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Amid nothing going right, Austrians lean far-left

By focusing on former non-voters, the Communist Party has gained considerably in recent elections. The Social Democrats should draw their lessons

When the citizens of Salzburg came to the polls in late April, they did so in a dismal atmosphere amid the highest inflation rate in Western Europe. Election night saw the radical parties of both ends of the spectrum propelled to record numbers. The far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) received a local all-time-high of 25.7 per cent of the vote – an increase of 6.9 per cent. And the far-left Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ PLUS) surprised political observers by taking home 11.7 per cent of the vote. Meanwhile, the support for Austria's Conservative-Green government has declined to a 32 per cent approval rating as it failed to fight off the cost-of-living crisis. Its chosen scattergun approach of dishing out large aid packages to all citizens instead of implementing lasting price-lowering measures or targeted support has enabled the inflation rate to hover 2.5 percentage points above the Eurozone average. Consequently, leading economists warn of the potential long-term effects on the economy and social cohesion as the lower middle-class struggles to make ends meet. National polls show the far-right surging up to 30 per cent. Meanwhile, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) are caught up in intra-party primaries and linger at around 25 per cent in the polls, at best.

It probably really is the economy, stupid

Amidst this background of crisis, fringe parties stood to gain. As usual, the far-right FPÖ reaped citizens' discontent, but spectators were taken by surprise by the Communist Party achieving its best result in a regional or national election since 1945. Salzburg marks the second instant of communist electoral success in Austrian politics below the national level. After the striking success of Elke Kahr in the 2021 mayoral race in the city of Graz, the communists now govern in a coalition with the Greens and the Social Democrats. This success has been ascribed primarily to the personal integrity of Mayor Kahr and the party's legacy of delivering to their constituents on issues dear to the many people in the lower half

income group.

Specifically, certain distinct intra-organisational policies make the Communist Party's anti-establishment appeal believable. All party officials cap their own salaries at a net maximum of € 2,300 and donate the rest to a fund that finances rent deposits and subsidises heating bills for those who need it. Their headquarters, where they offer uncomplicated assistance in difficult times, is located in the city's most deprived district – and citizens show up for it. To this day, chances are the mayor will be there in person. The credibility that has been built this way for decades is unmatched, in particular around housing, an issue concerning almost everyone.

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Salzburg's Communist Party copied Kahr's playbook and ran a very similar campaign focused on the horrendously high rents that have plagued the city of Salzburg and surrounding regions since before the inflation crisis. With the likeable 34-year-old Kay-Michael Dankl in the lead, they specifically targeted those districts with the lowest voter turnout. They hammered the governing parties on the housing issue, calling out the unwillingness of the national government to implement a rent cap, and contributing to the convincing narrative that those in power are not doing enough. When the votes were eventually counted, the liberal party, hitherto in charge of housing, missed the 5 per cent mark to make it back into the regional parliament. A full third of the Communist Party's votes came from previous non-voters, driving the increase in turnout by 6 percentage points to 71 per cent.

It may pay off to target non-voters

Like in many European democracies, voter turnout in Austria has been declining for the past decades, and it does so primarily among low-income groups and lower social classes. In Austria, non-voters make up to 20-25 per cent in national elections and up to 40 per cent in regional elections. Salzburg, for instance, has seen a steady decline in turnout during regional elections – from 77 per cent in 2004 to 65 per cent in 2018. This downward trend has now been halted, even reversed. Yet, the fact that non-voters have become so numerous that they, at times, constitute the biggest bloc has largely been ignored in political debates.

For decades now, the focus has been on gaining the votes of those who abandon the large mainstream parties for the newer liberal, green, far-right and other parties on the fringes. This is puzzling since targeting non-voters could pay off electorally. Had the Social Democrats convinced only a fifth of non-voters in the Salzburg election, it would have amounted to a whopping 6.3 per cent bump in their overall support – an amount that often decides elections.

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The success of the KPÖ in acquiring voters that felt disenfranchised also has implications for the ongoing Social Democrat intra-party primaries. Its poll among members did not yield a deciding result as all three contenders took in roughly a third of the vote. Party leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner came in a close third and resigned as a consequence. The contest now heads to the party conference where delegates decide between the two remaining contestants. On the hand, there is Hans-Peter-Doskozil, the governor of the Eastern province of Burgenland, who runs on the merits of his electoral record and champions a more restrictive immigration course, coupled with left-wing social and economic policies. His contender is Andreas Babler, the mayor of an industrial town home to the biggest refugee reception centre in the country. He runs a grass-roots campaign with decidedly progressive stances on immigration, social and welfare policies. Babler engages in a similar type of politics and winning formula as Dankl: a combination of unequivocal leftist policies, personal credibility, citizen engagement and a communication style centred on those who think politics is not for them (anymore). Both contestants represent a certain wing of the SPÖ. Whoever prevails is expected to influence the political direction of the party accordingly.

Breaking up is an option

What happens if Doskozil prevails? In this scenario, some expect an emergence of a new nation-wide far-left party platform spurred by the success of the KPÖ in Salzburg. So far, the far-left vote has been contained by the far-left party wings within the Social Democrats and the Greens, where they regularly succumb to the respective right wings. In

one such intra-party fight some years ago, the Greens kicked out parts of their youth organisation, some of which found new shelter in the Communist Party. Among them: Kay-Michael Dankl.

Could something similar happen with the left wing within the Social Democrats? Though Babler has ruled out leaving the party if he loses at the convention, the 9,000 new party members who mostly joined to vote for him in the primaries might take a different stance.

And what will happen if Babler wins? He would likely draw supporters from the Communist Party and the Greens to the point of preventing the former from making it into Parliament. And, crucially, he would likely win back votes from the disenfranchised and non-voters. First surveys suggest that both under Babler and Doskozil, breaking the conservative-far-right majority is within striking reach for a coalition led by the Social Democrats. 609 delegates at the party's convention on 3 June will decide. Regardless of the outcome, the debate on how to win back votes from the right wing has held the discourse within the Social Democratic Party hostage for decades. A focus on reengaging the disenfranchised and non-voters could fundamentally change this equation.

Read another view on the Social Democrats in Austria here.



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