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# **Electoral strategies and performance of Austrian right-wing populism 1986-2006**

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# Electoral strategies and performance of Austrian right-wing populism 1986-2006<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Until the early 1980s, Austrian politics was dominated the Christian Democratic *Österreichische Volkspartei* (Austrian People's Party, or ÖVP) and the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs* (Social Democratic Party of Austria, or SPÖ). Together, they usually won well over 90% of votes and seats and until 1966 shared power in a series of 'grand coalitions'. The SPÖ governed alone between 1970 and 1983, when in response to losing its majority it formed a coalition with the small *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party Austria, or FPÖ). Once in government, the FPÖ lost most of its electoral support, whereupon Jörg Haider took over the leadership and made the FPÖ western Europe's most successful right-wing populist party. In 1999 it won 26.9% of the vote and despite enormous internal and external protest entered government with the ÖVP in February 2000. In the subsequent two years, however, the FPÖ suffered a series of internal crises that triggered a premature termination of the coalition. Although the party re-entered government in February 2003, unresolved internal conflicts resulted in Haider forming the breakaway *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich* (Alliance for the Future of Austria, or BZÖ) in April 2005. The decapitated FPÖ plummeted in the opinion polls, but under its new leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, staged a significant recovery, obtaining 11% of the vote at the general election of 1 October 2006. By contrast, the BZÖ only narrowly scraped over the 4% general election hurdle.

This article identifies the electoral strategies of the FPÖ (and latterly the BZÖ) from 1986 and 2006. Thereafter, it examines these parties' electoral performance, focusing in particular upon extent to which changes to their goals and to the electoral strategies they employed to

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<sup>1</sup> A revised version of this Working Paper will appear in Bischof, Guenter and Fritz Plasser, (eds.) (2008) *The Changing Austrian Voter, Contemporary Austrian Studies XVI*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

achieve them were reflected in the profile and motivations of their vote. The concluding section will reflect on the future prospects of Austrian right-wing populism.

It would exceed the scope of this article to engage in a detailed discussion of the literature on the concept of populism (see for example Betz 1994; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Canovan 1999; Taggart 2000). We will thus take populism to denote a ‘major structural opposition’ (Dahl 1966: 341-344) that challenges not democracy itself, but the specific organizational form of representative democracy it encounters and does so by reference to the alleged superiority of popular/populist sentiment (Mény and Surel 2002). This situational contingency means populist parties will vary – and may be opportunistic – in respect of the electoral strategies and the issues they utilize.

### **PRIMARY GOALS AND ELECTORAL STRATEGIES 1986-2006<sup>2</sup>**

As Dahl (1966: 341-347) argues, political actors’ strategies in the key ‘arenas’ of political competition need to be considered in light of their ‘controlling goals’. Müller and Strøm’s (1999) rational-choice model conceives of parties being constantly pushed and pulled between the partly conflicting ideal-typical goals of votes, policy and office. Whether they result mainly from endogenous change, or from exogenous factors, fundamental shifts in a party’s ‘primary goal’ (Harmel and Janda 1994) are likely to require both organizational adaptation and revised electoral strategies (Harmel 2002; Luther 2003). On the basis of such considerations it is possible to divide the electoral strategies pursued by the FPÖ between 1986 and 2006 into three more-or-less distinct periods: populist vote maximization (1986-1999); incumbency (2000-2005) and return to populist vote maximization (since 2005). The following pages will deal with these periods in turn, focusing in particular upon (changes in) the party’s primary goals and electoral strategies; the main targets of those strategies; the party’s most important campaign themes and the style of its electoral mobilization. Given that

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<sup>2</sup> The following assessment draws upon interviews conducted by the author between 1985 and 2006 with over 200 FPÖ activists, including most key members of the party leadership during this period.

the FPÖ's changed orientation in 1986 was in large measure a response to the party's preceding primary goal and associated electoral strategy, we will first briefly review the developments in that earlier phase.

### **Pre-Haider: Policy-seeking to office-seeking**

The FPÖ spent the first decade of its existence prioritizing policy. The latter was predicated upon structural opposition to Austria's consociational system, as well as an uneasy mix of German-national and conservative liberal values. From the late 1960s, the FPÖ started to shift its primary goal towards office. Norbert Steger, the party's leader from 1980 to 1986, aspired to remold it into an Austrian version of the German Free Democrats: a pivot around which the centre-left or centre-right governments could alternate. The FPÖ thus adopted a less confrontational discourse and accelerated its programmatic liberalization, emphasizing above all anti-statism, free markets and individual achievement (*'Leistung'*). Steger believed programmatic liberalization and responsible behavior in the governmental arena would appeal to Austria's emerging pool of disproportionately white-collar and educated floating voters, who he hoped would in due course replace the FPÖ's traditionally protest-oriented electorate (and activists). In the event, the FPÖ's office-seeking came to fruition when the party became the SPÖ's junior coalition partner in 1983, but Steger failed both to realign his party electorally and to master the challenges of intra-party adaptation. By 1986, the FPÖ's opinion poll ratings were so low and its activists so unconvinced of the desirability of incumbency that Haider succeeded in ousting him from the leadership.

