

Finns Have a Gloomy View of Politics



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Introduction

The Centre for Finnish Business and Policy Studies (EVA) has carried out large-scale national attitude surveys every other year since 1984. The surveys give a many-faceted picture of public opinion, and of its development over the years. People's attitudes towards many aspects of society have been assessed. As the methodology of the surveys has always been the same, the results are fully comparable over time. A brief description of the methodology is given at the end of this article.

The most recent survey was conducted between early December 2002 and late January 2003, and the results were published in Finnish in early March. This article summarises some of the main findings of the study. The focus is on the Finns' view of politics, the central theme of this year's survey. The political system, its functioning and legitimacy, is given a thorough scrutiny.

The respondents were also asked to give their views on the substance matter of politics: What kind of policies should the government pursue? Opinions were charted on a wide-ranging set of issues, with special emphasis placed on taxation and how it should be reformed. This part of the survey received additional weight from the parliamentary elections that were held in March 2003, only a few months after the data were collected.

In addition to politics, several other issues were addressed in the survey. These include the functioning of the market economy, globalisation, the public sector and privatisation, work-

ing life, the environment, economic growth and technology, national identity, immigration, and international questions. These themes will not, however, be discussed in this article.

Finland's Political System and the Results of the Elections of March 2003

Finland has a unicameral parliament, the Eduskunta, a 200-member body that is elected through a proportional voting system every four years. The number of political parties is very large, eight parties gained seats both in 1999 and in 2003, and a further ten ran in the elections this time. The table below summarises the results of the March 2003 elections.

Finland's Parliamentary Elections in 1999 and 2003 Seats won by main parties

Party	1999	2003
Centre Party	48	55
Social Democrats	51	53
National Coalition	46	40
Left-Wing Alliance	20	19
Greens	11	14
Swedish People's Party	12	9
Other parties	12	10

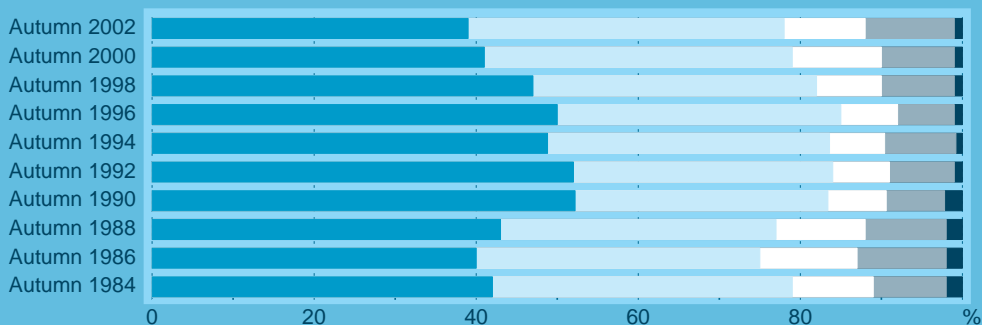
Total seats: 200.

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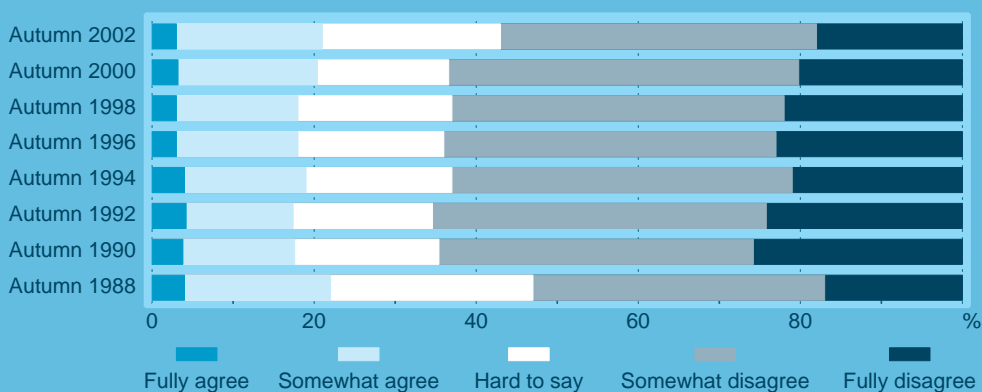
Due to the proportional voting system no party has been even close to having an overall majority in the post-war period, the largest party having usually held between one quarter and one third of the seats. The two largest parties have in most elections been the Social Democrats and the Centre Party (former Agrarian Union). Other significant parties are the conservative National Coalition Party, the Left-Wing Alliance (former communists), the Greens (a fairly recent addition to the political field), and the Swedish People's Party, whose main constituency is Finland's Swedish-speaking minority.

