

State elections in Austria

Landslide victory for right-wing extremists

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Last Sunday voters went to the polls in three of Austria's nine states (Kärnten, Tirol and Salzburg). The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) of Jörg Haider, which employs racist and neo-fascist slogans, increased its vote in all three states. In Kärnten, the southern-most state of Austria bordering Slovenia, the increase was exceptionally large. There the FPÖ vote rose by 8.8 percent, giving the party 42.1 percent of the total, the first time it has gained the largest single party vote in a state election.

The FPÖ pushed the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) into second place, with 32.9 percent--a 4.5 percent loss. For years, Kärnten was counted as a social democratic stronghold and the SPÖ played a key role in state politics. Up until 1989 the state president was almost always a social democrat. The conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP), from whose ranks the state president has come more recently, lost 3.1 percent of their vote, despite doing fairly well in the opinion polls before the election. Their total of 20.7 percent was less than half that of the FPÖ.

According to information from the Austrian polling institute SORA, voter movement was much stronger than usual. An exceptional number of former social democratic voters (26,000) cast their ballot for the FPÖ instead, with another 8,000 coming from the Christian democratic ÖVP. Dissatisfaction with both the social and Christian democrats, who have dominated federal politics in Vienna for over 13 years, ruling in a grand coalition, was abundantly clear. In the past voters tended to switch between these two parties, and this was generally the pattern reflected in Tirol and Salzburg: the SPÖ gained in urban Salzburg, whereas in the rural areas and tourist centres of the Tirol it was the conservative ÖVP.

In Kärnten, where Haider stood as a candidate and the FPÖ concentrated its campaign, the right-wing extremists were able to benefit from growing social and political protests.

By the evening of the election, the SPÖ state chairman, and their lead candidate in the elections, had resigned. The former state premier Christof Zernatto (ÖVP), faced with an electoral debacle for his party, made it clear that he would not be putting his name forward as the next state prime minister. This means the road is open in Kärnten for Haider to take the post.

Kärnten is a small state with just half a million voters.

However, the election result sent a shock wave throughout Austria and caused uproar internationally. It can no longer be excluded that the neo-fascist Freedom Party may become the strongest single party in Austria in June's European elections, and could even emerge as the victor in the federal elections this autumn.

Once already, in May 1989, Haider held the reins of power in Kärnten's capital Klagenfurt. However, at that time the SPÖ was the largest party and the FPÖ was only able to govern in a coalition with the Christian democrats. Nearly two years later, Haider was forced to resign after expressing his public admiration for Adolf Hitler and praising the "Nazi's employment programme" as a "model".

He then pursued his career at the federal level. In 1993 he initiated a referendum "Austria First!", which called for the rigorous expulsion of foreigners and asylum-seekers as part of a sweeping campaign against Austria's "überfremdung" (literally, "swamping with foreigners"). He systematically diverted the growing fear of rising unemployment and social decay into extreme right-wing, racist channels.

The recent election victory in Kärnten was also surprising because just last year the FPÖ was in a deep crisis and Haider had only been able to cling onto the leadership with great difficulty. As in other European parties of the extreme right, violent internal clashes had nearly led to the disintegration of the FPÖ. Following certain dark dealings and swindles, the party's former economic expert Peter Rosenstingl fled to Brazil, taking millions from the party coffers with him. Another leading member was found guilty of conspiracy to commit tax evasion.

Haider, who had often accused the other parties of corruption and dirty dealings, now faced the same criticism. He was forced to admit that his family had made its millions from the Nazi policy of "arianisation". One of his great uncles used his position in the Nazi party in order to take control of a Jewish widow's possessions. The 30 million deutsche mark inheritance was able to bypass the taxman, and came into Haider's ownership in 1986. The self-proclaimed "champion of the little man" has since belonged to Austria's wealthiest elite.

In the face of internal criticism and inner-party disputes, Haider threatened several times to resign and withdraw from

politics altogether. He hoped that the election in Kärnten would provide him with ammunition against his inner-party opponents. Even he was surprised at the scale of his victory. He told the press that he had expected to gain votes but had not thought the FPÖ would tally over 40 percent.

