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Politiques de *backlash* et développement durable en Amérique latine

## Introduction. Backlash Politics in Latin America: Challenges to Sustainable Development

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### Texte intégral

- 1 The terms “backlash” and “backlash politics” are essential elements of the contemporary political landscape, particularly in relation to sustainable development.<sup>1</sup> These terms are often used to refer to organized resistance against perceived threats to traditional values, power, or status, particularly in response to progressive policies or demographic shifts. It applies to various contexts, including conservative mobilization (such as opposition to human rights, feminism, and LGBTQIA+ rights), as well as movements advocating for local autonomy, radical right populism, and the rejection of international institutions (Alter & Zürn, 2020a).
- 2 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have not been immune to criticism: they are perceived as a hegemonic global political program, constituting an increasingly questioned and even contested agenda (Munro, 2023). In various contexts, the movements against the SDGs have expressed their disagreement through a multitude of channels, ranging from citizens taking to the streets to officials at the highest level taking a stand, including presidents. Their opposition to the SDGs appears through the explicit rejection of certain institutional notions and international norms that are currently considered predominant at different levels, whether locally, nationally, regionally, or internationally (Alter & Zürn, 2020a). These movements question fundamental principles such as human rights, the importance of protecting the environment and ecosystems, and the necessity of vaccines for public health, as well as social rights such as gender parity and women’s rights. They also challenge the policies and measures implemented under the 2030 Agenda, often arguing that these initiatives compromise national sovereignty, hinder economic development, or threaten cultural and traditional values.
- 3 Until recently, scholarly interest in conservative collective action was relatively limited (Poulson *et al.*, 2014), particularly within the French-speaking academic sphere (Agrikoliansky & Collovald, 2014). However, the rising influence and power of far-right governments in numerous countries (e.g., Hungary, Italy, Poland, the United States, Brazil, Argentina and India<sup>2</sup>) have brought this phenomenon to the forefront, presenting both a challenge and a

crucial area of inquiry for researchers and practitioners across various disciplines. This shift is particularly significant for those engaged in development studies and for scholars examining political transformations, especially in Latin America, where histories of inequality, resource dependency, and institutional fragility intersect with emerging global challenges. In this region, these developments pose significant risks to climate resilience, social equity, and long-term economic sustainability, as weakened governance and growing external pressures threaten to undermine progress toward inclusive and sustainable development. Understanding the dynamics of conservative mobilization, its impact on governance, and its implications for policy and social change has become increasingly urgent.

4 The idea for this special issue emerged from an observation shared by the dossier's coordinators: the *backlash* dynamics at play in several Latin American countries—particularly concerning the SDGs—seemed to echo phenomena observed elsewhere in the world. Some political scientists speak of a cultural backlash and an authoritarian restoration (Norris, & Inglehart 2019), while others emphasize the role of emotions in politics (Alter & Zürn, 2020a, 2020b; Petersen, 2020). The ongoing processes appear to be driving a significant transformation in societies and the political field, suggesting the emergence of a changed or evolving reality. We wanted to explore these phenomena through the lens of backlash, positioning ourselves within a rapidly growing international body of literature, while also bringing in a Latin American perspective—still underrepresented in these debates.

5 Composed of five articles, this special issue contributes to understanding the diversity of backlash in Latin America by presenting case studies on various themes (gender, social policies, the 2030 Agenda, and religion), from both Central America (such as Guatemala and Costa Rica) and South America, encompassing a range of regional contexts—from Caribbean-Andean countries like Colombia to the Atlantic Southern Cone, as exemplified by Brazil. Based on diverse methodologies, from critical discourse analysis to anthropological documentary research and interviews, it sheds light on various aspects of the backlash politics: the formulation of ideas in discourses, their impact on institutions and conflict/resilience wielded within them, and the constitution of pressure groups like the evangelical church and their mobilization strategies. While traditional political science tools and sociological theories provide valuable insights, they often fail to capture the complex, transnational, and digitally mediated nature of contemporary conservative movements. This highlights the need for new analytical frameworks and interdisciplinary approaches, which is precisely another of the key contributions of this special issue.

6 This introduction is organized into four sections. The next section contextualizes certain backlash movements and policies in Latin America through three analytical entry points (ideas, interests, and institutions) that have guided the call of this special issue. The second part traces the trajectory of the backlash debate and clarifies some of the controversies surrounding it. The third part examines major empirical findings of this special issue. Finally, the conclusion highlights potential avenues for future studies.

## 1. Backlash and Changes in Latin American Politics

7 Why is it particularly important to examine Latin American cases of backlash politics? Since the early 2000s, and especially in the past decade, Latin America has witnessed the emergence and consolidation of backlash movements that have profoundly influenced sustainable development policies. Beyond the historical context of the region—marked by significant political volatility, enduring social inequalities, and considerable reliance on natural resources—these movements have reshaped policy trajectories in ways that challenge long-standing commitments to social and environmental goals. Additionally, the Latin American region saw the emergence of neoliberal, far-right governments following the “pink tide” in the 2000s (Bull, 2013), which was characterized by the rise to power of progressive governments in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Ecuador, as well as by significant progress in socio-economic development indicators. Over the past decade, far-right candidates and parties have gained influence within social organizations and legislative institutions in several countries and have even risen to executive power in some cases. This trend can be seen in the rise of figures like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-2022), whose administration was marked by nationalist and authoritarianism rhetoric and strong ties to

some sectors of evangelical movements. In Argentina, Javier Milei (elected president in 2023) has gained prominence with a radical libertarian discourse that includes anti-establishment and anti-leftist positions. Similarly, in countries like Chile (José Antonio Kast and the Republican Party), Colombia (increased parliamentary presence of far-right sectors) and Peru (with parties such as Renovación Popular), far-right parties and politicians have expanded their presence in congress and public debates, often pushing back against progressive reforms and mobilizing conservative segments of society. These political movements are united by a set of core beliefs, including the defense of traditional identities, the promotion of dominant masculinities, and the endorsement of racialized forms of supremacy. They typically advocate for policies that weaken the welfare state, roll back progress on gender equality, and erode key democratic principles. Additionally, these movements often display climate scepticism, reject scientific evidence, advocate for widespread gun ownership, and show disregard for human rights.