The absence of a majority party implies that coalition governments are the norm. Over the past two parliaments, since 1995, Finland was governed by what might be called a 'rainbow coalition', consisting of the Social Democrats, the National Coalition, the Left-Wing Alliance, the Greens, and the Swedish People's Party. The Greens left the coalition in the spring of 2002 over a disagreement about energy policy. The post-election coalition comprises the Centre Party, the Social Democrats and the Swedish People's Party. It is headed by Ms. Anneli Jäätteenmäki, leader of the Centre Party.

Figure 1. "Political parties have become more and more removed from the everyday problems of ordinary people"



"Finnish democracy functions so well that there are no grounds for talking about poor opportunities for influencing decision making"



Sources: EVA, Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy 2003.

ETLA S03.1/f105

Dismal View of Political System

EVA's series of surveys has shown that most Finns are rather critical of the working of the political system. Political parties are prime targets for this criticism, as is shown by Figure 1. This is also reflected on a more personal level; about six out of ten respondents feel that 'no party champions causes that I find significant'.

To gauge the legitimacy of the political system, a number of statements on Finnish politics and its characteristics were put to those surveyed. The response was rather stunning: mainly negative characterisations corresponded with the views of a majority of the respondents, while almost all positive ones did not (see Fig. 2).

The criticism focuses on a few points. Real power is seen to lie in the hands of a small élite, who do not listen to the citizens, but act covertly and hidden from the public eye. This lack of transparency also implies that no real differences are perceived between the various political parties. As, according to the respondents, politics is for the ruling clique just another way to make a living, they are seen to further their own interests rather than the common good. The morale of the decision-makers is also questioned.

Sir Winston Churchill, the legendary British prime minister, is on record saying '...democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' The Finns seem to share this view, as despite all the criticism they aim at their political system and its actors, seven out of ten nevertheless agree that whatever the problems, there is no alternative (see Fig. 2). Voting is also believed in; 81 per cent agree that 'voting is always worthwhile even though a single citizen has little influence on national issues'. It is also noteworthy that criticism aimed at political parties and politicians has been diminishing since the mid 1990's (see Fig. 1), albeit at a slow pace.

Another consolation for politicians can be found in the response to the statement that Finnish politics is 'Of high standard and matter-of-fact in international comparison'. This was subscribed to by 40 per cent of the respondents, while only 21 per cent disagreed. Of course one may wonder how revolting politics is perceived to be in other countries, if the

condemned domestic version is nevertheless considered to be better! It is relevant to add that, according to Transparency International, Finland is the least corrupt country in the world. Thus the Finns may have some grounds to appreciate the functioning of their own political system above other countries.

The European Union and Big Business are Found too Powerful

Assessing whether certain actors and institutions in society have too much, too little, or a suitable amount of power has been a recurring theme in EVA's surveys. It should be noted that the question does not concern the absolute extent of the power of the mentioned institutions, but rather the relationship between perceived and desirable amount of power.

