Democracy's Guardians: Decoding Populism's Impact on Teachers in Europe

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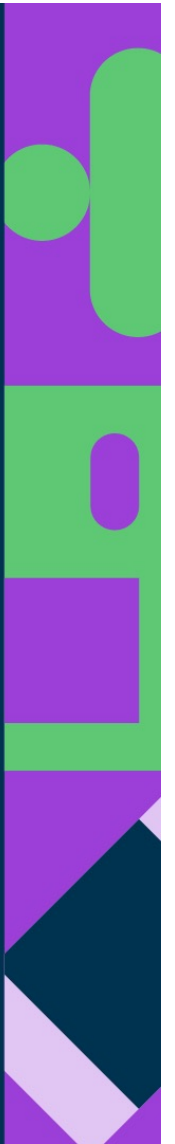DCU Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath Dublin City University

DCU Institiúid Oideachais Institute of Education

ECER 2024

The concept of Populism has been identified as a challenge to democracy, tolerance, and European values (Bugaric, 2020).

This presentation outlines the findings of a three-year European comparative research project focussing on the rise, influence, and impact of populism on young people in Europe.

It explores the relationships between populism and education in four countries in Europe: the Republic of North Macedonia, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Ireland.

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ERASMUS+ JEAN MONNET NETWORK

CitEdEV

Citizenship Education in the Context of European Values

The research was conducted as part of the **CitEdEv** (Citizenship Education in the Context of European Values) research initiative supported by the EU's Erasmus+ Jean Monet Network

…to investigate the complex and multifaceted nature of populism and its impact on educational landscapes, societal dynamics, and democratic values across European nations, both within and outside of the European Union.

Citizenship Ed in challenging times

The project sought to make EU citizenship education relevant in a context where many children and young people are increasingly anxious and concerned about their futures in the face of populism, xenophobia, divisive nationalism, discrimination, fake news, mis/disinformation, and the rise of right-wing politics in Europe, as well as the challenge of radicalisation.
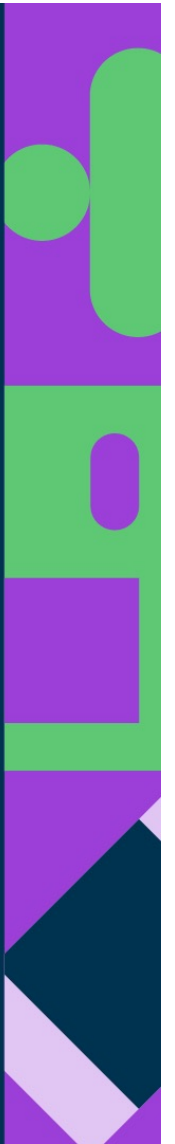
What is Populism?

Jan-Werner
Müller

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser
POPULISM
A Very Short Introduction

What is a Populist?

Mudde (2017) describes populism as a 'thin-centered ideology' dividing society into the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite'.

The idea of populism consisting of a moral view of the common people, anti-elitism, support for direct decision-making, manifesting in conspiracies, anti-vaccine movements, and national-chauvinistic expressions was echoed throughout the research and across the project partner countries.

A **political tool for gaining power through division** and conflict – rejecting consensus and compromise.

Involves **manipulation through 'attractive' ideas that have an emotional appeal** and appeal to a strong sense of injustice.

Populists present themselves as a radical alternative to the norm/mainstream political elites, who are viewed as self-interested.

Populists target groups as **'enemies' –** media, judges, global elites, doctors, scientists, immigrants, feminists, LGBTQ+, Brussels, etc.

Employ sophisticated media strategies – simple targeted messaging disconnected from truth but appeal to supporters.

Construct a collective identity, where **securing and maintaining support is key** – so support popular policies (Brexit, Immigration) even if they negatively impact the wider common good (e.g. COVID mask wearing, Anti-Vax).