### **1986-1999: Populist vote-maximization under Haider**

Haider shared Steger's opposition to Austrian consociationalism and realized office was a prerequisite for structural reform, but was convinced a governing party with merely 5% of the vote was inherently incapable of effecting system-level change and susceptible to being politically neutered. His strategy for the FPÖ was thus 'strict competition' (Dahl 1966: 344)

in the electoral arena, i.e. prioritizing vote-seeking, with a view to achieving a share at least as large as that of its competitors. This would, he calculated, ultimately enable the party to resume office with an intra-governmental weight sufficient to force through structural reform and ensure that the vote loss that would inevitably result from incumbency would not catapult the party into an existential crisis akin to that it had experienced at the end of its first period in office. The FPÖ thus abandoned Steger's bourgeois-orientated electoral strategy in favor of vote maximization targeted particularly (albeit by no means exclusively) on blue-collar voters traditionally represented by the SPÖ. This reorientation was informed in part by the greater size of this electoral segment. Haider was also aware that the socio-economic change Austria had been experiencing in recent years (including that linked to globalization) was likely to erode Austrians' hitherto exceptionally stable voting behavior (Plasser, Ulram and Grausgruber 1992) and to be particularly unsettling to blue-collar voters. He judged that no-holds-barred populist agitation would permit the FPÖ to detach from the SPÖ a sizeable share of fearful and insecure 'modernization losers'.

Central to the FPÖ's populist mobilization from 1986 to 1999 was by definition structural opposition to Austria's allegedly undemocratic political system. This was expressed particularly in constant attacks on grand coalition government and *Proporz* (the system of party-political division of spoils of office). Given the development since the 1960s of an Austrian national identity (Bruckmüller 1998), the FPÖ's traditional emphasis on German-national sentiment soon gave way to Austrian chauvinism ('*Österreich zuerst*'). This was intertwined with the new and in part opportunistic issues of immigration, crime and (in a reversal of the FPÖ's traditional position) EU-skepticism. The FPÖ's mobilizational style was characterized by rhetorical aggression and anti-intellectualism. The party placed much greater emphasis than its competitors upon professionalized permanent campaigning. Its slick presentation centered not on the party as such, but upon the personality of Haider, who was

depicted as the spokesperson of popular sentiment. Between elections, the FPÖ utilized constant provocation and direct democratic instruments (e.g. popular petitions against immigration and EU integration) to maintain public visibility. It constantly reviewed the efficacy of its vote-maximization strategy and sought to penetrate additional electoral segments.<sup>3</sup>

Having in 1994 achieved 22.5% of the vote, the FPÖ decided that were it to obtain sufficient votes at the subsequent general election (scheduled for 1998), it would consider entering government. Prospective incumbency prompted the party to slightly modify its behavior. In 1995, Haider publicly distanced himself from '*Deuschtümelei*', i.e. the FPÖ's traditional revisionist German nationalist sentiment. This was intended to rehabilitate him in the eyes of those for whom his record of controversial statements on such matters disqualified him for high public office. For the first time since the early 1980s, the FPÖ initiated a detailed policy debate, generating numerous action programs intended to demonstrate its substantive preparedness for government. These predictably included critiques of immigration and European integration policy, but also proposals in respect of pensions and of social and family policy designed to appeal to blue-collar voters. Since its most likely coalition partner was the ÖVP, the FPÖ was not averse to simultaneously championing policies directed at bourgeois voters, including market liberalization and income tax reform designed to reduce progressivity.

Policy inconsistency was a logical corollary of vote-maximization. Ideological promiscuity caused the FPÖ's more traditional supporters to accuse the leadership of de-ideologization.

There are at least two reasons why Haider could nonetheless maintain party unity. He

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<sup>3</sup> For example, women were numerically the most promising target. The party thus symbolically recruited women to prominent positions on its electoral lists. Since its electoral strategists judged the FPÖ's image as a *Bublerlpartei* ('lads party') and its 'hard' themes (e.g. anti-immigration, corruption and crime) to be potential obstacles to recruiting more female voters, from the mid 1990s the FPÖ also deliberately highlighted 'softer' issues. These included family policy and increasing child allowances via the so-called 'cheque for children' (*Kinderscheck*).

successfully circumvented potential counter-elites by de-emphasizing intermediate party structures in favor of direct dialogue with grass root functionaries. Furthermore, vote maximization had by 1999 quadrupled the party's public offices and thus the selective incentives with which the leadership could mitigate internal dissent (Luther 2003, 2006).

