

Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Conference Paper

Anja Besand
Ludwigsburg University of Education (Ludwigsburg)

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Don't leave them alone

Media populism as a challenge for civic education

My starting point is to make a clear distinction between the terms “popularity” and “populism”. Assuming that we do not want young people to be at the mercy of the various phenomena of medial populism, I will then turn to the issue: Which competencies or instruments do we need to teach them? More precisely, the question is: How should civic education deal with media populism?

Unfortunately, the tendency is rather common in Civic Ed to avoid the phenomenon of medial populism altogether, rather than to deliberately turn to it and make it part of the lessons. We thus lose an important opportunity of advancing the students' power of judgement. If we want political/civic education to be a competent partner for the students to discuss and evaluate current political phenomena from different media, then civic education must be open towards all political phenomena. Perhaps the boldest proposition I can make within the context of this workshop is that not the media causes the problem of populism, but rather the fact that the public lacks the powers of judgement to distinguish populist from popular messages.

Populism vs. Popularity

The difference between these two words is much bigger than the slight difference in spelling indicates. So on the one hand we are used to seeing the political populist or the populist politician as a demagogue or as a charismatic seducer of the common people, who wishes to seem close to the public, but who actually exploits emotions, prejudices, and fears of the people for his or her own purposes. A Populist is someone who offers clear-cut, plain solutions for political problems that are in reality very complex and not easy to solve.

A popular politician, on the other hand, is first of all a politician who is liked by the people.

So while we regard the populist politician as the “Pied Piper” or a rat catcher who seduces the people by leading them to believe in simple solutions, the popular politician might be popular exactly because he or she tells the truth – and truths which can also be uneasy. Let me use an example to clarify this:



Already while he was Federal Chancellor, Willy Brandt, for instance, was an extremely popular politician and (and this is although important in this context) he dealt with the media very expertly. An example for this is his famous gesture when he fell to his knees in the Warsaw Ghetto, an image that remains famous until today and stands as an iconic symbol for Brandt’s Ostpolitik. A closer inspection however reveals that Brandt had to enforced his Ostpolitik, which means the ratification of the Moscow and Warsaw treaties, the improvement of relations with the former Soviet Union and the GDR against a broad resistance, reaching far into to the middle of society. So we can clearly see that: Brandt was popular and respected, not because he catered to public opinion, but rather because he stood up for his policies, even against substantial opposition.

On the other hand, I would like to point out an instance of populism, with the mayor of Sofia (and perhaps future president of bulgaria) Boiko Borisov. Even during the night following the election when he was elected mayor of Sofia for the first time, he had bands of supporters clearing roadway damage in the capital, thus staging himself as the big boss in politics. Borisov takes political advantage from pointing out general ills. For example he claims the battle against corruption as one of his tasks, without however really fighting the structures in this field. Therefore Borisov’s populism appears as a potpourri of demands, that anyone would be willing to support, and that will not hurt anyone, either.

I think these two examples illustrate the terms “popularity” and “populism” quite well. Unfortunately, we however tend to lump together popular and populist politics – and this, I believe, not only refers to the German-speaking countries.

In a democracy that always builds on creating *majorities* regardless of the elected or preferred political style, such a vague and inaccurate use of terms is highly dangerous because in this way “Populism” can easily become a knockout term applied to just about any political opponent as long as the public approves of him or her. Niklas Luhmann already pointed this out when he said:

“The mildest of these reproaches is that political power must legitimize itself. As soon as politics attempts to legitimize itself, however, the added reproach is that of populism.” (cf: Luhmann 2000, S.18)

The example of Barack Obama in the United States currently underpins this context very well. In fact, though, by no means every politician who is clearly visible in the media could suspiciously be a populist.

Perhaps you are wondering why I am so much insisting on this. Why am I so pedantic in this respect? After all, you have more or less already known this before. Well, I am so pedantic, exactly because we need very clear distinctions for dealing with the medial dimension of political popularity and political populism: We should not suspect a political presentation of being populist, just because it is presented in the media. Certainly, it is true that especially political populists take advantage of various medial instruments to express their intentions. They use the media as a vehicle for their populist slogans. In Germany for instance, right-wing populist parties or organisations like to use popular media formats such as music or film in order to convey their political contents in an explicit, but sometimes also in a subtle manner.



