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*Published in:*  
Finnish journal of social research

*DOI:*  
[10.51815/fjsr.126124](https://doi.org/10.51815/fjsr.126124)

E-pub ahead of print: 01/01/2023

*Document Version*  
Final published version

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*Please cite the original version:*  
Vuorenlinna, E., Nygård, M., & Autto, J. (2023). Structural evil or individual deficiency? The construction of poverty in the Finnish Parliament. *Finnish journal of social research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.51815/fjsr.126124>

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# Structural evil or individual deficiency? The construction of poverty in the Finnish Parliament

Emily Vuorenlinna, Mikael Nygård, and Janne Autto

## Abstract

This article examines the political standpoints and arguments related to poverty by asking how Finnish politicians understand poverty as a social problem, how they construct the poor as a group, and what policy recommendations they propose to fight poverty. Qualitative content analysis was used to examine minutiae from the interpellation debate on the increasing inequality in Finland in November 2017. Despite an increase in austerity policies and a right-wing government, the poverty discourse remained in alignment with a predominantly structural nature, showcasing the strength of ideological and contextual continuity in terms of poverty policy development.

**Keywords:** poverty, construction, policy, content analysis, Finland

## Introduction

Although poverty is one of the most central social problems that the welfare state needs to address, it is a multifaceted phenomenon that has remained politically contested throughout history (Malin et al., 2002). For instance, political parties have traditionally nurtured different views on how to approach poverty (e.g., Alcock, 2006; Pantazis, 2015; Taylor, 2007). Such standpoints and discussions are important, as they influence policymaking and how these policies will affect society and the poor (Saari, 2015). Since the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the number of people living under the poverty line has remained at a higher level in Finland than before the crisis. Moreover, it brought with it an intensification of neoliberal governance in social policy (e.g., Nygård et al., 2019) that increasingly began to view poverty as individual problems to be solved through different workfare measures (cf. Alcock, 2006; Blyth, 2013; Kangas, 2019; Moreira & Lødemel, 2014; van Oorshot, 2002; Pantazis, 2015). This neoliberal dominance is, in turn, likely to increase the ideological convergence between parties and portend more individualist and workfare-inspired policies to regulate poverty (Saari, 2015).

While previous research has mainly focused on public attitudes toward the poor (e.g., Niemelä, 2008), attitudes of social workers (e.g., Blomberg et al., 2013) or poverty policies (Nygård & Krüger, 2012), there is still little research on the political debate and understanding of poverty among politicians. This research is important to examine what kind of thinking or rationale lies behind or steers policy-making (e.g., Kiss-

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ová, 2021). This article examines the political framing of poverty by focusing on politicians' speeches in the Finnish parliament, the *Eduskunta*. More specifically, we study how MPs described poverty as a social problem and the poor as a group, and what policy recommendations for poverty alleviation they proposed in the 2017 interpellation debate on rising inequality and poverty (VK 4/2017 rd). This particular debate was a reaction to the allegedly neoliberal social and economic policies conducted by the Centre-Right Sipilä government (2015–2019), as well as the inequality and poverty following in its wake. It thus serves as a fruitful case for studying politicians' arguments related to poverty and the poor as it provides rich data on how such constructions come to life in discussions. In this study, we refer to the 'neutral' meaning of ideology, referring to the left-right, conservative-liberal distinctions of political standpoints (Heywood, 2013; Taylor, 2007). We analyse the speeches by applying qualitative content analysis to examine the variation in constructions. We argue that although neoliberal ideas had become more influential in Finnish politics during the 2010s, this had not led to a convergence of partisan poverty constructions in an individualist way.

The article contributes to the discussion on poverty and poverty policy and its ideological and ideational drivers (e.g., Mkandawire, 2000; van Oorshot, 2002) by examining how politicians' perceptions of the poverty problem influence poverty policy. This adds to the understanding of the formation of policies to alleviate poverty and the influence of discourse and conceptions of poverty in the political setting.

In the following two sections, we discuss poverty as a social problem and how such problems are politicized. We will then present our data and methods as well as our findings and finally, we present our conclusions.

## Background

### Poverty as a social problem

Poverty can be described in different ways, from purely material to multidimensional definitions, which are continuously changed and redefined (Alcock, 2006). The most common measure of poverty within the EU is the relative income measure defining poverty as having a disposable income falling below 50 or 60% of the national median income (Swärd, 2012). Poverty can be defined multi-dimensionally, for example using the EU-AROE-indicator (At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion), which includes non-material deprivation (Eurostat, 2018; Saari, 2015). Moreover, poverty can be defined in a political/administrative or subjective way which refers to how policy-makers define poverty, for example, by defining a minimum budget (Kangas & Ritakallio, 2008). For the purpose of this study, we define poverty as having a disposable income of less than 60% of the national median income as there is no official, national definition of low-income earners or poverty line in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2023), although the poverty line is commonly used.

