

Public opinion and policy responsiveness in Australia

The case of same-sex marriage

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- ▶ Our research examines congruence between public opinion and policy positions taken by legislators on the issue of same-sex marriage.
- ▶ In keeping with the theme of this conference this policy area represents a significant social transformation of our time: change to the institution of marriage. Same-sex marriage has been legalized in 20 countries, but not Australia despite majority public support. We look at why (from one angle).
- ▶ The scholarly literature examining the nexus between public opinion and policy responsiveness is very limited in Australia. As such we look to the USA for precedence (Lax and Phillips, 2009; Haider-Markel and Kaufman, 2006).

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Representative democracy and public opinion

There are normative and practical reasons we might believe legislators respond to public opinion when forming their own (publicised) policy positions.

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There are normative and practical reasons we might believe legislators respond to public opinion when forming their own (publicised) policy positions.

Normative

The link between public preferences and policy outcomes is a critical element of representative democracy (Key 1961, Dahl 1989, p. 95).

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Practical

Elected officials require public support for (re)election and because they typically desire to hold office they should be responsive to the electorate's preferences (Downs, 1957; Mayhew, 1974; Maestas, 2000; Enns, 2015)

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However, there are reasons we may believe legislators may not adopt positions congruent with public opinion.

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However, there are reasons we may believe legislators may not adopt positions congruent with public opinion.

Burkean behaviour

Legislators believe they have a responsibility to adopt the positions they believe are correct, rather than popular.

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Status quo bias

Path Dependence of policy, with some groups perhaps having (near) veto-like powers over policy change, and with altering the status quo therefore being harder than maintaining it (Gilens, 2012).

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Parties as interest aggregators

Political parties may be better characterised as policy maximising interest aggregators, rather than office-seekers.

Policy preferences of actors within the parties act as centrifugal forces, pushing them apart on key issues (Wittman, 1973; Roemer, 2001; Gilens, 2012).

According to these frameworks, the parties may ignore public opinion on matters that are important to their goals, when they can.

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Salience

The ability (and willingness) of legislators to ignore majority opinion in any of the above frameworks may be increased if that issue has low salience (Lax and Phillips 2009, Haider-Markel and Kaufman 2006, p. 178). They may also not know what the public thinks (less likely on same-sex marriage).

In the Australian context, this may have reduced the pressure on MPs to provide congruent policy. A 2013 election poll found 57 per cent of respondents stated this issue was not important at all in determining their vote choice.

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A rich stream of political science scholarship has examined various elements of representative democracy to understand how voter behaviour, party competition, election rules and institutional settings, among other factors, shape policy outcomes.

Our inquiry adds to the sub-field of this scholarship and contributes to the literature examining the connections between public opinion and policy responsiveness. More recent academic works has established quite a strong interplay, flowing in both directions, between policy and opinion at national and sub-national levels (see Chapter 1 of Soroka and Wlezien 2009). However, little work on this area has been done in Australia.

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- ▶ Same-sex marriage classically labeled as morality issue.

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- ▶ Same-sex marriage classically labeled as morality issue.
- ▶ Morality issues are useful for study of public opinion and policy responsiveness. Easy for voters to understand and to have an opinion

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- ▶ Same-sex marriage classically labeled as morality issue.
- ▶ Morality issues are useful for study of public opinion and policy responsiveness. Easy for voters to understand and to have an opinion
- ▶ Link between media salience and policy responsiveness (Soroka and Wlezien, 2009).

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- ▶ Same-sex marriage classically labeled as morality issue.
- ▶ Morality issues are useful for study of public opinion and policy responsiveness. Easy for voters to understand and to have an opinion
- ▶ Link between media salience and policy responsiveness (Soroka and Wlezien, 2009).
- ▶ We expect that if there is a positive relationship between public opinion and policy responsiveness, which is emphasized under conditions of media salience, then this link should be observed for same-sex marriage in Australia. However, voters rate the issue as less important, could make it easier for parliamentarians to ignore (as outlined earlier).

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Same-sex marriage in Australia:

- ▶ Apparent lack of congruence (majority support, failed bill in 2012, little legislative action since).

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- ▶ Apparent lack of congruence (majority support, failed bill in 2012, little legislative action since).
- ▶ Relative salience (although perhaps not enough to force congruence).

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Same-sex marriage in Australia:

- ▶ Apparent lack of congruence (majority support, failed bill in 2012, little legislative action since).
- ▶ Relative salience (although perhaps not enough to force congruence).
- ▶ Substantial data on public opinion.

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Same-sex marriage in Australia:

- ▶ Apparent lack of congruence (majority support, failed bill in 2012, little legislative action since).
- ▶ Relative salience (although perhaps not enough to force congruence).
- ▶ Substantial data on public opinion.
- ▶ Two major parties, a number of minors. Positions of parties and legislators generally known.

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Our data

We draw on the 2013 Vox Pop Labs data collected during Australian federal election (Vox Pop Labs, 2016).

