



## **BENJAMIN BISHIN**

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### **ELITE-LED MOBILIZATION AND GAY RIGHTS: DISPELLING THE MYTH OF MASS OPINION BACKLASH**

What explains opposition to gay rights? Media and scholastic accounts describe a strong public opinion backlash—a sharply negative and enduring opinion change—against attempts to advance gay rights. Academic research, however, increasingly questions backlash as an explanation for opposition to LGBT rights. How can we reconcile the widespread backlash described by scholars and the media with the growing body of academic research that finds no evidence of the opinion change thought to be its hallmark trait?

We argue that what appears to be public opinion backlash against gay rights is more consistent with elite-led mobilization—one of the strategies used by anti-gay elites, primarily white evangelicals, seeking to prevent the full incorporation of LGBT Americans in the polity in order to achieve political objectives and increase their political power.

In this talk, we develop and test the theory of Elite-Led Mobilization. Employing a series of on-line and natural experiments, extensive survey, voting behavior, and campaign finance data, to evaluate these theories. Finally, we examine what is widely considered to be the textbook case of anti-gay backlash, the 2010 Iowa Judicial Retention Election. Taken together, the evidence supports our argument that Elite-led Mobilization explains opposition to LGBT rights. The results simultaneously explain how reports of backlash might occur despite increased public support for gay rights, and an academic literature that at once makes broad claims of backlash but that also finds little empirical evidence of its existence.

#### **TIME**

**Monday, Feb. 12, 2024  
12:00PM-1:20PM**

#### **LOCATION**

**SSC 121**

#### **ZOOM DETAILS**

**Meeting ID:  
Passcode:**