



Examining psychological effects of demagogic discourse on perceived threat and political intolerance

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Abstract

Despite warnings about the increasingly confrontational tone of political discourse, little research has experimentally examined the psychological impact that different political styles may have. We seek to fill this lacuna by investigating whether exposure to a type of political discourse labelled as ‘demagogic discourse’ fosters anti-democratic stances by threatening values and lowering political tolerance. To this end, we conducted three experiments in Spain and the U.S. ($N_{\text{total}} = 999$), where exposure to demagogic v. moderate discourses was manipulated. Ideological affinity was also considered by manipulating whether the ideology of the discourse matched that of participants in Studies 1 and 2. We found support for our hypotheses, as exposure to demagogic discourse increased value threat and reduced political tolerance independent of ideological-matching. Yet, in the U.S., effects on tolerance were moderated by satisfaction with democracy. Ultimately, our research validates warnings about the dangers of demagogic political discourses at a psychological level.

Keywords Demagogy · Democracy · Political tolerance · Value threat.

Across the democratic world, anti-establishment political options like the Trump administration, Bolsonaro’s PSL, the Brexit Leave campaign, “True Finns”, “Fratelli d’Italia”, and “Front National” have recently garnered considerable success. Among several characteristics that these options share, one of the most evident is the use of an unconventionally confrontative and polarizing discourse, which we refer to in this paper as demagogic. We define *demagogic discourse* here as a *type* of politically polarizing speech that is centered around outgroup blame attribution, aggressive language, us-versus-them rhetoric and anti-establishment

remarks (Reinemann et al., 2018). The presumed success of leaders and campaigns using this kind of polarizing discourse have sparked research on the topic (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), which often carries the untested assumption that such discourse helps to explain increases such support, thus contributing to a more polarized society in which, at some point, democratic principles may become threatened.

However, social-psychological research directly testing this assumption is surprisingly scarce. Thus, different from other work, we specifically focus in this article on empirically evaluating the direct causal psychological impact that such discourse may have on people. Because such discourse is focused on eliciting strong perceived threats and confrontative reactions against other groups and the system in general, we examine whether demagogic discourse can increase *perceived threat* (i.e. to one’s personal values) and decrease *political tolerance* (i.e. the willingness to extend key democratic principle of freedom of speech of one’s most disliked outgroup in society; Dono et al., 2018). Indeed, eliciting value threat may be the main goal of leaders using demagogic speech. Through using confrontative language and blame attributions they seek to mobilize their potential electorate by instilling the perception that cherished personal values are at stake. In fact, it might even be the case that

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demagogic discourse can evoke value threat independent of one's political affiliation. For those thinking alike the leader, value threat may emerge through the narrative that the outgroup -and even the system- is menacing, yet for those opposing such leaders, the discourse itself may be highly threatening. In a parallel fashion, the strong confrontative and anti-establishment language of the demagogic discourse may decrease political tolerance in a way that goes against democratic principles (e.g., wanting to limit freedom of speech of disliked outgroups in society). Again, this effect may arise across the ideological spectrum, as those agreeing with the leader seek to restrict those outgroups portrayed as menacing, while those opposing the leader want to silence the leader themselves. If true, then the increased value threat and decreased political tolerance that demagogic discourse may cause is problematic, as evidence suggests it contributes towards creating a negative political climate and hindering support for democracy (Skitka, 2002).

We tested this line of thought through experimentally examining whether demagogic discourse generates stronger perceptions of value threat and causes a decrease in political tolerance. Through testing this unexplored assumption, we will be in a better position to understand whether such discourse is indeed psychologically consequential, or just 'empty words'. Indeed, because we also wanted to understand whether demagogic discourse elicits similar effects across the ideological spectrum, our studies are not designed to be tailored to a specific form of content (e.g., specific forms of populism or ideology), but on the type of discourse we refer to as demagogic. To achieve this, we conducted three experiments in different political contexts, in which we randomly assigned participants to read a demagogic or moderate discourse and afterwards measured participants' perceived value threat and political tolerance, thus testing the causal impact of the discourse on those variables. Together, this set of experiments tests, for the first time, whether demagogic discourse causes a psychological impact by increasing perceptions and preferences that are detrimental for a positive democratic climate.

Key features of demagogic discourse

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, demagoguery refers to political leadership that appeals to "passions and prejudices," and is marked by being "unprincipled" and agitating (OED, 2024). In line with this definition, we use the term demagogic discourse to describe a communicative style characterized by a rejection of dialogue with other political actors and an avoidance of substantive policy debate. This discursive mode is not confined to any single ideology but rather appears across a range of political movements

including far-right and far-left populism (Mudde, 2019), authoritarianism on both ends of the spectrum (Conway et al., 2018), and authoritarian populism (Bugaric, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). However, instances of demagogic discourse could even emerge within more system-supportive political parties or ideologies (El País, 2024), especially if there are high levels of affective polarization. Hence, through using this conceptualization, we seek to capture the effects of a specific style of political communication, isolating those effects from the broader characteristics that might define a particular movement or ideology such as recurring issues, overarching narratives, or systemic orientations¹.

The key features of demagogic discourse, then, center around blame attribution, aggressive language, explicit outgroup derogation and anti-establishment remarks. We specifically operationalize demagogic political discourse as revolving around three main discursive elements: (1) presenting outgroups as threats and explicitly derogating them; (2) breaking 'political etiquette' by insulting political rivals and using morally charged attacks; and (3) using accusations against key democratic pillars, especially the media.

As for the first characteristic, demagogic leaders have been observed to inject their discourse with negative and morally charged remarks, targeting outgroups that are used as scapegoating targets for social problems (Newman et al., 2021). These outgroups are labelled as threats towards the righteous people by using mockery, insults and moral derogation (Cervone et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021). This constitutes an attempt to elicit a sense of generalized threat that users of the demagogic discourse seek to profit from by erecting themselves as the only leaders able to fight against this menace (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The attacked outgroups are not necessarily part of the 'elite' and in fact, they are often typical scapegoating targets such as immigrants. Thus, demagogic leaders seek to associate these 'malignant' groups with 'elites' that supposedly favour them to the detriment of 'the people' (Mols & Jetten, 2016).

