

CASE STUDY ON FINLAND ON EFFECTIVE MODELS OF POLITICAL PARTY-BASED RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL UNITS



This publication was prepared within the Swiss Electoral Support Programme in North Macedonia. The Electoral Support Programme is a project of the Government of Switzerland implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

The content and opinions in this publication can in no way be considered to reflect the views of the Government of Switzerland and IFES.

Publication prepared in June 2026 by: Demo Finland - Political Parties of Finland for Democracy, co-operative organisation of Finnish parliamentary parties

Political Parties of Finland for Democracy – Demo Finland is a co-operative organisation of 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. Demo Finland is also Finland's leading expert and advocacy organisation on democracy support. Demo Finland is not ideologically, religiously, or politically tied to any particular movement.

Cover page photo credit: Hilla Kurki

Case study on Finland on effective models of political party-based research and analytical units

Introduction

This paper has been conducted to support the Electoral Support Programme in North Macedonia (ESP) project of the Government of Switzerland, implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). The project's overall objective is to support democratic and credible election processes that facilitate political participation and social integration by enabling voters to freely select their representatives and hold them accountable.

As a supporting element in this project, this case study serves as a tool aimed at peer learning, reflection and policy dialogue between the Finnish and North Macedonian contexts. The study outlines the legal, institutional, and operational frameworks governing party-affiliated research structures in Finland, including governance models, funding mechanisms, levels of autonomy, accountability standards, and modes of interaction with party leadership and other party structures.

In addition to comprehensive literature review, four interviews and two written consultations with relevant political party-affiliated research and other units were conducted in the making of this paper. The analysis will highlight key good practices and possible transferable elements relevant to the national context of North Macedonia.

Finnish political context and independence of research

Finland is a multi-party democracy that has a long history of coalition governments. The parliament currently hosts nine political parties, and the current majority government is a coalition of four political parties the National Coalition, the Finns Party, Christian Democrats and the Swedish People's Party of Finland.

In Finland after the election, the party with most seats in the parliament starts government negotiations, usually involving all political parties, with the aim of building a majority government committed to a government programme. The party with the most seats in Parliament is generally assumed to lead the government and provide the prime minister, but only if it succeeds in forming a coalition that holds a majority in Parliament. Over the past decades, minority governments have been very rare. Traditionally, no single party is large enough to govern alone; therefore, cooperation and consensus-building are integral parts of Finnish political culture, and this approach is reflected at lower levels of decision-making as well.

Academic freedom is well established in Finland, supported by internationally competitive research, autonomous universities, an independent judiciary, and strong adherence to the rule of law. However, limited funding and the uncertainty of academic career paths constrain the autonomy of research, contributing to Finland's relatively modest ranking in [the Academic Freedom Index 2026](#), falling [38 ranks since 2023](#). According to the [Committee on Public Information](#), political and economic steering and harassment targeting researchers are increasing with repercussions to academic freedom.

Successive governments in Finland have actively promoted evidence- and research-based decision-making. To support this objective, several funding instruments have been established to strengthen the connections between science, research, and policymaking.

The main funding instruments (described below) assign the government a role in defining research themes and selecting the most suitable projects through competitive processes. A key sensitivity lies in the fact that, while in government, political parties can influence the choice of research topics. At times, these topics have been perceived as politically driven, and public debate surrounding them has become politicized. There are also inherent tensions at the intersection of scientific research and political steering: while researchers emphasize the importance of academic freedom, policymakers often seek evidence-based answers to questions defined within political agendas. This conflict is more readily managed within party-affiliated think tanks, whereas in independent and competitively funded academic research it remains more pronounced.

- [The Strategic Research Council \(SRC\)](#) established within the Research Council of Finland funds high-quality research with great societal relevance and impact. Each year, the SRC prepares a proposal on key strategic research themes and priorities to be approved by the Finnish Government. The Government determines the research needs and decides the final themes, which the SRC then formulates into research programmes. SRC programmes run for 3–6 years. In November 2025 the SRC launched the newest additions to the research programs including thematic research areas such as mental health and the Arctic. The SRC's annual funding budget is around 55 million euros.
- [VNK Tutkiva](#): When in government, political parties contribute to the research priorities of Government's and ministries' joint research and development activities (VN Tutkiva) which aim to support the Government's decision-making and policy preparation. In 2026, a call for commissions on 6 million euros was opened to universities, research institutes and other organisations conducting research to fulfill the information needs of ministries outlined in the annual government research plan. Research topics often

span issues that fall within the remit of multiple ministries and serve as enablers of cross-sectoral cooperation.

