Rewriting the Rules of Democratic Legitimacy:

Elite Discourse and the Dynamics of Polarization in the United States and Germany

by

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Master Thesis

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February 2026

Total number of keystrokes incl. spaces:157.550

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20195978   Department of Politics and Society   16.02.2026

Abstract

This thesis examines how political polarization was discursively escalated in the United States and Germany between 2020 and 2022 through elite political communication. While much existing scholarship conceptualizes polarization primarily as an attitudinal or structural condition, this study approaches polarization as a dynamic and multi-dimensional process shaped through public political discourse. Bringing together literatures on affective polarization, democratic norm erosion, and discursive conflict expansion, the thesis develops a framework for analyzing how political conflict becomes increasingly moralized, identity-based, and delegitimizing.

Empirically, the study employs an interpretive close-reading of elite speeches, public statements, and highly visible political communication across three analytically connected episodes: the delegitimization of electoral procedures, the institutional embedding of suspicion toward democratic processes, and the cross-domain expansion of moralized legitimacy conflicts into areas such as education and culture. Rather than measuring audience responses directly, the analysis traces how elite actors in both countries construct exclusionary and delegitimizing narratives that render intensified political conflict publicly intelligible and politically actionable.

The findings suggest that polarization escalation operates through a gradual redefinition of legitimate democratic contestation, in which procedural disputes become moralized struggles over authority, belonging, and institutional trust. By foregrounding the discursive mechanisms through which conflict expands and stabilizes, the thesis contributes to scholarship on polarization and democratic resilience by demonstrating how elite communication can reshape the normative boundaries of democratic politics across different national contexts.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In recent years, political polarization has been documented as a feature of democratic politics. Data and survey research across established democracies points to a rise in perceptions of division, declining trust in political processes, and intensified public contestation. The Democracy Report 2025 from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, outlines increasing levels of political polarization in a number of countries, and identifies weakening public discourse environments as a recurring pattern in both electoral and liberal democracies (Angiolillo et. al, 2025, p. 39-41). Furthermore, it links polarization to growing pressures on media systems and to disputes over institutional impartiality, indicating that political conflict increasingly concerns how democratic institutions are evaluated (Angiolillo et. al, 2025, p. 39-41).

A survey on the United States reflects these broader developments. The Pew Research Center finds that majorities of Americans describe politics as deeply divisive, and report that political debate has become less respectful and less based on shared facts (Pew Research Center, 2023). Based on this, perceptions of institutional fairness vary in regard to partisan lines. Similarly, a survey of public officials conducted by the Carnegie Endowment reports widespread perceptions that national polarization is increasing, even where local political cooperation remains stable (Carnegie, 2025). Together, these findings suggest that polarization is experienced not just as ideological disagreement, but also as a question of institutional credibility and fairness.

Germany shows similar tensions within a different institutional context. Protest data illustrates sustained mobilization surrounding federal elections, reflecting a political environment where conflict regularly extends beyond parliamentary debate into public space (Bernadi & Audibert, 2025). Electoral reporting highlights fragmentation and the strengthening of polarizing actors across the party system (Alkousaa, 2025). Furthermore, large-scale demonstrations against the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) emphasizes the intensity of opposition the party arguably provokes and the strong emotional reactions surrounding debates about democratic norms and political direction (AP, 2025). Taken together, these developments indicate a close connection between electoral competition and public mobilization in contemporary political conflict.

Polarization alone, however, does not necessarily determine democratic outcomes. Disagreement and competition are normal features of democratic politics. As Rostbøll argues, polarization cannot just be understood as a single phenomenon with uniform consequences, rather, its implications depend on the institutional arenas in which it unfolds and the form it takes (Rostbøll, 2024, p. 76-77). This perspective shifts attention away from measuring the degree of polarization and toward examining how polarization interacts with democratic institutions and with the standards used to evaluate political authority.

Research on political division also suggests that conflict may stem from different beliefs about institutional performance instead of just from differences in policy preferences. McNamara and Mosquera demonstrate that individuals can share similar distributive preferences while holding different beliefs about government spending levels and institutional outcomes (McNamara & Mosquera, 2024, p. 2–4). Thus, when assessments of institutional performance are different, then judgments about legitimacy might diverge as well.

All together, reports and survey evidence from the mid-2020s document levels of perceived polarization, visible public mobilization, and declining confidence in political processes (V-Dem Institute, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2023). These observations may raise questions about how political conflict interacts with democratic institutions and how standards of institutional evaluation develop over time.

Instead of just drawing conclusions from contemporary indicators alone, this thesis turns to the period 2020–2022 in the United States and Germany in order to examine how political actors articulated and contested institutional authority within specific episodes of conflict. This earlier period provides bounded contexts where electoral procedures, institutional practices, and governing authority were publicly debated and discussed. The study seeks to investigate how legitimacy claims were formulated, challenged, and interpreted within escalating political conflict.

1.1 Problem Formulation & Research Question

The significance of this thesis lies in its potential to deepen our understanding of political polarization as a dynamic and context-dependent process within contemporary democracies. While the United States is often treated as the paradigmatic case of extreme polarization, developments in Germany suggest that similar—though not identical—processes of

discursive escalation may be emerging in European democratic settings. By critically examining the ways in which political elites communicate, frame issues, and contest institutional legitimacy, this thesis contributes to broader debates on democratic resilience, procedural trust, and the moralization of political conflict in the 21st century.

Through a comparative lens, the study illuminates how standards of democratic legitimacy are articulated, challenged, and recalibrated in times of heightened polarization. It explores how elite discourse can transform routine institutional practices, media representation, and governing authority into morally contested terrain, thereby reshaping the interpretive landscape of democratic competition. By doing so, this thesis provides a systematic account of the mechanisms through which polarization escalates across different institutional contexts. To comprehensively investigate these dynamics, the following research question guides the analysis:

How does political polarization escalate, and how are standards of

democratic legitimacy articulated and contested within that process in the

United States and Germany in the period of 2020–2022?

2. Literature Review

This thesis examines how political polarization escalates into radicalized, delegitimizing conflict, with a particular focus on the United States and Germany. Rather than treating polarization as a singular phenomenon, this literature review conceptualizes it as a multi-level process shaped by structural conditions, political institutions, elite strategies, discursive practices, and mass-level psychological dynamics. The purpose of this literature review is not to explain the origins of polarization in each case, but rather to identify the conditions under which polarization can become affective, moralized, or destabilizing for democratic norms.

Building on this framework, the review brings together literature on partisan sorting, cultural value change and backlash, discursive constructions of political conflict, affective polarization, and democratic erosion. Together, these bodies of literature should provide the analytical foundations necessary to understand why some audiences can become receptive to polarizing discourse and exclusionary discourse, and also how political actors may exploit

these conditions. This review thus establishes the conceptual groundwork for the subsequent theoretical framework, methodological approach and case analysis.

Abramowitz - The Disappearing Center

A foundational understanding of contemporary U.S. politics requires acknowledging the profound partisan and ideological polarization that has developed over recent decades. (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 7, 8) Alan I. Abramowitz's (2010) 'The Disappearing Center' provides a foundational account of partisan polarization and sorting in the United States. Focusing on the increasing alignment between political elites and the mass public, Abramowitz (2010) challenges the assumption that polarization is primarily an elite-driven phenomenon disconnected from voters (p. x). Instead, he argues that polarization in institutions such as Congress reflects broader trends within the electorate, particularly among politically engaged citizens (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 10). Abramowitz (2010) states that "the central argument of this volume is that there is no disconnect between the political elite and the American people" (p. 10).

"Polarization in Washington reflects polarization within the public, especially within the politically engaged segment of the public" (Abramowitz, 2010, p. x). This engaged segment of the public (defined as voters who are attentive, informed, and politically active) is both the most partisan and the most ideologically polarized, but also the one which reflects the ideals of democratic citizenship the most (Abramowitz, 2010, p. x). This contrasts sharply with the least active members, who remain the most moderate (Abramowitz, 2010, p. x). Abramowitz (2010) elaborates that "partisan-ideological polarization is greatest among those individuals whose beliefs and behavior most closely reflect the ideals of responsible democratic citizenship, that is, the engaged public" (p. 4). Consequently, Abramowitz (2010) argues that the behavior of candidates and elected officials is "constrained by the preferences of their most active and informed supporters" (p. 7). Correspondingly, as party leaders and elected officials have become more ideologically consistent across a range of policy issues, the politically attentive public has mirrored this shift (Abramowitz, 2020, p. 20).

The growth in ideological consistency is a crucial mechanism of polarization (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 37). Consequently, distribution of ideological preferences, especially amongst the engaged public, has shifted from unimodal distribution towards bimodal

distribution, with Democrats on the left and Republicans on the right (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 7). Abramowitz (2010) argues that the engaged public can form the electoral basis for both major parties in the United States, thus making them a critical source of support, campaign funding, and votes in both primary and general elections (p. 4). This mass–elite alignment constitutes an essential precondition for contemporary partisan polarization in Congress, which Abramowitz (2010) argues largely reflects polarization within the American electorate (p. 13).

Furthermore, Abramowitz (2010) emphasizes that polarization is not exclusively destabilizing, but can also energize the public by clarifying the stakes in elections (p. x). By offering voters "a clear choice between parties representing divergent policy alternatives, polarization increases interest and participation in the electoral process among the public" (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 13-14). Abramowitz (2010) argues that, for those who are engaged, "more Americans appear to be excited and energized by the choice between a consistently liberal Democratic Party and a consistently conservative Republican Party" (p. 33).

While Abramowitz (2010) outlines how partisan sorting and mass-elite alignment structure contemporary political competition, in the United States specifically, his account does not fully explain why polarization creates opportunities for radical challengers, or how institutional environments shape these dynamics. To address this gap, the next section will outline some literature that emphasizes the role of mainstream political parties and institutional failures in enablin populist mobilization and escalation in polarization.

Causes of populism in the West

The rise of populism, the subsequent escalation of polarization, which leads to empowerment of radical challengers, is all tied to the strategic failures and institutional choices of mainstream political parties (Berman, 2021, p. 78). While Berman (2021) is primarily concerned with the rise of populist challengers, her analysis is relevant for studies of polarization escalation, as it highlights how mainstream parties' institutional and strategic failures can turn political competition into an antagonistic struggle between the "people" and a "corrupt elite" (p. 81).

From a supply-side perspective, populism thrives when democratic institutions becomes less responsive to citizens. This happens because institutional problems shape the

way voter preferences become political outcomes, thereby influencing which groups politicians listen to (Berman, 2021, p.78). In other words, this means that populism thrives because the political system, i.e. the government, leaders, and traditional parties, is not working properly. Rather, it has become unresponsive and ineffective at addressing people's problems and listening to their concerns. For example, mechanisms that allow money to disproportionally influence politics – or limit the representation of diverse socio-economic backgrounds – contribute to a less responsive democracy. This fosters dissatisfaction from the electorate towards the establishments, hereby deepening societal divisions (Berman, 2021, p. 78-79). Thus, when unelected officials make more decisions, and mainstream political parties lose their members and connection to the public, it further damages the democratic system (Berman, 2021, p. 80).

Furthermore, voluntarist explanations outline that the choices and behaviors of political actors, mainstream parties in particular, enable the rise of populism. When mainstream parties are confronted with emerging populist parties, their initial strategies, whether dismissive, adversarial, or accomodative, inadvertently shape the success of populist parties (Berman, 2021, p. 81). To put it more broadly, "populism tends to thrive when mainstream center-left and center-right parties fail to offer clear alternatives to voters on important contemporary issues" (Berman, 2021, p. 81-82) This represents a failure to offer clear alternatives, in particular when parties converge, which can create or further deepen a 'representation gap - a mismatch between the voters' preferences and the alternatives that the mainstream parties offer. This gap can generate extremism and democratic decay. Mainstream parties' strategic decisions can influence the salience of issues. This refers to the intensity or importance that is attached to a specific view and decisively affects political behavior (Berman, 2021, p. 82).

Thus, when European parties, especially center-left ones, started to agree more on economic policies, they began to focus more on social and cultural issues instead of economic ones (Berman, 2021, p.82). This shift by mainstream parties created a gap for right-wing populists to fill. They mobilized voters on issues such as immigration and national identity, which appealed to certain segments of the electorate who considered themselves fiscally left-wing but socially conservative (Berman, 2021, p. 82-83) Altogether, these institutional deficiencies and strategic missteps by the mainstream parties can create a political

environment where polarization can escalate, and radical challengers can find a space to flourish.

Berman's (2021) focus on institutional responsiveness and elite strategy highlights how political competition can become increasingly antagonistic. However, it does not fully explain why segments of the electorate are especially receptive to exclusionary or polarizing appeals. To contextualize this receptivity, the following section introduces Cultural Backlash Theory, which situates contemporary political conflict within long-term transformations in cultural values and identity.

Cultural Backlash

Drawing on the work of Norris and Inglehart (2019), 'Cultural Backlash Theory' provides a pivotal contextual background for understanding the social conditions that may foster audience receptivity to polarizing and radicalizing discourses. The theory argues that long-term shifts in cultural values within advanced post-industrial democracies have restructured political conflict, by way of reshaping the social norms and beliefs rather than through sudden political events (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 32).

At its core, Cultural Backlash Theory builds upon the silent revolution, which identifies an intergenerational value shift beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century. This shift is primarily attributed to the rising levels of existential security that are experienced by younger cohorts in post-war Western societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 32). A decline in material and physical insecurity made way for a shift in public priorities, moving from materialist concerns to post-materialist values centered on individual autonomy, social liberal attitudes, and self-expression (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 32). Examples of these shifts could include stronger support for environmental protection, human rights, gender equality, cosmopolitanism, and tolerance toward minorities such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities. Over time, these developments altered the balance of public opinion, which left traditional moral beliefs concentrated amongst a shrinking segment of the population (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 36).

Surveys show that since around 1970, socially liberal attitudes have risen consistently across Western Europe and the United States, particularly amongst younger and

better-educated people (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 94, 96). Norris and Inglehart (2019) attribute this long-term cultural evolution to structural factors such as intergenerational population replacement, increasing gender equality, growing social diversity, and urbanization. These transformations resulted in enduring generational differences in values that persist independently of socioeconomic variables (p. 36).

According to Norris and Inglehart (2019), these liberalizing trends have "catalyzed a major cultural backlash" (p. 123), particularly in reference to social conservatives. This backlash is disproportionally concentrated around older generations, such as the Interwar and Baby Boomer cohorts, as well as less-educated groups (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 96, 120, 123). Members of these groups increasingly perceive the erosion of traditional norms and social hierarchies as a threat to their identities and moral worldviews. As a result, many in these groups experience a sense of cultural displacement, wherein Norris and Inglehart (2019) "hypothesize that long-term cultural changes have reached a 'tipping point' where members of the former cultural majority, who still adhere to traditional norms, have come to feel like strangers in their own land" p. 91).

