

# Messenger and defender – Timo Soini’s populist leadership and media strategies in winning the elections of 2011

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The result of the Finnish parliamentary elections in 2011 was a surprise for many, as the True Finns (TF), a Finnish populist and nationalist political party of 5 parliamentarians, won the elections by boosting its parliamentary power obtaining altogether 39 seats. This article examines the populist leadership and media strategies of the party’s leader, Timo Soini, during the campaigning. Recent studies about the elections of 2011 confirm that the role of Timo Soini was crucial in gaining the votes for his party. However, as a media performer Timo Soini has not received much academic attention. Also the nature and amount of the media publicity of him and TF has remained in short supply. The goal of this article is to start filling that gap. The central assumption is that in the media publicity political leaders try to exploit the situation to their best advantage: create a basis of support for their policies by managing their visibility within the mediated arena. Scrutinizing a populist newcomer party’s leader’s interaction with the media, two central roles come up. To work successfully via the media, the leader needs to be both a messenger and a defender. As a messenger, the central task is to articulate the party’s program, policies and goals as convincingly and grippingly as possible. To work effectively in the media, a leader must also be able to repel the attacks, like criticism or rumours, which endanger the party’s or its leader’s credibility and reputation.

*Keywords:* Party leadership, populist parties, Timo Soini, media publicity, electoral campaign, parliamentary elections, populist leadership

## Introduction

The result of the Finnish parliamentary elections in April 2011 surprised everyone. True Finns (TF, *Perussuomalaiset* in Finnish)<sup>1</sup>, a Finnish populist and nationalist political party of 5 members of parliament at the time, won the elections by gaining altogether 39 seats and 19.1 per cent of the votes (Table 1), a great boost to their parliamentary power. All the other parties suffered losses compared to the previous parliamentary elections in 2007. The historical victory of the True Finns rearranged the established standing of the three largest parties by overtaking also the previous prime ministerial party, the Centre Party (*Suomen Keskusta*).

True Finns is distinctively the project and life work of Timo Soini, leader and co-founder of the party that was established in the ruins of the former centre-populist Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen Maaseudun puolue*, SMP) in 1995<sup>2</sup>. In the context of the Finnish political system the TF is a newcomer, even if its leader is already a seasoned politician and party leader: at the time of the elections, Soini had the longest run as party leader in the parliament with 14 years of continuous leadership.

The national share of votes of the True Finns has grown

slowly but steadily since the general elections of 1999 (Table 1). The presidential elections of 2006 were, however, the turning point for both the party and its leader Timo Soini as their candidate: those elections raised the TF’s profile and gave the party electoral credibility (Arter, 2010, 488). Since that Soini’s personal electoral success has been breathtaking. He gained the second highest individual polls in local elections of 2008 and the highest polls in next two subsequent elections: 2009 European Parliament elections and 2011 general elections<sup>3</sup>.

In the times of electoral competition the struggle for power is increasingly framed as a battle between party leaders in the media (see Mughan, 2000; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Langer, 2007; 2011; Niemi, 2011). Typically for populist parties, also in the TF leadership plays a central role. Publicity-wise Timo Soini has been able to allure far

<sup>1</sup> Since August 2011, the True Finns official name in English has been “The Finns Party”. To avoid misunderstandings, the commonly known and already established name “True Finns” is applied in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Timo Soini joined SMP at the age of 16 in 1979. The party managed to get 10 percent of the votes in some parliamentary elections; its standings were highest in the beginning of the 1970’s and again in the beginning of the 1980’s. Soini worked as party secretary from 1992 until the bankruptcy and breakdown of the party in 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Finland: Eduskuntavaalit [verkkojulkaisu].ISSN=1799-6252. Helsinki: Tilastokeskus [21.6.2011] <http://www.stat.fi/ti/evaa/index.html>.

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Table 1  
*The True Finns in the general elections, 1999–2011. Source: Statistics Finland (<http://www.stat.fi/til/vaa.html>).*

Year	Votes	Share of the total votes	Seats in parliament (Total 200)
1999	26 440	.99 %	1
2003	43 816	1.57 %	3
2007	112 256	4.05 %	5
2011	560 075	19.05 %	39

more media visibility for his party than its parliamentary size would appear to predict. (Berg & Niemi, 2009, 57–58, 61, 98–100). In the elections of 2011 both the popularity and the amount of media publicity ballooned further.

According to Paul Taggart (2000, 103), the populist emphasis on leadership reflects both a desire to reduce institutional complexity and the faith in leadership itself. In selecting the party to support, the voters of the True Finns were the ones who stressed most the importance of leadership. When asked about the crucial factors behind their party selection criteria, a good party leader was the most important issue. (Borg, 2012b, 200–201; see also Grönlund & Westinen, 2012, 178, 182.)

Interestingly, in the electoral competition of 2011, TF's campaign was by far the least professionalized<sup>4</sup> in the sense of both party structure and campaign strategy. This gives reason to hypothesize that the role of the “free” media space of political reporting may have been crucial in the rise of the party. (Moring & Mykkänen, 2012, 64, 75.) As the campaign was lean and its budget small, the role of the party leader and his actions in the media are worth scrutinizing further (Borg, 2012b, 201).

