



KEELE  
weUNIVERSITY

**The Revival of the Radical Right:  
The Austrian Parliamentary Election of 2008**

Kurt Richard Luther

Keele European Parties Research Unit  
(KEPRU)

Working Paper 29

---

© Kurt Richard Luther, 2009

ISSN 1475-1569

ISBN 1-899488-58-8

**KEPRU Working Papers are published by:**

**School of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy (SPIRE)  
Keele University  
Staffs  
ST5 5BG, UK**

**Fax +44 (0)1782 73 3592**

**[www.keele.ac.uk/kepru](http://www.keele.ac.uk/kepru)**

**Editor: Dr Kurt Richard Luther (r.luther@keele.ac.uk)**

**KEPRU Working Papers are available via SPIRE's website.**

---

Launched in September 2000, the Keele European Parties Research Unit (KEPRU) was the first research grouping of its kind in the UK. It brings together the hitherto largely independent work of Keele researchers focusing on European political parties, and aims:

- to facilitate its members' engagement in high-quality academic research, individually, collectively in the Unit and in collaboration with cognate research groups and individuals in the UK and abroad;
- to hold regular conferences, workshops, seminars and guest lectures on topics related to European political parties;
- to publish a series of parties-related research papers by scholars from Keele and elsewhere;
- to expand postgraduate training in the study of political parties, principally through Keele's MA in Parties and Elections and the multinational PhD summer school, with which its members are closely involved;
- to constitute a source of expertise on European parties and party politics for media and other interests.

The Unit shares the broader aims of the Keele European Research Centre, of which it is a part. KERC comprises staff and postgraduates at Keele who are actively conducting research into the politics of remaking and integrating Europe.

Convenor KEPRU: Dr Kurt Richard Luther (r.luther@keele.ac.uk)

---

Kurt Richard Luther is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Politics, International Relations and the Environment (SPIRE) at Keele University. (r.luther@keele.ac.uk).

# The revival of the radical right: The Austrian parliamentary election of 2008\*

KURT RICHARD LUTHER

## Background

From 11 January 2007, Austria was governed by a coalition between chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer's Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, or SPÖ) and the Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, or ÖVP) headed by Wilhelm Molterer. The coalition had been a forced marriage at odds with the party system bipolarisation evident since the formation in February 2000 of Wolfgang Schüssel's coalition with the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, or FPÖ) (Luther 2008). The SPÖ had wanted to govern with the Greens after the October 2006 election, but had lacked a parliamentary majority. Outgoing ÖVP chancellor Schüssel could theoretically have formed a right-wing government. Yet there had been considerable opposition within his party to renewed cooperation with the FPÖ, which had for its part ruled out both re-entering government and any form of collaboration with the necessary third party: the Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündis Zukunft Österreich*, or BZÖ). Led by Jörg Haider, the BZÖ had in April 2005 broken away from the FPÖ, which it replaced as the ÖVP's coalition partner, and then scraped back into parliament on 4.1% of the vote.

Before passing the party leadership to Molterer, Schüssel had headed the ÖVP's coalition negotiation team. In Gusenbauer he had faced someone as keen to be chancellor as he had been in 1999, but with only one realistic option. A shrewd and unpredictable tactician, Schüssel had used this to try to ensure the coalition agreement contained neither radical change to the ÖVP's neo-liberal policy agenda, nor commitments to the SPÖ's key electoral

---

\* A revised version of this working paper will appear in *West European Politics* Vol. 32, 2009.

promises of abolishing university tuition fees and cancelling the purchase of a new generation of interceptor fighters. Having made these concessions, Gusenbauer duly chancellor, but was to prove the Second Republic's shortest-lived incumbent.

Benefiting from reductions in the record levels of unemployment that had pertained under Schüssel, as well as increases in GDP growth and tax receipts, the new administration rapidly agreed a two-year budget. Within months, however, SPÖ/ÖVP relations became decidedly fractious at all levels of government and were never to recover. In part, this was a consequence of deep mutual distrust since 1999. Having in 2006 lost to the SPÖ by merely one percentage point, the ÖVP was unwilling to alter the substance and confrontational style of politics it had pursued since 2000 (Luther 2009). As Schüssel had not retired, but become chair of the parliamentary party, the SPÖ suspected he and his still well-placed allies aspired to terminate the coalition as soon as polls suggested the ÖVP might obtain a plurality. Their concerns appeared confirmed in March 2008, when the ÖVP reported to the public prosecutor the alleged theft by a Chancellor Office SPÖ functionary of a secret strategy plan on how it might provoke premature elections for June 2008.

