

Democracy and Democratization in Finland Perspectives from Outside and Inside

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Abstract

This article deals with democracy and democratization in Finland. In particular, it raises the question whether Finland can be considered an “immanent democracy.” According to O’Donnell and Whitehead, immanent democracies are a subset of consolidated democracies. In immanent democracies, the democratic credentials of the country are considered self-evident; the idea of democracy is a central element of national self-understanding. In O’Donnell and Whitehead’s account, the immanence of democracy has to do with the perspective “from inside, looking out,” rather than the perspective of a comparative researcher of democratization which is “from outside, looking in.” The essay describes the process of democratic consolidation in Finland, paying attention to the relapses of democracy, especially during the postwar era. The essay also examines how Finns perceive their own democracy. Although support for democracy is currently very high in Finland, the consensual patterns of electoral competition have a negative impact on people’s sense of external efficacy. Moreover, for a long time, national survival was the paramount goal in Finnish politics, and democratic norms and procedures sometimes were overlooked for the sake of this goal. Finns are very aware of the imperfections of their democracy, and for this reason, the label “immanent democracy” may not be entirely appropriate in the case of Finland.

Key words: Finland, immanent democracy, democratization, party competition, civil society.

Introduction: The Concepts of Consolidated and Immanent Democracy

According to O’Donnell and Whitehead, immanent democracies can be regarded as a subset of consolidated democracies. In consolidated democracies,

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“democratic rules and procedures have become accepted by all significant participants as ‘the only’ basis for the allocation and reassignment of public offices.”¹ In other words, democratic rules and procedures are accepted and followed by all key political actors involved in political competition. In immanent democracies, the basic characteristics of consolidated democracies apply, but in addition, democratic norms and ethos are a part of collective identity, or national self-understanding.

In some advanced democracies, most notably in the United States, the principles of constitution, such as individual equality and liberty, have become an element of national self-understanding. Moreover, O’Donnell and Whitehead refer to Huntington, who argued that the national identity in the United States has more to do with its civic and constitutional traditions than ethnic and cultural characteristics, which define national identities in many other countries.² This has arguably been the case, despite the dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture in the United States. However, in certain periods, the Anglo-Saxon culture has been discriminatory toward other cultures and identities. To some extent, the “civic” foundations of the American political culture can be regarded as a collective myth, which disguises the reality of the dominance of one particular ethnic group. According to O’Donnell and Whitehead, the same potentially applies to other democracies (e.g., Canada and Australia).

In O’Donnell and Whitehead’s view, immanence is something like a collective self-perception, and it is based on collectively held myths, that is, shared beliefs of the past. The belief in immanence of democracy is also a result of socialization. As O’Donnell and Whitehead put it: “From the standpoint of those most intensely socialized into U.S. society, the nation’s democratic quality shines out in such a way that it would require an effort of will to question a truth that seems so evident.”³ Democracy may become a kind of “civil religion”; it may even be considered disloyal to doubt the democratic credentials of the country. In O’Donnell and Whitehead’s account, the immanence of democracy has primarily to do with the perspective “from inside, looking out,” rather than the perspective of a comparative researcher of democratization which is “from outside, looking in.” In this respect, the perception of democratic immanence may even prevent realistic assessment of the state of democracy and receptivity to alternative models. O’Donnell and Whitehead suggest that the United States, in particular, is an exemplar of a

¹ Guillermo O’Donnell and Laurence Whitehead, “Two Comparative Democratization Perspectives: ‘Brown Areas’ and ‘Immanence,’” in *Democratization in America. A Comparative-Historical Analysis*, ed. Desmond King, Robert C. Liebermann, Gretchen Ritter, and Laurence Whitehead (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 37.

² *Ibid.*, 52-53.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

subcategory of immanent democracies which are “more assured and less open to self-doubt.”⁴

The first aim of this essay is to discuss the process of the consolidation of democracy in Finland. It is notable that Finland has managed to maintain its democratic institutions and practices since it gained its first republican constitution in 1919. According to Eric Hobsbawm: “The only European countries with adequately democratic political institutions that functioned without a break during the entire inter-war period were Britain, Finland (only just), the Irish Free State, Sweden and Switzerland.”⁵ As Hobsbawm points out, the continuation of the Finnish democracy has not been self-evident—it happened “only just,” not only during the interwar period but also during the period after World War II. The second aim of this essay is to answer how Finns perceive their own democracy and whether Finland can be considered an immanent democracy. O’Donnell and Whitehead indeed mention Finland as one candidate to be included in the category of immanent democracies.⁶ This essay argues that, although Finland scores very high on such measurements as “uncorruptedness,” and thus “from outside, looking in,” Finland today looks like a highly advanced parliamentary democracy, the picture is somewhat different “from inside, looking out.”