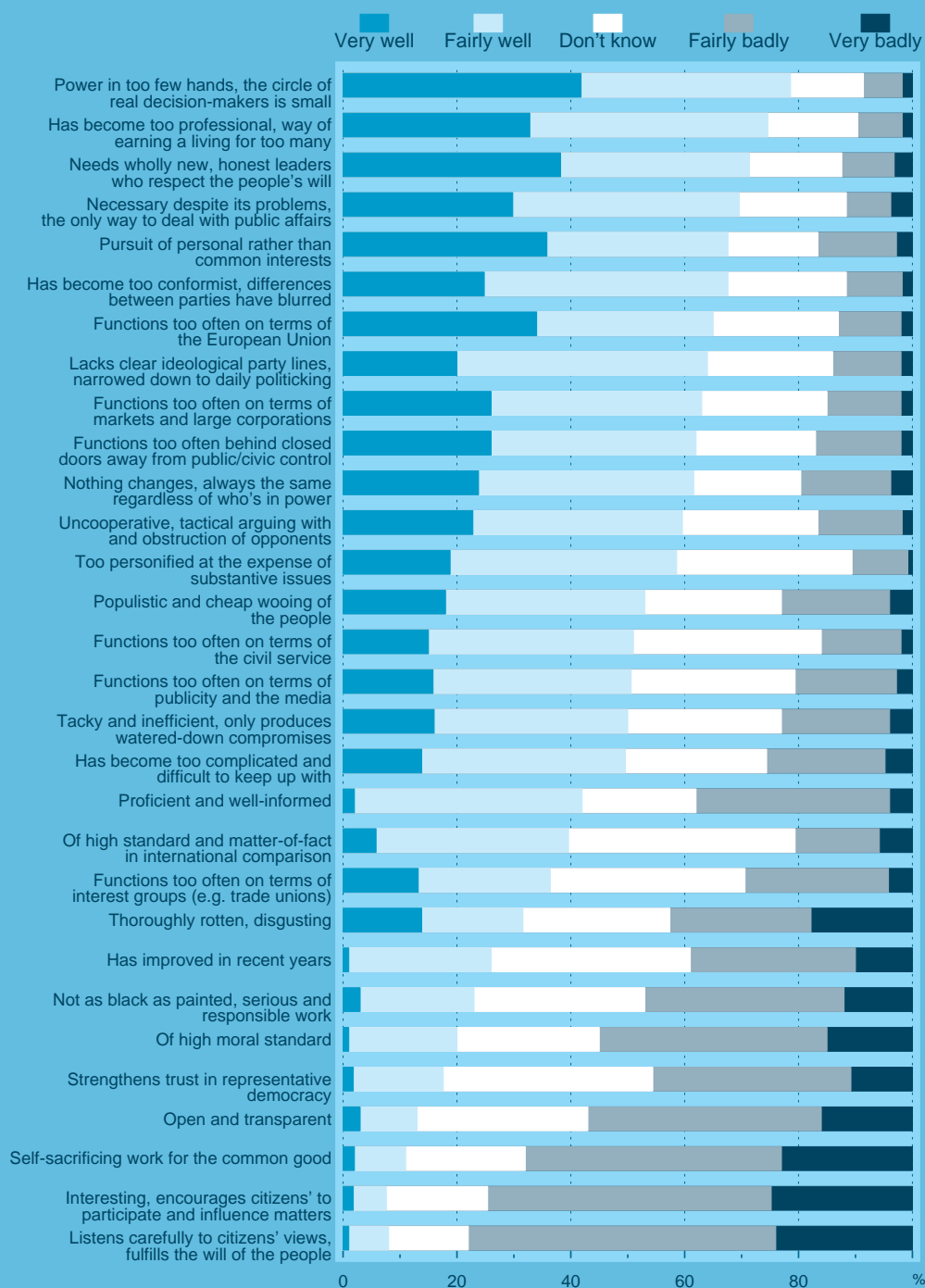
The European Union is widely believed to be too powerful, with two-thirds of the respondents sharing this view. Other 'too powerful' institutions and actors are the market forces, large corporations, the media, banks, and political parties. Too little power is concentrated in the hands of private citizens, families, the police force, and civic organisations (Fig. 3).

