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THE ‘JYTKY’ OF THE FINNS PARTY: OR, HOW TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MASCULINITY IN POPULIST POLITICS

Urpo Kovala & Jyrki Pöysä

ABSTRACT

In this article the authors look at the way leading politicians of the Finns Party have appealed to masculine values. The exceptional rise of the populist party between 2003 and 2015 is seen as a major indicator of the overall rise of ‘masculinist’ values in Finnish politics. However, the question is not only of *more* masculinist politics, but also of a change in *styles* of masculinity – a shift towards a plurality of different political styles emphasizing masculine values. This does not preclude the ideological nature of the adherence to those values but sets new challenges to scholarship addressing what has been called backlash of traditional values in recent years in Europe and from 2016 onwards in the United States as well. The authors analyze the usages of two keywords, ‘jätkä’ (roughly meaning ‘bloke’ when referring to oneself) and ‘jytky’ (big bang, referring to the landslide victory of the party in 2011) by former party leader Timo Soini. From this analysis the authors proceed to show connections between the masculinity-related rhetorics of Finns party representatives and the central identity politics of the party.

Introduction

The exceptional rise of the Finnish populist party ‘The Finns Party’ (earlier ‘True Finns’, in Finnish ‘Perussuomalaiset’, literally ‘basic Finns’ or ‘average Finns’) between 2003 and 2015 is a major indicator of the rise of ‘masculinist’ values in Finnish politics. However, it is not only a question of *more* masculinist politics, but also of

a change in *styles* of masculinity. From a stiff, ‘aristocratic’ masculinity of the earlier period of political status quo (criticized by the Finns Party), there has been a shift towards a plurality of different political styles emphasizing masculine values. This does not preclude the ideological nature of the adherence to those values but sets new challenges to scholarship addressing what has been called a backlash of traditional values in recent years in Europe especially and recently (from 2016 onwards) in the United States as well. In this article we look at the way leading politicians of the Finns Party have appealed to masculinity and masculine values (about masculinity studies and different masculinities in Finnish politics, see Nieminen 2013). Here, masculinity is not any natural, noncontestable given. Rather, we refer to a culturally constructed and ideological phenomenon, dubbing it ‘masculinism’.

From vikings to swing voters

In the 2003 parliamentary elections the success of the party was still mild in numbers (1.57 % of the votes) and was mostly based on the success of former athlete, show wrestler (known by the name *Ludvig Borga*), rude and ultra-masculine *Tony ‘Viking’ Halme*.

Halme’s political career did not last for many years, as he died in 2010 of alcohol and drug abuse. However, Halme did offer a fresh channel for both political protest for less-well-to-do voters and political expressions leaning towards openly chauvinistic and rasistic politics. The famous self-ironical news comment attributed to Halme (the day after the 2003 elections) perhaps explains a little his provocative style: ‘It seems like everything is possible in Finland. We have a lesbian president and me as MP.’ Although the result of the party in the 2003 elections, three MPs, was not noted as a big success, the new party, established in 1995, did make space for the idea of the need of an alternative to the clean and polished consensus politics of the older parties.



Picture 1. Tony Halme, show wrestler and later MP of Finns Party

The male swing voters and non-voters would later on be even more important for the slowly rising success of the party in the 2007 parliamentary elections (5 MPs) and particularly in the 2011

and 2015 parliamentary elections, which totally changed the Finnish political map's status quo (the Finns Party managed to get 39 and 38 MPs, respectively, out of 200 deputies of the parliament, meaning that – due to other changes in the relative strengths between parties – in 2015 the Finns Party became the second biggest party of the parliament!). The victory was called 'jytky', an ancient Finnish word denoting the sound of a heavy thump, but being, according to Timo Soini, leader of the Finns Party (Soini 2014), his own innovation into political language, heard from the people's mouth 'at some market place' (see Kovala & Pöysä 2017, 257-259). Later on the term has been used for other kinds of political victories and non-victories as well, for example during the media coverage of the 2016 presidential elections of the USA. This could also be seen as indication of the transition of the Finns Party from a marginalized, ridiculed position into the centre of political publicity in Finland during the early 2010s.

