DECODING LGBTQ SCAPING: U.S. SNAPSHOT

May 2024
Overview

This presentation focuses on how LGBTQ scapegoating is at play in the U.S. It is adapted from Over Zero’s “Decoding LGBTQ Scapegoating” presentation.

The broader presentation organizes insights about a growing international crisis: the global scapegoating of LGBTQ people. It seeks to answer four questions:

1. What is LGBTQ scapegoating?
2. How can it be identified?
3. What are its goals?
4. How can we distinguish LGBTQ scapegoating from politics as usual?

Here's what we found:

- LGBTQ scapegoating is strategic, used to achieve political goals.
- It is not random, not a “natural” consequence of polarization, but a strategy to drive polarization.
- It is global, not US specific.
- It is part of the “authoritarian playbook” eroding liberal democracy*


* Democracies with civil rights and individual liberties are called liberal; democracies with elections but not civil rights and individual liberties are called illiberal.
Our Perspective

The lives and freedoms of LGBTQ people are under growing global threat. That is reason enough to pay attention, but we hope to demonstrate one more: LGBTQ scapegoating is a threat to democracy, cloaking itself as culture war politics as usual.

To care about democracy is to care about LGBTQ scapegoating.

It is critical that journalists in particular, and citizens in general, are equipped to identify scapegoating as a tactic that facilitates authoritarianism, distinct from politics as usual.

This is also true for individuals who have qualms about specific LGBTQ-related issues. Individuals can oppose LGBTQ scapegoating even if they are not in ideological or policy alignment with the LGBTQ rights movement.
Censoring discussion or depiction of a marginalized group further stigmatizes them, cementing their status as a scapegoat.

Turning a scapegoated group into a common enemy to energize and organize a base.

Exploiting fears of the scapegoat to gain electoral support and secure victories in political contests.

Our research identified six interconnected and overlapping political goals of LGBTQ scapegoating.

By identifying these goals we aim to (1) illustrate that scapegoating is an organized authoritarian strategy, distinct from regular politics in a normal democracy; (2) Provide journalists and citizens with tools to discern the political motivations behind that scapegoating.

Several of these are legitimate political goals (e.g., mobilizing a base, winning elections). But when a marginalized group is scapegoated to achieve a political goal, alarm bells should go off.

Manufacturing a controversy to polarize society along fault lines that unify an authoritarian movement and/or spark divisions within a political opposition.

Shifting public focus away from critical issues, government failures, or unpopular goals by inflaming fear, disgust and anger at a scapegoat.

Targeting a scapegoat for intimidation, violence, and militia activity desensitizes the public to violence against the group specifically and in society more broadly.
Authoritarian Playbook

Queer scapegoating is occurring amid a broader democracy crisis. In 2024, Freedom House marked the 18th consecutive year of declining global freedom and liberal democracy.

Threats to democracy have evolved over the last three decades. Instead of military coups, democracy dies from the actions of elected leaders who gradually chip away at the institutional, legal, and political constraints that defend our civil rights and freedoms: this is called the authoritarian playbook.³

As Protect Democracy outlines, the authoritarian playbook encompasses seven key tactics observed globally in dozens of countries, including Russia, Venezuela, Hungary, the Philippines, Poland, Nicaragua, India, Turkey, and even the United States.

The authoritarian playbook encompasses seven key tactics:
1. Politicizing independent institutions
2. Spreading disinformation
3. Aggrandizing executive power
4. Quashing dissent
5. Scapegoating vulnerable communities
6. Corrupting elections
7. Stoking violence

This presentation focuses on one part of this playbook:
• Scapegoating vulnerable communities.
Facilitating Authoritarianism

LGBTQ scapegoating is a proven strategy that facilitates the erosion of democracy, but it must be understood with nuance:

- We say facilitate, not cause, because it does not always directly lead to democratic backsliding.
- Several of the six interconnected political goals of LGBTQ scapegoating are legitimate political goals (e.g., mobilizing a base, winning elections). But when a marginalized group is scapegoated to achieve that political goal, alarm bells should go off.
- LGBTQ scapegoating is often accompanied by efforts to scapegoat other groups.
- Further, scapegoating is just one of the interconnected strategies in the authoritarian playbook. To help identify authoritarian intent, look to see if it is occurring alongside other parts of the playbook.
- LGBTQ scapegoating misleadingly mimics a “natural backlash” to recent progress on LGBTQ rights, and leverages pre-existing homophobia and transphobia.

