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Background

In the previous parliamentary election, held in September 2013, the two major traditional parties, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Christian Democratic People's Party (ÖVP), had obtained a record low vote share, gaining a slim majority of 50.8% of the votes. The radical-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Greens had increased their vote share to 20.5% and to 12.4%, respectively. Two newly founded parties managed to pass the electoral threshold of 4%: the liberal NEOS (The New Austria and Liberal Forum) and the populist Team Stronach. Only the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), an FPÖ splinter founded by the late Jörg Haider in 2005, lost parliamentary representation and quickly disappeared from politics (Dolezal and Zeglovits 2014).

In the event, the renewed SPÖ–ÖVP coalition government that followed the 2013 election was a forced marriage between the two main parties driven mainly by the absence of a viable alternative. Yet the considerable ideological differences between the SPÖ and ÖVP, 'in particular regarding pensions, education and taxes', made the government compromise reached after the 2013 elections a very feeble one (Dolezal and Zeglovits 2014: 651). The coalition partners in fact had different stances in many key policy areas such as education, on which the SPÖ (unlike the ÖVP) favoured inclusive forms of education like comprehensive schools up to the age of 14 and rejected university tuition fees. Besides, the SPÖ supported the introduction of wealth and inheritance taxes, a demand strongly rejected by the ÖVP.

In the years following the 2013 election, economic stagnation, an increasing unemployment rate, which had reached an all-time high of 10.9% in January 2016,[1] and the so-called European 'refugee crisis' in 2015, intensified the disagreement between the two coalition partners, creating government stalemate

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and vast distrust vis-à-vis the government among the Austrian population. A survey of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), run two years after the 2013 elections (in October 2015), found that more than 65% of the population was dissatisfied with the work of the government (Kritzinger *et al.* 2016). This created a situation favourable to the radical-right FPÖ and its anti-immigration and anti-elitist discourse (Aichholzer *et al.* 2014): from mid-2015 until mid-2017, the FPÖ was the most popular party in Austria with an estimated vote share above 30%.[2]

The events of the presidential elections in 2016 showed just how deep the crisis of the incumbent SPÖ-ÖVP grand coalition was. Since 1945, the Austrian president has been backed by one of the two mainstream parties (Müller 2006), yet in April 2016 neither of the two candidates of the government parties managed to pass the first round of the presidential elections. Instead, Norbert Hofer (FPÖ) and former Green Party leader Alexander Van der Bellen competed in the run-off in May 2016 and in the repeated run-off in December 2016, which was eventually won by Van der Bellen. While Van der Bellen's victory came as a surprise to many national and international observers and provided a lifeline to centrist politics, the result of the elections also showed an urgent need for political reforms and the end of the stalemate grand coalition politics.

The results of the presidential elections had profound political consequences: first, they led to the resignation in May 2016 of SPÖ leader and *Bundeskanzler* Werner Faymann after dwindling support from his own party. Christian Kern, manager of the public railway operator with little political experience, became the new SPÖ party chair and Federal Chancellor. In May 2017, the ÖVP leader Reinhold Mitterlehner also resigned amid conflicts within the government coalition and his own party. He was succeeded by Sebastian Kurz, the 31-year-old Minister of Foreign Affairs, who demanded extensive changes within his party before accepting the nomination as party leader. In order to strengthen his position as party leader, Kurz demanded the right to decide single-handedly the nomination of government members and the candidates for the third (national) tier of the electoral ballot. Kurz did not take up the position as Vice-Chancellor in May 2017 and immediately forced early elections. Kurz and his team developed a new party logo, party label ('The New People's Party') and party colour, emphasising a new image for the ÖVP. The change in leadership and party image led to a dramatic rise in the polls, predicting the ÖVP as the front-runner.

