

4. Scapegoating and Affective Polarization

In the previous chapters, I presented the current literature on affective polarization, René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the revelation of Christ. I also laid out Girard's concepts of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry, victimization, and scapegoating in the modern day. I discussed his view of today as an apocalyptic situation as well. In this chapter, I aim to connect the previous three chapters by showing that Girard's theory adds a crucial insight to current political science on affective polarization. My key argument is that the current political science literature on affective polarization should incorporate *scapegoating*. In this chapter, I will operationalize scapegoating. Before doing so, I will concisely discuss employing Girard's theory non-theologically. Then, I exemplify what it means to include scapegoating in affective polarization, how it differs from current literature on affective polarization, and why including and analyzing scapegoating must be done with extreme caution. By showing how scapegoating can be operationalized, I hope to contribute to the current understanding of affective polarization.

4.1 Girard's theory without the cross

Girard's theory of mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the revelatory character of the Judeo-Christian scriptures has been used to study political events, but seldom as a political theory or to augment political scientific theories. The fact that Girard brought science and Christian apologetics together, "earned him criticisms from all quarters".²⁵¹ His thinking is neither easily used by theologians nor by social or political scientists and anthropologists. Suspicion and unease amongst scientists regarding his theory relate both to its scientific status, which I addressed in chapter 2 under the header 'falsification', and to his emphasis on the specific "epistemological relationship [of his theory] with Judeo-Christian revelation".²⁵² Girard's thinking can be characterized as being both "excessively and inadequately Christian".²⁵³ Girard himself considered his work scientific, and has asserted that it was his intellectual endeavors that brought him to belief, not the other way around. Girard is "clear that he does not consider himself to be erecting a theology or a theological anthropology".²⁵⁴

Even though it is uncommon to apply Girard to political science, it is not uncommon to argue that Girard's theory of mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the role of the Judeo-Christian scriptures can be separated from their apologetic features.²⁵⁵ For the purposes of this thesis, it is decisive to emphasize that Girard's thinking about our human tendency to scapegoat and the loss of the generative function of the scapegoat mechanism can be understood and employed from a non-theological standpoint. As I have previously described, Girard derived his ideas about our human tendency to scapegoat and the scapegoat mechanism as a generative mechanism from empirical anthropological studies and studies of literary and religious texts.

²⁵¹ Alison and Palaver, *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, 1st ed., 455.

²⁵² Alison and Palaver, *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, 1st ed., 468.

²⁵³ Anthony J. Scordino, "Method in Mimetic Theory: René Girard and Christian Theology," *Modern Theology* 40, no. 2 (2024): 323, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12880>.

²⁵⁴ Scordino, "Method in Mimetic Theory," 338.

²⁵⁵ Jun, *Toward a Girardian Politics*.

The loss of the generative function of the scapegoat mechanism and its consequences, as described in chapter 3, must be understood in light of the key role Christianity has played in history. Naturally, one can validly consider that Christianity played a key role in history without being Christian. Moreover, Girard's diagnosis of the modern era as an apocalyptic situation can be conceived of without referring to Christian doom or End-Time predictions. Predictions about the possibility of a nearing apocalypse or the end of humanity can be observed amongst other scholars as well, such as Anthropocene scholars.²⁵⁶

4.2 Operationalizing scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization

4.2.1 The lack of research on scapegoating in political science

Before I discuss a framework of scapegoating based on René Girard's theory in the next section, I draw attention to the aforementioned observation that scapegoating is not commonly discussed in political science. As I addressed in the Introduction chapter, in social psychology, sociology, and psychology, scapegoating is a recognized irrational social phenomenon that is thought to occur when people feel wronged.²⁵⁷ It includes taking out grievances on an innocent person.²⁵⁸ In political science, scapegoating is at times mentioned as a strategy that is deliberately employed by populist politicians.²⁵⁹ Curiously, scapegoating as a human inclination in the political realm is not a research topic on its own. Moreover, in affective polarization literature specifically, scapegoating is not mentioned as a feature of the phenomenon. The only person, to my knowledge, who has incorporated the 'scapegoat' as a part of the mechanisms of polarization is Bart Brandsma, a social and political philosopher by education, who is known to be a polarization expert.²⁶⁰ Thus, considering the lack of research on scapegoating as a widespread social phenomenon occurring in the political realm, it is important to address this research void.

