[redacted]

Cultures at War: Moral Conflicts in Western Democracies. By T. Alexander Smith and Raymond Tatalovich. (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2003. Pp. 302. $19.95)

With the publication of this book T. Alexander Smith and Raymond Tatalovich make a significant contribution to a growing body of literature exploring the characteristics and patterns of politics surrounding what are often called culture war issues, morality politics, or morality policy (including issues as diverse as animal rights, the death penalty, and abortion). Their contribution is achieved in two ways. First, the authors attempt to develop more fully a theoretical framework and embedded concepts for explaining the development and consideration of morality policy, and second, they make use of qualitative case studies across several Western democracies to test elements of the theory. Although other authors have examined some of the issue areas covered, such as gay civil rights, across countries, no existing publications have so systematically attempted to develop a morality policy theory and apply that theory across different countries and governmental institutions. I applaud the efforts of these authors and would recommend the book to social policy scholars, American politics generalists, students of political institutions, and comparative politics scholars.

In the first chapter, the authors nicely summarize their motivations for the book—a notion that moral conflicts are distinctly different from traditional politics involving economic and fiscal issues and that moral conflicts are problematic for democracies. The next section of the book brings together a variety of theories, including social psychological theories of status and symbolic politics, identity politics, and new social movements, among others, from different disciplines to establish a framework for understanding morality policy. They refer to this new framework as more or less a cultural theory of morality politics that not only explains individual level motivations, but also incorporates the importance of formal and informal institutions. In summary, they argue that moral conflicts are battles between groups based on differences in culture and a desire for identity recognition and status.

From this relatively abstract level of a loose framework, the authors in Chapters 4 through 7 explore the dynamics of moral conflicts as they have evolved in several Western democracies, including the United States, Canada, France, and Germany, in the post-World War II era. However, most of their attention is focused on the period from the 1960s to the present. For example, Chapter 4 examines the agenda-setting process in morality politics, with discussions of the key role played by interest groups, elected officials, and political parties. In this chapter, as well as Chapters 5 through 7, the authors provide supportive evidence based on examples from their case countries. So rather than explore each case

country separately, the authors incorporate the cases as they discuss the roles of various institutions, or address specific moral conflicts such as abortion. Although this method of case study analysis is intriguing, and could potentially provide a clearer picture to the reader than a more traditional set of case studies, the authors do not fully tie all of the material together in the concluding chapters.

Indeed, as we approach the conclusion, the key findings the authors tend to focus on are that moral conflicts are not only hurtful to democratic institutions, but they also encourage an antidemocratic process of policy making that is driven by special interests and elites, rather than by the behavior or preferences of the mass public. And more often than not, the problematic mesh between moral conflicts and the democratic process is the fault of left-wing political actors rather than those on the right. Although their evidence does tend to support these conclusions, and many readers will perhaps find these conclusions as the key, if not uncomfortable, points to take away from the book, I was somewhat disappointed that the authors seemed to have lost track of their stated goal of developing a culture based status identity theory of moral conflicts in politics. In fact, as the authors summarize their findings concerning changes in public opinion over time on morality issues, they develop completely new categories, such as futuristic shift, to describe potential shifts of public opinion, and in some cases, only weakly rely on the theoretical arguments made early in the book.

I found much of value in this book, including the nuanced and detailed descriptions of how specific governmental institutions have addressed moral conflicts. I came to believe that the relatively unsatisfying conclusion was in part a result of the authors' distraction with a theoretical debate over whether morality politics concerns the redistribution of values, the regulation of behavior, or some combination of the two. The authors go to great lengths, starting at the beginning of the book, to argue that morality politics has little to do with the redistribution of values. They interpret the redistribution of values to mean that some group or movement desires government action to impose its values on the general population and/or some target group in the population. This interpretation, I believe, is misguided, and it is all the more frustrating because it distracts the authors from more clearly testing their proposed theoretical framework.

The redistribution of values argument that has been a hallmark of the morality politics literature is not a suggestion that some group actually wants to change the values of the population, but instead that the group seeks to have its values, which previously have not been explicitly endorsed by the government, enshrined in law. Whether the change in law leads to a change in hearts and minds matters little to those groups seeking government endorsement of their culture, or identity, or to enhance their perceived status in society. In fact, seeking government endorsement for this purpose is precisely what the authors focused on at the start of their book. Nevertheless, the book does take us one step further in developing a more coherent theory for explaining moral conflicts in politics.

Donald P. Haider-Markel, *University of Kansas*