Usable $N = 601,550$. Allows us to estimate public opinion in all 150 house of representatives districts.

From these data we used responses to the statement Marriage should only be between a man and a woman as the outcome. This was a five category Likert scale, coded from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree, collapsed to binary measure of opposition.

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Measurement

We use MRP to estimate opposition in each electorate. This is done using voters' age, education, gender, birthplace, religion, as well as district-level median age and income, proportion of population living with same-sex partners, overseas born population and population density.

Overall estimated opposition to same-sex marriage was 33 per cent. This result is consistent with a number of surveys conducted at the time (see for instance Essential Media Communications 2016 and Coorey 2015).

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Results

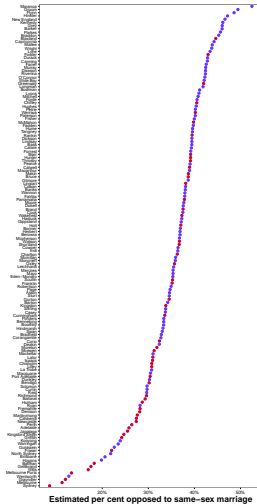


Figure: Probability of opposing same-sex marriage by electoral division.

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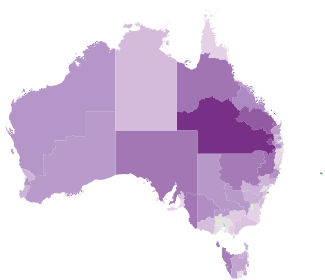


Figure: Map of estimated opposition towards same-sex marriage by electoral division (purple = higher opposition, green = lower.)

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Public opinion and legislators positions

Two sets of data for MPs positions:

- ▶ Vote on *Marriage Amendments Bill 2012*, which would have removed the prohibition on same-sex marriage in the Marriage Act.
- ▶ Public statements on positions since.

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2012

First:

$$Pr(y_{Labor.12} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(X_i\beta) \quad (1)$$

$$Pr(y_{Coalition.12} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(X_i\beta) \quad (2)$$

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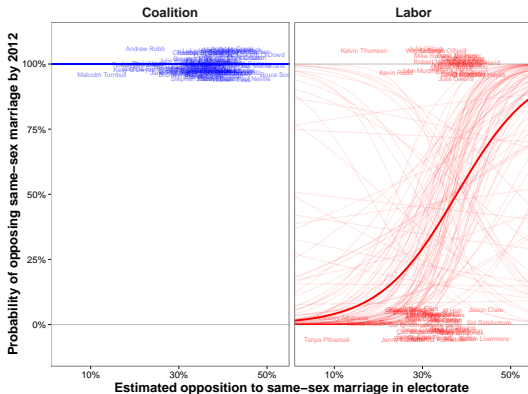
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2012

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Then:

$$Pr(y_{Labor.16} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(X_i\beta) \quad (3)$$

$$Pr(y_{Coalition.16} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(X_i\beta) \quad (4)$$

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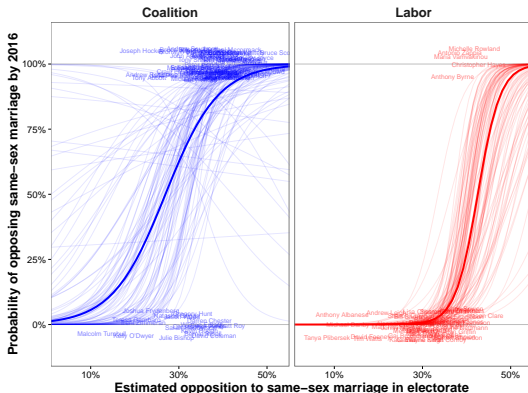
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2016

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Change between 2012 and 2016

Finally:

$$Pr(y_{Labor.change} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(X_i\beta) \quad (5)$$

$$Pr(y_{Coalition.change} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(X_i\beta) \quad (6)$$

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Using these data and methods, we found that legislators are generally responsive to public opinion (on this issue).

Compared to other parliamentarians of the same party, those representing electorates estimated to have higher levels of opposition to same-sex marriage were more likely to publicly oppose changes to the Marriage Act.

However, we also found evidence for the idea that they do tend to hold a status quo bias, and that they represent the interests of other policy group besides the general public. In both the 2012 parliamentary vote on same-sex marriage, and in the data on MPs positions collected later, it required far less than majority opposition in a given electoral division for the parliamentarian representing that area to have a 50 per cent or greater probability of opposing same-sex marriage.

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Further, there is clear evidence that the Coalition has generally represented the preference of interest groups opposed to same-sex marriage, and Labor MPs becoming increasingly supportive.

Despite this, we not only found a large and consistent relationship across both major parties and time between the estimated preferences of a legislators constituents and their public position, but also that the congruence between the two has increased since 2012.

This may suggest that the enduring majority support for same-sex marriage over the past decade is slowly overwhelming any possible status quo bias or the preferences of policy-motivated party actors.

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