

# Intra-party democracy in Finland’s political parties

## Contents

Introduction.....	2
Political parties in Finland: An overview .....	2
Electoral system .....	2
Legislation concerning political parties.....	3
Decision-making in Finnish political parties: party congress .....	3
What is a party congress?.....	3
Who participates in the party congress?.....	3
Inclusion of underrepresented groups .....	4
Gender equality and women’s participation.....	4
Gender quotas.....	5
Women’s organisations in the political parties.....	5
Youth participation .....	6
Political youth organisations.....	6
Representation of young people in political party decision-making .....	6
Young people in the party congress.....	7
Participation of persons with disabilities .....	8
Participation of political party members in programme work.....	8
Working groups .....	8
Member surveys.....	9
Utilisation of new technologies .....	10

# Introduction

Participation in political life is a human right that must be guaranteed to all, including various minority groups. Therefore, the internal practices and activities of political parties must also be democratic and open to all.

Intra-party democracy refers to the rules, practices and procedures through which political parties support and implement the rights and opportunities of their members to participate in the decision-making of the party. This is an important issue because party policies determine how well or poorly the opinions and aspirations of citizens are represented in politics. Political parties are the gatekeepers of democracy.

Demo Finland has produced a publication in Finnish presenting the different ways in which Finnish parliamentary parties implement internal democracy. This is a summary of that publication, and the aim is to share some of the good practices, spark discussion on intra-party democracy in political parties in other countries and offer tools for peer learning.

There is no one right model of democracy, nor is there one right way to implement intra-party democracy. Each party's approach reflects its historical background, ideology and understanding of democracy. Therefore, the purpose of this publication is not to assess which party is the most or least democratic but to present different policies and practices. This publication is also not an exhaustive list of all practices contributing to intra-party democracy. Instead, it concentrates on how the participation of some of the underrepresented groups is supported and what kind of opportunities political party members have to participate in programme work of the parties.

## Political parties in Finland: An overview

Finland is a parliamentary representative democracy. Currently, there are nine political parties represented in the Finnish Parliament. The Parliament has 200 members, elected for a four-year term by proportional representation in multi-seat constituencies. Finland has a multi-party system, with multiple strong political parties, in which no one party often has a chance of gaining power alone, and parties must work with each other to form coalition governments. The party that wins the most MPs in the 200-member parliament gets the opportunity to form a government. Traditionally, Finland has coalition governments with strong majorities, and it varies which parties end up working together in the government.

The political party field in Finland is quite stable, and most of the current parliamentary parties or their predecessors have had seats in the Parliament for decades or even more than a hundred years.

### Electoral system

Finland's electoral system is based on the d'Hondt proportional representation model. This allows voters to pick one candidate from party lists, with the candidates then arranged in order of popularity. Each party list allocates seats in proportion to their vote share. In short, this means that the more popular candidates a party has, the better the party does. Popular candidates may then “draw” other candidates to get elected.

Seats in the Parliament in the term 2023–2027 (current government parties marked with G):

National Coalition Party 48 G

Finns Party 46 G

Social Democratic Party 43

Centre Party 23

Greens 13

Left Alliance 11

Swedish People's Party 10 G

Christian Democrats 5 G

Movement Now 1

## Legislation concerning political parties

Under Finnish law, political parties are registered associations, and associations are obliged under the Associations Act to guarantee the decision-making opportunities of their members in the activities of the association. However, the Act on Political Parties also assigns political parties a special responsibility to ensure ‘democratic decision-making’ in the party’s decision-making and activities. This provision affirms the general principle of democracy but deliberately leaves it to the political parties themselves to decide how this democracy is to be put into practice.

The starting point in Finnish legislation is that intra-party democracy is not a one-dimensional line from less democratic to more democratic, but that instead there are different models and practices of internal democracy from which the political parties can choose the ones that suit them best.

## Decision-making in Finnish political parties: party congress

### What is a party congress?

- The highest decision-making body of the Finnish parliamentary parties is the party congress.
- The party congress typically elects the party leadership and decides on the party programme.
- The cycle for arranging the party congress varies from annual to once every three years.