“Contemporary democratic breakdowns are far more difficult to identify because — in snapshots — they can mimic the typical acts of political jockeying to gain advantage that are routine even in healthy democracies. But especially as these acts accumulate and intensify, hard-nosed politics can cross a line into authoritarian threats. Unfortunately, there is no simple bright-line answer or mechanical test to distinguish between the two."

“The Authoritarian Playbook”
Protect Democracy, June 15, 2022
Scapegoating 101

What is scapegoating? 

- A political strategy that constructs a threatening “them” to blame for society’s problems and a virtuous “us” in need of protection.

- The “us vs them” frame is a psychological tool that manipulates collective anxiety, anger, and fear to create a permission structure for previously unthinkable political goals.

In sum, scapegoating involves three parts:

1. Picking a problem to lay at the feet of a specific group;
2. Generating public anger, outrage, or panic about it;
3. Identifying the group to blame.

Scapegoating is a tactic that names a societal problem, real or imagined, and blames a group for that problem.

However, beyond a single malicious accusation, the “problem” blamed on a scapegoat is often every problem in the society, or modernity itself.

Blaming a marginalized community for the problems of modernity is called “restorative nostalgia” and it provides a narrative to focus all the discomfort people feel about a quickly changing society onto a single enemy.
Restorative Nostalgia

According to historian Anne Applebaum, scapegoats are often blamed for perverting “the course of history” and reducing “the nation to a shadow of its former self.”

This “restorative nostalgia” is a common factor in authoritarian movements that argue that “the nation is no longer great because someone has attacked us, undermined us, sapped our strength.” Ridding the nation of the scapegoat, they contend, provides a pathway to restore a mythologized past.⁵

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### KNOWLEDGE GAPS
Disinformation is maximally effective because the lack of public understanding about a group can make it easier to spread false narratives and stereotypes without being challenged.

### SMALL SIZE
Smaller, less-known groups can be more easily marginalized because they may struggle to counter disinformation campaigns effectively.

### SEXUAL ANXIETIES
Disinformation tying scapegoats to sexual anxieties and taboos can trigger strong emotional reactions of disgust and contempt, making it easier to dehumanize the targeted group.

### HOW TO CHOOSE A SCAPEGOAT
Our research reveals at least eight characteristics of a compelling scapegoat.

### REDUCE IDENTITY TO BEHAVIORS
Attacking behaviors and reframing innate identities as ideology can dehumanize scapegoats while shielding attackers from charges of bigotry by claiming to target conduct, not groups.

### RELIGIOUS ALLIANCE
Scapegoating the perceived opponents of a country’s religious majority builds support from religious institutions, reinforcing perception that actions against scapegoats are morally justified.

### INTERNATIONAL & FOREIGN
Groups that can be redefined as foreign or international can be strategically advantageous, as it taps into nationalist sentiments and fosters the "Us versus Them" mentality.

### PRE-EXISTING CONSPIRACIES
Pre-existing conspiracies help reinforce new ones. For this reason, scapegoating strategies usually tie into well known antisemitic conspiracies.

### RELATED TO WOMEN AND CHILDREN
Groups that can be exploited to evoke anxiety about women and children are the most strategic. Campaigns will frame the group as a threat to children (“groomers”) and women (“bathroom bills” & “women’s sports”) to make the targeted group appear more menacing.
SCAPEGOATING 101

What Makes the “Ideal” Scapegoat?

LGBTQ scapegoating has focused on “demonizing people via repeated false claims that LGBTQ+ people are ‘pedophiles’ who are ‘grooming’ children in order to abuse them.”

