

walking the talk? the educational agenda of the Austrian populist radical right: from discourse to policymaking

Philipp Schnell and Oliver Gruber

This paper explores the educational policy positions in programmatic and parliamentary discourse by the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and their actual policy measures implemented in executive office. The FPÖ is one of the most successful populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in Western Europe and also served in two periods of government with the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) (2000–2005; 2017–2019), providing a fruitful record over time. Our analysis over three decades (1990–2018) reveals that even though it's not a highly salient policy issue, education policy has indeed become an ideological battleground for the FPÖ. At large, it uses education policy claims to substantiate the ideological core pillars of PRRPs, yet it also delivers on many of these claims once in government. This is particularly true for its culturalist claims, which trigger an increasing convergence by the centre-right partner. In contrast, the always-existing congruence of redistributive claims results in several policy decisions in both periods of government.

Keywords: Austria, Austrian Freedom Party, education policy, Nativism

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) have become the focus of contemporary political debate and scholarly research alike, as they challenge existing democracies in many European countries. Within the broader set of parties on the far right end of the political spectrum, PRRPs are characterised by three common features: nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde, 2007). In contrast to extremist parties, PRRPs usually aim to compete within the existing democratic frameworks but with a populist appeal. Thus, they claim to represent the original “will of the people” against the established parties and elites as well as their ideologies (Canovan, 1999, p. 3). Regarding the PRRPs' dominant ideas, the vast majority of literature focuses on their agenda along culturalist dimensions of political conflict, such as issues like immigration, diversity, gender and LGBTQI, European integration, as well as their populist, anti-elite profiles as a whole. To a growing extent, literature has also tackled the socio-economic orientation among radical right parties, on which they are much more dispersed. Comparatively little, however, is known about the educational ideas and approaches of party families that have traditionally been on the fringes, including PRRPs (Berg et al., 2023; Giudici, 2020). This fact results from education policy studies' primary focus on parties of the mainstream right and left (Social Democrats, Liberals, and Conservatives), who have traditionally been considered the issue owners in this policy area (Berg et al., 2023; Busemeyer et al., 2013). Despite the growing success of PRRPs over the last three decades, with rising vote shares, growing numbers of seats in (sub-) national parliaments, and access to institutional power (Rathgeb & Busemeyer, 2022), their educational positions have been largely neglected or subsumed under their broader social policy agenda (Enggist & Pinggera, 2022; Fenger, 2018). A notable

exception is a recent study by Berg et al. (2023), analysing educational preferences in the latest manifestos of Western European PRRPs. The authors document that education is a rhetorically relevant policy area for these parties, with a clear focus on nativist culture, discipline, as well as practical skills. These foci can be traced back to PRRP's key ideological pillars of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. In another recent analysis, Giudici and colleagues (2024) reviewed findings from six case studies on Austria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia in a special issue on Far-Right Parties and the Politics of Education in Europe. They extend Berg et al.'s (2023) study by showing that far-right parties in Eastern and Western Europe cohesively frame education primarily as a means of disseminating (conservative and nativist) culture and values. In contrast, the studies show no consistent position on redistributive aspects of education, such as educational access or tracking. These findings document that educational ideas of the radical right are closely linked to their ideological preference for ethnically homogeneous societies and strictly ordered social hierarchies. Taken together, both studies underline that the policy area of education has indeed become an ideological battleground for PRRPs. Yet, as most studies primarily focus on manifesto data and election programmes, the actual policy choices of PRRPs and the implementation of manifest educational policies in office have received only very limited attention in the existing literature (Mattei & Bulli, 2023). Moreover, due to the dominant focus on education as cultural politics, we still lack a broader understanding of how the radical right tackles the redistributive structure of educational systems.

Addressing these two shortcomings, this article goes beyond previous literature by analysing the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) from a longitudinal perspective concerning both the educational policy positions in programmatic and parliamentary discourse as well as the actual policy decisions implemented in executive office. The FPÖ is an ideological pioneer of the populist radical right and one of the electorally most successful examples in Western Europe. Moreover, it has been one of the key players in the cross-national coordination of the European populist radical right family. Finally, and most importantly for the study of policy choices, it went through several periods of government participation with the Christian Democratic-Conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) (2000 to 2005; 2017 to 2019), which provides us with an empirically rich policy record over time. Thus, the following paper uses findings from a qualitative analysis of eight election manifestos, two party manifestoes and 136 plenary protocols of the Austrian parliament, as well as selected legislative bills from 1990–2020 to answer a) how the educational positions of the FPÖ have developed over time as well as b) whether and how these policy choices have been implemented during the party's periods in government. Using quasi-sentences as the unit of analysis, we first identified and condensed the educational subtopics addressed by the FPÖ, after which we captured the policy positions on these respective subtopics in the second coding cycle. We built upon Gruber and Schnell (2023) and subsumed the identified subtopics and positions under broader ideological traits to bridge the educational approach with the core ideological tenets of PRRPs as mentioned above. Concerning the limited space of this publication, we abstained from extensive quotations (for more detailed references to the primary material, see Gruber & Schnell, 2023).

