

## Pivoting from 'Responsible Populism' to Reactionary Conservatism: The Case of the Perussuomalaiset

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Résumé de l'article

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# Pivoting from ‘Responsible Populism’ to Reactionary Conservatism: the Case of the *Perussuomalaiset*

IRIS THATCHER

**ABSTRACT:** Although the *Perussuomalaiset* (True Finns or Finns Party) has its roots in populism under Timo Soini, this article argues that the party has transitioned to reactionary conservatism under Jussi Halla-aho. This change in leadership displayed a shift in party ideology: one that used to be more focused on the Eurosceptic economic narrative to one fixated on multiculturalism and anti-immigration. The shift in ideology and party rhetoric can be traced from party documents, use of blogging from both Soini and Halla-aho, and growing electorate support for the *Perussuomalaiset* during the 2010s. The article concludes with a discussion of how reactionary conservatism could be applied to other far right-wing parties in the Nordic region, while highlighting that the rise of reactionary conservative parties can pose notable challenges to democratic norms and political stability.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Bien que le *Perussuomalaiset* (Le Party des Finlandais ou PS) se soit enraciné dans le populisme sous Timo Soini, cet article argumente que, sous Jussi Hall-aho, le parti a transitionné vers un conservatisme réactionnaire. Ce changement de figure de tête démontre une transformation de l'idéologie du parti: d'un parti qui se concentrait sur une narrative économique eurosceptique, il se concentre maintenant sur le multiculturalisme et contre l'immigration. Ce changement d'idéologie et de rhétorique du parti peut être retracée grâce aux documents du parti, à l'utilisation des réseaux sociaux et blogues par Soini et Halla-aho, et au support électoral grandissant de *Perussuomalaiset* durant les années 2010. L'article conclue avec une discussion sur la manière dont le conservatisme réactionnaire pourrait être appliqué aux autres partis d'extrême droite de la région nordique, tout en soulignant que la montée des partis conservateurs réactionnaires peut poser d'importants défis aux normes démocratiques et à la stabilité politique.

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## Part One

### Introduction

**C**apitalizing on the European Union's (EU) incapacity to effectively respond to crises, radical right-wing parties are advocating for greater sovereignty from the EU. These parties exist among divergent states in Europe and are especially strong in the Nordic region. Nordic states are often celebrated for their egalitarian norms, generous foreign aid, and progressive welfare systems (Ingebritsen 1998, 2006). Despite this, right-wing parties within these states have made "statements critical to immigration and multiculturalism" (Jungar and Jupskås 225). The most striking case is Finland's *Perussuomalaiset* (Finns Party or True Finns). Though historically rooted in a populist past, the *Perussuomalaiset* has notably pivoted from its original Eurosceptic platform and has become an opponent of multiculturalism.

As scholarly attention centres on far right-wing parties, debates have emerged over how to label these movements. The most common classification is populism (Mudde; Stanley). Populist parties employ a people-centric and anti-elitist approach (Van Kessel 101). Interest in populism is increasing, where "in 2010 'only' 76 articles had been published with the words 'populism' or 'populist' in the title. In 2015 this number increased to 155, in 2016 to 208 and in 2017 to 332" (Rooduijn 2019, 362). Though the term is widely used in contemporary politics, populism, as a theory, lacks focus. Populism is flawed, as its anti-elitist and people-centric characteristics are broad and are overly applicable across the left-right political spectrum (Gidron and Mijs). It is an elusive ideology, one that cannot pinpoint the racial intolerance that many European right-wing movements exhibit today.

Since many European far right-wing parties emphasize cultural identity and nationalism, an alternative theory needs to be introduced to describe this trend. This substitute can be found in reactionary conservatism. The concept was developed by Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto, originally using the term to explain the Tea Party in the US. Following former-President Barack Obama's election in 2008, the Tea Party's goal was to subvert Obama's power. The authors assert that the Tea Party was paranoid about how their perceived dominance would be undermined by a black president. Motivated by ethnocentrism, the Tea Party is made up of older white men and women. Tea Partiers pressured Republican politicians to take a hardline approach against social changes in order to challenge equality in the US. (Parker and Barreto; Skocpol and Williamson). The Tea Party is a key actor as it moved the Republican Party further right and secured Donald Trump's 2016 election. In this article, I consequently aim to see if reactionary conservatism could be

applied to depict Europe's growing xenophobia, nationalism, and resistance to the supranational authority of the EU.

