

Victims of Their Own Making?

The Democratic Risks of Strategic Victimhood in Political Scandals

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Abstract

Political scandals have long functioned as key mechanisms of democratic accountability. However, the rise of social media has fundamentally altered how political actors respond to scandal. This article introduces strategic victimhood as an increasingly prominent response strategy, in which scandalized politicians portray themselves as victims of—rather than as perpetrators of—wrongdoing. Drawing on comparative examples across political systems and ideologies, we synthesize recent research to explain why victimhood claims resonate with both supporters and, in some cases, opponents. We highlight key psychological mechanisms underlying this appeal, including motivated reasoning, psychological reactance, and moral heuristics centred on harm and suffering. While strategic victimhood can yield short-term reputational benefits for individual politicians, we argue that its widespread use poses significant long-term risks for democratic accountability by undermining trust in media, judicial institutions, and the normative foundations of political responsibility.

Keywords: *strategic victimhood, political scandals, democratic accountability, political communication*

In an era where social media plays a central role in political discourse, the dynamics of political scandals have evolved considerably. Unlike in media conflict or publicist conflicts, in which two or more groups attempt to gain interpretive authority over a conflict or a controversially discussed issue in the public sphere (von Sikorski, 2025), political scandals are characterized by “intense public communication about a real or imagined defect that is by consensus condemned, and that meets universal indignation or outrage” (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1041). While scandals have long served as a mechanism for holding political actors accountable in democratic societies (Esser & Hartung, 2004; Entman, 2012; Maier et al., 2019), the erosion of traditional media’s gatekeeping function has opened new avenues for managing scandal narratives. Today, politicians are no longer dependent on conventional news outlets to reach the public (e.g., Stier et al., 2018). Instead, they can speak directly to their supporters via social media, reframing events in real time and circumventing critical journalistic scrutiny (von Sikorski & Kubin, 2022).

This shift in communication power has led to a diversification of scandal response strategies. Among these, one increasingly visible and morally charged tactic is what we call *strategic victimhood* in political scandals, a response strategy in which a politician presents themselves as a victim rather than a perpetrator (Chouliaraki, 2021; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2026; see also Voit et al., 2026).

Several prominent Austrian cases illustrate how strategic victimhood is employed in political scandals. Former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz responded to corruption allegations by claiming a politically motivated campaign aimed at “destroying” him.

With this claim, he shifted the focus from structural corruption to ideological persecution. Another example is the case of the former Vice Chancellor of Austria and former member of the right-wing populist party FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party), Heinz-Christian Strache, who was implicated in the so-called “Ibiza video” and framed the scandal as a “criminal plot,” while denying any wrongdoing. In particular, the strategic victimhood employed by Strache can be described as well-calibrated to the Austrian context. Strache relied on the narrative of portraying himself as the target (and victim) of “criminal structures.” This form of victimhood can be regarded as strategically astute, as it seamlessly builds on established patterns of FPÖ communication, which regularly conceives of itself as a systematically disadvantaged counter-elite and claims to defend “the people” (victims) against the elites (victimizers) (see Pelinka, 2002).

The Austrian context thus serves as a salient example of how strategic victimhood can distort perceptions of scandals and undermine trust in institutions, ultimately weakening democratic control mechanisms. However, numerous prominent international cases beyond the Austrian context demonstrate that strategic victimhood in political scandals can be found across different political systems and ideologies (see Table 1).

Exemplary of the U.S. context is the strategic victimhood adopted by Donald Trump. Trump repeatedly labeled the Mueller investigation (an investigation into Trump regarding Russia’s interference during the 2016 U.S. election) a “witch hunt,” framing legal scrutiny as persecution to delegitimize institutions like the FBI, while bolstering loyalty among supporters who saw him as a martyr. French politician Marine Le Pen, accused of misusing EU funds, claimed the case was politically

driven and described it as a “witch hunt” by European elites, reinforcing populist narratives of victimhood. Former president of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro, accused of coup plotting, also invoked the “witch hunt” metaphor, portraying himself as a target of anti-democratic forces. In all cases, the accused reframed allegations as attacks, positioning themselves as moral victims. This strategy may help maintain or even strengthen support, particularly in fragmented media environments.

but carries significant long-term risks for democratic societies. By drawing on recent empirical research, we examine how this rhetorical maneuver shapes public opinion and challenges the foundations of democratic accountability.

