

Austria's presidential race is heading for a third round – here are the lessons from the first two

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Austria is due to hold a rerun of its presidential election on 2 October, following the Constitutional Court of Austria's decision to annul Alexander Van der Bellen's narrow victory in May. [Mario Gavenda](#) and [Resul Umit](#) assess the lessons that can be taken from the first election. They note that concerns over Brexit may have strengthened the appeal of the pro-EU Van der Bellen, but that recent terrorist incidents could also see support drift toward the Freedom Party's candidate Norbert Hofer.



With the 2016 Austrian presidential election, '[one of Europe's most steadfastly dull countries has suddenly turned interesting](#)'. It put the country's characteristically stable political system under an unprecedented challenge, opened the traditionally ceremonial role of Austria's presidency to debate, and removed the two parties that created this stability — who had shared the presidential post between themselves since 1945 — from the race after the first round.



With the social-democratic (SPÖ) and centre-right (ÖVP) candidates and two further independents eliminated, former Green leader Alexander Van der Bellen and Norbert Hofer of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) confronted each other in the second run. In one of the closest presidential elections in recent memory, Austrians chose a Green over a far-right president on 22 May.

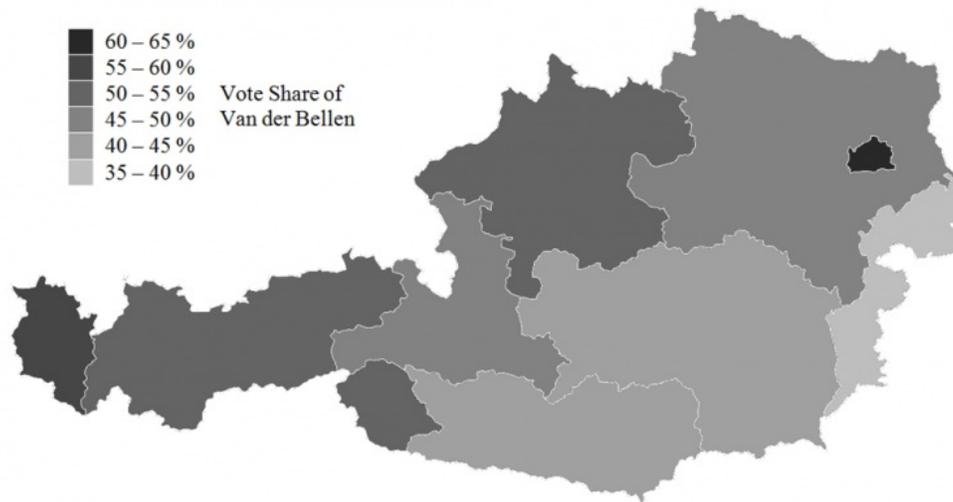
If all this were not interesting enough, the Austrian Constitutional Court ruled days before the inauguration ceremony that the second round of the election was to be repeated in its entirety in all of Austria. While there was no indication of any electoral fraud, the Court found [some procedural mistakes](#) in the second round of the election. The rerun has been set for 2 October.

Lessons from the first election

Following the second round, Austria was often described as '[a country divided](#)' by many commentators emphasising the near 50–50 split between the candidates; Van der Bellen won the election with only 30,863 votes more than Norbert Hofer. In other words, less than 0.5 per cent of the eligible voters decided the Austrian president. In [a recently published study](#), we show that there are at least two further ways that these results divided the country: between south-east and north-west regions as well as between urban cities and rural areas.

As Figure 1 shows, Van der Bellen received a majority of votes in the two westernmost provinces of Vorarlberg (58.6 per cent) and Tyrol (51.4 per cent), as well as in Upper Austria (51.3 per cent) in the north, while his weakest results were in the eastern and southern provinces of Burgenland (38.6 per cent), Styria (43.8 per cent) and Carinthia (41.9 per cent). The western provinces that are known as conservative strongholds with a traditionally weak left have produced a Green majority. On the other hand, the three mentioned regions with the strongest FPÖ result saw the social democrats win a plurality of votes in the last regional elections.

Figure 1: Vote share for Alexander Van der Bellen in the second round of the 2016 Austrian presidential election (May)



Note: For full results see [here](#).