An example for this is the so-called “Schulhof CD” (Schoolyard CD), which the NPD and other right-wing organisations used for election campaigns in different federal states of Germany. But also established parties and politicians increasingly use entertainment-oriented media formats for conveying their more or less complex political messages or for promoting themselves. The former Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder for example - who was well known as especially media-oriented - hit the headlines for appearing in entertainment programmes such as “GZSZ” (a well known daily soap) or “Wetten dass” (which is a famous Saturday night show).



In this context, the media scientist Andreas Dörner coined the phrase “politainment” – consisting of the words “politics” and “entertainment” (Dörner 2001). And it is interesting to note that he – rather unexpectedly – does not regard these phenomena as a threat to political and democratic communication. He rather sees the opportunities of making politics more visible for a large segments of the population and of gaining more attention for political issues in public space. In other words: Making politics more popular in society again. Dörner even considers it to be essential for lasting stability and for a democratic, constitutional polity that the political actors make an effort to increase their own popularity and that of their messages (cf. Dörner 2001, pg. 33). In this context, I like to quote Luhmann again, who said:

“Legitimacy (no matter what constitutional theory might say) in practical politics is always equivalent to popularity.” (Luhmann 2000, pg 100)

For distinguishing between populism and popularity the issue is not whether media are used for conveying political messages or which media is used for doing so. What is crucial is rather the very structure and content of the messages itself. Thus, a political message may be popular or unpopular. Whether it is communicated via the newspapers, television, radio or via the internet does not make it more or less populist. It only becomes populist if the intentions of communication are insincere, if it is conveyed for different purposes than those stated.

Another example:



The FDP, the German liberal party, opted for an extremely aggressive media strategy with their “Projekt 18” in the election campaign 2002. Guido Westerwelle, the party leader, used all and any available advertising space for campaigning. He appeared in programmes intended purely for entertainment such as the internationally known format “Big Brother”, he offered glimpses of his private life when he toured the country in his bus, called the “Guidomobil”, and he even used the soles of his shoes for advertising in a political talk show. The aim of the campaign was very clearly to gain 18 % of the seats in the Federal election but measured by the results, this was far too ambitious because the party miserably failed with its strategy and gained only 7.4 % of the seats. Certainly, this was due to the campaign, which many people considered too offensiv. For the election campaign in 2005, the liberal party therefore chose a very different, more low-key media strategy. I especially remember the following campaign spot.



It is very clear: Instead of stage effects, we now have a sober format, reminding of a newscast and this is clearly visible in the first seconds or sentences of this spot. Translated in English it runs as follows: “Dear fellow citizens, what what we are here sending to you is not a campaign spot for the coming election. We will rather bring forward our arguments...”

And now I am asking you: Which of the strategies was actually more populist? Does a politician really automatically become populist on appearing in a popular entertainment show that is mainly watched by young people? I should not think so. But there is a precondition: It is important that she or he remains true to her/his policies and does not behave opportunistic towards the audience. But I regard it as highly problematic, for the very same politician to appear in a spot, stating that this is not a spot, and only because the zeitgeist is currently turning away from media spectacles.

Media Populism as a challenge for Civic Education

What does this mean for Civic Education? If Civic Education is to prepare the citizens to deal competently with media populism, then it needs to sensitise students exactly for the differences between popularity and populism. Students have to become able to adequately judge the sincerity of political messages. For this purpose, civic education must necessarily include political messages in the context of various medial formats. Unfortunately – at least in Germany – Civic Education struggles with this necessity. Political education still regards the increasing links between politics and entertainment and the aggressive use of popular media formats for transporting political contents with a great deal of scepticism (cf. Besand 2004). Therefore, German Civic Education draws no clear distinction between the notions of “popularity” and “populism”. Quite to the contrary: The reaction to popular media formats for processing political subjects in Civic Education is one of downright

reflexive resistance. Ask students which media are used in their Civic Education lessons, and you will find out that the lessons are basically text-oriented. The students are encouraged to turn to upscale, political, daily or weekly papers, while the teachers hardly ever broach the issue of audiovisual or digital media, and much less use them in their lessons.