²⁵⁶ Christoph Antweiler, "Apocalypse," in *Handbook of the Anthropocene: Humans between Heritage and Future*, ed. Nathanaël Wallenhorst and Christoph Wulf (Springer International Publishing, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25910-4_239.

²⁵⁷ "Scapegoating - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics."

²⁵⁸ The following articles include a few of the sparse articles that study scapegoating in the political realm: Muller, "Enemies of Democracy"; Traber et al., "Errors Have Been Made, Others Will Be Blamed"; Hartevelt et al., "Multiple Roots of the Populist Radical Right"; Stoeckel and Ceka, "Political Tolerance in Europe."

²⁵⁹ Mariken A. C. G. van der Velden et al., "Populism and Polarization: A Nostalgic Narrative of 'Us' and 'Them,'" *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 4 (2025): 1408–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2025.10020>.

²⁶⁰ Bart Brandsma advises professionals about polarization, including mayors, municipalities, journalists, and managers. He has written various non-academic books on polarization for a broader audience, highlighting the various roles that exist in polarization. One of them is the scapegoat. The following link includes an illustration of Brandsma, showcasing the various roles he differentiates in polarization: https://insidepolarisation.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/1.-Roles-in-Polarisation_print.pdf. In the chapter "This Book keeps to the Middle" of the book *Polarisation: Understanding the Dynamics of Us versus Them* (2017, p. 7), Brandsma mentions that René Girard has inspired his work. "Bart & Inside Polarisation," Inside Polarisation, n.d., accessed April 11, 2026, <https://insidepolarisation.nl/bart-inside-polarisation/>.

4.2.2 Operationalizing scapegoating: building on Faldetta and Gervasi

In this section, I propose a framework of scapegoating within affective polarization based on René Girard's theory. Faldetta and Gervasi's 2024 Girardian analysis of workplace bullying served as inspiration for the framework I propose.²⁶¹ They employ scapegoating conditions based on Girard's thinking to address workplace bullying and its collective and social dimensions. First, I will explain these conditions, then, I discuss the proposed scapegoating framework relevant for affective polarization.

Faldetta and Gervasi undertake a Girardian analysis of workplace bullying to address gaps in existing theories in managerial and organizational studies on workplace violence.²⁶² Previous theories, such as Social Exchange theory (SET), Affective Event theory (AET), and displaced aggression theory, explain workplace bullying as either an affective or behavioral reaction to previous perceived mistreatment. Displaced anger theory further explains that bullying is often not reciprocal but displaced, for example, towards an uninvolved person. According to Faldetta and Gervasi, these theories do not explain why a specific victim is chosen and how larger collective and social dimensions play a role. Therefore, they turn towards René Girard's thinking.

As I addressed in the second chapter, "René Girard: Mimesis, Scapegoats and Christ," scapegoating occurs under a few conditions. Firstly, a crisis of *undifferentiation* is key.²⁶³ In such a crisis of undifferentiation – a mimetic crisis – mimetic rivalry is spreading throughout the community. As rivalry between antagonists grows, the original cause of the crisis, a natural phenomenon or disputed mimetic desire, for instance, has become irrelevant; only antagonism remains. The reciprocity between the antagonists consists of reciprocal insults, revenge, hatred, and fascination. As the initial object of desire disappears, "conflictual mimesis" takes over acquisitive mimesis, which, instead of dividing people over an initial object, unifies the antagonists to converge on the same adversary to strike down.²⁶⁴ *Violence*, a second key factor, is generated in this reciprocity. Continuing escalation can be detrimental to the existence of the group. To ensure the group's existence, violence is concentrated on a scapegoat.

In such a crisis, rather than turning to ourselves as sources of the crisis, we seek a scapegoat to blame for the crisis at hand. Therefore, for Girard, *accusations* are also a key feature of scapegoating.²⁶⁵ Importantly, that which makes the victim a scapegoat, and not a justly accused perpetrator, is that this person or group is held "uniquely responsible for the rivalry" or crisis itself, and that as a consequence they are preferably expelled or annihilated.²⁶⁶ It can also be the case that the scapegoat is accused of crimes that threaten the cultural order, such as

²⁶¹ Guglielmo Faldetta and Deborah Gervasi, "Escaping the Scapegoat Trap: Using René Girard's Framework for Workplace Bullying," *Journal of Business Ethics* 191, no. 2 (2024): 269–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05488-9>.

