

2017 Austrian election: A move to the right

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The major winners of the 2017 Austrian election held on October 15 were the parties on the right of the ideological spectrum. The Christian democratic People's Party (ÖVP) obtained 31.5 per cent of votes, coming in first place and increasing its vote share by more than 7 percentage points and obtaining 15 parliamentary seats more compared to the last general election held in 2013. Despite being unable to secure the second position and to equal the all-time high election results of 1999, the populist far right Freedom party (FPÖ) increased its vote share since 2013 by 5.5 points to 26 per cent. Hence, combined, the two parties on the right of the ideological spectrum reached a total of 57.5 per cent of the votes (see Table 1). The incumbent chancellor party, the Social Democrats (SPÖ), gained 26.9 per cent in a head-on-head race against the FPÖ.

The biggest surprise of the election night was the debacle of the Greens. One of the most successful Green parties of Europe (Dolezal 2016), the Greens were unable to make it into the Parliament– the first time since they first entered the Parliament in 1986. In the end, the Greens received 3.8 per cent of the vote, 8.6 percentage points less than in the previous elections and below the 4 per cent electoral threshold. The relatively new party NEOS who campaigned for the first time in 2013 managed to slightly increase its vote share securing one additional mandate to the 9 won in 2013. The spinoff of the Greens, Liste Peter Pilz, in its first appearance in a general election managed to enter the Parliament. Turnout was 80 per cent which represents a substantial increase of about 5 percentage points from 2013 (see Table 1) hence halting and even reversing the downturn tendency observed in recent elections in Austria (Kritzinger et al. 2013).

As discussed before the elections in [Plescia, Kritzinger and Oberluggauer in this volume](#), the new and young leader of the ÖVP, Sebastian Kurz, has been successful during the election campaign in establishing himself in the eyes of media and many voters as representing a fresh approach to politics with tough stances towards immigration. Just before the elections, Kurz was able to “steal” ownership of the immigration issue by conveying a clear anti-immigra-

Table 1. Results Austrian National Council (15 October 2017)

	2017		Change from 2013	
	Seats (N)	Votes (%)	Seats (N)	Votes (%)
Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	62	31.5	+15	+7.5
Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)	52	26.9	0	+0.1
Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	51	26.0	+11	+5.5
NEOS – The New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS)	10	5.3	+1	+0.3
Peter Pilz List	8	4.4	new	new
The Greens – The Green Alternative (GRÜNE)	0	3.8	-24	-8.6
My Vote Counts! (Gilt!)	0	1.0	new	new
Communist Party of Austria Plus (KPÖ)	0	0.8	0	-0.2
Others	0	0.5	0	-9.8
Total	183	100%		
Turnout (%)		80		+5.1

Source: Federal Ministry of the Interior.

tion position, thus eclipsing the FPÖ. Furthermore, Kurz worked hard during the election campaign in showing his competence and credibility in dealing with the immigration issue, credibility he gained during the refugee crisis in 2015 when he led a cross-country alliance, which allowed the closure of the so-called Balkan route and thereby holding back a further influx of refugees. The election campaign has been dominated by issues related to the immigration, both in terms of containing the number of refugees and restricting the access to welfare benefits for immigrants ([Bodlos and Plescia 2018](#)). The strong attention to the immigration issues eclipsed other themes such as social welfare and unemployment on which the SPÖ had historically the highest competence.

As soon as the election results have become official on October 20, the Austrian president Alexander Van der Bellen instructed Sebastian Kurz to form a new government. A few days after, Kurz started formal talks with all party leaders including chancellor Kern from the SPÖ. However, a renewal of a SPÖ-ÖVP coalition government was very unlikely due to the increased tension between the two former coalition partners that has led to an increasingly fractious outgoing administration. Kern in fact announced on Monday, 23 October, that his party, the SPÖ, would prepare for opposition. On October 24, official coalition talks started with the FPÖ. Though coalition negotiations only started very recently, an ÖVP-FPÖ coalition looks like the likeliest outcome of the hard-fought 2017 Austrian election campaign.

Table 2. List of issues with the highest priority included in the survey¹

Issue	Type	Priority (%)			
		All voters	ÖVP	FPÖ	GOV ^a
Fight unemployment	Valence	84	86	85	86
Fight crime	Valence	83	87	94	91
Protect from terrorism	Valence	82	84	97	91
Keep current asylum rules or make them more restrictive	Positional	82	85	96	91
Control immigration	Valence	82	91	97	94
Fighting poverty of elderly	Valence	81	80	87	84
The EU has to enforce refugee quotas or each country should decide by its own	Positional	81	53	51	52
Providing affordable homes	Valence	80	76	80	78
Fighting corruption	Valence	80	78	82	80
Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants or not	Positional	79	83	95	89
Stay in the EU or leave it	Positional	78	81	41	61
Providing social justice	Valence	78	78	80	79
Foreigners should fully adapt to Austrian culture or not	Positional	77	77	92	85
Protect the environment	Valence	76	76	69	73
Support economic growth	Valence	74	82	79	81

^a GOV: Government, as mean for the ÖVP and FPÖ electorates.

¹ Data from a CAWI survey conducted in Austria in September 2017; probability sample with N=853.

Table 2 summarizes the main findings from an online CAWI survey study conducted during the election campaign by the Department of Government at the University of Vienna in the context of a broader comparative research project (see [De Sio and Paparo in this volume](#)) of the Italian Centre for Electoral Studies (CISE) ([Kritzinger and Plescia 2017](#)). The table reports the fifteen issues with the highest priority for the overall Austrian electorate and for the electorates of the respective parties, the ÖVP and the FPÖ. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate the priority they assign to the selected goal for each of these issues. The issues classified as valence issues refer to one shared goal (e.g., fight unemployment, fight against corruption). Positional issues represent divisive issues that refer to two rival goals, e.g. public spending vs. tax cuts. Two important remarks can be derived from Table 2.

First, in terms of priorities, the ÖVP and the FPÖ electorates are very much in line with one another. The only issue on which the two electorates diverge is the issue of leaving or staying in the EU since the FPÖ electorate has a much lower priority compared to that of the ÖVP. Second, the mean priority of the two electorates bundled in the column “GOV” in Table 2 shows that the priorities of government voters are not off from those of the Austrian voters on several issues including fighting unemployment, crime and corruption. The priority of the government electorate is higher however, than that of the entire electorate on issues more closely connected to immigration such as control for immigration and foreigners’ adaptation to Austrian culture. Thus, if the two likely parties in government aim at following closely the priorities of those who voted for them, then a new government between the ÖVP and FPÖ will mostly focus on the various issues related to immigration. Which repercussions this will have on the old conflict line including economic and social welfare issues as well as on how pleased the overall electorate will be remains to be seen.

References

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