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## Electoral System Changes in Austria – an Assessment of the Political Consequences

In 2007, Austria was the first EU member state<sup>1</sup> which decided to grant to 16-year-olds the right to vote in any elections organised at both the national and federated state levels. Changes in election law introduced at the behest of the grand coalition Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer encompassed not only lowering the minimum age requirement for active and passive voting rights but also extending the term of the National Council (lower house of the Republic of Austria's parliament) from four to five years, as well as introducing postal voting. The National Council elections have already been held four times under the new voting system (in 2008, 2013, 2017, and 2019).

### Introduction – research assumptions

The paper assesses the consequences that the 2007 voting system reform produced in the election and parliamentary scene. It next turns its attention to the election participation rate among teenage voters and their political deci-

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<sup>1</sup> The voting age of 16 applies in Landtag (state assembly) elections in five German federated states: Lower Saxony (already since 1995) Brandenburg (since 2012), Bremen (since 2011), Hamburg (since 2013), Schleswig-Holstein (since 2013). In 2018, Malta became the second EU member state after Austria to grant voting rights to 16-year-olds.

sions. The assumption is that the National Council elections play a special role in the parliamentary-cabinet system of government in Austria; based on these elections, it is fully possible to determine how interested young people are in domestic politics, including what their attitude toward democracy and elections is.

The stated aim of the analysis is to answer the following questions posed by the author: 1) How did the election law in Austria change over the years?, 2) What were the political consequences of the voting system modifications introduced in 1970, 1992, and 2007?, 3) What was the election participation and the decisions made by the youngest voters starting from 2008?

The adopted research hypothesis assumes that each and every change in the voting system in Austria lead to more or less spectacular political consequences. The 2007 reform, which lowered the minimum age requirement for active and passive voting rights and introduced postal voting, failed to prevent the growing voter abstention in the National Council (NC) elections or guarantee a higher youth political activation.

Changes occurring in the electoral and parliamentary scene since the 2008 election were measured using qualitative and quantitative parameters. Analysed were the formation of new political parties and demise of established groupings, fragmentation of the electoral and parliamentary scene, voter turnout, and decentralisation of support. The indices of the effective number of parties at the electoral level and effective number of parties at the parliamentary level were calculated using mathematical formulas, taking measurements after each election between 2008–2019.

First, the article presents the election law and the National Council Election Regulation currently binding in Austria. Next, it discusses the reforms of the voting system introduced in 1970 and 1992 and analyses the political consequences that followed. Then, the paper describes the work on the 2007 voting system amendment and the parliamentary debate that preceded the vote on amending the Constitution. After that, it assesses voter turnout and the results of the four parliamentary elections held between the years 2008–2019. Further, the article attempts to define the factors that played a key role in election participation among the youngest voters and the electoral choices they made. The research presented herein will show the convictions and values held by the young people in Austria, taking into account their attitude towards democracy, the national parliament and the elections themselves.

The paper analyses the Constitution of the Republic of Austria and the amended National Council Election Regulation. The article also takes advantage of the results produced by the research conducted by Ulrike Kozeluh and SORA/ISA (German: *Institut für Strategische Analyse und Institute for Social*

*Research and Analysis*) in 2008 and the reports from the research done by the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) between 2013 and 2017. Also helpful was the research undertaken by a research team consisting of Markus Wagner from the University of Adelaide and David Johann and Sylvia Kritzinger from the University of Vienna, who evaluated the Austrian elections in terms of the quality of vote.

### Election law in Austria

Article 26(1) of the Federal Constitutional Law of Austria provides that the National Council elections are universal equal, direct, secret, proportional, and personal.<sup>2</sup> There is no compulsory voting at the federal level. The proportionality principle in force in Austria is not applied in the so-called pure form as small parties face an obstacle to the entry into the National Council in the form of a mechanism of direct seats and a 4% election threshold introduced in 1945, preventing excessive political fragmentation of the parliament that could hamper effective functioning of the legislature. Initially, as pointed out by Paweł Sarnecki, the minimum age threshold was relatively high: 21 years for active and 24 years for passive voting rights; it was not until the constitutional amendments of 1968, 1979 and 1992 that the voting age was lowered to 18 and 19 years, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The next change to the Constitution introduced by the 2007 amendment granted the right to vote to persons who, on the day of election at the latest, have attained the age of sixteen years (Art. 26(1) of the Constitution), while granting the right to stand for election to those nationals who have attained before that date eighteen years of age.<sup>4</sup>

Pursuant to Art. 26(2) of the Constitution, the electoral system makes allowance for the federal structure of Austria as the electoral district boundaries may not lie across the federated state lines and the number of members of parliament elected in a given district is determined based on the number of nationals residing permanently in that district, plus the number of nationals living abroad, which is periodically updated in population censuses. Article 26(5) provides that any exclusion from voting rights must always be based on an individual court decision. A competent criminal court may, depending on the facts of the

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<sup>2</sup> 27. Bundesverfassungsgesetz, BGBl. I 27/2007, [https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA\\_2007\\_I\\_27/BGBLA\\_2007\\_I\\_27.html/](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblAuth/BGBLA_2007_I_27/BGBLA_2007_I_27.html/), access 28 II 2022.