### *Nationalist and populist party*

The rapid growth of populist – typically right-wing – parties throughout Europe has led researchers to scrutinize the societal circumstances explaining this triumphal march (Widfeldt, 2000; Rydgren, 2004; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; on TF see Arter, 2010; Borg, 2012a; Wiberg, 2011b). The rise of new issues – like the environmental topics, immigration and the EU – on the political agenda has presented difficulties for more traditional parties and helped newcomers to challenge the power of ruling parties (Blomqvist & Green-Pedersen, 2004, 588, 597). Populist parties flourish when their adherents feel the onset of crisis and moral collapse (Taggart, 2000, 102). Criticism of the EU is an integral part also of the TF's program, and morality, religion, law and order are all highlighted by the party (see Widfeldt, 2000, 493; Raunio, 2011, 205; Mickelsson, 2011, 153–158; Ruostetsaari, 2011, 123–124).

The politicization of the immigration issue has been of great importance in creating niches in the electoral arena –

not least because it allows the parties in question better to garner media coverage (Rydgren, 2004, 476). In the electoral campaign of 2011 Soini himself was hardly active on immigration issues at all. However, the growing amount of criticism towards immigration within the party's ranks has been an important factor behind the rise of the party. (Pernaa, 2012, 31–32; Mickelsson, 2011, 164, 169–170; Railo, 2012, 437, 440–442).

In a nutshell, the True Finns' politics are a mixture of traditionalism, nationalism and modern populism (see Arter, 2010, Ruostetsaari, 2011; Mickelsson, 2011). Placing the party on the left–right spectrum has proven trickier, for their programs mix aspects from both directions. The party also lacks the extreme-rightist background of their cousins in Sweden (*Sverigedemokraterna*). In this sense the party has more in common with its Norwegian (*Framstegspartiet*) and Danish (*Dansk Folkeparti*) relatives. (Widfeldt, 2008, 275; see also Rydgren, 2004, 479–480; Borg, 2012b, 199.)

Speaking in the name of “the ordinary people” is a central and useful technique of populist parties, as it implies that the party has the trust and even the majority of the “common people” behind it. As Taggart notes, the important numerousness included in the idea of “the people” should not be confused with plurality: the concept is essentially monolithic although it remains undefined (Taggart, 2000, 92).

Common features of topical European populist parties include typically an anti-establishment (including the “media elite”), anti-politics and anti-intellectualism attitude. The emphasis is on the personalized leadership of key individuals while the party organization is weak. These parties are willing to limit immigration; in their rhetoric “own” citizens always come first. (Mudde, 2007, 66–67, 219–222, 260; Taggart, 2000, 16, 73–83, Arter, 2010, 488–489.) On the strength of the electoral results, the TF is distinctively a men's party. In the elections of 2011 it was the most favored party among men (22 per cent); clearly fewer women (16 per cent) chose to vote for them (Grönlund & Westinen, 2012, 159; Borg, 2012b, 195; see also Mudde, 2007, 90–118).

### *Research questions, material and theoretical background*

In winning the elections, a prominent media presence is important, but it is naturally just one part of a larger package: a newcomer wishing to break into an existing party system also needs an ideology, policies, leadership, a campaign strategy and so on (Mudde, 2007, 256–276; see also Widfeldt, 2008, 265). The voters' lack of faith in the well-established parties has often created an opening in the party space allowing newcomers to fill it in. (Widfeldt, 2008, 265.) The disappointment towards more traditional parties was apparent in the Finnish climate of opinion as well, and TF fed

<sup>4</sup> The state of professionalization consists of eight factors, including the campaign budget, the number of staff working on the campaign, the length of the campaign, the use of new means of communication and so on. (See also Moring & Mykkänen, 2012, 64)

this resentment by criticizing the “old parties” for their mistakes.

This interdisciplinary study examines the media publicity of the leader of the True Finns, Timo Soini, during the campaigning for the Finnish general elections of 2011. Visibility in the media does not in and of itself explain the party’s success and no leader can win the elections on one’s own. However, there are good grounds for the interpretation that in the electoral competition of 2011 these two factors were of particular importance. As this case study is about the leader of a relatively young populist party making its breakthrough, the nature of populist leadership and the role of media publicity in gaining support are strongly present in the analysis.

The primary research material includes reporting in the leading Finnish daily *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), both nationwide tabloids *Ilta-Sanomat* (IS) and *Ilta-lehti* (IL) and the three largest local dailies, *Aamulehti* (AL) from Tampere, *Turun Sanomat* (TS) from Turku and *Kaleva* from Oulu. The material is gathered from 1st January 2011 until the election day, 17th April 2011. To create a general picture of the electoral campaign’s media publicity, the primary newspaper material is complemented with additional research material gathered for a more comprehensive research project. It consists, first of all, of 10 more Finnish newspapers during the same time period<sup>5</sup>. The second part of the additional material consists of the information in TV programmes of the national broadcasting company *Yleisradio* (Yle) 17th February–17th April 2011<sup>6</sup>. The primary research material is analyzed by qualitative content analysis. The theoretical background of this article is a mixture of research literature concerning populism and political leadership, relationship between media and politics, especially the bandwagon and issue ownership theories, and theories on political scandals.