Secondly, the demagogic discourse would heavily rely on person-based attacks and explicit insults towards political

¹ We consider it important to clarify what we believe qualifies as demagoguery, distinguishing it from actively denouncing clear grievances that may also involve morally-charged language. In this sense, we believe that one of the main characteristics of demagogic discourse lies in the consistent and indiscriminate use of the three rhetoric characteristics previously mentioned. While denouncing a certain malpractice by a political agent could be accompanied by moral remarks, for them to remain non-demagogic, they should refer to a specific and verifiable malpractice, rather than being used indiscriminately whenever the political opposition is referred. As for attacks on press, it is important to clarify that these attacks tend to refer to the media as a whole, and aim to cast doubt on the idea of free press in general. Hence, a political leader criticizing a specific outlet spreading fake news would not be considered demagogic, while casting doubt on the integrity of press in general without any evidence of corruption is.

opponents, dismissing the typical costumes of politeness and discretion exercised in politics (Nai, 2021; Wodak et al., 2021). Therefore, a pillar of demagogic discourse would be to use insults and moral attacks towards their rivals in order to strip them of their dignity, reduce their assigned competence and devalue them by signalling permanent negative traits (Feldman, 2023). This fosters an image of a strong leader, alien to the rules of ‘traditional politics’, against the supposedly corrupt elite (Wodak et al., 2021). In this way, the demagogic leaders assign blame and associate political rivals with immoral outgroups increasing the sense of threat caused by political opponents and portraying them as invalid targets for dialogue (Cervone et al., 2021).

The third element involves attacks on institutions that are considered key for proper democratic functioning (e.g., the media, the judiciary branch), also called anti-establishment rhetoric. For our operationalisation of this component we have focused on attacks on free press, which are arguably more transversal across different political contexts and movements. Demagogic leaders tend to identify media outlets that are ideologically opposed to them as part of the corrupt elite, publicly dismissing their information as ‘fake news’ (Kellner, 2018). Furthermore, they tend to treat the media as interested actors in the political game who maliciously act to undermine their image (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). Supporting this, it has been observed that users of the demagogic discourse such as populists and authoritarian-populists have repeatedly portrayed the media as part of a conspiracy of the elites against them (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015), while people higher in populist attitudes effectively include the media as part of their conception of a corrupt elite (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021)².

Examining the psychological impact of demagogic discourse

The features of demagogic political discourses are important because these are potentially related to the two psychological reactions that jeopardize a positive and dialoguing political climate, that is, value threat and decreased political tolerance (i.e., less willingness to grant freedom of expression to disliked political groups). Indeed, based on literature on value threat and political (in)tolerance (D’Amore et al., 2022; van Zomeren et al., 2023), we expect that demagogic discourse can increase both these psychological responses. This is because the emphasis of

demagogic discourse on moral attacks and outgroup derogation signals threats to people’s core values that would prompt confrontational -and even violent- defensive reactions (Fiske & Rai, 2014; van Zomeren et al., 2023). In fact, our conception of demagogic discourse includes the very instrumentalization of value threat, and thus we aim to examine if it is successful in achieving this increase of perceived threat, and whether it threatens those from other ideological camps as well.

Supporting this claim, recent experimental research found that situational exposure to hostile messages from an outgroup morally attacking innocent people “like us” triggered perceptions of fundamentally malicious outgroup intentions. This is thought to motivate a value-protective response consisting of strong outrage, moralization, and a desire for punishment (D’Amore et al., 2022; also see van Zomeren et al., 2023). As moral attacks in demagogic discourses serve to undermine the basic values of political rivals, this is likely to reduce their consideration as moral actors and decrease tolerance towards them (D’Amore et al., 2022; Kovacheff et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the use of explicitly impolite remarks has been shown to elicit anger in the public (Gervais, 2019), an emotion related to the emergence of political intolerance (Halperin et al., 2009). The exacerbation of the us-vs-them rhetoric would also prompt an exclusionary reaction towards other groups that increases the willingness to limit their ability to spread their ideas (e.g. decreased political tolerance) (Finkel et al., 2020). Value threat and decreased tolerance may be further exacerbated by negative views of politicians representing other ideologies which negative, person-centred campaigns seem to promote at least at the implicit level (Carraro et al., 2010). Finally, conspiracy-rooted anti-media remarks could also promote threat and hamper political tolerance as they convey the idea that the system itself and its agents are corrupt and try to illegitimately promote the outgroup’s cause (Stoeckel & Ceka, 2023) and so they should be censored. In sum, there is good reason to assume that a demagogic political discourse has features that may trigger value threat and damage political tolerance.

The current research

The main goal of our research was to test whether exposure to a demagogic political discourse (compared to a moderate political discourse) increases perceived value threat and decreases political tolerance. To this end, we conducted three experimental studies in which Spanish and U.S. residents were exposed to either a demagogic discourse or a moderate one. Indeed, to increase the external validity of the findings, Study 1 was conducted in Spain and Studies 2 and 3 in the US.

² This could also explain the empirical association between support for populism and conspiracy theories (van Prooijen, 2018). In fact, populist leaders occasionally become the defenders and proponents of conspiracy theories, such as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro, who have referred to Climate Change as a hoax (Haltinner et al., 2021).

To enable experimental manipulation of the demagogic feature of outgroup derogation, the context for the discourses was the critique of the actions of a political outgroup, in which the political leaders also elaborated on the role of another candidate and the media. To increase ecological validity, we built the demagogic condition based on a series of statements adapted from the Twitter account of Donald Trump, a leader that has repeatedly used this kind of communicative strategy (Newman et al., 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In Studies 1 and 2, we randomly allocated participants to a left-wing or right-wing source of the discourse, and creating a “matching” and “non-matching” condition depending on participants’ ideological position. The design of Study 1 and Study 2 thus enabled us to test whether the discourse depended on the ideological fit between the leader and the participant. In Study 3, all participants broadly matched the ideology of the leaders. We further explored in Study 2 whether demagogic discourse affected satisfaction with democracy, and in Study 3 whether such discourse is related to different forms of threat and support for undemocratic practices. All studies were approved prior to being conducted by the bioethics committee of [BLINDED]. We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in these studies. Power analyses for all studies were executed a priori using GPower software. Data and materials for all studies are publicly available (OSF) at https://osf.io/jsqa8/?view_only=9337111dd9c4469496e8a1485623c613.

Study 1

We manipulated demagogic discourse and measured perceived value threat and political tolerance by using a between-groups 2 (demagogic discourse v. moderate discourse) by 2 (participant-leader ideology match v. participant-leader ideology mismatch) experimental design.

Method

Sampling Spanish participants were recruited online via Qualtrics. Due to the absence of literature on our specific topic, we based our a priori power analysis on expected effect sizes extracted from akin research on the effects of political incivility on citizens’ attitudes (Gervais, 2019). The latter research reported small-to-medium effect sizes ($d \approx 0.35$; converted from $R^2 = 0.03$). Using this effect size for an ANOVA analysis ($f = 0.17$) with $df = 1, 4$ groups and $\beta = 0.80$ yielded a target sample size of 274 participants. Participants who failed to correctly respond to a basic

comprehension check (“*Is the leader in favour or against the target group?*”) were automatically screened out. In the end, we recruited 310 participants (50.32% female; $M_{age} = 43.33$; $SD = 12.76$).