Ireland has over the last number of years experienced an increase in public and online support for, and broader acceptance of, populist ideas and protests some of which have focused on migrants and asylum seekers

Fintan O'Toole: People screaming abuse at asylum seekers are not stupid. They do it because they enjoy it

The toxic ideas of a century ago have seeped back into currency. A third of Americans now say they believe in the Great Replacement

Counter-demonstrators protest in front of police prior to a far-right Nordic Resistance Movement march in Gothenburg, Sweden. Photograph: Adam Ihse/AFP/Getty

Fintan O'Toole
Sat Feb 25 2023 - 05:00

Why are Ireland's anti-refugee protests erupting now? Look across the Irish Sea
Colin Gannon

Far-right rhetoric and tactics are being imported wholesale from the UK into Ireland. The effects on Irish politics are yet to be seen

An anti-immigrant protest in Dover, in March 2023. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

The growth in support for these ideas and actions, and particular their use **of social media and online platforms, highlights the need for educators to address fake news**, misinformation and media responsibility and these are increasingly becoming a focus of the work of schools, educators, and policy makers.
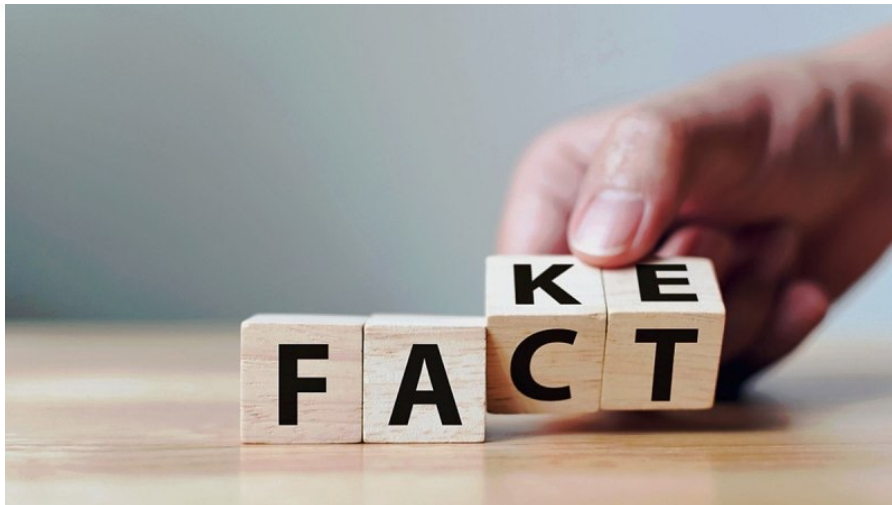
The CitEdEv research explored the role of education, specifically citizenship, democracy, and political education, in addressing the challenges posed by populism.

New parallel HORIZON Europe funded Project – (also presented at ECER 2024)

Education for Democracy

Gert Biesta (2020)

'education for democracy raises awareness of ourselves and others, how we act in society, our freedom and the limits that our living together poses to our own freedom' (p.96).
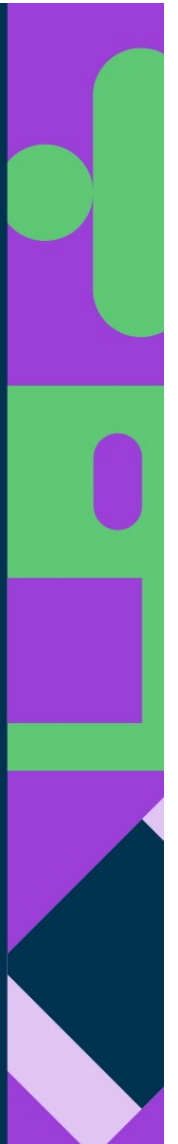
Education for Democracy

Schools play an important role as institutions educating young people about democratic principles and to serve as niches for the development of civic engagement (Hüning, 2022) .

The broad conceptualisation of **civic education is** often used to describe 'the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that children are expected to learn to be virtuous and civically productive members of society' (Levinson, 2014, p.1).

Education for Democracy?

