

# Theorising backlash politics: Conclusion to a special issue on backlash politics in comparison

The British Journal of Politics and  
International Relations  
2020, Vol. 22(4) 739–752  
© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/1369148120947956  
journals.sagepub.com/home/bpi



Karen J Alter<sup>1</sup> and Michael Zürn<sup>2,3</sup> 

## Abstract

This conclusion to a special issue on backlash politics develops a proto-theory of backlash politics. The special issue's introduction defined backlash politics as a particular form of political contestation with a retrograde objective as well as extraordinary goals or tactics that has reached the threshold level of entering mainstream public discourse. While a sub-category of contentious politics, we argue that backlash politics is distinct and should not be understood as 'regressive contentious politics'. Drawing from the contributions to this special issue, we discuss the causes of backlash politics, yet we argue that the greatest theoretical advances may come from studying backlash dynamics and how these dynamics contribute to different outcomes. We develop a proto-theory of backlash politics that considers causes for the rise of backlash movements, how frequent companions to backlash politics – emotive politics, nostalgia, taboo breaking, and institution reshaping – intensify backlash dynamics and make it more likely that backlash politics generate consequential outcomes.

## Keywords

backlash politics, contestation, emotional politics, taboo breaking, nostalgia, public discourse, retrograde

The term backlash has been invoked in very different contexts: in discussions of reactionary movements, anti-feminism, the pushback against LGBT rights, movements for local autonomy, radical right-wing populism, when discussing policy reversals, rejections of European and international institutions, and more. As this list reveals, backlash claims occur on different political levels – local, national, and international – and they can be issue-specific or generalised against a political order as a whole. One reason to focus on backlash politics is its contemporary relevance. We are currently experiencing a wave of backlash that is diffusing across the world. A second important reason is that backlash politics can be contagious and mutating, and it can generate large and important political transformations. Articles in this special issue have discussed the mutating and contagious nature of backlash politics, explaining that local antifeminist politics have migrated to the

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

<sup>2</sup>Research Unit Global Governance, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin, Germany

<sup>3</sup>Department of Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

## Corresponding author:

Michael Zürn, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Reichpietschufer 50, Berlin, 10785, Germany.

Email: michael.zuern@wzb.eu

United Nations (UN); anti-gay backlashes arise in places where there are no gay-rights victories to reverse; mobilisation against immigration can become a fundamental challenge to the procedural consensus of the political order; and anger-infused politics can transmute into mutual indignation that deepens polarisation and targets bystanders who may be uninvolved and mischaracterised.

Our introduction developed a composite definition of backlash politics that is conceptually distinct and that captures specific dynamics and logics in backlash politics. We defined backlash politics as a particular form of political contestation with a retrograde objective as well as extraordinary goals or tactics that has reached the threshold level of entering mainstream public discourse. All three features are necessary elements and together they distinguish backlash from contentious politics.

We created a separate category of frequent companions that are not necessary elements of the definition. Backlash politics – as we defined it – made the frequent companions more likely. Retrograde aspirations increase the likelihood of nostalgic emotion-laden appeals, and extraordinary claims and tactics increase the likelihood of taboo breaking, emotive appeals, and institutional reshaping. When present, these frequent companions intensify backlash politics and make it more likely that backlash politics generate consequential outcomes.

Our conceptualisation is intentionally broad so as to capture commonalities across cultures, political levels, and time. The definition can – like backlash itself – apply to both democratic and authoritarian contexts, so long as the public sphere has some independence from the power holders. Contributions to this special issue critically engaged with our conceptualisation from the perspective of literatures that have affinities or are similar to backlash politics (norm research, feminism, social movement theory, modernisation and cleavage theory, etc) or they applied our framework to a specific case (populist parties, Brexit, gay rights, UN family policy, international courts, foreign direct investment (FDI), etc). Part 1 of this conclusion builds on the special issue's contributions to draw a sharper distinction between our backlash definition and the social movements and contentious politics literatures. Part 2 begins to theorise about the interaction between causes, backlash politics, frequent companions, and outcomes. We argue that the value-added of studying backlash as a distinct category will come from focusing on these interactions and suggest a proto-theory that puts the frequent companions that the introduction identified in the centre. We also identify some questions that a focus on backlash politics generates.

## **Backlash as a special form of contentious politics**

All contributors – including the editors – began this collaboration with the open question of ‘is there such a thing as a politics of backlash?’ We immediately agreed that backlash politics, if it is distinct, would be a variant of contentious politics and we sought to learn from existing literatures and studies. Yet, we also wanted to begin anew to think about backlash politics. In this part of the conclusion, we engage with conceptual questions that are informed by the contributions to this special issue.

### *Is backlash simply regressive or right-wing contentious politics given another name?*

The common social science usage portrays backlash politics as a regressive form of contentious politics. This portrayal also exists in the social movements literature, which often

invokes Jane Mansbridge's categories of progressive movements (those that develop inclusionary strategies) and regressive (those that develop exclusionary strategies). While we agree with Della Porta (2020) that backlash movements are a sub-category of social movements, we do not want to equate them with regression.

