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## Electoral Reform Opens Roads to Presidency for Finnish Women

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### Introduction

Imagine a U.S. presidential election where four of the five leading candidates are women and a woman (naturally!) wins. Then, imagine that the new president is a leftist and Social Democrat, a single mom, unmarried with a partner, former head of a leading gay and lesbian rights organization, lives in a modest apartment in a working class section of the capital and splurges on one extra dress for the presidential campaign, refusing any packaging or makeovers. Sound far fetched? As impossible as it might be in the United States, it became reality [in] Finland, where just such a person, Tarja Halonen, was elected the country's first female president on 6 February [2000]. (Tripp 2000, 20)

This is how political scientist Aili Mari Tripp poignantly highlighted some of the differences between Finnish and U.S. presidential campaigns in an essay on the 2000 presidential elections in Finland. Eight years later, there would be plenty of additional oddities to report, for example, how President Tarja Halonen acquired and happily embraced a new image as a Conan O'Brien look-alike (surely every woman's dream!) and the subsequent meeting between both red-haired personae in her residence during her second-term presidential campaign. On a more serious note, however, the basics of the greater narrative of politics remain the same: That is,

since 1994, all three presidential elections in Finland have culminated in a second round in a race between a female and a male candidate for popular support. As a result, Foreign Minister Tarja Halonen was elected as the first woman president of the country in 2000 and reelected in 2006.

Both international scholars and Finns themselves are fond of explaining Finnish women's rise to high executive offices as an "automatic" consequence of the high general support for gender equality and the long history of women's high parliamentary representation in the country. Although these factors certainly serve as macro-level explanations for the rise of female presidential candidates in Finland, in this essay I wish to question their embedded assumption of an automatic, linear progress toward larger numbers of women politicians in higher offices, such as the presidency. My objection is that these explanations tend to overlook more immediate explanations like institutional changes, which, to my mind, better explain sudden transformations, such as the rise of successful female contenders for the presidency in Finland from the early 1990s onward.

The application of Occam's razor to the Finnish political context gives us three factors to consider from this perspective: first, the diminished powers of the presidency due to constitutional reforms and a consequent lateral power transfer to the parliament, the cabinet, and especially the prime minister; second, the reform of the electoral system from indirect elections to a direct majoritarian system in two rounds for the presidency, utilized in full for the first time in the 1994 presidential elections; and finally, prevailing gender-based voting patterns (voting for same-gender candidates), which serve to facilitate women candidates' chances for success.

Before 1994, Finland was regarded as one of the strong semipresidential systems of the Western world, along with France and the United States. Attempts to curb the power of the presidency were initiated in the 1970s, and they led, after a 20-year heated political struggle, to a series of constitutional reforms in 1991, 1993–94, and 2000. The president continued to lead the country's foreign policy but was forced to share these powers with the prime minister, who was now in charge of European policy, especially after Finland's entry into the European Union in 1995. Moreover, presidential powers relating to domestic policy were diminished as the nomination and dismissal of the government and prime minister were transferred from being a presidential prerogative to being the responsibility of the national legislative assembly.

Since these major institutional power shifts occurred simultaneously with the rise of successful female contenders for the presidency in Finland, they are often interpreted as women gaining access to “shrinking institutions” (Holter 1976). Similarly, Farida Jalalzai (2008) points out that women are more likely to come to executive power in institutional contexts where they share the power with somebody else. A slightly different interpretation of the constitutional reform, however, was expressed in a somewhat cynical statement by a highly placed Finnish woman politician, Riitta Uosukainen, then-speaker of the parliament and National Coalition Party presidential candidate in 2000, when no woman had yet achieved the presidency: “The new Constitution will serve to hold the Machiavellis in check so that we can also trust the presidency to men in the future” (*Iltalehti* July 3, 1999, cited in Kuusipalo 2000, 45).

I now turn to two key explanations for Finnish women’s success in presidential campaigns, namely, the shift from indirect to direct elections, and the possibilities that this created for women’s gendered concerns to affect the electoral process and outcome. First, however, I will briefly outline the context for Finnish women’s rise to higher executive power positions.

