Making general elections work: Challenges and experiences from the Austrian perspective

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I. Introduction to Austria (1)

Republic of Austria

- Democratic republic (Federal President is head of state)
- Approx. 84,000 km²
- over 8,000,000 inhabitants.
- 9 autonomous provinces (states)
- 2,354 municipalities
I. Introduction to Austria (2)

Electoral Boards (Commissions)

- **Federal Electoral Board**
  - 17 Members + 1 Chair
  - (15 party members, 2 judges)

- **Provincial Electoral Boards**
  - 9 Members + 1 Chair
  - (117)

- **District Electoral Boards**
  - 9 Members + 1 Chair
  - (2,354)

- **Municipal Electoral Boards**
  - 9 Members + 1 Chair

- **Precinct / Special Electoral Boards**
  - 3 Members + 1 Chair
  - (over 11,000)
I. Introduction to Austria (3)

General elections = National Council elections:
• Lower chamber of parliament
• 183 seats, election max. every 5 years
• Proportionality system
• No compulsory voting

Last general elections: 29 September 2013
Registered voters: 6,384,308; Turnout: 74.91 %
II. Austrian Peculiarities (1)

- “early elections” (ad hoc elections) always possible (majority decision in parliament)
- high number of electoral commissions (over 11,000 including “flying commissions”)
- electoral commissions composed of delegates of campaigning groups, chair is a political official (e.g. mayor) or his/her substitute
- polling stations closed at different times
- right to vote from 16 years onwards
II. Austrian Peculiarities (2)

- voting cards to vote in another municipality
- postal voting possible (ballots to arrive on e-day)
- very detailed laws (one act for each type of electoral event)
- no “law-making” competence of commissions
- no voting at embassies – only “drop-off place” due to postal voting
- limited legal restrictions regarding campaigning (e.g. prohibition zone)
III. Stages of the Electoral Cycle

Examples

- Pre-election period (cut-off day, registration, …)
- Election period (finances, training, HR, logistics/infrastructure, public information, …)
- Election day (results, …)
- Post-election period (evaluation, …)
Pre-election period

Calling an election:
• Government, parliament, president involved
• Cut-off day 82 days before e-day (important for right to vote and many subsequent deadlines)
• Tight schedule, little room for extension or the opposite (e.g. distribution of ballot sheets 27 days before e-day)

Electoral register/voters lists:
• No need to register actively
• Municipalities in charge, link with residence register
Election period (1)

Finances:
• Elections “always possible” (budget available)
• Expenses shared (Ministry of Interior and municipalities – approx. 5.5 mio MOI, approx. 7 mio. municipalities)

Training/Know-how:
• System of multiplicators (MOI → Provincial authorities → County authorities → municipal authorities)
• Meetings before every election
• Special training sessions (changes in postal voting systems, new rules for prisoners, new complaint procedures, …)
• Detailed manuals and orders
• Minutes for precinct commissions (instructive “check lists”)
Training Meeting with Provincial & County authorities
Call Center before elections
Election period (2)

Public information

• Federal Ministry and other EMBs reach out to the public
• Foreign Ministry contacts expatriates (reminder)
• Internet information – basically everything online and downloadable
• General phone number, advertisements, call center
• Flyer (brochure) sent to all Austrian households (including application forms for voting cards)
• Close co-operation with associations for disabled persons (CD, internet information, templates for blind voters, …)
Election period (3)

Logistics/infrastructure

• Sufficient number of polling stations per municipality (maximum of 70 voters per hour!)
• Local needs respected (different opening hours, flying commissions, accessibility of stations for disabled person)
• No compromises regarding printing matters (highest quality of voting materials – permanent checks, high number of extra ballot papers etc., …)
• Clear description of prerequisites of stations, booths, ballot boxes, etc. in the law → but flexibility regarding looks and models
• IT preparations - calculation system updates
Voting booth and ballot box (samples – Vienna)
Internet Presentation (accessible via WWW)
Election period (4)

Human Resources

• Daily routine and preparatory steps by administration (Federal Ministry of the Interior, Provincial authorities, County authorities, municipal authorities)
• Sensitive decisions ONLY taken by commissions
• 11,000 polling stations in Austria → high number compared to other countries (e.g. Romania: 17,000)
• Commissions only consist of citizens nominated by campaigning parties (“honorary office”) → challenge
Election Day

• No official meeting of Federal and Provincial Electoral Boards/Commissions (more flexibility for administration, all touchy steps already decided)

• Precinct commissions complete minutes
  → possible future review (e.g. Constitutional Court)

• Counting exclusively on the precinct level (no delay, no security issues) – postal ballots: county level

• Immediate reporting of results through chain of EMBs (by any means possible)
Postal Voting in use
Post-election period

Evaluation

• Collection of reports and complaints by citizens
• Reports of subordinate EMBs
• Review meetings with subordinate EMBs
• Discussions and reports within the framework of the federal electoral board meetings and in parliament (committees, factions, …)
• Legal amendments after evaluations (initiative to change law usually comes from parties)
• Impact of Constitutional Court (e.g. current case after European elections)
IV. Conclusions/Lessons Learned

- Solid legal basis is a prerequisite for sound general elections (clear competencies, fixed deadlines, effective legal redress, …)
- Get prepared for large numbers of voters (enough polling stations, enough ballot papers and voting cards, etc.)
- Sufficient public information (internet, call center, information by mail, ads, …)
- Don’t forget inclusiveness (persons with disabilities, prisoners, …)
- Subsidiarity allows for local peculiarities
- Document all crucial steps of the electoral process (minutes, checklists, …)
Thank You for Your Attention!

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