

Introduction

In 2024, Merriam-Webster, America's leading language-related reference publisher, dubbed 'Polarization' the word of the year.¹ Strikingly, concerns about political polarization are not restricted to American soil but have spread across various countries – from Western Europe to Southeast Asia; polarization seems to be increasing and deepening everywhere.² In 2012, the term *affective polarization* was coined by Iyengar et al. to capture the phenomenon in which people feel negatively towards others with opposing political views, converging with their social and political identities.³ The literature on affective polarization has multiplied in recent years; however, fundamental questions regarding the theoretical functioning and normative evaluation of affective polarization remain largely unanswered and under-researched in comparison to its empirical exploration. In this thesis, I will argue that René Girard's theory can function as a missing piece in the scholarly debate on affective polarization by introducing the feature of the scapegoat.

René Girard's theory has inspired polarization experts, such as the Dutch expert Bart Brandsma, but is not employed by political scientists in the literature on affective polarization. Girard (1923-2015) was a multi-disciplinary French scholar who spent most of his academic career in the United States.⁴ He developed a complex meta-theory. Building on his theory, a distinct field of study, mimetic studies, has emerged, which encompasses both a theological apologetic application of his theorizing and a broader application to various fields, including economics, culture studies, religious studies, and neuroscience. Key to his theory is the concept of the scapegoat mechanism. According to Girard, this mechanism has been crucial in the emergence of culture and in maintaining social order. In Girard's view, human desires are mimetic. This entails that desires are generated by imitation and are not authentically generated by the individual. Because desires are mimetic, crises can emerge when people, mirroring their desires, want the same things. Such mimetic rivalry is contagious, and when the desires of a community reach a certain threshold, there is a tendency to point to an individual or group as the source and solution for the crisis: the scapegoat. The scapegoat mechanism, the killing of the scapegoat, puts an end to the crisis. Girard argues that the scapegoat mechanism has lost its

¹ The Associated Press, *Merriam-Webster Announces 'Polarisation' as 2024 Word of the Year*, December 9, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/9/merriam-webster-announces-polarisation-as-2024-word-of-the-year>.

² John Burn-Murdoch, "Why American-Style Polarisation Is Spreading across the West," *Financial Times*, November 7, 2025; Natalia Matiaszczyk, "Campaigning With a Bulletproof Vest: Political Violence and Polarization in South Korea," *The Diplomat*, May 23, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/campaigning-with-a-bulletproof-vest-political-violence-and-polarization-in-south-korea/>; Juan A. Moraes and Sergio Béjar, "Affective Polarization in Latin America," in *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap-oa/book/9781035310609/chapter9.xml>; Yi-ching Hsiao and Eric Chen-hua Yu, "Affective Polarization in East Asia," in *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap-oa/book/9781035310609/chapter10.xml>; Ilkim Buke Okyar and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Teaching Israel-Palestine Across the Atlantic: Addressing Affective Polarization and Dehumanization through Dialogic Education," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 59, no. 2 (2026): 345–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096525101674>.

³ Shanto Iyengar et al., "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405–31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038>.

⁴ René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).

original, restorative, and sacred function since the crucifixion of Christ. The Bible has revealed the innocence of scapegoats and the arbitrariness of violence by siding with Christ. This has led to a problematization of unanimous violence against a scapegoat and robbed the scapegoat mechanism of its restorative function. Nowadays, we are involved in a sacrificial crisis, where the consequences of the mimetic nature of human desires seems to be on the verge of escalating, and our irresistible tendency to scapegoat still persists.

In political science, scapegoating is not studied as a social phenomenon on its own occurring in the political realm, but in relation to populism and (populist) rhetoric.⁵ In contrast to political science, scapegoating is a recognized social phenomenon in psychology, social psychology, and sociology that is often studied in line with prejudice or discrimination.⁶ It is at least curious that scapegoating has not been a further research topic in political science. On the one hand, this occurrence might be explained as a result of scapegoating being considered an irrational, primitive, superstitious habit that is simply wrong. Nonetheless, by diving into Girard's notion of the scapegoat mechanism, I will show that scapegoating is all around us, constituting a complex, pervasive, and societally imbedded mechanism.

