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Haggling for the Equilibrium: The Renegotiation of the Austrian Coalition, 1959*

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Extract

On May 10, 1959, Austrian voters, in giving overwhelming support to the coalition that has been governing them since 1945, split their ballots about as evenly as possible between the two competing coalition partners. The Socialist Party (SPOe) obtained 50.3 per cent of the vote cast for the coalition parties; but the People's Party (OeVP), despite a rigorous system of proportional representation, moved into the new Parliament with 79 seats, a plurality of one over the SPOe. The election of 1953 had shown strikingly similar results. Then, the Socialists had not been able to translate the electoral tie into a complete governmental equilibrium. This time, stung by losses sustained in the government negotiations after the OeVP's victory in the 1956 parliamentary election, and encouraged by its own victory in the 1957 presidential election, the Socialists demanded the formation of a government based on perfect equality of the two partners. They had waged the campaign with a plea to the voters to place the ship of state in equilibrium, and the voters had responded. For eleven weeks following the balloting, OeVP and SPOe engaged in coalition renegotiations which are recounted and analyzed in this study because of the light they throw on the nature of the rigid coalition that has become postwar Austria's contribution to the taxonomy of political institutions.

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References

- 1 The system, using the Hagenbach-Bischoff method within the basic districts (25), and the d'Hondt method for the figuring of remainders in the superior districts (4), is described in Kitzinger, U. W., "The Austrian Electoral System," *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 12 (1959), pp. 392–404 [Google Scholar](#) . Representation is based on population. Since the birth rate is higher in predominantly OeVP areas, seats come slightly more cheaply to that party; hence the discrepancy between the pluralities of votes and seats in a close election.
- 2 In 1953 the Socialists, with 50.5% of the major-party vote, obtained 73 seats, and the OeVP 74. Though the OeVP had declined to this position from a 10-seat advantage in 1949, it was able to maintain its 6:5 preponderance in ministries, though it had to make concessions in policy matters. A revision of the ministerial balance was averted by the OeVP in view of the fact that the SPOe had been, if anything, unduly successful in 1949. In that year, the party, though not victorious, had seized control of the nationalized industries from the coalition partner.
- 3 In 1956, the OeVP obtained 45.96%, the national-liberal opposition (FPOe) 6.52% (a total of 52.48%), against 43.04% for the SPOe. In 1957, Wolfgang Denk, the OeVP-FPOe candidate, received 48.88%, while Adolf Schaerf, the Socialist candidate, was elected with 51.12% of the vote.
- 4 The equilibrium theme, which will be discussed throughout this paper, was emphasized, with apparent success, in a widely displayed Socialist election poster which showed the ship of state listing dangerously toward the side of the People's Party. For a presentation of the poster and a discussion of its impact on the campaign, see *Forum* (Vienna), Vol. 6 (1959), pp. 167–169 [Google Scholar](#) ; see also Glatzl, Matthias, "Die Zahlen der Wahlen," *Oesterreichische Monatshefte*, May 1959, pp. 2–4 [Google Scholar](#) , and Kitzinger, , "The Austrian Election of 1959," *Political Studies*, Vol. 9 (1961), pp. 119–140 [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#) , at p. 125.
- 5 For accounts of these tensions, see Wandruszka, Adam, "Oesterreichs politische Struktur," in Benedikt, Heinrich (ed.), *Geschichte der Republik Oesterreich* (Vienna, 1954), pp. 289–485 [Google Scholar](#) ; and Gulick's, Charles A. monumental and detailed, but strongly biased, *Austria from Habsburg to Hitler* (Berkeley, 1948) [Google Scholar](#) .