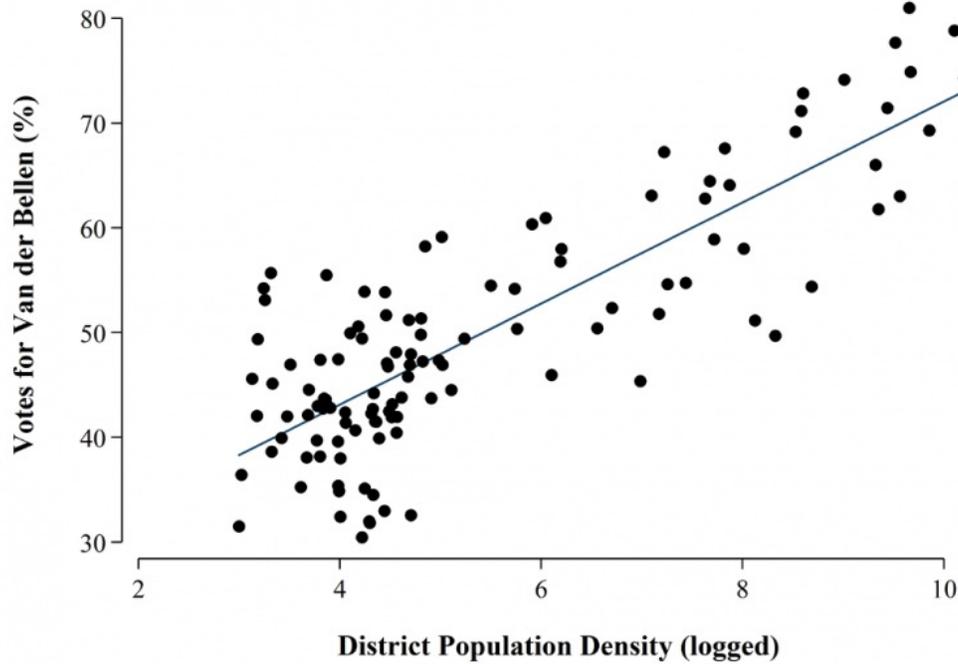
One element of the explanation seems to lie in the fact that Hofer is a resident of the eastern province of Burgenland, while Van der Bellen hails from an alpine valley town in Tyrol. Beyond this personal element, the state of Styria in the country's south-east, is an instructive case for the observed transformation of the Austrian party system. Traditionally dominated by the Christian-democratic ÖVP, the region nonetheless has a sizeable working class base and social-democratic tradition due to the existence of a number of old heavy-industrial towns. Beginning in the 2000s, the province became a battleground in which the ÖVP, the SPÖ and even the FPÖ have in turn managed to win a plurality of votes. This increased electoral volatility points to an ongoing *dealignment* of both working class and rural constituencies, both of which leaned towards the FPÖ candidate in the present presidential election.

Another interesting aspect — that must remain speculative at this point — is the relationship between these results and the issue of European integration. In line with his party, Hofer took a critical stand on the EU for its handling of the refugee question and on grounds of national sovereignty, while Van der Bellen made an explicit case for more integration. The fact that the easternmost areas voted more strongly for the Eurosceptic candidate than the west suggests that Austrian regions perceive the benefits and threats from European integration differently due to their vicinity to highly disparate EU members.

Vienna looms large as an exception to this regional disparity. In addition to being one of the nine states of Austria, Vienna is the capital and the largest city in the country — which might explain why it is different. Here we find a second important geographical divide at play, notably a conspicuous disparity between urban and rural areas. The urban-rural divide represents one of the long-standing cleavages in Austrian politics. The country's industrialised urban areas have traditionally voted left, while the rural areas were dominated by conservative forces, mostly due to Catholic and farming constituencies. The divide is slightly altered but not fundamentally transformed in this particular contest, with the Green candidate performing well among the urban left and the FPÖ candidate winning over conservative voters in the countryside.