Ideological Foundations and Educational Policy Positions of the FPÖ

While there is a plethora of studies of radical right parties regarding their positions on their signature topics such as immigration, European integration, or social welfare, we know very little about their educational positions and how they have developed over time. In a content analysis of the FPÖ's party manifestos and plenary speeches in parliament between 1990 and 2018, we have condensed a set of key topics and positions. It enables us to identify the ideological core of the

educational agenda pursued by the FPÖ that is present – though in varying nuances and emphasis – over the whole examination period. This core can be reduced to four continuous traits: (1) a massive anti-mainstream party appeal (*anti-mainstream*), rooted in the populist character of the party; (2) a highly intensive nativist division of students on all levels of education (*nativism*), neatly linked to the anti-immigrant nature of radical right parties; (3) a strong emphasis on grading, tracking, and merit-based principles within educational institutions (*merit*) that leans on an authoritarian preposition that is characteristic of radical right parties; (4) and finally a claim to economic principles of liberalisation, competition, and efficiency both vis-à-vis students as well as educational institutions (*liberalisation*).

Following the FPÖ leadership change to Jörg Haider in 1986, the party started pursuing a more populist profile, including a more aggressive strategy against the mainstream parties of the centre-right and centre-left (Gruber, 2014). This populist, anti-mainstream core, which is characteristic of PRRPs, is reflected in the party’s educational agenda. During the 1990s, the FPÖ based its educational claims on attacking mainstream parties and their colonization of educational institutions. The centre-left is attacked on ideological grounds through a dismissal of leftist – or even “socialist” – concepts of education, usually devalued as “a mollycoddling pedagogic approach.” The centre-right, on the other hand, is denounced for its organisational hegemony within the teacher’s union and its immobility. Consequently, the FPÖ promotes schools as “apolitical spheres of knowledge acquisition”, “free of ideology”, to counter mainstream parties’ penetration of educational institutions, such as schools. An individualising approach to pupils draws on the party’s heritage in 19th-century national liberalism and its claim for freedom of mind against the collectivist narratives of the mainstream left and the clerical dogmatism of the mainstream right. Moreover, with an eye on the long periods of grand coalition governments by SPÖ and ÖVP, the FPÖ spots a tradition of foul compromises in education policy that has resulted in the lowest common denominator and a decline in the educational system.

The most overt ideological trait of the educational positions expressed by the FPÖ is its nativist lens on all levels and matters of education. This emphasis is a visible transfer of the nativist trait at the base of radical right ideology to the realm of education and appears in a variety of manifestations: The separation of immigrant pupils into designated classes is an early claim, which over time becomes more nuanced and focused on German language competences as the criterion of selection. Separated schooling is considered to benefit both the segregated immigrant pupils as well as the regular pupils who are less distracted and liberated from the levelling down by non-German-speakers. Apart from the German language, the role of religion emerges as a pattern only after the millennium in the context of the post-9/11 debate and growing Islamophobia within the radical right in general and the FPÖ in particular. Zeroing in on Muslim pupils, teachers, and organisations, prominent claims comprise the ban of Muslim headscarves, Muslim eating habits, festivities, or symbols in a broader sense, as well as stricter control of teachers of Muslim religious education and Muslim educational institutions. Simultaneously, though, the party opposes ideas of introducing ‘ethics’ as an alternative to religious education and positions itself as a defender of Christian traditions instead. This represents a clear break with the rather secular, anti-clerical, and anti-Catholic stance of the party until the 1990s (Hafez & Heinisch, 2018). This nativist trait is the most characteristic educational USP that separates the FPÖ from other Austrian parties, which is less evident for the other traits dominant in the party’s educational discourse.

