

The Svenska Folkpartiet: the Gradual Decline of a Language Party

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Introduction

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 in Finland. Sfp is a rather exceptional regionalist 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. The overwhelming majority of Swedish-speakers live in two enclaves along the coastline that are not connected to each other, and this geographical dispersion has also contributed to the low emphasis on territorial aspirations.

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 by 2002 the figure was down to 5.6%.¹ This decline has been reflected in the support of the Sfp, as the clear majority of Swedish-speakers vote for the party. Nevertheless, Sfp has throughout its history enjoyed good access to economic and political power, and the party has a near-permanent status as a governing party. Sfp has been in every government since 1979. Thus the declining electoral strength has been compensated through a strong position in government negotiations.

Reflecting the key role of the language as a unifying factor behind Sfp, the next section examines the development of the language cleavage in Finland since the 19th century. The electoral performance of Sfp is analysed in the third section, followed by a description of the party ideology. The organisational features of Sfp are presented in section five. The sixth section focuses on the coalition behaviour of the party, both in Finland and at the European level. The concluding discussion summarizes the main points of the chapter.

The Development of the Language Cleavage

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 the nationalists' 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, mobilising the Swedish-speakers in defence of their language.

After the declaration of independence (1917), Finnish very soon became the dominant language. 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.

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 448 municipalities (in 2000), 21 were monolingually Swedish, 22 were bilingual with Swedish-speakers as the majority, 20 were bilingual with Finnish as the majority language, and the remaining 385 were monolingually Finnish. The majority of Swedish-speakers live in bilingual municipalities that are to a great extent dominated by the Finnish language. There are monolingual Swedish municipalities in Ostrobothnia and in the south-western region around Turku. All municipalities on Åland² are monolingual in Swedish. Only approximately 4% of Swedish-speakers reside in monolingual Finnish 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 therefore quite exceptional among European minorities in the sense that it is present both in the centre and in the periphery (Sundberg 1984: 100-104). 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 coastline stretching from the Turku archipelago to the east of Helsinki is bilingual and this applies also to the main cities, including Helsinki.

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, had acted as a counterweight to the strengthening Finnish nationalism, seeking to create a Finnish-Swedish identity among the Swedish-speaking minority. At that point the Swedish-speakers did not really form a meaningful entity to speak of. 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 by Axel Lille, 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. It achieved this by initially focusing only on the language question and by allowing members to form sub-groups or factions within the party. (Nousiainen 1998: 34-35) Only a small minority of the politically active Swedish-speakers stayed outside the new party, organising instead a Swedish-speaking branch of the Social Democratic Party (Sundberg 1984: 92). Sfp was active in the drafting of the constitution that came into force in 1919, and already in 1920 it entered the government. After independence the party was viewed with suspicion by some of the right-wing parties, primarily the Patriotic People's Movement (IKL), partly because it was perceived as harbouring separatist tendencies or at least as favouring the establishment of autonomous Swedish-speaking regions. The Social Democrats, having Swedish-speakers in their ranks, were meanwhile strongly in favour of bilingualism.

However, 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. (Arter 1999: 62-64) All parties represented in Eduskunta,

the unicameral national parliament, are in favour of official bilingualism. 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. The Swedish-speaking minority is numerically relatively small and lives in two territorial enclaves along the coastline. Hence the majority of Finnish-speakers have very little contact with the Swedish-speakers. The Swedish-speakers have also traditionally shown flexibility by using Finnish in their daily activities, particularly so in the larger cities. 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. 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. In the urban south, the Swedish-speakers effectively have to be bilingual with a good knowledge of Finnish. The south is also where intermarriage between the language groups is quite common. On Åland and in some parts of Ostrobothnia, on the other hand, it is possible to use only Swedish both in private and professionally.³ And, the clear majority of Finnish-speakers, particularly members of the economic and political elites, are quite rigidly 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.

Electoral Performance

The vote share of Sfp has by and large declined hand in hand with the declining share of Swedish-speakers. In the first elections to the Eduskunta, held in 1907, Sfp won 12.6 % of the votes, and its vote share dropped below ten per cent for the first time in the elections held in 1939. Its best electoral performance is from 1910 when it won 13.5% of the votes. During independence, its maximum has been 12.4% achieved in the 1922 elections. Since 1970 its support has remained stable, around five per cent. In the latest elections held in 2003 Sfp won 4.6% of the votes (Table 1).

