lipponen governments (1995-2003) emphasized again the importance of collective wage bargaining and corporatism, not least because the cooperation of the trade unions was seen as essential in order to meet the EMU criteria and to maintain economic discipline once in the eurozone.
  • The Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) decided unilaterally to abandon tripartite collective wage talks in 2007 when Finland was governed by a centre-right coalition. However, from 2011 onwards the system of comprehensive wage agreements has been revived.
Industrial relations have also changed considerably. Finnish labour market was characterized by frequent and often large work stoppages. With the establishment of a pattern of comprehensive incomes policy agreements and the growing political consensus, the high level of industrial disputes was replaced with a more conciliatory style of conflict resolution. The average annual number of work days lost due to industrial disputes was (in thousands of days) 1322 in the 1950s. In the 1970s the corresponding figure was still 1051, but in the 1980s as low as 316. During the first nine years of the 2000s it was down to 152. These figures bear witness of a shift from a pattern of industrial relations where manifest conflict is the overarching principle to the consensual culture typical of most of northern Europe.
Moreover, key interest groups are still actively involved in preparing new policies, and hence their voice is routinely heard in policy-making. But note that the number (and presumably also influence) of committees where interest groups are represented has declined in recent decades.

The capital or employers’ side is represented by The Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK).

Currently above 70% of the workforce belongs to trade unions.

Three main union confederations – The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), The Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK), and The Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (Akava).

The declining status of the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK) results from the simple fact that a smaller share of Finns derives their income from agriculture, with also the number of farms declining quite rapidly in recent decades.
Membership in trade unions and unemployment funds 2002-2016

% of all wage- and salary-earners

Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Working life barometers
From regulated markets to open economy

The previously regulated capital markets in Finland were opened to international competition in the 1980s, and Finland is now also member of both the EU and the eurozone. In the EU/EMU regime national instruments of economic policy-making are limited compared to the years of national currency and domestically regulated markets.

In an open economy the power of economic interest groups, especially trade unions, has declined compared to the earlier phase of more regulated markets.

Parallel with the internationalization or Europeanisation of the economy, increasingly market-oriented practices at home have had the effect of diminishing the role of the government and thus in fact limited the sphere of political decision-making.

While outright privatization is rarer than commonly assumed, public services are increasingly produced by private enterprises (especially in health care).
The recent global and European financial uncertainty, not to mention the economic recession of the early 1990s, has contributed to increasing debate about trade unions.

Especially from the political right they are seen as obstacles to much-needed economic reforms, while the left stresses their role in providing macroeconomic stability and peaceful industrial relations.

Whereas from the 1960s onwards trade unions were often behind major (and popular) socio-economic reforms, today they mainly focus on defending the status quo, with the initiatives coming from the employers’ side or from the centre-right parties.

The bargaining power of trade unions, and particularly SAK, is weaker when left-wing parties (particularly Social Democrats) are not in government: 1991-95, 2007-2011, 2015-
Economy and the welfare state

Finland (and the Nordic countries) usually scores high on indicators such as economic growth, income distribution, well-being, and gender equality.

Nordic women have reached a higher level of equality with men than in most other European countries, and this is arguably explained by the Nordic welfare model. In general women score high according to their educational level, economic activity, and political and cultural participation – after the 2015 Eduskunta elections 41.5 % of MPs were women. The high level of female employment: generous maternity benefits, the organization of day-care facilities etc.

An active government is often seen as the explanation for this ‘success’ – active meaning that the government redistributes income and is a major actor in economic policy.

But: extensive welfare state provisions are not possible without a well-functioning (market) economy generating the income
EUROPEAN SOCIAL JUSTICE INDEX (2016)

1) poverty prevention
2) equitable education
3) labour market access
4) social cohesion and non-discrimination
5) health
6) intergenerational justice
The welfare state as a political regime – a broad political compromise between the state, the labour movement, and the private sector

Comprehensive policies – providing (universal) benefits to citizens: universalism as a principle means that (basically) all citizens are entitled to benefits regardless of the level of income

Welfare state as an equalizer

Global programmes are preferred to selective ones; free education for all with a standard high enough to discourage the demand for private schools, free or cheap health care on the same basis, child allowance for all families with children rather than income-tested aid for poor mothers etc.