Procedure The study was introduced to participants as an experiment aimed investigating memory retention of political news. After completing sociodemographic questions, the introductory section to the experiment described to participants that they would be asked to read a brief piece of political news about a leader’s speech and instructed them to pay close attention to the text. To prevent potential biases the political leader would not be identified.

Participants then saw a screen that depicted a typical ‘loading’ page and were randomly allocated into one of four groups. The discourse condition was assigned in a straightforward fashion (demagogic $n = 161$, moderate $n = 149$). To create the matching conditions, the ideological information (self-placement and most disliked political group) of participants was crossed with the ideological condition to which they were randomly assigned as a way to determine whether they belonged to the matching or non-matching condition. For example, a person that self-placed themselves as a 2 on the ideological scale was assigned a match with the left-wing leader. This was combined with the group they stated to like less in cases of those people who self-placed themselves as moderates (e.g., score of 5). In this case, matching or non-matching was assigned depending on the orientation of their most disliked group (i.e. if both the leader they were exposed to and their most disliked group were right-wing, then the assignment was non-matching). When participants self-identified as moderates while at the same time not providing a specific negative political group, these participants were thus treated as missing values in terms of their matching condition (non-matching $n = 149$, matching $n = 160$, missing $n = 1$). Those who failed to provide a negative political outgroup were also assigned missing values in the tolerance scale ($n = 2$).

Experimental manipulation Both discourse conditions featured a political leader discussing the actions of a political outgroup. The leader in the stimuli discussed the actions of two fictional but realistic groups with opposing stances on the regulation of real estate and rent prices, a recurrent news topic in Spain at the time of data gathering. The demagogic condition included the three elements discussed above: outgroups as threats, moral attacks disregarding political etiquette and delegitimization of the media. Despite also -and

explicitly- arguing against the target outgroup, the moderate discourse pledged in favour of dialogue, did not attack or delegitimise outgroups or political rivals and stressed the importance of free press (for the full stimuli, see online materials).

Measures Participants reported their age, gender, and educational level. They also provided their political orientation on an 11-point self-report scale (0=totally left-wing to 10=totally right-wing).

Checks Participants first completed a comprehension check where they were asked whether the leader was in favour or against the target group. As both conditions leaders were explicitly against the target group, this check also guaranteed comparability of the two conditions. As a manipulation check, participants rated the tone of the message from *very confrontative* to *very conciliatory*. We opted for this check as a proxy as we believe the demagogic discourse should be rated as more confrontational. Although the fact that a discourse is catalogued as demagogic goes beyond tone of the message, we wanted to preserve the subtlety of the manipulation and avoid potential demand characteristics derived from directly asking participants about specific elements of each discourse. The perceived ideology of the leader and

target group was also assessed. All the above-mentioned scales were measured as single, 10-point-scaled items.

Value threat Participants indicated to what extent they felt their fundamental values to be threatened by the leader's discourse on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree, e.g. "*I think that the message from this political leader is proof that the moral values I personally care about are at stake*", $\alpha=0.87$).

Political tolerance In a measure adapted from previous research (Dono et al., 2018; Halperin et al., 2009), participants freely provided their 'most disliked' political group and then answered a series of questions the degree freedom of expression which that group should be granted (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree, e.g. "*This group should be allowed to... Give a speech at a public high school or university*", $\alpha=0.90$). Disagreeing answers thus express a willingness to censor and thus political intolerance.

Results

Manipulation check As intended, participants in the demagogic condition perceived the tone of the message to be less conciliatory than participants in the moderate condition ($M_{\text{difference}} = 3.27$, 95% CI = [2.87, 3.66], $t(308)=16.46$, $p<.001$, $d=1.87$). Moreover, participants who were exposed to a left-wing leader correctly identified the leader as left-wing ($M=4.40$) and the group targeted by the speech as right-wing ($M=5.89$). The reverse pattern was visible for those exposed to a right-wing leader, who identified the leader as right-wing ($M=6.97$) and the group targeted as left-wing ($M=4.00$).

Hypothesis testing An ANOVA analysis using the discourse and ideological matching manipulations as factors supported our hypothesis regarding value threat, as we found a statistically significant main effect of the discourse manipulation, where demagogic discourse caused higher threat ($F(1,305)=11.63$, $p<.001$; $\eta^2_p=0.037$; see Fig. 1). Interestingly, we did not find a statistically significant main effect of the matching condition ($F(1, 305)=2.08$, $p=.150$), nor did we find a significant effect of the interaction term ($F(1, 305)=1.21$, $p=.272$). This means that the effect of the discourse manipulation on value threat did not depend on ideology matching.

Regarding political tolerance, those participants in the demagogic condition reported statistically significantly lower tolerance ($F(1,304)=5.76$, $p=.017$; $\eta^2_p=0.019$; see Fig. 1). Again, we did not find statistically significant effects of the matching condition ($F(1, 304)=1.32$, $p=.474$), nor of the interaction ($F(1, 304)=0.20$, $p=.779$).

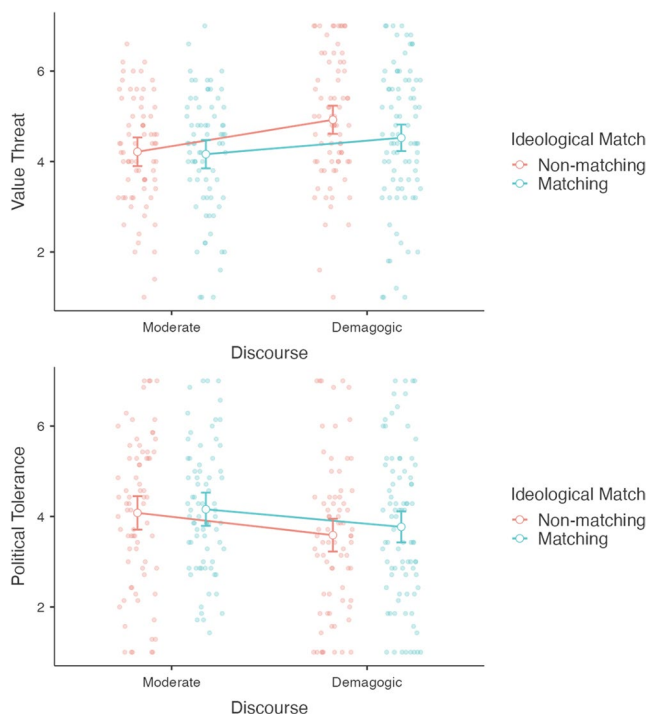


Fig. 1 Estimated marginal means of value threat plotted and political tolerance by discourse and ideology matching. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals

Discussion

Study 1 offered the first experimental support for the impact of demagogic discourse in citizens' psychology (independent of ideological matching). We found that, compared to a moderate condition, exposure to a demagogic discourse increased value threat and decreased political tolerance. As can be expected from experimental manipulations that rely on single exposure to a brief text, effect sizes were small-to-medium (value threat $d=0.38$, political tolerance $d=0.27$). We designed Study 2 to replicate the Study 1 findings, while also seeking to increase their generalizability by changing the sample and political context from Spain to the U.S.

