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# Demographic change and backlash: Identity politics in historical perspective

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## Abstract

Why are backlash politics so prevalent in the context of demographic change? And so that we may understand how to mitigate social conflict, what role do government and political actors play in their inflammation or reconciliation? Drawing from a larger study of six societies that have dealt with significant demographic change, I review the ways that government and political leaders' actions can produce three different social cleavages: (1) an overriding and enduring cleavage between ethnic constituencies in national politics, (2) an overriding cleavage that is suppressed by political actors, or (3) a new definition of social cleavages that re-constructs public understandings of the nation. I find that the drivers of these different trajectories relate to state actions in the construction of national identities, which either exclude certain subgroups or absorb them into a state of coexistence. I identify five ways governments channel backlash politics towards exclusion or coexistence, and provide examples from Hawai'i, a case where historical cleavages between natives and immigrants nearly disappeared. Ultimately, I find that these politics are subject to competing understandings of the nation – the pivotal sense of 'we' – that can unite or divide a multiethnic society.

## Keywords

backlash, comparative, demographic change, ethnicity, history, identity, immigration, race

## Introduction

In the United States and much of Europe, the spectre of demographic change looms over contemporary politics. The US Census Bureau (2018) estimates that a mix of Latin, Asian, and African-origin people will outnumber the non-Hispanic white American population by 2045. Non-white children already comprise fewer than half the American children under the age of 15 years old, and more than half of America's major cities are now 'majority minority' (Frey, 2018, 2020). As a result, many Americans are discomforted by rising immigration and declining native fertility rates and their effects on national identity and character (Allen, 2017; Gest, 2016; Sides et al., 2018; Hopkins et al., 2019). The demography of European countries like Belgium, France, and Sweden are beginning to parallel American population trends, producing parallel (even if premature) political sentiments.

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Numerous analyses suggest that the election of President Donald Trump, Brexit, and ascendant far right politicians represents an initial backlash to demographic change. Support for Trump's nativist agenda is strongest among voters characterised by resentment towards racial and religious minorities (Tesler, 2015) and ethno-centrism and intolerance (Kalkan, 2016). Sides (2017) finds that 2016 swing voters were principally motivated by a desire to preserve the Christian faith, deport undocumented immigrants, and reduce immigration. Gest et al. (2017) find that American and British support for radical right candidates and groups is driven by a sense of lost social and political status. In nearly all European states, far right parties seek to reduce immigration and counter the accommodation of Islam – a reaction to three decades of liberalisation (Betz, 1993; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Koopmans et al., 2005; Sniderman et al., 2004). This phenomenon is not limited to the West. In India, critics suggest that Prime Minister Modi is trying to denationalise Muslim citizens to protect the demographic superiority of the Hindu population. In Israel, advocates of a Jewish state openly strategise how to maintain the numerical supremacy of Jewish citizens.

My contribution draws from a larger study of six societies that have dealt with significant demographic change: Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Bahrain, Singapore, New York, and Hawai'i (Gest, 2020a).[1] Each of these Majority Minority states feature analogous demographic circumstances, despite distinct geographical, cultural, and regime contexts. In each case, the social histories follow a similar chronological sequence. After the British Empire's industrialisation created new global demand for agricultural and mineral commodities, the Empire found colonial labour pools inadequate and began to import manpower from across its dominion. To divide and control more unwieldy societies, the British (often with their national government partners, and Americans in Hawai'i) then segregated different ethnic groups and segmented the labour market. Eventually, the newcomers settled, and questions arose about the structural equality of immigrants in the eyes of the state. It is at this juncture that the cases under consideration truly began to diverge. While all six faced some degree of backlash, government responses were variable.

Whereas studies of demographic change by political psychologists and behavioralists often focus on contemporary public opinion studies, my research takes a long-term view. Studying a small number of cases over the course of 200 years, I am able to examine changes that occurred over decades and centuries. While previous historical analyses suggest the driving influence of popular discontent, racism, and xenophobia over government policy and rhetoric (e.g. Lake and Reynolds, 2008; McKeown, 2008; Tichenor, 2002), I focus on the effect of political leaders and institutions on public responses to demographic change (see Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin, 2014). Across the cases and periods, I identify different outcomes of backlash politics, and the factors that inflame or assuage social tension. In this essay, I will provide an overview of these outcomes, but then draw on the Hawaiian case as a touchstone to explore more deeply how inclusive political strategies can temper backlash that inevitably arises when ethnic groups lose their majority status. As each of these six case societies once endured the backlash politics characteristic of contemporary Europe and the United States, the results foretell alternative futures depending on how demographic change is governed today.