Governmental gridlock was also a product of SPÖ disunity. Elected in 2000 as a compromise candidate, Gusenbauer had been a weak leader prone to political gaffes. He had alienated SPÖ traditionalists by indirect hints he might abandon the SPÖ's long-standing policy of never collaborating with the FPÖ,<sup>1</sup> as well as by using the 2006 scandal centred on a bank owned by the SPÖ-oriented Austrian Trade Union Federation (*Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund*, or ÖGB) to push through a ban on the traditional practice of placing senior ÖGB functionaries on SPÖ electoral lists. The provincial-level electoral revival over which Gusenbauer presided<sup>2</sup> had paradoxically further weakened his intra-party power, as it contributed to a relative strengthening of the SPÖ's provincial parties. They were at the forefront of protest at his policy and portfolio concessions during the coalition negotiations.

Once SPÖ public poll ratings declined after it returned to government, those parties' leaders feared provincial electoral setbacks and joined an increasingly vocal chorus of attacks on Gusenbauer's alleged failure to stand up to the ÖVP. Pressure on Gusenbauer became acute after significant losses at Landtag elections on 9 March and 8 June 2008.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to sidestep his looming removal as chancellor, on 16 June he surprised his critics by installing Infrastructure Minister Werner Faymann as acting party leader and announcing he would remain chancellor and support Faymann's election as leader at a congress due in October.

The ÖVP maintained this was but the latest demonstration of the SPÖ's unfitness to govern. Ten days later, Gusenbauer and Faymann penned an open letter to the editor of the EU-critical *Kronen Zeitung*, Austria's most widely-read tabloid newspaper, announcing the SPÖ was now committed to the policy its editor had long espoused: a popular referendum on all future EU treaties. Buoyed by what seemed a solid 3-4 point poll lead, on 7 July Molterer used the SPÖ's change of EU policy to terminate the coalition. Parliament unanimously approved new elections for 28 September and Gusenbauer threw in the towel, announcing he would not stand for election and proposing Faymann as his party's chancellor candidate.

### **The Campaign<sup>4</sup>**

The SPÖ quickly united around Faymann, whose smiling face was omnipresent on SPÖ posters, often alongside the slogan "The new choice" (*Die neue Wahl*), selected to distance him from the stalemated Gusenbauer administration. Faymann was elected unopposed as SPÖ leader on 8 August by 98.4% of party congress delegates. The congress also launched the SPÖ's manifesto, designed to appeal in particular to traditional social democratic voters and those concerned about inflation. Its five key proposals dominated the 2008 campaign. These were halving value added tax on foodstuffs to 5%; prolonging the entitlement of workers under 65 years of age with 40 years of pensions contributions to retire on full pensions; increasing child benefit payments; bringing forward and marginally raising

pensions increases agreed for January 2009 and abolishing university tuition fees. Faymann sought to rally disaffected SPÖ grass roots support by also reaffirming the SPÖ's EU-sceptic line, reversing Gusenbauer's exclusion of senior ÖGB functionaries from the party's electoral lists and promising not to coalesce with Heinz-Christian Strache's FPÖ. Keen to be seen as assertive vis-à-vis the ÖVP, Faymann rescinded July's SPÖ/ÖVP agreement that neither would outvote the other during the government's remaining lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, on 24-25 September the parliamentary SPÖ where necessary collaborated with the BZÖ, Greens or FPÖ to ensure the passage of resolutions on all but the first of its above mentioned five proposals.

The ÖVP's core campaign strategy was to present Finance Minister Molterer as the personification of a competent and reliable party of government committed to a sound budget and unwilling to make irresponsible promises. Poster slogans thus depicted him alongside slogans such as "Gives security" and "Keeps Promises" (*Gibt Sicherheit* and *Hält Wort*). To prevent a loss of votes to the FPÖ (which its analysts considered largely responsible for the ÖVP's 2006 defeat), the ÖVP also produced posters calling for stiff penalties for child abuse and on immigration ("No German course. No immigration"). Given its justification for precipitating the election, a third ÖVP theme was the SPÖ's alleged abandonment of support for European integration. This now more disparate campaign was soon derailed. Its core message was undermined by Faymann's five proposals, which permitted the SPÖ to present it as inflexible in the face of the social consequences of the economic downturn. Moreover, there was limited public sympathy for ÖVP indignation at the SPÖ's EU policy shift, which had brought the SPÖ much more into line with popular sentiment. The ÖVP was further undermined by an inexperienced campaign team, accused by ÖVP insiders of amateurishness and incompetence, and by internal division. Some were wedded to the conservative values and economic liberalism of the Schüssel years. Others advocated a more progressive and

social profile. The latter strategy was associated above all with Agriculture Minister Josef Pröll, who had chaired an ÖVP policy forum (*Perspektivengruppe*) designed to help open the party to the left. Governor Erwin Pröll, his uncle and leader of the powerful Lower Austrian party, was lukewarm in his support for a premature election, whilst Upper Austrian Governor Josef Pühringer openly opposed it and announced his party would contribute much less than usual to national election coffers.<sup>6</sup> In Tyrol, a new party created by Franz Dinkhauser (FRITZ), formerly a senior functionary in the ÖVP' Workers and Employees League, had at the June Landtag election polled 18.4% of the vote and cost the ÖVP its absolute majority. With a poorly focused and ineffective campaign; ideological divisions; large provincial parties only campaigning half-heartedly; FRITZ now competing at the national election and Molterer performing weakly in key television debates, GfK Austria's tracking polls soon showed the ÖVP falling behind the SPÖ.

