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# **Election promises on children's wellbeing and health 2015 to 2021 – a study of Finnish voting advice applications database**

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## **Background:**

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children's views should be heard in policymaking. But it remains unclear to what extent children's wellbeing is considered in election promises

## **Methods:**

We investigated the extent to which Finnish political candidates consider children and their wellbeing in their election promises. We used YLE, the national broadcaster's voting advice application database, and analysed some 35,000 politicians' election promises made in the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary and the 2017 and 2021 municipal elections. We calculated the proportion of candidates who mentioned children and examined the content of the election promises in which children were mentioned. Logistic regression models were used to examine the role of the background of the characteristics of candidates.

## **Results:**

In the 2015 and 2019 elections, some 12% and 19% of candidates, respectively, mentioned children in their election promises. The figures for the 2017 and 2021 municipal elections were higher at 19% and 24%, respectively. In the 2021 election, the candidates considering children in their election promises were younger and had higher education qualifications. Inspection of a random set of 350 promises indicated that common issues mentioned in respect of children were education and hobby activities. Concrete proposals to improve the wellbeing of children were rarely put forward.

## **Conclusions:**

Political candidates are increasingly considering children in their election promises but concrete proposals to improve the wellbeing and health of children are rare. Effective policy solutions to improve the health of children should be discussed in election debates.

## Background

Political candidates' election promises matter for children, particularly for their wellbeing and health. Election discussions do not only reflect the political discourse at hand, but the promises made therein also shape subsequent policy decisions and policy implementation. Children are reliant on public services, such as schools, social services, health care and social security and thus have a vested interest in these services. Children are thereby greatly affected by election outcomes, budget decisions and policy choices. However, children in Finland, that is people under the age of 18 years, similar to most other democracies, do not have the right to vote. As a consequence, it is important to look in detail at how children and their wellbeing are addressed in election debates. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) acknowledges that children's views should be taken seriously and considered in policymaking [1,2]. Taking children's issues seriously has direct implications for their wellbeing and health [3], making the election promises concerning children's public health a highly relevant area for study.

However, little empirical evidence is currently available on the extent to which children's viewpoints and wellbeing are being taken into consideration in elections. The role of children and their wellbeing is, basically, undocumented in terms of election themes. In the US context, a study by Benning et al. found that children's health-related issues were rarely mentioned in the US Congressional candidate's campaign websites [4]. In the Finnish context, we are unaware of any study examining the role of children in election discussions. This represents an important gap in the literature. It is unclear whether there has been any progress in terms of CRC implementation and children's rights to be heard. Documenting the

extent to which children are considered in election debates is important for monitoring the CRC and improving children's health and wellbeing and for assessing the need for further action to promote the views of children.

In this study we address this research issue by analysing children's role in Finnish political candidates' promises made in municipal and parliamentary elections. Election promises reflect the current political debates, indicate candidates' top priorities and are thus likely to affect subsequent policy development. If children are absent from election promises, there is a risk that subsequent policymaking will not address the wellbeing and health of children. Our aim is to quantify the share of candidates who make election promises concerning children. We also compare the changes over time in this share. Our study expands on our previous report, available in Finnish [5], by examining election promises in particular and including the most recent election in 2021. Additionally, we seek to contribute to the understanding of the political economy of child health by using a novel and reliable data source, studying long-term trends and using a comprehensive methodological approach.

## **Setting**

This study is based on the Finnish context, a country with a population of some 5.5 million in 2021 [6] and with a territorial administrative structure encompassing slightly less than 300 municipalities in mainland Finland. Noteworthy for this study is that the provision of health and social services has been decentralised to the municipalities since 1993. This will, however, change once the long-prepared Reform of health care, social welfare and rescue services is implemented at the beginning of 2023. Thereafter 21 self-governing counties will be responsible for the corresponding services beginning in 2023 (for more information, see Finland: Country Health Profile 2021 [7]). Given that social, school and health services are of

great relevance to children's welfare, municipal councils currently enjoy significant potential to improve the wellbeing of children at the service delivery level. Moreover, given the decline in fertility rates, both in Finland and in much of the rest of Europe, children's and families' wellbeing has emerged as an increasing concern. The share of children in the population has declined from 35% in 1960 to 19% in 2019 (see Statistics of Finland: <https://www.stat.fi/tietotrendit/artikkelit/2020/milta-lasten-suomi-nayttaa-tilastoissa-lasten-maara-ja-osuus-vaestossa-historiallisen-pieni/>).

