

FINAL REPORT

Finland Parliamentary Elections
14th April 2019



Democracy Volunteers

1st July 2019



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Final Report on Election Observation

Mission Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process in Finland.
2. To advise the local councils and national electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice in Finland.
3. To support local bodies and national election authorities with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

Methodology

The mission deployed in two waves: a core team for up to ten days and the rest of the short-term observers for the weekend of the election. The mission deployed 12 observers in total which divided into six teams of two on polling day. These observers were all accredited with the Finnish Ministry of Justice and allowed to access any polling station in Finland. The core team attended a series of meetings with interlocutors across Finland to evaluate aspects of the election with specific reference to the competencies of the core team. On polling day, the observer team made 65 separate observations across seven municipalities. This allowed the observer team to also assess five separate electoral districts: Helsinki, Uusimaa, Tavastia, Pirkanmaa, and Oulu. The municipalities and the number of observations were:

- Espoo 10
- Helsinki 16
- Kerava 2
- Lahti 4
- Oulu 12
- Tampere 11
- Vantaa 10

All observers received written notice in advance of the deployment. The core team held a preliminary meeting with the Ministry of Justice on arrival in Finland and the entire team of twelve held a subsequent meeting at the Ministry. This was followed by a briefing in Helsinki.

Each observation was conducted in pairs to allow for objective observation and the observers then agreed their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data. The observations generally took between thirty and forty-five minutes per polling station, with the observers asked to ensure that they saw the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station. This happened on every occasion.

The organisation of polling stations was extremely well run across the area of observation. Voters could clearly see how to access voting and staff were trained to manage the process. Polls were generally open from 9am to 8pm. The teams were asked to observe an opening as well as a closing of a polling station and tour polling stations throughout the day.

Counting began almost immediately, based in the polling stations, before results were transmitted to the central count for checking.

Our observer team and electoral experts met with a number of professional and political interlocutors whilst in Finland and we have also included some of the feedback on these meetings in our conclusions. A full list of these interlocutors can be found in Appendix A.

The Core Team



Dr John Ault FRSA FRGS (United Kingdom) was the Head of Mission for the Finnish Parliamentary elections and is the Executive Director of Democracy Volunteers.

John has worked in elections throughout the UK and the United States since the 1980s. He has observed on behalf of the OSCE/ODIHR in parliamentary elections as far afield as Kazakhstan and is a former chair of the UK's Electoral Reform Society. He has also been elected to local government in the UK as well as being appointed to the South West Regional Assembly.

He has observed numerous elections for Democracy Volunteers including the Norwegian parliamentary elections, the UK general election in 2017, the Finnish presidential and Dutch elections in 2017, 2018 and 2019. He has also been a consultant on the subject of electoral and parliamentary reform in Moldova.

He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter and has previously lectured at Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Manchester. He specialises in elections and campaigns and has published a number of books on the subject, including his doctoral thesis on electoral campaigning.



Alex Ollington FRSA (United Kingdom) was Deputy Head of the Finland General Election Mission and is Head of Operations for Democracy Volunteers.

In his role at Democracy Volunteers, he plans all aspects of the observation including the advanced work on observer deployment. He is also one of the directors of the organisation.

He received both his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the University of Exeter studying International Relations. He has observed elections for the National Assembly for Wales in 2016, the UK General Election in 2017 as well as the Finnish Presidential election in 2018 among other international and domestic observations.

He coordinated with the International Elections Study Centre in May 2018 to facilitate the attendance of a team of Russian observers from the civil society organisation GOLOS at the English local elections.

Alex has previously worked with veterans at the Royal Hospital Chelsea as part of the fundraising and communications department finding funding for future projects as well as a researcher for a number of organisations including the universities of Harvard and Bristol.



Elizabeth Blunt MBE (United Kingdom) was media expert in the core team for the Democracy Volunteers observation to Finland. She is a journalist and broadcaster whose long career with the BBC (mostly in World Service radio) included a period as the Corporation's West Africa correspondent, after which she received the MBE for her reporting of the Liberian civil war.

She covered her first election, in Nigeria, in 1979, and has reported on many since, some good, some spectacularly bad.

Since retiring from the BBC in 2009, she has observed a number of elections in Africa for the European Union, and also served as member of the Commonwealth Observer Group for Nigeria in 2015.



Kim Kippen (Canada) was the Electoral Process Expert on the core team for the Finland parliamentary election. She is an Electoral Operations specialist with over twenty years working in domestic election administration and on international observation missions.

Her electoral experience includes a wide variety of operational roles with Canadian election management bodies, as well as field management positions. She has taken part in many election observation missions, both internationally and domestically, specialising in electoral administration, legal frameworks, electoral systems, voting processes, and out-of-country voting.



Burbuqe Brahimi (Kosovo) was political analyst in the core team for the Finland parliamentary observation. From March 2015 – January 2019 Burbuqe was part of the IFES team as Project Coordinator and as such, worked on various projects IFES implemented together with the Central Election Commission of Kosovo (CEC) and Election Complaints and Appeals Panel (ECAP). She has also worked on the meaningful participation of women in the political system, through the Women Leadership Program, and has worked with political party representatives to empower women engagement as EMBs, nomination of women for MPs and Mayor Candidates, and other relevant functions within parties.

