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R.A Butler's Prize Essay

*Question: Why do democratic governments commonly
scapegoat minority groups?*

Introduction

‘Democratic governments’ are supposed to represent all citizens, including minority groups, by upholding the values of tolerance and pluralism and by establishing constitutional safeguards to prevent scapegoating. Scapegoating occurs when a democratic government frequently blames broader unresolved societal problems on ethnic, religious or cultural groups with less political influence than the majority. Governments often exploit existing stereotypes and rhetoric against minority groups to mobilise electoral support while avoiding responsibility for deeper economic problems. These socio-economic issues, such as inflation and the cost of living, create economic insecurity, undermining perceptions of national identity and weakening social cohesion. The central issue is whether scapegoating tactics occur frequently to justify describing them as ‘common.’ It’s difficult for democratic institutions to scapegoat minorities without intense public scrutiny. Overall, this essay will evaluate, utilising a range of comparative political and sociological examples, that while democratic governments do not constantly frame minorities as being responsible for wider societal problems, they commonly do when it’s politically convenient for them.

To portray minorities as threats to society

If scapegoating often involves blaming ‘outsiders’ for broader economic and societal problems, governments facing political failures and declining popularity redirect citizens’ frustration towards minority groups to create ‘moral panics’ in their countries.

A ‘moral panic’ is the term introduced by sociologist Stanley Cohen in the 1970s to describe the exaggerated fear that society reacts to towards a specific group seen as ‘folk devils’ to both values and social order.¹ This reflects populist politics, in which political figures often amplify these fears to overemphasise that the problem is widespread and dangerous, even when evidence says otherwise.² Moral panics allow governments to redirect public frustration to vulnerable minority groups instead of the wider social issues, e.g. the political leader,

¹ Frothingham, M (2025, October 10). Moral Panic. [Accessed 1st June 2026]

² Milliband, D. (2020). Brexit, Populism, and the Future of British Democracy. *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 15, pp. 150-65 [Accessed 13th July 2026]

economic decline, societal limits. Cohen's Moral Panic Theory explains why moral panic enables populism by exaggerating the threat posed by minority groups, making it easier for governments to feed into existing prejudice and divert attention away from societal problems.

In October 2022, Home Secretary Suella Braverman told Parliament the UK was facing "an invasion on our southern coast" from migrants crossing the Channel. Critics called her comment "highly offensive" and "shameful," saying the comment "puts so many people at risk."³ To describe migrating asylum seekers as an 'invasion' transforms the matter into a security threat. It demonstrates how democratic governments can scapegoat minority groups because this creates an image of asylum seekers becoming military threats, depicted as a potential danger to the UK. In reality, it diverts us from broader structural challenges in immigration policy, e.g. more than 230,000 Ukraine and Hong Kong nationals entered through dedicated UK legal visa schemes that year.⁴ Scapegoating becomes effective when a minority is presented as the 'folk devil.' Such rhetoric exploits this 'us vs them' narrative, used to reinforce a united, national identity behind the immigration agenda. Hence, it became a top government priority in the UK to shift political debate. This shift aimed to construct asylum seekers as outsiders.

Furthermore, the European Court of Justice ruled that Hungarian law discriminated against LGBTQ+ rights in 2021, banning Budapest's 2025 Pride March. Viktor Orban – former Hungarian Prime Minister - portrayed the LGBTQ+ community as a threat to 'child protection' and family values to deflect attention away from economic difficulties that were damaging the government.⁵ The political framing of the LGBTQ+ community as a threat to traditional family values and Budapest's Pride March could have been viewed as a strategic decision made by Orban's government to distract the opposition from economic stagnation. The evidence therefore suggests that powerful leaders can claim to protect the people against threatening minorities, even though evidence for such a threat is contested. Upon reflection,

³ ITV (2022, November 1). Suella Braverman faces criticism for Channel migrant 'invasion' claim. [Accessed 3rd June 2026]

⁴ Syal, R (2022, November 1). 'Invasion' of the UK? Experts dubious of Suella Braverman's claim. [Accessed 3rd June 2026]

⁵ Kirby, P (2026, April 1). Unprecedented ruling finds Hungary's anti-LGBTQ laws in breach of EU values. [Accessed 8th June 2026]

vulnerable minorities are presented as the source of social anxieties during periods of uncertainty.

