



# Feminist Initiativ - Just another left party or something new?

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# **Feminist Initiative— just another left party or something new?**

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In the European Parliament election in 2014, the Swedish party Feminist Initiative (Fi) managed to win representation in the European parliament. This was the first time a party with feminism as its primary ideology<sup>1</sup> entered the European parliament, and a good candidate to be the largest electoral success of a feminist movement so far in the world.<sup>2</sup> The party has since then gained international attention and several followers have grown in other European countries, including the recently founded Women's Equality party (WE) in the UK.

This paper seeks to explain this result by exploring what made voters vote for Fi in the election to the European parliament in 2014, and further discuss what type of party Fi is. Previous research into party competition and voting behavior gives us three possible views on how this new party might be understood. First of all there is the possibility that, like many previous studies on Swedish politics have shown, the voting behavior is determined by economic left-right concerns. Secondly, it could be that voters are attracted by the niche appeal of a feminist party. Finally, Fi could be an example of what Kitchelt and others have called a left-libertarian party, one that appeals by combining an economic leftwing position with a liberal position on the cultural dimension.

Using data from the Swedish National European Parliament Election Study (SNEPES) 2014, we analyze which factors that make voters cast their vote on Fi in order to explore whether Fi represent something qualitatively new or whether Fi is best classified as a new left-wing par-

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<sup>1</sup> Several Swedish parties claim to be feministic in addition to other ideologies, but Fi is the only party that has feminism as its main ideology.

<sup>2</sup> Previous examples of feminist parties include the Feminist Party of Candada (e.g., Zaborszky 1987) and the Women's Alliance on Iceland (e.g., Styrkarsdottir 1999). Fi has also established collaboration with some European feministparties or alliances such as iniciativa feminista in Spain, Partia Kobiet in Poland and Feministische Partei DIE FRAUEN in Germany (see, <http://feministisktinitiativ.se/om/europasamarbetet/>).

ty. We find that both feminist beliefs and leftist ideology increase the probability to vote for Fi, indicating that scholars need to take both these dimensions into account when analyzing this new party. There are other alternatives for leftist voters, such as the Left Party (V). Similarly, there are other alternatives for feminists, such as the Liberal Party (FP).<sup>3</sup> Taken together, Fi is best described as *left-feminist* party, which attracts left-libertarian voters.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we present the rather fascinating case of Feminist Initiative. Thereafter, we present three different theoretical approaches to understanding parties appeal to voters and how they might be used to describe Fi. Following this, and describe our methodological approach and we present the results. The final section discusses the implications for party theory as well as current party competition in Sweden.