Recent studies about the elections of 2011 confirm that the role of Timo Soini was crucial in gaining the votes for his party (Borg, 2012a, Borg, 2012b, 200–201; Karvonen, 2012, 321–322; Grönlund & Westinen, 2012, 182; see also Herkman, 2011, 47, 166). However, as a media performer Timo Soini has not received much academic attention. Also the nature and amount of the media publicity of him and TF has remained in short supply. The goal of this article is to start filling that gap. What were the main policy issues in relation to which Soini appeared? What kinds of strategies did he use to maximize favorable attention for his party? Taking advantage of one’s “own” issues is important, but so is also the capability of preventing criticism and negative publicity – and sometimes even blocking sensations growing into scandals. How did Soini respond to the publicity challenges he encountered during the campaign? Last but not least: what kind of a role did media publicity play in the party’s electoral victory?

### Ensuring presence and utilizing favorable topics

Populist leaders, often seen as charismatic and talented in using the media for their benefit, are recognized as playing a central role in the breakthrough of their parties (Brug &

Mughan, 2007, 31–32; Bos & Brug, 2010, 778; Mazzoleni, 2008, 49, 55). In their typical media and communication strategies populist parties often include identification as a “media underdog” to gain popular support, clever exploitation of free media publicity and attracting media attention by staging media events. An overarching element of all the strategies above is the apparent willingness to see leaders as embodiments of these parties’ identities. (Stewart et al., 2003, 230, 232; see also Mazzoleni, 2008, 49–50; Taggart, 2000, 100.)

Visibility in mass media involves several positive opportunities for newcomers. Firstly, the attention paid to these parties may indicate what is politically salient and thereby help them legitimize their leaders, candidates and issues in the eyes of voters. Secondly, if a party leader wants to be seen as effective, which is important in the eyes of voters, visibility is the key. Prominence makes a small newcomer relevant and more attractive for voters, as media attention signals that the party is taken seriously and may get in power. For the rational voter who wants to vote influentially it means that a vote given to these parties is not a lost one. (Bos et al., 2011, 186, 197; Brug, 2004, 218.)

In times of electoral campaigning, party leaders work hard together with the party’s organization, trying to get the widest possible attention for the party’s policies, goals and candidates. The TF succeeded in this nicely: the party enjoyed wide media publicity – they even dominated the headlines from time to time. The economic crisis within the EU as well as domestic attempts to stabilize the economy in Finland became topical (Tables 2–3). The economic crisis of the EU, economic difficulties in Finland and the expensive efforts to help countries in trouble made criticism towards the EU more acceptable (see also Grönlund & Westinen, 2012, 168). Interestingly, the party itself became one of the most discussed topics. The nature of the TF “phenomenon”, like the party’s growing popularity and its programmatic output (or the lack thereof) was among the top issues in both dailies and tabloids. The TF’s continuous rise in the polls repeatedly guaranteed the party publicity in the headlines (Tables 2–3 & 6; see also Borg, 2012b, 207).

On the threshold of the general elections of 2011, the national broadcasting company *Yleisradio* decided to include Timo Soini in its TV debates for prime minister candidates. The main explanation for this decision was the rocket-like rise of the True Finns’ support in polls. It seemed possible or even likely that after the elections Finland would have four large parties instead of three, for Soini might lead his party to the government.

Stewart and her colleagues (2003, 218) have presented a typical life cycle of the “media–neo-populism interplay” including four phases starting from the (1) ground-laying

<sup>5</sup> Etelä-Saimaa; Etelä-Suomen Sanomat; Hufvudstadsbladet; Ilkka; Karjalainen; Keski-suomalainen; Lapin Kansa; Länsi-Savo; Savon Sanomat & Satakunnan Kansa.

<sup>6</sup> The material consists of the descriptions of news and other programs on Yle TV1 and Yle TV2 channels with the headword “Timo Soini”.

Table 2  
Ten most common policy topics in daily newspapers 1. Jan–17. Apr. 2011 (N=9 671).

	n
1. <i>Balancing state economy</i>	863
2. <i>EU economic crisis</i>	849
3. <i>Provincial issues</i>	810
4. <i>The True Finns “phenomenon”</i>	667
5. <i>Immigration and foreigners</i>	583
6. <i>Energy policy</i>	474
7. <i>Polls on the popularity of parties</i>	471
8. <i>Sensations concerning the financing of parties’ earlier campaigns</i>	435
9. <i>Pensions and efforts to lengthen careers</i>	375
10. <i>Security policy</i>	374

Note: The material includes the sections of domestic politics, regional issues, editorials and letters to the editor, but not sections of culture, foreign politics or economy in the following newspapers: *Aamulehti*; *Etelä-Saimaa*, *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Hufvudstadsbladet*, *Ilkka*, *Kaleva*, *Karjalainen*, *Keskisuomalainen*, *Lapin Kansa*, *Länsi-Savo*, *Savon Sanomat*, *Satakunnan Kansa* and *Turun Sanomat*. Single articles may have touched upon several topics. Data on the media agenda of general elections 2011; University of Turku, Center for Parliamentary Studies (material gathered by research assistants Niko Hatakka and Matti Välimäki). See also Perna & Railo, 2012.

