

Despite turmoil in the Austrian party system, the country might once again be heading for another grand coalition in September's elections.

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/08/08/despite-turmoil-in-the-austrian-party-system-the-country-might-once-again-be-heading-for-another-grand-coalition-in-septembers-elections/

08/08/2013

Austria will hold national elections on 29 September. [Sylvia Kritzinger](#) previews the vote and assesses the probable makeup of the next governing coalition. She notes that a series of scandals have hit the country's major parties, with a number of new parties, such as Team Stronach, also emerging in the Austrian party system. While the opinion polls make accurate predictions problematic, however, the chances of another grand coalition between the Social and Christian Democrats remain fairly likely.



National Council elections are coming up in Austria on 29 September. Austria has long been known for its stability in electoral choices. Indeed, a duopoly of the two mainstream parties [SPÖ](#) (Social Democratic Party of Austria) and [ÖVP](#) (Austrian People's Party) dominated the political, economic and cultural life of the country until the 1990s. Today, however, the incumbent grand-coalition government of SPÖ and ÖVP faces severe challenges from the two minor opposition parties in the Austrian National Council, [the Greens](#) and the [FPÖ](#) (the radical-right Austrian Freedom Party) as well as from the newly established political party, [Team Stronach](#).

Pre-election polls conducted by the [Austrian National Election Study](#) (AUTNES) between April and June 2013, suggest that of those voters turning out to vote around 25 per cent are going to vote for the SPÖ, 19 per cent for the ÖVP, 12 per cent for the Greens, 11 per cent for the FPÖ and 4 per cent for Team Stronach. Meanwhile, the [BZÖ](#) (Alliance for the Future of Austria – the party founded by Jörg Haider in 2005), which obtained more than 10 per cent of the vote share in the 2008 elections, will not make it into the National Council: the polls suggest that only around 1 per cent of the Austrian electorate will vote for the party. This is 1 per cent less than the predicted vote share for the [Communist Party of Austria](#) (KPÖ).

Furthermore, around 16 per cent of Austrians have already declared that they will probably not turn out to vote. These are alarming signs in a country which up until now had been characterised by high voter turnout. Most of these non-voters are SPÖ voters followed by ÖVP and FPÖ voters, and hardly any Green voters. Of those Austrians turning out to vote it is striking to observe that 1 out of 4 voters has not yet decided whom to vote for. The number of undecided votes is thus particularly high. Finally, 2 per cent of voters who turn out to vote will nevertheless vote blank in the upcoming elections. The stability in the electoral choices of Austrian voters seems to have vanished with the electorate becoming more volatile and partisan voters staying at home.



Austrian Parliament Building, Credit: Filip Maljković (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

'Turmoil' in the Austrian party system

Looking at the last legislative period 2008-2013, these polls seem less surprising. A series of corruption scandals involving both the government parties SPÖ and ÖVP and the opposition parties FPÖ and BZÖ came to the fore. Austrians saw an unprecedented number of accusations and even convictions of high ranked politicians in corruption affairs. Several court trials are still under way and will continue during the election campaign. Moreover, the government failed to make decisions over necessary reforms resulting in a standstill in most policy areas (pensions, higher education, the health system, etc.). This deadlock is all the more surprising as the SPÖ and ÖVP were in the unique situation of not facing any regional or local elections for a 2-year period (between autumn 2010 and spring 2013). This would have given them more political leeway both towards their own electorate and their powerful regional party organisations – a situation both government parties could not take advantage of to the extent that on average they lost 10 per cent of their support during this period.

However the hitherto greatest challenger to the two mainstream parties, the radical-right FPÖ, is also ailing following its involvement in the corruption scandals becoming public, and particularly since a new competitor has entered the political scene in September 2012: Team Stronach, a new party founded by the Austrian-Canadian billionaire Frank Stronach. Until that moment, the FPÖ's declared electoral goals were to increase its vote share substantially and to nominate the next Austrian Chancellor, namely Heinz-Christian Strache. After Frank Stronach's announcement to enter Austrian politics, the FPÖ's electoral forecasts decreased around 10 per cent and the goal of nominating the Chancellor has disappeared.

