

Moral panics intensify social divisions and can lead to political violence

Ron Barrett, Professor of Anthropology, Macalester College

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The day before Charlie Kirk was assassinated, I was teaching a college class on science, religion and magic. Our class was comparing the Salem witch trials of the 1690s with the McCarthy hearings of the early 1950s, when U.S. democratic processes were eclipsed by the Red Scare of purported communist infiltration.

The aim of the class was to better understand the concept of moral panics, which are societal epidemics of disproportionate fear of real or perceived threats. Such outsized fear can often lead to violence or repression against certain socially marginalized groups. Moral panics are recurring themes in my research on the anthropology of fear and discrimination.

Our next class meeting would apply the moral panic concept to a recent example of political violence. Tragically, there were many of these examples to choose from.

Minnesota State Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband were assassinated on June 14, 2025, which happened to be the eighth anniversary of the congressional baseball shootings in which U.S. House Majority Whip Steve Scalise and three other Republicans were wounded. These shootings were among at least 15 high-profile instances of political violence since Rep. Gabby Gifford was severely wounded in a 2011 shooting that killed five and wounded another 13 people.

Seven of these violent incidents occurred within the past 12 months. Kirk's killing became the eighth.

In most of these cases, we may never fully know the perpetrator's motives. But the larger pattern of political violence tracks with the increasing polarization of American society. While researching this polarization, I have found recurring themes of segregation and both the dehumanization and disproportionate fear of people with opposing views among liberals and conservatives alike.

Segregation and self-censorship

The first ingredient of a moral panic is the segregation of a society into at least two groups with limited contact between them and an unwillingness to learn from one another.

In 17th century Salem, Massachusetts, the social divisions were long-standing. They were largely based on land disputes between family factions and economic tensions between agriculturally-based village communities and commercially-based town communities.

Within these larger groups, a growing number of widowed women had become socially marginalized for becoming economically independent after their husbands died in colonial wars between New England and New France. And rumors of continuing violence led residents in towns and villages to avoid Native Americans and new settlers in surrounding frontier areas. Salem was divided in many ways.



The painting 'Trial of George Jacobs of Salem for Witchcraft' by Tompkins Harrison Matteson. Jacobs was one of the few men accused of witchcraft.

Tompkins Harrison Matteson/Library of Congress via AP

Fast forward to the end of World War II. That's when returning American veterans used their benefits to settle into suburban neighborhoods that would soon be separated by race and class through zoning policies and discriminatory lending practices. This set the stage for what has come to be called The Big Sort, the self-segregation of people into neighborhoods where residents shared the same political and religious ideologies.

It was during the early stages of these sorting processes that the Red Scare and McCarthy hearings emerged.

The Big Sort turned digital in the early 2000s with the rise of online information and social media platforms with algorithms that conform to the particular desires and biases of their user communities.

Consequently, it is now easier than ever for conservatives and liberals to live in separate worlds of their own choosing. Under these conditions, Democrats and Republicans tend to exaggerate the characteristics of the other party based on common stereotypes.

Dehumanization and discrimination

Dehumanization is perhaps the most crucial ingredient of a social panic. This involves labeling people according to categories that deprive them of positive human qualities. This labeling process is often conducted by "moral entrepreneurs" – people invested by their societies with the authority to make such claims in an official, unquestionable and seemingly objective way.

In 1690s Massachusetts, the moral entrepreneurs were religious authorities who labeled people as satanic witches and killed many of them. In 1950s Washington, the moral entrepreneurs were members of Congress and expert witnesses who labeled people Soviet collaborators and ruined many of their lives.

In the 21st century, the moral entrepreneurs include media personalities and social influencers as well as the nonhuman bots and algorithms whose authority is derived by constructing the illusion of broad consensus.

Under these conditions, many U.S. liberals and conservatives regard their counterparts as savage, immature, corrupt or malicious. Not surprisingly, surveys reveal that animosity between conservatives and liberals has been at its highest over the past five years than any other time since the measurements first began in 1978.

Adding to the animosity, dehumanization can also justify discrimination against a rival group. This is shown in social psychology experiments in which conservatives and liberals discriminate against one another to a greater degree than by race when deciding on scholarships and job opportunities. Such discrimination lends credence to further animosity.

Exaggerating fear

There is a fine line between animosity and disproportional fear. The latter can lead to extreme policies and violent actions during a moral panic.

Such fear often takes the form of perceived threats. Rachel Kleinfeld, a scholar who studies polarization and political violence, says that one of the best ways to rally a political base is to make them think they are under attack by the other side. She says that “is why ‘They are out to take your x’ is such a time-honored fundraising and get-out-the-vote message.”

In the past few years, the “x” that could be taken has escalated to core freedoms and personal safety, threats which could easily trigger widespread fear on both sides of the political divide.

But the question remains whether exaggerated fears are sufficient to trigger political violence. Are assassins like Kirk's killer simply pathological outliers among agitated but otherwise self-restrained populations? Or are they sensitive indicators of a looming social catastrophe?



The House Committee on Un-American Activities investigates movie producer Jack Warner, right, in Washington on Oct. 20, 1947.

AP Photo

Countering the panic

We do not have the answers to that question yet. But in the interim, there are efforts in higher education to reduce animosity and encourage constructive interactions and discussion between people with different perspectives.

A nonpartisan coalition of faculty, students and staff – known as the Heterodox Academy – is promoting viewpoint diversity and constructive debates on over 1,800 campuses. The college where I teach has participated in the Congress to Campus program, promoting bipartisan dialogue by having former legislators from different parties engage in constructive debates with one another about timely political issues. These debates serve as models for constructive dialogue.

It was in the spirit of constructive dialogue that my class debated whether the Kirk assassination could be explained as the product of a moral panic. Many agreed that it could, and most agreed it was probably an assault on free speech despite having strong objections to Kirk's views. The debate was passionate, but everyone was respectful and listened to one another. No witches were to be found in the class that day.

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