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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Can a change in the leadership of a populist radical right party be traced among voters? The case of the Finns Party

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Abstract

What happens to the electorate of a populist radical right party when the party splits? Finland provides an excellent case for an analysis of this nature. In 2017, the Finns Party split due to an internal rift. Party leadership was taken over by members of the party's anti-immigrant faction, who, in the election of 2019, succeeded in replicating the party's previous electoral successes in 2011 and 2015. At the same time, the moderate faction that split from the party was wiped out in the election. In the election of 2023, the party gained yet another victory. Using the Finnish National Election Studies (2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023), we examine whether the party's transformation to a more anti-immigrant populist radical right party is reflected in the policy positions and sociodemographic composition of the party's electorate. Our findings show that the electorate came to reflect the change in leadership after the party split. Furthermore, we are able to demonstrate that the pattern prevails in the newest election of 2023 under the leadership of Riikka Purra.

INTRODUCTION

The rise and continued electoral success of the populist radical right in Europe has generated significant scholarly interest. Negative attitudes towards immigrants and multiculturalism are recognized as pivotal factors explaining

their enduring presence. Populist radical right party (PRRP) elites raise concerns about immigration and tap into grievances that are prevalent among some voters (Arzheimer, 2009; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Golder, 2016; Kriesi & Schulte-Cloos, 2020; Mudde, 2007; Norris, 2005; Ortiz Barquero et al., 2022). However, a high number of immigrants or asylum-seekers does not always, and everywhere, contribute to the electoral fortunes of the populist radical right or the far right (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Lonsky, 2021; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012). In addition, antipathy towards immigrants does not automatically translate into a vote for the populist radical right under certain contextual circumstances (Golder, 2016, p. 485). Hence, it is relevant to examine in which countries and under what circumstances negative attitudes towards immigrants and multiculturalism mobilize voters to support the PRR.

In this study, we examine whether a party leadership change signalling a tougher party stance on immigration strengthens the link between anti-immigration attitudes and support for the populist radical right among voters. Our core argument is that an elite-level shift in emphasis on immigration, particularly after a leadership change, increases the salience of this issue and effectively appeals to individuals with negative attitudes towards immigrants and multiculturalism. The Finns Party, the epitome of the populist radical right in Finland, provides an ideal case to study. Internal factionalism involving moderates and hardliners over immigration policy eventually led to a party split in 2017. Dissatisfied with the election of anti-immigration hardliner Jussi Halla-aho as party leader and other hardliners voted as deputy leaders, the moderate faction broke away from the parent party. This group consisted initially of 20 out of the Finns Party's 38 members of parliament (MPs). The defectors also included all the party's ministers who were part of a bourgeois coalition government from 2015 to 2019. Blue Reform, the splinter party, failed to win any seats in the next election, while the Finns Party recovered and eventually managed to both increase its membership numbers and win 17.5 of the popular vote in 2019 (Hatakka, 2021). After the leadership change, the Finns Party was perceived to more clearly voice an anti-immigration discourse and demand stricter immigration policies. This was evident during the 2019 election campaign where immigration was a main campaign theme and the Finns Party positioned themselves against the mainstream parties (Arter, 2020).

The arguments and findings here contribute to a better understanding of the link between anti-immigration attitudes and support for the populist radical right, particularly from the perspective of policy voting (Kessenich & van der Brug, 2022; Kriesi & Schulte-Cloos, 2020; Ortiz Barquero et al., 2022). It adds a piece to the puzzle of why the support for PRRPs in Western Europe varies so much within many countries over time (Arzheimer, 2009). This study also addresses the nature of mass–elite policy linkages. It is contested whether voters are adequately informed on policy issues and party positions, and react to

elite-level policy shifts (Achen & Bartels, 2017; see also Costello et al., 2021). However, a change in the informational environment can stimulate issue proximity voting. If elite cues became clearer concerning the issue of immigration after the party split, voters were more likely to either shift their own policy positions in response to elite-level policy shifts or switch parties so that their policy preferences better aligned with party elites. Our study thus resonates with various strands of literature regarding consequences of party splits (Ceron & Volpi, 2022), how party elites influence public opinion (Adams, De Vries, et al., 2012; Castanho Silva, 2018; Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu, 2019; Steenbergen et al., 2007) and the sorting of voters into more homogenous partisan camps following policy shifts (Adams, Ezrow, et al., 2012; Hetherington, 2009).

We report analyses based on repeated cross-sectional survey data: four postelection surveys after the parliamentary elections in Finland 2011–2023. A before-and-after design is applied as the case of the Finns Party exhibited change on a key parameter: the party in the public eye taking a harder line on immigration after the mid-term leadership change in 2017. Our results show that anti-immigration sentiments far better predicted why people voted for the Finns Party in 2019 and 2023 following the party's split into hardliners and moderates. Anti-immigration sentiments also trumped positions on other issues. Furthermore, partisan sorting was evident as voters aligned themselves more closely with parties that shared similar attitudes towards immigration and multiculturalism. Voters with critical views were more likely to remain loyal or switch to the Finns Party, while former supporters with moderate views switched their vote choice to other parties or abstained.

We argue that Finland, for several reasons, represents a least-likely case to find a strong link between anti-immigration attitudes and a populist radical right vote. Historically, Finland has experienced lower levels of immigration and immigrant electoral power of immigrants has been low, thus diminishing the salience of the immigration issue. The presence of a well-established and comprehensive welfare state is likely to have mitigated economic insecurities caused by internationalization (Swank & Betz, 2003), although an increase in the number of persons born abroad (from 2.6% in 2000 to 7.3% in 2019) might have progressively fired up welfare chauvinism (i.e. welfare benefits should be restricted to 'native citizens') (Rydgren, 2003). Finland has a candidate-centred system where the candidates run personal campaigns and voters cast a preferential vote for an individual candidate. Therefore, the level of policy voting can be assumed to be lower compared to party-centred systems (see Costello, 2021, p. 582). Furthermore, as Finland's multiparty system reflects many social cleavages, other policy concerns are therefore likely to overshadow the immigration issue. Also, as Chen et al. (2021) point out, traditionally low levels of political polarization and a history of consensus politics make Finland a least-likely case for partisan sorting.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Populism is a contested concept (e.g. a political strategy, a folkloric style of politics or a thin-centred ideology), and the same goes for how the populist radical right should be characterized (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). We proceed from the ideational definition of populism: 'a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2007, p. 23). Furthermore, the populist radical right refers to those parties 'with a core ideology that is a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism' (Mudde, 2007, p. 26). Nativism represents a combination of *nationalism* ('states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group') and *xenophobia* ('nonnative elements [persons and ideas] are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state') (Mudde, 2007, p. 22).