A relatively high proportion of the labour force is employed by the public sector
• Consensual element – produces convergence on the left-right dimension about economy and social policy
• The welfare state model reflects – and is partially based on – the dominance of social democratic parties that modified their goals
• There has so far been broad political support for the welfare regime – including from right-wing parties
• But support for the welfare state is declining. In particular, the electorate seems to prioritise tax cuts ahead of maintaining the current level of public services
• Income differences between different occupations are quite modest in Finland – but income distribution is becoming gradually less equal. The public is also increasingly using the private sector (especially in health care services)
Can the welfare state / society survive?
The welfare state includes several policies that gradually increase public expenditure without any new decisions.
Since the 1990s discussion on the Finnish welfare state has mainly focused on the need to restrict the continuous rise of public expenditure.
Public expenditures have risen faster than taxes and other public revenues, and as a result public debt has increased.
Still in the 1980s, Finnish public debt was low, only about 15% of GDP. In the 1990s public debt rose to almost 60%, and after a temporary reduction in the late 1990s and first years of the 21st century, it has again risen during the financial crisis that began in 2008 (64% in 2016).
Strong constitutional provisions

The rights of citizens have been strengthened, with constitutional rules covering key aspects of public policy (in addition to fundamental rights) – including the right to free basic education and to social security and health care services

These constitutional provisions are largely based on amendments that entered into force in 1995 and they include for the first time economic, social and cultural rights

Section 16 - Educational rights

Everyone has the right to basic education free of charge. Provisions on the duty to receive education are laid down by an Act. The public authorities shall, as provided in more detail by an Act, guarantee for everyone equal opportunity to receive other educational services in accordance with their ability and special needs, as well as the opportunity to develop themselves without being prevented by economic hardship. The freedom of science, the arts and higher education is guaranteed.
Section 19 - The right to social security

Those who cannot obtain the means necessary for a life of dignity have the right to receive indispensable subsistence and care. Everyone shall be guaranteed by an Act the right to basic subsistence in the event of unemployment, illness, and disability and during old age as well as at the birth of a child or the loss of a provider. The public authorities shall guarantee for everyone, as provided in more detail by an Act, adequate social, health and medical services and promote the health of the population. Moreover, the public authorities shall support families and others responsible for providing for children so that they have the ability to ensure the wellbeing and personal development of the children. The public authorities shall promote the right of everyone to housing and the opportunity to arrange their own housing.

Section 124 - Delegation of administrative tasks to others than the authorities

A public administrative task may be delegated to others than public authorities only by an Act or by virtue of an Act, if this is necessary for the appropriate performance of the task and if basic rights and liberties, legal remedies and other requirements of good governance are not endangered. However, a task involving significant exercise of public powers can only be delegated to public authorities.
FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

- The Cold War period
- Finland’s independence was very much on the line – not only during the wars (1939-40, 1941-44), but also in the immediate post-war years
- Objective: to achieve maximum level of internal autonomy while living in the shadow of the Kremlin – Finland had to assure the Soviet leaders that its territory would not be used to attack the Soviet Union
- 1948: Finland and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (FCMA)
- During the Cold War, Finland was not seriously able to consider joining European integration beyond associate membership of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and a free trade agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC)
- The official policy of neutrality or non-alignment enjoyed high levels of support – and was probably the only realistic option; ‘compulsory consensus’
- The policy of neutrality culminated in 1975 when Finland hosted the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)
PUBLIC OPINION ON FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE COLD WAR

HOW GOOD OR BAD DO YOU CONSIDER THE CONDUCT OF FINNISH FOREIGN POLICY? (ALANEN & FORSBERG 1989)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Bad</th>
<th>Cannot say</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1971</td>
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<td>1978</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
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After the Cold War

FCMA was abolished in 1991 and Finland joined the EU in 1995.

With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, the entry of EU to the domestic political agenda, and the reductions in the powers of the president, security issues have become the subject of more intensive domestic debate.

