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MELBOURNE

21st century activism:

Active citizenship and community advocacy today

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Activism and a healthy democracy

Social movements are legitimate and important political actors

- Hold governments to account between elections

- Demand change on a range of social and political issues

- Provide an avenue for citizen participation in the democratic process

- Historically have been vital to expanding democratic rights (for workers, women etc)

Have come under increasing attack from governments

- Activists are often dismissed as acting only in self-interest

- Neoliberalism has centred the role of the market over the role of citizens in determining political priorities

- It is more and more difficult for movements to gain traction and achieve change

Active citizenship

‘People acting deliberately to contribute to the civic life of their communities and create positive change’

Acting deliberately and COLLECTIVELY



The rise of digital activism



An 'independent, grassroots community advocacy organisation which aims to build a more progressive Australia by giving everyday Australians the opportunity to get involved and hold politicians accountable on important issues'

Over a million members and over \$10m/year in (mostly) micro donations

Pioneered digital activism in Australia

Has increasingly combined digital and more traditional modes of activism

Has come under relentless attack from Coalition governments – investigated and cleared three times of being an 'associated entity'

Struggled to make an impact in the 2019 election campaign



Civil society as an alternate space of activism

NGOs/civil society have always provided an avenue for active citizenship and political participation

Like social movements their legitimacy as advocates has come under challenge

From Silencing Dissent (2004) to self-silencing (2017)

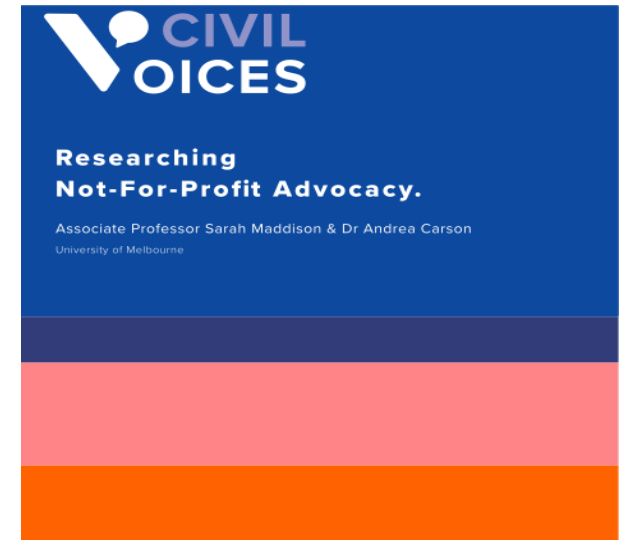
Governments continue to use funding to silence advocacy

Both implied threats and explicit restrictions

State governments more active in silencing advocacy than in 2004

Social media has transformed the way that NGOs engage in public debate

Not a reliable tool for getting a message to politicians





A path of quiet advocacy

Organisations are now 'self-silencing'

- Pursuing path of quiet advocacy, fear of antagonising government

- Board composition

- Managerial not activist

Advocacy work is not funded so is not the priority

69 per cent of respondents believe that dissenting organisations risk having their funding cut

Important implications for Australian democracy

- Marginalised groups are not heard

- The feedback loop to government is broken

Challenges for the future

The need for citizens to be active in social movements and civil society has never been greater

Power is seductive but government is not your friend

Understand what power is and how to build it in your community

Civil society organisations need to get brave again

You cannot rely on changes of government, active, engaged, and activist citizens must organise together to create change



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Thank you

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