She was educated at the University of Prishtina and is currently studying at the Santa'Anna University in Pisa in Electoral Policy and Administration. This was her second observation with Democracy Volunteers having previously attended the United States mid-term elections in Missouri in 2018.

FUNDING

All of the 12 observers deployed to Finland for the observation of the 14th April parliamentary elections did so at their own cost, or they were supported from general funds of the organisation. This was arranged by Democracy Volunteers, and this covered their travel to Finland, accommodation and internal transport. No finance was sought, or received, from any party, whether internal or external to Finland, for the observation or this Final Report. Our observations are wholly independent of any institution.

General information

The Republic of Finland is a country in northern Europe with a population of 5.5 million, out of which 4.5 million are entitled to vote. Elections in the Republic of Finland take place in a context of parliamentary representative democracy and a multi-party system. The parliamentary elections are held every fourth year, with the first parliamentary elections held in 1907 and the latest ones being held on April 14th, 2019. The Parliament of Finland, the unicameral supreme legislature of Finland, consists of 200 members.

There were approximately 2000 candidates running for the parliamentary elections of April 14th, across thirteen districts covering the entire country and 311 municipalities. The voting register derives from the Population Register Centre which compiles a computer register of everyone entitled to vote. The voting register contains voter information such as name, identity code, electoral district, municipality of residence and the polling station. The information provided is as it appears on the Population Information System fifty-one days before election day. However, after all other procedures are met, the register becomes legally valid at noon, 12 days before election day.

Parliamentary Elections 2019			
Voter Turnout in Finland		72,1%	
Voter Turnout		68,7%	
Party	Votes won	%	Seats
SDP	546471	17,7	40
The Finns Party	538805	17,5	39
National Coalition Party	523957	17,0	38
Centre Party of Finland	423920	13,8	31
Green League	354194	11,5	20
The Left Alliance	251808	8,2	16
Swedish People's Party	139640	4,5	9
Christian Democrats	120144	3,9	5
Other groups	89582	2,9	2

Political Issues

In the election of April 2019, to be an eligible party to run in these parliamentary election, or any other parliamentary elections, the party must have 5000 supporters/signatures, can nominate candidates without any other requirements and, should a party get no MPs within two consecutive elections, it is then withdrawn from the register. For a single candidate the minimum number of supporters for the parliamentary elections is 100. There were nineteen registered parties for the April 14th parliamentary elections however, on the pre-election polls the results were showing a close race among five parties in particular: the Social Democratic Party; National Coalition; the Finns Party; Centre Party, and the Green League.

The official post elections results showed the very close similarities and closely reflected the pre-election polls results. On page 4 are the total 200 seats allocated to respective parties according to the votes won. The data is extracted from the Ministry of Justice of Finland official webpage for elections. Helsinki seemed very much alive and vibrant in the days before the election day of April 14th. Parties rallied very close to each other on city squares, all in very close proximity to one another in party coloured tents. This allowed all parties to present their election campaign program, but on the other hand allowed also for the electorate to have a possibility to have a better and clearer understanding of each party election program.

Out of all the meetings held with representatives of the political parties running in these elections, all had views on the new method applied for the postal voting method. However, when asked to comment on the possible introduction of new methods in the future, such as electronic voting, all parties were strongly against the idea of introducing the electronic voting. This was because of potential foreign interference and meddling with election results.

The use of social media campaigning was especially noticeable in these elections; campaigning was varied across all the parties' candidates in these elections. The usage of social media versus TV ads was highly noted and commented on. It was immediately noticed that ads were presented on the personal social media accounts of candidates, and even on the social media accounts of visiting international election observers.

Gender issues

All the parties we met with had paid particular attention to gender balance. Whether it was fifty percent women or even sixty-two percent women candidates running for parliamentary elections, parties felt strong about their female representation of candidates for future MP. It was clear this was not just simply a numbers game but parties seemed to believe in the meaningful participation of women in politics

Security and Cybersecurity

Some of our meetings were held with those commissioned with protecting the electoral process from internal and external actors who might have illegitimate reasons for disrupting the electoral process. Most of these interlocutors were sanguine about the potential disruptions, but preparations were clearly in place to deal with disruption.

A committee including the Ministry of Justice as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and security experts has been set up. Although the working of this committee was evidently well-functioning there were differences in perceived threats to the electoral process. A number of the interlocutors identified that one of the core strengths of the new arrangements was that they no longer ‘worked in silos’. There was awareness that some of the issues which had affected the reporting of the Swedish general election in September had led to some perceived distrust in the electoral process in Sweden. Whilst not a direct cause of the creation of the committee, the attitude of interlocutors seemed to be that external and/or internal threats are now a perceived, as well as potentially real, challenge to democracy. However, interlocutors were keen to express that because of the paper-based nature of voting in Finland this aspect of voting was ‘extremely robust’, though this did not preclude cyberattacks on the electoral register, party websites and data systems as well as the Ministry of Justice’s own election website.¹ This Denial of Service Attack on the Ministry of Justice’s elections results website mirrors the challenge that Sweden faced in 2018 when it’s national results service ceased to issue results for several hours. It was clear that the Finnish authorities wished to avoid a similar outcome as it was argued that this led to an arguable loss of trust in this aspect of the process.