Moreover, the Coral Gardens Massacre in 1963, Jamaica signified how governments unjustly discriminate against minorities, enhancing prejudice. After a dispute in a service station in Montego Bay, PM Alexander Bustamante ordered “Bring in all Rastas, dead or alive.”⁶ His rhetoric appears to have contributed to the cruel actions of police and the military. They believed they had the right to condemn unrelated Rastafarians without due process.⁷ Here, Rastafarians are clearly being scapegoated through Bustamante framing the community as ‘criminally inclined.’ Contextually, the Coral Gardens incident builds from the stereotype of Rastafarians being associated with crime, drug use and social deviance.⁸ This supports Cohen’s Argument because the minority are unjustly being deemed responsible for violence and criminality in Jamaica, to magnify public fear across the nation. In a democracy, politicians are rewarded by solving complex issues with simplified explanations. Thus, democratic governments can amplify isolated incidents into national crises because punishing a marginalised group would ensure citizens that order is being restored, even when the main issue stays unresolved.

Scapegoating functions as a political strategy for governments to distract the public’s attention from economic issues and policy failures by scapegoating minorities as the perpetrators, to avoid political backlash. This allows democracies to claim the role of ‘protectors’ of their nation. Still, blaming minorities for societal issues capitalises on social divisions,⁹ uniting the nation around a common group to strengthen social cohesion.

Conversely, while Cohen’s ‘Moral Panic’ theory assumes threats against minority groups are exaggerated; instead, are governments just responding to genuine public concerns to protect citizens? It is the government’s responsibility to maintain social cohesion by correcting economic mistakes. Restrictive policies that affect minority groups may not always translate into scapegoating, but to promote the public interest.

⁶ Campbell, H. (2014, March 1). Coral Gardens 1963: The Rastafari and Jamaican Independence. [Accessed 10th June 2026]

⁷ Campbell, H. (2021, June 14). Coral Gardens rising. [Accessed 10th June 2026]

⁸ White, PE. (2025). Myth, Sovereignty, and the Suppression of Africana Religious in Jamaica: From Conquest to Coral Gardens. [Accessed 10th June 2026]

⁹ Huston, M. (2019, August 9). The Psychology of “Us-vs-Them” [Accessed 11th June 2026]

Orban's government justified cancelling the Budapest Pride March to protect children, rather than attack the Hungarian LGBT+ community, given the Child Protection Law was amended in 2021 to protect minors from sexual abuse, banning promotion of homosexuality¹⁰. If the Hungarian government actually believed children were at risk, maybe Orban didn't purposefully intend to create a moral panic; instead, he tried to safeguard children from abuse and harassment, e.g. the law faced accusations that gay men were paedophiles; a moral panic must include some level of distortion. Consequently, this scapegoating strategy's effectiveness was limited. The European Court of Justice ruled that Orban had interfered with discriminatory laws including those on sexual orientation and freedom of expression, further violating EU laws and human rights⁴. This may have contributed to the Budapest Metropolitan Police U-turning and approving the 2026 Budapest Pride March to continue without restrictions¹¹. Furthermore, falsely associating gay men with paedophilia can be viewed as a moral panic because Hungarian gay men were portrayed as dangerous outsiders who threaten children. This reveals how politicians can weaponise child protection to blame a marginalised group in society for their own political failings.

A clear example of how governments sometimes do respond to genuine public concerns is when the Danish Social Democrats supported increasing restrictions and controversial immigration policies on asylum seekers in Denmark, arguing they were necessary to protect the welfare state.¹² Leader Mette Frederiksen claimed, "I consider this mass migration into Europe as a threat to the daily life in Europe."¹³ Frederiksen did respond to public concerns by decreasing asylum applications by 57%¹⁴. This allowed Frederiksen to create restrictive policies to safeguard Danish citizens because he justified enforcing greater immigration policies to maintain social cohesion. Thereby, governments may believe immigration creates policy pressures and attempt to respond through restrictions. When evidence proves a minority is the cause of the issue, it can be difficult to justify scapegoating. Thus, even

¹⁰ Zsiros, S. (2026, April 21). EU Court rules Orban's anti LGBTQ+ law breaches core values, calls on Budapest to cancel it. [Accessed 14th June 2026]

¹¹ Kassam, O. (2026, May 29). EU to release \$16bn to Hungary previously frozen under Orban. [Accessed 14th June 2026]

¹² Adler, K. (2025, June 5). The country where the left (not the far right) made hardline immigration laws." [Accessed 15th June 2026]

¹³ Vinocur, N. (2025, March 20). JD Vance had a point on migration, Denmark's prime minister warns EU leaders. [Accessed 15th June 2026]

¹⁴ Pace, M. (2021, June 28). Denmark's immigrants forced out by government policies. [Accessed 15th June 2026]

though asylum seekers are often depicted as the root of social issues, policies impacting minorities are not necessarily intended as scapegoating.