The Development of Parliamentary Democracy in Finland

Between 1812 and 1917, Finland was a grand duchy of the Russian empire. Before this, Finland was for centuries an integral, eastern part of the Swedish kingdom. Since the early eighteenth century and the establishment of the city of St. Petersburg, Russia had had a growing aspiration to dominate the Baltic. As a consequence, Russians also had a growing military and strategic interest in Finland. Following the war between Russia and Sweden in 1808, Finland was incorporated into the Russian empire as an autonomous grand duchy. During the era of autonomy, Finland was governed under direct subordination to the Russian tsar by a council of government (senate), chaired by a governor general. The new autonomous status was interpreted to mark the creation of Finland as a nation, that is, the establishment of its political existence.⁷

As in many other places in Europe, Finnish nationalism and national identity came into being during the nineteenth century. By and large, the era of autonomy was characterized by the peaceful development of Finnish society. During the reign of Tsar Alexander II, in particular, Finnish autonomy was

⁴ Ibid., 44.

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (London: Abacus, 1994), 111.

⁶ O’Donnell and Whitehead, “Two Comparative Democratization Perspectives,” 47.

⁷ Osmo Jussila, Seppo Hentilä, and Jukka Nevakivi, *From Grand Duchy to a Modern State: A Political History of Finland since 1809* (London: Hurst, 1999), 21-25.

consolidated and many administrative and social reforms were implemented. Among other things, Finland adopted its own currency in 1865. However, at the turn and during the first two decades of the twentieth century, there were shifts between centralization from St. Petersburg during the “Years of Oppression,” and a more liberal regime allowing more national autonomy.

Following the defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War and the general strike of 1904-1905, several political and social reforms were carried out in the Russian empire. This situation opened the way for the reform of the representative system in Finland. In 1906, the antiquated Diet, representing four estates, was replaced by a modern, unicameral parliament (*Eduskunta*), elected through general elections with universal suffrage, including for women.⁸ The first parliamentary election was held in 1907, applying the proportional D’Hondt system, which is still in use. It is notable that nineteen women were elected to the parliament—these were the first elected female parliamentary representatives in the world. Finland was the second country in the world to allow women to stand as candidates in parliamentary elections. Australia was the first to grant women’s candidacy in 1902, but no women were elected in the first Australian election following the parliamentary reform.

However, the powers of the newly elected Finnish parliament were limited. The reformist period after the Russo-Japanese War was relatively short, and it was followed by policies aiming at the “Russification” of Finland. As a consequence, the *Eduskunta* was dissolved several times and the aspirations to achieve social reforms through legislation were obstructed.⁹ This contributed to the aggravation of social problems during the first decades of the twentieth century, which, in turn, increased the polarization of Finnish society. The idea of independence gained increasing support among the Finnish population, and the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 was seen as an opportunity to achieve this goal. In December 1917, Finland declared independence, alongside Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, and Ukraine. Lenin’s Bolshevik government was the first one to recognize the independence of Finland, in hope that it would later become a socialist republic.¹⁰

Finland had thus gained its independence, but the very beginning of the new Finnish state was particularly turbulent. There were 42,000 Russian soldiers in Finland; the Bolshevik revolutionaries in Russia expected the Finnish socialists to follow their path. As a consequence, red guards were assembled on the workers’ side and civil guards on the side of the bourgeoisie; the civil war between “the reds” and “the whites” broke out in spring 1918. The civil war ended in the victory of the whites, which was facilitated by

⁸ *Ibid.*, 79-83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

¹⁰ David Arter, “The EU Referendum in Finland on 16 October 1994: A Vote for the West, Not for Maastricht,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 33, no. 3 (1995): 361-387.

German intervention; a large-scale punishment of the red “rebels” followed. In the aftermath of the civil war, the left was almost entirely excluded from parliamentary decision-making. A new parliament was elected, however, in March 1919, and the Social Democrats with its new, moderate leadership became the largest party. The republican constitution was passed by the parliament in June 1919.¹¹

As in many other European countries, there was an expansion of right-wing radicalism in Finland in the early 1930s. This meant both increasing support for extreme right-wing parties in the parliament, and different types of legal or illegal anticommunist activism by right-wing groupings. As a consequence of this radicalization, the parliament passed a law in autumn 1930, which banned the activity of the Communist Party and the publication of some left-wing newspapers. At the same time, the main parties, apart from the Conservative Party which was divided, declared their support for the constitutional order and the rule of law, and rejected the demands for more authoritarian forms of government. The abduction of the former president and the key figure of the legality front, K. J. Ståhlberg, by right-wing activists in 1930 offended the sense of justice of the general public. This incident also deepened the division between the radicals and the legalists among the supporters of the right.¹² The radicals founded their own party (IKL) in 1932. The peak of its success was the election of 1933, when it gained the support of nearly 17 percent of the electorate, but its support declined steadily during the 1930s and early 1940s.

