

Democracy in Election Year 2024¹

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'Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....'

Winston S Churchill, 11 November 1947

These words uttered just after the Second World War and the fall of Nazi tyranny may have at the time resonated. But today simply being the best of a bad bunch is not enough. Democracy is not stagnant for it will then dry up and choices need to be made to improve the quality even of mature democracies. Democratic change comes in waves, it ebbs and flows but as King Canute found out as he tried to stem the tide on the Wash, it is an unstoppable phenomenon. Freedom and democracy are cherished goals for which many have made and are making huge sacrifices. In some European countries it can be taken for granted and could be under threat by a wave of apathy and discontent. Vigilance, self-reflection, change and learning from the mistakes and successes of other countries are important before these dangers turn into a tsunami engulfing democratic life.

Both Britain and the post-1945 Second Austrian Republic have different political cultures but face similar challenges to democracy and loss of trust by voters in politicians and so-called elites. A recent phenomenon in Austria and Britain is the relative success of the Newcomer, a politician that seems to come from nowhere and suddenly notches up electoral success. These surprise turnabouts in political fortune show that voters are indeed interested in politics but feel the 'established parties' are no longer in listening mode. What we witness now is that electoral volatility is increasing to the extent that the populists themselves fall as rapidly as they rise and with each bout of disillusionment the search for a more radical option increases.

Some aspects of the political system warrant mention in the light of this especially in an election year.

Political Parties

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<https://mehrheitswahl.at/material/Demokratiefund%202024.pdf> May, 2024

In Britain as in Austria a two party system was long dominant but has been subject to an erosion process. The electoral support of Labour and the Conservatives has since the early 1950s declined. Party membership in Britain has never been very high compared with Austria but here too we can see changing trends. The Conservative Party has a mere 160,000 members chiefly resident in the more prosperous south of the country and predominantly elderly. The Labour Party has witnessed more ups and downs in party membership which soared when the left-winger Jeremy Corbyn was leader and since has dropped off. The SPÖ once a classic membership party in the 1970s with its Vertrauenspersonen and the magic party book has also seen a falloff in membership. In part this can be seen as a 'normalisation' or westernisation of Austrian politics which in a pronounced Consensus Democracy transitioned to a political culture more influenced by conflict and confrontation.ⁱ

Since political parties are the backbone of a democracy the readiness to acknowledge their own failings and adapt is essential. The Labour Party in Britain is riding high in the polls but this has more to do with the disastrous mistakes made by the Tories. Labour has a respectable technocratic leader but enthusiasm for the party as was experienced under Tony Blair is absent. Again and again voters complain that the main parties in parliament at Westminster are out of touch. They are seen as representing a special elite and voicing the interests of other elites detached from ordinary people.

Candidate Selection

An important job of political parties is to provide candidates for a parliamentary election and forms the basis on which voters make a democratic choice.ⁱⁱ The procedure for nominating candidates in Britain differs from Austria with its party lists in a proportional representation system.

Again because of the electoral system great emphasis in Britain is placed on finding a local candidate to represent the constituency. This can have disadvantages by narrowing the field down and potentially better qualified contestants are overlooked. Standing as a candidate for a party can also be an expensive business and time-consuming.

In the UK increasingly candidates and elected Members come from the party machines or local councillors and less will have a "real" job outside this bubble.

The Labour Party is well aware that they could soon have a large number of MPs elected and that the potential for party splits and

scandals is thus greater. The selection process is trying to concentrate on those who will be loyal to the leadership and who can demonstrate that they have solid credentials as a law-abiding citizen.

The Conservatives have a different problem, namely finding candidates willing to stand at all for election given the poll predictions. Even once “safe” seats could fall to Labour.

Political Leaders

In recent times there is a trend to the grass roots or Basis of parties taking on a major role in the selection of leaders. That this does not always enhance the reputation of the party concerned can be seen in the case of the SPÖ.

In Britain the backbenchers in parliament, a concept less defined in Austria, can be instrumental in even dismissing a Prime Minister who is at the same time the party leader. This is especially the case in the Conservative Party which then has primaries for candidates including the parliamentary group and the members.

This attempt at democratising the leadership procedures can have drawbacks. It created a potential conflict within the party between the membership, the members of the parliamentary group and voters all of whom may have different incompatible interests. In the case of the Conservative party it has led to the multiplication of factions with the parliamentary group jockeying with each other for a future leadership campaign. This has promoted intra-party instability which when the party is in government has an adverse effect. Government leaders seek a degree of legitimacy which can stem from voters and/or rest on the ability to command a majority in parliament. If this is constantly under threat the power of a leader is undermined.

The Job and Resignations

What qualities should an MP have though? Apart from being able to win voters over there are few transparent criteria.

And what do MPs do? Many will be elected and never reach high office and will rarely make the evening news unless they are involved in a scandal of some kind. Lacking a job description can lead to misleading perceptions of who is responsible for some decisions.

MPs themselves therefore should explain how they see their job as a parliamentarian which could include:

- supporting their party in Parliament either in the Government or Opposition
- representing the interests of their constituency;
- representing individual constituents and grievances; acting as a conduit between voters and their own party and/or Government and conversely explaining decisions to voters on how it could impact them.
- holding the Government to account
- initiating and amending legislation;
- contributing to the development of policy whether in the Plenary, Committees or party structures

Additionally an MP may be active in the OSCE or Council of Europe or other international and European bodies.