Reactionary conservatism better explains contemporary European right-wing movements and why they are garnering popular support in various regions. Using this theory, instead of populism, to classify right-wing movements illuminates the fact that many Europeans are paranoid of losing social benefits and their niche cultures in exchange for diversity. Many European right-wing movements have mobilized support by blaming the supranational reach of the EU. Initially, some right-wing parties cited economic grievances as their priority for EU reform due to the Eurozone Crisis in 2010 (Nordensvard and Ketola). However, with the increases in immigration and the eventual Refugee Crisis in 2015, right-wing parties with various backgrounds converged in their attempts to emphasize cultural cleavages and national identities in the EU (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou). These parties have subsequently been successful in inciting social paranoia, where perceived social hierarchies for native-born citizens are threatened by non-white migrants.

Finland's right-wing party, the *Perussuomalaiset* (PS), provides a compelling case of Europe's change to reactionary conservatism from populism due to Finland's unlikeliness to have a xenophobic, nationalistic party. Finland has lower immigration rates in comparison to the rest of the EU.<sup>1</sup> Still, the PS has grown increasingly prejudiced: "We believe that society and taxpayers do not have the responsibility, voluntary or otherwise, to give support to migrant's feelings of identity, culture or religious practices" ("The Finn's Party Immigration Policy: The Finnish Parliament Elections of 2015" 4). The PS is nationalistic, as it believes that social benefits and government priorities should be focused on "everyday Finns" ("Periaateohjelma"). Considering Finland is an atypical case to have a flourishing xenophobic right-wing movement, using it as the primary case study for this article can reveal why populism is unable to adequately describe contemporary European far right-wing parties. Rather, it is reactionary conservatism and the perceived social fears that are attached with it that motivate movements like the PS.

The PS demonstrates the transition from populism to reactionary conservatism through changes in party leadership from Timo Soini to Jussi Halla-aho.<sup>2</sup> Soini graduated with a master's degree in political science from the University of Helsinki. He became an avid participant in politics and started his political career as the Secretary General for the *Suomen maaseudun puolue* or Finnish Rural Party (SMP). Due to his activism in the SMP, Soini continued its legacy after the SMP dissolved in the early 1990s. In 1995, he and a few former SMP members established the *Perussuomalaiset* (PS). Soini carried the SMP's agrarian populist tradition, Catholic beliefs, and traditional family values into the newly formed PS. During his time as PS Chairman, he focused on anti-EU rhetoric. Soini connected to the general public through blog posts, where he

often criticized EU economic policies. However, many of the PS's opponents and their constituents viewed him as secretly racist (Arter 2010, 498). Based on this perception and Soini's critical approach towards the EU, a new discriminatory faction emerged within the PS (Niemi 2013).

Jussi Halla-aho informally entered the party in 2008 and became an official member in 2010. Halla-aho also graduated from the University of Helsinki, but with a PhD in Slavic Language and Cultural Studies. He quickly rose to the top of the PS by receiving the highest parliamentary votes cast for the party in the country's largest municipality, Helsinki. Such victories earned him a seat in Eduskunta, or the Finnish Parliament, and garnered him notable influence within the party. Like Soini, he used blogs to appeal to the public. However, the two used staunchly different rhetoric and focused on disparate policy issues: "the pair are very different in style: Halla-aho is the de facto leader of the [PS's] anti-immigrant wing and a long-standing rival of Soini...it was only with the rise of Halla-aho earlier this decade that the anti-immigrant wing started to assert itself and criticize Soini" (Burtsov). Halla-aho diverts from Soini in his focus on welfare chauvinism. In fact, Halla-aho criticized immigration so harshly that in 2008 the Finnish Supreme Court convicted him of "ethnic agitation" based on comments he made towards women in the Green Party, Somalis, and Muslim culture in general (Teivainen). In 2017, Soini left the PS due to Halla-aho's burgeoning anti-immigrant base (Ahponen). He later established the Sininen tulevaisuus (Blue Reform) to oppose Halla-aho's version of the PS. Halla-aho eventually sought PS leadership and became the official predecessor to Soini. With this transition, an ideological shift occurred away from populism towards reactionary conservatism, the latter being embodied by Halla-aho, the new party leader.

The *Perussuomalaiset* (PS) has throughout its history displayed both populist and reactionary conservative elements. This raises the question: to what extent is the PS reactionary conservative instead of populist? Populism was the dominant theme embedded in most of the PS's history. However, Halla-aho's rise to power implemented: "a shift from traditional populism that opposes domestic elites to a new brand that militates against other EU nations and foreign immigration" (Pappas and Kriesi 306). Notably, this change in leadership signaled an alteration in policy priorities, where Soini represents the economic focus and Halla-aho embodies the cultural. There is now heightened social paranoia surrounding the loss of welfare and Finnish culture (Keskinen). That is not to say that economics do not play a role in this new iteration of the PS. Rather, cultural framing and an anti-immigration platform are more salient for the PS under Halla-aho (Horsti). I consequently argue in this article that the *Perussuomalaiset* has transitioned into a reactionary conservative party.