After the 2003 elections the party has eight seats (4%) in the Eduskunta (200 seats), its lowest share since the Second World War. Sfp's maximum number of seats since 1945 has been 14 (8%) achieved after the elections held in 1945 and 1951. Together with the single representative from the Åland Islands, the MPs of Sfp form the Swedish Parliamentary Group.⁴ In parliamentary elections Finland (excluding Åland) is divided into fourteen multi-member constituencies. Given the territorial concentration of Swedish-speakers, Sfp has traditionally only fielded candidates in the four bilingual constituencies (Helsinki, Uusimaa, Varsinais-Suomi, Vaasa). In the 1999 elections it put forward a total of 65 candidates in these four constituencies, but in the 2003 elections Sfp fielded 89 candidates in a total of six constituencies, including the two northernmost constituencies, Oulu and Lappi.

Table 1. The Distribution of Votes in Eduskunta Elections, 1945-2003 (%)

YEAR PARTY	1945	1948	1951	1954	1958	1962	1966	1970	1972	1975	1979	1983	1987
Social Democrats	25.1	26.3	26.5	26.2	23.2	19.5	27.2	23.4	25.8	24.9	23.9	26.7	24.1
Centre Party	21.3	24.2	23.2	24.1	23.1	23.0	21.2	17.1	16.4	17.6	17.3	17.6	17.6
National Coalition	15.0	17.1	14.6	12.8	15.3	15.0	13.8	18.0	17.6	18.4	21.7	22.1	23.1
Left Alliance	23.5	20.0	21.6	21.6	23.2	22.0	21.1	16.6	17.0	18.9	17.9	13.5	13.6
Swedish People's Party	7.9	7.3	7.3	6.8	6.5	6.1	5.7	5.3	5.1	4.7	4.3	4.9	5.6
True Finns						2.2	1.0	10.5	9.2	3.6	4.6	9.7	6.3
Christian Democrats							0.5	1.1	2.5	3.3	4.8	3.0	2.6
Liberal Party	5.2	3.9	5.7	7.9	5.9	6.3	6.5	6.0	5.2	4.3	3.7		1.0
Green League													4.0
Others	2.0	1.2	1.1	0.6	2.8	5.9	3.0	2.0	1.2	4.3	1.8	2.5	2.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Please note that the names of the parties are those in use in 2003. True Finns was formed in 1995 on the ruins of the Rural Party.

Source: Statistics Finland.

Apart from the autonomous Åland Islands region, Finland has no directly-elected regional institutions. Therefore Sfp has no regional level on which to compete against other parties. In municipal elections the activity of the party depends on the territorial distribution of the Swedish-speakers. The higher the share of Swedish-speakers, the stronger the position of Sfp. The vote share of the party in municipal elections has mirrored its success in Eduskunta elections. For example, in 1953 it won 6.9% of the votes in municipal elections while in the national parliamentary elections held a year later Sfp captured 6.8% of the votes. In the latest municipal elections, held in 2004, Sfp won 5.2% of the votes.

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. The Sfp has thus a very strong hold over the linguistic minority, particularly in smaller, rural communities where also social pressure for conformity is often very high. In such a situation, loyalty to the Swedish language presupposes a strong political affinity to the Sfp (Sundberg 1984: 96).

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. During the early decades of the party its core support came from the smallholders and the urban middle class, and the situation continues until the present day. In the 1948 elections Sfp's supporters were divided into three equally strong occupational groups, farmers, blue-collar workers, and white-collar workers. Reflecting larger societal changes, the share of farmers had dropped to 11% by 1991, with white-collar workers comprising 79% and blue-collar workers only 10% of the party's electorate (Table 2). The last two figures deserve attention, for in 1991 the averages for all parties were: farmers 14%, blue-collar workers 33%, and white-collar workers 52%. When comparing all the main parties, the share of blue-collar workers was smallest in Sfp, being even below the level of the conservative National Coalition. (Sänkiaho 1995: 71; see Pesonen et al. 1993: 103-121) The low share of the of the blue-collar workers among Sfp's supporters is explained by the fact that Swedish-speaking working class people have traditionally voted for the leftist parties, especially the Social Democrats. The occupational distribution is also reflected in the background of the MPs of the Swedish People's Party. Examining the occupational

background of Sfp's representatives elected to the Eduskunta between 1907 and 1982, only one per cent of the MPs were blue-collar workers, 17% were farmers, with the remaining 82% being white-collar workers (Sundberg 1985: 164).