We eschew the progressive/regressive dichotomy, and deliberately avoid casting backlash as regressive. In our definition, the retrograde directionality makes backlash goals distinct. The special issue's introduction explained that the notion of retrograde (returning to a prior social condition) is different from regressive (reversing civilisational achievements), avoiding the normativity and teleology that comes with the term regressive. In line with this idea, Jack Snyder's (2020) contribution shows how cultural revivalist movements adopt the language of rights and modernity to suggest the emancipatory nature of recovering local values and priorities. Meanwhile, Gest's discussion of how different societies have confronted demographic changes where minority groups surpass in number former majority groups notes that inclusionary political definitions of citizens and nations helps ensure that demographic change is not politically or socially disruptive. Yet, Gest does not suggest that exclusionary definitions are necessarily regressive. Instead, the exclusive and inclusive strategies represent top-down political choices based on different convictions, at least some of which may be normatively defensible (Gest, 2020). Canes-Wrone et al. (2020) do not cast the reversal of Chinese foreign investment as regressive, suggesting that it could be progressive in terms of supporting unionisation, and they find that reversing levels of Chinese investment does not map onto left/right or democratic/republican cleavages. Petersen's (2020) discussion of the root causes of American 'retrogrades' also suggests that valuing God and country is neither inherently regressive nor progressive.

Of course, movements with retrograde goals can be and often are regressive. For example, there are many reasons to believe, as Jelena Cupać, Irem Ebetürk, and Omar Encarnación suggest, that antifeminist and anti-gay backlash is regressive (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020; Encarnación, 2020). Our point, however, is that movements with retrograde goals are not necessarily regressive. Hanspeter Kriesi's contribution underscores this point. Opposition to elements of the European integration project involve concerns about European integration voiced by the political left and right, and the complaints themselves can generate both progressive and regressive reform agendas.

In avoiding a normative label, we render our backlash politics definition normatively thin. While acknowledging the analytical advantages of this choice, Nicole Deitelhoff's (2020) contribution notes that our definition fails to name and identify what might be larger normative stakes. Claudia Landwehr (2020) agrees insofar as she points out that backlash politics can undermine our basic social contract, which is the procedural consensus that societies create so that diverse peoples can live in peace together.

These normative critiques are important, and we agree that normative judgements must be part of studying backlash politics. Yet, we offer three reasons why we should not bring normative assessments into the definition of backlash. A first, already mentioned, reason is that retrograde goals may not be regressive. Calling normatively defensible objectives regressive could actually contribute to the indignation that Petersen discusses. Terman, Snyder, and Freedman also suggest that responses that criticise or shame backlash movement framings end up reinforcing the deviance or status framings of backlash movements. Second, whether a backlash politics becomes historically regressive or progressive will depend not only on a backlash movement's objectives, but also on the strategies, tactics, and counter-mobilisation of opponents. Indeed, the very same scholars raising this normative concern suggest that counter-mobilisations can revitalise and

reinforce the very scripts that backlash movements are challenging. Deitelhoff's (2020) discussion of African backlash against the International Criminal Court (ICC) makes this point when she says that '[t]he backlash might be bad news for the ICC but could still be good if unanticipated news for human rights protection'. A third reason, which we elaborate further in our discussion of whether backlash politics is necessarily backwards oriented, is that the regressive label obscures that backlash politics are themselves a contestation about the definition of what is progressive for a particular group or society. The dominant scripts backlash movements challenge include shared principles, goals, and practices within which political processes and the exercise of political authority occurs. These scripts often include ideas about what is good and legitimate, and as such whether an objective is regressive, progressive, or something else may be embedded into these scripts. To be sure, something fundamental is challenged by backlash politics. But it is neither necessary nor desirable to include a normative position of this challenge into the definition of backlash movements. Said differently, backlash should not be considered inherently regressive. Instead, the normative analysis of both the objectives of backlash movements and their opponents, and the outcomes of backlash politics must be done separately, drawing on normative theories that are independent of the definition of backlash politics.

### *Is retrograde exclusively backward-oriented?*

Our backlash definition is faithful to the idea that backlash is a reaction in the opposite direction, and thus a return to something prior. Without the retrograde directionality, backlash politics would be indistinguishable from a lot of social movement initiated contentious politics. But, as Jack Snyder implies, it is probably impossible for backlash politics to be wholly backward focused. Snyder suggests a few reasons why this is the case. He argues that modernism and rights are such enticing ideas that few backlash movements want to be seen as entirely backwards oriented. Thus, even actors that seek cultural revival will give their revival aspirations a modernist spin. Second, any politician worthy of the name will adopt modern strategies. They will appropriate the language of the day to attract support and confuse opponents, and use the latest mobilisation tools and technologies (Snyder, 2020).