Following this introduction, part two begins by defining and identifying the key characteristics of populism and reactionary conservatism. I outline the

strengths and weaknesses of both theories. Part three then applies reactionary conservatism to the Finnish case. I provide an analysis of the *Perussuomalaiset*, where Soini's populism and Halla-aho's reactionary conservatism are scrutinized. I reveal how Halla-aho has, to a greater extent, emphasized anti-immigration than Soini. Part four analyzes the nature of the PS's rhetoric. It elucidates that the PS should be included in future studies on radical-right wing parties. I conclude with an examination of how reactionary conservatism could be applicable to other Nordic far right-wing parties, especially when examining the relationship between immigrants and welfare programs.

## Part Two

### *Definition of Terms*

Radical right-wing parties are gaining influence in various political arenas across Europe, and scholars often use populism to describe these movements. The four general characteristics of populism are “people-centrism, anti-elitism, the homogeneity of the people and the proclamation of a crisis” (Rooduijn 2014, 591). Populist parties claim to advocate for the “common person” and to represent the will of the people. Though not uniform for every case, those that fit the definition of “the people” tend to be relatively well-educated white men within the working and middle classes (Holbolt 1265). Populist parties will often campaign on the premise that this segment of the population is undervalued in domestic politics. This platform gained prominence, particularly in relation to the EU. All European countries are interwoven into the EU's dynamics and rules, member state or not. Integration has compelled the entirety of Europe to deal with upsurges in immigration (Hollifield). Radical right-wing parties used the Eurozone and Refugee Crises, in particular, to claim that bureaucrats and non-white refugees had excluded the “common man”<sup>3</sup> from politics (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou).

As a result, a multifaceted dilemma occurred, where “populist” right-wing parties would criticize the 2010 Eurozone and 2015 Refugee Crises at varying degrees to appeal to “the people.” By blaming supranational EU institutions, populist leaders drove a wedge between the EU and its citizens. “Democratic deficiency” is widely used by these right-wing parties to argue that EU decision makers are only supporting political and economic changes that benefit upper classes (Ingebritsen 1998). The use of democratic deficiency can also be seen in Finland, where Timo Soini made Euroscepticism central to the PS's agenda: “The central criticism [of the EU] was that the people were paying, but not deciding: ‘no one is asking the ordinary people’” (Niemi 2013, 83). This people-centric, elite-critical position demonstrates the PS's deep-seated populist elements. These four characteristics of populism are evident in Soini's discourse and

typically define the broad path that many European far right-wing movements follow. Yet, every party approaches these aspects differently, making populism a tricky concept.

Though populism is widely used to characterize the growing radical right-wing shift in many European countries, it lacks specificity. For example, “people-centrism” and “homogeneity of the people” have equivocal definitions. In certain instances, this can be interpreted as being exclusive, where there is a defined in- and out-group (Rooduijn 2019, 365). “Elites” are also not clearly defined. “Elites” is a relative category that could be interpreted as domestic bureaucrats, EU commissioners, or business leaders. Conceptual inconsistencies in defining “the people,” “elites,” and “people centrism,” can lead to populism being over-applied and misused (Van Kessel). Moreover, populism can be used to describe both the left and the right: “These radical parties [tended] to draw heavily on populist appeals... There is consistent evidence that across Europe, lower socioeconomic status is correlated with support for the radical left and the radical right” (Gidron and Mijs 637). The left uses populist rhetoric to bolster support for social reform, whereas the right uses it as an opposition tactic that can make their policy objectives more legitimate (647). Correctly labelling these far right-wing parties is fundamental in discerning the party’s message and comprehending its policy goals for political issues.

Another theory that could be used to define these movements is reactionary conservatism, which has its roots in American politics and in the concept of the “pseudo-conservative.” Christopher Parker’s and Matt Barreto’s reactionary conservatism is inspired from Richard Hofstadter’s (1964) *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Hofstadter analyzes the right-wing movements that occurred during the 1950s and early 1960s. *The Paranoid Style* reveals that movements, like the John Birch Society (JBS), were acting out of the norm from established conservatism. Conservatives traditionally oppose rapid change but are willing to make compromises if it means preventing radical changes from the status quo (Parker and Barreto). By contrast, the JBS was unwilling to compromise on civil rights in the 1960s. Hofstadter formulated the concept of pseudo-conservatism to explain this animosity in politics. The pseudo-conservative reproaches change that affects their hierarchical standing and believes he<sup>4</sup> is “living in a world in which he is spied upon, plotted against, betrayed, and very likely destined for total ruin” (Hofstadter 45). Hofstadter revealed that there is divergence in the Republican Party, where the far right was no longer orthodox conservative.