As one interlocutor put it, ‘elections are safe, but the information environment is not safe.’ In reality most interlocutors believed the main threat to electoral integrity was more likely to be on a micro-scale, where individual candidates or parties were challenged either locally or through their literature. Fake news was not simply identified as being an online phenomenon but one which could also be delivered through fake party literature being distributed.

The Finnish Media and the Election

The Broadcast Media

In Finland, this is dominated by the powerful state broadcaster, YLE. It broadcasts in Finnish, Swedish, and occasionally in Russian and English, has four national television channels, numerous national and regional radio channels, and news websites in Finnish, Swedish and English. It doesn't take advertising, nor does it carry party political broadcasts, but its election coverage was very thorough.

At this election it devoted an hour-long programme to the leader of each major party, comprising a long interview, a seven-minute statement by the leader him/herself and a

¹https://www.poliisi.fi/keskusrikospoliisi/tiedotteet/1/0/poliisi_tutkii_eduskuntavaalien_tulospalvelujarjestelmaan_kohdistettua_palvelunestohyokkaysta_79649

discussion by political commentators. It also hosted a series of two-hour debates between the leaders of the parliamentary parties. Minor parties had their own separate debate. The only dispute about this format was over YLE's decision to relegate the Seven Star Movement to the 'minor group'.

The main commercial broadcaster, MTV, also broadcasts current affairs programmes, and carried campaign advertising, both for parties and individual candidates. Their debates and election night coverage appeared similar in tone and format to those of YLE.

Print Media

Again, one major player dominates the field, *Helsingin Sanomat*, the one Finnish language daily newspaper which aspires to national reach.

Finland has an impressive number of other newspapers – around twenty “paid-for, full-service quality daily papers”, in the words of an editor at *Helsingin Sanomat*. These are predominantly regional, each being the dominant paper in its own region.

There are also two tabloid evening newspapers. All, even the tabloids, were publishing a substantial amount of political content in the week before the election.

Media Regulation

Formal media regulation is light. The state broadcaster, YLE, is not subject to specific requirements at election time, such as the need to give equal air time; it is only obliged to be 'balanced and independent' in its coverage. Their plan for election campaign coverage was agreed in advance with an Administrative Council, made up of MPs.

Formal regulation is also light for the print media. The newspaper industry is self-regulating, through the Council for Mass Media, made up of media representatives. To be sanctioned by the Council is considered a serious matter, and peer pressure is effective.

Political Alignment and Perceived Fairness

Despite the number of outlets, the Finnish media does not represent a particularly wide range of opinion.

In the case of the state broadcaster, the fact that YLE needs to reflect a wide national consensus means that YLE is generally liberal/centrist in its coverage.

For the print media, Finland has many newspapers but almost no direct competition; each paper enjoys a near monopoly in its own market. So it makes no commercial sense to alienate any potential readers by taking a strong political position. An analysis by Media Landscapes describes party newspapers as 'a curiosity in Finland, at just a few per cent of the total'. The norm, again, is a non-aligned stance and a liberal/centrist position.

This has led to a situation where parties outside the centrist consensus can feel aggrieved and unrepresented in the mainstream media.

In particular, The Finns Party has bad relations with the press, especially *Helsingin Sanomat* and YLE. One parliamentary candidate told Democracy Volunteers, “YLE has been very unfair to us. ... They are pro-Green and pro-Left and very anti the True Finns. Also *Helsingin Sanomat* is completely against the True Finns”.

The feeling is mutual. The head of Current Affairs at YLE told Democracy Volunteers that the Finns were always the most difficult party to deal with and that they and their supporters had subjected one of her presenters to a campaign of personal attacks and harassment during the Presidential elections.

Use of media in the campaign – traditional media

Several respondents told Democracy Volunteers that this was the first election in Finland which had seen a major shift of campaign resources away from the 'old' media towards social media platforms.

Because of the system of voting by candidate numbers, much campaign advertising is about name and number recognition for individual candidates in the region where they are standing, so advertising on national television is not very cost effective. Nevertheless, some candidates did buy television time for 'recognition' type advertisements. The SDP was the only party spending heavily on generic party advertising in the week before the vote, promoting a message of social unity: “Come on board; we are all going in the same direction.” There were also a few advertisements from the Centre Party, and others stressing the importance of everyone going out to vote.

Parties did get a lot of free airtime during the lengthy television debates, but they didn't have control over the message, and party leaders such as the SDP's Antti Rinne, who are less confident television performers, may have lost rather than gained support as a consequence.

Newspapers used to be one of the main ways for candidates to reach the electorate, but newspaper advertising has dropped dramatically, because it is expensive and because it is seen as outdated; as one candidate told Democracy Volunteers, “Only old people read newspapers”. This means a considerable loss of revenue for papers like *Helsingin Sanomat*, which used to carry page after page of campaign advertisements. One of its editors told Democracy Volunteers he was more concerned about the way this changes how the political system functions, with online campaigns only providing voters with opinions from within their own 'bubble'.

