

# Austrian elections: rightist forces benefit from decline of social democracy

**Markus Salzmann****3 October 2008**

The so-called People's Parties were given a drubbing in the elections to the Austrian parliament held last weekend. The conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democrats (SPÖ), which had governed the country for the past 18 months in a grand coalition, both received their worst-ever results. In particular, extreme-right organisations were able to benefit from this development and registered their highest poll result since 1945.

The extreme-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), led by Heinz Christian Strache, and the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), headed by Jörg Haider, each improved their vote by around 7 percent and obtained a combined total of 29 percent. This total is nearly as much as the total for the SPÖ (29.7 percent), which gained the largest share of the vote but still lost 5.7 percent compared to its result at the previous national election in 2006.

The loss in electoral support for the ÖVP was even more pronounced. It won 25.6 percent--8.7 percent less than its total at the last national elections. The Greens also lost votes and with just 9.8 percent were reduced to the fifth-largest party in parliament. Outsiders such as the Liberal Forum (LiF), the Communist Party (KPÖ) and the newly formed Left all failed to achieve more than the 4 percent minimum necessary for representation in the Austrian parliament.

The voter turnout of 71 percent was an all-time low. The number of abstainers was equivalent to the vote for the party with the biggest total--the SPÖ.

Following six years in government, a series of defeats at the polls and a split away by Haider's BZÖ, the Freedom Party faced political and financial ruin a short while back, while in 2006 the BZÖ had only just scraped over the 4 percent limit.

This time around, the FPÖ was able to gain 40 percent in some Upper Austrian municipalities while the BZÖ won the absolute majority in Carinthia, where Haider is the state's governor. For its part, the SPÖ lost votes in

many traditional workers' areas in the large cities. In "red" Vienna, the SPÖ lost nearly 6 percent, while the FPÖ was able to increase its total by more than 7 percent.

The election result is an expression of popular protest against the country's two largest parties and a rejection of their anti-social policies. The *Kleine Zeitung* wrote of "A furious popular outburst against the political class," and the editor in chief of the *Kurier*, Christoph Kotanko, saw the "end of the two People's Parties" following the defeats for the ÖVP and SPÖ.

The main responsibility for the renewed rise of the extreme right undoubtedly lies with the SPÖ. In less than two years of the grand coalition, the reactionary and opportunist policy of the SPÖ has enabled the country's two extreme right-wing parties to recover, although they faced collapse a short time before.

According to analyses of voter preferences, the SPÖ lost 171,000 votes to the FPÖ and 75,000 to the BZÖ. The ÖVP lost 149,000 votes to the BZÖ and 86,000 to the FPÖ. Amongst young voters--the legal age to vote was reduced to 16 years this year--the FPÖ was able to acquire considerably more votes than the SPÖ.

The electoral debacle for the SPÖ cannot exclusively be reduced to its role in the outgoing coalition, as some commentators maintain. It is becoming increasingly clear that the decline of the SPÖ, which has dominated Austrian politics for the entire period of the Second Republic, has deeper roots.

The SPÖ and ÖVP had already governed together for many years in a grand coalition in the 1980s and 1990s. They divided posts amongst themselves according to their interpretation of the ruling ideology of "social partnership" and kept the working class in check with the cooperation of the trade unions and on the basis of awarding a few social concessions.

The economic and social changes that took place in the 1990s increasingly made such a policy impossible. Like

their affiliated parties throughout Europe, they implemented welfare cuts and an unrelenting series of attacks on the standard of living of the population. This was fertile soil for the Freedom Party, which received increased support at the end of the 1990s with its mixture of social demagogery and racist slogans.

This culminated in the election victory of the FPÖ in the elections of 1999, when Haider and his party took second place behind the SPÖ. The ÖVP responded by forming a right-wing coalition with Haider's FPÖ in 2000, and the SPÖ went into opposition.

When the SPÖ re-entered government following the election in 2006, it had moved so far to the right that it merely continued the policy of the predecessor government.

In the national elections in October 2006, the SPÖ emerged as the strongest party despite losing 200,000 votes, while the ÖVP, which had governed for six years with the FPÖ (following the split in the Freedom Party then with the BZÖ), suffered the worst result in its history. That was the answer on the part of the electorate to the vicious welfare cuts and right-wing law-and-order policies implemented by the People's Party in its six-year alliance with the right-wingers.

The subsequent adaptations made by the SPÖ to its coalition partner and the breach of all of its election promises only served to strengthen the conservatives, which refused to support the social-democratic chancellor and broke with the coalition in July after just one and a half years in office.

The SPÖ entered the election campaign in the autumn of 2006 promising to break with the right-wing, neo-liberal policies of the ÖVP/FPÖ government; it announced in particular that it would annul previously introduced study fees and cancel the planned purchase of the Eurofighter military aircraft.

In the event, following its electoral victory, the SPÖ did nothing of the sort. The "reforms" implemented by the conservative government were left untouched, and after taking power, the grand coalition planned fresh cuts to the country's pension and health systems, together with a further tightening up of the Austria's already repressive immigration laws.

The resignation of the bland bureaucratic Alfred Gusenbauer from the post of SPÖ chairman also failed to halt the decline of the SPÖ. His replacement, Werner Faymann, comes from the right wing of the party and maintains close relations with the populist *Kronen* newspaper, which had supported the right-wing

campaigns of Jörg Haider 10 years previously.

In light of this latest rebuff at the polls, Faymann and the SPÖ are neither able nor willing to change political course. On the contrary, when one reads the interviews and statements given by SPÖ leaders after the election, one has the impression that the party is preparing for a new, unprecedented round of attacks on the working class.

Despite their historic defeat, Faymann and the SPÖ leadership demonstratively proclaimed themselves as winners of the election and immediately began preparations for the forming of a new or, more accurately, old alliance. Last Monday, the Upper-Austrian SPÖ chairman Erich Haider spoke out in favour of a grand coalition with a "renovated ÖVP." Renovated in this case means a coalition without the former vice-chancellor William Molterer (ÖVP), who has enough enemies inside his own party.

Before the election, Faymann had already expressed his preference for a revived grand coalition.

Regional SPÖ chairman Michael Ritsch has declared his own support for a grand coalition that includes the Greens. Such a coalition would have a two-thirds majority in parliament and allow the government to press ahead with its "reforms" largely unhindered.

However, other political constellations are also possible. In the election campaign, Faymann made clear that every type of political constellation was possible, fuelling speculation that the SPÖ might even be prepared to work together with the FPÖ.

Inside the Freedom Party, there is now discussion over a possible reunification with the BZÖ. Immediately after the election, members of the FPÖ in Salzburg made clear they favoured unification with the BZÖ in order to exploit the "common electoral potential" of both parties.

The election result in Austria must serve as a serious warning to the working class. The strengthening of right-wing extremists is a direct result of the political degeneration and rottenness of the old workers' organisations. The only viable alternative to the right-wing demagogues is the building of a new political party based on a international socialist programme.



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