The Finnish Eduskunta: A Parliament in a Semi-Presidential System

By Tapio Raunio

Finland is by a wide margin the oldest semi-presidential country in Europe, with the semi-presidential form of government adopted in 1919, two years after the country became independent. However, recent constitutional reforms, enacted piecemeal since the late 1980s and culminating in the new unified constitution that entered into force in 2000, have quite radically altered the Finnish political system. In government formation the role of the president is now limited to formally appointing the prime minister and the cabinet chosen by parliament; moreover, the president cannot force the government to resign. Governments are thus now accountable to the Eduskunta and not to the president, as effectively was the case before. Overall, the president is almost completely excluded from the policy process in domestic matters. Turning to external relations, the government is responsible for EU affairs while foreign policy leadership is shared between the president and the government. Foreign and defense policy excluded, Finland is now effectively a parliamentary regime.
When compared with other EU countries, Finnish governments are outliers in three respects: their broad parliamentary support, high level of fragmentation, and ideological diversity. Since 2011 Finland has been governed by a ‘six pack’ coalition between the National Coalition, the Social Democrats, the Left Alliance (that left the cabinet in March 2014), the Green League, the Swedish People’s Party and the Christian Democrats, commanding a comfortable majority with 62% of the seats. Not surprisingly, the oversized coalitions that have held power since the early 1980s have ruled without much effective parliamentary opposition. The opposition has been both numerically weak and ideologically fragmented. The main objective of interpellations (confidence votes) is thus to raise the profile of the opposition parties and perhaps also to stimulate debate on topical issues. However, when tabling the interpellation, the opposition basically knows that it will not result in government being voted out of office.

Electoral system

The 200 MPs are elected every four years and in the next elections scheduled for April 2015 the country will be divided into 12 electoral districts, with the autonomous Åland region in addition electing a single MP. Candidates can be nominated by registered parties and constituency associations. Parties can form electoral alliances with one another and constituency associations can set up joint lists. Candidate selection takes place exclusively at the district level, with the national party leadership having only limited possibilities to influence the process. Voters choose between individual candidates from non-ordered party lists; that is, candidates appear on the party lists in alphabetical order. It can be argued that the electoral system leads to more competition within than between parties.

Each district is a separate subunit and there are no national adjustment seats. Seat allocation to parties is based on the d'Hondt method. After each party, electoral alliance and joint list has been allocated the number of seats to which it is entitled, the candidates on the lists are ranked according to the number of their preference votes. This means that within electoral alliances the distribution of seats is determined by the plurality principle, regardless of the total number of votes won by the respective parties forming the alliance. Advance voting is very common – in the 2011 elections 45% cast their votes during the advance voting period which begins eleven days before election day.
The decentralized candidate selection process and the open list system limit the disciplinary powers of party leaders vis-à-vis MPs, as representatives seeking re-election need to cultivate support among their constituents. MPs are also otherwise strongly present in local politics, as the clear majority of representatives are either members of municipal councils or belong to the executive organs of their local/district party branches. However, the traditionally strong role of the state, both in terms of legislative powers and of identity, means that MPs focus first and foremost on influencing national legislation. There is unfortunately very little research on the constituency links of Finnish MPs, but it appears that despite the electoral system there is no real tradition of regular constituency ‘surgeries’ or other such established forms of constituency work.

Finland was the first European ‘country’ to give women the vote, with the first female MPs elected in the 1907 elections. Their share has increased rather steadily, and after the 2011 elections 42.5 % of MPs were women.

**Parliamentary decision-making and culture**

Committees are the backbone of the Eduskunta. They meet behind closed doors and are the central arena for scrutiny of government bills and party-political cooperation, including between government and opposition parties. Committee deliberations precede the plenary stage, with the committees having the right to ‘rewrite’ bills (within certain limits). Committees must report to the plenary on all matters under consideration except private members’ bills and motions. Committees aim at unanimous decisions without voting, but an individual MP or the losing minority can add its dissenting view to the committee reports or statements.

