

Austria: No one loses, all win?

Carolina Plescia and Sylvia Kritzinger

5 June 2014

Introduction

Austria went to the polls on Sunday, May 25 to elect 18 members of the European Parliament, one fewer than in 2009 due to the European Union (EU) membership of Croatia. The electoral system used for the European elections is the same as for the national elections, but instead of 39 constituencies there is only a single national constituency. The electoral system is a proportional system with a threshold of 4% and the possibility for the voters to express a preference vote for a single candidate, a possibility that has been rarely used by Austrians (Müller et al., 2001). Finally, Austria is still the only country in Europe where citizens can vote at the age of 16 in nationwide elections.

The election campaign

Besides the two main parties that have dominated Austrian politics over the last decades, the *Social Democratic Party of Austria* (SPÖ) and the *Austrian People's Party* (ÖVP), both currently forming a grand coalition, voters found three other well-known parties on the electoral ballot: two Eurosceptic parties, the *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPÖ) and the *Alliance of the Future of Austria* (BZÖ) and the pro-European party, *The Greens* (Grüne). Alongside these parties, four new parties contested the European elections for the first time: the pro-European *The New Austria* (NEOS) and three Eurosceptic parties, *Another Europe* (Europe-Anders), *The Reform Conservatives* (REKOS) and the *EU-Stop*. The big winner of the European elections in 2004 and 2009, the EU-critical *List Hans-Peter Martin* (List HPM), decided not to run in this election and in fact disappeared from the Austrian political scene. Another notable absent is the *Team Stronach*, which ran for the first time in national elections in September 2013, gaining 5.7% of the vote share.

While it was quite clear before the election that only the parties currently represented in the Austrian Parliament (SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, Grüne, NEOS) would get enough votes to send their representatives to Strasbourg, a series of political scandals that hit the two government parties, SPÖ and ÖVP, made the election outcome less predictable. Generally speaking, the electoral campaign was characterised by a pervasive sense of disappointment with how the EU has addressed the financial and economic crisis without taking into account the social repercussions of the austerity policies; with the increasing inflation attributed to the euro, the alleged excessive bureaucratisation of the apparatus in Brussels and immigration. The anti-European campaign of the FPÖ focused exactly on this sense of disappointment with the EU. Meanwhile, the other parties focused their campaigns more on policies they will pursue in the European Parliament, if elected.

The results

Of nearly 6.5 million voters, less than half turned out to vote: approximately 45.4% against 46.0% in 2009; this is a rather low percentage when considering that the turnout in national elections in Austria is generally very high (75% in 2013), although it has been decreasing in recent years.

Preelectoral expectations about the electoral results have been all confirmed: only parties represented today in the Austrian Parliament have managed to overcome the 4% threshold. In addition, the two ruling parties, the SPÖ and ÖVP, were able again to retain the majority of the votes, although narrowly.

The ÖVP defended its electoral record confirming itself as the first party in European elections with 27% of the votes; however, the party loses 3 percentage points and one seat compared with the previous European elections. Despite this small loss, the ÖVP claimed victory, having actually gained 3 percentage points compared with the national elections in September 2013. The SPÖ gained 24.1% of the vote, improving slightly its performance compared with the last European elections when it obtained 23.7% of the votes.

The FPÖ earns many votes compared with what they had in 2009 (19.7% of the vote, + 7 percentage points), doubling its seats (2–4 seats) The FPÖ secured the 19.7% of the votes, 7 percentage points more than the previous European election, doubling its seats (from 2 to 4 seats). Notwithstanding this, the FPÖ failed to match, albeit slightly, the result of the last national elections when this party got 20.5% of the vote share.

The Greens party confirmed itself fourth party in Austria, increasing its vote share by 4.6 percentage points when compared to the previous European

Austria: No one loses, all win?

Table 1. Results of the 2014 European elections – Austria

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	EPP	27.0	5	-3.0	-1
Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)	S&D	24.1	5	+0.4	+0
Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	NI	19.7	4	+7.0	+2
The Greens (Grüne)	G-EFA	14.5	3	+4.6	+1
Alliance of the Future of Austria (BZÖ)	NI	0.5	0	-4.1	-1
The New Austria (NEOS)	ALDE	8.1	1	-	-
The Reform Conservatives (REKOS)	NI	1.2	0	-	-
Another Europe (ANDERS)	NI	2.1	0	-	-
EU-STOP		2.8	0	-	-
Others		0.0	0	-	-
Total		100	18		
Turnout (%)		45.4		-0.6	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		4%			

Source: http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMI_wahlen/europawahl/2014/Wahlkarten.aspx
 EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

elections. The very good performance of the Greens is surprising in light of the fact that pre-election polls gave the Greens only a tiny advantage over the NEOS. Instead, the Greens surpass the NEOS by 6 percentage points. Meanwhile, the NEOS party, which has contested the European elections for the first time, obtained a remarkable 8% of the vote and an important seat in the European Parliament. This result helps the NEOS to establish itself as a strong and viable party.