LGBTQ scapegoating sometimes touches on all eight characteristics by tapping into preexisting conspiracies, including anti-semitic conspiracies.

- Knowledge gaps
- Small size
- Sexual anxieties
- Reduce identity to behaviors
- Religious alliance
- Related to women and children
- International and foreign
- Pre-existing conspiracies

During the May 2012 protests against Putin’s election to a third term, a soldier cracking down on protests tells a reporter that “the truth was found in the book Blows from the Russian Gods...It purported to ‘uncover the real crimes of the Jews,’ who had taken over the world. One subsection was called ‘The Sexual Traits of the Jews.’ It began with homosexuality: ‘Not only was homosexuality widespread among the ancient Jews but it was known to take over entire cities, such as Sodom and Gomorrah for example.’ The lieutenant... [noted] that every soldier in his platoon had received a copy of the book.”

“The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia” by Masha Gessen
LGBTQ Scapegoating & Women’s Rights

According to author and historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat, women’s rights are often the primary target of authoritarian movements. However, targeting women’s rights is often met with fierce resistance. It is not strategic to target large and powerful groups early and directly.

If the goal of an authoritarian movement is to enforce gender roles with state power, it’s more strategic to start by weaponizing pre-existing homophobia and transphobia to target and scapegoat LGBTQ people.

"LGBTQ people are not always the primary target of authoritarians, but they are the group most consistently targeted by authoritarians."

Ruth Ben-Ghiat
Author of 'Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present,'
as stated during an interview conducted for this presentation in July 2023.
How a Campaign Against Transgender Rights Mobilized Conservatives *(NYT, April 16, 2023)*

“When the Supreme Court declared a constitutional right to same-sex marriage nearly eight years ago, social conservatives were set adrift. The ruling stripped them of an issue they had used to galvanize rank-and-file supporters and big donors. And it left them searching for a cause that — like opposing gay marriage — would rally the base and raise the movement’s profile on the national stage.

‘We knew we needed to find an issue that the candidates were comfortable talking about,’ said Terry Schilling, the president of American Principles Project, a social conservative advocacy group. ‘And we threw everything at the wall.’

What has stuck, somewhat unexpectedly, is the issue of transgender identity, particularly among young people. Today, the effort to restrict transgender rights has supplanted same-sex marriage as an animating issue for social conservatives at a pace that has stunned political leaders across the spectrum. It has reinvigorated a network of conservative groups, increased fund-raising and set the agenda in school boards and state legislatures.

The campaign has been both organic and deliberate, and has even gained speed since Donald J. Trump, an ideological ally, left the White House. Since then, at least 20 states, all controlled by Republicans, have enacted laws that reach well beyond the initial debates over access to bathrooms and into medical treatments, participation in sports and policies on discussing gender in schools.”

Key takeaway:
The decision to target trans kids in the US was a deliberate and tested political strategy.
This section illustrates each of the six political goals of scapegoating in the U.S. context.

Importantly, we are not saying that each instance of scapegoating will itself lead to authoritarianism. Scapegoating is part of the authoritarian playbook, and like the other playbook strategies, it sometimes fails. Further, proving intent is hard.

Even when queer scapegoating “fails” or does not directly lead to authoritarianism, it creates a more permissive environment for further scapegoating and anti-democratic actions.

While this snapshot focuses on scapegoating at work in the U.S., the broader report illustrates the six political goals of LGBTQ scapegoating globally, using examples from 8 countries across 4 continents.
US Context

In March 2022, Governor DeSantis passed Florida’s HB 1557, also known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, threatening educators with the loss of their teaching license if they allowed any mention of gender identity and sexual orientation around kindergarten-third grade students. Grades 4-12 were allowed “developmentally appropriate” instruction as determined by the Florida department of education.

A year later, Florida’s department of education approved Gov. DeSantis’ proposal to expand the ban to all public school students.

The intent is clear to student leaders: “when you ban something from the high school library, all you’re doing is saying that that is a bad thing. You’re not preventing anyone from getting any information” because it can be found online, and “the second you start limiting people’s views, and limiting the way they can express [them] based on the content of those views, it’s impossible to say who will be limited next.”