### Women’s Path to Executive Power

Finnish women’s success in politics is often explained with reference to egalitarian attitudes and the long history of women’s political mobilization and representation. The latter, as Nina Raaum (1999) shows, can be regarded in the framework of an incremental threshold model (Rokkan 1970): from legitimization and incorporation (formal suffrage) of women’s rights to their increasing representation in democratic assemblies, and, as a final step, their rise to executive power positions. For Nordic women as well, however, the thresholds to representation and executive power have been difficult to cross. For Finland, it was especially the latter — the hurdle over the threshold to executive power — that took a very long time to be fully realized.

In their analysis of the link between economic affluence and cultural modernization, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2003) depict Nordic countries as prime examples of postmaterialist societies: They are prosperous and secularized; they display high levels of individuation, including that of women; they have obtained a high level of gender equality; and women exhibit high levels of participation in all areas of

public life. The researchers placed Finland, Sweden, and Norway among the highest-ranked countries in the world with regard to support of gender equality and women's rights: Over 80% of the population was in favor of egalitarian gender roles (2003, 32–36). However, survey results continue to indicate considerable gender differences with respect to gender equality in Finland, too (Melkas 2004). Also, the economic affluence of Finland is historically quite recent. The transformation from an agricultural society to an industrialized one occurred only after World War II, in particular during the 1960s and 1970s when the Nordic-type “woman-friendly” social-democratic welfare state was also introduced.

Finnish women's international profile of relatively high political representation has a longer history. Women's suffrage and right to run for office was achieved as early as 1906. In 1945, the proportion of women members of parliament was 8.5%; in 1970, 21.5%; in 1983, 31.0%; in 1991, 38.5%; and in 2007, 42.0%. To put these figures in context, even today women's representation in the lower houses of parliament worldwide stands at only 18% (IPU 2008). Today, Finland's parliament, with 42% of its seats held by women, is ranked as fourth globally after Rwanda (49%), Sweden (47%), and Cuba (44%). Notably, there are no party quotas or electoral quotas used in any democratic elections in Finland in the context of the open-list proportional representation (PR) electoral system, contrary to what some international observers mistakenly assume. However, most of the bigger parties in Finland have internal recommendations for at least 40% women on their list (in parliamentary and municipal elections).

Finnish women's path to executive power has been much thornier. Researchers have repeatedly pointed to the strong vertical and horizontal gender segregation of Finnish politics (Haavio-Mannila et al. 1983; Kuusipalo 1989, 1992) as a barrier to women's advancement. This segregation has shown signs of diminishing only after the late 1980s.

The first female minister, Social Democratic member of parliament (MP) Miina Sillanpää, was elected to the cabinet as early as 1926. From World War II onward, there was often one female minister in the cabinet, usually in the areas of culture and education or social affairs and health; these were considered to be “women's portfolios” in the context of dual conceptions of citizenship, which emphasized women's roles as “societal mothers” (Sulkunen 1987, 1989). Beginning in 1968, an informal quota of one woman per cabinet (6%) became the unwritten rule. In the 1970s, the number expanded to comprise two female ministers, and in the 1980s, three to four female ministers per

cabinet (Haavio-Mannila et al. 1983, 125–26; Kuusipalo 1989, 1992). In 1991, the proportion of women ministers (41%) nearly reached parity for the first time and has fluctuated between 28% and 50% in the cabinets between 1995 and 2007. Since 2007, Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's cabinet has a female-majority (60% women) government, presumably for the first time in world history (before the new Spanish government entered office in 2008). Surprisingly, this occurred in a context of a center-right coalition government, whose parties, as comparative studies have illustrated, are not typically known for promoting women.

The horizontal gender segregation in Finnish politics has taken even longer to break. During 1926–92, 72 women were appointed to cabinet positions. Of these, 53 were appointments in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health or to the Ministry of Education. During this period, there were only 19 exceptions to the strict division between “women's” or “men's” posts within the cabinet (Kuusipalo 1994, 64). It was only during the late 1980s that the segregation between “masculine” and “feminine” areas in politics started to diminish, as women were for the first time also given “male” portfolios in government as ministers of defense, finance, justice, and the interior.

