Dēmagōgia in Context

With the recent waves of populism sweeping across Europe and the United State of America, the term 'demagogue' has seen a corresponding resurgence in use. That 'demagogue' has always had pointedly negative connotations in English can be seen from its first appearance in the *Eikon Basilike* of 1649 and Milton's reply in the *Eikonoklastes* (iv.36), where he refers to "the affrightment of this Goblin word". Neither Milton nor the monarchist author of the *Eikon Basilike*, however, had any particular love for democracy: we, who largely claim to venerate democracy, should make an effort to determine whether the meaning of 'demagogue' may have been twisted by the prejudices of those who imported it into the English language. To that end, in my paper I shall consider the uses of the Greek word *dēmagōgos* (and those terms directly related to it) in authors of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. My examination reveals that, far from indicating a particularly bad politician in a democracy, the sort of politician who gives democracy a bad name, *dēmagōgos* simply refers to any politician operating in, and accepting the validity of, democracy. Although this meaning could occasionally carry negative connotations of its own (compare the English word 'politician' itself, which, while usually a job description, can sometimes be deployed as a slur), most often the positive or negative assessment of *dēmagōgos* depended on an author's perspective on democracy: for any author who rejected democracy as a flawed politician system, a *dēmagōgos* was equally flawed. My conclusions build upon, and in some places correct, earlier analyses of the lexicography of demagogy such as Manfred Lossau's consideration of the term(s) in Aristophanes and Thucydides, Renate Zoepffel's work with Aristotle, and Luciano Canfora's comprehensive, diachronic exploration of the history of 'demagogue'.

Bibliography

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Audio-visual Needs

Just a projector: I shall bring my own laptop.