

**THE WORKING GROUP ON THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN AUSTRIA**  
**OF THE AUSTRIAN RESEARCH ASSOCIATION**  
**(Chair: Reinhard Heinisch)**

**SYNOPSIS AND OVERVIEW – ENGLISH VERSION**

**The Working Group (WG) – Mission & Objectives**

The WG is a national interdisciplinary and inter-institutional panel of scholars organized under the auspices of the Austrian Research Association and led by Reinhard Heinisch, Professor of Political Science at the University of Salzburg. The group's specific objective is to assess the state of democracy in Austria and to investigate important challenges that impinge on its future development. Specifically, the work intends to draw attention to significant questions and problems affecting the state of democracy in Austria in at least five critical dimensions.

Proposed Dimensions of Investigation

1. Assessing Representative Democracy, its Rules and Institutions
2. The Role of Civil Society—Attitudes, Function, and Institutions
3. After Consociationalism—the Economic and Social Perquisites of democracy in Austria
4. Internationalization— a Reluctant Immigrant Society and its Democratic Future.
5. Constructing the Democratic Public—the Role of New Media and Civic Education.

A specific strength and unique advantage of the working group would be its fundamentally interdisciplinary character.

Drawing on the diverse expertise of the scholars involved in this project, the goal is to engage in scholarly research, contribute to a public discourse on democracy, and stimulate further specialized research

**Implementation:** The Working Group plans to have one inaugural conference to be followed by two research conferences per year devoted to a particular dimension. The 2-day research conferences held in Vienna and a variety of locations in Austria are preceded by an international call for papers. Regular meetings of the Working Group are held in Vienna at the offices of the Austrian Research Association. The objective of the research conference is to develop one or several working papers, which are then developed into a scholarly publication. Conferences may also be accompanied by a public event such a discussion to engage a larger audience.

**DIMENSIONS OF INVESTIGATION – DETAILED AGENDA**

**DIMENSION 1: Assessing Representative Democracy, its Rules and Institutions**

Electoral turnout and political participation are generally in decline, especially among younger Austrians. The latter frequently express a particular disinterest in taking up a career in public service or politics. The image of politicians is rather low and Austria's traditional parties have growing difficulties in reaching voters to communicate political choices and their consequences. Whenever election fatigue becomes especially egregious such as in European Union elections and the recent Presidential vote there are public debates calling into question the political legitimacy and relevance of the institutions concerned.

The Problem of Declining Political Relevance: Some attribute the decline in political legitimacy of democratic institutions to their decrease in political power vis-à-vis economic institutions and actors. Critics blame especially the role of international financial markets in which shareholder value is said to trump all other political concerns and often thwart the democratic will. Others see the problem in modern campaigning. As modern political campaign strategies borrow heavily from advertising by treating voters like consumers, thus enticing them “to buy” a pitch by a politician or party, such political mobilization leaves voters feeling manipulated and disillusioned. They recognize that a sales pitch is no substitute for a meaningful debate or program. Some have persuasively argued that the declining ability of democratic politics to shape market outcomes has indirectly contributed to modern campaigning in which style and personality have replaced substance.

The Problem of Institutional Form versus Political Reality: Some see the reasons for the current negative trends in Austrian democracy more homegrown and point to the discrepancy between formal and real power in the country’s political system. It boasts an elaborate institutional inventory with nine provincial legislatures, a bicameral parliament, and an independent court system. Yet, real political power continues to be highly concentrated in the executive government and regional power is transmitted most effectively through vertical party lines and not the federal system. The Upper House of Parliament appears largely irrelevant and the more powerful Lower House mainly rubberstamps the bills introduced by the government or initiated by the major parties. The separation of power continues to be weak and the enforcement of constitutional court rulings leaves much to be desired. In short, political power continues to be highly monopolized and is exercised by the two traditional parties – yet for all their power, so the criticism, they stand accused of governing not very effectively given the long list of unresolved structural political problems ranging for sustainable health care, pension reform, tax reform, university education and R&D policy, public debt, and the deficit, to name some of the most pressing issues.