### **2000-2005: Office seeking and mounting internal disunity**

In February 2000, the FPÖ abruptly switched its primary goal to (maintaining) office. Operating in both the electoral and governmental arenas required a more differentiated strategy. The leadership decided to reposition the FPÖ in the electoral arena as a responsible party of government that nonetheless retained its common touch and commitment to improving the lot of the 'ordinary man' (*kleiner Mann*). Securing a second term, preferably as the senior coalition partner, was to be facilitated in the governmental arena by the FPÖ's control of the finance and social affairs ministries. The latter would champion popular social policy reform (e.g. the *Kinderscheck*), whilst the former would secure the necessary funding and deliver tax reductions shortly before the next election. This dual strategy would, it was hoped, help the party recover from predicted initial electoral losses and then ensure its vote at the general election scheduled for 2003 revived to around its 1999 level.

The party's strategy in the governmental arena was undermined by weaknesses in its ministerial team, programmatic contradictions, the need to support some neo-liberal ÖVP reforms unpopular with blue-collar voters and its traditional weakness in Austria's important neo-corporatist institutions. As for the electoral arena, persuading the voters that a party that had since 1986 pursued aggressive structural opposition was now a reliable steward of the nation's affairs was always going to be a struggle. Moreover, the party organization had difficulty affecting the transition from a well-oiled electoral machine to a communicator of the government's policy and alleged achievements. Electoral setbacks and the concomitant reductions in selective incentives greatly exacerbated intra-party conflict. There was dispute

over whether the electoral strategy should continue to prioritize blue-collar voters, or be retargeted at white-collar voters, which in turn implied more market-oriented policies. Supporters of the former strategy objected to what they saw as the government's overemphasis on business interests. A more fundamental conflict related to whether the party should be pursuing office at all. After thirteen years of populist agitation, many functionaries had great difficulty accepting the inherent compromises of office and often expressed their frustration with their party's governmental team in terms akin to those used in the period up to 1999 against the 'establishment parties'. Prominent amongst them was Haider himself, whose repeated criticisms of the FPÖ's government team and provocative actions – e.g. his visit to Saddam Hussain whilst FPÖ Vice-Chancellor Susanne Riess-Passer was in Washington DC – emboldened intra-party opponents of the leadership's strategy (Luther 2003a).

In sum, the FPÖ lacked the party unity required (Dahl 1966: 344) for its new dual strategy. Matters came to a head in the summer of 2002, when the government postponed tax reforms whilst retaining a commitment to purchasing the most expensive replacement for its ageing interceptor jets and taking what some internal critics judged too soft a line on the EU's eastern expansion. Haider was a key actor in the ensuing 'Knittelfeld rebellion'. This led to the resignation in early September of FPÖ Vice-Chancellor and party leader, Susanne Riess-Passer and of most of her government team.

The party's campaign for the November 2002 election had no overarching strategy. This was a consequence both of the above mentioned internal divisions and the fact that in the eleven weeks prior to polling day the party had four (interim) leaders. Under Matthias Reichhold's 42 day leadership, emphasis was placed on government responsibility and alleged policy achievements of its ministerial team. Once Herbert Haupt took over, the FPÖ reverted to an aggressive campaign in which Austrian chauvinism figured prominently, as did trusted issues

such as immigration, EU-skepticism and the 'ordinary man'. The campaign was also the first since 1983 without a central role for Haider. He had lost credibility amongst office-seekers because of his repeated attacks on the FPÖ's ministers, whilst the 'rebels' were infuriated by his refusal to resume the party leadership. He was also widely held to have become an electoral liability.

The 'external shock' (Harmel and Janda 1994) of massive electoral defeat did not prevent the leadership seeking to resume its twin-track strategy. The FPÖ executive voted unanimously to enter coalition negotiations, in which the party gave way on virtually all the substantive demands of the Knittelfeld rebels. As significant sections of the party objected to what they deemed the pursuit of office at almost any cost, the leadership resisted calls for an extraordinary party conference to debate the coalition agreement. It was passed (with two dissenting votes) in the national executive committee and ratified in the 240-strong party directorate, albeit with only 121 members attending and 11 of them voting against the agreement.

The FPÖ's reduced intra-coalitional weight undermined its strategy in the governmental arena (where it had inter alia lost the finance ministry). Its vicious public in-fighting had fatally damaged its strategy to present itself in the electoral arena as a responsible party of government. In virtually all elections held in the next two and a half years its massive general election losses were thus replicated (and in some cases exceeded). The concomitant loss of public offices (and office-oriented activists) strengthened intra-party opposition to the primary goal of a leadership increasingly attacked as a self-serving clique clinging to national office at the cost of not only votes and office at other levels of the system, but also of policy. For these critics, salvaging the FPÖ's electoral prospects required either greater assertiveness in the governmental arena, or exit from office. For its part, the leadership considered the grass-roots' substantive demands unrealistic and was – largely in the absence of an

alternative – clinging to the hope that the strategy of demonstrating governing competence would ultimately pay off.

