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FROM STATE PARTY TO PARTY CRISIS

The Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)

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7.1 Introduction

Social scientific analysis of current developments in Austrian political parties is a desideratum. This applies not least to the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ). The last substantial publications about the party date back many years and are now inevitably outdated (cf. Ucakar 2006, Müller 1996). While recent political science in Austria has produced little research on political parties, international comparative studies also usually lack relevant sections on Austria.¹ Of course, this does not mean that Austrian social democracy is not a publication topic: on the contrary, calls and appeals for political reorientation (Nowotny 2016; Scheiber 2019; Zeiler 2019), autobiographically inspired reflections from the party's internal perspective (Cap 2018), biographies of its leaders (Petritsch 2010; Misik and Kern 2017), or the presentation of the party's historical "success story" (Androsch et al. 2020) appear at regular intervals. However, most of these publications hardly claim to be critical in terms of social scientific analysis. Even the current book by political scientist Anton Pelinka (2020) is more of a polemic.

The following essay first sets out some general historical lines of development and national characteristics before focusing on the last 20 years, i.e. the period since the turn of the millennium. Since the Austrian example in particular has received little attention in the literature compared to others, I will go into more detail about the historical context and peculiarities in the party history of the SPÖ. The central question concerns the reasons for the almost uninterrupted decline of the SPÖ since the 1980s, both in terms of elections and members. As in other European countries, the former core voter group of social democracy, the working class, has become considerably smaller. Moreover, for various reasons, the party ties of workers to social democracy have weakened without new voter groups being won over to any significant extent. The relatively strong

unity of the party has been lost through numerous election defeats and a steady decline in membership. Internal conflicts show that the long-standing government and state party has fallen into a party crisis.

7.2 Austrian Peculiarities

In contrast to many other European countries, no politically relevant party to the Left of the Social Democrats has ever been able to establish itself in Austria. The Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ), which was founded as early as 1918, was unable to embody a serious alternative as a workers' party either in the First Republic (1918–1933) or, perhaps apart from the early years, in the Second Republic (since 1945) (Ehmer 1991; Ehmer 1995). The Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDAP) was an extremely strong organization. A unified theory and policy of socialism was considered a decisive feature of its programmatic basis, Austro-Marxism (Sandner 2018, 112–113). In the national elections between 1919 and 1930,² it won between 36 and 42 percent of the vote, and at its peak had over 1.5 million votes. Its highest membership level in the interwar period was in 1929 with 713,834 (Maderthaner 1995: 180). With an Austrian population of around 6.5 million, this indicates an extremely high level of membership, which is almost unique by international comparison. This also applied for several decades in the Second Republic. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that a more or less continuous downward trend began, which continues since. While the SPÖ still had more than 720,000 members at the end of the 1970s, today it probably has less than 160,000.³

In the Second Republic, the SPÖ was the governing party for several decades—in contrast to its almost permanent opposition role in the interwar period (cf. 3.1). The party's character as a state-supporting party, which had developed over decades of practice, was also confirmed in the federal presidential elections. In this direct popular election of individuals, in which the most promising candidates were usually nominated either by the SPÖ or the ÖVP, six of the nine office holders since 1945 have come from the ranks of the SPÖ. Until 1986, the SPÖ candidates had always won the federal presidential election. In 2016, however, the candidate of the Greens was elected Federal President, and since 2017 the SPÖ is again in parliamentary opposition. In 2019, it achieved the worst national election result in its history with only 21.18 percent of the votes.

Another political characteristic of Austria is the economic and social partnership, which has at least indirect consequences for the role of the SPÖ in the political system. After the Second World War, it developed based on voluntary cooperation between the employers' (Chamber of Commerce or Economic Chamber, and Chamber of Agriculture) and employees' associations (Chamber of Labor and Austrian Trade Union Federation) and the government, and for decades represented a consensus-oriented model in economic and social matters that was unusually stable by international standards. The “class struggle at the green table”—i.e. the compromise-oriented containment of systemic disputes

between labor and capital—resulted in an unusually low level of labor conflicts, which manifested itself, for example, in extremely low strike rates (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019: 46–48). The emergence and development of social partnership was closely linked to the grand coalition of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and SPÖ (1945/47–1966), which ruled in the post-war decades. The two major parties shaped personnel policy in administration and the state-run economy according to the principle of proportional representation and established a political system of clientelism and patronage (Wineroither and Kitschelt 2017, 255–256). Since the 1980s, however, this successful Austrian model has come under increasing pressure. From 2000 onwards, the governments led by the ÖVP with the extreme Right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) in particular had repeatedly attempted to reduce the influence of the social partners on politics, especially that of the Chamber of Labor and the trade union (Karlhofer and Tálos 2019; Tálos and Hinterseer 2019: 129–138). By international comparison, however, Austria still has relatively stable corporatism (Armingeon 2017: 408–409).

In 1945, the non-partisan Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) was founded. To this day, the ÖGB represents a central political power factor in the Republic, within which the Social Democratic Trade Unionists (FSG) represent the strongest political force. In the last 15 years or so, however, this relationship has changed somewhat. For example, the President of the ÖGB is no longer a Social Democratic parliamentarian, as was the practice for decades (earlier, an ÖGB President was even concurrently president of parliament for 15 years). Although the number of trade union members in Austria has also fallen by several hundred thousand, membership has recently stabilized at around 1.2 million. Trade union density is significantly higher than in Germany, for example, but lower than in most Scandinavian countries. Nevertheless, levels of unionization have halved since the 1980s. In 2017, about 28 percent of employees are members of the ÖGB (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019: 74–75). In Austria, more than 90 percent of employees are employed under collective agreements negotiated by the trade unions, which is a leading figure in Europe (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019: 54). Even though the majority of trade union members still vote for the SPÖ, the proportion of SPÖ voters among them has decreased significantly, as the table below shows.