²⁶² Faldetta and Gervasi, "Escaping the Scapegoat Trap."

²⁶³ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

²⁶⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 26.

²⁶⁵ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 270.

²⁶⁶ Benoît Chantre and Paul Dumouchel, *The Revelatory Power of Mimetic Theory: Reading René Girard, Texts and the World* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025), 15.

endangering certain groups, like children, women, or elders, or crimes like religious crimes or taboos. The scapegoat does not have to be a completely innocent person, but is not guilty to the extent of the accusations at hand. On the side of the persecutors, it is important to realize that “persecutors end up convincing themselves that a small number of individuals, even a single one, can cause fatal harm to the whole of society”.²⁶⁷

For Girard, the victim carries signs of being too different from the rest.²⁶⁸ Girard writes that, “in a crisis communities look for someone to blame for the worst crimes imaginable, and we see a common pattern of picking on those people who are marginal or different in some way that doesn’t fit the system of differences in the community”.²⁶⁹ This was originally the case because for the generative scapegoat mechanism to work, the eventual death of the scapegoat was not supposed to trigger a new cycle of violence. An important feature of the scapegoat, according to Girard, is therefore their *abnormal difference*, which often means they carry specific signs of “disability or abnormality” in a cultural or physical sense, or are at the margins of society.²⁷⁰ What this ‘abnormality’ entails is always context-dependent. Consequently, an approach to analyzing crises and scapegoating should be “extremely fluid”.²⁷¹ The scapegoat can be from outside of the direct rivalry, but it can also be one of the mimetic rivals. Furthermore, since the scapegoat mechanism lost its generative and restorative function, a scapegoat and its death do not give rise to sacralization. Attributing the scapegoat a sacrificial role can still occur, but no new sacrificial order emerges out of their death.

Faldetta and Gervasi summarize these points into four prerequisites of scapegoating that they apply to frame workplace bullying.²⁷² Basing themselves on Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*, they write that a Girardian framework of scapegoating includes the following four conditions:

1. A crisis of undifferentiation
2. Stereotypical accusation
3. Specific signs for the selection of victims
4. Violence²⁷³

In the case of workplace bullying, the conditions of scapegoating can be detected in the literature, according to Faldetta and Gervasi.²⁷⁴ First, the literature suggests that workplace bullying occurs during workplace crises. A crisis of undifferentiation can entail a crisis in the legitimacy of power, or an economic crisis, such as stressful, competitive, unpredictable work environments in which the hierarchical organizational order is under pressure. In terms of stereotypical accusations, Faldetta and Gervasi show that the condition aligns with how victims of workplace bullying are treated: they are accused and blamed for not following rules or doing their job well, not differentiating in the correct way or at all. Moreover, they find in the

²⁶⁷ Faldetta and Gervasi, “Escaping the Scapegoat Trap,” 275.

²⁶⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

²⁶⁹ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 217.

²⁷⁰ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 272.

²⁷¹ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 272.

²⁷² Faldetta and Gervasi, “Escaping the Scapegoat Trap,” 275.

²⁷³ Faldetta and Gervasi, “Escaping the Scapegoat Trap,” 275.

²⁷⁴ Faldetta and Gervasi, “Escaping the Scapegoat Trap.”

literature that victims are often people belonging to marginal categories in their context. Victims can also include managers at the top; Girardian ‘shattered idols’. The fourth condition, the presence of violence, is the “most evident characteristic”.²⁷⁵ Violence can take many forms, ranging from verbal harassment to social isolation, or physical violence. A consequence of taking Girard’s thinking seriously, Faldetta and Gervasi mention, is that this scapegoat mechanism, having lost its generative function, puts survival of an order at risk. Thus, Faldetta and Gervasi seek ways, in terms of positive mimesis, to escape this trap.