### **2005-: Stepwise return to populist vote maximization**

In April 2005, the FPÖ split along its internal fault line over the party's primary goal and governmental and electoral strategies. Its government team, the majority of its caucus and its Carinthian provincial party organization left to form the BZÖ. Haider justified the split by reference to the 'negative forces' that had 'irreparably damaged' the FPÖ brand'.<sup>4</sup> He calculated that an internally united BZÖ would be better able to present itself to the electorate as a credible governing party. This would, he thought, allow the BZÖ to marginalize the rump FPÖ and secure a further term in office. He also wrongly assumed that the bulk of FPÖ's organizational units would soon defect to the BZÖ.

Having at a stroke been liberated from the demands of supporting a government (however reluctantly), the FPÖ was returned to the primary goal of vote-maximization. At Vienna's provincial election of October 2005 it thus ran an aggressive populist campaign targeted at blue-collar voters and concentrating above all on crime and immigration. In light of the party's plummeting poll ratings in the preceding months, its 14.8% of the vote (only -5.3 percentage points compared to its 2001 result) was considered a great achievement. Buoyed by this success, in March 2006 the party reverted to mobilization via popular petition: its 'Stay free Austria' ('*Österreich bleib frei*') campaign centered on opposition to Turkish EU-membership and the defense of neutrality. That the FPÖ was campaigning with a virulence that had not been seen for some years was down to at least two factors. The 2002 crisis and BZÖ split had left protest-oriented activists in the ascendancy and revived the intra-party influence of right-wing student fraternities (*Burschenschaften*). Moreover, the FPÖ's

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<sup>4</sup> As he had been the architect of the party's strategy of populist vote maximization and a key instigator of the Knittelfeld rebellion, some commentators considered this rather ironic.

leadership considered unbridled vote maximization justified by the existential threat posed by the BZÖ, which should be ‘strangled at birth’ (Interview).

The FPÖ 2006 election campaign was targeted squarely at blue-collar voters. The predominant themes of the FPÖ’s campaign were Austrian and welfare chauvinism, as well as opposition to immigration. Its slogans included ‘Austria first’; ‘We for you’; Welfare instead of immigration; ‘Secure pensions instead of asylum millions’ and ‘Home not Islam’ (*Daham statt Islam*). Specific policy demands included preventing Turkey’s EU accession, repatriation of long-term unemployed immigrants and limiting welfare benefits to Austrian citizens. The March 2006 revelation that the trade-union bank (BAWAG) had lost billions of Euros through unauthorized speculation was a gift for the FPÖ’s populist structural opposition and utilized to try to discredit the SPÖ, its main rival for the blue-collar vote.

For its part, the BZÖ had in its first year made little headway in a governmental arena increasingly dominated by the ÖVP. When it had competed in the electoral arena, its results had been derisory (e.g. 1.15% in Vienna) and polls indicated it was at severe risk of not re-entering the National Council. The BZÖ’s primary goal remained office, but its more immediate priority of electoral survival required a radically revised electoral strategy. With an eye on white-collar voters, it warned against a lurch to the left (*‘Linksruck’*) in the form of an SPÖ-Green coalition and put forward a few neo-liberal policies. The BZÖ tried to distinguish itself from the FPÖ by stating that whilst the latter was fundamentally opposition-oriented, the BZÖ team that had since 2000 (!) delivered social policy benefits and budget consolidation was committed to resuming governmental responsibility. However, its prime electoral target was identical to the FPÖ’s: the blue-collar voters who had supported the latter during the 1990s. Accordingly, the BZÖ campaign also focused on immigration, the

BAWAG affair and – more prominently than the FPÖ – on crime.<sup>5</sup> Both parties employed rhetorically aggressive campaign styles reminiscent of the (early) 1990s.

There was fierce rivalry between them over the mantle of legitimate heir to the FPÖ of the period of populist vote maximization. The BZÖ brazenly claimed (inter alia in a mailshot to FPÖ-supporters) to be the true embodiment of the ‘successful path’ of FPÖ reform during the 1990s. This was symbolized in the BZÖ’s original campaign material, which reverted from its adopted color (orange) to the FPÖ’s traditional blue and included the designation ‘*Die Freiheitlichen*’, together with the epithet ‘the original’.<sup>6</sup> In his hour long live television debate of 15 September with BZÖ chair Peter Westenthaler, Strache for his part argued that for the sake of office the BZÖ had abandoned FPÖ commitments on issues such as immigration, crime and European integration.