Theoretically, there is a classical distinction between seeing poverty as caused by individual factors or emanating from structural factors. While the former position sees poverty as a reflection of individual deficiency or laziness (e.g., Murray, 1984), the latter sees poverty as something infringed upon the individual by society or structural forces (e.g., Townsend, 1979). This is, however, a simplification, as poverty is most likely caused by a combination of individual and structural factors that coincide for individuals and different groups of people (Alcock, 2006). The socioeconomic structures of a nation are complex and constantly changing and differ between countries. The choices and actions of individuals affect the creation and recreation of social structures, and these structures in turn set the boundaries for individuals' social space. In this way, actors and structures interact to create the socioeconomic sphere that in turn shapes poverty. According to Brady (2019), we can distinguish between behavioural, structural, and political explanations of poverty, where behavioural theories signify individual factors and behaviours, structural theories include demographic and labour-market considerations, and political theories bring forth the relationship between

political power, intuitions, policy, and poverty. Korpi (1971) identifies three drivers of poverty: fundamental factors, conditional factors, and triggering factors. Fundamental factors are the unequal distributions of resources in a class society, conditional factors are different poverty risks such as residence, gender, age, and upbringing conditions, and triggering factors are, for example, illness, unemployment, divorce, or eviction. Conversely, poverty may also stem from broader political causes, such as colonial state policies and history, political exploitation, conflicts, and as consequences of capitalist growth (Mosse, 2010).

Within the European Union, poverty is largely constructed and dealt with on a political level as an income-based and relative social problem. This is also the case in Finland, where the poverty line is mostly drawn at 50 or 60% of the national median disposable income, or defined administratively by using a minimum budget entitling persons to the Social Assistance benefit as a demarcation line for poverty (Kangas & Ritakallio, 2008).

### **The political construction of poverty**

Spector and Kitsuse (2001) argued that a social condition does not become a social problem until it is perceived and discussed as such. Also, constructing something as a social problem calls for some kind of solution. Poverty is a good example of this, as it has been debated for centuries (Alcock, 2006; Drake, 2001; Townsend, 1979). A particularly interesting part of the social construction of poverty is the construction process that takes place in the political arena, for instance, policy-making processes, because they lead to concrete policies (Heywood, 2013). Political discourses, i.e., how poverty is discussed (e.g., Gee, 2014 on discourse), in the political area, thus shape the way poverty is perceived and what political actions or policies, if any, should be orchestrated to fight it (Fischer, 2003).

Studying political discourses and the constructions of social problems they entail can be described as focusing on the input phase of the political process (Nyby, 2020; Nygård, 2020), since it highlights the political standpoints, ideas, and values that shape and drive policy. Using such an input approach comes close to what Hemerijck (2013) frames as the study of normative recalibration. In addition to their own worldviews and political opinions, politicians' standpoints of poverty are affected by the interests or interest groups they represent, their adherence to party ideologies (Heywood, 2013; Nousiainen, 1998), as well as dominant ideas, such as neoliberal ideas or ideas pertaining to austerity (Blyth, 2013). Moreover, standpoints on poverty are influenced by institutional legacies, for instance, the national welfare state tradition/model or the overall ideological climate of a country. Political discourses informed by such factors tend to construct social problems in different ways (Heywood, 2013). For instance, political positions on poverty are likely to differ depending on which party and ideological party colour a politician belongs to. Following a traditional Left-Right scale, can be said that the Left generally is more likely to advocate structural views on poverty and state interventions to address poverty, whereas a rightist position advocates an individual conception of poverty as well as policy solutions focusing on workfare methods or amelioration (Spicker, 2014; Taylor, 2007). In addition, right-wing ideologies generally favour perspectives where poor people are considered undeserving of (state) social support, while left-wingers adhere to a more universal or rights-based approach to social assistance. A third dimension concerning poverty policies can be defined as moral versus instrumental policies, where the moral perspective argues that poverty policy should be conducted on moral grounds, because it is considered "right" or socially just, while instrumental poverty policies are considered a means to serve and achieve social interest (e.g., Nolan, 2013; Sirén, 2019), such as decreasing dependency on social assistance and increasing employment.

