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A **demagogue** [Template:IPAc-en](/wiki/Template:IPAc-en) (from Greek dēmagōgos, dēmos ‘the people’ + agōgos ‘leading’)[[1]](#cite_note-1) according to [Webster's](/wiki/Webster's) Universal College Dictionary is a person, especially an orator or political leader, who attempts to gain power by arousing people's emotions and prejudices.[[2]](#cite_note-2)

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## History and definition of the word[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=1)]

The word *demagogue,* meaning a leader of the common people,[[3]](#cite_note-3) first arose in ancient Greece, originally with no negative connotation,[[4]](#cite_note-4) but eventually came to mean a troublesome kind of leader who occasionally arose in [Athenian democracy](/wiki/Athenian_democracy). Even though democracy gave power to the common people, elections still tended to favor the aristocratic class, which favored deliberation and decorum. Demagogues were a new kind of leader who emerged from the lower classes. Demagogues relentlessly advocated action, usually violent[[5]](#cite_note-5)—immediately and without deliberation. Demagogues appealed directly to the emotions of the poor and uninformed, pursuing power, telling lies to stir up hysteria, exploiting crises to intensify popular support for their calls to immediate action and increased authority, and accusing moderate opponents of weakness or disloyalty to the nation. While many politicians in a democracy make occasional small sacrifices of truth, subtlety, or long-term concerns to maintain popular support, demagogues do these things relentlessly and without self-restraint.[[6]](#cite_note-6) Demagogues have been found in democracies from Athens to the present day.[[5]](#cite_note-5) Democracies are instituted to ensure freedom for all and popular control over government authority; through their popular appeal, demagogues exploit the freedom secured under democracy to gain a level of power for themselves that overrides the rule of law, thereby undermining democracy.[[7]](#cite_note-7) The Greek historian [Polybius](/wiki/Polybius) thought that democracies are inevitably undone by demagogues. He said that every democracy eventually decays into "a government of violence and the strong hand," leading to "tumultuous assemblies, massacres, banishments."[[7]](#cite_note-7) Throughout its history, the word *demagogue* has been used to disparage any leader thought to be manipulative, pernicious, or bigoted.[[5]](#cite_note-5)

## Famous historical demagogues[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=2)]

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### Cleon[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=3)]

The Athenian leader [Cleon](/wiki/Cleon) is known as a notorious demagogue mainly because of three events described in the writings of [Thucydides](/wiki/Thucydides)<ref name=Grant> Michael Grant, *Ancient Historians,* [p. 98](http://books.google.com/books?id=e4st2bdc8CQC&pg=PA98#v=onepage), [pp. 110–111](http://books.google.com/books?id=e4st2bdc8CQC&pg=PA110#v=onepage). Barnes & Noble Publishing (1994). ISBN 1-56619-599-3 </ref> and [Aristophanes](/wiki/Aristophanes).<ref name=Merry> Aristophanes, *The Knights.* [Here](http://books.google.com/books?id=fBEWAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA5#v=onepage) is an old free version translated by William Walter Merry, Clarendon Press (1902). The translator says on p. 5:  
"The picture of Cleon the demagogue has been painted for us in the comedies of Aristophanes, and in the graver history of Thucydides. On the strength of these representations, he is commonly taken as the type of the reckless mob-orator, who trades upon popular passions to advance his own interests." </ref>

First, after the failed revolt by the city of [Mytilene](/wiki/Mytilene), Cleon persuaded the Athenians to slaughter not just the Mytilenean prisoners, but every man in the city, and to sell their wives and children as slaves. The Athenians rescinded the resolution the following day when they came to their senses.

Second, after Athens had completely defeated the Peloponnesian fleet and Sparta could only beg for peace on almost any terms, Cleon persuaded the Athenians to reject the peace offer.

Third, he taunted the Athenian generals over their failure to bring the war in Sphacteria to a rapid close, accusing them of cowardice, and declared that he could finish the job himself in twenty days, despite having no military knowledge. They gave him the job, expecting him to fail. Cleon shrank at being called to make good on his boast, and tried to get out of it, but he was forced to take the command. In fact, he succeeded—by getting the general [Demosthenes](/wiki/Demosthenes_(general)) to do it, now treating him with respect after previously slandering him behind his back. Three years later, Cleon and his Spartan counterpart [Brasidas](/wiki/Brasidas) were killed at the [Battle of Amphipolis](/wiki/Battle_of_Amphipolis), enabling a restoration of peace that lasted until the outbreak of the Second Peloponnesian War.