But please do not misunderstand me: I also regard the reading of quality newspapers as one of the best means to get politically informed, and I think it is wonderful to be able to inspire students to read them. Reality however has more facets. Many studies on media reception have shown newspapers and magazines to play a subordinate role for children, adolescents and young grown-ups today (cf. JIM 2006). Instead, they turn to audiovisual, entertainment-oriented, and digital media. If Civic Education, acting as a compensation, therefore attempts to keep students away from popular media formats, by confronting them exclusively with high-quality print media, the unfortunate implication will be that the students are left alone with popular media formats and with populist political communication strategies that these might, and more often than not, actually do contain.

And if you look closely there are many indicators for this, for example: If you ask students whom they talk to about their media reception, teachers are strikingly absent as communication partners (Rath/Marci-Boehncke, 2007, pg. 228). But how can this happen? Why do students regard their teachers as so unfit to discuss their media use with? For further hints, I turned to the various curricula for Civic Education.

Here, I found out that in various curricula for Civic Education the importance of media actually has increased within the last ten years. Media are no doubt present in the curricula, although I still found nine out of 27 curricula that completely went without any media-related contents and two of the curricula refer chiefly to newspapers and print media. But where audiovisual or even digital media do become an issue in the curricula, we can clearly see that they are either explicitly or implicitly viewed from the perspective of *manipulation by media*. In some curricula, moreover, I was able to verify an implicit distinction between good media (= print media) and bad media (= entertainment media). Basically and for the most part, the aim of introducing entertainment media in civic education seems to be to screen students from manipulation by media. They are induced to consume media (i.e. TV) as critically and as seldom as possible, while they are encouraged to read the newspapers. The following keywords and phrases therefore typically appear in the various curricula in the context of audiovisual and new media: “Torrent of images”, “Unreal views of the world”, “Cause for anxiety and aggressivity”, “Passivity”, “Isolation”, “Medial violence”, “Substitutional satisfaction”, “Escapism”, “Loss of reality”, “TV addiction”, and similar others. The key phrase *freedom of press* is, in contrast, only found with respect to print media (e.f. Besand 2004, pg. 151ff). In this context we can only speculate about the reasons and effects of this dichotomous assessment of the various media. I am afraid, however, that behind all this there is the over-simplified idea of television as seducing and glorifying and newspaper journalism as largely objective. This idea, of course, can by no means stand up to the complexity of our contemporary media reality.

And what is more: Lessons that are based on these key phrases as their core theme not only neglect the students and their needs and experiences, but also the current

state of the media scientific and ethical discussion. If Civic Education reduces itself to stigmatising media consumption in this way, it will block its own way to productively tracing the interdependencies between politics and media. And to a large extent it also leaves the students alone in dealing with the phenomenon of medial populism.

How can we change this?

If we want political/civic education to be a competent partner for the students to discuss with and to help them evaluate current political phenomena from different media, then civic education must be open towards all political phenomena. Perhaps the boldest proposition I can make within the context of this workshop is that not the media cause the problem of populism, but rather the fact that the public lacks the powers of judgement to distinguish populist from popular messages. And as things are now, people find only little support in Civic Education.

Lit.:

Besand, Anja (2004): Angst vor der Oberfläche – Zum Verhältnis von ästhetischer und politischer Bildung im Zeitalter Neuer Medien, Schwalbach

Dörner, Andreas (2001): Politainment, Frankfurt

Rath, Mathias/Marci-Böhnke, Gudrun (2007): Jugend – Medien – Werte, Die Studie, Weinheim

Luhmann, Niklas: Die Politik der Gesellschaft, Frankfurt 2000

Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest Ed. (2006): JIM Studie, Stuttgart