The Finnish governments in the 1920s and 1930s were typically minority or coalition governments, in which moderate bourgeois parties (the Agrarians and the liberal Young Finns) were represented. The first government including the left was the Social Democratic minority government formed in 1926. In 1937, a new coalition government between the Social Democrats and the Agrarians was formed; this was the first so-called “Red Earth” government coalition, which became usual in postwar politics. This new coalition was important in the process of reconciliation after the civil war; it also highlighted the strength of Finnish democracy. The first “Red Earth” government passed new laws on old-age pensions and annual holidays, which can be regarded as the first steps toward the Nordic model of the welfare state.¹³

The peaceful development of the Finnish society was halted by the beginning of the Winter War. The background of war was the nonaggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, which included a secret protocol assigning Finland, the Baltic States, eastern Poland, and Romanian Bessarabia to the Soviet sphere of interest. The offensive began in November 1939 after a few months of negotiations, during which the Finnish government rejected the

¹¹ Jussila et al., *From Grand Duchy to a Modern State*, 107-112, and 126-131.

¹² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 172-175.

Soviet demands for territorial concessions. The Soviet troops faced stronger resistance by the Finns than expected and, as a result, the original plans to occupy Finland were abandoned by the Soviet leadership. However, the conditions of the Moscow Peace Treaty in March 1940 were harsh for Finland. Most notably, the Soviet Union annexed the Karelian Isthmus, and more than 400,000 people were evacuated from the occupied areas.

During the short period of “interim peace,” there were constant disagreements concerning the interpretation of the Moscow Peace Treaty; Finns also felt increasingly threatened when the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic countries in summer 1940. The Continuation War (1941-1944) was started by the Finnish army offensive against the Soviet Union in June 1941, concurrently with the German Operation Barbarossa. From the beginning of the war, the Finnish government stressed the separate character of the Finnish war efforts. The primary aim of the war was to regain the areas lost in the Moscow Peace Treaty, especially the Karelian Isthmus. This goal enjoyed wide public support, including among the left. However, the Finnish troops crossed the old borders into Eastern Karelia in the early days of the war, which was strongly criticized, for example, by some leading Social Democrats. As the defeat of Nazi Germany became obvious, Finland was able to make a separate armistice with the Soviet Union in 1944. The conditions of the armistice were severe; in addition to the territorial concessions of the Moscow Peace Treaty, Finland had to concede other areas, pay reparations to the Soviet Union, and expel the German troops from Lapland. Moreover, the Soviet Union established a Control Commission in Helsinki. However, despite widely held fears, Finland was not occupied by the Soviet army in the aftermath of the war.¹⁴

Democracy in Postwar Finland

Throughout World War II, Finland was able to maintain its parliamentary form of government and its constitution from 1919.¹⁵ However, the postwar era was characterized by Soviet influence over Finnish domestic politics. Immediately after the war, the Communist Party was reestablished and different organizations emphasizing friendly relations with the Soviet Union were founded, including the Finnish People’s Democratic League, which soon developed into a political party. The leftist parties gained a victory in the parliamentary election of 1945, and a coalition government consisting of the Agrarians, the Social Democrats, and the Finnish People’s Democratic League was formed.

The Paris Peace Treaty in 1947 restored the Finnish right to self-determination, and the Control Commission left the country. As a consequence of the development of the Cold War blocs, the Treaty of Friendship, Co-

¹⁴ Ibid., 220-230.

¹⁵ Ibid., 201, 231.

operation and Mutual Assistance was signed between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1948. However, the terms of this treaty were considered generous for Finland, especially compared with those of the new Soviet “satellite” states in Eastern and Central Europe. The government coalition formed after the election of 1948 between the Social Democrats and the Agrarians, excluding the radical left, was also considered an indication that Finland would not become a people’s democracy.¹⁶

The postwar presidents, Paasikivi (1946-1956) and Kekkonen (1956-1981), saw their roles as guarantors of a “friendly” relationship with the Soviet Union in order to achieve maximum leeway in domestic and foreign politics. This delicate balance allowed Finland to claim military neutrality, participate in the Nordic cooperation, and become an associate member of the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) in 1961. During the postwar era, Finland experienced a period of steady economic growth, thanks to extensive trade relationships with the Soviet Union as well as economic integration with Western Europe. Redistributive welfare state institutions and the system of collective bargaining between employer organizations and trade unions ensured that a large share of the population actually benefited from the economic growth.¹⁷

Politically, the situation was more complicated. Maintaining the special relationship with the Soviet Union did not mean just a certain kind of foreign policy, but it also had many implications with respect to Finnish domestic politics. Most notably, from the early days of his presidency, Kekkonen had developed personal relationships with the Soviet leadership and, on these grounds, he gradually gained almost an uncontested position in Finnish politics. In postwar Finland, government formation was to varying degrees influenced by the parties’ or party leaders’ images in the Kremlin; the Conservatives and certain factions of the Social Democrats were particularly critically perceived in Moscow. Leading politicians tried to establish personal connections with their Soviet counterparts and abstained from direct criticism of the Soviet Union. Self-censorship was also exercised in the media; certain films were banned on the grounds that they were anti-Soviet, and none of the major Finnish publishing companies was ready to publish Solzhenitzyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* in the early 1970s.