A comprehensive understanding of the role of immigration and multiculturalism for the electoral success of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) involves the examination of both supply and demand factors.[1] Supply refers to which political parties are on offer (including their 'winning ideologies' and strategies on the electoral market), while demand involves voters' values, preferences, expectations and needs (Golder, 2016). On the supply side, many PRRPs in Europe embrace anti-immigration rhetoric, favour harsher anti-immigration policies and lash out against multiculturalism in general. They have a strong preference for the rights and privileges of native-born or established inhabitants of a particular country or region over those of immigrants or newcomers (Mudde, 2007; Norris, 2005). Although PRRPs should not be regarded as mere single-issue anti-immigrant parties (Mudde, 2007, p. 17), concern about immigration tends to be the single most important issue for these parties (Arzheimer, 2009). PRRPs are often the issue owners of immigration and position themselves vis-à-vis other parties, primarily mainstream parties (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012, p. 551). Some researchers have asserted that mainstream parties may undermine PRRPs issue ownership by adopting restrictive immigration positions (Meguid, 2005). However, such accommodative strategies are not necessarily successful in attracting anti-immigration voters; on the contrary, they might legitimize and normalize radical right discourse and help sway voters to vote for the radical right (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Krause et al., 2023).

When considering the demand side, there are various theories on which underlying insecurities or grievances trigger anti-immigration sentiments and lead individuals to gravitate towards PRRPs. Two main groups of (competing) theories are dominant: economic and cultural. Economic explanations propose that opposition to immigration is fuelled by economic anxieties due to increased labour

market competition, reducing job opportunities for natives and by immigration being perceived as a strain on the social welfare system. Cultural explanations relate to cultural grievances in different forms, such as perceptions of immigrants bringing crime and social unrest, undermining national culture and threatening liberal values (Cordero et al., 2023; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Golder, 2016; Lonsky, 2021; Mjelde, 2020). However, they need not to be competing explanations as both may matter but in different ways (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020), interact to affect social status and feelings of social marginalization (Gidron & Hall, 2020) or be context-dependent, whereby certain social groups develop anxieties only under certain circumstances (Cordero et al., 2023).

Due to data limitations, this study will not unpack the details of social, cultural and economic processes that shape anti-immigrant attitudes, which then lead people to vote for a PRRP. Instead, we assume that for a subset of voters, immigration is an important political issue, and they are attracted to a party that aligns with their stance on that matter. For instance, Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos (2020) assumed that cultural attitudes represented substantive grievances rooted in sociostructural transformations of society and demonstrated that, above all, issue positions on immigration, as well as European integration, were associated with a radical right vote in Western Europe. Ortiz Barquero et al. (2022) found that policy considerations provided greater explanatory power than material deprivation ('losers of globalization') and political disenchantment ('protest voting') to explain radical right party support in six Western European countries. Immigration carried the greatest weight followed by Green-Alternative-Libertarian and Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist (GAL–TAN) attitudes (i.e. traditional beliefs and authoritarian values). Kessenich and van der Brug (2022) also established that substantive policy positions (anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic attitudes) best-explained support for radical right-wing parties in the Netherlands.

We also recognize the importance of accounting for both the supply side and demand side of politics. The dual-process model states that mass–elite linkages flow in both directions, whereby party elites both respond to and shape the views of their supporters (Steenbergen et al., 2007; see also Adams, De Vries et al., 2012). In line with this model, PRRP elites can induce demand by simultaneously 'reading' and 'shaping' public sentiments. In the first case, the parties can make strategic decisions and position themselves vis-à-vis competitors to tap into existing grievances or sentiments among the public. In the second case, they may incite new grievances or sentiments through ideological framing and alarmist narratives (Mols & Jetten, 2020). Admittedly, it is difficult to establish to what extent PRRPs thrive because they tap into citizens' concerns about immigration or because the public responds to the xenophobic rhetoric of these parties (Knigge, 1998, p. 258).

As stated in the introduction, the argument we want to advance in this study is that a leadership change signalling a tougher party stance on immigration

strengthened the link between anti-immigration attitudes and support for the populist radical right in Finland. We assume that leadership change, and a consequent defection of politicians representing a formerly influential moderate wing, helped to provide voters with information about the policy preferences of the Finns Party and increase the salience of the immigration issue among its supporters.

Under certain circumstances, the likelihood of elite cueing should increase, whereby voters become more susceptible to persuasion and information (Steenbergen et al., 2007). Ideally, citizens are interested in and informed about the parties' policy positions. Citizens may weigh all relevant information from different sources (e.g. party elites' speeches, interviews, policy manifestos and behaviour) to update their policy attitudes and/or their party support. There are empirical observations suggesting that niche party supporters in particular perceive and react to policy shifts (Adams, Ezrow et al., 2012). Many national-conservative and right-wing populist parties have faced internal dissent and party defections, which are potentially damaging for a party's reputation by signalling a lack of competence and credibility. However, expressing clear-cut positions can help to restore the value of the party brand after an exodus of party members (Ceron & Volpi, 2022, p. 1043).

Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu (2019) offered an interesting insight into how leadership change can alter the nature of mass–elite linkages. They argued that voters develop a more accurate understanding of a party's policy positions following a leadership change. Voters become more responsive to policy changes as these new policy promises by the new leadership are seen as long-term, while they are bound to be sceptical of new policy rhetoric under old leadership because they are seen as short-term opportunistic changes. Thus, leadership changes draw increased attention to a party's policies and heighten the credibility of party policy offerings. On the one hand, this can activate latent support among current supporters and mobilize new voters. On the other hand, former party supporters who dislike the change in policies are likely to be demobilized and therefore abandon the party.

The latter phenomenon, the reshuffling of party affiliations, is known as 'partisan sorting'. Hence, mass partisans respond to clearer elite cues and sort themselves into parties that share their policy positions on issues. Partisan sorting does not necessarily lead to mass polarization where the public becomes increasingly divided; rather partisan camps become more homogenous and ideologically distinct from each other (Hetherington, 2009, 436). Partisan sorting is the combination of two processes: party persuasion and partisan switching. Party persuasion refers to party supporters who 'adjust their preferred policy positions in response to shifts in their preferred party's policy stances'. Partisan switching, by comparison, denotes those voters who 'switch their partisan loyalties in response to parties' policy shifts' (Adams, Ezrow, et al., 2012, pp. 1272–1273).

To summarize, we present three hypotheses regarding the consequences of the radicalization observed in the Finns Party leadership regarding their stance on immigration. The radicalization, which will be detailed in the next section, should have manifested within its voter base in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Hypothesis 1. Anti-immigration attitudes are more strongly associated with voting for the Finns Party after anti-immigration hardliners took leadership of the party.

Hypothesis 2. Anti-immigration attitudes took precedence over other issue attitudes in terms of predicting voting for the Finns Party after anti-immigration hardliners took leadership of the party.

Hypothesis 3. Anti-immigration attitudes were associated with partisan sorting after anti-immigration hardliners took leadership of the Finns Party.

THE FINNS PARTY

The Finns Party has its roots in a rural antiestablishment movement. Its predecessor, the Finnish Rural Party (SMP, Suomen Maaseudun Puolue in Finnish), was a protest movement in the 1960s and made its first electoral successes thanks to its colourful and somewhat charismatic leader, Veikko Vennamo (1970: 10.5%; 1972: 9.2%). In 1983, his son, Pekka Vennamo, even managed to bring the party into the government with a 9.7% vote share. Timo Soini, who had been a young politician in the Rural Party and witnessed its decline and bankruptcy, started a new populist party, the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, in Finnish, abbreviated as PS) in 1995. From the beginning, the Finns Party held on to the populist tradition of the SMP, arguing to the electorate that they were a party for the deprived ordinary people of Finland, such as pensioners and the unemployed, whom the Finns Party would protect from the corrupt Finnish elite. The Finns Party could thus be characterized as a fringe populist party that took largely centrist positions socioeconomically and culturally (Jungar, 2016; Kivisto & Saukkonen, 2020).

While the Finns Party was undoubtedly populist from the start, it could not be characterized as a radical right-wing populist party as it did not embody the kind of nativist ideology that is shared by the PRRP family. From 2003 onwards, however, the party's electoral programmes, and other official material, started containing progressively radical views after each major election. The party's parliamentary group and party organization included an increasing number of individuals with backgrounds in outspokenly nationalist and anti-immigration organizations, such as 'Suomen Sisu' (Jungar, 2016).

The Finns Party made a significant electoral breakthrough in the 2011 general election, increasing its vote share from 4.1% to 19.1% and becoming the third-largest party in terms of parliamentary seats (39 out of 200 seats) 2011–2015. Despite speculation about the party joining a government coalition, leader Timo Soini opted to keep the party in opposition. This decision led to the development of two factions within the party: a moderate faction led by Soini and a more radical nationalist faction, notably including anti-immigration members (Jungar, 2016; Kivisto & Saukkonen, 2020). Jussi Halla-aho, a vocal critic of Finnish immigration policies, emerged as the de facto leader of the radical faction and later replaced Soini as the party chairperson. Before the split, Soini had to manage the nationalist faction, often distancing the party from their extreme statements or actions by downplaying their seriousness or asserting that they did not represent the party as a whole (Hatakka et al., 2017; Niemi, 2013; Nurmi, 2017).

The presence of two distinct factions within the Finns Party raised questions about its classification as a PRRP in the 2011 and 2015 general elections. Scholars, including Mudde, noted that while the party had a well-established radical right faction, its overall leadership, programme and government policies did not align with the radical right (Mudde, 2017). This positioned the Finns Party as a borderline case among European PRRPs. Despite predominantly centrist positions on the socioeconomic dimension, the party's focus shifted towards sociocultural issues, especially immigration, with increased influence from the nationalist faction (Jungar, 2016). Notably, the salience of immigration-related topics grew steadily among Finns Party candidates since the 2008 municipal elections, intensifying after the party split in 2015 (Välimäki, 2019).

In the 2015 general election, the Finns Party secured 17.7% of the vote and 38 parliamentary seats, choosing to join Juha Sipilä's centre-right government. As part of the coalition, the party made concessions on immigration and European integration (Jungar, 2016; Kivisto & Saukkonen, 2020). While in government during the 2015 migrant crisis, internal dissent grew. Timo Soini faced criticism as evidenced by many demonstrations under the headline 'Close the borders' being organized. These developments, combined with a decrease in support indicated by polls, prompted the radical wing of the party to criticize Timo Soini openly and take steps towards making Jussi Halla-aho the new chairperson of the party (Nurmi, 2017). In March 2017, Timo Soini announced that he would not continue as the chairperson and named Sampo Terho as his preferred successor. Halla-aho ran against Terho for chairmanship in the party congress on 10 June 2017 and won a clear victory: Halla-aho got 949 votes and Terho 629 (Yle News 10 June 2017). The split in the parliamentary group prompted a crisis in the Sipilä Cabinet, narrowly avoided as 19 members of the party's moderate wing split from the Finns Party and formed 'Blue Reform'. The cabinet continued, with former Finns Party ministers representing Blue Reform, while the Finns Party, under Halla-aho, entered opposition.