Timo Soini, masculinity, and identity

Although the 2007 elections did not yet mean a great success for the Finns Party (with just 4.05 % of the votes), they did mean a great success for party leader Soini, who received the third biggest amount of voters in whole Finland (19 859 /+15 462). During the presidential elections in 2006 the personality of the long time political activist working already in the 1980s and 1990s for the former populist party, Finnish Rural Party [Suomen Maaseudun Puolue, SMP] had for the first time become well-known in Finland due to his personal media qualities and the populist message of the party. It is part of the definition of populism that populist political movements count on charismatic leaders. It seems that between 2003 and 2007 Soini had become one. While the star of Tony Halme as a political non-conformist was already on the decline, Soini as the leader of the party had risen to new spheres of celebrity, not the least for his fluent and skilful media presence and his average guy habitus –



Picture 2. Posters used in presidential (2006) and parliamentary (2007) elections

somewhat plump, but honest, sympathetic, critical of the ‘real’ politicians and the consensus politics of his time. The following two pictures from Soini’s campaign ad are republished in Soini’s first book (2008). The caption shows a degree of self-irony: ‘The invitation to dance by a district agrologist’ -look worked well both for presidential and parliamentary elections.

How to turn personal success into the success of the party? This question probably kept the Finns Party activists busy after the 2007 elections. In 2008 Timo Soini published his autobiography entitled *Maisterisjätkä*.

A great part of the book consists of building a personal mythology of Soini’s person as a political inheritor of the leader of the former Finnish Rural Party (SMP), legendary Veikko Vennamo. The title of the book is interesting as such. As an ad hoc coinage it combines the word ‘maisteri’ denoting a person with an academic

Master's degree and 'jätkä' denoting a non-educated ordinary guy ('lad', 'bloke', or 'dude'). Interestingly, Soini reveals in the book that also the Finnish name of the party, 'Perussuomalaiset', was based on his own, tentatively used, self-denoting attribute 'perussuomalainen mies' – 'ordinary Finnish man' (p. 88). The potential tension between the populist need for creating affinity with the ordinary people and Soini's background as academic M.Soc.Sc. (he actually wrote his Master's thesis about the history of populism, see Soini 1988), officially 'maisteri' (but expressed here in a somewhat old style, with the diminutive form 'maisteri-s') was resolved in this rhetorical oxymoron, which at the same time gave Soini a possibility to bring in masculine values into his political figure otherwise quite far from Halme's ultra masculinity. To call oneself a 'jätkä', whatever meanings it might have for the the addressee, is something totally different from calling oneself a politician (which he actually is). The following picture (3) probably crystallizes the habitus of Soini as a 'jätkä' of that time.

In his second autobiographical book entitled *Peruspomo* (2014) Soini gives himself a new oxymoronic attribute, 'basic boss'. As a folksy form for 'director' or 'leader', 'pomo' refers more explicitly to Soini's role as the head of the party, a kind of personification of the party. Although Soini's most important signs of ordinarieness (plumpness, a somewhat scruffy appearance, relaxed posture, cheap looking glasses, Millwall scarf, conservative – Roman Catholic - family values, and place of residence in Espoo Iivisniemi, horse racing and football as his hobbies) are still there, he is also tuning his political personality all the time according to the social climate. Now as the present Finnish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Soini has travelled quite far from the ordinary people and from being an unknown party worker for a marginal political party.

How has Soini dealt with this contradiction as minister since 2015? It looks like he has left aside some of his 'trademarks', for instance the blue and white Millwall scarf. But there is also tension to be seen between his occasional attempt to use the same kind of somewhat provocative language and the requirements of his present



Picture 3. Blokeness of Timo Soini

high position as Minister. Besides the language, also the use of pictures for self expression is important to note as part of Soini's political image. At the same time, photographers and journalists are lured to take seriously the casual style of the populist leader. It is somewhat banal that the nasal hair of Soini became a kind of trademark of his relaxed masculinist politics (see the cover of the leading Finnish business journal *Kauppa-lehti's* monthly review on the next page). Within Soini's habitus hairiness could also be seen as a sign of experience (age) and of a hard working masculine guy with no time to take care of outer appearance. In official and public pictures these kinds of details are not there just by accident.

Identity politics as a carrier wave for the Finns Party

The rhetorical strategies used by Soini are manifestly dynamic and reflexive. Soini is ready to try out new coinages, react apparently spontaneously to situations, and shift strategies according to changing contexts of operation. But the identity politics that those strategies support is something more stable.

