Demagoguery and Democracy
By Patricia Roberts-Miller
Arts Discussion Questions

1. On pg. 33, the author offers a definition of demagoguery. How would you define demagoguery in your own words? If you had to distill the message of this book into one sentence, what would it be?

2. Why is a discussion of demagoguery and democratic deliberation important? How do these concepts impact your life?

3. Why is demagoguery detrimental to democracy? Are there other areas of life where you have seen demagoguery at work?

4. “Democracy is hard; demagoguery is easy” (p.129). What distinguishes democracy from demagoguery? Why is demagoguery often more appealing than democratic deliberation?

5. Demagoguery works by dividing issues and people into in-groups (us) and out-groups (them) (p.36). In what ways might our consumption of art reflect and/or reinforce in-group favoritism? In what ways might it challenge in-group favoritism?

6. Do you agree that compassion and empathy can help us overcome the “us vs. them” style of debate? Can the arts help us to be more empathetic/compassionate towards others? What examples can you think of?

7. Roberts-Miller contends that argument is essential to democracy, and the strategies we use to argue matter. Can the arts help us argue more effectively? If so, how? If not, why not?

8. On pg. 14 the author states public discourse should favor principles such as inclusion, fairness, responsibility, and self-skepticism. Which of these principles do you believe is most essential? Would you add any other principles to the list? Explain.

9. Roberts-Miller offers several solutions for combatting demagoguery: consuming less demagoguery (via consuming multiple points of view, particularly those we disagree with), persuading those who repeat demagogic talking points (via empathy and humor), arguing (by dismantling the demagogic proclamations), and supporting democratic deliberation. Have you ever used these strategies? Which do you think are most effective? Are there other ways we can fight demagoguery?

10. Shepard Fairey (illustrator and designer of Obama’s now iconic campaign poster) and Franz Ferdinand (Scottish rock band) have both used their mediums to criticize President Trump for being a demagogue (see Fairey ‘s print Demagogue and Franz Ferdinand’s song of the same name). What do you think of Fairly and Franz Ferdinand’s own rhetorical strategies – are they following the principles of demagoguery or deliberation?
11. As education continues to evolve, many have debated the relative value of degrees in the arts vs. STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. Might this debate be a result of demagogic thinking? Are arts and STEM fields really opposites or could this be a false dichotomy? Can the arts and STEM complement and enhance one another as the new STEAM (STEM + Arts) and STREAM (STEM + Arts + WRiting) proponents suggest? Do scientists need arts training?

12. The arts can be a power vehicle of communication, and many artists throughout history have used their work to engage in public discourse and/or confront controversial issues (e.g. Otto Dix, Guerilla Girls, Ai Weiwei, Banksy). Can the arts help us express and respond to controversial ideas more effectively? What examples can you think of?

13. Criticism over the public funding of controversial exhibits by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ, sparked a controversy that ultimately led to the Supreme Court upholding a law that permits the National Endowment for the Arts to consider “general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public” when deciding whether to fund artistic grant proposals. This “decency clause” has been oft criticized as supporting censorship and violating free speech. Should artistic expression be limited when receiving public funding? Why/why not?