The rise of authoritarian populism in the last few decades has led to increasing scholarly production related to this topic.

However, populism has not aroused much interest among recent educational researchers, despite the long tradition of democratic citizenship education from the early 20th century.

As a result, **the educational system has rarely been analyzed as a factor related to the emergence of populism or as an opportunity to mitigate populism.**

(Estelle and Castellvi, 2020, p.2).

Education for Democracy

Using a qualitative case study approach to examine populism and its impact on and engagement with education systems we looked at

- The understanding of populism in each country

- How teachers felt that children and young people experienced and engaged with populism and populist agents

- How populism is addressed, or not, in the curriculum and in teaching

- The particular challenges it presented for teachers and national educational systems

- The relationship between populism and educational and broader societal values

Irreducibly complex contexts…

Kenny (2017 p.2) argues that, due to its experience of austerity after the 2008 economic crash, Ireland would appear to have been considered 'a fertile bed for populism' but that in fact the country witnessed populism 'only in a limited and unusual form' i.e. through protests against water charges. He suggests that Ireland's

- *'unique experience shows the irreducible complexity and locality of populism. Populism is always contingent and local, reacting to the peculiarities of political culture and circumstance. **The best way to study populism is not through theory and search for similarity, but through observation of diversity.** While we might see some similarity, pattern, and convergence in populism around the world, this is largely happenstance, and populism will always be recast and remade in each place to produce distinct and often unpredictable results'.*
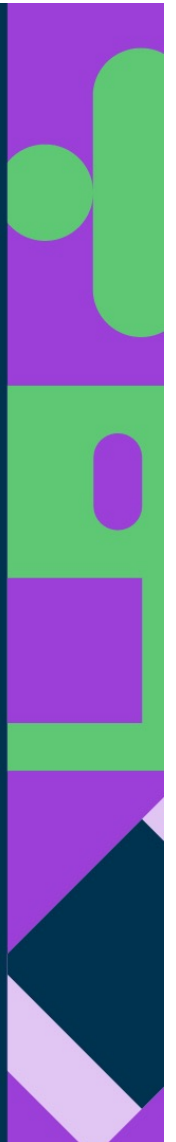
Findings & Recommendations

- The research highlighted the **multi-dimensional and context-dependent nature of populism**, varying across different political cultures and circumstances.

- Emerging from the data was the concept of the differences between education institutions, the formal curriculum, and the wider political/social culture, particularly in these **fast-changing times where political national and European events can determine societal and individual responses.**

- There are significant **differences in scope and opinion** depending on the educational discipline of the teacher

- Each countries recent and more established histories, the current political dynamic within the country, their relationships to their pasts and to their neighbours, their experiences when dealing with the EU as members, aspiring members and former members, the experience each country has of democracy itself, of democratic practices and processes and how well established these are in each country, their non-democratic experiences, all colour their understandings and acceptance and tolerance of populism, democracy and democratic values.
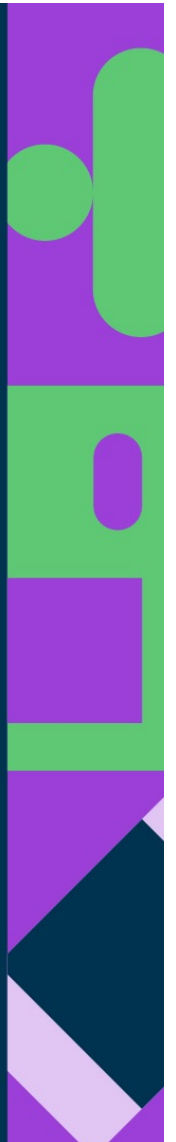
Findings & Recommendations

- **Critical Thinking Promotion**: Emphasise the promotion of critical thinking skills among students to enable them to analyse and understand populist narratives.

- **Historical Context Teaching**: Integrate teaching about the historical context of populism to provide a deeper understanding of its roots and evolution.

- **Global Perspectives Exploration**: Encourage exploration of global perspectives to broaden students' understanding of populist movements beyond national contexts.