<sup>3</sup> P. Sarnecki, *System konstytucyjny Austrii*, Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa 1999, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Only in the case of elections to the office of the president of the Second Republic the requirement for the presidential candidate to be at least 35 years old remained in place. In other instances, the passive suffrage was lowered from 19 to 18 years of age.

case, strip voting rights from persons sentenced to five years of imprisonment or more for a criminal offence and persons sentenced to more than one year in prison for treason, terrorism, election fraud, Nazi practices. The exclusion from voting rights begins as soon as the judgment becomes final and binding and ends at the moment the sentence is completed and precautionary measures related to imprisonment are carried out or lifted. Pursuant to Section 41 of the amended National Council Election Regulation of 1992, persons sentenced by a final judgment of an Austrian court to more than six months in prison or to a suspended sentence of one year's imprisonment are not eligible to be elected.

Candidates for members must submit (at least) one nomination. Each candidate requires three signatures of existing members of the National Council or garnering the number of declarations of support from voters provided for by statute for a given electoral district.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the nationwide candidates, nine nominations and a total of 2,600 supporting signatures is required.

The Constitution divides the territory of Austria into regional constituencies and electoral districts. In accordance with the currently binding 1992 National Council Election Regulation and its 2012 amendment based on the 2011 population census, Austria is divided into nine electoral districts which correspond to its nine federated states.<sup>6</sup> The electoral districts are subdivided into the total of thirty-nine regional constituencies. The number of regional constituencies in a given electoral district varies from two to seven, depending on the number of inhabitants. The number of members elected in an individual electoral district, out of the total of 183 National Council members, is proportional to the demographic size of the district and varies from 7 to 37 members. The least populous federated state, that is Burgenland, chooses 7 members, while Lower Austria has 37 seats at its disposal. The number of seats to be allocated in a given district is based on the most current population census, taking into account all foreigners who acquired voting rights.<sup>7</sup> The individual electoral districts are given a number of seats equal to the number of times the electoral quotient falls within the number of district inhabitants, while the remaining seats are apportioned based on the largest remainder method; if, however, at the allocation of the last seat the

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<sup>5</sup> Member candidates must obtain the following support for their nomination: candidates from Burgenland and Vorarlberg 100 signatures each, from Tyrol, Carinthia, Salzburg 200 signatures each, Upper Austria and Styria 400 signatures each, from Lower Austria and Vienna 500 signatures each.

<sup>6</sup> Bundesgesetz: Nationalrats-Wahlordnung 1971, BGBl. nr 98/1970, [https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblPdf/1970\\_391\\_0/1970\\_391\\_0.pdf](https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblPdf/1970_391_0/1970_391_0.pdf), access 28 II 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Burgenland has 7 seats to fill, Carinthia – 13, Lower Austria – 37, Upper Austria – 32, Salzburg – 11, Styria – 27, Tyrol – 15, Vorarlberg – 8, and Vienna – 33.

remainders are equal, then lots are drawn. Voters cast their votes using ballots listing the candidates for their regional constituency and for the electoral district.

The election outcome is produced by using three separate procedures: at the regional level (regional lists), at the federated state level (state lists), and at the national level (national list), since only such an operation guarantees the allocation of all 183 seats in the National Council. Votes cast at the level of the region and at the federated state level are calculated based on the Hare's method, also called the "largest remainder" method, which makes sure that the parties represented in the parliament are not solely those that obtained many votes, but also secures representation for those groupings that received little support. Pursuant to Section 100(1) and Section 107(2) of the National Council Election Regulation, only the parties that either captured at least one seat (the so-called direct seat) at the regional level (in one of 39 regional constituencies) or passed the 4% threshold in entire Austria participate in seat allocation. The final allocation of available seats at the national level is determined based on the D'Hondt method, wherein the entire country is treated as one electoral district. Also in this scenario, the only parties that are taken into consideration are the ones that have gained at least 4% support at the national level or captured at least one seat at the regional level. The number of votes cast for individual electoral parties (apart from those taken out of allocation at the federated state level) is divided by a series of integers until 183 highest quotients are obtained; consequently, the number of seats the individual parties receive is equal to the number of highest quotients they have, minus those seats that they have already received at the previous seat allocation stages. If the number of those seats is lower than the number of seats to be filled at the third stage, then the given party receives additional seats; if, however, the number of seats is higher, the party keeps its seats – without giving up the resulting difference, but this number is then subtracted from the general number of seats to be allocated among the remaining electoral groupings.<sup>8</sup>

When allocating seats to individual candidates, rules provided for by the National Council Election Regulation are applied. The candidates who have received the highest number of votes cast win the seat, but only if their support reaches at least half of the electoral quotient or a sixth of the valid votes cast for a given party in a regional constituency. To establish the order, the number of preferential votes obtained by each candidate is taken into account, while in the subsequent procedure the candidate's place on the list is the decisive factor.

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<sup>8</sup> H. Widder, *Rada Narodowa*, [in:] *Parlament Republiki Austrii*, red. H. Schambeck, Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa 1997, p. 55.

At the federated state level, the candidate who gained at least the number of preferential votes equal to the electoral quotient will become a member. At the national level there are no preferential votes.

