P180 / Morality Politics in Times of Backlash and Backsliding: Preventing, Reversing and Dismantling Moral Policies

Topic : Policy Change/Continuity/Dynamics

Chair : Carlos Alza (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Over the past decade, advances in LGBTIQ+ rights, gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights have met organised, transnationally connected opposition, while governments across Europe, the Americas and beyond have made hostility to these rights a political resource. Political science has responded with a vocabulary of regression that is itself under debate. Backlash names the mobilisation of those who feel their power threatened by a policy change, which undermines its support and constrains its institutionalisation (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008; Patashnik, 2019). Democratic backsliding names the gradual, often state-led erosion of democratic institutions, although critics argue that the paradigm flattens trajectories into progress, stagnation or regression and conceals the exclusions on which apparently stable democracies rest (Cianetti and Hanley, 2021). Policy dismantling names the reduction of policies, their instruments or the capacities to implement them (Bauer and Knill, 2012), and research on gender and social policy shows that regression proceeds less through repeal than through delegitimation, hollowed-out implementation and drift (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2018).

Morality politics offers a privileged but underused terrain for these debates. Moral policies are those in which conflict turns on first principles rather than on means (Engeli, Green-Pedersen and Larsen, 2013). Understood as a process, moralisation can reach almost any policy, since actors strategically moralise or de-moralise issues (Mucciaroni, 2011) and anti-gender campaigns have turned ostensibly instrumental fields such as education into moral battlegrounds (Tomazini, 2025). Yet this literature was built largely on cases of permissive change in Western Europe and North America, and has paid little attention to the long periods in which moral policies do not change, to what becomes of their defenders once they change, or to how recognised rights are later eroded. Recent research on Latin America points in that direction: the agenda-setting dynamics that keep abortion decriminalisation off the table in Central America (del Cid Castro and del Castillo Alemán, 2025) and the conditions and mechanisms through which same-sex unions have been blocked for decades (Alza Barco, 2025, forthcoming).

This panel brings these literatures into dialogue. Its research question is: how are moral policies prevented, reversed or dismantled, by which actors and mechanisms, and what does this reveal about the relationship between policy regression and democratic regression? Three lines of inquiry organise the discussion: whether preventing a right and undoing it are phases of a single process sustained by the same actors and moral repertoires; whether coalitions defeated on one moral policy displace their activity to adjacent policies, including digital platforms and the governance of artificial intelligence; and whether regression in moral policies operates mainly through ideational and administrative means that leave formal rules intact and escape existing indicators of backsliding.

The panel welcomes contributions from all regions and methodological traditions. Its relevance lies in distinguishing stasis, backlash, reversal and dismantling as different outcomes with different mechanisms, and in offering the study of democratic regression a policy-level account of how rights are lost, or never won, within formally intact democracies.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite papers on how moral policies are prevented, reversed, dismantled or defended. We understand morality politics broadly, as any policy field in which conflict is framed in terms of first principles, whether by long-standing definition (same-sex unions and LGBTIQ+ rights, abortion and reproductive rights, gender identity, euthanasia, drugs, religious freedom) or through the moralisation of instrumental fields (education, health, social protection, migration, digital platforms and artificial intelligence).

We particularly welcome papers addressing the following questions. How do ultraconservative, religious and anti-gender coalitions sustain restrictive regulation over long periods, and through which mechanisms? What becomes of these coalitions once a right is recognised: do they dissolve, adapt, migrate across domains or venues, or reorganise to reverse the change? How do governments of different ideological orientation, including left-wing and formally secular ones, contribute to the maintenance or reversal of moral policies? Through which pathways are recognised rights eroded without formal repeal, and how can that erosion be observed and measured? Under what conditions do reformist actors succeed in entrenching moral policies against subsequent dismantling?

Comparative designs across regions, countries, policies, or time periods, particularly those that engage with Latin America, are especially welcome, as are single-case studies that reconstruct mechanisms in depth. Proposals should include a title and a 300-word abstract stating the research question, framework, cases, method and expected contribution.

References

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