

1 Introduction

All politics is local, and the culture wars are no different. (De Leon)

Conflicts rooted in culture and morality – the so-called culture wars (Hunter, 1991) – are commonly seen as well beyond the remit of local governance. In dealing with the big and combustible questions of values and identity, culture war conflicts revolve around seemingly entrenched moral and ideological divisions concerning what is right and wrong (Fiorina et al., 2005; Bain, 2010). They are thus often inescapably national in scope. When Hunter (1991) first popularized the concept of “culture wars” in the early 1990s, he had in mind an all-encompassing conflict between the forces of orthodoxy and progressivism over the “meaning of America.” For him, the conflict was fundamentally “a struggle to shape the identity of the nation as a whole” (Hunter, 1994, p. 4), which would cut across “class, religious, racial, ethnic, political, and sexual lines” (Thomson, 2010, p. 4). Likewise, when Patrick Buchanan famously declared a “cultural war” during his speech at the 1992 Republican Convention, what he was describing was a war for the very “soul of America” (Hartman, 2015, p. 1). Each time there is talk about culture war, then, it always seems to add up to the “national culture” (Marone, 2014, p. 135).

Local government has rarely been viewed as the tier of government where such struggles over values, culture, and identity play out. According to local government scholars, what makes local politics distinct from its national and even state counterparts is that it is rarely ideological. Oliver (2012, p. 7) writes in *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy* that, “[w]hereas debates among ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ elites dominate national and state politics, most local governments are not amenable venues for contesting liberal, conservative, or any other ideological visions of social organization.” Certainly, a political hierarchy has long existed in federal systems whereby the lower the level of government, the more limited and administrative politics was thought to be. If national and state governments have historically engaged in redistributive politics of the kind that draws citizens into contentious discussions about the state of their country or world, local governments have for the most part been relatively powerless – unpolitical even – acting merely as administrative arms of higher levels of government (Berman, 2003; Zimmerman, 2008; Katz and Nowak, 2017).

In *City Limits*, Peterson (1981, p. 4) declares that “[c]ity politics is limited politics.” Unlike state and national entities, local governments primarily engage in what he calls developmental politics, administering initiatives concerning local land, labor, and capital (Peterson, 1981, p. 20). In practice, this has mostly restricted the lowest tier of government to the administration and resourcing of

policing, housing, taxation, parks and recreation, schooling, medical services, municipal courts, public works, infrastructure and zoning, transportation, and local economic initiatives. Given this, and the desire to “attract industry to a community . . . or to renew depressed areas within the city,” Peterson (1981, p. 132) argues that “[c]onflict within the city tends to be minimal.” Dictated instead by “homevoters” (Fischel, 2005), who can up and leave should they take issue with city politics, the local sphere is thus thought to operate largely outside the party political and ideological bubbles of federal and state politics, making large-scale disputes the exception rather than the norm.

These traditional administrative functions notwithstanding, recent years and decades have seen an increasing volume of local governments leap “to the forefront of ideological debates that used to be purely national in scope” (Kelleher Palus, 2010, p. 135). Divisive issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, feminism, school prayer, multiculturalism, school curricula, affordable housing, the environment, and, increasingly, national identity and history appear to have become a mainstay in the politics of many cities and municipalities, attracting ever more attention as objects of policy and administrative concern. Part of this is most certainly an outcome of local governments’ increased capacity to solve community problems and manage the lifestyle changes of their citizens (Denters and Rose, 2005). But beyond that, urban politics scholars have also begun to appreciate that distinctive localized cultural and moral divisions, which separate individuals and groups within cities and regions, can produce conflict (Borer, 2006; Sharp, 2007).

In recognition of the fact that “a national culture is not an undifferentiated whole” (Rosdil, 2011, p. 3473), these scholars understand that cultural divisions and conflicts can take different shapes in different communities (Sharp, 1999a). Whereas sometimes the dynamics of city politics can act as a mitigating force in culture war conflicts, providing a counterforce to fiery national contestations, at other times they can inspire passionate conflict that far exceeds other spheres. In these instances and localities, questions about how one’s home, suburb, or community is governed can potentially become explosive (Schleicher, 2007). Although Oliver claims that local governments are not ideological he acknowledges (Oliver, 2012, p. 8) that “[b]ecause citizens’ local political involvement is predicated so highly on strong local attachments to their communities, a political firestorm can be triggered by what may seem to be the most trivial of causes.”

