

# Equal Rights, Unequal Impact? The Intended and Unintended Effects of the Same-Sex Marriage Legalisation in Germany on Wellbeing

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## Abstract

While research suggests that the legalisation of same-sex marriage improves the mental and physical health of sexual minorities, its impact on wellbeing remains inconclusive. Additionally, most studies focus on sexual minorities as the primary beneficiaries, overlooking the consequences for individuals who oppose same-sex marriage. I address these gaps by providing causal evidence of the wellbeing effects of same-sex marriage legalisation in Germany, considering both direct beneficiaries and opponents. Using religiosity as a proxy for opposition, the analysis examines life satisfaction and affective wellbeing. Drawing on data from the nationally representative German Socio-Economic Panel, I apply a difference-in-differences approach, exploiting the exogenous nature of the legalisation of same-sex marriage on October 1, 2017. Control group definitions vary by opposition status to assess potential ripple effects. Results from two-way fixed effects regressions indicate no significant change in wellbeing among sexual minorities. However, religious individuals experienced a 0.44% decline in affective wellbeing relative to their non-religious counterparts, alongside an increase in stress of 0.38%. These effects are pronounced among older, male opponents living in rural areas. The findings align with intergroup threat theory, suggesting that the legalisation of same-sex marriage may be perceived as a threat to traditional values, leading to increased stress and lower wellbeing. The results highlight the complexity of progressive social reforms: while designed to promote equality, they may also produce unintended consequences. Future research should account for such heterogeneity, and policymakers need to be mindful of these effects.

*Keywords:* same-sex marriage legalisation; wellbeing; ripple effects; social reforms; policy evaluation; difference-in-differences design