The Greens, one of the most successful Green parties in Europe (Dolezal 2016: 15), could not take sustained advantage of the presidential elections in terms of poll results. Intra-party conflicts led, first, to the expulsion of the Green youth organisation from the party and then to the announcement by Peter Pilz, MP at the national or regional level for the entire parliamentary history of the Austrian Greens, that he was establishing his own electoral list (Liste Peter Pilz). Pilz's decision followed disputes in the process of candidate selection in which the party congress delegates chose new faces over a number of established

MPs. The support of several MPs (originally members of the Green and SPÖ parliamentary parties) allowed Pilz to pass the hurdle of candidacy and run a nationwide list on all three electoral tiers. These disputes, as well as a leadership change, were accompanied by severe losses in the polls for the Green Party.
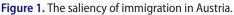
While NEOS managed to establish itself as a small but steady parliamentary party, the populist Team Stronach soon started to be eroded, and dissolved completely over the course of the legislative period.

The campaign

Similar to other countries in Europe, the issue of immigration, and the related topics of asylum seekers and border control, became a major issue of Austrian politics from the start of the European migrant crisis in summer 2015. The issue of immigration remained salient during the electoral campaign for both voters and parties. The dashed lines in Figure 1 show the yearly percentage of respondents mentioning immigration as the most important problem facing the country (as registered by the Eurobarometer, left y-axes). The figure shows an impressive increase after 2015, at the height of the European migrant crisis. The

Figure 1. The saliency of immigration in Austria.
Note: Legend: dashed line: percentage of respondents mentioning immigration as the most important issue for Austria (left y-axes), source: Eurobarometer; solid line: number of asylum applications per year in thousands (right y-axes), source: Statistik Austria; bars: saliency of immigration compared to all other prominently mentioned policy issues (titles or subtitles) in party press releases that were issued during six campaign weeks (left y-axes), source: AUTNES (Müller *et al.* 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d).

solid lines in Figure 1 show that the number of asylum applications per year in thousands (right y-axes) peaked in 2015, making Austria one of the countries in the EU with the highest number of asylum applications. The grey bars in Figure 1 indicate the salience of immigration in campaign communications measured as percentages of prominent statements in party press releases mentioning immigration, among all prominent statements in party press releases focused on policy issues (left y-axes). It clearly indicates that most parties increased their attention to the topics related to immigration. As immigration is a core issue for the FPÖ, its emphasis on immigration has been generally high (mean 1999–2013: 6.7%), but peaked in 2017 (13.4%). The ÖVP also mentioned immigration in more press releases than ever (7.6%), considerably more than in previous years (mean 1999–2013: 1.6%). The Greens also focused on immigration (2017: 9%, mean 1995–2013: 6%), although they have generally positioned themselves on the more pro-immigration and pro-asylum pole.[3]

Media and political observers widely agreed that Kurz boosted his popularity mainly by undermining the FPÖ's ownership of the immigration issue, and adopting many of the FPÖ's policy positions during the election campaign. Kurz's election campaign included proposals to close Islamic kindergartens and to cut social transfers to recognised refugees, reforms that the FPÖ also supports. Most prominently, Kurz claimed credit for the reduction in immigration to Europe after the closure of the Balkan route in 2016, which helped him convey the image of being competent on the immigration issue. Besides this, the ÖVP campaign was almost entirely focused on its top candidate and party leader Sebastian Kurz. Despite being a member of government for six years as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Junior Minister for Integration, Sebastian Kurz successfully drew on the narratives of 'change' and 'newness' helped by his young age and new party branding. The poster campaign was characterised by the absence of policy issues (with slogans such as 'It is time', 'Doing the right thing' or 'Austria back to the top: For all of us').

The SPÖ election campaign was ill-fated. First, the original campaign slogan ('Get what you are entitled to') provoked much criticism and was soon replaced with diverse messages including demands for 'secure pensions', 'tax reduction on labour' or 'social security'. Then, the final weeks of the SPÖ's electoral campaign were overshadowed by scandals related to the party's payments to and involvement with the political advisor Tal Silberstein who allegedly drew on anti-Semitic and racist stereotypes in anonymous Facebook pages aimed against Sebastian Kurz.

