

# Austrians to vote with far-right in sight of historic win

AFP – Austrians are voting Sunday in a general election, which could see the far-right narrowly beat the conservatives for a historic win in the Alpine EU nation.

The Freedom Party (FP0e) – which has already been in government several times – has never topped a national vote, though even if it wins, it is uncertain it would be able to form a government.

Since sharp-tongued Herbert Kickl took over the graft-tainted party in 2021, it has seen its popularity rebound on voter anger over migration, inflation and Covid restrictions, in line with far-right parties elsewhere in Europe.

“I want to vote for Kickl from the bottom of my heart. He needs to solve the problem of migration,” Angela Erstic, 69, a doctor, told AFP at a final FP0e rally in central Vienna late Friday.

Cementing the FP0e’s image as an anti-establishment party, Kickl, 55, has campaigned on slogans, such as “Courageously try something new”. The party now stands at 27 percent of support in opinion polls.

The ruling conservative People’s Party (0evP) has been lagging behind, but its leader, Chancellor Karl Nehammer, 51, has managed to narrow the gap in recent weeks.

Promising “stability instead of chaos”, the 0eVP is at 25 percent support in the latest polls.

– ‘Different this time’ –

Poll booths largely open at 0500 GMT and the last ones close at 1700 GMT. Projections based on postal voting and vote counts from stations that close earlier should be announced shortly after that.

More than 6.3 million people of Austria's nine million inhabitants are eligible to vote.

"It is a decisive election," Rachel Schwarzboeck, 74, an Austrian retiree with Jewish and Polish roots, told AFP, adding that she would not vote for the FPÖ – a party formed by former Nazis.

"I don't want a Nazi regime in power in Austria," she said.

Long a political force in Austria, the FPÖ's first government in 2000 under the conservatives set off widespread protests and sanctions from Brussels.

Since then, far-right parties have been on the rise throughout Europe, with outgoing governments largely on the defence after a series of crises, including the corona pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"This time it will be different, this time, we're going to come out on top in this election. This time, we will succeed," Kickl told a throng of cheering supporters in front of Vienna's main cathedral on Friday.

In his speech, he once again slammed EU sanctions against Russia, espoused the far-right concept of "remigration" that calls for expelling people of non-European ethnic backgrounds deemed to have failed to integrate, and raved against the outgoing government.

The conservatives' support has plunged from more than 37 percent in the last national election in 2019.

Their junior coalition partner, the Greens, now stand at 8 percent in opinion polls, or almost half of what they received

in 2019.

– No ‘people’s chancellor’ –

But analysts widely predict even if the FP0e wins the most seats, it will not have enough seats or partners to form a government.

Nehammer has repeatedly reiterated his refusal to work under Kickl, who has called himself the future “Volkskanzler,” the people’s chancellor, as Adolf Hitler was termed in the 1930s.

Thwarting a Kickl chancellorship could be an unprecedented three-party coalition headed by the OeVP with the Social Democrats, who are polling at just above 20 percent, and a third party, probably the liberal NEOS.

If the OeVP – who has been part of every government since 1987 – wins the most seats or performs almost as strongly as the FP0e, analysts see a possibility of a coalition with the far-right as a junior partner.

The two parties’ views converge “on many subjects”, and “creative solutions” could be found to deal with Kickl, Andreas Eisl, researcher at the Jacques Delors Institute, told AFP.

Both past OeVP-FP0e governments have been short lived.

The last one, headed by charismatic then OeVP leader Sebastian Kurz, collapsed over a spectacular FP0e corruption scandal in 2019, after just a year and a half in power.

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