As noted above, such political positions on poverty are closely associated with political ideologies (Taylor, 2007). Table 1 showcases the general differences between leftist and rightist positions as mentioned earlier (e.g., Alcock, 2006; Spicker, 2014; Taylor, 2007). Even if this kind of juxtaposition provides an oversimplified notion of the variation in poverty constructions, it can serve as a heuristic tool for studying political constructions of poverty.

Table 1. Traditional perspectives on poverty according to a classical left-right ideological continuum

Left	Right
Emphasis on structural factors as causes of poverty (administrative or bureaucratic problems, call for government or collective responsibility, societal problems, lack of opportunities or assistance) in poverty issues (structural perspective on poverty).	Emphasis on individual factors as causes of poverty, such as individual action and/or behaviour, responsibility, blame, and laziness (individualistic perspective on poverty).
All disadvantaged groups of people should be assisted.	Favours perspectives where certain groups of people are considered as deserving or underserving of (state-given) social support due to e.g. their health status, age, or behaviour.
Considers poverty policy should be conducted on moral grounds because it is considered “right” or socially just (moral poverty policy).	Poverty policies are considered as means to serve and achieve social interests, such as decreasing dependency on social assistance and increasing employment (instrumental poverty policy)

However, political constructions are also influenced by contextual factors, such as welfare-state institutions or political legacies. Finland is generally considered a Nordic welfare state with rather generous and covering social rights (Hemerijck, 2013; Nygård, 2020). Although Social Democracy has been an important political force shaping social policies, it never gained the same political importance as in Sweden (Karvonen et al., 2016; West Pedersen & Kuhnle, 2017). Moreover, since the 1960s, there has been a decline in support for left-wing socialism and a rise in right-wing political ideology (Karvonen et al., 2016). This means that “leftist” constructions of poverty have been challenged by “rightist” views, and it is likely that the latter perspective gained ground in the 2010s as a consequence of the economic depression following the 2008–2009 financial crisis and the strong influence from ideas on neoliberalism and austerity (Blyth, 2013; Farnsworth & Irving, 2015; Kangas, 2019; Nygård et al., 2019). The Right-Left or Centre-Right coalitions that held office during most of the 2010s, were likely to absorb and advocate such ideas. For example, in PM Sipilä’s government program (2015–2019), austerity ideas and cuts in expenditure played a central role in balancing Finnish state finances (Nygård et al., 2019).

Politicians’ constructions of poverty are also shaped by institutional factors, such as the parliamentary position of one’s party. Belonging to a party in office means that the discourse used often bears the hallmark of “state responsibility” or “fiscal soundness”, while discourses used by the opposition usually are intrinsically critical (Heywood, 2013; Nousiainen, 1998). Moreover, political institutions can be rigid and create a level of path dependency among political parties, meaning that it is difficult for them to deviate much from their ideologies, party programs, and promises given to their main constituencies. In parliamentary debates, however, the minor parties in both the Government and the Opposition, which have less power to influence the discourse and policy than the major parties, try to ally themselves with the major parties. As a consequence, the debates become a struggle between two groups of opinions or views (Autto, 2016). The drastic change will most likely be met with opposition both from other political powers and from the people supporting them, threatening the stability and acceptance of governing power. However, the influence of neoliberalism during the last two decades has influenced policymaking overall party affiliations, even more so during the economic downturn of 2007–2008, where the idea of austerity accentuat-

ing fiscal consolidation, financial prudence and public expenditure cuts became increasingly influential in policy making (Blyth, 2013; Farnsworth & Irving, 2015). The perceived need for financial management in state governance set limits to public spending, with neoliberal influences emphasizing individual responsibility in poverty issues becoming more accepted even amongst more left-wing political parties. Pertaining to the view on poverty and the poor in Finland, we believe the political positions have become more individualistically coloured and moralizing due to the increased neoliberal influence, as discussed by, for example, Marjanen, et al. (2018). In the context of this study, it is worth noting that this discussion took place under a right-wing, neoliberal and conservative government ruling, which could further enhance the individualistic tone of poverty descriptions.

Based on this discussion, we expect to find elements emanating from both a structural and an individualistic approach to poverty in the interpellation debate, but with a dominance of the latter, as well as instrumental policies due to neoliberal influences and a move towards activation policies, such as described by Moreira and Lødemel (2014) and Kärrylä (2022).

