

The Rise of Right-Wing Populism

A Dangerous Shift in Global Politics

by Wolfgang Geissler



The world is witnessing a dramatic transformation in its political landscape. From the United States to Europe, right-wing populist movements have surged in popularity, challenging the traditional political order and raising serious concerns about the future of democracy. In Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and the United States, figures like Herbert Kickl, Viktor Orbán, Giorgia Meloni, and Donald Trump have ascended to power, driven by a combination of economic discontent, cultural anxieties, and political disillusionment. The question is: How did we get here?

The Nature of Right-Wing Politics

Right-wing political parties and movements traditionally advocate for national sovereignty, cultural preservation, and economic liberalism. They emphasise law and order, oppose excessive state intervention, and often promote conservative social values. While some factions lean towards free-market capitalism, others endorse state-led protectionism to safeguard national industries. In recent years, populist right-wing leaders have harnessed these ideologies to mobilise support, particularly among those who feel left behind by globalisation and political elites.

The Populist Surge Across the West

In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ), led by Herbert Kickl, emerged as the leading party in the 2024 elections with 28.9% of the vote, reflecting a broader trend of rising nationalist sentiment across Europe. Similarly, Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), co-led by Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla, has transitioned from a fringe movement to a mainstream political force, securing 21% of the vote and becoming the second-largest party in the Bundestag.

Hungary's Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have demonstrated how right-wing populists can consolidate power over multiple election cycles, reshaping democratic institutions to suit their vision. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni and her Fratelli d'Italia party have propelled themselves into the political mainstream, advocating for national identity and economic protectionism. Meanwhile, in the United States, Donald Trump's resurgence in the political arena has deepened domestic divisions and intensified global instability.

Trump's Disruptive Influence and the Global Fallout

Recent developments underscore the volatility of this populist wave. Donald Trump has escalated international tensions through aggressive policies and confrontational diplomacy. His heated exchange with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in February 2025 led to the indefinite suspension of US military aid to Ukraine, leaving Kyiv vulnerable to Russian aggression. The ripple effects of this decision have alarmed European allies, who now face the prospect of a weakened transatlantic alliance.

Trump has also reignited global trade wars, imposing tariffs on Canada, Mexico, China, and the European Union. The result has been swift retaliation from affected nations, exacerbating economic uncertainty and disrupting global supply chains. These moves highlight a growing trend among populist leaders: a rejection of traditional alliances and multilateral cooperation in favour of nationalistic policies that prioritise domestic interests over global stability.

How Did We Get Here? The Underlying Causes

The rise of right-wing populism is not an accident; it is the product of deep-rooted societal shifts that have left many feeling abandoned and disillusioned. The key factors behind this phenomenon include:

1. **Economic Anxiety:** Globalisation and technological advancements have reshaped labour markets, leaving many workers feeling left behind. Wage stagnation, job losses, and economic inequality have fuelled resentment against political elites and created fertile ground for populist leaders who promise to restore national prosperity.

2. **Cultural and Demographic Changes:** Increasing immigration and demographic shifts have sparked fears about national identity and cultural erosion. Right-wing populists have capitalised on these anxieties, advocating for strict immigration controls and policies that preserve traditional cultural norms. A significant aspect of this challenge is the influx of asylum seekers from war-torn countries. Addressing this crisis requires not only border policies but also a concerted global effort to tackle root causes, including conflict resolution, counter-terrorism efforts, and economic development in destabilised regions. Shared international responsibility, support for host countries, and humane asylum policies are necessary to prevent further societal divisions and mitigate long-term instability.
3. **Who Is Most Vulnerable to Populist Influence?** Populist movements tend to gain ground among those experiencing economic hardship, lower levels of education, and political alienation. Individuals with limited educational attainment may be more susceptible to simplified narratives, while those facing job insecurity often seek leaders promising economic protectionism. Cultural anxieties, particularly concerning immigration and national identity, further drive support for populist parties. The perception of being ignored by political elites fosters a sense of disillusionment, making populist rhetoric more appealing.
4. **Atavistic Tendencies and the Role of Hatred and Prejudice:** While economic and political factors play a crucial role, one cannot ignore the deep-seated atavistic instincts—fear of the 'other', tribalism, and prejudice—that some populist leaders exploit. Historical grievances, cultural nostalgia, and social media-fuelled divisions can amplify hostility towards minorities, immigrants, or perceived external threats. This emotional appeal often overrides rational policy considerations, further entrenching support for nationalist movements.
5. **The Decline of Left-Wing Politics:** The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a decline in left-wing, particularly communist, parties across Eastern Europe. This shift created a political vacuum, allowing right-wing nationalist movements to fill the ideological gap. Without a strong leftist counterbalance, right-wing populists capitalised on nationalist sentiments, economic instability, and cultural fears, reshaping political dynamics across the West.
6. **The Media and Information Ecosystem¹:** The rise of social media has enabled populist leaders to bypass traditional media, spreading simplified, emotionally charged messages that resonate with frustrated populations. Misinformation and conspiracy theories flourish in this environment, further deepening divisions and eroding trust in democratic institutions.

1 Definition

An information ecosystem refers to the complex network of information sources, technologies, and audiences that shape how information is created, shared, and consumed. This ecosystem includes traditional media, social media platforms, citizen journalism, and the public, all interacting in a dynamic way that influences the flow of information. Understanding this interplay is essential for recognizing the challenges and opportunities presented by citizen journalism.

The Future of Democracy

The ascent of right-wing populism presents a serious challenge to the democratic values that have defined the post-World War II era. These movements often undermine judicial independence, weaken press freedom, and erode democratic norms under the guise of restoring national sovereignty. As populists continue to gather momentum, the global political order is shifting towards a more volatile and unpredictable future.

If history has taught us anything, it is that democracy is not self-sustaining. The forces that have enabled the rise of populism must be addressed: economic inequality must be tackled, political institutions must regain public trust, and societies must find a way to bridge cultural and ideological divides. The challenge of asylum seekers and global displacement must also be met with cooperation rather than isolationism. Without coordinated efforts, the crisis will only deepen, fuelling further extremism and geopolitical conflict.

The stakes could not be higher. The question now is whether the world will recognise the warning signs in time—or whether history is doomed to repeat itself.

The Austro-British Society is looking forward to your views and comments!



About the author

Wolfgang Geissler is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society, its Treasurer and a Committee Member of the United Kingdom Citizens in Europe. He has lived and worked for 40 years in the United Kingdom. In 2009 he settled again in the 3rd district of the City of Vienna

The views expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.