Social Media

Finnish politicians enthusiastically embraced the use of social media during this campaign, notably Facebook, Instagram and – to a lesser extent – Twitter. Facebook campaigns were cheap (around 200-300 Euros) and messages could be targeted by region, age, gender, or other attributes. The SDP was using social media to stress its 'green' credentials to voters who had expressed an interest in the environment. Democracy Volunteers met candidates who had paid to have advertisements delivered to women, to pensioners, to entrepreneurs, to people

associated with the University of Helsinki or those who mentioned the words 'defence' or 'military' in their profiles.

According to figures from Facebook, by election day almost 25% of paid-for posts in Finland were for political campaigns. A project using a Finnish version of 'Who Targets Me' software attempted to analyse where all these posts were coming from. They would have been influenced by the fact that their participants were disproportionately young, urban and left of centre, but they do suggest that the smaller parties – such as Liike Nyt, and even the Pirate Party – were surprisingly heavy spenders, perhaps calculating that this was a cheap and effective way of getting themselves in front of the voters. Candidates also used their own social media profiles to communicate with their followers; Swedish Party and Green candidates were particularly active.

No one has reported incidents of improper use of social media campaigning, nor have there been reported instances of 'grey' advertising from unknown sources, or of foreign 'trolling' in these elections.

There is no limit on campaign spending in Finland, which potentially gives the richer parties and candidates a big advantage. Social media campaigning may help level the playing field by its low cost and accessibility, and may possibly have contributed to the fact that some smaller parties did unexpectedly well in these elections, while the traditional 'big three' lost some of their former dominance.

Election Administration

The administration of Finnish elections is shared between several permanent central government and local electoral management bodies, with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) as the supreme electoral authority.² The MoJ is responsible for regulations and guidance to lower level election authorities and general coordination of election administration. In addition to overall administration and accountability for the conduct of elections at the central level, it is also responsible for registering political parties, managing the Election Data System, printing and coordinating election materials, and providing general information about elections to voters in a variety of formats (online, social media, print and videos).³

The MoJ organizes training for the local election authorities and provides instruction manuals for the various poll officials.⁴ Finnish electoral legislation also includes accessibility provisions for voters with disabilities and the MoJ, in cooperation with civil society organizations and the

² Other authorities responsible for distinct parts of the electoral process are the Population Register Centre, which manages and compiles the register of voters, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which administers advance voting abroad. See also Election Act, esp. Section 4, Election Procedure. <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1998/en19980714.pdf>

³ See for example <https://vaalit.fi/en/frontpage>. During the observation, the MoJ facilitated a meeting with the printing and logistics vendor, PostNord Strålfors Finland. PostNord is contracted to print and distribute many of the materials to the MECs. The MECs are provided with a web-based ordering system and expressed satisfaction with the speed and ease of use.

⁴ This includes the members of the election boards at the polling stations, the election officials at the advance polling stations and the members of the electoral commissions for voting in prisons, hospitals and other special advance polls.

local election authorities, continues to expand voting accessibility by providing voter information in Braille, sign language and easy to understand voting instruction videos.

Administering elections at the local level are 13 District Electoral Committees (DECs), one for each electoral district, and 311 Central Municipal Election Committees (MECs). While the MoJ is the supreme authority, these local administrative bodies have a significant degree of autonomy for the logistical conduct of the election, within their municipalities. As an example, the MoJ provides many of the tools and guidance to support the conducting of the election, but local MECs may decide whether and how to take advantage of these things, as it best suits the locality.⁵ Nevertheless, interlocutors at all levels expressed a high degree of confidence in the mutual cooperation between the levels of administration and the excellence of the work of the election administrators.

Postal Voting⁶

For the first time, Finnish voters out of the country were able to vote by post during this election. Eligible voters, whether permanently or temporarily abroad, now have the right to cast their vote by mail. Interlocutors noted that this new voting option was driven partly by the advocacy of expat Finnish associations and partly by the continuing efforts of legislators and administrators to expand voting options to voters who otherwise have barriers to exercising their franchise. Following the election, the Finnish statistics agency reported that over 6,000 postal votes were given by post.⁷

The postal voting process requires that voters order their own postal voting documents from the Ministry of Justice, which are then sent to the voter's address abroad.⁸ The voter is required to mark his or her ballot, seal it in a secrecy envelope, complete the required forms (with 2 attesting witnesses, not related to the voter), and then return the completed forms and envelopes to the voter's Central Municipal Election Board of his or her municipality.⁹ Like most postal voting models, the onus is on the voter to order and return their ballot on time, according to law. The postal voting papers can be ordered up to 3 months before election day, but the voter must wait for the publication of the candidates' numbers (about a month before polling day)

⁵ Examples of this flexibility include the variety of uses of training materials and electronic tools. Some MECs used all the training materials provided by the MoJ, while others adapted them to suit local circumstances and yet others outsourced their training. In another example, the MoJ provided the electronic list and electronic results system software for polling day, but it was up to the MEC whether to use these tools. Some MECs used only the e-list, others the e-list and electronic results system and still others had a hybrid of laptops and paper lists. The local MEC interlocutors expressed satisfaction and confidence with this flexibility.