These four conditions serve as a starting point for understanding how scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization works. As Faldetta and Gervasi note, scapegoating emerges during a crisis of undifferentiation, which includes a crisis of the social or hierarchical order. In this crisis, different sides try to differentiate themselves from the other, but end up imitating each other in their adversary and in their effort to differentiate themselves; conflictual mimesis. As mentioned in chapter 1, affective polarization was originally coined to refer to the phenomenon that “Republicans and Democrats increasingly dislike, even loathe, their opponents”.²⁷⁶ Depending on the identities at stake in the crisis or chaos, affective polarization, I argue, can be understood as a form of mimetic rivalry which can constitute a crisis of undifferentiation.²⁷⁷

Hence, I take affective polarization to be a possible condition in which scapegoating can occur. The severity of affective polarization influences whether there are different scapegoats for different poles, or whether at the height of the crisis, there is a situation of one versus all. As the crisis develops, the community searches for a victim, or a group of victims at the margins of society, who is/are blamed for the violence and crisis apparent in society. The crisis is characterized by a weakening of social institutions and a rise of crowds or mobs. The victim(s) is/are accused of being responsible for the disorder, instability, or the loss of identities of the crowds.

Precisely because the scapegoat mechanism lost its restorative function, scapegoating in the modern era takes the form of victimage with no sacralization and no effective end to violence.²⁷⁸ This also means that there can exist multiple scapegoats for various groups in a community, instead of one scapegoat that everyone agrees on, depending on the severity of affective polarization. Building on the framework of Faldetta and Gervasi, and Girard’s theory as discussed above, *scapegoating* in affective polarization includes the following features:

1. Scapegoating is a collective and contagious phenomenon.
2. Scapegoaters are convinced of the scapegoat’s guilt.
3. The scapegoat is conceived as being abnormal, in a physical or cultural sense, or is at the margins of society.

²⁷⁵ Faldetta and Gervasi, “Escaping the Scapegoat Trap,” 277.

²⁷⁶ Iyengar et al., “Affect, Not Ideology,” 405.

²⁷⁷ Apart from introducing the feature of scapegoating, Girard’s theory may provide an alternative meta-theory to explain why affective polarization occurs in the first place. In light of current explanatory theories in affective polarization literature – social identity theory and social categorization theory – mimetic theory might shed new light on the question of the origin, the role of affect and cyclical dynamics of affective polarization. Further inquiry into how desire and imitation influence affective polarization is warranted.

²⁷⁸ Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 266–72.

4. The scapegoat is accused of being responsible for the crisis at hand, of committing fundamental crimes, or of being a scapegoater.
5. The scapegoat's expulsion or annihilation is thought to solve a crisis.
6. The scapegoat is (likely to get) harmed.
7. The scapegoat is innocent to the extent of the accusations at hand.

These seven points include the features of scapegoating in affective polarization. Building on Girard's thinking about conflictual mimesis within a crisis of undifferentiation, it is crucial to stress that scapegoating is a collective phenomenon that is contagious, in the sense that it tends to grow and attract people. Scapegoaters are filled with delusion; they are unaware of their own scapegoat. A way to understand this point is that it is fairly easy to point at instances of scapegoating done by other people, but not at our own instances of scapegoating.²⁷⁹ As I discussed above, the person who is scapegoated is often someone at the margins of society, so that their potential expulsion or death does not restart a cycle of vengeance. The mutual blaming rivals engage in do not constitute acts of scapegoating. For it to be an act of scapegoating, the person being scapegoated must be attributed guilt for the crisis at hand, is accused of fundamental crimes, or is accused of being a scapegoater, and only their expulsion or annihilation is thought to solve the crisis. Scapegoating also entails that the victim is harmed or is in danger of getting harmed. The person who is scapegoated is never guilty to the extent that they are accused of being. They are innocent in that regard. This doesn't mean that scapegoats have to be entirely innocent of any crimes. In the next section, I will apply this framework to examples of contemporary scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization, to illustrate its insights.