### Who participates in the party congress?

In two parliamentary parties, all members are allowed to participate in the party congress and its decision-making.

In other parliamentary parties, not all members may attend the party congress, but the right of representation is based on the number of members in the political party organisation and position in the party organisation.

Distribution of party congress representatives:

All members may attend	The relative share of the members of the district/national member organisation of the party's total number of members	The number of representatives is based on the number of members in the party organisation <sup>1</sup>
Finns Party Movement Now	Greens Left Alliance National Coalition Social Democrats	Centre Party Christian Democrats Swedish People's Party

<sup>1</sup> These political parties do not distribute party congress representation proportionally on a district-by-district basis, but instead each party organisation (such as district organisation, municipal organisation, basic organisation, special organisation), depending on its status, is entitled to a certain representation based on the number of its members.

In some of the political parties, the party congress representatives are elected in member elections either at the district level or in smaller constituencies.

In addition to the party congress, the most important decision-making bodies in the political parties are the party board, which leads the party's practical work, and the wider party council, which exercises the highest decision-making power between party congresses. The composition and powers of the party board and party council vary a lot from one political party to another.

## Inclusion of underrepresented groups

### Gender equality and women's participation

Although Finland is the first country in the world to grant women full political rights, the number of women in political positions is still generally lower than that of men. Of the municipal councillors elected in the 2021 municipal elections, 40.2 percent were women, and only 36 percent of the chairs of municipal boards were women. At the national level, there has never been a female majority in Parliament, but in the 2023 parliamentary elections, the proportion of women of all MPs was 46 percent. Several Finnish governments have had a female majority. Finnish legislation does not have any gender quotas for elections, but some political parties have adopted voluntary quotas.

The underrepresentation of women in politics is reflected not only in positions of trust but also in political party membership. Among the five biggest parliamentary parties, men form the majority in four parties.

## Gender quotas

Currently, binding gender quotas are in use in six out of the nine parliamentary parties. However, the extent of the quotas varies greatly from party to party.

The most extensive gender quotas can be found in the rules of the Centre Party: the party requires both men and women to have at least 40% representation in the party council, in the party board and in the working committee – that is, at all levels of decision-making. In the Swedish People’s Party, the Social Democratic Party and the Greens, the same quota applies to the party council and the party board, but in the case of the Greens, the quota is formulated such that instead of the 40% minimum quota, maximum quotas of 60% are applied to allow taking actors with non-binary gender identities into account.

In the Christian Democrats, the 40% gender quota only applies to the party council, while in the Left Alliance, it only applies to the party board.

The only parties that do not have any binding gender quotas are the National Coalition Party, the Finns Party and the Movement Now. However, the National Coalition Party’s rules require that gender equality be taken into account in personnel choices to the party council, although there are no binding provisions or percentages defined in the rules.

## Women’s organisations in the political parties

All Finnish parliamentary parties have a women’s organisation, the status of which varies from a registered association to an independent group. Women’s organisations offer female party members, candidates and politicians peer support, assistance and better operating capabilities. Women’s organisations also carry out equality work and raise related issues within the party and in society at large.

5% of the party subsidy received by the parliamentary parties from the state has been earmarked for women’s activities within the parties. Party subsidy reserved for women’s organisations is an internationally rare practice that Finland was the first in the world to adopt. The co-operation body for parliamentary parties’ women’s organisations is the Coalition of Finnish Women’s Associations NYTKIS, which includes as its members not only the parties’ women’s organisations, but also the Feminist Association Unioni, the National Council of Women of Finland, and the Association for Gender Studies in Finland.

Several women’s organisations have a statutory right to participate in their party’s decision-making:

<b>Quota seat(s) in the party board/council</b>	<b>The chair has the right to speak in the party board</b>	<b>The representative has the right to speak in the party council</b>	<b>No statutory rights</b>
Centre Party Christian Democrats Swedish People’s Party	Finns Party	Social Democrats Left Alliance	National Coalition Movement Now Greens

In addition to a political women's organisation, the Greens and the Social Democratic Party also have separate men's organisations. The establishment of a men's network has also been discussed in the Left Alliance and the Christian Democrats.

