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**Outsider parties in government: a case study of right-wing  
populist party strategy and behaviour<sup>1</sup>**

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Keele European Parties Research Unit  
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## **Outsider parties in government: a case study of right-wing populist party strategy and behaviour<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

**This case study examines (anticipatory) adaptation in the intra-party and governmental arenas by a right-wing populist party that switched its primary goal from populist vote-maximisation to office. It draws on internal party documents and semi-structured interviews with over 200 activists of the Freedom Party of Austria. It suggests that such parties' likelihood of prospering will owe much to their leadership's capacity to identify and implement strategies and behaviours consonant with their new primary goal and to deal effectively with the inescapable tensions caused by the transition to incumbency. The article does not support the proposition that their experience of incumbency is necessarily doomed to failure. Agency remains an important determinant of success. Indeed, it appears that supply-side factors may well be far better at explaining rapid shifts in the fortunes of such parties than the still predominantly demand-side approaches to examining these and other categories of outsider parties.**

### **1. 'Outsider' parties and incumbency: The threefold challenge**

All parties entering government need to alter their behaviour if they are to prosper. The adjustment required of long-excluded parties will be especially profound. Their 'outsider' status will typically have resulted from a combination of competitors preventing their entry and strategic choices made by the parties themselves. The prior 'primary goal' (Harmel and Janda, 1994) of some will have been 'policy', whilst others will have prioritised 'votes' (Müller and Strøm, 1999). This article examines how and with what success a previously

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<sup>2</sup> A revised version of this working paper will appear in a special issue of *Party Politics* due to be published in July 2011.

vote-maximizing right-wing populist party changed its primary goal to office. We are using 'right-wing populist' to denote parties that constitute a form of 'structural opposition' (Dahl, 1966) claiming to represent 'the people' against an allegedly corrupt and self-serving political establishment.<sup>3</sup> Often leader-dominated, these parties' political style usually includes rhetorical aggression, especially in the electoral arena. They espouse socially conservative or reactionary policies, but as vote-maximisers are inclined to political opportunism, so their policy packages will often exhibit a significant degree of internal contradiction.

Parties rarely pursue only votes, office or policy, but typically seek to juggle these often conflicting goals (Müller and Strøm 1999: 12). At times, they might be able to have their cake and eat it, but often face 'hard choices'. This is no different for outsider parties who decide to pursue office. Although they overlap in practice, it is analytically useful to distinguish between three main arenas in which incumbency may pose costly challenges for former right-wing populist vote-maximisers. In the electoral arena, the parties will be threatened with the disintegration of their former voter coalition. To offset the departure of protest-oriented voters, they could seek to present themselves as responsible members of government, but the credibility of such claims is likely to be inversely related to the extent to which they hitherto engaged in populist vote mobilization. Moreover, they are likely to find policies irresponsibly advanced whilst enjoying the luxury of opposition unable to be delivered, so undermining the support of policy-oriented voters.

The second set of challenges concerns internal organizational adaptation. The parties must recruit persons appropriate for the positions now at their disposal, bearing in mind the claims of rival groups. They will also need to work to counter the potential for division between the various 'faces' of their party (Katz and Mair, 1993). For example, MPs may well be torn between supporting the government and maintaining good relations with their electorate in

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<sup>3</sup> Space prevents discussion of the extensive literature on the contested concept of (right-wing) populism. See Mudde (2007).

the ‘party on the ground’, where a preference for vote-maximization is likely to persist. The party central office will need to redirect resources from well-established zero-sum vote-maximizing behaviour towards providing effective support for and communication of the work of the government team. Moreover, if the party’s altered primary goal results in the predictable electoral setbacks, grass-roots scepticism vis-à-vis the leadership will probably increase, as will other internal conflicts, including over candidate selection. Meanwhile, those who welcomed incumbency may well disagree about which policies ought to be pursued.

In the governmental arena, these erstwhile outsider parties face at least two interrelated challenges. The first pertains to relations with their coalition partner(s). Matters requiring immediate resolution include the coalition agreement and division of portfolios. In the longer term, establishing effective mechanisms of intra-coalition communication and decision-making may prove crucial. Yet the legacy of their anti-establishment rhetoric may make for strained relations, at least initially. Second, these parties will need to ensure that the members of their government team (and their support staff) are competent and achieve the party’s strategic goals. Since they by definition lack government experience, these individuals are likely to be at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their coalition partners and may also be handicapped by disagreement over which of the incongruent policy goals previously advocated should be prioritised.

In sum, if a vote-maximising right-wing populist party is to be successful in the pursuit of its new primary goal, its leadership will need to identify and implement behaviours consistent with that priority, whilst mitigating its costs. Even if they have dominant leaders, parties are not unified actors, so the precise contours of that adaptation will reflect how various sections of the party respond to the revised strategy. Adjusting to incumbency is thus largely a path-dependent, incremental process of *post-hoc* trade-offs. Yet whereas some parties enter government with little notice, many start preparing for incumbency whilst still pursuing vote

maximization. Such *ex ante* adaptation constitutes a mixed strategy that is interesting both in its own right and in terms of how it might shape the party's performance once it finally enters government.

## 2. The case and data

The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) never faced a strict 'cordon sanitaire', but has since its foundation in 1956 consistently held executive office locally and in at least one provincial government.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, under Norbert Steger's liberalising leadership (1980-1986), its primary goal shifted from right-wing radical policy purity to incumbency, a goal realised when it entered federal government as junior partner of the Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ). That first experience of national incumbency (1983-1987) caused the FPÖ to fracture and in September 1986 led to Haider toppling Steger as leader. It was only once thwarted in his ambition to also replace Steger as vice-chancellor by Chancellor Franz Vranitzky's premature termination of the coalition, that Haider shifted the party's primary national goal from incumbency to vote maximization. Thirteen years later, the FPÖ re-entered government, this time with the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP).

