

Austrian state elections: a clear rebuff of government attacks on social welfare

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Regional elections in the Austrian states of Styria and Burgenland on October 2 and 9 resulted in a dramatic loss of support for the conservative and extreme-right parties ruling in Vienna—the Austrian People’s Party (APP) and the Alliance for Austria’s Future (AAF), Jörg Haider’s splinter group from the ultra-right Austrian Freedom Party (FP). The federal opposition, the social democratic Austrian Socialist Party (ASP), was able to claim victory in both states.

The ASP attained an outright majority in Burgenland with 52.2 percent of the vote. Hans Niessl, head of the state government, and his party increased their support by 5 percent compared to elections held five years ago. The People’s Party benefited only slightly from losses incurred by the Freedom Party, which declined by 6.9 percent to attain only 5.7 percent of the poll. Attracting only 36.6 percent of voters, the APP fell far short of its own expectations and clearly failed to fulfil its election ambitions. Polling 5.2 percent, the Greens also suffered a moderate setback compared to the last election.

An even more striking outcome was the voters’ rebuttal of the federal government’s right-wing policies. Having achieved a 15 percent lead over the social democrats five years ago, the People’s Party won only 38.7 percent of the vote, thus falling 3 percent behind the ASP with 41.7 percent.

The defeat of the extreme right was also clearly apparent. Jörg Haider’s AAF attained just 1.7 percent of the poll and thus failed to gain entry into the Styrian parliament—as did the FP (4.6 percent), which fell almost 8 percent compared to its performance in the state elections of 2000. On the other hand, the Greens with 4.7 percent and the Austrian Communist Party (ACP) with 6.3 percent will be represented in the new state parliament. The Communist Party succeeded in increasing its share of the vote almost six-fold in comparison with the election five years ago.

The results of the state elections can only be seen as a firm thumbs-down to the Vienna-based government. All surveys indicated that local state issues played only a minor role in the election.

It has been mainly the Freedom Party, the former minor coalition partner of the People’s Party, that has till now felt the public’s scorn of the reactionary and socially regressive policies of the federal government. Now, however, Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel’s APP is increasingly taking a hammering.

Waltraud Klasnic, the APP’s leading candidate, was still able to distance herself from the policies of the Styrian state government five years ago. This time around voters were not to be deceived and Klasnic resigned from her political post directly after the election defeat. Chancellor Schüssel was visibly shocked at the election results, not least because Waltraud Klasnic had served as his ally against adversaries in his own party.

Having lost Salzburg last year, the APP’s loss of the majority vote in Styria means that it now relinquishes the conservatives’ second traditional stronghold. Polling barely more than 11 percent in Carinthia, the party has also had to contend with its worst result in all the 118 National Council and state elections to have taken place in the Second Republic. Moreover, the People’s Party has failed to form a majority in the upper chamber for the first time since 1945. Each of the major parties, the APP and the ASP, will now govern in four federal states.

The miserable performance of Haider’s Alliance for Austria’s Future will also weaken the government coalition. The Styrian election was supposed to be the first indication of whether the party was to have any chance of survival. As a result of the poll, however, the party’s dissolution or a reunion with the FP is now being discussed.

The population’s desire for a new political perspective was expressed in the swing to the Austrian Socialist Party. The social democrats were particularly successful in Styria’s industrial centres and major cities. They increased their vote by 10 to 15 percent in Bruck, Fohnsdorf and Weiz. The ASP, the Communist Party and the Greens together attained more than 80 percent of the poll in some regions.

The conservatives and the far right also lost in the rural areas of Burgenland. The ASP was also able to capture up to

80 percent of the votes in some parts of this region. Burgenland, Austria's most eastwardly and poorest state, suffers from high unemployment. While industries based in the region have profited from European Union subsidies, workers remain vulnerable to company shutdowns and the migration of business.

It is obvious that in both federal states an unbridgeable gap exists between the desire of the population for progressive social policies on one hand and the politics of the ASP on the other. Nevertheless, the unmistakable protest vote against the People's Party failed to prevent leading candidates of the ASP in Styria and Franz Voves, the prospective state governor, from seeking a coalition with the APP directly after the election.

Voves stands on the right wing of the social democrats, having entered politics as a novice from the business world. Always ready to mention his working class origins on official occasions, the 52-year-old Voves rose to the executive board of the Merkur insurance firm 15 years ago. From there he joined the Styrian ASP and took over the post of chairman of the party's state branch in 2002.

There is not the slightest difference between his political perspective and that of his predecessor. Voves has already announced that he will not be making any changes in governmental posts—that is, the most important departments, such as the Ministry of Trade and Commerce, will be left in the hands of the conservatives. His main concern for the coming legislative period is “Styria Pty Ltd,” i.e., promoting Styria for commercial investment. However, although the strategic participation of various business enterprises will be pursued, there is to be no reclaiming of state concerns previously sold off to the private sector. Instead, Voves is pressing for the state to share in the costs and risks of restructuring companies by offering them tax concessions.

Hans Niessl, governor of the state of Burgenland, is also trying to instigate “broader cooperation with the APP” despite his party's absolute majority. A brand of politics exceptionally favourable to the business community has already left the traditionally social democratic state of Burgenland with, in many respects, the worst living conditions in Austria.

Burgenland's unemployment rate of 10 percent is higher than Austria's state average. A worker in Burgenland earns on average €200 a month less than workers in other parts of the republic. Furthermore, involvement in part-time and seasonal work is above the state average.

However, the ASP under Niessl distinguishes itself when it comes to defending the interests of the business world. The privatisation of the Bank of Burgenland—which foundered at the last moment—was the major project of the previous government. Having fallen into disrepute through

accusations of fraud and embezzlement, this bank was put back on its feet in past years with regional aid amounting to half the state's annual budget. Following this, it was to be sold to the business tycoon, Mirko Kovats, under—for him—very favourable conditions. As all parties—including the Greens, the FP and the APP—agreed in principle to the envisaged privatisation, it was thought probable that Niessl would be able to implement his plan in the coming legislative period.

Apart from the victory of the ASP, the success of the Austrian Communist Party in Styria—it did not field candidates in Burgenland—also reflected the angry mood of the electorate. For the first time in 35 years, the ACP managed to gain entry into the Styrian state parliament. Ernest Kaltenegger, its current leading candidate, had already won 21 percent of the votes in local council elections in Graz two years ago.

To a certain extent the success of the ACP is due to Kaltenegger's reputation. For years he has donated a large part of his income as a politician to a fund for the needy. His commitment to the socially deprived has placed him in contrast to the callous representatives of the ASP and APP, making him one of the most popular politicians in Styria.

Being the only party in the election prepared to focus on social issues, the Communist Party attracted former ASP voters, former non-voters and first-time voters who were obviously looking for an alternative to the left of the ASP. However, the ACP is certainly no such alternative. For years this formally arch-Stalinist party has remained passive on the national level. It is oriented towards local government politics and, above all, alliances with sectors of the trade union bureaucracy and globalisation opponents like Attac.

Kaltenegger and the ACP assured voters in their election campaign that their political perspective was in no way directed against capitalism. Slogans on their election posters—for example, “Help, instead of speeches”—were reminiscent of slogans put out by charities. Their election manifesto was limited to a few hackneyed demands for reform. The word “socialism” failed to gain a single mention.



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