## Data and Methods

We examine political standpoints on poverty and poverty policy by analysing a debate in the Finnish parliament (*Eduskunta*) in the context of the opposition's interpellation concerning the increasing inequality in Finland (VK 4/2017 vp). The debate took place in November-December 2017. The timing is significant since it reflects a time of economic instability and higher inequality in the wake of the 2008–2009 financial crisis (Kangas, 2019) and an ambition to stabilize the public economy in accordance with an austerity perspective.

Our empirical data consists of protocols from the parliamentary debate (PTK 132/2017 vp) relating to the abovementioned interpellation (VK 4/2017 vp). In 2017, the Finnish government consisted of a coalition between the Centre Party (CP), the National Coalition Party (NCP) and the Blue Reform (BR), while the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the Greens (GP), the Left Alliance (LA), the Swedish People's Party (SPP), the Finns Party (FP), and the Christian Democrats (CD) were in opposition. The data consists of 139 speeches held by MPs (PTK 132/2017) in the preliminary phase of the interpellation process. In this phase, politicians from different parties, both those in office and those in opposition challenging the government, present their main views and standpoints regarding the issues at hand, as well as motivations and arguments to support their views. After the debate, the parliament votes on the political support of the government. If a majority of the MPs vote against this, the government falls. In this case, the vote fell in support of the government despite the interpellation. The speeches are recorded in official protocols (VK 4/2017 vp and PTK 132/2017), which are available to the public on the Finnish Parliament website ([www.eduskunta.fi](http://www.eduskunta.fi)).

The data was chosen as it can be used to critically test to what extent political ideology is significant for the standpoint on poverty and poverty policy in Finnish political society following an intense time of governmental criticism. The interpellation and the discussion that followed display the viewpoints of both the opposition and the government, as well as current concerns about inequality within Finnish social policy. This type of data allows for transparency and exhibits what politicians have said in their discussions, thus opening a possibility to study the construction of poverty highlighting the politicization of poverty issues.

We applied qualitative content analysis (QCA) to analyse how government and opposition parties understand poverty, using a directed approach based on the theoretical perspectives on poverty (see Table 1). QCA is useful to interpret text data, such as protocols and other documents (Mayring, 2000), and allows a systematic classification process to identify themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), in this case standpoints about poverty. Discourse analysis was also considered, however, QCA was deemed as the more suitable method as this study focused on the content and pattern of communication in the debate rather than underlying power structures, though that could be a topic for further research.

The analysis process began with an initial word search to confirm if terms to describe conditions related to poverty were at all used by the politicians, the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Search words and the number of hits in the response to the interpellation PTK 132/2017 rd.

Search word	Hits
poor/poverty	137
inequality	277
equality	122
social exclusion/marginalization	56
low-income	7

Then followed a general reading of the entire debate after which the categorizing of relevant text passages was conducted. The text passages were categorized based on theoretical perspectives on poverty (cf. Table 1), according to whether they represented *individualistic* or *structural perspectives* on poverty, depictions of poor people as *deserving* or *undeserving poor*, and whether they supported policy measures of a *moral* or *instrumental* kind. The third distinction refers to whether the politicians argued for a poverty policy based on moral grounds or as a means to uphold the stability of the state and society. In the debate, the question of equality was often brought forward. With regard to this, it is worth noting the extent to which the question of morality was mentioned, as issues of equality usually are rooted in ideas and values concerning social justice. The alternative to the moral standpoint is to, instead, view poverty policy as an instrumental means to achieve certain political goals, such as increasing the labour force, rather than viewing equality as an end in itself and something of pure moral value.

The statements within the categories were then examined in light of the ideological left-right positions of the political parties to examine if the statements aligned with traditional party ideologies. The categories allow for insight into the framing of poverty and inequality that the politicians expressed and which views were dominant in the debate.

In the following section, the findings are presented together with text excerpts from the debate for substantiating the interpretations. These excerpts are translated from Finnish into English by the authors.

## Results

Since the recession in the 1990s, there has been discussion concerning the level of governmental support that should be provided in the Finnish welfare model. This became very tangible during the economic downturn following the 2007–2008 financial crisis. During the 2010s, there were continuous discussions concerning unemployment, austerity policies, cuts in social welfare, state debt, and the impact of economic recession on the welfare state (Gråsten, 2019; Rönning, 2017). This culminated in 2015 as the centre-right Sipilä government (2015–2019) suggested cutbacks in public spending amounting to 4 billion Euros, notably in social expenditures relating to unemployment, education, and early childhood education and care. The aim of this manoeuvre was to get the Finnish public economy “back in shape” (the slogan of the Centre-party’s election campaign “*Suomi kuntoon*” loosely translates as “Finland back in shape”).