### Amendments to the National Council Election Regulation of 1970 and 1992 and their consequences for the political arena

Since being passed in 1923, the first National Council Election Regulations provisions had undergone frequent changes. Before 2007, the two main reforms were implemented in 1970 and 1992.

Between 1949 and 1970, apart from the party-list system (which allowed the voters to change the list by crossing out the candidates offered by the party or by changing the order the candidates were listed), a mathematical formula developed by Hagenbach-Bischoff was employed to convert the votes cast in the twenty-five designated electoral districts into seats. This method favoured the parties with the most support at the expense of those with the least. In view of the fact that all 165 seats (the number of seats to be filled in the National Council at the time) could not be filled this way, the other stage used a different variant of the highest averages formula – the D’Hondt method – which, combined with a small size of the electoral district, also favoured the strongest groupings and contributed to their overrepresentation.<sup>9</sup> For the purpose of converting the remaining unallocated votes to seats, until 1970, Austria was divided into four so-called associations of electoral districts, namely: Vienna was the first, Lower Austria the second, Higher Austria, Salzburg, Tirol, and Vorarlberg jointly formed the third, and Styria, Carinthia, and Burgenland – the fourth. Only the parties that captured minimum one seat participated in the D’Hondt seat allocation method.

The electoral law in force at the time had a high reduction rate of the effective number of parties, which was 8.1, and a proportionality index of 97.5. The electoral barrier aimed at the smaller groupings contributed to the petrification of the Second Republic party system, causing the parties that once found themselves outside the parliament to drop out of the political market with time.<sup>10</sup> In those days, large groupings such as the SPÖ (German: *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, the Social Democratic Party of Austria) or the ÖVP (German: *Österreichische Volkspartei*, the Austrian People’s Party) that managed to overcome

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<sup>9</sup> J. Miecznikowska, *Europeizacja partii i systemu partyjnego Austrii*, Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR, Warszawa 2018, p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> The vote-to-seat conversion mechanism and the electoral threshold in place in 1959 excluded the Communist Party of Austria from parliamentary life, even though the party took as many as 142,500 votes, winning 3.27% support nationwide.



the electoral barrier only needed 25,000 votes to win a parliamentary seat. The 1945–1970 electoral system mostly benefited the Christian Democrats, who both in 1953 and 1959 captured a majority of seats in the National Council, despite the fact that they received fewer votes in both elections than the Social Democrats. The deformation of the party system was also encouraged by electoral geography, which maintained the varying numbers of votes needed to win a seat depending on the district. Granting more seats to individual electoral districts solely based on the demographic size, without accounting for the inhabitants' age, disregarding the internal migration from the countryside to the city and the spatial distribution of the population, led to the overrepresentation of rural regions over the urbanised areas, which, in turn, led to a privileged status for the Christian Democrats and weakening of the Social Democrats.<sup>11</sup>

The change of the electoral law in Austria, including the amendment to the Election Regulation in December adopted in 1970, consisted in increasing the number of seats (from 165 to 183) along with a threefold reduction in the number of electoral districts (from 25 to 9). By tying the division into electoral districts more closely with the federal structure of the state, the electoral district boundaries were equated with the federated state borders. For the purposes of the second seat allocation procedure, two large associations of electoral districts were distinguished (German: *Wahlkreisverband*) – the first one was formed by: Burgenland, Lower Austria and Vienna, while the other one by the remaining six federated states: Upper Austria, Carinthia, Salzburg, Styria, Tirol and Vorarlberg. At the same time, voters were given an option to cast preferential votes.

In force since the National Council election of 1971 until 1990, the amended electoral law led Austria to achieve one of the highest proportionality indices in Western Europe – 98.9, and allowed to limit the deformation of the election results.<sup>12</sup> The Hare's formula applied in the amended National Council Election Regulation was supposed more faithfully to reflect voter preferences than the Hagenbach-Bishoff method that had been applied before. After the 1970 reform, large groupings were no longer favoured and, thus, the chances of all parties, regardless of their size, were equalised. Strengthening smaller groupings contributed to the evolution of the party system towards a two-and-a-half

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<sup>11</sup> W.C. Müller, *Parteiensystem: Rahmenbedingungen, Format und Mechanik des Parteienwettbewerbs*, [in:] *Politik in Österreichs. Das Handbuch*, Hrsg. H. Dachs, P. Gerlich, H. Gottweis, H. Kramer, V. Lauber, W.C. Müller, E. Tólos, Manz'sche Verlags- und Universitätsbuchhandlung, Wien 2006, p. 286.

<sup>12</sup> W. Sokół, *Partie polityczne na arenie wyborczej i gabinetowej*, [in:] *Współczesne partie i systemy partyjne. Zagadnienia teorii praktyki politycznej*, red. W. Sokół, M. Żmigrodzki, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2003, p. 174.

party system. Before the 1970 reform, the FPÖ (German: *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, the Freedom Party of Austria) needed 42,238 votes to win one seat, while the ÖVP only needed 26,295 and the SPÖ – 27,432 votes.<sup>13</sup> The changes introduced decreased the disproportion resulting from the difference between the National Council seats captured and the support won by the party in the election.<sup>14</sup> Benefits from the amended Election Regulation were drawn chiefly by the Social Democrats, who ruled on its own for thirteen years, and subsequently, between 1983 and 1986, formed a small coalition with the FPÖ. In 1986, a new grouping found its way to the National Council: The Greens – The Green Alternative (German: *Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative*), becoming a fourth political power in the parliament. However, it was still very difficult for small parties to get into the first chamber of the Austrian parliament.

