Demagogues

The word demagogue is of Greek origin. It comes from the Greek words demos ("people") and ago ("manipulate"). The word demagogue literally means "a manipulator of the people." It's pronounced "dem-uh-gog.

What is a demagogue, or "manipulator of the people?" He or she is a public figure (usually a politician) who uses dishonest tactics and inflames emotions to get people to do what he or she wants. Demagogues often try and manipulate people through emotion, rather than being reasonable.

Every culture and country has had its demagogues. Even very educated and thoughtful people have fallen under their influence. By using the power of critical thinking, you can learn to recognize demagogues and their motives. We'll look at a few famous ones, and apply critical thinking to some of their ideas.

Joseph McCarthy

Joseph McCarthy was a well-known U.S. senator from 1947 to 1957. During this time, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a Cold War. The Soviets Union was a Communist country, and the U.S. was dedicated to stopping for the spread of Communism. Both countries developed nuclear weapons, and both used spies to learn information about the other. True war never occurred between the two. But people in the U.S. were very scared for many years that the Communist Soviet Union would try to destroy them. Fear of an enemy that is unseen and difficult to understand can make people act in ways they might not act under normal conditions.

It was during this time that Senator McCarthy would make his mark on the world. His first few years in the Senate were uneventful. Then, on February 9, 1950, McCarthy gave a speech to the Republican Women’s Club in Wheeling, West Virginia; it would make him a household name.

During the speech, McCarthy claimed to have a list of people who worked for the U.S. government who were actually Communists. He claimed that they were working to bring down the U.S. government from the inside.

Many of these people were fired quickly. It is likely that most of these people were marked in the years prior by an FBI investigation as being simply bad employees. But McCarthy called them Communists, or said they had "Communist leanings." He was unable to present any evidence.

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The media covered McCarthy's accusations, and there was great popular interest in the senator. At a hearing, just days after his earlier speech in West Virginia, McCarthy named many specific people as Communists. He used powerful language and spoke passionately, but produced no evidence. He even claimed that some of the accused were Soviet spies.

McCarthy continued to accuse people of being Communists, and criticized the government for not dealing with these people properly. He gained a large and loyal following as he accused more people.

Critics of McCarthy began referring to his baseless accusations as McCarthyism. The term is now an American synonym for demagoguery (being a demagogue).

McCarthy enjoyed the term, and referred to McCarthyism as "Americanism with its sleeves rolled up." Some people liked this sort of tough talk, and McCarthy remained popular with many. In January of 1954, a full 50% of people surveyed liked McCarthy.

Edward R. Murrow, a journalist of the time, was one of the most vocal people to criticize McCarthyism. On his news program, See It Now, Murrow said, "The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it—and rather successfully." Murrow makes clear one of a demagogue's key traits: a demagogue takes advantage of the public's fear.

Alcibiades

Alcibiades was a Greek statesman, born in 450 BC. He was a great speaker, according to the other statesmen around him. But Plutarch, one of the most famous Greek historians of the ancient world, said about Alcibiades: [he was] the least scrupulous and most entirely careless of human beings.

Alcibiades was the man behind the Sicilian Expedition, which was a military conquest of Sicily. He was able to convince people this was a good idea by playing on both their fear (like McCarthy) and their national pride.

He often changed positions on important topics, but this was rarely noticed by the population, since he was so skilled at talking his way around the issues. When Athens (his home) went to war with Sparta, he even left Athens and joined Sparta. He actively advised Sparta during their conflict, doing great damage to Athens. Eventually, the Spartan ruler, Agis II, decided Alcibiades was a bad influence. Alcibiades went to Persia, gaining trust of local authorities. Eventually, he used his new influence with Persia to gain entrance back to Athens, which he had betrayed.

He was reinstated as a general in Athens. After some military successes, he was assassinated.
By claiming access to specific, highly valuable information, which he sometimes had and sometimes invented, Alcibiades remained a powerful and influential manipulator for most of his life. **Playing on fear, national pride, and claiming to know special information** was a winning recipe for this demagogue—until he was killed.