Conceptualization of Political Party-based Research

Political parties host affiliated organisations such as women's and youth wings, local associations, affiliated foundations, and study centers. With the exception of Movement Now, the smallest party in Parliament, which has only one MP, all political parties currently represented in the Finnish Parliament have units that originated as political party-affiliated research bodies (Annex 1). However, as the functions of these units have evolved, their conceptualization has diverged.

This paper considers party-based units that have established relations with political parties and that have received funding from the Ministry of Culture and Education from budgets dedicated to funding political party-based research from 2005 up until 2024. The funding was cut in the budget negotiation for 2025 as a part of fiscal consolidation.

However, not all research units with links to political parties fulfil these criteria. Some research units originally established within political parties have grown beyond the party structure and emerged as independent research units with only limited links or associations with former host parties (such the previously Centre party affiliated research unit [E2](#)) and some have no established political party affiliations but have current or former staff or board members that have significant roles also in political parties building informal links between political parties and independent research units (such as the independent think tank [Libera](#)). As these units have no established link with political parties, they are not directly a target of this paper.

In this paper, the political party-based research units are not assessed based on the quality of their research. As discussed later, only some of the political party units established for research purposes continue to host academic researchers and publish high quality research. Most of these party-based units function as specialist organisations, publishing public communications that support political party policy drafting and providing new perspectives and ideas to politics with ideological links to host parties. Thus, this paper refers to political party-based units instead of research units to clarify that research is not a core activity in all the units.

Legal and institutional structures

As legal persons, these units are either registered foundations, registered associations or separate units under registered associations such as party-political educational associations. All these units function as separate legal entities from the political parties.

Registered foundations are directed by the [Finnish Foundations Act \(478/2015\)](#) and their compliance with the law is supervised by the Finnish Patent and Registration Office. Registered foundations are legal persons set up to manage property donated for a particular purpose. This purpose is determined during the set-up of the foundations. Foundations have no members, owners or stakeholders but a board of trustees that ensures the operations including legal responsibilities and responsibilities over the investments by the foundation.

Registered associations are directed by [the Finnish Associations Act \(503/1989\)](#). However, their rights are based on the Freedom of Association enshrined in the Finnish Constitution. In Finland, the freedom of association is understood as a universal right, which is why it applies in principle to all forms of association activities alike. Associations, on the other hand, are deemed to enjoy internal freedom of activity, which means that they have the right to independently draft their bylaws within the framework of law, and decide on their internal operations. Registered associations are legal bodies and the Finnish Patent and Registration Office keeps the Finnish Register of Associations. It contains details of registered associations, such as their bylaws and details of persons entitled to sign for the associations, in other words, people who can act on behalf of associations.

Some political party-based units receive funding from their host parties. Political parties are legal persons directed by the [Act on Political Parties \(10/1969\)](#), which outlines their legal obligations. According to the Section 9 a § of the Act, “The Ministry of Justice supervises the use of the subsidy granted from government funds and monitors compliance with this Act and other provisions and regulations issued by virtue of this Act in the activities of a party and associations acting as its district organisations as well as other associations”. Furthermore, the Act stipulates that the Ministry “may also appoint an auditor approved by the Central Chamber of Commerce to carry out inspections and examinations relating to the accountancy and use of funds”. Thus, when the party-affiliated units receive funds from political parties, the funding falls under these regulations.

The Act on Political Parties was adopted in the 1960s to reduce the influence of foreign powers in Finnish politics and to strengthen Finnish democracy. According to the Act political parties receive funding based on the number of seats they have secured in the parliament. The largest party in the parliament with 48 MPs currently receives 8,3 million euro in government support, whereas the smallest party with one MP received 173 000 euro. The political party funding is dedicated to political activities of political parties and political communication. In practice the funding supports the political party functions, such as local offices, women’s wings operations, staff costs, party political publications and communications and election campaigns. However, the support cannot be directed to individual candidates or to personal costs.

