

The Significance of the Trends Shown in The Austrian Party System During the 1990s

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During the 1990s, Austria experienced a massive ideological shift toward the right. Studying the Manifesto Project's database and right-left indicator scores shows that parties that had been left leaning for decades were suddenly adopting right wing positions. For example, the Greens, a traditionally leftist party, jumped up nearly 30 points towards the right. In 1995, the Greens occupied a position further right than Austrian Freedom Party, the traditionally far right party, had had just five years prior. Additionally by 1995, all of Austria's political parties represented in parliament were decisively right wing according to the manifesto project's left-right indicators. However, this trend did not continue. In 1999 the political system began to shift leftward and by 2002, all the parties represented in parliament were clustered together on the left side of the left-right spectrum. In fact, in 2002 only six points on the spectrum ideologically separated the far left party and far right party of this election. The most recent election for which we have data for, the 2008 election, shows all the parties in the Austrian system are gradually drifting towards the center, a far cry from the 1999 election. Between 1990 and 2008 political parties in Austria shifted their ideologies rapidly in an incredibly short period of time; parties swung from the far right to the far left and then to the center. These shifts in the ideological position of Austria's political parties were caused, according to the Downs' proximity model, because parties attempted to shift to find the median voter, and they could not find the median voter because of dealignment rather than realignment. In order to prove this theory, I will first briefly explain the concepts of dealignment and realignment, and describe the effects one would expect to see in each case. Then, I will present evidence that the Austrian system was experiencing dealignment; this evidence includes the percent of the vote won by each party and voter turnout during the first three elections of the 1990s. Next, I will disprove that the Austrian system could be an example of realignment by examining how the parties changed over time

with regards to a postmaterialist indicator, freedom and human rights. I will then compile the evidence supporting and disproving both theories and make a conclusion that Austria was in fact experiencing during dealignment not realignment. I will then connect how dealignment affected political parties' ideological platforms through the Downs proximity model. Finally, I will make predictions of what Austria's future elections would look like considering the theory of dealignment holds true in the Austrian case.

According to Wattenberg and Dalton's *Unthinkable Democracy*, dealignment is the process in which among individuals there is "increased public disenchantment with specific parties and often towards the system of party government itself" (Wattenberg and Dalton 2000; 3). During times of dealignment, voters increasingly feel as though their current political parties do not represent their interests and thus begin to vote unpredictably in the hopes of getting better representation. Voter turnout often drops because of how disillusioned the public feels with the government, and new, short-lived parties may split away from established parties in an attempt to meet voters' specific needs. On the other hand, realignment occurs as countries modernize and there is a change in values away from industrial concerns, such as economic security, and towards post-industrial values, such as women's rights and human freedom (Inglehart and Norris 2003; 65, 68-70). Voters would increasingly turn their support towards parties that represent their new values, and one can expect to see permanent voter changes toward new parties and new parties forming along a new left-right block in the case of realignment.

Prior and during 1990, the two dominant parties in the Austrian system were the Austrian Social Democratic Party, or the SPÖ, and the Austrian People's Party, the ÖVP, and "the traditional system of dominance by two parties [was] for decades the main characteristic of Austrian politics" (Pelinka 1990; 125). According to figure one, the party system at this point

was what one would typically expect to see; the parties in 1990 were relatively evenly dispersed along the left-right spectrum, and there weren't any extreme outlying parties. The most leftward party was the Greens at -12.4 on the right-left indicator, and the most rightward was the Austrian Freedom party, or FPO, at 14.9. But starting in 1990, the Austria system experienced a dramatic shift, the two powerhouse parties (the OVP and SPO) both fell in the polls, third parties picked up their loss, and voter turnout in general declined from 90.5 percent in 1985 to 86.1 percent (Pelinka 1990; 122). The decline in voter turnout represented the beginning of the "increasing disillusionment with politics" (Pelinka 1990; 122). All of this evidence from 1990 points to dealignment. 1990 marks the beginning of the end of the status quo of Austrian politics, and although the parties hadn't begun to respond yet, voters were already showing their discontent with the current system.