- 6 The only American scholarly writing dealing entirely with the Austrian coalition is Secher, Herbert P., "Coalition Government: The Case of the Second Austrian Republic," this Review, Vol. 52 (1958), pp. 791–808 [Google Scholar](#) . The coalition is discussed in Hiscocks, Richard, *The Rebirth of Austria* (New York, 1953), pp. 46–52 [Google Scholar](#) , and in Shepherd, Gordon, *The Austrian Odyssey* (New York, 1957), pp. 183–188 [Google Scholar](#) ; it is also partially the topic of Otto Kirchheimer, , "The Waning of Opposition in Parliamentary Regimes," *Social Research*, Vol. 24 (1957), pp. 127–156 [Google Scholar](#) , especially pp. 136–152, and of Gulick, , "Austria's Socialists in the Trend Toward a Two-Party System," *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 11 (1958), pp. 539–562 [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#) . For a trenchant but only partially valid account of the coalition, with undue emphasis on its personnel practices, see MacCormac, John, "The Improbable Coalition that Governs Austria," *Reporter*, January 23, 1958, pp. 33–37 [Google Scholar](#) . Hiscocks and Gulick (for all his Socialist bias) deal seriously with the basic aspects of the coalition, especially the socio-political and psychological ones, while Shepherd and Secher are concerned more with a critique of its policy-making and personnel practices. Particularly incisive and, at the same time, sympathetic observations on the coalition are contained in Kafka, Gustav E., "Die verfassungsrechtliche Stellung der politischen Parteien im modernen Staat," *Veroeffentlichungen der Vereinigung der deutschen Staatsrechtslehrer*, Vol. 17 (1959), pp. 53–102 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 7 The juxtaposition of these terms stems from Lipset, S. M., *Political Man* (Garden City, N.Y., 1960), pp. 21–22 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 8 *Lager* means camp, or armed camp. The term stems from Wandruszka, *loc. cit.* See also Diamant, Alfred, "The Group Basis of Austrian Politics," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, Vol. 18 (1958), pp. 134–155 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 9 *Buergerblock* (bourgeois bloc) coalitions consisted invariably of the Christian Social (Catholic clerical) Party, and, simultaneously or alternately, of the Pan-German Party and the Agrarian League, both nationalist groups.
- 10 Varying accounts of Socialist-Catholic contacts during the Nazi occupation can be found in Kasamas, Alfred, *Programm Oesterreich* (Vienna 1949), pp. 12–13 [Google Scholar](#) , and Schaerf, Adolf, *Oesterreichs Erneuerung 1945–1955* (Vienna, 1955), pp. 21–22 [Google Scho](#)
- 11 The most detailed account of the formation of the concentration government is found in Schaerf, , *Oesterreichs Wiederaufrichtung in 1945* (Vienna, 1960), pp. 69–86 [Google Scholar](#) . The formation of the Austrian People's Party—in most respects the successor of the Christian Social Party—in 1945 is reported most reliably in Weinberger, Lois, *Tatsachen, Begegnungen und Gespraechе* (Vienna, 1948), pp. 243–248 [Google Scholar](#) . For the original basis of party collaboration see Kafka, *loc. cit.*, p. 86n.
- 12 The OeVP gained 49.9% of the vote, the SPOe 44.7%. The OeVP obtained 85 seats, an absolute majority; the SPOe, 76 seats; the Communists, 4 seats.
- 13 This statement remains valid even when it is conceded that the vast majority of Austrian

voters vote primarily for one of the coalition parties, and only secondarily for the coalition itself. The voters are of course acquainted with the coalition partners' pre-election resolve to continue the coalition; also, a private public-opinion poll, taken in 1958, showed 90% of those asked as favoring the continuation of the coalition. This poll was commissioned by anti-coalition elements; most friendly to the coalition were housewives, with 94% affirmative replies, and least friendly upper- and middle-income groups, with 86% affirmative replies.