Finland has an electoral system with five types of elections, for the selection of: the president, the Members of the European Parliament, county council for each wellbeing services county (all three of which fall outside the scope of this study), the parliament, and the municipal and city councils. The parliamentary and municipal elections are held every four years using the D'Hondt system. More details on the Finnish electoral system are available elsewhere [8]. Finland has been characterised as a social democratic welfare state with universal health care coverage, a fairly good performing health system [7] and social rights as the main organising principle of its welfare service provision approach [9].

While the burden of disease, injury and risk factors among children is relatively low by international standards [10] and Finland ranks high in the wellbeing measures of children [11], there are nevertheless notable inequalities in child wellbeing and school outcomes by family socioeconomic background across the country. Previous research shows that there are strong social determinants to child mental health [12], school bullying [13], health behaviour [14–16] and self-rated health, similar to the other Nordic countries [17]. The discussion around wellbeing and health issues often includes reference to social exclusion, school bullying, material hardship, mental health issues, lack of physical activity [7] and access to

hobby activities among children. In this study, we investigate whether these concerns are reflected in politicians' election promises.

## **Methods**

### **Database**

We use data derived from YLE, Finland's publicly owned, national broadcasting company. We used YLE's voting advice application (VAA) database from four elections: two parliamentary elections, held in 2015 and 2019, and two municipal elections, held in 2017 and 2021. VAA is a web-based application to which political candidates submit their key agenda, characteristics and responses to a predetermined set of policy and value questions. The candidates' responses and an algorithm are used to suggest suitable candidates for voters based on the voter's own preferences. VAAs have previously been used as a data source in political science research in Finland [18] and elsewhere but the role of children has not been considered in these previous studies. The VAA data was obtained directly from YLE for research purposes. The individual VAA responses are publicly available. VAAs are discussed in greater detail elsewhere [19].

Overall, VAAs provide a unique and innovative data source. The VAA data is suitable for our purposes because the candidates' response rates are relatively high or satisfactory, VAAs reflect the current political discourse and VAAs are widely used by voters. VAAs are the most reliable and harmonised source of political candidates' election promises. Survey evidence indicates that around half of potential voters used a VAA in 2019 [20]. A substantial proportion of candidates have responded to the VAA. However, these figures vary somewhat by party, the lowest participation rate being among candidates of the Swedish People's Party of Finland while the highest rate was from those in the Green party [18].

In the VAA, each candidate is offered an opportunity to propose up to three short election promises for the voters. These promises are usually short and are shown to the voters when the VAA is suggesting a given candidate. We also use data on the background characteristics of the candidates. In this study, we do not use data on responses to the VAA's policy and value questions. We used this exclusion because the data did not contain specific questions on children, the value questions varied over the election years and our explicit aim was to focus on election promises.

### **Selection of the sample**

After excluding candidates with no data on election promises, our sample consisted of 1813 candidates in 2015 (some 84% of all candidates in the election), 15,469 candidates in 2017 (46%), 2261 candidates in 2019 (92%) and 15,898 candidates in 2021 (45%). Municipal elections tend to have a higher number of candidates and thus lower response rates.

### **Assessment of the variables**

We used variables available from the database including the election promise, election year, political party, gender and age. In addition, for the municipal elections in 2021, we obtained data on election budget (a binary variable taking a value of 1 if the budget was €1000 or more; more detailed data on election budgets was not available) political experience (a binary variable taking a value of 1 if the candidate did not mention any political experience from a list of different political positions) and education (five categories: high school graduate, other, primary school only, university degree and vocational degree). All of these categories were readily derivable from the database.

### **Analysis**

We analysed the role of children in election candidates' promises in three parts. First, we calculated the proportion of political candidates who mentioned children in one of their three election promises. We developed a search string using the word for child in Finnish (*lapsi*) in all forms and in Swedish (*barn*). We also included a word for children with families (*lapsiperhe*). We evaluated several search strategies but decided to use this simplified search string. However, our results do change significantly after including some synonyms or closely related words. We include all these search terms in Supplemental material Table I online.

