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# Paths to Power: Austrian Populism and the Significance of the 2017 Elections

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RENEWING  
THE CENTRE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Austria has voted, and populism has triumphed. Less than a year after the country narrowly rejected the presidential candidate of the far-Right, the populist FPÖ has substantially increased its share of the popular vote in the parliamentary election and is now likely to enter a coalition government.

**Right-wing populists have a long history of political success in Austria. In the 1999 elections, the far-Right FPÖ became the party with the second-highest vote share and entered a coalition government with the conservative ÖVP that lasted until 2006. The 2017 elections are likely to lead to a renewal of this conservative-populist alliance.**

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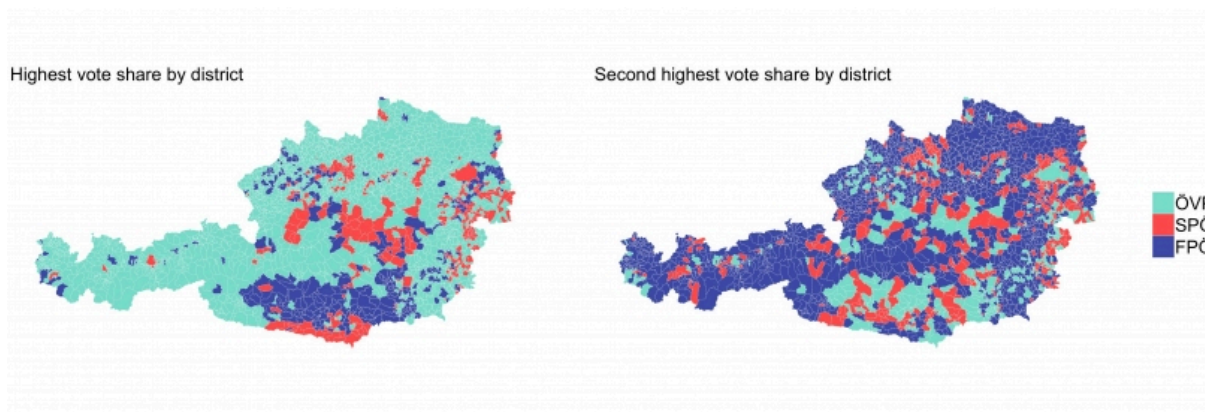
Below, I sketch out key trends of the 2017 election and situate Austria within a wider landscape of European populism. I argue that Austrian populism is ascendant in two ways: First, the election has confirmed the mass appeal of the FPÖ especially among younger voters and across large parts of the country. Second, it illustrates the degree to which populist logic and rhetoric have diffused into the political mainstream and have come to dominate the national political agenda. Because of this diffusion, focusing solely on the electoral strength of the FPÖ under-estimates the pervasiveness of populism in Austrian politics.

In a European political climate where mainstream parties and national governments are less able and willing to explicitly confront populist parties, and where populist sympathisers are growing more sceptical of the norms and institutions of liberal democracy, this points towards a possible future of growing political polarisation and increasing democratic fragility.

## ELECTORAL SUCCESS

Right-wing populists have a long history of political success in Austria. In the 1999 elections, the far-Right FPÖ became the party with the second-highest vote share and entered a coalition government with the conservative ÖVP that lasted until 2006. The 2017 elections are likely to lead to a renewal of this conservative-populist alliance.

Once again, populists exert significant influence over Austrian politics. The FPÖ remains behind the conservative ÖVP and the social democratic SPÖ at the national level, as it has for much of its history. But district-level results illustrate the pervasiveness and significance of right-wing populism.<sup>1</sup> In its traditional Southern heartlands, the FPÖ is now the strongest political party. And across much of Austria, it has edged out Social Democrats to become the party with the second-highest vote share.