4.2.3 How to incorporate scapegoating

Affective polarization involves loathing between people based on partisan group membership, which occurs when political identities become a salient identity category, driving negative or positive evaluations towards others based on political group membership.²⁸⁰ Affective polarization exists at various levels, including within the family, friendships, work and school environments, or in the political realm in general. To clarify how scapegoating plays a role as a feature of affective polarization, I analyze three contemporary acts of scapegoating: Donald Trump, immigrants, and the 'neutral' journalist. I shall analyze these from the current affective polarization narrative and from the scapegoating framework. By doing so, I will highlight how incorporating scapegoating into the conceptualization of affective polarization adds to our understanding of the phenomenon. It shows that affective polarization, besides involving negative affective evaluations of others based on partisan group membership, also can include blaming one person or one group for the crisis at hand. Taking scapegoating into account as a feature of affective polarization clarifies that scapegoating is related and in need of further analysis, not a separate, well-understood, unrelated occurrence. The inclusion of scapegoating

²⁷⁹ Aaron Pycroft, "Deconstructing the Scapegoat: Sources of Non-Violence Between Athens and Jerusalem," in *René Girard and Criminal Justice: Demythologizing the Victim*, ed. Aaron Pycroft (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), 43, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-82471-5_5.

²⁸⁰ Lelkes, "Review," 394.

also brings new perspectives on interactions between political elites and the masses regarding affective polarization, possible interventions, and ultimately, a responsibility for political science not to fall into the trap of scapegoating itself.

The first example includes Donald Trump, the 45th and 47th president of the United States. From the current literature on affective polarization, Trump would be considered a representative of a political elite whose discourse “trickles down” to the masses, deepening identity and affective divides.²⁸¹ He frames an opposing side, Democrats, as “immoral enemies”, not as adversaries.²⁸² From this perspective, his role is that he intensifies affective polarization. However, from the scapegoating framework perspective, this is only half of the story. The former two points would be rephrased, and a new point is added: Trump is both (1) a key scapegoater, whose scapegoating is contagious, and (2) a potential scapegoat. His framing of Democrats as ‘immoral enemies’, and his framing of immigrants, is an act of scapegoating, and this ‘trickling down’ constitutes the contagious element of scapegoating.²⁸³ On the other hand, Trump can also be considered a scapegoat in the making. For a growing group, especially leaning Democrat, Trump seems to internalize everything that is wrong with the world, and only his annihilation might save the country.²⁸⁴ The willingness to hypothetically act on this conviction exists amongst both Democrats and Republicans.²⁸⁵

Thus, Trump could be considered both a scapegoat in the making and a scapegoater. He crosses all sorts of boundaries, provokes chaos, disrupts order, and victimizes various groups of people. His behavior can be analyzed as forsaking humanity. He is embraced as a savior by his supporters, but by a part of the opposition and an amount of his previous followers, his annihilation is wished for. Building on the features mentioned in the scapegoating framework, Trump is on the margins of society, since only he is the current president of the USA. He is attributed full responsibility for various crimes, to which he is by no means completely innocent, but also not solely guilty. Apart from being publicly praised and partly sacralized, he is also harmed and violated; he is being mocked, humiliated, and threatened with his death

²⁸¹ Torcal and Harteveld, *Handbook of Affective Polarization*, 4.

²⁸² Torcal and Harteveld, *Handbook of Affective Polarization*, 5; “Trump Shares Video of Supporter Saying ‘the Only Good Democrat Is a Dead Democrat’ - CBS News,” May 28, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-trump-shares-video-of-supporter-saying-the-only-good-democrat-is-a-dead-democrat/>.

²⁸³ “Trump Calls Some Unauthorized Immigrants ‘Animals’ in Rant - The New York Times,” accessed May 1, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/us/politics/trump-undocumented-immigrants-animals.html>; “Trump Shares Video of Supporter Saying ‘the Only Good Democrat Is a Dead Democrat’ - CBS News.”

²⁸⁴ “Everybody Hates Trump Now,” *The New Republic*, n.d., accessed May 24, 2026, <https://newrepublic.com/article/198624/everybody-hates-trump-approval-rating-polls>; “Two-Thirds of Americans Have Strong Feelings about Donald Trump — and Most of Them Are Negative,” accessed May 24, 2026, <https://yougov.com/en-us/articles/52823-americans-strong-feelings-donald-trump-most-negative>.