To summarise, the argument that democratic governments often scapegoat minorities to deflect attention from public concerns conflicts with the belief that they genuinely act in the public's best interests. However, this is outweighed by the fact that while governments often portray themselves as 'protectors' of citizens' welfare, they strategically create moral panics to distract citizens from socio-economic issues by framing minority groups as threats. The most convincing answer is that democratic governments do not intentionally present minorities as threats, but as a conditional strategy to politically survive; commonly enough that scapegoating remains a central issue in today's politics.

To gain political support

Democratic governments often compete for political support and secure electoral advantages. This is achieved through scapegoating minority groups by shifting responsibility for socio-economic problems in society onto marginalised groups. While it can be justified that these governments are obliged to pursue policies that will maintain social stability and public confidence, this strategy is used to unite the nation behind a particular political leader while diverting attention from these underlying issues. Stuart Hall claimed governments "crystallise moral panics" to create public fear onto specific minority groups, thereby turning them into scapegoats for wider social problems, portraying them as threats to social order¹⁵.

Scapegoating therefore creates retrospective voting by simplifying major failures into easily identifiable targets. Governments can create political shortcuts to reduce political accountability while reinforcing existing prejudice to consolidate electoral success.

Consequently, the National Front, a far-right political party, consistently opposed large-scale immigration of North African citizens, blaming them as the source of France's economic difficulties. Leader Jean-Marie Le Pen claimed African immigration would "submerge" the country, exemplifying his racial hatred towards migrants, portraying them as a social threat to France's economic issues¹⁶. The 'National Preference' policy (Préférence Nationale), which

¹⁵ Hall, S. (1979). Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order. [Accessed 25th June 2026]

¹⁶ Henley, J. (2025, Jan 7). Jean-Marie Le Pen, the far-right provocateur whose ugly nationalism lives on. [Accessed 18th June 2026]

advocated protecting the French identity. This restricted jobs and benefits access to French citizens only, blaming North Africans immigrants for the increase in unemployment and crime. As punishment, the National Preference campaign restricted access to social support for immigrants.¹⁷ Scapegoating can be strategically manipulated to enforce political law and control onto citizens. This proved advantageous because his electoral growth significantly rose, capturing 14.4% of the first-round vote in the 1988 Presidential Election and gaining 35 seats for the National Front in the 1986 Legislative Elections¹⁸. Thereby, anti-immigration rhetoric can not only further marginalise minority groups in the nation by limiting state intervention, but also mobilise electoral support. The rhetoric used shaped France's national identity, conveying how only native French citizens belong in the country.

Another clear example is McCarthyism. In the 1950s, Joseph McCarthy scapegoated communists as a threat to national security not only to exploit public anxiety during the Cold War, but to gain political support by presenting himself and his allies as 'protectors' of the nation. The Second Red Scare became prominent after WW2, when McCarthy reignited the public's fear of real espionage cases to justify his anti-communist campaign¹⁹. Establishing McCarthyism portrayed suspected communists as a danger to the US, even other politicians who disagreed with his policymaking. This suggests 'minority' groups are defined by vulnerability rather than demographics. A minority group may lack the political power to oppose being presented as threats. Yet, congressional investigations and U.S citizens supported the anti-communist movement, enhancing McCarthy's re-election to the Senate in 1952²⁰. McCarthyism signifies how politicians can weaponise moral panics as a tactic used to create public fear and consolidate political power over the government. Minorities are scapegoated when they are vulnerable to state power, allowing governments to generate electoral incentives in periods of uncertainty.

For that reason, Hall's argument plays a pivotal role in scapegoating minorities. Scapegoating functions as a strategic plan for governments to exploit and amplify social anxieties, which helps politicians to establish political support and divert attention away from policy failures and build internal divisions within society.

¹⁷ Chrisafis, A. (2024, July 1). Far-right National Rally in reach of being dominant French party after election first round. [Accessed 18th June 2026]

¹⁸ Page, R. (2014, June 27). France's Front National (FN), International Affairs and Defence, SN06925. [Accessed 18th June 2026]

¹⁹ BBC. (2023, April 6). Post-war American society, McCarthyism. [Accessed 19th June 2026]

²⁰ Achter, P. (2026, May 22). McCarthyism | Definition, History, & Facts. [Accessed 19th June 2026]

On the contrary, while scapegoating may influence public opinions, electoral support is primarily achieved through strong leadership and successful policymaking that resonates with voters. Effective governance is critical for establishing electoral success.

