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# Sticking to the core or going beyond? The Austrian freedom party's educational approach in a longitudinal perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Although populist radical right parties (PRRPs) are actively studied in recent years, few research has addressed their approach to education policy. Previously not considered one of their signature issues, this paper argues that education has become important for PRRPs too. In a case study of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), one of the most longstanding and successful PRRPs in Western Europe, we explore key pillars of the FPÖ's educational positions and their development over time. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of party programs, election manifestos and plenary debates from 1990 to 2020, our analysis shows that the policy area of education has indeed become an ideological battleground for the FPÖ. Its educational positions are largely grounded in the ideological core of PRRPs and comprise a fundamental critique of mainstream parties' dominance in educational institutions (anti-mainstream); a nativist division on all levels of education (nativism); the advocacy of merit-based educational institutions coupled with authoritarian instruments of schooling (merit); and a plea for more liberalisation and competition in schools (liberalisation). Over time, positions become more nuanced, albeit only within the already established traits. These findings corroborate theoretical arguments for the influence of growing party age and government experience on PRRPs' positions.

## KEYWORDS

education policy; radical right parties; populism; Austria; Austrian freedom party

## 1. Introduction

The last decades have witnessed the strengthening and mainstreaming of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in parliaments of most Western European countries. Some have even become relevant actors in government coalitions. So far, a large body of studies have focused on the impact of PRRPs on policies within their core domains, such as migration, immigrant integration or European integration (Akkerman 2012; Mudde 2013) since the populist radical right mobilises primarily on cultural issues (Kriesi et al. 2006). Yet, a growing body of research has also shown that West European PRRPs place considerable emphasis on socioeconomic issues, in particular on welfare agendas (Röth, Afonso, and Spies 2018; Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2022).

One policy area that has not yet received much attention is education. If considered at all, it is either included as a secondary sub-dimension subsumed to the analysis of PRRP's broader social policy agendas (Fenger 2018; Enggist and Pinggera 2022) or as an element of the activities of extra-parliamentary actors, such as social movements, political leaders and

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intellectuals (Dorit and Santos 2021; Giudici 2020). Although recent studies have highlighted the increasing salience of education policy in party politics and public opinion overall (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020), PRRPs have not played a substantial role in the literature on the politics of education so far. Instead, most of partisan theory on education has focused on the dichotomy between centre-left and centre-right party families, who are considered 'issue owners' on education. PRRPs, on the other hand, are rather seen as 'issue-ignorers' that practise 'position blurring' (Rovny 2013) in their non-signature domains.

However, since education itself has become a key policy area (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020) in which broader societal models and preferences get contested across party families (Ansell 2010), we argue that it has become an unavoidable battleground for PRRPs too. Especially if they are well-established and successful proponents in their respective party systems, we expect PRRPs to pursue their own distinct educational approach. The policy area of education gains vast importance for voters and is highly formative for their life and career perspectives. Furthermore, the education system plays a substantial role in forming and transmitting political values and attitudes of the upcoming generations, thus for shaping future society. Consequently, our paper aims primarily at contributing empirical knowledge about the ideological pillars of PRRPs' educational positions.

Moreover, we expect the educational approach to undergo changes over time: e.g. it might broaden over the course of PRRPs increasing experience in participating in elections; it might be influenced by PRRPs eventual participation in government coalitions and role of public office; or it might shift due to changing voter segments targeted by PRRPs. Since literature on the politics of education is not concerned with the eventual transformation of PRRP's educational positions and its explanatory factors either, our paper secondly aims at contributing to this understanding of continuity and change.

We address both perspectives of this research gap by empirically investigating the educational approach of the 'Freedom Party of Austria' (FPÖ) between 1990 and 2020. The FPÖ provides a particularly interesting case for the study of PRRPs' educational positions for several reasons: it is an ideological pioneer and one of the electorally most successful examples among PRRPs in Western Europe; it has been one of the key players in the cross-national coordination of the European populist radical right family; and it went through several periods of government participation (2000–2002, 2002–2005; 2017–2019), including a major internal party split (followed by its replacement in government with the slightly more moderate splinter party, the 'Alliance for the Future of Austria', BZÖ, in 2005). Beyond that, education is a traditionally contested subject in Austrian politics and has gained further importance over the past two decades (due to public debate on the consistently poor results in international assessment studies, such as PISA). Yet, even in Austria and the case of the FPÖ, a systematic exploration of its educational approach is still lacking.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the paper's research questions are (1) whether and which educational positions of the FPÖ are grounded in continuous ideological principles, (2) how their educational positions developed over time and (3) which theoretical arguments help to explain this development and potential changes of positions? We present findings of a qualitative content analysis of both programmatic discourse (analysing two party programs and eight election manifestoes) as well as parliamentary discourse (analysing 136 plenary debates of the Austrian National Council) of the FPÖ between 1990 and 2020. This longitudinal approach allows us, firstly, to study the relation of the FPÖ's educational approach with the ideological core of PRRPs and, secondly, to investigate three theoretical arguments for eventual change: a) the evolution of the FPÖ's educational approach from its early PRRP beginnings to its establishment as third major party in Austrian politics (next to centre-left Social Democrats and centre-right People's Party) (*party age*); b) periods of opposition compared to periods of government participation and their influence on the party's educational approach (*office/coalition*); c) the influence of shifting compositions in the party's electorate and its growing share of

working-class followers (*voter transformation*). In order to conduct an in-depth analysis, we limit our framework to the area of schooling policies as the central segment of education policy debates.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. *The ideological foundations of the populist radical right: implications for education policy*

Considering the novelty of research on PRRPs educational positions, it is important to tie them to existing research and theory on the populist radical right's ideological foundations. We therefore draw on Mudde's (2007) argument that socio-economic policies of the populist radical right are subordinated to their core ideology and, thusly, expect these main ideological tenets to also shape their educational positions. In his seminal analysis of PRRPs in Europe, Mudde argues that among the broad range of far-right parties, PRRPs can be identified by the combination of three characteristics: populism, nativism, and authoritarianism.