In this article, I first examine why demographic change so reliably produces backlash politics in the manner anticipated by Alter and Zürn (this issue). Once these dynamics are clarified, I review three different ways that backlash to demographic change can be channelled by national leaders and institutions – to produce (1) an overriding and enduring cleavage in national politics, (2) an overriding cleavage that is suppressed by political actors, or (3)

a new definition of social cleavages that re-constructs public understandings of the nation. A key conclusion then is that cleavages are a consistent feature of the societies subject to demographic change and under study here; the question is how political actors and governments respond. The answers relate to state actions in the construction of national identities, which either exclude certain subgroups or absorb them into a state of coexistence. I identify five ways governments channel backlash politics towards exclusion or coexistence, and provide examples from Hawai'i, a case where historical cleavages between natives and immigrants nearly disappeared. Ultimately, I find that these politics are subject to competing understandings of the nation – the pivotal sense of 'we' – that can unite or divide a multiethnic society.

## The unavoidable backlash against demographic change

A core question integral to Alter and Zürn's concept of backlash is how governments or leaders can effectively respond to popular social concerns and avoid backlash that is harmful to certain population subgroups and democracy more generally. As the authors underscore, the public implications for the answer are significant. A clearer understanding might allow societies to avoid either the social change itself or the adverse effects that inevitable change generates (Alter and Zürn, this issue). However, in the recent decades – unlike reactions to other social phenomena – backlash to significant demographic change has been effectively unavoidable. Of course, the human instinct to focus on co-ethnic preservation is one degree of separation from the ethnic nationalism that underlies many political disputes (Vanhanen, 1999: 57). When individuals believe that their environment is changing, the in-group becomes the priority (e.g. Kaufmann, 2018: 203–204). But even though demographic change has remained a persistent attribute of human civilisation for centuries because of conflict, conquest, and resource scarcity, it has never been so politicised as in the 21st century.[2] Understanding this politicisation can help illuminate the connection between demographic change and the key elements of backlash politics.

What follows draws from my analysis of six former British territories that experienced a transformative demographic shift. In all six of these cases, demographic change led to calls for greater power-sharing by once-subjugated social groups. The subsequent intensification of ethnic politics thereafter is a by-product of liberalisation and democratisation since the late 19th century. Particularly in the post-war period, a number of trends have contributed to a gradual shift from minority rule to majority rule in countries worldwide (Kaufmann and Haklai, 2008: 743). Whether thanks to decolonisation, democratisation, or rights-based movements, hegemonic minorities have found it increasingly difficult to sustain rule in multi-ethnic societies (Kaufmann and Haklai, 2008: 746). While these changes are often touted, political liberalisation carries the potential for conflict because competition for political spoils suddenly and increasingly follows a different logic: that of majoritarian democracy (Côté et al., 2018: 87–88).

Amid the usual alteration of borders, migration, and nation-building projects, the evolution of more liberal norms and democratic institutions has meant that political power is increasingly subject to, if not solely derived from, the composition of national populations. New freedoms of expression allow for more combative language about ethnic identities. Freedoms of assembly facilitate mobilisation and uprisings along ethnic lines. Moreover, democracy's coupling of population and resource distribution raises the stakes of relative group size in a manner distinct from minority-led regimes that derive their power from violence, ideology, and/or patronage systems that operate more independently from population dynamics (Côté et al., 2018: 88–89).

Under electoral pressures in the six cases under study here, demographic change therefore produces each of the necessary elements for backlash politics theorised by Alter and Zürn. First, backlash to demographic change is inherently retrograde. Often expressed through nostalgia (Gest, 2016) but perhaps forms of disengagement or rebellion (Gest and Gray, 2015), the principal agenda of the threatened subgroup is to return to an earlier era when their members held numbers and power. Immigration policy is a primary policy domain for backlash to demographic change because immigration was, in all six cases, the core driver of the demographic change in the first place. Governments may recruit those immigrants deemed to be of desirable origins to reinforce their dominance and/or oppose the naturalisation or entry of all others.

