

The Populist Wave*

Yascha Mounk, Persuasion, September 20 2026

[...] Here's the single question I have been asked most often over the course of the last ten years: "Is the populist wave here to stay—or is it about to crest?"

The answer seemed obvious to me in the summer of 2016, when Donald Trump became the Republican nominee and Britain voted to leave the European Union. Now, it has grown undeniable: The populists are here to stay. What seemed abnormal a few years ago has—like it or hate it—become mainstream. Populists are no longer a fringe phenomenon; they are the most important force in today's politics.

Politicians who fall into this bucket are now in power in the United States, in India, in Turkey, and in many other parts of the democratic world. They have a high chance of taking office in France and Brazil over the course of the coming months. Even in places where they are likely to remain in the opposition for at least a few years, they have now grown sufficiently powerful to destroy any sense of business-as-usual.

The best recent illustration of that reality comes from the country that has resisted the trend the longest. Back in the fall of 2016, leading politicians in Berlin were still privately assuring me that the Alternative for Germany would never manage to enter the Bundestag. Today, the AfD is leading in national polls. In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the party once again came out on top, taking about 38 percent of the vote. Because a panoply of other parties failed to clear the five percent hurdle for representation in parliament, a broad left-wing coalition obtained just enough votes to govern the state. But this is an electoral accident which is unlikely to be repeated in the future—and a difference of a few thousand votes would have made the state completely ungovernable. [...]

Some will be tempted to respond to these developments by counseling surrender. If the political center cannot hold, then perhaps moderates on both the left and the right should finally read the signs of the times—and cast their lot in with the extremists "on their side."

That is not the right response to these developments. Neither the Linke [a populist left party] nor the AfD are capable of solving the very real problems that Germany now faces. In fact, for all of their massive differences, both have some conspicuous similarities—from their flirtations with Moscow to their persistent inability to give the boot to the anti-Semites in their midst.

But nor will it do to deny the gravity of the situation or to keep holding on to the certainties of a bygone era. For ten years, large parts of the political center have told themselves that the success of the extremes is down to foreign interference or social media algorithms or the tactical failings of this or that candidate or perhaps the stupidity or the sexism or the racism of voters.

Those attempts to blind oneself to what is in front of one's nose may be comforting. But they are also dangerous. Those of us who seek to preserve the values of a free society must stick to our principles. But we must also recognize that there are real reasons why millions upon millions of our compatriots are losing faith in the ability of existing parties and institutions to get to grips with genuine problems. They won't change their minds unless these parties and institutions show a willingness to listen and learn.

*** from a longer article: "Germany's Chancellor Has No Authority Left"**