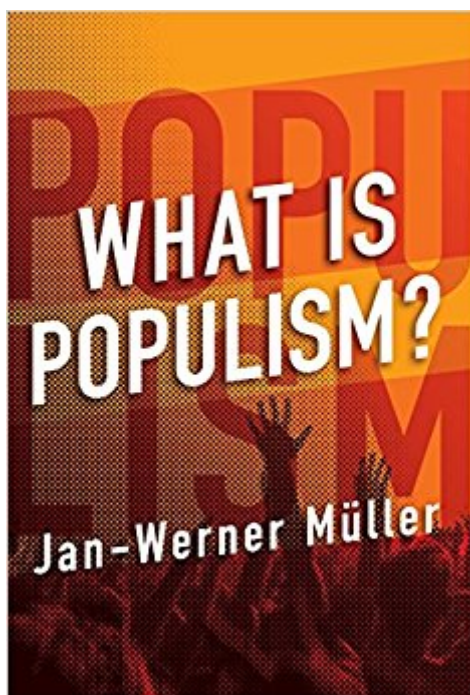


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What Is Populism?



Synopsis

Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, Marine Le Pen, Hugo Chávez – populists are on the rise across the globe. But what exactly is populism? Should everyone who criticizes Wall Street or Washington be called a populist? What precisely is the difference between right-wing and left-wing populism? Does populism bring government closer to the people or is it a threat to democracy? Who are "the people" anyway and who can speak in their name? These questions have never been more pressing. In this groundbreaking volume, Jan-Werner Müller argues that at populism's core is a rejection of pluralism. Populists will always claim that they and they alone represent the people and their true interests. Müller also shows that, contrary to conventional wisdom, populists can govern on the basis of their claim to exclusive moral representation of the people: if populists have enough power, they will end up creating an authoritarian state that excludes all those not considered part of the proper "people." The book proposes a number of concrete strategies for how liberal democrats should best deal with populists and, in particular, how to counter their claims to speak exclusively for "the silent majority" or "the real people." Analytical, accessible, and provocative, *What Is Populism?* is grounded in history and draws on examples from Latin America, Europe, and the United States to define the characteristics of populism and the deeper causes of its electoral successes in our time.

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Customer Reviews

"No one has written more insightfully and knowledgeably about Europe's recent democratic decay

than Jan-Werner Müller. Here Müller confronts head on the key questions raised by the resurgence of populism globally. How is it different from other kinds of politics, why is it so dangerous, and how can it be overcome? Müller's depiction of populism as democracy's antipluralist, moralistic shadow is masterful." — Dani Rodrik, Harvard University "This is an exceptionally intelligent book about a notoriously slippery, yet essential, political concept.

Jan-Werner Müller's sweeping critique of populism will both instruct and challenge anyone who seeks to understand the roots and nature of the political conflicts that are roiling Europe and the United States." — Michael Kazin, author of *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* "The most useful work to comprehend Trump's appeal is *What Is Populism?* (2016) by Princeton University political scientist Jan-Werner Müller. In this essential book, Müller defines populism's most salient characteristics — antielitism, antipluralism, exclusivity — and explains Trump and other populists through that framework. It is a quick read, and worth every page." — *The Washington Post* "Populism is not just antiliberal, it is antidemocratic — the permanent shadow of representative politics. That's Jan-Werner Müller's argument in this brilliant book. There is no better guide to the populist passions of the present." — Ivan Krastev, *International New York Times*

Jan-Werner Müller is Professor of Politics at Princeton University. He is author of several books, most recently *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth Century Europe*. He contributes regularly to *London Review of Books*, *the Guardian*, and *the New York Review of Books*.

This is an important book. The year 2016 has seen the election of Donald Trump in the US, the Brexit vote in the UK, post-coup consolidation of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and the near-election of Norbert Hofer in Austria. The year that follows will see bids for power by Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in The Netherlands. These people are widely dismissed as "populists". But what does that even mean? In his short new book *What is Populism?*, Jan-Werner Müller, Professor of Politics at Princeton University, suggests we don't have an answer to that question. He then supplies one. A populist, he states, is someone who claims to identify with "the people". S/he rejects everyone else. How "the people" are defined is left conveniently vague, but it is made clear that everyone not fitting that description is an outlier, a deviant, or, worse of all, part of an unresponsive "elite" against which s/he is leading a popular rebellion. Thus their views need not be taken into account. The