²⁸⁵ CNN, “Can’t Wait for This Guy to Die’: Reporter Reveals Some GOP Sentiment towards Trump, 2023, 06:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRXoqZ_RDIU; Maria Ramirez Uribe and Loreben Tuquero | Politifact, “How False Rumours of Trump’s Untimely ‘Death’ Spread on Social Media,” Al Jazeera, accessed May 24, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/3/how-false-rumours-of-trumps-untimely-death-spread-on-social-media>; Jesse J. Norris et al., “Would You Press a Button to Kill the President? Willingness to Engage in Political Violence and Its Implications for Terrorism Sting Operations,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 18, no. 2 (2025): 359–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2025.2458479>. Norris et al. report 17.4% (n=778) of the sample indicating they would press a button killing the then-US president Donald Trump, with 23.7% who lean Democrat and 4.4% who lean Republican. The research was conducted during Trump’s first presidential term.

regularly. I'm by no means the first to interpret Trump in terms of a scapegoat. Two ideologically opposed commentators have interpreted Trump in this fashion as early as 2016: David Graeber, an anthropologist, and David Gornoski, a conservative interpreter.²⁸⁶ Both have highlighted that Trump seems to resemble a Girardian sacred king. Recall that a Girardian sacred king is a designated victim. Girard argues that the original purpose of sacred kings was to be sacrificed.

Donald Trump exemplifies the possibility of prominent political leaders being scapegoated in a polarized society. As I mentioned in chapter 1, there is theorizing about horizontal (between the masses or between political leaders) and vertical (between the masses and political leaders) affective polarization in the current literature on affective polarization. Elite-popular affective polarization is thought to be fruitful when it contests the status quo, or harmful, when it results in fundamental distrust. The scapegoating framework presents a new look at this dynamic. Affective polarization between the masses, Republicans vs Democrats in this case, includes scapegoats for both sides, with a political elite, Donald Trump, becoming that of one side and potentially in the future, for both sides. It shows that affective polarization can go hand in hand with the scapegoating of prominent political leaders. Prime ministers, mayors, or other political leaders can become targets of scapegoating. Thus, political elites can play a role in deepening affective polarization as scapegoaters, and they can become part of the entire dynamic itself by being scapegoated.

Another example is the scapegoating of immigrants. From the perspective of the affective polarization literature, it is argued that populist rhetoric around immigrants intensifies the dynamics of affective polarization. Empirical research has considered immigrants as an outgroup who intensify affective polarization depending on the extent to which they are perceived as threats.²⁸⁷ Research has also analyzed whether the reliance of populist rhetoric on out-groups as scapegoats (including immigrants, amongst others such as left-wing people, climate activists, etc.) and nostalgia enhances affective polarization.²⁸⁸ From a scapegoating framework, the gist is overlooked when immigrants are analyzed as only an out-group, amongst other out-groups, that intensify affective polarization. They are not solely an out-group intensifying the phenomenon; they are part of the dynamics of affective polarization as scapegoats.

The way immigrants are treated in current political discourse is not only linked to a specific communication mechanism or tendency of populist parties, but has to do with our inherent tendency to scapegoat people in times of crises. In times of growing internal strife and communal tensions, immigrants have been selected as a group to blame for the chaos and

²⁸⁶ David Graeber [@davidgraeber], "could Trump be a sort of Girardian sacred king, marking a break with humanity by his crimes, but thus taking on the sins of his people...", Tweet, Twitter, November 12, 2016, <https://x.com/davidgraeber/status/797249297809031168>; David Gornoski, "Trump and the Scapegoat Effect," *The American Conservative*, September 1, 2016, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/trump-and-the-scapegoat-effect/>.

²⁸⁷ Emma A. Renström et al., "Protecting the Ingroup? Authoritarianism, Immigration Attitudes, and Affective Polarization," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (July 2022): 919236, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2022.919236>.

²⁸⁸ Velden et al., "Populism and Polarization."

disorder. The increasing loathing between people affiliated with opposing political parties co-exists with the scapegoating of refugees by people who identify themselves with right-wing or populist parties. Regarding the scapegoating framework, immigrants present a clear-cut scapegoat. Refugees find themselves at the margin of society, being partly within and partly outside the society they seek asylum in. Their expulsion will unlikely lead to acts of vengeance or more disruption. They are blamed (in various degrees) for chaos, disorder, and crises within western countries. Their expulsion is seen by some as the solution to the problems existing in society. They are not sacralized, and harsher and more violent treatment is desired. Therefore, understanding immigrants as scapegoats explains why they are potentially perceived as threats, and how their treatment is part of the dynamics of affective polarization instead of an outside factor that enhances affective polarization.