Table 2. Occupational Position of Sfp Supporters, 1948-1991 (%)

Occupation Election	Farmers	Blue-collar workers	White-collar workers	Total
1948	35	33	32	100
1966	43	22	35	100
1973	18	23	59	100
1991	11	10	79	100

Source: Sänkiaho (1995: 71).

Being able to rely on getting the vote of the clear majority of Swedish-speakers, Sfp has in national elections tried to broaden its appeal to both bilingual Finns and to the Finnish-speakers, lately primarily by advertising itself as a liberal party. The first time this was deliberately adopted as a party strategy was in the presidential election held in 1982 and in the parliamentary election held the following year (Sundberg 1984: 105-106). 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.⁵ Were the party to make a full-hearted attempt at expanding its vote share by abandoning monolingualism in favour of accepting Finnish as the second language of the party, it would run the risk of losing some of its core supporters to the other parties.

Party Ideology And Autonomy Goals

For several decades after its establishment in 1906, the party did not really have a 'normal' political programme that dealt with all policy sectors. Instead, Sfp focused almost exclusively on matters relevant to the rights of the Swedish-speaking minority, primarily in order to keep the party together and to unite the Swedish-speakers. In its programme adopted in 1964, Sfp for the first time declared itself to be a normal national party, with policy objectives encompassing all important societal matters⁶ (Nousiainen 1998: 83-85). According to the party itself, Sfp is a moderate liberal party. The categorization is accurate, for the party ideology emphasises social-liberal values, such as personal freedom, democratic institutions, private economic initiatives, sustainable development,

equality and an efficient social security system. In a sense the party fills a void, for there are presently no other liberal parties represented in the Finnish parliament. The party puts strong emphasis on cooperation and mutual accommodation, and respect of human rights that are fundamental in safeguarding the rights of minorities. On the left-right dimension, the party is usually placed close to, but right of the centre. For example, in the expert survey carried out in 1993 by Huber and Inglehart (1995) Sfp was given the value 6.57 (1 being the left end of the dimension, 10 the right end).

The most recent party programme, adopted in 1997, has eight chapters, and none of them is specifically devoted to the language question. The party does, however, in several passages throughout the programme underline the importance of bilingualism, paying particular attention to the need by the state and local authorities to ensure that Swedish-speakers receive education and services in their own language. Most significantly, the party focuses entirely on defending the language rights of Swedish-speakers at the national level without any demands for regional democracy or the autonomy of the Swedish-speaking areas. Demanding self-governing status for the Swedish-speaking regions would be very difficult given the fact that in both southern Finland and in Ostrobothnia the Swedish-speakers live interspersed with Finnish-speakers, particularly so in larger urban centres where they are without any exceptions in the minority. Therefore the best strategy for the party is to focus its efforts on ensuring that the rights of the Swedish-speakers are well protected by national legislation.

Sfp has since the start of integration debate in Finland supported both EU membership and the deepening of integration. The party came out in favour of membership in 1991. In the referendum on EU membership held in October 1994 85% of Sfp voters were in favour of membership. However, there was a geographical and urban-rural split within the party: farmers, in particular those from the Ostrobothnia region, opposed membership, while the urban middle classes residing in southern Finland were in favour. The party supports cautious strengthening of supranational institutions, mainly through increasing openness and the use of qualified majority voting in the Council and the application of co-decision procedure whenever Council decides by qualified majority, conferring legal personality to the Union, and making the Charter of Fundamental Rights part of the EU's constitution. The June 1997 party congress approved Finland's membership in the Economic and Monetary Union. In Common Foreign and Security Policy the party stresses the development of a credible foreign and security policy, concentrating on conflict prevention and crisis management. (Johansson & Raunio 2001) Sfp does not support a stronger role for the regions

in the EU policy process, for example through the strengthening of the Committee of Regions. Therefore the EU policy of Sfp is rather different from the policy objectives of the regionalist parties in the European Free Alliance, at least regarding the collective role of the regions at the European level.