Indeed, the pseudo-conservative is a theory applicable not only to the 1950s; rather, it is a force that exists in American politics today. In *Change They Can’t Believe In* (2013), Parker and Barreto expound Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” by developing reactionary conservatism: “reactionary conservatives are motivated more by the fear and anxiety associated with the perception that

‘real’ Americans are losing the country” (Parker and Barreto 268). Three aspects characterize reactionary conservatism: wanting to return to a previous time, ethnocentrism, and paranoia. Compared to the traditional conservative, reactionaries do not want to maintain political order. Rather, reactionaries want to regress time all together by going back to a perceived “golden age,” where they have the most social, political, and economic influence. This desire entails a form of ethnocentrism. Its premise is maintenance of a cultural hierarchy in which the reactionaries are at the top. When social order starts to evolve, reactionary conservatives fear that they will no longer be in control of their country.

Reactionary conservatism, as a theory, has principally been used to explain radical right-wing movements in the US, not Europe—although this article develops the claim that it helps theorize the rise of *Perussuomalaiset*. Parker and Barreto primarily examine the 2010 Tea Party. This limitation makes it challenging to validate reactionary conservatism’s relationship to Europe, especially since most countries, including Finland, have a multi-party system. With the lack of scholarship on how reactionary conservatism can apply to the PS, there is slight uncertainty in its relevance. Parker and Barreto also argue that reactionary conservatives are not motivated by economics: “Economic anxiety...doesn’t often successfully push people toward right-wing movements” (89). Still, not all scholars downplay economics. In his review of the book, Jeffrey D. Howison asserts, “the general weakness of the [theory is] the authors make no mention of economic factors in the rise of the Tea Party” (4–5). When Parker and Barreto tested for economic anxiety in their quantitative work, it was not significant.

Howison’s critique originates from the belief that reactionary conservatism is equivalent to regular conservatism. For traditional conservatives, free markets and limited government are important (Parker and Barreto). Economics is thus a key component to conservatism under this logic. This is evident in Corey Robin’s use of conservatism: “I use the words conservative, reactionary and counterrevolutionary interchangeably” (34). Robin’s definition of conservatism contradicts the compromising nature of many conservatives in maintaining existing social conditions. By omitting that decisive aspect of conservatism, scholars, like Robin, miss the significance of a distinct faction of the right-wing. This consequently misconstrues ideological goals. Nonetheless, it is fundamental to keep in mind reactionary conservatism’s limitations in European instances and in economic emphasis.



## Part Three

### *Setting the Stage for the Perussuomalaiset*

The *Perussuomalaiset's* (PS) relationship to populism rests on its history with its predecessor, the Suomen maaseudun puolue (SMP). The SMP advocated for the average Finnish farmer, and it criticized the former-President Urho Kekkonen's Cold War policies (Arter 2010). The SMP viewed Kekkonen as an authoritarian figure, as he was the longest serving Finnish president. The SMP "confronted the Cold War Finnish establishment in the name of the 'forgotten people'—the 'small man' in town and country" (486). This rhetoric was central in the SMP's populism and in gaining constituent support. In 1995, the PS emerged as a successor party to the bankrupt SMP. Inspired by the populist tactics of the SMP, Soini and other former-SMP members used similar "common man" rhetoric, but with wider applicability for the PS.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and Finland's membership to the EU in 1995, the PS appealed to a wider group of Finns, this time forgotten by trade, globalization, and the EU elites instead of Soviet policy. Representing state sovereignty, the PS uses "Finnishness" to advocate for the average Finnish person who is adversely affected by the decisions of EU elites and incumbent Finnish politicians (Arter 2010, 502). With the transition from the SMP to the PS, Soini wielded the populist legacy under a new interpretation.

### *Timo Soini and Euroscepticism*

As the PS gained traction with Finnish voters, the party began to encounter some shifts in its support. Between 2007 and 2011, the PS obtained a wider constituent base, jumping from four percent to nineteen percent in the Eduskunta elections ("Finns Party – In English"). Part of the reason for this increase was Soini's use of blogging. He became more accessible to the everyday Finn and would apply various Finnish dialects and minimalistic slogans (Niemi 2013, 81; Ahponen). Blogging became strategic during EU controversies, such as the 2010 Eurozone Crisis, where Soini critiqued the EU extensively:

Maksat meille enemmän kuin saat. Me hallinnoimme ja hallitsemme sinua. Sinun elämäsi tulee paremmaksi. Mikä se on? Euroopan Unioni! Sinä et saa valita heitä. Sinä et voi erottaa heitä. (Soini, January 2010)