This resentment is closely linked to preferences for social conformity and intolerance of non-conformity, which can strengthen authoritarian predispositions and heighten hostility toward minorities (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 90, 102). When a perceived threat to established social norms and traditional values arises, authoritarian tendencies are amplified, intensifying inclinations towards stereotyping, discrimination, and the scapegoating of out-groups (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 91). These dynamics can create a receptive audience for political actors, who frame social change as moral decay or national decline - in particular if they promise to change this (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p.102, 124).

The political consequences of this widening cultural cleavage are substantial. Cultural issues such as "demands for restrictions on immigration and the expression of ethnic and religious identities, such as wearing the hijab, fears of islamic terrorism, hostility toward LGBTQ rights, and appeals to xenophobic nationalism, are now potent wedge issues" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 124). This environment provides opportunities for authoritarian-populist leaders to mobilize resentment and frame political conflict in existential terms, often by

defending traditional values while rejecting pluralism and openness (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 125).

For the purpose of this thesis, these dynamics are treated as background conditions shaping audience receptivity to polarizing and exclusionary discourse, rather than as explanations for how polarization itself escalates into radicalized, delegitimizing conflict.

While Cultural Backlash Theory explains the social and generational conditions that produce audiences vulnerable to identity-based mobilization, it does not necessarily specify how political conflict is actively constructed and intensified in public discourse. Therefore, the next section examines the discursive mechanisms through which polarization may be radicalized, focusing on how fear, exclusion, and nationalism are produced and normalized through language.

Wodak: The Politics of Fear

In order to understand how political Polarization escalates from ideological disagreement into radicalized conflict, it is necessary to examine the discursive mechanisms through which the "us vs them" is constructed and normalized. In *The Politics of Fear* (2015), Ruth Wodak provides a conceptual foundation for the aforementioned task by demonstrating how polarization radicalizes at the level of public meaning-making, once polarization already exists (Wodak, 2015, p. 8). Her analysis focuses on Micro-politics, through which exclusionary ideologies are produced and reproduced in everyday politics, media, and campaigning - particularly through what she terms as "politics of fear" (Wodak,2015, p. 4-5).

Wodak (2015) outlines that the defining characteristic of right-wing populism does not only lie in rhetorical style, but also in specific contents (p, 3). This content can when "parties successfully construct fear and – related to the various real or imagined dangers – propose scapegoats that are blamed for threatening or actually damaging our societies, in Europe and beyond" (Wodak, ch.1, p, 3). Fear functions as a primary mechanism for delegitimizing the "other", thus transforming complex socio-economic and political developments into a simple narrative by "looking for a culprit" (Pelinka, 2013, as cited in Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 6). Such narratives draw on widespread social concerns, such as job insecurity, fears of migration, or perceived loss of national autonomy, which are then redirected towards targeted hostility (Wodak, 2015, p. 5).

In this sense, fear becomes a dominant public perspective. Political actors actively mobilize this to construct identities and justify policies (Altheide, 2002, as cited in Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 7–8). Essential to this process is the discursive practice of scapegoating and "othering". Right-wing populist actors offer simple answers by constructing enemies who are held accountable for societal problems (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 6). These "others" may be defined by race, religion, institutions, or linguistics, and may include groups such as migrants, Muslims, Roma, political elites, etc (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 6). By externalizing the blame, populist discourse allows for political actors to neglect internal social inequalities and instead focus the conflict on an externalized threat (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 6).

This dynamic is intensified through discursive strategies such as "victim–perpetrator reversal" and the construction of conspiracy theories (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 6-7) These portray "the people" as victims under attack while enabling political actors to present themselves as "saviours" defending the "man or woman on the street" against both elites and perceived external enemies (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 27) These discursive strategies not only moralize political conflict but also lay the groundwork for exclusionary definitions of political belonging.

Discursive mechanisms, as those mentioned above, are closely linked to nationalist projects that redefine political belonging through exclusionary identity constructions. Wodak demonstrates that nationalist discourse operates by producing identities through inclusion and exclusion, thus defining and "us vs them" (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 4). In the case of right-wing populist nationalism, this process relies on an understanding of the nation shifting away from legal citizenship, towards nativist principles grounded in ancestry and birth (Mudde, 2007, as cited in Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 4) This framework is often articulated through body and border politics, in which the nation is conceptualized as tied to a specific territory and ethnic heritage, where the notion of national belonging is fundamentally linked to "blood" (de Cleen 2012, as cited in Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 12).

Language has a central role in institutionalizing these exclusionary boundaries. Wodak argues that language ability and competency have an increasing function as a "gate-keeping device" for national membership, shaping access to citizenship, permanent residence, and entry visas across Europe (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 4) While language is often framed as a tool for integration, it rather functions and operates as a legislative obstacle to migration and a

"gate-keeping device" (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 4). In states with "traditionally exclusive citizenship," language tests and cultural knowledge requirements are particularly restrictive, reflecting an "ethnic understanding" of the nation and contributing to the marginalization of migrants as individuals with inherent "deficits," a condition Wodak conceptualizes as a form of "dis-citizenship" (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 32).

Lastly, Wodak (2015) highlights the political consequences of the discursive practices through the mainstreaming of exclusionary rhetoric. She outlines that mainstream political parties, often out of fear of losing voters, increasingly accommodate populist narratives through "fear-mongering" related to security, migration, and welfare protection (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 4). This arguably leads to the gradual adoption of nativist and anti-immigrant rhetoric by governmental actors themselves (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 15) Instead of attempting to neutralize far-right challengers, this process often produces a situation for mainstream parties in which they do not win, as they legitimize exclusionary narratives while failing to reclaim radical voters.

Altogether, Wodak's (2015) analysis outlines how fear, exclusion and nationalism are discursively produced and normalized by transforming political competition into a radicalized conflict structured around identities and moralized boundaries. By constructing threats, identifying enemies, and legitimizing exclusionary practices, populist discourse contributes to the escalation of polarization by enabling the systematic delegitimization of those who become defined as outside the national community. By this, Wodak (2015) provides a crucial account of how affective hostility and identity-based conflict are stabilized through language once polarization is already present.

Wodak's (2015) analysis demonstrates how political actors discursively construct rigid moral boundaries between "us" and "them," but it does not directly address how these narratives translate into emotional hostility among ordinary citizens. To capture this affective dimension of polarization, the following section turns to research on affective polarization, which examines how partisan identities generate dislike, distrust, and social distance across political divides.

Affective Polarization

Increasing animosity between citizens over political affiliations in the United States has come

to be known as affective polarization, and can be argued to represent how political disagreements may manifest themselves (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 129). This phenomenon is characterized specifically by the growing dislike and distrust towards members of the opposing side as "hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded" (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 129), and on that basis express an unwillingness to engage with them socially (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 129) This form of polarization is quite distinct from traditional understandings of polarization, which solely focus on ideological or policy differences (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 131).

More specifically, affective polarization is conceptually different from ideological polarization, meaning that major opinions on issues are not a prerequisite for hostility to develop (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 131) Although scholarly debate exists in regard to the extent of ideological polarization, researchers emphasize that affective and ideological divisions are "theoretically and empirically distinct concepts" (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 131). More specifically, affective polarization can intensify even as ideological divisions narrow (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016a, as cited in Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 131) This distinction emphasizes that political divisions are not only about what people believe, but rather how they feel about those who may believe differently from themselves.

At its core, affective polarization is rooted in partisanship as a social identity (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 129). Partisanship functions like other social identities, leading individuals to categorize the world into a "liked in-group" and a "disliked out-group" (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 130). This framework explains why partisans reward co-partisans and penalize members of the opposing party, often extending these biases into non-political domains, exemplifying in-group favoritism and out-group animosity (Iyengar et al., 2019, pp. 134–141). Research has shown that this behavioral and emotional divide is characterized by dislike, distrust, and social distancing from political out-groups (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 134) Although Iyengar et. al points out that in-group favouritism has generally been concluded to be the primary driver (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 141), this animosity towards the out-groups thus becomes a driver, characterized by dislike, distrust, and a perception that opposing parties are untrustworthy (Soroka, 2014, as cited in Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 142).

Thus, affective polarization transforms political disagreements into a deeper form of social and moral antagonisms, which creates conditions where political opponents are

perceived as illegitimate or even threatening. The animosity that is created is argued to have changed the "norms and standards" (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 143) that are typically applied to elected officials, and even questioning the legitimacy of electoral results - both of which are examples of something that can threaten the foundations of representative democracy (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 142).

Although the literature on affective polarization documents the emotional intensification of partisan conflict, it does not fully theorize the broader democratic consequences of these dynamics. The next section, therefore, situates affective polarization within the wider framework of pernicious polarization, which conceptualizes how moralized, identity-based conflict undermines democratic norms and institutional stability.

Pernicious Polarization

Whilst a certain degree of political disagreement is generally considered to be healthy for a democracy, recent scholarship highlights that a more severe and dangerous form of polarization has emerged. One that transcends policy differences thus threatening democratic stability. This escalatory pathway, which is often characterized by affective hostility and mutual delegitimization, is a pivotal concern when trying to understand contemporary democratic stress.

McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) argue that a "pernicious" form of political and societal polarization, that is quite distinct from regular ideological distance, presents risks to democratic polities (p.16). McCoy, Rahman, and Somer define polarization as a dynamic process in which "the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of 'Us' versus 'Them'" (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 16). This conceptualization emphasizes the relational and instrumental political use of polarization, which is often activated when societal groups mobilize for changes in power relations (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 16). While some degrees of political polarization can be beneficial and healthy for civic engagement, McCoy et al. (2018) are concerned with severe forms that can lead to societies aligning into "two camps with mutually exclusive identities and interests" (p. 18), thereby undermining social cohesion and political stability. More specifically, "it is the alignment of opinion under a single identity, rather than the radicalization of opinion" (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 18), that here

is argued to threaten social cohesion and political stability.

McCoy et al. (2018) furthermore emphasize the moralized, identity-based, and zero-sum nature of this pernicious polarization. They outline that at its extreme points, each camp questions the moral legitimacy of the others by viewing the opposing side as an "existential threat to their way of life or the nation as a whole" (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 19). This can transform a regular political adversary into an enemy, foster strong emotions of distrust, and make peaceful coexistence seem very unlikely (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 19) This affective dimension strengthens loyalty towards in-group members and prejudice towards out-group members (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 19) Together, this form of severe polarization leads groups to perceive their interests as a zero-sum game, in which one groups gain is the other groups loss - thus reducing notions of joint collective actions and reinforcing perceptions of differences (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 25) This form of societal polarization can extend into geographic and/or social segregation, thus hindering communication which makes depolarization more difficult (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 21).

Implications of this sort of moralized, identity-based conflict for democracy can be quite profound. McCoy et. al (2018) outline a causal chain in which deepening affective polarization can lead to reduced willingness to cooperate or compromise, as well as a "greater questioning of the moral legitimacy of political leaders from the out-group" (p. 25) In this process, McCoy et. al (2018) points out that this can be used to justify the abandonment of due process and the rule of law to achieve moralized ends (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 25) The consequences include significant problems of governance, such as gridlock, democratic erosion, or even democratic collapse (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 19, 25).

In their influential 2019 work, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies," McCoy and Somer (2019) extend the concept of pernicious polarization by emphasizing the role of strategic elite behavior. Polarization arises not only from structural cleavages or institutional arrangements but also from elites mobilizing voters with "divisive, demonizing discourse, and exploiting existing grievances" (p. 234). This dynamic thus intensifies when opposition either reciprocates with similar tactics or fails to make an effective non-polarizing response (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 234) A key concept in McCoy and Somer's argument is "formative rifts", which is explained as deep-seated divisions embedded in a nation-state's historical formation or reformation (McCoy & Somer,

2019, p. 237) The authors argue that when political actors politicize these formative rifts, the polarization is more likely to become enduring and produce pernicious consequences for democracy, as it questions fundamental issues of state identity and belonging (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p, 263).

Pernicious polarization can have severe consequences for democracy, leading to what McCoy and Somer (2019) term "democratic erosion" (p. 234). Dangers of democratic erosion include asymmetrical consolidation of polarized blocs, where one side achieves hegemony, which can potentially lead to democratic backsliding (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 257). Moreover, the aggressive discourse employed by polarizing parties delegitimizes opponents and the political system, which can distort public perception and foster distrust in institutions (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 257). Ultimately, pernicious polarization fosters "affective polarization," characterized by negative emotional reactions and social distance between citizens of opposing political affiliations. This environment, where opposing parties or policies are perceived as existential threats, can open the door to undemocratic behavior by political actors, accelerating democratic backsliding, illiberalism, and potentially even reversion to autocracy (McCoy & Somer, 2019, pp. 257-258).

McCoy and colleagues identify the systemic dangers posed by severe polarization, but their framework fails to address why citizens themselves tolerate or enable democratic norm violations. To address this mass-level mechanism, the final section introduces Svolik's concept of the partisan–democrat dilemma, which explains how polarized voters prioritize partisan identity over democratic principles.

Polarization versus Democracy

Milan W. Swolik's (2019) article, "Polarization versus Democracy", provides a micro-level mechanism for understanding how political polarization can undermine democratic stability. Svolik challenges conventional understandings, by addressing the puzzle of why citizens, who often express strong support for democracy, concurrently back elected leaders who actively subvert democratic principles (Svolik, 2019, p. 23, 30) This question is particularly relevant given that current democratic breakdowns often occur through gradual "executive takeovers" by democratically elected incumbents, rather than a traditional coup (Svolik, 2019, p. 20).

Svolik's core argument posits that a fundamental vulnerability within democratic politics is the inherent conflict voters face between democratic principles and partisan interests (Svolik, 2019, p. 23) In highly polarized societies, charismatic leaders can exploit societal cleavages, thus presenting voters with a choice: support preferred policies and leaders, even if they exhibit authoritarian tendencies, or vote for an opposition that may be more democratic but offer less desirable policy outcomes and forms of leadership (Svolik, 2019, p. 23–). This choice, Svolik argues, reveals that "ordinary people become pro- or anti-Chávez, Orbán, or Erdogan first, and democrats only second" (Svolik, 2019, p. 23). Svolik's experimental evidence, drawing on studies from Turkey, Venezuela, and the United States, demonstrates that voters are willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan gain, especially when policy or partisan differences between candidates are significant (Svolik, 2019, p. 26-27) This finding builds directly on research by scholars like Iyengar, showing how intense affective polarization can lead individuals to overlook or even sanction undemocratic behavior by their preferred party.

