



Sylvia Kritzinger / Eva Zeglovits /
Michael S. Lewis-Beck / Richard Nadeau

The Austrian Voter

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We dedicate this book to Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Philip E. Converse,
two truly inspiring scholars for electoral researchers.

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1 Chapter 1: The Austrian Case: an Overview

1.1 Aim of the Book

When reviewing the comparative political science literature on electoral behaviour, one can observe that Austria is rarely considered either theoretically or empirically. This state of the literature is rather surprising as Austria is part of the ‘old’ West European democracies, acting as an important bridge to the former ‘communist block’ and featuring interesting party characteristics. One of the reasons for Austria’s absence in the comparative literature is due to how data on electoral behaviour were collected in Austria. Unlike in other countries, data on national electoral behaviour were mostly not collected by academics; rather, polling institutes collected the data on behalf of political parties interested in their electoral fortune. Access to electoral data was thus to a great extent dependent on political parties’ goodwill in sharing their data and hardly ever made it into the public domain or into comparative international datasets. Apart from data access problems, researchers who were granted access to the data were faced with severe constraints in terms of which variables were available as the data collection process was not driven by academic interests. Rather, the data was collected to meet the operational needs of the political parties and was unsuitable for sophisticated models on electoral behaviour. This problem became even more evident the more fine-grained and sophisticated the theoretical models in electoral research became.

The situation changed substantially in 2009 when for the first time an academic election study was carried out in Austria, namely AUTNES. AUTNES, an acronym for the Austrian National Election Study, financed by the Austrian Science Fund and led by Wolfgang C. Müller, is the first academic election study to serve the needs of the academic community rather than the political parties. Thus, it includes for the first time a wide range of indicators necessary to test and extend the various theoretical models in electoral behaviour. Further, taking full advantage of this freely available new data source (AUTNES, 2009; Kritzinger et al., 2011) allows us to gain new insight into the Austrian case.

This book has overall two main objectives: first, we ‘bring Austria in’, we extend

comparative electoral research by adding the Austrian case. Second, we provide an international audience with empirical knowledge about electoral behaviour in Austria. We analyse contemporary electoral behaviour in Austria in the context of Austrian electoral history. As such, we capture the continuities and changes in Austrian electoral behaviour. Building on common theoretical approaches used in the literature on electoral behaviour, we test the impact of sociological, ideological and issue variables on vote choice, taking a time dimension into account, where possible. Thus, we provide empirical evidence on the Austrian voter – both from an historical and present-day perspective.

Apart from adding a case study of Austria to comparative electoral research, Austria is an interesting case in and of itself; both in terms of its electoral rules and electoral outcomes. Since 2007, Austria is the only country amongst established democracies which allows voting at the age of 16 in all national elections and referenda.

In terms of electoral outcome, Austria was known for its stability in vote choice in the past. In fact, there was a duopoly of the two mainstream parties – the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) – dominating political, economic and cultural life till the 1990s. At the mass level, this confrontation found expression in two main ideological *Lagers*, also called 'camps' or 'political subcultures' (e.g. Luther and Müller, 1992), in the Austrian electorate with one *Lager* having a left-oriented mentality and the second *Lager* oriented towards the right. Recently, Austria is more well-known for its strong radical-right parties. The rise of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) started in 1986 when Jörg Haider took over as chairman of the party and culminated in 1999 with the FPÖ gaining nearly 27 per cent of the national vote share: as a result, the FPÖ became the junior partner in the coalition government with the ÖVP. After some internal conflicts, in 2005 the FPÖ split; next to the FPÖ the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), a minor radical-right party, was established. In the 2008 national election, which is the focus of this book, these two radical-right parties jointly received 28.2 per cent of the vote share.

The book is structured as follows. In this introduction, we provide a short overview of the Austrian case drawing on past descriptions of Austrian scholars.¹ We put the Austrian case and our analysis in context: we briefly present the historical background of the Austrian political system and the election of 2008 and describe our data in detail before we start our analysis on Austrian electoral behaviour. In the following chapters, we summarize previous empirical findings and test various theoretical models against the data of the 2008 election.