### **The case of Feminist Initiative**

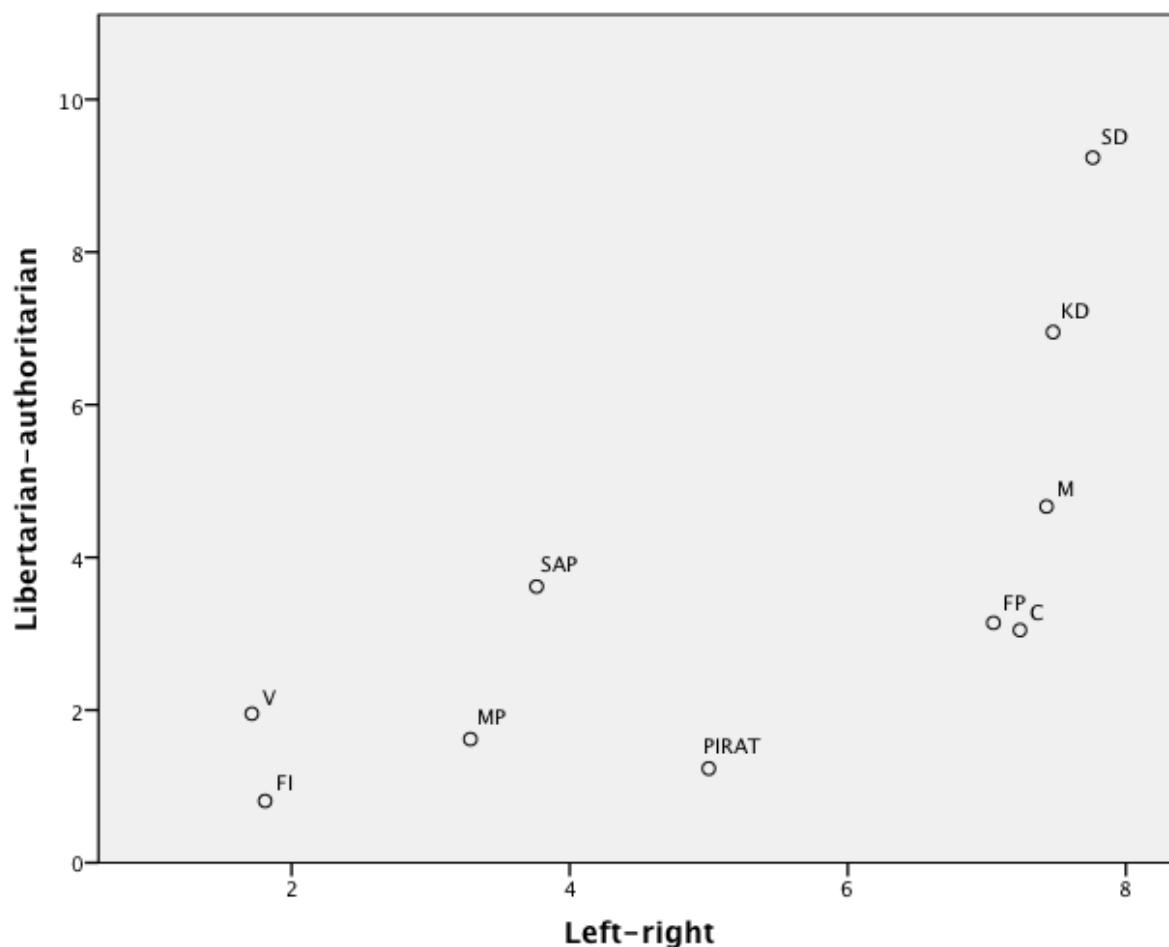
Feminist Initiative was founded in 2005 and stood for election for the first time in 2006. In this first electoral attempt, Fi received 0.68 percent of the votes, which was far from the four percent threshold to enter the Swedish parliament (Riksdagen). In the parliamentary election in 2010, Fi's turn-out was even worse than in 2006 with only 0.40 percent of the votes. This time, the party managed, however, to get representation in the municipality of Simrishamn, the hometown of the front figure Gudrun Schyman. Four years later in the super election year of 2014, Fi managed to gain representation in the European Parliament for its main candidate Soraya Post who, apart from being a feminist, also stood out as being one of the parliament's first representatives with a Roma background. In the parliamentary election a few months later, Fi gained 3.12 percent of the votes, thereby again failing to meet the threshold. However, in the local elections taking place the same day, the party gained, representation in 13 municipalities, including the largest cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. According their own records, Fi had more than 22 000 members in September 2015.

Fi's profile issues are equality and human rights, and the party is generally associated with anti-discrimination, global justice, and intersectionality. When founded, Fi claimed to have introduced a whole new dimension to Swedish politics and refused, rather aggressively, to take a stand on whether the party should be placed to the left or to the right. All from the beginning, the party was, however, under pressure from media and other parties to pick a side. That Gudrun Schyman had previously been the leader of the Swedish left party (V), together with the fact that several of the party's initial policy propositions—such as six-hours working day—were traditionally associated with the left, led, however, most commentators and experts to classify Fi as a party to the left (e.g. Liljekvist, 2014). For example, figure 1 shows expert survey placement of Swedish parties in 2014. This chart clearly positions Fi as far to the left, as well as clearly libertarian. It also shows that Fi is perceived to be very close to the Left party.

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<sup>3</sup> In the parliamentary election campaign in 2014, FP even used the slogan "Feminism without socialism."

**Figure 1: Expert placement of Swedish parties**



Note: 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al, 2015)

Over time, the party has persistently claimed to be neither left nor right but seems to have toned down their ambition to be perceived as a truly cross dimensional party. In the national parliamentary election 2014, Fi explicitly supported the candidate from the Social Democrats as prime minister, although at the same time stating that they were open to collaboration with all other parties except the Sweden Democrats.

