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***[Virginia Prescott] I’m Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works.***

***Today we’re answering a listener question: what is populism? How has it been defined and what does the word need in today's climate?***

***We asked the guy who has written the book on populism. It's actually called What is Populism? Jan-Werner Mueller is professor of politics at Princeton. Well let's get right to the listener question, what is populism?***

[Jan-Werner Mueller] The conventional wisdom of our time is that anybody who tends to criticize elites or as is often also said attacks the establishment is therefore necessarily some kind of dangerous populist. When you think about it that's actually a very strange thought because any old civics textbook would have told you that it's a sign of good democratic engagement on the part of citizens to keep a close eye on the powerful in politics in economics. But let's also say in culture and the media of course when there’s opposition, populists tend to criticize governments, and in that sense the powerful, but above all they do something else. They say that they and they alone represent what populous very often called the real people or also typically the silent majority that might not sound so bad initially. That's not obviously the same thing as racism. It's not obviously the same as let's say a fanatical hatred of the European Union in a European context. And yet I believe it always has detrimental consequences for democracy.

First of all populists are immediately also going to say that all other contenders for power all other politicians and parties are fundamentally illegitimate. This is never just a matter of disagreement about policy or for that matter even values. Populist will immediately make it moral and they will immediately make it personal. Remember the night of Brexit when Nigel Farage gave a speech where he said that the outcome of the referendum had been what he called a victory for real people. Implication of course being that the 48 percent who wanted to stay inside the European Union were not real. On one level those people aren't quite real, aren't properly part of the British people. So long story short I think what matters about populism is not anti-elitism. Any of us can criticize the powerful doesn't mean that we're right but it's not automatically something legitimate or dangerous for democracy. What is dangerous for democracy is this if you permit the term it's a bit highfaluting, anti-pluralist stance where you always end up excluding other people.

***[VP] OK. You've just unpacked so many things there that I want to get in on one. We are going to focus on what it means here in the U.S. because that's the questions we're dealing with on Civics 101. But I think it's interesting to look at examples of populist movements and leaders historically. The question was asked by a listener what is it traditionally meant. So what do you think the distinction is there?***

[JW M] It's a very good question because we owe the word populism to a late 19th century American party. It was the members of the People's Party who were first called populists in the English language. Now clearly these populists criticized elites. They were defending farmers in the Midwest against the railroad barons and Wall Street. In fact a lot of what they said sounds almost identical to what Occupy Wall Street said a couple of years ago. Sometimes if you put the text notes next to each other you could not necessarily tell which epoch it is from. However not all these people in the late 19th century necessarily were anti-pluralists. So in the U.S. because of this development sometimes sort of anti-elitism is generally run together with populism and it in turn that often run together with a general tendency to defend as the phrase often goes Main Street against Wall Street but I'm not sure that in our day that understanding of populism gives us enough of a distinction to really puzzle out these different phenomena we're seeing today because in many ways as I was trying to say earlier there's nothing wrong with criticizing the powerful and if everybody who does that is automatically a populist and therefore in the eyes of many observers somehow suspect I think we're going to be over inclusive and if in doubt we're going to discredit a lot of movements who are perfectly democratic. It doesn't always mean that critiques of the powerful are right but there's nothing automatically dangerous about them. Whereas what you cannot do in a democracy I believe is from the get go say certain people don't belong at all if the other party is in power. I'm going to deny their legitimacy.

***[VP] So it sounds a little bit less like anti-elite or anti-Wall Street or anti-Washington in the U.S. context than it is anti-people who disagree with me.***

[JW M] Yes I think that's an that's a necessary part because if it were simply about being against Washington or running against Washington then virtually every presidential candidate automatically becomes a populist if it's a movement that's framed as a reaction to or opposition to.

***[VP] How does that translate to actual governance and policy?***

[JW M] It's very often said that almost by definition populists cannot govern because they are supposedly all protest movements. And once you get into government surely you cannot keep protesting against yourself or it's all too often said that you know once you're in government you yourself have obviously become the elites so you cannot maintain any kind of anti-elite stance or another variation on this kind of sentiment. All these populists have unbelievably simplistic policy ideas, so on day one that's going to become obvious that nothing really works in practice. The wall is not going to get built and so on and so forth. I think these are all dangerous illusions. We have enough examples just in our own time to see that populists can govern specifically as populists by which in turn I mean as actors who deny the legitimacy of an opposition who deny the legitimacy if in doubt of independent institutions like courts and free media. And very often if they have sufficient majorities if they have sufficient power as actors who will really systematically try to reshape the political system in the way that they see fit and who as a consequence as we've seen for instance in Turkey, Hungary, Poland will really take their country in a much more authoritarian direction. So it's very dangerous to underestimate these actors.

***[VP] Well those claims have been used historically in this country and in other places by both the right and the left. How does the messaging change according to political parties?***

[JW M] So I agree that populism can be found both on the left and on the right. Sometimes in Europe it's said that populism is by definition a bad thing. The left is always good so the two can possibly go together. That's not true. You only need to look at a country like Venezuela. In our days to see actors who at one point started to say we are the only legitimate representatives of Venezuelan people committed to a socialist project for the 21st century. There's no space for legitimate disagreement anymore. Whoever isn't with us is against us and therefore is going to be completely excluded. So that can happen with left

wing content as well. But I think it's fair to say that in our era the predominance has been one of rightwing populism where the main themes clearly have been immigration refugee policy and the pushing of a very strong sense of nationalism against supposedly globalized elites.

***[VP] What are some examples of populist movement and leaders historically?***

[JW M] So there are plenty of people who were in a democratic context within a context of representative democracy have said only we represent the people. Some of them have been emperors. For instance Napoleon the third in France essentially said only I represent the people. After he came to power through plebiscite and then made himself Emperor I'm going to be careful in how I describe this. But I think if you accept my understanding of the term then fascists were also populists because clearly figures like Hitler Mussolini said only we represent the German slash the Italian people. It doesn't mean that all populists are really fascists. I would strongly argue against that notion because fascist also have a call to violence. There are also racist. It comes a lot of other ingredients if you like but the basic anti pluralism was also there.

***[VP] You've spoken about a number of things that are misunderstood about populism or are commonly held beliefs about populism that may not be correct. So going forward what should we know about populism?***

[JW M] I think one important thing is that we can tell who is or who isn't a populist by the rhetoric of leaders and politicians but we cannot say with certainty that all those who vote for populists are necessarily populists themselves. We cannot know for sure that they are anti-pluralists in the sense that I've been talking about we cannot say for sure that these people the voters themselves the citizens themselves must be a danger to democracy. So of course I'm not the first person to say this but I think it bears repetition that any generalization about these people along the lines of calling them let's say deplorable is if nothing else an empirical mistake because in many cases we simply cannot know that.

***[VP] Professor Mueller, thank you very much for speaking with us.***