[You pay us more than you get. We administer and govern you. Your life gets better. Who are we? We're the European Union! You can't elect them. You can't break away from them.]<sup>5</sup>

Soini's outrage towards democratic deficiency in the EU made the PS principally populist during the 2000s. The PS blamed EU elites for the 2010 Eurozone Crisis and outwardly condemned the Finnish government from providing any financial backing to struggling eurozone countries: "Timo Soini was the leading figure of EU critics and the most visible politician in fighting against the bailouts. Likewise, for Timo Soini, the economic crisis of the EU was the policy topic he appeared in most actively" (Niemi 2012, 13). This anti-elitist, pro-Finnish, and crisis-framing discourse allowed Soini to accept, and even publicly embrace, populism (Dite).

Though the PS focused on EU economic grievances against average Finns, nativist elements were boiling below the party surface. The wide applicability of "Finnishness" became an attractive feature to far right-wing factions. Particularly, the PS's absorption of Suomen Sisu in 2007 "increased [the party's] critique of immigration and multiculturalism" (Heinze 303). Even with this incorporation of the Suomen Sisu and new PS candidates with different policy agendas in varying municipalities, Soini maintained that it was crucial to avoid relating "Finnishness" to racial exclusion, as he knew "launching [this]...campaign might damage [the] party's prospects to join the coalition government later" (Niemi 2013, 80; Arter 2013). Although anti-immigrant appeals were becoming increasingly important for certain voters, for example in northwestern city of Oulu during the 2011 Eduskunta election, Soini "eschewed the pejorative connotations of populism and sought unashamedly to market...responsible populism" (Arter 2010, 490; Arter 2013). Moderate Finnish voters would not back an outwardly racist party, causing Soini to closely monitor party rhetoric.

In 2015, the PS successfully joined a governing coalition with two centre-right parties with Soini as the Foreign Minister. However, "soon the True Finns became the prime exhibit for the idea that responsibility tames populists — their support plummeted" (Milne). Despite gaining power in government, the PS was perceived as being unable to deliver on the EU crises as a result of another round of bailouts to eurozone countries and the EU's envelopment in the Refugee Crisis during summer 2015. By 2017, Soini's electoral performance caused his opinion polls to drop below 10 percent, demonstrating a clear divide within the PS's ideological goals (Milne).

### ***Jussi Halla-aho and Xenophobia***

Due to the nationalistic and racist appeal of the party, and the simultaneous dissatisfaction of Soini's leadership between 2015 and 2017, the PS expanded into an explicitly ethnocentric movement with the change in leadership to Jussi Halla-aho. Halla-aho's presence in the Finnish political arena began in 2008, when he was elected as a member of the Helsinki City Council. Like Soini, Halla-

aho utilized blogging to help generate a greater online public following. Within his blog, Halla-aho would outwardly criticize immigration. Around the same time Halla-aho appeared as a public figure, he inspired the establishment of Hommaforum, “a website and discussion forum intended for open discussion on problems related to immigration policy and multiculturalism” (Hatakka 2026). Collaboration between select PS politicians, like Halla-aho, and Hommaforum allowed for xenophobia to become gradually accepted among the PS’s constituent base, in spite of Soini’s attempts to restrain it during the 2010s.

Halla-aho has personally expressed intolerant, patriarchal language “by calling for the rape of women in the Green party by immigrants [and describing] Islam as the religion of pedophiles” (Burtsov). In the tweet below, Halla-aho demurs sarcastically at the Green Party’s Interior Minister, Maria Ohisalo, for describing asylum-seeking as a fundamental right:

Nuorten arabi-, afgaani- ja somali miesten oikeus tulla Suomeen ilman papereita ja notkua täällä tyhjän panttina veronmaksajien rahalla on oikeus, joka menee kaiken muun - kuten suomalaisten turvallisuuden - edelle? (Halla-aho, 8/25/19)

[How is it that the right of young Arab, Afghan, and Somali men to come to Finland without papers, and fool around here at Finnish taxpayer’s expense, trumps everything else, not least Finnish security?]

Although Halla-aho has received extensive critique from opposition parties for his derogatory comments, he sustained approval among PS members and voters. With this growing support for racial exclusion within the party, Soini and more moderate supporters of the PS broke off to establish the Sininen tulevaisuus in 2017: “Soini...cannot hide his dislike for Halla-aho and what he regards as his extreme pronouncements on race” (Milne 2020). The Sininen tulevaisuus was meant to underscore “socially reformist” policies, whereas Halla-aho incited racial cleavages to uphold a Finnish social hierarchy (Pakkasvirta 119).