The Problem of Rising Populism and the Decline of the Consensus Model: Since the 1980s Austria has seen the sharp rise of populist politics at all levels. In part, this was a response to the perceived lack of responsiveness and opaqueness of the democratic process. In part, this has been fueled by a zeitgeist in which transactional politics are generally regarded with great suspicion, which, in the long run, undermines the very foundation of representative democracy, namely interest mediation. As a result, elections have increasingly become contests, not between Austria’s two major parties, but between a traditional party and a populist challenger. In several Austrian provinces one of the two major parties that built Austria’s postwar democracy have essentially atrophied politically: In Vienna and Carinthia, the People’s Party has declined to small party status whereas the same has already occurred to the Social Democrats in the States of Vorarlberg and Tirol and seems to be also unfolding in Upper and Lower Austria. Remarkably, if current trends continue, six Austrian provinces will be dominated by one party with the major political alternative being a populist challenger. While the erosion of the closely-knit ideological camps in the 1960s and thus the overwhelming power of political parties was a welcome aspect of Austria’s societal modernization, any functioning democracy requires political organizations that perform the information, mobilization, and organization function with respect to voters.

The Problem of Lacking Leadership and the Role of Personality in Modern Politics: While long denied as a political aberration (“the Haider Phenomenon”), the emergence and continued success of populist parties and politicians is also a powerful indication of two seeming deficits in Austrian politics. One is a manifest lack of political leadership leaving people uninspired and disinterested. The second deficit seems to be the inability to articulate a coherent political vision that sets a party clearly apart from its competitors, without, as is often the case today, pandering to populist rhetoric while offering little more than technocratic fiat. Having grown so accustomed to presiding over a patronage system as a means of mobilizing and channeling votes, Austria’s two major parties may arguably have fundamentally unlearned other strategies of motivating voters.

Moreover, it has been suggested that internal party recruitment and promotion mechanisms, essentially rewarding loyalty and conformity, produce political candidates who know how to negotiate the party apparatus but are a poor match for an information-age democracy in which personality, oratory, appearance, and entertainment qualities trump insider knowledge and ideology. As populists have recognized this phenomenon, they have refashioned their parties into political vehicles designed to promote the political leader.

The Problem of Modern Electioneering: While the role of individuals has increased and that of parties has declined, some have pointed out that it is precisely the political horse-race aspects of modern democratic campaigns that leave voters disillusioned. The reportage about personalities and their qualities paints a completely unrealistic picture of any political figure and his/her abilities. As a result, this process is bound to disappoint and leave voter cynical. Yet, as recent political campaigns in the United States and United Kingdom have shown, electoral rules which favor majoritarian outcomes as well as individuals rather than party lists manage to engender a great deal of excitement. In short, such forms of political competition are said to hold at least the potential of drawing in otherwise jaded voters.

Political disillusionment with the existing political choices is neither uniquely Austrian nor are the existing problems here as manifestly severe as they are elsewhere. In other political systems, as Colin Crouch (2004) assures us, the influence of spin doctors and special interests on elections is far greater and the media are even more complicit in downgrading the quality of democracy. In Italy the Prime Minister personally controls both a private and public media empire; in the United Kingdom, protections of privacy rights have been significantly eroded. In the EU in general and the US in particular, private sector lobbyists and corporate interests are able to bring political pressures to bear that the public can hardly match. While this is no cause for Austria to feel smug about its situation, an analysis of the institutional dimension of Austrian politics cannot avoid looking at the bigger picture and place the Austrian model in some comparative international context.

Summing up, at the heart of this dimension should be the question of whether the existing institutional mechanisms are misaligned and thus diminish the effectiveness of representative democracy.

Sample Research Question: *What are the chief deficits in Austrian representative democracy, what are its causes and is it possible to weigh their relative impact?* The literature has been vague thus far in terms of providing a clear picture of the relative importance of the factors affecting the quality of representative democracy.

## **DIMENSION 2: The Role of Civil Society—Attitudes, Function, and Institutions**

Whereas claims about democracy fatigue in Austria are not new and while disenchantment with politics spiked significantly already in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the discontentment at the time ushered in an era of greater civic activism in the form of new citizen initiatives, grass roots campaigns, and protest behavior, resulting, by the early 1990s, in two new political parties and measurable increases in pluralist politics. In the meanwhile, this trend seems to have peaked and may actually have reversed itself, especially, if we consider the protests against the ÖVP-FPÖ government after 2000 a singular phenomenon and thus a deviation from normal Austrian politics. Current trends therefore suggest that young Austrians are turning away from politics and that citizens in general have withdrawn into their private worlds. In short, the decline in partisan support and the discontent with politics has not translated into corresponding increases in civic activism.