Parliamentary decision-making and particularly the legislative process are nonetheless strongly government-driven, with the detailed nature of the government programme and cooperation rules between the governing parties’ parliamentary groups effectively preventing any disagreements or public conflicts between the cabinet and its party groups. The abolition of the deferment rule in 1992 has in turn weakened the ability of the opposition to bloc or delay policy reforms. Until 1987, one-third of MPs (67/200) could postpone the final adoption of an ordinary law until the next election, with the proposal adopted if a majority in the new parliament supported it. In 1987 the period of postponement was shortened to until the next annual parliamentary session. The deferment rule enabled the opposition to influence laws before they were introduced in the Eduskunta, as the government needed to anticipate also the preferences of the opposition MPs.
The Eduskunta has attempted to make plenary debates a more central aspect of its work, for example through question time and facilitating topical debates. While these reforms have undoubtedly elevated the status of the plenary debates (as illustrated by the regular presence of the prime minister in the chamber), the actual bargaining and scrutiny take place in the committees and the party groups. It is nonetheless positive that now the government must defend and explain its actions and policies in public to a much greater extent than before.

**European affairs**

EU membership had presented a challenge for the Eduskunta, concerned not to see its new-won powers weakened as a result of regional integration. In EU affairs the specialized committees report to the Grand Committee, the EU committee of the Eduskunta, and not to the plenary as in domestic issues. The Grand Committee in turn hears Brussels-bound ministers before Council and European Council meetings. When scholars have ranked the effectiveness of the parliamentary EU scrutiny mechanisms, the Eduskunta has without exception been categorized as one of the strongest parliaments. The Finnish scrutiny model has also been exported abroad. The parliaments of at least the Baltic countries, Hungary and Slovenia examined it closely when preparing for EU membership, adopting several features of the Finnish mechanism in their own scrutiny models.

Finland used to have a relatively broad partisan consensus about Europe. However, in the run-up to the 2011 Eduskunta elections, the problems affecting the eurozone produced heated debates, and the EU – or more precisely the role of Finland in the bailout measures – became the main topic of the campaign. The elections were nothing short of extraordinary, producing major changes to the national party system and attracting considerable international media attention. The populist and Eurosceptical The Finns Party won 19.1% of the vote, a staggering increase of 15% on the 2007 elections and the largest ever increase in support achieved by a single party in Eduskunta elections.

The Finns Party has certainly left its mark on party politics and parliamentary culture, particularly in EU affairs. In contrast to previous lack of European debates, since 2010 EU matters have appeared much more frequently in the plenary, including through several euro crisis-related interpellations initiated by The Finns Party. These parliamentary debates are really the first time that the government has been forced to justify and defend its EU policies in public – and when the opposition has attacked the government publicly over its handling of European policy. Also in domestic politics the more confrontational style and colourful language of The Finns Party has impacted the tone of the plenary speeches that had previously been characterized as mainly facts-
based and cautious and lacking real deliberation or dialogue. Moreover, The Finns Party and the euro crisis era have at least partially changed the consensual mode of Grand Committee decision-making. Voting has become more common, with the votes reproducing the government–opposition cleavage that characterizes plenary decision-making, and with the losing opposition minority adding its dissenting opinions to the Grand Committee statements and minutes.

**Declining turnout**

But perhaps the main challenge facing Eduskunta is turnout, which has declined fairly consistently since the 1960s. In the 2011 elections the mobilization by The Finns Party, and the associated higher levels of contestation and interest, partly explain the rise in turnout to 70.5%. This was a welcome development given that the turnout in 2007, of 67.9%, had been the lowest since the Second World War. Parties may be more worried about entering the government, but for the Eduskunta it is important not to see turnout decline any further in the 2015 elections.

**Further reading**


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*Image: Miemo Penttinen*