The exact number of members of the Social Democratic Trade Unionists’ Group (FSG) within the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) cannot be determined exactly for various reasons.⁴ However, a certain indicator of the political relevance of the Social Democratic trade union faction are the Chamber

TABLE 7.1 Voting Behavior of Trade Union Members (Plasser and Sommer 2018: 28)

<i>In percent voted</i>	<i>SPÖ</i>	<i>ÖVP</i>	<i>FPÖ</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>Others</i>
1990	62	19	11	4	4
1999	49	19	21	6	5
2008	50	19	14	8	9
2017	44	21	25	1	9

of Labor elections, in which factions close to the political parties run against each other. In the last elections in 2019, the Social Democratic Group (FSG) received 60.48 percent of the votes.⁵ The close relationship between the SPÖ and trade unions has also been loosened in the statutes. For decades, party members were obliged to be members of a trade union (Müller 1996, 263–265). “Every socialist worker is therefore a trade unionist and a member of the Socialist Trade Unionist Group (FSG) in the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB)”, as old party books said.⁶ In the new organizational statute, by contrast, it is merely recommended “to belong to the social democratic representative organization in accordance with their profession” (SPÖ 2018a, § 9).

Another group that is disproportionately represented and well organized among the Social Democratic electorate is pensioners. The Pensioners’ Association of Austria (PVÖ) is an organization close to Social Democracy, in which all the chairmen have been well-known SPÖ politicians since its foundation in 1949. According to its own information, the PVÖ has 385,000 members.⁷

In view of the problem of nationalist Right-wing populism and authoritarianism, which is virulent throughout Europe, the Republic of Austria took on an “international pioneering role” at an early stage (Heinisch 2017: 466). The Far-Right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which had been only a small party for decades, experienced a more or less continuous rise since 1986—the year Jörg Haider took over the party chairmanship. It repeatedly came extremely close to the ÖVP and SPÖ in nationwide elections and sometimes even appeared in polls as the strongest party. In the southern province of Carinthia, it or the alliance that emerged from it, the Alliance Future Austria (BZÖ), even provided the provincial governor for many years (1989–1991, 1999–2008, and 2008–2013). In this respect, Austria was a kind of trendsetter, because in many other European countries, extreme Right-wing populism only experienced its rise later.

7.3 The Development of the SPÖ

7.3.1 From 1945 to 1999

In contrast to the First Republic (1918–1933), the SPÖ in the Second Republic developed into an almost permanent government party and thus to a certain extent, also a state party, as was critically noted (cf. Pelinka 1988). Of course, this was not meant in the sense of an undemocratic one-party state; rather, the criticism was aimed at the fact that the SPÖ increasingly embodied *raison d’état* and paid too little attention to the claim for political change. After the KPÖ left the all-party government in 1947, a long phase of the Grand Coalition with the ÖVP followed until 1966, during which the SPÖ, as the second strongest party in mandates, never provided the Federal Chancellor. The party participated in the economic reconstruction and the development of social partnership and has positioned itself more strongly since the Cold War against communism (Weber 2011). Four years of opposition (1966–1970) were followed by a phase of forming

the government. Bruno Kreisky, who was elected chairman of the SPÖ in 1967, held the office of Federal Chancellor for 13 years from 1970 onwards and, together with the party, shaped an era named after him (Wirth and Röhrlich 2018). During this period, the welfare state was comprehensively expanded, working hours were reduced and, in general, modernization and social liberalization (e.g. through reforms of criminal law) took place. Austro-Keynesianism achieved a stimulation of the economy through state investment and pursued an active employment policy. As a phase of economic prosperity as well as an unemployment rate that was very low by international standards, this specifically “Austrian way” (Fröschl and Zoitl 1986) is anchored in collective memory. After securing absolute majorities in votes and mandates in the elections of 1971, 1975 and 1979, Bruno Kreisky resigned as Federal Chancellor following the lost 1983 election. Under his successor Fred Sinowatz, a coalition with the then small party FPÖ followed (Pelinka 1993), and from 1986 a coalition government with the ÖVP under Franz Vranitzky. Vranitzky had ended the coalition with the FPÖ after Jörg Haider had been elected as its new chairman. In all subsequent SPÖ/ÖVP coalition governments from 1986 to 2000, the SPÖ was the strongest party and provided the Chancellor. In the Vranitzky era (1986–1997) at least three decisive political decisions were made: accession to the European Union in 1995, a commitment to Austria’s joint responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism in 1991, and a stronger centrist orientation of the SPÖ (cf. Pelinka 2016). However, it was precisely during this period that parts of the SPÖ’s historical identity were lost: In 1989, the daily *Arbeiter-Zeitung* ceased to be published by the party after a hundred years; in 1991, the party renamed itself from Socialist to Social Democratic Party; and in 1995, a traditional institution of the Social Democratic cooperative system, Konsum, went bankrupt. For decades, an important area of mass loyalty to the SPÖ was nationalized industry, which was privatized in a gradual process, especially from the 1990s onwards (Obinger 2017: 408–409). Today, the state holding company responsible for this only holds shares in very few companies. Franz Vranitzky was replaced in 1997 by Viktor Klima as party chairman and Federal Chancellor. When the ÖVP-FPÖ government took office in February 2000 after the 1999 national elections, the SPÖ had only been a parliamentary opposition party for four years out of 55 years in the Second Republic.

