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“Euroscepticism as political opportunity. Comparing the Euroscepticism of the Finnish and Swedish populist parties.”

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Abstract

A comparison of European populist right wing parties quickly identifies Finland as something of an outlier. Whilst the True Finns party is one of the most successful populist right wing parties in Europe, its success is based on a distinct strategy that shies away from the standard strategies employed by right wing parties that tend to focus on immigration and systemic critiques. Instead, the True Finns party has drawn heavily on Eurosceptic attitudes in its public discourse. Why did Euroscepticism create such an effective political strategy for the Finns party? With a focus on the Euroscepticism, the paper compares the political discourse of the True Finns party against that of the Swedish Democrats, exploring both their policy choices and their reactions to government policy. The paper suggests that the strict immigration policies in Finland have mainstreamed policies that elsewhere in Europe have remained in the domain of the far right, thus leaving the True Finns party with little option but to focus on Europe in its quest to create a unique and popular political identity in the Finnish political landscape.

Introduction

Eurosceptic strategies can be attractive to populist radical right parties because they present an effective method for carving out political space. In national elections the EU is often seen as a secondary issue that provides a comparatively cost-free strategy for populist parties to articulate their opposition to the political mainstream (Taggart, 1998). In this context, the striking lack of Eurosceptic political parties in the Finnish political landscape case has tended to be characterized as an ‘anomaly’ requiring explanation. The fact that in Finland, in contrast to Sweden and Denmark, Euroscepticism failed to gain traction as a vote-winning strategy has been explained by factors such as the consensual style of Finnish coalition politics and the policy of ‘speaking with one voice’ in Brussels (Raunio, 2005, 2007, 2008). However, the unprecedented success of the True Finns in the 2009 European Parliament elections and the 2011 national parliamentary elections on a primarily Eurosceptic ticket calls for a rethink. Has the success of the True Finns created a new ‘anomaly’ that requires explanation?

This change of circumstance forces us not only to reconsider the role of Euroscepticism in Finland, but also to rethink how we ought to go about making comparisons between Finland and Sweden. How do we best explain the shift from the ‘old Finnish exceptionalism’ that saw Finnish Euroscepticism as rather weak and ineffectual in comparison to their Swedish cousins, to the ‘new exceptionalism’ where Finland’s Eurosceptic is the most potent in Northern Europe? This paper suggests that these recent events prompt us to rethink how we perceive of the role of Euroscepticism in the political agendas of Nordic far right populist political parties.

We argue that attitudes towards European integration need to be understood in the context of long-term domestic agendas that are anchored in a range of locally relevant policy issues. Therefore the differences in ‘levels’ of Euroscepticism cannot be explained without reference to the other salient issues on the radical right populist agendas in Sweden and Finland, and the importance of these in the domestic debate. Given that the populist right identity is largely built on perceptions of nationalist and nativist perspectives, it should not be surprising to find that the domestic political agenda plays an important role in determining the parties’ positions on European questions. On the basis of this we further argue that the apparent

qualitative differences between Finnish and Swedish far-right approaches to articulating their political position, as illustrated by the different role Euroscepticism has played in the two country contexts, may in fact be a rather superficial difference. Digging deeper one in fact finds a broader set of shared issues and concerns between the two country contexts.

In order to illustrate this we propose to construct an archetype of Nordic populism that draws on nationalist social democracy, immigration and Euroscepticism. Where is the space is the critical question. There are different constraints in each country case that explain the prevalence of Euroscepticism in Finland. We need to contextualize Euroscepticism rather than analyzing Euroscepticism in isolation.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section positions our research in the existing literature on Euroscepticism and sketches out the 'archetype' of Nordic right-wing populism. In the second section the position of the True Finns and Swedish Democrats is explored further and in the third we sketch out our 'archetype' of a Nordic populist radical right party.