While we discussed the progressive and regressive elements of the Temperance movement, and imagined backlash movements that are both retrograde and future-oriented in the introduction (we called these 'back to the future' movements), Snyder persuasively argues that backlash politics always will combine retrograde goals with a positive vision of modernisation. For Della Porta, who wants to retain the regressive element, the presence of a modernist vision belies our conceptual use of the term retrograde. Meanwhile, Terman suggests that deviance involves constructing a contemporary other to react against so that deviance is constitutive of backlash politics. These ideas challenge our distinction between mainly retrograde movements and movements that combine retrograde goals with visions of the future, and it offers a reason why backlash agendas frequently mutate. While it may be still possible to compare backlash politics in terms of the different weights accorded to the retrograde and the future-oriented elements, it is probably true that retrograde and modernist elements can be found in many, if not most, backlash politics.

We stick with the idea that backlash politics necessarily contains a retrograde objective and reiterate that this orientation brings with it additional components. The fact that the

earlier condition (allegedly) existed suggests that return is humanly possible and that someone is responsible for the deterioration. This retrograde nature makes nostalgia and negative emotional appeals like anger, resentment, and indignation more likely. In addition, the extraordinary nature of backlash politics, perhaps fed by negative emotions and deviance, creates the mutability and unpredictability. Finally, our threshold criteria of entering mainstream discourse injects a scale and potential volatility that can spread across borders, issues, and actors. All of these factors distinguish backlash from modernist or everyday contentious politics.

### *How our backlash politics concept is different*

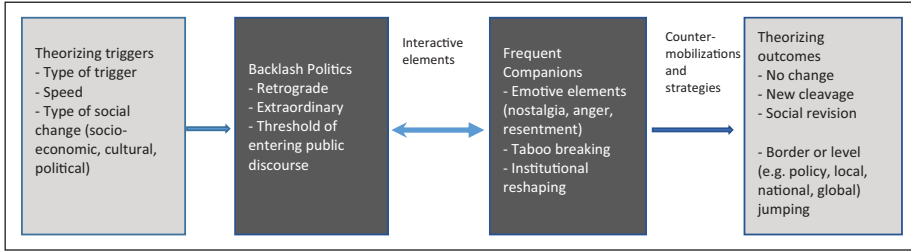
We think the differences between our definition of backlash politics and discussions of social movements and studies of change-politics more generally makes our approach distinct. This does not mean that we fundamentally break from social movements literature. The next section will explain that social movements literature is useful in thinking about why long-standing backlash movements gain new strength. Also, there is much to be gained by studying similar movements in a comparative way, which the social movements and contentious politics literature has long done with respect to their focus on right-wing radicalism and other anti-movements (e.g. anti-feminism, anti-gay rights, racism).

We suggest using backlash politics as a category that includes regressive backlashes, but that extends to all movements and politics that contain our three necessary conditions: (1) a retrograde objective, (2) extraordinary goals, tactics, and means, and (3) that has reached the threshold of entering mainstream public discourse. By allowing backlash politics to exist locally, nationally, or internationally; by allowing backlash politics be progressive, regressive, both or neither; by suggesting that backlash politics can be fundamentally transformative or peter out, we are – by definition – saying that all forms of backlash politics *are not* equal. Whereas, all politics are interactive and contentious, the contagious and mutating nature of backlash politics, and the large stakes and consequences that backlash politics can engender is why we should study backlash as a distinct form of contentious politics.

### **Proto-theorising causes, dynamics, and consequences of backlash politics**

The special issue's introduction established a framework for the study of backlash politics, captured by Figure 1 (reproduced below). We were mostly focused on explicating the middle boxes, but we also identified questions and summarised hypotheses based on how political pundits and scholars have discussed causes and outcomes of backlash politics. In this section, we sort through some of the arguments about the causes of backlash. We then focus on the dynamics and interactive effects of backlash politics, drawing from special issue contributions to theorise how the presence or absence of frequent companions can push towards the three different outcomes. We also argue that the greatest conceptual payoffs are likely to come from focusing on the processes of backlash politics.

A blanket caveat applies to this discussion. We are engaged in first-generation theorising. We started by focusing on instances of backlash politics – on different continents, in different times, and at different political levels. In research design language, we used the dependent variable to select our cases (although contributions by Encarnación, Cansees



**Figure 1.** Backlash politics – A framework.

Wrone et al., and Gest include examples where triggers are present but backlash politics is absent). Our negative findings are sound, but our empirical observations cannot be used to discern necessary or sufficient conditions, or to predict consequences. With this note of caution, we nonetheless boldly proceed with the goal of demonstrating the types of questions that a focus on backlash politics engenders.

### *On the causes of backlash politics*

The special issue's introduction made a case that a theory of backlash politics should include a discussion of causes and triggers. To be sure, we do not believe that it is possible to identify specific triggers, the early-stage elimination of which could nip backlash politics at the bud. We went even further, suggesting that counterfactual musings like 'if only Obamacare did not exist' or 'if only NATO hadn't expanded' misunderstands the nature of the backlash politics. Yet, even if the existence of a 'trigger' or 'cause' is not necessarily predictive, as social scientists we want to understand the conditions and circumstances that make backlash politics more likely. We highlight our findings in italics.

