

Austria's election: Four things to know about the result



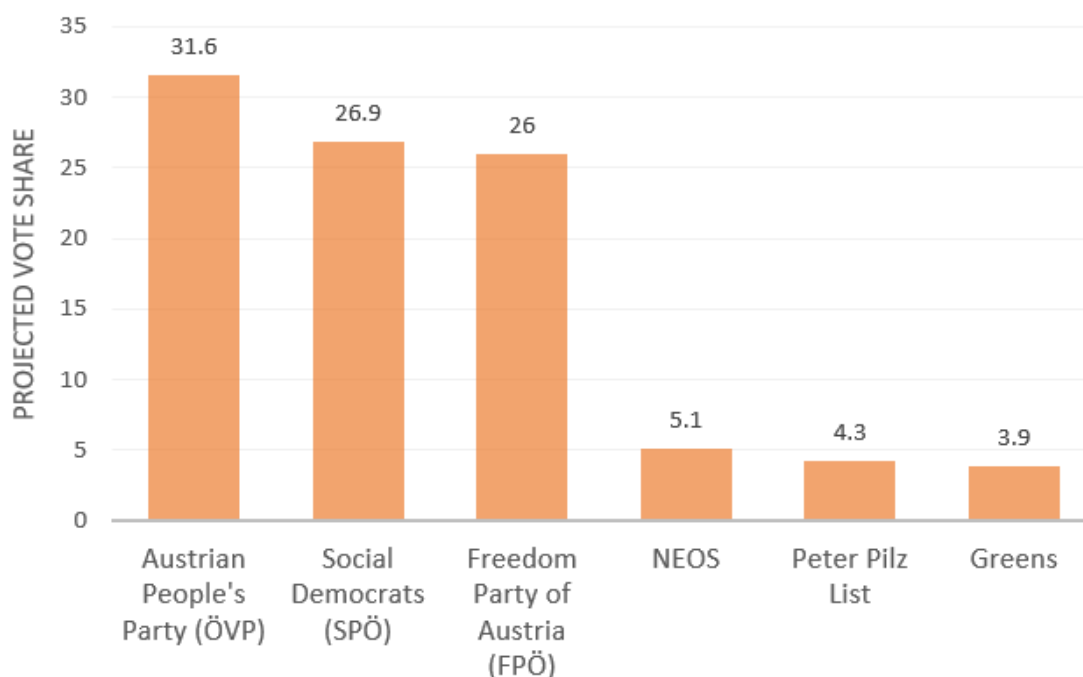
Austria's legislative election, held on 15 October, saw the Austrian People's Party, led by Sebastian Kurz, emerge as the largest party. [Manès Weisskircher](#) and [Matthew E. Bergman](#) highlight four things worth knowing about the results of an election that might not only be a game changer for Austrian politics, but which also reflected some of the key political developments in contemporary Western Europe.

On 15 October, roughly five million Austrians went to the polls to elect the next *Nationalrat* (National Council). [Preliminary results, with projections of the postal votes](#), show a clear winner. The centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) won a plurality, receiving 31.6 per cent, which is significantly stronger than in the past election of 2013 (+7.6). The party's leader, the 31-year-old foreign minister Sebastian Kurz, is likely to become the new chancellor. Remarkably, this was only the second time since 1966 that the Social Democrats (SPÖ) had not won a plurality of votes.

The current SPÖ chancellor Christian Kern was predicted in the preliminary results to have secured second place, ending up at only 26.9 per cent – similar to their record low from 2013 (+0.1). The radical right Freedom Party (FPÖ) was put at 26 per cent, substantially increasing its vote share (+5.5). Before Kurz took over the centre-right in May this year, polls had the FPÖ clearly in first place.

The Greens (3.9 per cent), with the only female leader of a major Austrian party, are at risk of not passing the four per cent threshold, with final results due on Thursday. Instead, the list of Peter Pilz, a renegade from the Green Party, seems to have passed the threshold (4.3 per cent). The [liberal pro-business](#) NEOS managed their second consecutive *Nationalrat* entry (with 5.1 per cent). The turnout was 79.5 per cent. The figure below gives an overview of the preliminary projections.