Furthermore, we added a number of measures. First, we wanted to be able to statistically control for any potentially confounding effects of the valence and complexity of the discourse, which we did by measuring these variables. Second, we added a measure of satisfaction with democracy, which could represent a potential consequence of the demagogic discourse at an structural level. In this way, we would be measuring consequences at the individual (value threat), intergroup (tolerance) and structural (satisfaction with democracy) planes. While dissatisfaction with democracy has been posited as a predictor of populist attitudes (Zanotti & Rama, 2021) other studies have reported opposite findings by claiming that it is populist supporters who support democracy more (Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). Similarly mixed results can be found when looking at the consequences of populism for satisfaction with democracy, with some studies reporting dissatisfaction after a populist electoral victory (Fahey et al., 2022) while others have found no relation between populist success and declines in support for democracy (Hartevelde et al., 2021). For this reason, we seek to explore the impact that demagogic discourses widely used by these populist movements may have on attitudes towards democracy.

Study 2

Method

Sampling Participants were recruited via Prolific. Considering that the effect size from Study 1 for the two independent ANOVAs was different but in both cases in the small-to-medium range, we decided to replicate the power analysis of Study 1 (target $n=274$). Again, those who failed to correctly answer the comprehension check were screened out. Our final sample was 309 U.S. participants (47.89% female; $M_{age}=38.82$; $SD=13.44$).

Procedure The procedure was identical to Study 1, except for the language used and the groups that the leader targeted.

To further increase ecological validity, we used two political groups prominent in the United States: the right-wing leader targeted the Black Lives Matter group in their discourse, whereas the left-wing leader discussed the Alt-Right movement. Participants were randomly distributed across the discourse (demagogic $n=162$, moderate $n=147$) and leaders' ideology conditions. The method to determine ideological matching was identical to that of Study 1 (non-matching $n=155$, matching $n=148$, missing $n=6$). Those who failed to provide a negative political outgroup were assigned missing values in the tolerance scale also ($n=4$).

Measures Manipulation checks and scales for *value threat* ($\alpha=0.91$) and *political tolerance* ($\alpha=0.93$) were identical to those of Study 1. Moreover, we added measures for valence (e.g., "How positive or negative do you think the message is?"), complexity (e.g., "How easy do you think the message was to read?"), and satisfaction with democracy (e.g., "Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the United States?"). All these variables were Likert-type single-item measures, valence and complexity ranged from 0 to 10; while satisfaction with democracy was assessed on a 1–7 scale, as the other DVs.

Results

Manipulation check As in Study 1, participants in the demagogic discourse condition perceived the tone of the message to be less conciliatory than participants in the moderate discourse condition ($M_{difference}=3.42$, 95% CI=[2.93, 3.92], $t(307)=13.63$, $p<.001$, $d=1.55$), indicating that the manipulation was successful. Those exposed to a left-wing leader correctly identified the leader as left-wing ($M=3.75$) and the group targeted by the speech as right-wing ($M=7.35$). This replicated for those exposed to a right-wing leader, who identified the leader as right-wing ($M=7.95$) and the group targeted as left-wing ($M=4.57$).

Hypothesis testing Replicating the effects of Study 1 in a different context, an ANOVA confirmed the effect of the discourse condition on value threat ($F(1,299)=15.03$, $p<.001$; $\eta^2=0.048$, see Fig. 2). We did not find significant effects of the matching condition ($F(1, 299)=0.33$, $p=.565$) or the interaction ($F(1, 299)=0.01$, $p=.946$). To control for any potential confounding effects that the valence or the complexity of the text may have had, we performed an ANCOVA with the former variables as covariates, to control for their effects. Results held, supporting our hypothesis that being exposed to a demagogic discourse (compared to moderate) increases value threat ($F(1,297)=9.47$, $p=.002$; $\eta^2_p=0.031$).

Fig. 2 Estimated marginal means of value threat plotted by condition and matching. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals

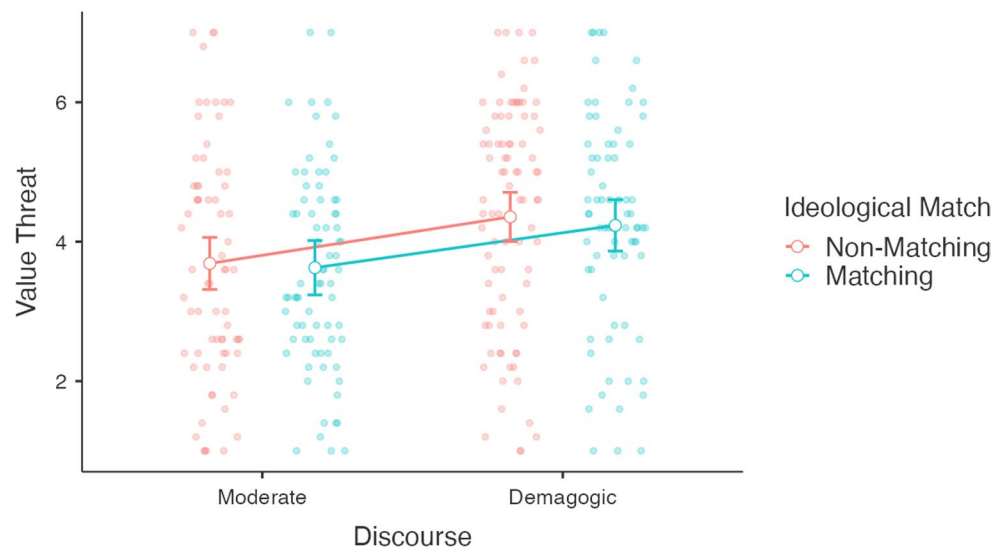
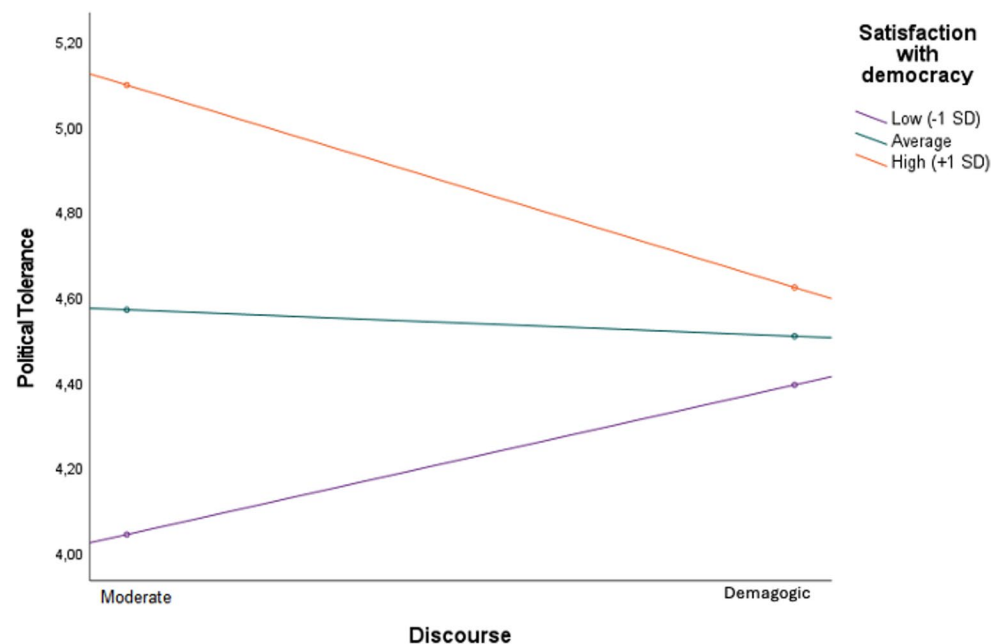


