


Was Austria's presidential election really a vote against populism?

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Austria's presidential election on 4 December saw a surprisingly large victory for Alexander Van der Bellen over Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the populist right-wing FPÖ. However, as [Eva Zeglovits](#), [Hubert Sickinger](#) and [Jakob-Moritz Eberl](#) write, the level of support received by Hofer suggests the FPÖ could nevertheless be well placed to win the next federal elections.



Vienna was crowded with journalists on Sunday, 4 December. A president was to be elected and the race between independent candidate Alexander Van der Bellen, a former leader of the Austrian Green party, and Norbert Hofer, candidate of the FPÖ, the successful far-right populist party, was assumed to be close. The journalists from all over the world had only one question on their mind: Was Austria to follow the pattern of the UK voting for Brexit and the US electing Trump?



An election full of surprises

The Austrian president is the head of the state and the constitution theoretically entrusts him with a lot of power, in particular when it comes to appointing the chancellor and the members of government. In practice, the function is more ceremonial: most of the president's acts take place on the advice of the government. Most citizens consider the president as a representative of Austria abroad and a moral authority within the country.



The president is elected directly by the people. Every candidate who manages to collect 6,000 signatures by eligible voters runs in the first round. If neither candidate gets an absolute majority, the two most successful candidates get to run in the second round. The presidential election in 2016 turned out to be full of superlatives and surprises, starting with the first round on April 24, 2016.

Table 1: Result in the first round of the 2016 Austrian presidential election

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Function or former function</i>	<i>Vote share (%)</i>
Norbert Hofer	FPÖ, 3rd president of parliament	35.1
Alexander Van der Bellen	Former Green party leader until 2009	21.3
Irmgard Griss	Former president of the Supreme Court, independent	18.9
Rudolf Hundstorfer	SPÖ, former president of the trade unions, then Minister of Social affairs	11.3
Andreas Khol	ÖVP, former president of ÖVP parliamentary party group, then President of Parliament until 2006, Head of ÖVP pensioners organisation	11.1
Richard Lugner	Entrepreneur, independent	2.3

Note: Vote share rounded to first decimal place.

Alexander Van der Bellen performed very well in the opinion polls and was therefore largely seen as the favourite for the first round of the election. It was a big surprise when FPÖ-candidate Norbert Hofer got nearly 1.5 million votes in and thus was by far the most successful candidate with 35% of valid votes. Van der Bellen was second with a wide margin, getting less than one million votes or 21%. Another surprise was that Van der Bellen was closely followed by Irmgard Griss in third place (19%), another independent candidate.

But the biggest surprise was probably that the candidates of the SPÖ and ÖVP, both well-known politicians, failed to get past the first round. This failure in the first round of the presidential elections was the expression of Austrians' strong dissatisfaction with the performance of their government. The former "grand coalition" that had never been less "grand" than now had lost all of its former attraction as a bringer of stability – instead it was perceived as bringing Austria not towards stability, but to a standstill. The mortifying results in the first round led to turbulences in particular in the SPÖ, which ended in the resignation of Chancellor Werner Faymann and the appointment of newcomer Christian Kern.

Thus, another four weeks of campaigning brought an increasing polarisation (which also led to an unexpected increase in voter turnout from 68.5% to 72.7%). For the first time, a lot of voters had to choose between the two extremes of the Austrian political spectrum: a green left-wing and a right-wing candidate, which made it more difficult for the voters in the middle.

The Hofer campaign followed a clear anti-pluralistic and anti-elite message. The second election in May 2016 again held another surprise as the number of absentee ballots was higher than ever before (16.6% of all votes compared to 12.5% in the first round). Absentee voting had been introduced in its current form in 2007, and had become more and more popular ever since. Election day and the day after became a real thriller, as Alexander Van der Bellen won by the slightest margin of around 30,000 votes and was called the winner only after all absentee ballots had been counted. Austria was heading for its first Green president, or so everyone believed.

However, the FPÖ contested the result, citing several faults in the counting of absentee votes, among other reasons. The FPÖ argued that absentee voting was prone to being manipulated in favour of Van der Bellen. Conspiracy theories began to spread on social media. In addition to the anti-pluralistic and anti-elite claim, the campaign now embraced a third, anti-democratic claim: a lost election must be a rigged election.

