

CHRISTINE MAYER / MONIKA MOKRE - WAHLKABINE.AT

WHY AUSTRIA'S MOST SUCCESSFUL VOTE MATCH TOOL IS NOW MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER



1. The elections to the European Parliament 2009 in Austria

Since its accession to the European Union in 1995, Austria has consistently shown a high degree of EU scepticism in public opinion polls. The Eurobarometer¹ survey carried out by the European Union shows that Austria usually ranks considerably, i.e. 10 to 15%, below EU average. In 2008, only 47% of Austrians thought

that their country had benefited from EU membership (compared to 56% EU-wide).²

Concerning the key question of the biannual Eurobarometer survey, i.e. “Do you think that Austria’s membership of the European Union is a good thing or a bad thing”, only 39% (+3 Pp) think positively and 21% (-5 Pp) negatively. For 38% (+2 Pp), Austria’s EU membership is “neither a good, nor a bad thing”. Here, the European average data are much better: 53% “good thing”, 15% “bad thing”, and 27% “neither a good, nor a bad thing”.³

In addition, election turnouts have been continually decreasing all over Europe, dropping from 63% in 1979 to 45,6% in 2004. In Austria, turnout decreased from 67.7% in 1996 to 42.4% in 2004⁴. As for the elections in June 2009, only 21% of Austrians said that they would consider voting (compared to 32% of voters EU-wide).⁵

Seen against this background, it is important to note that in the same survey, a majority of interviewees said they wanted more information about the European Union: only 41% of respondents stated they knew how the EU worked, and 68% believed that Austrians in general were not very well informed about the EU.⁶

Although given their rather Eurosceptic attitude, Austrians tend to expect more from media coverage about EU-related topics. [...] More than 50% of Austrians are satisfied with the extent of EU coverage in the written and broadcast media. Yet, there is an increasing tendency, i.e. 30%, to criticise EU information in the traditional media as being too little. More than half of respondents consider the coverage of EU-related matters as being objective, but for 20% the European Union is presented too positively. A weak point in that regard seems to be the online media: Half of respondents are not able to make a judgement about either the quantity or the quality of information about the EU.⁷

2. wahlkabine.at

wahlkabine.at (“polling booth”) does not only provide a possibility to fill these information gaps; furthermore, it offers an interesting alternative to traditional mainstream media as it serves as a quick guideline through party opinions and helps to compare political views of the user with those of political parties in full anonymity. Users fill in a questionnaire of approximately 25 questions. These answers are then compared with those given by the parties contesting within the upcoming elections. At the end of the quiz, users can access a detailed survey of all questions and answers as well as comments given by the parties. In addition, a glossary provides background information about topical issues.

The questions included in wahlkabine.at cover a wide range of fields, such as economics, education, energy, environment, family, food, migration, religion, security, social welfare, traffic, or women’s rights as well as art and culture. By pinning down parties to provide clear “yes” or “no” answers and to comment on questions like “Should the EU member states be required to support each other in case of natural gas supply difficulties?” or “Should homosexual couples be allowed to get married in all EU member states?”, wahlkabine.at serves as an essential information portal, not least by providing information on topics which may not even be included in party platforms and manifestos.

The tool abstains from telling users whom to vote for. Rather, it aims to raise awareness for political

issues and offers guidance concerning party policies on current issues. It serves as a basis for political discussion and provides additional information for interested users.

In spite of constant lack of support and promotion by the Austrian government, wahlkabine.at has become a central source of information since its first release in 2002: All in all more than 2.5 million quizzes have been completed since then. A new record was established in the forefront of the last national elections in Austria, when 23 millions questions were answered and 850.000 users completed the whole quiz.

2. wahlkabine.at: An instrument of civic education

Elections are *the* central mechanism of democratic decision making, and contemporary democracy is inconceivable without elections. Hence, declining election turnouts and low interest in politics by voters are considered serious problems for democracies worldwide. There is, however, a remarkable lack of ideas on the part of policy makers and educators about effective ways to confront this issue.

In this context, the buzz phrase “disenchantment with politics” is often used to denote that voters are not interested in the intricate workings of politics. By defining the problem as a general mental condition of the citizens, it is, at the same time, removed from the realm of political responsibility. Parties contesting in elections adapt to the (assumed) wishes of the voters by increasing personalization and by adopting commercial marketing strategies. Frequently, these forms of mediating politics are taken up and re-enforced by popular media. In addition, ever increasing numbers of opinion polls and quizzes about the outcome of the elections contribute but little to evoking genuine interest in the voters.

For the central task lies in politicizing voting decisions, i.e. in linking them to political contents. This goal cannot be reached by expecting citizens to search for a particular party position in its platforms, manifestos, and advertising brochures. Instead, easily accessible and attractive new instruments must be developed to disseminate information before elections.

wahlkabine.at is such an instrument. Interested

users can access information while spending comparably little time, and often even those who do not deal with political questions in their everyday lives become interested in the questions at stake and thus also in taking part in the polls.

“Democracy” remains an empty term if those who are meant to make political decisions, i.e. the people, are not adequately informed on the issues they have to decide upon. By providing easily comprehensible information on relevant political topics in the forefront of elections, wahlkabine.at thus provides a central instrument of civic education. By taking part in the network “Votematch Europe” preparing the EU elections 2009, the impact of wahlkabine.at has been enlarged beyond Austria.

1 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/standard_en.htm

2 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_at_exec.pdf

3 Ibid.

4 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2004/ep-election/sites/de/results1306/turnout_ep/turnout_table.html

5 <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,619028,00.html>

6 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb68/eb68_at_nat.pdf

7 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb68/eb68_at_exec.pdf