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What is Populism?

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Book Summary Developed By:

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About the Author:

Jan-Werner Müller's political science book, *What Is Populism?* (2014), aims to explain what it means to be a populist and how modern-day populist leaders are affecting global politics. Critics praise the book for its timely analysis of world leaders and for highlighting the need for social democracy. The author of numerous political books, Müller is currently the Professor of Politics at Princeton University. He regularly contributes to both the *London Review of Books* and the *New York Review of Books*. He also writes columns and thought pieces for the *Guardian* newspaper.

Who are Populists:

Müller considers both left- and right-wing populism. He looks at what makes a populist and why they are dangerous on both sides of the political spectrum. His thesis is that populists reject pluralism; meaning, populists believe that only they can represent the people and their true interests. They believe in isolating power and controlling the populace through moral manipulation.

Müller also considers for whom populists believe they are speaking. Populists, he argues, aren't speaking for a whole nation, but for the people, they believe agree with their views. A president might, for example, say that he or she speaks for the silent majority, but it is unclear who makes up that silent majority, and whether the leader intends to represent those who don't agree with his or her policies. Although Müller considers both left- and right-wing populists, he concludes that populism is best used to describe far right-wing leaders.

What Is Populism?

The answer is divided broadly into three parts—what populists say, what they do, and how we should deal with them. The book then provides a conclusion based on Müller's findings and a reminder of just how dangerous populist ideology is for global politics. The content is designed to appeal to both political science students and general readers who are trying to make sense of world leaders today.

1st Part:

In the first part of the book, Müller looks at the language used by populists when they make political speeches. Populists typically claim that their core voters are frustrated by one thing or other, and they feel they do not have a voice. Their voters are angry, bitter, and frustrated by a system that keeps them silent. The use of similar language across the spectrum is why the term populism can apply to both left- and right-wing leaders.



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It is also necessary, according to Müller, for populists to be critical of elites and those in authority. They present themselves as the bringers of much-needed change, attempting to appeal to all voters, whatever their political leanings. However, to qualify as a populist, a leader must be appealing to a clear voting demographic, whose interests they hold above the rest.

Populists claim they have a moral obligation to lead; their opponents are morally deficient because they reject this individual as the only possible leader. Populists isolate those who oppose their beliefs, rendering them outcasts. This is also how populists often secure loyal, unwavering support from those who believe that this person will protect their interests.

2nd Part:

In the second part of the book, Müller looks at this leadership behaviour in more detail. When populists are in power or when they are running for office, they refuse to recognize their opposition as legitimate. They do not take their opponents seriously, and they don't try to find common ground. It is the populist's way or no way at all. This is how regimes under populist leaders take a firm hold over any country; the modern-day United States being one example, argues Müller.

3rd Part:

In the third part of the book, Müller considers how opponents should handle populist leaders or populists who are running for office. Populists cannot be allowed to hijack the state as they wish to do, and they should never be allowed to buy or bribe voters, however underhand and subtle their attempts may be. They should never be allowed to achieve their main goal of stifling civil society and blocking democracy.

This blocking of democracy is why Müller believes we are too hasty to call both left- and right-wing leaders populists, because liberalists will never seek to do this. He believes, since our understanding of the term "populism" is so new, we should take this opportunity to reinvent it, using it only to describe hard-right leaders looking to oppress their opponents.

Using examples to support his position, Müller analyses leaders and politicians with mass support, from President Trump to Marine Le Pen, to show how they've garnered that support and secured their positions. He then considers the ways in which opponents are tackling these politicians and their regimes, and what we can learn about populism from their efforts.

Conclusion:

Müller leaves us with much to consider about our understanding of populism and what it means for us as a world going forward. If we recognize the signs of a potential populist leader early, then we can take steps to prevent that leader from securing the overall power desired.