

Ultra-right Freedom Party takes second place in Austrian parliamentary elections

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The parliamentary elections in Austria held on October 3 registered a pronounced swing to the right, with implications far beyond that country. For the first time since the end of the Second World War and the collapse of Hitler's dictatorship, a European party which openly advocates racism and xenophobia rose to second place in national elections—and this in a country which directly experienced the horrors of Nazi rule.

With 27.2 percent, the Freedom Party (FPO) of Jörg Haider increased its vote by 5.3 percent, overtaking by a narrow margin the conservative Peoples Party (OVP), which was able to maintain its own share of the vote. According to the latest figures—counting of postal votes is not yet complete—the OVP trails the FPO by 14,000 votes.

The biggest loss was suffered by the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPO). With 33.4 percent (-4.7 percent), the party recorded its worst result in the post-war period. Taking into account the low overall voter turnout of 76.2 percent, the social democratic vote fell by 20 percent from the total registered by the party in the last parliamentary elections four years ago.

In two of Austria's nine states the FPO obtained a plurality of the votes cast: in Kärnten, where Jörg Haider is already minister president, the party won 39 percent, and in Salzburg it won 29.8 percent. In the cities of Salzburg, Innsbruck and Graz—Austria's second biggest city—the Freedom Party took first place in front of the SPO. In the state capital of Klagenfurt, Haider's party was able to win 40 percent of the vote.

An analysis of voter patterns shows that the increase in votes for the FPO came at the expense of the social democratic SPO. The Vienna Centre for Applied Political Research (ZAP) commented that the election result indicated “a profound reorientation of voting behaviour in Austria.” It said the FPO did not just gain

support from marginal social democratic voters, but was “above all successful among traditional SPO voters in the workers' quarters”. According to the ZAP analysis, 48 percent of skilled workers voted for Haider, and only 31 percent voted for the SPO.

The FPO also gained the votes of a plurality of less skilled workers (45 percent). In the workers' quarters of the capital city—“red” Vienna—the social democrats lost more votes than they did on average across the country. In the town of Kapfenburg, which is dominated by heavy industry, the social democrats collapsed, winning just 10 percent of the vote. Those who deserted the SPO turned, virtually without exception, to Haider.

According to the magazine *Format*, a similar development took place in the nearby industrial towns of Leon, Bruce and Mürzzuschlag. “The FPO has replaced the SPO as the workers' party”, was the comment Monday in election analyses in Vienna.

Haider also won a plurality of votes cast by young people, especially young men. Some 35 percent of voters under 30 years of age chose the FPO, while 25 percent from this age group voted for the SPO and 17 percent for the People's Party.

The same ZAP analysis makes clear that many voted FPO as a protest, in order to express their dissatisfaction with the existing political establishment. Some 65 percent of FPO voters justified their choice of party by declaring they expected the FPO to organise a “merciless” investigation into political scandals.

The main responsibility for the swing to the right lies with the present governing parties—the SPO and OVP. The two parties have ruled Austria in a coalition government for the past 13 years, weaving a web of nepotism and political corruption unparalleled even by Austrian standards. From school principal to doorman—

every post has been allocated according to the relative strength of the two parties, rendering questions of competence, skill and performance virtually irrelevant.

In recent months the opposition of broad layers of the population to such political high-handedness, bureaucratic despotism and incompetence has become increasingly vocal. Jörg Haider, who likes to portray himself as the advocate of the “little man”, deliberately directed his election campaign against corruption and nepotism, playing the part, up and down the country, of a “Mister Clean” who would “clean out the pigsty in Vienna”.

Moreover, both governing parties have adopted the racist and xenophobic catchwords of Haider and translated them into political reality. SPO interior minister Karl Schögel implemented an absolutely rigid immigration policy, which has resulted in a virtual ban on foreigners entering Austria to live and work.

At the beginning of the year the interior minister and his chief of police, Stiedl (SPO), came under enormous public pressure because of their unconditional defence of the brutal action of police officers responsible for the expulsion and death of the asylum seeker Markus Omafuma.

On the eve of the election, the leading candidate for the FPO, Thomas Prinzhorn, emphasised his party's claim to the position of Chancellor. “From the very first minutes” (after the election) the FPO would raise its claim to the Chancellorship, he declared. The two losing parties “have nothing more to offer the country”, he added.

Party chief Haider adopted a more low key posture. He knows it is not necessary for him to become Chancellor. He can just as well determine government policies from his current position in opposition.

According to the national constitution, the Austrian President, as head of state, plays a key role in the formation of the new government. He names the new Chancellor and the members of the government are then nominated on the basis of his proposal.

One-and-a-half years ago Thomas Klestil was re-elected Austrian President. Since then he has made clear on a number of occasions that he regards Haider and his Freedom Party as potential candidates to participate in government. According to Klestil the continued exclusion of Haider's party from responsible posts constitutes an abuse of the electorate and is

undemocratic.

While Klestil argues for the inclusion of Haider and the FPO in government, he and others in the political establishment are concerned over possible damage to Austria's international standing. Klestil has first-hand experience on this score. He was Austria's ambassador to Washington when his predecessor in the office of President, Kurt Waldheim, was refused entry to the US because of his role in the Austrian Nazi government during the war. At that time Klestil was unable to forestall moves to ostracise Austria, but he worked intensively to restore diplomatic relations.

The sharp reaction to the elections by the Jewish World Congress, which declared that “Austria should be ashamed of itself,” together with the call from Israeli President Ezer Weizmann for Austrian Jews to leave the country as soon as possible, has unleashed a storm of discussion.

Even if Haider does not enter government at this point, the election represents a political watershed in Austria. The social democrats have hit rock bottom. Their program of drastic budget cuts in all spheres of social services has generated growing opposition. In the absence of a political alternative for workers, the ultra-right is able to fill the resulting vacuum, mobilising deprived and desperate layers of society as a force to be thrown against the working class.



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