Demagoguery and Democracy Discussion Questions
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According to Patricia Roberts-Miller, demagoguery is the reduction of politics to in-group vs. out-group. Demagoguery is discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric by framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and means by which (not whether) the out-group should be scapegoated for the current problems of the in-group. The argument is about loyalty and identity. Instead of engaging arguments and evidence, people accept and dismiss claims on the basis of who makes them.

1. Think about an example of when you might have considered something done by your out-group “bad” while excusing similar behavior by a member of your in-group.

2. An underlying problem of demagoguery is that it polarizes complicated political situations into arguments based on the identity of those arguing –us versus them –and blames them for problems. Name some examples of arguments based on identity?

3. Consider your identity or identities. Does your identity align with policies you support? Are there any policy issues that you support or oppose that stray from your identity? How do members of your in-group respond to your departure from the in-group narrative?

4. There are many policy issues that impact the health of individuals in communities locally, nationally and globally (e.g., climate change, gun violence, women’s reproductive health, health care, vaccination, immigration). Is there any common ground to be reached on any of these issues? Which? How?

5. Roberts-Miller says that arguments about how we should argue most interfere with demagoguery. If we are disagreeing about a course of action, then we are in the realm of policy deliberation – arguing about the cause of the problem, the need, and various plans to address it (p. 18). How would you suggest political leaders address health-related policy issues using democratic deliberation? Choose climate change, gun violence, women’s reproductive health, health care, vaccination, opioid abuse, immigration, or other issue with health outcomes that impact individuals, families and communities.

6. When gun violence in the US is framed as a public health issue, data are used to show that guns kill more than 39,000 people and cause nearly 85,000 injuries each year (APHA, 2019). At this moment, what is the likelihood that US politicians will take action to address this public health issue effectively? If we do something about the culture of demagoguery (p. 9), what is the likelihood that this public health issue can be addressed effectively? What solutions do you recommend? See suggestions on pp. 94-95.
7. How has women’s reproductive health been impacted by policy decisions at state, federal, or global levels? How can you make an argument to support women’s health that does not involve an argument based on identity? What data would you use to strengthen your argument in deliberation?

8. Read Getting a measles vaccination isn't a personal choice – it's a social responsibility. Robert Reich calls skepticism about science and conspiracy theories rubbish. “Some demagogues insist our national identity depends on the whiteness of our skin, our European heritage and our English language. And on keeping ‘others’ out.” But, Reich says, measles are back, largely because some people have stopped vaccinating. Having read the 2019 First Year Book, what do you think of Reich’s use of the term demagogue? If you have followed media about measles outbreaks, has the media contributed to a culture of demagoguery? How can the media do better? Explain.

9. Roberts-Miller says “Democracy is hard; demagoguery is easy (p. 129). What do you think the author means by that statement?

10. 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? (from ARTS question set)


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