The Problem of Declining Trust in Democratic Institutions: Recent data on institutional trust in Austria confirm the low opinion people have of political parties. Yet, civil society institutions such as, most importantly, the news media, labor market associations, and the Church fare not much better and in some cases even worse

(SWS/*Vertrauen in Institutionen* 2008).<sup>1</sup> Ironically, institutions representing the state and its authority such as law enforcement and the judicial system enjoy substantially higher levels of trust. While such trends are not inconsistent with similar developments elsewhere there is reason to be especially concerned about Austria. This is because of the country's historically low level of citizen involvement in politics in general, apart from conventional party politics. In fact, the near absence of extra-parliamentary oppositional politics has been a typical feature in Austrian politics. By the same token, Austrians have generally expected that reforms be initiated from above, which further marginalizes any role accorded to civil society and its institutions.

The Problem of a Leveling off of Civic Activism: Not long ago there was the assumption that Austria's conversion into a genuine middle class society along with the growing number of swing voters would inevitably lead to a significant strengthening of civil society. When Austrian politics appeared to leave behind the characteristic features of *Konkordanzdemokratie*, it was expected that "*Entaustriifizierung*" (Pelinka 1995) would lead to political normalization in the sense of greater civic activism. Yet, any potential reservoir of political activism created by the declining partisan support seemed to have been quickly organized by populist parties. An investigation into the future of democracy in Austria will therefore have to assess the state of civil society in general and specifically examine the reasons of why emerging political cleavages do not seem to resonate in civil society as much as they do elsewhere.

The Problem of Identity Politics: The rise of populist politics at both at the national and regional level has gone hand in hand with a new kind of politics of identity. Influenced by political debates in other countries, Austrians have been struggling to define who they are in an increasingly globalized world and integrated Europe. Owing to Austria's history with its shifting conceptions of nationhood and statehood, the question of Austrian identity and culture has had sometimes a shrill presence in electoral campaigns since at least the early 1990s. Established political parties and existing institutions both in the state and in civil society have found it difficult to address these questions, leaving the matter to demagoguery and political opportunists.

The Problem of Diverging Views on Internationalization between Elites and the Mass Public: On a more general level, Austrians have used democratic mechanisms to express their skepticism with respect to nearly all major international developments in recent years including European integration, economic internationalization, Eastern Enlargement along with collective efforts aimed international solidarity and security. While, for example, integration fatigue is spreading also elsewhere, few countries have benefitted as demonstrably from these developments as Austria has by enhancing its geopolitical security and economic prosperity. Yet, these changes only seem to have added to the considerable disenchantment with the state of politics and revealed, at the very least, a profound disconnect between the people and the body politics and its democratic institutions.

Summing up, the decline in legitimacy of political institutions without an equivalent strengthening of civil society as a corrective outlet would undoubtedly have negative implications for democracy. Examining the underlying causes and exploring ways to strengthen civil society are objectives which this working group should take up in its investigation.

Sample Research Question: *What are the causes of stunted civil society development?* The literature has been largely descriptive here and tends to view the low level civic mobilization in light of Austria's political tradition. Yet, it may be argued that the rise of populism indicates a more fundamental change in Austrian political culture so that new explanations may be needed to understand why discontent is not more effectively channeled into civic activism.

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<sup>1</sup> SWS "Face-to-face Interviews" FB 381, November/December 2008 *SWS-Rundschau*, 49 (2) 09:197-208.

### **DIMENSON 3: After Consociationalism—the Economic and Social Perquisites of Democracy in Austria**

Following a divisive interwar period and persistent cleavages between historically hostile political camps, consociationalism provided an effective means of ensuring stability and socially balanced economic growth. Without its unique mechanism and institutions, democracy in Austria may not have lasted especially during the difficult early years of the Second Republic.

The Problem of a loss in National Economic Governance: In the process of the country's modernization, consociationalism has not only lost much of its underlying rationale and wherewithal—most importantly, the erosion of major parties' legislative strength—but its very features have come under public scrutiny. Ceding economic authority partially to supranational institutions while pairing back redistributory and compensatory social policy measures has further eroded Austrian consociationalism and corporatist governance. As political parties and government institutions are less able to deliver significant economic benefits to core constituents, the latter necessarily become less engaged or turn away from their traditional political parties.

