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The champions of Euroscepticism? Austria's citizens and the EU

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Austria has long been among the EU member states with the highest level of Euroscepticism in the population, and after the UK referendum, the possibility of an Öxit haunted the national and European media. Yet a large majority of Austrians have no – and never had a – desire to leave the EU. They are pragmatic Europeans, who have little love for the remote and complicated Union, but recognise the benefits of membership. Responsible for the difficult relationship is not only the Eurosceptic FPÖ; the pro-European parties have also done little to bring the EU closer to their citizens.

Austrian Euroscepticism: the spectre of “Öxit”

In the referendum on Austria's accession to the European Union (EU) on 12 June 1994, 66.6% voted for accession – a much more enthusiastic support than in the other three accession referendums that took place in Sweden (52.3%), Finland (56.9%) and, especially, Norway (47.8%). Since accession, however, public opinion on the EU fluctuated, but it has overall remained markedly more negative

towards the Union than in most other member states. In Eurobarometer surveys, the percentage of Austrians believing that EU membership is a “good thing”, for example, has been consistently lower than the EU average since accession ([Figure 1](#)). Similar results can be found for other indicators, such as the image Austrians have of, or the level of trust they have in the EU.

The Eurobarometer data is often interpreted as indicative of a rather profound anti-EU sentiment in Austria, and after the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (UK) the spectre of an Öxit haunted public discourse and the media. “Öxit” was even awarded the title of “negative buzzword of the year” (*Unwort des Jahres*) in 2016. After the December 2016 election of pro-EU presidential candidate Alexander Van der Bellen against the candidate of the Eurosceptic Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) Norbert Hofer, a sigh of relief was heard throughout Europe; less than a year later, the electoral

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success and subsequent government participation of the Eurosceptic FPÖ in 2017 rekindled such fears.

Yet as the regular polls by the Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE) show, there is actually little support in Austria for an Öxit. The recent increase in support for EU membership is certainly, as in most parts of the EU, a reaction to the shock of the UK referendum. The polls also show, however, that there has, in fact, never been a majority in favour of leaving the EU ([Figure 2](#)). Support for Austrian EU membership has fluctuated over time, but it rarely dipped far below the initial 66.6% supporting accession in 1994. Similarly, the share of Austrians who want to leave the EU has so far never exceeded the 33.4% who voted against joining the EU in 1994.

Austrians and the EU – an ambivalent relationship

A survey¹ conducted by the ÖGfE in late 2014 on the occasion of 20 years of membership illustrates the ambivalent relationship many Austrians have with the EU: on the one hand, the EU has a number of positive connotations: a large majority of Austrians associated the EU with economic importance and peace, slightly fewer with democracy, solidarity or social mindedness. On the other hand, however, a majority also associated the EU with insecurity or constraint rather than liberty and considered the EU as weak, remote and, especially, complicated. Almost half believed that Austria had on the whole benefited more than it had lost

from membership, but benefits were perceived as unevenly distributed with large companies as the main beneficiaries, followed, with a large gap, by young people (pupils, students, apprentices), while employees, farmers, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or pensioners trailed far behind. They assessed the introduction of the Euro or free travel within the Schengen zone as mainly positive, but were critical of enlargement. A majority also felt that some of the concerns about EU membership have come at least partially true. Still, 57% believed the vote for accession in 1994 was the right choice, and 67% wanted Austria to remain a member.

The 1994 referendum campaign...

What are the reasons for this ambivalent relationship with the European Union? It is often pointed out that Euroscepticism in Austria increased decisively soon after the referendum, yet even before the referendum support for membership had fluctuated substantially. A few months before the referendum supporters and opponents were head to head, and even days before the referendum, media headlines asked whether a yes to accession might still be in jeopardy. From 1992 onwards, the government – supported by the two main parties as well as practically all important societal actors – therefore organised an extraordinarily intense and broad information campaign designed to make sure that “no one has the feeling they didn’t know enough on the day after the

¹ <https://oegfe.at/2014/12/oegfe-umfrage-20-jahre-eu-mitgliedschaft-oesterreicherinnen-ziehen-ambivalente-bilanz/>

referendum". In addition, the campaign was mainly focused on contrasting the advantages of EU membership with the negative consequences of getting left behind. "Together or Lonely?" (*"Gemeinsam oder einsam?"*) became its most famous slogan and *leitmotif*.

