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Voted out of office – The surprising result of the election in Austria in 2006

Austria's Social-Democratic Party SPÖ won a surprise victory at the country's national election on 1st October 2006. During the electoral campaign the party managed to turn strong initial disadvantages into a narrow majority over the conservative ÖVP. The next government will be a grand coalition led by SPÖ-Chairman Alfred Gusenbauer.

Karl A. Duffek

The initial scenario

Back in 2002, early elections had been brought forward after the Federal Chancellor, Wolfgang Schüssel (of the ÖVP, the Austrian People's Party) had terminated the alliance with his coalition partners, Jörg Haider's FPÖ. His gamble produced the desired effect: Gains of about 15% put him clearly ahead, with the Social Democrats well back in second position, while the FPÖ incurred considerable losses. Schüssel formed a new government with the FPÖ, which, after a split in the FPÖ, admittedly became increasingly a government led solely by the Conservatives. Schüssel succeeded in holding together his precarious coalition through to the end of the legislative period, although after a half-hearted attempt at pension reforms which would have put a one-sided burden on employees, no important political projects were turned into legislation in the last two years of the government. Rising unemployment,

especially among young people (where it almost doubled between 2000 and 2005), low growth rates and low levels of public investment, and an amazing lack of activity in the field of education policy following the poor results of the PISA Study were all factors which tarnished the image of the conservative/right-wing populist coalition.

As a result, at the beginning of 2006 the SPÖ was three to five percentage points ahead in all the polls. Then however, a financial scandal caused the BAWAG Bank, which belonged to the trade unions, enormous damage and brought the Union Congress as proprietor to the edge of ruin. The great majority of the acting persons involved were Social Democrats or at least close to the SPÖ.

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Resignations, court cases and conflicts between the party and the unions became the order of the day in late spring. The Social Democrats' image of economic competency and their approval rates began to founder.

The Election Campaign

In the summer of 2006 the election strategies of the political parties mirrored their situations:

The ÖVP put its hope on the sovereignty of its Chancellor – especially since his term as EU President had come to an end without any major problems – avoiding much public exposure, preferring to emphasize the country's positive development. At the same time they operated a pre-election strategy via intermediary organisations and other subsidiary channels aiming to discredit Alfred Gusenbauer, the SPÖ leader and to attack the party over the bank scandal.

As the challenger, the SPÖ naturally placed emphasis on attacking the government, while also concentrating on a consistent topic-based election campaign centred on the fairer distribution of wealth. Education, health, pensions and unemployment were given priority in the election campaign. At the same time, efforts were made to maximise the public appearances of the party leader. Even before the election campaign proper had begun, Gusenbauer was visiting all the districts of the country in order to contrast his popular touch to the aloofness of the Chancellor.

The Greens initially presented some very interesting proposals, but then returned to their characteristic role of the contemplative alternative party not used to engaging in controversial topics. The right wing populist parties BZÖ and FPÖ focused their campaigns exclusively on matters relating to foreigners and immigration – taking advantage of weaknesses of the other parties positions, though often going beyond the bounds of what is acceptable in a civilised democracy.

The election result and its reasons

The result of the 2006 election was clear: the ÖVP was voted out of office. A loss of eight percentage points, equivalent to an absolute figure of 460,000 votes, is a very definite result. The reasons, however, are diverse.

For a start, ÖVP's feel-good campaign began to go wrong at the latest when the problems of care for the elderly came to the fore after it was revealed that Wolfgang Schüssel's mother-in-law was being looked after by an illegally employed care worker – and Schüssel's reaction was very clumsy: he attempted to avoid talking about the problem of care for the elderly in general and then suggested in a singularly unwise remark that his in-laws' affairs were hardly a matter which need concern him.

Suddenly, the contest was not about whether Schüssel or Gusenbauer would be the better Chancellor, but about the question of which party took which topic serious. The campaign had shifted from a personality-led one to a topic-led one, which was just what the Social Democrats wanted.

Secondly, the ÖVP misinterpreted from the outset the mood of the voters. The desire for a change was admittedly fairly lukewarm, but at the same time, a considerable majority was of the opinion that they had personally not profited from the passable economic data. Clearly, the message on the ÖVP's election posters, "Hier geht's uns gut" (we're doing alright here) did not meet its mark.

Thirdly, the bank and union scandal, after the lapse of a few months, was no longer such a hot potato as it had seemed and the willingness – revealed only at the last minute – of the Chancellor and his finance minister to accept international invitations from the prime speculators shifted the focus of the scandal and prevented it from being seen as uniquely of the responsibility of the SPÖ.

Fourthly, Alfred Gusenbauer managed, in his TV appearances, to present himself as an equal opponent of the governing Chancellor. In direct confrontations between the two men, Gusenbauer was a model of calm and equilibrium in contrast to the below-the-belt attacks from his opponent.

Fifthly, many of the votes won in 2002 by the ÖVP were "loan votes". They returned to the right-wing populist parties which – together – gained an increase of over five percentage points.

Sixthly, the expectation of a sure election victory may have also dampened the mobilisation of the ÖVP clientele. A drop in voter turn-out of 5.8% speaks volumes in this respect. Hardly anyone was expecting a lead for the SPÖ; even the most optimistic polls for the party predicted not more than a close race.

That means that even having won the election, the SPÖ also lost around 130,000 voters, primarily as non-voters, but some of them to the right-wing populists. It is worth taking a look at a detailed analysis of this development. With a total of around 15% of the vote, the right-wing populist parties remain a political force in Austria which needs to be taken seriously, be it with or without Jörg Haider. In other words, this is not only a question of political charisma, but also of political agenda: Especially in the urban areas (in Vienna the SPÖ had to concede

2.8 percentage points), the Social Democrats are fighting increasingly on two fronts, caught between an increasingly popular Green Party and the far right. The fact that the conservatives experienced something similar this time, though in far more dramatic form, is no consolation.

The way ahead

The unexpected outcome led to such a shock within the ÖVP that initially, the party seemed unwilling to negotiate about the only realistic consequence of the election result, a grand coalition. Despite comments from some conservative quarters, the public would seem to have little understanding for that sort of talk. The public expects respect to be shown for an election result which is as it is. And support in the polls for Alfred Gusenbauer as the legitimate Chancellor of Austria is growing rapidly.

The SPÖ is still reacting with emphatically conciliatory signals and is now urging for negotiations about policy. A grand coalition is the option favoured by two-thirds of all Austrians, though there is still a lingering feeling that such alliances lead to standstill, isolation and disputes. The recently ended legislative period has shown, however, that a small coalition can lead to the same problems.

Unofficial final result of the general election in Austria on October 1, 2006

	in %		seats	
	2006	2002	2006	2002
Voter participation	78.5	84.3		
SPÖ	35.3	36.5	68	69
ÖVP	34.3	42.3	66	79
GREENS	11.0	9.5	21	17
FPÖ	11.0	10.0	21	18
BZÖ	4.1	-	7	

