

European  
Elections monitor

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RESULTS

# Landslide in Austria as far-right party leads federal elections for the first time

The Freedom Party (FPÖ), led by Herbert Kickl, came out ahead in the Austrian federal elections on 29 September. This is the first time that the far-right party has won such an election. Dominating opinion polls since the end of 2022, it garnered 28.9% of the vote and won 57 seats (up 26 on the previous federal election on 29 September 2019). This is a higher result than that predicted by opinion polls and the highest in its history. *'This is undoubtedly an earthquake, a shock wave for the entire political class,'* said political scientist Thomas Hofer.

The People's Party (ÖVP) of outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer took second place with 26.3% of the vote and 51 elected members (down 20) in the National Council (*Nationalrat*), the lower house of parliament. It was followed by the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), led by Andreas Babler, with 21% of the vote and 41 seats (up 1).

The FPÖ's victory was largely due to the losses suffered by the two traditional parties. Similarly, the two parties in the outgoing government coalition, the ÖVP and the Greens-Green Alternative (DG), have each paid the price for the tensions of the current parliamentary term that is now ending, and have in some ways hindered each other.

NEOS-New Austria (NEOS), led by Beate Meinl-Reisinger, won 9.1% of the vote and 18 MPs (+3). It outstripped the Greens-Green Alternative (DG), members of the outgoing government coalition and whose spokesman is Werner Kogler, which recorded a sharp downturn: 8.2% of the vote and 16 seats (-10).

The turnout was high, at 74.90%, which is almost the same as that recorded at the previous federal elections on 29 September 2019 (75.07%).

## Federal elections in Austria

29th September 2024

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### Results of the federal elections of 29 September 2024 in Austria

Turnout: 74.90%

| Political Parties   | Number of votes won | % of votes won | Number of seats |
|---|---------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| <b>Freedom Party (FPÖ)</b>  | 1 403 497           | 28.9           | 57              |
| <b>People's Party (ÖVP)</b>   | 1 277 949           | 26.3           | 51              |
| <b>Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)</b>  | 1 025 753           | 21.2           | 41              |
| <b>NEOS-New Austria (NEOS)</b>  | 442 544             | 9.1            | 18              |
| <b>The Greens-Green Alternative (DG)</b>  | 397 679             | 8.2            | 16              |
| <b>Communist Party (KPÖ)</b>  | 110 439             | 2.35           | 0               |
| <b>The Beer Party (Bin in einer Reformbewegung/I'm in the reform movement) (BIER)</b> | 93 554              | 1.99           | 0               |
| <b>Madeleine Petrovic List</b>  | 26 927              | 0.57           | 0               |
| <b>Keine von denen Parti (None of those parties, KEINE),</b>                          | 26 444              | 0.56           | 0               |
| <b>Menschen, Freiheit, Grundrechte (People, Freedom, Basic Rights - MFG Austria)</b>  | 18 799              | 0.40           | 0               |
| <b>Stimmen gegen den Völkermord (Votes against genocide) (GAZA)</b>                   | 18 796              | 0.40           | 0               |
| <b>Die Gelben (The Yellows) (BGE)</b>   | 147                 | 0              | 0               |

Source : <https://www.bundeswahlen.gv.at/2024/nr>

Far-right leader Herbert Kickl succeeded in imposing his agenda during the election campaign. A divisive candidate and controversial figure, he nonetheless managed to bring people together and assert himself against a backdrop of rising nationalist forces across Europe.

The FPÖ has prospered by exploiting the dissatisfaction of a large proportion of Austrians with their politicians, a dissatisfaction that has been at its highest since 2018. He draws on the frustrations expressed by the population and delivers an anti-system rhetoric that appeals to a large proportion of Austrians who do not feel represented by the parties. A nationalist, he wants to protect the Austrian identity, which he claims is under threat, and he puts forward views that are hostile to immigration and Islam.

For example, his *'Fortress Austria, Fortress of Freedom'* programme plans to reduce the health care granted to illegal immigrants and asylum seekers to a bare minimum and he is opposed to

family reunification for migrants already in Austria. *'We need remigration'*, emphasises Herbert Kickl. *"Its driving force has always been criticism of the establishment, the European elites, immigration and insecurity"*, points out Benjamin Rojzman-Guiraud, a doctoral student in political science at the University of Lorraine.