The Constitutional Court surprised everyone by deciding to annul the complete election. This has never happened before in Austria. In their reasoning, the court claimed that there had been a theoretical chance of manipulation of thousands of votes, although [statistical analysis](#) indicated that a manipulation was highly unlikely. Although the vast majority of voters did not believe there had been manipulation, people agreed that rules were not followed properly everywhere, but this was rather interpreted as typical bureaucratic sloppiness, not as purposeful manipulation of the election. Nevertheless, the court had reached its verdict.

A new date was set for 2 October. The summer months saw Brexit, and suddenly many Austrians began to [reconsider their Euroscepticism](#). As the EU became more popular than it had been in a decade, the Van der Bellen campaign picked up on the issue and attacked Hofer for openly considering an "Öxit" referendum.

But, yet another turbulence was to occur before Election Day. Again, it focused on absentee ballots. Due to some production error – "glue-gate" – the absentee ballots did not fulfil the necessary standards, and the re-run election had to be postponed. Austrians took it with humour, and the campaigns were yet again to be prolonged until 4 December.

With the election now taking place after the US-election, the question was raised as to whether the electoral success of Donald Trump would spin things in favour of Hofer, seeing that a lot parallels had been drawn between the two candidates, or instead if this would benefit Van der Bellen by mobilising the opponents of right wing populism. In the end, turnout on Election Day again increased and Van der Bellen's success with a margin of 7.6 percentage points was relatively clear cut.

Table 2: Result of the two second rounds of the 2016 Austrian presidential election

	22 May (%)	4 December (%)
Alexander Van der Bellen	50.4	53.8
Norbert Hofer	49.6	46.2
Voter turnout	72.7	74.2

Note: Percentages rounded to first decimal place.

Austria witnessed a huge gender gap – a clear majority of women voted in favour of Van der Bellen, with men in favour of Hofer – and a rural/urban divide, with all the bigger cities voting for Van der Bellen. In Vienna, where one in five voters live, more than 65% backed Van der Bellen. The rural areas were mainly in favour of Hofer.

Campaign factors

While Hofer's campaign was funded and managed by the FPÖ itself (billboard and newspaper advertisements were completely in line with the usual FPÖ style), Van der Bellen had to set up an independent campaign organisation. Although the Green party mainly funded the first and the runoff election campaign in April and May, his campaign had to set up funds independently for the repeated election in December.

This turned out to be quite successful – both campaigns had to spend at least around 7 million euros from February until December. Because the Green party is relatively small, the Van der Bellen campaign also had to rely strongly on independent grass roots activities and, in the runoff, it was partially supported by some regional party organisations and many prominent former and current politicians mainly from the SPÖ but also the ÖVP and others.

The key events of any nation-wide election in Austria are candidate discussions hosted by the public broadcaster ORF as well as smaller commercial channels Puls4 and ATV. Hofer's performance during the TV-debates was certainly a key factor for his surprising victory in the first round. However, his rhetorical techniques were increasingly criticised as “manipulative” and “destructive” throughout the second rounds of the presidential election.

Candidates and parties also adopted social media as the main instruments of their campaigns. The FPÖ, in particular, had built up a strong Facebook presence to communicate its own unmediated messages without having to rely on traditional media. On social media, the FPÖ performed an obvious “double strategy”: while Norbert Hofer mainly posted “positive” messages, other FPÖ functionaries took up the task of attacking his rival. Only in the very last weeks in November did the Van der Bellen campaign manage to catch up with their own messages.

It would be wrong to call it the dirtiest or the most polarised campaign ever seen in Austria, as the Waldheim campaign in 1986 had been even more polarised and dirty as well. But the last weeks of the election campaign brought a few blows below the belt. While Hofer was accused of being a Nazi or made fun of because of his disability, Van der Bellen's late father was also accused of Nazism and the candidate himself of being either a Communist or Soviet spy.

What comes next?

Alexander van der Bellen can be expected to be a pro-European level-headed president and a trustworthy partner for other heads of state. In domestic politics, he is expected to sustain the traditional patterns to focus on the ceremonial and moral role and not to make use of the constitutional powers of the federal president.

Within Austria, however, political actors from the government parties will have to take stock. They will need to assess how an electorate where 47% voted for Hofer can be prevented from making the FPÖ the strongest party in Austria

in the next federal elections. The step between voting for Van der Bellen and voting for the Greens might be wide. The step between voting for Hofer and voting for the FPÖ is much smaller.

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