Euroscepticism in Finland and Sweden

While the literature encompasses an increasingly sophisticated range of models to understand Euroscepticism, these models are less able to capture the far right populist approaches to European integration. In its broadest sense Euroscepticism refers to opposition to the process of European integration and here the analysis has focused largely on the Euroscepticism of political parties. Taggart's seminal analysis of West European parties according to their expressions of Euroscepticism (1998) has been followed by several others. Szczerbiak and Taggart (2000) distinguish two types of Euroscepticism: 'Hard Euroscepticism' refers to parties that express a principled opposition to the EU that is premised on withdrawal from the EU project, and 'Soft Euroscepticism' where parties express a qualified objection to certain policies, often with the aim of safeguarding national interests. Kopecky and Mudde (2002) claim further analytical ground as they construct a framework that considers the distinction between how parties position themselves against 'Europe as an idea' and 'the European Union as the current embodiment of these ideas'. In this way, by differentiating between 'diffuse' support for the general idea of integration and 'specific' support for the general practice of integration, the model captures both normative and practical policy aspects of Euroscepticism. Usherwood (2008), analysing the case of UK Independence Party, points to the external environment (electoral system and party competition) and internal party dynamics (ideology and leadership) as explanatory variables in determining the nature of Euroscepticism.

The presence of these external and internal factors point to the changeable and contingent nature of the broader context in which any model based on ideal types inevitably plays out. Vasilopoulou (2011), however, argues that the mainstream analysis of Eurosceptic parties has difficult time accommodating the radical right positions, and points to the weaknesses of the 'hard' and 'soft' approach, as not all radical right parties ascribe to hard Euroscepticism as the model describes it. Similarly, the model put forward by Kopecky and Mudde aims to capture a range of optimistic and pessimistic attitudes towards European integration, rendering half of the framework non-applicable to the study of the far right populism where only different degrees of pessimism are found. These observations suggest that in order to explain radical right approaches to European integration we need for a more nuanced unpacking of hard Euroscepticism.

Whilst the Eurosceptic trend in Sweden has been relatively well documented, it has featured largely as a policy strand within established parties or in the form of single-issue parties (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). The Left Party and the Green Party both accommodate substantial 'hard' Eurosceptic camps within their party membership while the Centre Party and

the Social Democrats have strong 'soft' Eurosceptic contingencies. Populist parties, such as Swedish Democrats, have opted to focus on other aspects of the Nordic right wing populist agenda, such as immigration and systemic critiques of the welfare state. The case of Finland has been rather different. Only a few years ago the analysis of Euroscepticism in Finland focused on explaining the distinct lack of electoral success for Eurosceptic parties (Raunio, 2008). The Eurosceptic camp within the mainstream parties has been hardly discernible and the only vocally Eurosceptic party, the True Finns¹, struggled to gain traction, even in the European Parliament elections. Is therefore interesting to note the unprecedented success of this strategy in the 2009 European Parliament elections and 2011 national elections. In the space of 24 months the True Finns - at least in terms of parliamentary representation - became one of the most successful populist parties in Europe.

It seems therefore obvious that Euroscepticism plays an important role in the explanation of variable fortunes of populist far right parties in the Nordic countries. In Sweden it is a region of politics populated largely by the mainstream parties whilst in Finland Eurosceptic arguments have been left almost completely untouched by the main parties. Yet, the argument put forward in this paper suggests that it is easy to overemphasise the differences in Swedish and Finnish far-right populism that a focus on Euroscepticism alludes to. In fact both countries share a strikingly similar rhetoric in critical domestic policy arenas. Too much emphasis on exceptionality, and the current situation would invite us to do the same at the opposite end of the scale. More interesting to say that these countries share the same populist culture, then why different manifestations can be observed in practice?

True Finns (Perussuomalaiset)

The True Finns party is the most recent reincarnation of a populist party representing the radical right in Finland. The party is largely based on the model established by its predecessor, the Finnish Rural Party, which claimed to protect the interests of the rural smallholders and other forgotten groups whose interests were not served by the elitist politics of the Finnish Parliament (Eduskunta). Although it lacks the xenophobic extremism that characterises the Danish People's Party and the Swedish Democrats, True Finns stand in support of a mix of traditional conservative and nativist values that locates it firmly in among the populist radical right parties of Europe (Arter 2010). As Arter points out, the pivotal concept in the True Finn ideology is 'the notion of (true) Finnishness' (2010: 502), an idea that informs much of the True Finn perception of Finland's future. These characteristics, he argues, position True Finns as populist radical right party as this relates to Western European political systems.

