This is a book about how we argue when we disagree, and how the worlds we use when in our
debates can lead to polarization that ultimately undermines democracy. It can be read both as a
reflection on how people like you and I debate issues, and also as a commentary about larger
public debates in the US and other democracies around the world.

1. What do you think are some good standards for argumentation? Fairness? Inclusivity?
Civility? Science? What do you think matters when we make our claims?

2. Who should we believe when we view public debates? Whose arguments carry more

3. The author is a rhetorician, concerned with the words we use. She argues that too much
of public debate today is based on demagoguery, i.e. argument based on the identity of
those arguing, where who is saying something matters more than what they are saying or
how they are saying it. Demagoguery simplifies complex issues and blames the other side
for problems. What are some examples of argument based on identity?

4. The book looks at the internment of Japanese Americans in the US during WWII as an
example in which demagoguery contributed to an unjust outcome. Are there other
examples of this that we can point to today, in the US and in other countries?

5. How do public arguments based on identity instead of other standards affect democracy?
Should we be concerned about this? The author points to the dangers of polarization.
Why is polarization a problem for democracy? Can you think of examples?

6. Democracy rests on the idea that we can argue about policy—which problems are
important, what causes those problems, and how we can solve them—and then decide
what to do based on voting instead of violence. Each side accepts the other side as
legitimate participants in the system. How does demagoguery—argument based on
identity—affect arguments about policy and perceptions of legitimacy?

7. Is the skepticism of science that we see on both the left and the right today (though about
different issues) a result of demagoguery? How might demagoguery undermine science?
What is the impact on policy of delegitimizing science?

8. How might demagoguery affect the level of violence in society? What is the relationship
between public speech that relies on identity, and the potential for violence in society?
Are there historical and current examples you can identify?

9. What is the role of the media in demagoguery? How does social media heighten the
problems of demagoguery?

10. What are some techniques each of us can use to ensure that we cut off this “us versus them” style of debate? What is “good disagreement”? What do you think of her suggestions for how to argue more effectively? Her suggestions are: consume less of “bad” media; don’t engage with people who rely on demagoguery, but engage instead with those who foster empathy; or argue with those using demagoguery, but do so in ways that undermine it (reject in-group/ out-group distinctions, avoid bad argumentation); and engage in democratic deliberation that emphasizes standards of fairness, inclusion, responsibility, self-skepticism.

11. When you hear or read arguments, can you identify the following problems that contribute to poor argumentation and demagoguery? Inconsistent premises, circular reasoning, genus-species errors/ overgeneralization, false dilemmas, misuse of statistics, post hoc ergo propter hoc, fallacies of relevance/ red herrings such as ad hominem attacks, appealing to authority, irrelevant appeal to emotion, bad motives, scare tactics, straw man, false equivalence. Give examples of each.

12. People on both the left and right of the ideological spectrum have criticized this book. Why? What do you think concerns them?