- 8 While backlash movements have emerged worldwide in various forms, their rapid consolidation in recent years raises important questions about their scale, strength, drivers and effects. With these aspect in mind, the opening section situates the discussion within the Latin American context, using three analytical entry points—ideas, interests, and institutions: the “three I’s” framework proposed by Palier and Surel (2005)—which, far from being rigid or isolated, serve as starting points for engaging discussions on backlash politics and movements. Thus, three guiding questions help to frame the analysis of backlash dynamics: How do backlash actors challenge dominant ideas, values, and SDGs? How does backlash become part of formal institutions and public policies? How do backlash movements gain support, build alliances, access resources and define strategies? Our goal is to highlight how these backlash actors not only react against perceived threats to traditional structures and values but also actively reshape governance, policymaking, and public perception in Latin America.

## 1.1. Conservative Agendas: Reframing and Contesting Sustainable Development Discourses

- 9 An analytical approach involves examining the dominant discourses surrounding the shared ideas, principles contested by conservative movements. In this context, it is essential to analyse the alternative agendas and programs they advocate, including the critical elements drawn from both historical legacies and forward-looking visions that these groups champion. While the 2030 Agenda presents a clearly articulated set of goals that are both well-defined and widely disseminated, the question arises: how is the so-called anti-2030 Agenda conceptualized, constructed, and expressed in political and social discourse? One striking example of an alternative backlash proposal is found in agroecology, which highlights the multifaceted setbacks faced by progressive initiatives in rural areas. In 2018-2019, the criticism levelled at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) for its support of agroecology—seen by its opponents as an ineffective response to global food challenges—was part of a more global reaction questioning the agroecological vision promoted by peasant movements for the transformation of food systems. On the contrary, its critics defended a “narrow view of science and knowledge to push for technology-driven food systems development, digitalization and financialization” (Canfield *et al.*, 2021).
- 10 Moreover, backlash movements have not only proposed alternative visions, but have also gained momentum and legitimacy, allowing them to enter and reshape the mainstream political discourse. This analysis involves investigating how these movements have redefined alternative sustainable development frameworks by integrating elements of backlash. Indeed, international and regional human rights systems appear increasingly threatened by anti-rights actors, seeking to “undermine rights related to gender and sexuality through misleading references to religion, culture, tradition and state sovereignty” (Shameem, 2017). These movements have increasingly adopted the language of rights and modernity from a different, reversed perspective to suggest the emancipatory nature of recovering local values and priorities (Bob, 2019; Snyder, 2020). For example, Corredor (2021) shows how people opposed to the gender perspective and the 2016 peace agreement in Colombia used the “human rights rhetoric to establish an alternative present and promote an imagined future rooted in exclusion and repression.”
- 11 In this special issue, Gustavo Fuchs analyses the ideas and discourses opposing Agenda 2030 and international cooperation in the speeches of presidential candidates in Costa

Rica (2022) and Guatemala (2023). Although this rhetoric is present in right-wing parties in both countries, Fuchs observes that the frequency of mentions against Agenda 2030, the UN, sustainable development, and globalization varies significantly between the two cases. This difference reflects the degree of both vertical and horizontal integration of the debate within society, encompassing a wide range of actors—from international organizations such as the UN to the interactions between governmental and non-governmental actors within individual countries. In both contexts, discourses opposing Agenda 2030 link it to “gender ideology”, “globalism”—contrasted with nationalism—and conspiracy theories. Marcela Donini de Lemos, also featured in this special issue, focused on the speeches of various actors, particularly far-right figures within the Brazilian executive and legislature, who express opposition to Agenda 2030 and its associated elements. Marcela Donini de Lemos specifically examines the speeches of Brazilian Presidents from 2015 to 2024 at the annual UN General Assembly, as well as the speeches of state officials, federal deputies, and senators who oppose Agenda 2030. This includes a focus on conservative and far-right actors, agribusiness representatives, and members of the Ruralist Caucus of the Brazilian National Congress—a powerful parliamentary group that defends the interests of large landowners, industrial agriculture, and extractive industries, often in opposition to environmental regulations and Indigenous rights.

## 1.2. Institutionalizing the Backlash: Changes in Norms and Politics

- 12 The second critical dimension explored in this introduction concerns the tensions and transformations in institutional rules and norms that facilitate the institutionalization of backlash ideologies, allowing them to gain legitimacy and influence. How backlash becomes embedded in formal institutions and public policy? Backlash politics, through its non-compliance with the usual processes and norms of opposition in democracies, profoundly calls into question the legitimacy of political action (Alter & Zurn, 2020a; Madsen *et al.*, 2018; Patashnik, 2019), generating particularly intense and volatile grievances (Patterson, 2023). Here, legitimacy hinges on recognition of political decisions as valid when they follow established procedures—such as parliamentary debate and judicial oversight—and uphold democratic principles like pluralism, minority rights, and the rule of law. In the Latin American context, backlash politics is fuelled not only by widespread distrust in political elites and democratic institutions, as seen in contested electoral outcomes in Brazil, Bolivia, El Salvador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela, but also by broader anti-system sentiments encapsulated in popular slogans like “*¡Que se vayan todos!*” (“They all must go!”). Many backlash dynamics involve rejecting institutions perceived as “corrupt” and praising anti-establishment leaders who present themselves as transparent and authentic alternatives to the political status quo.
- 13 In this sense, a crucial question is how backlash actors strive to embed backlash politics within institutions to ensure its longevity. The analysis extends beyond social movements to examine how these actors strategically occupy specific political and institutional spaces, prioritizing certain arenas—such as legislative bodies or media platforms—and operate across different scales, from local boards to international organizations, to exert influence. Which institutional arrangements are subject to renegotiation in ways that enable profound transformations in public policies, affecting both their form and their function? Consequently, the backlash may result in either gradual institutional changes or abrupt ruptures. Marcela Donini de Lemos highlights the institutional activism of executive and legislative actors in Brazil who are advancing reactionary policies against the 2030 Agenda and its associated elements, such as COP30 and pesticide regulation. These efforts aim to protect previously secured gains and privileges, particularly those benefiting the agribusiness and extractive industries. The article notes that backlash movements linked to the ultra-right manifest in various political configurations within the executive branch, sometimes adopting a more active and offensive stance, and at other times taking a more reactive and defensive position. These movements promote their values and act against the progressive agenda, often opposing sustainable land management and efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- 14 While backlash politics is not solely reactive—as we will examine further below—it can be strategically activated during politically opportune moments, often harnessing symbolic power to galvanize support and secure electoral advantage. A notable feature of the new neoconservative political momentum is the establishment of new political parties that respond