Opposition to accession had come mainly from the two smaller parties (Figure 3). The Green Party embarked on a pro-European course shortly after the referendum. The FPÖ, by contrast, had vigorously supported membership until the late 1980s, demanding a referendum on accession and introducing a parliamentary motion to start accession negotiations in 1987. Yet party leader Jörg Haider soon realised the electoral potential of equally vigorous opposition to membership and led the FPÖ on a decidedly Eurosceptic course. In fact, the sheer absurdity of some of Haider's claims during the campaign, most famously that EU membership would force Austrians to accept the sale of "blood chocolate" and "bug yoghurt" in their supermarkets, may actually have contributed to the positive outcome of the referendum.

... And the big silence after

Once the "the most encompassing propaganda battle in Austrian history" (H. Cernin in *Profil*, 9 May 1994) had been won, the supporters simply stopped talking about the EU, leaving citizens' remaining questions and concerns unanswered. In particular, the campaign for membership had raised high expectations regarding the benefits

of membership. Even though especially economic expectations were often fulfilled, not all citizens are aware of them or connect them to the EU. An (in)famous example was the government's promise in 1994 that every household would save around 1000 Shillings annually after accession (*"Ederer Tausender"*), which, although true, remains a powerful symbol of unfulfilled promises.²

Importantly, the silence after the referendum created an information gap that provided an opportunity for Eurosceptics to dominate public discourses. In the general elections a few months after the referendum, the FPÖ gained more than 20% of the votes for the first time in its history, and in 2000, it joined the government in a coalition with the Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP). What is sometimes underestimated outside of Austria in this context is the profound negative impact the reaction of the EU and its member states had on Austrian public opinion. While Austrian opposition to FPÖ government participation was widespread and vocal, the so-called "EU sanctions" left Austrian citizens confounded and angered by what was seen as an illegitimate and disproportionate meddling in internal democratic affairs.

Overall, Austrian citizens tend to see the EU less as an arena for proactive Austrian engagement, and rather as an encroaching foreign power³ to be fended off or at least contained. The Social Democratic Party of Austria

² <https://www.news.at/a/20-jahre-eu-lohnender-beitritt>

³ <https://www.news.at/a/umfrage-eu-%C3%B6sterreich-bevormundung-br%C3%BCssel-8631258>

(*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) and ÖVP also frequently fuelled such Eurosceptic sentiments by using the EU as a convenient scapegoat to blame for unpopular policies, even their own. Austrian governments of every colour have also repeatedly agreed to, and at times even initiated, policies at the EU level, only to criticise or even undermine them at home; the handling of the EU refugee relocation programme or the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) are recent examples. While scapegoating the EU is hardly an uncommon governmental strategy throughout Europe, it fell on fertile ground in Austria and certainly contributed to continuing Euroscepticism in public opinion. In a 2017 ÖGfE survey,⁴ only 29% of Austrians believed the EU to be portrayed too negatively in the Austrian political discourse, while 32% believed the portrayal to be too positive and 29% considered it to be “fair”.

Difficult developments in the EU since 2008 have further deepened ambivalences within Austrian public opinion. On the one hand, the financial and later eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, and

especially the inability of the EU to provide stable solutions for these challenges, have clearly had a negative impact in Austria.⁵ Views on migration and positions on EU integration are closely correlated,⁶ and together with “anti-globalisation tendencies, suspicion of foreign workers in general and a weak economic outlook made for an explosive mix” (Schmidt, 2017). The political centre in Austria has shifted to the right,⁷ and the hard stance on EU migration policy of Austrian foreign minister and chancellor candidate Sebastian Kurz certainly contributed much to the electoral success of the ÖVP in the 2017 general election. On the other hand, support for EU membership remains well over 70%, and a large majority considered, just before the general elections⁸ in 2017, a clear pro-European position of the government to be very important (40%) or fairly important (30%).

To conclude, Austrians certainly do not love the EU, but rather than simply anti-European they are critical yet pragmatic Europeans. In contrast to the British “have your cake and eat it” Brexit approach, Austrians like eating their cake – but complain about its taste.