Some of President Kekkonen’s maneuvers, especially, have raised the question whether he abused the “East card,” that is, his good relations with the Soviet leadership, for maintaining his own position in power and for influencing government formation according to his own preferences. In the 1970s, Kekkonen’s position as a president was so strong that his only contestants represented small, marginalized parties. One clear indication of the special position of President Kekkonen was that, in 1973, he was reelected

¹⁶ Ibid., 245-251.

¹⁷ See, for example, Arter, “The EU Referendum in Finland on 16 October 1994.”

through an exceptional law passed by a five-sixths majority of the parliament instead of by normal competitive elections. The maneuver was motivated by the fact that Kekkonen was considered a guarantor of the Soviet approval for the Free Trade Agreement with the European Economic Community.

Indeed, considering the definition of consolidated democracy put forward in the beginning of this essay, this event, together with the fact that the composition of governments did not depend on electoral outcomes but rather on the acceptability of governmental partners by the Soviet Union, could be regarded as kinds of relapses of democracy. These occurrences suggest that democratic elections were not “the only” basis of the allocation of the offices in postwar Finland, as the Soviet influence over Finnish domestic politics was remarkable. The term “Finlandization,” originally invented by West German critics of their country’s postwar foreign policy, became a synonym of increased Soviet influence in Western Europe. Finns hardly take pride in the postwar period of Finlandization, and, even today, it remains debatable to what extent the leading politicians and civil society actors went too far in their acts to please the Soviet Union.

The Rules of the Game of Finnish Democracy

The basis of the Finnish party system was created at the turn of the twentieth century, and the parties formed then, with a few exceptions, are still represented in the Finnish parliament. There traditionally have been three important political cleavages in Finnish politics. The first one is based on the linguistic division between the Finnish-speaking majority and the Swedish-speaking minority. This division was salient especially before independence, when the Finnish language gained an official status as a national language alongside Swedish. During the first decades of independence, the position of the Swedish language as the second national language was challenged by Finnish nationalists.¹⁸ As the proportion of Swedish speakers has dwindled, there is again an ongoing public debate concerning the status of the Swedish language as the second national language.

The second important cleavage is based on the socio-economic division between bourgeoisie and land-owners, on the one hand, and urban and rural workers, on the other hand. This cleavage was particularly salient during the first decades of the twentieth century, and the culmination of this conflict was the civil war in 1918. Since then, the development of the welfare state with redistributive policies has decreased the significance of this cleavage. The third relevant cleavage in Finnish politics pertains to the division between urban areas and large, sparsely populated rural areas, especially in the North and the East. This cleavage is still relevant in Finnish politics, despite the decreasing

¹⁸ Jussila et al., *From Grand Duchy to a Modern State*, 165.

importance of agriculture and the rapid postwar urbanization development.

The search for governmental coalitions that reach over the left-right division has been characteristic of Finnish politics. As pointed out above, the first coalition government between the Social Democrats and the Agrarians was formed as early as 1937. This cooperation was considered important for balancing the polarization of the society after the civil war and for the development of the welfare state. In postwar politics, the Conservatives were largely left out from governments. To what extent this was due to Soviet influence or the political maneuvering of President Kekkonen is still a matter of debate.

Nowadays, all combinations of the three major parties are possible governmental coalitions. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been bourgeois governments formed between the Conservatives and the Centre Party (former Agrarians), “Red Earth” governments involving the Centre Party and the Social Democrats, and a “Red-Blue” government between the Conservatives and the Social Democrats. In addition, there were two remarkably oversized “Rainbow” governments, headed by Paavo Lipponen (1995-2003), which included a number of parties from the left and the right, that is, the Conservatives, the Greens, the Social Democrats, and the Left League, excluding the Centre Party. The Rainbow and the Red-Blue coalitions seem to highlight the importance of the urban-rural cleavage in Finnish politics, as the Social Democrats and the Conservatives primarily represent urban populations, whereas the Centre Party represents sparsely populated rural areas.¹⁹

During the past decades, the electoral support of each of the three major parties, the Conservatives, the Social Democrats, and the Centre, has varied relatively little, and it usually has been between 20 and 25 percent. Governments usually have been oversized coalitions, as smaller parties are also involved in coalitions, most notably the Swedish People’s Party, which has had a governmental seat almost unexceptionally. The current government (since 2007) includes cabinet ministers from the Centre, the Conservative, the Green, and the Swedish People’s parties.