Compared to previous campaigns, the FPÖ and its top candidate Heinz-Christian Strache refrained from provocative statements. Instead, the party published an 'economic party platform' that was judged as an effort to enhance its chances of coalition with the ÖVP. Also, the FPÖ stressed that it had been the 'pioneer' of the immigration issue and accused Kurz of 'copying' FPÖ policies, in an attempt to defend its issue ownership on immigration.

The Greens did not prominently emphasise the issue of corruption, their main issue in the previous elections, and even lost control of this issue to Peter Pilz – a long-standing MP for the Greens with a well-known reputation as a 'corruption fighter' (Kritzinger and Plescia 2017). The Liste Pilz did not publish an electoral manifesto, running a campaign under the slogan 'the candidates are the platform'. NEOS formed an electoral coalition with Irmgard Griss, retired head of the Supreme Court who narrowly missed the run-off for the presidential election as an independent candidate.

The 2017 election campaign was characterised by several changes. Traditionally, TV advertisements play a minor role in Austrian election campaigns as they are legally banned from the public broadcasting company (Dolezal and Zeglovits 2014: 646). Yet in 2017 the SPÖ announced the intention to spend a significant portion of its campaign fund on TV spots (about 18%). Usually, posters and advertisements in print media are the most expensive tools in Austrian election campaigns, although relevant differences exist across parties. Nevertheless, the SPÖ allegedly decreased the budget share for posters to a third compared to the 2013 campaign and instead invested heavily in online tools.

Internet tools such as social media and online advertisements became an established means of campaigning. Unlike previous election campaigns, all major parties and their top candidates actively operated Facebook pages. In addition, parties extensively used YouTube by releasing more than 500 videos in six campaign weeks.

TV debates between pairs of top candidates are well-established events in Austrian campaigns and raise extensive attention among voters and journalists (Plasser and Lengauer 2010). In 2017, ten pairwise debates organised by the public broadcasting company attracted on average more than 700,000 viewers (11% of the electorate). More than 1.2 million viewers (19% of the electorate) watched the final round with all top candidates.[4] In addition, private TV channels organised similar debates and discussion formats. Altogether, interested citizens had the opportunity to watch the heads of the parliamentary parties in 23 televised debates in the public (ORF) and the two major private channels (Puls 4 and ATV).

The results

For the first time since 2002, the ÖVP became the strongest party with a vote share of 31.5% (+7.5 percentage points compared to 2013). The FPÖ achieved its second-best election result ever, winning 26% (+5.5 percentage points), and it only marginally lost the second place to the SPÖ. Combined, the ÖVP and FPÖ reached a comfortable majority of 57.4%, securing the largest vote share for parties of the centre-right and radical-right in Austria. Both parties gained votes in every *Bundesland*, with the largest gains in Carinthia, the region formerly governed by Jörg Haider, deceased leader of the FPÖ and later BZÖ.

The SPÖ retained its all-time low vote share of 2013 with 26.9% (+0.04 percentage points), remaining the strongest party only in the traditional strongholds of the *Bundesländer* Vienna and Burgenland. For the first time ever since they first entered parliament in 1986, the Greens were unable to win parliamentary representation. In the end, they received only 3.8% of the vote, losing 69% of their vote share in 2013. The Greens lost in all Austrian regions but their support dropped drastically especially in their core constituencies in Vienna (–10.5 percentage points) and in Tyrol (–10.7 percentage points). In the aftermath of the election, both the top candidate, Ulrike Lunacek, and the party spokesperson, Ingrid Felipe, resigned. NEOS, the parliamentary newcomer of 2013, obtained parliamentary representation by slightly increasing their vote share to 5.3% (+0.3 percentage points). The spinoff of the Greens, Liste Peter Pilz, founded less than three months before the election, managed to gather just enough votes to pass the electoral threshold with a 4.4% vote share. Liste Pilz secured its best result in Vienna (7.5%) while receiving an average support of about 3–4% in the other Austrian regions. Turnout was 80%, a rise of 5 percentage points from 2013 (see Table 1), hence halting the downward tendency started in recent elections in Austria (Kritzinger *et al.* 2013).