It is remarkable that international actors are most often seen to have too much power - apart from the EU, also the market forces, large corporations and banks are to a significant degree international by nature. The extent of the power of domestic political institutions, except political parties, is, on the contrary, considered to be close to optimal. It may also be added that compared to 1998, the previous time that this set of questions was included in the survey, the share of 'appropriate amount of power' has increased for all domestic political institutions. This is another indication that in spite of the harsh critique that politicians receive, the opinion climate is becoming more favourable to political activity.

The Political Agenda

As a general election and the formation of a new government were approaching at the time the survey was conducted, a set of questions on which issues the new government should concentrate on was put to the respondents. The results are summarised in Figure 4.

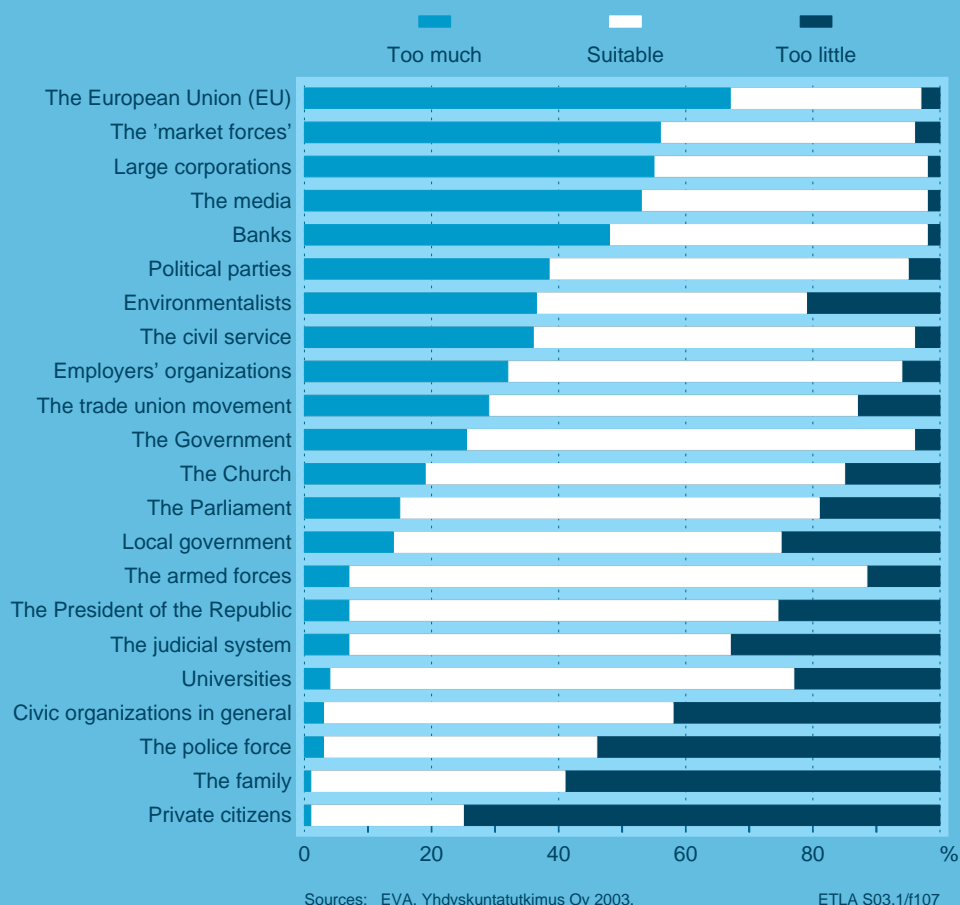
Figure 2. "How do the following statements and characterizations correspond to the image that you have of Finnish politics today?"



Sources: EVA, Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy 2003.