The main beneficiary of public dissatisfaction at the coalition's bickering had for some time been the FPÖ. Its vote had risen six points (to 10.5%) at the Lower Austrian election and by 4.4 points (to 12.4%) in Tyrol. Polls suggested it might in September double the 11% it had received in 2006.<sup>7</sup> Senior FPÖ strategists attributed the FPÖ's recovery to their repositioning it from a party of pure protest to a thematically coherent "social homeland party" (*soziale Heimatpartei*). The FPÖ's 2008 campaign thus recycled long-established populist themes such as anti-immigration; EU-scepticism; crime and Austrian nationalism, but also stressed interventionist economic and social policies targeted at blue-collar voters and welfare state recipients. Some were akin to those espoused by the SPÖ, including payments intended to compensate pensioners for inflation, as well as halving VAT on fuel, medication and food. As the campaign progressed, it became clear that the FPÖ's greatest competitor was the BZÖ, which was again challenging the FPÖ for the traditional radical right vote. Strache was keen to reject Hadier's claim he was merely a pale imitation of him, and his overtures

about possible collaboration.<sup>8</sup> The BZÖ's manifesto overlapped significantly with that of the FPÖ, but in contrast markedly government –oriented. It centred squarely on Haider, whom its sought to present in a completely new way, namely, as someone who had moved on from his provocative past to become a mature and moderate statesman concerned to play a constructive role and with a record of delivering allegedly effective policies as Governor of Carinthia. The BZÖ's campaign posters (including slogans such as “For you Austria” (*Deinetwegen Österreich*)) and Haider's television appearances were professionally delivered and its poll ratings gradually increased.

The central themes of the Greens' campaign were akin to those of 2006: female equality; renewable energy; education (though now with a greater emphasis on schools) and human rights (reformulated to broaden the party's prior focus on defending multiculturalist values against xenophobia). There was a very noticeable emphasis upon party leader Alexander van der Bellen, presented as the Greens' candidate for the vice-chancellorship. The Greens faced at least two problems. They had been caught in the middle of debate on the leadership's plans for organizational reform designed to streamline decision-making in a party that had for some years been aspiring to enter government. This exacerbated candidate selection and demotivated some activists. Second, the their traditional core urban, educated and female vote was threatened by the surprise candidacy of the Liberal Forum (LiF), whose campaign was headed by its former leader Heide Schmidt.<sup>9</sup>

## **The Result**

The major winners of the 2008 election were the parties of the radical right, whose combined share of the vote was 28.2%, i.e. above the FPÖ's 1999 peak of 26.9% (see Table 1). The FPÖ increased its vote by 6.5 points to 17.5% and might well have exceeded 20%, but for the phenomenal success of the BZÖ, which at 10.7% nearly tipped its 2006 result. The ÖVP not only failed to achieve the plurality to which Molterer had aspired, but crashed 8.3



points to 26%. This was worse than its previous record low of 26.9% in 1999 and not to be compensated as then by securing the chancellorship. Molterer immediately resigned in favour of Josef Pröll. Though the SPÖ's campaign had helped reverse the ÖVP's initial poll lead and thus secured a plurality, the SPÖ had dropped six points to 29.3%, considerably below its previous record low of 33.2% in 1999. Together, the two parties that had dominated Austrian politics since 1945 had been supported by only 55% of voters. A marginal increase in turnout since 2006 (which had been the lowest on record) meant this comprised merely 44% of the electorate. The strengthening of the FPÖ and BZÖ mean that the Greens' modest decline (to 10.4%) dropped them from third to fifth largest party in parliament. Van der Bellen resigned and a significant internal debate commenced over the party's strategy and future direction, with critics arguing the Greens needed to revert to their protest roots. None of the minor parties (including FRITZ and the LiF) got anywhere near the 4% threshold for parliamentary representation.