Table 3  
Ten most common policy topics in tabloids (*Ilta-Sanomat*, *Ilta-lehti*) 1. Jan–17. Apr. 2011 (N= 886).

	n
1. <i>Superficial stories and private life</i>	96
2. <i>The True Finns “phenomenon”</i>	87
3. <i>EU economic crisis</i>	86
4. <i>Polls concerning the popularity of parties</i>	69
5. <i>Balancing the state economy</i>	49
6. <i>Electoral campaigning</i>	59
7. <i>Electoral advertising</i>	43
8. <i>Competition between parties and their nomination of candidates</i>	37
9. <i>Competition for prime ministerial position</i>	35
10. <i>Financing current campaigns</i>	32

Note: The material includes the sections of domestic politics, regional issues, editorials and letters to the editor, but not sections of culture, foreign politics or economy in *Ilta-lehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*. Single articles may have touched upon several topics. Data on the media agenda of general elections 2011; University of Turku, Center for Parliamentary Studies (material gathered by research assistants Niko Hatakka and Matti Välimäki). See also Perna & Railo, 2012.

phase, continuing to the (2) insurgent phase and then to the (3) established phase ending with the (4) decline phase. When applied to the case of the TF, it can be inferred that the party reached the insurgent phase during the run-up of the general elections, culminating in the electoral victory of 2011.

In Finland tabloids have been active in their criticism of political and other elites and in placing themselves on the side of the “people” (Heino, 2006; 2007) – a message peculiar to populist politics as well (Taggart, 2000, 91–95). Also the sympathy or understanding for populist movements is more often present in the tabloids as their audiences are more likely to be supporters of these parties (Stewart et al., 2003, 222). Building up tensions by aggravations and the use of personal and emotional perspectives and extravagant rhetoric is common for both the reporting in tabloids and the political style of populists. In the light of both media visibility and the style of reporting, the above-mentioned connection between populists and tabloids seems close also in Finland (Tables 3 & 5). Timo Soini was the most visible party leader of the country in tabloids bypassing even the prime minister. However, the publicity was not always pleasant in nature (Tables 4–5).

The populism of the media themselves – especially tabloids – makes a significant contribution to the spread of the populist parties’ message. The media has been involved in creating a climate of cynicism and disenchantment which has subsequently created a niche for populist parties to grow in. (Stewart et al., 2003, 219–220.) The media have contributed also to a legitimization of the issues important to populist parties, as well as providing keywords and communication styles typical for populist leaders (Mazzoleni, 2008, 50).

While the media is willing to parrot potentially sensational or funny sound bites of populist leaders in their reporting, also the leaders work hard to produce emotional discourses to hit the headlines and gain support from “the ordinary people”. Furthermore, the tendency of the media to focus on dramatic topics instead of deeper long-term analyses suits the goals of populist parties (Stewart et al., 2003, 221, 226). This results in the media, often perhaps unintentionally, serving as an important mobilization tool for populist movements (Mazzoleni, 2008, 50).

The relationship between politics and media is fraught with potential conflict: journalists may pursue agendas opposed to those that politicians would prefer them to take (Thompson, 2005, 41; see also Stewart et al., 2003, 211). This tension was also present in the TF’s case, as Soini was time and again forced to answer annoying questions and to explain mistakes and rumours which contained the seeds of a political scandal (Table 4). However, also the sensational publicity underlined the party’s importance in its topical political moment.

The same epithets that are commonly used to describe the Finn’s nature like honesty, hard work and a sense of justice, also fit the public image of its leader Soini himself as he tends to underline the significance of straightforwardness, trustworthiness and fairness. However, Soini’s personal rep-

Table 4

*Life cycles of the four most visible media sensations concerning the True Finns 1. Jan–17. Apr. 2011.*

Case	Occasion	Media reactions	Soini's response	Duration & timing
1. "Copy scandal"	TF's program for climate and energy policy, presented as "Soini's model" was exposed to be partly copied.	Tabloids active, dailies reacted as well. "Embarrassing" "Reputation is tarnished".	Apologized quickly, admitted the mistake and promised to mend his ways.	Roughly a week; late January, early February.
2. "Change of heart"	If allowed to vote against the bailouts, TF might after all join a coalition government that increases Finland's share in helping EU countries with economic troubles.	Harsh criticism of Soini across all media for "backtracking" and "abandoning his principles".	Quick and humble retreat: "It is worth learning when the world teaches you." The party's new goal was to win a majority for the parties critical towards bailouts.	Roughly two weeks; late March, early April.
3. "Abortion scandal"	Soini was accused of refusing to explain his views on abortion and behaving arrogantly towards a schoolgirl asking whether he would deny abortion also to victims of rape.	Topic present every now and then but heated after <i>Ilta-lehti</i> wrote that Soini had "flared up" after "a schoolchild went for the jugular".	Played underdog first by accusing journalists of mischief, later by pointing to his painful memories from younger years: "I really am a very highly emotional person".	Roughly two weeks; late March, early April.
4. "Personal attacks"	Soini was accused by several former party members to be "a princess and an autarch", "a dictator" that also oppresses and belittles women.	Tabloids covered the story impressively, not followed by dailies.	Denied the accusations on sight. "Mud-slinging by jealous people does not bother me".	A few days; late March, early April.

