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Politics – and the people

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Politics – and the people

by Paul Jenkinson



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“Populismus” – ein Thema, das sowohl bei Politikerinnen und Politikern als auch der Bevölkerung häufig Unbehagen auslöst. Diese Unterrichtseinheit behandelt das aktuelle und viel diskutierte Thema in seinen unterschiedlichen Ausprägungen. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler arbeiten dabei mit Zeitungsartikeln, einer Karikatur, einer Statistik, einem Hörtext und Videos. Sie gehen kritisch mit dem Begriff “Populismus” um und diskutieren die Auswirkungen populistischer politischer Persönlichkeiten auf das Wahlverhalten der Bürgerinnen und Bürger. Sie behandeln die geschichtliche Rolle der Politik im Leben junger Menschen und die Folgen von Demonstrationen und anderen Formen politischer Teilhabe auf die Politik.

Politics – and the people

Oberstufe (Niveau)

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Competences and skills:

The unit contains texts and tasks that can be classified as level **B2/C1** (*Europäischer Referenzrahmen*). Students improve their **reading** and **writing skills** by working with different text types like newspaper and magazine articles and writing topically related compositions. Furthermore, they practice their **listening comprehension** and **viewing comprehension skills** with the help of videos and a TED-Talk and enhance their competences in **analysis** by analysing a cartoon and statistics. Students also improve their **speaking skills** in that they discuss and present various political matters. Finally, **mediation skills** are enhanced. Overall, students work on a variety of **interdisciplinary themes** concerned with society, history, arts and sport.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

A Text analysis

E Essay/Statement/Composition

LVC Listening/Viewing comprehension

P Presentation

RC Reading comprehension

W Writing

C Comment

LC Listening comprehension

MD Mediation

R Research

T Working with the text

Topic	Material	Method
1: Populism on the rise	M1–M2	RC, W, T, E
2: Manipulation? – Politicians and the press	M3–M4	RC, T, A, W
3: Young people and politics	M5–M6	A, E, MD, R, RC, T
4: Protests – provoking political change	M7	LC, W, PR
5: Protests – politics in sports	M8	C, E, LVC

Politics – and the people

Facts

One frequent criticism of politicians is that they are seemingly out of touch with the people they are supposed to represent. Self-interest, party politics and power plays often appear more important than solving the real issues that concern the average person in the street. In a world where false facts and disinformation is the political norm, together with an unwillingness to answer direct questions, unsurprisingly people are dissatisfied. Additionally, polarisation has been fostered creating stark differences of public opinion and bitterness that will take years to overcome, if at all: the USA and Britain are prime examples of now seriously divided countries.

The chasms among the electorate run deep but a “Grand Canyon” exists between them and the elitist politicians that operate in Britain and America with their privileged backgrounds, private educations and Oxbridge or Ivy League universities. Subsequently, they often adopt an “I know it better” approach instead of listening to the people they should be representing and acting on their grievances and concerns.

Bob Dylan once sang “The times are a-changing”, but politicians appear to be slow to recognise this and are quick to shout “populism”; but is populism as bad as politicians accuse it to be? And who are “the people” when issues are being discussed?

Changing times bring politicians’ promises and their “facts” into question, too. With digitalisation and social media, opinions and facts from politicians or other sources, true or false, can spread quickly. What are people supposed to believe? The resulting danger is that the electorate make decisions emotionally rather than informatively.

Political discontent, past and present, has also been expressed through music, the visual arts and sport. How valuable these voices are, and have been is difficult to assess, but they demonstrate that anyone committed to a cause can bring an issue to public attention, hoping to change inappropriate or unjust government policies; and a well-known voice carries even more weight.

Notes on the material

Topic 1 deals with how populism is viewed using a newspaper article from *The Independent*. The worksheet requires students to complete statements in multiple choice tasks about the content and to verify their answers accordingly.

Brexit has monopolised the news recently and has left many people speechless as democracy turned into farce. **Topic 2**, an article from the political magazine *New Statesman*, approaches this complicated and highly emotional subject by providing details of how and why Brexit came about. Topic 2 also includes official statistics from the referendum allowing pupils to draw their own conclusions concerning the results and to comment upon frequently used quotes of “leave” politicians. Furthermore, the mechanics of government can be reflected upon by analysing a cartoon.

With young people becoming increasingly critical of politicians’ lack of action in dealing with climate change and other environmental issues, **Topic 3** looks at how young people’s protests have evolved since the Woodstock Music & Art Fair in 1969: a *Guardian* newspaper article investigates this development and relates actions to failed politics. Since political protests come in many forms, further research into the subject is suggested by focusing on aspects of sport, music and art.

Topic 4 is a Ted Talk extract describing how protest is influencing, and has influenced, political change. The speaker is very clear and the worksheet is divided into two parts. The talk may be paused after the first section to allow pupils to complete it, or listen to it a second time in order to clarify answers. The speaker makes a reference to Mugabe, who died in September 2019, however, these details are not required for any answers.

Finally, protests are not just characterised by people demonstrating in the streets or waving their banners. As mentioned in Topic 3, musicians, artists and writers have also voiced their own criticisms of political issues at times. **Topic 5** includes two short video clips showing how some leading figures in sport have publically protested, too. The videos are independent of each other allowing greater flexibility: the first shows the current on-going action of the American football superstar, Colin Kaepernick kneeling down for the American National Anthem protesting against racial inequality; the second video takes a historical perspective focusing on five sportsmen whose protests cost them dearly.

Topic 1: Populism on the rise

M1 Text: *Populists on both left and right claim to be fighting for 'the people' – but who exactly are they?*



Radical, inclusive politics should be much more than a critique of those at the top; it needs to be an ongoing debate over who 'we' are and how 'we' can be empowered

5 Populism is seemingly sweeping the globe, threatening the established status quo. Optimistically, it promises to bring about much needed change to what appears to be a corrupt political and economic order. More ominously¹, it is dangerously promoting racism, sexism, xenophobia, jingoism², and attacking basic human rights around the world.

10 It is therefore important not to blithely³ conflate⁴ different populist and grassroots movements. The left-wing movements championing greater inclusion are plainly very different from right-wing ones keen on reinforced or increased exclusion. But despite their profound differences, they have one thing in common: they claim to represent a supposedly victimised popular majority, "the people".

15 Exactly who these "people" actually are is far from clear. All sides are embroiled⁵ in an ongoing struggle to determine how to define which populations count and which do not. Lost in the public outcry regarding populism is a deeper conflict over who matters socially, economically and politically.

20 In the wake of the recent upsurge⁶ in populist movements, there have been a number of attempts to better define what the word "populism" actually describes. Perhaps the best and clearest recent definition comes from Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell⁷, who write that populism "pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving⁸ (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people
25 of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice".

But populism doesn't just appeal with an "us-versus-them" attack on elites; it also offers its supporters a passionate sense of solidarity. It mobilises individuals and communities under a common identity, one that can be socially invigorating and politically empowering. Populism is therefore an opportunity



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