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**What Makes Someone a Demagogue?**

Not every passionate public figure and politician is a demagogue. Many leaders and DJs and rock stars say things that are unpopular with a large portion of the public. Simply speaking passionately, or calling people to act on an issue, does not make one a demagogue. So, what does? A lot has been written about demagogues throughout history, and scholars generally agree on a few traits that make a person a demagogue:

1. **A demagogue is a “man of the people.”** If the demagogue is rich, or has a privileged background, he is likely to downplay those things. He tries to seem “common” and “average.” His views and plans reflect popular fears. He is unlikely to suggest something unpopular with the majority of the people, such as raising taxes, even if such a plan is clearly in the people’s interest.

2. **Demagogues insist you’re with them or against them.** They often present extreme ideas (such as McCarthy’s claim that the government was filled with communists). If and when people pause to consider the demagogue’s claims and plans, the demagogue usually labels these people “part of the problem.” The demagogue insists there are only two sides to a given issue: his side and the wrong side.

3. **Demagogues don’t care about the rules.** The demagogue’s goal is obtaining power. He doesn’t have any respect for established rules. In fact, he may not even have loyalty to a particular cause. (For example, Alcibiades actually swapped sides in a war, twice. His primary concern was not patriotism, but rather his own advancement.) Laws and rules are often characterized by the demagogue as being obstacles to progress.

4. **Demagogues use emotion to manipulate people, and often reject logic.** Demagogues are very good at awakening people’s passions, often by playing on their fears. A demagogue may pound the podium, raise his voice, and use plenty of emotional language. These habits do not make someone a demagogue by themselves. They are tools to manipulate the emotions of a population, along with the other traits listed.

5. **A demagogue usually has a scapegoat.** A scapegoat is a person or group that can be blamed for a certain problem. Usually, the scapegoat takes the blame despite not being responsible for the problem. Adolf Hitler was a famous demagogue who used German Jews as a scapegoat group.
before initiating a genocide (mass killing) against them during World War II. Joseph McCarthy made government workers who he didn’t like into scapegoats, along with communists. A demagogue may claim that immigrants are ruining the country, for instance. As long as the claim specifies a group that can be scapegoated, it doesn’t matter if that group is part of the problem or not.

Questions to ask yourself when wondering if a public figure might be a demagogue.

1) Is this person making suggesting the solution to a complex problem is very simple?
2) What does this person have to gain by saying what he/she is saying?
3) Is this person using a scapegoat?
4) Is this person presenting him or herself as a “person of the people,” despite being rich or powerful?
5) Is this person playing upon people’s fears?
6) Does this person make arguments emotional, rather than logical?

If you answered “yes” to all these questions, you may be listening to a demagogue. But that doesn’t mean you have to believe what they say is true. By asking yourself these questions and knowing how to identify a demagogue, you can focus on using critical thinking to form your own opinions.

Questions:

Multiple Choice

1) Demagogue is pronounced how?
   a) “de-a-go-jee”
   b) “dem-a-gow-j”
   c) “dem-uh-gog”
   d) “dem-ow-gag”
2) Joseph McCarthy used the fear of what to manipulate people?
   a) Socialism
   b) Fascism
   c) Anarchy
   d) Communism

3) What did Alcibiades do that showed he was not a loyal citizen?
   a) Assassinated Caesar
   b) Switched sides during the war
   c) Burned the law books
   d) Started a critical newspaper

Short Answer

1) What is the primary emotion that demagogues use to manipulate people?
________________________________________________________________________

2) What is a scapegoat?
   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________

3) Does a demagogue reply primarily on logic, or primarily on emotion, to convey his message?
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

4) What does a demagogue usually do when people criticize his message?
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

Short Essay

Using what you have learned about demagogues, it’s your turn to become one. Pick an issue, and write the sort of speech a demagogue may use to persuade people to his or her way of thinking. Possible (pretend) topics include: the cafeteria has decided to stop serving juice and milk; the school day is going to be extended by two hours; you are running for student council President; or, you can pick your own.
Your speech should not simply be persuasive. Use what you’ve learned about demagogues to make a speech that includes the classic traits of the demagogue.
Answer key

Multiple Choice

1) C  
2) D  
3) B

Short Answer

1) Fear
2) A person or group who is made to bear the blame, often without cause.
3) Emotion
4) He/she claims that the critic is part of the problem or conspiracy.

Essay

The students’ “speeches” should demonstrate an understanding of the material. Their speeches should draw on emotion, rouse fear in the audience, create a scapegoat, and present a simple solution to the problem they pick.