In terms of electoral volatility, an online panel survey conducted during the 2017 election (Kritzinger and Plescia 2017) showed that the FPÖ was the most successful party in retaining its 2013 voters (about 78.5%); the FPÖ lost votes mainly to the ÖVP and partly to the Liste Pilz. The ÖVP retained about 71% of those who voted for it in 2013, losing almost equally to the SPÖ, FPÖ and NEOS. The SPÖ, which was able to retain about 69% of its 2013 voters, lost mainly to the ÖVP and FPÖ. The Greens lost about 34.7% of their past voters to the SPÖ, 18% to the Liste Pilz and 9.7% to NEOS; only 20.8% of the voters who had supported the party in 2013 remained loyal. The FPÖ benefited the most from the two parties – the BZÖ and Team Stronach – that did not run for election in 2017. While NEOS and Liste Pilz were much more successful among men than among women, with the opposite holding true for the Greens, support for the three main parties – SPÖ, ÖVP and FPÖ – was almost equally split across gender groups. The FPÖ was the party most successful among young voters (those below 35), while there were no substantial differences among age cohorts above 35 years old. Finally, in terms of education, the FPÖ was the most successful party among those with relatively low levels of education while performing relatively poorly among those with a college education, where the ÖVP and SPÖ were almost equally successful.

The new government

As soon as the election results were made public on the evening of election day, excitement and speculation about government formation started. Three government options were left on the table: yet another grand coalition government between the ÖVP and SPÖ, a coalition between the ÖVP and FPÖ, and a

Table 1. Elections to the Austrian National Council (15 October 2017).

	2017			2013		
	Seats (N)	Votes (000s)	Votes (%)	Seats (N)	Votes (000s)	Votes (%)
Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP)	62	1596	31.5	47	1126	24.0
Sozialdemokratische Partei Öster-reichs (SPÖ)	52	1362	26.9	52	1259	26.8
Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)	51	1316	26.0	40	962	20.5
NEOS Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum (NEOS)	10	269	5.3	9	233	5.0
Liste Peter Pilz	8	224	4.4	–	–	–
Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative (GRÜNE)	0	193	3.8	24	583	12.4
Meine Stimme Gilt! (Gilt!)	0	48	1.0	–	–	–
Kommunistische Partei Österreichs (KPÖ)	0	40	0.8	0	48	1.0
Team Frank Stronach (FRANK)	–	–	–	11	269	5.7
Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ)	–	–	–	0	166	3.5
Others	0	24	0.4	0	48	1.0
Total	183	5070	100%	183	4693	100%
Turnout (%)			80.0			74.9

Source: Federal Ministry of the Interior.

coalition between the SPÖ and FPÖ. The SPÖ had opened up to the possibility of forming a coalition with the FPÖ, reversing a long-term Social Democratic party principle, but several party officials and rank-and-file members remained sceptical. In addition, renewal of an SPÖ–ÖVP coalition government was very unlikely due to the increased tension between the two former coalition partners and their leaders, which led to an increasingly fractious outgoing adminis-tration. Hence, after brief consultation with all party leaders, Sebastian Kurz officially started negotiating government formation with the FPÖ.

Coalition negotiations between the ÖVP and FPÖ lasted almost two months, culminating in the presentation of the coalition programme and the new cab-inet on 16 December 2017 and the swearing-in of the new government on 18 December 2017. Altogether, the ÖVP gained eight ministries, among them the Finance, Justice, and Education ministries and the position of Chancellor, taken up by Sebastian Kurz. The portfolio allocation of the FPÖ includes six cabinet members led by Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache; the FPÖ got both portfolios dedicated to security (Interior and Defence) along with several other key portfolios including Foreign Affairs (not including EU affairs) as well as Social Affairs and Health. Of the new cabinet, only Kurz has government experience; many other cabinet members previously served as MPs (mostly in the FPÖ delegation) or joined the cabinet as experts without extensive experi-ence in politics (mostly in the ÖVP delegation).