We present the share of candidates who included children in their election promises by election year to illustrate the prevailing time trends. We further calculated the share by background characteristics of the candidates, including gender, age, education, political experience and political party, using data from the municipal elections of 2021. We did not calculate these figures by area or municipality given the high number of municipalities.

Second, to test the extent to which the background characteristics of candidates explained the likelihood of mentioning children, we utilised multilevel logistic regression models with random intercept at the municipal level. We regressed the odds of mentioning children, first separately on individual characteristics and then adding all covariates into a single model. We used data from the 2021 elections. We present the odds ratios and their 95% confidence intervals in the Supplemental materials.

Third, in order to interrogate the promises in greater detail, a random set of 350 responses in which children were mentioned from 350 different candidates in the 2021 election were selected for content analysis. Stata software's pseudo-random number generator was used for this selection. We analysed the themes of these promises. Each promise was inspected to assess whether it (a) consisted of a concrete proposal to improve the wellbeing of children

(i.e. policy or budget change), or mentioned (b) social security issues related to families, (c) early childhood education and care, (d) basic education, (e) children's equality, (f) social exclusion, (g) social care, (h) children's health and health services, (i) children's hobbies, (j) children's impact assessment, (k) children's rights in general, and (l) violence or bullying. A single promise could contain more than one theme. If the promise did not contain any of the themes above, it was coded as 'none'.

These items were selected based on a preliminary inspection of the most common themes.

AH inspected the promises and made the initial coding. PV supervised this process and read and agreed on the coding. Any disagreements on the content were solved via discussion.

Stata 17 was used during all stages of the analysis. The programming codes used to produce these analyses are available in Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/g2cj5/>).

## Results

Figure 1 shows the share of political candidates who mentioned children in their election promises by election year, political party and age. Children were considered more often in the municipal election than in the parliamentary elections. The share of candidates mentioning children increased; in the 2015 parliamentary elections, some 12% of candidates mentioned children while this figure in the 2019 elections was 19%. In the 2017 municipal elections, some 19% of candidates considered children. In the 2021 elections, this share increased to 24%. Similar increases between the elections of 2015 and 2019 as well as the elections 2017 and 2021 were irrespective of the political party, gender or age group.

Table II shows the characteristics of the candidates who mentioned children in the 2021 municipal elections. Some 19% of male candidates mentioned children while the

corresponding figure among female candidates was higher, at 31%. Children were most often mentioned by candidates aged 31–40 years and least often by candidates aged less than 30 years. There was also significant variation by political party. Candidates' election budgets were not significantly related to the likelihood of mentioning children. Candidates with higher educational qualifications were more likely to mention children than their counterparts with lower educational qualifications. Mentioning children was also weakly linked to the election outcome. Some 24% of elected candidates mentioned children, compared with 23% of non-elected candidates. Among those candidates occupying substitute places, the share was 26%.

In a Supplemental Table 2, we report the results from the logistic regression model. Adjusting for other characteristics and accounting for clustering within municipalities explained little of the associations between background characteristics and the odds of mentioning children in election promises. For example, before adjustments, university degree versus only high school graduate was linked to 1.41-fold (95% confidence interval 1.22–1.62) odds of mentioning children while after adjusting for party and other characteristics, the figure was 1.20 (1.03–1.39).

Figure 2 shows the most common themes that were coded in a random sample of 350 election promises concerning children. Most of the promises concerning children did not contain any specific theme and mentioned children only on a general level. The most common theme was education, followed by early childhood education and care and children's hobby activities. Very few promises mentioned children's rights or child impact assessment.

## **Discussion**

An increasing share of Finnish political candidates mentioned children in their election promises but, in the municipal elections held in 2021, still only one-fourth of candidates mentioned children in one of their election promises. There were, however, substantial variations by candidate age, political party and educational qualifications. Women and candidates with higher education qualifications mentioned children more often. In terms of the election promises concerning children, our assessment indicated that concrete proposals were rarely made, and children were mentioned mainly at a general level. Indeed, these promises often remained at the rhetorical or virtue signalling level with no indication of tangible attempts to positively influence children's wellbeing and/or health through the making of electoral candidate promises accountable to the electorate.

