

## The Extreme Right in Austria

### An overview

Since the end of the Second World War, Austrian politics has been characterized by a high degree of segmentation which has taken the form of two large and mutually hostile subcultures (or *Lager*) constructed around the socialist SPÖ (*Sozialistische Partei Österreichs*) on the one hand, and the Christian-conservative ÖVP (*Österreichische Volkspartei*) on the other. However, in the immediate post-war period there was also a significant number of people who felt excluded from both of these camps. It therefore did not take long for an organization to form which would seek to represent the interests of these people. In 1949 the *Verband der Unabhängigen* (VdU) was created with the aims of appealing to liberals who did not feel incorporated into the other two *Lager* and of reintegrating the half a million former Austrian Nazis.

The VdU did not last long, however. Despite winning 11.7 percent of the vote in the 1949 federal election, intraparty conflicts and the growing defection of voters to both the SPÖ and the ÖVP led to the party dissolving itself in 1955. Yet, such was the disappointment within the third *Lager* at the disorganization and eventual failure of the VdU, that a successor party, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ), was formed as early as 1956. Like its predecessor, the FPÖ embraced German-national ideology and sought to represent those not integrated in the post-war socialist or Catholic-conservative subcultures.

For the first decade of its existence the FPÖ was regarded as overtly right-wing extremist due, in large part, to the number of former Nazis within its ranks. Until the mid 1960s, it was considered a pariah and was excluded from government at every level. In 1966, however, under the leadership of ex-SS officer Friedrich Peter, the party began a move to the political centre-ground. It promoted economically liberal policies and even joined the Liberal International in 1979. This apparent conversion led a number of right-wing members to leave the party in 1967 and to set up the *Nationaldemokratische Partei* (NDP). For many observers this confirmed that the FPÖ had finally shed its Nazi legacy. The party's relations with the both the ÖVP and the SPÖ improved throughout this period and, in 1983, under the stewardship of Norbert Steger, this process of liberalization culminated in the FPÖ becoming the junior partner in an SPÖ-FPÖ governmental coalition.

The party's conversion to liberalism did not last, however. The 'Reder Affair' of 1985 (when convicted war criminal Walter Reder was given an official welcome on his release from jail in Italy by the FPÖ defence minister) caused a damaging split within the party between the right-wing nationalists on the one hand, and the more liberal members on the other. The controversy surrounding the candidature of Kurt Waldheim (for the ÖVP) in the 1986 presidential election further exacerbated the split within the FPÖ, as it brought up questions of Austrian identity over which the different sides of the party could not be reconciled. These internal wranglings finally ended in victory for the right-wing nationalists at the 1986 party congress in Innsbruck when the liberally-minded Steger was overthrown and the more radical Jörg Haider assumed the leadership of the party. In response, the SPÖ terminated the coalition immediately and began its policy of marginalization of the FPÖ.

The FPÖ had not fared well from its time in government in terms of electoral support. It had polled a mere 5 percent of the votes in the federal election of 1983, and its ratings in opinion polls over the next two or three years were even lower. Haider thus took control of a party which found itself in a somewhat perilous situation. To rescue the party, he set out to appeal to a wider constituency than ever before, and to transform the FPÖ first into what he hoped would be the only viable opposition, and then into a party of government. To achieve these goals, Haider adopted a populist style and became the master at playing the anti-establishment card.

At the centre of the FPÖ's ideology is its attack on the Austrian system of *Proporz* by which political spoils are divided between the establishment parties and their clienteles. The party also strongly opposes the patronage and neo-corporatism which accompanies this consensus system, stressing that it leads to nepotism, corruption, scandals and wasted taxation. The FPÖ thus takes on the role of 'guarantor of the ordinary citizen', or of the 'little man' against large and organized interests, and Haider presents himself as the 'trustworthy outsider' or the 'untainted politician'.

To match this populist style, the party advances many populist policies. It calls for the increased use of citizen initiatives, plebiscites and referenda, and has also suggested that the provinces be given more power and that the president be directly elected. To accompany these moves aimed at 'giving power back to the people', the party favours a reduction in the size of the public sphere and an expansion of the private sector, deregulation and lower levels of taxation.

Since Haider assumed the leadership of the party, the FPÖ has not only become more populist, it has also become significantly more right-wing and xenophobic. Most notably, as well as continuing to emphasize patriotism and to stress the importance of protecting traditional values and Austrian cultural identity, since the beginning of the 1990s the party has launched an aggressive attack on immigrants. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, the number of immigrants entering Austria had dramatically increased. By linking rising levels of immigration to rising levels of crime, to drug trafficking, to housing shortages and to unemployment, the FPÖ has attempted to attract a growing number of working class voters who were already anxious about the effects of socio-economic change.

From 1986, the number of working class voters casting their ballot in favour of the FPÖ has indeed increased – mainly at the expense of the SPÖ. Yet the party's support has remained diverse, partly because of its sizeable protest potential, making it difficult to identify a 'typical' FPÖ electorate. The party has attracted growing numbers of lower middle class voters, public employees and even a section of the business community. It has also been disproportionately popular among the young, the dissatisfied, and people who had previously been non-voters. The only two constituencies to have been continuously underrepresented within the party's electorate are women and university-educated voters.