Table 1
Depiction of Politicians as Victims in Scandals – Selected Examples

Politician / Party	Scandal / Allegation	Response / Victim Narrative	Quote / Representation
Heinz-Christian Strache, Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)	Ibiza Scandal (2019) – Corruption allegations from video	Presented himself as a victim of a secret plot or trap	Strache: these are “criminal structures”; “I am not the perpetrator, I am the victim.” (Der Standard, 2020)
Sebastian Kurz, Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	False testimony in the parliamentary inquiry, advertisement scandal	Claimed politically motivated investigations, criticized the WKStA (Austrian Public Prosecutor's Office) and spoke of a “red network” (i.e., political opponents and left-wing allies within the Austrian system)	“You want to destroy me”; “All are equal before the law, but I am “not being treated according to this principle” (NTV, 2023)
Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)	“Ibiza video” and other scandal allegations	The FPÖ's self-depiction as a victim of a state or left-wing conspiracy. Also, frequent comments by leading FPÖ politicians in which the FPÖ is continuously presented as victims of a system working against the will of the people	“Political assassination of Strache”; “assault on freedom and democracy” (Münch, 2019)
Marine Le Pen, National Rally (RN)	Fake Jobs Scandal – Misuse of European Parliament funds	Le Pen and her party claimed they were victims of a “political attack” by the European institutions, alleging a left-wing plot to sabotage her campaign	“rule of law was completely violated”; “witchhunt” (Ataman et al., 2025; see Le Monde, 2025)
Donald Trump, Republican Party	Russia Investigation (2016-2019) – Alleged collusion with Russia	Trump repeatedly claimed that the investigation into Russian interference was a politically motivated “witch hunt” to undermine his presidency.	“This is the single greatest witch hunt of a politician in American history!” (see Borger et al., 2017)
Jair Bolsonaro, Liberal Party (PL)	Scandalous alleged coup plot	Bolsonaro depicted himself as a victim of both the media and political opponents.	He described himself as a victim of a “witch hunt” (Buschschlüter et al., 2025)

The rise of strategic victimhood claims raises critical questions for scholars of political communication and democratic accountability. In this essay, we address three central questions: (1) *Why is victimhood such an attractive response strategy for political actors facing scandal?* (2) *How do different audience segments respond to strategic victimhood and what are the psychological mechanisms that explain this?* (3) *What are the broader democratic risks of this tactic?*

Overall, we argue that while strategic victimhood may offer short-term benefits to individual (populist) political actors (often among both political allies and opponents),

Toward a Definition of Strategic Victimhood in Political Scandals

Victimhood narratives are a key component of many political and intergroup conflicts where opposing groups claim to have suffered to a larger extent than other political parties or groups in society, a phenomenon also referred to as *competitive victimhood* (Young & Sullivan, 2016). Additionally, these narratives are increasingly entering the political sphere. For example, Voit and colleagues (2026) found that victimhood claims in German federal election and party programs have

increased between 2002 and 2021, particularly among parties represented in parliament. Further, parties at the far left and far right of the ideological spectrum used victimhood narratives more frequently than centrist parties, highlighting the role of victimhood narratives, especially in populist political campaigning. This trend makes sense as strategic victimhood aligns closely with the rhetoric of populist communication, which frames politics as a struggle between a virtuous “people” and a corrupt “elite” (Brubaker, 2017). Even though victimhood claims are often part of populist rhetoric, it is conceptually distinguishable and can be leveraged by non-populist politicians as well (see Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024; Voit et al., 2026).

Strategic victimhood is a large and encompassing communication strategy that can take many forms. For example, this deliberate strategy can communicate real, perceived, or false victimhood of oneself or one’s group as a way to gain political legitimacy or reach political goals (also see Gray & Kubin, 2024). One especially pernicious form of this communication strategy is *hijacked victimhood* (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024, p. 718). Hijacked victimhood has been described as a subset of strategic victimhood and as a narrative strategy used to frame dominant groups as vulnerable to domination, disappearance, or oppression by groups that are marginalized or socially subordinate (Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). This victimhood is often based on misattributions, exaggerations, and falsehoods but can be politically beneficial for those who use these strategies (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2026).