The following analysis of how and with what success the FPÖ re-prioritised incumbency will focus on the strategy and behaviour the party pursued within the intra-party and governmental arenas.<sup>5</sup> Before examining its two consecutive periods of incumbency, it will first consider the years 1995 to 1999, when the FPÖ's prime goal remained vote maximization, but it started to adapt its internal and external behaviour to prepare for incumbency. Eschewing the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* argumentation common in publications on the strategies of right-wing populist parties, this analysis draws on an extensive study of internal party documents and on

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<sup>4</sup> From 1989-1991 and again from 1999 to his death in 2008, Haider held the influential governorship of Carinthia. However, the focus of this article is necessarily limited to the national level. For details of the FPÖ's varied record of incumbency at the provincial level until 1987 and the case for a multi-level approach to understanding party strategy and party system change, see Luther (1989).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of adaptation in the electoral arena see Luther (2008).

over 200 semi-structured interviews. Conducted by the author between 1985 to 2010 with activists at all levels of the FPÖ, the interviews focused above all on party strategy and organization. Interviewees included Haider, Steger, his successors Susanne Riess-Passer and Heinz-Christian Strache, and many senior party FPÖ functionaries, MPs and government ministers. The extensive period over which interviews were conducted and senior actors' availability for follow-up interviews has enabled the author to document his interlocutors' changing evaluation of the party's strategy and organization. In addition, the author conducted interviews with ÖVP functionaries in the period 2004 to 2009. Unless indicated otherwise, the following material draws on those sources.

### **3. Maximising votes whilst preparing for office (1995-1999)**

From the outset, Haider's long-term goal as party leader had been to enter government.<sup>6</sup> Rejecting Steger's strategy of achieving incumbency by first modifying policy to make the FPÖ more acceptable to potential coalition partners, he initially pursued his goal via populist vote maximization. He calculated this would ensure that when it re-entered government, the FPÖ would not be the mere makeweight it had been, but have sufficient strength to significantly shape policy; if pursued relentlessly enough, it would also enable it to survive the electoral losses he fully expected the transition to incumbency would bring. Haider had accepted that the aggressive style associated with his strategy would alienate the SPÖ and ÖVP, but taken the view that political self-interest would ultimately cause one of them to abandon their declared commitment to Vranitzky's policy of excluding the FPÖ from national office (*Ausgrenzung*).

Haider's strategy reaped the expected electoral rewards. The FPÖ's national vote jumped from the 4.98% Steger had achieved in 1983 to 9.7% in 1986; 16.6% in 1990 and 22.5% at

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<sup>6</sup> Various interviews conducted by with Haider (including February 1988; March 1994; June 1998 and October 2008), as well as with many of his closest party colleagues.

the October 1994 election. At a secret strategy meeting held shortly thereafter, the leadership came to the view that the electoral support needed to risk re-entering government could be achieved at the subsequent general election, due in 1998. A senior FPÖ interviewee characterised the party's prime electoral goal from the mid 1990s as 'stamping the ÖVP into irrelevance' and supplanting it in the way Berlusconi had replaced the Italian Christian Democrats. There were two main schools of thought within the FPÖ regarding the party with which it should then coalesce. Some favoured governing with a weakened ÖVP, arguing this would guarantee the FPÖ the chancellorship. Others advocated holding out until the ÖVP had been significantly overhauled and then opting to be a junior partner of the SPÖ, which could be expected to share the FPÖ commitment to undermining the ÖVP's remaining power.

Though the ÖVP and SPÖ were both still formally committed to *Ausgrenzung*, the FPÖ leadership judged the prospects of one of them abandoning it to have considerably increased. In November 1994, the SPÖ-ÖVP 'grand coalition' had passed the last piece of legislation required for Austria's EU accession, thus achieving what had been the most important policy goal holding it together. The FPÖ's assessment of its good electoral prospects and enhanced party systemic opportunities caused it to adopt a mixed strategy that comprised maintaining vote-maximising behaviour in the electoral arena, but proceeding with internal and external preparation for incumbency. In the event, the coalition's unexpected collapse in the summer of 1995 altered the FPÖ's timescale and at the premature election of December 1995 the FPÖ even lost a few votes (22%). Yet the party's revised strategy had been encouraged in April 1995, when ÖVP-leader Erhard Busek, a committed supporter of *Ausgrenzung*, had been replaced by Wolfgang Schüssel. An ambitious political entrepreneur, Schüssel was motivated above all by obtaining the chancellorship and neoliberal economic policy goals (Luther 2010; Schüssel 2009). At the 1995 election he precipitated, Schüssel demonstratively refused to rule out governing with the FPÖ. This generated intense controversy, including within the ÖVP,



where many continued to regard the FPÖ as beyond the pale and helped ensure the SPÖ won the election. Though the grand coalition was reconstituted in March 1996, Haider felt vindicated in his view that the FPÖ had the potential to enter government after the next election, now due in 1999.

### **3.1 Internal preparation**

Central to the FPÖ's internal preparation for incumbency were strengthening the 'party in public office', centralizing candidate recruitment and reinforcing party discipline. The FPÖ's electoral strategy had already quadrupled its number of public offices. In May 1996, for example, it held over 4,000 communal, provincial and national level offices (Luther, 1997: 299). As its statutes granted public office holders *ex officio* seats on party bodies, this altered the internal balance of power, strengthening the party in public office at the expense of the party on the ground. The number of national party directorate members owing their seats to elected public office had increased from 14 in 1981 to around 150 in 1996. The executive grew from 22 members in 1990 to 34 in 1996, yet the number elected by the party congress remained at four. The congress' impact on the composition of the 13-member executive committee also declined. Between 1990 and 1994, the number of deputy party leaders (elected by the congress and automatically on the executive committee) was reduced from eight to five and three of those elected in 1994 were members of Land governments.

Haider had for some time used political capital earned by spearheading the party's electoral victories to establish greater influence over candidate recruitment. His efforts had had mixed success in enhancing candidate quality. It produced a 'catastrophic' candidate pool in 1994,<sup>7</sup> but the plus side was that significant proportion of FPÖ public office holders was now politically dependent upon Haider, which in turn enhanced his control over national party

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with a national executive member, who attributed this to poor choices at the local level and Haider's practice of parachuting in politically inexperienced outsiders to whom he had been attracted for in part personal reasons. For a detailed analysis of (changes to) the FPÖ's internal organization see Luther (1997 & 2006), from which the preceding data are drawn.

bodies. To heighten his control and consolidate the primacy of the national caucus, Haider established a 'Leader's Office' and an 'Information Centre' charged mainly with liaising between the national and provincial caucuses.