Svolik's work also complements McCoy and Somer's (2019) concept of pernicious polarization by explaining the mass-level dynamics through which such polarization erodes democratic resilience. While McCoy and Somer highlight the in-group/out-group dynamics of polarization, Svolik outlines why these dynamics can lead citizens to compromise on democratic norms. For example, attempting to punish an authoritarian leader may require voting against one's preferred party, a cost many voters are unwilling to bear, effectively creating a "structural opportunity" for aspiring authoritarians (p. 24). Unlike approaches such as Abramowitz (2018), which focus primarily on ideological sorting, Svolik examines the normative trade-offs voters make, due to partisan sorting and the resulting intensity of partisan identity.

Furthermore, Svolik's (2019) findings resonate with Berman's (2019) emphasis on the importance of elite behavior in democratic erosion. By identifying the "partisan–democrat dilemma" at the mass level, Svolik demonstrates how voter incentives can enable and even encourage elite strategies that gradually undermine democratic institutions. The willingness of a fraction of the electorate to prioritize partisan interests provides cover and legitimacy for leaders to pursue illiberal agendas (Svolik, 2019, p. 31) Thus, Svolik supplies a crucial micro-level mechanism, demonstrating that institutional breakdown is often enabled by this

conditional democratic commitment from the public, rather than simply a rejection of democracy (Svolik, 2019, p. 29).

Altogether, this literature review highlights that democratic polarization becomes dangerous when multiple dynamics converge. Structural transformations in cultural values can create receptive audiences for identity-based appeals (Norris and Inglehart), institutional failures and strategic choices by mainstream parties can open a space for radical challengers (Berman), discursive practices can construct moralized "Us vs Them" boundaries (Wodak), and affective polarization can transform political disagreements in social an moral hostility (Iyengar et. al). These conditions can all enable voters to tolerate or even welcome democratic norm violations when the partisan identities can be argued to be at stake.

Whilst each body of literature explains a distinct aspect of polarization, none of them can fully account for how polarization escalates into radicalized, delegitimizing conflict. This thesis will build on these insights by examining how institutional contexts can shape the interaction between discursive practices and affective hostility.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter will present an integrated analytical framework that will be utilized to conceptualize how political polarization escalates into radicalized delegitimizing conflict. Rather than conceptualizing polarization as a static condition or a one-dimensional phenomenon, this paper conceptualizes it as an escalating process through which political disagreement expands across discursive, affective, and normative domains. Thus, escalation does not refer to the origins of polarization, nor does it imply that democratic collapse is inevitable. Rather, it captures how existing polarization can become radicalized over time, reframing political competition as moralized, identity-based conflict that places democratic norms under strain.

3.1 Conceptualizing Escalation

Escalation is understood as a cumulative process in which political opponents come to be framed and interpreted not merely as legitimate adversaries, but as threats to collective

identity or moral order. Under such conditions, compromise is increasingly problematized, and adherence to democratic norms may become conditional rather than principled. While the concept of escalation appears across literatures on social conflict, radicalization, and democratic backsliding, no single theory specifies how polarization escalates within democratic politics through the interaction of discourse, affect, and normative commitment. This chapter, therefore, synthesizes existing theories by assigning each a delimited analytical role within a broader escalation sequence. The contribution lies not in proposing a new grand theory, but in clarifying how established mechanisms can be analytically understood to operate in sequence.

3.1.1 Audience Receptivity as a Structural Precondition

The first analytical layer of the framework is audience receptivity: the social and cultural conditions that can shape how political messages are received and interpreted. Drawing primarily on Cultural Backlash Theory, this section conceptualizes receptivity as an enabling condition rather than a direct cause of escalation.

Long-term processes of cultural change, including intergenerational replacement, rising education levels, gender equality, and social diversification, are argued to have shifted dominant value orientations in advanced democracies toward socially liberal norms (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 32–36). Such transformations are described as having gradually marginalized traditionalist worldviews that emphasize social conformity, hierarchy, and national homogeneity, thereby producing generational and educational divides in cultural values (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, pp. 94–96).

In response, segments of the population—particularly older and less-educated cohorts—are theorized as interpreting these changes as threats to established identities and moral orders, a dynamic associated with authoritarian predispositions and heightened sensitivity to perceived social disorder (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 120–123). Norris and Inglehart describe this condition as one of cultural displacement, where members of the former cultural mainstream come to feel like "strangers in their own land" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 91).

For this thesis, these dynamics are treated as structural preconditions that can shape the resonance of political messages. Cultural backlash does not itself necessarily generate

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Master Thesis
16.02.2026

radical polarization; rather, it contributes to the process of creating an uneven landscape of receptivity in which exclusionary, moralizing, or identity-based appeals are more likely to gain traction. Audience receptivity thus helps account for why escalation may become possible in some contexts, while leaving other dimensions of polarization to subsequent stages of the analytical framework.

3.1.2 Discursive Activation and Elite Strategy

The second stage of escalation concerns discursive activation, through which political actors articulate and mobilize audience receptivity into moralized political conflict. Whereas audience receptivity helps account for why certain narratives may resonate, discursive activation focuses on how such narratives are strategically articulated and amplified. Discursive activation thus focuses on how political polarization is discursively constructed and intensified by elites.

Building on Wodak's analysis of right-wing populist discourse, discursive activation is understood as a set of meaning-making practices that can construct antagonistic identities. Essential to this process is the politics of fear, through which some social developments are reframed as existential threats and presented as requiring urgent responses (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 4–5). Fear simplifies uncertainty and can channel anxieties towards identifiable culprits, thus facilitating scapegoating and the construction of morally opposed in-groups and out-groups (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 6).

Through discursive strategies such as the victim-perpetrator reversal, political actors can recast the dominant or majority groups as victims, thus presenting exclusionary measures as acts of self-defense (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 27) These strategies are closely intertwined with nationalist boundary-making, which redefines political belonging in increasingly exclusionary terms by shifting conceptions of the nation away from civic or legal definitions toward nativist understandings grounded in ancestry, culture, and homogeneity (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 4, p.12).

Discursive escalation can be further intensified through the mainstreaming of exclusionary frames, as established parties can adopt elements of populist discourse as a response to electoral competition and the perceived voter demand (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p.

15–16) Within this escalation framework, discursive activation thus functions as an analytical tool through which structural receptivity can be interpreted and articulated by redefining political disagreements as an identity-based struggle. This provides an interpretive link to the emotional dynamics that will be outlined in the next section.

3.1.3 Affective Polarization and Mass-Level Dynamics

The third stage of escalation is affective polarization, which examines how discursively activated conflict can become emotionally entrenched among citizens. Drawing on the work of Iyengar et al. (2019), affective polarization is defined as a growing dislike, distrust, and social distancing from political out-groups, independent of ideological divergence (p. 129).

At its core, affective polarization can reflect the treatment of partisanship as a social identity, thus producing in-group favoritism and out-group animosity (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 129–130). Once political identities have emotional salience, political opponents can increasingly be perceived as morally suspect or socially threatening, rather than just being mistaken (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 131–132) These emotional dynamics extend polarization into everyday social relations, fostering avoidance, social segregation, and reduced willingness to engage across political divides (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 136).

Within the escalation framework, affective polarization will be utilized as a tool to represent the stabilizing mechanisms of radicalized conflict. By embedding political antagonism emotionally and socially, affective polarization can make escalation durable and self-reinforcing. It can also alter citizens' evaluative standards by increasing tolerance for norm violations by in-group elites and undermining the trust in institutions that should be neutral arbiters (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 142–143). In this way, affective polarization links discursive escalation to the erosion of shared democratic expectations.

3.1.4 Normative Trade-offs and Democratic Erosion

The final stage of the escalation framework concerns normative trade-offs through which radicalized polarization becomes institutionally consequential. Whereas affective polarization embeds conflict emotionally, normative trade-offs capture how these dynamics weaken commitments to democratic rules and institutional constraints.

The literature on pernicious polarization emphasizes that polarization becomes democratically dangerous when political competition is moralized and structured as a zero-sum struggle between mutually delegitimizing camps (McCoy & Somer, 2019, pp. 234–235). Under such conditions, democratic norms can be instrumentalized, valued as long as they advance partisan or identity-based goals. On this basis, polarizing elites can justify exceptional measures as necessary defenses against existential threats, while opponents may either reciprocate with similar strategies or fail to effectively counter these narratives (McCoy & Somer, 2019, pp. 237–238, 257).

Svolik's analysis complements this macro-level account by identifying a micro-level mechanism that can be associated with democratic erosion. In highly polarized contexts, voters may face a partisan-democrat dilemma, in which support for democratic principles competes with partisan loyalty (Svolik, 2019, p. 23). Experimental evidence suggests that a substantial portion of citizens are willing to tolerate undemocratic behavior by their preferred leaders when perceived threats to policy outcomes or identity concerns are high (Svolik, 2019, pp. 26–27). This conditional democratic commitment does not reflect outright authoritarianism, but rather the prioritization of in-group protection over procedural integrity (Svolik, 2019, p. 29).

In the synthesis advanced here, normative trade-offs represent the analytical endpoint of polarization escalation. Democratic erosion is theorized as emerging not necessarily through mass rejection of democracy, but through the cumulative subordination of democratic norms to partisan and identity-based imperatives. This completes the escalation framework and provides the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

3.2 Analytical Scope and Empirical Implications

While this theoretical framework brings together literatures on audience receptivity, discursive escalation, affective polarization, and democratic norm erosion, the thesis does not seek to empirically measure all dimensions of this process. Rather, the framework is used to conceptualize polarization escalation as a multi-dimensional phenomenon and to situate discursive practices within their broader affective and normative implications.

Empirically, the analysis focuses on the discursive activation of political conflict by

elites, examining how exclusionary, moralizing, and delegitimizing narratives are constructed and normalized in public political discourse. The remaining dimensions—audience receptivity, affective polarization, and normative trade-offs—are treated as theoretically grounded interpretive lenses that inform the analysis without being directly observed or measured. This analytical posture ensures alignment between the theoretical ambition of the framework and the interpretive, discourse-centered methodology employed in the empirical chapters.

4. Methodological Framework

4.1 Comparative Analysis

This thesis adopts a comparative qualitative research design to examine how political polarization can escalate into radicalized delegitimizing conflict in contemporary democracies. The research question is concerned with *how* escalation unfolds when polarization exists, rather than estimating the independent causal effects of variables of polarization itself. Moreover, the study prioritizes analytical depth, contextual interpretation, and temporal sequencing over breadth or statistical generalization.

4.1.1 Ontological Commitments and the Limits of Variable-Based Explanation

Methodological choices in comparative political research presuppose underlying assumptions about the nature of the social and political world (Hall, 2003, p. 374, 399). Following Peter A. Hall (2003), this study starts from an ontology that understands political outcomes as being produced through complex, conjunctural, and historically situated processes, rather than through constant law-like relationships between variables (pp. 384, 387). Hall defines "ontology" as a set of fundamental assumptions scholars make about the causal structures of the social and political world, emphasizing that methodologies are only valid insofar as they are congruent with these assumptions (Hall, 2003, p. 374). His definition of methodology refers to the means that scholars use to increase confidence in their inferences about causal relationships (Hall, 2003, p. 373).

Hall argues that many phenomena in comparative politics, particularly those that involve path dependence and strategic interaction, do not conform to the assumptions

required for standard regression-based or correlational methods, such as unity, homogeneity, or constant conjunction (Hall, 2003, p. 385-386). He further argues that the field's ontologies have shifted toward theories whose conceptions of causal structures are at odds with the assumptions that are needed for standard regression techniques to provide valid causal inferences (Hall, 2003, p. 375). In such cases, variable-oriented methodologies can risk misrepresenting causal dynamics by abstracting from timing, interaction effects, and meaning. In this thesis, the escalation of political polarization treated as such a phenomenon, in which political conflict can intensify through sequences of interaction and reinterpretation rather than through additive causal effects.

With this ontological position, the study rejects the assumption that polarization escalation can be decomposed into independent variables with stable effects across cases. Rather, outcomes are understood to emerge from the interaction of discursive practices, audience receptivity, and normative evaluations whose significance depends on context and sequence. This aligns with Hall's argument that small-N designs, in particular those based on systematic process analysis, are well suited for analyzing phenomena that are characterized by interaction effects and temporal dependency, by offering "substantial potential for resolving the methodological dilemmas posed by the new ontologies of comparative politics" (Hall, 2003, p. 398).

4.1.2 Interpretive Epistemology and Process-Oriented Analytical Logic

Epistemologically, this study adopts an interpretive orientation. Interpretive research assumes that social and political realities are meaningful to the actors who inhabit them, and that these meanings are not epiphenomenal but constitutive of political outcomes. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow define interpretive research as an approach that seeks to understand how actors make sense of their worlds and how those sense-making practices shape political action and institutions (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 46).

Rather than treating meanings as mere noise to be controlled, interpretive analysis treats symbols, narratives, and discourse as empirical material. Knowledge claims are evaluated not by predictive accuracy or statistical generalizability, but through contextual plausibility, transparency of interpretation, and coherence between material and theoretical claims (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 108). Interpretive rigor is achieved through

explicit articulation of analytical steps, careful contextualization of evidence, and reflexive awareness of the researcher's interpretive role (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 2).

This epistemological stance is particularly appropriate for a study concerned with escalation, moralization, and delegitimization, as these dynamics operate through shared interpretations of political conflict rather than directly observable behavioral regularities. By adopting an interpretive approach, the study treats political discourse not as a proxy for underlying attitudes but as a constitutive arena in which political identities, threats, and norms are constructed and contested.

The analytical orientation of this study is explicitly process-oriented. Hall (2003) implicitly characterizes process-oriented explanation as an approach that focuses on how outcomes depend on the order, timing, and interaction of events over time, rather than on static correlations between variables (p. 384-386). Such approaches are particularly valuable when causal effects are dependent on prior developments or when earlier interactions reshape the conditions that may spur later action (Hall, 2003, p. 385-386).

In this thesis, polarization escalation is conceptualized as a cumulative process in which discursive practices, emotional alignments, and normative judgments become mutually reinforcing. The analysis does not assume a deterministic causal chain, nor does it claim that each stage of escalation follows the previous one. Rather, it attempts to reconstruct how particular discursive shifts can alter emotional and normative landscapes of political competition, thus making further escalation more plausible in specific contexts.

Rather than testing hypotheses about necessary or sufficient conditions, this study aims to utilize sequencing as an interpretive tool in order to make sense of how political conflict intensifies over time. This approach aligns with Hall's (2003) argument that qualitative comparative research, particularly through "systematic process analysis" (p. 391), generates explanatory insight by reconstructing causal narratives and assessing theories' predictions about causal processes against multiple observations of how events unfold over time. In doing so, it avoids reliance on assumptions typically required for experimental or statistical inference (Hall, 2003, p.394, 398).