Strategic victimhood in political scandals refers to victimhood claims and the deliberate self-presentation of political actors involved in scandals as victims rather than perpetrators. Instead of offering apologies, denying, or accepting responsibility, which are well-studied political communication strategies (Hamrak et al., 2024; Johnson, 2018), some politicians accused of misconduct increasingly portray themselves as targets of unjust attacks—often by the media, political rivals, or judicial institutions (see Kubin & von Sikorski, 2026). This rhetorical strategy reflects a form of perpetrator–victim reversal (Chouliaraki, 2021), which stands in stark contrast to victim-blaming. While victim-blaming shifts responsibility from the actual perpetrator to the true victim—such as when survivors of sexual assault are implicitly held responsible for the harm they suffered (see, for example, Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014; von Sikorski & Saumer, 2020; see also Gray & Kubin, 2024)—strategic victimhood reverses this dynamic. Here, it is the alleged wrongdoer who claims victim status (see Chouliaraki, 2021). A political actor accused of norm violations (e.g., corruption or abuse of power) communicatively reframes the situation by asserting that they are being unfairly targeted, thus positioning themselves as victims of external persecution rather than as accountable agents. This strategy enables them to deflect blame, reshape public perception, and potentially reduce the reputational fallout associated with their transgressions. Thus, strategic victimhood in political scandals refers to the deliberate self-presentation

of an accused political actor as a victim rather than a perpetrator, with the aim of deflecting blame and preserving public support.

The Logic and Roots of Strategic Victimhood

Historically, political actors had limited opportunities to communicate strategic victimhood. Traditional news media held considerable gatekeeping power, shaping public narratives around political scandals. Politicians, by contrast, had few channels to influence or counter these narratives effectively. This dynamic has shifted fundamentally with the rise of social media, which enables politicians to bypass traditional media filters and communicate directly with their audiences. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), *Facebook*, *TikTok* and proprietary channels like Donald Trump’s *Truth Social* allow political actors to present their side of the story without editorial oversight. In today’s digital media environment, traditional gatekeepers have lost much of their influence, while politicians have gained new tools to reframe allegations as politically motivated attacks. Especially regarding scandals during election campaigns (see Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012), they increasingly respond to scandal-related accusations by portraying themselves as victims of unfair, exaggerated, or strategically timed allegations.

Why, then, is victimhood such an appealing response strategy in the face of scandal? The answer lies in the powerful moral and psychological weight of victim status. Victims are generally perceived as more moral, trustworthy, and less culpable for harmful actions as compared to people who are not seen as victims (Gray & Kubin, 2024). Claiming victimhood can elicit sympathy among supporters and sow moral ambiguity among undecided observers, thereby weakening the impact of accusations. Thus, politicians may feel that claiming victimhood is advantageous for them politically. Compared to strategies such as apologizing, justification, or denial (see Hamrak et al., 2024; Bhatti et al., 2013; von Sikorski et al., 2018). Victimhood offers a more emotionally resonant and often less risky path to preserving personal credibility and political capital (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2026). For instance, denying wrongdoing can be more effective than offering apologies (Hamrak et al., 2024). However, such denials often only delay negative consequences, like reputational damage, particularly when evidence later disproves them (Bhatti et al., 2013). In contrast, victimhood claims do not carry the same risks.

Importantly, strategic victimhood is not merely a tactical maneuver. It draws its effectiveness from deep-seated psychological mechanisms. As Gray and Kubin (2024) argue, humans evolved in environments where threats of victimization were pervasive. Survival depended on forming cohesive social groups governed by shared moral codes. Because concerns over minimizing harm lie at the heart of moral judgments (Schein & Gray, 2018), those perceived as victims are often granted moral authority

and social protection. This dynamic persists in modern discourse: victims are typically seen as morally pure, less blameworthy, and more deserving of empathy (Gray & Kubin, 2024).

By adopting victim status, political actors not only deflect blame but also mobilize their base through appeals to shared grievances and perceived injustice. This is the core mechanism that makes strategic victimhood so potent in political scandals: it taps into intuitive moral heuristics that reduce perceived responsibility and heighten emotional identification. In effect, strategic victimhood functions as a form of moral immunization. First, when a political actor is perceived—at least partially—as a victim, public and media scrutiny may shift away from their misconduct and toward the supposed injustice of the accusation. Second, (alleged) victimhood can mitigate perceptions of scandalous behavior, redirect outrage, and foster empathy toward the accused. This rhetorical reframing can generate powerful emotional effects. By portraying themselves as victims, politicians trigger instinctive moral responses such as compassion and solidarity, particularly among their supporters (see Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024). In doing so, they shield themselves from reputational damage by activating moral instincts that protect rather than condemn them (see Kubin & von Sikorski, 2026). Third, as mentioned, strategic victimhood tends to be less risky for political actors compared to other response strategies such as denying and wrongdoing (Hamrak et al., 2024)—making strategic victimhood an especially attractive response for politicians embroiled in scandal.