Further, just four years later in the 1994 election, the majority of the party system- with the exception of the SPO- began shifting towards the right. Additionally, the SPO and OVP both failed to pick up a majority in parliament for the first time since 1945 (Sully 1995; 218). A new party, the Liberal Forum, or the LIF, also gained seats in parliament for the first time (Sully 1995; 218). The LIF was not formed along a new right-left block, as one would expect to see with a system experiencing realignment. Instead, "the Liberals under Heide Schmidt had broken with Haider's party, [the Austrian Freedom Party] in February 1993 disillusioned with what they perceived to be increasing authoritarianism, demagoguery and xenophobia" (Sully 1995; 219). The LIF was essentially a splinter party, and splinter parties are a characteristic of dealignment because they occur as parties break apart in attempt to meet more of the voters' needs that are not being addressed in the current system. The 1994 election ultimately showed a turn away from the two dominant parties, and a continuation of the pattern, which first began in 1990. Voters were

becoming increasingly frustrated with the status quo Austrian politics had had for nearly fifty years, and as a result voters began to vote unpredictably, or not at all. Voters were not feeling represented and were either seeking a party that could better represent their interests, or turning away from the democratic process entirely.

The next election occurred in 1995, at the height of Austrian parties rightward swing. In this election, while voter turnout actually did increase by 4.5 percent, this is not evidence contrary to dealignment because “34 percent of the voters were waverers, waverers, meaning that they initially considered to vote for a party different from that of their final choice” and another 21 percent were late deciders (Muller 1996; 413). This evidence fits in with dealignment because it shows electoral volatility. Voters were still unsatisfied enough with the parties that 10 percent of voters did not decide who to vote for until the day before the election (Muller 1996; 413). Traditional party loyalty was crumbling in the Austrian system, and parties had lost their bases of support. In figure one, one can see that after 1995, the party system gradually drifted towards the left in 1999. By 2002, the parties were clustered around one ideological point, and finally, in 2008, the parties completely switched ideological positions from what they had occupied in 1995 and were all left-leaning or far-left parties.

However, despite the evidence towards dealignment, there is the conflicting theory of realignment to consider. In order to test this, this paper constructed figure two in which this paper plotted a percent of the vote won in each election, against a post materialist indicator, freedom and human rights. If Austrian political parties were experiencing realignment, then one would expect to see a gradual correlation between post materialist values and vote percentages won. According to Inglehart’s theory, we would expect to see parties gradually becoming more postmaterialist and voters would flock towards these parties because postmaterialist issues

would be becoming more prevalent and important to the voters (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

However, no such correlation exists. As one can see in figure two, the majority of the parties receive a similar vote share no matter where they are on the postmaterialist indicator.

Postmaterialism ultimately did not seem to affect the vote share the parties received. The one notable exception is the Austrian Freedom Party, which seems to receive gradually more votes the more post materialist it becomes. One party out of six, however, is not enough to discredit the rest of the evidence. The vast majority of the parties in the Austrian political system have no correlation with vote share and postmaterialist values.