⁴ https://oegfe.at/2018/04/hu_at_umfrage/

⁵ <https://oegfe.at/2018/01/oegfe-umfrage-klare-mehrheit-fuer-eu-mitgliedschaft-oesterreichs-2-2/>

⁶ https://derstandard.at/2000040130739/Wer-in-Oesterreich-fuer-einen-EU-Austritt-stimmen-wuerde?_blogGroup=11

⁷ https://derstandard.at/2000082435589/Was-Sebastian-Kurz-erkannt-hat-Die-Mitte-ist-weit-rechts?_blogGroup=1&ref=rec

⁸ <https://oegfe.at/2017/11/oegfe-umfrage-klare-mehrheit-fuer-eu-mitgliedschaft-oesterreichs/>

Figures

Figure 1: Perceptions of Membership as a 'Good' or 'Bad Thing', Austria and EU average 1995 – 2018

Source: Eurobarometer, S = Spring survey, F = Fall survey

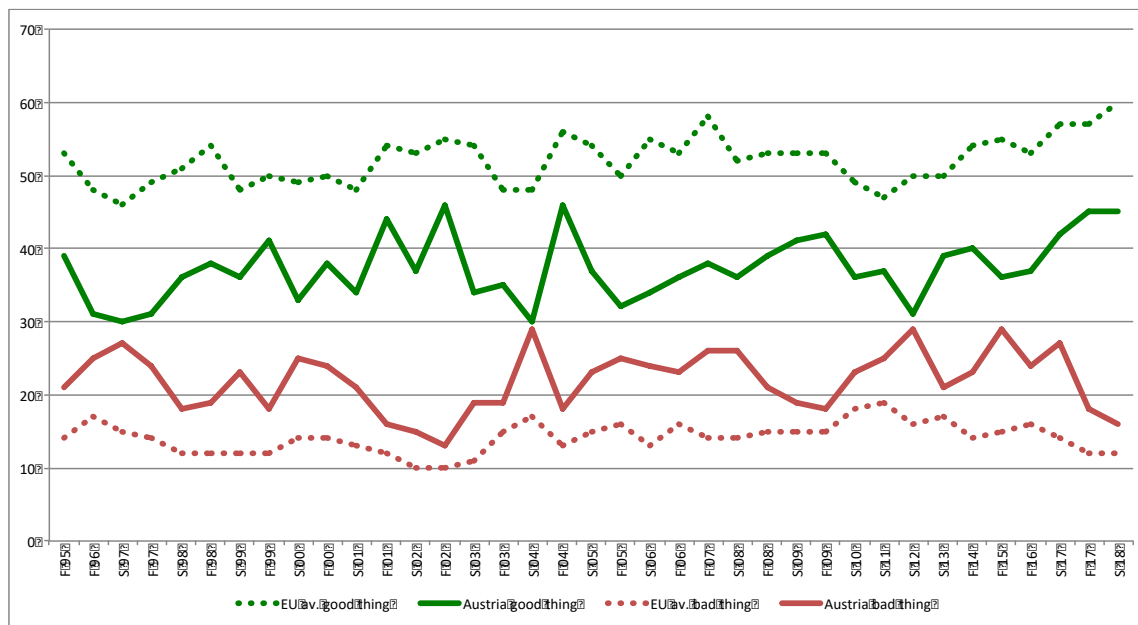


Figure 2: Support for and Opposition to EU Membership in Austria 1995 – 2018

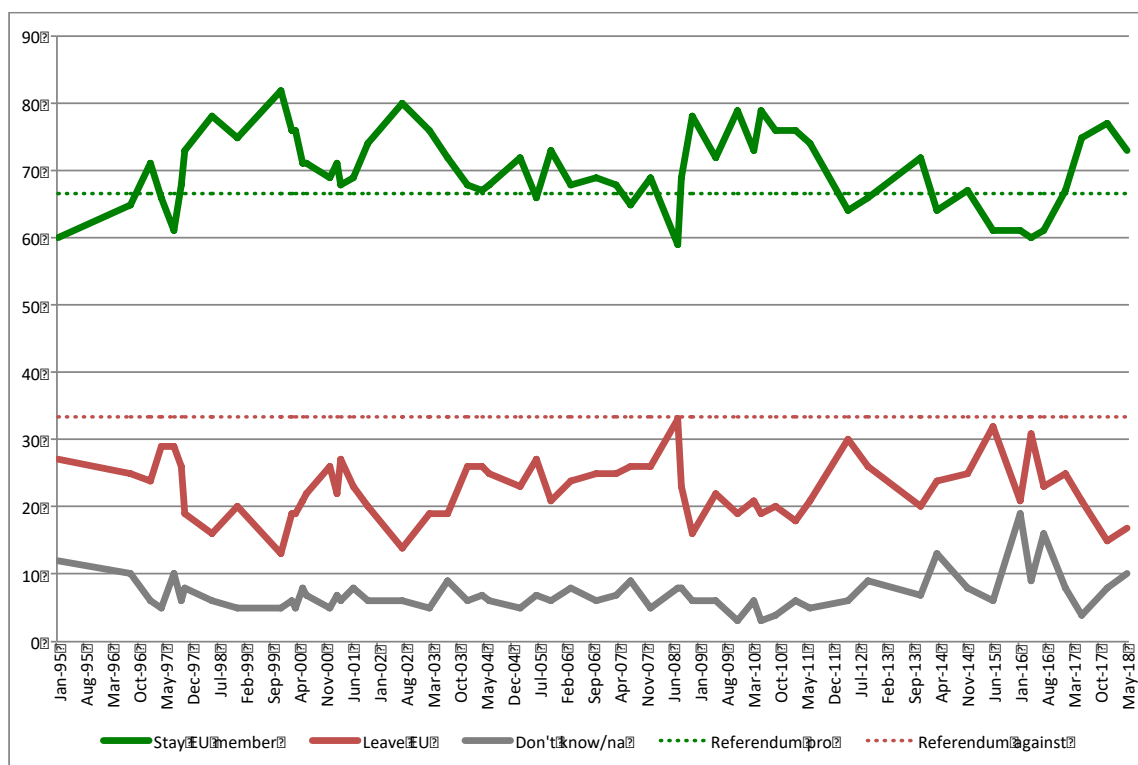
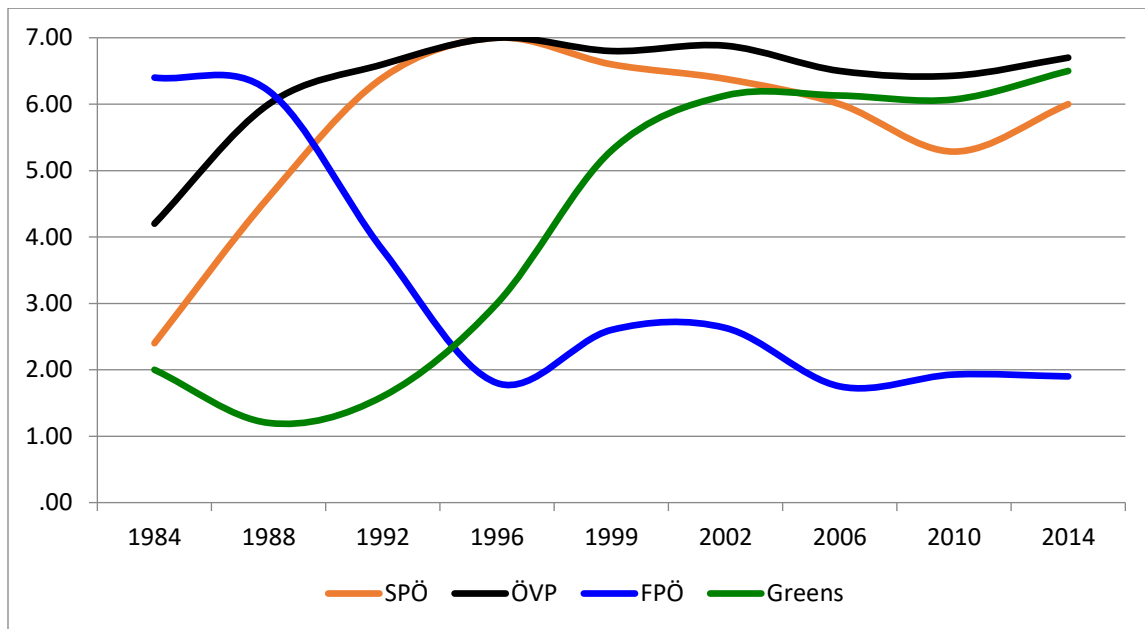
Source: [ÖGfE](#)

Figure 3: Party Positions on the EU 1996 to 2014

Notes: Adapted from [Ennser-Jedenastik 2017](#), party position towards EU integration from 0 = very negative to 7 = very positive



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