Second, because backlash to demographic change perceives the earlier population distribution to be preferable, it often entails extraordinary efforts to disrupt the norms and institutions of the status quo. Where immigration cannot turn back the demographic clock, in election-based systems, nativists turn to the electoral institutions that determine how and where power is distributed. Naturalisation may determine who has the right to vote and be counted. However, governments can also amend voting rights, revise Census rules, and distort constituency districts to mitigate the political impact of demographic change.

Third, because identity politics are core to backlash against demographic change, the accompanying discourse is essentialist and often existential. Demographic change has downstream effects on cultural, economic, and political power, giving the impression of a universal threat. Absent the ability to actually reverse engineer the population, backlash leaders instead pursue symbolic victories, in which solidaristic rhetoric bonds the endangered constituency and political actions may change one life but comfort millions by rendering a false sense of control. When nativists cannot control the demographic distribution, the means of violence, or the national culture, they at least seek to control the historical narrative – questions of heritage and identity that they can monopolise.

This discussion clarifies why backlash politics is common, even likely, under conditions of significant demographic change, but it does not explain why backlash politics generates enduring cleavages that divide societies with destabilising population trends in some states and not others. Alter and Zürn write that there are three possible ways these politics end: through a loss of internal energy, by achieving the retrograde change, or by being transformed into a cleavage that gets absorbed into ordinary politics. The existential nature of backlash to demographic change ensures that its energy persists, and it is physically impossible to achieve the retrograde change nativists seek. Consequently, the question is: 'What are the variable ways that demographic cleavages are absorbed into ordinary politics, such that we may understand how to mitigate the conflict they produce?'

## Variation in backlash politics: A range of possible outcomes

I distinguish among three principal political outcomes across the cases under consideration:

### *Contestation: An overriding and enduring cleavage in national politics*

*Mauritius.* A small island off the coast of southeastern Africa, Mauritius became inhabited when Dutch, French, and then British settlers imported slaves from Madagascar and Eastern Africa. In 1834, Mauritius became the earliest territory to introduce Indian indentured labourers in the world – the so-called 'Great Experiment' to replace slavery. Within

30 years, Indians outnumbered African freedmen and had completely displaced them on the sugar plantations. Many Indians would receive land at the conclusion of their indenture – a reward unavailable to the former slaves upon their emancipation, which set the Indian community up for economic advantage in the decades thereafter when Indian Hindus, Muslims, and largely African-origin, Catholic Creoles were given the right to vote. As tensions between the two communities deepened into the 20th century, Indian Hindus increasingly appealed to emerging Indian and Hindu nationalism and sustained diaspora links to their country of origin rather than reconcile with their African-origin countrymen. Hindu schools, missions, and associations reinforced their status and asserted their dominance in a country they quickly defined. The country's party landscape is completely racialised with separate parties for Hindus, Muslims, and Catholic Creoles, who are disenfranchised in a variety of subtle ways. Mauritius' African-origin people harbour profound resentment but also nationalist visions of their indigeneity.

*Trinidad and Tobago.* Similar to Mauritius, the 1807 abolition of slavery and the 1838 emancipation of African-origin slaves led the British Empire to import indentured labour from India to Trinidad and Tobago's plantations, forever altering the two Caribbean islands' demography. Placed together as an unintended consequence of British mercantilism, these two ethnic communities would evolve quite separately for a century until the colony's 1962 independence left them to govern one another with equal status. Afro-Trinidadian Creoles ruled for the country's first 30 years of sovereignty and have made fervent claims to the islands' cultural heritage. Indo-Trinidadians, however, have prospered economically, challenged such claims to authenticity, and have grown in numerical share and power thanks to the emigration of many Afro-Trinidadians to Britain, Canada, and the United States. With the two communities now comprising near equal, non-majority shares of the national population and a growing minority of mixed-race Trinidadians, many political matters have been interpreted through the narrow lens of ethnic supremacy with very slim margins. Suddenly, mundane issues such as immigration admissions, but also calypso and Carnival, assume symbolic meaning for the balance of power. The result is a society openly concerned with ethnic differences.