## Youth participation

The voter turnout of young people in Finland is lower than that of the rest of the voters. Partly because of this, young people are underrepresented among political decision-makers. In addition, young people are an underrepresented group among political party members. Among the members of Finland's six largest parliamentary parties, only in the Greens is the average age of members less than 50 years.

## Political youth organisations

Each Finnish parliamentary party has its own youth organisation. They have different organisational models in different political parties: in some political parties, the youth organisation is completely independent, while in others the youth organisation is a member organisation of the party, in which case a member of the youth organisation can also be a political party member through the same membership. Some political parties have a separate student organisation, while others have one organisation for young people and students. Irrespective of the organisational model, it is not unusual for political youth and student organisations to disagree or have different policies from their parties.

Political youth organisations are important educators and support providers for politically active young people and an important recruitment channel for political parties. Through the organisations, young people have the opportunity to participate in training and other events, gain experience, visibility and positions of trust, and create networks inside and outside the political party. Several MPs and party leaders have a background in a political youth or student organisation.

## Representation of young people in political party decision-making

In some parliamentary parties, statutory rights to participate in the party's governing bodies have been reserved for the youth and student organisations. The most extensive rights for young people are in the Centre Party, which has reserved one seat in the party board for a youth organisation representative and one seat for a student organisation representative as well as five seats in the party council for youth organisation representatives and three seats for student organisation representatives.

In addition to the Centre Party, the only political parties where young people and students have regular quota seats in the party's governing bodies are the Swedish People's Party and the Christian Democrats. In the Swedish People's Party, at least one seat in the party board and one seat in the party council have been reserved for a youth association representative, while the Christian Democrats have reserved a seat for one representative in the party board and two representatives in the party council.

According to the Finns Party's rules, the chair of the youth organisation has the right to attend and speak (without a right to vote) at party board meetings. The Social Democratic Party and the Left Alliance, on the other hand, guarantee in their rules for the representative of the youth organisation the right to attend and speak (without a right to vote) in the party council. In the Social Democratic Party, not only the youth organisation but also the student organisation representative has this right, but the Left Alliance's student organisation does not have a similar right.

According to the National Coalition Party's rules, when the party council is elected, "attention shall be paid to equal age distribution", but there are no actual quota seats or right of representation assigned to the representatives of the youth association.

In other parliamentary parties, young people or students do not have quota seats or other rights of representation in the party board or council separately indicated in the rules.

## Young people in the party congress

In Finland, the Centre Party has guaranteed the widest statutory rights to youth and student organisations also with regard to party congresses. At the Centre Party's party congress, most of the representatives consist of the representatives of local chapters and municipal organisations, but youth and student organisations (as well as the women's organisation) are also given the opportunity to send their own representatives. Such representatives can be sent by both youth and student central organisations and the district organisations subordinate to them. A similar arrangement is also in place at the party congress of the National Coalition Party.

Some political parties have not defined special representation rights for young people in their rules, but according to the rules, member organisations or special organisations can send representatives to the party congress. The youth organisation of the Greens, as a member of the party, can send one representative and a number of representatives based on the number of members to the party congress. The rules of the Christian Democrats allow each special organisation of the party, including the youth organisation, to send a maximum of 25 representatives to the party congress. Similarly, the Swedish People's Party's youth organisation is entitled to send three representatives to the party congress, in addition to which the organisation may send a number of representatives that is based on the number of its members.

In the Left Alliance, the representatives of the youth organisation have a statutory right to attend and speak, as well as a right to submit motions, at the party congress, but the student organisation does not have such rights. In the Social Democratic Party, young people do not have separate representatives, but youth and student organisations have a right to submit motions at the party congress. However, in both parties, youth organisation representatives do not have the right to vote.

