

# Populism's summer of discontent: Are voters turning their backs on authoritarians?

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Is authoritarian populism finally being rejected by citizens around the world?

In 2016, Donald Trump successfully fused his angry frustrations with globalism with false allegations about [immigrant rapists](#). Eight years later, he is still doubling down on identity.

But this time around, his message seems worn and brittle. He lacks a silver bullet like [the North American Free Trade Agreement \(NAFTA\)](#) or a border wall that he can leverage to make Democrats look weak.

## The global scene

In India, Narendra Modi [failed in his quest for a parliamentary super-majority](#) because he didn't address the country's deeper, long-term [economic woes](#). Youth unemployment and out-of-control inequality are just two reasons voters have begun to lose patience with [strongman capitalism](#).

Latin American populists like Mexico's former president Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) have had recent success with left populist messaging because they recognize the importance of economic well-being to political success.

For millions of Mexicans, AMLO's policies [aimed at lifting people out of poverty](#) compelled them to vote, and that practical incentive created a new political dynasty.

Claudia Sheinbaum, AMLO's [hand-picked successor](#), broke barriers as Mexico's first woman, Jewish president. But that wouldn't have happened without her predecessor's enormous popularity. And that popularity was based on his economic commitment to the poor and to increasing their spending power by raising the minimum wage each year.

Over the past six years, the number of Mexicans [living in poverty](#) [dropped](#) from 52 million to 47 million.

## Endless culture wars

There is a good reason for conservative populists [to simultaneously](#) rev the engines of economic grievance and cultural insecurity. Popular movements run on emotion, and people in rich countries often get fired up about [identity issues](#), like faith and values.

The constant boil of identity politics in Europe and North America has taught political scientists two things.

First, authoritarian populism is becoming so culturally extreme that it can hurt conservatives more than it helps by giving progressive voters a reason [to push back](#) forcefully on election day, as they did on the second ballot in France in July.

What's more, activating the [deep reservoir](#) of populist voters is harder when the right loses its grasp on issues that most matter to people and affect their economic well-being.

## British election

The Conservatives in the United Kingdom suffered a [massive defeat](#) following [the economic fallout of Brexit](#) and the chaos of five Tory prime ministers over [14 years](#).

The Tories failed to act on the soaring cost of living and falling competitiveness, made even worse by COVID-19 inflation. Instead, they tried to [blame Brussels bureaucrats, Eastern European workers and asylum seekers crossing the English Channel](#).

Leading up to this summer's election, [only about 30% of voters agreed with the Conservative Party's hard line on immigration](#)—not enough to make xenophobia a winning policy platform.

In fact, political polarization in the U.K. has been driven in part [by increasingly positive attitudes towards newcomers on the part of Labor supporters](#). Sometimes populist messaging backfires.

Unsurprisingly, the Labor Party won a huge victory. Even so, Nigel Farage's right-wing [Reform UK party](#) netted five seats in Parliament. As

the third largest party in the legislature, Reform UK is supported by 15% of the electorate, showing just how mainstream extremism has become.

But it also shows how populist pandering is fracturing post-Cold War conservatism and alienating the center. If center-right parties follow the [populist yellow brick road](#), they will find themselves in a dead end where trying to incite voter rage overshadows everything else.

## **Turnout is everything**

In the United States, Trump's relentless slurs—aimed at everyone from [fallen soldiers](#) to migrants and Joe Biden—are good for the far-right movement because it nurtures new extremists.

But it's bad [for his electoral prospects](#). His advisers keep urging him to make a real case to the American people about issues [they care about](#), but he seems incapable of abandoning his grievances.

Vice President Kamala Harris's team, meantime, has made access to abortion [one of its top campaign issues](#)—and it's one in which millions of Americans can see the direct impact of public policy on their lives.

Trump has begun to cast about for a pivotal [bread-and-butter](#) issue such as the rising cost of food to rally the faithful, too. But he's also [continuing to double down](#) on hate speech and conspiracy.

It's worked before, but it's a riskier bet now. In 2016, he could blame the economic ills of middle America [on NAFTA](#), but no more. Inflation is cooling. The U.S. Federal Reserve is [signaling a rate cut](#) soon, just weeks before the presidential election.

Populists are having an eventful year, defeated in both the U.K. and France while winning in [the Netherlands](#), [Austria](#) and [the former East](#)

[Germany.](#)

Getting out the vote is always the key to defeating authoritarianism. If enough citizens who believe in the values of democracy show up to cast their ballots, [populist forces](#) near and far could sooner or later get clobbered.

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