
The Role Of Social Media In Legalisation Of Same Sex Marriage In Australia

Civic participation involves individuals advocating to make a change in the lives of the public and wider community through both political and non-political methods. Civic participation has played an integral role in the legalisation of same sex marriage through things such as social media and celebrities advocating for change, pride festivities such as the mardi gras and individuals from the community supporting the issue.

Social media is an integral part of modern society and has had an immense impact on the legalisation of same sex marriage. This is due to some celebrities using their platforms to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, and thus influence their followers too. In her book "Same Sex Marriage and Social Media: How Online Networks Accelerated The Marriage Equality Movement", Rhonda Gibson writes about how social media has addressed the issue of equality and marriage within the LGBTQ+ community. Some scholars are incredulous that social media should be considered political engagement. Malcolm Gladwell (2010) argues that the weak connections between people on social media are too inadequate to create the engagement needed to produce actual change, thus implying that social media essentially does not have an effect on the legalisation of same sex marriage (Gibson, 2018).

Despite this, however, civic participation on social media for the past 10 years has increased greatly, and campaigns launched solely on social media have gained great traction. The "Say Yes" Campaign was one of them, with millions of people around the world lobbying social media to allow the legalisation of same sex marriage. Openly gay celebrities such as Colton Haynes and Neil Patrick Harris as well as Australian celebrities like Margot Robbie and Chris Hemsworth showed their support online, thus increasing awareness of the issue, resulting in more people lobbying for the campaign.

Social media plays a vast role in civic participation in that it allows the general public to access and engage with politics with more ease and decide which political ideas they will associate themselves with. This particularly advantageous for the Same Sex Marriage movement as it provides the ease of civic participation with essentially a click of a button. Individuals may effectively become civic participants through a tweet posted or a Facebook post written, and these posts eventually led to the government announcing the introduction of the plebiscite in 2017, which thus elucidates the true influence of civic participation on the legalisation of same sex marriage.

Social events and pride festivities have also assisted in the legalisation of same sex marriage. The first Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras took place on the 24th of June 1978 and it was intended to be a peaceful protest against the criminalisation of homosexuality. However, 53 people were arrested, and their names, addresses and workplaces were published by the Sydney Morning Herald, resulting in malicious beatings (McCrossin, 2019). Despite this, the Mardi Gras celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2018. This event is integral to the LGBTQ+ community as it provides a safe space and platform for speaking about the injustices committed against the community as a whole, including the legalisation of same sex marriage within society. Julie McCrossin, an outspoken advocate for Marriage rights, spoke of the first Mardi Gras, saying

that: “I wouldn’t describe it as a success. I would have described it as a traumatising experience because there was so much violence and people were actually hurt. It was intended as a celebration. Those who had been arguing for a gentler approach were shocked by the reaction they got.” (McCrossin, 2019). Despite the failures of the first Mardi Gras, it lives on today, and has had an immense influence on civic participation in raising awareness of the legalisation of same sex marriage. It has allowed LGBTQ+ youth to express their concerns about legislation protecting their community as well as lobby for increased rights and freedoms.

Although it is thought that contemporary society has accepted the LGBTQ+ community as equals, however that is still to be achieved. Attacks are extremely common around Mardi Gras weekend, and many have come close to death because of them. One of these people was Nicholas Bucknell, who spoke to Triple J, saying that his head was “bashed in” and that he thought “this is it. I was going to die” (Dias, 2019). This elucidates that despite the success of Civic participation leading to the legalisation of same sex marriage, Australia still has a long way to go in affording members of the LGBTQ+ community the same rights and freedoms as the rest of society.

In 2017, Australian citizens voted on a plebiscite which was to determine whether same sex marriage would be legalised in Australia. One politician who was determined to put a stop to the plebiscite was Malcolm Turnbull. He claimed that “[Tony Abbott] wants to have a plebiscite on same-sex marriage. I mean, this is ridiculous. The matter’s got to go to parliament” (Greewich and Robinson, 2018). However, despite his concerns, the plebiscite went through and was scheduled for late 2017. The plebiscite was not legally binding and was optional for people to fill out, and when it was announced, campaigns flooded television and social media. The two campaigns were the “Yes” campaign and the “No” campaign, and their premise was to encourage civic participation in order to either legalise same sex marriage or the opposite. This was seen when Jean-Jacques Fiasson transformed his home in Enmore, painting it all the colours of the LGBT flag, and he was recognised Australia-wide and praised for his efforts (Burke, 2017). This plebiscite gave young people in Australia the opportunity to have their voices heard in a way that they never had before, as this was an issue that directly affected almost all of them.

Some reasons why young people feel alienated from the political system in Australia are that they do not understand the system, they are isolated from politicians and the media, and arguably the biggest issue is that there is a widespread belief among young people that one person cannot make a proper difference or change in the community (Hallett, 1999). Because of this belief, the plebiscite aimed to specifically include young people and encourage them to vote, and it worked – according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 81.1% of females and 75% of males aged 18-19 voted in the plebiscite, illuminating the true passion with which young people regard the legalisation of same sex marriage. The courts have the ability to overturn a law if they find adequate reason to do so. For every case that occurs in the public eye, there is some form of civic participation.

In 2013 the Australian Capital Territory passed the Marriage Equality (Same Sex) Act 2013 (ACT). However, in *The Commonwealth v Australian Capital Territory*, the High Court held that the act was inconsistent with the Marriage Act 1961 (Cth) and rendered it “of no use” according to s 109 of the Australian constitution which states that “when a law of a statute is inconsistent with a law of the commonwealth, the latter shall prevail, and the former shall, to the extent of the inconsistency, be invalid” (McDonald and Chambers, 2014). This led to immense public outrage

and protests to no avail. These protests led to the plebiscite, in which the majority of Australians voted "Yes", thus resulting in the Marriage Amendment (Definition And Religious Freedoms) Act 2017 (Cth). This was an act of the parliament in Australia legalising same-sex marriages by amending the Marriage act 1961 (Cth) to allow marriage between two people regardless of gender. It also changed the definition of marriage in the act. Civic participation played an integral role in the implementation of this legislation. It occurred due to pressure being put on politicians from the public as well as protests, campaigns and current events.

In conclusion, civic participation has played an integral role in raising awareness of the legalisation of same sex marriage in Australia. Social media encourages individuals to put their political thoughts and ideas online, which resulted in the majority of the campaigns for the plebiscite happening online. Celebrities using their platforms in order to make a positive change and raise awareness for the issue has also been accommodating to the LGBTQ+ community. Social events and festivities such as the mardi gras have resulted in countless bouts of civic participation due to newfound confidence and support from the wider community. The plebiscite was a direct result of civic participation, and that resulted in the Marriage Amendment (Definition And Religious Freedoms) Act 2017, which achieved the goal that the community has been working towards for a myriad of years.

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