⁶ Details and statistics can be found at:http://www.stat.fi/til/evaa/2019/evaa_2019_2019-04-24_en.pdf. The Election Act can be found at: <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1998/en19980714.pdf>

⁷ It was also noted that, "Voting turnout also rose for those entitled to vote living abroad, as 12.6 percent of persons entitled to vote living abroad voted in the 2019 Parliamentary elections, which is 2.5 percentage points higher than in the previous Parliamentary elections. http://www.stat.fi/til/evaa/2019/evaa_2019_2019-04-24_en.pdf

⁸ The documents can be ordered via the website, by post or email. See also the postal voting info video and brochure for voters at <https://vaalit.fi/documents/5430845/12466616/Kirjeäänestysesite%2C+englanti.pdf/74711d78-643f-cb79-1a3c-5fac199eb1b8/Kirjeäänestysesite%2C+englanti.pdf.pdf>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWJ4Z6Bhvvo&feature=youtu.be>

⁹ <https://vaalit.fi/en/postal-voting>

and must ensure that the mailed postal vote package arrives by the deadline, on Friday before ordinary voting day.

All administrative interlocutors expressed that they were comfortable with the new postal voting administrative process, given that many aspects of the mailed envelopes and ballot processing were similar to that of advance voting. Nevertheless, postal voting overall was a new voting process and some interlocutors commented that it was difficult to anticipate how much capacity would be required to process the postal votes by the deadline. Helsinki, in particular, received very large numbers of postal votes to process. In addition, the Finnish postal voting process, like most postal voting systems, is ‘unsupervised’ by officials and is potentially more administratively difficult for the voter to complete correctly. As a result, many of the mailed forms had errors or uncertain information, making it more time consuming for administrators to process. Some interlocutors felt that it would have helped to have more guidance on how to interpret or adjudicate problematic or doubtful postal voting forms.¹⁰ As a result, many forms had to be forwarded for higher level adjudication. Nevertheless, it was universally agreed that this was, in part, the result of the novelty of the process and all interlocutors expressed confidence that they would have an opportunity to give feedback to their DEC’s and the Ministry of Justice, so that improvements could be made next time around.

While the success of the first postal voting experience in Finland seems clear, it is worth noting that it is just the latest voting option in an already long list of voting opportunities available to Finnish voters. While all interlocutors were enthusiastic and proud of the increasing voting options for Finnish voters, several expressed concern about the growing strain on the municipal election committees and administrators who must deliver all the services, with sometimes small administrative staff and inelastic capacity.

Advance Voting in Finland¹¹

Advance voting in Finland is traditionally a very popular method of voting. Advance polling locations are accessible to Finnish voters for many days, both in the country and abroad, and turnout is usually high. Indeed, for the 2019 Parliamentary elections, the number of advance votes, as a share of all who voted, rose to more than 50%.

Eligible voters in-country can vote at any of the approximately 900 advance voting stations, located across Finland. Voters can freely choose whether to vote on election day or at an

¹⁰ For example, what is the role of the MEC officials in interpreting the validity of certain parts of the form and attestations, such signatures matching, when witnesses have the same family name and live at the same address, when certain sections are illegible or left blank.

¹¹ Official advance poll figures, statistics and voting process details can be sourced at:

http://www.stat.fi/til/pvaa/kas_en.html [accessed May 13, 2019];

http://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/StatFin_vaa_evaa_evaa_2019/120_evaa_2019_tau_102.px/table/tableViewLayout1/

http://www.stat.fi/til/evaa/tup_en.html

http://www.stat.fi/til/evaa/2019/evaa_2019_2019-04-24_en.pdf

<https://vaalit.fi/en/voting-in-advance>

advance poll and need not give any reason for choosing advance voting.¹² Every registered voter is sent a ‘notice of right to vote’ (polling card), which includes a list of the advance polling stations in the voter’s district. As well, the Ministry of Justice website provides information about other advance voting locations, in addition to a wide variety of other information for voters in many languages and formats.¹³

Most general advance polling stations are located in well known, public service areas (e.g. municipal offices, libraries, post offices) and, more recently, in other convenient public places, such as grocery stores.¹⁴ Special advance polling is also conducted in other locations, including hospitals, prisons, Finnish ships, in a voter’s residence (subject to pre-conditions) and Finnish diplomatic missions (covered elsewhere in this report). The general advance voting period runs for several days up until the Tuesday before polling day.

The administrative challenges of an advance voting process that allows a voter to “vote anywhere” are managed by combining on-site technology and the postal system. Advance polls are equipped with laptops that contain the national voters register and scanners that scan the polling cards and some ID documents (required by law). Printers on site produce the forms required to mail the advance ballot to the correct electoral district, for immediate processing and later counting on polling day.

Counting the Advance votes begins at 3 p.m. on election day, behind closed doors, at the Electoral District Committees. In certain instances, the counting of advance votes can be started earlier – noon at the earliest. The early counting times are intended to ensure that the count is finished by 8pm, so that the preliminary Advance Poll results can be released quickly.

In-country advance voting was observed to be highly efficient and very professionally administered. The voter experience was observed to be excellent, as queues moved quickly and poll staff were able to serve voters promptly. Party candidate lists for each of the 13 electoral districts were readily available and poll officials were on hand to assist with questions. In most cases, it was observed that voters were in and out of the station within minutes. Voters moved smoothly through busy polls, as workers quickly scanned their documents to locate and then strike them from the voting register. Once the voters name was struck from the register as ‘voted’, a ballot and ballot secrecy envelope were provided to the voter and the form required to mail the ballots to the voter’s municipality was printed. Several times a day, the sealed mailing envelopes were picked up from the polling station to be delivered to the correct municipality.