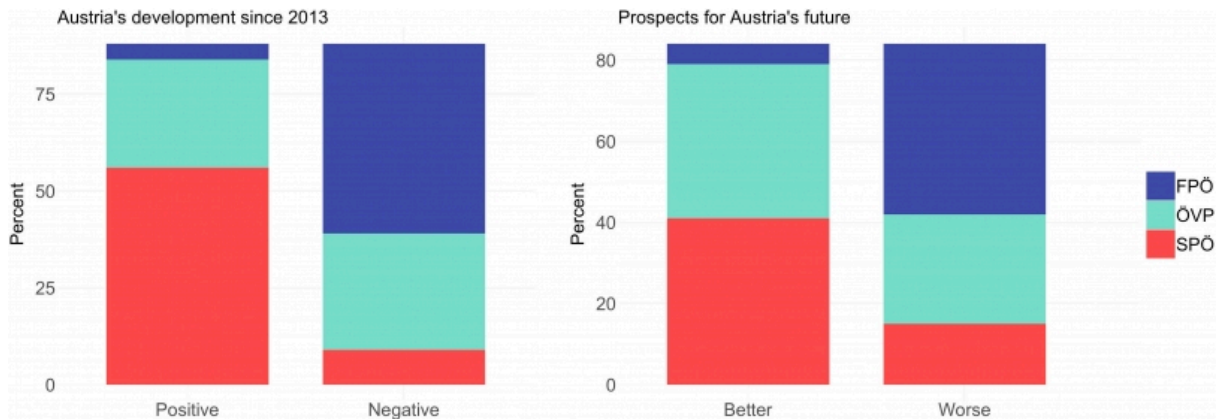


The success of the FPÖ confirms patterns that have recently appeared in other European countries: Populist sympathisers tend to see their country's recent development in a negative light and tend to be more pessimistic about the future. According to survey data gathered just prior to the election by the Austrian SORA Institut, FPÖ voters are much more likely to regard the last electoral cycle (2013-2017) as a period of national decline, and are much more likely to foresee worsening conditions in the future, than supporters of mainstream political parties.<sup>2</sup> They also tend to

<sup>1</sup> District-level data is available from the Austrian Ministry of the Interior at <http://wahl16.bmi.gv.at/>. Data used in this analysis is current as of October 17.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed data, see: <http://www.sora.at/themen/wahlverhalten/wahlanalysen/nrw17.html>.

have lower educational attainment and are disproportionately employed in blue-collar jobs, thus mirroring trends from the United States, Germany, and France.<sup>3</sup>