The next electoral law reform became a subject of discussions already in the second half of the 1980s. The Election Regulation adopted in 1992 maintained the party-list variant of the proportional system, although it introduced an option for the voter to modify the list. The assumption was that the regional constituencies and the institution of preferential votes would allow further personalisation of the National Council elections.<sup>15</sup> However, it is usually the order of candidates on the electoral list, which is determined by the party authorities, that is the decisive factor in winning a seat. Importantly, a candidate (e.g. a party leader) may not open the list in all constituencies, but may be on the list in one constituency only.

### Debate on the change of the voting system in 2007

After the parliamentary elections of 2006, the grand coalition made up of the SPÖ and ÖVP announced it would introduce further changes to the 1992 Election Regulation.<sup>16</sup> The programme for government adopted for the 23rd term of the National Council contained, *inter alia*, a chapter devoted to the state and administration reform that encompassed amending the electoral law<sup>17</sup> [German: *Regierungsprogramm*]. The coalition reported its readiness to: lower the active suffrage threshold to 16 years of age, introduce postal voting based on the German model, simplify the procedure for voting from abroad, extend the term of the National

<sup>13</sup> J. Miecznikowska, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> A. Pelinka, S. Rosenberger, *Österreichische Politik. Grundlagen, Strukturen, Trend*, WUV, Wien 2000, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> H. Widder, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> The June 2007 amendment was the tenth change to the Election Regulation of 1992.

<sup>17</sup> *Regierungsprogramm für die XXIII. Gesetzgebungsperiode*, [https://images.derstandard.at/20070109/regierungsprogramm\\_09012007.pdf](https://images.derstandard.at/20070109/regierungsprogramm_09012007.pdf), access 28 II 2022.



Council from four to five years, and also study the introduction of electronic voting. The proposed changes were developed by a team appointed at the Chancellery in February of 2007 and composed of experts from the SPÖ (Peter Kostelka, Theo Öhlinger) and the ÖVP (Franz Fiedler, Andreas Khol), as well as representatives of federated state governments. The team largely based on the earlier work of the Austrian Convention<sup>18</sup> and a special parliamentary committee – two bodies which between 2003 and 2005 worked on the constitutional amendments and reform of the institutions of the state. On 2 May 2007, the government programme was presented to the National Council. Since it involved amending the constitution, this meant that the government had to win the support of a qualified majority of 2/3 of the members, with a quorum of ½ of all members. It must be emphasised that the grand SPÖ–ÖVP coalition government had the necessary majority, as both parties jointly held 134 out of 183 seats in the National Council.

On 5 June, the 24<sup>th</sup> plenary session of the National Council was held. The vote on the government programme involving changes to the electoral law was preceded by a debate during which the parties argued which fraction had been the first to propose that 16-year-olds be granted voting rights. None of the parties disputed lowering of the active and passive voting rights. The Social Democrats and the Greens reasoned that the most important thing is the electoral participation of teenagers, regardless of their voter preferences. Taking part in the elections would significantly influence the general political awareness of young Austrians. It was emphasised that the civic education of youth had to be taken care of, so that teenage voters would get interested in politics and could be reached with information. It was estimated that in the following parliamentary election the number of eligible voters in Austria would increase by about 140,000–200,000.<sup>19</sup>

Far more controversial was the proposed introduction of postal voting and extending the legislative period from four to five years. Members from the Green party and from the FPÖ were critical of extending the term of the National Council, perceiving it as benefiting mainly the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, who wanted to secure another year in power as part of the grand coalition. Members from the Freedom Party of Austria contested postal voting

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<sup>18</sup> The Austrian Convention, led by Franz Fiedler, was held between 30 June 2003 and 31 January 2005. The Convention produced a report on the reform of the institutions of the state and amendment of the Constitution, which was presented at the plenary session of the National Council in January 2005. In July of the same year, a special parliamentary committee was formed to discuss the matters of the Constitutional reform and reaching a political agreement between the government and opposition.

<sup>19</sup> K. Gelles, *Młoda Austria kieruje się na prawo*, [in:] *Zagadnienia polityki wewnętrznej*, red. K. Gelles, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2018, p. 113.

as they feared that its introduction infringed on the principle of secret and personal ballot. Another argument raised was also that, in the age of advancing digitalisation, the future was rather online voting and not voting via traditional mail. Eventually, the government programme was passed with votes from the ÖVP, the SPÖ, the Greens and the BZÖ (German: *Das Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, the Alliance for the Future of Austria), only the FPÖ voted against it. The bill was sent to the Federal Council, which adopted it by majority of votes on 21 June. The new Election Regulation came into force on 1 July 2007.