No other party was able to obtain seats. It should be noted in this regard that the BZÖ is almost disappearing from the Austrian political scene; the party lost 3 percentage points when compared with the last national election and 4.1 percentage points since the last European elections in 2009. The replacement of the well-known leading candidate—the daughter of the famous Jörg Haider, Ulrike Haider-Quercia—with a little-known candidate during the election campaign certainly did not help the BZÖ. Also, the other Euro-sceptic parties were not able to pass the 4% electoral threshold. Despite this,

the performance of the EU-Stop party deserves to be mentioned: the party, in fact, obtained a significant 2.8% of the vote share. It called for a referendum to leave the EU, a return to the Austrian former currency, the Schilling, and the introduction of a Swiss-style direct democracy.

Discussion of the results

Two considerations deserve attention. First, the pro-European parties have won the 2014 European elections in Austria. These parties have in fact obtained almost 75% of the total vote share. Second, despite the fact that all parties consider themselves winners of these European elections, their performances appear less impressive if one takes into account that 18% of the votes of the List HPM were 'freely available' on the electoral market.

The two mainstream parties were able to stop, to a certain extent, the electoral losses they continuously experienced over the last years. However, the result of the SPÖ hides that the party leaders have chosen the wrong leading candidate: Eugen Freund is a famous TV journalist but with no experience in politics and, moreover, not a party member of the SPÖ. This choice had repercussions on the electoral campaign at the local level with party members not canvassing as strongly as necessary for their party. The party leadership was also more concerned with national issues, such as the budget for the next two years, rather than the electoral campaign. Concerning the ÖVP, its leading candidate, Otmar Karas, was probably the reason why the party did not lose more votes and remained the strongest party in the European elections. Karas' long experience and competence at the EU level surely paid off at the polls, with the national party contributing very little to his success.

The Eurosceptic party FPÖ rightly claims victory, but its alleged success is below expectations if one considers that some pre-election polls predicted that the FPÖ would become the first party in Austria, surpassing both the SPÖ and the ÖVP, a result that however, it failed to achieve. In addition, considering that the EU-critical list HPM did not run for the 2014 elections, the success of the FPÖ is even much less obvious. It appears as if the FPÖ failed to mobilise Eurosceptical voters in general and the Euro-critical list HPM voters in particular.

Thus, in the end, only the success of the Greens and NEOS can be labelled as clear electoral victories: these two parties were particularly successful amongst the young, urban and well-educated voters with a strong pro-European attitude. These two parties focused their electoral campaign on European issues that appear to be increasingly important to Austrian citizens, at least to those who turned out to vote.

Finally, with regard to the Austrian experience with the European elections considering the level of turnout, the country surely follows the model of the second-order national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980): the participation rate is always much lower than the national average. Still, the performances of the two government parties, the ÖVP and the SPÖ, and the opposition parties do not follow unambiguously the second-order elections model. In detail, while the SPÖ is often punished by voters in the European elections (except in the 2014 election), the ÖVP almost always performs better during the European elections. Opposition parties have never gained vote shares when compared with national elections, but the 2014 European elections indicate that this trend might be reversing.

Conclusions

Broadly speaking, one of the central issues of these European elections in Austria has been whether and to what extent the two mainstream parties would have been able to gain yet again an absolute majority of the votes. In fact, many wondered if there would have been a massive shift of the votes towards the FPÖ. The two ruling parties were able to hold, and these European elections send a strong message to all pro-EU parties. Despite this, considering that many Eurosceptic voters seem to have remained at home this time, only the next election will determine whether Europe is considered by Austrians the future or a threat.

References

- Müller, W. C., Jenny, M., Steininger, B., Dolezal, M., Philipp, W., Preisl-Westphal, S. (2001). *Die österreichischen Abgeordneten*, Schriftenreihe des Instituts für angewandte Politikforschung vol. 23. Wien: Facultas.
- Reif, K., and Schmitt, H. (1980). Nine Second Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results. *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 8(1), pp. 3–44.