In this thesis, I explore the following research question: In what ways can Girard's theory of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism provide insights into the question of affective polarization in political science? By framing affective polarization as a form of Girard's concept of mimetic rivalry, I will argue that Girard's concept of scapegoating is a crucial feature of affective polarization that has been overlooked. The scapegoat is the object to which violence, as a source and solution, is attributed. The incorporation of scapegoating may present new ways of understanding, evaluating, and measuring the quality and intensity of affective polarization in society.

In the first chapter, "On Affective Polarization", I will give an overview of current empirical and theoretical thinking on affective polarization amongst political scientists. I shall delve into its conceptual underpinnings, how it is currently measured, the role of affect, and how political theorists assess affective polarization. Is it worrisome, and if so, when and why? In the subsequent chapter, "René Girard: Mimesis, Scapegoats and Christ", I will discuss the theory of René Girard, and I will examine his theory along its three key features: mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the revelation of Christ. Thereafter, I will give a short defense of the usefulness of Girard's theory even though it contains some unfalsifiable claims. In chapter

⁵ The following articles include a few of the sparse articles that study scapegoating in the political realm: Denis Muller, "Enemies of Democracy: Populism and Scapegoating," in *Journalism and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Denis Muller (Springer International Publishing, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76761-7_3; Denise Traber et al., "Errors Have Been Made, Others Will Be Blamed: Issue Engagement and Blame Shifting in Prime Minister Speeches during the Economic Crisis in Europe," *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 1 (2020): 45–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12340>; Eelco Harteveld et al., "Multiple Roots of the Populist Radical Right: Support for the Dutch PVV in Cities and the Countryside," *European Journal of Political Research* 61, no. 2 (2022): 440–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12452>; Florian Stoeckel and Besir Ceka, "Political Tolerance in Europe: The Role of Conspiratorial Thinking and Cosmopolitanism," *European Journal of Political Research* 62, no. 3 (2023): 699–722, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12527>.

⁶ "Scapegoating - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics," accessed April 11, 2026, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/scapegoating>.

3, “René Girard & the Girardians on Modernity”, I shall explain how Girard’s mimetic theory, including mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and the Christian revelation, can be applied to the modern day. For this modern-day analysis, both Girard and several Girardians will take the floor.

Chapter 4, “Scapegoating and Affective Polarization”, presents the heart of the text. Here I shall argue that the current field of political science on affective polarization can greatly benefit from Girard’s theory by including scapegoating. I will operationalize scapegoating by proposing a framework of scapegoating within affective polarization. To illustrate how the framework may add to current literature on affective polarization, three contemporary examples of scapegoating will be given. Lastly, I will provide some concluding remarks, and I will lay out new questions that arise from including scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization for both empirical political scientists and political theorists.

Concluding Remarks

In this thesis, I have analyzed the field of affective polarization through the lens of René Girard to explore whether his theory offers new insights into the workings of affective polarization. Building on Girard's theory, I have argued that the field can merit from including the concept of *scapegoating*. Currently, political science on affective polarization does not include scapegoating into its understanding of affective polarization. The scapegoating phenomenon appears to have been overlooked. Girard's thinking, nonetheless, emphasizes that there is much more to scapegoating in terms of complexity, reach, and pervasiveness than is generally thought. Building on Girard's theory, affective polarization can be interpreted as a form of mimetic rivalry. I argued that our human tendency to scapegoat, to blame an individual or group for bearing sole responsibility for a current crisis or chaos, and to seek their annihilation, plays a key role within affective polarization. Rather than being an outside factor that intensifies affective polarization, scapegoating is part of the dynamics of affective polarization itself. Consequently, I proposed a framework of scapegoating as a first step to include scapegoating into our understanding of affective polarization.

Inspired by Girard's theory, scapegoating in affective polarization includes the following features: (1) it is a collective and contagious phenomenon, in which (2) scapegoaters are convinced of the scapegoat's guilt. The scapegoat is (3) conceived as being abnormal, and (4) blamed for inexcusable crimes and the ongoing crisis, so that (5) an expulsion or annihilation of the scapegoat is thought to solve a crisis. Scapegoats are (6) in danger of getting harmed or violated, and (7) innocent to the extent of the accusations at hand. Current political science does not incorporate scapegoating when studying affective polarization. However, I argue, in line with public polarization expert Bart Brandsma, that scapegoating should be specifically included. Before detailing some of the reasons for incorporating this framework, it should be emphasized that a correct incorporation of a Girardian understanding of scapegoating entails being conscious of the fact that everyone can be engaged in scapegoating. Only once we see the scapegoater in ourselves can we start hoping to end this mechanism.