*Note: "Copy scandal": The program appeared to have been partly copied from a report produced by the Finnish Metalworkers' Union "Metalli" for the Finnish parliament approximately one year before. Matti Putkonen, a former employee of Metalli, had brought his ideas with him as he moved to work in electioneering at the True Finns office. (IS 5.2.2011; IL 5.2.2011; TS 5.2.2011; Aamulehti 6.2.2011; Kaleva 6.2.2011). Soini admitted the similarities in both papers and promised to be more alert in the future (Yle TV1 4.2.2011; HS 5.2.2011; IS 5.2.2011). "Change of heart": Timo Soini had made it clear that TF would not join a coalition government that increases Finland's share in helping EU countries with economic difficulties. (Yle TV1 17.3.2011; Yle TV1 18.3.2011.) Later on, however, his views softened. (Yle TV1 28.3.2011; HS 23.3.2011; IL 24.3.2011; IS 24.3.2011.) The situation was captivating, as TF had earlier criticized the Green Party for its eagerness to cling on to power even if it compromised the party's core principles. (Yle TV1 22.3.2011; IS 29.3.2011; AL 29.3.2011; IL 29.3.2011; HS 29.3.2011; Kaleva 29.3.2011.) A day later the TF's new goal was announced to be winning the majority in government for the parties which resisted the bailouts. (Yle TV1 29.3.2011; AL 30.3.2011; TS 30.3.2011; see also IL 5.4.2011). "Abortion scandal": Soini's anti-abortionist views were well-known before the elections. However, Soini had underlined that his views were personal opinions, not the party line. In the very first TV-debate (Yle 17.3.2011) of party leaders, abortion was again on the agenda. A few days later Soini answered readers' questions in *Ilta-lehti* but refused to explain further his views on abortion. "I will not answer that. You are not asking other politicians these kinds of questions either", he claimed (IL 19.3.2011). Soini faced criticism on the topic especially in *Ilta-lehti* but succeed in turning the tide for his benefit in *Ilta-Sanomat* (IL 28.3.2011; IS 9.4.2011). "Personal attacks": *Ilta-lehti* placed an exposé about Timo Soini on its cover (IL 29.3.2011). The paper revealed that according to the former party secretary Hannu Purho, Soini "cannot stand any criticism whatsoever", and as a leader Soini is "a bit of a dictator". The party's former vice-chairperson, Terttu Savola, accused Soini of bad behavior like "shouting his head off at her". (IL 29.3.2011). The very next day *Ilta-Sanomat* added to the heat by letting some of the former party members say their piece. "Soini oppresses women", the headline claimed. Former female members told that women were silenced and belittled in the party – their "coffee-making skills were appreciated", however. (IS 30.3.2011) Soini defended himself by stating that "working in politics requires the ability to stand some discomfort" (IL 1.4.2011).*

Table 5  
*Media visibility of the leaders of political parties in parliament in tabloids (Ilta-Sanomat, Iltalehti) 1 Jan–17 Apr 2011.*

	n
1. <b>Timo Soini, True Finns</b>	194
2. <b>Mari Kiviniemi, Centre Party</b>	139
3. <b>Jyrki Katainen, National Coalition Party</b>	117
4. <b>Jutta Urpilainen, Social Democratic Party of Finland</b>	112
5. <b>Anni Sinnemäki, Green League</b>	32
6. <b>Päivi Räsänen, Finnish Christian Democrats</b>	26
7. <b>Paavo Arhinmäki, Left Alliance</b>	22
8. <b>Stefan Wallin, Swedish People's Party</b>	21

*Note:*The material gathered includes the sections on domestic politics, regional issues, editorials and letters to the editor but not culture, foreign politics or economics in *Iltalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*. A single article may have touched upon several topics. Data on the media agenda of general elections 2011; University of Turku, Center for Parliamentary Studies (material gathered by research assistants Niko Hatakka and Matti Välimäki). See also Pernaa & Railo, 2012.

utation hung in the balance during media sensations – most of them taking place just a few weeks before the elections (Table 5).

There is no unanimity concerning the effects of scandals on parties' electoral success. It seems, however, that the role of media publicity has become more important than before partly because other factors, such as party identification and social background, have lost their significance (Midtbø, 2012, 156–158). One thing is clear nonetheless: media scandals of different sizes have become more regular in Nordic countries since the 1990's and more visibility in the media is given also to topics of minor societal importance (Allern & Pollack, 2012a, 182, 184)

Reports on political scandals are goods in the marketplace which help to sell the papers. At the same time they also represent symbolic capital boosting the media's image as guardian of public life (Allern & Pollack, 2012b, 19). However, scandals are also used as weapons in political rivalries. Politicians' careers and the success of their parties depends on their credibility, so understandably politicians try to influence the process and outcome of the sensations to the best of their ability (Jenssen & Fladmoe, 2012, 52–53).

Soini's efforts to handle the sensations were not in vain. His immediate response to the growing criticism and willingness to speak out were essential in preventing the sensations from growing, spreading and strengthening (compare Thompson, 2001). In Soini's strategic toolbox there were several different choices to resort to. He reacted quickly, explained and apologized when needed, but offered also different framings instead of the ones journalists provided. For example in the "copy-sensation" Soini gave an alternative interpretation of the mistake's relevance, stating that attention should not focus on the manner of presentation: good ideas

should be universal. In the case concerning abortion Soini was first chased, but he managed to turn the publicity to his advantage by playing the role of an underdog. Roughly a week after the attacks, *Ilta-Sanomat* published an emotional article on Soini. According to the paper Soini's voice broke with emotion and tears were shining in his eyes, as he finally opened up about his abortion views. The abortion issue "clearly inflamed the emotions of the party leader", the paper wrote. (IS 9.–10.4.2011.)

### Beneficial publicity of the euro crisis and the rising support of the True Finns

In spring 2011 the main goal of the True Finns was to change Finnish EU policy. The party announced it was not willing to join a coalition government which would give financial support to eurozone countries in need. It also resisted the idea of mentioning EU membership in the constitution of Finland. At the end of March, party leader Timo Soini posited that the Finnish parliamentary elections are in fact a referendum on Finland's policy concerning EU politics.

