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Austrian Elections: When the Peoples' Parties Lose the People

by Emily Hruban

When Austrians went to the polls in last month's presidential election, the political establishment received a jarring wakeup call. Typically, presidents hail from one of the country's traditional *Volksparteien*, or people's parties—the center-left Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) or the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). However, amid mounting frustration with the political establishment, voters sent two so-called “outsiders” into a competitive runoff, taking place this weekend. Norbert Hofer, a member of the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) famously totes a Glock 26, and has said that refugees are a major threat to Austrian security. His opponent, Green Party veteran Alexander Van der Bellen is running as an independent in this race. He advocates for a strong and cohesive European Union and protecting refugees on humanitarian grounds. Although the role of president is largely ceremonial in Austria, this face-off between two extremes reveals a deepening polarization of the country.

Faymann the Flip-Flopper

The crisis intensified for the SPÖ just over a week after the first round of the election, when Austria's then-Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ) took the stage at his party's Labor Day celebrations. Jeers of protestors demanding his resignation nearly drowned out his speech about the refugee situation. On May 9, he acquiesced to public pressure and stepped down from his role as chancellor and party chief.

Faymann had been under fire for his flip-flopping on refugees. Initially, Austria welcomed refugees, but Faymann later bowed to the opposition, particularly from the right wing, and closed its borders. Austria even hosted a conference with several Balkan states to coordinate efforts to keep refugees out of Europe. The chancellor's change in tack appeared unprincipled to those who supported and opposed Austria's admission of refugees alike.

The Slow Trickle to Irrelevance

Faymann's demise, however, is not an isolated incident. His declining popularity is part of a growing trend away from establishment parties, which predates this current influx of refugees. Faymann's SPÖ has been hemorrhaging party members for decades. Party membership fell from 730,000 to 205,224 between 1980 and 2013.¹ The SPÖ maintained 27 percent support in 2010, falling to 24 percent by early 2015. Through the refugee crisis, support for the party weakened further to 21 percent.² The ÖVP also saw a significant decline in support over the past six years—while they commanded a plurality of 33 percent in 2010, that support had declined to 26 percent in early 2015, and has since dwindled to 22 percent.³

Although current refugee movements (and politicians' reactions to them) have certainly affected party support, a more serious problem is that these parties have not effectively represented the interests of voters. Josef Weidenholzer, a member of the European Parliament with the SPÖ wrote an article explaining the shortcomings of his party in *Zeit*, the German newspaper, on May 5. He argued that the party's aversion to self-critique prevents honest and constructive conversations from happening. He added that voters do not feel heard by the political elite.⁴

A number of recent policy choices reflect this perceived disconnect between the party elite and its constituents. First, the ruling coalition's reversal on dealing with the influx of refugees appeared to be an admission that allowing the refugees into the country was a mistake. A lack of consensus on the issue within the coalition continues to create confusion and makes voters feel that their leaders are unreliable. Furthermore, Austrians feel that the establishment parties have not taken their anxiety about security seriously in the past year. Many believe that the arrival of refugees poses a major security threat for the country. Hofer has capitalized on that fear and added to it by painting refugees as potential terrorists. The establishment has not done enough to set the record straight.

Second, voters are deeply concerned about the economy and growing unemployment rate, which reached 9.1 percent this April.⁵ The unemployment rate is higher this year than it has been in decades, and establishment parties are being blamed for not doing enough to protect their constituents. Hofer has capitalized on this angst to win over voters. For example, he claims that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) will eliminate Austrian jobs, and promises to defend the Austrian people from what he considers to be a dangerous deal. Although other candidates have also come out against TTIP, none have manipulated the topic so skillfully.

Finally, the two *Volksparteien* have been criticized for advocating policies that are indistinguishable from one another. While the ÖVP has traditionally been center-right and the SPÖ has been center-left, the coalition partners have adopted similar platforms in recent years. This has left voters on the right and left feeling alienated and unrepresented.

The People Problem

The establishment parties do not just have a problem of policy. They also have a problem of personality. Voters find candidates representing these parties uncharismatic and uninspiring. Younger voters are particularly unenthusiastic about the candidates. In a recent survey on presidential candidates' visibility, voters between the ages of 16 and 29 were asked to name candidates in the first round of the presidential elections. Sixty-four percent of the young people were able to name Richard Lugner, the 83-year old entrepreneur famous for paying celebrities like Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian to attend the Vienna State Opera Ball with him.⁶ Van der Bellen, the independent who will participate in Sunday's runoff election followed closely behind with 63 percent. Forty-five percent listed the right-wing candidate Hofer. Only 43 percent named the ÖVP's Andreas Kohl and 39 percent the SPÖ's Rudolf Hundstorfer. The establishment candidates will need to do a better job capturing the attention of young voters if their parties hope to remain viable in the future.

Is the Party Over?

The SPÖ is already taking steps to change its direction by selecting a businessman, not a politician, to replace Chancellor Faymann. As CEO of the Austrian Federal Railways, Christian Kern resurrected a moribund operation. Perhaps he will manage to work similar magic with the struggling Social Democrats. However, without a serious change in direction, Austria's *Volksparteien* will remain in jeopardy—the parties need new and charismatic leaders in order to win back the trust and interest of the voters. More critically, as Austria becomes more politically polarized, the ÖVP and SPÖ will need to come up with clear and distinct strategies for tackling Austria's pressing challenges to win back voters on the right and the left. Until the two parties are able to define their own identities more clearly, they will not be able to regain their base and risk losing control of the government in the 2018 federal elections.

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¹ <https://neuwal.com/2014/11/23/entwicklung-und-ueberblick-partemitglieder-in-oesterreich/>

² <https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-05/oesterreich-sozialdemokraten-spoee-niedergang>

⁵ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/austria/unemployment-rate>

⁶ <http://jugendkultur.at/bundespraesidentschaftswahl-2016/>