The first minister of finance, the prime minister, the minister of foreign affairs and the minister of trade and industry have been considered to be the “superministers” within the cabinet, and until 1987 these positions were held solely by men, with one exception (Kuusipalo 1994, 65; Nousiainen 1992, 79). Since then, only the positions of the minister of foreign affairs and the prime minister have been held by women politicians. Social Democratic member of parliament Tarja Halonen, later to be elected the president of the republic, held the position of minister of foreign affairs from 1995 to 2000. MP Anneli Jäätteenmäki (Center Party) was elected prime minister in 2003, but had to resign after two months in office because of an accusation of having extracted secret information on foreign affairs from a party compatriot working in the presidential office for use in her electoral campaign.

In addition to ministerial office, party leadership is an important indicator of women's rise to higher executive power. In the Finnish political system they are closely interdependent. Leaders of governmental parties automatically gain important positions in the cabinet, with the larger parties dividing the posts of “superministers” between them. Typically, party leaders — or their “statesman” predecessors — have also been (and still are) elected as party presidential candidates. Of the three major parties responsible for forming the cabinet, only the Center Party

had had a female party leader (Anneli Jäätteenmäki, 2002–3) before June 2008, when Jutta Urpilainen was elected the party leader of the Social Democratic Party. In the smaller “adjunct” parties, party leadership has been easier for women to achieve but still remains quite rare. Of them, extreme left-wing parties, the Greens and the Christian Democrats, have had a female party leader.

The constraints of this system for political ascendancy became subject to considerable change as Finland adopted a new direct electoral system for presidency in 1991, used for the first time in the 1994 election. In the next two sections, the impacts of this electoral change for women are discussed in more detail.

### Reform of the Presidential Electoral System

From the date of independence (1917), the president of Finland was by law elected via an indirect two-tier system for a six-year term. The electorate voted at popular polls (with a PR electoral system) for the members of an electoral college consisting of 300 (from 1981, 301) electors who, one month after the election, gathered to choose the president. If in the first round of voting, one of the presidential candidates gained the majority of the electoral votes, s/he was chosen as president. If not, the same procedure was repeated in the second round. This made it possible for parties to negotiate and join forces between the two rounds in selecting suitable candidates. If none of the candidates succeeded in receiving the majority of electoral votes in the second round, in the third round the two most successful candidates of the second round raced against each other for electoral votes. Notably, the electors were not tied to their original candidate: It was also possible to put up outside candidates, “black horses,” at any other stage except for the third round of the electoral college proceedings (Nousiainen 1998, 201–2).

The system was thus not very democratic in any modern sense, as it relied on the deliberations of “wise men and women.” In practice, the electoral process was characterized by horse trading between different parties for compromise candidates and by coalition building against hated or “unsuitable” candidates, most often along the left–right spectrum. Also, the accountability of the electoral college to the electorate varied greatly. In 1937, only 16.6% of the electorate had originally voted for electors standing for the president (Kyösti Kallio) who was selected (Nousiainen 1998, 202; see also Jyränki 1981, 51–52).

The problems concerning the presidential electoral system led to a two-stage reform, in 1987<sup>1</sup> and 1991. Beginning in 1994, the president has been elected in direct, democratic, majoritarian elections in two rounds. The nomination of presidential candidates is restricted either to political parties having at least one member of parliament or to electoral alliances consisting of at least 20 thousand registered voters. There was also an additional clause in the presidential electoral law: Party candidates for the presidency are to be elected so that the democratic influence of the grassroots membership is secured in the party nomination process, as decreed by more detailed party rules. This proved to be crucial as it forced the parties to reconsider their internal processes and to democratize them accordingly. Thus, party primaries, in which the grassroots members could choose their candidates, were introduced. Notably, from the point of view of women's increased influence, in 1991 the percentage of women in party membership was estimated to be 36% and rising, a much higher share than their representation in the decision-making organs of the parties (Sundberg 1996, 113–14).