“Although Austria is a small country, the SPÖ surpasses in absolute membership many of its sister parties in far larger states and clearly dominates all of them in terms of all measures of organizational density” wrote Wolfgang C. Müller in the mid-1990s (1996: 301). Since then, the number of members has dramatically decreased.

7.3.2 From 2000 to 2019

At the time of the Austrian elections in 1999, parts of European social democracy were pursuing the project of a third way, which—according to Anthony Giddens (1998)—should go beyond the traditional conceptions of democratic socialism and neo-liberalism. The positions of Europe’s social democratic parties

TABLE 7.2 National Election Results and Party Membership Levels

<i>Election year</i>	<i>Number of SPÖ votes</i>	<i>Percentage of SPÖ votes</i>	<i>SPÖ members</i>	<i>Degree of organization (Number of votes divided by number of party members)</i>
1945	1,434.898	44.60	357.818	24.95
1949	1,623.524	38.71	614.366	37.84
1953	1,818.517	42.11	657.042	36.13
1956	1,873.295	43.04	687.972	36.73
1959	1,953.935	44.79	710.378	36.36
1962	1,960.685	44.00	698.705	35.64
1966	1,928.985	42.56	707.972	36.70
1970	2,221.981	48.42	719.389	32.37
1971	2,280.168	50.04	703.093	30.83
1975	2,324.309	50.42	693.156	29.82
1979	2,413.226	51.03	721.262	29.89
1983	2,312.529	47.65	694.598	30.04
1986	2,092.024	43.13	674.821	32.26
1990	2,012.787	42.80	620.141	30.81
1994	1,617.804	34.90	512.838	31.70
1995	1,843.679	38.10	487.597	26.45
1999	1,532.448	33.15	384.328	25.08
2002	1,792.499	36.51	328.686	18.34
2006	1,663.986	35.34	287.146	17.25
2008	1,430.206	29.26	255.018	17.83
2013	1,258.605	26.82	205.241	16.31
2017	1,361.746	26.9	180.000	13.21
2019	1,011.868	21.2	165.000	16.31

Sources: Ucakar (2006, 332) until 2002, and with minor corrections; SPÖ (2008, 86), SPÖ (2010, 60), SPÖ (2014, 53), and SPÖ (2018c, 56).⁸

on the so-called Blair-Schröder course ranged between agreement and critical distance. Austrian social democracy did not pursue a clear position. While its candidate Viktor Klima appeared on posters with the then successful party leaders Tony Blair (UK) and Gerhard Schröder (Germany) during the 1999 election campaign, and the new manifesto also contained strikingly market-friendly passages (cf. 3.4.), Klima's successor Alfred Gusenbauer distanced himself from the third way, albeit cautiously weighing up the options (Gusenbauer 2002: 12–13; Sandner 2002: 158–159).

Although the SPÖ emerged as the strongest party from the 1999 elections, negotiations on forming a government with the ÖVP failed. Across Europe, the ensuing coalition of the conservative ÖVP with the extreme Right-wing FPÖ was seen as a breach of taboo. The EU member states imposed diplomatic sanctions on Austria and reduced bilateral relations to a minimum (Heinisch 2017: 450–451). However, these sanctions were lifted in September 2000. The two governments led by Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP) (2000–2006, particularly the Schüssel II government from 2002) offered the SPÖ an opportunity to raise its profile as an opposition party somewhat more. However, in the 2002 parliamentary elections—despite gaining votes and seats compared to

TABLE 7.3 National Elections 1999

<i>Political party</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>+/-</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>+/-</i>
SPÖ	1,532.448	33.15	- 4.91	65	- 6
ÖVP	1,243.672	26.91	- 1.37	52	+/- 0
FPÖ	1,244.087	26.91	+ 5.02	52	+ 11
Greens	342.260	7.40	+ 2.59	14	+ 5

the 1999 election—it became again the second strongest party for the first time since 1966, while the conservative ÖVP celebrated a major electoral success with 42.30 percent of the vote. The background for these developments was turbulence within the FPÖ, which led to the end of the Schüssel I government, new elections and subsequently to a party split within the FPÖ (Fallend and Heinisch 2016).

With its Chairman Alfred Gusenbauer, who had been in office since 2000, the SPÖ again had a classic “party man” at the top, who had already been a social democratic functionary as a young man. Among his most important tasks was the reduction of the party’s financial debts. Under Gusenbauer, however, a crisis arose in 2006 in the relationship between the party and the trade union. Speculative transactions of the union-owned “Bank für Arbeit und Wirtschaft” (BAWAG) had led to enormous financial losses and considerable damage to the image of the trade union movement (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019: 75). In order to keep the negative consequences of this scandal away from the party, neither the ÖGB president nor social democratic chairmen of sub-unions were to be given SPÖ parliamentary seats in the future, contrary to previous practice. This relatively strict separation of party and trade union was later withdrawn, but the ÖGB decided that at least its president would no longer be a member of parliament at the same time. In 2006, the first ÖGB president took office who, though from the ranks of the SPÖ, did not hold a seat in parliament (Der Standard, July 4, 2006).