*Populism* is based on an alleged antagonism between 'the people' as a pure social entity and 'the elite' as a corrupt counterpart to the true people's will. This reading of populism corresponds to what literature describes as 'thin' or political style-oriented features of populism. These features are not ideological per se but can be attached to different political ideologies to enhance the 'thick', substance-related core-issues of populism (such as anti-immigrant or anti-pluralist stances in the case of the radical right) (Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2007). In the policy area of education, populism might surface in an open accusation of dominant political elites (in the form of mainstream parties, cabinet members, educational bureaucracy, etc.) and their influence on teachers and curricula, against which the interests of parents are juxtaposed right up to the endorsement of home schooling as an escape route from state schooling (Brown 2021).

*Nativism* expresses the idea that the alleged homogeneity and hegemony of a native group within a political entity (mostly the nation but also regional entities) needs to be defended against the threats of non-native people or ideas. The nativist distinction can be linked to various markers of non-native otherness, most prominently ethnicity and language but increasingly also to broader categories of 'religion' or 'culture' (Betz 2019). With regard to education, nativism likely targets non-native groups in the education system. While pleas for all-out exclusion of non-nationals and their children in the realm of education (claims typical for the PRRPs social welfare chauvinism) are unlikely, as this would undermine the right and duty of compulsory schooling for all students, we still expect nativism to colour PRRPs' education policies into the direction of educational favouritism: i.e. a noticeable prioritisation of the 'native population' accompanied with claims for selection of accession to school as well as specified tracks for immigrant children based on their language proficiency or school performance (Rothmüller and Schnell 2019). Moreover, nativism most likely leads to the promotion of national (or even local/regional) history over multicultural curricular elements and a globalised, cosmopolitan orientation of education.

*Authoritarianism* refers to the idea of a strictly ordered shape of society stabilised by authority, in which challenges to order and authority require strict forms of punishment. Punishments are prominent in PRRPs' socio-economic approach with its strict separation of deserving from undeserving and its promotion of instruments of punishment instead of nurturing for the latter (Busemeyer, Rathgeb, and Sahn 2022). In the context of education, prototypical expressions of authoritarianism would be a strengthened role of teachers' authority, strict adherence to standardised numerical grading embedded in an overall spirit of studiousness and performance, or instruments of punishment for disciplinary and performance failures on the school level. At the system level, this trait might lead to pleas for centralised control of curricula and resource distribution, the endorsement of early selection and differentiated school tracks reflecting the static view of the social order (Harber 2004). The underlying moral worldview of authoritarian ideology traditionally opposes egalitarian models of society, which we would expect to shape curricular appeals. As Clarke et al. (2021) show, these 'zero-tolerance' and 'no excuses' approaches are well reconcilable with the neoliberal turn in education focused on individual effort, competitiveness and performance enhancement.

These foundational pillars of PRRPs are likely to shape the educational approach of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) to a large degree – especially in light of the generally increased salience of education policy in Europe in the last decades that has been highlighted by recent studies (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020).

## 2.2. Changes in educational positions over time

Besides, these general foundations there are other, country- and party-specific factors that lead us to expect a dynamic evolution of the FPÖ's education approach rather than a static platform over time. Given the, by now, extensive history of PRRPs (Mudde 2019), we consider it important to add two perspectives to the study of PRRPs' approach to education: a) a longitudinal view that helps to distinguish continuous patterns from topical aspects of their education approaches and b) the development of a clearer understanding of the factors that shape the evolution of PRRPs and their profiles on education accordingly. Although we expect educational positions of PRRPs to be subordinated to their main ideological tenets and core ideology, we investigate eventual changes in the specific manifestation of their positions over time based on three theoretical arguments.

Firstly, as shown by research on niche-party evolution, former 'single-issue'-parties in many cases *move closer towards mainstream-status and a broader profile* if their single-issue strategies have reached an electoral ceiling after several elections (Meyer and Wagner 2013). Hence, especially in electoral systems of proportional representation, with growing party age and number of contested elections PRRPs might diversify their platforms and address mainstream issues to attract more votes (Bergman and Flatt 2021) – all the more if these issues are publicly contentious. The FPÖ, though looking back at a long party history, reorganised into a prototypical PRRP only in the Mid-1980s under the chairmanship of Jörg Haider. Its restart as a niche party with a limited number of core issues proved a winning formula at first but stalled by the early 1990s. Thus, the party further expanded its platform to position itself as a broader alternative to the mainstream parties in the centre, which eventually led to second place and government-participation on the national level after the millennium (cf Figure A1, Appendix A) (McGann and Kitschelt 2005; Gruber 2014). If this expansion includes the policy area of education as well, we expect a broadening spectrum of educational positions over time.

Secondly, some PRRPs in Western Europe have been able to enter national government coalitions with other (mostly centre-right) political parties, who hold market-liberal views on the economy and tend to support a differentiated approach to education (Busemeyer 2014, 54). Studies investigating *office-seeking strategies of PRRPs* have indicated that 'the participation of these parties in government is [hence] embedded in intricate processes of coalition formation and logrolling with centre-right parties' (Röth, Afonso, and Spies 2018, 328) resulting in support for positions of centre-right parties and a more profiled level of expertise. In return, PRRPs oftentimes receive concessions in their core domain of immigration and asylum (Gruber and Rosenberger 2023). The FPÖ is one of the few European PRRPs that has held government responsibility repeatedly during the last three decades. Each time (2000 to 2002; 2002 to 2005; 2017 to 2019), it governed with the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), whose education policy is associated with a strong belief in personal responsibility and individualisation (Scheipel and Seel 1988) and a substantial focus on students' talent and ability, which has lent legitimacy to support selective schooling and a tracked education system (Engelbrecht 1998; Rothmüller and Schnell 2019). Thus, if the processes of government participation with the ÖVP shaped the educational profile by the FPÖ, we would expect a more elaborate and substantiated set of educational positions with a stronger consideration of policy implementation as a result. Moreover, we would expect the role of anti-elitism in the educational approach to take different shapes when PRRPs are acting either as opposition parties (with stronger emphasis on the populist element) or as governing parties, i.e. becoming part of the elites themselves.