By September 2023, North Carolina, Arkansas, Iowa, and Indiana had passed ‘copycat’ “Don’t Say Gay” bills, and 23 states introduced variants of the bill for the 2024 legislative session.

By November 2023, a Florida bill had been introduced expanding censorship into the workplace. In the U.S. Congress, Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA) introduced the “Stop the Sexualization of Children Act” a week before he secured the speakership. The federal bill extends the censorship of the “Don’t Say Gay” bill nationwide and beyond schools, by targeting restrictions at all institutions receiving federal funds.
In April 2022, the Washington Post identified Chaya Raichik, a participant in the January 6 insurrection, as the anonymous creator behind “LibsofTikTok” (LoTT). The ironically titled social media account has been mobilizing conservatives by claiming that children are being “groomed” by “predator” LGBTQ adults. Since being publicly identified, Raichik has been embraced by the right, dining one-on-one with former President Trump, appearing numerous times on Fox News and addressing CPAC alongside former President Bolsonaro.

The site has “become an agenda-setter in right-wing online discourse, and the content it surfaces shows a direct correlation with the recent push in legislation and rhetoric directly targeting the LGBTQ+ community,” according to the Washington Post.

In the past year, “harassment and threats of violence against at least 35 institutions, events, or individuals have followed incitement from the social media account.” After Raichik spread misinformation about gender-affirming care at Boston Children’s Hospital last fall, doctors and nurses received death threats and the medical center received bomb threats. Schools around the country have received continued bomb threats after similar spotlights. A drag show in California was stormed by the Proud Boys after its location was posted on the site and 31 members of the Patriot Front were arrested as they attempted to storm a show in Coeur D’Alene, Idaho.

In 2022, this mobilized base was implicated in 141 documented cases of threats against US drag shows across 47 states. This base was powerful enough to hurt Bud Light sales in a widespread 2023 boycott of BudLight after their partnership with trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney.
US Context

In 2021, the right-wing activist organization Moms for Liberty was established in Florida to influence and gain control of school boards. It gained significant traction leading up to the 2021 school board elections and the 2022 midterms. The group rapidly expanded, establishing 265 chapters in 43 states, and by July 2023, its membership exceeded 110,000.

One membership strategy included showing recruits information from hate-filled social media accounts like “LibsofTikTok.” Any reference to sexuality, even indirect, is labeled “pornography,” opponents are labeled “groomers,” “pedophile sympathizers,” and accused of abusing their children or possessing child pornography.

The group claims to have won 40% of its school board races in 2023. Republican presidential candidates Ron DeSantis, Nikki Haley, and Donald Trump all addressed Moms for Liberty’s 2023 conference.

In one breakout session, Christian Ziegler, the chairman of the Florida Republican Party and husband of Moms for Liberty co-founder Bridget Ziegler, coached attendees on how to deal with the media: “Your product is parental rights. Your product is protecting children and eliminating indoctrination and the sexualization of children. You’re the grassroots. You’re on the ground. You’re the moms, the grandparents, the families that are impacted. The stories you tell help set a narrative.”
US Context

In the US, groups pushing anti-trans laws have been purposefully attempting to divide the women’s movement and the LGBTQ movement, according to reporting in the *New Republic*.

As the Women’s March organized after President Trump’s 2016 election victory, the head of the Christian right group Family Policy Institute of Washington State wrote, “the real war on women,” was the “transgender phenomenon.”

Meg Kilgannon, then the Executive Director of Concerned Parents and Educators of Fairfax County, made the strategy explicit in 2017: “Focus on gender identity to divide and conquer,” because “for all of its recent success, the LGBT alliance is actually fragile.”

Efforts to create a wedge between the women’s and LGBTQ movements continued when “an anti-trans feminist group” called the Women’s Liberation Front, or WoLF, and the Family Policy Alliance, formalized an alliance in 2017. The groups submitted a joint amicus brief to the Supreme Court that invoked women’s rights arguments in support of the anti-trans bathroom policy in Virginia drafted by Alliance for Defending Freedom (ADF).