While often less visceral and less frequently publicized than national skirmishes, when local actors, activists, and domains become embroiled in volatile cultural, ideological, and moral clashes, they can blur the distinctions between local, state, and federal (Brown et al., 2005). When this happens, ostensibly

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national debates turn into local issues that can incite culture war conflicts that fall neither within the conventional nor expanded purview of local government activity (Sharp, 1996; 1997; 1999a; 2007; Brown et al., 2005; Rosenthal, 2005; Craw, 2006; Sharp and Brown, 2012).

These challenges present local governments with significant governmental and administrative challenges. According to the political scientist Elaine Sharp (1996; 1997; 1999a; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2007) – whose research on local government and culture wars remains the most authoritative in the fields of urban politics and public administration – local governments do more than act as “first responders” in many cultural and moral conflicts. Their decisions on public resourcing and administration can sometimes inadvertently thrust them into the “eye of a [culture war] firestorm” (Sharp, 1996, p. 738).

1.1 Objective and Rationale

The objective of this Element is to advance understandings of how local governments govern culture war conflicts today. In the fields of urban politics and public administration, Sharp’s work was not just pioneering, but remains the cornerstone scholarship on this topic. Sharp provides a foundational typology of local government responses to culture war controversies, which includes nine categories designating different levels of responsiveness and intentionality. She also offers a set of conceptual tools to explain why local governments may respond in one way or another. Yet, with her foundational research now over two decades old and ever more local governments wading into culture war disputes that are fundamentally different in nature, there is a need to synthesize and extend Sharp’s insights in keeping with current developments.

Local politics has seen an injection of excitement in recent years, with prominent commentators pushing for a rethinking of politics that begins at the bottom of the federal hierarchy (Florida, 2017; Brooks, 2018). While not without their critics, these advocates have championed an “extreme localism” that sees communities addressing their own problems and building their own economies outside the confines of federal politics (Florida, 2017). This may be at odds with what cities can currently achieve (Liu, 2018), but it is nevertheless reflective of new ways of doing politics that sees local governments, together with a network of local public, private, and civic actors, lead on a range of controversial social, economic, and environmental issues. This emerging “new localism” (Katz and Nowak, 2017), we argue, is connected to two key developments that underscore the importance of rejuvenating and enlarging Sharp’s foundational research on local governmental roles in culture war conflicts.

First, the face of local government has changed in important respects (Carr and Feiock, 2016). Not explicitly mentioned in the American Constitution, the limited powers that local governments do possess have traditionally fallen within the residual powers of their state legislatures (Grumm and Murphy, 1974; Writ, 1989; Gibbins, 2001). But the contours of this federal hierarchy are rapidly shifting. Decades in the making, this shift has less to do with the so-called home rule – a principle of American federalism which, in certain jurisdictions, enables local governments to exercise their delegated powers so long as they do not contravene state laws and constitutions (Barron, 2003; Dalmat, 2003; Russell and Bostrom, 2016; Hicks et al., 2018) – than a range of political developments and challenges that have resulted from increasing decentralization and globalization.

Decentralization has given local governments expanded authority over matters that may have once been the sole preserve of state and even federal governments (Somin, 2013; Levine Einstein and Kogan, 2016). Notwithstanding the federal colossus (Zavodnyik, 2011), localities have been actively asserting their independence at important intervals, becoming “laboratories of democracy” and political innovators in their own right (Shipan and Volden, 2006; Kincaid, 2017). Activists have not been oblivious to these shifts, nor to the comparative advantage they enjoy in smaller, local venues where their capacity to set or deny agendas can sometimes be amplified (Schattschneider, 1960). Similarly, while globalization may have eroded the sovereignty of the nation-state and undermined the capacity of national governments, it has at times had the opposite effect on cities. “Globalization not only creates a hyperconnected world,” write Katz and Nowak (2017, p. 47), “it also opens up new means for expressing local identity and new possibilities for local development strategies.” As the hubs and command centers of the global political economy, cities – and those who govern them – have thus found themselves occasionally in the driver’s seat of political, economic, technological, and cultural change, whether they like it or not (Sassen, 2001).