*This special issue raises important challenges for the pundit's perspective. In specific, there is little to suggest that policy or structural changes that go 'too far' or 'too fast' are a primary cause of backlash politics.* None of the special issue contributions saw backlash as being caused by structural or rapid changes, and a few actually contradicted this common presumption. Drawing on a larger study, Omar Encarnación (2020) argues that anti-gay backlashes arise in places where there are no gay-rights victories to reverse, and backlash can fail to arise in response to gay right victories. Justin Gest (2020) argues that whether demographic change generates backlash politics depends on whether identity binaries are designed to push towards coexistence or inflammation. Claudia Landwehr (2020) demonstrates that the 'procedural consensus' is a target of European backlash movements, even though there is no particular change that explains why the mode of building a procedural consensus is newly problematic. Similarly, the two studies of international courts show that long-standing practices rather than specific decisions or changes are the subject of backlash criticism (Deitelhoff, 2020; Madsen, 2020). Terman's discussion of deviance argues that deviant groups will construct something to oppose. And, using probabilistic analysis, Canes-Wrone et al. dispel common beliefs about backlash to FDI. Certain backlash contributors are 'organic', such as security concerns and changes in global supply chains, but other contributors are generated by domestic politics. Because factors unrelated to the local situation contribute to the backlash politics, whether the locality is highly unionised does not matter, and Congressmen whose districts are not directly affected can be the drivers of backlash politics (Canes-Wrone et al., 2020).



These findings suggest that backlash politics is associated with political strategies that are usually not directly caused by structural changes and specific policy changes. Encarnación (2016) makes this point as he discusses the lack of gay-rights backlash in many machismo Latin American countries. This echoes observations that support for immigration-fueled right-wing populists is often highest in countries (e.g. Poland and Hungary) and regions (e.g. Saxony, a region in Germany) with low numbers of immigrants. At the very least, the proximate cause – be it increased immigration flows or a financial crisis – needs to be framed so as to indicate which policy or group is the culpable target of backlash politics. Without a named political target, even major material disruptors, such as climate change, can escape backlash blame.

Second, and unsurprisingly, *resource mobilisation and political opportunities are important factors contributing to the strength of backlash movements*. Encarnación (2020) argues that effective backlash movement leadership, a crucial resource of social movements, helps us understand variation in when anti-gay backlash arises. Madsen (2020) argues that the Danish government supported the recent Copenhagen reforms of the Council of Europe's human rights system to demonstrate to Danish critics that their concerns were being addressed. The government's perception that this demonstration was necessary, he argues, arose because of the successful resource mobilisation of the Danish populist party. Similarly, the Brexit referendum called by Prime Minister Cameron was a response to a successful mobilisation of EU-opponents within his Conservative Party and in the new the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). It is also clear that events create opportunities that mobilise actors and make backlash politics more likely. Hanspeter Kriesi noted that right-wing populist parties are long-standing actors in Euro-sceptic politics. The 2007 financial crisis and the increased inflow of immigrants contributed to the rising strength of these parties (Kriesi, 2020). Cupać and Ebetürk (2020) argue that intensified transnational networking and strategic responses to earlier feminist successes at the UN level fuel the current antifeminist backlash on the UN level. Similarly, Deitelhoff (2020) sees the judgements of the ICC against African leaders as contributing to African states' opposition to this international court. The African and the UN examples underscore political opportunities need not be an 'objective crisis'. If a backlash movement can portray a given situation as crisis-like, the constructed 'crisis' can serve as a political opportunity structure.

This is not a novel finding, as Donatella Della Porta's (2020) discussion of the social movements literature notes. Yet, we are also saying that crisis politics, political opportunities, resource infusions, and intensive networking do not necessarily cause or predict backlash politics. Moreover, the very same forces may also fuel counter-movements that quench backlash politics before reaching the threshold of entering public discourse, a point that Encarnación makes as he discusses a lack of gay-rights backlash in Latin America. Thus, even if certain factors contribute to a strengthening of backlash movements, or if they explain variation in when and where certain backlash movements gain strength, this does not mean that these factors explain the backlash politics that then follows. What we can say is that as a sub-category of contentious politics, both backlash politics and backlash counter-movements can be animated by the same causal forces found more generally in contentious politics.

Third, *perceived grievances – a third major activating force discussed in social movement literatures – also play a role in backlash politics*. The idea that grievances related to status-loss generates backlash is inherent to Mansbridge and Shame's (2008) theorisation of backlash politics.<sup>1</sup> A number of contributions concur with this view, insofar as they find that a felt sense of status loss can contribute to backlash politics. Yet as a whole, the

varied contributions also suggest that status concerns neither automatically nor inevitably generate backlash politics.

Sometimes, status-loss perceptions are a primary reason, and an enounced motivation, in backlash politics. For example, Petersen (2020) explains that American ‘retrogrades’ are personally affronted by a perceived contempt of God and country, supposedly espoused by the group he dubs ‘the progressives’. The deeply felt nature of these sentiments, however, as manufactured and implausible they may be (e.g. the nostalgia for the glory of the British Empire, which is part of the Brexit debate Freedman (2020) discusses) can precipitate backlash politics. Certain backlash movements (e.g. anti-feminism, White supremacy, anti-West, anti-gay politics) may be inherently motivated by retrograde status reclamation objectives.

