



## Freedom in the World - Austria (2008)

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**Capital:** Vienna

**Population:**  
8,300,000

**Political Rights Score: 1**

**Civil Liberties Score: 1**

**Status: Free**

### Overview

**In 2007, months of negotiations following the 2006 general elections finally produced a new government. The Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPO) narrowly defeated the center-right People's Party of Austria (OVP), but neither could form a majority coalition with its preferred allies among the smaller parties. As a result, the two large parties formed a grand coalition: Alfred Gusenbauer of the SPO became chancellor, but the OVP obtained several key ministries.**

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Modern Austria emerged at the end of World War I, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire broke apart. It was annexed to Nazi Germany in 1938 and suffered defeat in World War II. Postwar Austria, by consent of both sides, remained neutral during the Cold War. Focusing instead on economic growth, Austria has developed one of the wealthiest economies in Europe.

From 1986 until 2000, the two biggest political parties—the center-left Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPO) and the center-right People's Party of Austria (OVP)—governed together in a grand coalition. Members of the two parties shared in the administration of cabinet ministries, as well as in many other government functions. Labor relations were corporatist, with management and unions both represented not only in the decision making of individual firms, but also in national policy making.

The 1999 elections saw the emergence of the first government since 1970 not to include the SPO. Instead, the OVP formed a coalition with the Freedom Party, a far-right nationalist party with vestigial Nazi sympathies. The Freedom Party had risen steadily in the polls as voters became disaffected with the power-sharing arrangement of the large parties and the near impossibility of major political change. The Freedom Party won 27 percent of the vote in 1999 and was thus included in a coalition led by the OVP. The reaction among fellow members of the European Union (EU) to the election results was dramatic. In 2000, the EU officially suspended ties with Austria. Support in Austria for the Freedom Party jumped, as Austrian voters resented the EU's interference. Later in 2000, the EU reinstated Austria.

Due to the sanctions, the controversial Joerg Haider (who once referred to the Nazi death camps as "punishment camps") stepped down as leader of the Freedom Party, though he remained governor of Carinthia. With his withdrawal, Austrian politics returned to near normality, as the Freedom Party was moderated by the day-to-day reality of governing. After an internal leadership struggle, the party withdrew from the coalition in September 2002. The parliamentary elections of November 2002 saw the Freedom Party's share of the vote fall to 10 percent. It rejoined the coalition with the OVP, but this time clearly as the junior partner.

Subsequent poor performance (for example in European Parliament elections) fueled internal rifts in the party. Most of its members of parliament, as well as Haider, chose in spring 2005 to leave the party and form the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZO). The Freedom Party remained in parliament as a rump, though it retained many activists. The BZO became OVP's junior coalition partner.

In October 2006, parliamentary elections confirmed the OVP's relative decline. The SPO won with 35

percent of the vote and 68 seats, while the OVP took 34 percent and 66 seats. The Green Party secured a surprising third-place tie with the Freedom Party, with 21 seats each. The BZO took 7 seats. Neither of the large parties was able to form a coalition with any combination of the smaller parties, making a grand coalition the only feasible government.

However, antagonism between the SPO and the OVP, as a result of the hotly contested vote, made negotiations drag on into 2007. One issue was the SPO's campaign promise to cancel the previous government's purchase of 18 advanced Eurofighter jets, a pledge the OVP refused to accept. Finally, the two parties agreed on a coalition government in January. The SPO's Alfred Gusenbauer became chancellor, but most of the important ministries were given to the OVP, including the finance, foreign affairs, interior, and economy ministries. The SPO also climbed down on the Eurofighter issue; the jets were all scheduled to be delivered by 2008, with an SPO promise to try to cut the costs of the deal. Many SPO voters and insiders felt that Gusenbauer gave too much to the OVP in order to make himself chancellor, though the coalition agreement did call for a boost in spending on education and social projects dear to the SPO base. Tension remained between the two parties for the rest of the year over the elimination of school tuition fees (they had been introduced by the previous OVP government and were disliked by the SPO), foreign policy (whether Austria should consider NATO membership), and other issues.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Austria is an electoral democracy. The lower house of the Federal Assembly, the Nationalrat (National Council), has 183 members chosen through proportional representation at the district, state, and federal levels to ensure both overall fairness and a voice for each region. Members of the Nationalrat serve four-year terms, and the chancellor, appointed by the president, needs the support of the legislature to govern. The 62 members of the upper house, the Bundesrat (Federal Council), are chosen by state legislatures.

Perhaps ironically, the participation of the Freedom Party in government highlighted the country's basic democratic rights in 2000, when other European countries tried unsuccessfully to induce Austrians to forgo their duly elected choice. Though there are competitive political parties and free and fair elections, the traditional practice of grand coalitions in Austria caused substantial disillusionment with the political process. Frustration with the cozy relationship between the OVP and the SPO contributed to the rise of the Freedom Party, but the party's participation in government brought it closer to the mainstream right.

Austria is now less corrupt than it was during the 1980s, when campaign donation laws were tightened somewhat. However, the 2006 collapse of Bawag, a bank owned by a union federation with strong ties to the SPO, led to a flurry of media stories about bad loans, the covering up of financial losses, and the lavish lifestyles of the bank's executives. Austria was ranked 15 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The media are free, though not highly pluralistic. The end of the monopoly by the state broadcaster ORF has not brought significant competition to the broadcast market, and print media ownership is concentrated in a few hands. Harassment and libel lawsuits by politicians (notably from the Freedom Party) against investigative and critical journalists have hampered reporters' work. There are no restrictions on internet access.

Nazi and anti-Semitic speech and writing are banned, and in 2005, David Irving, a British historian, was arrested on charges of Holocaust denial. He was sentenced to three years in prison in February 2006, but was released on probation in December of that year.

Religious freedom is respected in Austria and enshrined in the constitution. There are 13 officially recognized religions, which can draw on state funds for religious education. Recognition by the state requires a period of 10 years as a "confessional community" with fewer privileges, and the religion in question must have a membership equaling at least 0.05 percent of Austria's population. The Jehovah's Witnesses have complained that this practice violates their freedom of religion, although

they are recognized as a confessional community. Academic freedom is respected.

The rights to freedom of assembly and association are protected in the constitution. Civic and nongovernmental organizations are able to operate without restrictions. Trade unions have traditionally been powerful. They not only are free to organize and strike, but have been considered an essential partner in national policy making.

The judiciary is independent, and the Constitutional Court examines the compatibility of legislation with the constitution. Austria is a member of the Council of Europe, and its citizens have recourse to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. The quality of prisons and police generally meet high European standards, though isolated incidents of police brutality, as well as crowded and sometimes harsh prison conditions, are reported.

Residents generally are afforded equal protection under the law. However, immigration has fueled some resentment toward minorities and foreigners; as of 2002, Austria had one of the highest numbers of asylum seekers per capita in the world. The asylum law was tightened in December 2003, placing it among the strictest in the developed world and drawing criticism from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It allows some asylum seekers to be deported while appeals of their cases are pending. New arrivals are asked for full statements within 72 hours. The UNHCR has also criticized shortages of qualified legal advisers and interpreters for detainees.

A 1979 law guarantees women freedom from discrimination in various areas, especially the workplace. A 1993 law sought to increase women's employment in government agencies, where they were underrepresented.