Modern commentators suspect that Thucydides and Aristophanes exaggerated the vileness of Cleon's real character. Both had personal conflicts with Cleon, and [*The Knights*](/wiki/The_Knights) is a satirical, allegorical comedy that doesn't even mention Cleon by name. Cleon was a tradesman—a leather-tanner; Thucydides and Aristophanes came from the upper classes, predisposed to look down on the commercial classes. Nevertheless, their portrayals define the archetypal example[[8]](#cite_note-8) of the "demagogue" or "rabble-rouser."

### Alcibiades[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=4)]

[Alcibiades](/wiki/Alcibiades) convinced the people of [Athens](/wiki/Athens) to attempt to conquer [Sicily](/wiki/Sicily) during the [Peloponnesian War](/wiki/Peloponnesian_War), with disastrous results. He led the [Athenian assembly](/wiki/Athenian_assembly) to support making him commander by claiming victory would come easily, appealing to Athenian vanity, and appealing to action and courage over deliberation. It should be noted, however, that Alcibiades's expedition could have succeeded if he was not denied from command due to the political maneuvers of his rivals.[Template:Citation needed](/wiki/Template:Citation_needed)

### Gaius Flaminius Nepos[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=5)]

[Gaius Flaminius Nepos](/wiki/Gaius_Flaminius_Nepos) was a Roman [consul](/wiki/Consul) most known for being defeated by [Hannibal](/wiki/Hannibal) at the [Battle of Lake Trasimene](/wiki/Battle_of_Lake_Trasimene) during the second Punic war. [Hannibal](/wiki/Hannibal) was able to make pivotal decisions during this battle because he understood his opponent. [Gaius Flaminius](/wiki/Gaius_Flaminius) was described as a demagogue by [Polybius](/wiki/Polybius), in his book the Rise of the Roman Empire. "...Flaminius possessed a rare talent for the arts of demagogy..."[[9]](#cite_note-9) Because Flaminius was thus ill-suited, he lost 15,000 Roman lives, his own included, in the battle.

### Joseph McCarthy[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=6)]

[thumb|upright|Senator](/wiki/File:Joseph_McCarthy.jpg) [Joseph McCarthy](/wiki/Joseph_McCarthy), an American demagogue [Joseph McCarthy](/wiki/Joseph_McCarthy)[[10]](#cite_note-10)<ref name=Wicker>Tom Wicker, *Shooting Star: the Brief Arc of Joe McCarthy,* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2006) ISBN 0-15-101082-X  
"Joe McCarthy may have been the most destructive demagogue in American history." p. 5  
"McCarthy's Senate colleagues voted sixty-seven to twenty-two to censure him for his reckless accusations and fabrications." back cover</ref>[[11]](#cite_note-11) was a [U.S. Senator](/wiki/United_States_Senate) from the state of [Wisconsin](/wiki/Wisconsin) from 1947 to 1957. Though a poor orator,[[12]](#cite_note-12)[[13]](#cite_note-13) McCarthy rose to national prominence during the early 1950s by proclaiming that high places in the United States federal government and military were "infested" with [communists](/wiki/Communists),[[14]](#cite_note-14) contributing to the [second "Red Scare"](/wiki/Red_Scare). Ultimately his inability to provide proof for his claims led him to be [censured](/wiki/Censure_in_the_United_States) by the United States Senate in 1954, and to fall from popularity.[[15]](#cite_note-15)

## See also[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=7)]

* [Authoritarian personality](/wiki/Authoritarian_personality)
* [Autocracy](/wiki/Autocracy)
* [Charismatic authority](/wiki/Charismatic_authority)
* [Cult of personality](/wiki/Cult_of_personality)
* [Thought-terminating cliché](/wiki/Thought-terminating_cliché)
* [Fear mongering](/wiki/Fear_mongering)
* [Majoritarianism](/wiki/Majoritarianism)
* [Narcissistic leadership](/wiki/Narcissistic_leadership)
* [Ochlocracy](/wiki/Ochlocracy)
* [Pandering](/wiki/Pandering_(politics))
* [Polemic](/wiki/Polemic)
* [Populism](/wiki/Populism)
* [Platitude](/wiki/Platitude)
* [Social dominance orientation](/wiki/Social_dominance_orientation)
* [Toxic leader](/wiki/Toxic_leader)

## References[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=8)]

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## External links[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=9)]

[Template:Wikiquote](/wiki/Template:Wikiquote)

* [Template:Wiktionary-inline](/wiki/Template:Wiktionary-inline)

[Template:Authority control](/wiki/Template:Authority_control) [Category:Propaganda techniques](/wiki/Category:Propaganda_techniques) [Category:Populism](/wiki/Category:Populism) [Category:Political terminology](/wiki/Category:Political_terminology)