While the administrative burden of handling so many envelopes and ballots can be heavy, the municipal election officials were efficient and demonstrated they had the capacity to reliably

¹² The Election Act, section 9 and 46., found at: <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1998/en19980714.pdf>

¹³ www.vaalit.fi

¹⁴ Some interlocutors noted that, while local post offices had been traditionally used for advance poll locations, over recent years, some offices had closed down. In their place, some local authorities have added new, convenient locations, such as grocery stores.

process the advance votes, despite it being a highly ‘manual’ process, under very tight timelines. Some interlocutors noted that the success of this process was also dependent on the capacity of the postal system, but no significant problems were reported, in that regard.

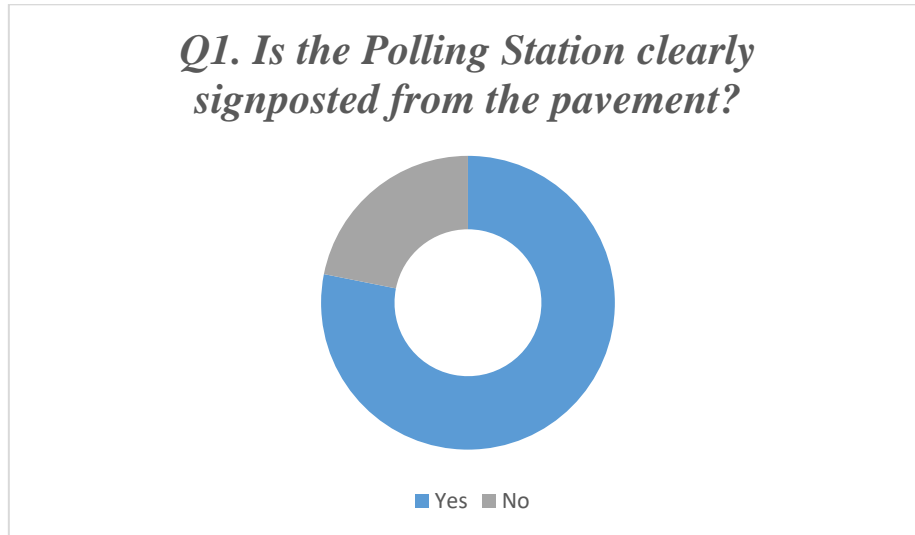
Out of Country Advance Voting

As well as observations in Finland the observer group also deployed three teams across the United Kingdom to observe advance voting outside Finland. These teams deployed to Birmingham, London and Manchester. Out of country voting is available in numerous countries and territories around the world, primarily using the resources of the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs but also via the offices of local community groups and Honorary Consuls in many countries.

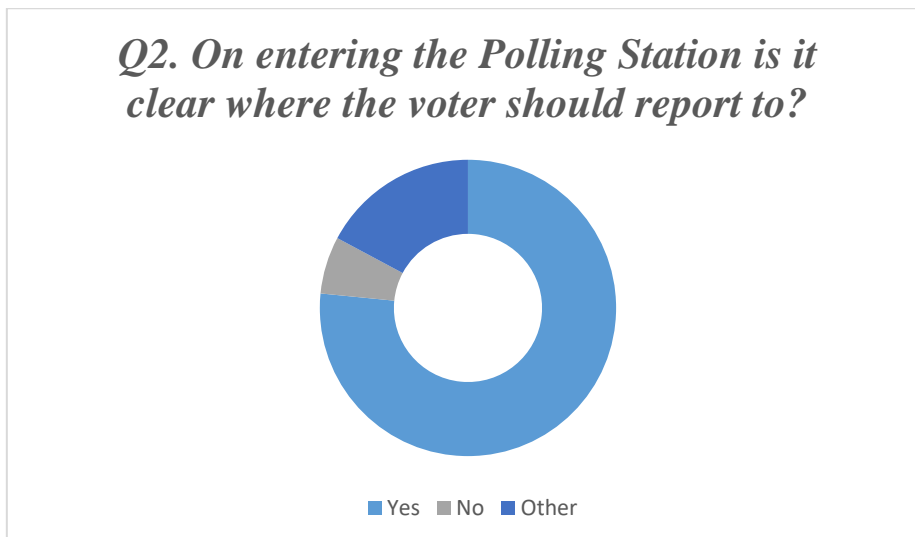
The process was heavily engaged with by local Finnish communities and all three polling stations observed, on the preceding Saturday to polling day, indicated a well-run election by which votes were coordinated and sent on to Finland by courier via the London embassy. Access was sometimes an issue for observers; there were some queries over accreditation, as this had not yet been issued by the Finnish authorities, but observers were welcome to observe the process.

Results of the Polling Day Observation

The observers answered the following questions in order as they progressed with each observation at each polling station:

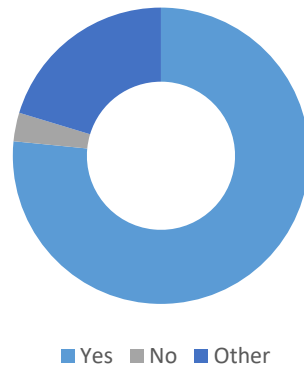


QUESTION 1: In only 78% of cases were polling stations properly signposted from the street. Generally, signage was good, but many polling stations often had small signs which were not obvious. Locally we do not doubt that many voters would be aware of their polling station. However, those who are first time voters or new to an area would benefit from better signposting.