### *Suppression: An overriding cleavage that is suppressed by political actors*

*Bahrain.* The demography of Bahrain, long a crossroads for the pearl trade, has for centuries reflected tensions between the Shias, who comprise a majority of its nationals, and the Sunnis, who have historically ruled the island with the backing of the British as a bulwark against the Persian Empire. Since the 1970s oil boom, as elsewhere in the Gulf Region, vast numbers of temporary labour migrants have grown to outnumber both sects of the national population and complicate the preexisting tensions. Driven by these admissions, the population of Bahrain nearly tripled between 1995 and 2017, from 559,000 to 1.5 million (see Kapiszewski, 2006). On the one hand, this demographic transformation has discomforted Bahrainis of all religious backgrounds, and the Kingdom has severely restricted access to citizenship to ensure that migrants do not receive access to the country's enormous, oil rent-backed subsidies and benefits. On the other hand, and unlike elsewhere in the Gulf, the government has also wielded these same citizenship laws to selectively naturalise Sunni Arab migrants as a buffer against the sectarian tensions that flared amid the 2011 Arab Spring. Although Bahrain historically separated the ideas of numerical dominance from political dominance, the ruling government now uses global

migration to bolster the position of its dominant class. The result is a society characterised by social conflict, suppressed by a powerful, Saudi-sponsored state that placates Shia nationals with rent-backed subsidies and subordinates immigrants as a second-class constituency with limited rights and freedoms.

*Singapore.* In Singapore, the principally Chinese-origin leadership has struggled to rhetorically justify Chinese demographic dominance over the indigenous Malays and immigrant-origin Indians, first promoted by the British Empire during the 19th century. The Chinese sojourned in this tropical port, an island at the tip of Malaya, since the British arrival in 1819 and have sought to naturalise their presence as the necessary keepers of one of the world's most important centres of commerce. To sustain its success, Singapore's postcolonial founders insisted that the city-state needed to sustain its 'multiracial' harmony. However, since 1965, the government has pursued this harmony by freezing its demographic distribution at levels recorded at the turn of the 20th century. To do so, the city-state has used highly selective immigration admissions policies to compensate for declining fertility rates and ageing among the Chinese-origin community in the face of growing Indian and Malay constituencies. This *de facto* race-based selection for the sake of 'balance' squarely contradicts the country's meritocratic, race-blind doctrine. While Singapore has managed to both resist demographic pressures and significant social conflict, the government's awkward contortions to preserve Chinese hegemony have begun to foment the very anxieties and competition they were designed to suppress.

## *Reconstitution: A new definition of social cleavages that re-constructs public understandings of the nation*

*New York.* United States immigration admissions and removals were federalised only in 1882. In the preceding years, states like New York managed their own policies of selection and deportation the same way a sovereign state might do so. This left the New York Commissioners of Emigration responsible for the unprecedented amount of Irish people who entered between 1845 and 1854 – an influx that outnumbered all other sources of immigration to New York since 1776 combined. At the time, the state and city of New York were largely of English and Dutch origins, and the United States was being swept by a wave of support for the xenophobic Know Nothing movement and its nativist American Party, which scored election victories in many mid-19th-century gubernatorial, congressional, and mayoral races. The backlash focused on the predominantly Catholic Irish – many of whom arrived as paupers and public charges. While there was a great deal of sabre rattling, there was very little action by the government to actually prevent immigrants' arrival and execute their removal. New York's immigrant population was by then a well-integrated voting bloc that was coveted by candidates as well as a labour force that was valued by powerful business interests – a model for future waves of newcomers. Beginning with this political incorporation, the Irish (along with Italians and other once-excluded groups) were eventually also incorporated into the American fraternity of whiteness by the 1960s, which both cemented their higher status and distinguished them from future waves of excluded immigrants. This redefinition of the American identity preserved the social and political dominance of 'white' Americans – once exclusively comprised of people with Anglo and Protestant backgrounds – by expanding their ranks to include 'white ethnics' and sustain a majority over people of African, Latin, and Asian origin.