The president is still under the new constitution in charge of foreign policy, but shares that leadership together with the government – with EU issues the domain of the government.

The old policy of neutrality has effectively been abandoned.

In addition to becoming active in developing EU’s foreign and security policy (CFSP), Finland has moved closer to NATO, taking part in the various Partnerships for Peace operations (planning, equipment interoperable with NATO forces etc.).

Actual NATO membership is still a fairly distant prospect – not least because the public opposes it. The National Coalition is the only party in favour of joining NATO.
PUBLIC OPINION ON NATO
(% in favour of joining)
• **Policy-making**
  • Formulation of national foreign and security policies is based on broad partisan consensus
  • A key role is performed by the government report on Finnish security and defence policy. The report is published roughly every four years and its drafting is overseen by a working group where both the government and opposition parties are represented

• **Questions for the future**
  • Should one abandon the conscript army and the goal of territorial defence in favour of a smaller (professional) army capable of taking part in international crisis management operations?
  • What international crisis management operations should Finland take part in and in what capacity?
  • To what extent Finland should participate in foreign affairs through multilateral arenas, particularly the EU, and to what extent it should have bilateral relations with neighbouring Russia?
The Eurosceptical Nordic region

The Nordic region is usually associated with Euroscepticism, with Nordic people less supportive of integration than the citizens of the EU as a whole.

This Euroscepticism is usually explained by the affluence of the region that together with the egalitarian welfare state model make Finns (and the Nordic people) less interested in transferring policy-making powers to the European level.

Reflecting the protestant political culture, concepts such as nation-state and national sovereignty have also traditionally occupied a more central place in the discourse of the Nordic polities than in most Central and Southern European EU countries.

Finns nonetheless have become generally more supportive of EU membership and of euro.

A broad partisan consensus emerged (at least until the 2011 elections) for a national European policy that was characterized as flexible and constructive.
Finland is also the only Nordic country that belongs to the euro zone, with the single currency basically adopted without much political contestation.

The EU is now the first-choice framework or reference group for Finland.

European integration has undermined the importance attached to Nordic cooperation (this applies to all five Nordic countries, including Iceland and Norway that are not EU member states) – not least because many of the main achievements of Nordic cooperation (e.g., passport-free zone) are nowadays regulated by the EU.

Nordic cooperation is practiced through two consultative organisations: the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers.
Reasons for joining the EU

The broad support for membership shown by the political elite before the referendum is explained by both economic interests and security considerations.

Finland is heavily dependent on trade, and beginning from the 1980s, the industry (particularly the influential wood-processing sector) had expressed its preferences by exporting heavily to Western Europe.

As barter trade with the Soviet regime had accounted for about one-fifth of national trade, the demise of the communist bloc increased trade dependence on EU countries.

The heavy recession of the early 1990s, including the instability in monetary policy and the devaluation of *markka*, further convinced the industry and the trade unions about the importance of joining the Union.

The only significant interest group campaigning against membership was The Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners, a position explained by the anticipated negative impact of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) on the farming sector.
The rather uncertain political situation in Russia brought security concerns to the fore. While security policy considerations were often downplayed during the referendum campaign, there is no doubt that the security dimension was a key factor behind the decision of both the elite and the voters to support EU membership. Indeed, the importance accorded to security policy is what distinguishes the Finnish case from the other Nordic countries. Moreover, in general there was a broader cultural argument about rejoining the West. The significance of EU membership for Finland should not be underestimated, for it constituted a key element in the ‘process of wholesale re-identification on the international stage’ (Arter 2000: 691). While the pro-EU camp argued before the membership referendum held in 1994 that by joining the Union Finland would merely be maintaining or consolidating its place among Western European countries, there is little doubt that especially among foreign observers the ‘western’ identity of Finland was far less clear.
- Finland’s EU policy
- While many commentators expected Finland to become a cautious member state, Finland has since joining the EU in 1995 consistently supported deeper integration.
- In membership negotiations the centre-right Aho government accepted the Maastricht Treaty without any major opt-out clauses.
- In the Intergovernmental Conferences held since joining the EU, Finland has supported further transfers of competencies from the national level to the Union, together with the extension of majority voting in the Council and a stronger role for the Commission and the European Parliament.
- Moreover, Finland joined the third stage of EMU among the first countries, and has played an active role in the further development of CFSP – especially regarding crisis management (together with Sweden).
Finance minister Sauli Niinistö phones his Greek colleague, 1.1.2002
Underlying this pro-integrationist stance is/was the conviction that a strong and efficient EU can best protect the rights and interests of smaller member states, as intergovernmental processes tend to favour larger member states.