The electoral reform was, in part, motivated by the idea that the considerable powers of the president necessitated direct democratic legitimation from the people. On the other hand, partly because of the authoritarian rule of President Urho Kekkonen's 25-year term, it was at the same time considered necessary to curb the concentration of powers in one person by limiting the six-year presidential term to only two terms. These and other major and minor adjustments to presidential powers in the early 1990s were completed a few years later with the overhaul of the Constitutional Law.

The impact of the electoral reforms on women's chances to stand as presidential candidates, to be nominated as official party candidates, and to be elected as presidents was considerable. Before 1994, there had been only one female presidential candidate on the Finnish political scene. In 1982, the very small Liberal Party, struggling with decline in electoral support and the threat of extinction, recruited an outsider woman candidate as its figurehead for the presidential election. The candidate, Helvi Sipilä, was at the time the only Finnish woman who had gained a high profile internationally as deputy United Nations

1. In 1987 a constitutional adjustment introduced an "intermediate model," which was utilized only once, in the presidential election of 1988. The electorate gave their votes at the polls both directly for the preferred candidate and for an electoral college member. If any of the candidates had received the majority of direct votes, s/he would have been chosen as president. Since this did not occur, the final election took place in the electoral college proceedings instead.

secretary general and founder of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Despite some positive feedback imagewise, the party's face-lift was not very successful as far as the electoral outcome was concerned. The Liberal Party's electoral college candidates received only 2.6% support at the polls, resulting in one electoral college member out of 301 electors (Central Statistical Office of Finland 1982).

In 1994, the situation was very different. In its internal primary, the Swedish People's Party elected Elisabeth Rehn, the minister of defense and the minister of gender equality, as its presidential candidate. Notably, Rehn had not been in the core party leadership. In addition, Eeva Kuuskoski-Vikatmaa, an experienced politician and a former minister, was defeated in the Center Party primary by Paavo Väyrynen, the former longtime party leader. She still decided to stand formally as a presidential candidate in the election by forming a citizens' electoral alliance for her nomination and campaigning after the party defeat. Party primaries produced great surprises for other parties as well. For example, the longtime former prime minister and leader of the Social Democratic Party, Kalevi Sorsa, to his chagrin, lost the party primary to an outsider candidate, Martti Ahtisaari, who had made his career outside Finnish domestic politics as a diplomat in the United Nations.

The shocks to the established male party elites were not confined to the party primaries, but continued throughout the electoral campaigns of the candidates and the consequent two rounds of majoritarian voting. First, Rehn's nomination as an official presidential candidate made visible women's dissatisfaction with the male composition and behind-the-scenes practices of Finnish politics at the top. Rehn succeeded in attracting female supporters across party lines and across the language barrier (she is a Swedish-speaking Finn) as Finnish women came to realize that, for the first time, there was a real chance to have a woman president. During her campaign, well-known feminists and even high-placed left-wing women politicians openly declared their support for her, preferring her to the male candidates from their own parties whose egalitarian commitments were questionable (Lammi-Taskula 1994). This caused consternation within the parties at women's "traitorous" behavior. As a result of the wide popular support from the female side of the electorate in particular (Krzywacki 1994, 43–44), Rehn received the second-most votes (22.0%) in the first round of the election (against Martti Ahtisaari's 25.9%) and proceeded to the second round. Notably, her support exceeded her party's normal parliamentary support by more than 17 percentage points. In the second round of the election, Rehn,

*Table 1.* Percentage (and number) of female presidential candidates and their share of votes in the first and second round of presidential elections in Finland, 1994–2006

	1994	2000	2006
Round 1: % female candidates (N)	18 (2 out of 11)	57 (4 out of 7)	25 (2 out of 8)
Round 1: % of votes cast for the female candidates	24.6	64	49.8
Round 2: % female candidates (N)	50 (1 out of 2)	50 (1 out of 2)	50 (1 out of 2)
Round 2: % of votes cast for the female candidate	46.1	51.6	51.8