And sometimes, status concerns are plausible unnamed factors in backlash politics. In these cases, preceding changes affecting the distribution of societal status may underlie the backlash movement, but status claims may not be an open part of the public discourse. Contestation over refugees flowing into Europe or the bureaucracy of the EU, African states complaining about the uneven practices of the ICC, or initiatives against Chinese investments do not prominently contain status claims. Yet, it is possible that for backlash supporters a changing status hierarchy as a result of immigration, Chinese but not Korean FDI, or lost national sovereignty is an unarticulated status-loss grievance.

Yet, not all status changes generate backlash politics. Justin Gest’s (2020) contribution demonstrates that groups facing a majority status-loss have choices. The six cases in his larger study all faced the structurally induced reality of losing majority status, yet only sometimes did this reality generate status-reclaiming agendas.

It is also possible that status claims are as much a consequence as a cause of backlash politics, instigated by the emotional appeals of backlash movements, which is to say that the dynamics of backlash politics may in itself generate a newly felt sense of status loss. For instance, in discussing the case of Brexit, Freedman suggests that the advocates of Brexit had few options other than a status framing. Pro-leave advocates did make materialist arguments for exit, yet the closer in time one got to Brexit, the harder it became to link Brexit to material advantage. As materialist claims declined, status reclamation played an increasingly larger role in Brexit debates (Freedman, 2020).

What we lack is a way to assess or predict when and where status loss, real or imagined, will generate a status-related backlash politics. Overall, we disagree with a somewhat mechanistic zero-sum suggestion that advances by one group inducing a felt sense of status loss in another, causing backlash politics (see Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). Economic decline, cultural change, and political changes may be building-blocks of status loss narratives, but fortunes, cultures, and politics are in constant flux, and these types of changes do not always result in status-loss grievances, let alone grievances that rise to the level of backlash politics. These reasons are why status claims are neither part of our definition of backlash politics, nor a necessary condition of backlash politics. That said, the construction, amplification, and spread of status-loss-fueled backlash is a topic worthy of additional study.

### *On dynamics and consequences*

The introduction envisioned three possible outcomes of backlash politics. First, backlash politics may peter out without any fundamental change in institutions, cleavages, or the dominant script. Second, backlash politics can generate a new social cleavage that



becomes a permanent feature of future politics. Third, backlash politics may succeed in their extraordinary objectives, reconstituting the polity to fit the vision of the movement. In addition, we noted that backlash politics can be mutating and contagious, and thus additional possible outcomes included no border, issue or level jumping, regional border jumping or transference to similar types of political systems, and global effects should new international scripts emerge as a consequence of backlash politics.

As of yet, we have little material to inform a contagion or diffusion query. It is likely that backlashes that occur simultaneously are influencing each other's momentum, if only through the typical forces of diffusion: mimicry, emulation, lesson-drawing, networks, electoral, or evolutionary dynamics (Börzel and Risse, 2012; Graham et al., 2013; Linos, 2011; Roithmayr, 2017). Encarnación's discussion of the gay-rights movement, and Cupać and Ebetürk's discussion of UN level anti-feminism both suggest that networks diffuse backlash politics to different venues, and there is increasing evidence to suggest that today, backlash movements often work closely together, borrowing rhetoric and methods, and constructing disparate issues into an ideational package that may eventually define one side of a societal cleavage (e.g. anti-feminism, anti-gay rights, anti-immigration, anti-EU, anti-international courts). Transnationalisation of these ideational packages could, in principle, add up to construct a new cleavage that cuts across countries and political levels, an idea discussed by scholars who debate disagreements about communitarian versus cosmopolitan ideals (see De Wilde et al., 2019; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2008, 2012).

Even where transnational backlash contagion arises, local backlash movements will be shaped by local particularities and antecedent conditions (Slater and Simmons, 2010), and thus backlash reactions might manifest in different ways across locales. The idea that external forces play out differently across countries stands behind Gest's finding that demographic changes induced by the British empire produce different results across his six cases, shaped in large part by local conditions and factors. When and how transnational backlash contagion occurs is a subject that studies of backlash politics needs to address.

The rest of our discussion focuses on backlash politics as they occur at a single level, exploring how frequent companion features may intensify and render backlash politics more consequential. The special issue's introduction did not include hypotheses or predictions about when backlash politics would generate different outcomes. Mostly, we argued that counter-mobilisations and counter-strategies will shape backlash politics, so that a full fledged backlash theory needs to incorporate how different types and modes of counter-mobilisations affect outcomes. Here we go a bit further. Figure 2 builds on a discussion of cases to start to imagine interactive dynamics where counter-reactions shape future trajectories, offering a first cut effort to think about the interaction between frequent companions and outcomes.