Together, these ontological and epistemological approaches justify the choice of a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative research design. By prioritizing meaning-making, sequencing, and contextual specificity, the study aims to examine how polarization escalates

within particular democratic settings, rather than to derive general causal laws. Claims are therefore treated as analytically grounded and scope-bound, consistent with the limits and strengths of interpretive comparative research as outlined by Hall (2003) and Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012).

4.2 Case Selection and Comparative Logic

This thesis employs a small-N comparative case study design, a strategy commonly used in comparative politics when the number of cases is too limited for statistical analysis but too large for a single-case explanation. As Lijphart (1971) outlines, small-N comparison has an intermediate position between case studies and large-N analysis, allowing researchers to engage in systematic comparison whilst maintaining attentiveness to contextual complexity (p. 682–683). Rather than seeking population-level inference, small-N comparative designs aim to generate analytically grounded insights into political processes by analyzing patterns, similarities, and contrasts across a small number of cases (Lijphart, 1971, pp. 685–686).

The small-N design is relevant for this study because the research question is concerned with escalation processes, namely sequences of interaction, reinterpretation, and norm contestation, which cannot be reduced to variables or measured across large samples. Hall (2003) argues that ontologies that emphasize path dependence and strategic interaction suggest causal structures that can be in conflict with the assumptions of regression-based methods that rely on stable and independent causal effects (p. 373-374). Rather, such ontologies can conceptualize political outcomes as emerging from sequenced and interactive processes, in which timing and prior events can shape subsequent possibilities (Hall, 2003, p. 381).

Hall advocates for qualitative small-N research designs based on systematic process analysis, which allows for theories to be assessed through close attention to how events unfold within these cases over time, thus offering a richer explanatory leverage than variable-centered approaches (Hall, 2003, p. 397-398).

Hall (2003) argues that ontologies emphasizing path dependence and strategic interaction posit causal structures that conflict with the assumptions of regression-based methods, which rely on stable and independent causal effects (pp. 373, 375). Instead, such

ontologies conceptualize political outcomes as emerging from temporally sequenced and interactive processes, in which timing and prior events shape subsequent possibilities (Hall, 2003, pp. 381, 398).

Hall therefore advocates qualitative small-N research designs based on systematic process analysis, which allow theories to be assessed through close attention to how events unfold over time within cases, offering richer explanatory leverage than variable-centered approaches for complex political phenomena (pp. 393, 397–398).

This thesis employs a small-N comparative case study design that focuses on the United States and Germany. The purpose of the case selection is not statistical representation or population-level inference, but analytical leverage over the processes through which political polarization might escalate into radicalized and delegitimizing conflict. In qualitative research, case selection is a pivotal part of theory-building rather than a preliminary step that precedes analysis (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, 294-296).

The comparative logic of this thesis takes its point of departure in Lijphart's (1971) formulation of the comparative method. Lijphart defines comparison as a strategy for systematic analysis, in conditions where the number of cases is too small for statistical analyses, but controlled comparison can strengthen the analytical inference (Lijphart, 1971, p. 682, 685).

While Lijphart (1971) discusses the method of difference as a form of controlled comparison involving cases that are similar in many respects but differ in outcome (p. 687), later methodological literature distinguishes this logic from a most-different systems design. Landman (2008) outlines a most-different systems design as a comparative strategy in which cases that differ in multiple areas but share an outcome or process are compared in order to examine whether these similar outcomes occur across otherwise dissimilar contexts (Landman, 2008, p. 47-48) The analytical purpose of this approach is not necessarily causal control, but to assess whether proposed explanatory mechanisms retain plausibility across divergent settings. In this thesis, the relevant shared outcome is the escalation of political polarization into affective, moralized, and delegitimizing conflict.

Following Seawright and Gerring (2008), case selection is treated as a central component of the research design, rather than as a neutral choice. They argue that in qualitative research, cases are chosen for their capacity to illuminate theoretical mechanisms

and processes, not to approximate a population (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 294–295). Case selection, thus, shapes the kinds of inferences that can be drawn and the types of questions that can be addressed meaningfully.

Seawright and Gerring outline various case selection strategies, emphasizing that theory-guided selection is particularly appropriate when examining causal mechanisms as recurring processes that link conditions to outcomes within specific contexts (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 297–298) In this study, the United States and Germany function as analytically informative cases because they allow for within-case tracing of escalation dynamics and cross-case comparison of how similar discursive mechanisms operate under different institutional and party-system configurations.

The cases are not treated as interchangeable observations. Rather, each case is examined as a contextually embedded configuration in which structural conditions, political institutions, and discursive elements interact over time. Cross-case comparison is thus utilized to assess whether similar patterns of escalation emerge across contexts rather than test hypotheses in a statistical sense. The comparative design is further informed by a process-oriented perspective that emphasizes sequencing and temporality. Comparative analysis often requires a detailed within-case understanding before meaningful cross-case contrasts can be drawn. Consistent with this view, the study prioritizes within-case analysis of escalation trajectories before engaging in systematic comparison.

By selecting cases that experienced polarization escalation during broadly comparable historical periods but under different institutional arrangements, the design enables analytical contrast without assuming uniform causal timing or identical political developments. This temporal sensitivity aligns with the broader process-oriented orientation of the study and allows the analysis to remain attentive to context-specific pathways of escalation.

4.2.1 Scope and Limits of Comparative Inference

Consistent with the broader discussions in qualitative methodology regarding the limits of inference, the study does not claim universal generalizability from the comparison of two cases. Whilst Seawright and Gerring acknowledge that purposive methods "cannot entirely overcome the inherent unreliability of generalizing from small-N samples" (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 295), they argue that such methods "can nonetheless make an important

contribution to the inferential process" (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 295).

In line with Seawright and Gerring's (2008) emphasis on transparency in qualitative inference, conclusions drawn from the comparative analysis are treated as theoretically informed and scope-bound. The authors repeatedly stress the challenge of representativeness in case studies, noting that "the problem of representativeness cannot be ignored if the ambition of the case study is to reflect on a broader population of cases" and that "cases must be representative of the population of interest in whatever ways might be relevant to the proposition in question" (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 294, 306). They also mention the importance of considering "the changing status of a case during the course of a researcher's investigation" and the need for revision in research design, suggesting an iterative and transparent approach to inference (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 306). The comparative logic thus strengthens analytical plausibility while remaining explicit about the limits of inference inherent in small-N qualitative research.

4.3 Data Sources and Material Selection

This study relies on qualitative textual material as its primary empirical data. Because the research question concerns how political polarization escalates through discursive practices and their interpretation over time, political texts are treated not merely as sources of information but as sites of meaning-making in which political identities, threats, and normative justifications are constructed and contested.

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow argue that interpretive inquiry treats language, symbols, and narratives as empirical material because they actively shape how political actors understand situations, define problems, and justify action (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 46) In this perspective, discourse not only expresses political conflict, but it also helps produce it by establishing categories of belonging, threat, and legitimacy (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 39).

In interpretive research, texts are understood as constitutive elements of political life rather than as neutral reflections of underlying attitudes or interests. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow argue that interpretive inquiry treats language, symbols, and narratives as empirical material because they actively shape how political actors understand situations, define

problems, and justify action (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 46). In this perspective, discourse does not merely express political conflict; it helps produce it by establishing categories of belonging, threat, and legitimacy (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 39).

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow emphasize that meaning-making is not an individual cognitive activity but a social and political process embedded in shared languages and interpretive practices (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 10). The term meaning-making refers to the process through which actors assign significance to events, identities, and norms, thereby rendering political situations intelligible and actionable. Treating texts as empirical material, therefore, allows the analyst to examine how political realities are constructed and stabilized through discourse.

The empirical material consists of publicly available political texts produced by politically salient actors in each case. These include, but are not limited to, speeches by party leaders, official party statements, campaign materials, parliamentary or congressional statements, and high-visibility mediated political communication. These genres are selected because they are central arenas in which political conflict is publicly articulated, moralized, and legitimized. Public political texts are particularly suitable for comparative analysis because they are oriented toward broad audiences and are designed to resonate beyond narrow organizational settings. As Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) note, interpretive analysis often focuses on texts that circulate publicly because such texts contribute to the stabilization of shared meanings and political boundaries (p. 42).

In accordance with the process-oriented analytical orientation, the empirical material is selected with attention to temporal sequencing. Temporal sequencing refers to the analytical practice of examining how discursive statements can relate to prior or subsequent political developments, instead of treating them in isolation. Hall emphasizes that political outcomes often depend on the order in which events unfold, thus making temporality central to explanation, as "the timing of a particular development can matter a great deal to its effect" and "the sequence in which developments occur becomes important" (Hall, 2003, p. 385). Hall (2003) argues that current outcomes reflect "complex chains of strategic interaction" (p. 385) and "a branching tree of historical developments," which cannot be adequately explained by reference only to the present or immediate past (p. 387).

Therefore, texts are analyzed as moments within broader trajectories of polarization

escalation. This involves situating discursive interventions within their political context, including events, institutional debates, and ongoing conflicts. Contextualization is necessary to avoid simplifying complex causal processes and to understand how evolving causal relationships are conceptualized in the field (Hall, 2003, p. 383–384).

Furthermore, given that some of the is political speeches, transcripts have been retrieved in order to properly be analyzed. Speeches that are concerned with the United States have been retrieved from online, ready-made transcriptions. In regard to speeches from the German case, these have been retrieved from Youtube-videos. Due to language barriers, online-tools at Clipto.com has been utilized to transcribe the German material in its original language, and then afterwards been translated using tools available at Deepl.com. This has been done in order to most accurately conduct the same form of analysis, rather than having to rely on reportings on the German material. All of the original sources are available in the reference-list, and the transcriptions are attached as appendixes.

4.3.1 Scope and Limits of the Data

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the scope and limitations of the data selection strategy. The reliance on publicly available texts means that the analysis captures elite-level and mediated discourse. However, this focus is consistent with the theoretical framework, which emphasizes the role of elite discourse in activating audience receptivity and normalizing exclusionary narratives.

Seawright and Gerring (2008) highlight that case selection in case study research aims to develop general causal theories about a broader population, seeking both a representative sample and useful variation on dimensions of theoretical interest (p. 296). They emphasize that the utility of a case study depends on the assumption that the case represents the broader population (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, p. 306). In other words, this clarity regarding the breadth of the primary inference and the population of interest is crucial for implementing case selection techniques (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, p. 296). The findings from the selected materials are therefore interpreted as context-dependent and theory-informed rather than as accounts of political discourse in each case.

4.4 Analytical Strategy and Interpretive Procedure

This section outlines the analytical strategy through which the empirical material is examined and explains why an interpretive, close-reading approach is adopted. The analysis is qualitative, interpretive, and theory-guided. Rather than treating discourse as a transparent reflection of underlying attitudes or interests, interpretive analysis treats language as constitutive of political realities (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 46) In interpretive research, explanation is built through attention to meaning, context, and sequencing rather than through variable isolation or measurement (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 48) Schwartz-Shea and Yanow emphasize that interpretive methods prioritize understanding over prediction and plausibility over generalizability, with analytical rigor achieved through transparency, reflexivity, and coherence between theoretical claims and empirical interpretation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 1) . This involves accounting for evidence that could challenge the researcher's explanation and inconsistencies to refine the overall portrait and offer a representation of complexity and diversity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 109) This approach is relevant for a study of polarization escalation, as escalation operates through changing interpretations of political conflict - who belongs, who threatens, and which action can be justified.

      The analysis employs a set of sensitizing concepts to structure interpretive attention. Sensitizing concepts, as outlined by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, do not function as variables or categories to which data are assigned. Instead, they provide general points of orientation that guide what the analyst looks for in the empirical material, focusing on "experience-near" concepts that emerge from the field rather than a priori definitions (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 49, p. 38).

      These concepts are derived from the theoretical framework developed earlier in the thesis, and include constructions of political threat, practices of scapegoating and othering, victim–perpetrator reversals, moralization of political disagreement, delegitimization of political opponents or institutions, justifications of exceptional or norm-challenging measures. Instead of functioning as a checklist for mechanical classification, these concepts are utilized to identify recurring patterns across texts and over time (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 56) Analytical claims are thus grounded in the presence of such patterns across multiple texts

and contexts. This approach is in alignment with Schwartz-Shea & Yanow's argument that interpretive rigor stems from seeking "thickness by mapping the research setting to gain exposure to multiple perspectives on the research focus" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 56).

In accordance with the process-oriented design, the analysis pays attention to temporal sequencing. Texts are examined as interventions that are situated in broader trajectories within political conflict. In accordance with arguments laid out by Hall, sequencing is treated as analytically important, as earlier discursive moves can reshape interpretive conditions under which later claims are made (Hall, 2003, p. 381–382) Initial readings identify dominant frames and structures, and subsequent reading then refines the interpretation by situating these elements in an evolving political context. Within each case, the analysis then reconstructs how discursive patterns intensify, stabilize, or shift over time, thus tracing escalation as a process rather than a series of events.

After within-case analysis, cross-case comparison is used to examine whether similar discursive mechanisms operate across different institutional and political contexts. Consistent with the comparative logic outlined earlier, the aim is not to establish equivalence between cases but to assess the analytical plausibility of the escalation framework across divergent settings.

Throughout the analysis, analytical discipline is maintained by explicitly linking empirical interpretations to theoretical concepts. This reflects an interpretive approach in which analysis moves iteratively between theoretical expectations and empirical material, allowing interpretations to be refined in light of ongoing engagement with the data (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 51). Interpretive judgments are made transparent, and alternative readings are acknowledged as possible, consistent with commitments to reflexivity and transparency in sense-making (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 143).

4.4.1 Scope, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations

This section clarifies the scope conditions, analytical limitations, and ethical considerations of the research design and analytical strategy. The scope of this study is deliberately restricted. The analysis focuses on elite-level and political discourse in the United States and Germany. Furthermore, it examines how political polarization is articulated, intensified, and normalized

through discursive practices that can construct political conflict in moralized and delegitimizing terms. Findings are thus context-dependent, and should be interpreted as analytically grounded insights into these specific cases rather than generalizable claims about polarization across all democratic systems.

In accordance with Lijphart's outline of the limits of small-N comparative research, the study does not aim to identify the necessary conditions for polarization escalation, nor does it seek to outline a universal causal explanation (Lijphart, 1971, p. 690–691). Instead, the comparison seeks to examine recurring patterns and mechanisms that can appear across two different democratic contexts, thus strengthening the analytic understanding, without extending the claim beyond an appropriate scope. Moreover, the analysis is concentrated around discursive escalation specifically, rather than on a direct measurement of mass attitudes or institutional outcomes. While the theoretical framework engages with audience receptivity, affective polarization, and democratic norm erosion, these dimensions are treated as contextual and interpretive lenses rather than as empirically measured variables.