Sources: Statistics Finland 1994, 2000, 2006.

however, lost the presidency by 46.1% to Ahtisaari's 53.9% of the votes. (Table 1)

The next presidential election, in 2000, produced some similar and some different surprises. As in the 1994 election, there were surprises in the party primaries: great anticipation concerning the possibility of a first woman president and much fanfare over women's public crossing of party lines to support female presidential candidates. The greatest innovation this time, however, was the party contagion effect emanating from the 1994 presidential election. It produced an electoral context in which *the majority* of presidential candidates were female. Four of the seven candidates were women, this time all as official party candidates. Elisabeth Rehn was once again the candidate for the Swedish People's Party. The Social Democrats, together with the Left-wing Alliance, selected Tarja Halonen as their presidential candidate; the National Coalition Party picked Riitta Uosukainen, and the Greens chose Heidi Hautala. Of the bigger parties, only the Center Party had a male candidate, former party leader and Prime Minister Esko Aho. The campaign was a contest among the female candidates from the very outset: Initially, the opinion polls were in Rehn's favor, leaning later toward Uosukainen and settling finally on Halonen. Halonen (40%) and Aho (34.4%) were the winners of the first round. In the second round, Halonen defeated Aho by a very tight margin (51.6%, by 103,532 votes). (See Table 1)

In the 2006 election, Halonen secured her second term in office by defeating the right-wing male candidate Sauli Niinistö, again in a very close race (51.8% to 48.2 %). This time the only other female contender

in the first round was Hautala of the Greens. She had been one of the founders of the party in the 1980s and had served as its leader and parliamentary representative, though with no ministerial experience. Notably, of the five individual women who stood for the presidency between 1994 and 2006, Hautala was the only one (with her two candidacies, 2000 and 2006) who had a background as a party leader. Although the other female candidates had lengthy political experiences as parliamentarians, as ministers, and in other political leadership positions, none with the exception of Halonen had ever been in charge of a superministry.

Consequently, the overall profile of female presidential candidates is different from that of male candidates of the established parties, who, with the exception of Ahtisaari, had all served either as party leaders or as superministers. This comparison also indicates the new windows of opportunity that have opened up for women politicians as a result of the electoral reforms and the democratization of party nomination procedures. Democratic support both within the parties and in the electorate at large aided women's rise to presidential candidacies, despite the barriers posed by masculine party hierarchies and gendered political structures and evaluation criteria.

The phenomenon of gender-based voting (i.e., same-gender voting) provides additional illumination regarding the success of female presidential candidates. Gender-based voting has not been a very common topic of study internationally (see Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Sanbonmatsu 2002) for the simple reason that the electoral systems in use do not make it possible; the parties design the lists in closed PR systems and the voters cast their votes for the lists, not for the individual candidates. Moreover, the scarce supply of female candidates makes it hard to study gender-based voting empirically in most majoritarian electoral systems. By contrast, Finland has an open-list type of proportional-representation electoral system in parliamentary and municipal elections, where the electors vote both for the individual candidate and for the party list.

The scarce longitudinal survey data available on parliamentary elections in Finland tells us that the majority of both male and female voters there have for decades had a strong preference for candidates of their own gender. For example, in 1970, 40% of women voted for women, which can be regarded as quite an astonishing figure for the period. Then, 93% of male voters cast their vote for a male candidate, with only 7% of men opting for a female candidate (Haavio-Mannila 1979). In the 2007

parliamentary elections, 53% of women voted for women and 72% of men for male candidates (Holli and Wass forthcoming).

The adoption of a majoritarian system for the presidential election made the impact of the Finnish people's propensity to vote for same-gender candidates much more direct and visible (Table 2). Here, we must not forget the fact that Finnish women make up a slight majority of voters and that they also have been more active voters than men since 1987, which gives their opinions an extra boost in elections.