As the new party chair, Halla-aho replaced key leadership positions with his supporters, some linked to far-right groups like Suomen Sisu (Jungar, 2016; Kivisto & Saukkonen, 2020). Under Halla-aho's leadership, the Finns Party became a single-issue party focused on opposing immigration (Arter, 2020, p. 268). In the 2019 general election, the party campaigned with a manifesto that reflected its new leadership. Unlike the 2011 or 2015 manifestos, the 2019 manifesto declared 'harmful' immigration to be the main problem facing Finland, due to it being costly and damaging to Finnish society (Pohtiva, 2022). The Finns Party started to resemble other populist radical right parties in the 2019 election. This, however, did not hurt the electoral success of the party, as the Finns Party received 17.5% of the vote and emerged as the second biggest party with 39 parliamentary seats Meanwhile, the former moderate faction, now Blue Reform, received only 1% of the vote and no seats, leading to marginalization and many members leaving politics.

In August 2021, Halla-aho stepped aside and a close ally of his, Riikka Purra, was elected as the first female chairperson of the Finns Party. Her political views on immigration are very similar to those of Halla-aho. Under her leadership, the party made yet another electoral success in the parliamentary election in April 2023. In a very competitive election, The Finns Party received 20.1% of the popular vote and finished second, behind the Conservative National Coalition Party (20.8%) and slightly ahead of the Social Democrats (19.9%). After long and difficult negotiations, a bourgeois government was formed in late June with Petteri Orpo (National Coalition Party) as PM and with the Finns Party as a coalition party. Two minor parties, the Swedish People's Party and Christian Democrats take part in government as well.

In summary, the trajectory of the Finns Party can be characterized as having its start as a marginal populist party that began by being largely centrist in socioeconomic and sociocultural dimensions. From 2003 onwards, however, the party gradually adopted increasingly negative stances on European integration and immigration. As the party organization gained members from nationalistic far-right organizations, such as Suomen Sisu, sociocultural issues became more salient. Eventually, the development culminated in 2017 when the radical faction of the party, led by Jussi Halla-aho, assumed the main leadership positions within the party and the parliamentary group split. In the aftermath, the party resembled a PRRP more than ever in the 2019 general election with a manifesto that primed 'harmful immigration' as one of the main problems facing the country. Additional evidence for this development is found in Table 1, which presents how the Finns Party radicalized from 2006 to 2019, according to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey. Since 2006, the party has been deemed to increasingly favour a restrictive policy on immigration and favour assimilation rather than the integration of immigrants and asylum seekers. Since 2019, the party has not become more moderate on these issues. In fact, the Finns Party was able to influence Orpo's government programme and the government plans to restrict immigration with several measures as a result.

TABLE 1 Position and salience towards immigration and multiculturalism of the Finns Party according to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

	Immigration policy		Integration of immigrants and asylum seekers	
	Position[a]	Salience[b]	Position[c]	Salience[b]
2006	8.1	8.2	7.9	—
2010	9.1	8.9	9.1	8.9
2014	9.0	—	9.4	—
2019	9.8	9.8	9.8	8.6

[a]0 = Strongly favours a liberal policy on immigration, 10 = Strongly favours a restrictive policy on immigration.

[b]0 = Not important at all, 10 = Extremely important.

[c]0 = Strongly favours multiculturalism, 10 = Strongly favours assimilation.

Source: https://www.chesdata.eu/ches-europe

DATA, VARIABLES AND METHOD

The present article aims to decipher whether the rather radical change in the Finns Party leadership in 2017 is reflected among its electorate. We used survey data from the Finnish National Election Study that have been gathered through face-to-face surveys directly after each parliamentary election. We focused on two elections before (2011 and 2015) and two elections after (2019 and 2023) the party split. In each year, data were collected from a nationally representative sample of voting-age Finnish citizens, and they included questions on socioeconomic background, voting, ideology and political policy preferences. Furthermore, many of the questions have been repeated from survey to survey, which allows us to compare changes within the electorate between one parliamentary election to the next. The bibliographic citations to the data sets are listed at the end of the references in the present article. The 2011–2019 data are currently open access through the Finnish Social Science Data Archive with the identification numbers FSD2653, FSD3067 and FSD3467. A detailed description of each study, including sampling, interview methods and questionnaires, is available at https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/en/.

The first dependent variable was a binary indicator, distinguishing whether the respondent voted for the Finns Party (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0). The latter category is a reference category, which includes respondents who either cast a vote for another party or abstained from voting. To further explore the occurrence of partisan sorting, we included a second dependent variable with three categories: loyal, mobilized and defected. *Loyal* refers to the category of voters who reported they voted for the Finns Party in two consecutive elections, based on concurrent survey responses and recall of vote choice in the previous election four years earlier. The term *mobilized* denotes those voters who

switched to the Finns Party in the concurrent election. *Defected* describes former Finns Party voters who withdrew their electoral support for the party and chose to either vote for another party or abstain from voting.

Our key independent variable was an index combining two interrelated survey items that tapped subjective feelings towards immigration and multiculturalism. While the first item concerned the number of immigrants, the second was about tolerance regarding the coexistence of distinct religious and cultural groups living side by side in the same country. The preamble for both items was: 'In the following, some propositions relating to the future direction of Finland are listed. What is your opinion on these propositions?'. The two propositions were 'Finland that has more immigration' and 'Multicultural Finland where foreigners with different religions and lifestyles are tolerated'. The response alternatives on the 11-point scale varied from 0 (*a very bad proposition*) to 10 (*a very good proposition*) with five in the middle (neither a good nor bad proposition). The responses were first rescaled so that higher values indicated anti-immigrant and antimulticulturalism sentiments and then the average for each respondent was calculated. Cronbach's α for the two-item scale was 0.81 indicating good internal consistency.