Thirdly, considering that education is not a policy issue traditionally owned by PRRPs, these parties might be sensitive to *sociodemographic changes in their electorate*. As a number of studies

have documented, since the 1990s the composition of PRRP's key electorate in Western Europe has diversified: from an electoral support base previously resting on the petty bourgeoisie (e.g. production workers and small business owners), to a growing inclusion of working-class support (Ivarsflaten 2005). These electoral changes have substantially shaped the direction of PRRPs' social welfare policy approaches in favour of a more leftist orientation meant to appeal to the growing working-class supporter base (Afonso and Rennwald 2018). While the parties have remained on the right in terms of socio-cultural issues (Lefkofridi and Michel 2017), on socio-economic positions, recent studies indicate greater variation, for example regarding PRRPs' social welfare positions (for an overview, see Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2022). If such an electoral adaption comprises electoral concerns of PRRPs' views on education as well, then the FPÖ's morphing electorate makes the party a crucial case for the analysis of these potential positional alignments. Over the last two decades, the party's former middle-class basis was surpassed by a growing share of working-class voters (Rathgeb 2021, 637), coupled with a constantly decreasing share of highly educated supporters (cf. Figure A2, Appendix A). This likely encouraged the inclusion of educational positions considered 'leftist', such as increasing social mobility and equality among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, claims for stronger permeability between school tracks (Schnell 1993), schools free of charge (Dermutz 2007), or generally more (re-)distributive education policies – positions usually formulated rather by centre-left Social Democrats (SPÖ).

### 3. Data and methods

To explore educational positions of the FPÖ in relation to PRRPs' three ideological foundations, whether these positions change over time and which theoretical arguments are of relevance, we present findings from a qualitative content analysis of the FPÖ's presence in two types of party discourse between 1990 and 2020.

Firstly, we analyse the party's *programmatic discourse* on education as expressed in election manifestos and party programs. Studying party programs and election manifestoes is considered the most straightforward way to identify parties' core policy profile (Zulianello 2013). These documents represent the widest consensual core of the political positions a party agrees upon and allow for the identification of shifts in positions over time. We covered eight electoral manifestos for the general elections of 1990, 1994, 1999, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2013 and 2017 as well as the general party programs of 1997 (in the version of 2005) and 2011.

Secondly, we studied *parliamentary discourse* as expressed in plenary debates of the Austrian parliament's lower house (Austrian National Council). Parliamentary debates are much more susceptible to the general political agenda of day-to-day politics and to the different subtopics of educational debate (Gruber 2014). Moreover, plenary debates also reflect mutual references between party representatives and therefore offer a more nuanced insight into similarities and differences of their educational approaches. Protocols of Austrian plenary debates have been digitalised only since 1996, leading to an initial sample of 1.117 protocols between 1996 and the end of 2020. We identified education-centred debates within this period based on a list of 23 keywords (compare Table A1, Appendix A), with higher sum scores of keywords for each protocol indicating a longer and more intensive debate on education topics. After we excluded all protocols of minor relevance (sum score less than 20), a total of 682 protocols remained. Of those, we coded the highest quantile (136 protocols) – as the most substantial educational debates in the Austrian National Council (sum scores from 460 to 2089 hits) – and covered every single year between 1996 and 2020.

To identify the FPÖ's educational positions we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the selected programs, manifestoes and plenary debate protocols (Mayring 2007; Berkhout and Sudulich 2011). In each of the document types, the coding unit for the inductive coding process was the quasi-sentence that expressed one identifiable and definitive single position. Hence, while usually this definition applies to individual sentences, in some instances the single position can be expressed over more sentences without stating a new position, or conversely, a number of positions can be part

of one formal sentence (such as in enumerations). In such cases, the sentence is aggregated or split into one quasi-sentence as the coding unit (Volken et al. 2013). For each coding unit we coded the educational topic, the educational level addressed as well as the position expressed by the quasi-sentence. After primary coding we condensed these codes inductively into clusters of positions and subsumed the recurrent clusters to major traits of the party's educational approaches. These traits represent the dominant and continuous elements of the FPÖ's educational approach as observed in our data, which we then examine for their relation to the ideological principles of PRRPs deduced from the literature. Secondly, we investigate potential changes over time and their potential explanatory factors, for which we report shifts in positions within each major trait by dividing the observation period into four phases: (1) an early opposition period (1990–1999); (2) a first period of government participation with the ÖVP (2000–2005); followed by (3) another opposition period (2006–2016); and (4) a second government participation period with the ÖVP (2017–2019) (for a schematic overview of the development over time, see Table 1).

#### 4. Findings: educational positions of the FPÖ in longitudinal perspective

Four traits have emerged as continuous and overarching patterns throughout the whole examination period of three decades: (1) Anti-mainstream party profiling (anti-mainstream), (2) nativist division on all levels of education (nativism), (3) Tracking, objectivity, and merit-based educational institutions (merit), as well as (4) Liberalisation, competition, and economic efficiency (liberalisation). They constitute the foundational pillars of the FPÖ's educational approach. However, over time, not all of these pillars receive similar emphasis, and they are adapted to the party's shifting conditions and educational contexts, as discussed below (cf. Table 1).

**Table 1.** Schematic presentation of traits, by intensity per time-period.

<i>Period</i>	Anti-mainstream	Nativism	Merit	Liberalisation
1990–1999	++	+	+	-
2000–2005 (gov.)	m	+	+	m
2006–2016	+	++	+	+
2017–2019 (gov.)	m	++	+	+

Intensity of trait: ++ = very high; + = high; m = medium, - = low.

##### 4.1. Anti-mainstream party profiling with specific anti-left spin (anti-mainstream)

Already in its early years as a populist radical right contender, the FPÖ bases its educational positions on a fundamental critique of mainstream parties' dominance established within educational institutions and of the assertion of their political doctrines. This *anti-mainstream trait* is translating the PRRP's core tenet of 'populism' into the education policy area and provides a politics-oriented umbrella for the FPÖ's substantive policy positions below.