to traditional parties' ambiguous positions on sexual morality (Morán Faúndes & Peñas Defago, 2020). One example is José Antonio Kast, in Chile, who left the Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) to found the Republican Party, which promotes a strong moral agenda. Similar movements have also emerged in Colombia, Argentina, and Ecuador (Morán Faúndes & Peñas Defago, 2020). It is also important to note the feedback effect, that is, how policies influence other policies (Pierson, 1993). This effect is particularly evident in sustainability policies when they face local resistance, as in the case of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) dynamics—where communities oppose projects they perceive as harmful to their local environment, health, or way of life, even when such projects are framed as serving the broader public good. Such resistance can affect policies in various areas such as climate (Patterson, 2023; Vihma *et al.*, 2021), migration (Alesina & Tabellini, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2023), or the participation of women (Kjelsrud & Sjurgard, 2022). Taking into account the feedback effect of public policies implies simultaneously considering the unintended consequences and the inertia effects of these policies (Spire, 2017), making it possible to uncover the influence of interest groups and (non-)state actors. Denise do Carmo Direito's article in this special issue highlights a crucial point: it examines how the rise of a far-right government in Brazil has contributed to the dismantling of social policies, raising concerns about a return to conditions in which social assistance programs are deprived of funding, reduced in scope, and disconnected from community participation. Through her analysis of the National Council of Social Assistance (NCSA)—a federal body composed of a balanced mix of governmental actors (such as representatives from federal ministries like the Ministry of Social Development and other public institutions responsible for implementing and overseeing social programs) and non-governmental actors (including social assistance professionals, user associations, and academic institutions)—Denise do Carmo Direito provides important insights into the institutional resilience of participatory mechanisms. She argues that public policies incorporating multisectoral deliberative mechanisms, such as participatory councils, are likely to be only partially dismantled, so long as the composition and perspectives of both state and non-state actors involved in the process remain intact.

### 1.3. The Strategies and Interests of Backlash Actors

- 15 The third and final critical dimension discussed in the articles of the special issue is the strategies and tactics employed to expand the support base of backlash movements, strengthen their presence in public discourse, and secure greater political and institutional power. How backlash movements mobilize support, alliances, and resources? A key issue to examine is the identification of backlash actors and the network of connections that support and link them. Equally important is the analysis of the political divisions and alliances that defend reactionary policies. According to Della Porta (2020), these conservative movements benefit from diverse class coalitions, which include not only economic elites but also segments of what was once considered the working class. It is essential to investigate the strategies they employ, the interests at stake, and the roles of bureaucracies, as well as of “intermediaries” and “entrepreneurs” involved in shaping and channelling these agendas. Denise do Carmo Direito examines the dismantling of social policies under the Bolsonaro government in Brazil, highlighting how rollback efforts and various forms of policy deconstruction have been driven by two key processes. First, the strategic realignment of the bureaucracy to conform with the interests of political actors, which gradually facilitated the weakening of institutional structures. Second, the adoption of less visible but more insidious dismantling strategies—such as shifting decision-making authority from participatory collegiate bodies to centralized government control—has been further exacerbated by civil society's difficulties in monitoring, interpreting, and mobilizing effective resistance.
- 16 From another perspective, a critical examination should investigate the financial mechanisms and material resources that facilitate and sustain backlash mobilization. This raises important questions regarding development, such as the use of foreign aid as leverage in situations involving human rights violations (Dasandi & Erez, 2023). This is particularly relevant in light of Donald Trump's new mandate in the United States, which has already signalled significant cuts to international aid and a broader effort to instrumentalize backlash narratives. These narratives are not only being used to justify domestic rollbacks in areas such as gender rights, climate action, and public education, but also to reshape global development priorities. Additionally, it is important to consider media and digital platforms as strategic



arenas for backlash phenomena, facilitating not only the emergence and mobilization of grassroots actors but also amplifying the influence of political leaders. In this context, Allan Santos in this special issue demonstrates—through the analysis of documentary sources and posts on Bolsonaro’s official Facebook page between 2010 and 2018—that his discourse evolved from initial attacks on educational programs to the official launch of his presidential campaign, gaining national prominence in the process. Building on these initial insights, the next section delves into the theoretical definitions of backlash and examines the emerging debates in the literature.

## 2. Backlash Politics: Definitions, Debates, and Dilemmas

17 In this part, we present key discussions that question common assumptions about backlash politics, drawing on examples from both within and beyond the special issue. First, it is essential to move beyond simplified explanations that portray backlash actors merely as reactive forces responding to specific events—particularly the often repeated idea that progressive change has gone “too far, too fast”—or as phenomena solely linked to the rise of the far right. Such interpretations risk oversimplifying the complexity of these movements. Instead, we argue that backlash actors advance distinct political agendas underpinned by their own internal logics and strategic visions. Drawing on insights from Latin American case studies, we seek to challenge the idea that these movements and policies are exclusively “retrograde”, defined by regression or social decline. While they often mobilize nostalgic references to an idealized past, they also articulate alternative future-oriented projects, pointing to the need for a more nuanced understanding of their political imaginaries and aspirations. In this sense, backlash politics should be understood not only as a force of resistance but also as a project of reconfiguration.