The Act on Political Parties obligates political parties to transparency in funding. Political parties are obliged to report to the National Audit Office on all external support that exceeds 1 500 euro annually.

Results and impact of political party-based units

The political party-based units have limited resources and only a few of the units produce academic research, others work as specialist organisations, producing publications and providing information relating to political ideology of their host parties, more alike to think-tanks than research units.

The political party-based units were originally created in 2005 to generate public discussion and develop new political initiatives. According to interviews, this goal has been partially realized. During the interviews conducted by Demo Finland, we observed that the political party units recognize that due to limited resources and space in public discussion, the party-based units have had limited direct impact. The Finnish political scene is characterized with more established actors such as labor unions, advocacy organisations and lobbies, limiting the space in public discussion for political party-based units.

However, the units also report significant added value within the parties despite limited public interest. The units act both in support of the policy drafting and development of their political parties as well as in generating new initiatives and ideas within the ideological framework of their political parties. For example, the Green party-based unit Visio has generated debate within the party on basic income, increasing the level of knowledge within the party and supporting decision-making by research on a variety of models of practical implementation, international examples and mapping pilots on European level and releasing publications and organizing events regarding the topic.

Depending on the autonomy of the unit, it is able to perform these roles; the more independent the unit is, the more likely it is to propose new policy initiatives and priorities. The less independent units are more likely to provide support and back existing policies of the party with relevant research initiatives.

Operational frameworks

The units have multiple sources of funding. On average, party-based units host 1-3 staff members, with the largest party-based unit hosting 7 employees and a budget of approximately 700 000 euro. Between 2005 and 2024 the main source of funding for many political party-based units was state funding through a budget line in the Ministry of Culture and Education. Other sources of funding include funding from political parties, independent or political foundations, European political or think tank umbrella organisations and other funding

instruments in the state budget. Some research units also report fundraising activities, such as support fees, ticket sales, events, and selling publications.

Until 2024 the Ministry of Culture and Education hosted an annual budget of approximately 700 000 euro in 2024 dedicated specifically to political party research units. The state funding for party-based units was cut in the state budget negotiations of 2025, but until then research units received funding based on political party representation in the parliament (favoring larger parties) and previous funding decisions (favoring stable funding for established units). The precise criterion for funding has not been released ([Kannisto 2019](#)). State funding was established based on a [report by the Ministry of Justice in 2005](#) that outlined the role of political party-based research units to support political parties as actors in democratic participation by generating public debate and processing of political goals.

The role of state funding between research units varied between fifteen thousand euro to smallest units up to some 150 000 euro to the units affiliated with largest political parties. Due to abolishment of state funding one research unit has ceased functions for the time being, and others have made significant adaptations and rely on all functions to other forms of funding. During interviews the largest party-based unit reported that the state funding amounted to approximately 20% of the complete budget of the unit and the cuts led to reduction of two staff members. Currently the largest unit hosts 7 employees, whereas smallest units have only hosted part-time employees even during the state funding.

Links between political party leadership and party-based units

Cooperation between political parties and research units includes joint events and platforms, disseminating research papers and publications in party conferences and other party events, and sharing information such as pooling data and proving research to support policymaking. Many research units also share offices with political parties allowing for informal cooperation. Altogether, the political party-based units target both political party members as well as decisionmakers within their own party to bring traction to new ideas and start policy debates within the ideological frame of the political party. Some of the latest publications include [a questionnaire report on public worry regarding drones](#) by Ajatuspaja Toivo, [analysis of the level of education and reaching educational goals](#) by Kalevi Sorsa Foundation and [update of database on migration data in Helsinki capital region](#) by Suomen Perusta.

All currently operational political party-based units are directed by boards that oversee the functions of the unit and give strategic direction. Out of the 8 units, 6 have their own boards, whereas two are directed by the political parties' study centers, that host training and educational activities. All major political parties host [study centers](#) affiliated with political

parties that provide training and educational activities to politicians and aspiring party activists, some provide trainings that are open to all citizens.

The composition and appointment of political party-based unit boards vary between units. Some of the political parties appoint the boards of their respective unit. In other cases, the board consists of volunteers selected independently in general assemblies of the association or foundation.