Consistent with Lijphart's (1971)discussion of the limits of small-N comparative research, the study does not aim to identify necessary or sufficient conditions for polarization escalation, nor does it seek universal causal explanations (p. 690–691). Instead, the comparison is intended to illuminate recurring patterns and mechanisms that appear plausible across two distinct democratic contexts, thereby strengthening analytical understanding without extending claims beyond their appropriate scope. Moreover, the analysis concentrates on discursive escalation rather than on direct measurement of mass attitudes or institutional outcomes. While the theoretical framework engages with audience receptivity, affective polarization, and democratic norm erosion, these dimensions are treated as contextual and interpretive lenses rather than as empirically measured variables. This scope condition follows directly from the choice of data and analytical strategy and is made explicit to avoid conflating theoretical interpretation with empirical demonstration.

Several limitations follow the methodological choices made in this thesis. First, the interpretive orientation of the analysis involves the researcher's judgment. Although interpretations are grounded in theory and followed by systematic engagement with empirical material, alternative readings of the same text are possible (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 39). As Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) emphasize, this openness to multiple

interpretations is a characteristic of interpretive research rather than a methodological flaw, provided that analytical reasoning is transparent and theoretically coherent (p. 109). Second, whilst the design allows for analytical contrasts across cases, it cannot isolate causal effects in the manner of experimental or large-N statistical designs. The study rather focuses on a narrative and process-oriented explanation of escalation, and accepts these trade-offs explicitly and refrains from making strong causal claims that would exceed its methodological capacities.

5. Analysis

The forthcoming section examines how political polarization in the United States escalated discursively between 2020 and 2022 through elite political communication. Rather than treating polarization as a fixed condition, the analysis understands escalation as a process in which political conflict is increasingly framed in moralized, identity-based, and delegitimizing terms. The focus is on elite discourse, such as speeches, public statements, and highly visible political communication because such discourse plays a central role in defining threats, interpreting institutions, and shaping what counts as legitimate political contestation.

The analysis unfolds through three analytically connected episodes. *The first* examines the delegitimization of electoral procedures following the 2020 presidential election. *The second* traces how suspicion toward electoral integrity becomes institutionally embedded through audits and legislation, making democratic procedures increasingly conditional. *The third* shows how this moralized legitimacy logic expands beyond elections and becomes portable across governance domains, including education, culture, and constitutional interpretation. These episodes are not presented as a comprehensive account of U.S. politics during this period, but as selected moments that illustrate how escalation develops over time from contesting procedures, to institutional durability, to cross-domain normalization.

The chapter uses an interpretive, close-reading approach guided by sensitizing concepts drawn from the theoretical framework, including threat construction, scapegoating, victim–perpetrator reversal, moral boundary-making, and delegitimization. The aim is not to measure public attitudes or institutional outcomes, but to trace how elite discourse renders increasingly far-reaching challenges to democratic procedures and norms publicly available

and intelligible. In doing so, the analysis demonstrates how escalation reshapes the terms of political conflict and the conditions under which polarization can deepen and stabilize.

5.1 The United States

5.1.1 Episode 1: Contesting Electoral Legitimacy

This episode examines how political polarization is discursively escalated during a moment of procedural uncertainty: the vote count in the 2020 United States presidential election. It focuses on Donald Trump's Election Night address (November 4, 2020) and the White House press conference of November 5, 2020. The analysis traces how uncertainty surrounding the electoral process is reframed as moral injustice and delegitimization of electoral procedures. In line with the theoretical framework, the analysis centers on elite discourse, while affective and normative dynamics serve as interpretive lenses rather than empirically measurable outcomes.

Trump's Election Night address marks the discursive starting point of polarization escalation examined in this thesis. The speech was delivered while votes were still being counted and intervened at a moment of procedural uncertainty. Rather than treating this uncertainty as a normal feature of democratic elections, the address reframes it as a moral and political rupture. Continued vote counting is presented not as a routine procedure, but as an abnormal and threatening interruption of an already completed outcome.

The speech opens with a declaration of victory before the electoral results are finalized. Trump claims that his campaign has "won states that we weren't expected to win" and that "we were winning everything" before the process was "called off" (Appendix A, l. 8). This framing establishes a temporal boundary: the election is presented as effectively finished, and any subsequent developments are cast as deviations rather than continuations. When Trump later states that "frankly, we did win this election" (Appendix A, l. 59), the claim is asserted as fact rather than interpretation. Vote counting is thereby rendered unnecessary and implicitly illegitimate.

This move transforms uncertainty into moral injustice. Trump immediately follows the victory claim by stating that "a very sad group of people is trying to disenfranchise" his

supporters (Appendix A, l. 5). Here, the continuation of vote counting is framed as intentional harm directed against a clearly defined in-group. Electoral administration is no longer presented as a neutral procedure, but as an act of oppression, and disagreement over outcomes is reframed as victimization.

This framing reflects Wodak's concept of the politics of fear, in which uncertainty and complexity are simplified and narrated as a threat (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–5). Instead of acknowledging uncertainty as an inherent part of democratic processes, uncertainty itself is treated as evidence of wrongdoing. Fear is mobilized through the suggestion that fundamental rights are being actively stolen from Trump and his supporters.

Trump reinforces this interpretation by repeatedly stressing the size of his claimed margins in several states, stating that they "aren't even close" and "almost impossible to catch" (Appendix A, l. 32–33). These assertions function less as empirical evidence than as moral signals. If victory is overwhelming, then any delay or reversal can be framed as illegitimate. Emphasizing large margins thus serves to cast procedural contestation as inherently suspicious.

The escalation intensifies when Trump announces his intention to involve the Supreme Court, stating that "we'll be going to the U.S. Supreme Court" and that "we want all voting to stop" (Appendix A, l. 62). This demand is not framed as a legal challenge within an ongoing process, but as an intervention against a system already described as fraudulent. Trump further claims that continued counting would allow ballots to be "found at four o'clock in the morning and added to the list" (Appendix A, l. 63). This language invokes imagery of illicit activity without identifying specific actors or mechanisms.

At this stage, no evidence is provided to support these claims. Electoral legitimacy is rejected on moral rather than procedural grounds: counting is framed as wrong because it produces an outcome that contradicts the declared victory. This represents an early articulation of conditional democratic legitimacy, in which democratic procedures are accepted only when they affirm a preferred result.

The speech can also be read as an initial victim–perpetrator reversal. Despite holding executive power and institutional authority, Trump presents himself and his supporters as victims of injustice, while democratic institutions and procedures are implicitly cast as perpetrators. As Wodak describes, this reversal allows dominant actors to frame extraordinary

or exclusionary measures as acts of self-defense (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 27).

Importantly, the speech does not identify a concrete out-group responsible for the alleged wrongdoing. References remain vague, such as the claim that "a very sad group of people" is acting improperly. This absence of a clearly specified scapegoat is analytically important. It allows suspicion to circulate without being tied to a single actor, institution, or group. Such vagueness lowers the threshold for later escalation, as blame can subsequently be directed toward courts, election officials, media, or political opponents without contradicting the initial narrative.

At this early stage, the framework's audience receptivity layer is not directly observable but provides contextual plausibility. For segments of the electorate already inclined to distrust political institutions or experience cultural displacement, the framing of vote counting as theft might resonate as confirmation rather than surprise (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 91). The speech does not create these predispositions; instead, it activates them discursively by offering a morally charged interpretive frame.

Together, the Election Night address initiates polarization escalation by recasting electoral uncertainty as a moral violation, redefining democratic procedures as hostile acts, and framing institutional intervention as necessary self-defense. While affective hostility and institutional breakdown are not yet fully articulated, the speech establishes the discursive groundwork that makes further escalation intelligible in subsequent interventions.

The November 5 press conference marks a clear shift from the initiation of escalation to its consolidation. Whereas the Election Night address framed ongoing vote counting as suspicious and harmful, this intervention stabilizes that framing by explicitly dividing votes into "legal" and "illegal" categories and by naming institutions and locations as adversarial actors.

Trump opens the press conference by stating: "If you count the legal votes, I easily win. If you count the illegal votes, they can try to steal the election from us" (Appendix B, l. 3–4). This distinction is analytically important, as it redefines electoral legitimacy itself, rather than questioning specific procedures of outcomes. Votes are no longer treated as presumptively valid unless proven otherwise; instead, validity becomes conditional on whether the outcome affirms Trump's declared victory.

This framing transforms disagreement over counting into a moral boundary. Votes that

benefit Trump are implicitly "legal," while votes that reduce his lead are framed as illegitimate by definition. The category of "illegal votes" is asserted without evidence or specification, allowing the label to function as a flexible discursive tool rather than a legal claim.

Trump reinforces this boundary by repeatedly asserting that votes are being "found," "whittled away," or added in secret after Election Day (Appendix B, l. 49; l. 59). The repetition of these claims across multiple states constructs a pattern narrative: the same wrongdoing is implied to be occurring everywhere Trump's lead narrows. The emphasis is not on demonstrating fraud, but on establishing suspicion as an expected interpretation of electoral developments.

At this stage, previously vague culprits become more clearly identified. Trump states that the "voting apparatus" in undecided states is "run in all cases by Democrats" (Appendix B, l. 47–48) and names specific locations—Detroit and Philadelphia—as sites of corruption and secrecy (Appendix B, l. 92–93). These places are described as "known as two of the most corrupt political places anywhere in our country" (Appendix B, l. 93), anchoring allegations of fraud in long-standing reputational narratives rather than concrete evidence.

This shift represents a stabilization of scapegoating. Whereas Election Night relied on an unspecified "they," the November 5 address attaches wrongdoing to identifiable institutions, locations, and partisan actors. This aligns with Wodak's description of scapegoating as a discursive strategy through which complex political processes are simplified by assigning blame to morally suspect out-groups (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 6).

Trump also reframes institutional oversight as hostile obstruction. Claims that observers were kept "60, 70, 80, 100 feet away" (Appendix B, l. 52) present transparency mechanisms as intentionally violated. Courts and election officials are not framed as neutral arbiters, but as participants in concealment. Even when legal victories are acknowledged, they are narrated as temporary obstacles in a broader corrupt system (Appendix B, l. 68–71).

This framing deepens the earlier victim–perpetrator reversal. Trump positions himself and his supporters as victims of a coordinated effort involving election officials, courts, media, and Democratic actors. Institutional authority is no longer merely questioned; it is actively recast as illegitimate and morally compromised. As Wodak notes, such reversals allow dominant actors to justify extraordinary claims and measures as defensive responses to

persecution (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 27).

The press conference further sharpens normative conditionality. Trump repeatedly emphasizes that only "legal votes" should count and challenges opponents to explicitly endorse that framing (Appendix B, l.. 148–150). Democratic procedures are accepted only if they conform to a predefined outcome; when they do not, they are framed as corrupt by nature. Democratic legitimacy thus becomes conditional rather than procedural.

Importantly, this address still avoids explicit calls for mass action or rejection of democracy as such. Instead, escalation operates through normalization. Fraud is presented as obvious, widespread, and already understood by "the people" watching events unfold (Appendix B, l. 88–90). Litigation is framed not as a last resort, but as the natural and necessary response to a system that cannot be trusted (Appendix B, l. 155–159).

Together, the November 5 press conference consolidates the discursive escalation initiated on Election Night. Electoral disagreement is stabilized as moral injustice; institutions are clearly positioned as adversaries; and democratic procedures are rendered conditionally legitimate. While affective hostility and institutional rupture are not yet fully articulated, the interpretive groundwork is laid for viewing further escalation as reasonable, defensive, and necessary.

Furthermore, Trump's Election Night address and the November 5 press conference initiate and consolidate a discursive escalation that fundamentally redefines the terms of electoral conflict. Across these interventions, procedural uncertainty is transformed into moral injustice, and democratic procedures are reframed as legitimate only insofar as they affirm a pre-declared outcome. What begins as a premature assertion of victory develops into a stabilized interpretive framework in which vote counting, institutional oversight, and legal adjudication are no longer neutral mechanisms of democratic resolution but are instead cast as hostile acts directed against a morally defined in-group. In this process, electoral legitimacy becomes conditional rather than procedural: democratic rules are accepted selectively, and institutional authority is granted only when it produces substantively "correct" outcomes.

Crucially, this episode does not yet entail the full articulation of affective hostility or institutional breakdown. Rather, its significance lies in how it alters the criteria through which political disagreement can be interpreted and contested. By framing electoral administration as intentional harm and institutional intervention as persecution, these discursive moves

weaken the capacity of procedural rebuttals to restore legitimacy. Once disagreement is moralized and institutions are positioned as adversaries, subsequent appeals to legality, evidence, or due process can themselves be reinterpreted as further proof of corruption. In this way, Episode 1 establishes the interpretive conditions under which delegitimation can persist beyond the immediate electoral moment, creating a foundation for its later stabilization and institutional embedding.

5.1.2 Episode 2: Institutionalization of Electoral Suspicion

Where Episode 1 examined how electoral uncertainty was discursively reframed and stabilized as moral injustice, Episode 2 seeks to examine how this delegitimising frame becomes institutionally durable. By 2021, claims of electoral fraud no longer functioned solely as contested assertions requiring justification. This episode analyses how suspicion toward electoral procedures is institutionally enacted through audits and legislative reforms, thus embedding the discursive constructions analyzed in episode 1 into administrative and institutional practices. The purpose of this episode is not to analyze the validity of fraud claims, but rather to examine how electoral illegitimacy is treated. In process terms, this episode attempts to capture a shift from discursive escalation to institutional uptake, enabling the normalization of conditional democratic legitimacy through political and bureaucratic mechanisms.

In Arizona, more specifically in Maricopa County, the institutionalization of electoral suspicion became visible through the authorization of audit procedures as an administrative response to the 2020 election (Maricopa County, n.d.). Analytically, the significance of the Maricopa County case lies in how auditing becomes normalized as an institutional practice for distrust. Building on the discursive stabilization outlined in Episode 1, the Maricopa County case illustrates how stabilized suspicion can prompt institutions to engage in extraordinary verification processes. This can be seen as treating doubt as legitimate and actionable, thus implicitly acknowledging claims of electoral illegitimacy as administratively relevant.

On January 27, 2021, the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors unanimously authorized a forensic audit of the county's election equipment, framing the decision as an administrative effort to ensure transparency and public confidence (Maricopa County, 2021).

The county's official audit overview emphasizes that the review was conducted by certified laboratories and independent experts, which presents the audit as a "multi-layered" verification of tabulation equipment rather than a challenge to certified results (Maricopa County, 2021).