In proximity to conservative and neoliberal understandings of educational institutions as allocation systems for the economic demands of the market and the state, two further ideological traits evolve

in the party's approach to education:

One line of argumentation, a merit trait, emphasises the need for a stronger merit-based element in educational institutions, a finer differentiation of school tracks, and a more objective grading of pupils. It is voiced in vocal opposition to comprehensive schooling, which is considered costly, impracticable for teachers, and resulting in an unwelcome regression to the mean. Instead, the FPÖ rather demands stronger forms of selection, performance orientation, and an orientation towards talented and outstanding pupils. At the core of this pedagogical approach is an individualised understanding of learning as the outcome of individual will, effort, and competence. It can only be promoted through strong guidance, strict performance reviews, standardised testing instruments, and objective grading with numerical rather than verbal grades. Socioeconomic inequalities and educational mobility are of subordinated relevance in this approach; instead, educational systems are rather considered to provide different pathways for the different types of pupils based on their talents.

Another discursive trait demands increasing liberalisation within the educational system, for example, by promoting more autonomy for schools as well as more competition among schools and greater freedom for parents ("free school choice"). Claims for decentralisation and organisational autonomy originate in the first opposition era but they are expanded and elaborated more thoroughly during the first coalition government and have become hallmark claims ever since. They are linked to strong support of the private school sector and demands for greater efficiency and efficacy of the educational system as a whole. The central bureaucracy should be reduced for the benefit of school autonomy and increased parental involvement. As part of this liberalisation perspective, the FPÖ also pushes for closer alignment with the demands of the economy, to prepare pupils for future jobs as well as their entrepreneurial existence. In this vein, the party also pleads for the improvement of the vocational track in the Austrian Dual System and the stabilisation of apprenticeship places through stronger orientation to the economic needs and the reduction of business taxes for training companies.

While these four core traits are the most stable and continuous patterns within the educational discourse of the FPÖ, their prominence varies over three decades. The anti-mainstream appeals are stronger during the periods of direct opposition to the mainstream party coalitions from 1990–1999 and 2006–2017. During the periods of government participation, those appeals are toned down to provide the discursive entrance for a more policy-centred communication interested in promoting the own achievements rather than the failure of the mainstream. On the other hand, for the three substantive traits, we find different patterns over time. While the nativist trait was already strong during the earlier periods, it became even more intensified after the internal party split and the reorganization of the more radical remainders into the new FPÖ in 2005. From then on we find a much more aggressive tone and the inclusion of a religious dimension addressing Islam. The merit trait is the most continuous of all traits and already characterises the party's educational core in the 1990s. Its focus on outstanding pupils and differentiation is juxtaposed as an antipode to the ideas of a comprehensive school system or a levelling-down of the pupils, which the party identifies within the current system. But even here, we find changes over time, for example, a growing linkage to an anti-egalitarian logic of meritocracy and more authoritarian arguments of tough teaching and strict assessment of pupils. Finally, the trait with the clearest evolution pattern over time is the liberalist argumentation. The stable claims for free schooling are increasingly enriched by a growing demand for more school autonomy and a slimmed-down school bureaucracy as well as an increasing economic orientation of teaching and educational tracks suggested for pupils.

From Discourse to Policymaking: Educational Policy Measures by the Right-Wing Coalition Government

What separates the Austrian Freedom Party from many other populist radical right parties in Western Europe is that it has not only been electorally successful but has also repeatedly been part of government coalitions on the national level. Thus, it provides an instructive case to investigate which educational claims will be turned into manifest policy outputs once the radical right is in power.

It comes as no surprise that at the very top, we find policy measures that tackle the party's dominant nativism trait. The most prominent and controversial example is the eventual introduction of German language classes ("Deutschförderklassen") separated from regular schooling, which the party implemented during its second term of office in 2018. This setting eventually implemented the longstanding claim for separate education of immigrant children via the criterion of language, even though it was introduced against an overwhelming majority of negative expert assessments and scientific critique. Another example of nativist education policies was oriented towards the second immigrant marker increasingly addressed by the FPÖ, i.e. religion. With the adoption of a ban on headscarves for elementary schools (later also for elementary pedagogical institutions), the party succeeded in translating a key signal directed against Islam (the head coverings of other religious groups were explicitly exempted), into official law. An important factor for the successful transfer into policy decisions, though, was the considerable policy shift to the right that the centre-right coalition partner ÖVP had taken during the second ÖVP/FPÖ coalition under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who had effectively incorporated traditional FPÖ claims into the program of the ÖVP, a contagion effect that had not been yet visible during the first right-wing coalition government after the millennium.

