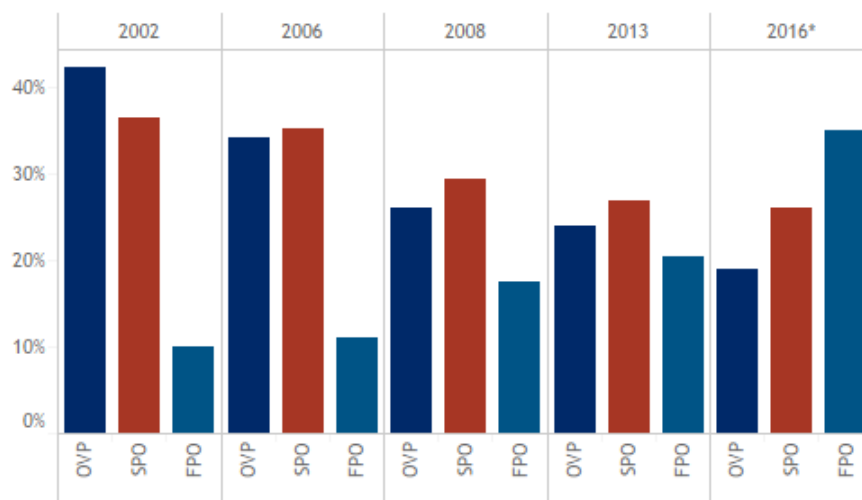


# Austria - does the centre still hold?

Blog post by Associate Adviser Roberto Robles, 05 December 2016

Once again, much of the European mainstream was relieved on Sunday evening, when - against expectations - the far-right FPÖ candidate was defeated by a 46-54 margin by the Green-backed independent Alexander Van der Bellen in the re-run of the second round of the presidential elections. Following the UK vote to leave the EU and Donald Trump's election to the presidency, the Austrian result has been hailed as a rare victory for liberal internationalism. However, this relief may be premature, as attempts to use this wealthy, Central European country as a proxy for balancing North, South, East and Western European attitudes work both ways. The FPÖ may not have won the presidency, but their candidate did still come very close and won 46% of the popular vote, up from 21% in the 2013 parliamentary election and 15% in the 2010 presidential election.

Support for the main Austrian political parties



Source: Ministry of the Interior, \*Gallup (for November 2016 opinion poll)

Strategists in France talk about a '25% strategy' of containment for Eurosceptics - i.e. accepting this is a force, but preventing momentum from building towards 52% as it did in UK. But Brexit, Trump, Austria and Italy all show that a 25% strategy does not work when there are only two choices. Opposition has tended to mobilise around an 'anything but status quo' platform. Van der Bellen's victory may have been able to mobilise all non-FPÖ voters, but this pool is shrinking. A two-candidate presidential election is not the same as a multi-party parliamentary election, and while the Van der Bellen coalition will not be represented at the next election, the FPÖ will. It's a long way to go until 2018, but in the last five general elections the lead party in forming a government had won between 26% and 42% of the vote. The latest opinion polls show the FPÖ with 33% support, ahead of the

SPÖ on 25%. If the FPÖ can consolidate voters who crossed a Rubicon to vote for them in May and yesterday, then they could become the favourites to form the next government.

Finally, that a Green-backed independent became the proxy candidate for the centre highlights the deep decline of the two main Austrian parties. The centre-left SPÖ and the centre-right ÖVP which have ruled Austria - mostly in a grand coalition - since the Second World War, placed fourth and fifth in the first round of their presidential election. Their combined support at the next general election would fall below 50% according to the opinion polls, down from 79% only 15 years ago. The decline of the mainstream is a phenomenon seen across Europe, but it is starkest in Austria - for now. For those in Brussels considering whether and how to respond, it is worth remembering that Austria only joined the EU in 1995 and is a significant net contributor to the budget. Euro-scepticism and EU-scepticism comes in many forms.