However, mainstream parties are attacked on different grounds. While the FPÖ primarily directs ideological arguments against leftist concepts of education, it attacks the centre-right mainstream rather on procedural grounds (most prominently in the form of the ÖVP-dominated teachers' union that is accused of blockade mentality vis-à-vis necessary change and for its sell-out to social democratic educational ideas). Hence, in terms of educational ideology, the FPÖ's primary target is 'leftist' education, in some instances even more explicitly labelled a 'socialist' or 'social democratic' perspective, whose positions the FPÖ declares to diametrically oppose.

24 years of socialist education policy have brought Austria's education system to the brink of a deep existential crisis. In various areas, instead of performance, what matters is only party politics and levelling down. Where previously there were opportunities to education and training provided to the Austrian youth, today the political experiment is prevailing (Election Manifesto, 1994).

Key pillars of this critique comprise allegations of leftist levelling down of pupils, of ignorance towards the heterogeneity of talents as well as of a mollycoddling pedagogic approach (pejoratively labelled 'a'68 generation's approach') that is accused to obstruct children's and teachers' determination for performance and to fail in preparing pupils for the hardships of everyday working life.

The common accusation against mainstream parties is that they produce foul compromises in a never-ending series of educational reforms. The FPÖ alleges that these compromises produce the lowest common denominator at the cost of the average pupil, while political elites themselves are accused of protecting their own children by enrolling them in private or suburban schools with a less challenging composition of pupils. Furthermore, the party attacks mainstream parties for politicising educational institutions that should remain apolitical spheres of knowledge acquisition, 'free of ideology'. Hence, the FPÖ objects the influence of teachers' unions and of partisan teachers or principals who are accused to shape schools based on their partisan ideology. It also demands the relief of schools from the presence and influence of social partners,<sup>2</sup> who are criticised as mere intermediaries of mainstream parties' ideological goals and positions. These claims aim at loosening mainstream parties' penetration of society and its institutions.

Another key element of this mainstream party critique is the accusation that the existing system produces immature individuals, who are incapable of making free and reasonable decisions apart from the collective. Conversely, in the tradition of its 19<sup>th</sup> century national-liberal origins, the FPÖ's vision of an education system is a rather individualised one. It claims to enlighten and liberate individuals as well as to immunise them against the collectivist narratives of the mainstream left and the clerical dogmatism of the mainstream right. This appeal contributes to the party's endeavour of carving out an alternative third electoral space next to the two previously dominant political camps by presenting the FPÖ as a spokesman for various manifestations of contemporary anti-mainstream individualisms.

The Austrian education system ought neither be geared to the preservation of the antiquated nor to the transformation at any cost. Instead, it rather ought to train people that are capable to decide on their own future free and knowledgeable. Character formation and knowledge acquisition shall enable young Austrians to recognise cultural, economic and political relations and to shape them in a responsible manner. For this goal, it is necessary that the whole educational system is cleared of all party political influence (Election Manifesto, 2008).

In longitudinal comparison, though this anti-mainstream trait remains a constant pattern of discourse throughout the whole observation period, it is most pronounced during the FPÖ's early opposition period in the 1990s. It becomes less aggressive during the party's government participation but returns as a dominant pattern right after the party's internal split, its ousting from government and the return of the centrist Grand coalition (compare Table 1). The educational debates triggered by the results of comparative PISA-tests after the millennium are used by the FPÖ to directly relate these outcomes to mainstream parties' alleged mismanagement of educational reforms. They provide the background against which the FPÖ's claims for an alternative – in parts revisionist, in parts modernising – educational approach is conceptualised and increasingly substantiated.

#### **4.2. Nativist division on all levels of education (nativism)**

In line with the populist radical right's nativist core and its ownership of immigration and integration issues, the distinction of native/domestic vs. immigrant/foreign participants in educational institutions is an omnipresent trait. It is a continuous element of the party's educational discourse, and it comprises all levels of schooling.

On the primary schooling level, already during the early 1990s, the FPÖ demands separate classes for immigrant pupils designed to prepare these kids to participate in regular classes. While in this period the claim for selection is formulated rather generically vis-à-vis immigrating children, over time these claims largely focus on language as a criterion for selection. Only



children with a sufficient proficiency in German should be allowed to attend regular schooling. Occasionally these claims are linked to suggestions for quota for pupils with non-German mother tongue in schools. Throughout the whole observation period, the FPÖ justifies these demands with the argument that those pupils are levelling down the academic performance of native-born children and that teachers are growing frustrated about pupils not understanding their instructions. Yet, after the millennium, the claim is increasingly linked to large-scale assessments (such as PISA). These LSA-studies document the below-average performances of immigrant pupils, in particular those with weaker socioeconomic backgrounds – a distinction that, however, is often concealed in the FPÖ's discourse.

It is all about the question: What's the share of immigrant pupils or the share of children with non-German mother tongue in the schools? So, there may finally be established some order! So that the level of education for all children – for those who are obliged to integrate as well as for the native children – is going to improve. But in that respect, nothing is happening! (Plenary Debate, 2009, No. 42)

Over time we find that what is formulated in more general terms during the FPÖ's opposition period in the 1990s transforms into a more nuanced, explicit, and radical claim after the party's first government participation, collapse and reorganisation. In the following years as an opposition party, it repeatedly forwarded motions in parliament that immigrant children must require sufficient knowledge of German before they participate in regular classes. Their separated form of schooling is justified as the ideal support structure for pupils with low German language competence, more importantly though by the party's claim that proficient German language speakers are relieved by the disturbing presence of the former.

Austria first. Children of residents without Austrian citizenship and without German as their mother tongue are obliged to pass a German language test one year prior to school enrollment. In case of test-failure, the child has to attend a crash course, to be paid by the parents. Once the test is passed, enrollment into the public school system in Austria and an excellent qualification for the future possible (Election Manifesto, 2008).