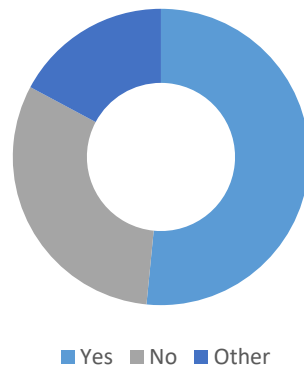
QUESTION 2: In 77% of cases, observers did not identify problems with where voters should report. In some buildings multiple polling stations were distributed around several parts of buildings making it potentially challenging to find the relevant area.

Q3. Was it clear how disabled voters would access the Polling Station?



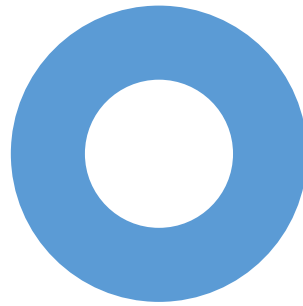
QUESTION 3: 77% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear. Another 5% suggested that the disabled access was available however this was not clearly signposted. 20% identified other issues which included the clarity of signposting, the positioning of polling booths, and accessibility within the buildings themselves. In some cases, booths which should be available specifically for disabled access were not present.

Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?



QUESTION 4: 52% of presiding officers did check the ID of observers on arrival. 31% did not. Staff were invariably welcoming to the observers. 20% of the time observers had their details recorded concerning their attendance whereas in 58% of cases no evidence of the observation mission's presence remained.

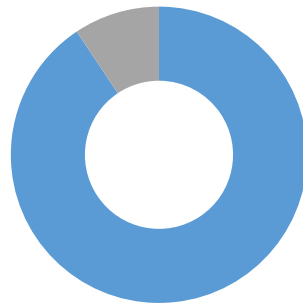
Q5. Are there three staff on duty in the polling station as you arrive?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 5: 100% of polling stations had the required three members of polling staff on duty when observers arrived at the polling station.

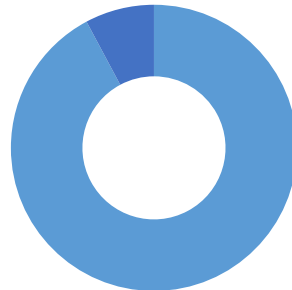
Q6. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with cable ties/locks seals etc.?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 6: On 91% of occasions the ballot boxes were correctly sealed. Dependent on the municipality ballot boxes differed. In some cases, these were sealed with keys which were retained by the same official. We would recommend that the keys should be kept separately.

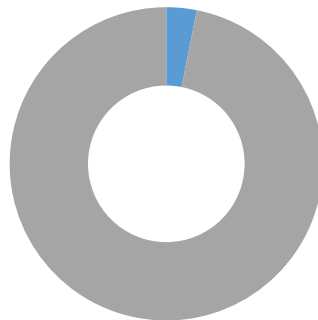
Q7. Each Polling Booth should be equipped with a small poster explaining how to vote, how to fold the ballot and a pencil.



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

QUESTION 7: This rule was well observed but on some occasions some parts of the polling booth equipment was missing. The only occasions when we could not state that we observed this was when the polling station was too busy to inspect each polling booth in the time we visited due to the business of the polling station.

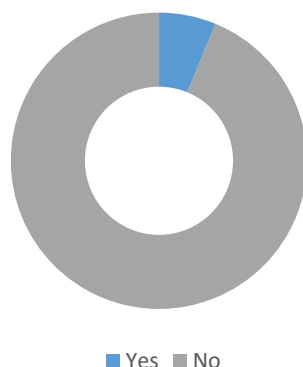
Q8. Are there any political leaflets in sight or on the way to the polling booth? This can include lists of councillors etc.



■ Yes ■ No ■ Other

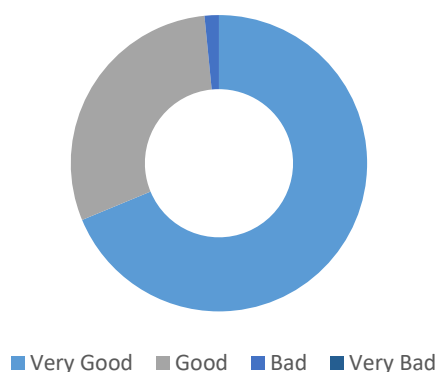
QUESTION 8: We saw very limited evidence of political activity in polling stations. This took the form of voters leaving party political literature in the polling booths.

Q9. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?



QUESTION 9: In 6% of polling stations, our observer team identified so-called ‘family voting’. The observer group observed some 3148 voters enter polling stations during their observations. This meant that only 0.25% of voters were affected by, or involved in, family voting. This is significantly lower than we see in other European countries such as the UK.