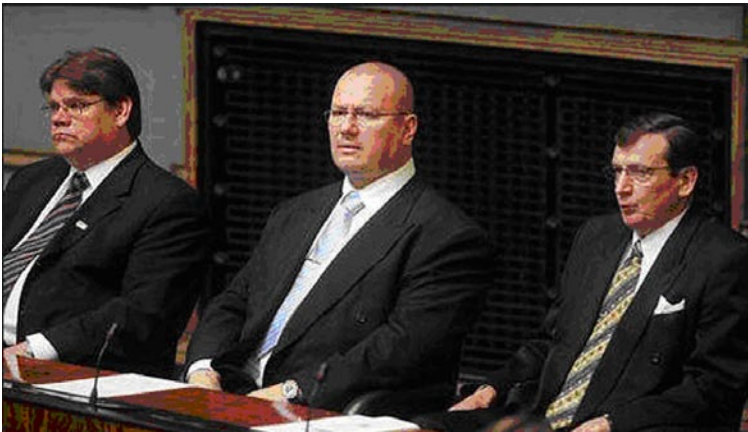
Much of the success of the Finns Party boils down to an identity politics where traditional gender roles and family values are in a



Picture 4. Cover picture of *Kauppalehti* monthly

salient position and which links with the value conservative undercurrent of the Finnish populist movement. This comes close to what Paul Taggart (2000) identifies as the core of populism – the nostalgia towards and effort to reach the ‘heartland’ – ‘a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of the imagination’. Soini’s habitus is definitely a central part of the core identity politics in the Finns Party, which is often said to be part of a more general backlash towards a bygone state of culture and society where things were clear and simple – in brief, towards a heartland.

However, the identity politics associated with Soini has not been the only one among the leading politicians of the party. In a picture taken of three Finns Party MPs at the Finnish parliament somewhere around 2006 we see three different kinds of masculinities judged by their outer appearance and career history: Ostrobothnian policeman Raimo Vistbacka, show wrestler Tony Halme and populist party veteran Timo Soini.



Picture 5. Three Finns Party MPs (from right to left): Raimo Vistbacka, Tony Halme, and Timo Soini

It is indeed interesting to note that in today's Finns Party there is room for different kinds of masculinities. Tony Halme's aggressively non-conformist habitus was very different from Soini's although both are (were) known as good speakers. Vistbacka, then, was something different as well: dry, grey, decorous, fact oriented politician. Although Vistbacka was the sole MP of the party in the early years of the party, he has never attracted much media attention and has apparently not been so much as striving at high media visibility. In line with the popular image of a Finnish policeman he is a more matter-of-fact kind of politician than the other two shown in the photograph.

In contrast to Soini, Halme and Vistbacka, the public image of Jussi Halla-aho, leading figure of the anti-immigration fraction of the party, is a far cry from any bloke-like appearance. Although a populist politician in the strong sense of the term, he acts and looks like an academic. It would be hard to imagine him calling himself a 'jätkä' – or being called one. Rather, with the bike, helmet, and backpack, and overall learned habitus, he would easily go for a supporter of the Green Party. Halla-aho's political agenda is actually very narrow and boils down to just three topics: immigration



Picture 6. Jussi Halla-aho, MEP, leader of Finns Party since June 2017

and multiculturalism, the related danger of Islam, and the issue of gun control.

Jussi Halla-aho and Jussi Niinistö, Minister of Defence at the time this article is being written, are far from ordinary guys and are not trying to appear as ones, either. Both have a doctoral degree, the former in Slavic philology and the latter in historical studies. Neither would identify with or appeal to the people in their rhetoric or in their politics. Although the two and Soini are part of the same populist movement, they have both different agendas and different political styles (see Palonen 2017, 309). Nevertheless, all these politicians are in line as regards their relationship with the said traditional values and pull towards the same direction. They also share the anti-idealist and anti-cultural elite attitudes, although to different degrees.

Apart from the habituses of the leading Finns Party politicians, the very politics of the party shows strong masculinist features. The focus on issues of power (including the military) and the nationalist emphases, enhanced value conservativity and self-conscious anti-culture attitudes seem to be tendencies which have appealed to male voters much more than female ones (Ylä-Anttila 2014, 192). It must be remembered that Soini's occasional jokes about feminists and especially 'male feminists' are far from ambiguous: 'If a bloke declares himself a male feminist, I bend twice over and die of laughter.'

The 'immigration critical' rhetorics and policies of the party, in turn, connect more or less closely with forms of present-day racism and the exclusive nationalist ideologies of right-wing patriotic groups, whose influence in the party is bigger than the relatively small number of their active supporters would suggest. Part of the immigration-critical fraction of the party have had contacts with such radical groups and there has been some pressure against party leader Soini to the effect that he should explicitly forbid cooperation and any contacts with such groups. Failure to do so can be seen as an indication of the fact that there is some support basis there to be lost for the party.