The changes adopted in 2007 involved extending the term of the National Council from four to five years and lowering the voter age threshold. Amendment to Art. 26(6) of the Federal Constitution of 2007 introduced postal voting (German: *Briefwahl*), which allows those eligible to vote who, on the day of the election, are not able to participate – for example, due to illness, absence in the place of registered residence or a trip abroad, to cast their vote via mail. In such a case, voter identity must be verified, i.e. when casting a postal vote, voters sign a declaration that their choice is made personally and in secret.

#### Analysis of 2008–2019 National Council election results

The number of eligible voters in Austria is about 6.4 million, with the total population of 8.8 million. For over twenty years, voter turnout in parliamentary elections, which between 1945 and 1986 exceeded 90%, has noticeably been dwindling. In the period between 2002 and 2019, participation in parliamentary elections fell by approximately 10 percentage points, from 84.3 to 75.6%, which means that on average four-fifths of eligible voters exercise their voting rights. In 2008, with 6.33 million eligible voters, voter participation was 78.8% while 1.34 million voters abstained, whereas in 2006, with 6.11 million eligible voters, voter turnout was 78.5% and the number of non-voters was 1.31 million (see Table 1). Accordingly, in the first election held after the amendment had come into force, not only was there no spike in turnout, but there was even a larger number of non-voters. The year 2013 saw the lowest voter turnout (74.9%) recorded in the history of the Second Republic. At the time, as many as 1.6 million Austrians, that is 25% of those eligible to vote, remained home. All political parties saw a considerable drop in electoral support compared to their results achieved in the previous election. Also the 2019 NC election recorded high abstention, when 1.56 million nationals decided against voting.

Analysis of the data contained in Table 1 allows to conclude that the highest number of invalid votes (103,000) was cast in the parliamentary election of 2008, which may have been a consequence of the introduction of postal vote, as well

as of a higher number of young people who participated in the election for the first time. To a certain extent, this fact may be explained by voters being offered insufficient information on how to cast a valid vote via mail or at a polling station. In 2017, with the highest voter turnout recorded in the last decade (80%), about 51,000 invalid votes were cast, which is less than half of what it was in 2008.

Table 1. Compilation of data from National Council election between 2008 and 2019

	2008	2013	2017	2019
Eligible voters	6,333,109	6,384,308	6,400,992	6,396,812
Voter turnout (in %)	78.81	74.9	80.0	75.6
Votes cast	4,990,652	4,782,410	5,120,881	4,835,469
Invalid votes	103,643	89,503	50,952	58,223
Non-voters	1.34 million	1.60 million	1.28 million	1.56 million

Source: Author's own study based on data from <https://bmi.gv.at/>, access 20 III 2022.

The increasing number of postal ballot papers issued to nationals in Austria and abroad testifies to the fact that, starting from 2008, more and more voters choose to participate in elections in this convenient manner. Postal voting is growing in popularity not only among voters abroad but mainly in the country. If before the 2008 NC election voters had been issued with the total number of over 588,000 postal ballot papers (9.29% of eligible voters), in 2019 such ballot papers were applied for by a record 1,070,933 of voters, that is 16.75% of those eligible to vote. It is hard, however, to consider postal voting as an effective way to increase voter turnout since the latter is constantly diminishing, despite the introduced measures intended to encourage voter participation.

In the years 2008 and 2013, voters were courted by as many as 14 parties, whereas until the end of 1970s, no more than six parties sought voter support at the federal level. A record-high number of parties (16) stood for the National Council election in 2017. In the last National Council election, 13 parties fought for voter support – three parties fewer than two years prior (see Table 2); that election also saw the lowest (4.08) Laakso–Taageper index of effective number of parties at the electoral level recorded in years.

At the same time, the percentage of lost votes, that is the votes cast for the parties that did not pass the 4% electoral threshold and failed to win a seat in the National Council, is gradually increasing. This index reflects the erosion of the party system, growing loss of trust that the electorate put in the existing parties and the fact that voters are trying to find new formations they could trust. The largest loss of votes in the period analysed occurred in 2008, when the Liberal Forum (German: *Liberales Forum*, LIF) and the KPÖ (German: *Kommunistische*

*Partei Österreichs*, The Communist Party of Austria), as well as several smaller newly established groupings, such as the Fritz Dinkhauser list, which gained nearly 2% support, failed to get into the National Council. In 2013, the rate of lost votes was 5.5%, chiefly owing to the fact that the BZÖ – despite having won 3.5% of the votes – won no seats in the National Council. In the 2017 NC election, the Greens did not manage to overcome the 4% electoral barrier, which also contributed to the high rate of lost votes (5.95). Compared to previous elections, the markedly lower rate of lost votes (3.18) recorded in the 2019 NC election, proves that the political parties now present in the parliament have attracted new electorate, accumulating also the votes from the electorate of other groupings (see Table 2).

Table 2. Compilation of data from National Council elections in the years 2008–2019

	2008	2013	2017	2019
Share of votes for two parties, the SPÖ and the ÖVP (in %)	55.2	51.0	58.4	59.8
Number of parties running for NC election	14	14	16	13
Laakso-Taageper index of effective number of parties at the electoral level	4.79	4.52	4.08	4.20
Lost vote rate (in %)	6.09	5.58	5.95	3.18
Laakso-Taageper index of effective number of parties at the parliamentary level	4.27	4.59	3.60	3.94

Source: Author's own study based on data from [http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/fileadmin/media/pdf/Wahlergebnisse\\_1945-2019.pdf](http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/fileadmin/media/pdf/Wahlergebnisse_1945-2019.pdf); <https://bmi.gv.at/>, access 28 II 2022.