## **ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE**

This section does not aspire to prove a causal link between electoral strategies and outcomes. Its more modest aim is to highlight the pattern of electoral outcomes within and between the periods of electoral strategy identified above, with a view to offering tentative conclusions as to efficacy of those strategies.

### **Overall strength of the vote**

As Table 1 shows, the FPÖ’s vote was predictably highest during its period of sustained populist vote maximization and lowest when the party was office-seeking, or constrained by incumbency and internal conflict over primary goals and electoral strategy. At first sight, reverting to populist vote maximization in 2006 brought the FPÖ only a modest recovery, namely 1 percentage point more than it had won in 2002. Yet a more appropriate benchmark would be the party’s 6% opinion poll rating following the BZÖ breakaway, since it is only

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<sup>5</sup> This caused the BZÖ’s liberal Justice Minister Karin Gastingner to resign from the party just days before the election.

<sup>6</sup> On 1 September, a court ruled in favour of the FPÖ’s claim that this was a deliberate attempt to deceive voters and required the term ‘*freiheitlich*’ to be deleted from the BZÖ’s literature and web site. The BZÖ also failed in its attempt to take over the FPÖ’s traditional third ballot paper spot.

then that it reverted to this electoral strategy. Moreover, the 2006 result is double what the FPÖ achieved when it was office-seeking and the combined vote of the parties that conducted right-wing populist electoral strategies in 2006 amounted to 15%.

**Table 1: FPÖ and BZÖ votes and seats 1983-2006 by electoral strategy period**

	Office-seeking	Populist Vote Maximization (pvm)					Incumbency	Return to pvm
	1983	1986	1990	1994	1995	1999	2002	2006
FPÖ % Vote	5.0	9.7	16.6	22.5	21.9	26.9	10.0	11.0
Seats	12	18	33	42	41	52	18	21
BZÖ % Vote	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.1
Seats	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7

Source: Bundesministerium des Inneren

### **Vote strength in different electoral segments**

A more differentiated picture of the impact of the FPÖ's electoral strategies is obtained by an examination of the party's electoral segment support by electoral strategy period (Table 2).

#### *Populist vote maximization under Haider*

During this phase, the FPÖ increased its aggregate vote by 17 points. Its electoral progress varied significantly according to gender, age and occupation, however. Though the FPÖ had latterly targeted women, the increase in its female vote was lower (+ 14) than that amongst men (+ 20) and in particular amongst non-gainfully employed males (+ 23). In terms of age, growth was greatest amongst the oldest and youngest cohorts. By 1999, FPÖ support by age thus exhibited a U-shaped distribution, with a distinct bias to the under-30s (+ 35), where the socializing effects of Austria's erstwhile dominant political subcultures were weakest. Indeed, by 1999 only 25% of these voters supported the SPÖ and a mere 17% voted ÖVP.

The FPÖ's electoral strength varied most markedly in relation to occupation. FPÖ growth was the lowest amongst farmers (+5), who remain the ÖVP's most loyal voters. The party's aggressive rhetoric and anti-intellectualism probably contributed to its underperformance in the white-collar segment (+9); amongst civil and public sector workers servants (+11) and amongst students (+14). By contrast, thirteen years of consistent targeting of blue-collar had

reaped substantial rewards (+37). In 1986, the party's vote in this segment was 10% and the SPÖ's 57%. By 1999, the SPÖ could only muster 35% of the vote, whilst FPÖ support had surged to 48%. In sum, the period of populist vote maximization witnessed an electoral realignment of Austria's working-class.

**Table 2: FPÖ electoral segment support by electoral strategy period (1986-2006)**

	Populist vote maximization			Incumbency		Return to pvm		Change
	1986	1999	1986-1999	2002	1999-2002	2006	2002-2006	1986-2006
Overall	10	27	+17	10	-17	11	+1	+1
<u>Men</u>	12	32	+20	12	-20	12	+/-0	+/-0
Employed	13	33	+20	14	-19	11	-3	-2
Pensioners	11	28		9	-19	14	+5	+3
<u>Women</u>	7	21	+14	8	-13	9	+1	+2
Employed	7	22	+15	9	-13	9	+/-0	+2
Unemployed	8	22	+14	8	-14	7	-1	-1
Pensioners	5	19	+14	5	-14	10	+5	+5
<u>Age</u>								
18-29	12	35	+23	14	-21	10	-4	-2
30-44	11	29	+18	11	-18	10	-1	-1
45-59	6	21	+15	10	-11	10	+/-0	+4
60-69	8	21	+13	7	-14	12	+5	+4
70 plus	9	25	+19	6	-19	11	+5	+2
<u>Occupation</u>								
self-employed/ professionals	15	33	+18	16	-17	6	-10	-9
Farmers	5	10	+ 5	1	-9	9	+8	+4
civil servants / public service	9	20	+11	7	-13	3	-4	-6
white-collar	13	22	+ 9	11	-11	11	+/-0	-2
blue-collar skilled	11	48	+37	15	-33	20	+5	+9
blue-collar un-/semi-skilled	8	45	+37	18	-27	11	-7	+3
Housewives	8	25	+17	11	-14	7	-4	-1
Pensioners	7	24	+17	7	-14	12	+5	+5
in schooling	9	23	+14	7	-16	9	+2	+/-0