From an escalation perspective, the authorization of the forensic audit can be seen as an institutionally significant move. By authorizing a forensic audit, county officials implicitly acknowledge a political context in which regular certification procedures do not suffice, where additional measures are considered necessary to restore legitimacy.

The proceduralization is further reinforced in the forensic audit transmittal letter released by the county, which situates the audit as a formal response to "speculation and rumors" surrounding the 2020 election infrastructure (Jarrett & Valenzuela, 2021). The letter emphasizes technical competence and independence as key sources of legitimacy, while concluding that no evidence of internet connectivity, tampering, or malicious activity was found (Jarrett &Valenzuela, 2021). Analytically, this can be seen as an important dynamic of institutional escalation. Even though the audits affirm that there were no signs of electoral illegitimacy, their implementation simultaneously normalizes the premise that elections may require extraordinary verification beyond established democratic procedures.

This dynamic aligns with Wodak's (2015) arguments about the politics of fear, where uncertainty is reframed as a potential threat that requires intervention rather than acceptance as a feature of democratic governance (p. 4-5). This can thus be seen as an institutional response that seeks to reassure, thus, whether intentionally or unintentionally, reinforce delegitimizing frames by treating suspicion as administratively reasonable.

Alongside the county-authorized audit, the Arizona Senate–commissioned review conducted by Cyber Ninjas functioned as a second and more overtly politicized mode of institutionalization (Howard & Ramachandran, 2021). The Brennan Center's analysis of the review documents extensive methodological flaws, security concerns, and partisan entanglements, while also noting that the final report nonetheless confirmed that Joe Biden won Arizona (Howard & Ramachandran, 2021). Importantly, the analysis highlights that the review's political significance did not depend on demonstrating fraud, but rather on sustaining insinuation and doubt through ambiguous claims and procedural irregularities (Howard & Ramachandran, 2021).

From the perspective of escalation, the Cyber Ninjas review created an institutional setting that allowed delegitimizing narratives to continue beyond the immediate election moment. Unlike the Election Night and November 5 speeches, this stage did not rely on direct rhetorical claims. Rather, suspicion became sustained through an extended review process that kept allegations publicly visible, even without evidentiary closure. The durability of this process is evident in the need for Maricopa County officials to issue a detailed public rebuttal of the audit's claims in January 2022. The county explicitly described several of the audit's findings as "bogus" and systematically countered allegations regarding duplicate ballots, deleted data, and procedural irregularities (Duda, 2022).

However, the need for such a rebuttal shows the limits of relying on official clarification once electoral conflict has been moralized. Institutional authority is no longer necessarily assumed to settle disagreement; rather, official responses can be interpreted as further evidence of concealment or bad faith. This dynamic is consistent with Wodak's concept of victim–perpetrator reversal, whereby institutions tasked with maintaining democratic order are recast as active participants in wrongdoing (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 27). In this context, institutional responses do not restore closure but contribute to the persistence of contestation. Arizona illustrates how electoral delegitimation becomes institutionally durable through audit procedures that treat suspicion as administratively actionable. Even when audits reaffirm integrity, the normalization of extraordinary verification reflects a political environment in which procedural legitimacy has become conditional and contestable.

Whereas Arizona illustrates the post-election embedding of suspicion into formal review processes, Texas reflects the forward-looking embedding of suspicion into statutory reform. Texas Senate Bill 1 (SB 1), enacted in 2021, builds suspicion of voter fraud into the structure of election governance by treating election administration as a matter of ongoing threat prevention. The bill text defines its purpose as safeguarding "election integrity and security" and emphasizes the legislature's authority to enact laws necessary to "detect and punish fraud" (S.B. No. 1). The bill outlines that fraud threatens the stability of democracy by undermining the public confidence in elections, thus constructing suspicion as a justification for reform rather than an empirical claim (S.B. No. 1).

This framing is analytically important, as it demonstrates how delegitimizing discourse can manifest itself in a durable institutional form. Considering the aforementioned

points, the law does not need fraud to have actually occurred in the 2020 election; rather, it institutionalizes the assumption that fraud is plausible and that such a dangerous threat warrants restrictive measures. In Wodak's terms, this can be seen as reflecting the politics of fear as a meaning-making practice that simplifies uncertainty into existential risk requiring intervention (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–5). This normalization is further reinforced by Governor Abbott himself. In announcing the signing of SB1, Governor Greg Abbot framed the legislation as a bill that would ensure trust in elections, stating that it would become "easier to vote and harder to cheat" (Office of the Governor of Texas, 2021). This formulation arguably positions the law as a defensive measure, which arguably implicitly legitimizes the restrictions as necessary self-protection against an assumed threat.

Reports by the Texas Tribune situate the institutionalization within broader political contestation, as they describe SB1 as a wide-ranging law that alters voting procedures while noting that its proponents justified the reforms as essential for preventing fraud and restoring confidence (Ura, 2021). This can be seen as illustrating how fraud-suspicion becomes a stable policy rationale that structures legislative debate. Texas illustrates how delegitimizing frames are embedded prospectively through law, transforming fraud-suspicion into a durable justification for electoral governance. Conditional legitimacy is no longer tied to specific electoral events but becomes institutionalized as a standing concern within democratic administration.

Taken together, the Arizona and Texas cases demonstrate a critical escalation step in which delegitimizing discourse becomes institutionally durable. In Arizona, suspicion is embedded in post-election audits that extend contestation across time and normalize extraordinary verification procedures. In Texas, suspicion is codified prospectively through statutory reform that frames fraud as a standing threat to democratic stability. Across both cases, the central mechanism is not the empirical substance of fraud claims but the normalization of fraud-suspicion as a legitimate institutional agenda.

From the perspective of Wodak (2015), this reflects the politics of fear at the institutional level. Uncertainty is reframed as an ongoing threat requiring intervention, and institutions are positioned within a narrative of defense rather than neutral administration. From the perspective of McCoy & Somer (2019), the embedding of fraud-suspicion into formal procedures aligns with pernicious polarization, in which political competition becomes

structured around moralized identity conflict and institutions are drawn into zero-sum alignment. Finally, in light of Svolik's (2019**)** partisan–democrat dilemma, the institutionalization of suspicion creates conditions under which citizens may increasingly evaluate democratic procedures instrumentally—supporting them when they advantage their preferred camp and questioning them when they do not. Together, this can be argued to illustrate how institutional durability is not merely administrative change, but part of a broader escalation in which democratic procedures become conditionally rather than procedurally authoritative.

By the end of Episode 2, the delegitimation of democratic procedures is no longer confined to the immediate aftermath of the 2020 election. Suspicion toward electoral integrity has become institutionally durable, embedded in audit processes and statutory reform rather than tied to a single moment of procedural uncertainty. At this stage, considering that the analysis seeks to examine escalation of polarization, the analysis will move on to examine whether the same discursive logic extends beyond the electoral domain. Thus, the shift in the next episode is not a change in analytical focus, but a change in the empirical arena under examination. What is traced across episodes is not a single issue, but the portability of a legitimacy template.

Education and cultural governance provide a particularly revealing site for this transition. Unlike episodic elections, governance over schools, curriculum, and cultural identity is continuous. If the moralized framing of "us versus them" logic developed in electoral situations reappears in these domains, it suggests that escalation has moved beyond situational grievance and become a reusable framework for interpreting political conflict. Episode 3, therefore, examines whether conditional legitimacy and civilizational framing persist when the object of contestation shifts from vote counting to governance itself.

5.1.3 Episode 3: Cross-Domain Normalization

This episode examines how polarization escalation moves beyond electoral contestation into other areas of governance. Whereas Episode 1 analyzed the delegitimization of electoral procedures and Episode 2 traced its institutional embedding, Episode 3 focuses on the normalization of moralized conflict across governance arenas. The empirical focus remains

on elite discourse (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 46), analyzed through Wodak's concepts of fear construction, scapegoating, and victim–perpetrator reversal (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–7, 27). Affective polarization and normative trade-offs are treated as interpretive implications rather than directly measured outcomes (Iyengar et al., 2019, pp. 129–131; Svolik, 2019, p. 23). The analytic criterion is not factual accuracy of claims. It is the rewriting of legitimacy rules: what counts as acceptable political contestation, who is framed as morally legitimate, and when institutional constraints are narrated as oppression rather than binding democratic procedure (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6).

On February 28, Trump held a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) (Appendix C, 2021). This speech represents a pivotal moment in the escalation process, as it is not confined to election contestation. Rather, it puts election delegitimation into a broader civilizational narrative where "radical Democrats," "fake news media," and "cancel culture" are framed as coordinated threats to the country (Appendix C, l. 27). In doing so, it shifts the object of polarization, where the conflict is no longer limited to whether the election was conducted fairly. It becomes a struggle over the moral and cultural survival of the nation. In Wodak's terms, this reflects the expansion of a politics of fear in which institutional disputes are reframed as existential threats that require moral alignment rather than procedural adjudication (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6).

Furthermore, Trump states that: "We have a very sick and corrupt electoral process that must be fixed immediately. This election was rigged…" (Appendix C, l, 522–523). He then argues that rules were "illegally changed at the last minute… by local politicians… and local judges… as opposed to state legislatures as required by the Constitution," and that the Supreme Court "didn't have the guts or the courage to do anything about it" (Appendix C, l. 582–589).

This is not merely a repetition of fraud allegations. It is a reinterpretation of institutional closure. Here, institutional refusal is reframed as moral betrayal. The judicial refusal to 'do anything about it' is reframed as evidence of institutional cowardice; they can no longer restore legitimacy. Furthermore, they are portrayed as not being neutral, but rather as actors who lack the "guts" to correct what Trump outlines as a failure of the system. This aligns directly with Wodak's (2015) victim–perpetrator reversal, the institutional system becomes the aggressor, while the losing candidate is recast as constitutional defender.

This move preserves illegitimacy claims beyond procedural exhaustion. It keeps contestation morally alive even when institutional pathways have ended. That durability is analytically crucial. It explains how escalation moves from being episodic (Episode 1) to an interpretive template. In addition, Trump expands beyond electoral claims. "For the next four years, the brave Republicans in this room will be at the heart of the effort to oppose the radical Democrats, the fake news media, and their toxic cancel culture… We have the Republican Party. It's going to unite and be stronger than ever before." (Appendix C, l. 26–31) Several escalation mechanisms become visible simultaneously in this quote.

First of all, republicans are described as "brave." Democrats are "radical." The media is "fake." Culture is "toxic." This is not just an issue of disagreement; it can be seen as morally dividing. In McCoy & Somer's (2019) terms, this aligns political competition along a moralized identity dimension (p. 234–235). The opposing camp is not merely wrong but normatively corrupt. The antagonistic field, here, expands from electoral officials to media institutions and cultural actors. This broadening is analytically important, as it then detaches polarization from a single institutional arena and mobilizes conflict.

Furthermore, Trump states that "We're not starting new parties… We have the Republican Party. It's going to unite and be stronger than ever before." (Appendix C, l. 29–31). This statement outlines the strategic mode of escalation. The speech does not advocate withdrawal from electoral politics or rejection of democratic competition. Rather, it calls for serves to give confidence to the people, that they will be more successful in the future. However, while democratic competition is formally affirmed, institutional authority is simultaneously reinterpreted. Earlier in the speech, Trump argues that election rules were "illegally changed at the last minute" (Appendix C, l. 582), and that the Supreme Court "didn't have the guts or the courage to do anything about it" (Appendix C, l. 589). Non-intervention is therefore reframed not as procedural closure, but as moral failure. This move reflects what Wodak describes as the politics of fear, in which institutions are portrayed as compromised or captured, thereby transforming procedural disagreement into existential threat (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6). Courts remain in place, but their authority is discursively undermined.

While formally affirming participation in electoral politics, Trump simultaneously undermines trust in institutional outcomes in procedural legitimacy by emphasizing that

non-intervention is a sign of corruption. This aligns with McCoy and Somer's argument that polarization becomes pernicious when political opponents and institutions are cast as morally illegitimate rather than simply adversarial (McCoy & Somer, 2019, pp. 234–235). It also anticipates Svolik's "partisan–democrat dilemma," in which institutional norms risk being subordinated to partisan loyalty under conditions of moralized conflict (Svolik, 2019, p. 23).

The shift intensifies when Trump states: "We will fight the onslaught of radicalism, socialism, and indeed it all leads to communism." (Appendix C, l. 40–41). Later, he contrasts the parties in moral terms by stating that "Their party is based upon unvarnished disdain for America… Our party is based on love for America…" (Appendix C, l. 448-451)   Again, the conflict is not framed as disagreement over policy. It is reframed as a dispute over emotional and moral allegiance to the nation itself. In Wodak's framework, this represents boundary construction in which political belonging is defined through moral allegiance to the nation (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 4). Disagreement is recoded as betrayal. Political opponents are not just wrong, they are portrayed as having "disdain" for the country (Appendix C, l. 449).

This aligns with McCoy and Somer's analysis of moralized identity alignment, where political competition changes into a single moral dimension of "us versus them" (McCoy & Somer, 2019, pp. 234–235). When one party embodies "love of country" and the other "disdain", then compromise can become unrealistic. Iyengar et al. (2019) demonstrate that when partisan identities become morally saturated, out-party animosity and social distancing intensify (pp. 129–131). The CPAC speech does not measure this effect, but it arguably discursively constructs the morality that enables it. The cross-domain expansion becomes clearer when Trump states that "we believe in patriotic education and strongly oppose the radical indoctrination of America's youth" (Appendix C, l. 468-469) He continues:

> "We are committed to defending innocent life and to upholding the Judeo-Christian values of our founders and of our founding. We embrace free thought. We stand up to political correctness, and we reject left-wing lunacy, and in particular, we reject cancel culture" (Appendix C, l. 470-472).

Shortly thereafter, he adds:

"We affirm that the Constitution means exactly what it says, as written… They want to change it… They want to get rid of it, frankly" (Appendix C, l. 673-475).

What is significant here is positionality. Trump is no longer speaking primarily as a candidate contesting electoral procedures. He speaks from the position of cultural defender. The antagonism is reframed as a struggle over youth, morality, religion, constitutional meaning, and national continuity. Furthermore, he constructs a clear 'us versus them' distinction by positioning himself and his party as wanting to defend the traditional conservative values of the right-wing, while rejecting the changes that the radical left is framed as seeking to implement.

