Moral panics intensify social divisions and can lead to political violence

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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.

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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