

Austria

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Introduction

Following World War I, Austria emerged as a federal republic under the influence of the Allied Powers. It was created after the signing of the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye on 10 September 1919 (Jelavich, 1987). The collapse of the Habsburgs led to the dissolution of the empire, and dissatisfied Austrian elites had to reluctantly adopt a new institutional framework within significantly more modest borders than those previously held. The country was economically devastated and had three active cleavages that cut across Austrian society: clerical, class and ethnic cleavage (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: p. 23). This context led to political conflicts between parties that often erupted into violence throughout the interwar period. Two major paramilitary forces, the Republikanischer Schutzbund on the left and the Heimwehr on the right, frequently clashed each other. In principle, the country was politically divided between rural Austria and urban Vienna (Jelavich, 1987).

On October 1, 1920, Austria enacted a new constitution that prescribed a bicameral legislature. The upper house, the Federal Council, consisted of representatives from federal states. In addition, the lower house or National Council, consisted of 165 members elected through universal elections featuring proportional representation (McHale and Skowronski, 1983). Executive authority is jointly held by the federal president and the cabinet (Wende, 1981). The president, elected through a popular vote for a six-year term, and holds the power to dissolve parliament within the four-year legislative period. He is also authorized to call for new elections. The head of government is the federal chancellor, who is appointed by the president. However, it's important to note that the parliamentary majority effectively influences the president's choice. The chancellor then further nominates other cabinet members, and their official appointments are made by the president.

Elections

Austria voted 5 times in the interwar period, including the Constituent Assembly elections: in 1919, 1920, 1923, 1927 and 1930. Members of the Constituent National Assembly were elected through proportional representation in multi-member constituencies ranging from four to nine seats each. The Constituent Assembly elections were the first time that all women were granted the right to vote (Gamper, 2021). Additionally, German citizens Sudeten Germans in the newly-formed Czechoslovakia were also permitted to participate in the elections, despite objections from Czechoslovakia (Jelavich, 1987)

16 February 1919

The Constituent National Assembly for German-Austria, elected on February 16, 1919. The first parliament in Austrian history to witness the free and equal participation of both women and men (Gamper, 2021). On March 4, 1919, it succeeded the Provisional National Assembly, previously established through the 1911 Reichsrat elections. During its mandate, the Constituent National Assembly enacted significant measures, including the passage of the Habsburg Law, the ratification of the Treaty of Saint-Germain—sealing the disintegration of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire—and the formal declaration of Austria’s independence from Germany (Österreichische Nationalversammlung, 1920). In its concluding session on October 1, 1920, the assembly approved the Federal Constitution

The Social Democrats secured the highest number of seats, 72, making them the largest single party. The coalition around the Christian Social Party followed with 69 seats, while the German Nationalists obtained 26 seats (Graham, 1930; Nohlen and Stöver, 2010). The Social Democrat Karl Renner was elected as the first State Chancellor of German-Austria in October 1918

17 October 1920

The next elections for Austrian parliament took place on October 17, 1920. This was the first regular voting following the adoption of the new constitution just two weeks earlier.

The Christian Social Party emerged victorious now, securing 85 out of the 183 seats, with a voter turnout of 80%. The Social Democrats were second securing 69 seats (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010; Graham, 1930). After the election, the Christian Social Party formed the government with nationalist and anti-semitic Greater German People's Party.

21 October 1923

Ahead of the 1923 elections, the Social Democrats harshly criticized the government's austerity measures, emphasizing their detrimental impact on civil servants and workers (Kriechbaumer, 2001). They opposed planned reductions in health and unemployment insurance, as well as expressed concern about job security. Another focal point of criticism was the perceived excessive influence of the Roman Catholic Church on Austrian politics. Additionally, election posters were deployed against the rising Austrian National Socialists and the resurgence of Austrian monarchism. On the other hand, the Greater German People's Party ran a blatantly anti-Semitic election campaign. They advocated for the disenfranchisement of what they claimed were '50.000 Eastern Jews'. Accusing the Social Democrats, they asserted that the party aimed to gradually subject the Viennese population to Jews and Czechs. Criticism of the anti-Semitism displayed by the Greater Germans and the Landbund primarily came from the Jewish electoral community, which cautioned against a surge in anti-Jewish sentiment in Austria (Kriechbaumer, 2001).

