

FINLAND

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Sauli Niinistö confirmed as Finnish President

Finnish President gets re-elected to second term in a landslide victory

Since 1994 the President in Finland gets elected through direct vote by the people. Scoring 62.7% of the vote Sauli Niinistö is the first ever presidential candidate to get elected in the first round by securing an absolute majority straight away. The reasons for the president's high approval ratings appear to symbolize shifts in Finnish politics.

Sauli Niinistö ran for president as an independent candidate, however supported by both the conservative party (*Kokoomus*) and the Christian democrats (*Kristillisdemokraatit*). In the run up to the election he faced the Green Party's parliamentarian Pekka Haavisto (*Vihreäliitto*) and Laura Huhtasaari from the right-wing Populist Party True Finns (*Perussuomalaiset*). Although the President's victory was expected, the margin by which he won over his nine challengers was startling. Pekka Haavisto who came second with 12.4% of the vote exemplifies the magnitude of the President's victory. Laura Huhtasaari who finished third attracted only 6.9% of the votes. Furthermore, the fact that Niinistö received less than 50% of the votes in only 13 Municipalities in the whole of Finland exemplifies his dominance. He scored highest in Luodo in western Finland with 84.3% and lowest in Tervola, a municipality in Lapland, with 44.3% of the vote.

Victory in the first round was predictable

The strong support became already evident on the campaign trail, with Niinistö polling temporarily at over 70%, giving him confidence in his appearances. During an event in Kuopio on January 11th the former Left-

wing MP (*Vasemmistoliitto*) and major of Kuopio Erkki Virtanen assured Niinistö his support in the event of a second round in the election. However, the President responded by predicting that there would be no second round. Although he stressed later on that his statement had to be seen in the ironic context of the conversation, it was apparent to the majority that he was practically running for re-election without real competition.

President enjoys high trust-ratings

Sauli Niinistö managed to convince a broad group of people transcending party lines during his first time in office and on the campaign trail. His alignment with the *Kokoomus* party played only a marginal role in determining his popularity. In contrast, his campaign focused on him as a person and his trustworthiness. In addition, the historic election-result also yields further implications for the Finnish political system. Ever since the 1990s including the altered constitution on March 1st 2000, the formal influence of the President has waned. Yet the increased trust by the population into its current president has a recuperative effect on its power. The president in cooperation with the government determines Finland's foreign policy according to the constitution. However, strengthened by a landslide victory, Sauli Niinistö is expected to take on a more important role in Finnish foreign policy considering the government's low approval ratings at around 40%.

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Reassurance for Finland's neutral stance

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Sauli Niinistö took the result of the election as a confirmation of his previous political stance. After the election he reaffirmed that he does not see any imminent reason to join NATO if the current situation does not change. However, he underlined the importance of regularly reassessing the situation.

Also internationally the result was seen as a positive sign of stability. Estonias President Kersti Kaljulaid was the first to send her wishes via Twitter. Russia in turn saw the result as a reassurance for Finland's neutral stance towards its eastern neighbor. It is arguably one of the biggest accomplishments of Niinistö's policy to balance its relations with its European allies, NATO and Russia.