This shift matters because it demonstrates that escalation is not tied to a specific procedural dispute. The 2020 election is just one episode within a broader narrative of societal decline and moral corruption. Elections, education, religion, media, and constitutional interpretation are folded into a single interpretive frame in which the nation itself is under threat. In Wodak's terms, this reflects boundary construction through moral allegiance (Wodak, 2015, ch. 4, p. 4). Political belonging is defined not simply through partisan alignment but through adherence to "Judeo-Christian values," constitutional originalism, and resistance to "cancel culture" (Appendix C, l. 470-472). Those positioned on the opposing side are not just advancing alternative policies, they are narrated as attempting to corrupt youth and erase foundational values. This arguably portrays escalation through expansion of the conflict domain. The moralized "us vs them" first used to contest electoral legitimacy is now applied to governance and culture. The object of polarization remains partisan camps, but the arena in which it is visible widens.

This aligns with McCoy and Somer's argument that polarization becomes pernicious when political identity aligns along a single, moral dimension (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 234–235). Once one side embodies constitutional fidelity and moral defense, the other is positioned as corrupt. Under these conditions, the plausibility of instrumental norm evaluation intensifies, as described by Svolik as the partisan–democrat dilemma (Svolik, 2019, p. 23). At this point in the process, escalation is no longer episodic, but rather, considering the constant framing in different arenas, it can be seen as structural, with politics framed as civilizational defense across domains.

5.2 Germany

The 2021 German federal election was held on 26 September 2021, and it resulted in a Bundestag with the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) emerging narrowly ahead of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) bloc and a range of smaller parties securing seats, including the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (Voce & Clarke, 2021) .

In a press conference on 27 September 2021, AfD federal spokesperson Jörg Meuthen and co-party chairman Tino Chrupalla, alongside parliamentary group leader Alice Weidel, responded to the election results. Meuthen described the outcome as something that the party " must learn from this election result and not create taboos," signalling procedural acceptance rather than delegitimation (Appendix D, l. 95-96). Chrupalla similarly affirmed continued parliamentary engagement for the AfD, positioning the party as a "strong opposition force in the German Bundestag" (Appendix D, l. 25). The immediate post-electoral statements do not frame the electoral process itself as illegitimate, fraudulent, or manipulated. There are no claims of fraudulent vote counting. Instead, the focus is on internal analysis, media treatment, and strategy for future political positioning.

Analytically, this moment represents procedural stabilization rather than escalation. Democratic procedures — voting, counting, certification, and initial institutional closure — are accepted. This stabilization provides the backdrop against which escalation later unfolds in the German case, not through rejection of electoral legitimacy, but through the gradual reinterpretation of institutional neutrality and the moral evaluation of governing authority. Escalation in the German context therefore does not begin with electoral dispute, but with contestation of how institutions operate within a competitive democracy.

5.2.1 Episode 1: Discursive Erosion of Institutional Neutrality

(Stimme Wahlcheck Interview, 29 August 2021)

The empirical material analyzed in this episode stems from a public interview conducted on 29 August 2021 as part of the Stimme Wahlcheck series hosted by the regional newspaper Heilbronner Stimme (Appendix E). The interview is a structured pre-election format in which

Alice Weidel responds to questions about media coverage, coalition prospects, and policy positions. It takes place during the election campaign.

The interview takes place within a routine journalistic format that treats democratic competition as legitimate and ongoing. The discursive moves observable here concern how political institutions and public actors are described and evaluated within an accepted democratic process. As such, the episode does not involve procedural delegitimation. Rather, it provides insight into how institutional neutrality can be questioned and reinterpreted even in the absence of electoral rupture.

When asked why the AfD is not benefiting more strongly from the electoral weakness of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Weidel responds that the AfD is "not adequately represented in the media with our practical politics" (Appendix E, l. 254–255). The question presupposes that dissatisfaction among conservative voters might have transferred into gains for the AfD. At first glance, Weidel's response can be seen as a routine partisan dissatisfaction. On its own, this cannot be seen as a complaint that constitutes escalation.

However, the framing does not remain at the level of tone. Weidel continues by claiming that within the AfD "very little actual policy" (Appendix E, l. 342) is reported and that instead "it's extremely interesting to always construct things that don't actually exist within our party" (Appendix E, l. 338–339). The claim here shifts from bias to fabrication. The media is not simply critical; they are portrayed as making false realities about the party. This distinction is important. If "things are constructed that don't actually exist," then the communicative channels through which citizens form political judgments are portrayed as unreliable. Electoral outcomes are no longer interpreted as reflecting voter preference alone, but as partially mediated by flawed information flows. The explanatory focus subtly moves from democratic reception to structural filtering.

Escalation further intensifies when Weidel questions public broadcasting during the flood crisis: "Why do we have such an expensive public broadcasting system if it is no longer able to warn people?" (Appendix E, l. 766–767). Here, the critique expands beyond representational fairness. Public broadcasting is framed as generally failing its institutional mandate. The issue is thus not just partisan coverage but institutional malfunction.

At this point, the escalation threshold is arguably crossed. Media institutions are arguably framed as structurally biased and normatively deficient, rather than neutral and

efficient. Institutional neutrality becomes suspect rather than assumed. This reflects what Wodak conceptualizes as institutional delegitimization through threat construction, where established institutions are recoded as compromised actors within a morally divided landscape (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6). Escalation operates here through reinterpretation of fairness rather than rejection of democratic procedure. Elections remain accepted, parliamentary participation affirmed, but the communicative foundation of democratic competition is discursively destabilized.

A significant escalation dynamic becomes visible when Weidel discusses coalition formation and parliamentary positioning. Instead of describing coalition politics as routine majority-building, she frames them as coordinated exclusion. She argues that a "very broad coalition" cannot be sustained if its purpose is "to exclude us" (Appendix E, l. 1291–1296). Furthermore, she states that such arrangements "support the election losers, but not the election winners" (Appendix E, l. 1294–1295).

This formulation is analytically significant, as in Germany's proportional representation system, coalition-building is a standard institutional mechanism through which parliamentary majorities are formed. Legitimacy derives from negotiated majority support, not from singular party plurality. However, by suggesting that coalitions "support the election losers," Weidel reframes this as democratic distortion (Appendix E, l. 1294-1295).

The evaluative standard of representation is arguably narrowed. Electoral legitimacy is discursively anchored in direct electoral strength rather than coalition capacity. Exclusion from the government is not framed as strategic disagreement, but as coordinated suppression. The escalation threshold is thus arguably crossed when procedural outcomes are treated as substantively illegitimate if they disadvantage the AfD.

This reinterpretation is reinforced when Weidel discusses the AfD's use of roll-call votes. She argues that through such mechanisms, the party has "established itself" to the extent that other parties "will no longer be able to avoid dealing with us" (Appendix E, l. 435–436). The implication is that mainstream parties have systematically evaded engagement. Political disagreement is recoded as intentional silencing. At this point, the party system is implicitly divided into two camps: the AfD as an authentic democratic representative, and the established parties as a coordinated exclusionary bloc.

The structural logic that is outlined arguably resembles cartel framing: mainstream

parties are grouped as a collusive entity whose primary function is containment. This aligns with McCoy and Somer's characterization of pernicious polarization, in which political competition becomes structured around morally delegitimizing camps rather than adversarial rivals (McCoy & Somer, 2019, pp. 234–235). Escalation here operates through reinterpretation of procedural fairness. Parliamentary structures remain formally accepted, but their neutrality is discursively destabilized.

Another escalation dynamic emerges when Weidel addresses accusations directed at the AfD and its supporters. Unlike coalition exclusion, which is concerned with procedural positioning within parliament, this mechanism concerns moral boundary-setting in the public sphere.

When discussing migration policy, Weidel states:

"Anyone who wants to discuss this is immediately labeled a Nazi… anyone who actually wants to have a discussion about a controlled law-abiding immigration policy is immediately labeled a Nazi" (Appendix E, l. 632–635).

Later, she generalizes:

"If you have a different opinion… then you're a Nazi" (Appendix E, 2021, l. 913-914).

This differs analytically from the cartel framing. Here, the claim is not necessarily that institutions coordinate to exclude the AfD. Instead, the claim is that dissent itself is morally disqualified. An escalation threshold is thus arguably crossed when political disagreement is framed not as adversarial contestation, but as systematic moral suppression. The word "immediately" (Appendix E, 2021, l. 632) is crucial. It constructs labeling as automatic. The accusation of extremism is portrayed as routine rather than being exceptional. This reframes moral boundary enforcement as political weaponization.

In Wodak's terms, this resembles victim–perpetrator reversal (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 27). The AfD is positioned as engaging in legitimate debate ("controlled law-abiding immigration policy," Appendix E, l. 635), while critics are framed as aggressors who silence discourse through stigmatization. The contest over legitimacy unfolds at the level of public

discourse, and the neutrality of the public sphere is discursively contested. Debate is portrayed as normatively distorted. This dynamic contributes to moralized identity alignment, where political conflict is structured less around policy disagreement and more around perceived injustice and suppression (McCoy & Somer, 2019, pp. 234–235).

In the German case, escalation operates first through reinterpretation of institutional neutrality and moral boundary enforcement. The structure of escalation is therefore distinct, even if the broader theoretical mechanisms remain comparable.

In episode 1, there are no instances of procedural delegitimation. Electoral rules are not rejected, outcomes are not described as fraudulent, and parliamentary participation remains affirmed. Instead, escalation unfolds through reinterpretation of institutional neutrality. Across the interview, three cumulative mechanisms recalibrate the position of institutional fairness.

First, media institutions are framed as structurally distortive rather than critical. Claims that reporting "constructs" realities that "do not exist" (Appendix E, l. 338–339) changes the issue from adversarial coverage to epistemic unreliability. Public broadcasting is similarly depicted as failing its mandate (Appendix E, l. 766–767). Second, coalition formation is framed as coordinated exclusion. When broad coalitions are described as existing "to exclude us" and as supporting "election losers" (Appendix E, l. 1294–1296), the distribution of seats in parliament is thus arguably reframed as democratic distortion rather than routine majority-building. Third, moral labeling is portrayed as automatic suppression. The claim that the AfD is "immediately labeled a Nazi" (Appendix E, l. 630–634) reframes boundary enforcement as weaponized stigmatization.

Altogether, these moves arguably repositions democratic institutions. In Wodak's terms, established institutions are recoded as normatively compromised actors within a morally divided landscape (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6, 27). In McCoy and Somer's framework, competition shifts toward moralized camp alignment rather than adversarial disagreement (McCoy and Somer, 2019, pp. 234–235). The escalation threshold in the German sequence therefore lies not in procedural rupture but in the erosion of presumed neutrality. Democratic structures remain intact. What changes is the evaluative standard: institutions are no longer presumed to be impartial; they must be morally justified.

5.2.2 Episode 2: Moral Requalification of Governing Authority

(Bundestag General Debatte, 7 September 2022)

Episode 1 showed a first German escalation threshold, that neutrality is not necessarily assumed. Media representation, coalition fairness, and public boundary enforcement can become morally suspect. The Bundestag speech of 7 September 2022 marks a deeper shift. Here, the object of suspicion is not mainly institutional fairness but governing authority itself. The speech redefines what democratic authority is for, and thus arguably what counts as legitimate rule.

The escalation mechanism in this episode can be stated simply: procedural authorization is treated as insufficient. The government may have the formal right to govern, but the speech challenges legitimacy as conditional based on a morally defined protective mandate. Authority thus arguably becomes legitimate only if it protects the "people" and does not violate constitutional restraint.

The speech opens by positioning the present as exceptional. " Germany is heading into the worst storm since the Federal Republic was founded" (Appendix F, l. 7). This is arguably not merely a dramatic metaphor; rather, it can be understood as a scale shift. By anchoring the present in the founding of the Federal Republic, the speech elevates political conflict from routine policy contestation to a crisis of historical scale. This arguably changes the background against which legitimacy is judged. Under a "worst storm" frame, normal democratic disagreement looks inadequate, slow, or even irresponsible.

Framing the present as a "storm" raises the stakes of political judgment. Uncertainty is cast as threat, and what might otherwise appear as policy trade-offs can be interpreted as failures of protection (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6) Under this framing, the government is evaluated less as one legitimate actor among others in regular democratic debate, and more as the authority responsible for preventing harm. Legitimacy thus arguably becomes tied to protective performance rather than procedural authorization alone.

An escalation point becomes visible when Weidel invokes the government's oath of office. After framing the present as "the worst storm since the Federal Republic was founded" (Appendix F, l. 7–8), she claims that the duty "to avert harm from the German people is becoming perjury" (Appendix F, l. 43).

This accusation shifts the critique. Policy disagreement within parliamentary debate is routine. The charge of "perjury," however, implies breach of sworn obligation. The government is not simply described as mistaken, but rather as violating the very duty that legitimizes its authority. Electoral authorization remains formally intact; however, legitimacy is not necessarily treated as procedurally sufficient anymore. Thus, it is arguable framed as conditional upon fulfilling a protective mandate.

The speech anchors this claim in concrete examples. Weidel criticises "ideological fantasies and arrogant adherence to wrong decisions" (Appendix F, l. 43–44), emphasizing the continued shutdown of nuclear power plants (Appendix F, l. 45). She further claims that the government is "ruining this country economically" (Appendix F, l. 46). Within the logic of the speech, harm is thus framed as foreseeable and self-inflicted. If the government is said to produce harm rather than prevent it, the oath of protecting the country arguably becomes a standard against which it is judged.

This can be said to reposition authority. The state, ordinarily seen as the pillar that should guarantee welfare, is framed as the source of danger, whilst citizens appear as exposed to its consequences (Appendix F, l. 11–14). This resembles what Wodak describes as victim–perpetrator reversal, in which institutional actors are recoded as harmful while political challengers position themselves as defenders (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, p. 27).

Escalation here unfolds within democratic procedure. The Bundestag remains the arena, and constitutional language is invoked rather than rejected. However, the evaluative standard shifts. Legitimacy is no longer necessarily presumed through electoral mandate alone, it arguably becomes morally conditional upon protective performance.

Once authority is framed as mandate-violating, the speech can shift from 'they govern badly' to 'citizens have a right to respond'. Weidel outlines that citizens have "every right to take to the streets" (Appendix F, l. 47–48) against such a government and policies. This is an important process step because it connects the legitimacy redefinition to a practical implication.

Protest is not framed merely as ordinary democratic participation. It is framed as a justified defense against a government that is constructed as harmful and oath-breaking. This is not necessarily institutional exit, rather it can be seen as escalation in the moral interpretation of conflict. A government that violates its mandate forfeits their positions, and

citizens citizens become entitled to resistance.

This dynamic aligns with Svolik's argument that democratic commitments can become conditional when actors prioritize partisan or group-based evaluations over procedural norms (Svolik, 2019, p. 23). Whereas the speech does not demonstrate whether opinion shifts have manifested and people have actually taken to the streets, it does provide the moral framing within which procedural loyalty may appear secondary to protective obligation. Because the government is morally disqualified at the level of mandate, the speech can pull multiple policy areas into a single narrative of failure. First, economic policy becomes evidence of harm. The government is "ruining this country economically" (Appendix F, 2022, l. 46). This is not framed as a contested trade-off. It reads as destructive governance.

