

# The far right leads the polls for the Austrian federal elections on 29 September

On 29 September next, 6,346,029 Austrians (including 62,651 living abroad), slightly fewer than in the previous federal elections in 2019, are being called to the ballot box to renew the 183 members of the National Council (Nationalrat), the lower house of the parliament. Only 3 of the country's 9 Länder have more than one million voters: Lower Austria, Vienna and Upper Austria. Austria amended its electoral law at the beginning of 2023, introducing, among other things, the possibility of early voting in the three weeks preceding the polling date. The majority of the 'major' political parties were in favour of this reform.

Nine political parties are fielding candidates in all 9 Länder: the People's Party (ÖVP) of outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer; the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) led by Andreas Babler; the Freedom Party (FPÖ), led by Herbert Kickl; the Greens-Green Alternative (DG), members of the outgoing government coalition and whose spokesman is Werner Kogler; NEOS-New Austria (NEOS), led by Beate Meinl-Reisinger; Günther Hopfgartner's Communist Party (KPÖ), which has not been represented in the National Council since the mid-1950s; the Beer Party (BIER) led by Dominik Wlazny, aka Marco Pogo, leader of the punk band Turbobier (singer and guitarist), who advocates a 'depoliticisation of politics'; the List Madeleine Petrovic, a party founded by a former member of the Greens, who is opposed to sending aid to Ukraine, and finally *Keine von denen* (KEINE), which is the name that Der Wandel (The Change) has taken for the ballot to provide a choice for voters who do not identify with any of the parties in the running.

3 other parties are competing in at least one Land: Menschen, Freiheit, Grundrechte (MFG) in 7 Länder, as are Stimmen gegen den Völkermord (GAZA) and Die Gelben (BGE) in Burgenland alone.

## HAS THE FREEDOM PARTY ALREADY WON? THE BATTLE OF THE POLLS

The Freedom Party (FPÖ) has led in the polls since the end of 2022. The latest survey at the beginning

of September by the Market-Lazarsfeld institute credits it with 28% of the vote, ahead of the People's Party (ÖVP) with 26% and the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) with 20%. NEOS-New Austria is credited with 10% and the Greens-Green Alternative (DG) with 7%. Two other parties may enter the National Council: the Beer Party (4%) and the Communist Party (3%).

The same institute also conducted a poll on the party leader most likely to be elected Chancellor (assuming there is a direct vote). Respondents put Freedom Party leader Herbert Kickl in the lead (22% of the vote) ahead of outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer (18%).

Finally, on 9 June, the Freedom Party won the European elections for the first time in its history. It won 25.36% of the vote and took 6 seats in the Strasbourg parliament (+3 compared with the previous European elections on 26 May 2019). It narrowly outstripped the People's Party, which won 24.52% of the vote and 5 seats (-2).

The Freedom Party thrives on exploiting the dissatisfaction expressed by a large proportion of Austrians with regard to their politicians — a feeling which has been at its highest level since 2018. It draws on the frustrations expressed by the population and promotes an anti-system discourse. It is a nationalist movement that holds views hostile to immigration and Islam, and defends patriotism. 'FPÖ supporters vote to express a form of dissatisfaction, even disenchantment, with the way democracy currently works,' said Benjamin

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Biard, a researcher at the Centre for Research and Socio-Political Information. *'For the electorate, the party's mission is to kick the establishment in the butt'*, confirmed Harald Vilimsky, MEP.

The FPÖ's programme is called *Fortress Austria, Fortress of Freedom*. It plans to reduce the care given to illegal immigrants and asylum seekers to a "basic level" only, and opposes family reunification for migrants already in Austria. *'We need remigration'*, emphasised Herbert Kickl. He is also proposing a reduction in both corporate tax and wage costs, two measures that are also included in the ÖVP's programme. This similarity in the economic programmes of the two right-wing parties might encourage ÖVP voters to turn away from the latter and vote even further to the right.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, the FPÖ is defending a position of neutrality in the war between Russia and Ukraine and is opposed to sanctions against Russia. Its relations with Moscow became more firmly established in 2016 when Norbert Hofer (FPÖ) won the 1st round of the presidential election (35.05% of the vote ahead of Alexander Van Der Bellen, who was finally elected in the 2nd round). The cooperation agreement signed between the FPÖ and Vladimir Putin's party, United Russia (ER), has been renewed and will run until 2026. Herbert Kickl has indicated that Vienna will cease all financial aid to Kyiv if the FPÖ comes to office. *"We defend an active policy of peace and neutrality. Payments to the EU Peace Fund should be stopped and Austria should use its money for its own army."*

### WHICH PARTNER(S) FOR THE FREEDOM PARTY?

If opinion polls are to be believed, the most likely government coalition after the 29 September elections would be an alliance between the FPÖ and the ÖVP. These 2 parties have led the country together on several occasions (2000-2005 and 2017-2019). Moreover, the 2 parties are closer than they have ever been. There remains problem of Herbert Kickl however. Some members of the ÖVP, including outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer, are unwilling to unite with the far-right leader.