This is the first study to assess children's wellbeing in the election promises of Finnish political candidates. In the Finnish context, we are aware of previous studies that have assessed the extent to which children are represented in municipal council discussions [21], newspapers and in election studies [22]. Our findings are in line with the US study by Benning et al., showing that children are not central to election discussions [4]. We are unaware of other studies in the Nordic countries or from similar socioeconomic contexts.

In this study, we observed an increasing share of candidates who mentioned children. This suggests that some improvements have been made in the implementation of the CRC when it comes to children's right to be heard. It is unlikely that selection bias to VAA responses alone explains this increasing share of candidates mentioning children. The increase was seen in both municipal and parliamentary elections (in which the VAA response rate is high) and irrespectively of the candidates' political party, gender or age group. We suspect that the increasing role of children in the election promises may be related to the advocacy work of child welfare organisations and their often discussed concerns regarding declining fertility or

the general policy environment. The Finnish fertility decline has caused concerns regarding the long-term economic sustainability of the Nordic welfare state model. As such, children's wellbeing is often discussed in this context. The reasons behind this increase are, however, beyond the scope of this study. Unsurprisingly, children were mentioned more often in the municipal elections than in the parliamentary elections as municipalities are responsible for many services that greatly affect children; although this will change with implementation of the reform to social and health care in 2023.

We observed significant variations in the likelihood of mentioning children in election promises based on the characteristics of the candidates. A typical candidate with an election promise concerning children was female, aged 31–40 years and highly educated. This sociodemographic group is likely to be that with the closest proximity to the lives of children and their issues, although in this study we did not analyse the family status of the candidates. Logistic regression models indicated that the observed characteristics of candidates did not explain party differences and vice versa. Interestingly, candidates who mentioned children were slightly more likely to be elected but this study does not allow for causal conclusions here due to likely confounding issues.

Our content analysis indicated that the majority of the municipal election promises in which children were mentioned did not contain any specific theme. Our assessment is that children were often mentioned only at a general level. Of the specific themes, the most common was understandably education, for which the municipalities are responsible. Little in the way of concrete proposals was contained in these promises. Children's health and health care were rarely mentioned. Very few candidates mentioned social care, which is concerning because the UN CRC put heavy emphasis on the needs of the most vulnerable children. One reason

for this may be the skewed age distribution of the candidates – older candidates may find health services more relevant for them personally than social services.

This study suggests that concrete policy proposals to improve children's wellbeing and their rights should be more broadly discussed in election debates. Election promises can be seen as an epistemic work through which politicians frame the operational environment, identify actors and perceive identifications, defining norms and ideals [23]. Election promises are important because political decisions are managed through actors' perceptions of the current challenges that need to be addressed. Consequently, this would probably lead to more structured political discussions and debates on children's health and wellbeing at elections across all governance levels (from the local to the regional and ultimately to the national). To facilitate discussion on more concrete solutions, election debate moderators may find it useful to ask for candidates' views on specific interventions and policy solutions to improve the wellbeing of children as proposed by experts.

To be clear, we have not solicited children's or their caregivers' views, and the present results reflect aspiring politician decision makers' responses to questions posed via a voting application database. Subsequent studies are needed to assess the extent to which election promises concerning children truly reflect children's views.

## **Strengths and limitations**

The strengths of this study include the large and unique dataset spanning more than five years that it utilised. VAAs can be viewed as a trustworthy data source of election promises submitted in harmonised form. The VAA administered by YLE is a public type of voting advice application owned by the State and thus is possibly more impartial than other VAAs administered by non-governmental organisations or interest groups, at least in Finland. As

such, we recommend that VAAs could and should be used in subsequent studies investigating both the political economy and social determinants of health.

Limitations in respect of this investigation included the fact that we did not include synonyms for children. It is possible that some election promises with indirect reference to children were not captured. Another limitation is that there is a risk of non-response bias given that the response rates for the municipal elections were only satisfactory while the response rates were high for the parliamentary elections. We are thus rightly cautious in directly comparing the figures between the municipal and parliamentary elections. We did not have data to assess the extent to which the characteristics of the candidates who responded to the VAAs and those who did not differ. Furthermore, in the content analysis, the themes of individual promises were agreed upon by two researchers, but clearly some measurement error is inevitable. A random sample of 350 election promises was selected for content analysis. Thus, it is important to note that the exact ranking and the prevalence of the themes investigated remains uncertain.