The Problem of Increasing Socioeconomic Disparity: Despite the overall economic benefit, the impact of modernization and internationalization on the workforce was uneven, negatively affecting laborers with low skills, and generally depressing wage levels overall. Increases in wage disparity and unequal economic outcomes came to be (justly or unjustly) associated with the ascendancy of the neoliberal model and a *laissez-faire* approach to economic governance on the part of the body politic. The corresponding increase in economic insecurity especially for so-called modernization losers and, most recently, the effects of the international financial crisis have led to renewed calls for a more activist role of the democratic state in regulating economic actors and shaping market outcomes.

Summing up, although it is not clear whether there is a sustained interest in a revival of consensus politics and corporatist governance beyond the status quo, the relationship between democratic and economic outcomes is central to any analysis of the future of democracy in Austria. Specifically, *Konkordanzdemokratie* requires clearly demarcated societal subgroups with designated political representatives empowered to negotiate on the group's behalf. As a result, any intended strengthening of Austrian consensus democracy will also have to be mindful of the possible incongruity of consociational mechanisms and institutions on one hand and the contemporary amorphous mass public on the other. If, at the macro-political level, the Austrian system was designed to achieve stability and cohesion, a specific objective for this working group could be to explore what is reasonably possible for an integrated economy like the Austrian and democratically acceptable for a population with defined preferences for social and economic security.

Sample Research Question: *What socioeconomic arrangements and conditions are indeed prerequisites for democracy in Austria?* The literature on Austro-Corporatism has been exceedingly unclear on this, treating the Social Partnership as an institution in perpetual crisis since the 1980s but nevertheless indispensable and still relevant.

### **DIMENSON 4: Internationalization—a Reluctant Immigrant Society and its Democratic Future**

Austrian society has been profoundly shaken by internationalization. The country's prior relatively insular position between the East and the West has further exacerbated the profound sense of national transformation and opening. As noted European integration scholars such as Vivian Schmidt and others have argued, Europeanization has brought radical changes to the governance practices of all EU member states, as the latter have clashed with traditional ideas about democracy. Internationalization has thus affected democracy in Austria in numerous ways.

The Problem of Perceiving a Loss of the Mastery of One's Own Domain: The transfer of powers and governance instruments to supranational bodies has been well-documented as has the increasing dependence on international

market forces and investment streams. A third area concerns the impact of globalization on Austrian culture, society, and its self-understanding. The main problem, as Schmidt alleges, has been that national leaders generally fail to develop new ideas and discourses to reflect Europeanized realities.

The Problem of Austria as an “Immigrant Democracy”: While questions of European integration and economic globalization have received relatively greater attention in politics, the role of Austria as an immigrant country is deemphasized. Interestingly, Austria is on one hand an example of comparative tolerance toward the expression of religious beliefs, even those of foreigners, so that, as Rosenberger and Sauer show, liberal regulations have actually been strengthened in recent years. Compared to Germany, Austria has also been far more willing to award citizenship to immigrants. On the other hand, this relative institutional tolerance stands in market contrast to rather palpable racist attitudes and antiforeigner rhetoric in politics.

In Austria and elsewhere in Europe, Migration is typically treated as a “problem” and viewed from the perspective of labor competition, resource competition, and cultural integration. As a result, Austria has placed the burden on the migrants, who are expected to demonstrate that they fit in both in terms of labor market expectations and culture. Rarely do public debates acknowledge the beneficial aspects of immigration or assess its likely consequence for Austrian society and political system. In short, the quality of Austria’s democracy will also depend on how the political will of people with a migration background can be incorporated in democratic decision-making. Despite the excessive pressure placed on foreigners to integrate themselves, it will neither be feasible to expect individuals with fundamentally different life experiences to behave as if they had been exclusively socialized in Austria, nor will it be prudent to exclude new citizens and their offspring from the political process in Austria.