Eurosceptical parties remained until the 2011 elections marginalized in Finnish politics, despite the fact that many of the parties – notably the Centre, the Green League, and the Left Alliance – were severely divided over membership in the referendum held in October 1994.

This is something of a paradox, considering the narrow majority (57%) in favour of membership in the 1994 referendum, and the persistence of a rather Eurosceptical public opinion.

The only consistently Eurosceptical party that has won seats in the Eduskunta since Finland joined the Union is the Finns Party, and its breakthrough in the 2011 elections has brought about changes to national EU policy.
Formulating national EU policy

EU matters belong to the competence of the government, with presidential involvement limited to Treaty changes (ratification phase) and co-operating with the government in CFSP matters.

The priority of the national EU coordination system is to manufacture national unanimity or at least broad elite consensus, which can arguably be translated into additional influence in Brussels.

While the overall aim ‘is to speak with one voice on all levels of decision shaping in Brussels’ (Stubb et al. 2001: 306), the importance attached to achieving such consistency varies between policy areas and individual legislative initiatives.

Decision-making in both security and EU policies is thus based on search for broad domestic consensus.
Parliamentary control in EU matters

While the Eduskunta has lost power to the EU, it has subjected the government to relatively tight scrutiny in EU matters.

The scrutiny model of the Eduskunta has four main strengths:

- the position of the parliament is regulated in the constitution
- the Eduskunta gets involved relatively early in the processing of EU legislation
- ministerial hearings in Grand Committee
- the responsibility of monitoring European matters is delegated downwards to specialised committees (that report to the Grand Committee, not to the plenary)

The Grand Committee is responsible for coordinating the Eduskunta’s positions in EU matters, while the Foreign Affairs Committee is responsible for CFSP matters.

The ministers appear in the Grand Committee in person before and after Council and European Council meetings.
While the Grand Committee does not give legally binding voting instructions to the ministers, it is extremely rare for a minister to act against its wishes.

The standing committees are closely involved in the scrutiny of EU matters, and the final position of the Grand Committee is based on guidelines from the standing committees.

The active scrutiny of European legislation has improved the overall dialogue between the government and the Eduskunta. The regular appearance of ministers before the Grand Committee has also led to improved policy coordination within the cabinet and has forced the ministers to study the issues more thoroughly than might otherwise be the case.

An often-mentioned feature of the EU policy process is bureaucratisation, the shift of power from civil servants. However, the autonomy of civil servants is at least partially counteracted by the active scrutiny of the Eduskunta in EU matters.
Also in the Eduskunta the processing of EU matters is geared towards building broad consensus.

Particularly noteworthy has been the lack of conflict, or of even real tension, between the government and the Eduskunta on the one hand, and between the government and the opposition on the other hand.

The emphasis is on pragmatic examination of EU’s legislative initiatives in the committees, with relatively few partisan ideological debates about national integration policy or the overall development of integration.

Opposition parties are actively involved in formulating national EU policy in the Grand Committee and the specialized committees. Granting the opposition a larger role in European matters facilitates broader backing for governmental action at the European level.

However, the euro crisis and the 2011 elections did at least temporarily change the consensual mode of parliamentary EU decision-making. Since 2011 voting has become more common in the Grand Committee, with the votes reproducing the government-opposition cleavage characterizing plenary decision-making, and with the losing opposition minority adding its dissenting opinions to the reports and minutes of the Grand Committee and the specialized committees.
ANGRY BIRDS?

Considering the debates and campaigns of the 2011 elections, the National Coalition-led cabinet led by PM Katainen formed after the elections was under serious political pressure to defend national interests in Brussels.