18 While backlash politics has surged in prominence in recent years, the debate itself is far from new. Its roots can be traced back to the 1970s, it gained widespread recognition in the 1990s, and it developed a robust conceptual framework throughout the 2000s—with significant evolution occurring particularly since 2020 (Alter & Zürn, 2020a, 2020b; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008; Thomas, 2008; Faludi, 1991; Lipset & Raabs, 1970). Moreover, discussions on backlash movements span various research fields and disciplines, including anthropology, communication, law, policy studies, and sociology (Sosa, 2020; Alter & Zürn, 2020a, 2020b; Vinjamuri, 2017; Krämer, 2017; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). Three seminal studies are frequently cited as precursors to the broader theoretical discourse on backlash politics. First, Lipset and Raab’s book (1970), *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970*, focuses on political and ideological positioning, conceptualizing backlash politics as a form of right-wing extremism that emerges in response to perceived losses of power and status amid societal changes. Second, Faludi’s (1991) *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* examines gender issues, portraying backlash as a reaction aimed at reversing the hard-won gains of the feminist movement. Third, the 2008 “Critical Perspectives” section of the journal *Gender and Politics* was dedicated to exploring the dynamics of gender backlash. It builds on Faludi’s thesis by situating backlash within broader political and global contexts, offering a range of scholarly perspectives on its causes, manifestations, and implications.

19 In that special issue, the article by Mansbridge and Shames (2008), “Toward a Theory of Backlash: Dynamic Resistance and the Central Role of Power”, stands out for its effort to develop a non-ideological definition of backlash. The authors define backlash as a reaction characterized by coercive power dynamics, aimed at partially or fully restoring a group’s previous ability to convert preferences or interests into outcomes. In essence, backlash is a process in which one group resists another’s attempt to enact change, seeking to reassert or preserve a former power equilibrium. By deliberately detaching the concept from ideological labels—such as conservative or progressive—Mansbridge and Shames provide a neutral framework that enhances the analytical utility of the term. This definition facilitates its application across various social and political contexts, encompassing resistance movements from both dominant and subordinate groups. For example, it includes conservative religious communities opposing cultural shifts, as well as minority groups reacting to perceived threats from other marginalized populations. Despite their attempt at a neutral conceptualization, the

authors acknowledge an asymmetry in how backlash manifests across the political spectrum. They note that “the left, in general, initiates more changes to the status quo than the right (although, recently, the radical right and the libertarian right have much in common with the left in this sense)” (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008: 633). This suggests that while backlash politics is not inherently tied to any specific ideological orientation, it has historically been more frequently associated with right-wing and far-right movements seeking to resist progressive social, political, and economic transformations. Nonetheless, their argument also opens the door to considering instances where actors from different ideological backgrounds, including libertarian and radical right factions, engage in backlash dynamics under certain conditions—specifically when they perceive a loss of power as capacity (e.g., libertarians resisting COVID-19 mandates or gun control laws; radical right groups reacting to immigration policies, affirmative action, or LGBTQIA+ rights expansions). Thus, backlash politics emerges as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by shifting power structures and ideological contestations.

20 One of the most notable contributions to recent literature on the topic is the special issue “Backlash Politics in Comparison”, edited by Karen J. Alter and Michael Zürn in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2020). The authors conceptualize backlash as a subcategory of contentious politics, one of great contemporary relevance, capable of driving significant transformations in societies and political systems. According to Alter and Zürn (2020a, 2020b), backlash politics is characterized by three key elements. First, it pursues a retrograde goal, aiming to restore a past social condition—whether real or imagined—distinguishing it from a purely regressive movement, which seeks to return to a less developed state or undo civilizational advancements (though these elements may also be present). Second, it employs extraordinary goals and tactics that challenge dominant narratives regarding political legitimacy, visions of a better world, and the means to achieve and sustain such a world. These efforts often involve ambitious social reconfigurations and bold policy transformations. Third, backlash movements actively work to integrate their discourse into public debate, shaping at least a semi-independent public sphere. This discursive shift creates openings for backlash movements to gain visibility and advance policies aligned with their agenda. Alter and Zürn argue that backlash politics frequently relies on accelerating factors such as nostalgia, emotional appeals, the breaking of taboos, and institutional restructuring—dynamics that can make its effects unpredictable, contagious, transformative, and enduring.

21 Embedded within these conceptual developments, however, are at least three key controversies that help delineate the concept of backlash politics. The first concerns the normative framing of backlash, which is often linked to conservative and far-right movements. The second relates to the notion that backlash inherently seeks a return to a past condition, raising questions about whether all resistance to change qualifies as backlash. The third debate centres on whether backlash is always a response to change that is perceived as too rapid or too profound, or if it can emerge under other circumstances.

## 2.1. Towards a Non-Ideological Understanding of Backlash Politics?

22 Backlash politics has traditionally been associated with conservative movements and right-wing or ultra-right actions—a viewpoint dating back to early debates (Lipset & Raab, 1970). Mansbridge and Shames (2008) note that backlash is frequently portrayed as a conservative reaction to social change or progressive policies. However, we endorse the efforts of Mansbridge and Shames (2008) and Alter and Zürn (2020a) to construct a more neutral, normative definition, for two key reasons. First, although most studies (including all the articles in this special issue) tend to link backlash politics with right-wing governments (Della Porta, 2020), there are notable cases where societies with socialist legacies or left-wing populist governments also display backlash dynamics as they attempt to revert to earlier conditions or challenge democratic advancements. In Latin America, for example, opposition to what is labelled as “gender ideology” can also originate from left-wing parties, as seen in the emblematic cases of former presidents Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in Mexico, and Rafael Correa, in Ecuador. Second, what constitutes a progressive movement is inherently tied to the social constructs, values, principles, and practices shared by a community, which in turn shape political processes and the exercise of authority. As Alter and Zürn (2020b: 742) observe, these

constructs encompass notions of what is considered good and legitimate, ultimately determining whether a goal is classified as regressive, progressive, or otherwise.