ETLA S03.1/f106

Figure 3. "Assessment of the extent of the power of various institutions and actors in society"



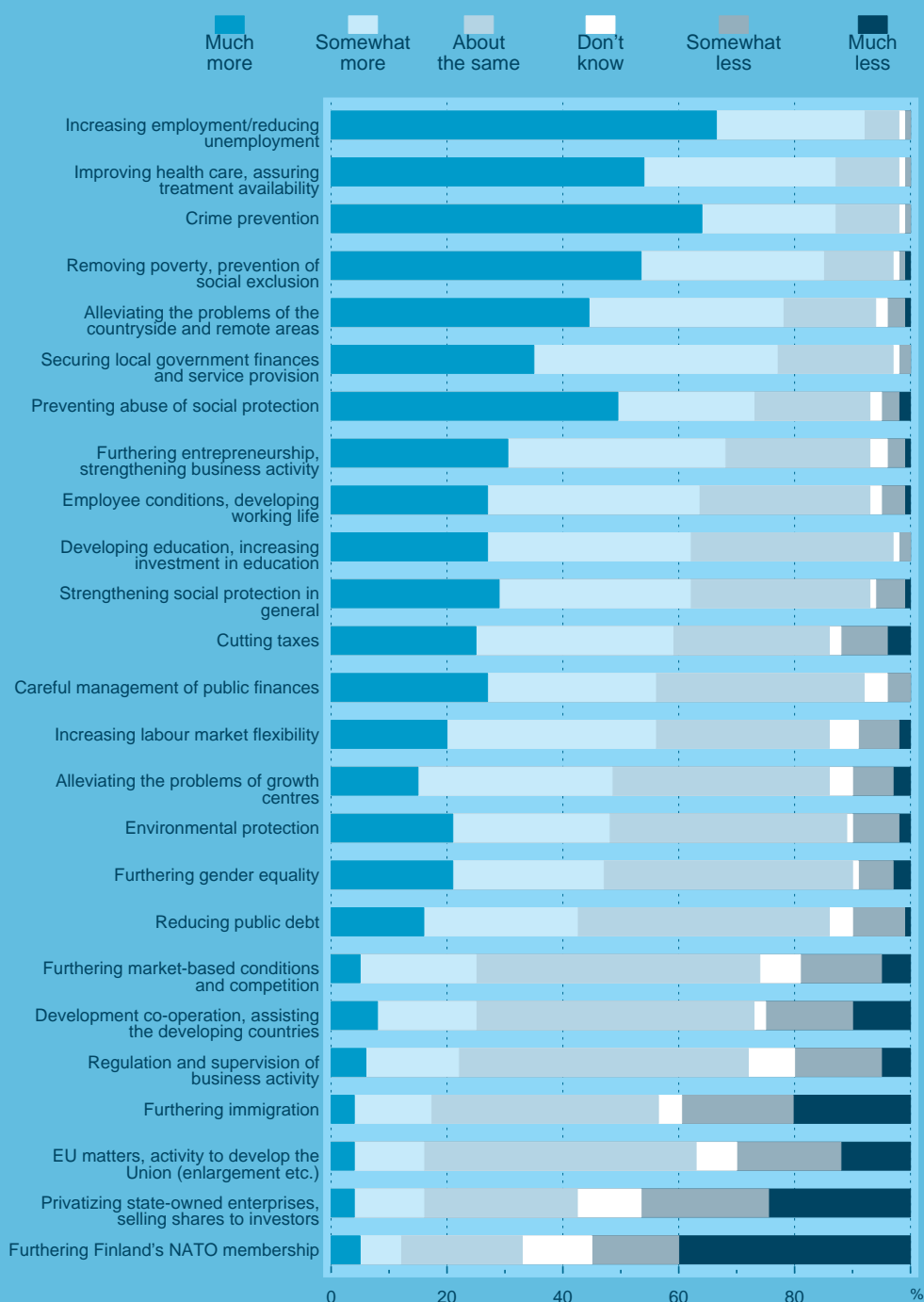
The first conclusion one may draw from the results is that the Finns want their future government to be active on a broad field of policies. Almost all of the 25 areas listed should, according to a majority of the citizens, be given as much or more emphasis than at present. This can also be interpreted that the main criticism of the policies of the outgoing government is that of ineffectiveness: Few demands for an actual change of course are made. The present policies should only be pursued more vigorously.

