

Huge losses for Haider's Freedom Party in Austrian elections

An analysis of the vote

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The huge loss of votes by the Austrian Freedom Party (FP), led by right-wing populist Jörg Haider, was applauded in European capitals Monday. “Haider finished” (*Financial Times*) and “petty bourgeois tames the arsonist” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) were typical headlines, as it became clear that Haider's FP had lost two-thirds of its vote in last Sunday's prematurely called Austrian general elections. From a level of 26.9 percent three years ago, the FP plunged to 10.1 percent Sunday.

Haider's immediate response was to offer his resignation as minister president of the Austrian state of Kärnten and declare his intention of retiring completely from politics. In Klagenfurt, the capital of Kärnten, he told the press, “I have had enough of politics.” Just a few hours later, however, he declared he had changed his mind and would remain in office.

The main party to profit from the heavy losses of the FP was the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) led by the current Austrian chancellor, Wolfgang Schüssel. The ÖVP received 42.3 percent of the vote, an increase of 15.3 percent. This is the biggest increase in votes by a party in post-war Austria and was the greatest election victory for the ÖVP in 36 years.

For the first time since 1966 the ÖVP received a larger percentage of the vote than the social democrats and now has the biggest representation in the Austrian parliament.

Contrary to forecasts of polls prior to the vote, which indicated a neck to neck race, the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) was only able to make a minimal improvement in its vote—just 3.8 percent—and with a total of 36.9 percent trailed clearly behind the Peoples Party. The Austrian Green Party also expected

to do better. It won barely 9 percent, an increase of 1.6 percent. The Liberal Forum (LIF) also lost votes, dropping 2.7 percent, and received less than 1 percent of the vote. Electoral participation was 80.5 percent, slightly higher than in the last elections three years ago.

An examination of electoral voting patterns makes clear that the major shift took place amongst supporters of the governing parties. From a total of 765,000 former FP voters, 602,000 switched their vote to the FP partner in government, the Peoples Party. Only 11 percent of former FP voters switched to the SPÖ. This figure is significant because in the elections three years ago many workers voted for Haider in protest at the anti-welfare policies of the SPÖ. Haider subsequently used this support to pretentiously and somewhat prematurely proclaim himself the “new workers leader in Austria”.

Now many of the former SPÖ supporters have voted for Wolfgang Schüssel rather than return to the camp of social democracy. Two conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, that Haider's rise and surprising electoral gains three years ago, which enabled the FP to overtake the ÖVP and become Austria's second biggest party, was principally based on a protest vote rather than reflecting of a deep-seated right-wing sentiment amongst voters. Secondly, it makes clear that the social democrats are incapable of regaining their former voters because they have nothing to offer which could be regarded as an alternative to the right-wing and conservative policies of the ÖVP.

The decline of the FP was particularly pronounced in the industrial areas of large cities. Three years ago the FP became the strongest party in the Austrian capital of Vienna, with Haider referring to Vienna as a “bastion for freedom”. In this latest election the FP lost ground

not only to the SPÖ (44.4 percent, gaining 6.5 percent) and the Peoples Party (30.1 percent, gaining 13.1), but also the Greens (14.8 percent, gaining 4.5 percent).

In workers districts of Vienna the SPÖ was able to win above-average results, while in more middle class areas the Green Party benefited. In the student district of Vienna Neubau the Greens received the largest percentage of all parties. The situation was similar in other big cities. Three years ago the FP was the strongest party in five capital cities of Austrian states. It has now lost this dominating position. Even in Klagenfurt the party lost 17.5 percent, winning a total of 21.7 percent. In countryside electoral districts votes lost by the FP were almost invariably switched to the Peoples Party, while in the cities the social democrats gained above-average results. According to an analysis of the election by the Austrian paper *Standard*, “the bigger the city, the larger the wins for the SPÖ”.

The SPÖ refrained from undertaking any sort of mobilisation of the working class in the election. Instead, it offered its services as partner to Austrian business organisations as a force more able to implement unpopular budget cuts and measures aimed against the Austrian welfare state than the right-wing conservative coalition of Wolfgang Schüssel.

In his aggressive election campaign Chancellor Schüssel also took advantage of the dramatic plunge in popularity of the Germany coalition government, which was re-elected for a further term in office in September. The ÖVP put up posters featuring the picture of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and warning of chaos should a government similar to the SPD-Green Party coalition be elected in Austria. The poor showing of the SPÖ is also therefore a consequence of the complete lack of orientation, combined with readiness to attack social gains, which has characterised the German government for the past two months.

Media commentaries and election experts have been quick to locate the main component for the dramatic loss in votes of the FP in the “destructive role” and the “drive towards self-destruction” of Jörg Haider, who sabotaged the work of the government, including his own party. Such estimations are too superficial, however. The decline of the FP has deeper roots.

Since Haider acquired control of the Freedom Party in the mid-1980s and masterminded its right-wing populist course, the party has been beset by a

fundamental contradiction. Based on social demagoguery, the party attempts to win the support of protest voters by promising benefits for disillusioned and despairing social layers. At the same time, in its economic and social policies, the party defends the interests of business organisations—a neo-liberal programme combining tax cuts for the rich with budget cuts at the expense of less privileged layers.

Participation in government by the Freedom Party three years ago intensified this conflict. Haider himself refrained from taking up a post in government and instead openly criticised the policies of the government and his own party from his base in Kärnten. This inevitably led to fierce internal party conflicts finally leading to the party’s plunge at the polls.

The most important role of the Freedom Party in the past few years has been to clearly force the political agenda to the right. This is also the reason why Chancellor Schüssel is keen to continue governing in a coalition with the FP despite the latter’s election losses.

The conclusion to be drawn by the working class is the urgent necessity of building its own party to combat unemployment and the destruction of the welfare state on the basis of an international and socialist programme. Otherwise the danger remains that the developing social crisis and growing desperation will create conditions for a revival of support for Haider or other right-wing demagogues.



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