This key policy proposal, eventually, was implemented by the ÖVP/FPÖ-government coalition in 2018, which shows that the party played a more influential role in shaping the second ÖVP/FPÖ-government's educational approach. With the introduction of separated 'German language classes' for a duration of up to 2 years, the FPÖ achieved one of its most long-standing educational goals. A pattern that emerges only after the millennium, is the focus on religion as an element of education policy. It is linked to the global anti-Muslimism turn shaping the radical right after 9/11 and the FPÖ's radicalisation after the party split in 2005. Hence, the focus lies almost exclusively on Muslim pupils, teachers, and organisations. Its most prominent claim concerns the ban of Muslim headscarves, which covers almost all educational levels, from kindergarten to schooling to, eventually, universities. Here too, the FPÖ eventually succeeded in implementing a legal ban for children in kindergarten and primary schooling during the second ÖVP/FPÖ-coalition government, whereas claims for further bans beyond the level of primary schooling could not be implemented in time before the fall of the coalition in 2019. The headscarf is not the only claim focusing on Islam. In a similar vein, the FPÖ also demands stricter control of Muslim religion teachers and Muslim educational institutions, while at the same time it opposes ideas of introducing 'ethics' as an alternative to religious education. Though the 'religious turn' of the FPÖ affects a number of other policy areas, it is particularly remarkable in education, considering the rather secular, anti-clerical and anti-Catholic stance of the party until the 1990 (Hafez and Heinisch 2018). It signals a sacrifice of traditional (liberalist) principles at the party's root for the sake of a populist *zeitgeist* in the wake of debates about Islam – for which educational institutions are considered a key arena by the FPÖ.

Thus, from a longitudinal perspective, nativism is a not only a continuously defining trait but de facto the party's most unique feature in contrast to other parties' educational approaches. Yet, even this trait changes in intensity, as it becomes more nuanced over time and merges the populist motive of the first opposition period with expanded know-how from the party's government experiences how to formulate viable policy proposals. Hence, it receives a significantly greater role

after the FPÖ's first period of government participation (compare Table 1). This development is encouraged by the fact that the nativist trait resonates with both key segments of the FPÖ electorate, namely the middle-class bourgeoisie and the working-class-segments – hence, it does not force the party into electoral trade-offs as do some of the other traits.

#### **4.3. Tracking, objectivity, and merit-based educational institutions (merit)**

Throughout the observation period, we find a continuous and aggressively formulated bundle of educational positions by the FPÖ that express support for a merit-based education system. A core element of this 'merit trait' is the pronounced opposition against all forms of comprehensive schooling. The party considers the mingling of both high and low performing students a devaluation of traditional values like performance and talent and to subvert merit-based schooling and grading, which leads to a levelling down of pupils. The rejection of comprehensive schooling is one of the oldest education policy claims put forward by the FPÖ, dating back to the Manifesto on Social Policy from 1973 (Engelbrecht 1998). While this stance is omnipresent in all periods under consideration, it was reinforced in the FPÖ's 2012-dismissal of so called 'new secondary schools' (Neue Mittelschule), introduced by the centrist coalition government. The party criticises them as 'comprehensive schooling elements through the backdoor', too costly for the schooling budget and a mere additional burden for teachers. In contrast, the FPÖ strongly supports the existing system of selection, in which students are streamed into different educational paths according to their natural abilities, while for the lower secondary level it explicitly favours the exam-based model of O-levels.

Those who refrain from demanding performance completely misjudge the willingness to perform and the seriousness of children, and also underestimate human beings in general. They block opportunities for development. Achievement is a fundamental democratic principle. The social status in society is not determined by birth or money, but instead by performance (Plenary Debate, 2015, No. 68).

The strong focus on a merit-based education system is rooted in the idea that knowledge acquisition in schools can only be achieved through individual studiousness and effort. This is considered an important preparation for the hardships of everyday working life, which is why the FPÖ favours strict performance reviews using numerical rather than verbal grades. Numerical grades are a cornerstone of the FPÖ's approach to schooling, considered the only way to guarantee so-called 'grading transparency' (*Notenwahrheit*) by providing teachers and parents with a comprehensible and transparent instrument to assess their child's status in comparison to their classmates. Moreover, numerical grades from primary school onwards are expected to provide performance incentives for students:

Children are proud to receive numerical grades. Grades mean motivation. The grading system is appropriate for today's pupils - and I'll tell you why: because there will also be assessments in professional life. You always have to face evaluations. And that is why children need this numerical grading system. Let me finish by saying that we, the FPÖ, are strongly supporting a numerical grading system for our schools. For us, this is ideology (Plenary Debate, 2004, No. 85).

The FPÖ further expanded and sharpened its strong focus on performance and merit in the mid-2000s when it emphasised the need for an expansion of standardised testing in order to provide greater 'objectivity'. A similar rationale guided the party's claim for a centralised design of A-levels, which emerged in this period and eventually was introduced in 2018 by the ÖVP/FPÖ-government.

The FPÖ consistently formulates its performance-based approach with an eye on promoting outstanding pupils who deserve specific training tailored to their strengths but who do not receive them in the existing school system. Over the whole examination period, the party also raises frequent demands for additional laws and an adaptation of the curriculum to ensure the promotion of outstanding students. However, in contrast to conservative parties, the FPÖ's educational claims do not merely focus on outstanding pupils, but also include explicit claims for other pupils, whose talent development is better preserved in the vocational sector. Hence, claims for an improvement of

vocational schooling and, in particular the Austrian apprenticeship-system, are steadily apparent in election programs as well as parliamentary debates on education.

Overall, while this trait is particularly constant over time (compare Table 1), a number of educational positions by the FPÖ in the 'merit trait' have been refined over time (e.g. claims for standardised testing), while others have become tied to authoritarian elements. Especially from 2010 onwards, educational claims towards objectivity and merit-based educational institutions are often-times linked with an authoritarian line of argumentation: students are described as 'willing to learn' but at the same time in need of 'strong guidance'. According to the FPÖ, discipline, sense of responsibility and sense of duty are substantial parts of performance-based teaching, and students breaking behaviour rules should be sanctioned accordingly.

#### **4.4. Liberalisation, competition, and economic efficiency (liberalisation)**

The fourth continuous trait comprises the FPÖ's claims towards a greater degree of liberalisation in education. Above all, this trait demands free school choice and the elimination of school catchment areas. With the 'free school choice'-argument the FPÖ pursues its declared goal of increasing competition in the educational market. To this end, it supports the private school sector and regularly calls for its expansion, arguing that a greater supply of private schools and free school choice would provide more flexibility and latitude to parents and increase efficiency of the education system.