Source: Fessel+GfK Exit Polls (n: 1986 = 2,149; 1999 & 2002 = 2,200; 2006 = 1,982)

### *Incumbency*

At the 2002 election, the FPÖ vote collapsed by 17 points. Losses were somewhat higher amongst men (-20) than women (-13), which slightly reduced the party's mobilizational gender gap. They were greatest amongst the youngest and oldest age cohort (-21 and -19 respectively), which meant that the distribution of FPÖ electoral support by age was much 'flatter' and the U-shape pattern replaced by a negative correlation of support by age. FPÖ incumbency, two years of public infighting and an inconsistent election campaign had a markedly uneven impact upon the voting behavior of different occupational groups. It seems to have been least alienating where the party was weakest: amongst farmers, white-collar voters, and public sector workers (-9, -11 and -13 points respectively). However, it was hugely damaging to the party's blue-collar support. The FPÖ vote dropped by 27 points amongst unskilled and semi-skilled workers and by 33 points amongst the skilled. The SPÖ resumed its lead amongst the unskilled and semi-skilled (47%), with the ÖVP in second place (26%). For the first time ever, skilled worker support was marginally higher for the ÖVP (39%) than the SPÖ (37%). In sum, the class realignment of the period of populist vote maximization had been nullified.

### *Return to populist vote maximization*

The FPÖ's revised electoral strategy appears to have alienated the younger age cohort (-4%), but attracted voters over 60 (+5). For the first time since 1986, FPÖ support is no longer greatest amongst young voters, but virtually identical across all age groups. White-collar voters were the only occupational segment in which the FPÖ's return to populist vote maximization was not marked by a significant change in voting behavior. Support fell in particular among self-employed and professionals (-10), but also amongst un-skilled and semi-skilled workers (-7), public sector workers (-4) and housewives (-4). It increased amongst the numerically small farming segment (+8), pensioners (+5) and skilled workers

(+5). The FPÖ's targeting of blue-collar voters met with mixed success. Its vote amongst unskilled and semiskilled workers is identical to its overall share, but within the skilled worker segment is virtually double that level (20%). Conversely, the FPÖ is weak amongst the self-employed and professionals (6%) and those working in the public sector (3%).

Table 2 also compares the sociodemographics of the FPÖ's support in 1986 and 2006, i.e. at the first elections after each periods of incumbency. The party has retained the blue-collar bias it developed in the 1990s: support amongst self-employed and professionals is 9 points lower, but that amongst skilled workers 9 points greater than it was in 1986. The FPÖ's vote amongst public sector workers is considerably lower (-6) and that of pensioners higher (+5) than it was. The gender gap is slightly narrower, whilst the significant ageing of the FPÖ's electorate hints inter alia at a possible cohort effect.

Though merely indicative because of the small sample size, GfK Austria's 2006 exit poll data on the 4% of BZÖ voters suggest the lowest levels of support came from the under-30s (2%) and the strongest from voters in their 60s (6%) and from farmers (6%). The BZÖ was perhaps more attractive to men (5%) and to pensioners (5%), but it performed below average in the worker segment (3%). One could speculate that the somewhat greater level of support amongst those aged 30-44 might point to a transfer of loyalties from the FPÖ to the BZÖ of an age cohort socialized during the Haider-led period of populist vote maximization.

### **Voter availability and motivations**

The significant voter shifts that accompanied the FPÖ's 1986-1999 electoral strategy exacerbated an existing trend for Austrian voters to become electorally more available. When the FPÖ was seeking office for the first time, half the electorate was willing to vote for the same party (i.e. overwhelmingly for the SPÖ or ÖVP) even when not fully satisfied with it. Nine out of ten decided well before the closing phase of election campaigns which party they would support and only one in ten changed their vote from one election to another. Populist

vote maximization helped to halve unconditional party loyalty and to double the proportions of late deciders and party changers. These trends continued after the FPÖ had changed its primary goal to seeking office (see Table 3). However, the FPÖ was now a less attractive option for Austria’s more fickle electorate. At elections held between 1986 and 1999, up to half of all party changers moved to the FPÖ, but in 2002 that fell to 6%, before reviving to 17% in 2006. It seems reasonable to conclude that the switch from opposition to office and back again changed voters’ willingness to support the FPÖ. Greater insight into FPÖ voter motivations during the last two decades are provided by the regular exit polls conducted by GfK Austria (formerly FESSEL-GfK).