In 2004, the SPÖ-nominated candidate Heinz Fischer won the federal presidential election; the Social Democrats also obtained the highest score in the elections to the European Parliament; and they won the majority in the state elections in Salzburg, and in Styria one year later. Both provinces had always been governed by the conservatives in the Second Republic. In 2006, the SPÖ became the party with the highest number of votes in the national elections. At least for a short period, some electoral successes seemed to halt the decline of social democracy.

Around three months before the election and shortly after Austria’s ratification of the EU Treaty of Lisbon, Federal Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer and Infrastructure Minister Werner Faymann (both SPÖ), in response to poor poll results, agreed with the editorial line of popular daily *Kronen Zeitung* (very critical of the EU) in a letter to the editors published in that newspaper on June 26, 2008 (Heinisch 2017: 461). In it, they held out the prospect that future EU treaty changes would be subject to a referendum. Four days before the election date of September 28, 2008, the SPÖ voted with the opposition in favor of a number of political measures which it had not been able to push through in its governing

TABLE 7.4 SPÖ Votes, Percentages and Mandates, 1999–2019

<i>Election year</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Percentages</i>	<i>Mandats</i>	<i>After election</i>
1999	1,532.448	33.15	65	Opposition
2002	1,792.499	36.51	69	Opposition
2006	1,663.986	35.34	68	Government
2008	1,430.206	29.26	57	Government
2013	1,258.605	26.82	52	Government
2017	1,361.746	26.86	52	Opposition
2019	1,011.868	21.18	40	Opposition

coalition with the ÖVP: the abolition of tuition fees, an increase in care allowance and an extension of the so-called “Hackler” (i.e Worker) regulation, which allowed long-term insured employees to retire early without deductions before reaching the standard retirement age. Under the new party chairman Werner Faymann, the election of 2008 was only relatively successful. Although the SPÖ fell below 30 percent (29.3 percent) for the first time, it was ahead of the ÖVP, which only achieved 26 percent. The Far-Right “third camp” (“drittes Lager”) was split into two factions, with the FPÖ obtaining 17.5 percent and the BZÖ 10.7 percent; the Greens attained 10.4 percent.

Under the new party chairman and Federal Chancellor Werner Faymann, who served for a total of seven and a half years from August 2008, Austria was also hit by the international financial and economic crisis. There was a considerable economic slump; though unemployment, for example, rose less sharply than the EU average (Marterbauer 2010: 35–36). More dramatic for the development of the SPÖ were the events of autumn 2015, when around 800,000 refugees reached Austrian territory, the vast majority of whom continued their journey to Germany or other destination countries (Plasser and Sommer 2018: 57). After initially agreeing with German Chancellor Angela Merkel’ stance (“We can do it”), the SPÖ Chancellor Faymann, under pressure from evidently changing public opinion, changed course and set “upper limits” for the admission of refugees. Among other lines of conflict, this led above all to internal party tensions. At the traditional Social Democratic rally on the first of May, the party leader was booed by some SPÖ supporters during his speech in 2016 at Vienna’s Rathausplatz in front of thousands of people. Only a few days later, Werner Faymann resigned (Der Standard, May 9, 2016).

With his successor as Federal Chancellor and party chairman Christian Kern, there was a brief sense of departure for new shores in the SPÖ. However, the Social Democrats lost the elections in 2017 and Kern resigned as chairman in September 2018 after some internal quarrels. He was succeeded by Pamela Rendi-Wagner, the first woman to lead the SPÖ. She could not look back on any career or previous history within the party and had joined the SPÖ only shortly before her engagement as Minister of Health in March 2017. Despite constant criticism from within the party, she achieved a relatively high approval rate (71 percent) in a party member survey in 2020 (Der Standard, May 6, 2020).

At the SPÖ party congress at the end of June 2021, Rendi-Wagner received the approval of 75 percent of the delegates (without opposing candidates) as chairperson, which was generally interpreted as a very bad result.

In May 2017, Sebastian Kurz had been elected as the new chairman of the ÖVP. The People's Party thus pursued a Right-wing course. The elections on October 15, 2017 were clearly dominated by the refugee crisis and migration. The SPÖ also had problems in positioning itself because its electorate and its functionaries were more divided than those of the FPÖ and ÖVP, in which clear majorities were in favor of a tougher course, and those of the Greens and NEOS, in which many supporters advocated a liberal direction (Plasser and Sommer 2018: 50–56). Added to this were image losses due to dubious activities of a PR company cooperating with the SPÖ, the Silberstein affair (Toth 2017). Furthermore, it became increasingly clear that the party was divided regarding the so-called Vranitzky Doctrine, which ruled out forming a coalition with the FPÖ.

In most of the provincial elections since 2015, the SPÖ had to accept losses, some of them considerable. Especially in western Austria election results were significantly below or close to 20 percent: Vorarlberg (9 percent in 2019), Tyrol (17.25 percent in 2018), and Salzburg (20 percent in the 2018 elections). In Lower Austria in 2018 and Styria in 2019, too, social democracy only achieved around 23 percent in the provincial elections, which means that the former dominant party SPÖ has a share of less than 25 percent of the vote in six of nine states. In contrast, the SPÖ was more successful in Vienna (39.6 percent in 2015), in Carinthia (47.9 percent in the 2018 elections) and in Burgenland with 49.9 percent in January 2020. In the most recent elections in Upper Austria in September 2021, the SPÖ was also unable to benefit from the FPÖ's loss of votes and stagnated at 18.6 percent.