At 18.4%, net volatility (Pedersen 1979) was not much behind its postwar peak of 21% in 2002, whilst gross volatility hit a record 28% (Plasser and Ulram 2008: 7). The voter flow analysis produced by SORA (2008) suggests the ÖVP was able to retain only 70% of its 2006 voters, of whom 9% defected to the BZÖ, 5% to the FPÖ and 4% to "Others" (presumably above all to FRITZ and the LiF), whilst 7% abstained. The SPÖ's retention rate was somewhat better (73%), but a similar proportion of its 2006 voters abstained (6%) and defections to other parties were greatest in the direction of the FPÖ (10%) and the BZÖ (4%). The Greens' weak result was reflected in its poor retention rate (69%) and in part down to abstention (8%), but above all a consequence of losses to "Others" (12%), which in its case comprised mainly the LiF. These defections were not balanced out by net inflows from the ÖVP and SPÖ. The FPÖ had the highest retention rate (79%) and although it lost 8% of its 2006 voters to the BZÖ and 4% each to abstention and to the SPÖ, this was more than

compensated by inflows, above all from the SPÖ, but also from the ÖVP, which respectively made up 21 and 10% of those who voted FPÖ in 2008. The BZÖ retained 79% of the 4.1% who had voted for it in 2006 and lost 13% to the FPÖ. Its success was the product of inflows mainly from those who had in 2006 voted ÖVP, SPÖ, or abstained. They made up respectively 29%, 15% and 12% of the BZÖ's 2008 electorate.

Table 1: Elections to the Austrian National Council (28 September 2008)

	2008			2006		
	Seats	Votes	Votes	Seats	Votes	Votes
	N	(000's)	%	N	(000's)	%
Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ)	57	1,430	29.3	68	1,664	35.3
Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP)	51	1,270	26.0	66	1,616	34.3
Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)	34	857	17.5	21	520	11.0
BZÖ – Liste Jörg Haider* (BZÖ)	21	523	10.7	7	194	4.1
Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative (GRÜNE)	20	510	10.4	21	520	11.1
Die Liberalen (Liberales Forum) (LiF)		102	2.1	-	-	-
Bürgerforum Österreich Liste Fritz Dinkhauser (FRITZ)		86	1.8			
Kommunistische Partei Österreichs (KPÖ)		37	0.8	0	48	1.0
Liste Dr. Martin – Für Demokratie, Kontrolle, Gerechtigkeit (MATIN)	-	-	-	0	132	2.8
Others		72	1.5	0	15	0.3
Turnout (%)			78.8			78.5

\* In 2006: “Die Freiheitlichen – Liste Westenthaler – BZÖ”

Source: *Bundesministerium für Inneres*

GfK Austria's exit poll (Plasser and Ulram 2008: 14) provides insights into the social demographics of voter switching. It appears the FPÖ managed to increase its support most

amongst the under-30s (+24%) and blue-collar voters (+16%) and least amongst pensioners (+4%). Blue-collar voters and the under-30s also shifted to an above-average extent to the BZÖ (+10 and +8%), as did white-collar voters (+8%). Meanwhile, the SPÖ lost dramatically in the blue-collar and under-30s segment (-22 and -18%), but did much better among pensioners (-3%) and those employed in the public sector (-1%). This unevenness hints at the differential impact of the SPÖ's campaign focus on pensions. The ÖVP's losses were spread more uniformly, though highest in the public sector (-15%) and amongst the under-30s (-10%). The jury is still out as regards voter motivations, but it appears candidate-voting was highly significant in the case of the BZÖ, played a modest role in respect of the SPÖ, Greens and FPÖ, but was of little relevance for the ÖVP.<sup>10</sup> Immigration and crime were very important motivations for BZÖ and FPÖ voters. SORA and the Institut für Strategieanalysen (2008) report that pensions were very important for about two thirds of SPÖ and FPÖ voters and just over half of ÖVP and BZÖ voters, but for under a quarter of those who voted Green. They also suggest voters' concern about inflation reflected their chosen party's relative campaign emphasis on this topic. It was very important for 64, 63 and 60% of SPÖ, FPÖ and BZÖ voters, but for only 40 and 35% of ÖVP and Green voters respectively.

Gfk Austria's exit poll details the net impact of the voter shifts on party support in the various social segments of Austria's electorate. The changes in respect of age are quite marked (Plasser and Ulram 2008: 10; 2007: 309-312; 2006: 10). The parties' shares of the vote amongst the under-30s in 2008 (and 2006) were as follows: FPÖ 33% (9%); ÖVP 20% (30%) Greens 14% (22%); SPÖ 14% (32%) and BZÖ 10% (3%). One of the factors that might account in part for these shifts is the lowering of the voting age to 16, which appears to have greatly benefited the radical right at the expense of in particular the SPÖ, but also the ÖVP and Greens. Age correlates positively with support for both the SPÖ and ÖVP, but that relationship is considerably stronger for the former, which in both the 60-69 and 70+ age