- 14 The third *Lager*, the nationalist, does not participate for the very reason that the coalition began as a union of non-Nazi Austrians. The formally organized national-liberal party (League of Independents, VdU; since 1955 Liberal Party, FPÖ) does not contain all of Austria's former active Nazis, nor are all of its adherents former active Nazis. The party was licensed in 1949 after a Socialist drive to bring about the launching of a second non-Socialist group, which would end the parliamentary majority of the ÖVP; see Schaerf, , *Oesterreichs Erneuerung*, pp. 238–247 [Google Scholar](#) ; Helmer, Oskar, *50 Jahre erlebte Geschichte* (Vienna, 1957), pp. 247–248 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 15 *Loc. cit.*, pp. 136–141.
- 16 For Austria's chamber and interest structure, see Secher, , "Representative Democracy or 'Chamber State': The Ambiguous Role of Interest Groups in Austrian Politics," *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 13 (1960), pp. 890–909 [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#) . Elections held since those reported by Secher have shown similar results.
- 17 In 1945 Cardinal Innitzer prohibited political activity and office-holding on the part of the Catholic clergy; Schaerf, *op. cit.*, p. 189. This prohibition was in sharp contrast to the practice of the First Republic. Then, Ignaz Seipel, a cleric, was the principal leader of the Christian Social Party, and twice Federal Chancellor.
- 18 The program, drawn up by a committee headed by Benedikt Kautsky—the son of Karl Kautsky—and adopted on May 14, 1958, says: "Socialism and Christianity, the religion of love of one's neighbour, are entirely compatible with each other. There can be no conflict between a Socialism which is based on ethical convictions, and the religious communities, so long as the latter avoid using the machinery of the state for the attainment of denominational demands" SPÖ, *The New Programme of Austrian Socialism* (Vienna, 1958), pp. 6–7 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 19 Secher, *loc. cit.* note 16 above, pp. 904–906.
- 20 This point is emphasized by Kafka, *loc. cit.*, pp. 66–67.
- 21 The party, united by Victor Adler in 1889, is one of the truly remarkable political organizations of political history; witness its sudden and effective resurrection in 1945, after eleven years of suppression. Its most formidable potential resource is the strike threat it wields through its domination of the ÖGB. Paradoxically, the party also controls Austria's largest private bank, the *Arbeiterbank*.

- 22 The writer will offer evidence for this and similar assertions in a later work on the Austrian coalition and democracy.
- 23 "Comparative Political Systems," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 18 (1956), pp. 391–409 [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#) .
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 405–408.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 407.
- 26 The dissolutions of 1953 and 1959 were urged by the OeVP, that of 1956 by the SPOe. The challenger sustained losses in every case.
- 27 See note 14. For a detailed, though hostile, account of OeVP efforts to include the VdU in the coalition (in 1953) see Schaerf, , *Oesterreichs Erneuerung*, pp. 328–331, 334–336 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 28 In 1959, the government declaration was an amalgam of the wishes of both parties. Earlier declarations had reflected primarily the policy intentions of the chancellor.
- 29 Prior to 1956, the coalition pacts were secret. Schaerf, claiming as his justification the publication (in 1954) of the 1949 pact by a VdU journal, published the 1953 pact in *Oesterreichs Erneuerung*, pp. 332–334. The 1956 and 1959 pacts were published in pursuance of inter-party agreement; *Wiener Zeitung*, June 27, 1956, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) ; July 26, 1959, p. 1.
- 30 The struggle over exceptions to this unanimity requirement (the so-called coalition-free area) is one of the major themes of the two subsequent sections of this article.
- 31 Secher, *loc. cit.*, MacCormac, *loc. cit.*, and others have overdrawn the specter of the *Porporz*. The system applies to the personnel of the governing boards and management of government corporations and nationalized industries, but not to the ordinary bureaucracy. There is, on the other hand, no regular merit system; rather, with exceptions, the party of the minister dominates the appointments to his department. For an accurate description of the *Proporz* see Kafka, *loc. cit.*, pp. 87–91.
- 32 For an earlier account of the position of the President, see *ibid.*, p. 82.
- 33 The OeVP voting percentage climbed from 41.26% in 1953 to 45.96% in 1956. The FPOe voting percentage showed a corresponding decline, from 10.95% in 1953 (VdU) to 6.52% in 1956. The Socialists more than held their own, rising from 42.11% in 1953 to 43.04% in 1956. In Vienna, however, where the fortunes of the SPOe are watched most closely, its percentage fell from 50.15% to 49.73%, and it actually lost 36,692 votes. The decline, expressed mostly through abstentions, was ascribed by many to the considerable increase in streetcar fares in 1955 by the Socialist city government. The writer was told that many thousands put streetcar tickets instead of ballots in their voting envelopes. For a discussion of the internal issues arising from the State Treaty, see Secher, "Coalition Government," *loc. cit.*, pp. 799–807.
- 34 The letters stood for *Industrie- und Bergbauverwaltung* (Industrial and Mining