Team Stronach partly competes along the same electoral lines as the FPÖ: it is sceptical towards the European integration process, it demands to leave the euro and, finally, it denounces the Austrian political system and its political class. In the past, the FPÖ 'owned' all these issues. Unlike the FPÖ though, Team Stronach does not tackle the issue of immigration, which was a major FPÖ issue in the last electoral campaign. The consequences for the FPÖ could be observed in the regional elections that took place in March, April and May 2013: Team Stronach showed that it was able to attract a great share of 'protest voters' and hurt, in particular, the FPÖ which experienced substantial electoral losses in two of these three regional elections. Given these circumstances, the FPÖ has already declared that it will campaign heavily on the issues of immigration, asylum and social benefits only for 'locals'.

Finally, though the Greens contributed substantially to making the different corruption scandals public, they remain in a rather static position with little to lose but also little to gain. An increase to 15 per cent of the vote share (in 2008 they obtained around 10 per cent) is already considered a success by the Greens. Although the Austrian party system is in a phase of 'turmoil' with new parties entering the political scene and SPÖ, ÖVP and FPÖ under pressure, the Greens cannot make significant gains from it. In the rural areas of Austria, in particular, they have little electoral support.

Which parties will form the next Austrian government?

Given the Austrian electoral system, where seats are assigned to parties via proportional formulae, elections in Austria also involve the question of which combination of parties is most likely to form the next government. Since the end of World War II, grand-coalitions have been the norm in Austria, with the exceptions of the periods 1966-1986 and 2000-2006. This Austrian 'tradition' allowed the two main ideological *Lagers* in the Austrian electorate to be reconciled in one government: one *Lager* having a left-oriented mentality and the second *Lager* being characterised by an orientation towards the right. Even though decreases in the SPÖ and ÖVP vote shares suggest that Austrian voters are not supportive of the performance of the two government parties since the last election, it is still striking to see that nevertheless a majority of Austrian voters consider the grand-coalition between the SPÖ and the ÖVP the most preferable one to run the country after the election in September. All other coalitions are looked upon more sceptically. One has to conclude that the relationship of Austrian citizens with the grand-coalition can at best be described as ambivalent: on the one hand, it is the most preferred coalition form; on the other hand, it symbolises 'old politics', little transparency and no new impetus from new parties and individuals resulting in lower vote shares for the two mainstream parties.

Considering the pre-election polls at this stage it is difficult to make clear forecasts on the composition of the future Austrian government. While a new edition of a grand-coalition seems rather likely, it is far from certain. The electoral strengths of the FPÖ, Greens and Team Stronach might prevent the SPÖ and ÖVP from gaining more than 50 per cent of the vote share. However, on the other hand, the three competitors with whom other two-party coalitions could be built are not very likely to obtain enough votes to be able to act as a junior coalition partner to any of the two mainstream parties either. Hence, the possibility of a three-party coalition government must also be taken into account.

Though coalitions including more than two parties have been rare in Austria, current regional elections have shown that such coalition agreements have started to be a viable alternative at the regional level. At the national level the most viable three-party coalition would include SPÖ-ÖVP and the Greens. All other three-party constellations are rather unlikely to happen: the Greens are unlikely to cooperate with the FPÖ and Team Stronach, and the SPÖ has already excluded any coalition with the FPÖ. Less clear are the plans of the ÖVP. Building a coalition with the FPÖ and Team Stronach would put the ÖVP in the driving seat and allow them to nominate the Chancellor – an openly declared goal by the ÖVP Vice-Chancellor Michael Spindelegger. After the rather unfortunate coalition with the FPÖ between 2000 and 2006 it is doubtful, however, as to whether the ÖVP would again start such an uncertain experiment.

To conclude, an interesting electoral campaign can be expected in the next two months in Austria: first, the two mainstream parties need to mobilise their voters to turn out to vote; second, all parties will campaign heavily for the large portion of undecided voters; third, statements about potential coalitions will dominate the news media. And if we follow the famous Karl Kraus who stated that in Vienna everything takes a bit longer than anywhere else in the world, stability might once again characterise the Austrian electoral outcome, with a grand-coalition continuing to govern Austria.

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