The 'free school choice'-argument has been expanded substantially over time with claims for school autonomy. First demands to increase organisational liberalisation and to decentralise the educational system processes appeared already in the late 1990s. However, the importance attributed to school autonomy has grown noticeably since the first ÖVP/FPÖ-coalition period and has become an integral educational position of high intensity by the party until today (compare Table 1).

The state has to set the general framework, the financing, the basic objectives of the education system and the school board. Everything else should be regulated autonomously by the schools themselves. More school autonomy shall facilitate a stronger involvement of parents in the decision-making-processes of the school (Election manifesto, 2017)

Another claim that complements the FPÖ's emphasis of more school autonomy since the early 2000s is the fostering of economic efficiency of schools. According to the FPÖ, schools should be run like companies with school managers – selected through an objective recruiting process – who are hired to lead the institution. Teachers should be selected and paid by schools based on performance-reports, hired for a fixed term instead of permanent appointments and punished in case of insufficient performance. In order to further achieve greater economic efficiency, stronger market-based control mechanisms should be implemented: i.e. transparent school programs, publicly available financial reports, as well as the obligation to publish achievement test results of schools.

...modern school management aimed at swiftly developing school autonomy further. Schools should become educational enterprises, communicate with the broader school environment much more than they have done so far, take over work orders for business enterprises. In my opinion, dear Minister, schools of the future must at some point acquire full legal capacity so that they can set goals themselves and are also responsible for achieving them. There should be school managers. They should be able to choose their own teachers (Plenary debate, 2000, No. 24).

The FPÖ not only wants schools to be run more efficiently through market-based means, but it also generally pleads for a stronger orientation of the school system towards the economy, e.g. a greater cooperation and exchange between (upper) secondary schools and business enterprises. This marketising position is further expanded from the mid-2000s onwards by demanding that school subjects should be examined with regard to their economic orientation and that economic issues should be integrated more comprehensively in everyday teaching.

These increasing supply-sided economic arguments extend another position prominent throughout the whole observation period: improving the VET-system, which is considered the cornerstone of

labour market-oriented education in Austria. The FPÖ continuously demands to secure the number of apprenticeship places, primarily through tax reductions and other fiscal benefits for training companies, in particular for small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Overall, the ‘liberalisation trait’ is characterised by continuity in some aspects, especially with regard to the repeatedly demanded freedom for parents to freely choose schools. This ‘free-school choice’ argument is also in line with the rejection of the comprehensive schooling proposal by the FPÖ (compare ‘merit trait’) since parents should be able to choose freely between a half-day and full-day schooling systems. At the same time, we find a clear increase and growing complexity in the party’s emphasis of school autonomy (organisational liberalisation) since the first ÖVP/FPÖ-coalition (compare Table 1). In fact, it directly adopts the proposals for more autonomy that had been suggested by an expert report (Zukunftskommission) commissioned by the Minister of Education (ÖVP) during this period. In the following years, the FPÖ supplemented its claims for school autonomy with pleas for market-based control.

Table 1 summarises the four overarching traits and their intensity over time in a schematic way.

## 5. Discussion and outlook

This article breaks into uncharted territory: while the Austrian Freedom Party, one of the most longstanding and successful PRRPs in Europe, is well studied with regard to its populist radical right signature topics (e.g. immigration and European integration), so far no systematic longitudinal analysis of the party’s approach to education has been conducted. As our analysis shows, this has been a considerable omission since the policy area of education has indeed become an ideological battleground for the FPÖ as well. This disconfirms older assumptions of PRRPs acting as issue ignorers or engaging in position blurring with regard to issues not owned by themselves. Instead, we give proof that, over time, PRRPs indeed develop a more complex profile by addressing important policy areas, such as education, more thoroughly.

Yet, in response to our first research question of continuous ideological principles in education we demonstrate, that PRRPs seem to approach these ‘new’ issues via the same ideological lens that guides their handling of their trademark-issues. Thus, the FPÖ’s educational approach is largely grounded in the ideological tradition of the populist radical right. Firstly, the *anti-mainstream* trait in education is a clear expression of the populist pillar of PRRPs’ core ideology. It accuses political elites in mainstream parties of forgetting the concerns of the people but rather exploiting and tailormaking the educational system to encourage mainstream party obedience. Secondly, the *nativism* trait is an obvious extension of PRRPs’ nativist core to the policy area of education, and it is the feature that most clearly separates the FPÖ from other Austrian parties’ educational approaches. It is the party’s ‘unique selling proposition’ and consequently informs the party’s approach to new issues, especially because it resonates with both electoral target groups of the FPÖ, petty-bourgeoisie and working-class voters. Thirdly, although ‘merit’ is a principle unanimously accepted by most political parties, the FPÖ’s *merit* trait differs from other parties in its rather anti-egalitarian character, oftentimes reinforced by authoritarian claims. The party refrains from any input-oriented claims that would facilitate achievement of merits by socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils. Instead, it is exceptionally rigid by defending the absolute value of formal assessment and by tying this assessment to strongly differentiated tracks. Fourthly, although the *liberalisation* trait might not be linked to one of the prototypical pillars of PRRPs’ core ideology according to Mudde (2007), it is indeed characteristic for the FPÖ in two ways: It relates to the FPÖ’s national-liberal party heritage and its critique of an interventionist state, yet at the same time it is fuelled by the party’s contemporary critique of mainstream parties’ penetration of all social sectors (compare anti-mainstream trait). This underlines that beyond their shared ideological core pillars, PRRPs also feature positions that are owed rather to their geographical context or party history and that allow them to tie their key pillars to the contemporary neoliberal discourse in education (Clarke et al. 2021).