Q10. Overall how do you rate the quality of this polling station



QUESTION 10: Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 69% of polling stations were reported to be ‘Very Good’, 30% ‘Good’, 1.5% ‘Bad’, and 0% ‘Very Bad’.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are five areas that the observer team felt that the Finnish authorities should consider further action following the observation on 14th April. They were:

- Accessibility to Polling in Finland
- Local Voting on polling day
- Postal Voting Adjudication
- Queuing
- Increasing Workloads for Elections Staff

Accessibility to Polling in Finland

Generally, accessibility is good in Finland but the observer groups noticed some disparity in access in some areas. This is dependent on the age and retrofitting of some buildings but did lead to sometimes complex access requirements for some disabled voters. One observer group reported, ‘there was a note on the door with a phone number to call to be allowed through [the] disabled entrance on the far side of the building, this other entrance was not obvious and past a heavy gate.’ This made voting potentially very challenging for some voters, especially if they were unaccompanied.

Nearly all six observer groups identified suboptimal conditions in some polling stations. In some cases, booths specifically designed to afford access to those in wheelchairs were not in place.

R1 All polling stations should have ease of access for disabled voters. These should be prepared by central elections staff before polling day to ensure that they are clear and functional.

Local Voting on polling day

All observer groups reported significant levels of voters who were turned away from voting because they had attended the wrong polling station. This seemed, based on conversations with both staff and voters, to be because advanced voting can be at any polling station but on polling day this must be at the locally designated polling station.

The Helsinki observer team reported, ‘10 were at the wrong polling station and were advised to go to their appropriate polling station.’

R2 The format of the polling card issued to voters should be changed to emphasise where the ordinary poll is located.

Postal Voting Adjudication

As previously stated, ‘many of the mailed forms had errors and doubtful information, making it more time consuming for administrators to process. Some interlocutors felt that it would have helped to have more guidance on how to interpret or adjudicate problematic or doubtful postal voting forms. As a result, many forms had to be forwarded for higher level adjudication. Nevertheless, it was universally agreed that this was, in part, the result of the novelty of the process and all interlocutors expressed confidence that they would have an opportunity to give feedback to their DEC’s and the Ministry of Justice, so that improvements could be made next time around.’

R3 In future more guidance from the Ministry of Justice be provided to MEC officials with regards to adjudicating or interpreting the postal voting forms.

Queuing

In many polling stations our observer teams identified some or extensive queuing. In some cases, this resulted in voters standing in line for a considerable length of time. Bottle necks were often seen at busy times in large polling stations. This can be simply remedied if resources allow.

R4 That adding an extra voting booth would speed up the voting process where lines were observed.

Increasing Workloads for Elections Staff

It was clear, based on the core team’s meetings with local election management bodies, that the workload for elections staff has increased over the past few years. This has led to a number being concerned about their capacity to deliver the election as efficiently as they would wish. A number reported stresses to the process especially over the ever-increasing success of Advance Voting in Finland. These votes are all received and counted by officials and their staff and not by those tasked with running polling stations on polling day itself.

It was clear that this concern was apparent given that staff would raise this with the observer team. We therefore recommend;

R5 That the resources available to municipal election administrators keep pace with the increasing workload demands as well as new voting processes and tools, as they require.

APPENDIX A - INTERLOCUTORS

Ministry of Justice

Arto Jääskeläinen (Director of Electoral Administration)

Heini Huotarinen (Ministerial Advisor)

Laura Peuraniemi (Senior Specialist)

Laura Nurminen (Senior Specialist)

Tuomas Rekola (Higher Trainee)

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mikko Kinnunen (Ambassador Countering Hybrid Threats)

Elina Dakash (First Secretary, Unit for Security Policy and Crisis Management)

The Security Committee

Antti Sillanpää (Secretariat of the Security Committee)

Local Election Management

City of Järvenpää

Laura Kattelmäki (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Secretary)

City of Helsinki

Juha Viertola (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Chair)

Veera Reuna (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Secretary)

Timo Lindén (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Secretary)

City of Espoo

Jussi Aaltonen (Legal Advisor)

City of Vantaa

Tapani Salmi (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Chair)

Niina Kolju (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Secretary)

Nelli Jääskeläinen (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Secretary)

City of Kainiainen

Magnus Öhman (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Chair)

Lena Filipsson-Korento (Central Municipal Electoral Commission Secretary)

We would also like to thank all those staff who we met whilst observing polling stations across Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Tampere, Lahti, Oulu and Kerava.

Media

Riitta Pihlajamäki (Head of current affairs, YLE)
Matti Kalliokoski (Editorial page editor, Helsingin Sanomat)
Jarmo Makela (Chair, Journalists without Borders)
Aleksi Knuutila (Election Watchdog project on social media)
Petra Piitulainen-Ramsay (Faktabaari - political fact checkers)
David MacDougall (Managing Editor, News Now Finland)
Mikael Sjövall (News Assignment Editor, The News Agency Nyhetsbyrån SPT)

Political Parties

Henna Hakkarainen (Green Party Communications Manager)
Tero Shemeikka (SDP Secretary for International Affairs)
Tuomas Meriniemi (Kekusta Secretary for international affairs and labour)
Matilda Af Hallstrom – (Kokomus Head of international affairs)
Tiina Rytky (SDP Campaign Director)
Mika Oranan (Candidate, Liike Nut)
Laura Korpinnan (Candidate, Finns Party)
Mikko Makkonen (Party worker, Kokomus)
Tuomas Meriniemi (Centre Party, International Officer)