Fig. 3 Plot of the interaction effect between the demagogic discourse condition and satisfaction with democracy on political tolerance (Study 2)



The results of the discourse manipulation on political tolerance did not replicate Study 1, as the demagogic discourse failed to alter scores on political tolerance ($F(1, 297)=0.28$, $p=.59$). Dovetailing with Study 1, the ideological-matching manipulation did not generate significant differences either ($F(1, 297)=1.81$, $p=.17$), nor did the interaction between conditions ($F(1, 297)=0.13$, $p=.71$). We also did not find support for an effect of the discourse manipulation on satisfaction with democracy ($F(1, 299)=0.01$, $p=.92$). The matching manipulation did not produce significant effects either ($F(1, 299)=0.39$, $p=.53$). The interaction between discourse and matching was also statistically non-significant ($F(1, 299)=0.63$, $p=.42$). We followed-up these analyses with ANCOVA analysis controlling for complexity and valence and once again results held.

Exploratory analysis To better understand why findings might not have replicated in this context, and considering that satisfaction with democracy was not affected by the discourse manipulation, we explored this variable as a moderator of the relationship between the manipulation and political tolerance. We believed this to be a viable way forward, as dissatisfaction with democracy has been previously found to be associated to attunement with political options that more heavily rely on demagogic discourse (Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). Hence, the ultimate impact of the discourse on tolerance may be moderated by the degree in which people consider democracy to be functioning correctly. A moderation analysis with 10,000 bootstrapped samples suggested support for this interaction ($B=-0.25$, $SE=0.12$, 95% $BCI[-0.50, -0.01]$) (see Fig. 3 for a graphic

representation of the pattern, Table 1 for the simple slope analysis), showing that for those higher on satisfaction, the demagogic discourse manipulation decreased political tolerance. Conversely, for those lower on satisfaction, the scores in the demagogic discourse condition were similar, but they were more intolerant when exposed to the moderate discourse compared to the demagogic one.

Inspired by these explorative results, we then considered the possibility that the effects of the discourse condition on value threat may also be moderated by satisfaction with democracy. Results, however, showed that this was not the case ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% $BCI [-0.08, 0.35]$).

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the Study 1 findings for value threat, but not for political tolerance. Adding to Study 1, Study 2 found that the value threat findings held when controlling for the perceived valence and complexity of the discourse. Together, Studies 1–2 show that demagogic discourse increases the perception of value threats. Importantly, Study 2 also offered a pointer toward a more complex pattern of results for political tolerance in the US context. Specifically, we found evidence for moderation by satisfaction with democracy, suggesting that demagogic discourse positively impacts tolerance for those more dissatisfied with democracy, while negatively impacting it for those more satisfied?. Before interpreting this interaction, however, we first wanted to conduct a third study to replicate this pattern within the same context and sample. Study 3 thus again included a measure of satisfaction with democracy.

Because the effects were again independent of ideological matching, we dropped this factor in Study 3. Instead, we fixed the study so all participants would ideologically match with the leaders. For that reason, however, in Study 3 we also measured support for the leader. The reason is that, as both leaders criticise another political group, supporting the leader should imply higher threat levels due to negative views on the exogroup. Thus, to accurately examine whether discourse type produces any additional threat, we need to control for support.

Finally, we wanted to zoom in on which specific values are threatened by demagogic discourse. Thus, Study 3 explored which type(s) of values (personal, societal or democratic) would be threatened by a demagogic discourse. We reasoned that a *value* threat response would be visible across all these types and would be unmoderated by satisfaction with democracy. In addition, we also

Table 1 Simple slope estimates for moderation analysis of satisfaction with democracy by demagogic discourse condition on political tolerance (Study 2)

Levels of M (Sat. Democracy)	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
			Lower	Upper		
Average	-0.06	0.20	-0.46	0.34	-0.30	0.764
Low (-1SD)	0.35	0.30	-0.25	0.94	1.15	0.250
High (+1SD)	-0.47	0.27	-1.01	0.05	-1.74	0.082

added a measure of support for undemocratic practices (Voelkel et al., 2023) to explore.

Study 3

Method

Sampling Participants were recruited online via an online sourcing platform (Prolific). We used the effect size from Study 2 resulting from the ANCOVA analysis on value threat in Study 2 ($f=0.17$) to perform a power analysis for an ANCOVA with two groups, one degree of freedom and one covariate. The resulting minimum sample size was 274. We recruited 380 U.S. participants (47.63% female; $M_{\text{age}}=41.19$, $SD=14.01$, 1 missing).

Procedure The introductory information and stimuli were identical to those of Study 2. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions (demagogic condition $n=206$, moderate/moderate condition $n=174$) yet all participants were assigned to a leader whose ideology broadly matched theirs. Satisfaction with democracy, given its conceptualised role as a moderator, was measured before the manipulation in this study. After the manipulation, participants answered to all relevant scales, including a scale of support for the leader added as a covariate. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were fully debriefed.