Party Organisation

The chairperson of the party is elected by the party congress. The current party leader is Jan-Erik Enestam, the Minister of the Environment in the government formed after the 2003 elections, who was elected for the first time in June 1998. The party has had a total of twelve chairpersons since its establishment, and none of these have been women.⁷ The chair is assisted by three vice-chairs. The executive committee is the main decision-making organ between the party congresses. The executive committee meets approximately once a month and has currently 29 members: the chair and the three vice-chairs of the party, 18 members chosen by the party congress, one representative from each of the districts and from the youth organisation and the women's organisation. However, the highest operative organ is the working committee (presently 13 members) that prepares decisions for the executive committee. Members of the working committee are the chair and the vice-chairs, party secretary, the chair of the parliamentary group, and at most five other persons chosen by the executive. Party congress convenes annually, bringing together nearly 300 delegates from the local branches. The congress elects the chairs and vice-chairs of the party and members of the executive committee. Sfp also has a youth organisation (*Svensk Ungdom*) and a women's organisation (*Svenska Kvinnoförbundet*). Reflecting overall patterns among Finnish political parties, the share of women in the party's national organs has increased in recent decades. Currently (in 2005) one of the three vice-chairs is a woman, and approximately half of the members of the executive committee are women.

Sfp has four district branches (Helsinki, Uusimaa, Turku area, Ostrobothnia) with their own district executive committees and offices, and an additional district without any executive committee or an office that covers the rest of the country. The number of local party branches ranged between 85 and 99 from 1961 to 1979, but since then their number has risen as the larger branches were split into smaller ones. Since the mid-1980s the number has stabilized at the present level, and in 1995 Sfp had 153 local party branches. (Sundberg 1996: 46-48) The number of party members was just above 50 000 in 1960 and has since the early 1990s fallen below 40 000 (Table 3). (Sundberg 1996:

88-89). Approximately 35% of Sfp's supporters were estimated to belong to the party between 1954 and 1983 (Sundberg 1985: 167). According to the party's own estimate it had in 2003 about 32,000 members in just under 160 local branches. Considering that the party won nearly 129,000 votes in the 2003 elections, this means that approximately one out of four of those who voted for Sfp are also party members. This is a very high share indeed, making Sfp a 'mass party' in terms of its membership figures. Moreover, given the strong presence of Sfp in Swedish-speaking municipalities, it is often quite difficult to draw the line between party members and non-party members (Sundberg 1985: 119-172)

Table 3. The Number of Local Party Branches and Party Members, selected years.

Year	Local party branches	Party members
1961	99	48 874
1965	98	50 041
1975	85	43 336
1985	153	45 255
1995	153	36 941

Source: Sundberg (1996: 46-47, 88-89).

An important feature of the party's structure is its close ties with the active Swedish-speaking civil society and media. Cultural, economic and social organisations perform an important function within the Swedish-speaking minority, especially in bilingual municipalities, as there the people can use their own language. These organisations, particularly the Swedish Cultural Foundation (*Svenska kulturfonden*), the Swedish Central Archive (*Svenska centralarkivet*), and the *Svenska bildningsförbundet* that organises education and training, are often closely connected with the party.

Always in Government

Although its electoral strength has declined, Sfp is almost a permanent government party. Indeed, the party prioritizes government membership and regards inclusion in the cabinet as crucial for defending the interests of its constituents. Table 4 shows the composition of Finnish governments formed after the Second World War. Out of the 61 cabinets (excluding caretaker cabinets) formed since independence, Sfp has been included in 42. Moreover, Sfp has been a member of every government formed after the 1979 elections, the only party to do so during that period. (Arter 1999:

63; Nousiainen 2000) Only the agrarian Centre Party, occupying the median position on the left-right dimension, has been included in more governments than Sfp. After the Second World War the Swedish People's Party has even held the post of the prime minister once, in 1954, when Ralf Törngren was the PM for just under six months.

