

Community leaders will play a very important role in whipping votes for or against in the same-sex marriage plebiscite. AAP/Melissa Meehan

Chris Mitchell, formerly The Australian's editor-in-chief, got it right recently when he pointed to [social conservatism among many ethnic communities](#) as a key factor in deciding the result of the upcoming same-sex marriage survey. [He noted](#)

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... the truth is, many recent migrant groups from Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu backgrounds will be among the most passionate opponents of SSM.

At the 2016 federal election, two if not three seats went to the government on the back of an unexpected rise in the Christian Democratic Party's primary vote. The preferences then flowed to the Liberals.

These seats had large numbers of voters with a Chinese background. They were hit with a massive Weibo social media campaign by evangelical Christians of Chinese ethnicity targeting fears over same-sex marriage and the Safe Schools program – and the impact [was dramatic](#) .

The power of fear

The “No” campaign has [already linked](#) same-sex marriage with Safe Schools. This linking of the two was perfected in the Chinese community at the 2016 federal election with real effect.

However, [the idea](#), promoted by the likes of Tony Abbott, that all “politically correct” issues can be confronted by voting “no” may prove to be something of an overstep.

The Chinese community, and many religious minorities, [were resolute](#) in resisting Abbott’s and then Malcolm Turnbull’s [push to amend Section 18C](#) of the Racial Discrimination Act. They did not [buy the argument](#) about freedom of speech.

The numbers game

Assuming the government’s [prediction](#) of a survey turnout of at least 50% is correct, the “winner” will need to secure just over 4 million votes from about 8 million people surveyed.

The [2016 Census](#) provides some insight into the numbers of minority community Australians involved in the same-sex marriage vote.

About 2.5 million Christians living in Australia were born overseas. 500,000 have come from eastern and southern Europe, 160,000 from North Africa and the Middle East, 155,000 from the Americas, 400,000 from southeast Asia, 150,000 from northeast Asia, 130,000 from southern and central Asia, and 200,000 from sub-Saharan Africa.

Not all are of voting age, nor are they all Australian citizens. But they do form serious reservoirs of more conservative cultural values.

Looking at Australian citizens of voting age, there are about 8.5 million Christians, about 4.7 million secularists and non-believers, about 300,000 Buddhists, about 230,000 Muslims, 160,000 Hindus, and about 60,000 Jews. If 60% of the believing communities responded “No”, then same-sex marriage could fail.

As the “Yes” vote groups already realise, getting the vote out will be crucial. The “No” campaigners only need to convince those undecided not to vote. So, voting “Yes” becomes an increasingly “brave” act, and one that may be experienced as a serious breach of community norms.

What to expect

[Religious blocs](#) , consisting of conservative Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders, have previously united to confront the UN over birth control strategies, and show their resistance to abortion and similar interventions.

Effectively, that bloc now has the US government [in its corner](#) . They may well be joined by Buddhist and Hindu leaders this time around.

Interfaith meetings [have taken place](#) where religious leaders combined to confront government agencies on the same-sex marriage question, and even the very legitimacy of homosexuality. Where it occurs, the debate is fiery, as was revealed by the opposing submissions from religious leaders and gay activists [from ethnic communities](#) to the Senate inquiry into same-sex marriage.

Community leaders will play an important role among those voters who have poorer English language skills. It's not hard to envisage churches, temples, mosques, synagogues and similar holding working bees, where attendees can be assured they have filled in the forms correctly, and they can then be collected and posted en masse so none are lost.

The [example of grandchildren](#) of retired Jewish families in Florida arguing them into supporting a black Democrat presidential candidate (Barack Obama) in 2008 indicates that strategies can be implemented that minimise the stereotypical attachment of older religious people to conservative values.

However, it is not clear, for example, how younger Muslim or Hindu people will go arguing with their parents and grandparents to support same-sex marriage.

If the voluntary vote survives a High Court challenge [over its legality](#), it may well prove a much more powerful weapon for the conservatives than a compulsory plebiscite would ever have been.

Andrew Jakubowicz does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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