

Populism can degrade democracy but is on the rise—its causes and how it can be weakened

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There's a widespread view that populism is on the rise, [from the United States and Turkey to India and Hungary](#).

What is fueling this movement?

[Populism is a political ideology](#) that positions "the people" as a morally just, good group in society, in contrast with other people who are elitist and out of touch with society. Politicians such as former [President Donald Trump](#) have used [this general approach](#) to help propel their rise to power—and maintain their popularity among their supporters.

Trump, for example, [described his political campaign](#) in June 2024 as an "epic struggle to liberate our nations from all of the sinister forces who want to destroy them." These "sinister forces" typically include everything from the media and international organizations to mainstream science and immigrants.

And Viktor Orbán, the populist prime minister of Hungary since 2010, [often blames](#) international groups such as [foreign nonprofits](#) for [interfering in Hungarian politics](#) and acting against the country's interests.

The European Parliament determined in 2022 that [Hungary could no longer be considered a democracy](#).

In its most radical, authoritarian form, [populism poses a threat to democracy](#). It polarizes societies and erodes trust in experts.

But populist leaders still hold appeal, as they promise to return power to the people.

Yet they often deliver something very different from what they promise. They tend to [worsen problems such as gender and ethnic inequality](#), without addressing the gap between the rich and the poor.

[I have dedicated much of my career](#) to analyzing populist movements, both as a politician serving in the Hungarian Parliament in opposition to Orbán's regime and now as a scholar.

This unique experience has taught me one thing: Protecting democracy from populism requires first understanding its root causes.

What's behind populism

Many journalists and [political scientists](#) view populism as a "[cultural backlash](#)" of conservative white men who fear the loss of their privilege in a diversifying world.

Immigration, race and religion are three issues that are often central to many populists' politics. There are also [economic factors](#) such as a poor economy, international trade, industrial robots and [artificial intelligence](#) that some experts think also contribute to the rise of populism.

This is because the growth of artificial intelligence, for example, has led to the reduction of stable jobs in sectors such as manufacturing, which once gave working-class people a pathway to social mobility.

Many pundits and scholars still question whether the economy plays a significant role in populism. This argument takes various forms, but it typically boils down to statements like this one, made by a prominent political scientist about the 2016 U.S. [presidential election](#): "[Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote.](#)"

In other words, the 2016 presidential vote was influenced by white voters' fears about losing their dominant status in society rather than because of their financial struggles—at least according to this argument.

It's the economy

My recent research shows a different source of anxiety behind growing support for populism: people's concerns about [economic insecurity](#) are a

[crucial factor driving populism](#) in Europe, North America and Latin America.

For example, Americans who lost their jobs in the manufacturing industry in the 2010s were especially likely to abandon the Democratic Party and vote for Trump in 2016.

There is evidence that people's anti-immigration attitudes are also [fueled by their anxiety](#) about their own jobs.

Research also shows that Europeans who lost their jobs or whose earnings were reduced because of competition with [low-wage immigrant workers](#), for example, were more likely to [feel threatened by globalization](#). They were also especially likely to embrace nationalism and vote for populist right-wing candidates throughout Western Europe.

Populist voters in the US

Still, research shows that not all populist voters can be lumped under the same umbrella. Populist voters are a diverse group with various motivations and concerns.

For example, artificial intelligence threatens jobs [more in the U.S.](#) and [in Western Europe](#) than in Eastern Europe, making Americans and Western Europeans more concerned about this issue than Eastern Europeans.

Race is another factor. Some [white voters facing financial hardship](#) may feel as if immigrants and people of color are responsible for taking the available jobs—and are to blame for their economic woes.

Populism is not just about conservative white men, however, despite the popular support Trump holds [among many in this group](#). For example, Democratic politicians in the U.S. have [increasingly struggled to win the](#)

[support of working-class voters](#) without a college degree, including a growing number of Black voters.

Black [voters still generally vote for Democrats](#). But the Democratic Party has seen about a 28 percentage point decrease in [Black voters between 2020 and 2024](#). Most of them switched to become Republicans.

This [voter realignment has been occurring since 2008](#). When Trump was elected in 2016, he not only increased his party's support among the white working class by four percentage points from GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney's 2012 defeat, he also increased support [among Black working-class voters by the same amount](#). This shift suggests that the Democrats have a working-class problem and not a white working-class problem. Economic factors, rather than just racial identity, are a major factor driving voters away from the Democratic Party.

Not all populist voters are extremists

Many media outlets tend to focus on core populist voters, who are masters of causing outrage with what one populism scholar calls "[bad manners](#)." In this context, that means using inflammatory language or making politically incorrect statements, among other tactics, to draw attention to their cause.

The most successful populist political movements in places such as Italy and Poland, however, have grown by appealing to voters concerned with bread-and-butter issues. They [combine the core group](#) of populist voters, who are motivated by culture and racism, and an outer group of voters who are not primarily motivated by these issues.

Finally, voters' support for populist leaders also depends on how nonpopulist, mainstream politicians appeal to them. Inclusive socioeconomic policies, such as expanding [unemployment insurance](#), for

example, can help stave off a populist surge.

The way ahead

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to the challenge of populism. For example, [job guarantee programs](#) help provide stable work, reducing the economic insecurity that often fuels populist sentiment.

In an economy characterized by gig work and people frequently moving from one job to another, [portable benefits](#) that workers carry from job to job—giving them continuous access to health care, retirement savings and other benefits—may help alleviate the anxieties that drive people to populism.

Boosting affordable housing and [controlling rents](#) can also promote more stable living conditions.

I think countering right-wing populism demands a concerted effort to tackle the economic insecurity that fuels this global phenomenon. The path forward may be challenging, but the alternative, a world where democracy is eroded and societies are polarized, is even more frightening.

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