Unemployment has arguably been the most severe economic problem that Finland has faced

since the early 1990's, and remains so at close to nine per cent of the labour force. This is also reflected in popular wishes, as reducing unemployment tops the list of issues requiring 'more emphasis' by virtual unanimity.

The welfare society has in EVA's surveys been found to be very popular with the Finnish public. This is confirmed by the fact that health care, removal of poverty, and securing public services (most of which are in Finland provided by the local authorities albeit with central government financial assistance) should all be given more emphasis than at present.

Figure 4. "How much emphasis should the next government place on the following issues?"



Sources: EVA, Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy 2003.

ETLA S03.1/f108

Demands to preserve and improve public services can be contrasted to the fact that bringing down taxation, careful management of public finances and reducing public debt all receive less support than upholding various aspects of the welfare society. It should be noted, however, that taxes have been cut and public debt has been reduced over the past few years, so that even putting as much emphasis on them as before would imply a policy of sound public finances with lowered taxes over the course of the next parliament.

Looking at the lower end of Figure 4 it is found that international issues are not very popular among the Finnish public. However, furthering Finland's NATO membership is the only policy which should be given less emphasis than currently in the opinion of an overall majority of the respondents. It should be noted that Finland's official policy in this respect is wait-and-see: future membership has not been ruled out, but for the time being an application is not to be expected. Thus even continuing the present policy would not make membership likely in the near future.

Other international issues not in public favour are EU matters (of which enlargement was mentioned as an example), and development assistance. Furthering immigration, another policy with international overtones, is also rather unpopular.

Taxation was given an even more thorough scrutiny than public policy issues in general. A set of statements on Finland's present tax regime and proposals for its reform were presented. The results can be found in Figure 5.

Taxation is considered to be too severe. This is especially true of taxes on wages, salaries and pensions. Over two-thirds share both of these views. An even slightly larger proportion of the respondents think that a lower tax burden would be good for work incentives and entrepreneurship.

The relationship between taxes and the public services and transfer payments that citizens receive in return is of course highly significant in assessing the tax system. Do the Finns feel that

they are getting value for their money? The answer given by this survey is mixed. Several statements pertaining to this issue were included in the set presented in Figure 5.

Almost two-thirds of the citizens agree that 'Taxes must not be lowered, if it impairs social protection and public services'. On the other hand, when more or less the same argument is put in a more abstract way, 'High taxes are part of the Nordic welfare model, and should thus be accepted', only slightly over a quarter agree, and close to a half disagree. Other formulations of the same basic argument give results in between these two extremes. Thus it seems that the jury is still out on whether or not the Finnish taxpayers feel they are getting their money's worth from the public sector.

How the Survey was Carried Out

The study is the tenth in the series of EVA's national attitude surveys, the first one of which was carried out in 1984. The survey, like the previous ones, was commissioned from Mr. Pentti Kiljunen of Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy. The Finnish report, '*Vaatelias vaalikansa*', was published in March 2003, and can be found on EVA's website: www.eva.fi.