Audience Reactions, Psychological Mechanisms and Democratic Implications

The effectiveness and democratic consequences of strategic victimhood in political scandals cannot be fully understood without examining how different segments of the public respond to such rhetorical maneuvers. Audience reactions are not uniform; they are shaped by political orientations, psychological predispositions, and are essential (as we argue) for understanding whether strategic victimhood mitigates reputational damage.

How Co-Partisans Respond to Strategic Victimhood

Existing research shows that responses to scandal are strongly filtered through partisan and affective lenses (von Sikorski et al., 2020; see von Sikorski, 2018). Supporters of the implicated politician may readily adopt the victim narrative, interpreting the scandal as politically motivated or unjust—in-line with how in-group members are inclined to dismiss scandals their co-partisans are accused of (Ekstrom et al., 2024).

For supporters of the accused, victim narratives often generate affirmation and solidarity. They function not only as a defense of the political actor but also as a defense

of the in-group, reframing the scandal as a collective attack. This “us versus them” framing increases affective in-group identification and strengthens shared political identity. In this way, strategic victimhood may act as a rallying cry, deepening loyalty and reinforcing moral alignment with the accused. Empirical research supports this: when political figures present scandals as unjust or unfair attacks, core supporters are more likely to dismiss the allegations and perceive the accused as morally vindicated (von Sikorski et al., 2020; von Sikorski & Kubin, 2026).

How Opponents Respond to Strategic Victimhood

Political opponents may view victimhood claims as manipulative and disingenuous, which can intensify outrage and further polarize the political landscape (see von Sikorski & Kubin, 2022). In some cases, strategic victimhood may appear as a cynical and strategic attempt to invert the moral logic of accountability. Rather than viewing the accused as unjustly targeted, opponents may interpret the victim claim as an evasion of responsibility and a performative and inauthentic act to gain undeserved sympathy. This can provoke stronger affective polarization and reinforce perceptions of a political system rife with bad-faith actors (see von Sikorski & Kubin, 2022).

However, recent empirical research highlights that this may not always be the case. In their research, Kubin and von Sikorski (2026), find that people across the ideological spectrum have more positive evaluations of scandalized politicians (regardless of the politicians’ political ideology), when the politician responds to scandal using a strategic victimhood strategy as compared to other strategies (e.g., apologizing). While at first it may seem surprising that even opponents would have more positive evaluations of politicians who claim victimhood, this work highlights the universal nature of victimhood (Gray & Kubin, 2024; Schein & Gray, 2018) and how it can build a common currency of moral understanding even between political adversaries (see Kubin et al., 2021; 2023; 2025). This conflicting research regarding how strategic victimhood can lead to more (vs less) positive evaluations from political opponents, highlights the need for further research examining when and why strategic victimhood as a communication strategy is effective across the partisan aisle—though some insights can already be gleaned from social psychology.

Psychological Mechanisms at Play

To understand the efficacy of strategic victimhood, one must understand human psychology. There are many psychological mechanisms that explain when and why strategic victimhood is effective. We examine some of these here.

One key factor explaining why political allies will respond positively to strategic victimhood (and political

opponents in some cases may respond negatively to this strategy), is motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning is the tendency to interpret information in a way that reinforces existing beliefs and emotional commitments (Kunda, 1990). Supporters are not necessarily persuaded by the logic of victimhood claims, but by the moral and identity protection these narratives provide. Similarly, partisan perceptual filtering suggests that political orientation influences not only how people interpret information, but what they perceive as credible in the first place (Taber & Lodge, 2006)—meaning in some cases opponents may use motivated reasoning to dismiss claims of victimhood.

Another relevant mechanism explaining allies support for scandalized politicians who make claims of victimhood is psychological reactance. According to reactance theory, individuals experience motivational arousal when they perceive their freedom or autonomy as threatened (Brehm, 1966). When accusations appear coercive—particularly from media or judicial authorities—supporters may react defensively, strengthening their support for the accused. Ironically, this may occur even in the face of credible evidence. In this sense, strategic victimhood may leverage cognitive and emotional tendencies that transform accountability into perceived injustice, and criticism into persecution.

