



# Morality Politics in American Cities (Studies in Government and Public Policy)

*Elaine B. Sharp*

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Topless bars, casino gambling, needle exchange programs for drug addicts—there's no question, morality issues remain front and center in urban politics.

Presenting a systematic analysis of culture-war issues at the local level, Elaine Sharp shows how American cities deal with these ongoing concerns. Drawing on a sample of ten strategically chosen cities, she explains differences in how municipalities respond to controversies surrounding sex business, abortion clinics, legalized gambling, gay rights, and drug use. By analyzing the relative importance of subculture, economics, and institutional arrangements in the disputes, she points the way toward richer and more complete understanding of how different cities respond differently to these hot-button issues.

Far more than a statistical study, *Morality Politics in American Cities* is a collection of fascinating stories of real people grappling with down-to-earth issues and real-life drama—richly informative case studies that will captivate students and interested citizens alike. Mayors, public health directors, activists, and others speak their minds about the pros and cons of these controversies. Here are officials in one city confronting the Vatican over funding for abortion services, those in another battling a local university over its refusal to provide health benefits to gay partners of faculty members, and still others mounting a massive, community-sponsored attack on topless clubs.

These stories provide detailed evidence to support classifications needed for comparing cities' experience with each of the five morality issues. They also corroborate inferences drawn from the comparisons by showing what considerations were in play as local officials grappled with these issues. Overall, the study shows that cultural factors usually dominate policymaking in local politics—except when specific economic interests are at stake—and also observes that county-level governments are more important than previously thought in terms of morality-issue decisions.

As provocative as it is informative, *Morality Politics in American Cities* demonstrates that such issues—same-sex marriage, for example—are multidimensional and often difficult to resolve. Its conclusions, however contingent, mark an important step in the ongoing process of understanding important differences in approaches to these issues and clearly show how moral conflicts continue to define American politics.

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