For a single party, the important question concerning elections is how much light it and its candidates are able to shed on the issues that are most beneficial for them, meaning the topics in which they are strongest and in which they have a good reputation (see Blomqvist & Green-Pedersen 2004, 610–611). In Finland, among the topics that enjoyed the widest attention in the newspapers around the time of the parliamentary elections in 2011 were firstly, balancing the state economy, and secondly, the European financial crises; also in the tabloids the crisis of the EU was among the top three topics (Tables 2–3). Portugal's request for help electrified the discussion around the economic crisis of the eurozone, and EU politics became a major subject of the elections, dominating, for example, TV debates.

Several studies concentrating on the contents of news have examined the subject using the theory of issue ownership (Smith, 2010; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Petrocik, 1996). Issue ownership theory of voting underlines the role of electoral campaigns in setting the criteria for voters to choose between candidates. It argues that voters will vote for the party that is able to attract the most attention to its own issues during the campaign. Each party has a set of policy issues that they are strong in and have a good reputation at. This means parties can gain electoral support by increasing the salience of issues close to them during a campaign (Brug, 2004, 210–211; Smith, 2010, 1477). When a subject gains plenty of attention in the news, some voters give more priority to that particular subject (Brug, 2004, 212, 224; see also Petrocik, 1996, 829–830).

Portugal's request for help in the middle of the electoral battle came as a stroke of luck for the TF. Party leader Timo Soini got valuable backup for his critical message, accusing the Finnish government of carrying money abroad to wasteful bankers while there are decent people in need back at home as well (see IS 8.4.2011; IL 8.4.2011). Among the leaders of the four largest parties in the TV studio, Soini was

the only one strictly resisting all kinds of crisis funds. (Yle TV1 25.2.2011; Yle TV1 31.3.2011; Yle TV1 1.4.2011.)

When *Helsingin Sanomat* reported on Yle's debate for prime minister candidates, Soini was the focus of attention as other party leaders were challenging the "star of the polls". Like ever so often during the campaign, Soini's competitors accused him of irresponsibility. (HS 1.4.2011.) The same setup was repeated a few weeks later, as party leaders debated on the euro: Minister of Finance Jyrki Katainen and Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi were calling for "responsibility", Timo Soini and the leader of the Social Democrats, Jutta Urpilainen, were demanding "alternatives". As usual, Soini was a sharp-tongued critic of reckless banks and the eurozone being too extensive (HS 14.4.2011). Based on an analysis of the reporting in newspapers, Timo Soini was the leading figure of the EU critics and the most visible politician in fighting against the bailouts. Likewise, for Timo Soini, the economic crisis of the EU was the policy topic he appeared in most actively.

The reputation of parties in how they handle various issues emerges from their history. What increased the credibility of Soini's message was the fact that he had been openly euro-skeptical for as long as he had been a public figure in Finnish politics. Already in his presidential campaign in 2006 Soini launched his well-known witticism "Find the EU, find a problem" (see Soini, 2008, 210–211). For the True Finns the topical questions have been Finland's sovereignty in the EU and the prevailing tendency towards increasingly liberal values. Criticizing the EU has been present in the party's programmatic output ever since the very first program in 1995 (Raunio, 2011, 205; Mickelsson, 2011, 123).

As the leader of the smallest and newest party in the parliament, Timo Soini played the role of a challenger. The challenger may acquire a short-term advantage, a so-called "performance-based ownership of the issue", if the parties in power can be plausibly blamed on current difficulties and have obvious problems in handling the job (Petrocik, 1996, 827). Soini's reputation in demanding alternatives to the predominant cooperative and active participation in EU politics gave weight to his criticism. He had not changed his views or focus concerning the topic but the political and economic situation had changed so that his criticism was more plausible than before. However, Soini and the TF were also lucky, as the issue they had been active in before became the most important subject of the electoral campaign.

In the media publicity of the 2011 general elections, the rapid rise of the True Finns' support entered the media agenda with an unequalled force; it has even been described as the "great saga" of the elections. The rise of the party's success was steepest from March 2010 to March 2011: during those twelve months it grew a little over ten percentage points. (Suhonen, 2012, 46, 57.)

Polls concerning the support of political parties, and publishing, commenting on and analyzing them were among the top issues discussed during the election campaigns (Tables 2–3 & 6). Three national media alone – *Yleisradio*, MTV3 and *Helsingin Sanomat* – published ten nationwide surveys (Table 6). Furthermore, in the local newspapers included

in additional research material there were 17 local surveys<sup>7</sup>. The number of polls made was substantially higher than in previous parliamentary elections. The main reason for the increase is likely the notable change in parties' competitive positions. In the polls published late March 2011 the support for the TF was already over 17 per cent, while in early 2010 it was approximately 6 per cent. (Borg, 2011, 177; Table 6).

While opinion polls during election campaigns have become more numerous, also the public's exposure to them has increased. Furthermore, as a consequence of the loosening bond between parties and the electorate, more people than before are potentially available for being influenced by campaign effects like opinion polls. (McAllister & Studlar, 1991, 725, 736.) The methodological quality of published polls as well as the role of the media possibly misusing the information gathered via opinion polls has drawn concern and criticism (Sonck & Loosveldt, 2010, 231; Wiberg, 2011a, 45–53; Borg, 2011, 175–194). Compared to the actual results of the parties, especially the very last survey by Yleisradio was not accurate (Table 6). The magnitude of the TF's victory exceeded all expectations.