*Hawai'i.* Before their annexation by the United States in 1898, the Hawaiian Islands were a multi-ethnic kingdom with a prosperous economy centred on its sugar plantations and mid-Pacific harbour. Both to position itself geopolitically and ensure its crops were harvested, Hawaiian monarchs pursued relations with foreign governments by populating their cabinets and cane fields with foreigners. After the introduction of continental diseases killed two-thirds of the Native Hawaiian population by 1823, their share of the population was further reduced by the arrival of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Portuguese, British, and American immigrants, most of whom were recruited by the Kingdom. From 1840 to 1898, the native Hawaiian population declined from a 97% majority to a 36% minority. And while some intermarriage (particularly with Chinese labourers) and relatively generous treatment of foreigners produced more harmonious interethnic relations during this period, it also produced an 1893 American-backed coup that was opposed by Native Hawaiians who – by this point – were without sufficient popular or military power to resist. One result of the American annexation was the segregation and suppression of native Hawaiian culture, but also the integration of its many nationalities into a part-Hawaiian, multiracial, and 'non-white' underclass. Many of these families quietly preserved Native Hawaiian culture until a 1960s revival that is carried on today by a multiethnic coalition of advocates in the face of American hegemony.

In each case, some degree of political backlash is present. Many native Hawaiians formed civic organisations to protest the end of isolationism and the various concessions made by the Kingdom to foreign peoples and foreign governments from the 1840s until its annexation in 1898. The arrival of Irish Catholics into New York aroused stereotypes of Irish destitution and complacency, and stoked paranoia about Papist foreign allegiances. Mauritius' and Trinidad and Tobago's Indian and African-origin constituencies have maintained their allegiances to respective pan-Indian and pan-African diasporas so tightly that cross-cutting national identities never developed. In Bahrain, the government has overtly naturalised Sunni Arabs to tilt demographic scales and, when members of the Shi'i opposition have condemned the moves, their leaders were exiled, imprisoned, or suspended from Parliament. Meanwhile, in Singapore, backlash politics often emerges in the form of pro-democratic activism that points to Malays' marginality and so-called 'Chinese privilege'.

In each case, the spectre of immigrant-origin people's equal status or incorporation into their new societies eventually inspires nativism and a sense of existential threat. The arrival of immigrants prompts a search for national consciousness – a sense of 'we' to confront the seemingly unified, distinct sense of 'they'. To substantiate demands for newcomers' integration, the incumbents feel an obligation to clarify the identity and culture to which all must adhere. The results are often cacophonous, contradictory, and constructed understandings of heritage that scramble for a narrative, and usually do not find one. In these moments, officials in power have the choice of inflaming such sentiments or forging a path towards greater coexistence.

## Identity binaries: Institutional pivots to inclusion or exclusion

What separates majority minority societies with sustained or suppressed backlash against the ascendance of certain subgroups from those that better reconcile their differences? Over the course of my research, I have found that the answer lies in the nature of national

**Table 1.** Identity binaries.

| Pivot to coexistence | BINARY | Pivot to inflammation |
|---|---|---|
| The production of universalist, transcendent ideologies – and the creation of an inclusive national identity<br>a. intermarriage;<br>b. religion to unite;<br>c. socialism;<br>d. labour solidarity;<br>e. authoritarian ideology. | ***Ideology*** | The production of ideologies of inferiority and favouritism – and the creation of an exclusive national identity<br>a. residential segregation;<br>b. religion to divide;<br>c. stratification;<br>d. supremacy;<br>e. eugenics. |
| Inclusive socialisation<br>a. National language policy<br>b. Universal conscription<br>c. School integration<br>d. Textbooks | ***Socialisation*** | Exclusive socialization<br>a. National language policy;<br>b. Selective conscription;<br>c. School segregation;<br>d. Textbooks. |
| Promotion of inclusive national cultural attributes:<br>a. music;<br>b. cuisine<br>c. sport<br>d. tradition and custom | ***Culture*** | Promotion of exclusive national cultural attributes:<br>a. politics of memory/truth;<br>b. invigoration of historical dispute;<br>c. tradition and custom. |
| Inclusive commercial experience:<br>a. market interdependencies;<br>b. reduction of inequality;<br>c. distribution of state resources. | ***Commerce*** | Exclusive commercial experience:<br>a. labour market segmentation;<br>b. racialised poverty;<br>c. politics of reparation and affirmative action. |
| Focus on sources of external threat to produce inclusion:<br>a. war;<br>b. encroachment;<br>c. pan-ethnic political movements. | ***Threat*** | Focus on sources of internal threat to produce exclusion:<br>a. census politics: gerrymandering and representation;<br>b. racialised partisanship. |

identity politics. Inclusive redefinitions of national identity override historic inequities across racial or ethnic groups, while societies that pursue exclusive identities are confronted by latent social tension among structurally unequal constituencies and overt contestation in states with equally enfranchised constituencies (Gest, 2020a).