Similarly, in the European Parliament elections the SPÖ reached only 24.1 percent in 2014 and 23.89 percent in 2019, thus lagging behind the ÖVP in each case. A historic break in the political landscape were the elections for the Federal Presidency in 2016, when Heinz Fischer, the SPÖ candidate, had to step down after two terms of office (2004–2016) according to the constitution. In the first round, the candidates of the former major parties ÖVP and SPÖ received only about 11 percent of the votes each. After some turbulence (repetition and postponement of the run-off vote), the winner was the candidate nominated by the Greens, Alexander van der Bellen, who finally won with 53.8 percent of the votes against Norbert Hofer of the FPÖ. A green university professor pitched against a candidate from the extreme Right—this constellation reflected the polarization existing in many European countries between the electorate of urban centers and that of small towns or villages (Helms and Wineroither 2017: 196–197). In any case, it became clear that social democracy suffered from an enormous weakness in mobilization and that it now has only a very small proportion of reliable regular voters.

The internal development of the party has also not remained unaffected by this. In comparison to the ÖVP, which was deemed to be divided between the interests of its sub-organizations (“Bünde”) and the somewhat powerful regional organizations, the SPÖ was for a long time a party that always demonstrated

“unity to the outside world” (Müller 1996: 296–297). This changed dramatically, especially in recent years, clearly demonstrated by the terms in office of the last three party leaders—Werner Faymann, Christian Kern, and Pamela Rendi-Wagner. At an operational meeting, in which the Social Democratic federal executive discussed necessary cuts and planned dismissals among SPÖ employees as a result of the election defeats and cuts in public subsidies, a secret audio recording was made and then forwarded to the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (Der Standard, December 22, 2019). The message to the public was disastrous: the former party of workers was firing some of its own employees.

New elections were sparked by the “Ibiza scandal”, in which extremely compromising statements by two leading FPÖ politicians (including the eventual vice chancellor) were made public by a secretly recorded video—also widely reported in the international media. However, the SPÖ was unable to seize this opportunity and suffered a devastating defeat. The elections of 2019 ended with great success for the ÖVP, which then formed a coalition with the Greens.

At the beginning of October 2021, however, the ÖVP was also rocked by a serious scandal. In the course of criminal investigations against Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and some of his confidants, police searched the Federal Chancellery and the ÖVP party headquarters. The party is being investigated for false statements, breach of trust, bribery and corruption. After the publication of vulgar chats that revealed Kurz as an unscrupulous power-hungry politician, he resigned as chancellor.

After the electoral defeat of the CDU/CSU in Germany and the end of the “Kurz model”, which was often cited as a model for other Christian Democratic parties, Jan-Werner Müller asked whether we had not long since been confronted with crisis not only of Social Democracy but also of Christian Democratic parties. What did they want programmatically? What became of the pro-European course, what of the tradition of Christian social thought? While the man/woman in the street could at least roughly say what social democracy stood for, this was becoming increasingly difficult with the moderate Right-wing parties (Müller 2021).

Can social democracy in Austria benefit from these recent developments?

Although party leader Rendi-Wagner is a trained medical doctor and had worked in the fields of virology and epidemiology before her political career, neither she nor the party managed to benefit politically from being a critic of the government’s policy during the course of the Covid pandemic. Party leadership and chairmanship seem to remain contested, and no clear political line is emerging so far.

TABLE 7.5 Results from the National Elections in 2019

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>+/-</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>+/-</i>
ÖVP	1,789,417	37.5	+ 6.0	71	+ 9
SPÖ	1,011,868	21.2	- 5.7	40	- 12
FPÖ	772,666	16.2	- 9.8	31	- 20
NEOS	387,124	8.1	+ 2.8	15	+ 5
Greens	664,055	13.9	+ 10.1	26	+ 26

7.3.3 *The Electorate of the SPÖ*

Numerous analyses repeatedly establish a close connection between the decline of social-democratic parties and the rise of Right-wing extremist or Right-wing populist parties (e.g. Adorf 2017). Häusermann (2018) questions this dichotomy of former social democratic workers' parties versus "new workers' parties" of the extreme and populist Right (although not explicitly for Austria). She assumes that the decline of working-class voters in social-democratic parties is primarily due to structural change (i.e. the decreasing proportion of workers in the population), to which a certain demotivation among former Social Democrat voters is added. In contrast, "the direct flow of voters from the social democrats to the Right-wing nationalists is only very small". Above all, new workers' votes would be mobilized among voters who had not previously been politically anchored.

In Austria, at any rate, political science analysts diagnosed gains of the FPÖ among SPÖ voter segments by the 1999 national elections, if not earlier. While only 35 percent of workers voted Social Democrat, 47 percent voted for the FPÖ (Plasser, Ulram, Seeber 2003: 129).

How reliable are such statements? In any case, it is certain that obviously different investigations with different methods lead to different results. With regard to the proportion of voters from the working class in the SPÖ, for example, three different institutes used different methods (interviews or aggregate data analysis) to arrive at different results for the 2013 parliamentary elections (Sommer and Unterhuber 2014: 208): thus, the proportion of workers among the Social Democratic electorate ranged from 32 to 35 percent, compared to 27 to 30 percent for the FPÖ. Even if the gap between the parties varied (between eight and two percentage points), the proportion of workers was always higher in the Social Democratic Party. Whether the SPÖ can still be called a workers' party is a legitimate question, but whether the FPÖ is the new workers' party is at least as important a question.