- **Teacher Professional Development:** Provide professional development opportunities for teachers in civic education and media literacy to equip them with the tools to address populism in the classroom effectively. Address the lack of preparation and resources for teachers to tackle populist ideologies in the classroom by emphasising specialised teacher training (Gifford et al 2023).

Findings & Recommendations

- **Curriculum Re-evaluation:** Call for a re-evaluation of the curriculum to effectively integrate discussions on populist ideologies, ensuring that it reflects the exposure of students to critical discussions of populist ideas through various channels.

- **Civil Society Involvement:** Emphasise the importance of local history, role models, and external organisations in providing support to address populism's impact on young people within schools and education.

- **Defending Democratic Norms:** Acknowledge the potential threat of populism to European values and democracy, emphasising the importance of defending democratic norms, especially in the context of challenges to freedom of expression and the development of responsible citizenship among children and young people (Gifford et al 2023).
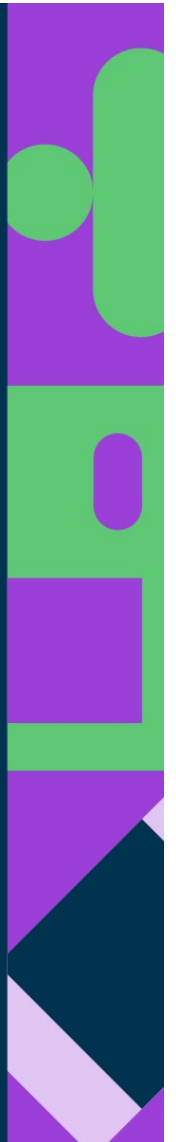
Given the threat of populism to democratic values, **a curriculum that can address populism (at both school and university level) is needed.** This will be dependent on subject area as well as local manifestations of populism, but we emphasise deliberation around concepts of populism (which may be drawn from examples of movements from across Europe and beyond) and the cha**llenges this poses to European values, especially within the contexts of students' lived-experiences.**

Within the context of teacher education (both pre and in-service) and education for other social professions, the role of developing understanding of populism and its challenges, is further emphasised. **Moreover, teacher education should provide opportunities to engage in professional development focused on civic education, media literacy, and strategies for addressing politically sensitive or controversial topics in the classroom**. (Cunningham, 2023)

Citizenship in the Context of European Values: Recommendations for teaching in higher education

Report of Working Group 12 of the Jean Monnet Network Project: Citizenship Education in the Context of European Values: CitEdEV
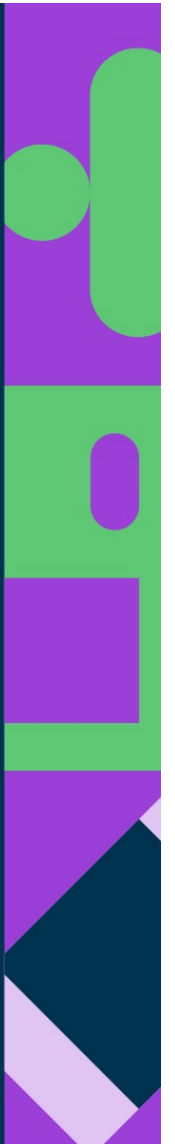
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Education for Democracy – what next?

There remains a dearth of in-depth research into the experiences of populism amongst young people and children and suggest that this is an area that needs to be urgently addressed.

Clearly, higher education institutions are well-placed to take this forward, and we recommend that this agenda is prioritised, including through resourcing (Cunningham, 2023)

When populism threatens democracy, it becomes a danger to the development of children and young people as responsible and confident citizens.

It potentially undermines their freedom to express, negotiate and act upon their values without fear of reprisal and shame. In such scenarios, educators are obligated to call out populist ideas and messaging.

The protection and development of an empowering citizenship education that allows for respectful and open dialogue on values remains fundamental to European democracies.

Thanks for Listening

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Populism and its impact on young people

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