Broadly speaking, it appears that the emphasis on national interests and on the role of smaller member states has become more pronounced in Finland in recent years, and the success of the Finns Party has clearly pushed the other parties in the direction of more cautious EU discourse.

The Katainen government

- demanded specific bilateral collaterals for its bail-out payments to euro area countries;
- was alone in attempting to reject 85% majority in decision-making in the European Stability Mechanism, demanding unanimity instead;
- and, together with the Netherlands, blocked the entry of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen area.
The programme of the Sipilä government (2015-)
The EU section of the programme is certainly more critical of integration than the programmes of previous cabinets, with Finland seeking ‘less, but better and lighter, regulation than at present.’

Strong emphasis on economy and national interests

Euro area governance
The programme emphasizes strongly that each euro area country is responsible for its own economy, and ‘EMU should not be developed through such deepening of economic coordination which would lead to an expansion of joint responsibility’. Sipilä’s cabinet is thus ‘opposed to increasing Finland’s liabilities in handling the euro crisis’ and that ‘if the European Stability Mechanism must still be used, it should be done only within the framework of the mechanism’s current capacity and capital structure’
Hence it was not surprising that Finland was in the summer of 2015 among those countries that were most critical of a new Greek bailout package. In the end the government, including the Finns Party, swallowed the bitter pill and accepted the bailout deal, not least because they realized that under ESM rules Finland could not alone bloc decision-making.

**Immigration**

‘The Union must act decisively to manage illegal migration flows in the Mediterranean area. Relocation of asylum seekers within the EU should be based on the voluntary participation of Member States’

In late September 2015 the government abstained (= voted against) when the Council of the EU decided on relocating 120,000 refugees. However, note that Finland has respected the decision and essentially fulfilled its commitments.
The euro crisis was a turning point in Finnish EU policy, with party-political conflict and public contestation that clearly constrains the cabinet in EU level bargaining, at least in euro zone decision-making – at the same time it must be remembered that Finland has supported the various euro area coordination instruments (bailouts, ESM, Fiscal Compact, banking union etc.)

While problematic for the government, these developments are certainly good news in terms of democracy and public debate.

Since the euro crisis began in the spring of 2010 the fate of the euro, and European integration more broadly speaking, have appeared repeatedly in the media and in parliamentary debates.

The parliamentary debates about the eurozone are arguably the first time that the government has really been forced to justify and defend its EU policies in public — and that the opposition has attacked the cabinet publicly over its handling of EU matters.

The end of domestic (elite) consensus over EU?
SWEDISH-SPEAKING MINORITY

- History
  - The share of Finns speaking Swedish as their first language has declined steadily since the 19th century.
  - In 1900 12.9% of Finns were Swedish-speaking but by 1950 their share had declined already down to 8.6%. In 1990 5.9% of Finns spoke Swedish as their first language and currently that share is 5.3%.
  - Finland belonged to Sweden until 1809, when it became an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian empire. After being a part of Sweden for 650 years, Swedish remained the language of administration throughout the first half of the 19th century.
  - It was not until 1863 that Finnish was recognized as an official language in Finland. For some time, Russian was also used, and the administration was in fact multilingual.
  - Finnish nationalist sentiments and movements gained in strength during the latter half of the 19th century, and their actions were primarily directed against the Swedish-speaking elites that had very strong positions in both economic and political decision-making. During this period also the Swedish-speaking middle class asserted itself, mobilizing the Swedish-speakers in defense of their language.
After the declaration of independence, Finnish very soon became the dominant language

**Geography**

Finnish municipalities are either monolingual or bilingual. Where the entire population speaks the same mother tongue, or where the linguistic minority is less than 8%, the municipality is monolingual. But if the linguistic minority consists of over 3,000 people, the municipality is regarded as bilingual, irrespective of the percentage of minority language speakers.

Out of a total of 311 municipalities (in 2017), 16 are monolingually Swedish (all in Åland), 33 are bilingual with Swedish-speakers as the majority in 15 of them, and the remaining municipalities are monolingually Finnish.