The FPÖ's radicalization at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s led to many of its more liberal members leaving the party. In 1993, they went on to establish the Liberal Forum under the leadership of Heide Schmidt. This prompted Haider to withdraw the FPÖ from the Liberal International before he was forced to. It also allowed him complete dominance over the party, as rivals and dissenters had finally been rooted out.

Haider had already clearly put his mark on the internal organization of the party since assuming the helm in 1986. In particular, he had implemented a sustained membership drive. From 1992, however, just as the liberals were preparing to leave the party, he pushed through a number of further reforms which significantly strengthened his power base within the party. He also increased his control over the selection of candidates at both national and provincial level. Together, such measures allowed him to ensure that no rival groupings within the party assumed too much power. Instead, members were both loyal to and dependent on the party leader.

From the moment Haider took over leadership of the FPÖ, the party's fortunes at the polls increased. Having won a mere 5 percent of the votes in the 1983 federal election (the lowest score in its history), the party polled 9.7 percent of the votes in the 1986 federal contest. Further success followed in several provincial elections in 1988 and 1989. Most notably, in Carinthia, the party finished in second place and entered into a governing coalition with the ÖVP. Haider became state governor. The party's vote share increased still further in 1990. In the federal election of that year the FPÖ won an unprecedented 16.6 percent of the vote.

The ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in Carinthia came to an abrupt end in June 1991 following Haider's remarks about the 'benefits' of the Third Reich's employment policies. The SPÖ and the ÖVP joined together in a vote of no confidence and removed Haider from the position of state governor. Such negative publicity did little to harm the FPÖ however. A mere five months after Haider's expulsion as governor of Carinthia, the party amassed 22.5 percent of the vote in the Viennese municipal elections.

In the 1994 federal elections Haider once again showed himself to be extremely adept at playing the populist, anti-establishment card and at linking a variety of issues to immigration. As in past campaigns, the issues of corruption and wasted taxation featured highly in the FPÖ's programme, as did the perceived threat to social stability posed by immigrants. The party went on to poll 22.5 percent of the vote attracting, at the expense of the SPÖ, a sizeable proportion of the working class and lower middle class electorate.

When the SPÖ-ÖVP coalition broke up prematurely in October 1995 and early elections were scheduled for December, Haider and FPÖ looked set to benefit. Having secured the best electoral score in its history only twelve months earlier, the party entered the 1995 federal election campaign promoting the same issues as it had in 1994. However, for the first time since Haider had assumed the leadership of the party, its rise was to be interrupted. The party's vote share fell slightly to 21.9 percent. In the event, many of the issues championed by the party in 1994 turned out to be of secondary concern by 1995. Of utmost priority in the campaign of 1995 were budgetary questions which had caused the SPÖ-ÖVP coalition to break up. The issues of immigration and crime which the FPÖ so liked to emphasize were thus somewhat sidelined. The decline in the FPÖ vote was further attributed to remarks made by Haider at a meeting of Waffen-SS veterans only three months before the election in which he praised his audience and called them 'decent people of character' who had 'stood up for their beliefs and remained loyal to their convictions'. Against this backdrop, and amid growing fears that the FPÖ might stand a realistic chance of entering government at the national level (most likely in coalition with the ÖVP), many working-class voters who had switched allegiances to the FPÖ in 1994 returned to the SPÖ in 1995.

This setback proved to be both minor and temporary. By the following October, the FPÖ had not only regained the ground it had lost, but it had increased its vote share still further. In the Viennese municipal elections of that month the party polled 27.9 percent of the votes, whilst in the concurrent elections to the European Parliament it won 27.6 percent of the ballots. Then, in March 1999 the party won 42.7 percent of the votes in the provincial elections in Carinthia and Jörg Haider was reinstated as state governor. Although it suffered another slight setback three months later in June 1999, when it polled just 23.2 percent of the votes in the Euro-elections, the FPÖ quickly recovered once again. It went on to win 26.9 percent of the ballots in the federal election of October 1999 and, by so doing, caused both national and international uproar and condemnation.

With 29.6 percent of the vote, the FPÖ became the second largest party in Austrian politics – albeit by the narrowest of margins, as the ÖVP had won just 415 fewer votes. This situation presented serious problems for both the SPÖ and the ÖVP. To start with, prior to the election, the ÖVP had declared that it would enter into opposition if it finished third in the contest. Now that this threat had become a reality, the party found itself in a difficult predicament. With the Liberal Forum having disappeared from parliament and the Greens proving too small to be a coalition partner for either of the establishment parties, only two possible scenarios existed if the ÖVP was to stay true to its word: on the one hand there could be a coalition between the SPÖ and the FPÖ, whilst on the other hand, the government could be a minority one, comprised solely of the SPÖ. Both these situations, however, were unacceptable or unlikely. It was obvious the SPÖ would not entertain forming a coalition with the FPÖ, and it was also clear that neither the ÖVP nor the FPÖ would tolerate a minority SPÖ government. Far from having to cast itself into opposition, the ÖVP now found itself in critical and decisive position. Only two coalition options remained: either a return to the SPÖ-ÖVP ‘grand coalition’, or a coalition comprised of the ÖVP and the FPÖ.