Some of the units complement political appointments with experts in specific fields of research or areas of specialization. Others appoint primarily trusted and active political party members. However, all boards of these units host significant political figures with many of the boards chaired by members of parliament or other prominent figures in the associated political party.

Importantly, the role of the board alters between units. In some cases, the board gives specific direction regarding research topics and activities, whereas in other cases the board hosts a specialist role supporting the initiatives of the executive. For example, by contributing to the units' publications and events with substance knowledge of a certain topic.

The role and composition of the board have significant implications for party-based unit independence. In cases where the board has limited power, the units are altogether more independent from political parties. Similarly, the independence of units is greater in cases where boards host more specialists in comparison to political party activists. Some of the units report that their independence varies between boards. In particular, chair appointments can change the relationship between the political party and the unit.

Multi-party cooperation and international peer-learning

Multi-party cooperation between political party-based units is currently primarily based on personal relations of unit staff. The units with mutual interest host events and research seminars together and bring visibility to one another. The cooperation is particularly valuable as units are small in terms of personnel and overall resources.

Before the state funding was cut, political party-based units attended shared activities as a condition for the funding. However, since the funding was discontinued, the cooperation has been based mostly on personal relations. Alongside events, previous shared initiatives include publications bringing together views from a variety of party-political perspectives, for example, in 2017 during the celebrations of Finland turning 100 years, seven party political-based units shared their visions for the future of the country in a shared publication.

Political party-based units also take part in international cooperation with fellow organisations, especially on a European level with think-tanks and research units affiliated with same ideological basis. This peer-learning develops political party-based unit operation through

sharing of best practices, bringing new ideas and policy proposals and shared activities such as contributions to comparative studies or shared publications.

Options for future and internationally transferrable elements

Funding

- The **stable funding by Ministry of Culture and Education kick started political party based unit activities in Finland**. 20 years later all major political parties hosted units, most of which were able to continue regular functions after the direct state budget funding ended. Based on this experience, it could be concluded that a **funding instrument precisely for political party-based units is needed**. If the units depend on party financing, the risk is that political parties focus money on campaigns rather than research.
- A funding instrument open for application to politically affiliated research units could trigger political parties' interest in developing their own units.
- The units have adopted **a variety of functions** from public communication and organizing events to publishing academic research. Introducing a funding instrument with more direct demands for upholding academic standards could help steer the units toward more rigorous, credible, and independent research. For example, such funding instrument could consist of two parts: basic funding (for staff costs and basic needs) and commission (dependent on number of MPs, quality of research or other criteria).

Organisation, management and independence

- The added value of political party-based research units is embedded in ideological and practical links to political parties, but **relative autonomy is needed to ensure their role not only supporting existing policies but also in generating new initiatives and renewing political debate**.
- The **loose legal conceptualization of political party-based units** allows varying levels of autonomy. In the absence of strict legal base, personal relationships, political party ideology, and culture play a significant role in the management of the units.

International cooperation

- Political party-based units host limited cooperation with international counterparts, some receive international funding and host cooperative functions with fellow European organisations, releasing shared publications, taking part in international seminars and sharing ideas and developing functions through cooperation. Thus, **instead of establishing new political party-affiliated think tanks or research units, political parties also have the option of strengthening and deepening their international connections and research collaboration**.

ANNEX 1 List of political party-based units

- Ajatuspaja Toivo: <https://toivoajatuspaja.fi/> (National Coalition Party)
- Ajatuspaja Alkio: <https://ajatuspajaalkio.fi/en/etusivu/> (The Centre Party)
- Suomen Perusta: <https://www.suomenperusta.fi/> (The Finns)
- Kalevi Sorsa Foundation: <https://sorsaoundation.fi/in-english/> (Social Democratic Party)
- Visio: <https://ajatuspajavisio.fi/in-english/> (The Greens)
- Vasemmistofoorumi: <https://vasemmistofoorumi.fi/in-english/> (Left Alliance)
- Tankesmedjan Agenda: <https://agenda.fi/en/briefly-in-english/> (Swedish People's Party of Finland)
- Kompassi: <https://www.kompassi.org/in-english/> (Christian Democrats)