The majority of Swedish-speakers live in bilingual municipalities that are to a great extent dominated by the Finnish language.
SWEDISH-SPEAKING MUNICIPALITIES
With the urbanization and industrialization before and after the Second World War, formerly Swedish-speaking areas, especially in the capital region, received a massive influx of Finnish speakers.

Another element of societal change was the migration, from the 1950s to the 1980s, of Swedish-speaking Finns to Sweden.

The Swedish-speaking minority is quite exceptional among European minorities in the sense that it is present both in the centre and in the periphery.

The periphery applies here particularly to the western region of Ostrobothnia that is territorially cut off from the southern parts of the country where Swedish is spoken. The Swedish minority has also a very strong presence in the centre, particularly in the capital area.

**The language issue**

According to the constitution Finnish and Swedish are the official national languages. Practically all official documents produced by national public authorities are available thus in both Finnish and Swedish.
Although both languages are accorded the same status, this is perhaps more of a moral and political principle than a law for immediate application.

The constitution also stipulates that the cultural and social needs of the two language groups shall be met on equal grounds. This forms the basis for providing all citizens with the same services.

Since the first decades of independence the language question has effectively become a low salience issue, and since the Second World War opposition to bilingualism among political parties has been practically non-existent.

All parties represented in Eduskunta are in favour of bilingualism – although the rise of populism has influenced the debate. The language question really surfaces only in relation to the status of Swedish as a compulsory subject in schools throughout the country, with some interest groups and politicians demanding that Finnish-speaking pupils should have the right to decide whether they want to study Swedish or not.
Several factors have contributed to the depoliticisation of the language question

1) The Swedish-speaking minority is numerically relatively small and lives in two territorial enclaves along the coastline (no territorial aspirations). Hence the majority of Finnish-speakers have very little contact with the Swedish-speakers.

2) The Swedish-speakers have traditionally shown flexibility by using Finnish in their daily activities, particularly so in the larger cities.

3) In bilingual municipalities contacts across the language border are numerous, and this social integration has further reduced the modest tensions that existed during the first decades after independence.

4) A key role is performed by the fact that a clear majority of Swedish-speakers know Finnish. About one-fifth of all Swedish-speaking Finns are practically monolingual in Swedish, the rest know Finnish fairly well and use it to a varying extent both in everyday life and at work.

5) And, the clear majority of Finnish-speakers, particularly members of the economic and political elites, are strongly in favour of bilingualism, in part because having a Swedish-speaking minority has been seen more as an asset than a burden, especially in terms of maintaining contacts with the Nordic countries.
**Swedish People’s Party**

- The Swedish People's Party (*Svenska folkpartiet*, SFP) is effectively a language party, whose main function is to safeguard the interests of the Swedish-speaking minority.

- SFP was an active participant in the state-building process preceding and after the declaration of independence. The Swedish Party, its predecessor that was established approximately in 1870, acted as a counterweight to the strengthening Finnish nationalism, seeking to create a Finnish-Swedish identity among the Swedish-speaking minority.

- The introduction of universal suffrage in 1906 changed the political situation as the Swedish-speaking minority had to organise itself in order to defend its interests. Hence when the SFP was formed in Helsinki 1906, it immediately developed into a vehicle for safeguarding the rights of the whole Swedish-speaking minority, and successfully bridged the divide that had existed within that minority between the urban elites and the rural people.
The Swedish People’s Party has participated in most governments, including all cabinets formed between 1979 and 2015. The near-permanent government status of the party can be interpreted as a mechanism for protecting minority rights, but it is also explained by the centrist and flexible ideology of the party. The policy objectives of the party do not include separatist or autonomist goals. With the rights of the linguistic minority well protected by national legislation, and with the language question no longer really a salient issue in party competition, SFP focuses instead on influencing policy-making at the national level.

As the overwhelming majority of Swedish-speakers live in two enclaves along the coastline that are not connected to each other, this geographical dispersion has also contributed to the low emphasis on territorial aspirations.