Another possibility put forward by many politicians is a coalition of three partners: the ÖVP, the SPÖ and NEOS-New Austria. Since 2019, however, several parties, including Menschen, Freiheit, Grundrechte and the Beer Party, have appeared on the political scene, and these parties could achieve a sufficiently high result on 29 September to make it difficult to form such a government coalition.

The FPÖ therefore has a major problem. On the face of it, nobody wants to take part in a coalition government led by Herbert Kickl. The ÖVP has already refused to take part in a government led by him and criticises Herbert Kickl for being much more radical than his predecessors; a radicalism that works well for him if opinion polls are to be believed. Karl Nehammer has even described him as *'a risk to the country's security'*. According to many political analysts, the outgoing Chancellor's distrust of Herbert Kickl is undoubtedly explained by the situation faced by Karl Nehammer when he succeeded the far-right leader as Interior Minister in 2019. It has been said that mistrust of Austria was at its height among its allies at the time, with Herbert Kickl accused of providing confidential information to Russia.

Herbert Kickl says he is confident that the ÖVP will agree to form an alliance, as it did last year, following the regional elections in Lower Austria (29 January 2023) and Salzburg (23 April 2023), after having claimed the opposite throughout the election campaign in these two Länder.

A former Minister of the Interior (2017-2019), Herbert Kickl replaced Norbert Hofer as leader of the FPÖ in June 2021. His radical views have made him a controversial figure. For example, he likes to say that he wants to become the *'people's chancellor'*, an expression once used by the Nazis.

The President of the Republic, Alexander Van Der Bellen, has indicated that he would not be obliged to appoint Herbert Kickl as Chancellor if the FPÖ came out ahead in the federal elections. The head of state has criticised the far-right leader for his *'anti-European'* stance and his refusal to condemn the invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces. He has raised the

possibility of preferring another, more moderate figure from the FPÖ.

## SCANDALS

On 29 April this year, a corruption investigation was opened against Herbert Kickl and other party members in relation to events in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The far-right leader is suspected of having, as Minister of the Interior, ordered advertising inserts from a major media group at Austria's expense. In exchange, the media concerned undertook to give favourable coverage to the far-right party led at the time by Hans-Christian Strache. However, the affair has done nothing to dent Herbert Kickl's popularity. Nor did what became known as *Ibizagate* in 2019. On 17 May 2019, two German newspapers - *Der Spiegel* and *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung* - broadcast a video showing Heinz-Christian Strache, Vice-Chancellor, Minister for the Civil Service and Sport and leader of the FPÖ, and Johann Gudenus, leader of the parliamentary group, filmed without their knowledge in a villa in Ibiza in 2017, negotiating (with a woman who called herself Alyona Makarova and who claimed to be the niece of the Russian gas oligarch Igor Makarov) privileged access to Austrian public contracts via the creation of a construction company in exchange for her financial support for the FPÖ so that it could buy *Die Kronen Zeitung*, one of Austria's largest daily newspapers. On several occasions, the woman explained that the funds she was able to pay were the result of financial malpractice. This scandal led to the resignation of Hans-Christian Strache and the fall of the government of Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP). *"The explanation lies in the fact that far-right parties have got into the habit of presenting themselves as victims of the system as a whole. Pressing this point may, if not reinforce it, at least help them to consolidate their discourse of victimisation"*, points out political scientist Benjamin Biard.

## THE PEOPLE'S PARTY AND THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY

On 9 June, the ÖVP suffered its first defeat in the European elections, as it was outstripped by the far right. The coalition led by outgoing Chancellor Karl

Nehammer has experienced many tense moments during this legislature. The most recent came when the Minister for Climate, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology, Leonore Gewessler (DG), voted in support of the Nature Restoration Act at the European Union's Council of Environment Ministers. The text, which is one of the pillars of the Green Deal for Europe, provides for the restoration of at least 20% of the European Union's maritime and land areas by 2030 and of all degraded ecosystems by 2050. The minister decided to go against the position defended by her government. *"When the health and happiness of future generations are at stake, we must take courageous decisions"*, she declared. The ÖVP is opposed to the Nature Restoration Act, citing problems of funding, food safety and agricultural production to justify its opposition. Outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer described his minister's action as *'unacceptable'* and *'unconstitutional'*. He nevertheless refused to step down and call early federal elections, saying he wanted to *'avoid chaos'*.

The ÖVP is also suffering as a result of Austria's poor economic performance. Unemployment is on the rise (5.3% forecast this year); the inflation rate (7.7% in 2023) is higher than the European average (6.4%) and economists are forecasting low growth for 2024. The country is also suffering because of the poor health of its German neighbour, to which it is closely linked.

Over time, the outgoing Chancellor's party has grown closer to the FPÖ on the issues of immigration, asylum and Islam, particularly when the two parties have governed together. The ÖVP supports the outsourcing of immigration and asylum policy to centres outside the borders of the European Union, and outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer says he backs the UK's plan to deport asylum seekers to 'safe' third countries. The ÖVP wants to make it impossible for immigrants to access the social benefits system before they have been resident for 5 years, and to confiscate asylum seekers' valuables when they arrive in Austria to cover the costs of their reception.