Having identified key traits of the FPÖ's educational approach and the close link to PRRP's underpinning ideological foundations, our second and third research questions asked for eventual changes of positioning over time as well as for the drivers of these changes based on three guiding assumptions: Regarding the *influence of the growing party age and the FPÖ's evolution from a niche-party to an established major party contender* our findings confirm that over time, the FPÖ-discourse features a more diversified and substantiated set of educational positions. However, this expansion and diversification occurs largely within the already established traits, while we find very little new educational traits or positions over the course of our examination period. New elements rather emerge within the already existing substantive traits (nativism, merit & liberalisation), which are elaborated even more thoroughly with the goal of occupying a distinct spot in the political competition over education. The increased elaboration continues to shape the educational approach even after the FPÖ's internal split of 2005, which overall revived a more aggressive party profile. This reshaped party profile is influential for the further development of three substantive traits, yet it also affects the party's anti-mainstream trait, in close interaction with our second theoretical argument for change: the FPÖ's participation in public office.

While many European PRRPs act from the role of a parliamentary opposition party, *office-seeking theories of party behaviour suggest that the FPÖ's experiences of government participation (from 2000–2005 and 2017–2019)* and the influence exerted by the (centre-right) senior coalition partner might encourage the professionalisation of educational concepts and the development of viable legislation to implement actual educational reform. Our findings confirm that after joining the government coalition, the FPÖ's educational approach indeed became more oriented towards the implementation of educational reforms, with two important consequences: Firstly, it reduced anti-mainstream attacks on the mainstream predecessors. The critique does not vanish completely, but it is reshaped into an appraisal of the FPÖ's educational achievements to overcome the previous centrist failures. Secondly, in this period, the FPÖ clearly extracted know-how from the broad expertise available in the educational bureaucracy as well as from the senior coalition partner, helping to nuance and professionalise particularly its claims for liberalisation in education, which were less substantive before the government coalition period (compare [Table 1](#)). Conversely, we find little evidence for the second assumption deduced from coalition theory, i.e. a one-directional convergence by the FPÖ towards the centre-right coalition partner. Instead, we see different patterns of exchange across the traits: Noticeable convergence of the FPÖ only occurs with regard to the party's evolving liberalisation trait, whereas the merit trait features an overlap with conservative educational concepts already well before the joint coalition. Contrariwise the intensification of the FPÖ's unique nativism trait rather triggers convergence towards the FPÖ during the recent participation in government (from 2017 to 2019): Benefiting from a reverse convergence of the centre-right ÖVP towards the populist radical right in general terms (Gruber and Rosenberger 2023; Hadj and Ruedin 2022), the FPÖ succeeded in turning many of its signature claims (from German language classes to the headscarf-ban in kindergardens and schools) into actual legislation.

Concerning vote-seeking arguments of *a shifting voter composition towards working-class supporters leading to more working-class-oriented positions on education*, we find only limited empirical evidence. In fact, the FPÖ continuously demands to improve the vocational sector and to secure the number of apprenticeship places – an educational claim that might be targeted primarily to working-class parents and their children, well before the shift within its electorate towards the working-class. At the same time, the growing working-class support with lower educational backgrounds in the past two decades does not prompt the FPÖ to pursue a more leftist or egalitarian educational approach including more redistributive claims over time. In our reading, the primary signal – though not exactly leftist thinking – towards working-class voters is provided by the aggressive nativism trait in the FPÖ's educational approach to satisfy their desire to 'protect' their children from immigration.

Situating the FPÖ's education approach between traditional mainstream parties, we document a clear leaning towards positions of the centre-right, while the (centre-)left remains the predominant ideological opponent. In an attempt of carving out a distinct ideological approach between the

mainstream party antagonisms in education policy, the FPÖ obviously seeks to fill the gaps left by the centre-right rather than including leftist arguments that supposedly might appeal to working-class voters. By emphasising claims in a more radical way (e.g. in the nativism or merit trait), it aims to pressure the centre-right into more radical concessions. Rathgeb (2021, 654) recently argued in the context of socio-economic welfare policies that ‘their [PRRPs] core ideology mediates the impact of growing working-class support on policy choices’, which would help explain our findings of little if any leftist shifts in educational positions by the FPÖ. However, while this might be a plausible explanation for some Western European PRRPs, these findings might indeed be different in other European contexts – which points to education policy being part of the contemporary debate on the wide span of socio-economic policy positioning of PRRPs.

In conclusion, beyond the paper’s research questions, our findings – gathered from one of the most longstanding and successful PRRPs in Europe – provide three further valuable implications for the European dimension of the populist radical right’s relation to education: Above all, we show that even non-signature issues can be readily amalgamated into the right’s *core ideological pillars*, and that in particular its nativist tradition travels easily into the realm of education policy – a pattern likely applicable for European PRRPs in general (less so than the authoritarian pillar). Moreover, we demonstrate that beyond these key pillars, *country-specific peculiarities and party-specific heritages remain important factors* that explain individual characteristics of specific PRRPs (such as the FPÖ’s national-liberal heritage does for the relevance of the party’s liberalisation trait). Finally, our findings confirm *PRRPs ability to translate some of their key claims into actual educational policies once in government*. This is an important learning not only for future research on the fourth generation of PRRPs but also for the general configuration of educational systems in a Europe characterised by a resurgent far right. These findings should thus inform future research and the theorisation of PRRP’s educational policies and positions across Europe.

## Notes

1. Few studies investigated positions on education policies by centre-right governments with FPÖ participation, revealing some communalities in the dynamics of education policy reforms between both periods.
2. i.e. Austria’s consociation institutional arrangement of unions with chambers of labor, commerce and agriculture.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. Both authors contributed equally to the study.