What about the voter flows between SPÖ and FPÖ? Voter flow analyses are usually not based on surveys, but on the analysis of the results of constituencies or electoral districts and compare two consecutive elections. The renowned Austrian institute SORA (Institute for Social Research and Consulting) has compiled voter flow analyses of all Austrian national elections since 1919 in a larger project (Sora 2019a). On this basis, with regard to our question, at least some points can be established for the period from 1986 onwards, i.e. from the beginning of the rise of the FPÖ:

TABLE 7.6 Voting Behavior of Workers, 1979–2013 (Wineroither and Kitschelt 2017: 273)

	1979	1983	1986	1990	1994	1995	1999	2002	2006	2008	2013
SPÖ	65	61	57	53	47	41	35	41	47	21	23
ÖVP	29	28	26	22	15	13	12	34	25	16	18
FPÖ	4	3	10	21	29	34	47	16	18	34	33
Grüne			4	2	4	3	2	3	3	5	5

Although the focus of attention in Austria was mostly on the voter flows from Social Democracy to Right-wing populist or extreme Right-wing parties, it is noticeable that in the observation period mentioned above (1986–2017), there was also a considerable migration of voters from the ÖVP to the FPÖ. In the 1990 elections the ÖVP lost even more voters to the FPÖ than the SPÖ, and even in 1999 the percentage of former ÖVP voters within the FPÖ electorate is higher than the percentage of former SPÖ voters. The highest losses of the SPÖ to the FPÖ were in the 1994 elections with 228,000 votes, and in 1999 with 175,000 votes. The highest loss of the ÖVP to the FPÖ was 175,000 votes in 1990. It is striking that the net balance from a Social Democratic point of view was negative for almost the entire period. The only exception was 2002 (the FPÖ plummeted from around 27 to around 10 percent in this election) when the SPÖ regained 147,000 votes from the FPÖ. In the same election, however, the ÖVP won 630,000 former voters from the FPÖ. With regard to Häusermann's demotivation thesis, the data on the losses of social democracy to the non-voter sector is interesting: according to SORA, 127,000 early SPÖ voters stayed away from the elections in 2006, and as many as 154,000 in 2013. In the last national elections in 2019, the SPÖ lost "only" 27,000 voters to the FPÖ. 74,000 former SPÖ voters voted for the ÖVP, 84,000 did not vote, and 193,000 voted for the Greens (Sora 2019b).

7.3.4 Programmatic Development

Theoretical debates and programmatic discourses have always played a major role in Austrian Social Democracy. Actual manifestos—so-called *Grundsatzprogramme*—have so far been adopted by the SPÖ in the Second Republic four times at intervals of 20 years each. A comparison of these manifestos is revealing with regard to the political development of social democracy. The first manifesto of 1958 still called for the public ownership of key economic enterprises. However, the interaction of the public sector with the private sector is already explicitly mentioned; "entrepreneurial initiative", "competition" and a market-based "price mechanism" should also "have a wide scope" (SPÖ 1958: 13). One target perspective is economic democracy (SPÖ 1958: 14). Demands are "economic planning and democratic control of the power of disposal over the means of production" (SPÖ 1958: 6). However, anti-communism was also a programmatic cornerstone. Socialists were, it is said, "unbending and uncompromising opponents of fascism as well as communism" (SPÖ 1958: 6). Therefore, the SPÖ rejected "the imperialist policies of the old capitalist powers as well as the imperialist expansionist policies of Soviet communism" (SPÖ 1958: 8). The groups whose support the SPÖ seeks are workers and employees, but also self-employed persons, academics and intellectuals. The SPÖ had changed from a party of wage workers to a "party of all working people" (SPÖ 1958: 7). In a certain sense, with this manifesto the SPÖ bid farewell to its revolutionary Linzer program from 1926, but held on to the perspective of a change of system.

In the 1978 manifesto, the “dominant idea” was also the prospective goal of “social democracy” (according to the preliminary remarks), based on the fundamental values of freedom, justice, equality, and solidarity. In addition, a term was used that notably played a central role in the SPD of neighboring Germany—“democratic socialism”, which was in turn demarcated from fascism and communism. Here the SPÖ locates itself in a historical phase model. In a first phase it had fought for political democracy and in a second phase for the welfare state. Now, in a third phase, it is a matter of developing these two forms of democracy into social democracy (SPÖ 1978: 7). Various characteristics of social democracy are repeatedly mentioned, such as the right to work, a humane environment or political participation and cooperative management (SPÖ 1978: 23). The coexistence of a public and a private sector is advocated. The instrument of planning also played an important role: the economic process should be democratically determined by industry-wide planning and by planning in society (SPÖ 1978: 23). In the later manifestos (1998 and 2018) such ideas no longer appear.