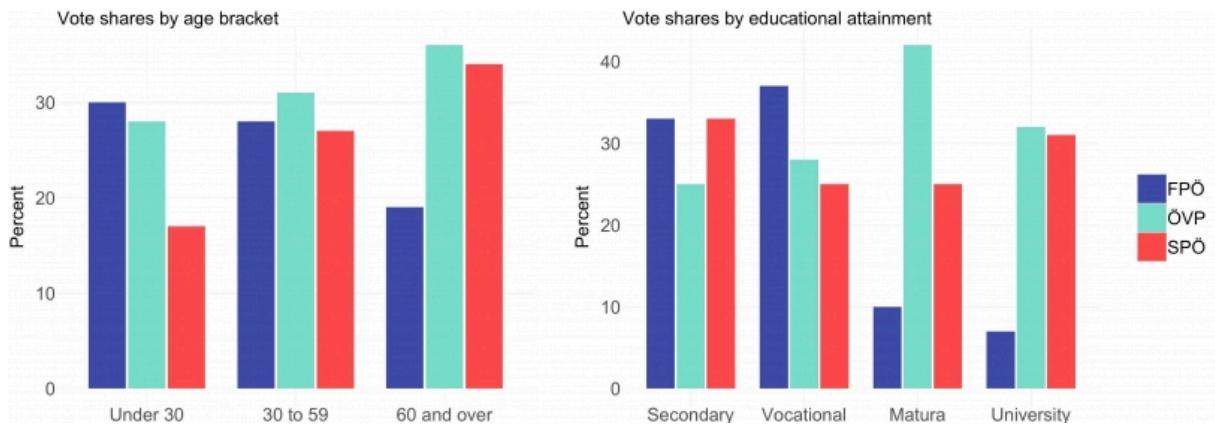


Yet Austrian populism is distinct in two regards: First, the FPÖ has now become a party of the young. While Trump (in the United States), the Front National (in France) and the Alternative für Deutschland (in Germany) underperformed among young voters and garnered significant support among middle-aged and older constituents, the Austrian FPÖ has won the highest vote share among voters below 30. It has performed almost twice as well among young voters as the Social Democrats. In contrast, the FPÖ is weakest among voters over the age of 60, with 19% of the vote compared to the SPÖ's 34% and the ÖVP's 36%.

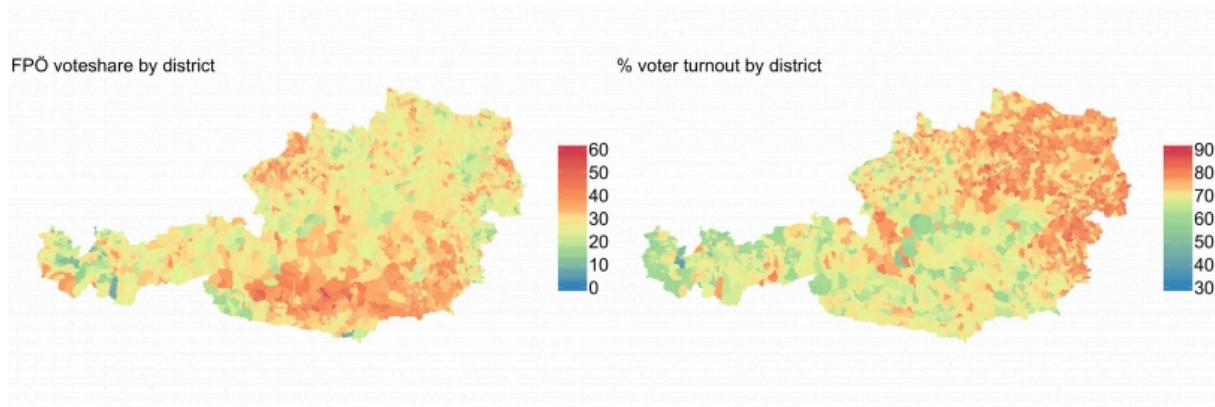
Thus, the common refrain of populist surges as knee-jerk reactions of aging voters who seek merely to preserve a bygone past does not hold up in Austria. Pessimism and discontent with centre-Left politics are now pervasive among a younger generation as well. Just as there is no longer a “natural” class-based constituency for social democratic parties, there is also no “natural” age-based constituency for populist politics.

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<sup>3</sup> The FPÖ now has the highest share of working-class voters among Austrian parties, mirroring trends in Germany.



Second, populists in the United States and Germany increased their vote shares partially by mobilising non-voters. For example, about 25% of German AfD supporters had not voted in previous elections but turned out in September 2017 to cast a ballot. Especially in Southern Germany, increased voter turnout thus correlated strongly with increased support for the AfD. Yet in Austria, support for far-Right populism remains strongest in regions with low voter turnout. While mainstream parties can still mobilise constituents in the Austria's Eastern regions, their political appeal and their ability to mobilise voters are much more limited across the South and in parts of Western Austria.



The Austrian example thus highlights the diverse paths to power for contemporary populists. In some countries, their electoral success depends on building coalitions of older voters and mobilising non-voters. In other countries, they thrive among young voters and in communities where discontent with mainstream politics leads to electoral disengagement. While the forms of populist discontent remain recognisably similar across countries – anxieties about unmoored national identities, about uncertain

futures, about political marginalisation, and about a perceived powerlessness to affect change within the confines of mainstream politics – the concrete manifestation of this discontent as an electoral coalition can differ significantly.