Figure: Projected results of the 2017 Austrian election



Note: These were early projections announced shortly after the end of voting and may change. **Source:** ORF and SORA

How did the results come about, and what consequences will they have for Austria moving forward? Here are four things to know about the shift to the right in one of the most prosperous EU countries.

1. A shift to the right – not only in the shadow of the “refugee crisis”

The intensification of the “refugee crisis” in Europe is an important contextual factor for understanding the Austrian vote. However, immigration and integration had already been salient issues long before. The rise of the FPÖ in the 1990s, under the leadership of Jörg Haider, [transformed](#) domestic politics. In 2000, the first ÖVP-FPÖ government led to, in the coalition’s own parlance, “[sanctions](#)” by other EU members. For three decades, the political mainstream [has been struggling](#) to find effective responses to the radical right challenger.

Since the second half of 2015, however, the issues of immigration and integration have become even more relevant to many voters and parties. Austria was among the EU countries with [the highest number](#) of asylum applications in 2015 and 2016. At its peak, [more than 50 per cent](#) of Austrians referred to immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the country. At the beginning of 2017, this number was significantly lower (between 30 and 40 per cent), but still substantially higher than it had been from 2005 to 2015.

Many individuals and groups in Austria actively supported the newly arriving immigrants. At the same time, a [Chatham House survey](#) conducted in December 2016 and January 2017 found that 65 per cent of Austrian respondents agreed with the statement “All further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped” – a demand more radical than the “[Muslim Ban](#)” of the Trump administration. In this survey, supposedly liberal Germany had 53 per cent of respondents answering similarly.

Given this context, [it does not seem surprising](#) that the Austrian radical right, which performed [particularly well](#) with the young, men, and workers, continues to be electorally successful. What is more interesting is that the centre-right managed to perform as well as it did, significantly increasing in popularity after polling only third at the beginning of 2017. When Kurz took over, the centre-right immediately jumped about 10 per cent. The main reason for this was Kurz’s stances on immigration and integration.

Kurz claims to have reduced immigration to Europe by initiating the closure of the Balkan route in February 2016, shortly before the EU agreement with Turkey. Beyond such anti-immigration efforts, the ÖVP has pushed for a “[Burqa ban](#)”. Although the ÖVP has not had a liberal approach toward immigration and integration in the past, the extent to which it put immigration and integration at the centre of the party’s platform was certainly novel. The strategy of [undermining FPÖ ownership of these issues](#) caused significant electoral gains for the centre-right, at least this year.

For [42 per cent](#) of ÖVP voters, Kurz was the main reason for their choice – substantially more than the values for the leading candidates of the SPÖ and FPÖ. However, the importance of Kurz re-defining the ÖVP as a “new” People’s Party and personalising the movement, although emphasised by many observers, probably had a smaller impact than his political stances.

2. The failure of the left

For the Austrian left, the election was a major setback. The Social Democrats have been in national government for 40 of the past 47 years, frequently holding the chancellorship – this will most likely change. Meanwhile, the Greens celebrated their former party leader Alexander Van der Bellen clinching the presidency less than a year ago. Now they might not make it into parliament.

The transformation and crisis of the European left has many important long-term causes that are reflected elsewhere, from [changes to the size and composition](#) of the working and middle classes, to the [difficulties posed by European integration](#), and [the challenge of finding responses to immigration](#) that guarantee human rights and dignity of those on the move while still attracting electoral majorities. Still, despite these long-term issues, the electoral defeat of the Austrian left was not inevitable.

In the past eighteen months, the SPÖ missed several opportunities to call for snap elections when the ÖVP obstructed more effective “Grand Coalition” cooperation. When Kurz took the initiative, it was too late for the SPÖ. During the electoral campaign, Chancellor Kern suffered from poor strategic decisions and, [even more so than Martin Schulz in Germany](#), advisors that destroyed his electoral chances. The party was at the centre of a series of [rows](#), though, curiously, scandals on the centre-right did not produce similar damage for the ÖVP. Some left-wing Austrian pundits continue to regard Kern as a talented individual who failed to reach his potential, but a key future challenge for the party will be its [aging voter base](#).

The Austrian Greens have recently been [the most electorally successful](#) representative of their party family in Western Europe. However, already during last year's presidential campaign, the party was notably absent in pushing its own agenda – not daring to risk the electability of Van der Bellen. After that, intra-party controversies emerged, amongst others related to the party's actions in regional government and the treatment of its youth activists.