The growing erosion of the existing party system in Austria manifested itself as the decentralisation of support for well-established groupings (SPÖ and ÖVP) noticeable since the 1990s. The two moderate formations had not only been dealing with a noticeably dwindling electoral potential but also with the outflow of party members from their own ranks. An important symptom of the changes linked to the falling voter turnout in Austria was the decreasing ties of the electorate to the hitherto dominant Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats observed during the 2008 and 2013 election. The SPÖ and ÖVP, which until 1983 would garner joint support of up to 80–90%, in 2013 won between them only 51% of the votes combined. Both in 2017 and in 2019, the ÖVP won a landslide election victory (see Table 3). Strengthening of the Christian Democrats entailed at the same time weakening of the Social Democrats who, lacking a strong chairman and torn by internal strife, suffered in 2019 a historic defeat, managing to win only 21.2% of the votes that allowed them to secure 40 seats in the National Council. The Austrian party system is evolving from a mod-

erately multi-party system with two dominant parties towards a multi-party system with one decisively dominant grouping, which has in the recent years been the Austrian People's Party.

Table 3. Results of National Council elections in the years 2008–2019 (in %)

	ÖVP	SPÖ	FPÖ	Grüne	NEOS	JETZT	Team Stronach	BZÖ
2008	26.0	29.3	17.5	10.4	-	-	-	10.8
2013	24.0	26.8	20.5	12.4	5	-	5.7	3.5
2017	31.5	26.9	26.0	3.8	5.3	4.41	-	-
2019	37.5	21.2	16.2	13.9	8.1	1.87	-	-

Source: Author's own study based on data from [http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/fileadmin/media/pdf/Wahlergebnisse\\_1945-2019.pdf](http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/fileadmin/media/pdf/Wahlergebnisse_1945-2019.pdf), access 28 II 2022.

The analysed 2008–2019 period shows an increase in the level of fragmentation of the Austrian parliament as measured by the increase in the effective number of parties (see Table 3). Gradually, the number of parties that pass the 4% electoral threshold for entering the parliament went up. The 2013 election saw the highest parliament fragmentation since the beginning of the Second Republic of Austria. As many as six parties made it into the 25<sup>th</sup> National Council, including some groupings that had been formed just before the election: the populist Team Stronach (German: *Das Team Stronach für Österreich*) and the liberals from NEOS (German: *Das Neue Österreich*, The New Austria). After the 2013 election, the Laakso-Taageper index of effective number of parties at the parliamentary level was 4.59 and after the 2017 election, due to the defeat of Austria's Greens and withdrawal of the Team Stronach, the index fell to 3.60. It was the first time that the Jetzt party, founded by Peter Pilz – one of the founders of Austria's Greens – made it to the National Council. After the 2019 election, the index of the effective number of parties at the parliamentary level was 3.94; the National Council again has members from five parties, after Pilz's party failed to clear electoral threshold.

### Election participation and political decisions of the youngest voters in the years 2008–2019

Voter turnout amongst teenage voters (16–17 years) during the 2008 election was 79%. This result is interpreted as the effect of novelty and enthusiasm for granting voting rights to Austrian youth. In 2013, only 63% of voters aged 16 to 17 cast their vote – substantially below the total voter turnout, which at the time

was 74.9%.<sup>20</sup> The 2017 NC election turnout climbed to 80%, even topping 90% amongst the youngest voters (aged 16 to 17 years), which was decidedly higher than among slightly older voters aged 18 to 20 years, where it only reached 74.6%.<sup>21</sup>

Analysing the 2008 NC election results reveals that the Social Democrats won considerably less support amongst voters aged below 29 years (19%) than in other age groups (29.3%). When we look at the detailed findings of a survey conducted by ISA/SORA on a group of teenage first-time voters, we can see that only 9% of 16–17-year-olds voted for the SPÖ.<sup>22</sup> Slightly more votes from the electorate aged below 29 were gained by the Greens and the BZÖ compared to the support those two parties won in other age groups (see Table 4). Eleven percent of 16-year-olds and 15% of 17-year-olds voted for the Greens, while 10% of 16-year-olds and only 3% of 17-year-olds voted for the BZÖ. Among the youngest voters (aged 16 to 17 years), the Freedom Party won 21% support, which heightened experts' concerns that the right-wing and populist formations, such as the FPÖ and BZÖ the teenage voters turned to, became the beneficiaries of the lowered voting age. On the other hand, presenting the results of the research conducted on teenage voters, analysts from ISA/SORA did not confirm the youth's "turn to the right", simultaneously pointing to the fact that 16–17-year-olds do not vote differently than other age groups.<sup>23</sup> The FPÖ and BZÖ were treated by the youngest voters as establishment parties, especially as both groupings had previously formed coalition governments with the Christian Democrats.