In the summer of 1994 Haider publically announced his intention to dissolve the FPÖ, and in January 1995 pushed through statutory reforms to fundamentally restructure the party (Luther, 1997: 287-292). Renamed 'Die Freiheitlichen (F)' and with the label 'party' excised from all its bodies, it was henceforth to work alongside a newly-constituted 'Citizens' Movement' as part of the 'Alliance 98', named in anticipation of an election in 1998. The Citizens' Movement was intended to encourage external inputs to policy development and to extend the candidate pool. It was also to be responsible for conducting primary elections. In part inspired by his observation of Unites States' experience, Haider believed primaries would enhance the FPÖ's overall media presence and that the one at which he would be elected chancellor candidate would cement his intra-party power. They were also intended to centralize candidate recruitment, as evidenced by §51 of the party's revised Standing Orders, which left the final decision on the national candidate list to the Haider-dominated national party executive. In the event, the Citizens' Movement was never fully implemented and most of its innovations abandoned. Inadequately thought through, the changes were judged to have undermined the party's effectiveness in the electoral arena, further success in which was a precondition for incumbency. Haider had also underestimated both the conservative bias of the pre-existing structures and local functionaries' capacity to instrumentalise primaries to divide the spoils of office amongst their supporters. Yet the reforms remain a testament to Haider's strategy of liberating the leadership from the party's traditional functionary cadre, which he increasingly suspected would prove a hindrance to his government aspirations. He was to revert to this strategy in April 2005.

Haider's FPÖ has routinely been characterised as a markedly leader-dominated party. Yet even in the period of mounting electoral success, maintaining internal discipline remained a challenge. In the spring of 1998, for example, the leadership felt obliged to respond to conflict within Salzburg's provincial party group by suspending all its functionaries and shortly thereafter, the deputy leader of the Lower Austrian branch fled Austria after embezzling millions of Euro. Fearing this might fatally undermine the FPÖ's claim to be an anti-corruption party, Haider initially toyed with founding a new party, but then skilfully exploited the crisis to enhance his internal control. He staged a special party congress in July 1998 at which, under the threat of not being re-selected, all FPÖ holders of public office were obliged publically to sign individual 'democracy contracts' with him as party leader. These required them to inform the party of income from publically-funded bodies, their personal wealth and of any pending insolvency, criminal or administrative law proceedings. Looking ahead to internal discipline after the FPÖ's aspired-for entry into government, Haider inserted undertakings 'to comply ... in particular with any written commitments ... in ... government agreements, parliamentary initiatives and other political activities'.<sup>8</sup> On paper, this gave the leadership the prospect of unprecedented control over its caucus.

### **3.2 External preparation**

From 1995 the FPÖ invested significant resources in developing detailed policy proposals designed to demonstrate its governing potential. These extended considerably beyond topics with which it had become primarily associated.<sup>9</sup> Many were included in a new party programme adopted on 30 October 1997. Its authors' perception was that whilst the document necessarily reflected the FPÖ's opposition to immigration, its Austrian nationalism and EU-scepticism, those sections' measured wording would assuage many critics in the SPÖ and

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<sup>8</sup> 'Demokratievertrag. Ehrenkodex für politische Funktionäre zur Erhaltung politischer Prinzipien, Versprechen und Vereinbarungen', Clauses 4 and 2 respectively.

<sup>9</sup> These appeared *inter alia* in publication series of the FPÖ's party academy (*Freiheitliche Akademie*) such as the *Reihe Vertrag mit Österreich* and the *Freie Argumente*.

ÖVP. Against internal resistance, the leadership ensured it contained the claim that the traditionally anti-clerical FPÖ was now ‘the ideal partner of the Christian churches’.<sup>10</sup> For some, such innovation removed a major hurdle to co-operation with the ÖVP; for others it was a key part of a ‘surrogate ÖVP programme’ (Interview) designed to help the FPÖ replace the ÖVP. During 1998 and 1999, the FPÖ increasingly emphasised market-oriented economic and fiscal policies that chimed well with the preferences of the ÖVP Business League, with which Schüssel was associated.<sup>11</sup> Yet it also advanced policies designed to protect the welfare and employment situation of the ‘little man’. Such contradictions were consistent with continuing to maximise votes and keeping coalition options open.

An early action Haider had undertaken to make his party a more acceptable to both potential governing partners was his public rejection in August 1995 of the FPÖ’s nostalgic Pan-Germanism, a major bone of contention within the ÖVP and the SPÖ.<sup>12</sup> Another such programmatic shift saw the FPÖ tone down its calls for fundamental reform of Austria’s political system towards the so-called ‘Third Republic’. Haider never ruled out coalescing with the SPÖ and there were a number of informal soundings between the parties, but the SPÖ’s support for *Ausgrenzung* remained high. His efforts at building the bases of potential government co-operation became increasingly targeted at Schüssel’s ÖVP. From 1995, numerous confidential discussions took place between the parties and these helped rebuild relations strained by the aggressive rhetoric associated with the vote maximization strategy the FPÖ continued to employ in the electoral arena. In January 1996, the Styrian FPÖ helped ensure the local ÖVP retained that province’s governorship. January 1997 saw the first direct meetings between Haider and Schüssel (2009: 43) and in early April 1999 the ÖVP supported Haider’s re-election as Carinthia’s Governor.

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<sup>10</sup> *Program of the Austrian Freedom Party, adopted 30 October 1997*, Chapter V, Article 2.

<sup>11</sup> Thus the motto of the FPÖ’s extraordinary party conference of October 1998, was ‘Lower taxes – Create jobs’ and its lead motion proposed the introduction of a regressive ‘flat tax’.

<sup>12</sup> See *Wirtschaftswoche*, 17 August 1995; *Profil*, 21 August 1995, 27-33 and Haider’s televised interview of 20 August 1995 with the state broadcasting company (*ORF-Sommorgespräch*).