In terms of foreign policy, the FPÖ is defending a position of neutrality in the war between Russia and Ukraine and is opposed to sanctions against Russia. Its leader also wants to ban the passage through Austria of weapons from other countries to Ukraine. He also wants to maintain supplies of Russian gas despite the European Union's commitment to withdraw from Russia by 2027.

The man who wants to be called *Volkskanzler* (people's chancellor), an expression used by Adolf Hitler, has attracted anti-vax campaigners with his conspiratorial remarks against anti-Covid 19 measures during the pandemic in 2020.

According to Reinhard Heinisch, Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Salzburg, “they are strong because, like other populists, they occupy a part of the spectrum where they have little competition. They oppose the positions of all the other parties and they are perfectly positioned to attract people who are disillusioned with democracy, disillusioned with the elites and who have grievances against mainstream politics”.

“Politically, Herbert Kickl differs from his predecessors in that he is less willing to compromise,” says Bernhard Weidinger, an expert on the far right at the Documentation Centre on Austrian Resistance (DÖW). “Not only has Herbert Kickl brought his party back to centre stage in record time, but he has done so without moderating his style, which sets him apart from his predecessors,” adds Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik, a political science researcher at the University of Vienna.

“The party has demonstrated that it has a solid structure and that it is rooted in society. It is not just the creature of a charismatic leader, as was long thought”, stresses Kai Arzheimer, professor of political science at the University of Mainz.

Outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer called for a vote ‘against radicalism, for stability, not chaos’. The two right-wing parties have nevertheless grown much closer in recent years. The ÖVP has taken up much of the FPÖ's anti-immigrant rhetoric, calling for tougher immigration rules, the establishment of detention centres for refugees in third countries, the deportation of certain refugees to Syria and Afghanistan, and the withdrawal of development aid to countries that refuse to take back their nationals.

For its part, the FPÖ has become more liberal, rejecting any increase in taxes and declaring itself in favour of reducing corporate taxes and payroll taxes, and cutting social security reimbursements.

Having come out ahead in the federal elections, will the far right be in a position to govern? Outgoing Chancellor Karl Nehammer repeated during the election campaign that he would never ally himself

with Herbert Kickl: “I have always said that with Herbert Kickl, who believes in conspiracy theories, who accuses the World Health Organisation (WHO) of being the next world government and the Davos meeting of being a prelude to world domination, we cannot run a state sensibly and responsibly. And I still stand by that.”

However, he has always made it clear that he is not per se opposed to a coalition government with the FPÖ, which he says ‘has some responsible people in it’. The FPÖ could therefore return to government as a minority partner. The two parties have led the country together on several occasions (between 2000 and 2005, then between 2017 and 2019).

“Having been in office since 1987, the ÖVP will not accept to be the minority partner in the government,” said Thomas Hofer, adding “preferring to join forces with the Social Democrats and the Liberals of NEOS-New Austria, a three-party format that would be unprecedented in Austria”.

Jérôme Ségal, a researcher at the Sorbonne University, considers the possibility of Herbert Kickl becoming Chancellor to be implausible. “The Chancellor is appointed by the President of the Republic. President Alexander Van der Bellen would never accept a government headed by a far-right figure. It's an established practice, but as far as I know, it's not in the Constitution”, declared the head of state back in 2023 when speaking about appointing the leader of the party that came out on top in the elections. In particular, the head of state criticised the far-right leader for his ‘anti-European’ stance and his refusal to condemn the invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces.

“Faced with the very clear message from the ballot boxes, we are reaching out to all parties”, declared Herbert Kickl when the results were announced. However, Kickl might prefer not to be part of the government. “Make no mistake, he could live with such a situation, which would allow him to cultivate his anti-elite message,” stressed Thomas Hofer. “Herbert Kickl is not really in a hurry to come to office because he is convinced that the FPÖ will continue to grow in strength,” says Patrick Moreau,

who adds: "So he prefers to wait and rely on this possible rise to power. And no doubt, in his own words, 'to continue his liberation struggle against the system'".

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