In 2013, both the Social Democrats (20%) and the Christian Democrats (21%) drew much less support among the youngest voters (16–29 years) than among the entire electorate, which is even more striking as both parties, having jointly gained almost 51% support, formed a grand coalition government. Interestingly, according to the AUTNES study, a clear-cut win in the youngest group of 16–17-year-old voters went to the Social Democrats with 26% of support, while the Greens, who took 15%, came in second. In 2013, only 12% of the youngest teenage electorate voted for the FPÖ,<sup>24</sup> however, in the age group of below 29 years of age the Freedom Party commanded 22% of the votes in total (see Table 4).

<sup>20</sup> S. Kritzinger, E. Zeglovitz, O. Oberluggauer, *Wählen mit 16 bei der Nationalratswahl 2013*, Universität Wien, Wien 2013, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> S. Kritzinger, S. Wagner, M. Glavanovits, *Wählen mit 16 – ErstwählerInnen bei der Nationalratswahl 2017*, Universität Wien, Wien 2018, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Junge Wählerinnen und Wähler bei der Nationalratswahl 2008*, E. Zeglovits, A. Zandonella, S. Schwarzer, F. Perlot, U. Kozeluh, Institut für Strategieanalysen (ISA), Institute for Social Research and Analysis (SORA), Wien 2009, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> S. Kritzinger, E. Zeglovitz, O. Oberluggauer, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–22.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.



In 2017, despite being a clear favourite in the NC election, the Christian Democrats enjoyed only marginally more support among the youngest voter group (24%) than the FPÖ (22.4%). Although they were defeated on a national scale, the Greens enjoyed 9.7% support among young nationals, even if over 11 percentage points less compared to the 2013 election. With 13% support, the Social Democrats were the third party voted for by voters under the age of 29 – at the same time, it was the SPÖ's lowest result in all voter age groups.

In 2019, the ÖVP and the Greens garnered the most support among the youngest voters. Despite having lost over 2 percentage points, the FPÖ unalterably enjoyed support at the level of 20% from voters below 29 years of age, even though it had suffered some image loss. The SPÖ, supported by only 14% of young nationals, suffered a decisive defeat.

Table 4. Political preferences of the electorate (<29 years) in National Council elections in the years 2008, 2013, 2017, and 2019 (in %)

Election year	SPÖ	ÖVP	FPÖ	Grüne	BZÖ	NEOS	Team Stronach	JETZT
2008	19	24.5	24.5	13.5	13.5	-	-	-
2013	20	21	22	21	-	6	5	-
2017	13	24	22.4	9.7	-	6	-	5
2019	14	27	20	27	-	8	-	-

Source: Author's own study based on <https://www.sora.at/themen/wahlverhalten/wahlanalysen.html>, access 28 II 2022.

Studies conducted by Ulrika Kozeluh and ISA/SORA in 2008 after the first election with the lowered voting age threshold prove that 2/3 of the 16–17-year-olds were interested in the election campaign.<sup>25</sup> The group of “rather uninterested” in politics was at the time 34%. Approximately 26% of those surveyed declared that they follow daily political coverage on TV, radio, in newspapers and on the Internet. As much as four-fifths admitted that they obtained political information from the media at least once a week. At the same time, 55% of the youngest voters declared their trust in the National Council, 49% placed their trust in the federal government, while only 20% trusted the politicians and political parties.<sup>26</sup> Sixty-six percent of respondents agreed that politicians only make empty promises to voters. Almost a half of teenagers proclaimed

<sup>25</sup> „Wählen mit 16“ *Eine Post Election Study zur Nationalratswahl 2008. Befragung – Fokusgruppen – Tiefeninterviews*, S. Schwarzer, M. Zandonella, E. Zeglovits, F. Perlot, U. Kozeluh, U. Perlot, Institut für Strategieanalysen (ISA), Institute for Social Research and Analysis (SORA), Wien 2009, pp. 24–25.

<sup>26</sup> *Junge..., op. cit.*, p. 4.

that the politicians deal with issues that are not important for the youngest electorate. Over 2/3 of young voters pointed to the issues of education, youth unemployment, equal rights, and poverty as very important and in need of action. The influx of migrants and their integration with the Austrian society were deemed as considerably less important. In spite of their disillusionment with the politicians, over 80% of 16–17-year-olds proclaimed that democracy is the best form of government. In the 2008 study, as many as 88% declared that they would definitely take part in the election, but simultaneously as many as 23% of respondents were unable to name the party they would vote for.<sup>27</sup>

Teenage voters emphasised that for them the credible sources of information on politics are first and foremost the parents and grandparents, and also school. Studies conducted by a team composed of Sylvia Kritzinger, Markus Wagner, and David Johann show that while interest in politics among 16–17-year-olds before and after the 2013 election was rather low, it sharply increased in 2017. Still in 2013, only 29% of the youngest first-time voters declared high or moderate political interest, with 38% after the election. However, before the elections in 2017, 50% – and after the election already 64% – of 16–17-year-olds rated their interest in politics as high or moderate (see Table 5). At the same time, over several years, the rate of teenagers who were entirely uninterested in politics dwindled. Accordingly, if before the 2013 election this attitude was confirmed by 35%, then already in 2017, only 2% of youth professed a complete lack of interest in politics. Also in 2017, nearly 87% of the questioned 16–17-year-olds declared their participation in the election.

