THE BEST THING TO DO IS TO MAKE PEOPLE FEEL THAT THEY ARE LISTENED TO

Jane Suiter emphasises the important role of journalistic media in fostering voters' trust in their political system. In her country, the media are aligned with the political center and, despite all differences, consensus-oriented. However, in her opinion it is still important to continually consider who might feel excluded.

The interview was conducted by Dirk Bornschein*

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Dr. Jane Suiter is a Professor in the School of Communications at Dublin City University. She plays a pivotal role in the University, not just as a Professor but also as director of DCU's Institute for Future Media, Democracy and Society. She has contributed to over 30 published journals in Political Science, Electoral Studies, Politics, and International Communication along with one of many recent books, 'Reimagining Democracy: Lessons in Deliberative Democracy from the Irish Frontline'.

Dirk Bornschein: Our main interest is in comparing the immigration debates in different European countries, their deep-rooted origins, internal dynamics, and consequences. But over time, we realized that we also need to consider the connection to the populism debate.

I would like to begin by asking you: what, in your opinion, are the underlying roots of the populism debate in Ireland?

Jane Suiter: We have been examining this issue for many years. There has consistently been a presence of populism, much of which has been superficial, particularly in Ireland. However, the Irish debate surrounding immigration became more prominent following the COVID-19 pandemic. Certain communities were radicalized by medical conspiracies and disinformation, which subsequently contributed to broader migration conspiracy theories and related narratives. Additionally, this period coincided with a significant increase in the number of international protection applicants arriving after the pandemic

If we use the term populism here, how do you define this term in your work?

Suiter: Well, there are different types of populism. Typically, they are anti-some outgroup. Right-wing populist thinking tends to be anti-immigrants, whereas some left-wing populism may focus more on being anti-elite, or sometimes both. Most of our work has been related to survey research, conducted as part of the National Election and Democracy Study in Ireland. In this research, we have examined topics such as trust, conspiracy beliefs, and support for certain immigration conspiracy theories.

Could you please explain us this relationship between populism and trust?

Suiter: In Ireland we don't have a right-wing populist party like many other European countries. Before the most recent waves of populism, the most populist party was Sinn Féin, who would have said that they were a left-wing populist party. But they were never explicitly anti- immigration. So, the people who were anti-immigration didn't actually have a party to vote for. They mostly either didn't vote, or they voted for a range of parties, or they voted for independence.

We have a lot of independent candidates in Ireland. In more recent years, there have been more right-wing populist candidates who are running, but they haven't managed to get elected to the national parliament to any great extent, and only a few in local government. And they haven´ t been able to come together as parties. Their impact is dissipated somewhat.

What reasons do you see for this development? Do elements of direct democracy also play a role?

Suiter: Yeah, it's a combination. Obviously, direct democracy can sometimes be used in ways that favor the majority at the expense of minorities, which is one reason why many countries are hesitant to adopt it. In Ireland, in recent years, we have often tried to combine direct democracy with deliberative democracy. For example, we have had citizens' assemblies and similar forums where people's voices are heard, and they make recommendations regarding referendums. This approach incorporates elements of direct democracy because it becomes part of the public debate. While combining direct democracy with deliberative democracy is not a perfect solution, it is certainly a helpful approach.

Normally we can distinguish certain stages in the development of populist beliefs. What policies or circumstances have fueled populism in Ireland?

Suiter: Yeah, so it's often related to trust and to believe in conspiracies. So, we've been doing some work about that and we can see that there are still relatively high levels of trust in institutions in Ireland. For example, there's only 16% of people who have little or no trust in the Electoral Commission or 20% in the courts or the civil service or the citizen assembly. Of course, it's higher for the Parliament and the government and the parties, you know, 44% have only a little or no trust in the political parties, but nonetheless, this is higher than in some other countries. A combination of things is helping with this. One is a relatively high trust in journalistic media.

Suiter: This provides more trust in general. Because if you trust journalistic media, you tend to trust other institutions a little bit more. But at the same time, we also see that there's a big rise in conspiracy theories since the pandemic. So, for example, we find that one conspiracy theory would be, for example, that elected officials want more immigration to bring in obedient voters. And, you know, we find that 22% of people think this is either definitely or probably true. And or that the establishment is trying to replace white Irish people with non-white Irish people. And again, 24% of people think this is either definitely or probably true.

22 or 24 %, this is something.

Suiter: Yes, it is. It's not as high as in some of the countries, it's certainly a lot lower than if we look west across the Atlantic, but nonetheless it's concerning.

That's why we're trying to look at what are the factors that are helping the people who say this is probably or definitely not true. And for them it's things like trust in citizens' assemblies, trust in journalistic media, these kinds of things are definitely protective against these kinds of conspiracies. The thing that most predicts the belief in these conspiracies is trust in social media.

Trust in social media?

Suiter: Yes, it's about both the use of social media and the level of trust in it. You can be young and use social media to get your news, but if you trust the information, you find there, you're much more likely to believe in conspiracies.

German journalistic media are often seen as placing a greater focus on their educational role compared to other European countries. I'm curious—how is it in Ireland?

