

The Politics of Right-wing Populism in Contemporary Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Germany, UK and Austria (2000-2020)

ABSTRACT

One of the most notable aspects of politics in the twenty-first century is the ascendance of right-wing populism. Several parts of the world have witnessed the rise of aggressive nationalism and right-wing populist sentiments, most notably in Europe and the United States. The rise of right-wing populism in contemporary times can be seen as a challenge to the very essence of liberal democracy. This upsurge indicates a slight shift in the domestic as well as global political order that had been established in the post-Cold War years.

This study aims to examine the nature of contemporary right-wing populism in Europe, focusing specifically on the case studies of Germany, UK and Austria. These case studies have been chosen keeping in mind their varying experiences with right-wing populism despite similarities in geographic, socio-economic and political features. Germany, a country where right-wing politics was ostracized in the post war years, witnessed the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party as a reaction to the European migrant crisis of 2015-16. The party has been making rapid strides in recent years, capitalizing on ever-increasing levels of anti-immigration sentiment. The UK, too, has traditionally sidelined right-wing parties and groups though these have historically maintained a steady presence in British politics over the years. The noted exception in recent times is the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which played an integral role in influencing the referendum to leave the European Union in 2016. The UKIP is a classic example of a populist party relying on a charismatic leader, anti-immigration rhetoric and identity politics. Its disintegration post Brexit further confirms its nature as a fundamentally populist party thereby underlining its relevance to this study. Austria presents a different picture from its counterparts in light of the fact that it was one of the first European countries to embrace a right-wing populist party in recent times; the right-wing Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs/ Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Freedom Party became the first of its kind to enter a European government in 2000. Till recently, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) in coalition with the Freedom Party was one of the few right leaning governments in Western Europe.

This research project aims to look into the causes and nature of the rise of right-wing populism in these cases in the hope of gaining a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of right-wing

populism itself. It will focus on the socio-economic political backgrounds in each of these countries to identify the factors that create the perception of threat necessary for the growth of right-wing populist politics. Its objective is to analyze if and why there is a variation in the occurrence of right-wing populism since these countries have had differing experiences with it. The crucial role of immigration as an inducing factor for right-wing populism will also be a central theme in this study.

The nature of populism has evolved with the onslaught of globalization and advances in modern technology and communication. Populism exerts influence both at the domestic and international level making it a crucial area of study. Despite an ever-increasing ambit of influence, the basic tenets of populism, be it left-wing or right, have remained largely unchanged. Questions of identity and of the conflict of interests between the 'people' and the 'elite' remain central to populist politics even today. This study is based on the contextual background that contemporary right-wing populism, despite having commonalities in its fundamental underpinnings, is bound to have variational aspects in its causes and trajectory. The significance of this research lies in its attempt to analyse and compare certain crucial facets that contribute to the rise, progression or dissolution of right-wing populism in the three chosen case studies, rather than follow a process of broad categorization. In doing so, it aims to shed light on certain aspects which are often overlooked in contemporary right-wing populist discourse.