Table 4. Finnish Governments Since 1945

No.	PM	Date in	Formal resignation	Government parties
1	Paasikivi III	17.04.45	26.03.46	ED, ML, SFP , SDP, SKDL, prof.
2	Pekkala	26.03.46	29.07.48	SKDL, ML, SFP , SDP, prof.
3	Fagerholm I	29.07.48	17.03.50	SDP, prof.
4	Kekkonen I	17.03.50	17.01.51	ML, ED, SFP
5	Kekkonen II	17.01.51	20.09.51	ML, ED, SFP , SDP, prof.
6	Kekkonen III	20.09.51	09.07.53	ML, SFP , SDP, prof.
7	Kekkonen IV	09.07.53	17.11.53	ML, SFP , prof.
8	Tuomioja	17.11.53	05.05.54	VL, KOK, KP, SFP , prof.
9	Törngren	05.05.54	20.10.54	SFP , ML, SDP, prof.
10	Kekkonen V	20.10.54	03.03.56	ML, SDP, prof.
11	Fagerholm II	03.03.56	27.05.57	SDP, KP, ML, SFP , prof.
12	Sukselainen Ia	27.05.57	02.07.57	ML, KP, SFP , prof.
13	Sukselainen Ib	02.07.57	02.09.57	ML, KP, prof.
14	Sukselainen Ic	02.09.57	29.11.57	ML, KP, TPSL, prof.
15	von Fieandt	29.11.57	26.04.58	prof.
16	Kuuskoski	26.04.58	29.08.58	prof.
17	Fagerholm III	29.08.58	13.01.59	SDP, KOK, KP, ML, SFP
18	Sukselainen II	13.01.59	14.07.61	ML, SFP
19	Miettunen	14.07.61	13.04.62	ML, prof.
20	Karjalainen	13.04.62	18.12.63	ML, KOK, KP, SFP , TPSL, prof.
21	Lehto	18.12.63	12.09.64	prof.
22	Virolainen	12.09.64	27.05.66	ML, KOK, KP, SFP , prof.
23	Paasio I	27.05.66	22.03.68	SDP, KESK, SKDL, TPSL
24	Koivisto I	22.03.68	14.05.70	SDP, KESK, SFP , SKDL, TPSL
25	Aura I	14.05.70	15.07.70	prof.

26	Karjalainen IIa	15.07.70	26.03.71	KESK, LKP, SFP , SDP, SKDL, prof.
27	Karjalainen IIb	26.03.71	29.10.71	KESK, LKP, SFP , SDP, prof.
28	Aura II	29.10.71	23.02.72	prof.
29	Paasio II	23.02.72	04.09.72	SDP
30	Sorsa I	04.09.72	13.06.75	SDP, KESK, LKP, SFP , prof.
31	Liinamaa	13.06.75	30.11.75	prof.
32	Miettunen II	30.11.75	29.09.76	KESK, LKP, SFP , SDP, SKDL, prof.
33	Miettunen III	29.09.76	15.05.77	KESK, LKP, SFP , prof.
34	Sorsa IIa	15.05.77	02.03.78	SDP, KESK, LKP, SFP , SKDL, prof.
35	Sorsa IIb	02.03.78	25.05.79	SDP, KESK, LKP, SKDL, prof.
36	Koivisto II	25.05.79	19.02.82	SDP, KESK, SFP , SKDL, prof.
37	Sorsa IIIa	19.02.82	31.12.82	SDP, KESK, SFP , SKDL, prof.
38	Sorsa IIIb	31.12.82	06.05.83	SDP, KESK, LKP, SFP
39	Sorsa IV	06.05.83	30.04.87	SDP, KESK, SFP , SMP
40	Holkeri Ia	30.04.87	28.08.90	KOK, SFP , SDP, SMP
41	Holkeri Ib	28.08.90	26.04.91	KOK, SFP , SDP
42	Aho Ia	26.04.91	20.06.94	KESK, KOK, SFP , SKL
43	Aho Ib	20.06.94	13.04.95	KESK, KOK, SFP
44	Lipponen	13.04.95	15.04.99	SDP, KOK, SFP , VAS, VIHR, prof.
45	Lipponen II	15.04.99	31.05.02	SDP, KOK, SFP , VAS, VIHR, prof.
46	Lipponen III	31.05.02	17.04.03	SDP, KOK, SFP , VAS
47	Jääteenmäki	17.04.03	24.06.03	KESK, SDP, SFP
48	Vanhanen	24.06.03		KESK, SDP, SFP