Suiter: In the public service media, so the media which is funded by a license fee and so on, there is an element of needing to educate and inform and that is part of the overall responsibility.
But it's also about balance and about impartiality, entertaining and also about reflecting culture back, and so on. There's a variety of elements. And there's a lot less control of Irish media by billionaires than in the UK or the US.

A few days ago, I spoke with a British expert who told me that British journalism, compared to German journalism, is more like a game and less focused on education.

How do you see Ireland in comparison to England?

Suiter: The British media system is quite divided, but there's a lot of game rather than issue. And if you actually do the coding in Ireland for media populism, for example, when you're covering elections, there's quite a lot about game, like who's up and down in the polls, who's more likely to be in, who's winning, who's losing. So that kind of game rather than issue is definitely there in Ireland, but there's less aggression.

Compared to the UK.

Suiter: Yeah. The British tabloids are very aggressive and not very wedded to truth. And there's a stronger focus on factual accuracy in Irish media too.

And the ideological orientation in the media landscape?

Suiter: Well, In Ireland we have a lot of access to BBC. The Irish equivalent is nowhere as well funded. In terms of printed newspapers, they are slightly different but they are all oriented to the center and consensus-oriented. There's no newspaper which is even as left-wing as The Guardian in the UK, for example.

When you talk about the center, do I understand this correctly? Do you mean an orientation towards finding a consensus among different beliefs?

Suiter: Exactly. You know, all of the parties think that the newspapers are working against them and for one of the others. Even the voters—they are usually right in the middle, maybe slightly to the left of a normal distribution, but not by much. Whereas in other countries, the distribution doesn't look so normal.

In addition to the media, academic institutions also sometimes play an important role in the political debate, such as the immigration debate.

Jane Suiter: Traditionally in Ireland, many academics would have lamented the fact that much policy-making occurred without reference to their research, and that there were not many research positions within the civil service or the political parties. That is changing a bit now, and the committees in Parliament are gaining more power. Previously, decision-making was very centralized within the executive branch only, so there is now much more academic input into parliamentary debates and similar discussions, and the media tend to use academics more often. So, academic influence is present, but policymaking is not as evidence-based as it is in some other European countries. However, it is definitely more than it was 20 years ago.

Sounds like a positive trend.

Suiter: I think so, yeah. If we look at populism, we look at Brexit, this is a way for debates that aren't largely based on any sort of epistemic value of truth. So, I think having some sort of academic expertise, especially if people aren't partisan, they can genuinely give both sides. Or if they are coming from a certain side that's recognised and they're balanced by someone from the other side.

But isn´t it possible that the more you are used by political interests, the greater the risk that certain programs and research organisations will start to serve one side more than the other.

Jane Suiter: Yeah. That can happen too.

It's a question of balance.

Suiter: It's a question of balance. I have colleagues who have regular weekly columns in newspapers and, you know, some of them are definitely center-right and others are more center- left, and so I think it's important that these different perspectives are balanced. It's also very much about the different disciplines talking about a specific issue. In the migration debate you have lawyers and sociologists, who would be talking about the kind of obligations under the Geneva Convention and how we're treating people and so on. And then there's others who will talk about the electoral reality of what happens if a party supports a lot of migration and so on. And, you know, different newspapers will focus more on one than on the other. The public service broadcaster will try to have both voices on some of the discussion programs, but always it's going to be down to what does the producer think? What happens with the audience reaction? Because, of course, all media is now thinking about clicks and reactions.

We have now discussed the roles of media and the academy for a very long time. I would like to take a step further.

Does the official political debate in Ireland reflect the different needs of the voters?

Suiter: I think, they do reasonably well. But probably, they need to really consider reflecting more on actually listening to other voices. There is a subgroup of people who truly feel that their voices aren't being taken into account. There is a significant housing crisis in Ireland. Young people especially feel that they aren't necessarily listened to or that their opinions aren't prioritized. I believe that's dangerous. So, probably the biggest problem in Ireland is that there might be a tendency for people to think, oh, we don't have any of these major issues. Everything is fine, and we don't need to do much. However, I believe we need to do a lot of thinking about what we have, how we can protect it, and also, how we can consider all the people who feel they aren't listened to or involved, and so on.

Could you kindly summarize how the expressions of populism in Ireland should be responded to?

Suiter: As I just mentioned, the best thing to do is to make people feel that they are listened to. So, you know, I think the work that Commissioner McGrath is doing on the democracy shield will be very important. There are so many different aspects to this. Some of it involves trying to protect journalistic media and to secure more funding for investigative journalism. I believe it's really important to have the infrastructure in place for listening to citizens across all European countries. For example, I know the Joint Research Centre is doing fantastic work in terms of how to actually listen to and work with citizens.

However, not all European countries have excellent infrastructure to support these efforts, so I think funding for that is necessary. Additionally, what we do with social media regulation and education around digital media literacy is crucial. Overall, I believe it’s a very multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive approach from all of us.

Jane Suiter, we didn't talk much about the specific migration debate, but there's no doubt that your area of expertise has a lot to contribute. Thank you for these insights.

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