This argument embraces and reinforces what Alter and Zürn refer to as the 'illusory' nature of backlash politics. Backlash against demographic change reflects subjectivities in subgroups' perceptions of status, but – more profoundly – subjectivities in the understanding of the nation itself. The constructed nature and mutability of the nation, typically at the direction of political leaders, cuts both ways: officials and leaders may make emotional, nostalgic appeals to divide, or they may use the same rhetorical and cultural tools to promote coexistence and mutual understanding under a common banner.

Five key identity binaries that push towards a politics of inclusion or exclusion arise from my comparative historical analysis (See Table 1). These binaries help explain the way that some societies more effectively evade tension around demographic change,

while others are defined by such tension. The first binary relates to the use of inclusive or exclusive **state ideologies** that unite or divide a multi-ethnic population. The second binary relates to the **socialisation** of children into inclusive or exclusive state programmes with normative instruction. The third binary relates to the promotion of **cultural attributes** that either transcend or reinforce social boundaries. The fourth binary relates to a **system of commerce** that either reproduces social disparities or segregation in the economic sector or overlooks them for the sake of mutual benefit. Finally, the fifth binary relates to whether the state's **identification of threats** are external and thereby unifying or internal and thereby divisive.

As an example, Hawai'i – which features the most hopeful outcomes of the six cases I examine – ultimately pivoted towards coexistence in each of the five binaries I identify since statehood in 1959. After the arrival of Americans early in the 19th century and their subsequent conquest, Native Hawaiians were dominated and disoriented – their Kingdom toppled, their identity suppressed, their norms undermined. By the time Hawaiians organised to resurrect their principal normative components during the 1960s 'Renaissance', the nation's composition had changed. Native Hawaiians had intermarried and intermingled their traditions, their culture, their genealogies with people from China, Japan, Portugal, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and the United States. Global diffusion therefore both nearly eliminated Native Hawaiian culture and characterises who Hawaiians are today. In defining their nation, Native Hawaiians have had no choice but to formulate a vision and **ideology** that internalises this diversity and accepts its contradictions. This has obviated debates about 'authenticity' and 'heritage' that have plagued identity politics elsewhere.

The segmentation of the labour market was as stark in Hawai'i as elsewhere. As sugar plantations evolved from crowded barracks and unsanitary camps into villages with family-oriented cottages, racial differentiation dictated the location of housing, schools, and wage structures (MacLennan, 2014: 170–171). Relegated to working in the fields, the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos were assigned different tasks according to stereotypical attributes determined by the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (MacLennan, 2014: 197). Native Hawaiians were less inclined to work on plantations but, when their access to land and water was disrupted by planters, most eventually became the planters' tenants and provided crops in lieu of payment. These disruptions, however, also brought Native Hawaiians into closer contact with Asian immigrants. Like the Hawaiians, the Chinese and Okinawans also farmed taro, and it was common for them to share their skills and labour with each other (Lasky, 2014: 53). **Commercial exchanges** between subsistence farmers and fishers produced early interracial marriages that led to further ways Hawaiians introduced foreign practices and traditions into Native culture.

Hawaii's post-statehood revival of its indigenous **cultural attributes** has been powerful because it has welcomed all who are interested in reinvigorating the archipelago's ancestral traditions. This is both a strategy for inclusion, but also a necessity in light of the extent of intermarriage in Native Hawaiian society. The revival has related to the restoration of ancestral agricultural and fishing practices, the establishment of Hawaiian language schools, and the teaching of *hula* rituals. Its popularisation and commercialisation has also made it appear more innocuous to those who cannot trace their heritage to the original Kingdom. Nevertheless, the orientation of this revival has been unequivocally against the hegemonic history and persistent power of interests from the mainland United States. Beyond creating an awkward relationship with national countrymen, military, and the tourists driving its top industry, this shared sense of **threat** has also brought multi-ethnic, working-class Hawaiian people closer together.