In the months preceding the 1999 election, Haider made personnel changes designed to promote the FPÖ's prospects of office. In April, the party's confrontational caucus leader was replaced by the conciliatory Herbert Scheibner, a move characterised by Haider at the relevant press conference as symbolising an 'important change of course', indicating the FPÖ offered not only 'accentuated opposition', but also 'solutions for Austria's problems'. Haider signalled the FPÖ's willingness to support Schüssel's policy preferences by choosing FPÖ industrialist Thomas Prinzhorn to head the party's candidate list and ensuring the market liberal 'Haider-Prinzhorn Plan' figured prominently in the final phase of FPÖ's campaign.

In the October 1999 election the FPÖ polled 26.9, beating the ÖVP into second place by 415 votes. The ÖVP's heavy defeat prompted significant groups within that party to argue it should leave government. Though Schüssel had promised to lead the ÖVP into opposition if it came third, he still aspired to the chancellorship. For his part, Haider was convinced the time had come for the FPÖ to enter government. At secret coalition discussions held with ÖVP interlocutors immediately after the election, Haider let it be known the FPÖ would concede the chancellorship and he would not enter government, but remain Carinthia's Governor. In public, the FPÖ released documents seeking to underscore its claim to have a credible policy agenda<sup>13</sup> and Haider made statements he hoped would assuage those still convinced the FPÖ's attitudes to Austria's Nazi past made it unfit to govern.<sup>14</sup> On 13 December, the FPÖ executive committee decided the party would compile its own government programme, key elements of which were market liberalisation and a universal child allowance ('children's cheque'). By then it appears an ÖVP-FPÖ coalition had secretly been all but agreed. It was not until nearly the end of January, however, that Schüssel formally abandoned negotiations with the SPÖ and moved to formal talks with the FPÖ. Many in the FPÖ national executive –

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<sup>13</sup> The first (on 28 October) was entitled 'Freedom Party Positions for the Future of Austria'.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to media appearances at home and abroad, on 12 November Haider held a 'Speech on the State of the Republic', in which he said he could no longer accept any 'brown shadows' and personally apologized for any statements made in respect of National Socialism that 'might well have been insensitive or given to misunderstanding' (FPÖ-provided transcript).

including Haider protégé, Susanne Riess-Passer, executive party leader since 1996 – judged the party still unprepared for government,<sup>15</sup> but Haider won the day, arguing that although incumbency might well cost the FPÖ up to a third of its votes, when ‘the door of history opens’ the party had to accept responsibility (Interviews). On 1 February 2000, the ÖVP and FPÖ announced they had reached agreement and on 4 February the government was sworn in.

## **4. Strategy and behaviour during Schüssel I: 2000-2002**

### **4.1 The governmental arena**

Foregoing the chancellorship helped the FPÖ secure office, but cannot account for its poor overall performance in office. Austrian government decision-making operates according to the ministerial government model and cabinet decisions require unanimity. The FPÖ held six of 12 cabinet portfolios<sup>16</sup> and the vice-chancellorship, occupied by Riess-Passer. In line with its strategy of securing a second term, it had acquired the finance and social affairs portfolios. The former was to enable it to deliver tax reductions planned for before the 2003 election. The latter was to ensure it be credited with intended welfare innovations such as the ‘children’s cheque’ and enhanced severance rights. Both ÖVP and FPÖ committed themselves to privatisation and circumventing neo-corporatist decision-making, as well as to tightening immigration and asylum policies.

Most ÖVP ministers had considerable experience in executive office and relevant policy fields. They could also draw on the know-how of ÖVP partisans in the web of neo-corporatist institutions linked to their densely organised party. By contrast, three FPÖ ministers had no governmental experience and the others at best modest provincial track records. With the

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<sup>15</sup> Some (e.g. the leaders of the Styrian and Viennese parties) were predisposed to co-operate with the SPÖ, but it offered merely the prospect of a future coalition if the FPÖ supported a minority SPÖ administration. Others feared granting a demoralised ÖVP the chancellorship would help it revive and thus undermine the FPÖ’s long-term goal of party system re-alignment.

<sup>16</sup> Finance; Social Affairs; Defence; Justice; Infrastructure and Transport and the newly-created Ministry for Public Services and Sport (Riess-Passer). It also had two junior ministers.

exception of the second FPÖ ministers of justice and of social affairs (Böhmdorfer and Herbert Haupt), most had little pertinent policy expertise and there was still precious little available within their comparatively modest party organization. Analogous weaknesses were to be found within the FPÖ's ministerial cabinets. Some ministers performed well despite such challenges (e.g. Riess-Passer and finance minister Karl-Heinz Grasser), yet as a whole, the FPÖ's team had difficulty asserting itself vis-à-vis the ÖVP and relevant ministerial bureaucracies. The deficient skill sets of individual FPÖ ministers was reflected in unusually high ministerial turnover. The party's first justice minister lasted merely 24 days; the widely-mocked social affairs minister resigned in October 2000, to be followed three weeks later by the infrastructure minister, whose replacement herself only lasted 15 months.

The FPÖ's effectiveness was also undermined by inconsistency in strategy. A significant degree of the blame can be placed at Haider's door. He had been largely responsible for selecting the FPÖ's ministers. That only three of the original six had in the preceding years been well-integrated within the party<sup>17</sup> contributed to ensuring a relatively low degree of 'partyiness' of the government team. Some ministers adopted a non-partisan, technocratic style (e.g. Böhmdorfer), whilst Grasser threatened to outdo the ÖVP in his advocacy of neo-liberalism. Haider also undermined intra-governmental decision-making. The coalition agreement had specified the coalition committee as the ultimate forum for co-ordinating relations between the governing parties and making the politically most sensitive decisions. Haider was to be tied into responsibility via his membership of that committee. Initially, it worked well, yet Haider increasingly absented himself when unpopular decisions were to be made and publically criticised them. In February 2002, he resigned from it altogether. Such 'internal opposition' further reduced cohesion within the FPÖ's government team. It also emboldened those within the caucus who had at best reluctantly accepted the party's changed

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<sup>17</sup> Riess-Passer; Infrastructure Minister Michael Schmid (executive committee member since 1989), and Defence Minister Herbert Scheibner (executive member since 1989).

primary goal and resented what they saw as its degradation to a rubber stamp for coalition decisions often inconsistent with FPÖ policy priorities.