cohorts received 36% of the vote. The Greens' support is now greatest (16%) amongst 30-44 year-olds, which underscores the ageing of their electorate. The picture in respect of education has not changed that much (Plasser and Ulram 2008: 12; 2007: 309-312). Educational attainment still correlates negatively with support for the SPÖ, but positively with that for the ÖVP and especially for the Greens, who received 19% of the vote amongst those qualified for or with tertiary education, but only 3 or 4% amongst those with merely minimal or vocational education. The relationship between FPÖ support and educational attainment remains U-shaped, but with a marked bias towards minimal levels. Perhaps the most striking feature of the socio-demographics of the 2008 vote relates to employment (Plasser and Ulram 2008: 10-12; 2007: 309-312; 2006: 10-11). Compared to 2006, the ÖVP's vote amongst the self-employed was down from 28 to 23%, whilst that of the Greens rose from 18 to 21% and that of the BZÖ from 5 to 10%. The most dramatic changes were amongst blue-collar voters, however. In 2006, the parties' shares of blue-collar vote had been as follows: SPÖ 47%; ÖVP 38%; FPÖ 18% BZÖ ca. 2%. In 2008, the FPÖ was ahead of the SPÖ amongst skilled workers (34 to 32%, with the ÖVP, BZÖ and Greens on 19, 6 and 6% respectively), but even more so within the category of semi-skilled and un-skilled workers (34 to 21%, with the ÖVP, BZÖ and Greens on 16, 18 and 5% respectively). In sum, the election brought about shifts in class voting analogous to the re-alignment of 1999. Again as in 1999, the 2008 result showed a significant public-sector/private sector cleavage (Plasser and Ulram 2007: 319; 2008: 12). Amongst those employed in the public sector, the SPÖ was the strongest party (32%), followed by the ÖVP (21%) and the Greens (14%). The radical right parties' joint share of the public sector workers' vote was 23% (FPÖ 15%; BZÖ 8%), but amongst those employed in the private sector it came to 36% (FPÖ 23%; BZÖ 13%). For their part, the SPÖ, ÖVP and Greens could respectively only muster 26%, 20% and 11%.