## IDEOLOGICAL DIFFUSION

Yet Austria also illustrates the far-reaching impact that populist parties can have on national political environments beyond electoral results alone. For much of the 2017 campaign, the FPÖ has set the political agenda by forcing discussions about immigration, integration, national security, and asylum policies into the mainstream. According to data from the SORA Institut, ÖVP voters now agree with FPÖ sympathizers that these topics constitute the most salient national political challenges. The percentage of Austrians who regard immigration reform as the country's top political challenge has more than tripled in recent years, from 24% in 2015 to 66% in 2016 and 77% in 2017.<sup>4</sup> Discussions of welfare reform have increasingly become defined in nationalist terms as well, and are now commonly discussed as matters of citizenship- or residency-based access.

But the FPÖ has also influenced the electoral programmes of its competitors. Under its young chairman Sebastian Kurz, the conservative ÖVP has broken with the moderate politics of the "Grand Coalition" and has sharply pivoted towards the Right. Kurz has proposed a focus on border security and the swift deportation of undocumented migrants, has pronounced "political Islam" as the enemy of Austrian security, and has advocated for far-reaching tax cuts financed in part by the elimination of welfare entitlements for asylum seekers.<sup>5</sup> The similarity between the campaigns of the ÖVP and the FPÖ was striking enough that the FPÖ's leadership voiced repeated concerns about policy poaching by the Conservatives. This strategy has proven to be successful: The ÖVP increased its vote share by 7.5% and won the election by a wide margin.<sup>6</sup> It will now

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4 Austrian pollsters usually distinguish between immigration and integration. The former category inquires about migration levels, border security, and rules for asylum seekers. The latter category focuses on the entitlements and responsibilities of migrants that are already in Austria. For detailed survey data, see: [http://www.gfk.com/fileadmin/user\\_upload/dyna\\_content/AT/PM\\_2016/GfK\\_Charts\\_Challenges\\_of\\_Nations\\_2016\\_Austria.pdf](http://www.gfk.com/fileadmin/user_upload/dyna_content/AT/PM_2016/GfK_Charts_Challenges_of_Nations_2016_Austria.pdf)

5 Islam has long been a feature in Austrian national security discussions, with frequent references to the siege of Vienna in 1683 and ominous warnings about the "Islamisation" of Europe.

6 There is considerable evidence that the strength of the ÖVP has more to do with the candidate Kurz than with his party's platform. Throughout the campaign – widely seen as the ugliest in Austria's recent history –, Kurz cast

make negotiations between the ÖVP and the FPÖ easier as well. In the most salient policy domains, both parties have embraced similar positions already.

Again, Austria thus illustrates the diverse links between populist politics and political power. Populists can become influential if they seize control of mainstream parties, as has happened with the Republican Party in the United States. Because open primaries are uncommon in Europe, and because party hierarchies tend to be more closed to outsiders, such a seizure of control is much less likely to occur in European parliamentary democracies. But populists in Europe have achieved success by building alternative political parties that can compete in national elections and have now govern in several Eastern European countries, and by exerting sufficient pressure to alter the content and direction of mainstream politics.

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himself as someone who could break up the stale consensus of mainstream politics. He is now on track to become Europe's youngest head of government at age 31.