Measures Manipulation checks, as well as scales for *satisfaction with democracy*, and *political tolerance* ($\alpha=0.93$), were identical to those of Study 2. In addition, the measures for specific value threat were based on the items used in the two previous studies, and were, for each of the three types, composed of 4 items. As such, three subscales were created that contained similar items that measured *personal* (e.g. ‘I think that the message from this political leader is proof that the moral values that I personally care for are at stake’, $\alpha=0.92$), *democratic* (e.g. ‘I think that the message from this political leader is proof that democratic values are at stake in this country’, $\alpha=0.94$), and *societal* (e.g. ‘I think that the message from this political leader is proof that our society’s most fundamental values are at stake’, $\alpha=0.95$) value threat. Furthermore, the support for undemocratic practices scale, adapted from Voelkel et al. (2023) contains four items that assess the support for the preferred party to engage in undemocratic actions (e.g. ‘Republicans [Democrats] should reduce the number of polling stations in areas that support Democrats [Republicans]’). The target parties on the items were adapted to measure support for the party representing the political orientation declared by

participants at the beginning of the survey. The scale contains 4, 7-point Likert-scaled items ($\alpha=0.83$).

Results

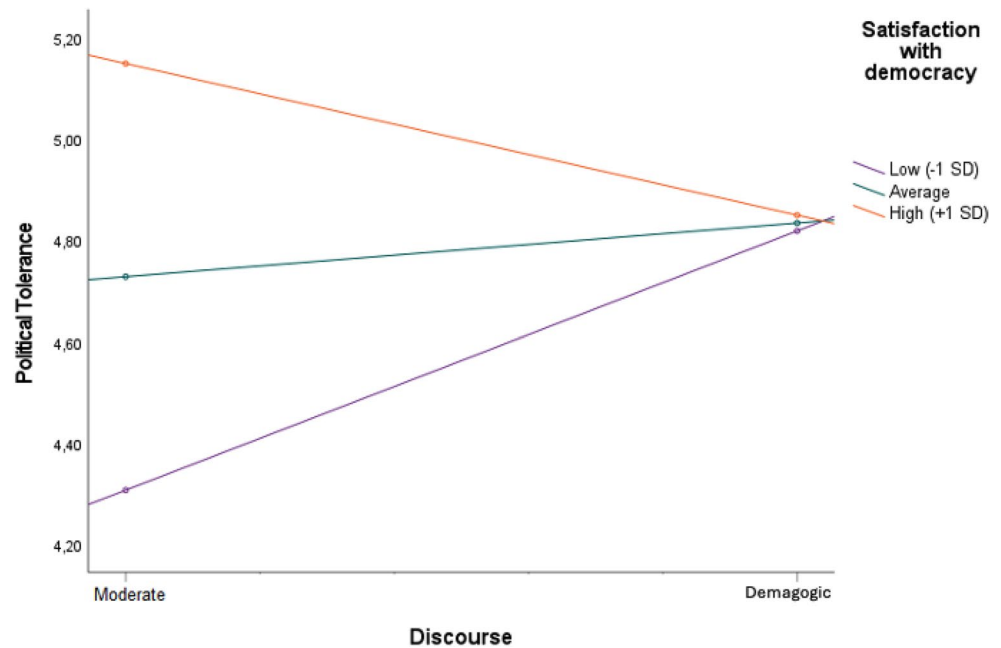
Manipulation check Replicating Study 1–2, participants in the demagogic condition perceived the tone of the message to be less conciliatory than participants in the moderate condition ($M_{\text{difference}}=4.70$, 95% CI= [4.29, 5.11], $t(378)=22.54$, $p<.001$, $d=2.32$). The manipulation thus was effective.

Hypothesis testing As we wanted to assess the impact of demagogic discourse specifically on distinct types of value threat, we performed separate univariate ANOVAs. Unlike Study 1–2, we did not find significant differences between the demagogic and moderate condition on either personal threat ($F(1,378)=0.79$, $p=.37$), democratic threat ($F(1,378)=0.56$, $p=.45$), or societal values threat ($F(1,378)=2.57$, $p=.11$). However, this analysis does not control for the potentially confounding influence of support for the leader. Furthermore, as expected, support for the leader was associated with all three value threat measures (Personal, $r=.25$, $p<.001$; Democratic, $r=.20$, $p<.001$; Societal, $r=.23$, $p<.001$). We therefore reran the same analysis with support for the leader as a covariate. These results showed that people in the demagogic condition showed increased threat of personal ($F(1,377)=5.95$, $p=.015$; $\eta^2_p=0.016$), democratic ($F(1,377)=3.88$, $p=.049$; $\eta^2_p=0.010$) and societal values ($F(1,377)=9.31$, $p=.002$; $\eta^2_p=0.024$). This conceptually replicates the Study 1–2 findings.

Replicating Study 2, neither the ANOVA analysis ($F(1,362)=0.97$, $p=.32$) nor the ANCOVA using support for the leader as a covariate ($F(1,361)=0.35$, $p=.55$), showed a direct effect of the demagogic condition on political tolerance.

We then proceeded to test the moderation found for tolerance in the previous study. Specifically, we performed a moderation analysis using 10,000 bootstrapped samples to test the moderation of the discourse condition by support for democracy. As in Study 2, results showed a statistically significant interaction between the condition and satisfaction with democracy in predicting political tolerance ($B=-0.25$, $SE=0.11$, 95% BCI [-0.47, -0.04]). The pattern of the interaction also replicates that of Study 2 (Fig. 4; Table 2 for simple slopes).

Fig. 4 The plot of the interaction effect between the demagogic discourse condition and satisfaction with democracy on political tolerance (Study 3)



Further replicating Study 2, this moderation was not significant for value threat, be it personal ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% $BCI [-0.05, 0.34]$), democratic ($B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% $BCI [-0.07, 0.32]$) or societal ($B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% $BCI [-0.01, 0.39]$).³ We also examined whether the demagogic condition affected support for undemocratic practices. Neither the ANOVA ($F(1,378) = 0.22$, $p = .63$) nor the ANCOVA using support for the leader as a covariate ($F(1,377) = 1.51$, $p = .22$) were statistically significant. Results further showed a non-significant interaction effect ($B = 0.07$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% $BCI [-0.07, 0.23]$).

Discussion

Study 3 results supported a general value threat interpretation, as the demagogic message threatened all three types of values (when support for the leader was statistically controlled for --- we believe that this control is essential in this study because the effects of demagogic discourse are, after all, subtle. Indeed, when considering that in this study all participants match the ideology of the leader, opinions about the groups being criticized may otherwise obscure the impact of the type of discourse). Study 3 also replicated

the Study 2 moderation of satisfaction with democracy on the relationship between the demagogic discourse condition and political tolerance. This is an unexpected finding, as demagogic discourse should decrease tolerance, and we elaborate on our explanation of this moderation below.⁴

General discussion

Across three experiments conducted in two different national and political contexts, we found some unqualified and some qualified support for our hypotheses on the psychological impact of demagogic discourse. That is, we found that demagogic discourse caused an increased generic sense of value threat (including personal, societal, and democratic value threat), but did not consistently directly affect political tolerance. Interestingly, demagogic discourses had value-threatening effects even when it came from a leader of a like-minded ideology. This can be interpreted in terms of the matching leader creating threat through the narrative that the outgroup and even the system is menacing (and should be silenced); yet for those opposing this leader, the discourse itself may be highly threatening (and lead to wanting to silence it). The key point here is that such effects do not contribute to healthy democratic functioning (Dono et al., 2018).