Led by president Thomas Klestil, who was pressing for a renewed ‘grand coalition’, the negotiations between the SPÖ and the ÖVP went on for three months. Yet, they collapsed at the end of January 2000. Officially it was reported that the SPÖ and the ÖVP had not been able to reach an agreement because of differences over the need for austerity measures. Unofficially, however, it was widely suggested that Wolfgang Schüssel, the ÖVP leader, had had no real intentions of resurrecting the ‘grand coalition’. Such accusations gained further weight when the ÖVP and the FPÖ entered into talks as early as January 25<sup>th</sup> and agreed on a government programme a mere week later.

The entry of the FPÖ into government provoked a national and international backlash. Unable to stop the formation of the government, president Klestil insisted that Schüssel and Haider sign a statement committing the government to protecting human rights, to respecting the rights of minorities and to opposing xenophobia. Meanwhile, the other fourteen members of the European Union imposed sanctions on Austria and ceased all bilateral relations. The USA soon followed suit. Sanctions were only lifted in September 2000.

Since its entry into government the FPÖ controls half the cabinet posts, including the position of vice-Chancellor which is occupied by Susanne Riess-Passer, Haider’s former private secretary and close confidante. The party also holds the ministries of finance, defence, justice, social affairs and infrastructure. Haider himself chose not to take up a cabinet post, preferring instead to remain governor of his province of Carinthia. This move has allowed him to continue to exert control over the party whilst at the same time it has given him the opportunity to distance himself from any unpopular governmental policies.

Haider's tactics were soon in further evidence. At the end of February 2000, just three weeks after his party had assumed its place in government, the FPÖ leader announced his resignation, and handed over the leadership to Riess-Passer. Publicly, Haider simply insisted that his resignation would help the governmental coalition run more smoothly as it would stop people thinking that FPÖ ministers were having to refer every decision to him. Whilst many party members were stunned at the news, and whilst a number of European countries were also baffled by Haider's departure as party leader, those close to him understood that the move would allow him greater room for manoeuvre out of the public eye and might give him more chance to achieve his goal of one day becoming Chancellor. Once again, he created a situation in which he would be able to distance himself from any unpopular policies the government might push through, whilst at the same time retaining control over the party. Indeed, rather than the limited, so-called 'supervisory' role which he maintains he plays, Haider clearly remains party leader in all but name.

Despite Haider's tactical manoeuvrings, the FPÖ's ever increasing electoral successes have ceased. Instead, the party has experienced a reversal of fortunes and has suffered heavily losses since its entry into government in February 2000. In the Styrian provincial elections of October 2000, the party's policies were rejected by a significant section of the electorate and its vote share fell to 12.4 percent from 17 percent six years earlier. Similarly, in the Viennese municipal elections of March 2001 the FPÖ managed to win just 20.3 percent of the votes, compared to 27.9 percent in 1996.

These losses can be attributed to voters being disappointed with the FPÖ for failing to live up to its original election promises. It entered government promising to protect the 'ordinary citizen' and the 'little man' against large, organized, vested interests. Yet, in the eighteen months since it has been in office, the FPÖ has pushed through spending cuts which have affected both the unemployed and the ill. Furthermore, Haider's recent defence of Austria's World War II veterans who fought alongside the Nazi army, and his attacks on the Jewish leader in Vienna, Ariel Muzicant, have done little to help the party's fortunes at the polls.

In response to such losses, in the short term, the FPÖ is likely to become more aggressive both in the way in which it presents its policies, and in the manner in which it behaves with the ÖVP within the federal coalition. The two parties may well come to cross swords over who assumes the responsibility for unpopular decisions, and who takes the credit for popular policies. In the longer term, however, the FPÖ will have to tread a very difficult path if it is to attempt to retain its populist right-wing protest character whilst at the same time continuing to assume the responsibilities of government.

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**Electoral Support for the FPÖ, 1959-2001**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Type of Election</b>	<b>%</b>
1959	Federal	7.7
1962	Federal	7.0
1966	Federal	5.4
1970	Federal	5.5
1971	Federal	5.5
1975	Federal	5.4
1979	Federal	6.1
1983	Federal	5.0
1986	Federal	9.7
1987	Vienna City	9.7
1990	Federal	16.6
1991	Vienna City	22.5
1994	Federal	22.5
1995	Styria province	17.0
1995 (December)	Federal	21.9
1996 (October)	Vienna City	27.9
1996 (October)	Euro	27.6
1999 (March)	Carinthia province	42.7
1999 (June)	Euro	23.5
1999 (October)	Federal	26.9
2000 (October)	Styria province	12.4
2001 (March)	Vienna City	20.3