Party abbreviations: ED = National Progressive Party, KESK = Centre Party (previously ML = Agrarian League), KOK = National Coalition, KP = Finnish People's Party, LKP = Liberal People's Party, SDP = Social Democratic Party, SKDL = Finnish People's Democratic League, SKL = Christian Union (since 2001 KD = Christian Democrats), SMP = Rural Party, TPSL = Social Democratic League of Workers and Smallholders, VAS = Left Alliance, VIHR = Green League, prof. = non-partisan ministers.

Sfp's near-permanent status as a government party is largely explained by three factors: small size, flexible ideology and the low salience of the language question in domestic politics. Small size makes its inclusion in the government rather easy for the larger parties. Sfp's ideology is relatively vague or flexible (the party considers itself a "bridge-builder" in Finnish politics) enough to allow cooperation with parties across the ideological spectrum. For example, after the 1995 and 1999 elections the party was a member of the rainbow government that brought together five parties,

including the most right-wing (National Coalition) and left-wing (Left Alliance) parties in the legislature. While this government-opposition dynamic has largely dictated the party's coalition behaviour at the national level, Sfp has both in the Eduskunta and in local councils been willing to cooperate with all parties. This cooperative attitude is based on the pragmatic Finnish political culture that largely pervades societal decision-making and on the fact that no party represented in the Eduskunta has really questioned the status of the Swedish language in Finland. Nevertheless, due to its centre-right liberal ideology, Sfp is ideologically closest to the other right-wing parties, mainly the National Coalition and the Centre Party.

As a result of the language connection, Sfp has active links to the other Nordic countries, especially to the liberal parties. Sfp is a member of the Liberal International (LI). Since 1995 it has also been a full member of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR). Sfp has had a positive attitude towards European integration and the EMU from the very beginning, and this has facilitated its inclusion in the pro-integrationist ELDR. Sfp has had one MEP in the European Parliament since Finland joined the Union. Astrid Thors served in the Parliament from 1996 to 2004, and the present MEP is Henrik Lax.⁸ Considering its pro-EU stance and emphasis on liberal values, it is not surprising that Sfp's entry and adjustment to the ELDR group has been unproblematic.

Conclusion

The Swedish People's Party is strictly speaking a language party, established to defend the interests of the Swedish-speaking minority that presently makes up just over five per cent of Finland's population. The Swedish-speaking minority is territorially dispersed, living in the Ostrobothnia region, and in the coastline of southern Finland. This geographical factor will also in the future make it very unlikely that the party would make demands for autonomy to its constituencies. With no directly-elected regional institutions in Finland, the party has so far focused its energy primarily on influencing policy-making at the national level. In this the party has also been very successful: the rights of the Swedish-speakers have been respected and Sfp is nowadays considered an almost permanent government party.

Language is not a salient issue in Finnish politics, at least not amongst parties or in the Eduskunta. No established party has questioned the status of Swedish as the second official language, and therefore Sfp does not really need to aggressively defend the position of Swedish. This low salience

of the language issue has enabled the party to focus on "normal" issues, emphasising particularly liberal values and its commitment to human rights issues. Sfp is currently the only real liberal party in the Eduskunta, and this may lure more Finnish-speaking citizens to supporting the party.