Affective polarization entails the increasing loathing between people based on party affiliation. The proposed framework of scapegoating adds the tendency to scapegoat to this current understanding of affective polarization. I would like to make it explicit that scapegoating may arise from all poles in affective polarization, and as affective polarization intensifies, the likelihood of a communal scapegoat emerging for multiple poles increases. The framework may contribute to political science in various ways: (1) it posits scapegoating as a part of the dynamics of affective polarization, (2) it brings the possibility to differentiate between groups involved in affective polarization, as rivals or as scapegoats, (3) it offers a different angle for analyzing the interaction between political elites and the masses in affective polarization, (4) it airs a concern with respect to interventions and 'neutral', third parties (5) it highlights the risks of possible escalations of affective polarization concerning the vulnerability of scapegoats, and lastly (6) it establishes a responsibility for scholars concerned with affective polarization to be cautious of scapegoating.

Future directions

Incorporating the concept of scapegoating in political science posits numerous possibilities and questions for empirical political scientists and political theorists. I will first address a few of the queries it prompts concerning political theory, then I will address a question it poses for empirical political science.

A fundamental question in political theory is whether affective polarization is intrinsic to the political realm or not. The same can be asked about scapegoating. Is scapegoating always present in the political realm, or can it be overcome? Girard offers an interesting perspective for political theorists in this regard. He argues that persecuting and mimetic desire are inherent human tendencies but can be overcome through religious conversion, as I briefly addressed when discussing Girard's view on individualism and the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Secondly, political theorists have wondered when affective polarization becomes a cause for concern. This question can likewise be asked about scapegoating; is scapegoating, as a feature of affective polarization, worrisome, and if so, when? In response to the question of when affective polarization can be considered worrisome, Manon Westphal proposed a distinction between agonistic and antagonistic forms of affective polarization. This entails distinguishing between polarizing rivals and polarizing enemies. She argued that the second form – antagonistic affective polarization – is particularly worrisome because here political opponents view each other as enemies to be destroyed. Future studies may clarify whether the proposed scapegoating framework can contribute to this differentiation by analyzing whether the relations are forms of rivalry or acts of scapegoating.

With respect to empirical political science, the introduction of scapegoating as a feature of affective polarization prompts the question of how it can be operationalized to be included in empirical research. Current empirical political research measures either the implicit, expressive, or behavioral attitude people have towards people with an opposing political identity as a measure of affective polarization. Based on the characteristic features of scapegoating that I delineated in the scapegoating framework, putative scapegoats could be identified. Measuring the attitudes people have towards their scapegoats, or the number of people expressing an aversive attitude towards a pronounced scapegoat, could, for instance, become an additional measure to gauge the severity of affective polarization.

Lastly, a further, more comprehensive Girardian analysis of the question of affective polarization could be very fruitful. Such an analysis might investigate affective polarization as a mechanism of 'doubles', instead of a mechanism of differences. With a mechanism of 'doubles', I refer to Girard's idea that imitation is crucial to desire and conflict, which he pinpoints with his concepts of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry. What might the notion of mimetic rivalry tell us about the mechanisms of imitation in affective polarization? If affective polarization can be understood as a form of mimetic rivalry, in what ways can concepts such as mimetic desire, the object of desire, and undifferentiation help to further understand the functioning of affective polarization? Furthermore, a Girardian perspective on the role of affect can shed new light on the roles of disappointment and anger in affective polarization in relation

to imitation and desire. An analysis of affective polarization through a Girardian lens could also entail exploring the role of modern victimhood in affective polarization. Finally, Girard's thinking could inspire new intervention methods for affective polarization and scapegoating. As I have mentioned before, Girard tells us to renounce 'bad' mimesis and look at ourselves as persecutors; only then can we hope to stop polarizing and scapegoating.