The Problem of Upward Mobility and Political Inclusiveness: A special concern for the future of democracy in Austria relates to the lack of upward social mobility of people in the lower social strata. While this is a problem for Austrians in general, it affects immigrants in particular since most of them are selected on the basis of their willingness to work in capacities not particularly desirable for native Austrians. This fact tends to trap immigrants and their children in conditions marked by poor education, little social advancement, and socioeconomic marginalization. Given that, in Austria’s education system, class is still the predominant predictor of career success and that many immigrants with culturally traditional and rural or working-class background lack the wherewithal to help their children navigate the educational pathways to escape their milieu, targeted programs would be necessary to avoid the negative potential political and social consequences associated with socioeconomic segregation. Aside from depriving Austrian society from the diverse talent and input of its new citizens, this problem also harbors a tremendous conflict potential: While the immigrant generation itself may be quite willing to accept sacrifices to make a new start, their children may not, as was demonstrated in France in 2005, when many youth with immigrant background took to the streets. One way or another, Austria’s growing population with a migration background will be looking for a place in society and in the democratic decision making system.

Summing up, the working group should draw on its diversity of expertise to grapple with the impact of globalization on democracy in Austria and specifically investigate the question of how the future composition of society is likely going to affect the quality of democracy in Austria.

Sample Research Question: *What exactly are the linkages between internationalization and the quality of democracy in Austria, what is their relative importance, and what downstream effects are they likely to have?* Moreover, the literature in political science has thus far not focused on the role of immigration and its impact on democracy in Austria from the perspective of (especially ethnic) inclusiveness.

## **DIMENSION 5: Constructing the Democratic Public—the Role of New Media and Civic Education**

An important prerequisite for a functioning democracy is a democratic public, the establishment of which is closely linked, on one hand, to the media as the forum of public discourse and, on the other, to civic education and political awareness.

The Problem brought on by a Changing Media Landscape: Although the media landscape in Austria has been changing more slowly than elsewhere and is profoundly shaped by the country's large neighbor to the north, the growing role of commercial broadcasters, the increased economic pressure on traditional quality print media, the emergence of a new IT infrastructure along with the development of the second generation internet, the establishment of social network sites, and blogging have all begun to create a new media reality. As elsewhere, these trends have produced contradictory effects. One hand, the public is increasingly segmented as media outlets and narratives proliferate so that collective political experiences that may serve to establish a common citizen experience are increasingly rare. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for elites to reach relevant population cohorts with consistent messages designed to explain complex developments and defend political decisions. On the other hand, new avenues for democratic expression and new opportunities for political activism provide unprecedented freedom and capacity for grassroots organization outside the traditional mechanism of influence. Therefore, a key objective of the working group should be to assess the role of new media and to gage, with a view to citizen empowerment, the likely impact of current trends in mass communication on the future of democracy in Austria.

The Problem with Civic Education in Austria: Another facet concerning the fostering of a democratic public is the role of civic education, which Austria has traditionally neglected and which may account for the general eagerness to defer in political decisions to authority figures and the state. *Politische Bildung* was both a late creation (following a ministerial directive dating to 1978) and an incomplete one. In schools, the teaching of politics is still not considered a subject of a value equal to most others. To the extent that civic education takes place, it tends to be oriented at the formal institutions of government or at history. As Filzmaier and Klepp (2009) report, there have been also few comprehensive studies on the attitudes of young Austrians and the effect of civic education. What little exists tends to be anecdotal or must be inferred from general values surveys. While Austria's youth appears to be far less susceptible to radical or unconventional political attitudes than is commonly assumed—in fact, they tend to mirror the population at large – there is a significant segment that prefers an authoritarian leader (nearly 20%). A quarter of young Austrians surveyed want nothing to do with political parties whereas a majority holds the view that government will “do the right thing” and that “the economy is more important than politics” (Filzmaier and Klepp 2009: 345). More ominously, the work of non-governmental organizations and non-conventional politics is either de-emphasized or seen as irrelevant. As a result, only about a quarter of young Austrians seem willing to sign petitions or engage in non-conventional political expression. The attitudes of students are of course closely connected to those of educators and their formation. The existing data here also show significant deficits in terms of fostering citizen empowerment. At the same time, the surveys also indicate feelings among teachers of being overwhelmed by, and left alone with the complexity of contemporary politics both nationally and internationally.

Sample Research Question: *What are the specific factors that will shape Austria's Democratic public in the future and what role are the new media likely to play in the new information age?* In this area, Austrian research is also in its infancy and new scholarship would thus make an invaluable contribution.