We accounted for dominant demand-side theories in the literature to rule out alternative explanations: *policy voting* (other than immigration), *political discontent* and *sociostructural characteristics* (Kessenich & van der Brug, 2022). First, anti-immigration attitudes and a host of other attitudes are not necessarily mutually exclusive; they may be part of a coherent system of interconnected beliefs. Our ambition was to isolate the influence of hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism on PRRP voting and to determine whether this is a decisive factor. Three of the four composite indices were based on the same battery of questions concerning the future direction of Finland on a 0–10 scale. *Left-right* socioeconomic attitudes included three items capturing traditional issues of government intervention in the economy and wealth redistribution. The *moral-authoritarian* component combined attitudes on Christian values, family values and authoritarian views on law and order. Only a single indicator for *Euroscepticism* was available and captured how attached Finland should be to the European Union (EU).[2] The exact item wordings are presented in the Supporting Information S1: Table A1.

Second, to control for political discontent, the variable *antiestablishment* attitudes combined four items regarding MPs losing touch with ordinary people, having no influence on political decision-making, parties having no genuine concern for people's opinions and a perceived lack of policy differences between parties (see Supporting Information S1: Table A1). For each item, the original 5-point Likert agree/disagree scale was recoded into a 0–10 scale.

Third, we also controlled for various sociostructural characteristics: age, gender, level of education, unemployment status, subjective social class and urban-rural location. The typical populist radical right or far right voter is 'a

young male, with a low level of education, who is either unemployed, self-employed, or a manual worker' (Golder, 2016, p. 483). We included the urban-rural divide because immigration 'is a predominantly urban phenomenon' (Harteveld et al., 2022, p. 441). The categorical variable delineates various residential settings in the Finnish National Election Study: (1) central areas of larger cities or towns, (2) suburbs of a city or town, (3) smaller municipal centres or population centres situated in rural areas and (4) sparsely populated rural areas. We considered subjective social class in our data to be the most appropriate measure for social class as 'certain social classes are more likely to perceive that their interests are under pressure from immigrants than others' (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012). While many researchers prefer objective class-based indicators such as occupation or employment relationships, it also gives rise to challenges in terms of conceptualization and operationalization. A precoded measure of the subjective class has been demonstrated to perform well as a measure of people's material situation (Oesch & Vigna, 2023).

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the mean responses for the anti-immigration and antimulticulturalism scales, separately for supporters of the Finns Party voters, other parties and nonvoters. Hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism was most prevalent in 2011 among all groups of voters. Anti-immigrant sentiments had softened by 2015 across the whole population, including the Finns Party electorate. The postelection interviews were conducted in late spring of 2015, coinciding with the early stages of the European migrant crisis, which produced an influx of refugees primarily from the Middle East and North Africa. This context may have initially led to a wave of sympathy during the early phases of the refugee crisis. While softened attitudes towards immigration prevailed among supporters of mainstream parties both four and eight years later, the electorate of the Finns Party had radicalized by 2019. By 2023, their supporters had become as critical as in 2011 in terms of the immigration questions, but not when it came to multiculturalism. The extent to which Finns Party voters and other parties' voters differ in relation to each other increased in 2019 and 2023. Nonvoters also reported more hostile attitudes during the same years, although these attitudes were substantially more restrained than those of Finns Party voters. These findings imply that nativism and anti-immigrant resentment might have played a significant role in motivating support for the populist radical right in Finland in 2019. The upcoming regression analyses will more rigorously assess how the attitudes of Finns Party voters differ from other voters.

Table 3 presents the estimates for the binary logistic regression models predicting a Finns Party vote. Our primary focus lies on the coefficients for the anti-immigration variable. We observe that for each one-unit increase in the

TABLE 2 Anti-immigration and antimulticulturalism attitudes among different groups of voters in Finland, 2011–2023.

	Finland that has more immigration			Multicultural Finland where foreigners with different religions and lifestyles are tolerated		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Finns Party						
2011	8.1	2.1	119	7.1	2.5	109
2015	6.7	2.3	198	4.9	2.7	198
2019	7.6	2.2	184	6.5	2.4	184
2023	8.1	2.0	510	5.9	2.6	508
Other party						
2011	6.1	2.3	556	4.4	2.7	549
2015	5.2	2.5	990	3.2	2.4	990
2019	5.1	2.3	921	3.3	2.3	921
2023	5.0	2.5	4479	2.8	2.3	4479
Nonvoters						
2011	6.7	2.0	73	5.5	2.7	70
2015	5.9	2.6	287	4.1	2.8	287
2019	6.2	2.6	181	4.7	2.7	181
2023	6.2	2.5	316	4.0	2.8	315
All						
2011	6.5	2.3	806	4.9	2.9	786
2015	5.6	2.6	1587	3.8	2.6	1587
2019	5.7	2.5	1598	4.0	2.6	1598
2023	5.8	2.7	5305	3.6	2.7	5302

Note: Higher values indicate greater anti-immigrant and antimulticulturalism sentiments.

Abbreviation: SD, standard deviation.

anti-immigration variable, the log odds of voting for the Finns Party increased, while holding all other variables constant. The coefficient for 2019 stands out as being more than twice as high as the coefficients for the two previous elections. This finding aligns with our first hypothesis that anti-immigration attitudes would gain prominence after the party's split in 2017, resulting in a stronger influence on the likelihood of voting for the Finns Party in 2019 compared to

TABLE 3 Binary logistic regression predicting vote for the Finns Party.