A similar political development can be observed in Austria as has been witnessed in other countries. The anti-social policies of the larger established parties--the social democrats and conservatives who had determined the fate of the country for many years--come more and more into conflict with the great majority of working people. Under the conditions of political crisis and paralysis in the working class, a political vacuum ensues that right-wing parties and groups can exploit, despite their own divisions and lack of orientation.

It is no accident that the racist demagogues have found support in Kärnten, where the social and political problems of Austria are concentrated most strongly. Unemployment is above average and the social crisis is most pronounced in this region with a weak infrastructure, and characterised by small-scale farming and tourism. The widening gulf between rich and poor is there for all to see. While millionaires swank about around (lake) *Wörther See*, and build opulent villas and castles in the other tourist centres, the European Union's agriculture policy is forcing more and more small farmers to abandon their holdings, facing entire families with ruin.

As well as whipping up racism, Haider very consciously stressed the social questions in his demagogic election speeches. He demanded that factories with more than 20 percent foreigners in their work forces should lose all state subsidies. He combined his well-known rabble-rousing against the European Union with the call for a guaranteed existence for farmers in the form of a "jobs premium". Families and single parents should receive more support, including state benefits. Symbolically, he distributed "family cheques" and promised a minimum benefit payment up to the age of six for every child. Moreover, he called for a drastic lowering of rents and for mass tax cuts. How he would finance his proposals was not spelled out. In any case, these promises were made to be broken.

There are also historical reasons why Haider did well in these elections, and in previous ones in Kärnten. There is still a strong Slovenian minority in southern Austria. In eight of Kärnten's districts, Slovenian is the second official language. Even before Haider there had been many racist attacks on Slovenians in Kärnten. In 1920 a referendum was held to determine whether south Kärnten, the area around Klagenfurt and Villach, should become part of Yugoslavia. This provoked a strong German nationalist opposition that instead called for *Anschluss* (union) with Germany. Even before the vote was taken, violent battles fomented by the so-called "defence force" ensured that there was no question of the area joining Yugoslavia.

In the 1930s the Nazis were able to rely on this pro-German nationalist grouping, while Italian and Yugoslavian anti-fascists

had to operate illegally in this area. After the war, these contradictions remained. The veterans of the anti-fascist struggle gathered inside the Communist Party. On the other side, many Nazi thugs hid away in Kärnten.

To counter the influence of the Communist Party, the social democrats also encouraged racist sentiments against the Slovenian minority and rested on German nationalist traditions. In the "Ortstafelsturm" (name-sign storm) of 1972, under social democratic state and federal governments dual-language street name signs were forcibly torn down, even though the Austrian constitution of 1954 obliged the provision of such signs. The signs have still not been replaced in some districts with a high percentage of Slovenians.

Haider has invented nothing new in Kärnten. In the past, the racism of the social democrats was hidden behind a thin façade of "social partnership". The end of this policy means that the social democrats are revealing their true colours. The social democrats could prevent Haider from becoming state premier by refusing to support him in the state legislature, where he would need a majority to enter office. But they do not want to do this. Instead, they are preparing to collaborate with him at the federal level. They are politically confounded and are striving to channel Austria's growing social conflicts in a racist direction.

Social democratic opposition to Haider consisted of making him superfluous by adopting his slogans. The policies of the two parties continued to merge. Increasingly, social democratic politicians came to applaud Haider. The mayor of Wolfsberg in Kärnten, Gerhard Seifried, said on the election eve that Haider had "proved to be the best social democrat". He became the first SPÖ politician to openly call for Haider to become state premier. Others then followed.

Despite certain exceptional circumstances in Austria, the election must be seen in the context of contemporary European and international relations. The coming to power of social democratic governments throughout much of Europe was an expression, if a limited one, of a mobilisation of the working class against the worsening attacks of the conservative governments on social conditions. This immediately created a political crisis in the ranks of the right-wing extremists. As these social democratic governments continued the anti-social policies of their conservative predecessors, and went even further, political frustration grew, providing the right with new impetus.

To prevent this requires a reckoning with the policies of social democracy and the building of a workers party that will not leave the social questions to the right-wing demagogues.



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