A much more commonly shared ideology in education that has already influenced the first coalition from the year 2000 onwards are the two remaining traits of merit and liberalisation. One could argue that the learning process occurred in the opposite direction, as the FPÖ improved many of its previously vague claims into more nuanced, concrete, and eventually implementable legislative proposals during the first ÖVP/FPÖ coalition. For example, its positions on school autonomy resulted from the adoption of policy recommendations raised by an expert report commissioned by the ÖVP-led Ministry of Education. Another example concerns the implementation of stronger merit-based elements in educational institutions. Both parties not only emphasised their commitment to the highly stratified structure of the Austrian educational system (Neue Volkspartei/FPÖ, 2017, p. 59), but also introduced several measures to further increase differentiation within the education system. During the second ÖVP/FPÖ coalition, numerical grading from 2nd grade in primary school onwards was reintroduced. In addition, pupils in 2nd grade who do not provide sufficient performance should repeat a school year or be required to attend remedial lessons. The Minister of Education at that time, Heinz Fassmann (ÖVP), openly admitted that the introduction of numerical grades and the option to repeat a school year had no scientific basis but was a political decision (Rothmüller & Schnell, 2019), reflecting the common ideological nature of these policy choices. A further educational measure towards greater differentiation was the reintroduction of performance groups in the non-academic track in lower secondary education (Neue Mittelschule, NMS). Finally, both parties share the belief that performance evaluations can be objectified through narrowly defined educational standards. These assessments are supposed to be the same for everyone and therefore considered 'fair'. During the second coalition period, a bill was passed to introduce assessment tests in reading and mathematics

at the beginning of the third and fourth grade, as well as in the seventh and eighth grade. These performance evaluations were intended to determine and legitimise students' educational decisions at important transition points in the Austrian educational system and significantly increase selection and differentiation.

Although ideological similarities exist between both parties regarding meritocratic beliefs and the differentiated structure of the education system (merit-trait), we do not observe a one-directional convergence by the FPÖ towards the centre-right coalition partner during the coalition periods. Instead, we find patterns of exchange with positions of the FPÖ largely overlapping with conservative educational concepts even before the joint coalitions. This explains the relatively large number of policy measures being introduced, even though the second coalition period lasted only two years. It also explains why the FPÖ succeeded in implementing its educational claims even though it never presided over the Ministry of Education. A marked difference between both parties, however, is that the FPÖ often formulates its pleas for differentiation and greater merit-based regulations more radically, emphasising stronger punishment, sanctions, and penalties. Some of these pleas have been implemented, one example being an amendment introduced in 2018 that regulates compulsory school attendance violations, requiring legal guardians to pay fines of between €110 and €440 if a child is absent from school without a valid excuse. In addition, a mandatory report (after three days of absence) has been introduced, and exclusion from school has been tightened. Other FPÖ claims that reflect its authoritarian understanding of education were never implemented, for example, the proposal that violent pupils should no longer just be suspended from school but should instead be re-socialised in 'educational camps for violent problem pupils' supplemented by compulsory social services during school vacations.

Discussion

Education is a key social system responsible for the individual acquisition of social and educational resources, as well as the most potent institutional allocator of social status in society. Among mainstream parties, it has therefore been a traditional topic of ideological contestation, but with the populist radical right knocking on the doors of power in many European democracies, it is of growing relevance to have a better insight into its approaches to education. Our analysis of one of the longstanding and successful PRRPs in Europe provides evidence that they not only enter the ideological competition over education but that PRRPs also walk the talk once they are in office. We demonstrate that the FPÖ indeed delivers on many of its culturalist claims in education, which are the signature claims that separate it from the remaining party spectrum. Slowly but surely, it has pushed the centre-right to promote segregating schooling policies and measures of religious prohibition itself, claims which it previously had refused. That way, it has established a new educational common ground between the centre-right and radical right that led to respective policy decisions during the second coalition in the late 2010s. We also find that, concerning the redistributive aspects of education, this common ground has always been quite developed in ideological terms, allowing for a vast number of policies to be implemented by the right-wing coalition government already during the first coalition in the early 2000s but also in the second coalition from 2017 to 2019. Both with regard to claims pursuing the merit-argumentation – such as stricter grading, stronger differentiation, etc. – as well as with regard to arguments within the liberalism-trait – such as private schooling, entrepreneurial organization of schools, etc. – the FPÖ's discourse is even more radical than its centre-right coalition partner. Once in government, however, the party seems to acquire significant knowledge and expertise, which over time informs its more nuanced policy claims in both dimensions.