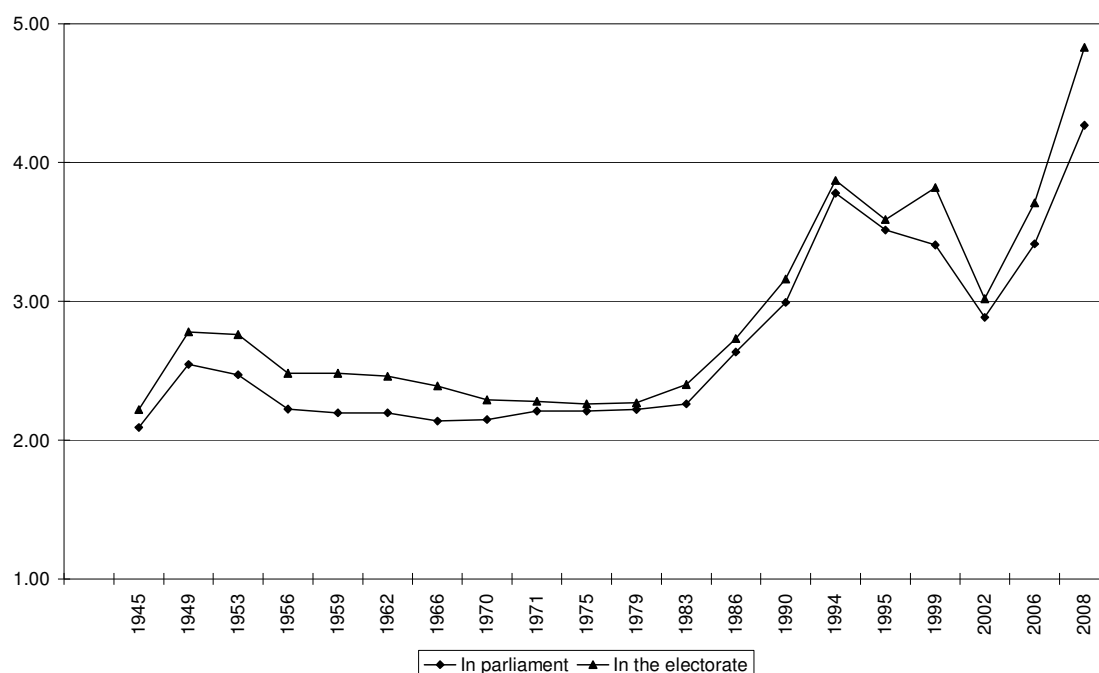
## Coalition Building

The 2008 election had produced record electoral and parliamentary fragmentation, with the effective number of parties being 4.8 and 4.3 respectively (Figure 1). This generated an unusually large number of theoretically possible majority coalitions, all but one of which required three partners rather than two, as had hitherto always been the case. Most were politically out of the question, however, as they required one or more parties of the left to collaborate with the BZÖ and/or FPÖ. Only two ideologically contiguous minimum winning coalitions remained. The first comprised the ÖVP, FPÖ and BZÖ and would have had 106 seats in the 183-member parliament, but at least three factors militated against it. For one, there had since 2000 been considerable resistance within the ÖVP to governmental cooperation with the FPÖ, which most regarded as a both unreliable and politically unpalatable partner. The ÖVP's defeat and Molterer's resignation had weakened the group around Schüssel that might have been willing to risk this option, which was not supported by the ÖVP's new leader (Luther 2009). Second, notwithstanding their similar policies, the BZÖ and FPÖ were still characterised by the mutual hostility engendered by the BZÖ's 2005 breakaway. Keen to re-enter government and aware this constellation was his only option, Haider organised a meeting with Strache on 8 October, intended as an initial attempt at rebuilding bridges, with a view to then sounding out coalition possibilities. Haider's fatal car accident on 11 October arguably put an end to any prospect there might have been for this to develop further. Third, the FPÖ leadership was in any event reluctant to enter government, believing another SPÖ/ÖVP coalition would strengthen it electorally and put it in a stronger bargaining position after the next election.<sup>11</sup>

The remaining ideologically contiguous coalition option was the widely-predicted resurrection of the SPÖ/ÖVP government. Derided by its critics as a "coalition of losers" destined to recreate the outgoing administration's gridlock, it would now control only 108 as

opposed to 134 seats, i.e. less than the two-thirds qualified majority required to pass not only changes to the constitution, but also a range of other legislation. Faymann and his party were united in their support of an SPÖ/ÖVP government. It was widely assumed Pröll was also in favour, but opinion within the ÖVP was divided. Its pragmatic, policy-oriented Leagues were supportive, as were the large Upper and Lower Austrian branches. Others were fearful that governing under an SPÖ chancellor would result in both unpalatable policy compromise and in the ÖVP experiencing the electoral squeeze from the radical right it had experienced in the 1990s. Whilst some advocated a coalition with the FPÖ and BZÖ, others suggested the ÖVP should go into opposition, leaving the SPÖ to form a minority government, or risk new elections. Opposition to an SPÖ/ÖVP coalition was especially vocal in the Styrian branch (which included significant elements that had been supportive of Schüssel' decision in 2000 strategy to co-operate with the FPÖ), but also in Burgenland and Carinthia. At an ÖVP executive meeting of 14 October, the leaders of the Styrian and Burgenland parties voted against authorising Pröll to enter coalition negotiations with the SPÖ, as did two other Styrian members.<sup>12</sup> Though internal opposition meant Pröll had to tread carefully to keep his party on board, the coalition negotiations proceeded much more smoothly than those after the elections of 1999, 2002 and 2006. Their successful completion was announced on 23 November, some 56 days after the election, i.e. only about half the time it had taken to form Austria's last three governments. Unlike in 2007 (Luther 2008), the SPÖ was united in its support for the coalition agreements, whilst the ÖVP remained divided. The ÖVP leadership rejected internal demands that the agreement be ratified by the extraordinary party congress called for 28 November to elect the new leader. It was instead approved by 29 to three votes at an executive committee of 24 November.<sup>13</sup> On 28 November, Pröll was elected unopposed as party leader, albeit by "only" 89.6%, whilst his four deputies received the votes of between 89.8 and 94.8% of delegates.

Figure 1: Effective number of Austrian parties at national elections from 1945 to 2008



Source: Calculated by the author according to the index of Laakso and Taagepera (1979)

The new government was sworn in on 2 December. There were only minor changes to the allocation and scope of portfolios in the outgoing administration. The parties were largely focused on their core areas. For example, the ÖVP controlled the agriculture, economics, and finance agendas, whilst the SPÖ's ministries include social affairs, health; women's affairs and public services. Indicative of the new government's apparent rejection of the marginalization since 2000 of Austrian social partnership (Tálos 2006) was that ÖGB president Rudolf Hundstorfer became minister of social affairs and labour, whilst the economics ministry went to Reinhold Mitterlehner, general secretary of the Austrian Chamber of Commerce. Central to the coalition agreement were measures designed to tackle Austria's economic downturn, including a €2.2 billion fiscal stimulus based on tax reductions targeted on middle income earners and an economic stimulation package. The compromise solution to the EU referenda dispute that had triggered the election was that both parties expressed

support for EU-wide referenda and agreed neither would table any national referendum proposal without the other's consent, or else there would have to be new elections. The agreement contained numerous statements of intent on policy areas such as the family, education and health, but frequently provided little or no any detail, limiting itself to stating there would be further discussion, often within the system of social partnership. The agreement often specified that the realisation of these ambitions was subject to additional funding being found, but failed to indicate from where it might be forthcoming. During the campaign, it had been suggested civil service reform offered the potential for significant savings, but the agreement did not specify and such reform. Moreover, it stipulated that the budget deficit was not to exceed the 3% Maastricht criteria. With the economy contracting in the last quarter of 2008, unemployment expected to rise to over 4% in the government's first year in office and Austrian banks looking exposed in eastern Europe, that limit was regarded by many as over-optimistic.