Fi has from start been associated with celebrities. Several Swedish academics and public intellectuals were among the founders of the party and well-known individuals such as Jane Fonda and the former ABBA-member Benny Andersson have contributed financially to the electoral campaigns. Similarly, 65 artists, including international stars such as Robyn and The Knife, contributed to Fi's promotional CD that was launched before the elections in 2014. Fi has also gained reputation for innovative or, some would say, provocative campaigns such as

a manifestation in Almedalen 2010 when Gudrun Schyman burnt up approximately 10000 Euro (100000 SEK) as an action for equal salaries for women and men.

The first systematic analysis of the Fi-supporters (Blombäck and de Fine Licht, 2015b) shows that those who sympathize with Fi, i.e. answer Fi on the question “Which party do you like best today?” are primarily female: 78 percent identify as women, 21 percent identify as men, and 1 percent identify as “other.” The supporters are also relatively young compared to supporters of other parties and live primarily in larger cities. Further, the sympathizers politically interested and are well educated: 49 percent states that they have a university degree. 83 percent identify as to the left of the center on a left-right scale, and a huge majority voted for either Fi or one of the other leftist parties (V, S, MP) in the elections in 2014.

### **Theoretical approaches to Feminist Initiative and its voters**

Fi presents an interesting case for studying the relationship between reasons for voting and types of political parties. While the party is shrugged off as yet another single-issue party by some, others regard it as just another left party, but unlike many other new parties there is no strong element of protest with associated with Fi (Blombäck & de Fine Licht, 2015a). A study of how the votes for Fi can be explained will thus allow us to study the effects of political preferences for a party that can be seen as partly mainstream, party niche. Studying what motivates voters to vote Fi will not only explain the outcome in the 2014 EP election, it will also help us understand what kind of party Fi is. Different kinds of parties appeal to voters in different ways, some with a broad program designed to catch as many voters as possible, others by specializing on a previously neglected issue for example. This section elaborates how different conceptions of what type of party Fi is would lead us to expect that votes for Fi could be explained by different (combinations of) political preferences.

One possibility is that Fi is just another left wing party. The Swedish party system has traditionally been very dominated by the left-right cleavage (e.g. van der Eijk et al, 2007), and in most studies left-right opinions come out a strong predictor of party choice. In a political system dominated by the economic left-right dimension, positioning itself on this dimension is a way for the party to make it easier for voters to use informational shortcuts when deciding who to vote for, and lets the party escape being branded as “single-issue”. At the same time the party will be in direct competition with other parties with a similar position, and might potentially alienate niche voters who do not share the same left-right position. Rovny and Edwards (2012) argue that niche parties in general try to stress the social dimension over the economic one, while established parties who benefit from the status quo attempt to reduce competition to the economic left-right dimension.

As is clear in the description of Fi, there are good reasons to conceive of the party as a left wing party. Political commentators have, all from the beginning, claimed that Fi is a left party, they supported the Social Democratic candidate for prime minister in the national election

2014, and the supporters of Fi hold very similar policy positions as the supporters of the Left Party (Blombäck and de Fine Licht, 2015 b). If Fi is a left wing party, then we should see votes primarily explained by voters' left-right preferences.

An alternative approach is to conceive of Fi as a niche party. Niche parties as a group are not united by their origins or policy stance, as is the case with traditional party families, but rather by the style of their political appeal and how they relate to the existing party system (Meguid 2005:347-348). A niche party is *not* focused on traditional class-based politics, choosing instead to focus on non-economic issues. It raises issues that are new or peripheral to the existing political debate; issues that might not fit very well within the existing lines of political competition. Finally, niche parties tend to have a limited political platform; competing on one salient issue rather than a wide platform of policy proposals (Meguid 2005:347-348; Bischof, 2015:6).

In her much cited work on niche parties Meguid (2005) primarily discusses green and radical right parties as niche parties, but makes it clear that these are not the only types of parties that can best be understood as niche parties. Bischof (2015:5-6) discusses five possible "segments" of the political market that could be occupied by niche parties: ecological, agrarian, regional, extreme right, and Eurosceptic. He also slightly relaxes Meguid's criteria that the niche parties' issues should be *outside* the existing party competition to arguing that the issues should be *on the periphery*, thereby making it possible to argue that parties politicizing previously rather dormant issues, such as regional issues perhaps, can be treated as niche parties.

Fi fits many of these criteria. While feminism has not been absent from the Swedish political arena, the issue has not been contested on a party base. One reason for this is that nearly all the established parties identify themselves as feminist. The party has attempted to distance itself from the traditional class based politics and focus on the feminist dimension in politics. If Fi is a niche party, we should thus see voters primarily motivated by their position on feminist issues.