As regards the Finns Party and the Movement Now, there are no special provisions in the parties' rules regarding the right to represent a youth organisation, but as these parties have direct membership, all the parties' young members are already entitled to attend the party congress based on their party membership.

## Participation of persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities face numerous obstacles in participating in political decision-making, but due to the lack of statistics, it is difficult to reliably estimate the number of persons with disabilities in politics. In the Finnish Parliament, there are and there have been few MPs with visible disabilities. There has only been one MP using a wheelchair in the Parliament – in the 1980s.

The Greens is the only Finnish parliamentary party that has a member organisation focused on promoting the participation of persons with disabilities. The Greens was founded in the 1980s by persons from different movements focusing, for example, on environmental issues, gender equality and disability rights. Thus, the disability rights movement has been an integral part of the party from the beginning. According to established practice, the Greens' organisation for persons with disabilities gets one representative in the party council. As a member of the party, the organisation also has representation in the party congress, based on the number of its members.

The Social Democratic Party and the Left Alliance have also established disability networks and working groups on disability as part of their activities. They do not have statutory representation in the party organs. Most Finnish political parties have a policy paper or programme on disability. Different political parties also have internal instructions, guidelines and trainings to promote the accessibility of their activities and communications.

In addition, tools for addressing harassment and discrimination have become more common in the parliamentary parties. Most of the parties have a form for reporting inappropriate behaviour and designated contact persons for addressing harassment. These contact persons can be either permanent trusted persons of the organisation or event-specific support persons.

## Participation of political party members in programme work

### Working groups

In Finland, political party members have opportunities to exert influence in the nomination of candidates for elections and in the party's leadership election. However, an essential part of democracy is also the opportunity to participate in the outlining of, and making decisions on, policies. The most important political decisions are made in the party congress, but before the party congress representatives can vote on whether to approve or reject policies, someone has to prepare proposals for them. Several parliamentary parties have working and actor groups that outline policies and prepare decisions.

The Finnish electoral system gives voters the opportunity to influence on who will be elected to which position, but not on what the policy options are. Therefore, it is important for democracy that the policies are not only outlined by the political party leadership but also by the political party members, thus providing citizens with an opportunity to influence them even before elections.



The policies are prepared not only by the political parties' staff and governing bodies but also by the various working groups in which the political party members participate. Precise regulations on working groups are usually not found in political party rules, so their status varies not only between political parties, but also within the same party at different times. Some working groups operate very informally, while in other political parties, working groups have a more formal status.

Political parties' working groups are typically set up to prepare a specific programme or document for either the party board or the party congress. In some political parties, working groups may also give opinions on current issues independently, but in others this is not possible.

In most political parties, working groups are set up via an open call for a specific term, which typically ranges from one to three years, and they cannot be joined mid-term. An exception to this is the National Coalition Party, whose members may join the working groups at any time.

In some political parties, the weight of the working groups has been reinforced by means of rights conferred by the rules. For example, in the Greens, the Left Alliance and the Movement Now, working groups have a statutory right to submit motions to the party congress. On the other hand, in all these parties, the members also enjoy the same right to submit motions, so the working group's right to submit motions does not extend an individual member's rights to exert influence – yet the working group can, of course, be expected to have more weight in the party congress than an individual member or members.

There are many differences between the political parties in the number and operation of the working groups. The Social Democratic Party has the biggest number of working groups, as many as 33 in the period of 2023–2027.

The National Coalition Party, the Centre Party, the Greens, the Left Alliance and the Swedish People's Party have six to seventeen working groups. However, the number of working groups varies from time to time. Most of these working groups have been specifically set up to work on policy content. Other political parties also have temporary working groups that change from time to time.

## Member surveys

Political parties have, to an increasing extent, introduced different kinds of member surveys to gather information in support of the party's activities and decision-making. Member surveys are not an activity prescribed by the rules and thus have no formal status, but at best the results of member surveys are used to support the development of the party's operations and political decision-making.