## **Conclusion**

Children's issues should be heard more clearly and better taken into account in policymaking. Children's participation in making policy is imperative, addressed, for example, in the UN CRC. This study investigated the extent to and the ways in which Finnish political candidates consider children in their election promises by using the national voting advice application data from four elections held between 2015 and 2021. An increasing, yet still minor, share of political candidates considered children in their election promises. However, concrete promises to improve the wellbeing and health of children remained quite rare. In conclusion,

we suggest that effective and concrete policy solutions to improve the health of children should be discussed more thoroughly in election debates.

#### Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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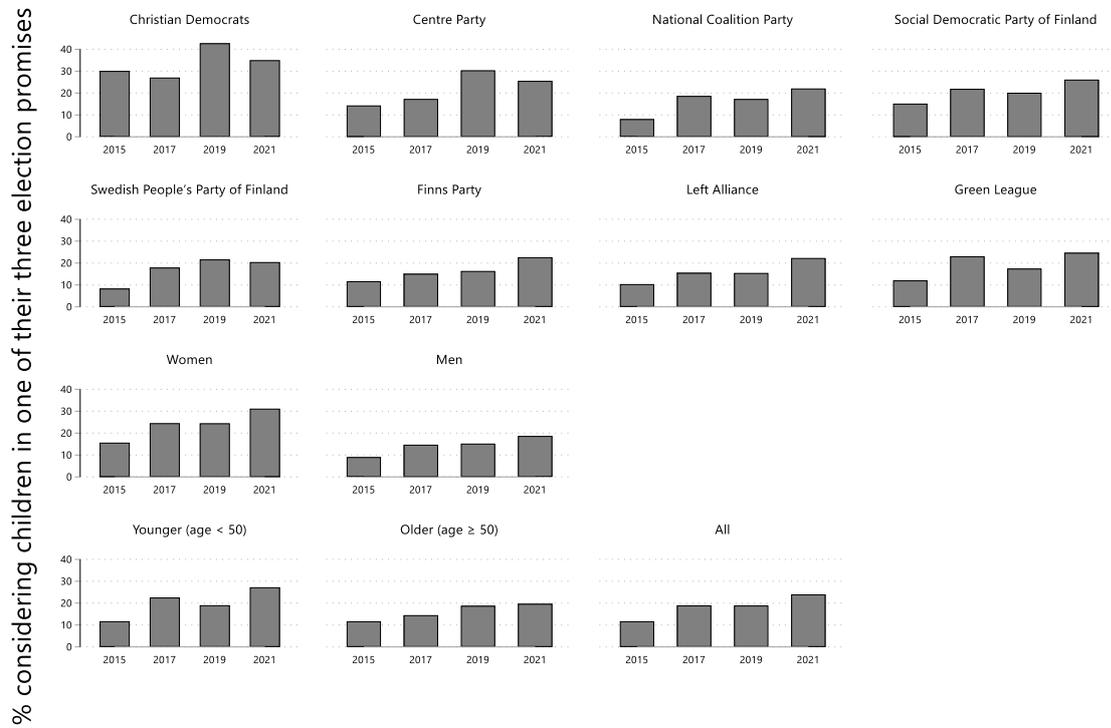


Figure 1. Share of political candidates mentioning children in one of their election promises. Yle's voting advice application data. See table 1 for number of candidates per elections.