These cutbacks and reforms were highly criticized for several reasons, specifically because the cutbacks were regarded as being aimed towards people already in vulnerable financial and social positions. In some cases, multiple expenditure cuts affected the same groups of people, since these groups depended on

several different forms of social support. The opposition reacted to this situation by initiating the interpellation in which they claimed that the government program was increasing inequality between the wealthy and the poor.

The government's economic policy puts those with the lowest incomes in a weaker position while the previous government's measures reduced income disparities. The government's decision-related politics have cut most from the income of the citizens who earn the least; we're talking about tens of euros. This money is a direct minus in the daily subsistence of low-income earners. For middle-income earners, the effect has been neutral, and these decisions have increased the income of high-income earners with up to hundreds of euros. The income differences have thus increased. The government's decisions are also increasing the poverty rate. (VK 4/2017 vp, p. 2.)

Despite the opposition's claims, statistics from, for example, the OECD (2021) show a fairly stable poverty rate in Finland during the previous decade, with a slight decrease from 2013 until 2016, and only a slight increase from 2016 to 2017. While below the OECD average, the increase in relative poverty has still been significant in the late 2000s (Mikkonen, 2013).

As expected, much of the interpellation debate consisted of statements where the opposition challenged the politics of the government, and the government defended the same. However, a significant amount of time was also spent on discussing issues of inequality, promotion of equality and, within these contexts, poverty. The findings show that politicians largely shared a concordant understanding of poverty, independent of party affiliation. The dominating perspectives of poverty were of structural nature, and poverty was considered a problem and a threat to equality between citizens and well-being within the welfare state. There was consensus that different groups in society (low-income earners, the unemployed, families with children, the sick, students, and pensioners) should be assisted by the state as a reflection of collective responsibility, even if certain political groups emphasized more individual responsibility and less state responsibility.

"Poverty" and "inequality" were often used together or as synonyms in different contexts (e.g., Orpo, NCP & Kiuru, SDP). Both government and opposition parties expressed an understanding of poverty and inequality being interconnected. However, these were usually mentioned in the context of economic or material resources. The use of the words "poverty" or "poor" was limited, instead indirect references to poverty-related issues were apparent. It was noticeable that politicians often used terms such as "inequality", "low-income households" or "exclusion" to refer to conditions similar or equivalent to poverty. This may stem from a perspective of poverty being mainly a material issue or income-related, defining poverty using the poverty line. When poverty was specifically mentioned, it was usually referring to measures of disposable income. It can also perhaps be seen as a reflection of the fact that the word "poor" is a controversial word that politicians tend to avoid, therefore seeking to use less value-charged words.

The main party differences observed concerned the preferred means of poverty policy, where certain parties such as the NCP promoted strong labour policies to combat poverty, while others such as the SDP and LA expressed concern that the current austerity policies had hit the most vulnerable groups in society unfairly and called for more social assistance. This can be explained in part due to the constellation of the government and the opposition in the interpellation debate (where the opposition is expected to criticize government actions), but also due to differences in left-right party ideologies. The Sipilä-government was an ideologically centre-right government and the opposition was largely centre-left, with some exceptions (SPP, FP, and CD). This was reflected in the distribution of the research categories between the government and opposition parties. The centre-right parties promoted strong labour market policies, saying that people need to be encouraged to work, and the left parties advocated for social policy aspects, such as services, social assistance, and income distribution.



## Individualistic vs. structural perspectives on poverty

To further explore the results, an analysis for each individual category is broken down. The first category is based on the opposition between individualistic and structural perspectives on poverty. In line with previous research on perceptions of causes of poverty in Finland (e.g., Niemelä, 2008), there was a consensus on viewing poverty from a structural perspective.

Although the definitions of poverty were similar between all party members, the causes of poverty were emphasized somewhat differently. Members of the government parties emphasized unemployment, a weak national economy, and excessive public debt as the main causes of inequality and poverty. The NCP repeatedly stated that the national economy is both a cause and solution to poverty and that work is what determines the difference between the groups of people who do well and those who do not (Talvite, NCP, PTK 132/2017, p. 10). Economic factors and state debt were seen as contributing factors, for example, to unemployment, and were used as supporting reasons for the reforms made by the government (Orpo, NCP, PTK 132/2017, p. 1). This aligns with traditional conservative/right-wing perspectives on how to solve the poverty problem. A lack of availability of work is a structural rather than individualistic cause of economic vulnerability, and the NCP displayed a structural perspective by insisting that the government had and needed to work on the national employment rate, in accordance with the labour market ideology that the party advocates. The traditional individualistic perspective on poverty of the NCP did not stand out clearly in this debate. However, some remarks also suggested a more individualistic perspective on poverty than other parties did, and the liberal ideology was more noticeable, though less pronounced:

Last month, the government discussed inequality in its strategy session with the working group and how we can strengthen people's responsibility, initiative and independence (Orpo, NCP, PTK 132/2017, p. 3).