There are different kinds of member surveys. Various organisational surveys familiar from general association activities, such as member satisfaction surveys, are used to map out the members' satisfaction with the political party and its activities. Organisational surveys are an important tool for developing a party's organisation and operations, and they allow political party members to express what kind of activities and opportunities they would like their party to provide. For example, the Social Democratic Party conducts an annual member satisfaction survey in which the party calls all its members.

The impact of organisational surveys on policy is small, as they typically focus on concrete working practices rather than policies. However, organisational surveys can play an important role in, for example, strengthening inclusion in cases where they provide persons belonging to minorities with an opportunity to express their special needs.

In addition to organisational surveys that assess practical issues and member satisfaction, political parties also conduct surveys to map out the opinion of their members on a specific decision. For example, in 2011, the Centre Party conducted a member survey to ask its members' opinions on participating in government negotiations<sup>1</sup>. Based on the survey, the party decided to participate in the negotiations, but the negotiations did not lead to the Centre Party's participation in the government. In 2017, the Christian Democrats, on their part, asked their members whether the party should nominate its own candidate for the presidential election. Such surveys are very clear as they present a concrete yes/no choice.

In addition to surveys on concrete decisions, political parties also conduct more general surveys in support of their policy-making. Unlike a decision survey, such a survey is not related to one specific question, but instead is intended, for example, to support the work of the party's working groups and decision-makers.

In 2022, both the Finns Party and the Christian Democrats asked their members about Finland's possible NATO membership. Membership surveys showed support for NATO membership, and both parties also aligned in favour of applying for NATO membership soon after the surveys. Such surveys are extensively used by the Christian Democrats.

## Utilisation of new technologies

Politics and political debate are increasingly taking place online today. In various situations, social media in particular has been perceived both as an opportunity to democratise and expand participation and as a serious threat<sup>2</sup> to the entire democratic system. Many political parties are looking for new ways to utilise technology and the new opportunities it brings.

The effects of technology are not unequivocal: on the one hand, political parties have created new discussion platforms and channels of influence for their members online, while on the other hand discussion and opinion gathering has expanded from members to other citizens as well, which may reduce the attractiveness of political party membership even further.

Finnish political parties, each from their own perspective, have sought to utilise the Internet and other technological tools in their operations. The Movement Now's online platform "Online Parliament" is the most extensive example of a political party operating online. The actual structure of Movement Now is fairly traditional with its local associations and district organisations, but the party uses consultative online

---

<sup>1</sup> Finland has a tradition of coalition governments, where the government parties commit to a jointly drafted government programme. Co-operation on some issues or between some parties may sometimes be difficult, and the government negotiations determine which parties eventually end up forming a government together.

<sup>2</sup> This publication does not focus on hate speech and other threats that political party members and politicians may face online. However, some political parties in Finland have guidelines and instructions for situations where politicians face online harassment.

votes as a basis for decision-making. In addition to the online parliament, Movement Now also has a mobile application that is open to everyone.

The Online Parliament is an Internet forum where registered users can discuss political issues of current interest. In addition, votes are conducted in the online parliament, the subject matters of which are often related to the current work in Parliament. The purpose of the votes is thus to support the work of the party's parliamentary group. In addition, the Online Parliament is also utilised in the party's programming work, and through it, people may participate in the preparation of the party programme.

Of the other parties, the Centre Party provides an opportunity on its website to answer a few questions that change from time to time. Some of the questions resemble feedback surveys, such as those concerning the success of the Government's actions, while others are rather inquiries on political opinions. Other parliamentary parties provide their members and other visitors with a general feedback/questionnaire form on their website and this form can be used to provide open answers.

---

© Political Parties of Finland for Democracy – Demo Finland 2024

Produced with support from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.

Political Parties of Finland for Democracy – Demo Finland is a co-operative organisation of all Finnish parliamentary parties. It enhances democracy by strengthening the political participation of women, youth and persons with disabilities in particular and by supporting dialogue between political parties.

[www.demofinland.org](http://www.demofinland.org)