A vacuum was created with Soini’s absence, and Halla-aho subsequently endorsed immigration reform as the central policy focus (“EU-politiikka ohjelma 2019”). The PS’s rhetoric became, to a greater degree, ethnocentric: “nationalism has resurfaced in recent years with a more pronounced resistance to immigration ... and increased support for Finnish culture and traditions” (Jungar and Jupskås 224–25). “Finnishness” formally equated to common cultural and national identity (Nordensvard and Ketola). With Halla-aho as the new PS Chairman, the party fixated on the exclusivity of welfare with cultural

belonging, pursuing policies that centred on the betterment of native Finns and exclusion of non-European migrants.

### ***Immigration Policy and Applying Reactionary Conservatism***

The PS did not have an official immigration policy until 2015,<sup>6</sup> and it can be seen as the starting point for when the PS uniformly asserted “negative and racializing descriptions of migrants from Africa and the Middle East...They are described as ‘expensive free riders’ and people who ‘do not have the skills needed in the labor market’” (Keskinen 361). Immigrants were always viewed as “costly” under the PS platform, even under Soini’s leadership. Yet, they were still largely tolerated by Soini, as immigration was not considered a primary policy concern during the 2015 *Eduskunta* elections (Arter 2010; “Finns Party Platform”). As a result, Soini’s approach to the “immigration question has been moderate” even with the introduction of an immigration program during his leadership (Arter 2010, 497). It was Halla-aho’s entry into the political arena that revealed voters were attracted to his “idiosyncratic characterization of Muslim attitudes,” and he encouraged many of these policies to be adopted by the party since he was elected (497-98; Pakkasvirta 126). Once Halla-aho took over the PS in 2017, he championed ethnocentrism as the primary policy focus following Soini’s handling of the PS’s role in the coalition.

As ethnocentrism has become increasingly visible in the PS’s public discourse and policy priorities, social paranoia amplified as Halla-aho has taken over as chairman of the party. With more refugees entering Finland, “the [PS] defends what they understand as Finnish culture and counter pose to other cultures. They present the majority Finns as those who embody ‘governmental belonging’ and thus wield the power to define the culture and manage the nation” (Keskinen 360–61). In order to ensure that Finnish culture is not “lost,” the PS proposes stopping all forms of “harmful immigration” and sending immigrants back to their home countries (“Eduskuntavaaliohjelman 2019”). The PS’s perceived fear that refugees “steal” Finnish welfare from hardworking Finns and “steal” Finnish dignity is the source of its immigration policy, albeit their claims are not empirically justified.

Moreover, the PS wants to revert back to when Finland was minimally integrated with the EU and ostensibly harmful immigration. The PS’s 2019 *Eduskunta* campaign slogan accurately reflects this sentiment: “‘return to Finland’s Future’ whereby the party looks forward to reestablishing the traditional values of Finland and the Finnish society” (“Jussi Halla-aho, Chairperson, the Finns Party – Finns Party’s ‘Workmen’s Discussion Hour’”). In doing so, the party’s policy goals are to develop, circumscribe, and repair Finnish welfare programs by preventing further EU integration (“EU-politiikka ohjelma 2019”). As a result, the PS inspired “a strong and nostalgic pining after

something 'old', even among young people. They were longing for the independent and authentic Finland that somehow existed in their minds before EU-membership and the arrival of refugees and migrants" (Pakkasvirta 127). This fear is augmented by the perceived loss of welfare to non-native Finns. The PS's 2019 Party Platform underlines that immigrants take advantage of Finland's welfare and are detracting from Finland's education system and workforce ("Eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2019"). Under Halla-aho, the PS aims to prioritize native Finns, consequently blaming immigrants for detracting from Finnish culture and values associated with generous welfare, such as education and public services.

An increased emphasis on the loss of welfare suggests that economics still play a role in PS rhetoric: "declining rural populations, unemployment and lack of opportunities have provided ripe territory to stir up anger at inner-city elites and the job stealing immigrants" (Dite). While the emphasis on the perceived loss of employment and economic opportunities is relevant for certain voters, and can be a powerful rhetorical tool, constituents are swayed by perceived cultural dangers. For example, in a poll conducted in 2019, ninety-six percent of anti-immigrant voters were living in rural areas and were supporters of the PS ("Finland Divided on Immigration Issue"). For many voters (PS and non-PS voters), it was important where immigrants came from. The majority of respondents preferred immigrants from the EU, whereas only sixty percent of overall respondents to the survey were fine with immigrants from the Middle East and fifty percent were fine with immigrants from Africa. Globalization can also be seen as a negative concept to PS voters, but it is less salient especially among young voters, as they view the Schengen Area as a positive thing for native Finns (Pakkasvirta 128). These two examples illustrate that the economic rhetoric should not be ignored but suggest that cultural elements are likely the driving force for PS constituents.