- 23 Building on these elements, we assume a non-ideological interpretation of backlash politics, defining it as a reaction to significant shifts in social conditions and power relations, independent of any value judgments about the changes themselves or the responses they provoke (Alter & Zürn, 2020a; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). As Alter and Zürn (2020b: 742) emphasize: “The analysis of the objectives of backlash movements and their opponents, as well as the results of backlash policies, should be based on normative theories that are independent of the definition of backlash policies.” This approach allows for a broader and more flexible examination of backlash movements and policies across different political and social contexts, historical periods, and levels of analysis, whether local, regional, national, or international. By decoupling backlash from any specific ideological framework, this perspective accommodates a range of interpretations, regardless of the political spectrum or prevailing societal values regarding what is considered good or bad, desirable or undesirable.

## 2.2. Backlash Politics and the Past-Future Continuum

- 24 A second key controversy in the debate on backlash politics concerns its orientation toward the past. As discussed earlier, Alter and Zürn (2020a, 2020b) define backlash movements and policies as backward-looking forces seeking to restore previous social conditions and power relations—though these objectives may not always be explicitly stated in public discourse. Encarnación (2020) supports this interpretation, arguing that backlash movements against LGBTQIA+ rights, often driven by resentment over perceived status loss, aim to revert society to a time when homosexuality was condemned as a sin, if not a crime, and heterosexuality was upheld as the universal norm. According to Alter and Zürn (2020b: 742), “without this retrograde directionality, backlash politics would be indistinguishable from many contentious politics initiated by social movements.”
- 25 However, as Snyder (2020: 646) highlights, backlash is often more accurately described as a “back to the future” phenomenon. Rather than simply reverting to the past, these movements embrace a version of modernization that integrates core societal values with contemporary political and economic realities. In other words, they seek to preserve distinctive cultural and social features while modernizing the technologies of production and power. In Latin America, for instance, climate-sceptical sectors have gained increasing visibility by promoting a vision of agricultural modernization that embraces advanced technologies such as genetically modified crops, precision farming, and agribusiness expansion. These actors often frame their agenda as a defence of national sovereignty and rural traditions, even as they adopt cutting-edge tools to boost productivity and global competitiveness. This illustrates how backlash movements can simultaneously reject certain international norms while strategically embracing others—redefining the meaning of “progress” in line with their political and cultural priorities.
- 26 This is evident in how backlash movements strategically adopt contemporary rhetoric to attract supporters and disorient opponents while leveraging cutting-edge mobilization tools (Snyder, 2020; Alter & Zürn, 2020b). The widespread use of social media and digital platforms, as observed in several articles in this special issue and other studies (Nadal, 2024; Heiss & Matthes, 2020; Krämer, 2017), underscores how these movements weaponize modern communication technologies to amplify their agendas. The article by Allan Santos particularly illustrates this point in this special issue. Della Porta (2020) further challenges the idea that backlash politics is purely rooted in nostalgia. Instead, she argues that these movements, actions, and policies bridge the past with a vision of the future. Traditional ideological frames are reconfigured to address contemporary concerns, as seen in European and American anti-globalization movements that adapt far-right economic discourses to the neoliberal era by advocating for welfare chauvinism—reserving social benefits exclusively for native populations (Della Porta, 2020). An example of this modernity among actors pursuing retrograde goals—framed as a return to the past—can be seen in the attacks on gender education in Latin American schools, as demonstrated by Tomazini. Analyzing the cases of Peru, Brazil, and Costa Rica, Tomazini (2025) argues that movements—such as *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* (“Don’t Mess with My Children”) in Peru, and *Escola Sem Partido* (Nonpartisan School Movement) in Brazil—fuse nostalgic visions of a lost, imagined past with ambitious calls for a disciplined, modern society. Despite internal contradictions, there is a “conservative-modernization” alliance underway (Apple, 2001, 2006): a coalition of anti-gender actors



seeking to promote international competitiveness and educational control by advocating privatization (neoliberals), defending traditional standards (neoconservatives), and promoting faith and family values in schools (religious conservatives) (Tomazini, 2025).

## 2.3. Too Far and Too Fast?

- 27 The third controversy revolves around whether backlash arises as a response to changes or power shifts perceived as too rapid or too profound. As Mansbridge and Shames (2008) argue, intense backlash movements tend to emerge—or be significantly exacerbated—when proponents of change (i) push further and faster than society at large is willing to go, and (ii) fail to acknowledge the deeper concerns of their opponents or the general public. In other words, “going so far and so fast often provokes intense backlash movements” (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008: 628). However, beyond the challenge of defining what constitutes “going too far and too fast”, Alter and Zürn (2020a) and Encarnación (2020) highlight that not all rapid social changes trigger backlash, and in some cases, backlash movements emerge even in the absence of significant change. In analysing Latin America, Encarnación (2020: 654) illustrates, “a gay rights backlash can take place even in the absence of gay rights”.
- 28 This perspective is particularly relevant when considering cases where backlash movements arise long after the changes they ostensibly resist. For instance, Brazil’s re-democratization occurred in the mid-1980s, yet anti-democratic and reactionary movements advocating for a return to dictatorship only gained traction in the second decade of the 2000s. Similarly, the examples analysed in this special issue by Gustavo Fuchs, for Guatemala, and Marcela Donini de Lemos, for Brazil, appear to support this argument. Their findings suggest that opposition to the 2030 Agenda gained momentum in both countries even before it had enacted substantive changes or generated significant tensions, underscoring how backlash can precede or operate independently of actual policy shifts.
- 29 In various contexts, backlash movements may emerge pre-emptively as a means of blocking potential future demands and reforms (Paternotte, 2021). These movements and their associated policies can also be strategically mobilized to achieve political gains, whether in electoral campaigns—to align with voters’ expectations—or in key political decisions, such as the use of the anti-gender agenda to oppose the Peace Agreement in Colombia, a case highlighted by Paternotte (2021) and documented by the Sebastian Acevedo Ojeda’s article in this special issue (Documents section). These examples suggest that additional factors must be considered to explain why “structural dissatisfactions only sometimes crystallize into backlash politics” (Alter & Zürn, 2020a: 574). In this sense, a deeper analysis of the political economy—including the resources mobilized and their origins—as well as the political opportunities that enable backlash movements—such as shifts in governance, strategic alliances, and negotiated compromises—can provide further insights (Della Porta, 2020). In this special issue, Allan Santos explores how opposition to sexual rights promotion is not merely an attempt to reinstate past norms but rather a move toward constructing a new political order defined by anti-democratic truth politics and anti-intellectualism. These so-called truths reject debate, complexity, and expert knowledge—which is where the “anti-intellectualism” comes in. In this context, denying sexual rights becomes a symbolic act that reinforces authoritarian control, suppresses dissent, and delegitimizes critical thinking—hallmarks of anti-democratic regimes. To conclude this section, it is important to set aside analyses that, for example, frame denialist positions as irrational or illogical, and instead consider them as positions that seek to construct and engage in battles over values, meanings, and political stakes (Szwako, 2023).