The parliamentary elections took place on 21 October 1923. The result was a victory for the Christian Social Party, which won 82 of the 165 seats. Voter turnout was 87.0% (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010; Graham, 1930).

24 April 1927

In 1927, it was a busy election year with both parliamentary and state elections taking place. State elections were also held Burgenland, Lower Austria, Carinthia, Styria and Vienna. There were also numerous local council elections. The christian socialists created a coalition list with nationalist and anti-Semitic parties and run under the name 'Unity List' (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010). The Social Democrats campaigned criticizing

high unemployment and inflation under conservative and nationalist government led by Ignaz Seipel (Kriechbaumer, 2001).

Once again, the social democrats secured the second position, getting approximately 42% of the popular vote. The nationalist coalition, led by the Christian Social Party, emerged victorious, claiming the top spot with roughly 48% of the vote. (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010; Graham, 1930)

9 November 1930

The campaign that preceded these elections featured a very intense political conflict between two political camps: social democrats and conservatives (Kriechbaumer, 2001). The election in 1930 marked the final parliamentary elections in the First Austrian Republic, i.e., the 1930 National Council election was the last before the Austrofascist coup on March 4, 1933 when Dörfel proclaimed the 'self-elimination of parliament' (Tálos and Neugebauer, 2005). Compared to the previous elections, there was a slight shift in the balance of power, as the social democrats secured the highest vote share at 41%, with the Christian Social Party finishing in second place with 35% (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010; Graham, 1930). Voter turnout was 90.5%

Parties

Social Democratic Party of Austria

The Social Democratic Party of Austria or Sozialdemokratischen Partei Österreichs wanted a union with Germany with the goal to gain more power in order to advance the desired socialist revolution. It was strictly anti-Habsburg and it was revolutionary (Maderthaner and Peterson, 1985). Social Democrats were very dismissive and almost hostile towards the catholic church which made them lose support among the petite-bourgeois. The party was very left-wing at the time and almost marxist. It had its paramilitary organisation: Republikanischer Schutzbund. Main Goal: a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat (Maderthaner and Peterson, 1985). The party introduced important reforms, such as the

8 hour work day. It had two wings: a leftist, the dominant one and a reformist, more moderate wing under the leadership of Karl Renner (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: p. 49)

Christian Social Party

This was a conservative right-wing party. Austrian People's Party emerged out of it. Austrofascism dominated under Engelbert Doofuss, until then most of the party belonged to the fatherland front (Gehler and Kaiser, 2004). The party had divergent economic interests, it was established as a union of economic and cultural associations, aimed to represent various social and economic groups. It was a highly decentralized party and had corporate vision of the Austrian society (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: p. 27).

Agrarian League

The Agrarian League or Rural Federation (Landbund für Österreich) was an association that represented of the rural population. The party was a protestant, anti-Marxist, anti-fascist association of agrarian groupings that was in in favour of Austro-German unification (Klösch, 2013). It brought together farmers who were dissatisfied with what the Austrian People's Party had to offer. However, its focus solely on agrarian interest limited its political potential (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: p. 27). As they were supportive of the corporatist state, they joined the Fatherland Front in the 1930s.

Greater German People's Party

The Greater German People's Party or Pan-German People's Party (Großdeutsche Volkspartei) was a German nationalist and antisemitic organisation (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: p. 46). After the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, 17 different groupings of Germany nationalist and liberal parties formed a a federation called Großdeutsche Vereinigung, that later became one party (Albrich et al., 2018). The party drawn support from urban middle class, public sector employees, bureaucrats, businesses and students (Jelavich, 1987; McHale and Skowronski, 1983). Economically, they supported free trade, politically —

they were a antimarxist nationalist party in favour of unification with Germany (Pauley, 1998; McHale and Skowronski, 1983).

Homeland Bloc

Homeland Bloc is the result of the Home Defence League's (Heimwehr) attempt to form a legitimate political organization (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: p. 40). The influence of the military was widespread, the bloc supported authoritarianism was nationalist, antisemitic, antimarxist and antiliberal. It had support from industry circles, large landowners and Italian Fascists. The bloc rejected democracy and had corporatist world-view (McHale and Skowronski, 1983). They participated in February Uprising in 1934 (Wiltschegg, 1985). Eventually, the bloc split into a monarchistic and German-nationalist wing.

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