OVER
ZERO

DECODING LGBTQ SCAPEGOATING: ABRIDGED

May 2024

Overview

This is an abridged version of Over Zero's "Decoding LGBTQ Scapegoating" presentation.

It organizes insights about a growing international crisis: the global scapegoating of LGBTQ people.

We conducted this research via literature reviews, case studies, and over a dozen expert interviews.

This presentation 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* worldwide.

* 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.

Six Interconnected and Overlapping Political Goals of LGBTQ Scapegoating

Our research identified six underlined 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.

GOAL # 1
STIGMATIZE

Censoring discussion or depiction of a marginalized group further stigmatizes them, cementing their status as a scapegoat.

GOAL # 2
MOBILIZE BASE

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

GOAL # 3
WIN ELECTIONS

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

GOAL # 4
POLARIZE

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

GOAL # 5
DISTRACT

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

GOAL # 6
NORMALIZE POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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 <u>marked</u> 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 <u>Protect Democracy</u> 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.

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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.

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"The Authoritarian Playbook"
Protect Democracy, June 15, 2022

Democracy's Blind Spot

The queer community has long been a target of strategic scapegoating, but the *first* cross-national study of this phenomenon that we're aware of was only published in September 2023 by UCLA's Williams Institute. **This blind spot is a glaring vulnerability for democracy.**

According to the ACLU, 23 state legislatures have collectively signed more than 84 anti-LGBTQ bills into law in 2023, more than doubling the number from 2022, with hundreds of additional bills in the pipeline for 2024.

And the United States is not alone. This is a global crisis that will only accelerate in the coming year. The time to understand queer scapegoating is now.

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> *Attacks on LGBTI people and their rights can be a precursor to democratic backsliding, and anti-LGBTI stigma and policies may contribute to the weakening of democratic norms and institutions.*
> "

Democratic Backsliding and LGBTI Acceptance
Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law
September 2023

Scapegoating 101

What is scapegoating?[4]

- 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.[5]

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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SCAPEGOATING 101

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.

HOW TO CHOOSE A SCAPEGOAT

Our research reveals at least eight characteristics of a compelling scapegoat. [4]

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.

SMALL SIZE

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

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.

PRE-EXISTING CONSPIRACIES

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

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.

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.

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.

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.[7] 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.
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Ruth Ben-Ghiat
Author of 'Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present,'
as stated during an interview conducted
for this presentation in July 2023.

Scapegoating Linguistics

According to linguist <u>Anna Szilagyi</u>,[8] all scapegoating strategies share a universal speech pattern:

"Us versus them" is the foundational "speech strategy" of scapegoating.

Division is created mainly through plural forms ("we", "us", "they", "them", "our", "their").

The division between "us" and "them" can then be further reinforced by framing.

"Us vs Them" Framing Strategies

Labeling
Making a "super label" of the group's name (LGBT) through repetitive association (e.g., "Groomers", "Pedophiles") trains listeners to think of a handful of malicious and hostile labels when they hear the group's name.

Metaphors
Powerful rhetorical devices which support the threatening labels (e.g., "LGBT invasion") and dispossess the group of its humanity (e.g.: "Rainbow Plague") in ways that violence against its members may appear to be legitimate.

Reversals
Attackers always claim to be the victim; this is important psychologically and very effective (e.g., "Groomers" is a label that communicates a reversal that "they are attacking our kids").

Scapegoating Linguistics:

Labels & Metaphors

If you see these words and phrases directed at the LGBTQ community then you are witnessing the linguistics of LGBTQ scapegoating.

- "Pedophile sympathizers"
- "Eliminating indoctrination and the sexualization of children"
- "Promote homosexuality and gender change"
- "Rainbow plague"
- "LGBTQ emergency"

- "Promote the sexualization of children and adolescents"
- "Immerse young children in sexual imagery and radical gender ideology"
- "Stop the sexualization of children"
- "Pedophile menace"
- "Sexual propaganda"
- "Groomer" or "Grooming"
- "LGBT invasion"
- "Transgenderism Must Be Eradicated"

Identifying Scapegoating Worksheet

Responding "yes" to even a few of these questions can aid in distinguishing between regular politics and scapegoating.

☐ Is an entire group accused of being a threat to society (e.g., a threat to children, families, our "way of life")?

☐ Are scapegoating linguistics being used?
- ☐ Us versus them
- ☐ Labels
- ☐ Metaphors
- ☐ 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

☐ Is the campaign being organized with support from a global scapegoating infrastructure?

☐ Does it appear that the campaign could be accomplishing several interconnected political goals for an authoritarian movement?
- ☐ Stigmatize using state power
- ☐ Mobilize base with scapegoating
- ☐ Win elections with scapegoating
- ☐ Polarize with scapegoating
- ☐ Distract with scapegoating
- ☐ Normalize political violence

☐ Is the campaign similar to scapegoating efforts that were used to subvert democracy in other countries?

☐ 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?

US Context

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.

Key Takeaways

- *LGBTQ scapegoating is a democracy issue*

- *LGBTQ scapegoating infrastructure = authoritarian infrastructure*

- *The US is in the midst of escalating LGBTQ scapegoating*

- *Democracy defenders must mobilize a response*

LGBTQ scapegoating is a democracy issue, in addition to a civil and human rights concern

- LGBTQ scapegoating impacts everyone as a key strategy to undermine democracy worldwide.

- It is part of the "authoritarian playbook" that facilitates the erosion of democracy globally, including and beyond the U.S.

- Journalists can investigate, document, and report on LGBTQ scapegoating as an authoritarian tactic, distinct from politics or policy stories.

- Citizens, leaders, as well as advocacy and religious organizations can oppose LGBTQ scapegoating, even if they are not in ideological or policy alignment with the LGBTQ rights movement.

The US is in the midst of escalating LGBTQ scapegoating

- This is not politics as usual.
- It is possible to identify LGBTQ scapegoating using analytical frameworks.

Democracy defenders must confront this issue and strategize a response

- LGBTQ scapegoating is organized, not random, and will not go away on its own.
- It is not merely a "natural" consequence of polarization or rights advancements but a tool to deepen polarization and undermine democracy.

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