	2011		2015		2019		2023	
	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)
Anti-immigration	0.25	(0.08)**	0.16	(0.04)**	0.52	(0.05)**	0.47	(0.04)**
Moral-authoritarian	0.02	(0.09)	0.10	(0.06)	0.23	(0.07)**	0.14	(0.04)**
Left-right	0.08	(0.12)	0.01	(0.06)	0.14	(0.07)	0.14	(0.04)**
Euroscepticism	0.26	(0.05)**	0.13	(0.04)**	0.19	(0.05)**	0.14	(0.03)**
Antiestablishment	0.08	(0.07)	-0.03	(0.04)	-0.11	(0.05)*	-0.07	(0.04)
Man	0.73	(0.33)*	0.04	(0.20)	0.46	(0.22)**	0.23	(0.16)
Age/10	0.69	(0.55)	0.88	(0.36)*	1.34	(0.39)**	0.17	(0.30)
Age/10^2	-0.07	(0.05)	-0.10	(0.04)**	-0.13	(0.04)**	-0.02	(0.03)
No vocational education	0.98	(0.66)	1.24	(0.43)**	-0.27	(0.45)	-0.46	(0.36)
Vocational education	-0.09	(0.65)	0.83	(0.37)*	0.22	(0.41)	0.07	(0.25)
Middle education	0.68	(0.60)	0.33	(0.36)	0.11	(0.41)	-0.21	(0.28)
Polytechnic education	-0.15	(0.79)	0.33	(0.42)	0.34	(0.41)	-0.08	(0.25)
Unemployed	0.10	(0.42)	-0.32	(0.28)	0.00	(0.33)	-0.44	(0.27)
Working class	0.84	(0.60)	0.69	(0.40)	1.38	(0.52)**	0.36	(0.30)
Lower middle class	0.47	(0.70)	0.33	(0.45)	1.18	(0.59)*	0.46	(0.32)
Middle class	0.85	(0.56)	0.24	(0.40)	0.74	(0.46)	0.08	(0.26)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	2011		2015		2019		2023	
	Est	**(SE)**	**Est**	**(SE)**	**Est**	**(SE)**	**Est**	**(SE)**
No social class	−0.45	(0.71)	0.32	(0.52)	1.21	(0.60)*	0.03	(0.32)
City/town centre	−0.34	(0.61)	0.43	(0.46)	0.93	(0.47)*	−0.17	(0.21)
City/town suburb	0.75	(0.50)	0.34	(0.47)	0.88	(0.46)	−0.14	(0.22)
Rural centre	0.23	(0.55)	0.42	(0.48)	0.23	(0.49)	0.22	(0.22)
Constant	−8.68	(1.69)**	−6.48	(1.00)**	−10.89	(1.22)**	−6.51	(0.88)**
Pseudo R^2	0.29		0.10		0.30		0.25	
N	727		1435		1243		4811	

Note: The reference categories are woman, university education, not unemployed in the past 12 months, upper middle/upper class and rural area.

Abbreviations: Est, estimate; SE, standard error.

**$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

2011 and 2015. The positive association was almost as substantial in 2023, suggesting that anti-immigration attitudes continued to matter after 2019.

We also present our results as average predictive margins to enhance interpretability. They were computed by averaging the predictions from the fitted logistic regression models at fixed values of the anti-immigration index while retaining the actual values for all other covariates. In Figure 1, the predicted probability of voting for the Finns Party increases as the anti-immigration variable goes from 0 to 10. The slopes for 2019 and 2023 are steeper compared to previous elections, indicating that anti-immigration attitudes had a stronger influence on vote choice. For respondents with an
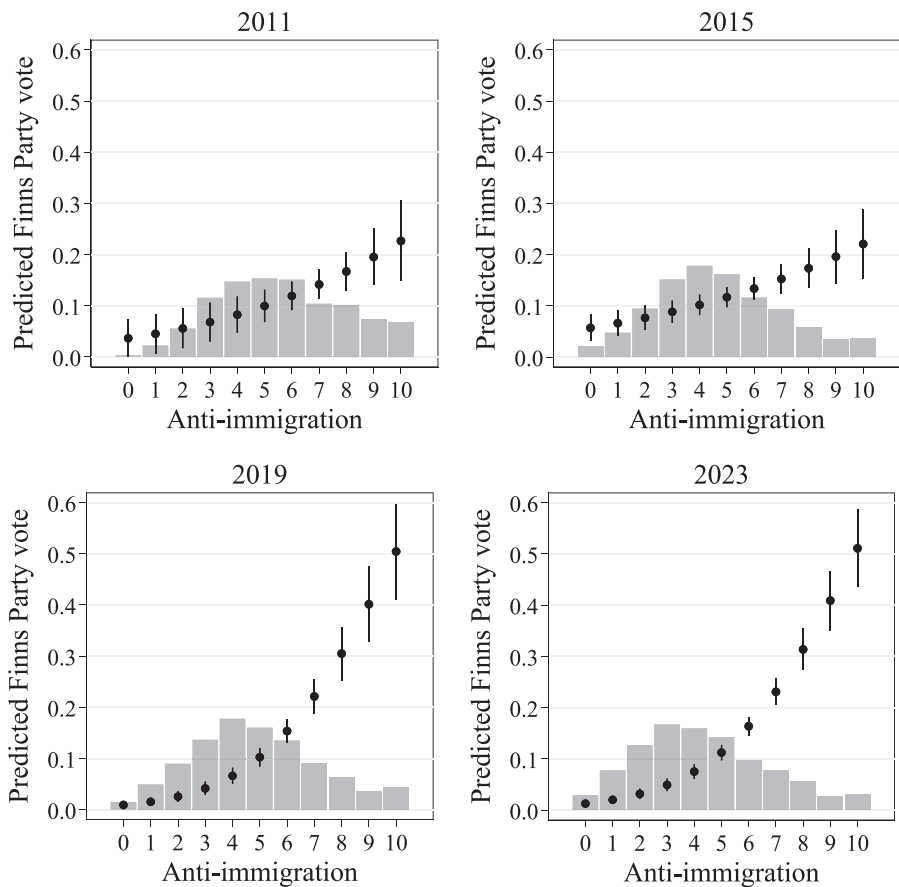

FIGURE 1 Predicted Finns Party vote by anti-immigration 2011–2023 with 95% confidence intervals. The bars indicate the distribution of the observed data according to the anti-immigration index value.

anti-immigration score of 0, the predicted probability of voting for the Finns Party was close to zero. Respondents with a neutral stance had a 10% predicted probability of voting for the party. The probability increased progressively from that point onwards, reaching 50% for those with the most extreme anti-immigration views in 2019 and 2023, while this figure was 23% and 22% in 2011 and 2015, respectively.

