

Austria after the presidential election: a country divided

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Alexander Van der Bellen won Austria's presidential election on 22 May, defeating Norbert Hofer, who would have become the EU's first far-right head of state. [Fabio Wolkenstein](#) writes that a key turning point in the campaign was the resignation of Austria's Chancellor, Werner Faymann, and that the country is now a divided one with the electorate split between two radically different visions of society.



Austrian politics is seldom exciting. The 2016 presidential election was a rare exception. Commentators around the world predicted Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the right-wing populist FPÖ, to win the second round of the election, becoming the first democratically elected right-wing populist head of state in western Europe.

Some saw in this a potential “[warning to the West](#),” an election that could raise the support of anti-establishment parties across established democracies. But in the end, Hofer's centre-left opponent, Alexander Van der Bellen, narrowly won the race. Very narrowly, in fact: it was only the 750,000 postal votes that decided the election in favour of Van der Bellen.

This result is surprising given that Van der Bellen was entering the second round campaign with his back to the wall. After Hofer won the first round last month with a wide margin, few observers expected the 72-year-old economics professor, who is uncharismatic and a mediocre public speaker, to prevail. But Van der Bellen's campaign gained momentum in the final weeks before the election.

What certainly helped was that the campaign was backed by a broad coalition of public figures, which included many artists and former politicians from different political parties. It also helped that, across Austria, many citizens who feared Hofer's victory actively campaigned for Van der Bellen, both on social media and in their neighbourhoods.

However, chief among the factors that changed the dynamics of the campaign in Van der Bellen's favour was the resignation of the wildly unpopular Social Democrat Chancellor Werner Faymann and his replacement by Christian Kern, previously the head of Austria's federal railway company ÖBB.

Kern, a straight-talking managerial type, managed to convey a credible commitment to change the status quo and lead the government in a constructive and 'goal-oriented' fashion. In doing so, he was able to soften the impact of protest voting on the election result, which would arguably have given Hofer a few percent more and so won him the election. That is to say, had Faymann not resigned, Hofer would have most likely been the election winner.

Progressives, liberals and moderate conservatives may be tempted to celebrate the final election result as a triumph of reason and liberal values, even if Van der Bellen's victory was not exactly a comfortable one. But there is little reason for complacency. First, the election indicates the deep polarisation that pervades Austrian society. Recall that Hofer and Van der Bellen represent the opposite poles of the Austrian political spectrum.

Hofer promotes closed borders, more national sovereignty, social conservatism and cultural homogeneity, while Van der Bellen is committed to a liberal border regime, an integrated Europe, and similar policies. These positions reflect radically different visions of society, and even if those voting for one of the respective candidates were driven mainly by the aim of preventing the victory of the other, they probably didn't vote for a candidate whose principles and goals they completely disagree with either.

At the very least, then, the future president of Austria, and indeed Chancellor Kern's government, will have to invest considerable efforts and energies into unifying the country. The way forward here is not co-opting the FPÖ's ideas – the current government has done that already, in particular when it comes to [refugee and asylum policy](#). Rather, it must be acknowledged that the demands and orientations of those voting for the FPÖ are not always or necessarily illegitimate.

In particular, concerns related to internal security and the risks of TTIP must be discussed, rather than discredited, without thereby adopting the language of the FPÖ or relativising the hard right background of many of its elites. The point is simply this: if there cannot be reasonable discussion and debate about alternative visions for society, it is hard to see how democratic rule-making can succeed and a sense of solidarity among citizens can be sustained in the long run.

And there is a second reason for why one should be cautious when celebrating Van der Bellen's election victory: now that Norbert Hofer didn't become president, he could possibly become the FPÖ's *Spitzenkandidat* in the 2018 general election. This means the political establishment could be in more serious trouble than already anticipated.

Though he was virtually unknown before the presidential elections, Hofer has proven to be an excellent campaigner capable of mobilising support far beyond his party's core electorate. Often called the "friendly face" of the FPÖ, he is arguably better placed than anyone else in his party to attract voters from the centre-right ÖVP and the Social Democrats.

In the end, however, the FPÖ's prospects of success in 2018 will depend mainly on the ability of the newly elected president and the current government to counteract the polarisation that cuts so deeply through Austrian society. This is now the main challenge facing Austria's political establishment.

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