Already declining in the polls, the Greens were dealt another blow in early summer, when Peter Pilz, one of their former key figures, left the party. In the absence of a successful radical left party in Austria, [with the important exception of the Communists in Graz](#), Pilz formed his own party, pursuing an agenda self-described as “left-wing populism”. Uniquely, however, Pilz combines a left-wing social and economic agenda with pronounced criticism of liberal stances on immigration and integration. Other individuals on his list – such as Green and Social Democratic renegades – come closer to the typical agenda of contemporary radical left parties in Europe. While the Greens seem to have lost votes to many different parties, the fate of *Liste Peter Pilz* will certainly shape their future electoral fortunes.

3. The future government coalition

The ÖVP is now spoilt for choice. The party could lead two different two-party coalitions. One option is to resume work in a “Grand Coalition”, this time with the SPÖ as a junior partner. The other, and according to many pundits, more likely option, is an ÖVP coalition with the radical right. An ÖVP-led minority government seems least likely – such an arrangement would be atypical for Austrian politics.

For this election, the SPÖ did not exclude forming a national government with the FPÖ – this had previously been a no-go for the national SPÖ. It is unclear whether the SPÖ would risk the intraparty tensions of making such a move in case the FPÖ preferred them to the ÖVP. If the radical right enters the next coalition, one of their most fundamental aims will be to prevent the repetition of [its previous electoral decline and division while in government](#).

Ultimately, President Van der Bellen will be the one to swear in the government. Personally, his sympathies for governing radical rightists are certainly limited. Still, it does not seem likely that he will try to act as a [veto player](#). In 1999/2000, then President Thomas Klestil, a courageous conservative, illustrated the potential pitfalls in attempting this. In the end, all he could do was refuse the appointment of two FPÖ politicians as ministers, pushing a “pro-European” preamble to the coalition agreement, and showing a grim face at the swearing-in ceremony. In formally “[semi-presidential](#)” Austria, the Nationalrat has determined government formation – a pattern that does not seem likely to change this time.

4. Likely policy outcomes

Some of the main substantial consequences of the vote relate to economic and social policies as well as to immigration and integration. However, the expansion of direct democracy might be another important political consequence. While the precise agenda will heavily depend, of course, on the future government coalition, there are some indications on the likely trajectory.

Leading FPÖ politicians have emphasised the strengthening of direct democratic instruments as a condition for their government participation. As a role model, they point to the Swiss political system, [similar to some other contemporary radical right parties](#). To an equal or lesser extent, many other parties and civil society groups, with the Social Democrats perhaps being least enthusiastic, have recently supported an expansion of direct democracy in Austria. Despite the important implications of such pledges, however, journalists and pundits in Austria have hardly debated them.

In matters of immigration, not only the ÖVP and FPÖ, but also the SPÖ leadership, agree that “[the Mediterranean route has to be closed now](#)” – a demand associated with Kurz. These stances are [not too different](#) from some other, rhetorically more liberal Western European governments. On integration, certain policy proposals of the ÖVP and the FPÖ represent textbook cases of “[welfare chauvinism](#)”: Both support the reduction of minimum social transfers to recognised asylum seekers, for example. While welfare chauvinism is often understood, or misunderstood, as corresponding to an economic left-wing turn of radical right parties, the FPÖ presented a particularly neoliberal [economic manifesto](#) for this year's election.

The latter corresponds to ÖVP taste, too. The party campaigned for a substantial reduction in government spending. In Kurz's quest to make Austria more “competitive”, an initiative of his foreign ministry has promoted, ironically, the policies of Schröder's Red-Green coalition in Germany, such as [labour market liberalisation](#) and [corporate tax cuts](#), as “ideas of success”. Underemphasised in the public debate, economic policies in Austria will shift to the right, especially if the SPÖ does not enter government. Beyond Austria, a new ÖVP-led government would pose [yet another difficulty for reforming the Eurozone](#) – however, the influence of an Austrian government on this issue will be minor, at most.

Nevertheless, many observers will have a keen eye on the development of Austrian politics over the coming years. Future developments will indicate to what extent a right-wing coalition may transform political systems in Western Europe – and what responses left-wing players may offer.

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