

Finland: Elections buck European trend with social democrat win

The social democrats won the vote by a narrow margin over the nationalist Finns Party. The strong result for the Finns Party is unlikely to be a bellwether for European parliamentary elections about a month from now



Source: Liam Lysaght

Fragmented Finland

The Social Democratic Party won 17.7% of the vote in Finland's general election on Sunday, helping it to become the largest party in Finland for the first time since 1999 and bucking the recent trend of social democrats losing votes across Europe. However, the margin over the far-right Finns Party, which won 17.5% of the vote, was smaller than expected and does not make coalition talks any easier. Like in many European countries, the political landscape in Finland has become more fragmented, with no party winning more than 20% of the vote for the first time in over a century.

Bellwether for European elections?

A strong result for the Finns Party came after internal struggles that led to a breakup in 2017. Until

the start of the year, the party was polling at just 10% before gaining momentum in recent weeks. Still, the party did marginally worse than in the 2015 elections, when it won 17.7% of the vote. The recent surge could be taken as a bellwether for the performance of other eurosceptic parties in the European parliamentary elections, but with current polls still showing a strong lead for centrist parties, momentum would have to change radically across Europe for a large nationalist bloc to change EU policy making.

Finland certainly serves as a bellwether for Europe regarding its demographics, which were an important factor in the campaign leading up to the elections. The battle against an ageing population is causing concern about health care and wealth reforms and the sustainability of Finland's public finances. The Center Party of caretaker Prime Minister Juha Sipilä failed to get reforms through parliament recently and was punished in the elections for it, with just 13.8% of the vote after 21.1% in 2015.

The social democrats have promised to let in work-related immigrants to battle the ageing population, along with refugees, and raise taxes to maintain the Finnish welfare state. They now have a difficult task ahead of them in finding allies for this agenda after a fragmented election result. ☒

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