Additionally, it could be argued that Soini exhibits the elements of reactionary conservatism. Still, this was to a lesser extent than Halla-aho. To start, Soini did remain complicit in allowing anti-immigration to be acceptable amongst prominent supporters and representatives: "Soini's attitudes towards immigration appear indirectly, in the way he manages racist comments made by others in the party, and tolerates members who explicitly oppose immigration" (Horsti 359). Nonetheless, Soini continuously "distanced himself from anti-immigration" as he recognized that it would not reflect upon the party well (359). Conversely, Halla-aho was "the intellectual mind of the movement and he provided an example and direction for the [anti-immigration] debates" (365). Since Soini did not stress xenophobia in the PS's party platform, nor give it much attention in his blog posts, ethnocentrism was not as pronounced as it was with Halla-aho. Moreover, Soini's history with the SMP and agrarian populist traditions made the PS more focused on EU elites

and the infringement of national sovereignty, principally in economic terms with the eurozone. Soini was against using racism in his discourse because it “involved kicking the weak” (Arter 2010, 497). However, the PS’s populist and nationalistic elements allowed individuals, like Halla-aho, to push the party into a new, racially insensitive direction, one that exploits social media, like Hommaforum, and mobilizes supporters to frame immigration and asylum-seeking in a harmful way (Dite).

Since Halla-aho’s ascension to leadership in 2017, the PS maintains solid constituent support (leveled at about seventeen percent) in its Eduskunta elections Halla-aho has successfully cultivated and stoked ethnocentrism in the PS’s party platform, and the PS climbed to the second largest party within the Eduskunta in 2019 (Finns Party – In English”; Official Statistics of Finland). The PS has been particularly successful in mobilizing voters within more sparsely populated areas, those experiencing higher unemployment rates and those within agricultural and industrial areas, revealing that “the unemployed ‘ethnically’ Finnish voter supports the Finns Party, especially in suburbs with a relatively high immigrant population” (Pakkasvirta 123). As of 2021, Halla-aho continues to galvanize support for the solidified, reactionary conservative PS through clamoring for the “survival of Finnish culture and traditions” (128).

## Part Four

### *Why Focus on the Perussuomalaiset?*

The PS represents a compelling case for the spread of reactionary conservatism due to its nationalistic appeals and ability to mobilize voters to believe that immigration harms the distribution of welfare (Keskinen). The PS emphasizes “nationalism and strong defense of sovereignty of the Finnish state,” or put plainly by the PS itself, “the emphasis is on the value of the ordinary Finnish citizens and their role in the voice of politics, economics and culture of Finland” (Pappas and Kriesi 304; “Finns Party Platform”). The PS’s primary goal as a party is to promote the interests of native Finns, which has gradually been narrowly defined through the development of welfare chauvinism (Keskinen 366).

It is important to reemphasize that it was Soini’s nationalistic appeals that encouraged radical supporters, like the Suomen Sisu, to join the PS. Moreover, the initial English translation of the *Perussuomalaiset* to the “True Finns” signals an ethnocentric divide. Considering the name came off as racist, Soini had to curtail this idea by stating, “the [True Finns] name was wrongly associated with extreme nationalism and an essentialist, rather than a culturally ‘common’, Finnishness” (Jungar and Jupskås 220). The translation was eventually modified to the Finns Party, but that did not deter the party’s burgeoning xenophobia.

Common “Finnishness” brought various individuals together who wanted to protect Finns; whether that was expressed by Soini in terms of economics or was expressed by Halla-aho in terms of cultural protection. The latter narrative allowed reactionary conservatism to dominate the PS at the time of writing. The PS’s contemporary position as the second largest party in the Eduskunta and political tactics it uses under Halla-aho makes the PS a case worth considering in future studies on European far right-wing movements.

### ***Potential Application to the Nordic Region***

Classifying parties as populist does not accurately represent the marked shift in European politics. At first, these movements gained traction by employing economic, political, and social rhetoric against those who they argued did not serve the interests of “the people.” Hence, populism became the defining label. With time and the emergence of the Eurozone and Refugee Crises, populism alone became inadequate in describing these parties. Some scholars argue that populism is “thin” and can consequently be combined to other ideologies (Stanley). Categorizations, like “populist radical right-wing,” have emerged to adhere to that gap in scholarship (Mudde). Nevertheless, the “thin ideology” is unable to get to pinpoint that far right-wing parties are moving into a new, but similar projection point: one that limits integration with the EU, limits immigration, and expands national, or more specifically, cultural sovereignty.