We note that the results of our Study 1, conducted in Spain, fully supported both our main hypotheses, as value

³ We also explored whether the demagogic condition had an indirect effect on support for democratic practices via value threat. Since the main effect of the discourse condition on value threat was only significant when support for the leader was introduced as a covariate, we also included it as a covariate in the mediational analyses. Interestingly, results showed a significant indirect effect of the demagogic condition on support for undemocratic practices through personal value threat ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .03$) but not via democratic ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .14$) or societal values ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .06$).

⁴ Study 3 also examined demagogic discourse indirectly increases support for undemocratic practices via value threat. This finding suggests that a demagogic discourse can also -indirectly- increase support for trying to bend democracy in accordance with the interests of the ingroup.

Table 2 Simple slope estimates for moderation analysis of satisfaction with democracy by demagogic discourse condition on political tolerance (Study 3)

Levels of M (Sat. Democracy)	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
			Lower	Upper		
Average	0.19	0.18	-0.16	0.54	1.07	0.282
Low (-1SD)	0.60	0.26	0.07	1.12	2.24	0.025
High (+1SD)	-0.21	0.24	-0.69	0.26	-0.88	0.379

threat increased and political tolerance decreased among those participants exposed to the demagogic discourse compared to those in the moderate condition. Study 2–3, conducted in the U.S., offered more nuance by replicating the effects for value threat, but not for political tolerance. Specifically, tolerance tended to diminish only for those satisfied with democracy that were exposed to the demagogic style, while tending to increase for those dissatisfied with democracy.

Understanding this finding requires reminding that we operationalized political tolerance to measure the degree of freedom of speech extended towards participants' most disliked political outgroup. Below we offer a set of potential explanations for this finding. For one, this effect may be due to attunement of those unsatisfied with democracy to anti-establishment rhetoric (Uscinski et al., 2021). People who are more satisfied with how democracy works should resonate less with anti-establishment populist rhetoric and groups (e.g., Zaslove & Meijers, 2023) which are the ones that use this kind of discourse more often. In other words, people satisfied with democracy may see the demagogic discourse as problematic. Meanwhile, those dissatisfied with it may have more negative views about the moderate discourse, as something fake, subject to the 'tyranny of political correctness' and in general representative of the establishment they perceive to be malfunctioning (Galais & Pérez-Rajó, 2023).

It could also be possible that participants may have perceived the moderate discourse as evasive or insufficiently confrontative, prompting those satisfied with the system to censor those groups who they consider threatening. Alternatively this could motivate those more dissatisfied with the system to accept a more open playing field, where more drastic opinions may emerge. Hence, for those satisfied with democracy, the demagogic discourse might trigger a negative reaction against politicians that derives in a willingness to limit freedom of speech. Those unsatisfied with democracy, by contrast, would be more pleased with the more 'authentic' demagogic style (Montgomery, 2017), prompting an improvement on the opinions about politicians and a subsequent increase in tolerance.

Extending this line of thought, those unsatisfied with democracy may be more attuned to an anti-establishment (and demagogic) discourse and hence more prone to increase their political tolerance towards other groups to prevent anticipated censorship of their views. In an important sense, then, people unsatisfied with democracy may seek to promote a political space where 'everything' is allowed and there is no political correctness, so by claiming they do not wish to censor others they expect others to let them express their anti-system views. Alternatively, exposure to the demagogic condition may have reduced previous

concerns about the freedom of expression of their most disliked groups, as this rhetoric suggested that those groups are unlikely to be taken seriously in the first place.

Another aspect that needs to be accounted for when discussing these results is that, considering tolerance was measured as extended freedom of speech, its weight on the political culture and national identity of both Spain and the U.S. may differ. For instance, freedom of speech is a core component of national identity in the U.S. (Stuckey, 2023) which may require further examination and nuanced analysis about the boundary conditions around censorship for U.S. citizens.

Theoretical and practical implications

This article offers the first series of experimental studies analysing the psychological consequences of demagogic discourse, specifically in triggering a conflictual mindset featuring value threat and decreased political tolerance. In line with the notion that populist, authoritarian and far-right or left movements represent a threat to peaceful and democratic coexistence (Mudde, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), our findings suggest that participants exposed to the king of demagogic (vs. moderate) discourse preferred by these movements perceived their values to be more threatened, which could cause dangerous defensive reactions (Skitka, 2002). This is congruent with value protection models, especially those that assume a political (and democratic) context (e.g., D'Amore et al., 2024; van Zomeren et al., 2023). Nevertheless, those models do not focus on the political discourse. The current findings imply that it will be fruitful to combine theory and research on political discourse with theory and research on value protection, and hence to combine key insights from moral and political psychology.

Furthermore, the notion of demagogic discourse as a threat to democratic coexistence is strengthened by the observation that this type of discourse hampers political tolerance (i.e. creates a greater willingness to censor political outgroups). The unexpected finding of a moderation in the U.S. contexts, however, shows that, within this context, this may only be true for those highly satisfied with democracy.

Another interesting insight is that the effects of the type of discourse we studied were not moderated by ideological matching. The movements more often associated with the use of demagogic discourse have been predominantly associated with right-wing ideologies (Mudde, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), but we wanted to examine whether left-wing people and right-wing citizens could be similarly affected by these narratives. Given the consistent findings for value threat across the board, our findings imply that the effects of the demagogic political discourse on value threat and tolerance seem elicited regardless of whether or not

participants share their ideology with the leader that communicates the message. This would mean that demagogic discourses appeal to common psychological, threat-eliciting mechanisms that are not bound by ideology, and may have polarizing effects across the board.

Finally, our findings may have implications for theorizing about “strong” leaders. Indeed, our findings support the idea that leaders using demagoguery can be effective, through their discourse, in promoting a confrontative and less dialoguing political climate which may allow them to influence the political demand and supply dynamics (Klandermans & Mayer, 2005). This is supported by recent research that has shown that morally polarized political scenarios increase the demand for ‘strong’ leaders (Crimston et al., 2022). Even though our dependent variables do not include moral polarization, such findings fit rather well with the idea that demagogic (and ‘strong’) leaders are more prone to thrive in the conflictual contexts they create. Future research is needed to better understand the specific components of the appeal of demagogic rhetoric.