Both women and men favored same-gender candidates in the presidential election of 2006. In the first round, 60% of women voted for either of two female candidates; in the second round, 58% of them supported Halonen's reelection. In the first round, 59% of male voters cast their vote for one of the six male candidates; in the second round, 56% of them supported the male challenger, Sauli Niinistö. These figures are in line with the gender distribution of the second round of the 1994 presidential election, where 55% of women and 60% of men opted for a same-gender candidate (Holli 1994). In contrast, the first round of the 2000 presidential election was quite exceptional in that the majority of candidates were women, which also greatly affected the gender-based voting patterns. Then, as many as 79% of women and 66% of men voted for a female candidate. The second round with a woman–man contest, on the other hand, ended up with two-thirds of women (67%) opting for Halonen and 49% of male voters for Aho. This occurred in spite of the fact that Finnish women typically tend to favor nonsocialist parties in elections (i.e., Finland displays a traditional gender gap in voting).

A recent study (Hellsten, Holli, and Wass 2007) proved that candidate gender indeed affected both women's and men's voting preferences. Whereas U.S. studies tend to point out that women at times base their candidate choice on gender, the Finnish study empirically showed instead that, when controlling for other relevant variables, Finnish men were more prone than women to vote for a candidate of their own gender in the 2006 presidential elections. That is, they had the tendency to veer toward male candidates and away from female candidates regardless of socioeconomic background variables and party convictions. The same, although to a lesser degree, was evident in women's preferred choice of female candidates.

The analysis also revealed differences between men's and women's reasons for gender-based voting. Women voters more often had motivations based on the principles of descriptive and substantive representation. They regarded voting for women as important *per se*, and

*Table 2.* Gender-based voting by gender in presidential elections in Finland, 2000 and 2006, by percentage

	<i>2000 Round 1</i>		<i>2000 Round 2</i>		<i>2006 Round 1</i>		<i>2006 Round 2</i>	
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Voted for same-gender candidate	79	34	67	49	60	59	58	56

*Source:* Hellsten, Holli, and Wass 2007, 185.

chose a candidate who was an active advocate on behalf of concerns regarded as important for their gender, as well as of gender-equality issues. By contrast, habit was the only factor explaining men's higher propensity to vote for same-gender candidates. Thus, the researchers concluded, for Finnish women, candidate gender is a much more politicized issue at elections than for men (Hellsten, Holli, and Wass 2007).

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have focused on two factors that tend to be overlooked when considering explanations for women's advancement to presidential office in Finland. The first relates to institutional change, namely, the effects of a majoritarian electoral system from 1994 onwards. The democratization of the party-level nomination processes also created new opportunities for women politicians to strive for and achieve candidacy. Notably, the pool of women politicians with political, including executive, experience was already very high, although due to various gendered structural barriers, women had most often not been able to acquire the "correct" background and experience needed by "suitable" and electable presidential candidates. Party primaries and direct democratic elections functioned to amend these so-called deficiencies of women and to change the criteria for the presidency, which previously had lopsidedly favored male political elites.

In addition to these institutional changes, new research points to the significance of gender-based voting in the presidential election especially after 1994, suggesting that for women, in particular, gender concerns structure vote choice in a quite explicit manner. Although gender-based voting is much stronger among Finnish men, their motivations for it differ from women's. This gap could probably be explained by gender bias and gender stereotypes.

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## Seizing a Window of Opportunity: The Election of President Bachelet in Chile

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I am here as a woman, representing the defeat of the exclusion which we have objected to for so long.

Michelle Bachelet<sup>1</sup>

The election of Michelle Bachelet as president of Chile on January 15, 2006, was an historical milestone for women and gender equity, both in her own country and for Latin America in general, where women have made significant gains in terms of parliamentary representation but continue to confront great difficulties in being elected as heads of state.<sup>2</sup> Bachelet's election as the first female president was astonishing and surprising in many respects. In contrast to the experiences of other

1. First annual address to Congress, May 21, 2006, <http://www.presidencia.cl>. (5 July 2008).

2. Only nine women in all have served as heads of state in Latin America: in Argentina (2), Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru.