

ELECTION BRIEFING NO.45 EUROPE AND THE AUSTRIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS OF 28 SEPTEMBER 2008

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Key points

- On 28 September 2008, premature general elections were held in Austria after the coalition between the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) had broken down. The Social Democrat-Austrian People's Party government had been characterised by infighting right from the start, resulting in a modest policy record and increased public disaffection.
- Not surprisingly, the two governing parties lost votes (in fact, both fell to unprecedented low-points), while in particular the two right-wing, populist parties, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), won.
- A major reason for the government split was a controversy over EU policy. The SPÖ, responding to wide-spread negative attitudes towards the EU, announced that in the future important changes of EU treaties should be subject to national referendum, a move the Austrian People's Party and serious newspapers criticised as populist.
- The election campaign was not dominated by the EU issue, however, but by social issues, in particular measures against rising inflation. As a result, the Social Democratic Party was able to make up the leeway it had in opinion polls and, like in 2006, to cross the finish line as strongest party. The success of the Social Democratic Party was largely due to a massive anti-Austrian People's Party campaign of the EU-phobic *Kronenzeitung*, the tabloid with the highest circulation in Austria.
- In spite of their recent break-up, Social Democratic Party and Austrian People's Party renewed their coalition after the elections, because of the aggravating international financial crisis and for lack of alternative options. A large part of the 'old guard' in both parties, especially in the Austrian People's Party, was replaced, though.

Background/Context

The general elections for the first chamber of the Austrian Parliament, the *Nationalrat*, on 1 October 2006 led to a new federal government. The Social Democratic Party of Austria

(*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) won the elections by a narrow margin of 1% over the hitherto leading liberal-conservative Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP). After long coalition negotiations the new Social Democratic-Austrian People's Party government was sworn in on 11 January 2007.¹ The 'grand coalition' formula was not new to Austrian politics, as the country had already been ruled by Austrian People's Party-Social Democratic or Social Democratic-Austrian People's Party coalitions from 1947 until 1966 and from 1987 until 2000, respectively.

The price the Social Democrats had to pay to return to power after seven years of opposition was high, however: not only did the People's Party receive the most important portfolios (finance, economics, interior and foreign affairs), but the Social Democrats also had to forsake important electoral promises (above all the promises to abolish tuition fees for students and to cancel the purchase of Euro-fighter interceptors). The media commented that, although the People's Party had lost the elections, it had won the coalition negotiations. Intra-party critics reproached Social Democratic party chairman Alfred Gusenbauer for having sacrificed his party's credibility for his personal ambition to become Federal Chancellor.

From the beginning, the work of the new government was ill-fated. Still during the coalition negotiations, the Social Democrats offended the People's Party when they joined forces with the Greens and the right-wing, populist Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) to install two parliamentary committees to investigate the Euro-fighter purchase as well as the alleged failure of the ministry of finance in supervising the (trade union-owned, Social Democratic) BAWAG bank, which nearly went bankrupt as a consequence of speculative bargains in the Caribbean Sea. Intra-coalition conflicts prevailed throughout the years 2007 and 2008, concerning new property taxes, the transformation of the existing segregated school system into a comprehensive one, organisation and financing of nursing services, health or pension policy.

The basic problem of the coalition was that the People's Party blocked the revision of any of its major policies of the 2000–2007 period.² Social Democratic representatives lamented the failure of the Austrian People's Party to accept its electoral defeat and its new role as only a secondary player in the coalition. They speculated that the new Austrian People's Party party chairman and Vice-Chancellor Wilhelm Molterer was only a vassal of former Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, who now presided over the Austrian People's Party's parliamentary group and was suspected of acting as an *éminence grise*, defending his political legacy and begrudging the Social Democratic successful policy reforms. Austrian People's Party government members, on the other hand, deplored a lack of leadership qualities on the side of the new Chancellor Gusenbauer, compared to his predecessor Schüssel.³

Intra-party changes in the Social Democratic Party, which, according to opinion polls, lagged behind the Austrian People's Party by about 5%, finally led to the break-up of the coalition. At first, incumbent party chairman and Chancellor Gusenbauer, who was unpopular because of his broken electoral promises and his off-colour public appearance, was replaced as party chairman by the Minister for Infrastructure Werner Faymann. The new party chairman tried to strengthen the social profile of his party and rejected the 'pension automatic', on which the

¹ For a report on the 2006 general elections see Franz Fallend (2007), 'Europe and the National Parliament Election in Austria, October 1 2006', *European Parties Elections and Referendum Network, Election Briefing No 31*, at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/microsoft_word_-_epernaustria2006.pdf.

² From 2000 to 2005, the Austrian People's Party had governed in a coalition with the Freedom Party, since then with the Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, BZÖ).

³ See Franz Fallend (2008), 'Austria', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 47, p. 906-7.

two governing parties had just agreed. According to this, the future development of the pension levels would have been linked to 'objective' criteria (i.e., the development of life expectancy, in combination with a deterioration of the relation between pension levels and expenses). Faymann disliked the idea that it was not parliament, but 'a computer' that would decide about pensions in the future.

The second issue that roused the Austrian People's Party's anger concerned a change of the Social Democratic position vis-à-vis the EU. A few days after the majority of the Irish people had said No to the Lisbon treaty on 13 June 2008, Faymann and Gusenbauer announced that in the future major amendments of EU treaties should be subject to national referendums in Austria as well. As the Lisbon treaty had already been ratified by the *Nationalrat* in May, the position change had no immediate consequences. Nonetheless, the Austrian People's Party accused the Social Democrats of departing from the agreed EU line of the government and of giving in to populism. As a matter of fact, before the parliamentary ratification of the Lisbon treaty the Social Democrats had rejected Freedom Party claims to hold a national referendum on it. That Faymann and Gusenbauer had announced their new EU policy in a letter to the editor of the EU-phobic tabloid with the widest circulation in the country, the *Kronenzeitung*, was denounced by the Austrian People's Party and Greens were seen as 'kowtowing' to this.⁴ Intra-party criticism was stirred up by the fact that the decision and its announcement were made without prior debate in the party executive.

On 7 July 2008, the Austrian People's Party chairman and Vice-Chancellor Molterer pronounced 'it is enough' and terminated the coalition with the Social Democrats. The major reason given for the decision was the change of the Social Democrats in their EU relations. More generally, the move was declared as inevitable as the Social Democratic Party, in the Austrian People's Party's eyes, lacked direction and leadership and was incapable of developing common policies. Some observers speculated that Molterer was also motivated by growing intra-party challenges to his own leadership; by heading for new elections, he cemented his position as party chairman and top candidate. Party strategists were optimistic about the electoral prospects of the Austrian People's Party because, in contrast to the Social Democrats, it was perceived as stable party. On the other hand, experts warned the Austrian People's Party that the EU issue, because of the high unpopularity of the EU in Austria, was inappropriate for a successful electoral campaign, and that the Social Democratic Party with its re-discovered emphasis on social concerns had the 'better' issues.

Campaigns

Never before since 1945 had so many parties competed for parliamentary representation. The poor performance of the governing parties had produced a record level of protest voters (about one third of all voters, according to opinion pollsters) and encouraged quite a few small and/or new parties to put up candidate lists. Hans-Peter Martin, MEP, whose list had won a remarkable 14% of the votes in the 2004 elections for the European Parliament, but had failed to repeat his success in the 2006 elections for the Austrian *Nationalrat*, refrained from running as a candidate. All in all, ten parties ran for elections at the national level (in some provinces, one or two additional parties stood for election).

⁴ In 2007, the *Kronenzeitung* was read by 42.2% of all Austrians over 14 years, see Media-Analyse 2007, at <http://www.media-analyse.at/studienPublicPresseTageszeitungTotal.do?year=2007&title=Tageszeitungen&subtitle=Total>.

Although he was member of the incumbent cabinet, responsible for infrastructure and also for government coordination, the new Social Democrat party chairman, Faymann, was presented as ‘new choice’ on election posters. The recent intra-party criticisms of the party leadership subsided quickly. The dramatic standing in the opinion polls led the party to unite behind Faymann, who was also nominated as top candidate for the elections (incumbent Chancellor Gusenbauer accepted his demotion without apparent resistance). Faymann also hoped to improve relations with the trade unions. Contrary to 2006, when, as a consequence of the BAWAG scandal, the Social Democratic Party had banned trade unionists, he re-introduced the former tradition of reserving mandates on the Social Democratic list for chairpersons of the trade unions’ sectoral branches.

To fulfil his own commitment that ‘there has been enough quarrel’, Faymann declared the coalition pact with the Austrian People’s Party to be still valid at the beginning of his campaign. Five weeks before the elections, however, he cancelled the holding-still pact. He argued that he had tried in vain to convince the Austrian People’s Party to do something against inflation, which had reached 3.9% in June, the highest rate for 15 years. To help above all people of low income, he proposed a five-point programme, with a volume of 1.3 billion Euros, to be enacted before the election by free parliamentary majorities. On 24 September, in a partly chaotic session, the *Nationalrat*, with changing majorities, decided to abolish the tuition fees for students, to introduce a 13th family subsidy for all children older than 6 years, to increase the subsidies for nursing and to prolong the possibility of long- and hard-working people to retire before the regular retirement age; all in all, measures costing 2.8 billion Euros were decided (by comparison, in 2007 the federal government had spent 72.3 billion Euros and produced a deficit of 2.9 billion Euros). The 5th point, the reduction of the value-added tax for groceries from 10 to 5%, was dropped as Austria had already introduced two reduced tax rates (and more were not allowed by EU regulation). The Austrian People’s Party and the Greens, supported by economists, had also pointed out that such a measure was not socially accurate as rich people would profit from it as well. Anyway, economists could not see an overarching rationale behind the generous expenditures and warned of an increased budget deficit, which would reduce the financial scope for a later big tax reform.

As far as coalition options after the elections were concerned, Faymann relied on a renewed coalition with the Austrian People’s Party - with the ‘positive’ forces in the party, as he said, meaning without Schüssel, Molterer and their entourage. On the other side, he ruled out coalitions with Freedom Party or Alliance for the Future of Austria, which, as he argued, only stirred up xenophobic feelings, but had no solutions for the immigration problem. The Social Democratic campaign was massively supported by the *Kronenzeitung*. Other newspapers saw a personality cult of North Korean degree around the party’s top candidate Faymann (political opponents and serious media suspected that, as part of a counter-deal, the national railways, which belonged to Faymann’s Infrastructure Ministry, ran advertisements in the tabloid).

Although it was the Austrian People’s Party which had called off the coalition with the Social Democratic Party, the party’s election campaign was badly organised and designed, even to the mind of leading party representatives, especially in the provinces. Newspaper commentators explained the absent enthusiasm of many Austrian People’s Party functionaries with their expectation that an electoral defeat would remove the ‘old guard’ around Molterer and Schüssel and pave the way for a new party leadership (the name of the Minister for Agriculture and Environment, Josef Pröll, was mentioned most often in this context).

The Austrian People’s Party’s top candidate, Vice-Chancellor and Finance Minister Molterer, was perceived by the public as stuffy, as a good clerk - but not as an inspirational political

leader. Molterer hinted at the Austrian People's Party's status as stable governing party, which, as opposed to the Social Democrats, guaranteed an unshakable pro-EU policy and a consolidated budget. He stressed the reliability, honesty and seriousness of his party, which was not willing to make excessive promises to the voters. In the end, however, the Austrian People's Party agreed to three of the four Faymann initiatives, which successfully passed the *Nationalrat* a few days before the election.

Another prominent issue in the Austrian People's Party campaign was security. The Austrian People's Party presented its minister of the interior as a tough lady, fighting to secure law and order against criminals, especially criminal asylum seekers. In particular, she announced the intention to introduce a dataset with the names of sexual offenders and stricter procedures in case of asylum abuse. In fact, some Austrian People's Party slogans (e.g., 'No immigration without a German-language course') could be taken for Freedom Party ones. Alluding to the notorious Gusenbauer-Faymann letter to the *Kronenzeitung*, the Austrian People's Party projected a picture onto the wall that Austria must not be governed by the editor of this tabloid, using the next Chancellor (probably Faymann) as his marionette.

The Greens' campaign focussed on their top candidate and party chairman, the university professor of economics Alexander van der Bellen. Their campaign was overshadowed by internal controversies over the candidate lists which lasted until three weeks before the election. The election programme contained, among others, demands to extend investments into public transport and alternative energies, to introduce a basic income of 900 Euro per month, to make kindergartens free of charge and to implement gender equality. In addition, the Greens put an animal rights activist on their list to stress their support for NGOs and their commitment to human rights (they criticised the fact that the activist had been imprisoned on the absurd basis of an anti-mafia paragraph in the criminal code and without evidence) - a risky strategy, though, apt to alienate moderate sympathisers. The Greens saw themselves as the only bulwark against the two right-wing, populist parties Freedom Party and Alliance for the Future of Austria and excluded the possibility of any coalition with them. They also attacked the Liberals, who competed for the same voters (young, urban, well-off and educated people). In particular, the Greens tried to undermine the social appeals of the Liberals by hinting that they were financially supported by a rich builder, who, to crown it all, allegedly was a 'friend' of the Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin.

As usually, the Freedom Party, under its chairman Heinz-Christian Strache, focussed on the issues of patriotism, immigration, security and welfare. Strache criticised the high levels of criminality and the apparent lack of will of many, above all Muslim, immigrants to integrate themselves into Austrian society and to learn the German language. He proposed that immigrants should be excluded from social benefits and that only after receiving Austrian citizenship (i.e., after ten years) they should enjoy all rights. The Social Democratic Party was criticised for its broken electoral promises, the Austrian People's Party for an 'arrogance of power' and its EU submissiveness, and the Greens for their crude multi-cultural utopianism. In general, however, the Freedom Party tried to formulate its claims in a less offensive language than in the past and did not automatically say no to all proposals coming from other parties. Like the Alliance for the Future of Austria, the Freedom Party profited from Faymann's five-point initiative, as the SPÖ chairman was forced to negotiate with both parties to get majorities for his measures. Strache (like Haider) used the opportunity to set conditions (i.e., additional expenditures) for his agreement to the suggested measures.

The Alliance for the Future of Austria, which had split from the Freedom Party in 2005⁵ and had almost failed to enter the *Nationalrat* in 2006, counted on former Freedom Party and now Alliance for the Future of Austria chairman Jörg Haider, since 1999 Provincial Governor in Carinthia, as their top candidate. The Alliance for the Future of Austria campaign focussed on Haider ('the original' - in contrast to 'the copy', i.e. Freedom Party chairman Strache), disappointed protest voters, 'modernisation losers' and measures against inflation. Relentlessly, Haider presented his province as a model for Austria, by pointing to the anti-inflation measures he had enacted there (e.g., direct subsidies for people of low income, cheaper oil, free kindergarten). According to opinion polls, Haider made the best out of his appearances in the TV debates between the top candidates of the parliamentary parties. As he did not intend to take up a seat in the *Nationalrat*, his opponents accused him of using the national elections simply as test run for the provincial elections in Carinthia, scheduled in March 2009.

At the beginning of the electoral campaigns, opinion polls gave at least two other parties serious chances of jumping over the 4%-threshold necessary for parliamentary representation: The Liberals, who had lost all their *Nationalrat* seats in 1999, were seen as having good prospects for a comeback after their former party chairwoman Heide Schmidt agreed to lead the party list. The Liberals wanted to offer voters disappointed by the governing parties an alternative other than Freedom Party and Alliance for the Future of Austria. They advocated a free market, supplemented by higher taxes for the rich and a basic income, stressed human rights and dismissed exclusion, populism, scare tactics and deception of the public. When the party chairman (who had been MP on a Social Democratic ticket since 2006) after an initial denial had to admit that, in spite of his opposition to the Euro-fighter purchase, he had worked for the Euro-fighter company (EADS), the hopes of the Liberals were spoiled irrevocably, however. Chances were also given to the list 'Fritz', named after the former president of the Tyrolean Chamber of Labour (Fritz Dinkhauser), who had won 18.3% of the votes in the 2008 general elections in the province. However, it did not succeed at the national level. Dinkhauser, a former Austrian People's Party member, appealed to the lost Christian-social tradition of the Austrian People's Party, but the campaign of the 'working-class hero' was perceived as too much personalised and lacking substance; even his Tyrolean voters seemed to prefer him to stay in the province and not to move to Vienna.

The remaining three parties which put up candidates did not represent serious dangers for their competitors, partly because of their sectarianism. The Communists, as usually, advocated a re-distribution of wealth from the rich to the poor; they favoured equal social rights for both natives and foreigners. The main issue for 'The Christians' was the family; to increase the birth rate, they wanted to introduce a 'mother's income' and to make abortion until the 12th week of pregnancy again subject to prosecution (like it had been before 1975). The anti-EU oriented Citizen Initiative 'Save Austria' defended the country's neutrality, fought for a national referendum on the Lisbon treaty and a ban on genetic engineering.

Newspaper analysts suggested that, while the world economy and the financial markets tumbled into the biggest crisis since the 1930s, the political class in Austria, thanks primarily to the Social Democratic Party, was quarrelling for weeks over a questionable reduction of value-added taxes. Populist tendencies characterised the electoral campaigns of most parties, while answers to the really important problems of the country (such as education, health, climate change) were missing. An opinion poll revealed that 71% of the Austrians had negative associations (horror, anger, political theatre, chaos, liars, broken promises etc.)

⁵ See Franz Fallend (2007), 'Europe and the National Parliament Election in Austria, October 1 2006', p. 2-3 (footnote 1).

relating to the election campaigns; and 80% deplored the lack of vision on the side of the politicians.⁶

The impact of the EU issue

Since Austria joined the EU in 1995, public support for European integration has been low. According to the recent Eurobarometer survey, only 39% of the Austrians held EU membership to be a 'good thing' in October/November 2008 (only three countries showed lower rates, the average of the EU-27 was 53%).⁷ The election programmes of the parties mirrored this situation and were dominated by Euro-sceptical positions. Almost all parties demanded referendums on future changes of EU treaties. While the Austrian People's Party, Greens and Liberals favoured EU-wide referendums, the Social Democratic Party, Freedom Party, Alliance for the Future of Austria, the List Fritz, the Communists and the Citizen Initiative 'Save Austria' wanted to hold *national* referendums. Three parties - the Social Democrats, Austrian People's Party and Alliance for the Future of Austria - advocated a national referendum on the EU accession of Turkey. The Freedom Party and the List Fritz rejected Turkish accession under any terms. A common topic in the election programmes was also about reducing Austria's financial contributions to the EU.⁸

The issues of Europe and the EU did not rank prominently in the campaigns of most parties. This was surprising considering the fact that it was above all the Social Democratic-Austrian People's Party disagreement over the EU issue which had prompted the break-down of the coalition and the premature elections. Obviously, Social Democrat party chairman and top candidate Faymann was not interested in an open debate about his party's new position on the EU, as this might have definitely ruined any chances of a renewed coalition with the Austrian People's Party after the elections (and he had no other serious coalition options). That is why he contented himself with diffuse proclamations that the Social Democratic Party was still in favour of European integration, but that it preferred a more social, more ecological EU, and that it was necessary to bring the EU 'closer to the people'.

Even if most parties did not emphasise the EU matter, the influential newspaper *Kronenzeitung* did. Almost every day the tabloid published articles or letters to the editor with negative comments on the EU and on related, 'un-patriotic' Austrian People's Party positions. Opinion polls revealed that 51% of all exclusive readers of the *Kronenzeitung* (40% of the readers of the *Kronenzeitung* and other newspapers, 20% of the exclusive readers of other newspapers) were of the opinion that EU membership had brought more disadvantages than advantages for the Austrian people. Of the exclusive readers of the *Kronenzeitung*, 39% voted for the Social Democratic Party, 26% for the Freedom Party, 17% for the Austrian People's Party, 12% for the Alliance for the Future of Austria and 1% for the Greens. Of the exclusive readers of other newspapers, 32% supported the Austrian People's Party, 23% the Social Democratic Party, 20% the Freedom Party, 13% the Alliance for the Future of Austria and 12% the Greens.⁹ On the other hand, the issue of a 'national referendum on new EU treaties' was only the 14th important voting motive for the voters, 'very important' for only 32% of

⁶ See Der Standard, 19 September 2008, 11.

⁷ See Standard Eurobarometer 70: Public Opinion in the European Union: First Results, Autumn 2008, at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_first_en.pdf.

⁸ See Der Standard, 20 September 2008, W 12-13.

⁹ See GfK Austria Politikforschung, Die Wahlanalyse 2008: Wer hat wen warum gewählt?, press briefing, 29 September 2008, p. 31-32.

them. Even among the Social Democrat voters, only 1% was motivated by the issue.¹⁰ To summarise, it was the Social Democratic Party which profited most from the anti-EU (and anti-Austrian People's Party) campaign of the *Kronenzeitung*, although its impact should not be over-estimated; according to experts, it brought the party about 3-5% of its votes.

Results

The general elections on 28 September 2008 saw a voter turnout of 78.8% (i.e., 0.3% more than 2006). As expected, the volatility of the voters reached new records. 33% of them could be qualified as 'late deciders', who only in the last two weeks before the election forged their opinion which party to vote for; 28% voted for another party than two years ago.¹¹

The governing parties, the Social Democratic Party and the Austrian People's Party, lost considerably. As a result of a successful campaign and the support of the *Kronenzeitung*, the Social Democratic Party was able to turn a 5% lag behind the Austrian People's Party in opinion polls at the beginning of the electoral contest into a 3% advantage at the polls. The 29.3% which the Social Democratic Party achieved meant the worst result for the party since 1945. Never before had the strongest party fallen under the 30% level. The Austrian People's Party lost even more votes than the Social Democratic Party (-8.3% as opposed to -6%), with the effect that the distance to the Social Democratic Party in parliamentary seats grew. A major handicap of the Austrian People's Party was that its top candidate was not very popular even among the party's own voters; only 25% of them mentioned him as a motive for voting (in contrast to this, 53% of the Social Democrat voters mentioned Faymann). In the whole population, Faymann also ranked before Molterer concerning the question who should become chancellor (21% and 15%, respectively).¹²

¹⁰ See Gfk Austria Politikforschung, Wahlanalyse 2008, p. 16, 28 (footnote 9).

¹¹ See Gfk Austria Politikforschung, Wahlanalyse 2008, p. 5, 7 (footnote 9).

¹² See Institut für Strategieanalysen / SORA, Nationalratswahl 2008, p. 22, 30, at http://www.sora.at/images/doku/SORA_ISA_Analyse_NRW_2008.pdf.

Table 1: General Elections to the Austrian Parliament (*Nationalrat*, First Chamber) 2006 and 2008

Party	2006		2008	
	Percentage of Votes	Number of Seats	Percentage of Votes	Number of Seats
SPÖ	35.3	68	29.3	57
ÖVP	34.3	66	26.0	51
FPÖ	11.0	21	17.5	34
BZÖ	4.1	7	10.7	21
Greens	11.1	21	10.4	20
LIF	-	-	2.1	-
Fritz	-	-	1.8	-
KPÖ	1.0	-	0.8	-
DC	-	-	0.8	-
RETTÖ	-	-	0.7	-

Abbreviations:

ÖVP	Austrian People's Party (<i>Österreichische Volkspartei</i>)
SPÖ	Social Democratic Party of Austria (<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs</i>)
FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria (<i>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</i>)
Greens	The Greens – The Green Alternative (<i>Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative</i>)
BZÖ	Alliance for the Future of Austria (<i>Bündnis Zukunft Österreich</i>)
KPÖ	Communist Party of Austria (<i>Kommunistische Partei Österreichs</i>)
LIF	Liberal Forum (<i>Liberales Forum</i>)
Fritz	Citizen Forum Austria - List Fritz Dinkhauser (<i>Bürgerforum Österreich - Liste Fritz Dinkhauser</i>)
DC	The Christians (<i>Die Christen</i>)
RETTÖ	Independent Citizen Initiative Save Austria (<i>Unabhängige Bürgerinitiative Rettet Österreich</i>)

Source: Federal Ministry of the Interior (www.bmi.gv.at).

The elections strengthened the extreme right. Both parties in this spectrum, the Freedom Party and the Alliance for the Future of Austria, were voted for above all in order to 'bring a wind of change' (65% and 67%, respectively) and to 'protest against the government' (61% and 50%, respectively). The issue 'immigration' was 'very important' for 73% of the Freedom Party voters and for 75% of the Alliance for the Future of Austria voters.¹³ The overall gains of the Freedom Party (+6.5% to now 17.5%) were predicted by opinion polls, although its success among young voters was surprising; 33% of the people up to the age of 29 years voted for the Freedom Party (20% for the Austrian People's Party, 14% each for the Social Democrats and the Greens, 10% for the Alliance for the Future of Austria).¹⁴ The extent of the Alliance for the Future of Austria's success was unexpected. While opinion polls in the beginning of the campaign predicted about 4-6% for the party, in the end it was able to almost triple its share of the votes (from 4.1 to 10.7%). Top candidate Haider was by far the most important voting motive (for 49% of the Alliance for the Future of Austria voters), followed

¹³ See Institut für Strategieanalysen / SORA, Nationalratswahl 2008, p. 18, 21, 26 (footnote 12).