## 3. Backlash Politics: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Findings

- 30 The special issue offers both theoretical and empirical insights that engage in dialogue with broader bodies of literature on democracy and populism, contentious politics, social movements, public action sociology, media studies, and related fields. They also enrich existing debates by incorporating perspectives from the Global South, highlighting how Latin American experiences both resonate with and challenge dominant theoretical frameworks

developed in Euro-American contexts. The contributions of the special issue are fourfold, as follows.

### 3.1. Backlash Politics and Policy Dismantling: Points of Convergence and Divergence

- 31 One important contribution of this special issue is its analysis of the relationship between backlash politics and the dismantling of public policies. This discussion is particularly present in the work of Denise do Carmo Direito and is central to various studies on the Brazilian context, especially during President Bolsonaro's administration (Quintela, 2023; Lotta *et al.*, 2023; Sá e Silva, 2022). While these two processes often intersect, they remain distinct. Bauer and Knill (2012: 35) define policy dismantling as "a change of a direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic nature that can reduce the number of policies in a particular area, reduce the number of instruments used or reduce their intensity". The extent of dismantling depends on the interests of political actors, institutional opportunities, and constraints. Various strategies may be employed, including the elimination of policies (active dismantling), the reduction of their scope or intensity (dismantling by default), the transfer of responsibilities to other actors or governance levels (leading to their weakening—dismantling by arena shifting), or their delegitimization through discursive strategies (dismantling by symbolic action) (Bauer & Knill, 2012).
- 32 Although backlash movements and policies generally involve processes or attempts to dismantle public policies, the former concern broader changes. Backlash movements don't just question public policies; they stress the principles, goals, procedures and practices within which political processes and the exercise of political authority take place (Alter & Zürn, 2020a). It is a reaction that seeks to return to a real or imagined previous social condition or power relations, "not merely the reversal of a public policy or action" (Alter & Zürn, 2020a: 566). While dismantling processes can be directed at a policy and mobilize strategies with low visibility (Bauer & Knill, 2012), generally backlash movements and policies challenge actions and programs in an area or even in the organization and political system in general (e.g. deconstruction of democracy, criticism of globalism, etc.), mobilizing strategies and discourses with high visibility, in order to garner greater support and become a common element in discourse and public life.
- 33 Backlash policies can arise from socio-economic changes that create groups of perceived "losers" who regret their previous economic conditions, socio-cultural changes that challenge old cultural patterns and ways of life, and political changes that alter power relations and the functioning of public institutions. These factors can manifest as a social reversal, a fundamental change, or no political change at all (Alter & Zürn, 2020a, 2020b). When backlash is directly linked to a specific public policy, it manifests as a strong and sudden negative reaction from various actors who seek to reverse the policy through extraordinary means. Consequently, policy dismantling can occur as a result of these backlash dynamics. Thus, dismantling can represent the institutionalization of backlash ideas and discourses into changes in public policy such as rolling back policies related to the green transition or those aimed at more effectively taxing fossil fuels. Although the same elements may cause backlash politics and policy dismantling, such dismantling is the result of backlash dynamics and policymakers' interests, ideas, and strategies (Bauer & Knill, 2012). A crucial task within backlash studies is to distinguish between the process of policy dismantling and the dynamics of political backlash, in order to understand how backlash politics operates within institutional frameworks and how ideological resistance leads to policy change.

### 3.2. Institutional Activism and Backlash Politics: Contention within the State

- 34 The second contribution of this dossier lies in bridging the debates on backlash policies and institutional activism, as explored in Marcela Donini de Lemos's article. The concept of institutional activism originates from social movement theories and was initially developed to examine the various ways state and society interact, by focusing on social movement actors operating within government structures (Cayres, 2017; Santoro & McGuire, 1997). From this perspective, activists who entered government institutions sought to advance the

institutionalization of political agendas and projects aligned with social movements (Cayres, 2017; Abers & Tatagiba, 2015).

Over time, as scholars have engaged more deeply with studies on government bureaucracy, the scope of institutional activism has expanded beyond actors directly tied to social movements. Some researchers began analysing the activism of bureaucrats independently of their affiliations with social movements, recognizing their agency within state institutions (Abers, 2021; Ferreira, 2016; Ferreira & Lotta, 2016; Abers, 2015; Pettinicchio, 2012).

According to Abers (2015: 148), institutional activism refers to efforts by individuals within state institutions to advance political or social projects they perceive as serving the public or collective good. Research in this field explores how actors in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches actively advocate for and mobilize around contentious causes, shaping policy and institutional change (Abers, 2021; Pereira, 2020; Zanolli, 2019; Ferreira, 2016; Cayres, 2015; Abers, 2015). Institutional activists work to either transform or sustain programs and initiatives, navigating institutional constraints while leveraging the margins of opportunity available to them. As Abers (2021) explains that institutional activism is shaped by the tension that Olsson (2016) describes as *institutional subversion*—a dynamic interplay between internal constraints and strategic opportunities. Although government actors operate within hierarchical systems that limit dissent, they also have access to powerful instruments—such as official protocols—that can be used to advance a cause (Abers, 2021).