As a consequence of the special competitive setting among the three main parties, there is a certain pressure toward consensus in Finnish politics. Major parties do not want to narrow the prospects of forming a government with either of the two other main parties. For this reason, there is a tendency to avoid policy positions and statements which would alienate potential coalition partners. Parties appear to want to play down differences in their policy positions in electoral campaigns. Moreover, large parties do not normally announce preferences before elections concerning their coalition partners or any issue positions considered conditions for governmental cooperation. The

¹⁹ See, for example, David Arter, “From the ‘Rainbow Coalition’ Back Down to ‘Red Earth’? The 2003 General Election,” *West European Politics* 26, no. 3 (2003): 153-162.

avoidance of adversarial politics may give voters the impression that elections do not involve opportunities for real policy choices.

After a quarter of a century in power, President Kekkonen stepped down in 1981 due to health reasons. After Kekkonen's resignation, there was a strong political will to change the rules of the political game. Indeed, there has been a tendency toward "parliamentarization" of Finnish politics since the 1980s. President Koivisto, who followed Kekkonen in 1982, was strongly committed to the parliamentary form of government. Compared to his predecessor, Koivisto adopted a much more limited interpretation of the constitutional powers of the president, most notably in government formation. Consequently, there have also been three constitutional reforms (in 1987, 1991, and 2000) which have decreased the powers of the president, mostly in domestic politics but also increasingly in foreign policy.²⁰

Since the Finnish membership in the EU in 1995, matters considered to be in the domain of presidential powers, such as many areas of foreign policy, have been increasingly subject to policy coordination at the EU level. This has further limited the competencies of the Finnish president. At the same time, the position of the prime minister has been strengthened, as she or he normally represents Finland in the EU Council meetings. Indeed, in comparative politics literature, Finland was usually considered a semi-presidential system until the 1980s, whereas these days, it can be better characterized as a parliamentary democracy.

Democratic Civil Society in Finland

The political history of Finland has been strongly influenced by its geo-political position as a neighboring country to Russia. Yet, culturally, Finland has more in common with its Scandinavian neighbors. Finland is a predominantly Protestant country, where nearly 80 percent of the population still belongs to the Lutheran Church—however, the society is quite secular. The egalitarian and individualist ethos in the Finnish society can be partly explained by Lutheranism, which emphasizes one's personal relationship with God. Moreover, although Finland has its nobility dating back to Swedish rule, it has not had a feudal system or serfdom. These socio-historical facts may have further contributed to the egalitarian ethos in Finnish society.

Especially during the postwar era, the Finnish welfare-state structures were developed, largely following the Swedish model of the welfare state. Nowadays, the welfare system provides basic income, healthcare, and childcare, as well as free tuition at all levels of education. Most of the welfare services are provided by municipalities, which have traditionally enjoyed high levels of autonomy. Although the Finnish welfare state may not be as strong in all respects as the

²⁰ Ibid.

welfare state in the other Nordic countries, some parts of it are particularly efficient. Most notably, Finland's basic educational system has been frequently ranked one of the best in the world in the OECD surveys.²¹ There is a relatively wide-spread political consensus on the value of the Finnish welfare state, and even the rightist parties are not in favor (at least openly) of the eradication of welfare services.

Finland has high levels of "social capital," like the other Nordic countries. According to Robert Putnam's famous definition, social capital consists of two elements, voluntary associations and interpersonal trust.²² It has been further specified that "bridging" social capital is especially relevant for the functioning of democracy. Bridging social capital requires, in particular, generalized interpersonal trust and voluntary associations, which include people from different social groups. Traditionally, there have been plenty of voluntary associations in Finland; social, educational, cultural, and other organizations have flourished in Finland since the early twentieth century. Finland also has very high levels of generalized interpersonal trust; according to the European Social Survey (ESS) 2004, which includes twenty-two European countries, interpersonal trust in Finland is the third highest in Europe, after Denmark and Norway.²³

There are several explanations for the high levels of interpersonal trust in Nordic countries. Bo Rothstein has argued that the lack of corruption in public institutions helps to maintain high levels of social trust. In particular, uncorrupt implementing institutions, such as the police and the legal system, are effective in their law enforcement and treat people equally.²⁴ The Finnish public administration is quite clean from corruption; administration is also quite transparent and the public has good access to administrative documents. Indeed, in the comparisons made by Transparency International, Finland frequently has been ranked as one of the least corrupt countries in the world. Moreover, Rothstein has argued that the universal welfare state helps to maintain interpersonal trust, because it is based on the principle of equal treatment of individuals. Similarly, Eric Uslaner has pointed out another possible link between the welfare state and generalized trust. He argues that economic equality maintains high levels of interpersonal trust, as it increases

²¹ The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, "Pisa 2009 Assessment Framework" (2009) <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/40/44455820.pdf> (accessed September 13, 2010).

²² Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²³ Kimmo Grönlund and Maija Setälä, "Social Trust, Normative Expectations and Institutional Confidence," a paper presented at the Annual Conference of APSA, Washington, D.C., September 2010.

²⁴ Bo Rothstein, *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

general optimism about one's prospects to do well in life.²⁵

Several studies show that support for democracy is very high in Finland. For example, based on the data of the World Value Survey 2003, it has been found that 91 percent of Finns totally or partially agree with the statement that democracy is the best form of government.²⁶ In this respect, the pattern in Finland is similar to that of the other advanced democracies. In other words, democracy as a regime principle enjoys very high levels of support in Finland. The overall satisfaction with how democracy works in Finland also seems to be relatively high. According to ESS 2004, which includes twenty-two European countries, satisfaction with democracy is second highest in Finland (after Denmark).²⁷ However, there are some other studies using different data (e.g., CSES 2001-2004), which suggest that satisfaction with democracy is somewhat lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries.²⁸ Traditionally, Finns have placed much trust in public institutions, including the parliament. During the last couple of years, trust in the parliament and politicians has declined due to a large-scale campaign funding scandal, which has led to several criminal investigations involving leading political figures. Indeed, due to the campaign financing scandal, Finland was ranked “only” the sixth least corrupt country in the 2009 study by Transparency International.²⁹

However, “external political efficacy,” frequently measured in survey research, has been in decline in Finland. External political efficacy refers to citizens' subjective evaluations of the extent to which they can exert influence on politics. In other words, external efficacy measures citizens' belief in the responsiveness of the political system to people's political preferences and action. According to recent studies, the subjective perception of the responsiveness of the political system has declined in Finland since 1975.³⁰ The decline of external efficacy has been considerable in Finland, and there are also some indications that the situation in this respect may be worse than in

²⁵ Eric M. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁶ Mikko Mattila and Risto Sänkiahio, “Luottamus poliittiseen järjestelmään,” [Trust in political system], in *Vaalit ja demokratia Suomessa* [Elections and representative democracy in Finland], ed. Heikki Paloheimo (Helsinki: WSOY, 2005), 77-78.

²⁷ Kimmo Grönlund and Maija Setälä, “Political Trust, Satisfaction and Voter Turnout,” *Comparative European Politics* 5 (2007): 400-422.

²⁸ Heikki Paloheimo, “Asenteet poliittisia instituutioita ja toimijoita kohtaan” [Attitudes toward political institutions and actors], in *Suomen demokratiaindikaattorit* [The indicators of democracy in Finland], ed. Sami Borg (Helsinki: Oikeusministeriön julkaisu, 2006): 128-153.

²⁹ Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2009*, http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table (accessed September 13, 2010).

³⁰ Kimmo Grönlund, Heikki Paloheimo, Jan Sundberg, Risto Sänkiahio, and Hanna Wass, “Kiinnittyminen politiikkaan” [Involvement in politics], in *Vaalit ja demokratia Suomessa* [Elections and democracy in Finland], ed. Heikki Paloheimo (Helsinki: WSOY, 2005), 88-118.

the other Nordic countries.³¹

There are several possible explanations for the decline of external efficacy in Finland. Traditionally, there have been certain submissive elements in the Finnish political culture. Finns seem to have had a feeling that their capacity to determine their own destiny is limited, and that they are dependent on decisions made by more powerful players in international politics. The history of Finland, indeed, seems to support this, as for several times the destiny of Finland has been dependent on power politics among Sweden, Russia, and Germany, in particular. However, the decline of external efficacy after 1975 cannot quite be explained by this factor. In fact, the collapse of communism in 1989 has increased the leeway in Finnish politics, and, therefore, increase rather than decrease in external political efficacy might have been expected.

One factor that recently may have decreased the sense of external political efficacy is the increased supra-national policy coordination, especially at the EU level. Supra-national policy coordination almost inevitably strengthens the role of executive government and limits the scope of democratic accountability, that is, both the parliament's and the general public's capacity to monitor and control the acts of the government.³² In a comparative perspective, the Finnish parliament has quite advanced procedures to deal with EU matters, but its role is still limited on these issues.³³ Although the lack of accountability due to supra-national policy-making could explain the decreased sense of external efficacy in Finland, it does not explain why political efficacy seems to be lower in Finland than, for example, in the other Nordic countries.

Finally, one reason for the decline of external political efficacy may be the patterns of party competition and coalition politics in Finland. As pointed out before, nowadays a majority government requires a coalition between two of the three main parties. In order to appeal to potential coalition parties, the main parties clearly are reluctant to express their positions on contested issues; rather, they play down their differences in electoral campaigns. This is a stark contrast, for example, to Sweden, where the elections are framed as a contest between the left and the right and where parties in different blocs may even exaggerate their differences. Furthermore, a system of proportional representation with open lists is used in Finland. This means that a voter votes for not just a party list, but rather for a candidate on a particular party list. This has led to the

³¹ Lauri Karvonen and Heikki Paloheimo, "Demokratian näkymiä Suomessa" [The prospects of democracy in Finland], in *Vaalit ja demokratia Suomessa* [Elections and democracy in Finland], ed. Heikki Paloheimo (Helsinki: WSOY, 2005), 290-340.