Hawaiian developmental psychologists have found that children raised on the islands take less notice of racial differences and rely less on racial prejudice when assessing other people, which predicts less outgroup stereotyping even when controlling for gender, age, race, and social context (Pauker et al., 2016). When researchers studied the racial attitudes of white students who moved from the continental United States to Hawai'i, they found a significant reduction in the students' propensity to generalise about race over their first year of university residence (Pauker et al., 2018). This reduction was corelated with increases in the racial diversity of the white students' acquaintances, and an increase in the white students' egalitarian attitudes and cognitive flexibility. While this may say a lot about **socialisation** in Hawai'i, it also suggests that Hawaiian cultural norms are transferable to other Americans, if not other populations elsewhere in the world.

## Broader insights

Alas, Hawai'i and the outcomes of its initial backlash to majority minority demographics are rare in the world.[3] Other cases studied here provide a variety of contrasting examples along the five binaries of identity politics (See Gest, 2020). Across these societies, backlash politics reveal a general consistency with Alter and Zürn's (this issue) general definition and understanding. In its desire to re-establish one group's numerical advantage or power, backlash to demographic change has historically entailed a retrograde objective and a nostalgic national identity. In its attempt to reverse engineer a society, backlash to demographic change has often involved contorting institutions in an extraordinary manner to achieve goals made difficult by fertility rates and immigration trends. And in its engagement with rhetoric and symbolism to construct and re-construct national identities, backlash to demographic change has historically been acutely concerned with public discourse and its vernacular – in particular the definition of the nation.

It is unsurprising then that today's backlash movements have oriented themselves around loose attempts to define the nation in the face of disorienting change. They seek to be anchors for ships tossed in the tempest of crisscrossing global currents. 'Take back control' exhorted the Leave campaign during Britain's 2016 Brexit referendum. 'We are the silent majority', Donald Trump's supporters asserted in the United States. 'Au nom du people' – In the name of the people – proclaimed Marine Le Pen's far right National Rally party in France. 'Wir sind das volk!' – We are the people! – declared Germany's far right Alternative für Deutschland. However, these ubiquitous slogans beg: *Which* people? *Who* had control? *Who* are 'we'?

Such questions always go unanswered, for it is far easier for such movements to define the Other than to define the nation purportedly entitled to power. 'We may not know who we are, but we know who we are not', today's populists seem to be shouting in their backlash against immigration, Islam, and the emergence of an increasingly globalised culture. Defining who 'we' are has grown challenging because it necessarily entails exclusion in many countries heretofore concerned with the preservation of a liberal order and constitutions protecting individual rights. Hard lines ignore the ways that social boundaries have blurred over the course of generations of global mobility, intermarriage, and statecraft; they also resist the global diffusion of ideas, identities, and norms that have weakened territorial links between blood, soil, and self.

This study, based on a broader historical analysis, places the experience of six majority minority countries in parallel. And while every country case is subject to unique circumstances related to their culture, geography, and specific histories of social relations, all

converge on the politics of nation-building. Outstanding questions abound. How do some parties and leaders resist short-term political calculations and appeal to a broadened understanding of the nation? What are the rights of a majority constituency to protect their numerical advantage and the enduring character of the nation they have historically governed? Can the politics of heritage co-exist in a liberalising world? These questions require further consideration. For now, a simple test can illuminate whether the actions of states, organisations, and individuals are oriented towards a future of coexistence or conflict: Are we reinforcing the social boundaries between us or somehow transcending them?

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## Notes

1. While New York is a subnational unit, as I explain below, the state controlled immigrant admissions into and removals from its territory until 1882 – just like the other cases in the postcolonial era. There are not many other Majority Minority sovereign countries. From my review, these include Fiji, Guyana, Kuwait, Qatar, Suriname, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Fiji, Guyana, Suriname are structurally similar to Mauritius and Trinidad, given the arrival of indentured labourers from South Asia and Java. However, it is notable that Indians displaced indigenous Fijians, rather than the descendants of African slaves, and Suriname has a Dutch colonial history and no ethnic majority. Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE generally resemble the Bahraini experience. However, they lack Bahrain's sectarian politics between native Sunni and Shia constituencies.
2. Tracking news stories from the 1800s to 2010, Howe and Jackson (2011: 32–33) finds far more mentions of the phrase 'population decline' linked with 'nation' or 'power' between 2000 and 2010 than in any earlier decade on record.
3. Some of the ideas in this final section are derived from an earlier publication: Gest 2020b.

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