Second, there are new fronts in the culture wars that require examination (Davis, 2018; Castle, 2019). It is clear that culture war conflicts have expanded into new terrains since Sharp first began documenting their local expressions in the 1990s and 2000s. The recent rise of populist politics has seemingly deepened ideological and cultural polarization, with culture war conflicts becoming more divisive and pervasive. For many scholars, to understand the current age of populism is to understand the important role that culture – specifically, cultural backlash – plays (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Populists like President Donald Trump, some argue, have “pioneered a new politics of perpetual culture war” where,

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just about every policy issue is a wedge issue, not only traditional us-against-them social litmus tests like abortion, guns, feminism and affirmative action, or even just the president's pet issues of immigration and trade, which he has wielded as cultural cudgels to portray Americans as victims of foreign exploiters. These days, even climate change, infrastructure policy and other domestic issues normally associated with wonky panels at Washington think tanks have been repackaged into cultural-resentment fodder. (Grunwald, 2018)

While scholarly research on the influence of populism on the contours of culture wars is still playing catch-up with popular commentary, the political battle lines identified by Hunter appear to have hardened in ways that dramatize perceptions of social conflict and entrench partisan divides (Davis, 2018).

One of the consequences of this new populist politics is growing political gridlock and dysfunction at the federal level, which invests local governance with particular challenges and opportunities. America's deepening partisan divide now often stops the country's chief political leaders from reaching meaningful consensus or making difficult decisions for the nation as a whole. Against this backdrop, some commentators have called for a constitutional localism that would shift more political decisions and authority down the federal ladder (Hais et al., 2018). Others have used the situation to repeat their claims about federalism's virtues. But, according to the likes of Somin (2019a), it has been Trump who has done the most to make federalism great again. Indeed, as he points out, one unexpected consequence of Trump's presidency is that it has helped even progressives rediscover the merits of limiting federal power. As the legal fight surrounding so-called sanctuary cities – or local jurisdictions that have disregarded federal policy to deport undocumented immigrants – showed, there is growing support among progressives and conservatives alike for the view that states and localities can and sometimes should go their own ways (Somin, 2019b).

This Element seeks to critically evaluate, advance, and rejuvenate research on local government and culture wars in light of these developments. Following Sharp's own methodology of "conceptual clarification," we aim to ascertain whether her established typology of local government responses and explanations constitutes "a comprehensive listing of governmental roles in such controversies and whether the conceptualization of any of the roles requires refinement" (Sharp, 1999b, p. 7). In doing so, we find the need to extend her typology to include four additional categories of responsiveness that bring into clearer view the peculiarities of culture war politics and the different ways in which local governments and local government officials can be implicated in them. Specifically, our updated typology introduces an analytical dimension of

ambiguity which acknowledges that local governments can respond to culture war controversies in subtle, often opaque ways that are neither self-evidently supportive nor unsupportive of status quo challengers; it also draws attention to new dynamics of local governance. The first new category we introduce is Unintentional Responsiveness, which recognizes that local governments can sometimes be swept up in a culture war issue without overtly intending to respond to it. Our second new category, Incremental Responsiveness, identifies the small and often piecemeal ways in which local governments can respond to a cultural or moral controversy without being overtly wedded to culture war conflict. The third new category is Nonresponsive Responsiveness, which recognizes that culture wars sometimes compel seemingly contradictory policymaking at the local level which boils down to the need to balance competing political claims. Finally, we introduce a fourth new category of Local Activism, which draws attention to new and emerging ways of doing politics at the local level that link local governments with a variety of nongovernmental actors, partners, and institutions.

Shifting dynamics at the federal level and increasingly incendiary cultural conflicts present unprecedented new challenges for local governments, particularly as they are called to govern unfamiliar issues that would have once been considered well outside of their remit. Now is thus a pertinent time to revisit and rethink the various ways local governments can respond to culture war clashes. Moreover, these developments invite a slight shift in focus, away from simply explaining “urban politics through culture” and instead seeking “to understand, interpret, and theorize the role of cultural conflict in producing politics in the city” (Sharp and Brown, 2012, p. 395).

1.2 Contribution, Case Studies, and Structure

In pursuing this line of inquiry, we contend that this rejuvenation should extend to local politics and culture wars beyond the American context. Presently, the literature in this realm is almost exclusively focused on the American experience. But the United States is not the only country where culture war conflicts have presented local governments with thorny policy dilemmas (Cochrane, 2004; Pruijt, 2013; Koch, 2017). Different as these contexts and debates may be, cross-national comparison can broaden empirical and theoretical understandings of cultural controversies and how they play out in different federal political systems. Indeed, in a rapidly globalizing world, many of the culture war issues that local governments must deal with are global in scope (i.e. climate change) or have parallels in other countries (i.e. same-sex marriage). As such, adding comparative scope allows scholars and practitioners to draw

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potentially instructive insights from other contexts dealing with similar struggles and issues. With a noted absence of “strong theory” to explain variation in local government roles in culture war conflicts (Sharp and Brown, 2012), a comparative perspective is also valuable in its own right.