The goal of the 1998 manifesto is indeed “a society of free and equal people in which class differences are overcome” (SPÖ 1998: 6). However, hardly any instruments for the realization of this goal are mentioned in it, and the formulation appears rather as an empty reference to the program tradition. Instead, the dynamics and innovative capacity of markets are emphasized, even though it is stated that markets alone do not ensure fair distribution. In this context, a warning is also issued against capital concentration and monopolies (SPÖ 1998: 7). “Functioning markets and fair competition make an important contribution to promoting prosperity”, the manifesto states, and it is therefore the task of “politics and business” to “ensure the functioning of markets” (SPÖ 1998: 9). The idea of an alternative economic order thus no longer seems to play a role. A comparative program analysis therefore speaks of “a drastic paradigm shift in the (...) programmatic orientation of social democracy” (Kapeller and Huber 2009: 172). Terms such as socialism or labor movement do not appear in the entire program, workers as a social group are mentioned exactly once, in a direct quotation from the 1978 manifesto. The prospect of a “further development of political democracy into economic, and thus social democracy” (SPÖ 1998: 18), which was still aggressively present in the last manifesto 20 years earlier, is hardly given coverage anymore. The section “high quality of life in a humane environment” does not mention global warming or climate change, which is a remarkable omission six years after the 1992 World Climate Conference in Rio de Janeiro.

In the manifestos of 1958 and 1978, the SPÖ turned away from a perspective of Austro-Marxism oriented towards overcoming the system and already summed up successes of its government policy, without, however, giving up its claim to change. “Today the workers have more to lose than their chains”, stated the 1958 program suggestively, but “they still have a world to win” (SPÖ 1958: 6). Both manifestos held on to certain cornerstones of Social Democratic identity: economic democracy, a public sector parallel to the market economy,

the further development towards social democracy. The manifesto of 1998 was already clearly marked by the debates on the third way, especially by the at least implicit rejection of parts of the political tradition of social democracy.

After a volatile discussion process lasting several years, the new manifesto for 2018 was adopted. Right at the beginning, it connects with the manifesto of 1978 and thus skips over that of 1998. It formulates social and economic policy in a much more militant way, and also sees itself as an answer to the financial crisis of 2008: “Financial markets must never again become independent in this form” (SPÖ 2018b: 28). The new manifesto only briefly addresses the far-reaching changes in the labor market and primarily calls for social security and an appropriate legal framework (SPÖ 2018b: 31). An inheritance tax (“taxation of large inheritances, which as non-performance-related income contribute nothing to the community”) and a reduction of working hours are explicitly demanded. The ecological question and “climate change” are interpreted as part of the social question. With regard to the market economy, the focus is on a deficit analysis, from which a mission for Social Democratic policy is derived. “We are not waiting for better times. We are making them”, states one passage (SPÖ 2018b: 60). Time and again a certain self-criticism is also heard, for example, in the distancing from paternalism, which Social Democracy also practiced for a long time, as is admitted (SPÖ 2018b: 59). Phrases such as “Austrian social democracy sees itself as a liberation movement” may contrast with political practice, but at least the programmatic break with the decades-long role as a pragmatic state party is nevertheless remarkable.

The manifesto was subjected to a vote among party members and met with 86 percent approval among the 37,000 or so participants. Together with the manifesto, an organizational reform was also voted on. The individual points, including the time limit on the term of office, protection against the accumulation of posts by party officeholders, and a vote by party members on future coalition agreements received approval rates of between 72 and 88 percent. However, the implementation of this organizational reform was postponed, which caused some unrest within the party (Der Standard, October 8, 2018).

Häusermann (2021) identifies Economic Leftism, Cultural Liberalism, Left National-Conservatism and Centrism as possible programmatic choices for Social Democratic parties. In any case, the current party manifesto represents most likely a combination of Cultural Liberalism and Economic Leftism. Even if the chances of success of such an orientation cannot be predicted with certainty, it does represent a unique selling point in view of the lack of a party operating nationwide to the Left of the SPÖ.

7.4 Why Does the SPÖ Lose?

What exactly is the political profile of social democracy today; what is its identity? Michael Keating and David McCrone (2013: 1–13) define some of the core contents of the Social Democratic program, which in their view can be summarized

despite national differences. They include, for example, the need for social regulation of market capitalism, a strong public sector, and advocacy for the needs of the underprivileged. The Social Democratic world is a world of tamed capitalism in which conflicts between labor and capital are in principle resolvable through negotiation. It has a strong and economically active state, a functioning welfare system, and trade unions with a close alliance to the social-democratic party. In contrast to the third way, social democracy is not only concerned about equal opportunities from the outset (Blair and Schröder 1998: 3), social justice includes also equality of outcome. Blatant inequality in wages and income and widening wealth gaps are not compatible with a Social Democratic program. In addition, women's economic, social and political rights, but also individual liberty rights and minority rights are part of the agenda. Moreover, Social Democracy has always been a movement of internationalism, although solidarity was easier to pursue within the confines of the nation-state. Can the Social Democratic path still be continued on this historical foundation—dense social security systems and a strong public sector on the one hand, individual freedom and social pluralism on the other? Which population groups could be targeted?

The working class as the “core layer” of the electorate was also a central feature of the SPÖ in the years and decades after 1945 (Müller 1996: 198). This was particularly true because there was never any serious competition on the left. The proportion of workers in Austrian society has also declined significantly, and in recent decades it has become considerably more difficult for social democracy to maintain a bond between social class and the party. Moreover, the proportion of immigrants in the working class is above average. Many of them have no right to vote. The existence of a “new working class” (Bohrn Mena 2018) whose members work in precarious and atypical forms of employment, and who have little party affiliation, reinforces this process of alienation between the working class and social democracy.

Neither the trade union nor Social Democracy have yet found convincing answers to the changes in working life and to the new inequalities.