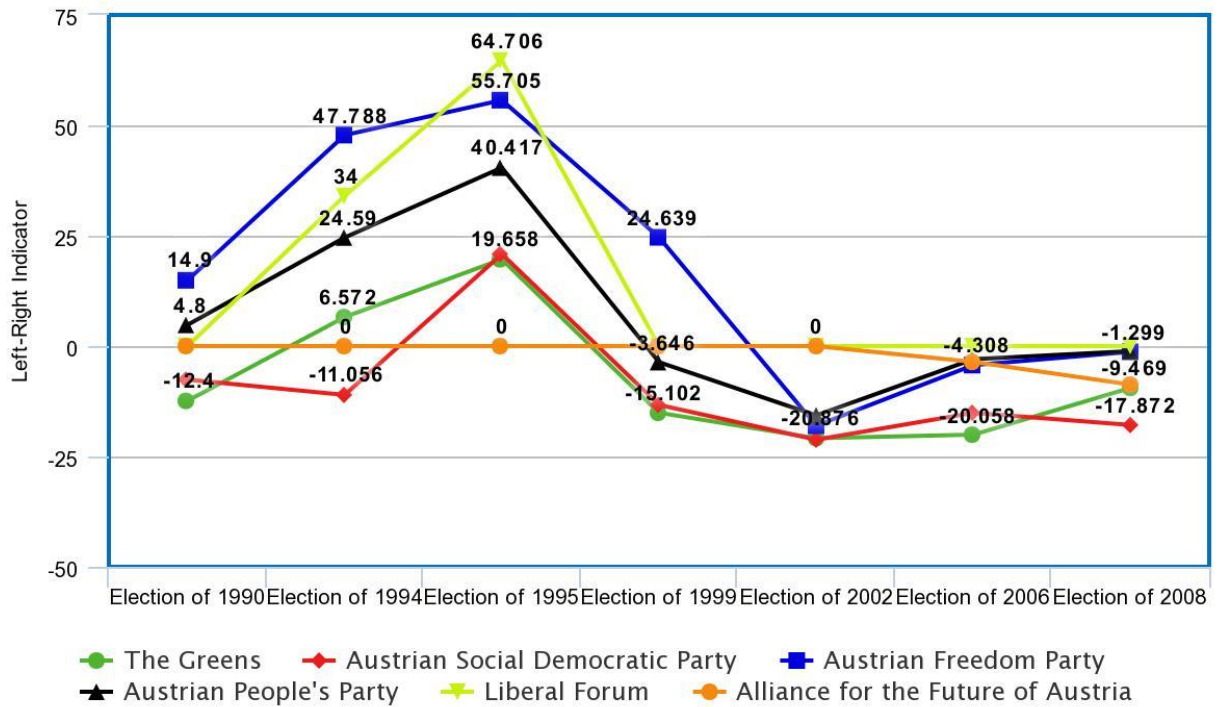
One can reasonably conclude, that because the majority of the evidence points to dealignment as a cause of Austria's ideological upheaval in the 1990's towards modern day. Voters, frustrated of the decades long dominance of the OVP and SPO, turned away from the major parties, and began to vote unpredictably in an attempt to become better well represented. This then affects party ideology because "parties in two-party systems converge to the median vote" and "according to Downs' proximity model, voters value parties close to their personal policy preferences" (Meyer and Muller; 2014, 803). Additionally, although one could argue the Austrian party is not a two party system, and therefore the Down's model does not apply, Meyer and Muller applied the model in their paper "Testing theories of party competition: The Austrian case", and therefore, this paper finds the model appropriate in the case for the same reasons Meyer and Muller did: that the Austrian political system had long functioned as a two party before splintering off into a multiparty system. The Downs' model essentially boils down to the fact that political parties wish to capture the median voter because it will lead to acquiring a larger vote share. Prior to 1990, when the Austrian political system functioned as a two party system, the SPO and OVP were able to capture the median voter and win a majority in

parliament. Beginning in 1990, however, the median voter changed unpredictably, and parties began to change drastically change their ideologies in an attempt to capture a median voter that was no longer voting predictably.

