



Austria — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[For the time from 1900 to 11/11/1918, Austria refers to the Austrian Half of the Habsburg Empire.]

12/21/1867 Start Constitutional Monarchy: On 08/11/1804 the Austrian Empire was proclaimed. The Austrian part of the empire was a constitutional monarchy under the Habsburg dynasty. The emperor held significant executive power, but there was also a parliament (Reichsrat) which had legislative authority. Officially known as the Kingdoms and Lands Represented in the Imperial Council, this part of the empire was often referred to as Cisleithania, distinguishing it from the Hungarian part (Transleithania). The Austrian part was ethnically diverse, including Germans, Czechs, Poles, Ukrainians, Slovenes, Italians, and others. This diversity created a complex societal fabric, with various linguistic and cultural influences. In 1861 men gained the right to vote, however, only with the December Constitution of 12/21/1867, the Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire was placed on a durable constitutional footing for the first time. The constitutional laws established legally binding civil rights, expanded the legislative authority of the Reichsrat, and formally constrained the emperor's executive power, even though political participation remained limited and socially exclusive. The settlement of 1867 therefore marks the clear transition from autocratic to constitutional monarchy in Cisleithania (Deak 2015). Women were first allowed to vote in 1907.¹ Nationalist tensions among various ethnic groups posed significant challenges, with calls for more autonomy and rights. The political landscape was fragmented, with numerous parties representing different ethnic and interest groups. Political liberties are classified as absent by LIED and as somewhat present according to V-Dem's PCLI. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive encountered slight limitations on decision-making power imposed by other institutions. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. According to LIED only multiparty legislative elections were held until 1913, from 1914 to 1916 no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held and in 1917 only multiparty legislative elections were held.

11/11/1918 End Constitutional Monarchy/Start Democratizing Regime: On this date, Emperor Karl I signed his abdication. On 11/12/1918 the republic was announced, the law of state and government reform was introduced. Article 9 of the reform mentioned that suffrage for the election of the Austrian Parliament should be universal, regardless of gender.² Since the period started after 07/01/1918 and ended before 07/01/1919 it does not appear in the country-year-version of the dataset. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive and legislative elections were present during this period of transition, which aligns the observations of LIED. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are somewhat present in 1918 and are present in 1919. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

02/16/1919 End Democratizing Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, free and fair founding elections were held for the Constituent Assembly. The elections were the first election in which all women were granted the right to vote. German citizens living in Austria, as well as Sudeten-Germans living in Czechoslovakia were allowed to participate in the elections. The Social Democratic Workers Party (SPÖ) won

the majority with 72/170 seats. In September 1919 the Treaty of Saint-Germain was signed, finalizing the end of WWI, and officially breaking up the Habsburg Empire. The coalition resulting from the elections between the SPÖ and the conservative Christian Social Party (CS) with Karl Renner as Chancellor, passed the first constitution for the First Austrian Republic on 10/01/1920. During this time the elections were competitive. V-Dem's CEI scores full cleanliness until 1930, before switching to somewhat cleanliness. Moreover, V-Dem's EF&FI underlines free and fair elections until 1929, before somewhat freedom and fairness is scored. The 1930 elections were „overseen” by the fascist Heimwehr, paramilitary units that were politically represented by the Heimatblock (HB). Although the SDAP had won the majority in the elections, the CS formed a coalition with the HB.³ V-Dem's PCLI categorization states a period of presence of political liberties from 1919 to 1932. According to LIED political liberties were absent. Since 1920, according to Polity5, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. Between 1919 and 1933 Austria represented a borderline case between a liberal and an electoral democracy when assessed across the dimensions of liberties, suffrage, participation, and executive constraints. The regime fulfilled the essential procedural requirements of democracy, with universal suffrage, competitive multiparty elections, and a constitutionally accountable executive. During the early 1920s, parliamentary institutions and judicial independence operated effectively, and political competition was genuine. However, the liberal dimension of democracy remained weak. Civil and political liberties were only partially protected, and from the late 1920s onward, escalating polarization, paramilitary intimidation, and selective state repression undermined the freedom and equality of participation. Executive constraints deteriorated as parliamentary authority declined and emergency powers expanded. These developments did not erase the democratic foundations of the First Republic but progressively eroded their liberal substance. Austria thus occupied an intermediate position: a democracy in form and procedure that initially approached liberal standards but evolved into an electoral democracy before its authoritarian breakdown in 1933. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were present during this period, which aligns the observations of LIED. For the year 1920, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. For 1921-1932, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For the year 1933, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

