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Right-wing populists in the ascendant



What was the most misused term of the past year? “Establishment” and “elite” are leading contenders. Both expressions have been used excessively as soon as there is any mention of supposed political grievances and the grave mistrust of the ordinary man. Right-wing populists have used these buzzwords in their search for people to blame for their anger in the name of the forgotten and neglected.

Right-wing populists became increasingly vindictive throughout the entire western world last year, including in France, Germany, Hungary, Finland and Austria. They also received support in elections and polls. While moderates rubbed their eyes with disbelief, those opposed to refugees and foreigners and – as mentioned – to the establishment and the elite were in the ascendant.

The situation was no different in Switzerland. When the rise of the populists reached an unexpected peak with Donald Trump’s election as President of the USA in November, his kindred spirits in Switzerland celebrated the triumph as if he were one of their own. They could barely conceal their joy – or *schadenfreude* – at the election of the New York billionaire who has disparaged women, Mexicans and gay people in equal measure. They dubbed the election result a resounding blow to the establishment by the people.

They also attempted to harness the populist momentum abroad and to transfer the mood directly to Switzerland, which was clearly absurd. While the impoverished lower middle classes in the USA have been suffering and have actually turned the urban elite into the enemy, the anger of the people conjured up here by the right is less understandable. There are obviously also people in Switzerland who are underprivileged and justifiably discontented. However, the social divide is small compared with that in the USA. Unemployment is low at 3,3% and general satisfaction and trust in the authorities, such as the judiciary, are high, according to representative studies.

So, where is this seething anger of the Swiss people? And what is it actually based on? And who are the “people” who the right-wing populists are claiming for themselves? And who are the establishment in Switzerland who are deserving of such mistrust?

The fact is that Switzerland is performing very well compared to neighbouring countries. The breeding ground for right-wing populism should therefore stay sparser here than in France or Germany, where campaigners like Marine Le Pen and Frauke Petry are seeking power.

MARKO LEHTINEN, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Apprenticeships in Switzerland – welding the connections of a thermal element using a micro-welding burner. (Photo: Keystone)