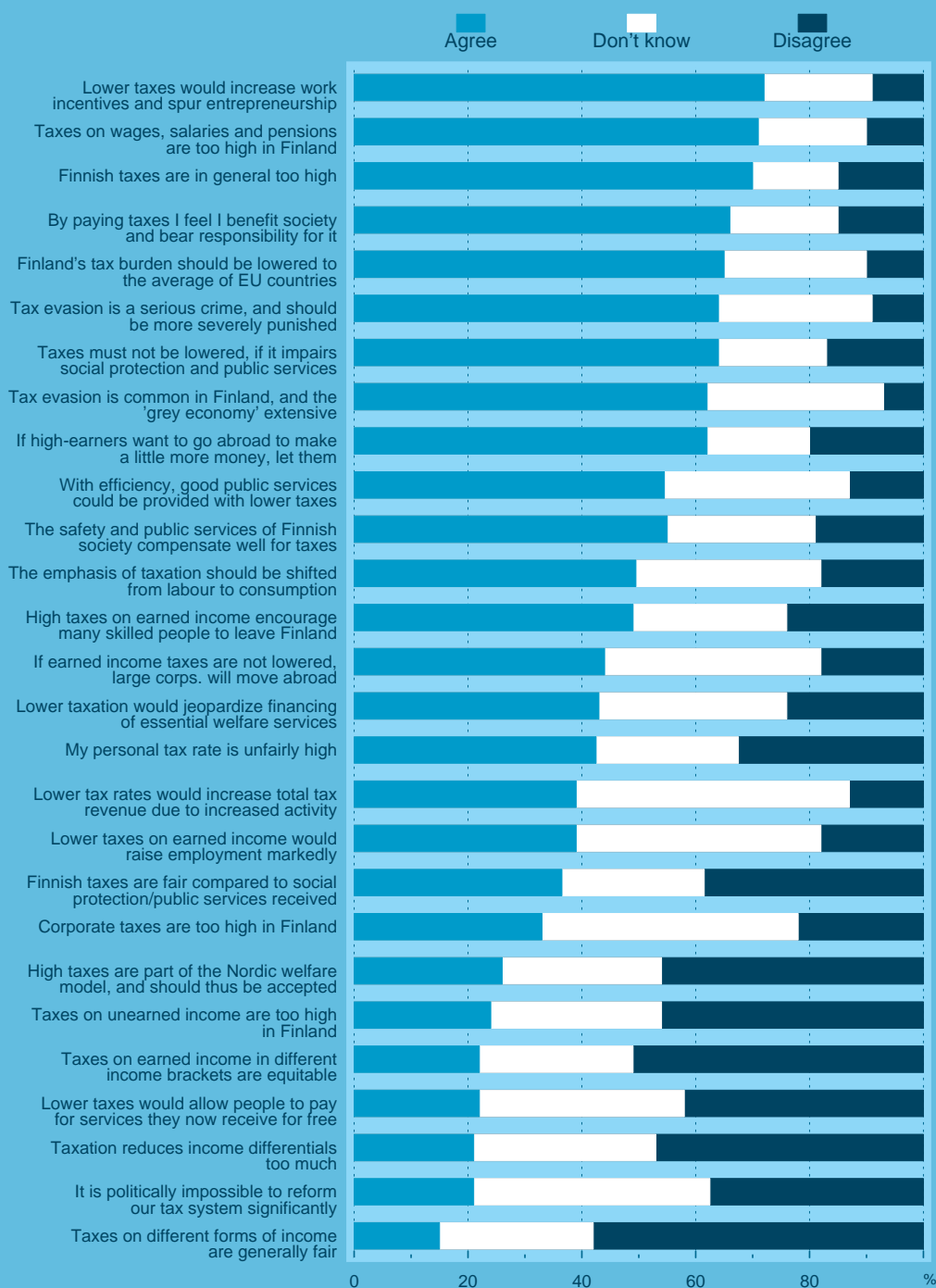
The survey is based on polling 2,133 respondents, who formed a random sample of Finland's 18- to 70-year-old population. They received a written questionnaire by mail. The replies were received between December 3rd, 2002 and January 29th, 2003.

The sample is representative of the whole population with respect to demographic, social and regional factors. Persons with academic education are slightly overrepresented.

The five per cent confidence interval for the results is one to two percentage points in the whole sample depending on the form of the distribution. In subgroups the confidence interval is somewhat larger.

The data of the whole series of surveys are held at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD), a unit of the University of Tampere. FSD's website is www.fsd.uta.fi.

Figure 5. "How do you feel about the following statements and reform proposals concerning taxation?"



Sources: EVA, Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy 2003.

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