¹ In our short overview, we focus on the period after World War II. For more information on electoral behaviour during the time of the Habsburg monarchy or in the First Republic see e.g. Heinisch, 2002; Rathkolb, 2008.

1.2 A Bit of History – from World War II till Today

Interpreting and understanding current electoral behaviour cannot be done without putting it into a historical context. On the one hand, the institutional context such as the electoral and the party system is of importance, on the other hand, former electoral behaviour stands in close relationship with current individual voting decisions. Both continuities and changes in electoral behaviour need to be nested in past behaviour to unfold its meanings but also its repercussions for the current political system. In the following, we present the context of Austrian politics, first, by explaining the electoral system and the changes it experienced over time, and second, by describing the Austrian party system, its changes and its current status quo.

1.2.1 The Electoral System – Changes over Time

As a federal country, Austria has a bi-cameral parliament: a Federal Council (*Bundesrat*) with limited power and a National Council (*Nationalrat*). Members of the Federal Council are delegates appointed by the nine regional parliaments, while members of the National Council are chosen by popular vote. Seats in the National Council are assigned to parties via proportional formulae.

Since World War II (WWII) several reforms of the electoral system have taken place. The general trend in established democracies to lower the voting age from usually 21 to 18 after the mid-1960s (Franklin, 2004) could be observed in Austria as well: in 1968 voting age was lowered from 21 to 19. The reform of 1970 then increased the number of seats in the National Council from 165 to 183, and reduced the number of constituencies from 25 to 9, next to some changes in seat assignment and the introduction of the preference vote in the 9 constituencies (Ucakar, 1995).

The next major reform took place in 1992 and introduced three important changes: First, voting age was further lowered from 19 to 18. Second, the number of constituencies was again increased, namely from 9 to 43, and also seat assignment again changed: most importantly, parties must *either* exceed the general threshold of 4 per cent of nationwide vote share to gain seats in the National Council, *or* win a direct mandate at one of the regional constituencies. Third, the reform considerably strengthened the preference vote: the closed list system came thus to an end (Müller and Scheucher, 1995).

The last reform of the electoral system took place in 2007. This most recent reform facilitated absentee voting and most importantly enfranchised adolescents. The reform introduced a general voting age of 16 for all nationwide elections, including federal elections, presidential elections and elections for the European Parliament, as well as referenda and all forms of plebiscites (Hofer et al., 2008).

Austria is thus the only western democracy that lowered the voting age to 16 in national elections. Moreover, the legislative period was extended from four to five years.²

1.2.2 Voter Turnout over Time

After the end of World War II, Austria was occupied by the Allies until 1955. Austria, like Berlin, was divided into a Soviet, an American, a French and a British sector. Nevertheless, the first national elections were held in November 1945. Over 93 per cent of Austrian citizens eligible to vote³ turned out in this first election (see Table 1).

Table 1: Turnout in Austria: elections for the National Council 1945 – 2008

Election	Turnout
1945	94.3
1949	96.8
1953	95.8
1956	96.0
1959	94.2
1962	93.8
1966	93.8
1970	91.8
1971	92.4
1975	92.9
1979	92.2
1983	92.6
1986	90.5
1990	86.1
1994	81.9
1995	86.0
1999	80.4
2002	84.3
2006	78.5
2008	78.8

Source: Federal Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Note: Turnout also includes invalid votes.

In the following election in 1949, this rate increased to over 95 per cent. Though this high turnout rate of the 1940s was never reached again, turnout remains high in Austria. Only as late as the 1980s, did turnout rates fall below 90 per cent,

² For a more detailed overview on changes in the Austrian electoral system see e.g. Ucakar and Gschiegl, 2010.

³ Noteworthy in this first election, former Nazi party members and members of some military units were not allowed to vote (Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2012). This is the main reason why the number of eligible voters increased from 3.5 million in 1945 to 4.3 million in 1949.