Finally, as noted above, situations where people across the political spectrum view scandalized politicians who use strategic victimhood more positively may be explained by the psychological process of how we make moral judgements. The Theory of Dyadic Morality (Schein & Gray, 2018) highlights how all of us care about suffering and thus victimhood can not only garner sympathy and moral impunity from in-group members but can also build moral understanding from adversaries (see Gray & Kubin, 2024)—making strategic victimhood especially attractive to scandalized politicians interested in improving the publics' opinion of them.

Implications for Democratic Accountability

The personal advantages politicians may gain by using strategic victimhood to reframe public perception carry significant implications and potential negative spillover effects for democratic governance. When public officials deflect responsibility by adopting the stance of a victim, the normative expectation that power should be exercised transparently and ethically is undermined (see also Allern & von Sikorski, 2018). This becomes particularly troubling when victim narratives are used to delegitimize core democratic institutions such as the press or judiciary (e.g., using accusations such as “fake news” or “witch hunts”). In such cases, strategic victimhood functions not merely as a personal defense but as a broader discursive weapon against institutional oversight, with potentially harmful consequences for democratic accountability.

The resulting erosion of trust can deepen institutional

cynicism, leading citizens to perceive the media, courts, and even democracy itself as biased or corrupt (Nguyen et al., 2026; see also von Sikorski & Herbst, 2020). While this tactic may help individual politicians weather scandals, it risks undermining the very foundations of democratic governance. By reframing credible allegations as persecution, politicians not only weaken accountability mechanisms but also diminish public confidence in the legitimacy of institutions. Repeated use of this strategy can create a precedent for scandal fatigue, permanently reducing the effectiveness of journalism and civil society in holding leaders accountable (von Sikorski & Kubin, 2022). Over time, persistent invocations of victimhood foster public cynicism, exacerbate polarization, and further compromise the capacity of watchdog institutions—especially in societies already marked by ideological divides and populist rhetoric (Brubaker, 2017). As public discourse shifts from reasoned debate to competing narratives of grievance, the ability of democratic institutions to ensure transparency and justice is significantly diminished (Young & Sullivan, 2016).

Conclusion and Next Steps

Strategic victimhood in political scandals is not merely a rhetorical device but a socially and psychologically potent strategy that reshapes public perception of wrongdoing and accountability. Different cases like the scandals involving former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and former Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache demonstrate how this strategy is carefully calibrated to resonate within specific national and party contexts. In Austria, Strache's framing of the “Ibiza video” as a “criminal plot” effectively drew on the FPÖ's long-standing narrative of itself as a systematically disadvantaged counter-elite defending “the people” against corrupt elites, illustrating how strategic victimhood can mobilize partisan solidarity and deflect scrutiny from structural wrongdoing. Similarly, Kurz's portrayal of corruption allegations as politically motivated attacks highlights how even mainstream actors can leverage victimhood to shift attention from institutional failings to claims of ideological persecution. These Austrian examples underscore the broader democratic risks of strategic victimhood. By reframing legitimate allegations as persecution, politicians can undermine public trust in institutions, weaken accountability mechanisms, and potentially foster long-term cynicism toward media, courts, and democratic governance itself (Nguyen et al., 2026).

The repeated invocation of victim narratives risks normalizing scandal fatigue and eroding the effectiveness of watchdog institutions, with consequences not only for Austria but also for other democracies facing similar pressures from populist communication and fragmented media environments. Critically, our findings suggest that the strategic deployment of victimhood is contextually nuanced: its effectiveness depends on the political culture, the credibility of the institutions involved, and the

preexisting alignment of supporters and opponents. In Austria, where populist rhetoric is disseminated, among others, by the FPÖ, strategic victimhood in political scandals appears particularly potent—yet the risks it poses to democratic accountability are universal. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for scholars, journalists, and policymakers alike. Future research should continue to investigate strategic victimhood across diverse political and cultural contexts, examining both the psychological mechanisms that make it effective and the institutional

safeguards that might mitigate its democratic costs. In particular, efforts to enhance media literacy are vital in countering the corrosive effects of strategic victimhood. The public must become more attuned to the growing use of strategic victimhood by political actors (Voit et al., 2026)—and to the potential consequences this strategy may have for democratic processes. Future research should explore these issues more thoroughly, both in Austria and in diverse cultural contexts worldwide.

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