These findings underline that the evolution of PRRPs eventually leads to the inclusion of policy issues, such as education policy, that traditionally have been owned by mainstream parties and on which radical right parties have rather been considered issue-ignorers. It is striking that even within the area of education, the FPÖ continues to substantiate the classic ideological core pillars of PRRPs, i.e. nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. However, maybe more of a surprise is that even with regard to redistributive aspects of education, the FPÖ has little if any congruence with left-wing positions, a pattern that could indeed be different for PRRPs in other countries, as the socio-economic orientation of the party family is much more dispersed than its socio-cultural profile. From the perspective of educational sociology, however, what indeed remains open for future research is to which degree the policies implemented by the FPÖ indeed contribute to improved educational outcomes for both the party's core clientele as well as Austrian pupils and students as a whole. Much of the educational research seems to indicate that segregated and highly differentiated educational systems rather benefit the socio-economically wealthier and native segments of society, which eventually could result in conflicts with the working-class segment of the PRRP electorate.

References

Berg, A. E., Jungblut, J., & Jupskås, A. R. (2023). We don't need no education? Education policies of Western European populist radical right parties. *West European Politics*, 46(7), 1312–1342.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2023.2177010>

Busemeyer, M. R., Franzmann, S. T., & Garritzmann, J. L. (2013). Who owns education? Cleavage structures in the partisan competition over educational expansion. *West European Politics*, 36(3), 521–546.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2012.753703>

Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies*, 47(1), 2–16.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184>

Enggist, M., & Pinggera, M. (2022). Radical right parties and their welfare state stances – not so blurry after all? *West European Politics*, 45(1), 102–128.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1902115>

Fenger, M. (2018). The social policy agendas of populist radical right parties in comparative perspective. *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 34(3), 188–209.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21699763.2018.1483255>

Giudici, A. (2020). Seeds of authoritarian opposition: Far-right education politics in post-war Europe. *European Educational Research Journal*, 20(2), 121–142.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904120947893>

Giudici, A., Gruber, O., Schnell, P., & Pultar, A. (2024). Far-right parties and the politics of education in Europe. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. Advance online publication.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2352518>

Gruber, O. (2014). *Campaigning in radical right heartland* (Vol. 1). LIT-Verlag.

Gruber, O., & Schnell, P. (2023). Sticking to the core or going beyond? The Austrian Freedom Party's educational approach in a longitudinal perspective. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1–17.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2221188>

Hafez, F., & Heinisch, R. (2018). Breaking with Austrian consociationalism: How the rise of rightwing populism and party competition have changed Austria's Islam politics. *Politics and Religion*, 11(3), 649–678.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048318000172>

Mattei, P., & Bulli, G. (2023). Educational policy agenda, ideological transformation and radical right populism: The case of the education-identity nexus of the Northern League in Italy, 1994–2018. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2212598>

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>

Neue Volkspartei/FPÖ. (2017). *Zusammen. Für unser Österreich. Regierungsprogramm 2017–2022*.

https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/documents/131008/569203/Regierungsprogramm_2017–2022.pdf/b2fe3f65-5a04-47b6-913d-2fe512ff4ce6

Rathgeb, P., & Busemeyer, M. R. (2022). How to study the populist radical right and the welfare state? *West European Politics*, 45(1), 1–23.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1925421>

Rothmüller, B., & Schnell, P. (2019). Bildungspolitik unter Schwarz-Blau. In E. Tálos (Ed.), *Die Schwarz-Blauende Wende in Österreich. Eine Bilanz* (pp. 328–345). LIT-Verlag.

Recommended Citation

Schnell, P., & Gruber, O. (2024). Walking the talk? The educational agenda of the Austrian populist radical right: From discourse to policymaking. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 7(20).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2024.20.4

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting [guidelines](#).

Philipp Schnell

Philipp Schnell serves as the Director of the Austrian Institute for Research on Vocational



Education and Training (öibf) and lectures at the Department of Sociology, University of Vienna. His research focuses on educational inequalities, vocational education, and education policies, both within Austria and from a comparative, international perspective.

Oliver Gruber

Oliver Gruber is a habilitated university lecturer at the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna. His research and teaching are focused on party politics, in particular radical right parties and populism, as well as migration and education policy, with a focus on the Austrian political system and the EU.