*If retrograde objectives are specific, and complaints are addressed, mobilised complaints may be more likely to peter out before reaching the threshold of backlash politics.* Retrograde objectives might be achieved through ordinary means: contested elections generating enacted policy reforms. If retrograde objectives are fairly specific (e.g. Cane-Wrone et al.'s discussion of limiting Chinese foreign investment, Encarnación's discussion of anti-gay rights efforts in Latin America, and Deitelhoff's discussion of limiting ICC investigations of African heads of state), ordinary means might effectively address concerns with the most likely outcome being that the movement will peter out, perhaps before even reaching the threshold level of backlash politics. The moment when these

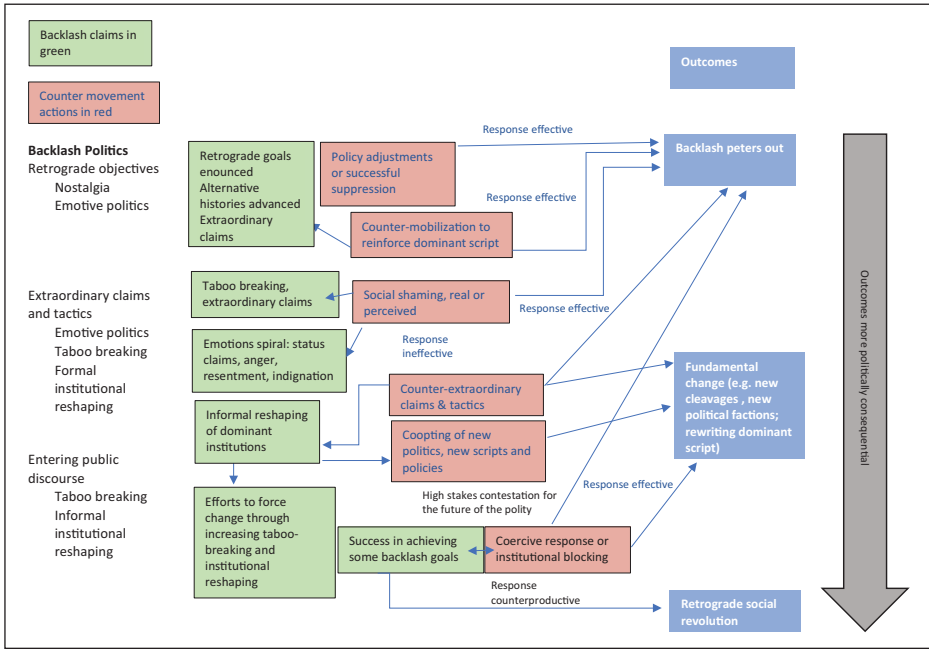


Figure 2. A proto-theory of backlash politics.

specific issues get reconstructed as general issues of stigma, status, or how the world is supposed to be, petering out is less likely. Although we lack specific examples, the introduction also imagined that suppression could be used to effectively quell backlash movements.

*If backlash demands are ignored, emotions may kick-in and backlash politics may escalate, and goals may mutate beyond the initial issues.* Our contributors observed that ignoring issue-specific backlash movements can trigger resentment, and thus, generate an escalation. According to Deitelhoff, the failure to address African concerns helped transform contested politics into backlash politics. Hanspeter Kriesi (2020) identified complaints against the EU coming from the political left and right. His analysis suggested that addressing concerns on the left through policy change might quell some leftist Euroscepticism but not only did this not happen for a long time, reforms that pleased leftist critics may have had no effect or a counter-productive impact on rightist Euroscepticism.

*If backlash movements feed and grow, institutional reshaping or new cleavages will become more likely. Emotions, nostalgia, and taboo breaking are frequent companions that make these consequential outcomes more likely.* The most consequential frequent companion in backlash politics may be emotional elements, which can lead regular contentious politics in directions that are difficult to address with policy or material fixes. As Roger Petersen explains, emotions act as a switch among a set of basic desires, leading future desires to be discounted and emotional satisfaction to sometimes become an obsession. Anger fuels a quest to identify perpetrators of alleged wrong-doing and to seek retribution. Resentment is a group-level anger that takes the form of a hierarchy claim, pushing resentful individuals and groups to try to change the status hierarchy. Resentment

thus brings status concerns into the open. If this resentment is widespread, backlash is likely to surpass the threshold needed for backlash politics. Anger and resentment can progress to indignation, which hardens in-group and out-group perceptions on all sides. In this way, negative emotions fuel, reinforce, and lock-in backlash dynamics, making individuals less open to rational, material, and pluralist appeals. When these three emotions are triggered, politics arguably enter the throes of backlash (Petersen, 2020). The organisation, strategies, and support for counter-movements will shape what then happens.