³² Robert A. Dahl, "Can International Organizations Be Democratic?" in *Democracy's Edges*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19-36.

³³ See, for example, Tapio Raunio and Matti Wiberg, "The Eduskunta and the Parliamentarisation of Finnish Politics: Formally Stronger, Politically Still Weak?" *West European Politics* 31, no. 3 (2008): 581-599.

personalization of politics, as the campaign efforts of individual candidates rather than parties play a crucial role. The electoral procedure seems to blur the ideological differences among parties further. Consequently, it seems to be quite hard for Finnish voters to understand the connection between their vote and policy outcomes.³⁴

Of course, the consensual character of Finnish politics is not necessarily only a negative feature. The consensus-seeking political culture has led to lower political polarization of politics than in most other advanced democracies, including the other Nordic countries.³⁵ However, the decreased sense of efficacy is most likely the reason why the voter turnout is lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries. Indeed, Finland has a lower turnout than could be expected based on the high levels of trust in the parliament.³⁶ Also, there has been a significant decline of turnout in parliamentary elections since the 1980s, when the prevailing patterns of coalition politics emerged. The lowest turnout in postwar parliamentary elections was experienced in the election of 2007, which was also the Centennial Election of the Finnish parliament. Despite specific measures taken to activate Finnish voters, the turnout was just 67.9 percent. Perhaps paradoxically, there has not been a similar decline in voter turnout in presidential elections, despite the fact that the political powers of the president have been significantly decreased.³⁷

Self-perceptions of Democracy in Finland

In international comparisons of measuring the quality of life, Finland often scores very well. In a recent study conducted by *Newsweek* (2010), Finland was ranked as the best country in the world, especially because of its educational system.³⁸ According to recent surveys, Finland also is one of the top countries in the world when it comes to people's subjective well-being and happiness.³⁹ These kinds of results, in some respects, may contradict the image Finns have about themselves and their country. Due to the sometimes inhospitable natural conditions and problematic history, Finns still sometimes consider themselves poor and backward, especially when compared with traditionally more affluent

³⁴ Karvonen and Paloheimo, "Demokratian näkymiä Suomessa."

³⁵ Paloheimo, "Asenteet poliittisia instituutioita ja toimijoita kohtaan."

³⁶ Grönlund and Setälä, "Political Trust, Satisfaction and Turnout."

³⁷ Kimmo Grönlund, Heikki Paloheimo, and Hanna Wass, "Äänestysosallistuminen" [Electoral participation], *Vaalit ja demokratia Suomessa* [Elections and democracy in Finland], ed. Heikki Paloheimo (Helsinki: WSOY, 2005), 119-146.

³⁸ Tara A. Lewis, "Best Countries in the World," *Newsweek*, 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/feature/2010/the-world-s-best-countries.html> (accessed September 13, 2010).

³⁹ See, for example, Ronald Inglehart, Roberto Foa, Christopher Peterson, and Christian Welzel, "Development, Freedom and Rising Happiness," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 4 (2009): appendix A.

and self-confident Swedish neighbors.

The most important collective myth for the Finnish self-identification has been the story of the “miracle” and the “spirit” of the Winter War.⁴⁰ The heroic battle against unjustified aggression by an overpowering army is a story in which Finns have been eager to take pride. The story of the Winter War seems to support the self-perception of Finns as tough survivors in hostile conditions. Moreover, the Winter War helped to unify the nation divided in the civil war, as even the communists were ready to fight for their country. However, it has taken much longer for the Finnish society to recover from the trauma of the civil war; one important step was the public debate on Väinö Linna’s trilogy, *Täällä Pohjantähden alla*, published in 1959-1962.

As a contrast to the heroic battle of the Winter War, the Finnish political history has also been characterized by pragmatist compliance to the leaders of more powerful states. During the era of autonomy, Finns were regarded by the Russian tsar as obedient subjects in contrast to the rebellious Poles.⁴¹ Similar tendencies can be traced during the postwar era, when the Finnish political leadership was eager to please their Eastern neighbor. Some have argued that the same tendency has prevailed during the Finnish membership in the EU, as some Finnish political leaders have made great efforts to develop close relationships with the most prominent players in EU politics.