It has been estimated that on average about three quarters of the Swedish-speaking Finns vote for SFP. The remaining quarter of Swedish-speakers vote primarily for the leftist parties, particularly the Social Democrats but also the Left Alliance and lately the Green League.
Considering that language is the unifying element keeping the party together, the party electorate is necessarily very heterogeneous, ranging from liberal, post-materialist voters to both conservative smallholders in the Ostrobothnia region and the business elite in the south that includes some of the wealthiest people in the country.

Being able to rely on getting the vote of the clear majority of Swedish-speakers, SFP has tried to broaden its appeal to both bilingual Finns and to the Finnish-speakers, lately primarily by advertising itself as a liberal party.

However, the monolingualism of the party and its role and image as the defender of the interests of the Swedish-speakers are obstacles to attracting the votes of Finnish-speakers.
CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

- Consolidation of parliamentary democracy
- The Finnish political system has experienced a major change since the 1980s, with the parliament and the government emerging from the shadow of the president (and the Soviet Union) as the central political institutions.
- Finland used to be characterised by short-lived and unstable governments living under the shadow of the president. But the governments appointed after the era of president Kekkonen have basically stayed in office for the whole four-year electoral period – a period which Nousiainen (2006) has termed the era of ‘stable majority parliamentarism’.
- EU membership has strengthened parliamentary democracy in Finland by consolidating the political leadership of the government and the PM. Without domestic constitutional change, the president would have led national EU policy and would have represented Finland in the Union.
- Foreign and defense policy excluded, Finland is now effectively a parliamentary regime.
A nice illustration of this is the increased role of the Eduskunta as a forum for debate. Whereas still in the early 1980s the number of plenary speeches made by PMs during the lifetime of a government was below ten, their number has increased rapidly since the late 1980s. The PM now appears almost on a weekly basis in the Eduskunta to defend his government’s actions.

Presidential leadership has been replaced by leadership by strong majority cabinets, which have ruled without much effective opposition since the early 1980s.

**Strong governments and office-seeking parties**

When comparing with other European countries, Finnish governments are outliers in three respects: their parliamentary support, level of fragmentation, and ideological diversity.

Government formation is now based on partisan negotiations and, free from presidential interference or the need to take into account foreign policy imperatives, also more responsive to the election result than before.
The investiture vote requires the party groups of the government parties in the Eduskunta to actively support the cabinet from the beginning, and not surprisingly, the government programme has become more important in guiding government action.

The abolishment of the deferment rule has weakened the ability of the opposition to influence public policy – and has contributed to the office-seeking behaviour of political parties.

Challenges for political parties and democracy:

- At the same time, Finnish political parties are facing similar challenges as parties in the majority of European countries.
- Decline of the left and rise of populism.
- The strengthening of the parties in the national political institutions stands in contrast to the weakening of the parties among the electorate.
- Turnout has declined almost consistently
- New / alternative forms of political participation, including the citizens’ initiative, are challenging traditional representative democracy – not necessarily a bad thing!
- However, when compared with other European countries, the Nordic region and the Finnish polity are nonetheless characterized by high levels of turnout, political participation and trust in political institutions and politicians
- Governments have, particularly since 2003, invested resources into participatory mechanisms and encouraging citizen participation
The bewildered citizen?

In a comparative perspective, Finns display a good level of knowledge about politics. However, their subjective citizen competence is comparatively low; more than citizens in Europe on average, Finns frequently find politics difficult to understand. Perhaps the extent and rapidity of change makes it difficult for citizens to assess the division of political power in the country. The decades of flexible, sometimes ideologically highly unorthodox surplus cabinet coalitions make the assignment of political responsibility difficult. Since the 1970s Finland has become dramatically more prosperous, open and tolerant than it used to be. At the same time, the forces that determine social and political power have become much more numerous, multi-layered and elusive than a generation or two ago.

Growing differentiation among citizens: those that are politically active and those that feel ‘left out’
Still a consensual polity?

Despite the parliamentarisation of the Finnish political system, Finnish politics is still by and large based on consensual arrangements.

Main consensual features are:
- Multiparty governments
- Partisan cooperation across the left-right dimension
- Corporatism
- Welfare state
- Decision-making in foreign and EU policies

The weakness of consensual governance: lack of transparency; closed circle of elites?