We also find support for the second hypothesis, which posited that anti-immigration attitudes exert a stronger influence on voting for the Finns Party than other policy considerations after the party split. To substantiate this claim, we see that the differences in the sizes of the estimates were smaller in the first two elections. Anti-immigration and anti-EU attitudes played equal roles in influencing party choice, while the other attitudinal variables were insignificant predictors. In 2019 and 2023, the influence of anti-immigration sentiment on vote choice was significantly larger compared to the other attitudinal variables. Both moral-authoritarian values and Euroscepticism mattered in the parliamentary elections following the party split, but the coefficient for the anti-immigration index is more than twice as large as the coefficients for the latter two variables. The coefficient for left-right socioeconomic attitudes is also positive but did not reach the conventional 5% level of statistical significance in 2019.

The antiestablishment measure, representing political discontent, was unexpectedly negatively associated with voting for the Finns Party 2019. We conducted additional tests (see Supporting Information S1: Table A3) that showed that when nonvoters (who tend to be dissatisfied with politics) were excluded, the antiestablishment variable was positively associated with casting a Finns Party vote in the two first elections and an insignificant predictor in 2019. More importantly, anti-immigration became an even stronger predictor in 2019 when non-voters were excluded. Also, it does not appear that the voter base has become more critical of the EU over time, in comparison to those who voted for other parties or abstained from voting. Despite the Finns Party remaining a Eurosceptic party, a viewpoint shared by many of its voters, both former chairman Halla-aho and successor Purra have publicly stated that leaving the EU is unrealistic, given the broad support for EU membership among the general public. This may have contributed to why the salience of the issue and the level of issue-divisiveness have not increased.

The sociodemographic background variables, included as control variables, offered a restricted amount of additional explanatory power. The following groups were more likely to vote for the Finns Party when controlling for policy attitudes: men in 2011; middle-aged with lower education in 2015 and; middle-aged, respondents identifying themselves as working class, lower middle class or having no specific class and residing in a city/town centre as opposed to a rural area in 2019. In 2023, none of the sociodemographic variables seemed to predict the Finns Party vote. Obviously, the attitudinal measures absorbed the

predictive power of male gender, middle-aged, lower education and living in a rural area (i.e. when policy attitudes were excluded from the model).

To test the third hypothesis, we used multinomial regression analysis to model the relationships between the independent variables and the probabilities of being in each of the nonreference categories (loyal and mobilized) compared to the reference category (defected). The models also included sociostructural control variables, but their coefficients are not reported for space considerations (they were mostly insignificant predictors). The estimates are presented in Table 4, and the related average predictive margins for 2019 and 2023 in Figure 2. In line with the third hypothesis, anti-immigration attitudes played a significant role in partisan sorting with the anti-immigration cluster gaining increased prominence within the Finns Party. The estimates demonstrate that the 2019 election represented a 'watershed election'. First, this is evident because loyalty with the Finns Party increased with anti-immigration attitudes

TABLE 4 Multinomial logistic regression predicting loyal and mobilized Finns Party voters.

	2007–2011		2011–2015		2015–2019		2019–2023	
	Est	**SE**	**Est**	**SE**	**Est**	**SE**	**Est**	**SE**
Loyal versus defected								
Anti-immigration	0.57	(0.77)	−0.07	(0.10)	0.37	(0.14)**	0.24	(0.08)**
Moral-authoritarian	2.32	(1.64)	0.03	(0.12)	0.04	(0.13)	0.22	(0.09)**
Left-right	0.76	(1.01)	−0.06	(0.13)	0.20	(0.14)	0.01	(0.07)
Euroscepticism	2.22	(1.27)	0.16	(0.08)**	0.22	(0.11)*	0.01	(0.08)
Antiestablishment	−1.40	(0.94)	−0.07	(0.09)	−0.28	(0.12)*	0.08	(0.06)
Mobilized versus defected								
Anti-immigration	0.71	(0.72)	0.00	(0.11)	0.46	(0.13)**	0.05	(0.08)
Moral-authoritarian	1.59	(1.57)	−0.14	(0.14)	0.28	(0.15)	0.11	(0.09)
Left-right	0.91	(0.97)	0.08	(0.15)	−0.26	(0.17)	0.06	(0.07)
Euroscepticism	1.80	(1.28)	−0.01	(0.10)	0.19	(0.12)	−0.01	(0.06)
Antiestablishment	−1.80	(0.90)*	0.04	(0.11)	−0.38	(0.12)**	−0.04	(0.07)
Pseudo R^2	0.58		0.15		0.24		0.11	
N	105		244		202		539	

Note: Estimates for the sociostructural characteristics are not reported for brevity.
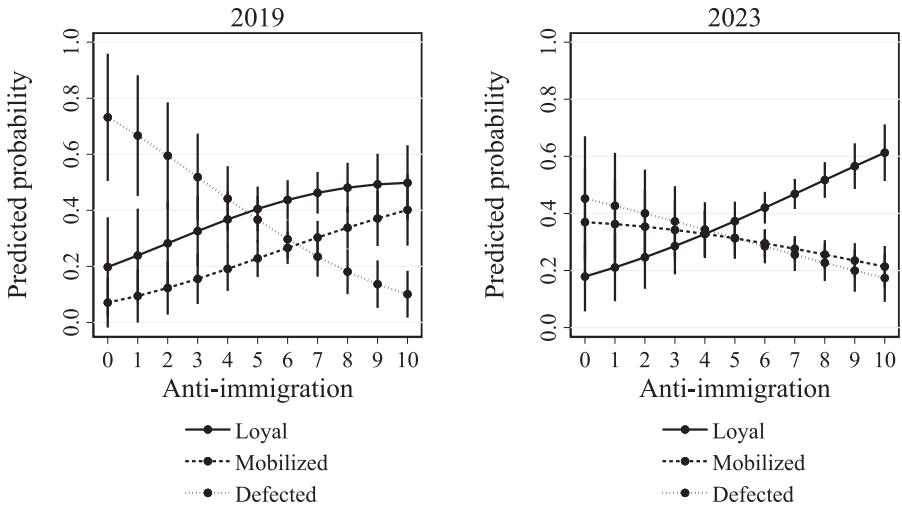
**$p < 0.01$; $p < 0.05$.