Initially focused on the institutional activism of progressive bureaucrats, this literature is beginning to analyse conservative institutional activism, linked to the right and the extreme right (Biroli *et al.*, 2024; Nascimento, 2022), and the contentious relationships established between progressive activists and activists who react from retrograde objectives (Pereira *et al.*, 2023; Pereira, 2020). In fact, the dialogue between the literatures on backlash and institutional activism seems very promising to us, insofar as it allows us to unveil the role of certain actors (individual and collective) who act, at the interface of state and society, in contentious causes. This dialogue allows us to explore, from a relational and comparative perspective, the constraints, resources and different strategies/tactics mobilized by institutional activists situated on both sides of the confrontation: movements and counter-movements without disregarding the tensions and rivalries that animate each camp (Paternotte, 2021). Following Della Porta (2020, this dialogue—and also with social movement literature more broadly—helps to make explicit and visible the political resources and opportunities exploited by backlash movements (and their activists) within a network of complex political interactions and processes.

### 3.3. Disinformation, Conspiracy, and Fake News

Building on Alter and Zürn's (2020a, 2020b) argument that backlash movements prioritize shaping public discourse as a key political objective, this special issue makes a third contribution by highlighting the relationship between backlash politics, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news. This theme is explored in at least three articles in this dossier (Gustavo Fuchs, Allan Santos, and Sebastian Acevedo Ojeda, Documents section). The cases analysed here, along with other studies (Lawson, 2024), demonstrate that disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news play a crucial role in backlash movements and policies. While not always present in every backlash action, these discursive tactics help define allies, construct worldviews, and shape political mobilization.

As Lewin (2021) explains, discourse does more than convey ideas; it determines which ideas gain traction, who is recognized as a legitimate political actor, and what is accepted as truth or political possibility. Discourse does not just describe the world; it actively shapes and defines it. When certain narratives gain momentum and align with others, they become normalized, reinforcing dominant perspectives through a process that produces power effects and serves as a tool of control and discipline (Lewin, 2021; Foucault, 1986).

In this sense, discourse serves as both a catalyst for political change (Schmidt, 2008) and a tool for resisting it. Backlash actors strategically use discourse—whether through misinformation, ideological narratives, or media manipulation—to advance their agendas, shape public opinion, and counter progressive transformations.

One defining feature of populist governments—particularly those on the far right—is their tendency to fuel backlash movements against gender rights, feminism, migration, climate change, and other causes (Tumber & Waisbord 2021). Media outlets and digital platforms are

thus used to disseminate conspiracy theories, blatant falsehoods, fake news, and distorted “alternative facts”. Populism can be understood not as a fixed ideology, but as a political logic that constructs society through binary oppositions, dividing “the people” from “the elites” (Laclau, 2005). Populist leaders strategically blend truth with disinformation to exploit existing beliefs, prejudices, and identities, thereby consolidating public support and fostering a sense of in-group community. According to Tumber and Waisbord (2021), this deliberate blurring of fact and fiction—amplified through saturated public discourse—serves as a key mechanism for political survival and self-legitimation. By undermining shared frameworks for verifying truth, populism fosters an epistemological divide in which truth is no longer collectively established but becomes the exclusive domain of the leader and their followers. In the Latin American context, religion plays a crucial role in the elective affinity between populism and post-truth, reinforcing polarizing narratives (Waisbord, 2018). In this special issue Documents section, Sebastian Acevedo Ojeda draws on Quesada (2019) to illustrate how evangelical leaders mobilize popular support through a spiritual warfare narrative that frames issues such as feminism, sexual and reproductive rights, and “castrochavismo” as “modern demons.” In Venezuela, *Chavismo* serves as a prime example, where an epic narrative persisted despite facts contradicting its idealized revolutionary rhetoric (Waisbord, 2018). In this binary worldview, political identity shapes truth—populists embrace the “truths” of their allies while dismissing opponents as liars. Rather than relying on demonstrable facts or scientific rigor, populism elevates “popular” beliefs, with loyalty to the leader often serving as the ultimate measure of what is considered true (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021: 21).

- 42 Beyond the strategies employed by populist leaders, Lewin (2021) examines how backlash movements—particularly anti-feminist and anti-queer movements—gain traction by capturing, distorting, and eroding progressive discourses to serve far-right agendas. According to him, these movements re-signify discourses by framing theoretical debates on gender as ideological propaganda, displace narratives by shifting the focus from women’s abortion rights to foetal rights and maternal bonds, and appropriate symbols and rhetoric, as seen in *La Ola Celeste* (“The Light Blue Wave”), a conservative response to Argentina’s *La Marea Verde* pro-choice movement. *La Ola Celeste* has emerged as a mobilization that champions the “right to life” from conception. It employs emotive imagery of unborn children, religious symbolism, and nationalist language to oppose abortion rights. The movement strategically mirrors the tactics and aesthetics of feminist activism—such as the use of *pañuelos* (“handkerchiefs” as protest symbols)—while promoting a deeply conservative agenda, inspiring similar initiatives across Latin America. In this special issue (Documents section), Sebastian Acevedo Ojeda’s article examines the political achievements and growing influence of evangelical actors aligned with the pro-life movement in Colombia. Also in this special issue, Allan Santos analyses how then-presidential candidate Bolsonaro weaponized an image of a child at a Gay Pride Parade to incite opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights policies. These types of images circulated widely on social media and were used to portray LGBTQIA+ communities as a threat to children and traditional family values. This reinforced a broader narrative framing progressive social agendas as dangerous and immoral. Such strategies played a key role in mobilizing conservative and religious voters during the 2018 presidential campaign, as well as in subsequent campaigns. These tactics suggest that disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news function as powerful accelerators of backlash movements, reinforcing “us versus them” divisions and sustaining confrontations between agents of change and those resisting it (Petersen, 2020).