05/27/1933 End Electoral Democracy/Start Right-Wing (Corporatist) Autocracy: Engelbert Dollfuss (CS), holding a ministerial position, assumed the role of prime minister through standard procedures on 05/20/1932. In October, his government began to rule by emergency provisions and forced judges to resign. This purging of judges was completed by 05/27/1933. In March 1930 the parliament had failed to elect a speaker and thus was suspended by Dollfuss. The Communist Party (KPÖ) and the Austrian National Socialist Workers Party (NSDAP-Hitlerbewegung) were banned by Dollfuss at the same time. Dollfuss organized a new cabinet in favor of personal friends and the HB on 05/10/1933. Later on, the CS and the Heimwehr (the paramilitary group) merged into the Vaterländische Front (VF), aiming to gain mass support and build a one-party regime.⁴ The Austrofascist corporative state closely followed the ideal of a Christian corporative state as developed by Pope Pius XI in the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*. After Dollfuss was assassinated in 1934, his successor Kurt Schuschnigg continued the regime and maintained (Kitchen 1980: 5, 41, 110, Lentz 1999: 40-42, Casey et al. 2020: 2). Since 1934, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations during this time. For 1934-1937⁵, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. Furthermore, political liberties were not present according to LIED. V-Dem's PCLI scores dropped back to ambiguous in 1933 and to present from

1934 onwards. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive and legislative elections were present during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED.

03/12/1938 End Right-Wing (Corporative) Autocracy/Start Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy: German troops, accompanied by Hitler himself, entered Austria on this date (Hochman 2016a: 237, Casey et al. 2020: 2). However, due to the strength of the national-socialist movement in Austria the period is not classified as an occupation, but as a new fascist ideocracy (by the Nazi movement). For instance, Vienna had already had a national-socialist mayor with Hermann Neubacher (Pauley 1981). In the brief interval between the Nazi seizure of power in Austria and the country's formal incorporation into the German Reich, political authority was exercised through a rapidly imposed yet still hybrid structure. Real power rested with Austrian National Socialists backed by German support, while formal state offices persisted through a short transitional phase. Arthur Seyß-Inquart, appointed Chancellor under German pressure, served as nominal head of government but functioned primarily as an instrument of coordination between Austrian institutions and the Nazi leadership in Berlin. The Austrian administration and security apparatus were immediately subordinated to Nazi control, with the SS and local party organizations assuming operational command. Decision-making became concentrated within a narrow circle of pro-German officials, and the process of Gleichschaltung commenced almost instantly. Within days, opposition figures were arrested, Jewish organizations were targeted, and all remaining vestiges of the corporatist regime were dismantled. Although Austria had not yet been formally annexed, it had already ceased to function as a sovereign state and was governed de facto as a subordinate extension of the Nazi regime (Hochman 2016b, Steininger 2008).

04/10/1938 End Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy [as independent country]/Start Part of Other Country [of Germany, Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy]: On this date a plebiscite regarding the Anschluss to Germany was held. The result of 99 per cent pro annexation appears highly questionable. LIED codes political liberties as absent in this period. V-Dem does not provide data for Austria for that period. According to LIED no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held.

04/27/1945 End Part of Other Country [of Germany, Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Allied Forces]: Allied occupation of Austria and Restoration of the Republic of Austria. Austria was divided into four occupation zones and jointly occupied by the United Kingdom, the USSR, the USA, and France.

11/25/1945 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Allied Forces]/Start Electoral Democracy: Austria between 11/25/1945 and 10/25/1955 is a borderline case between a democracy and occupation. Parliamentary elections on 11/25/1945 were free and fair. On 06/28/1946 the 'Second Control Agreement' was signed by the Allies. The agreement intended to gradually loosen their dominance over the Austrian government. The Austrian government continued to exist after parliamentary elections and was able to govern by democratic means, but the Allies retained the possibility of undermining government decisions through veto rights. In turn Soviet vetoes were routinely canceled by Western opposition.⁶ While the country was still formally occupied it was largely sovereign regarding domestic policy. However, the occupying troops only left Austria on 10/25/1955. Since the Allies did not compete with the government for power and internal political autonomy prevailed, it is coded as a democracy from the time of the parliamentary elections on 11/25/1945. However, given the veto power of the Allies Austria is classified as an electoral democracy until the end of the occupation. LIED categorizes political liberties as not present until 1955. Whereas V-Dem's PCLI already indicates full political liberties since 1946. As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. Based on our observations, since this period, multiparty executive and legislative elections were present, which aligns the observations of LIED. According to V-Dem's PCLI political liberties were present from 1947 onward.