The FPÖ's record of populist vote-maximization had engendered considerable hostility to the party within the state bureaucracy and neo-corporatist structures with which the government had to interact, and where there were few FPÖ partisans. There was also universal dismay within the ÖVP that their party – which they regarded as the embodiment of dependability and pro-European sentiment – was internationally reviled for facilitating right-wing extremist entryism. Exhilaration that the ÖVP had regained the chancellorship helped attenuate that ill-feeling, as did the spectacular electoral gains the ÖVP soon started to make. They appeared to vindicate Schüssel's claim that bringing the FPÖ into government would weaken it electorally and reverse the ÖVP's electoral decline. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of the ÖVP continued to regard collaborating with the FPÖ as anathema (Luther 2010; Schüssel 2009).

At the highest levels of the coalition, Schüssel from the outset made a point of presenting a united front, in part because of the diplomatic 'sanctions' imposed on his government. He conducted joint post-cabinet press conferences with Riess-Passer and lavished praise on her and Grasser – who both enjoyed consistently high poll ratings – whilst simultaneously ignoring Haider's attacks. This exacerbated the gap between the FPÖ's governmental team and extra-parliamentary organization. As FPÖ disunity grew, the FPÖ's capacity to shape policy declined and by default, Schüssel's neo-liberal agenda was strengthened. This further ratcheted up the FPÖ's divisions and meant that from 2001, the coalition experienced a series of crises that laid bare fundamental differences between the governing parties and within the FPÖ itself. A key disagreement in the FPÖ related to economic policy and in particular to what many considered the excessive pursuit of a zero budget deficit that had never been wholeheartedly endorsed by the party. The FPÖ's pre-emptive programmatic adaptation to Schüssel's neo-liberal agenda and its coalition agreement undertakings had led to the party in



government being tied into policies that were fundamentally at odds with other elements of the FPÖ's programmatic profile and strategy. These included its emphasis on social policy and tax reductions designed to help secure a second term. During the first half of 2002, economic growth declined, unemployment increased, and the government's tax take rose to an all-time high. On 9 June, the FPÖ's party congress passed a lead motion re-affirming the party's commitment to pre-election tax cuts. Yet in August the government announced their postponement beyond 2003 and simultaneously confirmed its decision to purchase 18 expensive replacement interceptor fighters. The visceral conflict this unleashed within the FPÖ led to the resignation of Riess-Passer and her cabinet team on 8 September, whereupon Schüssel terminated the coalition.

## **4.2 The intra-party arena**

The collapse of Schüssel's first government was primarily a consequence of the FPÖ's failure to master tensions between the party in public office and the party on the ground. There was widespread internal resentment that the FPÖ's government team was insufficiently partisan and inadequately representative of the party's pattern of regional support. Recruitment was largely down to Haider, for whom region was secondary to his (often flawed) assessment of the loyalty to him of those he selected. The original six ministers comprised two from Upper Austria, which had 24% of the party's membership; two from Haider's Carinthian branch (10%); the chair of the Styrian party (13%) and Scheibner, who was unpopular in his Vienna party (10%). As FPÖ ministers resigned, the regional imbalance and limited organizational rootedness of the ministerial team became more pronounced. From February 2002, three FPÖ ministers were Carinthian, another was Haider's lawyer, who never joined the FPÖ, and the two others were only weakly entrenched in their provincial branches.<sup>18</sup> There was universal

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<sup>18</sup>. The Carinthian ministers were Grasser, Haupt and Infrastructure Minister Matthias Reichhold, who had in February replaced his Upper Austrian predecessor, Monika Forstinger. The others were Scheibner (Vienna) and

support within the FPÖ for the coalition's removal of significant numbers of SPÖ partisans from positions in the state bureaucracy, in (privatized) state enterprises and in other para-state organizations. However, the FPÖ frequently lost out to the ÖVP when it came to refilling those posts. This was customarily blamed by those who had aspired to such posts on the feebleness of FPÖ ministers. It also further alienated those within the FPÖ still committed to the party's long-term strategy of replacing the ÖVP as Austria's main right-wing party. In the colourful language of one national executive member, having chosen to get into bed with the ÖVP, the FPÖ now found itself not only unable to 'slaughter the ÖVP's holy cows', but also helping it recover its strength. (Interview)

The personal and regional rivalries caused by such recruitment, patronage and strategic issues were exacerbated by divisions at the highest levels of the party. On 1 May 2000, Haider resigned as leader in favour of Riess-Passer, a move many considered a ploy to bring an early end to the sanctions. Everyone understood he intended to remain *de facto* leader. Yet having not entered cabinet and now resigned the chairmanship, his control over day-to-day party decisions was significantly diminished. This was in part an unintended consequence of the organizational adaptations undertaken when preparing for incumbency, when internal power was concentrated in the office of the leader and the party in public office. Once the sanctions had been lifted and external pressure for party unity thereby removed (September 2000), Haider increasingly vacillated between supporting and attacking the government. The extent to which this was a consequence of the FPÖ's now bifurcated leadership, of Haider's emotional lability, or his unwillingness to abandon his well-rehearsed confrontational style is unclear. What is clear is that his behaviour encouraged dissent throughout the party. The increasingly acrimonious confrontations within the executive (where the party in public office had a majority) were replicated in the public realm. FPÖ ministers accused the extra-

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Riess-Passer,. Though from Upper Austria, her party career was attributable not to a regional power base, but to Haider's patronage.

parliamentary party (but also some MPs) of failing to accept the inescapable compromises resulting from the party's decision to opt for incumbency and of making wholly unrealistic demands (such as reducing the budget deficit by cancelling Austria's EU contributions). In turn, they were charged with betraying the party's principles and being motivated primarily by the trappings of power and personal aggrandisement.