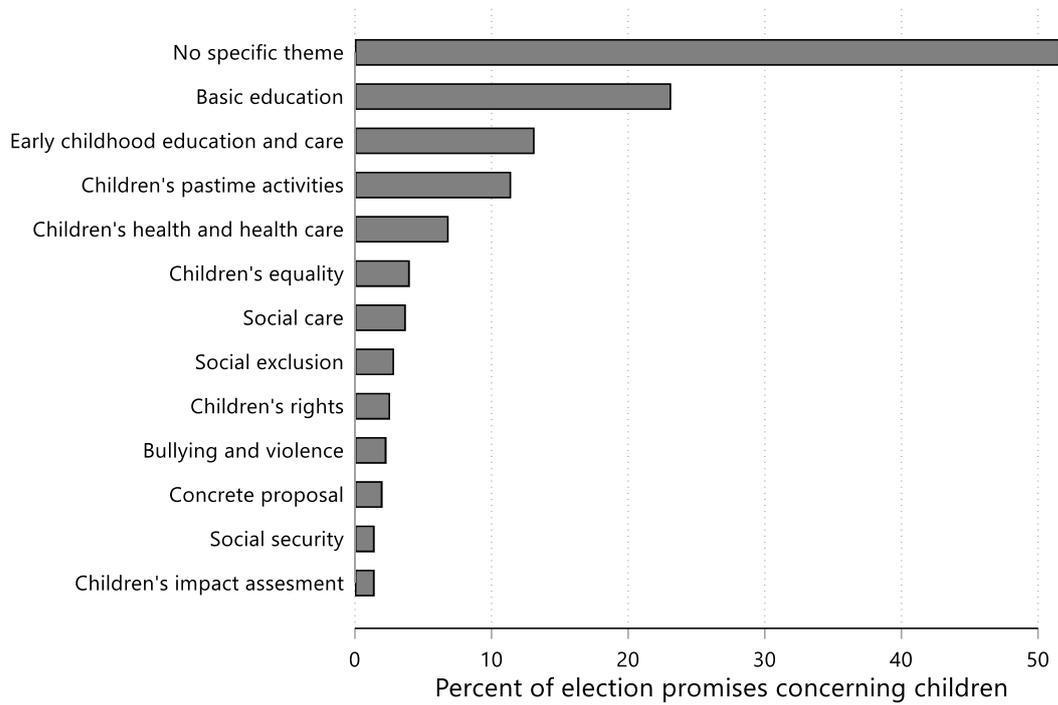


Figure 3. The most common themes mentioned in the election promises concerning children. Results based on a random sample of 350 election promises that included the word 'children' from different candidates.

Table 1. Number of candidates, responses to the VAAs and analysed election promises. YLE's VAA data.

	Total number of candidates in the elections (source statistics of Finland)	Number of persons with valid responses in VAA included in the analysis
2015 parliamentary	2 146	1813
2017 municipal	33 618	15469
2019 parliamentary	2 468	2261
2021 municipal	35 627	15898

Table 2: Characteristics of candidates mentioning children in their election promises in the 2021 municipal election.

	Percent mentioned children in their election promises	Total number of candidatesl freq
Gender		
Female	31.1	6800
Male	18.7	9006
other	10.9	92
Total	24.0	15898
Age group		
Less than 21	16.4	317
21-30	18.7	1499
31-40	31.7	3396
41-50	27.0	4218
51-60	19.6	3445
61-70	19.6	2448
More than 70	17.9	575
Total	24.0	15898
Political party		
National Coalition Party	22.0	3016
Other	19.1	1054
Finns Party	22.6	2191
Centre Party	25.5	2834
Christian Democrats	35.0	675
Social Democratic Party of Finland	26.1	2318

Swedish People's Party of Finland	20.4	651
Left Alliance	22.3	1252
Green League	24.7	1907
Total	24.0	15898
Election budget		
1 000 euros or more	23.3	1925
less than 1 000 euros	24.0	13973
Total	24.0	15898
election Experience		
no previous experience	27.3	5088
some political experience	22.1	10239
Total	23.8	15327
Education		
high school graduate	19.7	1395
other	19.0	993
primary school	17.1	409
university degree	25.9	8410
vocational degree	23.4	4691
Total	24.0	15898
Election outcome		
elected	24.2	4908
not elected	22.8	7228
substitute place	25.8	3762
Total	24.0	15898

Source: Yle voting advice application

## Supplementary materials

Supplementary table 1. Specific search words. % of candidates mentioning in their election promises.