The alliance and its deliberate use of feminist rhetoric has “helped inject Christian right policy objectives into public debates between liberals,” in turn helping create a wedge between the women’s and LGBTQ movements.
Since June 2022, when the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, twenty-one states have begun banning or restricting abortion, and bans have been blocked or defeated in an additional six. The issue has been consistently mobilizing for Democratic voters across multiple elections, including the 2022 midterms.

As Republican controlled legislatures looked to ramp up unpopular abortion restrictions in 2023, Republicans introduced a wave of over 125 bills that re-focused national attention on the very small number of trans teenagers who receive gender affirming treatment. “GOP candidates really suffered from headlines about abortion,” said Kelly Baden, vice-president for public policy at the Guttmacher Institute, which tracks policies related to sexual and reproductive health.

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This strategy aligns with one exposed in a leaked memo from Independent Women’s Voice (IWV) for a $6 million messaging campaign to promote anti-trans narratives in 10 swing states ahead of the 2022 midterms. The memo characterizes transgender people as a threat to women’s success and safety, and argues that focusing on issues other than abortion enables the IWV to more successfully “convince moderates” to vote for Republicans.

The research firm that uncovered the memo, True North, argues that IWV’s campaign “could be part of a through-line strategy to distract voters from the fallout of last summer’s supreme court ruling against the constitutional right to abortion.”
Support for political violence has risen significantly since the January 6 insurrection, according to several studies. The Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution, for instance, found 23% support for this statement in October 2023, “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country,” up from 15% in March 2021.

Over that same period, according to ICAP, many of the same “armed extremist groups—including the Proud Boys, who led the breach of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021—have increasingly targeted LGBTQ+ community events” as a mobilizing rallying cry. “Across the country, drag events and other LGBTQ+ community spaces have been vandalized, disrupted, and violently attacked.” This includes, “documented instances of armed extremists seeking to disrupt LGBTQ+ community events, often by seeking to block entry with armed demonstrations or by initiating conflict with community members... Recent efforts have targeted drag events that are open to all ages, given the focus by violent extremists and private paramilitary organizations on the false narrative that LGBTQ+ communities are sexually “grooming” minors.”

A report monitoring anti-LGBTQ+ hate incidents from June 2022 to April 2023 by A.D.L. and GLAAD that collected data on 356 incidents across 46 states and DC had similar findings. Nearly half the incidents were connected to organized extremist groups; 191 were connected to the “grooming” conspiracy theory, 138 incidents targeted drag events and performers, and 128 incidents referenced antisemitic tropes or conspiracies.
LGBTQ scapegoating is not politics as usual. The situation in the U.S. checks all the boxes of an authoritarian strategy.

- Is an entire group accused of being a threat to society? (e.g., children, families)
- Are scapegoating linguistics being used?
  - Us versus them
  - Dehumanizing frame: Labels
  - Dehumanizing frame: Metaphors
  - Dehumanizing frame: Reversals
- Does the group have several of the characteristics of an ideal scapegoat?
  - Knowledge gaps
  - Small size
  - Sexual anxieties
  - Reduce identity to behaviors
  - Religious alliance
  - Related to women and children
  - International and foreign
  - Preexisting conspiracies

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the campaign being organized with support from a global scapegoating infrastructure?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Does it appear as if the campaign could be accomplishing several interconnected political goals for an authoritarian movement?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Stigmatize using state power</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Mobilize base with scapegoating</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Win elections with scapegoating</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Polarize with scapegoating</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Distract with scapegoating</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Normalize political violence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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- Is the campaign similar to scapegoating efforts that were used to subvert democracy in other countries? Yes
- Advanced stage: are scapegoating linguistics being used to quickly pass laws impacting a vulnerable group, especially in the absence of serious policy debate about the societal crisis these laws are supposed to address? Yes
2. The following works support this statement on targeting of LGBTQ people by various illiberal regimes:
4. The following works were referenced in this presentation’s analysis of scapegoating:

Additional works referenced:
United States

Works Cited

United States, continued