As a densely organized mass party, the SPÖ has always included different regional and social groups. A certain tension between intellectually savvy leaders, the majority of party functionaries, and the working class already existed in the interwar period. Today, however, former top social democratic functionaries are also active in the leading management of the private sector, and so change sides—from labor to capital—in terms of political interests.

In Austrian society there are at least two well-organized groups with relatively high affinity to the SPÖ. On the one hand, trade union members still vote social democrat by a majority, although other parties are catching up in this respect (Plasser and Sommer 2017: 25–30). On the other hand, there is the equally numerous group of pensioners, some of whom, as has been shown, are organized in an association with close ties to the SPÖ. The difficult challenge is certainly to make attractive political offers to these two groups while increasingly addressing those who have shown little support for Social Democracy in recent years and decades.

To what extent could non-voters be mobilized for the SPÖ? These groups include low-income people, who also have a low level of education. Education, income and wealth determine political participation, including voter turnout (Ehs 2019; Zandonella 2021)—and Social Democracy must react more strongly to this fact than it has previously, not only out of electoral self-interest. For equality of political participation is one of the core elements of Social Democracy, as is repeatedly mentioned in the programs of the SPÖ.

Connecting these different groups of voters with socially liberal-minded people who often live in cities and are active in cultural and intellectual professions, but especially with young people who vote less and less for the SPÖ, is an extremely difficult task. This becomes clear in some thematic areas, which interest these groups to different extents and sometimes provoke opposing interests and positions. On the subject of migration, a strong trade-union wing of the party must also address the effects of immigration on the labor market. On the right of asylum, by contrast, it is a matter of practicing the tradition of social democracy as a “liberation movement” (SPÖ 2018b: 59), also in the sense of refugees. Whether a stronger focus on migration and a harder line on this issue would strengthen social democracy seems questionable. An intensification of internal conflicts would be an unavoidable consequence. It should also be remembered that the party’s greatest defeat came in a national election (2019) when this issue was no longer the central one. Social democracy is more likely to succeed on issues where its policies are still being trusted—welfare, social policy, and labor market policy. This, of course, requires a coherent program in these areas and the ability to communicate them convincingly to different social groups.

Like many Social Democratic parties, the SPÖ supports the projects of European integration and economic and monetary union. But for social democracy this is an ambivalent issue, because the economic policy of the European Union restricts the scope of the national welfare state, which was once a successful Social Democratic project. Jacques Delors’ vision of a social Europe, by contrast, seems to have become almost illusory. The challenge for the SPÖ is to maintain a pro-European course against Right-wing nationalism, but at the same time to fight offensively for a different Union with a social policy profile. How good the chances are of achieving this in a project that is, in essence, economically liberal, and to what extent the EU is capable of social reform, must remain open questions.

Although climate policy was prominently placed in the new SPÖ manifesto, the party immediately articulated a negative position on national CO₂ taxes (Der Standard, August 22, 2019). Here, too, there are very different expectations among the supporters and probably also among the functionaries. But a coherent climate policy position is indispensable, first of all because it is not a short-term economic issue, rather one that will not go away in the long term; and secondly, climate policy is also indispensable for principally mobilizing younger, educated people and for possible alliances with NGOs and parts of engaged civil society.

On the one hand, Austria’s special characteristics require social democracy to break with its history: voting shares beyond 40 percent, many hundreds of thousands

of members, a substantial public sector with a densely organized workforce, and numerous overlaps between state and party—all this belongs to the past. On the other hand, as we have seen, many political positions of social democracy are perfectly capable of responding to current challenges. After all, the SPÖ is also “the only traditional party with an unbroken commitment to parliamentary democracy” (Karlhofer 2020). Its program focused above all on the common good, public interest and distributive justice. The fact that there is “no simple winning strategy for the social democratic parties” (Häusermann 2021: 30) is of course also true for Austria. The long-term effects of the current crises cannot be estimated at present. However, they are unlikely to lead to a loss of importance of the state and the public sector.

Notes

- 1 Exceptions like Kitschelt (1994) confirm the general rule.
- 2 The Austrian Parliament has two chambers, the National Council and the Federal Council, which jointly represent the legislative power.
- 3 Various media reports have mentioned SPÖ membership figures between 158 000 and 160 000 for 2020. The membership development of political parties in Austria is not very transparent. In contrast to Germany, we also know nothing about the social composition of the members of the Social Democratic Party.
- 4 Telephone conversation with the Federal Chairman of the FSG, Willi Mernyi, on March 25, 2020.
- 5 https://www.arbeiterkammer.at/ueberuns/akwahl/AK_Wahl_2019_FSG_baut_absolute_Mehrheit_aus.html (February 28, 2020).
- 6 My thanks go to Sabine Letz and Willi Mernyi, who showed me an SPÖ party book from the 1950s.
- 7 <https://pvoe.at/content/der-pvoe> (February 28, 2020).
- 8 As only rounded figures for 2017 (Kurier, March 17, 2017) and an estimate for 2019 are available, the calculated degree of organization for 2019 is somewhat imprecise. According to the APA of August 8, 2018, 169,208 people were eligible to participate in the SPÖ 2018 member survey. Between this number and the 160,000 indicated for 2020, this results in the realistic estimated value of 165,000 members for the year 2019. My thanks for information and advice go to Michael Rosecker (Renner Institute), Georg Spitaler (VGA), and Alexander Neunherz (SPÖ).

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