Riess-Passer's leadership group attempted to rally internal support by employing the party central office to trumpet the government's alleged policy achievements. Yet the resources of the national party apparatus remained modest and best suited to populist electioneering. Even with assistance from the party's ministerial cabinets, to which a significant proportion of the most experienced central office staff had been relocated, and despite staging events such as the 'Hello Minister' meetings of June 2001, it proved impossible to win over large parts of the party on the ground. Here, a strong preference for vote-maximization persisted, as did a fundamentally anti-government and protest-oriented sentiment, particularly in respect of the EU. This widened the gulf vis-à-vis Schüssel's Europhile ÖVP and Brussels now became the main target of the FPÖ grass roots' traditional populist accusations of political corruption and economic mismanagement. Similarly, prospective eastern EU enlargement became the prime focus of rhetoric on crime and immigration, as well as of nostalgic nationalist sentiment, notably via the insistence that Czech accession be made conditional upon a rescinding of the 1945 'Beneš Decrees' authorising Germans' expulsion from Czechoslovakia. In July 2001, the leaders of the Upper Austrian, Lower Austrian and Viennese branches initiated a petition calling on the government to veto Czech accession until the Czechs closed their Temelin nuclear plant. To Schüssel's consternation, it was supported by parts of the ÖVP and in January 2002 signed by 15% of Austria's electorate. Riess-Passer's pragmatism served only to exacerbate the gulf between her and the party on the ground.

The Temelin petition illustrated not only the extent to which the extra-parliamentary party was still wedded to populist vote-maximizing behaviours, but also the party leader's declining capacity to maintain internal discipline. There were numerous other internal actions to which she was opposed that Riess-Passer could not prevent. These included meetings of FPÖ fundamentalists with European radical right parties. The first took place in Carinthia on 10 November 2001, when Riess-Passer was on an official visit to Hungary, and included Istvan Czurka of Hungarian Truth and Life Party. The second was Haider's July 2002 meeting with the Vlaams Blok and Lega Nord. She later characterised Haider's meeting with Saddam Hussein in February 2002, which coincided with her official visit to Washington DC, as the beginning of the end. The FPÖ was divided. It was unthinkable that the formal leader could sanction Haider, whom the grass roots still considered the personification of the party. Having resigned from the coalition committee following the furore surrounding his Iraq visit, Haider in spring 2002 privately proposed to Riess-Passer that he resume the party chairmanship at the June party congress, when her two year term was due to end. Believing this would reinforce leadership division, she made her resignation conditional upon him assuming the vice-chancellorship, calculating this was the only way tie him into governmental responsibility.<sup>19</sup> He refused and she was duly re-elected with Haider's public support, but in private he was still committed to re-asserting his control of the party.

In August 2002, he thought his moment had come. At the three provincial elections since February 2000, FPÖ support had dropped between two and eight percentage points. Predictably, this caused grass-roots functionaries facing the actual or potential loss of their seats to doubt the party's new strategy. Those losses were still within the range the leadership (including Haider) had anticipated for that stage in the electoral cycle and considered largely redeemable if the government kept to its commitment – reaffirmed by Riess-Passer at the June

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<sup>19</sup> It was unclear, however, whether President Klestil would have approved Haider's nomination.

congress – to deliver tax reductions before the election. Yet on 14 August, the executive approved (in Haider’s absence) the coalition proposal to postpone them. That galvanised internal opposition to the government’s widely unpopular neo-liberal policies and Haider used this latest internal crisis to mobilise his supporters against the party in government. Using an obscure clause of the party statutes, they launched a delegate petition to force an extraordinary conference, at which FPÖ ministers were to be mandated to reinstate the tax cuts, cancel the Eurofighter purchase and veto EU enlargement if the Beneš decrees were not rescinded. Haider lost control of events, however, and seriously underestimated Riess-Passer’s resolve. The day after a botched meeting in Knittelfeld, where a compromise document was to have been signed, she resigned, bringing the government to an end. Haider reneged on his undertaking to the ‘Knittelfeld rebels’ to resume the chairmanship and dropped out of sight. Scheibner served as caretaker leader until an emergency congress of 21 September elected Haider-nominee Reichhold, but having announced he would not permit Haider to appear on the party’s candidate list, on 31 October Reichhold resigned ‘on health grounds’. The interim leader was now his fellow Carinthian Haupt, eventually elected uncontested as FPÖ chairman on 12 December, albeit by only 87.8% of congress delegates. In the circumstances, it is unsurprising that at the election of 24 November the FPÖ crashed to 10% of the vote.

## **5. Strategy and behaviour during Schüssel II: 2003-2006**

### **5.1 The governmental arena**

In Schüssel II, sworn in on 28 February, the ÖVP had eight cabinet seats to the FPÖ’s three and also controlled the finance ministry, still presided over by Grassler, who had left the FPÖ and though ostensibly non-partisan was in reality Schüssel’s protégé. Böhmendorfer continued in his post as did Haupt, now also vice-chancellor. The revised infrastructure portfolio was taken by Hubert Gorbach, who had since 1993 held a similar position in Vorarlberg’s

government. Both parties had three junior ministers. The FPÖ's included Ursula Haubner, Haider's Upper Austrian sister, and Karl Schweitzer (Burgenland). Appointed the FPÖ's coalition co-ordinator, he was to liaise with his ÖVP counterpart, passing on issues they could not readily resolve to Schüssel and Haupt's one-on-one pre-cabinet meetings. The task of ensuring the parliamentary passage of agreed legislation was entrusted to a body comprising the two caucus leaders, their administrative directors and the heads of the offices of the chancellor and vice-chancellor. Inasmuch as the coalition parties could be said to have had a co-ordinated strategy, this was largely determined outside these structures, however.

Overall, the new FPÖ cabinet team was more experienced and had greater policy expertise than its predecessor. Yet its potential to shape government policy was limited by its reduced size and because, like the weak new FPÖ leadership, it lacked a clearly-defined set of overarching goals for the government arena and appropriate strategies to achieve them. Moreover, the FPÖ had in the coalition agreement effectively capitulated on all the issues that had been the subject of the 'Knittelfeld rebellion'. These included EU enlargement, budget consolidation and delayed tax reductions. The agreement did propose a further tightening of immigration and asylum procedures, but it had a strong neo-liberal bias that was inconsistent with FPÖ commitments, especially to protecting the 'little man'.