FIGURE 2 Predicted loyal, mobilized and demobilized Finns Party vote by anti-immigration with 95% confidence intervals.

(solid line). Second, voters with more pro-immigration attitudes tended to defect from the Finns Party (dotted line). Third, those with a more hard-line stance on immigration are more likely to be mobilized to vote for the Finns Party (dashed line). These models do not reveal which voters were mobilized. Upon closer inspection of the data for 2019, about half of these 'mobilized voters' had switched from mainstream parties, one-third had abstained in the previous election, and one-eighth were allowed to vote for the first time. In 2023, the Finns Party continued to retain many of the voters with a tougher stance on immigration. While previous Finns Party voters with pro-immigrant attitudes were significantly more likely to defect, the party was not more likely to disproportionately mobilize voters who were more critical of immigration and multiculturalism (the slope is in fact negative but not statistically significant from zero).

DISCUSSION

Understanding the appeal of populist radical right parties is vital to being able to provide insights into what issues matter for voters, how it shapes the dynamics of political competition and the potential policy changes that may result from their electoral success. In doing so, numerous scholars have emphasized that models of electoral support should account for both the supply side and demand side of politics, especially since supply and demand are likely to interact and reinforce each other. Hence, parties are likely to succeed when

they have issue ownership and align with voters who share their policy positions. However, it is not obvious that voters actually react and respond to elite-level policy shifts because they should be adequately informed about the policy positions of parties. This study of voters in Finland during the 2010s and beginning of the 2020s provided suggestive evidence for theoretical assumptions that niche party supporters perceive and react to policy shifts (Adams, Ezrow, et al., 2012), parties that express clear-cut positions after a party split can help to restore the value of the party brand (Ceron & Volpi, 2022), and that voters are responsive to policy changes following a leadership change (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu, 2019).

Hence, the present article analyzed an interesting case, the metamorphosis of the Finns Party in Finland. The party won a landslide victory in the parliamentary election of 2011 and continued to attract about the same share of votes in the election of 2015. In 2017, after two years as a partner in a bourgeois three-party government, the Finns party split, and the party was left in opposition under a new, more radical leadership. At the same time, the old leadership was able to remain in government after having founded a new party. In the national election of 2019, the new Finns Party was able to regain the popularity of the Finns Party in 2015. Simultaneously, the governmental faction under the party name Blue Reform was totally wiped out from parliament. The case of the Finns Party was ideal for studying voter and party congruence longitudinally. We had the possibility to analyze the behaviour of voters of a party whose electoral support remained consistent across elections, despite significant changes in the political landscape, party leadership and policy emphasis.

We showed that the immigration issue drove a clearer wedge between voters in Finland after the Finns Party split into two camps, immigration hawks and moderates and better explained why people cast their ballot for a PRRP. First, we found that negative views towards immigration and multiculturalism predicted much better why people voted for the Finns Party in 2019, after the party split between immigration hardliners and moderates, compared to 2011 and 2015. What is more, we were able to see that the hardline leadership, which continued from Halla-aho's period to the current leader Riikka Purra, was reflected in sustained issue salience regarding the immigration issue among Finns Party voters in the 2023 parliamentary election. Second, anti-immigration and antimulticulturalism attitudes became the primary issue as of 2019, while left-right socioeconomic attitudes, moral-authoritarian values, Euroscepticism and political disaffection were of secondary importance for the party's old and new voters. Third, while the Finns Party did not manage to enlarge its overall support in 2019, as it tallied about the same share of the nationwide vote as in 2015, we found indicative evidence that there was partisan sorting, meaning that the profile of the party electorate changed between 2015 and 2019. Hence, the party managed to hold on to former supporters with anti-immigrant

attitudes and mobilize voters with similar attitudes. Still, the party lost supporters with moderate or positive views on immigration and multiculturalism. Finally, our analyses showed that in 2023 voters with anti-immigrant sentiments were more likely to be loyal to the Finns Party, but the main flow of new voters with anti-immigrant attitudes occurred already in 2019.

Who is in charge of a (radical right) party seems to matter. The core values of the leadership in a party seem to be reflected among its electorate. In our case, the more evident anti-immigration views of the Finns Party leaders since 2017 are demonstrated through an increased association between anti-immigrant views and voting for the party.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All the data are available free of charge for research and teaching purposes from the Finnish Social Science Data Archive FSD. See references for details (Borg & Grönlund, 2011; Grönlund & Borg, 2019; Grönlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2015). The 2023 FNES data have not been publicly released yet.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Subjective feelings towards immigrants and multiculturalism are closely related and are considered intertwined here. Both the inflow of immigrants and the growth of multiculturalism mobilize support for the populist radical right. The concept of multiculturalism is, however, broader and refers to the existence of several distinct ethnic and cultural groups, as well as a policy promoting such a society (Ivison, 2015). A finer distinction can be made, as Norris (2005) did, by empirically distinguishing between negative attitudes towards immigrants, refugees and multiculturalism.

[2] Principal component analysis using a polychoric correlation matrix was conducted on the 2011–2019 data, which included identical survey items, to confirm the viability of creating indices that capture the aforementioned attitudinal components (see Supporting Information S1: Table A1. As the obtained scales were expected to correlate, the components were subject to oblique (oblimin) rotation. The item on attachment to the European Union did not load on any of the components and therefore we included it as a separate measure to capture. Euroscepticism. In 2023, the following two survey items were not included: Finland that has more entrepreneurship and market economy (left-right) and Finland where the status of traditional nuclear families is reinforced (moral-authoritarian). There is no indication of problematic multicollinearity (i.e. variables exhibiting excessively high correlations, potentially causing

imprecise estimations and inaccurate inferences about the underlying structure of the data). Supporting Information S1: Table A2 presents the intercorrelations between the attitudinal items.

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