Once we have a clear idea of what MPs do it could be easier to judge if they are doing their job. Codes of Conduct in parliaments also provide criteria for the press and public to try and objectively conclude whether an MP is seriously failing.

What to do then when an MP is seen to be failing in their job or has committed a serious misconduct?

Again the British electoral system makes it easier to allow voters to recall the MP concerned. After a parliamentary committee has looked at the case and decided an MP should be suspended from parliament for a long period the plenary can decide to endorse or otherwise the penalty. Then the relevant constituency can hold a petition to decide whether the MP should be reelected or not. Ten percent of the electors can trigger such a recall and a by-election will follow. Thus the fate of the MP lies with those who put them there ie with the electorate. Even the threat of a recall can motivate an MP to resign to avoid the humiliation of a lost by-election as was the case with Boris Johnson.

Parliament

The so-called Mother of Parliaments at Westminster has tried to address the disillusionment with politicians. It has live coverage of committees and the chairpersons of these will be elected by the plenary and not chosen as before by the party managers. Yet many see Parliament as a farce or show where nothing really happens, where promises are made and broken and which is out of touch with the lives of ordinary people.

No surprise then that big events which have taken place in recent times have been often shaped by those outside of Parliament such as the Brexit party.

As in Austria there is now greater public consultation in the UK on draft legislation so that voters can be involved in the law-making process. For this to really work effort must be made to reach out beyond the usual culprits such as big interest groups. Feedback should be swift and clear if suggestions to amend draft bills were taken up and if not why not to make this an exercise which could stimulate the feeling that citizens can really be involved in decisions in-between elections.

In addition many parliaments seek to modernise their democracies by enhancing:

- Democratic rights for Opposition, Civil Society and Media
- A Freedom of Information Act
- Well-equipped parliamentary administration
- Inclusive consultations with regard to gender, ethnic background etc
- Timely pre-information and subsequent feedback on results of consultation
- Consolidated laws and explanatory notes accessible on relevant websites
- Simple law-making
- Education for general public on political affairs
- Clearly formulated aims of any consultation

Parliamentary debates in the UK are on the whole more lively and spontaneous than in Austria and long speeches which are read out are frowned on.

As far as Opposition rights are concerned Austria too has improved these in respect of parliamentary minorities. Yet because of the Klub organisation an individual MP has fewer rights than their counterpart in the UK eg in amending and initiating laws.

Before a British general election the main opposition party has access to discussions with senior civil servants to prepare them on any obstacles to their proposed policies should they form a Government.

Only parties in Opposition can claim public financial support in the UK and this does not change in the event of any defections from one parliamentary group to another but is based on the result of the previous general election. Thus the Reform Party, the successor to the Brexit party has an MP who defected from the Conservatives but cannot claim financial support.

The Green Party with only one seat in Parliament has received financial support even though it only secured around 2.5 percent of the total votes at the last general election.

Coalitions

Generally these are rare in Britain and not especially liked. Election programmes can be watered down to accommodate the coalition partner and end up in a coalition pact. In 2010 the Liberals formed a coalition with the Conservatives although many of their voters would have preferred a pact with Labour.

The Austrian experience with coalitions could be of interest to the UK although the latter developed similar working mechanisms as for example a coalition coordination committee to smooth over conflict in advance between the two partners. There was also a mutual recognition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats that a coalition government did not mean a coalition parliament and contrary votes between the two did not lead automatically to early elections because of this. Britain then had fixed term parliaments which have since been abolished.

As an alternative to coalitions Britain has also minority governments as in 2017 between the Conservatives and the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The latter agreed to a deal according to which Northern Ireland received financial support for infrastructure projects and in return the DUP supported the Conservative government in crucial votes such as the budget and no-confidence votes. It remained an opposition party without any ministries but as such could still receive public funding.

Conclusion

Political culture, history but also parliamentary rules of procedure make it difficult to parachute practices from one country to another. Both in Austria and the UK politicians from long-established parties grapple with the problem of how to reach out to voters who have switched off. There has been progress in transparency, codes of conduct, more diversity and increased intra-party democracy. One main problem is the lack of credibility that politicians have. International factors have worked against the perception of domestic politics as being in the position of solving the big issues. Voters are not clear where power lies and feel that nothing much changes whatever they do or whomever they support. Financial and job security is no more guaranteed and the State or political parties can no longer seem to support the basic needs of the population.

Resources at the disposal of politicians are scarce and the good times are over.

In the UK the job of being a politician has become more dangerous and especially women and those with an ethnic background suffer from abuse on social media. This could deter those with a sense of public duty from considering such a career in the first place.

A party that has been long in power either alone or in a coalition will find it more difficult to win back trust. Trust will not be restored in politics overnight and it was not lost suddenly. The perception that politicians are in it for themselves and insincere will long persist. This is the main democratic dilemma facing politics in many European countries. Voters will still support politicians who appear authentic and have the ability to communicate with ordinary people, have a clear vision of what they want to do and show that they can put it into practice.

ⁱ See also Melanie Sully <https://kurier.at/meinung/gastkommentar/hurra-wir-sind-normal/402546476>

ⁱⁱ See Heinrich Neisser, Fritz Plasser eds. *Vorwahlen und Kandidaten-Nominierung, im internationalen Vergleich*, 1992.