As affective polarization intensifies and escalates, the chances of there being one chosen scapegoat instead of various scapegoats for different poles heighten. A good example is a ‘neutral’ journalist. As affective polarization increases, those who claim to be on the outside of the conflict or to be neutral are more likely to get picked on. Here, the contagious aspect of mimetic rivalry – conflictual mimesis – is important. As a scapegoat of antagonists becomes the focus, more people will be mimetically attracted. A community can turn into a mob. Those who, out of professional reasons, choose to remain ‘neutral’ are then at the margin of society, and it is possible that for all sides, this one person or one group, becomes the carrier of guilt, and their expulsion starts being desired. The role of (social) media in heightening affective polarization, and the vulnerability of ‘good’ journalism in polarizing times, have been researched.²⁸⁹ Empirical research on journalism’s potential role in lowering affective polarization has also been conducted, be it with mixed results.²⁹⁰ The vulnerability of journalists in becoming part of the dynamics of affective polarization as scapegoats has not been subject to research. For media interventions, the scapegoating framework suggests that it is important to take into account the possibility of journalists becoming scapegoated.

Two points regarding the scapegoating framework itself and its use must be stressed. Firstly, the scapegoating framework is a first step towards operationalizing the process of scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization. The examples above offer modest examples of how applying the framework can bring new insights compared to current literature on affective polarization. To further assess and evaluate the validity of the framework, more detailed case studies of historical cases of affective polarization and scapegoating can be beneficial. Secondly, with respect to its use, in Girard’s view, it is crucial to emphasize that everyone can be a scapegoater. As I quoted at the end of chapter 2, Girard highlights that to see the validity

²⁸⁹ Silvio Waisbord, “The Vulnerabilities of Journalism,” *Journalism* 20, no. 1 (2019): 210–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918809283>; R. Kelly Garrett et al., “From Partisan Media to Misperception: Affective Polarization as Mediator,” *Journal of Communication* 69, no. 5 (2019): 490–512, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz028>.

²⁹⁰ Jay D. Hmielowski et al., “Interventions Targeting Affective Polarization: Media, Journalism, and Technology,” in *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap-oa/book/9781035310609/chapter30.xml>; Emily Kubin and Christian Von Sikorski, “The Polarizing Content Warning: How the Media Can Reduce Affective Polarization,” *Human Communication Research* 50, no. 3 (2024): 404–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqae006>.

of his theories means to recognize oneself as a persecutor, as another word for scapegoater. Recognizing the scapegoater within oneself is the core of a Christian conversion for Girard. In order to correctly incorporate scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization, it is vital to acknowledge that everyone can be engaged in scapegoating someone or some people, not just one of the sides within an affectively polarized community. One must remain cautious not to fall into the trap of scapegoating someone or a group of people by claiming they are the only ones who are engaged in scapegoating. It is easy to denounce others' scapegoats by holding one's own scapegoats to be objectively guilty. This Girardian paradox is crucial to keep in mind: having a scapegoat means thinking one doesn't have a scapegoat. Thus, when including scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization, it is of the utmost importance to be cautious not to scapegoat the scapegoaters one is researching.

All in all, these different examples have shed light on what incorporating scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization entails. The reasons for incorporating scapegoating into conceptualizations of affective polarization are multilayered: (1) scapegoating appears to be part of the dynamics of affective polarization instead of a communication strategy employed by politicians to intensify affective polarization, (2) scapegoating provides the possibility to verbalize and analyze the differences between groups that are involved in affective polarization as rivals or as scapegoats, (3) it provides a new lens for understanding the dynamics between political elites and the masses, (4) it brings up the issue of the vulnerability of 'neutral', third parties (5) it raises concerns regarding escalations of affective polarization and possible harm to scapegoats, and lastly (6) it brings a responsibility to scholars working on affective polarization not to scapegoat scapegoaters. Altogether, the proposed framework of scapegoating provides a first step for including the process of scapegoating, a phenomenon that appears to have been overlooked and underestimated in terms of its complexity and reach, into our understanding of affective polarization.