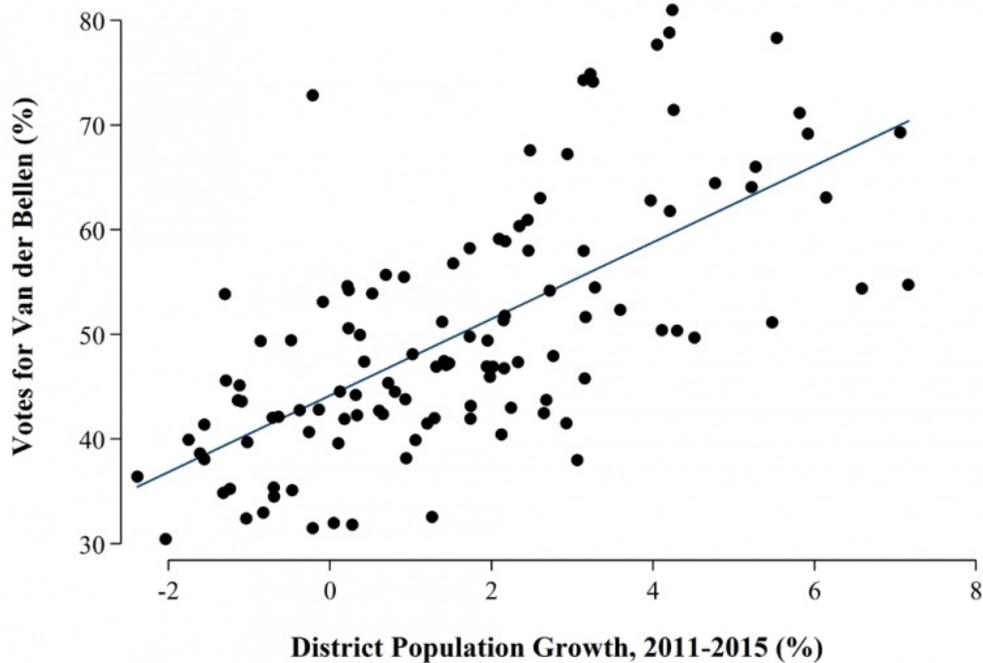
The results show that Van der Bellen won in 37 out of the 40 most densely populated districts of Austria. The only exceptions were Krems (*Land*) in Lower Austria, Villach (*Stadt*) in Carinthia and Simmering in Vienna. Van der Bellen almost won the latter as well, but eventually fell short with 49.7 per cent of the votes in this district. As Figure 2 shows, Van der Bellen's vote share indeed grows steadily with the degree of urbanisation of a district, measured by population density and population growth. Van der Bellen did not simply win in urban districts; he won with a higher percentage of votes in more densely populated and faster growing districts.

Figure 2a: Relationship between population density and support for Van der Bellen in the second round



Note: For more information, see the authors' accompanying [journal article](#).

Figure 2b: Relationship between population growth and support for Van der Bellen in the second round



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Linking sociological and regional dynamics may provide the basis for an explanation. Urban areas attract populations with ongoing or completed higher education, while many rural areas record negative demographical

trends. It was found that particularly young women (who gave Van der Bellen [67 per cent](#) support) show a [tendency](#) to move from the countryside to the cities, leaving a surplus of men in rural districts. Figure 2b indicates that districts with a negative rate of population growth report consistently low vote shares for the Green candidate, frequently in the range between 30 per cent and 40 per cent.

The ‘third round’

What do our findings tell us about the prospects for the rerun of the second round of the election? On the one hand, the political and economic fallout from the Brexit referendum may make Austrians wary of similar demands from Hofer and his FPÖ. This may present the pro-EU Van der Bellen with an asset in the campaign and the situation has already led to [ambiguous statements by Hofer](#). On the other hand, the persistence of violent incidents across Europe may heighten the appeal of Hofer’s demands for national demarcation.

As to the geographical dynamics we describe above, it is to be expected that both candidates will attempt to mobilise their respective strongholds to turn out again. At the same time, Hofer could target the city of Vienna more specifically in his campaign. Indeed, the city had [previously been](#) the party’s main battleground against the social democrats and Hofer’s weak showing with only 36.7 per cent of the votes in May came as a surprise to many. Van der Bellen’s weakness outside the urban centres was also reflected in the limited campaigning efforts made there. Whether more resources can and will be effectively deployed to win over rural voters is however at least uncertain at this stage.

*For more information on this topic, see the authors’ [recent article](#) in *Regional & Federal Studies*.*

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the authors

Mario Gavenda – *Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna*

[Mario Gavenda](#) is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna. His current research deals with the politicisation of European integration and its impact on party positions and intra-party politics.



Resul Umit – *Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna*

[Resul Umit](#) is a final year PhD candidate at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna. He works on elections, legislative behaviour, and particularly the communication between members of parliaments and their constituents.



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