More practically, our findings imply that demagogic political narratives may create a negative and even violence-prone social climate, as people tend to feel outraged and even react violently to defend their moral values when they perceive them to be threatened (Fiske & Rai, 2014; Pretus et al., 2018). We hope that this set of studies can spark further research that improves our understanding of this phenomenon, for instance by comparing the effects of different discourses that use different combinations of the elements used here to operationalize demagoguery, or even novel ones that could fit this style. Furthermore, we hope that our results may also spark concern among politicians, media, and citizens in general due to the negative effects demagogic discourse has on the public. Hopefully, our work can also bring awareness about this situation so that those agents might consider advocating more strongly for a more sophisticated and dialogue-oriented political style.

Limitations and future directions

The present set of studies has limitations while also offering avenues to start further research. First, we would like to acknowledge that the experimental effects we found are small-to-medium in size. However, it is important to be aware that these are found in the context of single-exposure experiments. In real life, exposure to demagogic discourse rarely happens in isolated instances such as what participants of our experiment have experienced, but rather citizens are exposed to it in a more constant basis. This may suggest that the effects we found could be exacerbated, but it could also mean that different degrees of exposure may generate different effects that the current research would be unable to pick

up on. For instance, a very high degree of exposure could generate habituation and lack of a threat response. While single exposures can provide insight into immediate reactions and causal mechanisms, future research would benefit from adopting longitudinal or repeated-exposure designs to more accurately capture the sustained influence of demagogic communication in political life.

Second, the studies were set and conducted in two so-called *WEIRD* countries (Henrich, 2020) and hence may be difficult to generalize to other, non-*WEIRD* settings. It would be interesting, for instance, to examine the psychological consequences of demagogic discourse within East Asian democracies. Following the Asian Values hypothesis that argues that East Asians are more prone to civic obedience (Kingsbury & Avonius, 2016) similar discourses may not be as effective in triggering threat, or could be even more potent in fostering intolerance. Another possibility is that different norms on politeness across cultures (Kádár & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011) influence whether demagogic discourse is seen as more or less acceptable. The political context may also play a crucial role. For instance, countries with a more recent authoritarian past may still show more authoritarian practices (Cameron & Orenstein, 2012) and thus find demagogic discourse that relies on harsh, uncivil criticism of the opposition more appealing. Future research can test whether the current results hold or not.

Third, future research can improve the measurement of political tolerance in the US context. Despite finding an interaction effect between the discourse manipulation and satisfaction with democracy on tolerance, we believe Studies 2 and 3 would have shown clearer results on a measure not focused on people's most disliked outgroup. This is less fitting with the U.S. two-party political system (Frymer, 2010), in which participants are likely to select one of the two main parties as their 'most disliked' group. By contrast, in the Study 1 context (Spain), the political landscape in the last decade became multi-party oriented (Spálti et al., 2023), which makes it more likely that participants select more radical political groups as their most disliked. This could imply less restrictions on limiting freedom of expression towards the group one has in mind. Thus, future research may benefit from measures of tolerance that are more specifically tailored to the political context studied.

Moreover, future research in this area may benefit from considering individuals' level of political involvement. Variables such as personal political salience (Duncan & Stewart, 2007) could influence how participants perceive different types of discourse and shape their responses. Future studies might also consider sampling specific subgroups, such as partisans or political activists, to capture these dynamics more precisely.

We argue that our interpretation of the political tolerance results in the U.S. also opens up intriguing avenues for future research to substantiate and extend our findings. One promising direction is to examine how moderate discourses are perceived across different contexts. For instance, a discourse that aims to be moderate may be perceived as disingenuous, inadequate, or even negligent when addressing an issue that citizens consider highly important. We also encourage further investigation of our "open playing field" hypothesis --- that more radical individuals may be less inclined to censor others after receiving a demagogic discourse as they favor a political environment in which all views (however extreme) can be freely expressed. Furthermore, because our manipulations involved a political leader commenting on the actions of a social group, future studies could explore how various discursive styles are received when the focus shifts to a specific issue or policy rather than an outgroup.

If these interpretations of our results would be confirmed in future research, it would imply that demagogic discourse deteriorates the prodemocratic leanings of those citizens who should be, in principle, more prone to defend those ideals. Yet, surprisingly, it could increase tolerance of those less satisfied with democracy, although we still harbour doubts about how prodemocratic motivations behind this may be. To fully understand this effect, it is necessary to conduct further studies, but it is key to highlight that tolerance here is operationalized as allowance of free speech. Although demagogic discourse fosters willingness to let others express themselves for those most dissatisfied, such effects may not be exclusively positive. People dissatisfied with democracy and exposed to demagogic discourse, for example, may see this rhetoric as a 'fresh' change from old and corrupt politics. Thus, their willingness to let others speak freely may be related to a desire for a new political field in which everything is allowed, without formal rules or political correctness. Although this is only our current attempt to explain our results, we believe that actually putting this idea to the test constitutes one exciting avenue for future research.

Finally, future research could also advance our understanding of the effects of demagogic discourse by examining different types of threats. While we have already attempted to distinguish how demagogic discourse may threaten various kinds of values (such as personal, democratic, and societal), perhaps greater nuance and elaboration is needed. For example, it would be valuable to investigate whether demagogic discourse differentially threatens distinct moral foundations (e.g., binding vs. individualizing) and how such effects may interact with individuals' ideological orientations, for example as proposed by Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2013). Demagogic discourse might

particularly threaten individualizing foundations such as care, because it symbolically hurts others (D'Amore et al., 2024). It is also possible that participants interpret demagogic discourse as a threat to their own group identities—either through direct attacks or through a broader sense that their ingroup and its values are not respected within society (van Zomeren et al., 2023). Future studies examining the impact of demagogic discourse would benefit from expanding the range of threat types assessed, in order to capture the full scope of its potential effects.

Conclusion

Our research offers the first *experimental* confirmation that the warnings made about demagogic discourse may be justified at the *psychological* level. Although in our experiments we examined just one exposure to such discourse, it seems that rather than mere words, demagogic discourse elicits perceived threat in people that goes against democratic plurality. One can only imagine what, for example, sustained exposure to such discourse across an electoral campaign or a presidential term can do. The first experimental evidence we hereby present on the noxious effects of demagogic discourse compels us to take a more in-depth look at how potentially dangerous words are in this context. Alongside the growth of this kind of discourse, there is also a wave of euphemization by those who use it and those who support them, arguin that, even when foul, words are just words. We have provided some first evidence that this is a crude downplay of the implications of political speech, and that demagogic political discourse contributes to setting the table for potentially antidemocratic confrontation.

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Ethics approval Prior to implementation, all studies received ethical approval from the institutional Bioethics Committee of the University of Santiago de Compostela.

Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Declarations

All data and materials used in this article is openly available online at the Open Science Framework repository (link in the manuscript)

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