Administration). From 1956 to 1959, the IBV was the parent body for the government of the nationalized industries.

- 35 See note 3. Schaerf's voting percentage of 51.12% in the face of bipartisan opposition contrasts with Socialist parliamentary-election percentages of 42.11% in 1953, 43.04% in 1956, and 44.79% in 1959.
- 36 The scandals are described concisely by Kitzinger, *loc. cit.*, p. 123. The OeVP, as the party of business, is bound to sustain damage from alleged scandals, just as alleged unseemly tradeunion practices are bound to hurt the Socialists.
- 37 Wiener Zeitung, March 6, 1959, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 38 *Id.*, March 7, 1959, p. 1.
- 39 *Id.*, March 12, 1959, p. 2; Die Presse, March 12, 1959, p. 3 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 40 Arbeiter-Zeitung, March 29, 1959, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 41 Neue Tageszeitung, April 3, 1959, pp. 1-2 [Google Scholar](#) . The economic program of Raab and Kamitz as an election issue is analyzed by Kitzinger, *loc. cit.*, pp. 126-127.
- 42 Wiener Zeitung, April 4, 1959, p. 2 [Google Scholar](#) . For Socialist rejoinders, see Pollak's, Oskar editorial in Arbeiter-Zeitung, April 12, 1959, p. 2 [Google Scholar](#) , and Pittermann, in Salzburger Nachrichten, April 14, 1959, p. 10 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 43 Maleta, in Wiener Zeitung, April 18, 1959, p. 2 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 44 Information in this paragraph was compiled from official returns. Note also Kitzinger's analysis, *loc. cit.*, pp. 137-140.
- 45 There is some room for argument as to what the voters intended. Thuer-Porta, Hans (Salzburger Nachrichten, May 16, 1959, p. 18) [Google Scholar](#) argues strongly that the voters voted for the predominance of their respective parties, and not for the equilibrium. The writer, however, is not convinced by this argument, especially in view of the equilibrial election outcomes of 1953 and 1957, which were of course known to the electorate. One OeVP aide told the writer that his party, by going into the voting with 82 of 165 seats and not asking for a majority mandate, actually asked for a moderate defeat. As is usual in Austria, there are, in the interpretation of political phenomena, three "truths": one "black," one "red," and one anti-coalition.
- 46 Kitzinger, *loc. cit.*, p. 123.
- 47 When asked about the desirability of having real power vested in an extra-constitutional group, a leading Socialist politician said to the writer: "In no country is there a complete congruence between official and real leaders. In Austria, at least, everyone knows who the real leaders are: the ten members of the coalition committee."
- 48 In addition to Raab and Pittermann, the delegates were: for the OeVP, Alfred Maleta (parliamentary caucus chairman and then general party secretary), Alfons Gorbach, the present Chancellor (provinces), Reinhard Kamitz (liberals and industry), Josef Kraus (peasants), Johann Wagner (commerce and small business), and Lois Weinberger (Catholic