An additional question is how much institutional reshaping can a backlash movement achieve to transform backlash politics into enduring change? And how can counter-movements' adoption of extraordinary tactics, emotional appeals, and institutional reshaping be employed to quell backlash politics? The answer to these questions may shape whether both backlash movements and the defenders of the status quo break taboos and come to support changing aspects of the dominant script. It is also possible that the degree of institutional reshaping and the amount of enduring change depends on the nature of the backlash claims (and also confounding events, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic). For proponents of cleavage theory, it matters whether economic factors (e.g. an industrial revolution such as increased automation), cultural factors (e.g. Snyder's cultural revival movements), or political factors (e.g. rising nationalism) animate backlash politics, as these different factors will impact existing political cleavages and as such, they may increase the likelihood that backlash politics reshape political cleavages (Bartolini, 2007: building on; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Mair, 2006).

*Taboo breaking can trigger a politics of deviance, with a counter-reaction of shaming. The two together – taboo breaking and a reaction of shaming – can contribute to resentment that becomes indignation.* Rochelle Terman (2020) explains that deviance has its own incentive and drivers, and extraordinary politics creates openings for deviance-seeking showboating that adds fuel to the fire in the form of emotive appeals. If the reaction is then shaming, or something that is cast as shaming, Snyder, Terman, and Petersen suggest that backlash emotions can spiral, escalating into open status reclaiming. At this point, positions harden into polarised politics. A fight over institutional reshaping, whether it be reforms of the type discussed by Madsen, reinforcement of an inclusive or exclusive identity as discussed by Gest, or a redefinition of the procedural consensus as discussed by Landwehr, then a critical juncture becomes a more likely outcome.

Figure 2 starts to imagine backlash escalation influenced by the responses of counter-movements and the addition of frequent companion backlash features. Counter mobilisation efforts (in darker grey boxes) are strategies employed to avoid a retrograde political revolution. If the counter-mobilisation strategies are effective, backlash politics and backlash-politics inspired changes might be limited. Yet, if the strategies prove counter-productive, backlash movements (in white boxes) may add in more frequent companions, intensifying backlash politics, and encouraging counter-movements to respond in-kind, expanding the extraordinary nature of backlash politics, and further infusing public discourse with backlash claims and counter-reactions. The more both sides break taboos and employ extraordinary tactics, the more likely backlash politics are to generate consequential outcomes. We, thus, see an interactive trend where counter-movements dampen or fuel backlash politics, where frequent companions become more present, and where the consequences of backlash politics become increasingly consequential.

The fundamental question, of course, is what combination of persuasion and reframing, political tactics (e.g. policy adjustments, political appeals, hardball political tactics),

and coercion (suppression, violence) make a response effective (e.g. backlash reducing) or counter-productive (e.g. backlash fueling) and what factors aid backlash movements, helping them resist and escalate in the face of counter-mobilisation. To study backlash politics does not suggest that there are universal answers to these all-important questions. Societal dynamics differ, polities differ, backlash agendas differ, random luck, expected or unexpected events (e.g. elections, economic crashes, natural disasters, pandemics), or backlash politics turbulences may introduce new challenges, all of which make backlash politics both contingent and variable. Our primary point is that focusing on interactive elements that escalate or diminish backlash politics unleashes a set of new research questions, and thus help readers imagine how a politics of backlash could emerge from the categories and frequent companions discussed in this special issue.

Also important is what has not appeared in this conversation. Backlash discussions about legal rulings generally suggest that the problem is that judges should not be making policy, especially if the policy is discordant with social values of local groups. If federal or international level rules (e.g. international human rights, federal statute, or constitutional norms) occupy a space that actors operating at the state or local level dislike, the politics could very well be framed as a disagreement about process, law, or enshrined legal rights. But what might really be going on is a backlash politics that is coded in law or rights talk. Encarnación's (2020) discussion of gay-rights backlash in the United States shows how an American legal framing of 'religious rights' versus 'gay rights' has taken over the American debate, with backlash movements proposing more than 245 anti-gay ballot measures and 'constitutional amendments that succeeded in banning gay marriage in some 30 states'. Snyder (2020) points out that shaming associated with international human rights can trigger a backlash motivated culture-revivalist counter mobilisation (although this is not the only possible response (see Encarnación, 2016)). In any event, the focus on process or form may be mostly a framing device that conceals the retrograde objective.

### **Conclusion: What can a study of backlash politics tell us?**

Our goal in this special issue was to investigate whether there is something distinct about backlash politics, so that studying backlash politics as a category might be fruitful. This question arose because we could see that backlash politics operated on many levels, leading international relations, comparative politics, American politics, and political theorists to engage in parallel yet very distinct conversations. We hoped that uniting these conversations around the topic of backlash politics could generate new insights, and we think that it can.

Our goals were necessarily limited. We focused on building from disparate literatures, while thinking anew about what backlash politics might be. We differentiated necessary elements of backlash politics and the frequent companions, arguing that backlash dynamics make frequent companions more likely, and the presence of frequent companions intensifies and renders backlash politics more consequential.

In this conclusion, we have further advanced the ball by more clearly distinguishing the backlash politics concept from discussions that occur in the social movements and contentious politics literatures. We suggested that focusing on backlash causes only (a prevalent if not dominant strategy in political science) may be a strategy that neglects the importance of backlash dynamics as influenced by the frequent companion features and counter-mobilisations.