The SPÖ elected its new leader Andreas Babler on 3 June 2023. Babler warned of the danger of a government coalition led by the FPÖ. He has distanced

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himself from calls for a tougher stance on immigrants and asylum seekers, stricter border controls and the establishment of a Fortress Europe, all of which are on the agenda of his main opponents. *"Herbert Kickl is an admirer of Viktor Orban and he wants to introduce illiberal democracy into Austria (...) Viktor Orban's policy is that of a Europe of walls and isolation in which the right to asylum is violated,"* stressed Andreas Babler, who wants immigration to be managed in a more humane way.

The SPÖ wants to speed up the procedures for admitting asylum seekers and is calling for a fairer distribution of refugees in the Member States of the European Union, which means introducing sanctions for countries that refuse to accept them. 45 people applied for asylum in Hungary last year, compared with 60,000 in Austria. According to the Social Democratic Party, such measures would reduce the number of asylum applications by 75%. The party is also calling for the compulsory integration year for refugees to be extended so that they can familiarise themselves with the German language and the values of the Republic of Austria.

According to political analyst Peter Filzmaier, immigration and security issues will dominate the forthcoming election campaign. The issue of inflation, which is advantageous to the Social Democratic Party, is slipping down the agenda as a result of the pay increases granted in recent months.

### THE AUSTRIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Austrian parliament is bicameral. It comprises a lower chamber, the National Council (Nationalrat), made up of 183 members elected for 5-year terms, and an upper chamber, the Federal Council (Bundesrat) or chamber of the Länder, which has limited powers and comprises 64 representatives from the country's 9 Länder.

The members of the National Council are elected by majority vote in Vienna and Vorarlberg, and by proportional representation in the other 7 Länder. Each region appoints between 7 and 36 deputies. Each constituent has 2 votes: one for a party at national

level and the other for a particular candidate in a local constituency.

Seats are allocated using the Hare method in regional and provincial constituencies and the d'Hondt method at federal level. A party fielding a candidate throughout the country must obtain at least 4% of the votes cast or a direct mandate - i.e. around 25% of the votes in one of the 43 regional constituencies - before it can enter parliament.

On election day, it is up to each municipality to decide when the polls open and close. Finally, since 28 September 2008, Austrians have been able to vote in all elections from the age of 16.

Political parties with fewer than 3 seats on the National Council must collect the signatures of at least 2,600 voters to be able to take part in the legislative ballot. These signatures must come from the whole of Austria and be distributed as follows: a minimum of 500 in Lower Austria and Vienna, 400 in Upper Austria and Styria, 200 in Carinthia, Tyrol and Salzburg and 100 in Burgenland and Vorarlberg.

The Federal Council (Bundesrat) represents the Länder. Each Land is administered by a government (Landesregierung) and a Diet (Landtag). The Länder are responsible for all matters that are not expressly the responsibility of the federal state, such as regional planning, environmental protection, land use and transport. Each Land appoints (by proportional representation) a number of representatives in proportion to its population (at least 3) to sit in the upper chamber. Vienna, the most populous region, has 12 representatives in the Bundesrat. The presidency of the Bundesrat is held by a different Land every six months, in alphabetical order.

Finally, Austrians elect their President of the Republic by universal suffrage every 6 years. Alexander Van der Bellen, the outgoing head of state, was re-elected head of state in the first round of voting on 9 October 2022, winning 56.69% of the vote. He beat Walter Rosenkranz (FPÖ) and ombudsman of the National Council, who obtained 17.68% of the vote. The turnout was 65.19%.

5 political parties are represented in the current National Council:

- the People's Party (ÖVP), a centre-right party founded in 1945 and led by outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer, has 71 seats;
- the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), founded in 1889 and led since June 2023 by Andreas Babler, has 40 seats;
- the Freedom Party (FPÖ), a far-right party founded in 1956 and led by Herbert Kickl, has 31 seats;
- The Greens-Green Alternative (DG), a member of the outgoing government coalition and whose spokesman is Werner Kogler, has 26 seats;
- NEOS-New Austria (NEOS), a liberal party founded in 2012 and led by Beate Meinl-Reisinger, has 15 seats.

### Results of the last federal elections of 29 September 2019 in Austria

Turnout: 75.07%

Political parties	Number of votes won	Percentage of votes won	Number of seats
<b>Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)</b>	1 780 976	37.54	71
<b>Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)</b>	1 006 749	21.22	40
<b>Freedom Party (FPÖ)</b>	769 187	16.21	31
<b>The Greens/Alternative Green (DG)</b>	654 961	13.80	26
<b>NEOS-New Austria (NEOS)</b>	382 329	8.06	15
<b>Others</b>	150 294	3.17	0

Source : [https://www.bundeswahlen.gv.at/2019/card\\_total\\_ov\\_0.html](https://www.bundeswahlen.gv.at/2019/card_total_ov_0.html)

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