10/26/1955 End Electoral Democracy/Start Liberal Democracy: On this date, the Austrian National Council passed the Constitutional Law on the Neutrality of Austria. Austria is a parliamentary democracy with a bicameral system consisting of the National Council (Nationalrat) and the Federal Council (Bundesrat). The president serves as head of state and the head of government is the chancellor.⁷ The governmental power in this regime period alternates regularly, indicating competitiveness of the national elections.⁸ Only from 1966–1970 and from 1970 to 1983 have parties governed via a single-party government in Austria since 1945, with the ÖVP holding the first period and the SPÖ holding the second.⁹ Generally, elections in Austria are free and fair (Pelinka 2009).¹⁰ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Austrian elections after World War II have consistently been scored as competitive by LIED and clean, free and fair by V-Dem's CEI and EF&FI. Political parties operate freely in a competitive environment. The judiciary operates independently. FH classifies Austria for the whole regime period as free with a score between 2 and 4.¹¹ LIED categorizes political liberties as present from 1956 onward. According to V-Dem's PCLI political liberties were present in the whole regime period. As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was in the whole regime period on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. For 1956–1980, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. Since 1981, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also comprehensive. The long era of stability began to fracture in 2017 when the Grand Coalition collapsed, leading to early elections. The subsequent government, led by Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) and including the far-right FPÖ, represented a significant departure from postwar consensus politics. This government lasted until its premature collapse in May 2019.¹² On 09/29/2019, snap elections were held for Austria's National Council following accusations of attempted corruption against the FPÖ leader and vice-chancellor. A leaked video showed him conspiring with a fake Russian oligarch's wife to take over a major Austrian newspaper, which made international headlines as the Ibiza scandal.¹³ Sebastian Kurz, among others, took center stage in the election campaign. ÖVP, his party, emerged as a clear winner. Backing for the FPÖ crumbled, resulting in the party losing 20 seats in the National Council. The ÖVP secured 71 seats, the highest among all parties but insufficient for a governing majority. The SPÖ obtained 40 council positions, the FPÖ secured 31, and the liberal NEOS garnered 15. After a two-year absence from parliament, the Green Party made a comeback and secured 26 seats.¹⁴ A ÖVP-Green government took office with Kurz as chancellor. After corruption allegations, Kurz had to resign in October 2021. After Kurz resigned, Alexander Schallenberg followed him as chancellor for a few weeks. Then Karl Nehammer took over in December.¹⁵ On 09/29/2024 legislative elections took place and the National Council was elected. In an historic outcome, the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), led by Herbert Kickl, won the election with 28.8% of the vote. This marks the first time a far-right party has achieved a plurality in Austria since World War II. The coalition negotiations between various parties were very difficult, meaning that the FPÖ was unable to form a government. The ÖVP-SPÖ-NEOS government was formed in February 2025 in a second round of negotiations, with Christian Stöcker from the ÖVP taking over as chancellor.¹⁶

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Benedikt 1977, Carsten 1978, Gerlich/Campbell 2000, Grass 1969, Gulick 1976, Kitchen 1988, Pelinka 2009, Poier 2010, Strong 1974, Sweet 1950, Tálos 2001, Tálos et al. 1995, Weinzierl/Skalknik 1983a, Weinzierl/Skalknik 1983b)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage_in_Austria

- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage_in_Austria
- ³ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, Austria_V: 2.
- ⁴ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, Austria_V: 2
- ⁵ Both indicators do not provide a value for 1938, although the invasion of German troops only occurs after the reference date (January 1st of the respective year).
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allied-occupied_Austria
- ⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Austria
- ⁸ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, Austria_R, Austria_V
- ⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austria#Independence>
- ¹⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/austria/freedom-world/2023>
- ¹¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/austria/freedom-world/2024>
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austria#Since_2006
- ¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/20/austria-ibiza-scandal-sting-operation-what-happened-why-does-it-matter>
- ¹⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/austria/freedom-world/2020>
- ¹⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/austria/freedom-world/2023>
- ¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Austrian_legislative_election

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