We also identified a number of issues where a study of backlash politics might advance. Normative theories – beyond the idea of inclusive=progressive and exclusive=regressive – need to be part of backlash politics debates, as does the study of how ideas are identified or cast in progressive or regressive terms. We need to better understand the dynamics that lead backlash politics to jump across levels of analysis (policy, local, national, regional/similar systems, international). And we need to better understand the strategies backlash movements employ to escalate backlash politics, and how counter-mobilisations and counter-strategies quell or exacerbate backlash politics. In raising these questions, we are not proposing that each question generates a universal type of response. Backlash politics is likely to vary based on underlying causes, retrograde objectives, whether the political system is democratic or authoritarian, local histories (aka critical antecedents), and more. This variation is also important to study.

There may never be a consensus about whether it is desirable or reasonable to try to recover elements of the past. This would only mean that the goals and aspirations of backlash movements probably will be, and should be, contested. But because there are large groups of people who will mobilise to recover a lost past – real or imagined – political scientists need to think harder about how to address these concerns in order to manage the more volatile, contagious, destabilising, and sometimes violent elements of full throttle backlash politics.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Michael Zürn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2243-8380>

## Note

1. Discussing gender backlashes, Mansbridge and Shames made a general claim that:

[w]hen a group of actors disadvantaged by the status quo works to enact change, that group necessarily challenges an entrenched power structure. The resistance of those in power to attempts to change the status quo is a ‘backlash’, a reaction by a group declining in a felt sense of power Lipset and Raab (1970) of the broad sort, that is, power as capacity.

Mansbridge and Shames (2008) go on to say that their theory is specifically about ‘backlash to regain the lost or threatened power as capacity’ (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008: 625), so one might say that they are only discussing one type of backlash politics. According to Cupać and Ebetürk (2020), there is not per se a feminist perspective on backlash politics, since feminist scholars show ‘little interest in a strict definition of backlash’ in part because ‘they are keen to see a greater number of developments as antifeminist backlash’.

## References

- Alter KJ and Zürn M (2020) Conceptualizing backlash politics: Introduction to a symposium on backlash politics in comparison. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Bartolini S (2007) *Restructuring Europe. Centre Formation, System Building, and Political Structuring between the Nation State and the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Börzel TA and Risse T (2012) When Europeanisation meets diffusion: Exploring new territory. *West European Politics* 35(1): 192–207.
- Canes-Wrone B, Mattioli L and Meunier S (2020) Foreign direct investment screening and congressional backlash politics in the United States. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).

- Cupać J and Ebetürk I (2020) The personal is global political: The antifeminist backlash in the United Nations. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- De Wilde P, Koopmans R, Merkel W, et al. (2019) *The Struggle Over Borders: Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deitelhoff N (2020) What's in a name? Contestation and backlash against international norms and institutions. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Della Porta D (2020) Conceptualizing backlash movements as a form of contentious politics: A perspective from social movement studies. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Encarnación O (2016) Beyond machismo: How Latin America came to embrace gay rights. *Foreign Affairs*, 11 January. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-01-11/beyond-machismo> (accessed 23 July 2020).
- Encarnación O (2020) The gay rights backlash: Contrasting views from the United States and Latin America. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Freedman J (2020) Back of the queue: Brexit, status loss, and the politics of backlash. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Gest J (2020) Demographic change and backlash: Social cleavage and coexistence in majority minority societies. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Graham ER, Shipan CR and Volden C (2013) The diffusion of policy diffusion research in political science. *British Journal of Political Science* 43(3): 673–701.
- Hooghe L and Marks G (2018) Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(1): 109–135.
- Kriesi H (2020) A backlash against European integration? *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(2).
- Kriesi H, Grande E, Dolezal M, et al. (2012) *Political Conflict in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kriesi H, Grande E, Lachat R, et al. (2008) *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Landwehr C (2020) Backlash against the procedural consensus. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Linos K (2011) Diffusion through democracy. *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3): 678–695.
- Lipset SM and Raab E (1970) *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lipset SM and Rokkan S (1967) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (Contributors: Robert R Alford and Others). New York: Free Press.
- Madsen MR (2020) Two level politics and backlash against international courts: Evidence from the politicisation of the European court of human rights. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Mair P (2006) Cleavages. In: Katz RS and Crotty WJ (eds) *Handbook of Party Politics*. London: SAGE Publishing, pp.371–375.
- Mansbridge J and Shames SL (2008) Toward a theory of backlash: Dynamic resistance and the central role of power. *Politics & Gender* 4(4): 623–634.
- Petersen R (2020) Emotions and Backlash in US Society and Politics. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).
- Roithmayr D (2017) Evolutionary dynamics theory and method. In: Ulen T (ed.) *Methodologies of Law and Economics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp.153–178.
- Slater D and Simmons E (2010) Informative regress: Critical antecedents in comparative politics. *Methodology Forum* 43(7): 886–917.
- Snyder J (2020) Backlash against naming and shaming: The politics of status and emotion. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20(4).
- Terman R (2020) The positive side of negative identity: Stigma and deviance in backlash movements. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4).