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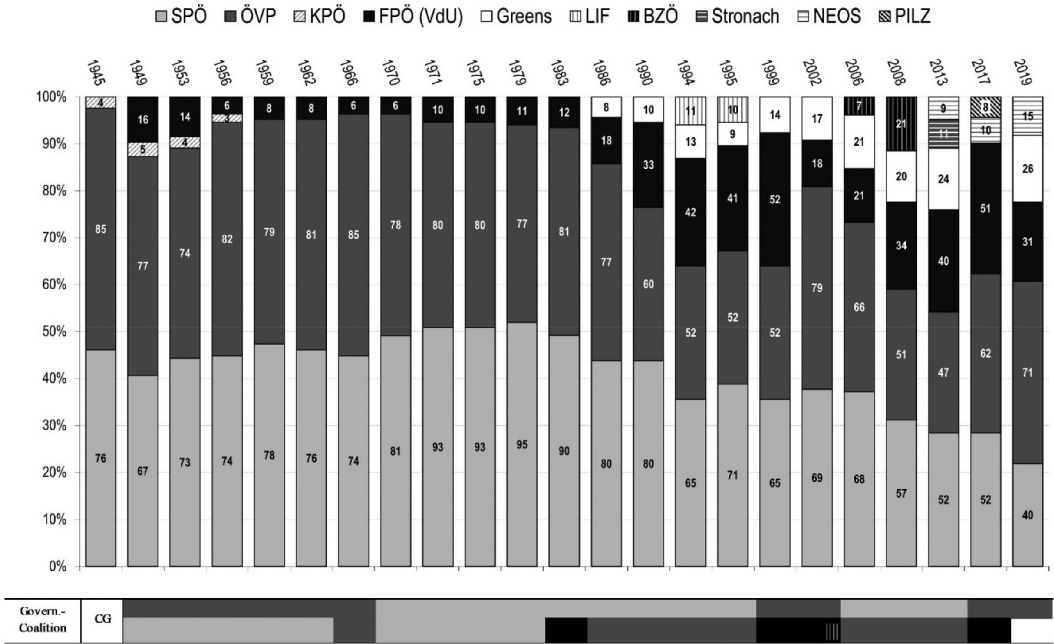
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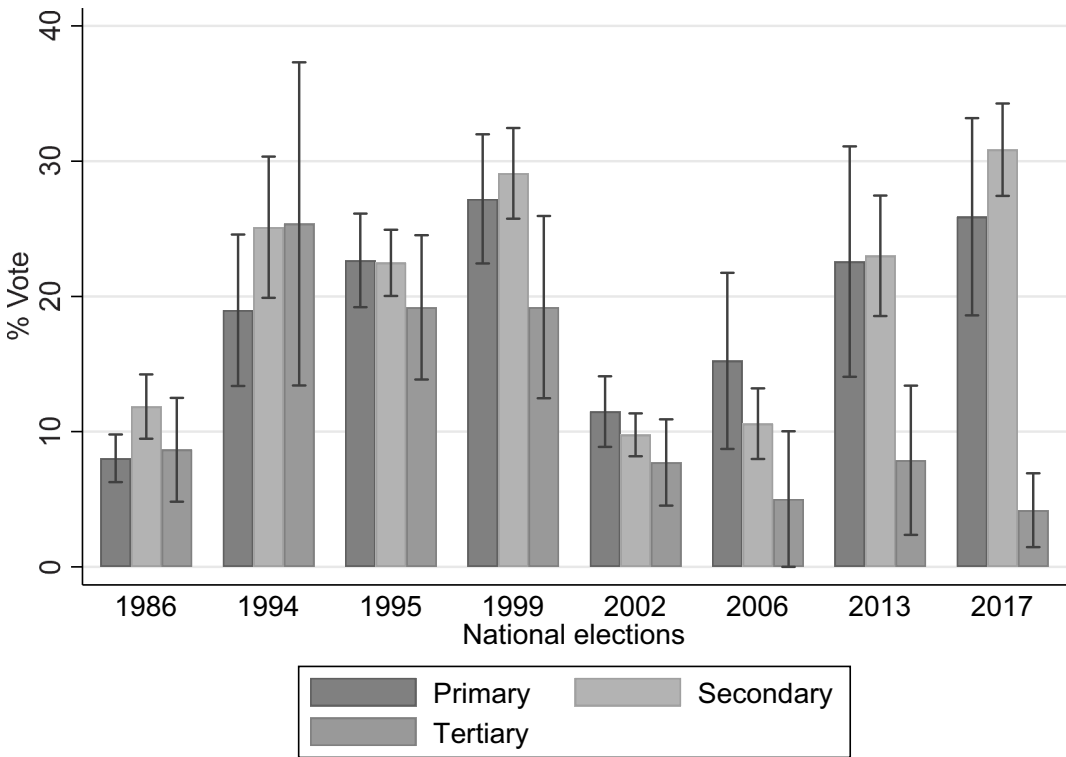
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## Appendix A



**Figure A1.** Parliamentary seats, government coalitions in Austria, 1945–2020. Parliamentary seats at the start of the legislation period (no consideration of intra-legislation secession or shifts). 165 parliamentary seats until the general election of 1971, since then 183 parliamentary seats; Government coalitions after the respective election, CG = Concentration government of SPÖ/ÖVP/KPÖ until 08.11.1949. *Source:* Electoral Statistic, Austrian Ministry of Interior, own illustration based on Gruber (2014).



**Figure A2.** Votes for freedom party of Austria (FPÖ) in national elections 1986–2017, by educational level of electorate (percentages and 95% confidence intervals). *Source:* World political cleavages and inequality database (WPID), own illustration.

**Table A1.** Keywords used to identify education-centred plenary debates in the Austrian national council (1996–2020).

General concepts	School designations	School tracks	VET-System
Bildung (1) (Education)	Pflichtschule/n (7) (Compulsory education)	Kindergarten (11) (Kindergarten; Pre-school)	Berufsschule/n (21) (Part-time vocational school)
Schulsystem (2) (Education system)	Bundesschule/n (8) (Federal schools)	Volksschule/n (12) (Primary education)	Lehre (22) (Apprenticeship)
Schule/n (3) (schools)	Privatschule/n (9) (Private schools)	Neue Mittelschule/n (13) (Vocational oriented schools in lower secondary education) Formally: Hauptschule/n (14)	Ausbildung (23) (Vocational training)
Unterricht (4) (Teaching)	Ganztagsschule/n (10) (All-day schools)	Berufsbildende höhere Schulen (15) (College for higher vocational education))	
Lehrer/in (5) (Teacher)		Berufsbildende mittlere Schulen (16) (School for intermediate vocational education)	
Schüler/in (6) (pupils/students)		Allgemeinbildende höhere Schule/n (17) (Academic secondary schools) Universität/en (18); Hochschule/n (19) (University) Fachhochschule/n (20) (University of Applied Sciences)	