Representatives from the Centre Party supported the idea of paid labour as the best social protection for individuals who can work as well as a means of tax income to finance services (Heikkinen, CP, p. 8). Perceptions of causes of poverty and inequality were mainly of a structural nature, and labour issues and access to social services were stressed. The responsibility of promoting well-being was laid on the state rather than on the individual, even though the Centre Party also emphasized the need for active job-seeking among the unemployed. This aligns with the ideologies of the political centre, where both individual responsibility is taken into account while simultaneously working for collective solidarity and equality.

Despite a consensus of a structural perspective on poverty, there were still differentiating factors between the parties that can largely be explained on the basis of left-right political ideologies. The opposition stressed that vulnerable groups in society were highly hit by the government's social policies. This particularly concerned financial assistance since vulnerable groups can experience cutbacks in several areas simultaneously (e.g., housing support, unemployment benefits, child benefits, pensions, and compensations for medical expenses), and therefore experience a stronger, combined effect than other groups in society. The opposition parties emphasized that social protection needed to be strengthened in order to prevent poverty and inequality by, for example, universal basic income and investments in education and housing. These are all examples of a structural mindset concerning poverty where social structures are seen as crucial, which leads to the promotion of social measures to combat poverty.

The basic precondition for a functioning society is that everyone in it is considered to be a part of it, and that everyone considers that they have a right to exist and to participate in society ... It is understood that it is worth keeping the most vulnerable within society (Adlercreutz, SPP, PTK 132/2017, p. 57).

In some cases, the government parties could accept some level of inequality if based on the individ-

ual's efforts or lack thereof, shown in the example of working a low-paid job as a cashier in a small food market, Alepa:

... there are also justified income disparities. The one who rises early in the morning and goes to work as the cashier at Alepa should earn more than the one who neither rises nor goes (to work) (Zyskowicz, NCP, PTK 132/2017, p. 49).

In such cases, the parties stressed individual responsibility for provision, without regard to external circumstances for an individual to be able to use their abilities or have access to job possibilities.

Both government and opposition party members expressed a structural perspective on poverty in terms of the labour market and policy issues contributing to poverty and inequality. However, the government parties' emphasis on the labour market and employment both as a cause of and solution to inequality also allowed for some more individualistic perspectives on poverty. Paid labour was repeatedly mentioned as the solution to poverty, and several party members expressed that the unemployed should get themselves into work, aligning with right-inclined political ideologies that emphasize personal responsibility. Traditionally, the Finnish Centre Party has not been as right-oriented as it was perceived to be during the time of the Sipilä-government. The NCP and the Blue Reform made several statements that emphasized individual responsibility rather than a collective (social) way of thinking.

The results from this study were that although party ideologies to a certain extent were visible in terms of individualistic versus structural perspectives on poverty, the structural perspective still dominated. The structural perspective can be said to be dominant on a national level (e.g., Niemelä, 2008), which corresponds to the foundational ideas of the Nordic welfare model where the state has the main role of providing welfare.

### **Deserving vs. undeserving poor**

The consensus on which groups deserve social assistance was so strong between all parties, independent of ideology, that it is barely meaningful to separate the standpoints of the different parties. Groups that should be assisted were described as "poor", "low-income earners" and/or "disadvantaged". Groups repeatedly mentioned as being financially vulnerable or poor were "the unemployed, students, families with children, pensioners" (Rinne, SDP, PTK 132/2017, p. 44) and people with illnesses and impaired functional abilities (Mikkonen, GP, PTK 132/2017, p. 55). These are all considered risk groups in poverty research due to their socioeconomic situation. The phrase "low-income earners" was sometimes used to encompass different groups of people considered low-income earners for various reasons: families with children, students, and pensioners. These are all groups that may have low total incomes and be dependent on social assistance, and therefore be especially vulnerable to austerity policies.

One group of people was only mentioned briefly – the working poor – and only by representatives from the Social Democrats (Filatov and Kymäläinen). The working poor are those who receive wages that do not cover their needs, therefore needing to supplement their income with social assistance and, despite that, will still fall below the poverty line. MP Filatov brought to attention the problem that more people are working yet social expenditures have increased (social assistance payments), which implies that people's wages are not covering their expenses. This issue reflects the social democratic ideology that redistribution of resources is important to promote equality based on solidarity. The fact that the issue of the working poor was barely mentioned may also be a reflection of how strong the idea of paid labour being "the best social policy" is in Finland, forgetting that having a job might not be enough for everyone.