## **Conclusion**

The radical right enjoyed a major revival at Austria's 2008 general election. Its combined vote soared from 15.1 to 28.2%, whilst the governing parties' combined share of the vote plummeted from 70 to 55%. The party system is the most fragmented it has ever been. Two months later, the SPÖ and ÖVP agreed they would again govern together. Not for the first time, they promised that the latest iteration of (increasingly less "grand") coalition government would be constructive and abstain from the petty point-scoring that had gridlocked the work of its predecessor and contributed to strengthening the radical right.

There are parallels here with the situation in the 1990s, when the parties of the centre-right consistently had parliamentary majorities, but because of the FPÖ's (self-)exclusion from office, governments were always formed between the centre parties, whose share of the vote was generally in decline. In 2008, the main beneficiary of the radical right's exclusion



from office was again the SPÖ, whilst the ÖVP was once more relegated to the role of junior coalition partner. To extract the ÖVP from the SPÖ's embrace and achieve his neo-liberal policy goals, Schüssel had in 2000 opted to govern with the FPÖ. Incumbency pressures had in 2002 caused the FPÖ to implode in 2005 the formation of the BZÖ signalled a bifurcation of the radical right. Yet the elections of 2006 and in particular of 2008 demonstrate its resilience and for many have called into question the long-term efficacy of Schüssel's strategy of "co-optation and castration" (Luther 2003: 150). The BZÖ's 2008 growth was largely down to Haider, whose control over that party was greater than it ever been over the FPÖ. His death raises significant questions concerning the future of the BZÖ and has greatly strengthened the position of the FPÖ and of its leader Strache, but does not threaten the persistence of the radical right.

Schüssel's decision to co-operate with the FPÖ and force through his neo-liberal agenda against the resistance of the social partners polarised Austria's party system. Even after he lost the chancellorship, the legacy of that polarisation continued to impact on Austrian politics, not least as a factor undermining relations within the Gusenbauer government. The latter's collapse can thus be regarded as at least in part a consequence of the bitterness left over from the Schüssel years. Under Proll's leadership, the ÖVP appears to have at least for now rejected Schüssel's coalition preferences and political style in favour of a return to grand coalition and consensus politics. Not least in view of the altered international economic climate, it has also considerably diluted his policy goals. For its part, the SPÖ is much more untied under Faymann than it was under Gusenbauer and has returned to Vranitzky's policy of ruling out the FPÖ as a potential coalition partner. On the other hand, it has sought to undermine the FPÖ's electoral potential by toughening its stance on EU integration and on immigrant labour.

During 2009 and 2010, Austria will have elections in numerous communes, for seven provincial parliaments, the European Parliament and the presidency. Two months into the lifetime of the new government, no major disputes had broken out within the coalition. This may have something to do with the fact that both parties are now headed by more pragmatic political actors with a greater commitment to consensus politics, or at least to avoiding the negative political consequences for their parties of the divisiveness that characterised the preceding government.<sup>14</sup> It is unclear, however, whether this harmony will persist. Numerous tough decisions will be coming the government's way, many of which will relate to the impact of the international credit crunch. It will be difficult for the coalition parties to find solutions that do not alienate their respective supporters. Meanwhile, there is little evidence to suggest that the appeal of the radical right will necessarily decline, especially in tough economic times. Those parties' prospects will of course be shaped by the strategies and behaviour of their leaders, but they will also depend to a significant extent on whether the SPÖ/ÖVP coalition can avoid the public acrimony that alienated voters in 2008. One of the first acts of the short-lived Gusenbauer government was to increase the duration of Austrian parliaments from four to five years. It remains to be seen if the new government will be able to take full advantage of that extended term.

## **REFERENCES**

- Laakso, Markku. and Taagepera, Rein (1979) "Effective" Number of Parties: A Measure with Applications to West Europe', *Comparative Political Studies*, 12:1, 3-27.
- Luther, Kurt Richard (2003). 'The Self-Destruction of a Right-Wing Populist Party? The Austrian Parliamentary Election of 2002', *West European Politics*, 26:2, 136-152.
- Luther, Kurt Richard (2008) 'The 2006 Austrian Parliamentary Election: From Bipolarism to Forced Marriage', *West European Politics*, 31:5, 1004-1015.