¹⁴ See GfK Austria Politikforschung, Wahlanalyse 2008, p. 10 (footnote 9).

by 'makes reliable policy in Carinthia', 'programme/better party' and 'anger about other parties' (all 13%).¹⁵

The Greens could not exploit the unpopularity of the governing parties and the high political alienation among the voters and lost slightly (-0.7%). The new, small parties had almost disappeared from the news headlines and the TV screen during the last weeks before the election and clearly failed to enter parliament.

Consequences

After relatively short coalition negotiations, a new Social Democratic-Austrian People's Party coalition was sworn in on 2 December 2008. Both parties had not been able to work together in a constructive way in the last government and had achieved their worst election results in history, but the necessity to cope with the consequences of the crisis of the international financial markets was interpreted by leading Social Democrat and Austrian People's Party politicians as well as by the media and the public as a mandate for a renewal of a 'grand coalition'. Alternative options (especially a right-wing Austrian People's Party-Freedom Party-Alliance for the Future of Austria coalition) were given up at least after Alliance for the Future of Austria chairman Haider died in a car accident shortly after the elections on 11 October. The Alliance for the Future of Austria lacked a real party organisation as well as a clear programme and was equated with Haider as person. Without his leadership, the Alliance for the Future of Austria was expected to disintegrate sooner or later - and therefore seemed too hazardous as a coalition partner. Freedom Party chairman Strache at first declared that as one of the big election winners his party must take part in government; however, with excessive conditions (e.g., an immediate national referendum on the Lisbon treaty and the EU accession of Turkey) he soon excluded himself as serious coalition partner.

The Social Democratic Party and Austrian People's Party knew that their renewed partnership would only have a serious chance with new personnel at the top. The Social Democratic Party had already replaced its party chairman and chancellor before the elections. The Austrian People's Party followed with its party chairman and Vice-Chancellor, who assumed responsibility for the poor election result. As expected, the Minister for Agriculture and Environment Josef Pröll, a nephew of the party chairman of the strongest provincial organisation of the Austrian People's Party and Governor in Lower Austria, took over the positions as party chairman (replacing Molterer) and as chairman of the parliamentary group (replacing Schüssel). In fact, all Austrian People's Party politicians who belonged to the 'camp' of former Chancellor Schüssel had to give up their leading positions (all of them, except Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, remained ordinary MPs, though).

The coalition programme was generally criticised as lacking vision, but the new Chancellor, Faymann, and his Vice-Chancellor and Finance Minister, Pröll, seemed to have learnt their lesson and tried to lead the government under a new spirit of constructiveness. The EU issue was defused in the way that the two parties confessed themselves in the coalition pact 'in unrestrained form to the project of European integration'; they announced to work hard so that Europe would 'engage increasingly in the fields of growth, employment, social affairs, sustainable climate, environment and traffic policy as well as consumer protection'.¹⁶ While

¹⁵ See GfK Austria Politikforschung, Wahlanalyse 2008, p. 24 (footnote 9).

¹⁶ See Regierungsprogramm für die XXIV. Gesetzgebungsperiode, p. 4, at <http://www.bka.gv.at/DocView.axd?CobId=32966>.

this provision carried the handwriting of the Social Democratic Party, the Austrian People's Party could be satisfied with the clause which forbade each of them to make or to support any parliamentary motion to hold a national referendum against the will of the coalition partner.¹⁷

As the Greens, in spite of only marginal losses, likewise changed their leadership (the economist van der Bellen, appealing to moderate voters, was replaced as party chairperson by the more profiled Eva Glawischnig), four of the five parliamentary parties were led by new chairpersons at the end of the year. With the exception of the Freedom Party, all parties also seemed to have entered a phase of programmatic re-orientation.

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¹⁷ See Regierungsprogramm, p. 7 (footnote 16).