

## Political System in Austria

In the Austrian Parliament there are two chambers, the National Council and the Federal Council.

### National Council

The 183 members of the National Council are elected by the citizens entitled to vote. In Austria, the National Council must be re-elected every five years at the latest. Voters must choose a particular party. The National Council is then formed on the basis of a list and proportional representation system. The seats - or mandates - in the National Council are distributed among the parties.

However, not all parties win a seat in the National Council. Parties are only considered in the distribution of mandates if they achieve at least four percent of the votes in the entire federal territory or a direct or basic mandate in an electoral district.

This rule is intended to guarantee that only parties of a certain (Austria-wide) significance sit in the National Council.

### Federal Council

The second chamber of parliament, the "Bundesrat" (Federal Council), is not directly elected by the people. Its members are sent by the state parliaments. The composition of the Federal Council therefore depends on the strength ratio of the parties in the state parliaments of the federal states ("Bundesländer").

The members of the Federal Council exercise their functions for the duration of the legislative periods of the respective State Parliament ("Landtag"). The composition of the Federal Council thus changes after each State Parliament election ("partial renewal"), which is why there are no legislative periods in the Federal Council: it has been in permanent session since 1945.

The number of members of the Federal Council to be elected by the State Parliament depends on the number of Austrian citizens living in the respective federal state. The largest federal state has a maximum of twelve members, the smallest at least three.

The Federal Government consists of the Federal Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor and the other federal ministers. State secretaries may assist individual ministers in their official duties. However, they are not members of the government. Like the Federal President, the Federal Government is at the head of the federal administration. This means that it is responsible for matters that affect the whole of Austria. These are, for example, education policy, police, national defense or economic policy.

In Austria, the government is appointed by the Federal President. The federal government or individual members can be made to resign at any time by the National Council through a vote of no confidence (political ministerial responsibility). This is the core of the parliamentary system of government. Members of the federal government can also be members of the National Council. However, all members of parliament must resign their mandate when they assume a government office.

At the beginning of its term of office, the federal government presents a government program that it intends to implement during its term. For many of its measures, it needs laws. Here it depends on close cooperation with the National Council and the Federal Council. Passing laws is the responsibility of Parliament, not the government. The federal government therefore needs majorities in the National Council to support its legislative proposals and pass them - possibly with amendments proposed by parliamentarians.

## Elections in Austria

Voting means having a say. There are five different general elections in Austria:

*National Council election*

*Landtag (State Parliament) election*

*Municipal council election (and election of the mayor, if provided for)*

*Election to the European Parliament*

*Federal President election*

(The members of the Federal Council are elected by the provincial parliaments)

All Austrian citizens have the right to vote (active suffrage) and to be elected (passive suffrage) as soon as they have reached voting age: irrespective of gender, class, property, education, religious affiliation, etc. The only reason for exclusion from the right to vote: a court sentence to an unconditional prison term of more than five years (in certain cases: more than one year). However, the court must make an explicit decision on this. Parliament, Federal Government, Federal Chancellor, Federal President: all political institutions established by the constitution derive directly or indirectly from elections. The universal suffrage is important because it guarantees that all citizens have a say in the political process.

The Federal Constitution distinguishes between active and passive suffrage, i.e. the right to vote and the right to stand for election. Austrians are allowed to vote from the age of 16 and to stand for election

### Elections to the National Council

The National Council is elected according to the principles of universal, equal, direct, personal, free and secret suffrage. National Council elections must take place every five years at the latest.

EU citizens of other states are not entitled to vote in National Council elections. There is no compulsory voting.

183 members of the National Council are elected - and not the federal government. However, there is a close connection: The Federal President appoints the Federal Government. However, he/she makes sure that the government has sufficient support in the National Council - i.e. usually a simple majority.

On the ballot paper, the parties running for election are elected. In the run-up to the election, they submit the lists with their candidates. The allocation of the mandates then follows as a rule the order on these party lists. This way of voting is called list voting.

By means of a preferential vote, voters can change the order within a party list. In the regional constituencies, candidates can be marked directly; preferential votes at the state and federal level are awarded by entering the name of the candidate or their ranking number. The parties running for election decide alone which persons they put on their lists. Other persons cannot be elected.

In addition, there are elections to the statutory interest groups ("social partners") (e.g. Chamber of Labor, Chamber of Commerce, Austrian Students' Union), in which, however, only the respective members can participate.

*Person or list: Two types of elections*

In Austria there are two types of elections: personal elections on the one hand, and list and proportional elections on the other.

Personhood voting means: the people elect a person directly and personally (Federal President).

List voting means: Individual parties run for election with a list of candidates. The eligible voters elect a party and thus the persons belonging to it (Parliamentary Election).

In Austria, only the Federal President and the mayor are elected in person, insofar as the provincial regulations provide for the direct election of this office. The Austrian electoral law is therefore primarily a list election law.

In a list election, parties are elected first and foremost. The parties seeking election submit a list of candidates to the electoral authority in advance. The more votes a party receives, the more listed candidates are elected. In recent decades, list elections have been supplemented by elements of personal election law, such as the possibility of awarding preferential votes.

Proportional representation converts the votes cast into mandates. It is applied in all list elections. The ratio of valid votes cast to the number of seats (or mandates) to be allocated then determines the number of mandates achieved.

Information on the **Austrian Political System** can be found on the website of The Austrian Parliament (<https://www.parlament.gv.at/en/explore/political-system/index.html>).