Table 5. Interest in elections among 16–17-year-olds (compared before and after National Council election)

	2013			2017		
	16–17 years			16–17 years		
	Before election	After election	Difference	Before election	After election	Difference
Very interested	1	14	+13	11	18	+7
Somewhat interested	28	24	-4	39	46	+7
Not very interested	35	54	+19	48	2	0
Not at all interested	35	9	-26	2	2	0

Source: Author's own study based on S. Kritzinger, E. Zeglovits, P. Oberluggauer, *op. cit.*, p. 29; S. Kritzinger, M. Wagner, I. Glavanovits, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> „Wählen mit 16“..., *op. cit.*, p. 42.

The study conducted by AUTNES draws attention to the fact that, even though teenage voters participate in elections often more willingly than the older ones, they make considerably less conscious political decisions. The youngest electorate group has the least knowledge of the functioning of democracy, candidates' views and political party programmes, and, at the same time, is less involved in organising election campaigns or working for non-governmental organisations. It raises concerns that the youngest voter group is less resistant to manipulation and machinations of political marketing specialists and that populist party slogans fall on fertile ground. That is why civic education of the youth is extremely important, as is igniting their interest in politics and providing all voter groups with access to information, while adjusting the message to the voters' age.

### Conclusions

Using the qualitative and quantitative parameters, the paper demonstrates the transformations undergone by the Austrian voting and parliamentary scene, depicting the more and the less apparent political consequences of the successive modifications to the voting system. The 1970 and 1992 amendments to the Election Regulation diminished the disproportion between the share in the National Council seats and the support won by a party in elections. After the early 1990s changes to the voting system, Austria was viewed as a country with a relatively proportional system, which faithfully reproduced the structure of voter preferences as expressed in the act of voting.<sup>28</sup>

The 2007 amendment lowered the electoral threshold but did not diminish the problem of low voter turnout. Despite the initial euphoria brought about by granting the right to vote to 16–17-year-olds, higher participation among the youngest electorate in the 2008 National Council election was not repeated in the next election. What is more, the 2013 and 2017 studies confirm the disconcertingly high voter abstention among the slightly older, 18–20-year-old voters. On the other hand, polls confirm the interest in politics declared by 16–17-year-olds, which proves that this electorate should not be dismissed by politicians and that the issues that are pertinent for this electorate, such as education, youth unemployment, housing, poverty, should be treated as a priority. The politicians who will take an interest in the problems of the youngest voters and reach this age group with their message (also via social media) stand a better chance of

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<sup>28</sup> A. Antoszewski, R. Alberski, *Systemy wyborcze*, [in:] *Demokracje zachodnioeuropejskie. Analiza porównawcza*, red. A. Antoszewski, R. Herbut, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 1997, p. 246.

winning its support. The 2008, 2013, 2017 and 2019 election results prove that the preferences of the youngest voter group are unstable and are evenly split among various political parties, without tipping the scales in one party's favour.

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**Abstract:** The analysis developed in this paper addresses the changes that took place over the years in the Austrian election and parliamentary scene following the succession of changes in the election law. The paper discusses the amendments to the National Council Election Regulation that came into force in 1970, 1992, and 2007. Using qualitative and quantitative parameters, it shows the transformations the federal party system was subjected to, exploring the political consequences of the voting system change. The paper focuses on assessing the changes that occurred in the election and parliamentary scene after 2007, when 16-year-olds were granted voting rights and postal voting was introduced. The reflections presented in this paper aim to provide an insight into whether amending the National Council Election Regulation put a stop to the falling voter turnout, gauge what the election participation of the youngest electorate was, identify what political decisions teenage voters made and examine what changed in the Austrian party system.

**Keywords:** Austria; voting system; National Council; voter turnout; lowering the voting age; postal voting

### Zmiany systemu wyborczego w Austrii – ocena konsekwencji politycznych

**Abstrakt:** Podjęta w pracy analiza ukazuje zmiany na arenie wyborczej i parlamentarnej, jakie następowały na przestrzeni lat wraz z kolejnymi modyfikacjami prawa wyborczego w Austrii. W artykule omówione zostały nowelizacje ordynacji wyborczej do Rady Narodowej z lat 1970, 1992 oraz 2007. Za pomocą ilościowo-jakościowych wskaźników przedstawiono przeobrażenia zachodzące w federalnym systemie partyjnym, ukazując polityczne skutki modyfikacji ordynacji wyborczej. Artykuł koncentruje się na ocenie zmian zachodzących na scenie wyborczej i parlamentarnej po roku 2007, gdy przyznano czynne prawo wyborcze 16-latkom oraz wprowadzono głosowanie korespondencyjne. Podjęte rozważania zmierzają do udzielenia odpowiedzi, czy nowelizacja ordynacji do Rady Narodowej, którą jest partycypacja najmłodszego elektoratu w wyborach, powstrzymała malejącą frekwencję oraz jakie były decyzje polityczne podejmowane przez nastoletnich wyborców i jakie zmiany nastąpiły w austriackim systemie partyjnym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Austria; ordynacja wyborcza; Rada Narodowa; frekwencja wyborcza; obniżenie wieku wyborczego; głosowanie korespondencyjne