Our study draws together American and Australian experiences, which share sufficient similarities to make their differences illuminating. Similar to the United States, Australian local governments sit at the bottom of the federal hierarchy (Brown, 2006) – although they are typically much weaker than their American counterparts, commanding less resources and with a more restricted mandate. Not recognized in the Commonwealth Constitution, local governments in Australia are largely dependent on higher governments for resourcing (Aulich and Pietsch, 2002; Grant and Drew, 2017). Local governments’ share of own-purpose public expenditure is about 6 percent of total government spending in Australia compared to 24 percent in the United States (Brown, 2008, p. 439); among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, Australian local governments have the fourth lowest share of taxation (Bell, 2006). Australian local governments also do not oversee areas such as education and policing, which are the purview of state governments (Dunn et al., 2001; Gibbins, 2001). Instead, their roles are largely restricted to the administration of infrastructure and property services, health and community services, planning and development, water and sewerage, and selected cultural and recreation facilities. Finally, compared to America’s 89,000 local governments, Australia only has 537.

Despite this, Australian local governments have not shied away from nationally contentious cultural and moral disputes. While the recent expansion from “services to property” to “services to people” is yet to shift dominant perceptions of local government as purely concerned with the “three Rs” of rates, roads, and rubbish” (Dollery et al., 2010), some Australian local government scholars believe that more local governments are now “place-shapers” (Dollery et al., 2008; Grant and Dollery, 2010). This conception sees local governments as champions of their areas and shapers of local identity and interests – both cultural and economic – in association with other governments, nongovernmental organizations, and private interests. Australian local governments can be understood as place-shapers to the extent that they engage, in limited ways, in “building and shaping local identity,” “representing the community, including in discussions and debates with organisations and parts of government at local, region and national level,” and “maintaining the cohesiveness of the community” (Dollery et al., 2008, p. 492). Together, these functions demonstrate the decidedly political and ideational roles Australian local governments play (Grant and Drew, 2017, p. 159). It is particularly against this backdrop that

local governments have embroiled themselves in a variety of culture war issues, ranging from affordable housing, climate change, same-sex marriage, transgender rights, and the treatment of asylum seekers to employment (Gibbs, 2017; Slezak, 2017; Altmann et al., 2018). Australian local governments' comparative weakness only makes these interventions more intriguing.

Moreover, Australia's culture wars are closely aligned to those in the United States and sometimes follow closely in their footsteps (George and Huynh, 2009). If we are interested in how cultural conflict shapes local politics, as Sharp and Brown (2012) suggest, then this makes Australia a natural point of comparison with the United States. On both sides of the Pacific, as George (2009, p. 3) notes, culture wars thrive because "struggles for material survival have been largely overcome" making disputes over "post-material things" like culture, values, and identity more influential in shaping public debate. The histories and cultural developments of the two countries have intersected at various points in time as well. McKnight (2005, pp. 142–143) explains:

Both are new nations in historical terms, which began as colonies of the British. Both are settled lands which were inhabited by societies of Indigenous peoples. Both developed industrially and politically without all the weight of custom and culture of tradition-bound societies in Europe. Both underwent a culture revolution in the 1960s and 1970s which questioned the role of women, rejected authority and established cultural identity as a central political concern.

Recent years, too, have seen culture war conflicts become more incendiary in Australia, with the middle ground seemingly out of reach on numerous cultural and moral issues as a more populist style of politics takes hold at the federal level (Davis, 2018). While populism in Australia has a distinct trajectory and manifests differently than in the United States (Moffitt, 2017), a notable point of coalescence between the two is that populist politics have breathed new life into nationalist causes. Müller (2019) writes that, among other things, the "populist art of governance is based on nationalism (often with racist overtones)." This has served to reanimate national culture, identity, and values as a significant culture war front in both countries.

1.2.1 Case Studies

In line with this, our Element explores two significant if underexplored comparative case studies: the respective American and Australian local government responses to culture war conflicts concerning Columbus Day and Australia Day. Local governments in the United States and Australia have played strikingly similar roles in these controversies, with many taking the lead – often to much

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public and political consternation – in changing or cancelling holiday celebrations in recognition of the harmful legacies of European colonization on indigenous peoples. Given that they address ostensibly national issues and federal public holidays, these two case studies can be particularly revealing of how cultural conflicts affect local and city politics. Along with the development whereby local and state politics have become nationalized in important ways (Schleicher, 2017; Hopkins, 2018), citizens now regularly conflate local and national politics and see their own backyards as a political battleground of national identity, culture, history, and values (Hartman, 2015; 2018; Somerville, 2015). How these cultural battles play out locally significantly impacts the tenor of similar debates nationally, thus offering insightful lessons into contemporary local politics and government.