Second, migration is narrated as boundary failure. The government is accused of "opening the floodgates" (Appendix F, l. 140). Metaphors like "floodgates" matter in interpretive analysis because they are not neutral descriptions; they position the state as failing to control entry and thus failing in protection. The policy debate is, therefore, arguably moralized and the question becomes whether the state is still able to safeguard the national community.

Third, emergency legislation is framed as normalization of coercion. The Infection Protection Act is described as making "the state of emergency a permanent institution" and rights restriction "the norm" (Appendix F, 2022, l. 176–177). In discursive terms, this extends the mandate-failure narrative into the constitutional register, and governance is not only portrayed as harmful, but it might also be rule-transforming.

Finally, protest and labeling are folded into the same structure. Weidel claims that government-critical demonstrations are labeled as right-wing extremism by the Interior Minister (Appendix F, l. 180–181). This links earlier claims that citizens have a "right" to protest (Appendix F, l. 48) with the suggestion that the state seeks to delegitimize such protest through stigmatizing classification. The result is a reinforcing pattern: the government harms, citizens resist, and the state is portrayed as suppressing that resistance.

Across these domains, escalation operates through threat construction. Distinct policy issues such as economy, migration, emergency law, and protest are interpreted through a shared frame of institutional failure and endangerment. In line with Wodak's account,

uncertainty and policy complexity are reorganized into a coherent narrative of threat that demands moral clarity rather than procedural patience (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6). The collective effect is not institutional exit, but a recalibration of legitimacy: authority is no longer presumed through procedure alone, but evaluated through its perceived capacity to protect.The importance of this episode lies not in rejecting democratic procedure, but in changing how authority is judged. The speech does not question elections, parliament, or the constitutional order. Instead, it shifts the standard by which governing authority is considered legitimate.

Throughout the address, legitimacy is outlined as conditional upon fulfilling a morally defined duty. When the government's obligation "to avert harm from the German people" is described as "becoming perjury" (Appendix F, l. 43), authority is evaluated in terms of protection. When migration policy is framed as "opening the floodgates" (Appendix F, l. 140–141), legitimacy is tied to maintaining boundaries. When emergency legislation is portrayed as turning the "state of emergency" into something permanent and making restrictions of rights "the norm" (Appendix F, l. 175–177), authority is judged against standards of constitutional restraint.

Altogether, these moves do not amount to institutional exit. Elections are not rejected. Parliament remains the arena. Instead, legitimacy is requalified. The government may hold office formally, but its moral right to rule is presented as dependent on whether it protects the people and respects limits on power.

Once legitimacy is framed in this way, further steps follow. Protest can be described as a justified response to mandate failure (Appendix F, l. 48), and state actors can be portrayed as suppressive if they label dissent as extremism (Appendix F, l. 180–182). Political conflict is thus arguably organized less around policy disagreement and more around a moral divide between protection and harm.

This aligns with McCoy and Somer's argument that polarization becomes pernicious when opponents are framed as morally illegitimate rather than simply adversarial (McCoy & Somer, 2019, pp. 234–235). The speech does not show democratic breakdown. It shows how legitimacy can be discursively redefined so that authority must be morally earned, not just procedurally granted.

Episode 2 therefore marks a clear sequence step from Episode 1. Neutrality

contestation is no longer the main issue. The core move is the mandate logic: the government is framed as oath-violating and therefore morally disqualified (Appendix F, l. 43). Crisis emphasis raises the stakes (Appendix F, l. 7–8), justified resistance becomes available (Appendix F, l. 48), and multiple policy domains are fused into a single story of protective failure and rights threat. Escalation remains inside democratic participation, but it is no longer primarily about contesting institutional fairness. It is about reframing authority as morally conditional: legitimacy must be earned through protection and restraint, not presumed through procedure.

The German case does not begin with procedural rupture. Electoral outcomes are accepted, parliamentary participation continues, and no claims of fraud are advanced. Episode 1 marks the first escalation threshold. Institutional neutrality, particularly in media representation, coalition formation, and public boundary enforcement, is rendered morally suspect. Institutions are no longer presumed to function as impartial arenas of competition. Rather, they are portrayed as structurally biased and exclusionary. This involves reinterpretation. Democratic structures remain intact, but the presumption of neutrality weakens.

Episode 2 deepens this recalibration. The focus shifts from institutional fairness to governing authority itself. By framing the government's oath as "becoming perjury" (Appendix F, l. 43), authority is reframed as mandate-violating rather than misguided. Legitimacy thus arguably becomes morally conditional. Electoral authorization remains formally valid, but it is not necessarily treated as sufficient. Authority must fulfill a protective duty toward "the people" to retain its normative standing.

This shift is reinforced through cross-domain consolidation. Economic decline, migration, emergency legislation, and protest labeling are fused into a single narrative of governance failure. The state is portrayed not only as ineffective but as potentially harmful and suppressive. The emphasis on changes is put on the standard by which authority is evaluated.

Across both episodes, escalation remains inside democratic participation. Trust boundaries are arguably recalibrated. Institutions can be seen as treated as formally intact but normatively compromised. What shifts is not necessarily the existence of democratic procedure, but the standard by which it is evaluated. Legitimacy thus moves to being morally

contingent upon protective performance and constitutional restraint. This defines the distinctive German pathway. Escalation does not begin with electoral delegitimation. It begins with contestation of institutional neutrality and culminates in moral requalification of governing authority.

Escalation, therefore, can be seen as operating through reinterpretation of what democratic authority is for. The comparative contribution of this thesis lies precisely here: polarization radicalizes not primarily through institutional exit, but through the gradual rewriting of legitimacy rules within democratic competition.

5.3 Comparison of the United States and Germany

The preceding chapters reconstructed two escalation sequences through close interpretive analysis of elite discourse between 2020 and 2022. Instead of measuring institutional breakdown or democratic erosion, the analysis traced how legitimacy criteria are gradually reworked: which institutional presumptions are destabilized, how authority is morally requalified, and how those reinterpretations become durable over time.

This section compares those sequences. In line with the thesis' interpretive and process-oriented orientation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 46), escalation is treated as a sequence of legitimacy rule shifts rather than as an aggregate outcome. What matters is not rhetorical intensity, but the moment when institutional legitimacy ceases to function as presumptively binding and becomes morally conditional (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6, 27).

The most consequential difference concerns the institutional object first placed under pressure. In the United States, escalation begins at the level of electoral authorization. During the Election Night address and the November 5 press conference, ongoing vote counting is reframed from routine democratic procedure into moral wrongdoing (Appendix A, l. 8; Appendix B, l. 3–5). The distinction between "legal" and "illegal" votes does not just contest ballots; it redefines what authorizes electoral legitimacy. Electoral closure becomes acceptable only if it confirms a pre-declared victory.

This marks a decisive shift. Democratic procedure no longer legitimizes itself. Rather, it is subordinated to substantive outcome-consistency. When courts decline to intervene, non-intervention is reframed as moral failure, "didn't have the guts or the courage"

(Appendix C, l. 535). Institutions that are tasked with administering elections are reframed as aggressors rather than neutral arbiters (Wodak, 2015, ch. 1, pp. 4–6, 27).

In Germany, electoral authorization is not the initial target. The 2021 Bundestag election is described as something the AfD "must learn from this election result," (Appendix D, l. 95-96). and parliamentary engagement is affirmed (Appendix D, l. 25). Institutional closure functions as closure.

Escalation instead begins within the system, at the level of institutional neutrality. The media is framed as fabricating narratives (Appendix E, l. 338–339). coalition politics as coordinated exclusion (Appendix E, l. 1291–1296), and public labeling as systematic suppression (Appendix E, l. 913–914). Democratic procedures remain intact, but mediating institutions become morally suspect.

The structural contrast is clear. In the United States, escalation destabilizes procedural authorization, whereas in Germany, escalation destabilizes institutional neutrality. Both cases involve reinterpretation of legitimacy, but they begin from different foundations.

Once destabilized, legitimacy becomes morally conditional in both cases, though on different grounds. In the United States, legitimacy is increasingly tied to outcome-confirmation and moral alignment. Procedures are framed as valid only insofar as they produce the "correct" result (Appendix B, l. 3–4). Continued counting is narrated as deviation rather than completion (Appendix A, l. 62–63). Suspicion is then institutionalized through audits and statutory reform, where extraordinary verification becomes normalized (Maricopa County, 2021; S.B. No. 1).

By early 2021, this conditionality expands beyond elections. Courts are criticized for non-intervention (Appendix C, l. 581-586), and opponents are framed as morally hostile to the nation (Appendix C, l. 27). Legitimacy becomes tied not only to procedural compliance, but to substantive allegiance. In Germany, conditionality develops along a different trajectory. Initially, institutions are legitimate only if they operate impartially (Appendix E, l. 1291–1295). Legitimacy remains procedural, but fairness becomes morally evaluated. In the Bundestag speech of September 2022, this deepens. The government's oath "to avert harm" is described as "becoming perjury" (Appendix F, l. 43). Authority is not necessarily sufficient because it is elected; it must fulfill a protective mandate. Migration is integrated into a narrative of mandate failure (Appendix F, l. 140–141).

Escalation becomes durable in both contexts, though through distinct mechanisms. In the United States, durability first appears through institutional uptake. Audit processes and legislative reforms embed suspicion into governance structures (Maricopa County, 2021; Howard & Ramachandran, 2021; S.B. No. 1). Electoral legitimacy becomes something that must be actively secured. Delegitimizing logic then expands into a broader moral narrative of national decline and cultural threat (Appendix C, l. 470-475). What begins as electoral contestation becomes a reusable interpretive template. In Germany, durability emerges through cumulative governance indictment rather than verification infrastructure. Economic harm (Appendix F, l. 45–47), migration boundary breakdown (Appendix F, l. 140–141), emergency governance (Appendix F, l. 173–177), and protest stigmatization (Appendix F, l. 179–182) are integrated into a narrative of systemic failure. Institutional trust becomes performance-dependent across domains. In both cases, escalation stabilizes through portability. Legitimacy is no longer self-evident; it should be morally secured. Yet neither sequence culminates in institutional exit. Elections continue. Parliamentary arenas remain active. Escalation unfolds inside democratic competition, through recalibration of legitimacy rather than rejection of democratic form.

The comparison reveals a patterned difference within a shared structural dynamic. Both cases demonstrate that polarization escalates when democratic legitimacy shifts from being procedurally presumed to morally conditional. However, the United States destabilizes electoral authorization first and moralizes legitimacy through outcome-consistency and allegiance. Germany destabilizes institutional neutrality first and moralizes legitimacy through protective mandate and performance. Escalation, therefore, does not necessarily require institutional collapse. It operates through reinterpretation of what democratic authority is for. The comparative contribution of this thesis lies precisely here: polarization radicalizes not just through institutional exit, but also through the gradual rewriting of legitimacy rules within democratic competition.

The comparison does more than identify divergence. It clarifies how escalation unfolds as a structured sequence of legitimacy recalibration. Existing literature on polarization, populism, and democratic erosion often identifies similar symptoms across cases: moralized conflict, delegitimization of opponents, institutional distrust, and conditional democratic commitment (Wodak, 2015; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Svolik, 2019). What this

comparison shows, however, is that these elements do not have to emerge simultaneously. They can unfold through ordered reinterpretations of legitimacy. Sequence might matter.

In the United States in this analysis, escalation begins by destabilizing the mechanism that authorizes political victory. Once electoral procedure is reframed as morally suspect, every subsequent institutional interaction, courts, audits, legislative reform, is interpreted through that destabilized foundation. Conditionality here mobilizes outward from electoral authorization into broader civilizational narratives.

In Germany, in this analysis, escalation begins by destabilizing institutional neutrality while leaving electoral procedure intact. Suspicion first attaches to mediating institutions, media, coalition dynamics, public labeling, before moving toward moral requalification of governing authority. Conditionality here mobilizes across institutions within the system before ultimately targeting the normative basis of authority itself.

This difference is quite important analytically. It suggests that escalation does not follow a single script. It depends on how institutional presumption is first rendered morally contingent. Where electoral authorization is destabilized early, conditionality centers on outcome-consistency. Where neutrality is destabilized first, conditionality centers on fairness and protection.

Importantly, in both cases escalation operates inside democratic competition. Parliamentary arenas remain active, political actors affirm formal democratic structures even as they try to change the criteria by which those structures are judged. Rather than locating escalation primarily in affective hostility or institutional erosion, the analysis attempts to show how escalation becomes intelligible through discursive shifts in legitimacy standards.

In this sense, the points of polarization that have been analyzed in this thesis arguably radicalize when their authority becomes conditional upon moral alignment. That conditionality, once stabilized and portable, can be seen as reshaping the interpretive landscape of democratic contestation.

6. Conclusion

The thesis set out to answer the research question; *How does political polarization escalate, and how are standards of democratic legitimacy articulated and contested within that process in the United States and Germany between 2020 and 2022*. Through a comparative and

interpretive examination of selected episodes, the analysis traced how escalation unfolded in democratic institutions.

This thesis has shown that contemporary polarization does not necessarily escalate through open rejection of democratic institutions. Instead, escalation can unfold within democratic competition through the gradual recalibration of legitimacy criteria. The analysis shows that in the United States – specifically when looking at the speeches made by Trump – that destabilization of electoral authorization is a pivotal process of the escalation of polarization, whereas in Germany – looking at Weidel's speeches – it emerges through the erosion of presumed institutional neutrality. Despite these different entry points, both cases demonstrate how democratic authority becomes increasingly morally conditional rather than procedurally presumed. This comparison demonstrates that escalation does not necessarily follow a single pattern. However, a shared dynamic is visible. In both contexts, democratic institutions were increasingly evaluated through moral criteria. Legitimacy remained formally grounded in democratic rules, but the binding force of legitimacy became contingent on interpretations of fairness, protection, and correctness.

The analysis therefore suggests that the destabilizing potential of polarization lies not only in institutional breakdown, but in the incremental rewriting of what makes democratic rule legitimate. Understanding these discursive shifts is crucial for explaining how democratic contestation can intensify while formal institutions remain intact.

The contribution of the thesis lies in clarifying escalation as a sequential process of legitimacy reinterpretation. Instead of just treating polarization as ideological distance or partisan hostility, the analysis shows how polarized conflict can reshape the standards of how democratic authority is judged. Escalation, as reconstructed in this thesis, unfolds through discourse, through institutional engagement, and through the gradual redefinition of what counts as justified authority.

By tracing these processes comparatively, the thesis demonstrates that the significance of contemporary polarization lies not only in its intensity, but in how it restructures the evaluative terms of democratic legitimacy itself.

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