### 3.4. Thematic Insights

- 43 Beyond contributing to recent theoretical discussions on backlash, the articles in this special issue address broader themes such as crises and social conflict through the analytical lens of different types of actors—religious groups like evangelical churches (Sebastian Acevedo Ojeda, Documents section), state and non-state actors (Denise do Carmo Direito), and elected officials (Allan Santos, Marcela Donini de Lemos, Gustavo Fuchs). A wide range of thematic areas is also covered, including social issues (welfare programs), environmental struggles (pesticide deregulation and opposition to COP30), and broader societal challenges related to gender, international governance, rights, and democracy.
- 44 While the existing literature provides extensive coverage of backlash against gender and LGBTQIA+ rights (examined in the Documents section of this dossier by Sebastian Acevedo



Ojeda in Colombia, and Allan Santos in Brazil) these issues continue to be central points of contention in political debates. In Latin America, issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and gender education have increasingly shaped political cleavages, particularly in the last decade, becoming central to everyday political debates (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020). Some studies highlight the electoral significance of the backlash against gender equality programs in Latin America. This significance arises not only from the region's highly varied, younger, and more fragmented party systems compared to other parts of the world but also from the substantially weaker party identification (Smith & Boas, 2024). The increasing gender backlash appears to resonate with cultural divisions that have proven to be electorally effective in Latin America (Smith & Boas, 2024).

45     Going onto less researched territories, backlash against environmental policies—such as those addressing climate change (Vihma *et al.*, 2021; Patterson, 2023)—as well as initiatives aimed at reducing inequality and poverty, is also explored in this dossier. Two articles focus specifically on reactions to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Gustavo Fuchs analyses this phenomenon in Costa Rica and Guatemala, while Marcela Donini de Lemos examines it in the Brazilian context. Their work highlights the resistance to international sustainability agendas and the challenges of aligning domestic policies with global objectives. These reactions can be understood as a specific form of backlash against globalization, particularly from countries in the Global South (Walter, 2021). Gustavo Fuchs' article emphasizes that opposition narratives to the 2030 Agenda are closely intertwined with nationalism, cultural issues, and circulating conspiracy theories. A key challenge is analysing how various factors—such as cultural and institutional influences and the transnational spread of conspiratorial ideas—shape these narratives. Disentangling these elements and developing a coherent analytical framework presents significant methodological challenges.

46     In sum, this special issue brings together a range of Latin American case studies that challenge sustainable development—whether framed as opposition to “globalist” agendas, associated with international institutions and transnational governance; “feminist” agendas, linked to gender equality and women's rights policies; “woke” agendas, referring to progressive stances on race, gender, and social justice; and “imperialist” agendas, perceived as the imposition of foreign values or interests. We aim to contribute to a comparative perspective on Latin America that highlights regional particularities while also challenging assumptions of exceptionalism. In doing so, the articles in this special issue provide a basis for future research on how these oppositional narratives may extend beyond the region, hopefully offering insights into future research on their transnational circulation, adaptation, and broader political impact.

## Conclusion: New Avenues for Research Agenda on Backlash Politics

47     Although the conceptual clarifications and the theoretical and empirical contributions emerging from this special issue have been significant, we encourage the continuation of studies and research on backlash policies and movements. In this regard, the analytical framework based on the three I's (ideas, interests, and institutions) that guided the call for this special issue offers valuable insights for deeper explorations and comparative studies. This approach allows for the identification of both the similarities and the specificities in the configuration of actors and their alliances, as well as their ideas, values, discourses, and the institutional tensions they provoke, both in Latin America and globally.

48     Equally important is the need to investigate themes and issues that remain underexplored in backlash literature, both in Latin America and in the world, to advance a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. In this sense, one significant area of concern is the backlash against Indigenous rights. Despite advancements in recent decades, these rights are facing renewed opposition, particularly from conservative groups. In Latin America, Indigenous land rights are increasingly under pressure, reflecting a broader resistance to Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protection. Another critical aspect is the backlash against migration. While much scholarship on anti-migrant sentiment focuses on the United States and Europe, similar trends are emerging in Latin America. For example, the Bolsonaro administration in Brazil employed nationalist and exclusionary rhetoric toward migrants, echoing discourses observed elsewhere (Safarik, 2020). Investigating how backlash politics



influence migration policy in the Latin America can shed light on the intersections of nationalism, security concerns, and social exclusion. Moreover, as expected, the environmental policy sector is facing growing backlash, despite the urgent need for climate action. Research that identifies and helps to understand the drivers behind this backlash is key to addressing ongoing policy rollbacks and is also of critical importance in the region.

49 The international and transnational dimensions of backlash politics present a critical avenue for research. The rise of governments that challenge progressive advancements in areas like gender rights and climate policy—such as Trump’s election in the United States—can inspire similar backlash movements in Latin America. This dynamic was evident during Bolsonaro’s presidency in Brazil and is now unfolding under Milei in Argentina. To understand these cross-border influences, the analytical frameworks used in policy transfer studies could offer fresh perspectives and expand research on backlash politics. Additionally, one key area of inquiry is the discursive strategies used to legitimize backlash narratives. If, as suggested by Boltanski and Thévenot’s (1991) framework, justification registers often draw on themes of family and tradition, it would be useful to examine how these narratives intersect with economic concerns, particularly in societies grappling with deep inequalities. Understanding these connections can help illuminate the broader socio-economic forces driving backlash politics, as well as their resonance with different segments of the population—particularly in relation to perceptions of power loss, such as the middle class’s sense of downward mobility or relative decline. Forms of resistance to the backlash often emerge from experiences of social downward mobility (“*déclassement*”) and aim to reassert or reclassify the status (“*reclassement*”) of certain segments of the population who perceive themselves as being threatened—either by actual changes or by the mere prospect of transformation.

50 Finally, as backlash movements continue to rise, not only in Latin America but globally, it is essential to examine the responses they generate from governments, institutions, and civil society. Understanding these counter-reactions—and the alternative policy ideas and governance models put forward—will be key to assessing how democratic institutions adapt and resist the pressures of backlash politics. In the face of movements that seek to undermine democratic norms, these counterforces may play a decisive role in shaping the future of governance and institutional resilience in the years ahead.

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## Notes

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2 As a reminder Viktor Orbán became Prime Minister in Hungary in 2010, Giorgia Meloni in Italy in 2022, the Law and Justice Party has been a major actor of the Polish political scene since 2005 in Poland, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in 2016 and 2024, Jair Bolsonaro president of Brazil from 2019 to 2023, Javier Milei was elected president in 2023 in Argentina, while Narendra Modi at the head of an Hindu nationalist party has ruled in India since 2014.

## Pour citer cet article

### Référence papier

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## Recent publications

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