Most political leaders of governments pursue policies that protect minority groups, instead of exploiting them. If governments were to frequently scapegoat minority groups, they would lack electoral support from them during general elections. Hereby, scapegoating is merely a secondary framing strategy rather than the primary cause. It's better understood as a political strategy that utilises existing support, rather than the cause of electoral success. Nevertheless, Trump's scapegoating of minority groups has contributed to his increasing brand image, leading to governmental scapegoating. During his 2015 presidential campaign, he described Mexican immigrants as bringing "crime" into the U.S, framing Mexicans as "rapists" to gain strong media coverage. Trump continuously portrayed immigrants crossing the border as "invading" the U.S. He further proposed to ban Muslims from entering the US, promoting the Muslim travel ban in 2017. Critics recognised Trump's scapegoating of minorities by "blaming them for US problems,"¹⁵ while most supporters viewed Trump's rhetoric as national security measures, undermining his frequent rhetoric. Conversely, it reinforced social anxieties and exploited pre-existing stereotypes. Trump's rhetoric reflects core features of populist politics¹ - he positioned migrants as hostile outsiders instead of portraying them as 'real people,' symbolically constructing how political leaders will position minority groups as a threat to society.

As well as this, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, established by the Indian government, fast-tracks citizenship for religious minorities from other countries into India. Indian PM Modi aimed to improve religious persecution across South Asia by recognising "moral duty" and equality regardless of religious background²¹. This illustrates how governments strive to promote greater religious equality and nationalist support, rather than scapegoating different cultures, to gain an electoral advantage. Indeed, this enhanced Modi's reputation amongst Hindus by recognising India's national identity is centred upon Hinduism, supporting the claim that the most effective leaders consolidate electoral support by building more ethical policies. However, critics argued the CAA is anti-Muslim law. Even though Muslims aren't a 'persecuted minority,' they still are a minority; many other groups, particularly Muslims, face exclusion without justification by the discriminatory 2019

²¹ BBC. (2024, March 12). CAA: India's new citizenship law explained [Accessed 25th June 2026]

amendment²². This built tension between Muslims and other minority groups because they have also suffered due to their religious identities and seek refuge in India. By excluding Muslims, this creates a separation as to who's 'deserving' and 'underserving' of protection. The exclusion of Muslims depicts them as societal outsiders, making them convenient scapegoats whilst Modi gains an electoral incentive. The state can define who belongs, who deserves protection and who remains politically suspect. Still, a democracy has the duty to protect all citizens regardless of their ethnicity.

Overall, these examples indicate how democratic governments scapegoat minority groups to mobilise electoral support, reducing political accountability. This provides democracies with electoral incentives. However, its effectiveness depends on whether the minority group is politically vulnerable and on public anxieties.

Conclusion

To conclude, this evidence suggests that scapegoating is a divisive tool weaponised by democratic governments to direct public frustration onto vulnerable minorities in society. This shifts the public's focus away from their own key issues, instead of conveying marginalised groups symbolically as the common enemy. Minorities are effective scapegoats because they possess limited political power to challenge the 'us vs them' narrative that intensifies populism and moral panics across society.

However, an objection to that is it's not a government's aim to commonly scapegoat minorities but to safeguard their countries. Furthermore, to argue whether governments scapegoat 'commonly,' scapegoating mostly occurs conditionally during periods of economic downturns, intense electoral competition or when political leaders lose public trust. Unfortunately, this allows governments to present themselves as the 'protectors' of the nation. Nonetheless, these periods recur frequently across democracies, scapegoating can still be considered 'common.'

²² Ellis-Peterson, H. (2020, January 21). 'Modi is afraid': women take lead in India's citizenship protests [Accessed 25th June 2026]

As a result, democratic governments commonly scapegoat minority groups because electoral competition rewards politicians who blame identifiable minority groups for wider societal issues. Although some politicians and legal safeguards try to limit this, they cannot remove the political incentive that makes scapegoating an effective strategy for democratic governments. Scapegoating persists not because democratic governments fail minorities, but because democracies can cover complex societal problems in simple solutions to avoid political accountability.

END

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