As new culture war fronts (Liechty, 2013; Carey, 2018), the Columbus Day and Australia Day controversies symbolize the willingness of local governments to take decisive action on issues once considered outside their remit and, in some instances, their jurisdictions. They also represent the politicized role local government can play in culture war conflicts related to “big” issues such as national identity and values. Both in the United States and Australia, local government actions have generated heated debate, even drawing in Presidents and Prime Ministers; in Australia, for example, the Federal Government even used its powers to strip certain local governments of their rights to conduct citizenship ceremonies. Yet, unlike comparable issues like sanctuary cities, which have received significant scholarly, popular, and legal attention (Somin, 2019b), both the Columbus Day and Australian Day controversies remain decidedly understudied and undertheorized. In the United States, scholarship on the Columbus Day controversy has been primarily limited to indigenous studies and American cultural studies (Hitchmough, 2013; Liechty, 2013), with most popular accounts by journalists and other commentators (Phillips, 2016; Murdock, 2018). In Australia, while scholars have highlighted the local level as a “rich site” for ideological disputes over nationalism, identity, and belonging (Dunn, 2005, p. 29), the roles of local government in the Australia Day debates have, with a few exceptions, by and large escaped academic attention (Chou and Busbridge, 2019). This is perhaps not surprising given the general lacuna in systematic research on the intersections of culture wars and local government in Australia. To date, scholarship on culture wars in Australia tends to focus on the federal and national level of politics (McKnight, 2005; George and Huynh, 2009), whereas scholarship on local government tends to overlook its roles and responsibilities in cultural conflicts (Ryan et al., 2015; Grant and Drew, 2017).

In exploring the culture war conflicts concerning Columbus Day and Australia Day, our Element applies Sharp’s (2005) methodology in straddling

the divide between large-N quantitative studies and single government case studies. Sharp's rationale for taking this methodological middle ground is that it offers scholars both a sufficient sample to compare and contrast cities to "yield evidence about the importance of various explanations for different local governmental stances" as well as the capacity to engage in "detailed examination of each one's recent handling" of the morality and culture war issue being studied (Sharp, 2005, p. 9). While large-N studies obviously come with the methodological advantage of generalizability, they typically preclude the capacity to delve deeply into the unique cultural, institutional, economic, and intergovernmental contexts and histories of a given city. Such an approach limits the "historical narratives" that "provide detailed evidence to support the classifications used to compare and contrast the cities' experience" with morality issues, as Sharp (2005, p. 9) argues. Our study suits this approach because our main objective is, first, to explore two exciting new fronts in the culture wars from a comparative perspective and, second, to revisit, test, and revise Sharp's typology. A large-N study might help provide a more systematic or definitive global picture of local government roles in these contemporary culture wars. However, it will not offer us the capacity to "fully and accurately depict" city narratives and developments in order to make an assessment of whether they fit – or do not fit – within Sharp's typology (Sharp, 2005, p. 22).

Specifically, we draw on a sample of ten strategically selected cities – five American and five Australian – whose local government responded to the controversies over Columbus Day and Australia Day in varying ways to enable meaningful comparison (Table 1).

Following Sharp, our city selection first applied a multivariate analysis of numerous cities which had prominent or interesting engagements with the Columbus Day and Australia Day culture war debate. The aim, like Sharp, was to ensure our cities had sufficient "variation on key explanatory variables and minimal correlation between explanatory variables" (Sharp, 2005, p. 22). However, given the comparative focus of our project, we had to deviate from a strict adherence to Sharp's methodology because many of the indicators she utilizes in her multivariate analysis to make sense of US cities (DeLeon and Naff, 2004) do not entirely translate to the Australian context. Sharp employs a multivariable assessment of cities' sociocultural type and economic development status in order to map and select her sample. Recognizing that measures of city culture and economic status differ in Australia, we examined a set of comparable indicators in selecting a diverse sample of cities to study. For economic development status, we took into account the city's population size and median income while for sociocultural type, we considered the percentage of the city's workforce in professional, scientific, technical, or educational