Fi could also be seen as an example of what Kitschelt (1988) and others have called a left-libertarian party. Such a party is characterized by combining left wing concerns of solidarity and equality with a libertarian emphasis on personal autonomy and participation (Kitschelt, 1988:197). Feminism<sup>4</sup> fits rather neatly into the issues associated with left libertarian parties, as does for example ecology. Previous research does tell us that left wing and libertarian positions tend to go together, just as right wing and authoritarian positions do. This is true for both voters and parties, to a varying degree in different countries. In Sweden, this correlation is moderately high<sup>5</sup> and there are examples of both left-libertarian parties and right-authoritarian parties in parliament. If Fi is a left-libertarian party, voting for the party should be driven by both left-wing and feminist opinions.

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<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that Kitschelt in his 1988 survey of left libertarian parties includes one of the few feminist parties to ever have gained electoral representation – the Icelandic Women's Party (Kitchelt, 1988:200)

<sup>5</sup> For example, an analysis of expert survey data on party positions show a 0.5 correlation between the economic and social left-right dimensions (Bakker et al, 2012).

As always, when studying voting in European Parliament elections, the issue of the European Union itself might affect the voters' decisions. There are niche parties that primarily compete on the opposition of European integration, UKIP is probably the most well-known among these, but there is also the possibility for a new party to appeal to voters by offering a new stance on European integration in combination with something else. Voters often face cross-pressure when their preferred party on the left-right dimension do not share their view on the EU. New parties with different EU-positions can thus be tempting options for these voters. Swedish EP elections in particular tend to be structured by voters' and parties' EU opinions, since the Swedish EU membership remains controversial (e.g. Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2010). Unlike for example V, Fi does not advocate a Swedish withdrawal from the EU, and as such could be a more tempting option for some left wing voters.

## Method

In order to explain what makes voters cast their vote on FI we first give an overview of how voters in general and Fi voters respectively perceive Fi, followed by logistic regressions to estimate the effects of socio-demographic factors and political preferences. We use data from the Swedish National European Parliament Election Study (SNEPES) 2014. Our data set includes those 1882 respondents who indicated that they voted for a party in the European Election.<sup>6</sup> For the initial overview of voter perceptions of Fi we use three questions that ask respondents to give their opinion about the party, left-right placement of the party, EU opinion of the party and an item that asks voters which parties they believe have good policies on equality.

We use logistic regressions to estimate the effect of left-right position and the effect of feminist beliefs on the choice to vote for Fi.<sup>7</sup> Left-right self-placement is measured on a scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right). This is a fairly straightforward measure that is often used for similar purposes.<sup>8</sup> Feminist beliefs are trickier. We chose to use the policy proposal to redistribute power from men to women as a sign of feminist beliefs. Although there is great variation within the group of self-identified feminists on what feminism actually is, redistribution of power might be thought of as a minimal definition of feminism and something that nearly all feminists should agree on. For this reason, we chose to not include other possible policy proposals, such as increased possibilities for parental leave for men. Attitude towards to policy proposal was measured on a scale from 0 (very bad proposal) to 10 (very good proposal). We also include three social-demographic variables in the analyses: Sex, age, and level of education, as well as respondent's own EU opinion.

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<sup>6</sup> This means that we have excluded those indicating that they did not vote in the European Parliament election, those indicating that they casted a blank vote, and those not answering the question.

<sup>7</sup> For a similar approach, see Erlingsson and Persson 2011.

<sup>8</sup> We have also run the regressions using the distance between the respondent's own placement on the left-right scale and the respondent's placement of Fi on the same scale. No larger changes occurred.



## Results

First, we will explore how voters perceive Fi. Table 1 shows that both Fi voters and voters in general agree that Fi is a left wing party. When it comes to evaluations of Fi's star issue, equality, the opinions are more divided. Only a third of voters in general chose Fi when asked about parties with good policies on equality, compared to more than ninety percent among the party's own voters. Interestingly enough, Fi voters perceive the party to be less EU negative than do voters in general.