	2015	2017	2019	2021
lapsi	0.22	0.32	0.84	0.55
lapsen	0.72	0.54	1.28	0.73
lasta	0.06	0.12	0.31	0.08
lapset	0.88	1.41	1.55	2.40
lasten	5.30	8.66	7.43	12.00
lapsien	0.17	0.17	0.13	0.26
lapsia	0.28	0.54	1.11	0.71
lapsessa	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsesta	0.00	0.04	0.22	0.06
lapseen	0.00	0.01	0.09	0.01
lapsissa	0.17	0.24	0.31	0.39
lapsista	0.22	0.48	0.57	0.94
lapsiin	0.33	0.27	0.62	0.59
lapsella	0.22	0.35	0.53	0.50
lapselta	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapselle	0.22	0.47	0.57	0.54
lapsilla	0.06	0.65	0.44	0.74
lapsilta	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.08
lapsille	0.33	2.43	1.59	2.86
lapsena	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.04
lapseksi	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsetta	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsina	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsiksi	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsitta	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsin	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsiperhe	0.00	0.02	0.04	0.02
lapsiperheen	0.06	0.01	0.04	0.06
lapsiperhettä	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsiperheet	0.17	0.31	0.57	0.51
lapsiperheiden	2.87	2.86	3.41	3.06
lapsiperheitten	0.00	0.05	0.04	0.03
lapsiperheitä	0.17	0.27	0.35	0.29
lapsiperheessä	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsiperheestä	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsiperheeseen	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsiperheissä	0.00	0.02	0.04	0.03
lapsiperheistä	0.06	0.05	0.13	0.09
lapsiperheisiin	0.00	0.03	0.04	0.06
lapsiperheellä	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
lapsiperheeltä	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
lapsiperheelle	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.03
lapsiperheillä	0.00	0.02	0.04	0.04

lapsiperheiltä	0.17	0.01	0.04	0.00
lapsiperheille	0.39	0.61	0.66	0.84
barn	0.11	0.27	0.09	0.27
barnet	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
barnen	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.04
barns	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.04
barnets	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01
barnens	0.06	0.01	0.00	0.02
Any	11.69	18.93	18.89	23.96

Supplementary table 2. Multilevel logistic regression with random intercepts at municipality level. Outcome: mentioning children in the three election promises.

	(1) Bivariate model	(2) Mutually adjusted
Female	Ref.	Ref.
Male	0.51*** [0.47,0.54]	0.52*** [0.48,0.56]
other	0.27*** [0.14,0.53]	0.32*** [0.17,0.63]
Less than 21	Ref.	Ref.
21-30	1.20 [0.87,1.67]	1.00 [0.71,1.42]
31-40	2.38*** [1.75,3.24]	1.90*** [1.37,2.64]
41-50	1.91*** [1.41,2.59]	1.54** [1.11,2.14]
51-60	1.25 [0.91,1.70]	1.02 [0.73,1.43]
61-70	1.26 [0.92,1.72]	1.08 [0.78,1.52]
More than 70	1.11 [0.77,1.61]	1.00 [0.68,1.47]
National Coalition Party	1.00 [1.00,1.00]	1.00 [1.00,1.00]
Finns Party	1.04 [0.91,1.19]	1.12 [0.97,1.28]
Centre Party	1.24*** [1.09,1.40]	1.22** [1.07,1.38]
Christian Democrats	1.91*** [1.59,2.29]	1.88*** [1.56,2.27]
Social Democratic Party of Finland	1.27*** [1.11,1.44]	1.23** [1.08,1.40]
Swedish People's Party of Finland	0.91 [0.73,1.13]	0.90 [0.72,1.12]
Left Alliance	1.04 [0.89,1.22]	1.00 [0.84,1.18]
Green League	1.16* [1.01,1.33]	0.95 [0.82,1.09]

other	0.85 [0.71,1.01]	0.78* [0.65,0.94]
no previous experience	Ref.	Ref.
some political experience	0.75*** [0.70,0.81]	0.76*** [0.70,0.82]
No data	0.98 [0.80,1.19]	0.92 [0.75,1.13]
Election budget 1 000 euros or more	Ref.	Ref.
Election budget less than 1 000 euros	1.04 [0.93,1.18]	0.91 [0.80,1.03]
high school graduate	Ref.	Ref.
other	0.95 [0.77,1.17]	0.99 [0.80,1.23]
primary school	0.83 [0.62,1.11]	0.94 [0.70,1.27]
university degree	1.41*** [1.22,1.62]	1.20* [1.03,1.39]
vocational degree	1.24** [1.07,1.44]	1.20* [1.02,1.40]
Observations		15898

Exponentiated coefficients; 95% confidence intervals in brackets

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$