Although Finland has been able to maintain democracy since its first constitution and Finns are very much in support of democracy, they do not seem to be particularly excited about their democracy or to take particular pride in it. Partly, this may be due to the fact that Finnish democracy has been very much elite-driven, and the role of political leaders has been emphasized in situations when the nation’s survival has been at stake. The storyline related to the development of Finnish parliamentary democracy in which Finnish people are most likely to take pride is the strong position of Finnish women in the first parliamentary election and in Finnish politics, in general.

Consider the following two examples which highlight relatively low value assigned to democracy in Finland. The first one is the Centennial of the Finnish Parliament, which was celebrated in 2006 and 2007. The Centennial was strongly criticized for not being a celebration for the whole nation, but only for a small circle of those in the political establishment and academics.⁴² Another example is the fact that Finland has not made regular “audits” of democracy like the other Nordic countries, most notably Sweden.⁴³ The bourgeois government in 2003-2007 seemingly took a more systematic approach to the development

⁴⁰ Jussila et al., *From a Grand Duchy to a Modern State*, 188.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴² See the program of the celebrations at <http://web.eduskunta.fi/Resource.phx/parliament/ek100/index.htm> (accessed September 20, 2010).

⁴³ Johannes Lindvall and Bo Rothstein, “Sweden: The Fall of the Strong State,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 29, no. 1 (2006): 47-64.

of Finnish democracy by establishing a policy program for citizen engagement. This program, however, did not lead to any substantial changes in the patterns of public decision-making in municipalities or in the central government. One of the concrete outcomes of this program was the establishment of a special administrative unit for democracy issues under the Ministry of Justice.⁴⁴

In general, Finnish governments have been quite reluctant to try new forms of citizen participation in politics. The use of participatory innovations, such as institutions of direct democracy or deliberative citizen forums, has not received much support in Finland. This reluctance is largely due to skeptical attitudes among political elites; the idea of electoral democracy also totally dominates the public debate. Neither the main parties nor the mainstream media are particularly supportive of new forms of citizen participation. Based on comparative research, Finland is not necessarily exceptional among advanced democracies in this respect. However, when it comes to the use of instruments of direct democracy, for example, Finland has been one of the most cautious countries in Europe.⁴⁵

In Finnish society, much value has been given to the efficiency of decision-making and hard work; these seemed to be crucial, for example, during World War II and the postwar reconstruction. Indeed, the Finnish culture arguably differs from the Swedish culture dramatically in this respect. In Sweden, much more value is given to consensus-seeking dialogue, which from the Finnish perspective, is often found time-consuming and frustrating. One might thus argue that Finns do not value democratic procedures as much as Swedes, but rather appreciate efficiency in achieving certain given goals. Of course, such a posture is possible only in situations where the common goals are not questioned. This kind of a consensus may no longer prevail in Finland because national survival is no longer the paramount goal in politics. Furthermore, the Finnish population has become increasingly multicultural in its composition, which potentially undermines the consensus on basic values.

Concluding Remarks

In international comparisons, Finland often ranks quite high, especially when it comes to such measurements as uncorruptedness and quality of life. The

⁴⁴ Oikeusministeriö [Ministry of Justice], *Kansalaisvaikuttamisen politiikkaohjelman loppuraportti* [The final report of the Citizen Participation Policy Programme] (2007) <http://www.om.fi/1181802264664> (accessed September 23, 2010).

⁴⁵ The only national referendum in postwar Finland has been the plebiscite on the EU membership in 1994. Markku Suksi, *Kansanäänestys valtiollisen tason osallistumisen muotona. Vertaileva katsaus Euroopan maiden valtiosääntöjen pohjalta* [The referendum as a nation-wide form of participation: A comparative review based on constitutions of European countries], Oikeusministeriön selvityksiä [Reports by the Ministry of Justice] (Helsinki: Oikeusministeriö, 2002).

foundations of Finnish democracy, most notably civil society and interpersonal trust, as well as support for democracy, are strong. Although nowadays Finland may appear an exemplary democracy from outside, Finns may not feel that their democratic credentials are self-evident. Democracy can hardly be regarded as a “civil religion” in Finland; it is not a crucial element of self-identification or an issue of national pride. For a long time, national survival was the primary goal in Finnish politics, and democratic norms and procedures sometimes were overlooked for the sake of this goal.

Moreover, Finns are also relatively well aware of the deficiencies of their democracy. During the past decades, in particular, there has been much public debate and critical reflection on the relapses of Finnish democracy, especially during the postwar era of “Finlandization,” when the Finnish political establishment was, in retrospect, sometimes too eager to please the Kremlin. From the comparative perspective “from outside, looking in,” this kind of critical reflection may have improved the quality of democratic life in Finland; it has been the motivation for the “parliamentarization” of Finnish democracy, and it has increased the public awareness of the importance of democracy. However, an understanding of past problems does not necessarily help to recognize the current problems of democracy. These seem to originate from the specific features of political competition in Finland as well as from the increasing complexity and new patterns of policy-making in the economically interdependent world.