**Table 1: Voters' perceptions of Feminist Initiative 2014 (%)**

	<b>All voters</b>	<b>Fi voters</b>
<b>Left of center</b>	79,1 (1385)	88,4 (86)
<b>Good policies on equality</b>	33,0 (1379)	90,1 (81)
<b>EU negative</b>	48,6 (908)	22,7 (75)

Note: Left of center= 0-4 on a 0-10 scale of left to right. Good policies on equality= chose Fi when asked to tick all parties with good policies on equality. EU negative= 0-4 on a 0-10 scale of EU negative to EU positive

Having looked at voters' perceptions of Fi, will now continue with analyzing voting for the party. Table 2 shows results of the logistic regression analyses.

Model 1 only includes socio-demographic factors. The results confirm previous studies (e.g. Blombäck & de Fine Licht, 2015b) showing that Fi-voters are predominantly young women. Women are significantly more likely to vote Fi than men, and with increasing age the likelihood goes down. Somewhat surprisingly, since Fi is widely considered to be a party of academics, there is no significant effect of education.

In Model 2 the political preferences are also included. It shows that both left wing preference and feminist views significantly increase the likelihood of voting for Fi. EU opinion, on the other hand, does not have any effect. This supports the conception of Fi as a left-libertarian party rather than just another left party or a feminist niche party.

**Table 2: Effects on voting for Feminist Initiative (Logistic regression coefficients)**

	<b>Model 1: socio-demographic factors</b>	<b>Model 2: socio-demographic factors and political preferences</b>
<b>Socio-demographic factors</b>		
Gender (0=male, 1=female)	1.200*** (0.261)	0.981** (0.299)
Age	-0.047*** (0.007)	-0.048*** (0.008)
Education (8 categories 0-1)	0.403 (0.656)	0.257 (0.561)
<b>Political preferences</b>		
Feminism agreement (0-1)		2.114*** (0.553)
Left-right placement (right to left 0-1)		4.149*** (0.694)
EU opinion (negative to positive 0-1)		0.599 (0.486)
Constant	-1.721*** (0.464)	-5.805*** (0.860)
N	1882	1882
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)	0.137	0.300

Note: All variables except age have been recoded to vary theoretically between 0 and 1.

## Conclusions and discussion

When Feminist Initiative entered the European parliament in 2014, it was one of the first electoral successes of a party based primarily on feminist ideology. By analyzing what makes voters cast their votes for Fi, we have shown that Fi should not be classified as just another left party. Left-right placement is not enough to explain Fi votes. However, Fi does not fit the traditional niche party category either, as its voters, and to an increasing extent its leadership, clearly position themselves to the left. What we find is that Fi actually falls rather neatly into the category of a left-libertarian party, as described by Kitschelt (1988).

An important question that is raised by these results is whether a party can keep its niche appeal while conforming to the dominant left-right dimension. Fi does fulfill many of the niche party criteria while our results show that it is also attracting votes with its leftwing position. This implies that the niche party concept needs to be further elaborated and calls for a more in

depth analysis of how voters navigate among the parties at offer. Our results further indicate that Fi will continue to be a strategic problem for the other Swedish parties to the left, especially its main competitors the Left Party (V) and the Green Party (MP). These parties cannot meet the challenge from Fi by opposing its policy positions as these are very close to their own positions. At the same time, both parties lost considerable amounts of votes to Fi during the elections 2014 (Blombäck 2015).

What we cannot account for in this study is why people choose to vote for Fi rather than one of the alternative left-libertarian options in the Swedish party system (V or MP). One possibility is that they did so primarily because of its “newness.” Although this was not the first time Fi stood for election to the European parliament, this was the first time it had a reasonable chance of getting elected. Therefore, it could be the case that Fi stood out as a more “sexy” choice for left-leaning voters than the more established alternatives this time, but that this extra shine might fade during the parliamentary term. Sweden has kind of a tradition of electing new parties to the European parliament for one term. This happened for example in the case of the June List in 2004 and the Pirate party in 2009. At the same time, Fi is not *that* new. Founded in 2006 it has been around in Swedish politics and, not least, Swedish media for almost a decade, and after the last elections it has a rather solid base at the local level with representation in 13 Swedish municipalities.

Does this mean that Fi be able to transform itself to a fully established party and speaker of the feminist movement in representative assemblies? Will Fi be the first in a series of new parties based in a feminist ideology across Europe? We will see in the next Swedish parliamentary election in 2018 and the next European election in 2019.

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