None of the representatives explicitly mentioned any group of people not deserving of help. However, some did express that unemployed people who are not active and get back into the workforce do not contribute to society and therefore are more of a burden to the state than those who hustle and work. Economic growth would seem to only be available for the proactive and industrious. This indirectly creates a group

of “the undeserving”; i.e., those who do not comply or live up to the expectations of good citizens. Similar results have been noted in other studies (e.g., Pantazis, 2015). Such statements came from the government parties, and can also be seen as a defence of the government’s activation policies concerning the unemployed:

... growth also belongs to those who create it: entrepreneurs, risk-takers and ordinary, hard-working workers (Suutari, NCP, PTK 132/2017, p. 43).

It is quite clear that all types of so-called ideological unemployment must be eliminated. This is best achieved by removing incentive traps and requiring the unemployed to actively seek work (Kiviranta, CP, PTK 132/2017, p. 65).

The idea of supporting active and diligent workers coincides with right-wing ideologies emphasizing individual responsibility to contribute to society in order to be deserving of assistance from the state. It is also in accordance with the austerity discourse which emphasizes hardworking and resilient people as a route out of the economic downturn and public debt, as well as highlighting the division between deserving and undeserving groups of people (e.g., Forkert, 2017). Those who expressed such standpoints were all representatives from the government (NCP and CP), while opposition parties expressed a desire for universal, unconditional forms of support (SDP, GP, and LA). This can be interpreted in two ways; as an expression of government vs. opposition dynamics or due to ideological factors. Here the political ideological differences were visible: right-wing parties favoured individualistic perceptions, and the opposition expressed more collectivistic perceptions of social issues (with the exceptions of the FP and SPP).

### **Moral vs. instrumental poverty policy**

Poverty and inequality were often mentioned within the same context in the interpellation debate. In some cases, poverty was equated to inequality, or poverty was described as an expression of inequality. Of the three categories in this study, this is where the greatest differences between the political parties could be observed. The government parties repeatedly emphasized labour market policy as the solution to the poverty problem and unemployment was seen as the reason for financial problems.

... the basic problem remains that we have inequality, we have poverty. The greatest reason is unemployment. Unemployment is based on various things, which is why employment should come first for everything to work well in Finland (Orpo, NCP, PTK 132/2017, p. 33).

While the economy was presented as the main solution, it was simultaneously used to emphasize and give credit to the government’s labour market policies and decrease unemployment. The emphasis on work was also used as a counterargument to the opposition’s proposals which mostly contained structural, social methods of fighting poverty and inequality.

Inequality is not stopped, for example, by the proposal of the main opposition, that is, by sharpening the progression of taxation, raising capital income taxation, eliminating the corporate tax deduction and tightening dividend taxation. These cause unemployment. Inequality is tackled, in line with the government’s agenda, through measures to create the conditions for new jobs, reward diligence and enable risk-taking without fear of society’s safety nets failing (Suutari, CP, PTK 132/2017, p. 43).

Where the government parties wanted to focus on the national economy and steer the population towards labour (leading to greater tax incomes and lesser social expenditures), the opposition parties called

for solutions to social problems through social assistance, strengthening the social protection system. MP Rinne (SDP), expressed his frustration over that austerity measures had hit those already poor while tax breaks were given to the wealthy. He called this right-wing politics (PTK 132/2017, p. 55), which elucidates the foundational disagreements between the government and opposition parties. The opposition called for more inclusive policies which present a moral standpoint on the issue by viewing the state as a collective and should take moral responsibility for supporting people in the lower socio-economic classes. Politicians from the opposition parties repeatedly asked if the government considered it fair that the situation had worsened for low-income earners, claiming that the government had taken from the poor and given to the rich. Previous studies have shown that fairness gets side-lined in favour of economic growth and limiting state debt in times of austerity policies (Autto & Törrönen, 2019).

The government is cutting from pensioners, students, families with children, and the unemployed. Why do we have hundred-meter bread lines in Finland today, like we did yesterday? Why is Hursti's (*a charity organization, eds.*) mercy work needed for people to get by in their daily lives? Why do people have to choose between bread and medicine? (Ojala-Niemelä, SDP, PTK 132/2017, p. 40).