populist, says Maffler, is therefore inherently anti-pluralist. They cannot be a democrat. Yet they can present themselves as exactly that, through their claim to represent the popular base. The first part of this definition of identification with something called "the people" is not new, but Maffler presumably wouldn't claim it was. What may break new ground is his suggestion that this identification makes the populist inherently anti-pluralist, because any definition of "the people" must exclude stakeholders in the polity that don't meet it. Given the diversity of modern societies, it's fair to guess that a big percentage of the people won't be "the people". A quick glance at Trump and Britain's Brexit advocate Nigel Farage suggests this is so. Trump actually didn't win the popular vote in 2016, even though he won the electoral college; so his definition of "the people" may be missing a few "people". As for Farage, the Brexit referendum was won 52-48%. Yet both men insist that "the people" have spoken. (After the November election, we were treated to the sight of these men celebrating their victory over "the elites" in a gold-plated lift at Trump Tower.) Should we worry about populists? After all, a leader whose politics make no sense will be called out in the end. The trouble is that they can do a lot of damage first. One reason is that, as Maffler says, the populists can present themselves as democrats, although to him they are inherently not. "The danger is ...that [populism] promises to make good on democracy's highest ideals (Let the people rule!). ...That the end result is a form of politics that is blatantly antidemocratic should trouble us all." He supports this last point with a discussion of the way populist governments of the left and right have behaved in Hungary, Venezuela and Poland. Maffler has less to say about the way we must react to populism. He does talk about the safeguards that have been built into European constitutions since the war, but says little about the ways in which democracy has been defined, and then protected from populist capture. He could for example have raised the "tyranny of the majority" arguments set out by the Founding Fathers and by John Stuart Mill, and set out the case for representative government. It may be that Maffler wished the book to be concise, with a precise focus; it explains and defines populism, and that is all it sought to do. But I believe that, having explained why populists can't be pluralists, he could also have set out the ways one preserves pluralism. What Maffler does do, is to demand that we confront, but also engage with, populism. "I reject the paternalistic liberal attitude [of] therapy

for citizens whose fears and anger have to be taken seriously. He says. But he also rejects exclusion of populists from debate, pointing out that this will simply support their contention that the "popular will" is excluded from the "system." I think he is right on both counts. I would prefer to have read more in this book about the constitutional pluralist structures that can protect us from populism. I would also have liked to see more analysis of why voters respond to populist leaders who clearly don't have their best interests at heart. But Miller has written widely on politics and government elsewhere, and perhaps these discussions would have blunted this concise, readable little book. Miller's main purpose was simply to define populism and he has certainly done that. Moreover his definition of populism as inherently anti-pluralist is a well-argued and elegant warning. As Trump apparently said in May 2016, "The only important thing is the unification of the people, because the other people don't mean anything. If you're not sure you're one of Trump's people (or Farage's, or Wilders's, or Erdoğan's), the populist vision of democracy does not include you."

I read this book because I keep seeing the term "populist" slung around on the news these days, especially in relation to Donald Trump. I thought it just meant that he was popular. Turns out it's something much more sinister and after reading the book I can totally see why Trump qualifies as a populist. If you have any curiosity about this subject, then this is the book you should read. Not only is it informative, it is also well-written and easy to read, at least for such a topic. It has a number of lines that are worth quoting and, though I can't put them all here, I thought I'd give you a few to give you an idea. *****The simple fact is that "anger" and "frustration" might not always be very articulate--but they are also not "just emotions"....[Populism] is a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified...people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior. This is the core claim of populism: only some of the people are really the people. At a campaign rally in May, Trump announced that "the only important thing is the unification of the people--because the other people don't mean anything."*****In the context given in this book, that last declaration is pretty damning. At any rate, I found the book very informative and a great help to understanding today's politics and the danger our democracy faces when a populist is the head of the government.

Michael Farage, Donald Trump, Marine Le Penn, Hugo Chavez, these are names that are associated with the word populism. What creates the association? What is populism? Why should there be so many books and articles trying to understand and explain populism? *The Populist Explosion* by John Judis one such book. Miller explains that the term is used as a synonym for anti-establishment but clearly it is more than that. More than merely a feeling of anti-establishment, there are the additional features of resentment and frustration among voters. He also say that modern capitalist societies are drawing a line between the 1% and the 99%, populists are not claiming to represent the 99% percent. They are claiming to represent the 100%. They claim that they are the authentic will of the people. Populists are also anti-elitist and anti-pluralist. Miller warns that populism is a danger to democracy. He sets out to explain that populists believe that not only do they represent the 100% but that they are also morally right. He argues that populism is undemocratic and raises questions as to what do anti-establishment populists do once they become the establishment. He discusses the ways of dealing with populists, but his tender timid suggestions of the alternatives do not seem persuasive nor does he sound confident. Perhaps the terror and peril of populism has this effect. The reader has to gauge the final chapter of Miller's book for himself. But what if Miller is wrong, and that populism defies definition, how might one deal with a monster whose shape and form one cannot see until it is too late?

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