The publicity around the growth of the TF's rising popularity in polls can be divided into two main categories. First, a great number of news articles were written around the polls showing the party constantly gaining favor. Second, another large share was taken up by articles commenting on and analyzing the meaning, reasons and consequences of the party's triumph. In view of the bandwagon theory: how relevant to campaigning is the type of publicity gained? How did Soini capitalize on the publicity of his party's success?

On 18 March *Helsingin Sanomat* wrote of the Gallup poll which indicated that the TF had conquered second place in the race for the spot of largest party in the country (HS 18.3.2011). News of rising figures in polls were likely beneficial for the party and its leader for several reasons. Timo Soini (or rarely, other representatives of the party) got the opportunity to present time and again the reasons behind the party's success, like the assumptions that "Finns" could not understand why they should pay for "others'" mistakes: people were disappointed in the "old parties" which had not kept their promises and had gotten dirty in several sensations and even scandals. By listing the reasons to support his party, Soini got a chance to encourage hesitant voters as well as sustain the ones already allied behind the party.

The ability to shape and express the dissatisfaction of citizens – sometimes also produce or feed it – has surely been an important element in the rise of the TF. Yet the media image of the party is not as bleak as one might think. Timo Soini expressed openly his satisfaction with the party's success; pictures of him laughing in triumph were common especially in the tabloids' flamboyant reports. Celebrating the rising rates of the TF was likely to be advantageous, for it strengthened the picture of the party as a possible winner and therefore a worthy choice to vote for. (TS

<sup>7</sup> All local newspapers of the study except Aamulehti and Hufvudstadsbladet published 1-2 surveys providing information on the parties' support in their electoral district.

Table 6  
*Nationwide polls on party support, ordered by Yleisradio (YLE), MTV3 and Helsingin Sanomat (HS) 1 Jan–17 Apr. 2011, per cent.*

Release date	National Coalition Party	Social Democratic Party of Finland	True Finns	Centre Party	Left Alliance	Green League	Swedish People's Party	Finnish Christian Democrats
<b>26 Jan.</b> HS	21.0	18.2	16.2	18.3	8.1	8.8	4.2	4.1
<b>28 Jan.</b> YLE	20.4	18.9	16.6	18.5	7.2	9.2	4.1	3.8
<b>10 Feb.</b> MTV3	19.8	17.3	17.0	19.3	7.3	9.2	4.0	4.1
<b>17 Feb.</b> HS	20.2	17.9	17.9	18.2	8.0	8.8	4.0	4.0
<b>24 Feb.</b> YLE	20.9	17.5	16.9	18.9	7.3	8.5	3.9	4.2
<b>17 Mar.</b> YLE	20.1	18.1	17.2	18.1	7.3	9.0	3.8	4.6
<b>18 Mar.</b> HS	20.7	17.4	18.4	18.3	7.8	8.8	4.1	3.5
<b>5 Apr.</b> MTV3	19.9	18.1	16.2	19.8	7.7	8.4	4.2	4.2
<b>12 Apr.</b> HS	20.2	18.0	16.9	17.9	8.1	8.3	4.4	4.3
<b>14 Apr.</b> YLE	21.2	18.0	15.4	18.6	8.2	9.0	4.2	4.2
<b>Vote share in general elections</b>								
2011 (2007)	20.38 (22.26)	19.10 (21.44)	19.05 (4.05)	15.76 (23.11)	8.13 (8.82)	7.25 (8.46)	4.28 (4.57)	4.03 (4.86)

*Note:* Yleisradio (YLE) is the national broadcasting company, MTV3 is a commercial, also nationwide TV channel and Helsingin Sanomat (HS) is the most widely circulated daily newspaper in the country. Data of the "Media Agenda of General Elections 2011" project; University of Turku, Center of Parliamentary Studies (Gathered by research assistants Niko Hatakka and Matti Välimäki). See Pernaa & Railo, 2012; Statistics Finland. (<http://www.stat.fi/til/vaa.html>).

11.2.2011; *Kaleva* 11.2.2011; IS 11.2.2011; IL 11.2.2011; HS 17.2.2011; *Kaleva* 22.2.2011; IS 28.3.2011.)

In the beginning of the year 2011 the TF's support in nationwide polls had been between 16 and 18 per cent. It was cut off only in early April, just before election day, when polls indicated some come-down for the party compared to earlier polls (Table 6). (HS 12.4.2011; HS 15.4.2011; *Kaleva* 15.4.2011). "I place my trust in the Finnish people", Timo Soini commented confidently. "The nation has always helped me", he continued. (HS 15.4.2011.) Interestingly the worst figures for the TF in the polls were delivered just after the publicity challenges the party had faced in late March and early April (Table 4).

Can the information on other people's views act as a self-fulfilling prophecy? The bandwagon effect sees voters favoring, for whatever reason, a party that is doing well in the polls. If the information on the majority's opinion is widely reported, some voters may shift their support to follow the views of others. Conversely, the underdog effect predicts that support will go to a party trailing in polls: the very

same information causes some voters to adopt a minority view. (McAllister & Studlar, 1991, 721; Morwitz & Pluzinski, 1996, 54, 64; Marsh, 1985, 51.)

