

Backlash Politics Book Workshop [Framework]

We are seeking proposals to contribute to a book project tentatively titled *Backlash Politics*. A workshop to discuss the various contributions will be held in Berlin 19–20 September 2024.

The project builds upon a special issue published in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* in Winter 2020 (see the attached table of contents). For the book project, we want to expand the geographic and issue areas of cases studies, reach back further in time, and provide deeper investigations (11,000–13,000 words per contribution).

The motivation

The project's impetus was a dissatisfaction with the existing literature engaging political backlashes, and a sense that backlash politics, as a specific type of politics, is not sufficiently defined, conceptualized or theorized. We wanted to consider if there were general dynamics at play in a series of issues where backlash is frequently discussed, including ethnic violence, religious fundamentalism, race relations, gender and sexual politics, right wing radicalism, irredentism, the politics of nostalgia, and more. Our motivation was therefore to overcome debate silos regarding specific topics and subfields in political science, sociology, history and social psychology with the hope of moving the scholarly debate forward. Given how fundamentally backlash politics is reshaping domestic and international politics around the world today, we believe that we can and should help our disciplines and practitioners in understanding how backlash politics evolve, how they play out over time, and which types of political responses dampen or deepen backlash politics.

To create a working definition of backlash politics, we held a workshop in October 2017 where we read and debated a very broad range of articles and books related to something we might want to call backlash politics. From there, we developed the definition discussed below. A second workshop in September 2018 involved considering the relevance of the concept through what ended up being 13 short (5000 word) investigations. Whereas the first workshop focused on more senior scholars, the second workshop and the special issue sought to help junior scholars and widen the diversity of our participants. We always planned to continue with a book project, yet we only wanted to proceed once we could meet again in person.

Defining backlash politics

We wanted an analytically useful concept of backlash politics that was faithful to the term 'backlash,' and that was specific and thus not reducible to contested politics or reactive sequences. We came up with a composite definition where three elements are jointly necessary and mutually co-constitutive of backlash politics:

- a retrograde objective of returning to a real or imagined prior social condition
- extraordinary goals and tactics that challenge dominant scripts, and
- a threshold condition of entering mainstream public discourse

This definition recognizes that actors who want to return to a prior social condition always exist but many of them were insular, or their goal was not to transform society or the world. Backlash politics, as we define it, is different in that it involves a retrograde imaginary, social transformation as a goal and backlash actors have succeeded in reshaping public discourse. When all three jointly necessary conditions operate together, we can say that backlash politics exists in a community or polity.

This definition excludes elements that scholars frequently link to backlash politics. We added the notion of frequent companions, which include nostalgia, emotional appeals, taboo breaking and institutional reshaping. These frequent companions do not cause backlash politics, nor are they necessary parts or outcomes of backlash politics. Yet they tend to be associated outgrowth of the three necessary backlash elements. We theorized that when present the frequent companions may serve as accelerants of backlash politics, and they may make backlash politics more politically consequential.

The article [Conceptualizing Backlash Politics](#) defines each aspect further. As we explain, our definition detaches the notion of backlash politics from the idea that backlash politics are inherently and necessarily regressive. By locating common features in today's backlash politics in a separate category of frequent companions, we are suggesting that these companions are not per se part of nor do they necessarily portend backlash politics. The [conclusion to the special issue](#) cumulated the insights and identified a set of questions and theoretical issues related to backlash politics. We explained that backlash politics should not be equated with regressive contentious politics, nor should we assume that status loss is an inherent part of backlash politics. We also summarized questions related to the topic that emerged from the special issue contributions. It is safe to say that further elaboration is needed to better understand triggers, what dampens or intensifies backlash politics, and the different types of outcomes including border and level jumping. Moving beyond inherited ideas and proto-theorizing is a goal we would like to pick up in the book.

The proposed workshop and the book

The book project will start with this framework. We invite contributors to apply it, or to expand upon it. We especially ask for contributions that probe how the frequent companions arise and become consequential, and how backlash politics contributes to social change. By reaching back in time we hope to be able to further theorize about the range of outcomes. By expanding the issues and geographies, we also hope to learn about backlash outside of democratic contexts.

We have invited some senior experts to write on different concepts, issues, historical moments, parts of the world, and social-political phenomenon. We thus anticipate that part of the book workshop will be a sort of master class regarding what we know about backlash politics with respect to the issues you study. The second round of invitations is occurring through an open call for proposals. While senior scholars are welcome to apply, we also hope to include junior scholars and to increase the diversity of voices. The organizers will cover travel and lodging expenses (economy class) for all invited participants.

We invite proposals of 500 words, submitted [here](#) by 1st February 2024. Applicants will be notified by 1st March 2024 whether we can include them in the project.

All the best,

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