Parties that were once concretely rooted in populism, like the PS, have shifted over to reactionary conservatism. The same could potentially be seen with other prominent Nordic parties, such as the Sweden Democrats, Norwegian Progress Party, and Danish People’s Party —regardless of their different historical backgrounds and involvement in the EU. Recently, the Nordic cases are displaying similarities in ideology to the PS as they view, “immigration and law-and-order issues [as their] primary focus” (Jungar and Jupskås 222). Restricting anti-immigration as a principal policy platform is intertwined with welfare due to the Nordic model’s relationship in establishing national identities within the Nordic states (Keskinen 354). The Nordic welfare state functions as a niche system, which in the view of the reactionary conservatives, establishes a mandate to protect it. This is a source of major anxiety that all four of these parties draw on. Particularly, the Nordic model aims to pursue “full employment, a centralized system of wage bargaining, universal social policies, and the pursuit of equality” (Ingebritsen 2006, 58). The Nordic model rests on the fact that citizens are willing to pay high taxes in exchange for state support in social services, establishing a strong trust between the government and its citizens. As a norm-based exchange, the model

relies on the fact that each member contributes to the health, happiness, and prosperity of the community (Ingebritsen 2006).

Considering national and cultural belonging to the Nordic model is important, it is an effective method for Nordic right-wing parties to mobilize voters. Reactionary conservatism should therefore be explored in other cases of right-wing parties, notably within Scandinavia due to the extensive benefits provided by the Nordic states. Social paranoia, ethnocentrism, and returning to a perceived “golden age” could be embedded in these parties’ platforms. Correctly labelling these Nordic parties will elucidate their motivations, public appeal, and ability to cause racial divisions within society – both domestically and throughout Europe.

### **Conclusion**

I would argue that the rise of reactionary conservative parties threatens the stability of the Nordic region. As reactionary conservatives attract greater support, they will gain more seats in their respective parliaments. The PS is currently dubbed “the most popular party in Finland,” a title that refers to their standing in opinion polls conducted since parliamentary elections in spring 2019 (Teivainen). In the 2019 Eduskunta elections, the PS gained 39 seats, and although they are not in a governing coalition, they make a critical impact at the municipal, national, and supranational levels (“Finns Party – In English”; Dite).

Halla-aho’s ability to attract media attention and reframe the Finnish political landscape by blaming immigrants for violent attacks against ordinary Finns has proved to be powerful. In addition to producing dangerous divisions within Finnish society, the PS has joined the Democracy and Identity Group within the European Parliament (EP). This EP group’s focus is on “job and growth, security and tackling illegal immigration” (“Parliament Group Priorities”). Its members are primarily concerned with the lack of democratic representation within the EU, where this void allows for a loss of national identity and for an increase in “harmful immigration.” Many of its members include prominent right-wing figures throughout Europe, such as Matteo Salvini of the League in Italy. The PS’s participation in a group like this is important to highlight because it reveals how reactionary conservatism is infiltrating different facets of political life – all to combat Islamism, multiculturalism and vehemently protect national identities from these perceived dangers (“Far-Right Parties Form a New Group in European Parliament”).

By underscoring ethnocentrism, welfare chauvinism, “Finnishness,” and social paranoia towards immigration, the PS will have a durable impact on the norms guiding Finnish politics. Particularly, having the PS or any other



reactionary party in power will “likely give rise to growing numbers of incidents involving harassment and violence on racial, ethnic, and religious grounds, as long-suppressed inter-group animosities are brought to the surface of everyday interaction” (Bonikowski 207). Allowing jingoism to be acceptable in political dialogue will adversely impact democratic norms. This will make societies, even ones that are typically viewed as equitable, unstable.

#### NOTES

1. By 2019, Finland ranked 22 out of the 27 EU member states for taking in immigrants, per 1,000 people (“Migration and Migrant Population Statistics”).
2. All the biographical information found on Soini and Halla-aho can be found within Tatu Ahponen’s “True Finns, False Hopes” and through a simple Google search.
3. The PS believes in traditional family values and consequently framed their rhetoric towards Finnish men.
4. Matching pronouns used by Hofstadter used in the quote, recognizing this is not inclusive.
5. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
6. Although this was the first immigration program, it is important to note that there were some documents in the early 2010s that discussed immigration policy openly, much of which came from the anti-immigration faction of the PS. The introduction of an official immigration policy in 2015 demonstrates “the True Finns have moved towards harsher rhetoric that combines the radicalization of non-Western migrants and welfare exclusionist demands” (Keskinen 362).

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