- workers and employees); for the SPOe, Franz Olah, labor's strong man (then parliamentary caucus chairman, now OeGB president), Oskar Helmer (then Minister of the Interior), Karl Waldbrunner (Minister, then for Nationalized Industries, now of Transport), Bruno Kreisky (now Foreign Minister), Otto Probst (central secretary), and Felix Slavik (Vienna
- 49 Wiener Zeitung, May 14, 1959, p. 2 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 50 *Id.*, May 12, 1959, p. 2.
- 51 *Id.*, June 6, 1959, p. 1. In view of Austria's dependent status till 1955, and the neutrality imposed by the State Treaty, an independent foreign ministry had not heretofore been considered essential. Such considerations seem to have guided the OeVP when it selected this ministry for an offer. Another consideration was the decision, most likely reached by that time, to retire Felix Hurdes as President of Parliament and to replace him with Leopold Figl, then the Foreign Minister.
- 52 For the original offer and immediate comments, see Wiener Zeitung, June 13, 1959, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) ; Die Presse, June 13, 1959, pp. 1, 3 [Google Scholar](#) ; Salzburger Nachrichten, June 13, 1959, pp. 1–2, 4 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 53 Die Presse, June 13, 1959, pp. 1, 3 [Google Scholar](#) ; June 14, 1959, p. 1; Salzburger Nachrichten, June 13, 1959, p. 4 [Google Scholar](#) ; June 15, 1959, pp. 2, 5; Wiener Zeitung, June 14, 1959, p. 2 [Google Scholar](#) ; Arbeiter-Zeitung, June 14, 1959, pp. 1–2 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 54 Wiener Zeitung, June 16, 1959, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) ; Die Presse, June 16, 1959, pp. 1, 3 [Google Scholar](#) ; Salzburger Nachrichten, June 16, 1959, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) ; *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, June 17, 1959, folio 1.
- 55 Wiener Zeitung, June 26, 1959, pp. 1–2 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 56 *Id.*, July 7, 1959, pp. 1–2; July 8, 1959, pp. 1–2; Die Presse, July 7, 1959, pp. 1–2 [Google Scholar](#) ; July 8, 1959, pp. 1, 3; Salzburger Nachrichten, July 8, 1959, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) ; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, July 7, 1959, p. 3 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 57 Die Presse, July 9, 1959, pp. 1, 3 [Google Scholar](#) ; Salzburger Nachrichten, July 9, 1959, p. 2 [Google Scholar](#) ; *Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, July 9, 1959, folio 1; July 10, 1959, folio 2.
- 58 Wiener Zeitung, July 11, 1959, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) ; Die Presse, July 11, 1959, pp. 1, 3 [Google Scholar](#) ; July 14, 1959, p. 1; Salzburger Nachrichten, July 14, 1959, p. 2 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 59 “People's shares” in nationalized industry had been included in the government declaration of 1956, but the SPOe had blocked nearly all action on what it alleged would constitute reprivatization of public property.
- 60 For the complete text of the declaration, see Wiener Zeitung, July 18, 1959, pp. 1–3 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 61 *Id.*, July 22, 1959, pp. 1–2.
- 62 *Id.*, July 26, 1959, p. 1.
- 63 Die Presse, June 27, 1956, p. 1 [Google Scholar](#) .
- 64 The comparison is made with particular poignancy and humor in Nitsche, Roland, “Die

Jungwaehler werden entscheiden," Die Weltwoche, May 1, 1959, p. 27 [Google Scholar](#) .

See also Kafka, *loc. cit.*, pp. 92–93.

- 65 For Kafka's interesting observations on the "unstable equilibrium," see *ibid.*, p. 95.
 - 66 There is, however, the 1958 poll referred to in note 13; see also note 45.
 - 67 Such a mythical voter is described in a little ditty made available to the writer by its author, the drama critic and humorist Hans Weigel. After much soul-searching about his coming vote, this mythical voter opines: "If one could only tell for sure that the 'blacks' will come out ahead, one could safely vote for the 'reds'."
 - 68 Kafka argues the latter point cogently; *loc. cit.*, pp. 96–97.
-