Having in the autumn again 'irrevocably' withdrawn from national politics, Haider had not negotiated the coalition agreement and was not included in the approved co-ordination procedures. Once his self-imposed Carinthian exile was over, he used his support amongst FPÖ fundamentalists within the caucus and beyond to pressurise the ÖVP to attenuate government policy. His tactical repertoire included established populist behaviours such as suggesting petitions against government measures, or attacking politicians' privileged severance and pension rights. He also threatened FPÖ ministers would use their veto rights to

blockade cabinet decision-making, that MPs would vote down government bills, or even form a breakaway caucus.

The unpredictable and confrontational manner in which Haider was to intervene in government policy making was demonstrated during the coalition's first major project, the 2003 pensions reform. In late March, the cabinet agreed a white paper jointly presented on 1 April by Haupt and the ÖVP economics minister. Rattled by the FPÖ's loss of nearly three quarters of its vote at the 30 March Lower Austrian election, on 4 April Haider publically demanded a popular referendum on the reform. Haupt dutifully concurred. On 10 April, Haider suggested that failing an amelioration of the proposed burdens for the socially weak, the coalition might not survive. The cabinet approved a revised text on 29 April, but at a subsequent FPÖ executive meeting, four of the nine provincial party leaders rejected it and on 5 May, Haider announced the caucus would not support it. He called for and on 15 May got an albeit unsuccessful roundtable on the pensions reform. Chaired by the federal president, it included representatives of the government and neo-corporatist actors, as well as opposition party leaders. To the ÖVP's dismay, on 9 May he held a well-publicised meeting with SPÖ leader Alfred Gusenbauer, allegedly discussing possible joint actions against the proposals. The cabinet passed another draft bill on 4 June. It was agreed by the parliamentary budget committee with the votes of the FPÖ and ÖVP, but the next day, eight of the FPÖ's eighteen MPs declared they would not support it in the plenary unless there were yet more concessions. Some were duly found and parliament approved the bill on 11 June. On 23 June, nine of the FPÖ's ten Bundesrat members refused to support essential supplementary legislation, delaying the law's final passage by a few weeks.

Haider had clearly become the ultimate arbiter of the FPÖ's behaviour in the government arena. His interventions were habitually the most aggressive after the FPÖ's frequent electoral defeats. Following the party's loss at the September 2003 Landtag elections in Upper Austria

and Tyrol of about 60% of its vote, which he attributed in part to Schweitzer's failings and Haupt's poor presentation and negotiations skills, Haider installed Gorbach as vice-chancellor and his confidante Böhmdorfer became the FPÖ's more combative coalition co-ordinator. Haider chose to be the FPÖ's chief negotiator regarding the coalition's next major policy initiative, tax reductions. He liaised directly with Schüssel and Grasser on details of the bill, which were finalised in early 2004, and was also to play a key role in subsequent decision making, including the controversial 2004 second pensions reform. For many, Haider was the personification of irresponsible brinkmanship, unwilling or unable to make the hard choices that go with incumbency. There is much to be said for this evaluation. Yet it is important to note that Haider remained committed to the FPÖ's strategy of incumbency. By late 2004 he was tiring of the fundamentally oppositional orientation of in particular his extra-parliamentary 'Knittelfeld' allies. Initially encouraged by Haider's rhetoric, they had for their part become alienated from him by his repeated refusal to resume the FPÖ leadership and by what they increasingly viewed as his instrumentalisation of the party to bolster his political ego and by his abandonment of its principles. Whether or not they had supported the Knittelfeld revolt. FPÖ MPs were exposed to growing pressure from their provincial selectorates to reflect grassroots fundamentalist opposition to government policy. Accordingly, both the ÖVP and Haider were increasingly uncertain that the FPÖ caucus could be relied upon to provide the requisite parliamentary majorities.

On 4 April 2005 (following secret consultation with Schüssel) Haider formed the breakaway Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, or BZÖ), the statutes of which gave its leadership and party in public office the predominant role. The whole government team, the vast majority of the caucus and of Haider's Carinthian branch joined him. The deep-rooted tension within the FPÖ between incumbency and protest had been resolved by the more pragmatic elements of the party in public office seceding from the party on the ground.



The FPÖ's presence in the government arena had by default been terminated. Bereft of all but the rump of its erstwhile caucus, it reverted to the role of populist outsider party. The creation of the BZÖ immediately guaranteed the coalition's parliamentary majority. Yet it also ensured that for the remainder of its term, Schüssel could act as though he headed a single-party government. For the BZÖ's capacity to counter his policy priorities was undermined by the claim made at its foundation that its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the FPÖ lay in its commitment to government responsibility and the fledgling BZÖ could not afford early elections. At the time, Schüssel's supporters regarded the BZÖ's formation as a confirmation of his strategy of collaborating with Austria's right-wing populists, since it appeared to have separated the FPÖ's more pragmatic forces (which to the surprise of many included Haider) from its incorrigible protest elements. Conversely, those in the FPÖ who had taken the view that 'getting into bed' with the ÖVP would allow the latter to recover its strength and thus undermine the FPÖ's strategy of replacing as Austria's major right-wing party felt themselves fully vindicated.

## **5.2 The intra-party arena**

The internal legacy of the party's implosion in the summer of 2002 included unresolved divisions of strategy, policy and personality, a loss of members and a rudderless leadership. These and other problems persisted throughout Schüssel II. There were early indications the FPÖ would again experience difficulty maintaining internal support for incumbency. The day after the FPÖ's disastrous general election result and less than three months after its visceral internal conflict had catapulted it out of government, its executive voted unanimously to seek to reconstitute the coalition and on 21 February approved entering formal coalition negotiations, again unanimously. Haupt had promised if the party obtained under 15% of the vote, a special party congress would be convened to decide on any draft coalition agreement. Doubtful the grass roots would approve, he reneged on that undertaking, however. The

decision was taken in the executive, two members of which voted against . More ominously, the party directorate meeting at which the decision had to be ratified was attended by only half its 240 members, eleven of whom voted against.