As language is the glue keeping the party together, it is natural that the party's electorate is a very heterogeneous group, ranging from conservative farmers in the Ostrobothnia region to more liberal middle classes in the southern bilingual cities. The party has succeeded in its mobilization efforts. Approximately three out of four Swedish-speakers vote for Sfp, and, reflecting in part the rather high engagement in civil society among the Swedish-speakers, party activity at the local level is in comparative terms at a relatively high level. Indeed, in terms of its membership figures Sfp could be characterised as a modern mass party. The heterogeneity of the electorate has been reflected within the party. Upon its establishment, the party made an explicit strategy of allowing internal groups or factions to function inside the party. However, while internal party politics is often heated, the decision to focus on safeguarding minority rights has successfully united the various strands of opinion behind the common cause.

The future of the Swedish People's Party is tied to the language question. The party does enjoy very good access to power and it has managed to stabilize its support at around five per cent. Also in the future the vote share of the party will depend primarily on the size of the Swedish-speaking minority. While the party has tried to broaden its appeal by seeking the support of liberal Finnish-speakers, it can only go so far down that road without endangering its electoral support. The language issue keeps the party together, and abandoning monolingualism in favour of a liberal, bilingual party would probably result in sections of the traditional voters switching to other parties. The low salience of the language issue, with all parties in favour of bilingualism, may also weaken the ties between the Swedish-speakers and Sfp, particularly among those voters who do not share the liberal ideology of the party. As the language barrier between Finnish and Swedish is further weakened through social interaction and bilingual families, a higher share of Swedish-speakers may in the future vote for other parties.⁹ Should these tendencies continue, the gradual decline in the support of the Sfp will continue as well.

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1. Statistics Finland, www.tilastokeskus.fi/tk/tp/tasku/taskus_vaesto.html.

2. The Åland Islands is a self-governing province within Finland. Åland is located between Sweden and the south-western corner and archipelago of Finland and consist of more than 6,500 islands and skerries and has approximately 25,000 inhabitants. The Åland Islands have the right to enact their own laws and to have their own provincial administration, which provides many government services. The most important of these are education and culture, health care, social issues, municipal administration, postal services, radio and television, and local business and industry. The Åland Islands have a party system of their own that is different from the Finnish party system. For more information, see www.aland.fi.

3. For basic information on the status of Swedish-speakers, see the website of The Swedish Assembly of Finland (www.folktinget.fi), and particularly McRae (1997).

4. Also the parliamentary groups of other parties have included Swedish-speaking MPs. Social Democrats have since the first elections held in 1907 had Swedish-speaking representatives. For example, after the 1999 elections there were 16 Swedish-speaking MPs in Eduskunta: in addition to the eleven Sfp's representatives and the MP from Åland, the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats, the Left Alliance, and the Green League each had one representative whose first language was Swedish.

5. The exception was the presidential election held in 1994 when the Sfp's candidate, Mrs Elisabeth Rehn, finished second. Mrs Rehn captured in the first round 22% (702,211 votes) of the votes and 46.1% (1,475,856 votes) in the second round that was held between the two candidates who received the most votes in the first round. The personal success of Mrs Rehn did not lead to any increase in the vote share of the Sfp.

6. Sfp has had nine party programmes since its establishment. These were published in 1906, 1914, 1917, 1924, 1937, 1964, 1974, 1988, and in 1997.

7. The previous chairs have been: Axel Lille (1906-17), Eric von Rettig (1917-34), Ernst von Born (1934-45, 1955-56), Ralf Törngren (1945-55), Lars-Erik Taxell (1956-66), Jan-Magnus Jansson (1966-73), Christian Gestrin (1973-74), Carl-Olof Tallgren (1974-77), Pär Stenbäck (1977-85), Cristoffer Taxell (1985-90), and Ole Norrback (1990-98). It has not been customary for the party leader to be challenged, but in 2002 the MEP Astrid Thors tried to unseat Enestam.

⁸ In EP elections the vote share of Sfp has been higher than in Eduskunta elections. In the 1996 EP elections Sfp won 5.8% of the votes, in 1999 6.8% of the votes, and in 2004 5.7% of the votes.

9. This was also the conclusion drawn by the party chair Jan-Erik Enestam when considering reasons for the defeat in the 2003 elections. "Concern about the position of Swedish is not as strong as before", said Enestam. See Jouni Mölsä, "Enestamin asema ei heilunut Rkp:n kokouksessa", *Helsingin Sanomat* 29 March 2003.