

Governing parties suffer losses in Austrian elections

By Markus Salzmann
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Austria's Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the conservative Peoples' Party (ÖVP) achieved their worst result since the Second World War in national elections last Sunday. Both parties have governed the Alpine republic over the past seven years in a grand coalition.

Both parties lost 2 percentage points and together received just over half of all votes. The SPÖ obtained 27.1 percent, and the ÖVP 23.8 percent. In the 1970s and 1980s, both parties obtained a combined vote of over 90 percent. The SPÖ achieved an absolute majority in 1979 with 51 percent of the vote.

The radical right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) came just behind the ÖVP with 21.4 percent, a gain of 4 percent. The Greens fell far short of their own expectations, increasing their share of the vote by just 1 percent to 12 percent.

Two parties which were only recently founded are also represented in parliament, the party of Austro-Canadian billionaire Peter Stronach and the right-wing liberal NEOS. "Team Stronach" achieved 5.8 percent, while the liberals surpassed the 4 percent hurdle with 4.9 percent. The Alliance for Austria's Future (BZÖ), founded by the right-wing extremist Jörg Haider, received just 3.6 percent of the vote and will not be represented in parliament.

As for the makeup of the next government, along with a continuation of the grand coalition, which is most likely, possibilities also include a coalition between the ÖVP, FPÖ and Team Stronach, or the Social Democrats and FPÖ.

ÖVP leading candidate Michael Spindelegger did not rule out a coalition with the right-wing parties, and there are a growing number of voices in the ÖVP calling for this. In 2000, then ÖVP leader Wolfgang Schüssel concluded an alliance with Haider's FPÖ.

If the votes of the FPÖ, BZÖ and Team Stronach are taken together, more than 30 percent of the electorate voted for extreme right-wing parties. As in 2000, it is the politics of the major parties which has made this strengthening of the far right possible.

The FPÖ was completely discredited by its participation in the government from 2000 to 2006. The party stood on the verge of financial collapse and after the split with the BZÖ, led by their long-standing chairman Haider, the FPÖ appeared to be finished. Its renewed rise is above all bound up with the politics of the Social Democrats, whose right-wing policies played into the hands of the FPÖ.

The grand coalition, which replaced the ÖVP/FPÖ government in January 2007, continued the policies of its predecessor and even intensified them. Particularly after 2009, when the global economic crisis reached the Alpine republic and Eastern Europe, which is an important region for Austrian economic interests, Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ) adopted massive budget cuts and reductions in social spending. At the same time, his government increased taxes, a burden which fell mainly on lower and middle-income layers.

This is also linked to the success of NEOS. The votes for the liberals came overwhelmingly from former ÖVP and Green voters. Matthias Strolz, the party's founder and a former ÖVP member, was able to connect with well-off layers of the petty bourgeoisie. He received massive financial support from Hans Peter Haselsteiner, a businessman in the construction industry.

"We are the most pro-European force that there is," said Strolz on the Austrian television channel ORF. He also used the discussion to assure the other parties that the liberals are in general ready to act as a coalition partner. They were ready for "cooperation," stated

Strolz. Only for a firm coalition with the extreme right FPÖ were they “still too far apart,” according to Strolz.

The Greens also demonstrated their readiness to align themselves with the SPÖ, ÖVP, or both. Over recent years, the Greens have been squeezed between the two parties, and they have abandoned any ideological polarisation and formed coalitions with either the left or right at the state level. “The end of the grand coalition would be the beginning of an enormous one,” the *Berliner Zeitung* remarked on this.

While Chancellor Faymann has been striving so far for the maintenance of the grand coalition, some social democrats are contemplating a coalition with the far right. Representatives of trade unions and the official body for employee representation (AK) have attacked Faymann for only negotiating with the ÖVP.

“We are allowing ourselves to be held hostage by the ÖVP with this position. The SPÖ has absolutely no other option than to accept the conditions of the ÖVP,” said the president of the AK in Salzburg Siegfried Pichler. The party should negotiate with the FPÖ, he continued. Here there were many points of agreement, for example on the question of pensions. Both parties have been seeking massive cuts to pensions for some time and an increase in the retirement age.

Norbert Loacker, the chairman of Austria’s trade union confederation (ÖGB) in Vorarlberg, views the fixation on the Peoples’ Party in the talks to form a government as a “fatal mistake.” One could not exclude the whole group of FPÖ voters, Loacker explained. Horst Schachner from the Styrian ÖGB also called for talks with the FPÖ. “It was not only those who are far to the right who voted for the FPÖ,” he said.

“I fear that we will end up with our trousers round our ankles again, like in 2006 under Gusenbauer (the chancellor prior to Faymann), only to achieve a government with the ÖVP,” stated Josef Muchisch from the Bau/Holz trade union. “If no radical reforms are possible with the ÖVP, the SPÖ should look for another coalition variant.”

Nikolaus Kowall, representative of the Social Democrat youth, noted that there was an “overlap in terms of content” with the FPÖ, and it would certainly be possible to cooperate with them at the parliamentary level. He said that a minority government would be one possible option. Josef Cap, head of the SPÖ’s

parliamentary fraction, was appointed to lead discussions with all parties. He explained that he had already held telephone discussions with several parties, including the FPÖ and Team Stronach.

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