## A POPULIST EUROPE

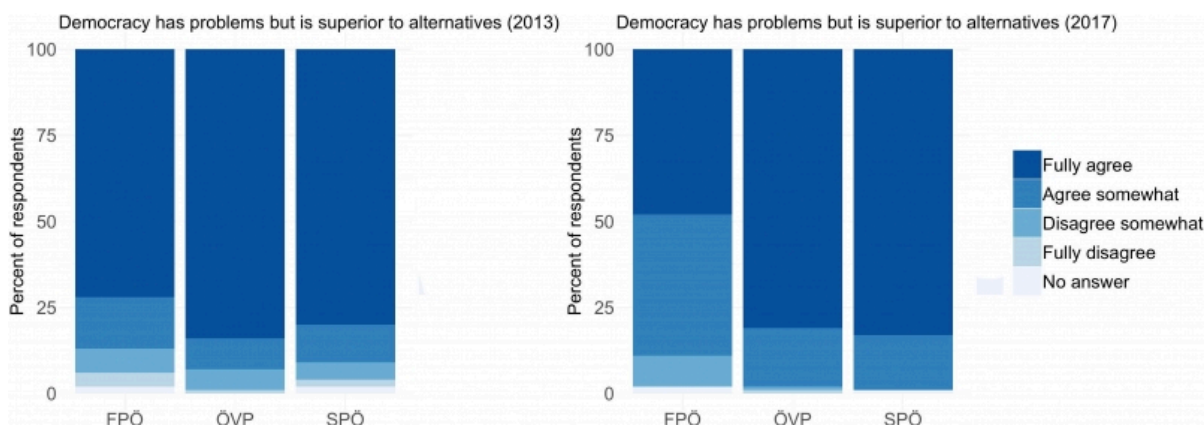
The situation in Austria has a direct historical precedent: In 1999, the FPÖ also became part of a governing coalition as a junior partner to the conservative ÖVP. But the outrage was swift: 14 European countries imposed bilateral sanctions over the FPÖ's perceived racist rhetoric and illiberal policies, and centre-Left parties in Austria threw their support behind the so-called "Thursday protests" against the government.

The sanctions were quickly lifted in 2000, and the coalition won re-election in 2002 despite significant domestic opposition. But the episode highlights a far-reaching consensus that existed across Western and Northern Europe around the turn of the century: Political leaders across Europe tended to understand far-right populist parties as a significant threat to liberal democracy and were willing to deploy the tools of diplomacy to address it.

No such consensus is evident today. Confronted with significant populist agitation, national governments and mainstream parties have grown more hesitant to lead public opinion in matters of immigration and European integration, and have become less willing to confront populist trends beyond their borders. Some governments – in Hungary under the auspices of Fidesz, or in Poland under the Law and Justice Party – have openly embraced far-Right policies. Austria is now likely to (re-)join a growing list of European countries that have populist parties in governments.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Austria offers a glimpse at a future where populist parties have a real change at governing, where populist support proliferates among younger generations, and where mainstream parties and the international community are unable or unwilling to confront the logic and rhetoric of reactionary populism. This should give us pause, because support for populist parties is closely linked to higher scepticism about political institutions and democratic norms.<sup>7</sup> Populist voters are more likely to hold unfavourable opinions about parliaments, governments, and courts, and profess greater openness to illiberal social and political norms. Data from Austria suggests that this scepticism is increasing: Prior to the 2017 election, only 48% of FPÖ supporters agreed fully with the statement that “Democracy has its problems but remains superior to alternative forms of government” – a number that has declined sharply since 2013. Thus, not only are voters becoming more open to far-Right populist parties as alternatives to the political mainstream, but supporters of these parties are also becoming more sceptical of the institutions and norms of liberal democracy.



In the best case, the long history of Austrian populism suggests that European democracies are remarkably resilient in the face of political polarisation and radicalisation. While the FPÖ has fundamentally changed the political centre of gravity in Austria since the 1990s, there is little evidence that it has contributed to a weakening of formal institutions and that its participation in coalition governments has increased political instability. But in the

<sup>7</sup> The correlations between populist sympathies and great scepticism of norms and institutions is robust across national contexts: It characterises most populist parties in Europe.

worst case, the recent surge in populist and illiberal sentiments in Austria foreshadows a future where democracy becomes more fragile as democratic discontent finds a home in parties with considerable mass appeal. In this scenario, a growing affinity between populism and illiberalism threatens to change not only the content of European politics but also the democratic institutions that facilitate political participation and moderate political disagreement.



Right-wing populists have a long history of political success in Austria. In the 1999 elections, the far-Right FPÖ became the party with the second-highest vote share and entered a coalition government with the conservative ÖVP that lasted until 2006. The 2017 elections are likely to lead to a renewal of this conservative-populist alliance.

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