In conclusion, because voters felt frustrated with the political status quo that had prevailed for decades in Austria their voting patterns changed, and then political parties were unable to find the median voter, so they responded by changing their ideologies drastically in attempt to recapture the median voter. Now this paper, only looked at the first three elections in the 1990s in detail, but looking into the elections beyond 1995 in detail would make for an interesting question for further research. From figure three, one can see the effects of dealignment likely continued in the Austrian system into the last election in 2017. While the manifesto project does not have data beyond 2008, one can surmise that because the voters continue to vote unpredictably and more and more parties are joining and then leaving parliament that Austria today is still experiencing the effects of dealignment. Parties like Team Stronach make short appearances in parliament before quickly disappearing. Austria's system is continually breaking away from the two party system it once was into a multiparty system. If the trends established in the early elections of the 1990s were to continue further, one could expect to see even more voter volatility and ideological shifts in the parties. Until the voters' faith in Austrian politics returns and they began to vote predictably, political parties will be unable to accurately find the median voter, and will then, as a result, swing across the ideological spectrum.

Appendix

Austrian Political Parties on the Left-Right Indicator from 1990 to 2008
Manifesto Project

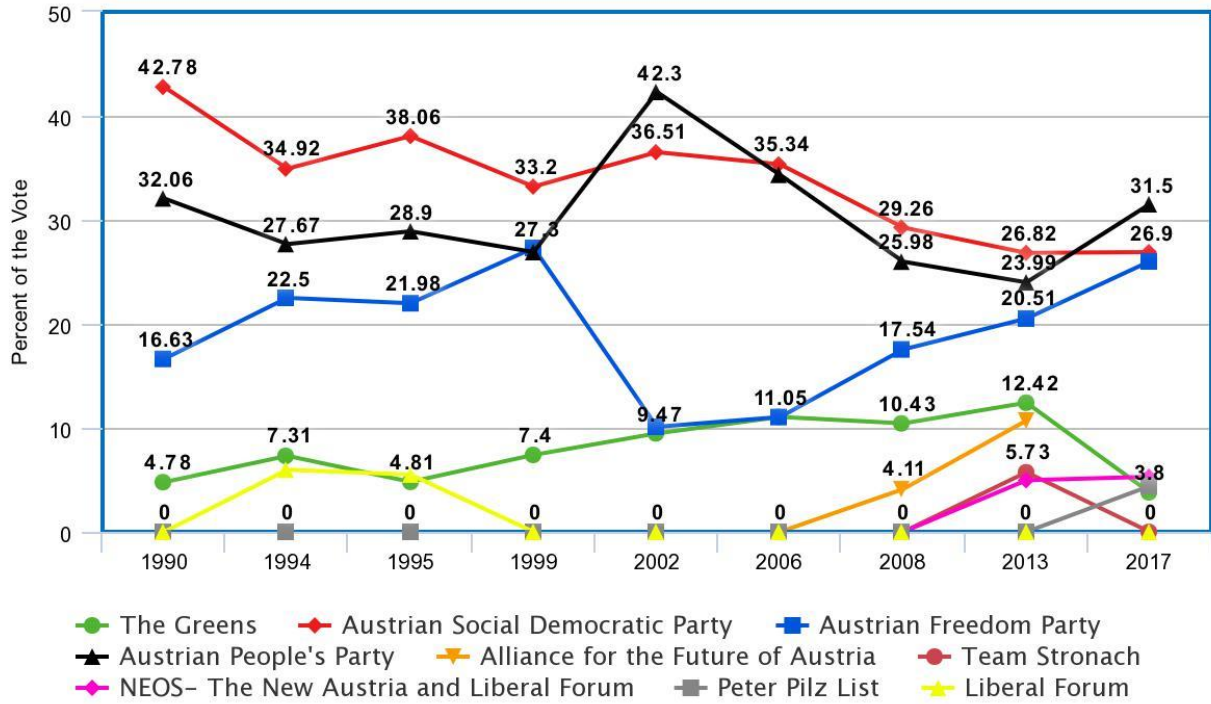


meta-chart.com

Figure one

Source: *Manifesto Project* (Webels 2017); From the data on Austrian parties from the years 1990, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2006, and 2008.

Percent of the Vote Won by Each Party
European Elections Database



meta-chart.com

Source: *European Election's Database* (European Elections Database 2017); From data on Austrian parties from the years 1990, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2013, 2017

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