Dropping from 26.9% to 10% of the vote had cost the national party over half its public funding. The party central office issued redundancy notices and deep cuts were made in the party academy and caucus. The FPÖ's dramatic losses at all but one of the elections held in 2003 and 2004 brought further cuts in public funding. With resources severely depleted and numerous elected offices being lost, grass roots functionaries grew increasingly alienated from the strategy of incumbency. In their view, the leadership lacked concern for the extent to which the costs of the coalition's unpopular policies were being borne almost exclusively by them in the form of lost votes and seats, rather than by those enjoying the trappings of high national office. Many of the FPÖ's market-liberal and pragmatic elements had left the party, or gone into internal exile. The new coalition's agenda was thus even less consistent with the now even more fundamentalist and protest-oriented extra-parliamentary party. This exacerbated FPÖ discontent with the government team. Infrastructure minister Gorbach was well rooted in the party, having been in the executive committee since 1992, but was a business-oriented pragmatist who had for 14 years governed with the ÖVP in Vorarlberg and for many in the FPÖ's grassroots far too quiescent. On 25 June 2004, Böhmendorfer was replaced by another non-party member: Karin Gastinger.

From the start of Schüssel II, Haupt's chairmanship was undermined in public and in private by the 'Club of Friends of Jörg Haider', a group of key Knittelfeld actors formed explicitly to reinstall Haider, who spearheaded accusations that Haupt's leadership group was betraying the party's commitment to the 'little man'. Though Haider still refused to enter government, it appeared in early summer 2003 that he was about to resume the leadership. Yet on 28 June, Haupt skilfully engineered a vote of confidence in the party executive, which Haider had

again failed to attend. On 23 October 2003, however, Haupt had to yield to Haider's insistence that Haubner be appointed executive party leader. With his sister in charge, Haider believed he had resumed control, yet the FPÖ was not only in serious financial straits and self absorbed, but bitterly divided and lacking discipline. At the European Parliament election of June 2002, for example, the Knittelfeld fundamentalists organised a preference vote campaign that ensured their lower-ranked candidate, Andreas Mölzer,<sup>20</sup> obtained the one seat to which the party's massively reduced vote entitled it, thereby replacing the serving MEP, whom Haider had placed at the head of the candidate party's list. That same month, Haider offered one of their leaders, Vienna party boss Strache, a junior ministry and even the party leadership, but he refused. Instead, Haubner was elected leader on 3 July, albeit with only 79% of the delegate vote.

As internal conflict escalated into 2005, Haider's capacity to control the FPÖ became ever more tenuous and he openly toyed with radically restructuring the party (as he had in 1995). It was at this point, in April 2005, that he decided to leave the FPÖ and found the BZÖ. He expected that all but a small core of what he referred to as 'destructive forces' would follow him and that he could then position the BZÖ at the next election as a responsible party of government, thus affording at least some opportunity for a continuation of incumbency. In the event, the BZÖ remained limited in the main to the national caucus and Carinthia. For its part, the FPÖ elected Strache as leader on 23 April and under him the party reverted to strategy of populist vote maximization which at the 2006 general election won it 10% of the vote. The BZÖ only just managed to get over the 4% hurdle. Both returned to opposition.

## **6. Conclusions**

Few parties are motivated exclusively by one goal, be it policy, office or votes. Under Haider, the right-wing populist FPÖ initially vigorously pursued the primary goal of vote

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<sup>20</sup> Mölzer has long been regarded as one of the prime ideologues of the German-national wing of the party.

maximization. Yet as Müller and Strøm (1999: 9) argue, votes ‘can only plausibly be instrumental goals’. The remarkable success of the FPÖ’s vote-maximising strategy did generate a range of valued political goods. The party automatically received proportionate increases in state subsidies, a significant proportion of which was re-invested to further increase its vote. There were a range of individual goods for party functionaries, not least in the form of office, especially at the local and regional level. Though still in opposition, the FPÖ was also able to exercise considerable influence on government policy, notably in respect of immigration. The primary goal of the mixed strategy the FPÖ pursued from 1995 to 1999 remained vote maximization, but the party also prepared for incumbency, Haider’s aspiration since assuming the leadership. Many in the party were sceptical about the decision to enter office in 2000, but followed Haider’s lead. His prime motivation for this high-risk goal shift appears to have been (deferred) office seeking. Haider’s interest in office had been illustrated at the subnational level in his relentless efforts to recapture the Carinthian governorship he had held from 1989-1991. He now retained this influential position, calculating that Schüssel I could well be succeeded by a coalition with him as chancellor. Policy-seeking motivations also figured in his calculations, however, not least as he believed office would permit the party to undermine the foundations of the Austrian consensualism that had helped marginalise the FPÖ.

Once the FPÖ entered government, long-standing tensions were aggravated by the uneven distribution of the costs of incumbency. For many of the predominantly protest-oriented grass root functionaries, for example, the FPÖ’s defeats at local and provincial elections meant the loss of office. Conflict between the pragmatic party in government and the extra-parliamentary party, where there was little support for neo-liberalism and no appetite for policy compromise, led to a continuous wave of self-destruction that in 2002 lost the FPÖ two thirds of its vote and in 2005 split the party along its internal fault line. Some of the FPÖ’s

problems stemmed from unintended consequences of the internal and external measures the party had undertaken in preparation for incumbency. Yet the majority of the responsibility for the FPÖ's failures is to be attributed to party actors simultaneously pursuing strategies and behaviours of right-wing populist vote maximization on the one hand and office on the other. This mix proved dysfunctional for the revised primary goal upon which the leadership had decided. Put another way, rather than adequately following through on that new goal, the party effectively scored an own goal.

However, this study does not support the proposition that right-wing populist parties are necessarily doomed to failure once they change their primary goal to office. Instead, it strongly suggests that erstwhile outsider parties' likelihood of prospering once in government will owe much to their leadership's capacity to identify and implement strategies and behaviours consonant with the parties' new goal and to deal effectively with the inescapable tensions caused by the transition to incumbency. That is not to say that strategic and behavioural change are without risk. They can and do lead to unexpected, or unintended consequences, not least in view of the unpredictable responses of other actors. However, agency remains an important determinant of success. Moreover, although researching the internal working of right-wing populist parties can be extremely challenging, the insights of such supply-side studies constitute invaluable additions to the perspectives offered by the still predominantly demand-side approaches to examining these and other categories of outsider parties. Indeed, they may well be far better at explaining rapid shifts in the fortunes of such parties.

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