**Table 3: ‘(Un-)Availability’ of Austrian voters by FPÖ electoral strategy period**

	<b>Office- seeking 1983</b>	<b>Populist vote maximization 1986</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>Incumbency 2002</b>	<b>Return to pvm 2006</b>
Voter loyally even if not fully satisfied	47	39	26	25	29
Early deciders	92	84	80	77	76
Late deciders	8	16	20	23	24
Party changers	10	16	18	24	26

Sources: Fessel+GfK Exit Polls (n: 1983 = 2,000; n 1986 = 2,149; 1999 & 2002 = 2,200; 2006 = 1,982)

### ***Populist Vote Maximization under Haider***

Above, we argued that a consistent defining feature of the FPÖ’s populist mobilization strategy was structural opposition directed in particular at grand coalition government and *Proporz*. We also pointed to three other elements: the focus on Haider’s personality; the interlinking of Austrian chauvinism with issues such as immigration, crime and EU-skepticism, as well as to the development from 1995 onwards of policy proposals related to for example the family, social affairs and taxation. Although the FPÖ’s chosen campaign themes were undeniably divisive and remain controversial, the data on FPÖ voter motivation suggest they made a significant contribution to the success of the party’s 1986-1999 strategy. The proportions of FPÖ voters motivated by the issues the party utilized to tap into structural opposition (rows 1 and 2 in Table 4) varied, but ranged from a quarter to nearly half. In 1986,

over half cited Haider as their major motivation and although this proportion gradually declined, one plausible interpretation is that he was soon so intimately identified with the FPÖ that voting for the party was an implicit indicator of support for Haider. Table 4 also shows how anti-immigrant sentiment became an increasingly important motivating factor. The FPÖ's post-1994 development of policy proposals designed inter alia to communicate a commitment to the *kleiner Mann* appears also to have had a positive mobilizational effect. Some 16% of its 1999 voters attributed their vote to these policies, whilst 15% cited the party's commitment to ordinary people. (Plasser and Ulram 2000).

**Table 4: FPÖ voter motivation during the populist vote maximization period 1986-1999**

	1986	1990	1994	1995	1999
Protest, scandal, party weariness	16	38	32	20	13
Time for a change, rejection of grand coalition	10	7	7	12	27
Image and leadership of Haider	54	23	17	19	13
Foreigner resentment	3	7	12	12	15

Sources: Fessel+GfK Exit Polls (n: 1986 = 2,149; 1990 = 2,229; 1994 = 2,200; 1995 = 2,333; 1999 = 2,200)

### *Incumbency*

Though permitted to cite multiple motivations, only 15% of the FPÖ much reduced 2002 electorate mentioned the personality of its leader Haupt. Haider's virtual absence for most of the rudderless party's campaign and Haupt's as yet interim status and make this unsurprising. A mere 5% of all 'candidate-oriented personality voters' Plasser and Ulram (2003: 150) cast their vote for the FPÖ. Considerations of coalition options figured prominently: 37% of respondents mentioned a desire to avert a return to grand coalition government and 56% wanted to avoid a possible red-green coalition. Similarly negative orientations underpinned the other major type of voting incentive, namely issues. Some 52% of FPÖ voters claimed to have been motivated by the party's opposition to immigration and EU eastern enlargement.

### *Return to populist vote maximization*<sup>7</sup>

According to SORA calculations (1 October 2006 press release), only half (49%) of those who voted for the FPÖ in 2002 did so again in 2006. A fifth (18%) abstained and one in seven (15%) voted for the BZÖ. GfK Austria's exit poll (which again permitted multiple responses) shows that at 12%, personality was an even less important motivation for FPÖ voters than in 2002. Westenthaler's personality was named by 26% of BZÖ voters as a decisive influence upon their vote, but 22 claimed to have been motivated by the BZÖ being 'Haider's party'. Just under a third of both FPÖ and of BZÖ voters claimed to have been decisively influenced by their party's commitment to the problems of the 'ordinary man'. Both parties' voters were motivated above all by negative emotions. Immigration was of greater significance to the FPÖ than BZÖ voters (51% against 29%), whilst the BZÖ's greater mobilization on crime may help explain why 57% of BZÖ voters but 'only' 45% of those who supported the FPÖ claimed their vote had been decisively influenced by their chosen party's support of harsher action against criminals. Finally, half of each group reported that a decisive factor shaping their voting decision had been considerable discontent with others parties.