Even if the studies on the subject show inconsistent results, there are clearly grounds to assume that in some cases media dissemination of poll information may produce notable effects. Even if people do not adjust their opinions in light of any information produced by the polls they are exposed to, they are not indifferent to the poll results published. (See Sonck & Loosveldt, 2010, 250; McAllister & Studlar, 1991, 737; Morwitz & Pluzinski, 1996; Marsh, 1985, 51–54; Borg, 2011, 175.) In the rise of the True Finns there is reason to assume polls might have played at least a somewhat significant role. As a newcomer on the leading edge, the party was likely to benefit from the repeatedly published news on its growing popularity. The party's standing was strengthened, as it did not seem to be the small yet critical alternative anymore but a well-matched and worthy rival.

## Conclusions

In the media publicity political leaders try to exploit the situation as best they can to their advantage: they try to create a basis of support for their policies by managing their visibility within the mediated arena. The workings of the media and media logic, then, both enable and restrict their efforts. Scrutinizing Timo Soini's interaction with the media during electoral campaigning brings up two central roles. My interpretation is that to work successfully via the media, the leader of a populist newcomer party needs to be both a *messenger* and a *defender*.

As a *messenger*, the party leader's central task is to articulate the party's program, policies and goals as convincingly and grippingly as possible. In this, the leader's ability to bend the public's attention to the topics favorable for the party is paramount. Timo Soini succeeded in this: his anti-EU message was both accurate and plausible due to his earlier activity with the topic, and the repetitive nature of the publicity gave his message credibility.

There are several reasons for Timo Soini's success in gaining ground in the media. First of all: he truly was present in the media "for better and for worse". He appeared in reports and interviews commenting on the latest topics, criticizing competitors' antics, pushing forward his party's agenda, celebrating its growing popularity – and also explaining himself and defending his party when necessary. Secondly: Timo Soini was not only willing to appear in the media, he was also able to do so in an entertaining manner that sells papers. In this, Soini's quality as a politician of a populist nature plays an important role. His personal rhetorical style is often sarcastic, critical and humorous. He places himself in the shoes of the everyman, taunts the establishment as well as other parties and often depends on short, insightful exclamations and irony (see Mickelsson, 2011, 165, 167). In Soini's media strategy showmanship met availability in a manner that helped the party to maximize its publicity in the already favorable conditions of economic crisis.

However, there is no reason to underestimate the importance of the journalistic decisions made by editors in media companies. In predicting the support of anti-immigration parties, the public images of the leaders, especially their legitimacy and effectiveness, have been found significant (Bos & Brug, 2010). By naming Soini as one of the leading prime ministerial candidates and inviting him to the most important TV debates *Yleisradio* boosted the hype around the True Finns. The fact that this decision had sound journalistic grounds does not detract from its significance. The party's popularity in polls had risen notably before the decision was made, but it likely helped to keep the snowball effect running. Since *Yleisradio* is a major player in the media field, their decision was widely adopted by others, which multiplied the "prime-ministerial" treatment Soini enjoyed during the campaign.

Due to the media's willingness to report on the TF "phenomenon", and the party's rising support in the polls, and the topicality of the EU's economic crisis, the leader of the smallest group in parliament was able very beneficially to

heighten his and his party's profile. The journalistic decisions made and the amount of media publicity followed by those decisions gave the signal that Timo Soini was not only an established politician and party leader, but also a possible winner of the elections which made his party worth voting for.

Populist parties place themselves in opposition to the various elites of society – also the media. While media publicity served as a platform for the True Finns' message, the party included the "media-elite" in the "establishment" harshly criticised by the party. This gave the party's media relations a contradictory tone. Following his systematic media strategy, party leader Timo Soini was at the same time actively working with the media, gaining notable amounts of publicity on the one hand, and being critical towards the media for its partiality in favoring "old" parties and putting down the TF on the other.

While working as a messenger is important, it is not enough. The second task as a *defender* concerns the issues less favorable and even risky for the party. To work effectively in the media, a leader must be able to repel the attacks which endanger the party's or its leader's credibility and reputation. Soini was fairly successful also in this, although one important yet difficult task is to lead the party in a manner that pre-empts negative publicity.

A politician facing recurrent competitors' attacks is in a contradictory situation. On the one hand he or she is forced to react somehow to defend the party's reputation. Defending oneself is time-consuming and sensations may blot the politician's copybook for quite some time. However, in some cases, media coverage on the attacks contributes to the newsworthiness of the attacked party (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007, 377). Publicity-wise sensation-driven attention is therefore not only an adverse situation, as the party gets visibility anyhow and is able to highlight its policies.

Being attacked may in some cases also raise sympathy if a single party or politician seems to be harassed without reasonable cause or the party is treated unfairly compared to its opponents. As mentioned earlier, the media strategy of positioning themselves as an underdog is typical and often beneficial for populist parties. This may explain Timo Soini's willingness to every now and then assume the role of a victim – although it endangered his image as a strong and powerful leader. Whether or not this was a strategic decision, his resorting to emotional expression and intimate commenting served perhaps as a lifeline especially in the discussion concerning abortion. It is noteworthy that Soini did manage to get through that sensation without ever really answering the question about his view on the right for abortion of raped women.

It is impossible to say what kind of impact – if any – the sensational news had on the popularity of the True Finns simply by analysing the content of news. What we can note, however, is that even several unfavorable headlines could not prevent the party's historical electoral victory.

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