Contrary to the government parties, the opposition parties stressed social methods and soft values in their policies. It can be argued that this was used as an argumentation method against the government parties. However, it was mainly the opposition parties that brought up issues of, for example, the working poor, the growing bread lines in the country, as well as the social aspects of poverty such as exclusion, hopelessness, and marginalization.

Marginalization is a sense of exclusion and invisibility; a lack of faith that sometimes things could be better; small mundane dreams, the realization of which are seen as impossible (Parviainen, GP, PTK, 132/2017, p. 52).

The opposition also stressed inequalities among the population that they considered to have increased due to the government's policies, both in financial aspects and in terms of access to healthcare services and education between different areas around the country. Again, this concerns moral standpoints – to advocate for equality – rather than pure instrumental poverty policy, but can simultaneously be seen as an argumentations tactics against the government's policies.

## Discussion

This article set out to examine how Finnish politicians framed poverty and what policies they advocated for dealing with this problem. Based on our analysis, a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, there seemed to be an overall and concordant understanding of poverty according to a structural view. In most cases, there was also agreement concerning which groups in society need assistance. The noticeable difference concerned the form in which assistance should be given. Parties on the right tended to see poverty as something that could be remedied through the market and booming growth, as well as stricter rules on benefits such as unemployment benefits. By contrast, left-wing parties refrained from benefit cuts and instead called upon the welfare state to ease the way of the poor into the labour market, for example by using active labour-market policies. This result aligns with previous studies and shows that poverty constructions and policy recommendations in this field are strongly impregnated by political ideology (Nygård, 2020). Political systems are often path dependent, meaning that drastic measures are needed to change and disrupt the stability of them. In this case, there seemed to be an agreement on the nature and causes of poverty that superseded the disagreements on what should be done. In a way, this can be

interpreted as an influence of a Nordic welfare-state legacy, where the structural view on poverty is salient (e.g., Kangas, 2019; Niemelä, 2008).

Second, the influence of neoliberalist thinking was less prevalent in the debate than expected. According to previous research (Nygård, 2019), neoliberal ideas on austerity have become stronger in Finnish policymaking, but we could not trace such ideas in this debate.

Even though the word “inequality” was used more than “poverty”, inequality was discussed in economic terms, for example in relation to cutbacks in social assistance or concerning peoples’ income. This corresponds with the theoretical foundation as well as previous research on the relationship between poverty and inequality. In theoretical discussions, inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources between groups, whereas poverty refers to the lack of disposable income or resources. During the interpellation debate, the words “poverty” and “inequality” were often used together or as substitutes for each other, and in poverty theories, poverty can also be seen as a question of equality or fairness. Poverty can itself be a product of inequality, and addressing this may require taking moral standpoints or instrumental policy tactics to combat the negative effects poverty has on society.

The limited use of the words “poverty” and “poor” begs to question why the politicians did not explicitly use such words while still referencing conditions that would be considered as poverty. Was it simply a case of favouring a discourse of equality/inequality, or seeing inequality and poverty as being similar conditions? Are the words “poverty” and “poor” too value-charged? Or was there in actuality a lack of political interest to address poverty as a deprivation issue? While it was acknowledged that there are groups who suffer in the Finnish welfare state, there were few signs of politicians being willing to call it out as a poverty issue. Instead, a discourse of equality was dominant, shifting focus towards redistribution and issues of fairness, possibly displaying a notion of not seeing poverty as an urgent issue in a welfare state. This can also be a reflection of the strong social democratic tradition within the Nordic welfare systems, elucidating path dependency as well. It can also be argued that this is an effect of the transition to using terms such as (social) exclusion rather than poverty within the EU political and administrative arena, as described by Saari (2015).

While interpellation debates provide insight into current discussions, the study is limited by the contextual borders of the debate. The study gives a snapshot of the current conditions, but may not completely reflect ideologies over extended periods of time. The financial crisis gave strength to austerity policies, and though criticized, the policies were still enforced in order to adjust the state economy. This showcases how ideological paths are strengthened or weakened depending on current national and international events and circumstances. However, some policies, like the activation model for the unemployed, were scrapped by the following social democratic-led government of Rinne/Marin, and the focus shifted to soft-value policies, which might suggest an ideological move towards the left as the new government formation was almost reversed politically compared to the Sipilä-government. It will yet be seen if this shift will withstand future economic challenges, or if this was simply a counteraction towards the previous governmental setup. Further research could deeper explore both the ideological impact of policies and the effects of different policy methods on poverty alleviation, especially with the publication of an action plan to alleviate poverty by 2030 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2022).

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