Among the policies included in the coalition agreement, those that have drawn most attention among observers are the reductions of income and cor-poration taxes, a tax bonus for parents, making working hours more flexible

and a series of benefit cuts and stricter rules for asylum seekers, monitoring and potential closure of Islamic kindergartens, a rejection of Turkey's EU accession and a second year of compulsory kindergarten and separate classes for schoolchildren not speaking German. The coalition agreement also foresees retrenchments in the administration of the social security system, the extension of university tuition fees and a repeal of the smoking ban in restaurants.

The first government formation process between the ÖVP and FPÖ in 2000 had caused severe national and international protest and even diplomatic sanctions by other member states of the European Union (Luther 2003). In contrast, the negotiation process and inauguration in 2017 were accompanied by little critique from European or international leaders and less national protest.

Given that the ÖVP and FPÖ share many policy positions regarding immigration and asylum restrictions, a relatively swift implementation of policies in these areas is expected. The newly formed government will probably face more difficulties in areas with more veto players (as in the social security system) and in areas with uncertain factors (like economic growth that may affect the leeway for tax reductions).

Conclusion

To sum up, the main winners of the 2017 Austrian election were the parties on the right of the ideological spectrum, with the centre-left party, the SPÖ, holding its previous vote share but losing its position as the strongest party in Austria. The SPÖ result is in line with an overall decline of support for centre-left parties across Europe.[5]

In a long-term perspective, a number of aspects of the 2017 election warrant attention. First, of course, is the role and performance of the new government, which includes one of the most successful radical-right populist parties in Europe. During the first ÖVP–FPÖ governments (2000–2006), the FPÖ suffered from a high turnover of cabinet members and severe intra-party conflicts that led to a party split and a series of vote losses (Luther 2003, 2008). The performance and development of the FPÖ in its new role as the incumbent party remains an open question and will serve as an example for populist parties in other European countries. The new government may also adopt a governing style first introduced by the past ÖVP–FPÖ coalition in 2000, including a more conflictual, zero-sum style of politics (Müller and Fallend 2004) and neglecting the traditional involvement of the major interest groups in legislative processes (Luther 2003), a tendency that is in sharp contrast to the traditional consensus-seeking in Austrian politics. In addition, it will be interesting to see the extent to which the fate experienced by the Green Party at the federal level will have repercussions at the regional level (*Länder*), especially in those regions where the Greens are part of the regional government. The debacle of the Greens reflects a Europe-wide phenomenon: with issues of border control

and security looming large, pro-immigration Greens have found themselves at odds with the prevailing political mood.

Notes

1. Arbeitsmarktservice Österreich (2017). 'Arbeitsmarktdaten', available at http://www.ams.at/ueber-ams/medien/arbeitsmarktdaten (accessed 28 November 2017).
2. All information on opinion polls are taken from Neuwal, 'Wahlumfragen für Österreich', available at https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen (accessed 18 December 2017).
3. NEOS and Liste Pilz both dedicated about 6% of their policy messages in press releases to immigration (not shown). The SPÖ is ranked last in 2017 with roughly 2%.
4. ORF (2017). 'Wahl 17: ORF informierte insgesamt 5,6 Millionen, bis zu 1,409 Millionen sahen TV-"Runde der Spitzenkandidaten"', available at http://der.orf.at/unternehmen/aktuell/171012_konfrontation_rw100.html (accessed 18 December 2017).
5. Other recent contributions in the elections in context series include, for example Lancaster (2017) and Green and Prosser (2016).

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Disclosure statement

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