An overview of relevant documents from the True Finns, particularly the manifestos for Finnish parliamentary elections and for the European Parliament elections are useful in shedding light on the way the True Finns see and position themselves as a political party. First of all, the True Finns adhere to traditional conservative values that are highlighted in the importance placed on law and order, tougher punishments for public order offences (particularly where drugs and alcohol are concerned) and for the importance of traditional family values as a key source of social solidarity and cohesion. Second, the True Finn party position supports a nativist policy where a policy of ethnic homogeneity is the preferred policy. However, whilst certain, more 'radical' members of the party have called for hardline immigration policy bordering on the xenophobic, the party leadership have been very careful to distance themselves from such statements. While the True Finn position on this issue has clearly hardened since 1995 when the party was founded, it is communicated less through official policy channels and more through informal rhetoric through 'rogue' party members. Third, the True Finn policies are often based on attacking the downgrading of the Nordic welfare state

model by successive Finnish governments and the structural inequalities and unfairness that this perpetuates. Given its genealogy as a party protecting the interests of the 'small man' or less fortunate in society, its policies include, for example, calls for more progressive taxation arrangements.

Finally, the gradual growth of the Eurosceptic discourse within the True Finns is also worth noting. The founding documents make at best a very brief, in passim, mention of the European Union and only gradually does the True Finn scepticism on issues relating to the European Union grow. The early documents contrast starkly with the 2011 election manifesto where critique of the European Union runs to several paragraphs.

Swedish Democrats (Sverige Demokraterna)

In contrast to the Finnish discourse, Euroscepticism has not been an exclusive area of populist parties but has been widely held by both parties on the left and right. Vänsterpartiet (the left party) has in the party program the goal of leaving the European Union and replace this with a more democratic international arrangement (www.vansterpartiet.se). The same goes for the Green Party (Miljöpartiet de Gröna) which frames departure from the European Union as its main policy goal. Until that day both of these parties remain Eurosceptical and critical of an organization they deem to be undemocratic and centralized. The Euroscepticism is not just on the left side of politics but also through one-issue party June-list (Junilistan), which was the third largest party in the European Parliament election in 2004 but failed to re-enter the European Parliament in the 2009. The party aims to cover the whole spectrum of left and right and therefore try to be equally distributed among the left and right scale. Even the mainstream parties of Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna) and the Centre party (Centerpartiet) contain factions that are critical of the European Union.

Euroscepticism is rather crowded area and is far less a political opportunity for a populist party such as Swedish Democrats. The party is Eurosceptic in the way that they support a return of competencies to the Swedish state. They argue that the EU should be based on more of a co-operative model rather than on a federal state. Swedish Democrats want to re-negotiate the EU treatment but there are no official demands to leave the European Union. The party has rather explored the political opportunity of nationalism where the party focuses on the national identity of Sweden. Rydberg defines that this rests on a relationship between the Swedish people and its culture: "This ambition rests upon an ontological relationship to the terms 'people' and 'culture' (i.e. to the notion that each nation embodies *one* ethnically determined culture) and a nostalgic belief in what I have previously called "the myth of the golden past" (Rydgren 2003). The Swedish Democrats put a focus on the nation state which is the prime community and that there is a strong linkage between the Swedish nation state and the Swedish people. The party relies very much on the concept of a Swedish cultural Gemeinschaft (Gemenskap) and it defines its three important questions as reducing immigration, reducing crime and safeguarding the welfare of pensioners.

The party wants to safeguard the Swedish welfare state and argues that even if a tax reductions were desirable, these should never happen on the back of the Swedish welfare state. In many ways the Sweden Democrats represents a populist party that contains right wing elements (nationalism, nation state, xenophobia, security) but their party program does contain certain Scandinavian aspects such as strong support for the Swedish Welfare state and a position against death penalty. There are many strong signs that Swedish Democrats should be seen as a different form of populism which contain element of both left and right-wing populism.

Nordic exceptionalism?

This relatively brief comparison of the positions of the main populist parties in Finland and Sweden suggests, first of all, that there are certain common features across the political ideologies of these parties. Both parties adhere to a strong systemic critique of the current governmental policies that support progressive taxation and stronger welfare state (return to the golden 1960s) and speak in favour of nativist policies that aspire to greater cultural homogenisation. Both parties are also largely in support of authoritarian policies on issues such as crime. However, the key difference is around the issues of immigration and Euroscepticism. While True Finns have developed a sophisticated policy agenda around the critique of the European Union, they have been relatively more reticent on the issue of immigration. In contrast the Swedish Democrats have adopted an opposite strategy of highly vocal politics on the issue of immigration and a much more limited agenda on Euroscepticism.