### **THE FUTURE OF AUSTRIAN RIGHT-WING POPULISM**

The FPÖ's electoral performance has been shown to be closely related to the party's altered primary goals and (the delivery of its) electoral strategies. It was also shaped, however, by a range of factors which this article has not been able to examine. One constitutes the strategies of its competitors. The ÖVP and SPÖ's determination to treat Haider's revitalized FPÖ as a pariah and form a series of defensive grand coalitions arguably had the a perverse effect of strengthening the credibility of the FPÖ's claims that the 'system' conspired against it. By contrast, the ÖVP's controversial decision to coalesce with the FPÖ in 2000 effectively

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<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, the small sample size means data on the BZÖ need to be treated with considerable caution

amounted to the latter's political 'co-optation and castration' (Luther 2003a: 150). A second factor is the fundamental transformation since the early 1980s of Austria's electorate. In the early 1980s, Austrian voters were still remarkably stable, with very high levels attachment to the ÖVP and SPÖ (Haerpfer and Gehmacher 1984). Since then, the sub-cultural pillars (*Lager*) hitherto underpinning Austrian consociationalism have crumbled; class and partisan de-alignment have grown; a generalized party weariness has become apparent and there has been a significant increase in anti-party and protest sentiment.<sup>8</sup> In short, Austria's electorate has become much more volatile, a trend accelerated by the FPÖ's own conduct in the electoral market.

A more unpredictable electoral market should increase the potential impact upon electoral outcomes of party strategies, privileging in particular smaller, more mobile parties (Müller, Plasser and Ulram 1999). Yet to succeed in such markets, parties need to choose an electoral strategy appropriate to their goals and ensure its consistent and effective application. Between 1986 and 1999, the FPÖ achieved this via the relentless pursuit of populist vote maximization. When in office, however, (i.e. between 1983 and 1986, as well as between 2000 and 2005), it was unable to maintain internal unity over goals and strategies. Moreover, there were significant discrepancies in respect of party behavior in the different arenas of political competition and amongst FPÖ functionaries. Many (including Haider) resorted to behaviors that had been successful during the period of populist vote maximization, but were now counter-productive. Such inconsistencies damaged the party's electoral performance and triggered the BZÖ's breakaway. In other words, the FPÖ's ability to achieve its primary goals and desired electoral outcomes has been closely related not only to whether it was in office or opposition, but also to its leadership and internal discipline.

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<sup>8</sup> That transformation is extensively documented by Plasser and Ulram (2007) and will thus not be considered in detail here.

It would be premature to conclude that the FPÖ's dismal 2002 result and its 2005 split signals the end of Austrian right-wing populism. After all, notwithstanding over four years of in part vicious public wrangling within the FPÖ and latterly between it and the BZÖ, these parties succeeded in obtaining a combined 15% of the 2002 vote. This suggests the potential for populist electoral appeals is probably greater. The 'demand' for right-wing populism is not unrelated to the persistence of anti-party sentiment, the fears of in particular 'modernization losers' and the enduring mobilizational capacity of for example welfare chauvinism, EU-skepticism, immigration and crime.

Austrian right-wing populism is likely to persist for supply-side reasons also. For now, the FPÖ has reverted to unbridled populist vote maximization targeted at blue-collar voters. It hopes that by emphasizing a commitment to the 'ordinary man' it will be well placed to win from the SPÖ voters it feels are likely to be disappointed by the latter's inescapable policy compromises. The recent rise in political scandals should enhance the mobilizational capacity of its traditional structural opposition also. Although it committed the FPÖ to returning to opposition in 2006, the leadership also hinted it might seek to re-enter government after the next election. Even assuming it were to find a willing partner, it is not clear why the party would cope any better with a third period of incumbency.

The BZÖ's future is less secure. It lacks the FPÖ's organizational institutionalization and has been unable to establish significant party structures outside Carinthia. It has also failed to develop a secure electoral following. Early indications suggest that now it has achieved the existential goal of re-entering parliament, its electoral strategy will be targeted a more bourgeois electorate than that of the FPÖ. It is too early to tell whether, if it fails to achieve a significant growth in public support, it might at subsequent elections again revert to populist agitation to ensure its electoral survival.

Future relations between the FPÖ and BZÖ remain uncertain. Reunification would be most attractive for the BZÖ, for unless it can improve its stubbornly low poll ratings (still only about 4%), it still risks eviction from the National Council and the concomitant loss of funding and political visibility. If the parties ever wished to re-enter government, their prospects of doing so would be enhanced by reunification, as would their intra-governmental weight. On the other hand, levels of personal animosity between the two leadership groups are still so high that reunification appears unlikely unless at least one set of leaders is replaced. Moreover, the parties appear to be developing somewhat different goals and electoral strategies. As the experience of recent years has shown, seeking to combine such differences within a single party does not augur well for organizational unity or electoral success.

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