- Luther, Kurt Richard (2009) 'Deciding to govern with right-wing populists and managing the consequences: Schüssel and the FPÖ', in Günter Bischof and Fritz Plasser (eds) *The Schüssel Era in Austria*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, forthcoming.
- Pedersen, Mogens, (1979) 'The Dynamics of European Party Systems: Changing Patterns of Electoral Volatility', *European Journal of Political Research*, 7:1-2, 1-26.
- Plasser, Fritz and Ulram, Peter A. (2006) *Die Wahlanalyse 2006. Wer hat wen warum gewählt?* Vienna: Gfk Austria.
- Plasser, Fritz and Ulram, Peter A. (eds) (2007) *Wechselwahlen. Analysen zur Nationalratswahl 2006*. Vienna: facultas.wuv.
- Plasser, Fritz and Ulram, Peter A. (2008) *Die Wahlanalyse 2008. Wer hat wen warum gewählt?*, Vienna: Gfk Austria.
- SORA (2008) *Wählerstromanalyse Nationalratswahl 2008*, Available at <http://www.sora.at/de/start.asp?b=497> [Accessed 12 December 2008].
- SORA and Institut für Strategieanalysen (2008) *Nationalratswahl 2008*, Available at [http://www.sora.at/images/doku/SORA\\_ISA\\_Analyse\\_NRW\\_2008.pdf](http://www.sora.at/images/doku/SORA_ISA_Analyse_NRW_2008.pdf) [Accessed 12 December 2008].
- Tálos, Emmerich, (ed.) (2006) *Schwarz – Blau. Eine Bilanz des „Neu-Regierens“*, Vienna: Lit Verlag.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> In May 2003, for example, Gusenbauer had a much-publicised lunch with Haider and in January 2007 was unexpectedly restrained in his response to the publication of photographs of FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache engaging alongside persons later convicted of right-wing extremism in what most observers interpreted as paramilitary exercises.

---

<sup>2</sup> These included increases of 12.% in Salzburg in 2004 and of 9.4% in Styria in 2005, as a result of which the SPÖ captured those provinces' powerful governorships from the ÖVP.

<sup>3</sup> The SPÖ dropped from 33.5% to 25.5% of the vote at the Lower Austria election of 9 March 2008 and from 25.9% to 15.5% at the Tyrolean election of 8 June 2008.

<sup>4</sup> The following draws on the author's detailed interviews with key actors in the campaign teams of the SPÖ, ÖVP, Greens, FPÖ and BZÖ.

<sup>5</sup> As the SPÖ's coalition co-ordinator in the outgoing government, Faymann had been a key actor in forging such compromises, but that was something his campaign team sought to ignore.

<sup>6</sup> Pühringer's position was in large measure a legacy of resentment vis-à-vis what he felt had been the national leadership's careless disregard for his party's prospects at the Upper Austrian election of September 2003, immediately prior to which it announced the highly unpopular privatisation of the VOEST. This allowed the SPÖ to increase its vote by a record 11.5 points (Luther 2009).

<sup>7</sup> GfK Austria nationwide telephone poll of 8-17 July 2008, n=1,000. It also suggested 36% of those intending to switch their 2006 support planned to vote FPÖ.

<sup>8</sup> One of the highlights of the series of television debates between party leaders was Strache's confrontation with Haider on 22 August 2008. Strache's team had expected Haider to attempt a strategy of politically "embracing" him and thus when Haider addressed him with the familiar "Du", Strache insisted on using the formal "Sie".

<sup>9</sup> The Greens invested considerable effort in attacking the business links of Austrian industrialist Peter Haselsteiner, the LiF's financier. They also alleged LiF leader Alexander Zach had misused his political position to advance private business interests that contradicted his public statements on behalf of the LiF. Five days before the election Zach resigned from LiF leadership and electoral list.

<sup>10</sup> Compare for example Plasser and Ulram (2008: 15-32) and SORA and the Institut für Strategieanalysen (2008). This article refers mainly to the former, which is based on GfK Austria's exit poll data. This had a higher sample (n=1,800 as opposed to n=1,200) and as but the latest in a long line of polls by GfK Austria/Fessel GfK, provides a better longitudinal perspective.

---

<sup>11</sup> There were individuals and groups in the FPÖ, BZÖ and ÖVP who did favour a coalition between these three parties. There had been informal bilateral contacts between them before the election and they continued even after Haider's death.

<sup>12</sup> The latter two were Economic Minister Martin Bartenstein, a long-standing Schüssel ally, and Christian Buchinger, who then resigned as deputy leader of the national party.

<sup>13</sup> Bartenstein and Styrian party leader Hermann Schützenhofer again dissented, as did a Carinthian member.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, there has been wide ranging change in the key actors of all parties represented in Austria's parliament. At the end of 2008, the only party leader who had been in office for longer than four months was Strache, who took over the FPÖ in April 2005.