It is evidence of the new political status of the Finns Party that it has managed to create new normalities to the political language and other practices. One example of the latter: representatives of the other two parties in the present cabinet – The Coalition party and the Centre party – have started showing signs of enhanced masculinity as well. The most famous of these was the ‘fist bump’ of representatives of the three parties – Jari Lindström (Minister of Justice and Minister of Labour), Juha Sipilä (Prime Minister), and Alexander Stubb (Minister of Finance) – in early March 2016, in connection with a success in pressing forward the ‘competitiveness boost’ with the help of a ‘historical’ (forced) agreement between different sides of the labour market. It is possible to interpret the gesture as another sign of the spread of a new, ‘boyish’ populist style in Finnish top politics. The gesture was (not without justification) interpreted in Finland as a sign of a backlash, although in another context it could be seen as a mark for a new, relaxed political culture (see for



Picture 7. ‘We made it!’ Ministers’ boyish fist bump to celebrate the agreement between different sides of the labour market.

example president Obama's fist bump with his wife and children). The latter was very probably the impression the politicians wanted to give to the public, but in the context of the weakening of the terms and conditions of employment of the low salary female workers the fist bump got a totally different meaning: 'we won!'

Is the Finns Party a 'male party'?

In this article we have shown how an apparently uniform political formation such as the Finns Party can incorporate very different political orientations. It seems that especially in times when a populist movement has air under its wings, it can take in different kinds of personal habituses, identity politics, and rhetorical strategies under those wings – which is very much in line with the Laclauan definition of populism.

It has often been noted that the Finns Party is not attractive to women – whether voters or striving politicians. This may be due to the fact that the issues taken up by Finns Party politicians or the worlds of justification evoked in that process (see Ylä-Anttila 2014, 206), are more distant for women than men. Another explanation, touched on in this article, is the polemical and often aggressive political style that the party is known for. However, one can also ask *why* the women who have voted for the party or are political actors in the party on various levels have done so. What is the 'affordance' of the movement and the party for them?

There may be pragmatic reasons for women to vote for or join the Finns Party – an aspiring politician may well find a new party, which is rising in popularity and is in need of candidates, attractive from the career perspective. And a populist movement, by definition, gathers together under a common banner both diverse causes and diverse supporters with various personal motivations. Another possible explanation would be the nostalgic lure of the 'heartland', a stable, traditional gender system with home-like qualities. For a somewhat stronger interpretation of the lure, however, we need to

go back to issues of identity dealt with above. Namely, identity politics is not only about gender, but also about social and cultural background. More precisely, it seems that at least for some representatives and supporters of the party, their solidarity to the party rests on a sense of belonging to a socio-cultural group (or groups) that considers itself neglected by the older parties. This solidarity may or may not override the problematic aspects of the party for many women. Although it is not paid much attention to in the media and political commentary, this kind of alienation, together with other explanatory factors, seems to us to be involved in the popularity of Finnish political populism for both men and women, although the ‘affordance’ of the party is undeniably more lucrative and more easily digestible for men.

Conclusions

In this article we have charted the masculinity-related rhetoric of Finns Party, starting with Timo Soini, former leader of Finns Party, and proceeding from there to deal with a number of other leading politicians of the party. Our goal was to account for the ways in which masculinity figures in the habituses, rhetorics, and policies of those politicians. Much of the success of Finns Party rests on an identity politics emphasizing traditional gender roles and family values, which links with the value conservative undercurrent of the Finnish populist movement and forms much of the core of the ‘heartland’ of the movement.

The article reveals that there are both different masculinities and related identity politics manifested by leading politicians of Finns Party. Timo Soini’s habitus is distinct from those of Jussi Halla-aho, Jussi Niinistö or the late Tony Halme. Nevertheless, the principle of equivalence, here too, prevails over differences. All these politicians are basically in line as regards their relationship with the said traditional values and pull towards the same direction. They

also share the anti-idealist and anti-elite attitudes, although to different degrees.

Apart from the habituses of the leading Finns Party politicians, the very politics of the party shows strong masculinist features. The focus on issues of power and the nationalist emphasis, enhanced value conservativity, and self-conscious anti-culture attitudes seem to be tendencies which have appealed to male voters much more than female ones. The latter, although the party has often been dubbed a masculine party, shared some of the other reasons for their support for the party. In sum, much of the success of the party and its central politicians rested on appeals to masculinist values, with which populism got entangled.

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