

Attitudes to same-sex marriage and civil unions

A nation divided

The legal recognition of same-sex relationships has been on Australia's political agenda for several years. Australian federal law has been amended numerous times to afford same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual couples in areas such as taxation, employment and health. Yet a national civil union or marriage scheme has not been made to include same-sex couples. By state law, gay couples can join in civil partnerships or registered relationships in Tasmania, Victoria, ACT, NSW and Queensland. The Marriage Equality (Same Sex) Act 2013 was recently passed in the ACT, the first Australian state to legalise same-sex marriage, however the Act was repealed after the High Court ruled it was invalid.

More than half of the Australian public in 2011 (57%) were found to be in support of same-sex marriage¹. How does this compare to the attitudes of church attenders? In late 2011 as a part of the 2011 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant church attenders were asked the following question:

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Same-sex couples should be able to marry

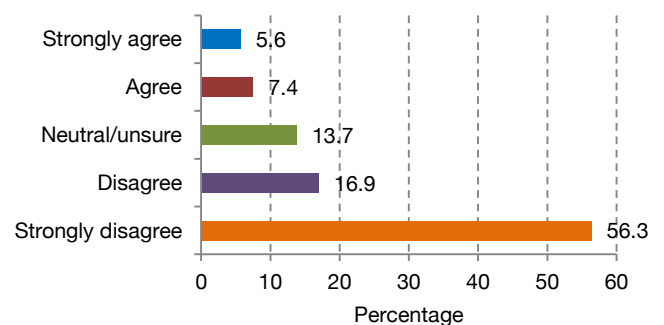
Same-sex couples should be able to register their relationships as civil unions

Overall results

As shown in Figure 1, the majority of Australian church attenders disagreed or strongly disagreed with same-sex marriage (73%), and only a small proportion agreed or strongly agreed (13%). It appears that much less support for same-sex marriage can be found in churches than among the Australian public. Attenders were more accepting of civil unions, with 12% strongly

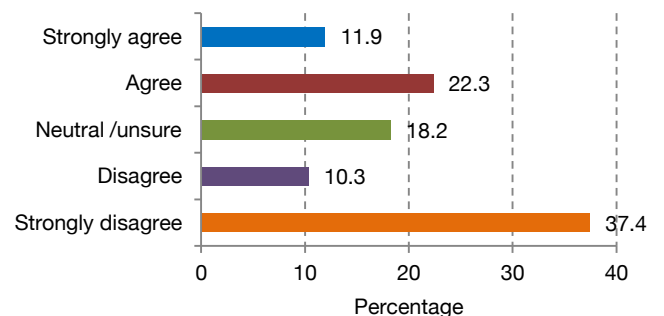
agreeing and 22% agreeing they should be legalised (see Figure 2). However, a large proportion still opposed this alternative to marriage – 10% disagreed and 37% strongly disagreed. A further 18% were unsure as to whether they supported civil unions or not.

Figure 1: Attitudes to same-sex marriage



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey 0 v2 (n=1,232).

Figure 2: Attitudes to same-sex civil unions



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey 0 v2 (n=1,225).

Demographics

The majority of every age group (split into 15-19 year olds and subsequent decades) disagreed with same-sex marriage, although this was only just the case for 15 to 19 year olds (56% disagreement). This age group also had the highest amount of attenders who were neutral/unsure about this issue (27%, the next closest being 40-49 year olds with 16%). Views about civil unions differed little between age groups.

¹ <http://www.starobserver.com.au/news/greens-seize-on-marriage-poll/47780>

Men and women differed somewhat in their views about same-sex marriage. Men were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree (77%) than women (70%), with women more unsure (16%) than men (11%) about the issue. Men and women did not differ significantly in their views about civil unions.

Attendees with a university education were more likely than attendees with less education to agree with same-sex marriage (see Table 2). Those with a trade certificate or diploma were the most likely to disagree (81%). Attendees with a degree were more than twice as likely as attendees with only schooling to agree with same-sex civil unions (47% compared to 23%).

Table 2: Attitudes to same-sex marriage and civil unions by education

	Education		
	School	Trade cert/ diploma	Degree
Same-sex marriage	Percentage		
Agree/Strongly agree	11	10	18
Neutral/unsure	15	9	16
Disagree/Strongly disagree	74	81	67
Civil unions			
Agree/Strongly agree	23	33	47
Neutral/unsure	20	17	18
Disagree/Strongly disagree	57	50	35

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,213 to 1,216)

Religious practice

Newcomers to church life within the last 5 years were more likely than other attendees to agree with same-sex marriage (24% vs. 12%) and civil unions (44% vs. 34%).

The more frequently churchgoers attended church, the more likely it was that they disagreed with same-sex marriage and civil unions. Seventy six percent of those who attended weekly disagreed with same-sex marriage, compared to 59% of those who attended less frequently. Regarding civil unions, 51% of those who attended weekly or more often disagreed, compared to 28% of those who attended less frequently.

Denominational differences

Attendees from all denominations were more likely to disagree with same-sex marriage than agree, however views nonetheless differed strongly between denominations. 'Other Protestant' attendees were the most against same-sex marriage, with 91% disagreeing

or strongly disagreeing. The Uniting Church had the greatest proportion of attendees in favour of same-sex marriage, with over a quarter (26%) agreeing or strongly agreeing with it.

Attendees from every denomination except the Anglican and Uniting Churches were more likely to disagree with civil unions than agree with them. Forty two percent of Anglicans and 53% of Uniting attendees were in favour of civil unions. Pentecostal attendees were the most conservative on this issue, with 72% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Anglican attendees were the most likely of any denomination to be neutral or unsure.

Table 3: Attitudes to same-sex marriage and civil unions by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
Same-sex marriage	Percentage						
Agree/Strongly agree	13	9	16	13	5	26	3
Neutral/unsure	11	6	19	12	7	18	6
Disagree/Strongly disagree	76	85	64	75	88	56	91
Civil unions							
Agree/Strongly agree	42	25	39	22	17	53	26
Neutral/unsure	29	16	19	18	11	12	19
Disagree/Strongly disagree	29	59	42	61	72	35	56

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,225 to 1,232)

Summary

Church attendees appear to disagree with same-sex marriage much more than the Australian public. While more accepting of same-sex civil unions, strong opposition to this alternative to marriage was also present in the results. Younger attendees, the highly educated, newcomers and infrequent attendees were the most likely to support same-sex marriage and civil unions. Results varied particularly strongly as a function of denomination, with evangelical Protestants most opposed.

Data sources

Powell, R., (2014) [computer file], 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2. Sydney, Aus: NCLS Research.

Citation

Hancock, N., Pepper, M. & Powell, R. (2014) Attitudes to same-sex marriage and civil unions, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 14015. Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press.