

A Win on Marriage for Obama

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Posted: 05/15/2012 12:18 pm

President Barack Obama's statement that he believes in marriage equality could have been sooner and could have been stronger, but it is still significant. While Obama may have been slightly behind the curve on this statement, it is also a reminder of how quickly public opinion has changed for the better on marriage equality. It was only 16 years ago when the last Democratic president, Bill Clinton, announced his support for the discriminatory Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). Clinton was also in the midst of a reelection campaign, but was in a better position regarding the election in 1996 when he made that decision than Obama is now. Nonetheless, outside of the LGBT community and a few other liberals, nobody was too upset about Clinton's decision.

Obama's position on marriage equality changes the policy debate on this issue, probably permanently. Not only is it good to see that the President of the United States supports equality for all Americans, but Obama's statement throws down a challenge for future bigots and enshrines marriage equality as the Democratic position. This will be particularly true if Obama gets reelected. It is hard to imagine a Democratic candidate in 2016 or 2020 taking a position against marriage equality after the previous Democratic president supported it.

The Republican Party, however, will remain in a different situation. Obama's position on marriage equality has forced the Republicans to restate their commitment to a narrower view of marriage, but more calculating Republicans realize that the president has boxed them into a corner, forcing them to strengthen their views in a way that will not appeal to many key swing voters. If Obama is reelected, future Republican candidates for president will not simply have to pledge their opposition to marriage equality as most Republican candidates today do, but will have to commit to either repealing an increasingly recognized right, or at the very least making a rhetorical commitment to support discrimination. Republican candidates already do the latter, but pledging to pro-actively advocate for discrimination is different than simply supporting the status quo which, until last week, is what most Republican candidates have done.

If Obama wins, the Republican candidate in 2016 will likely be caught in the demographic trap of needing to win support from a Republican primary electorate that is older and more conservative than a general electorate that, due substantially to age replacement, is becoming more supportive of marriage equality with the passage of time. Obama's position, to a real extent, has made belief in marriage equality the new norm, opposing marriage equality, therefore, will seem increasingly anachronistic and reactionary with every passing year.

There is, of course, more to be done, and more presidential leadership to be exhibited by President Obama. Obama's statement came only a few days after North Carolina became the most recent state to pass legislation limiting state recognized marriages to those between a man and a woman. It would be good to see Obama back up his position by, for example, pushing for the repeal of DOMA, or otherwise mobilizing the executive branch of government in support of

marriage equality. However, despite arriving at a pro-marriage equality position later than many would have hoped, the president has helped repeal DADT and stopped enforcing DOMA, so it is not too hard to believe that if reelected he will try to do more for marriage equality. At the very least, Obama's statement has made it a lot easier for state officials to take a position in support of marriage equality.

It is very likely that twenty years from now, Obama's statement on marriage equality will be perceived as uncontroversial, a minor thing, or even that his timidity on the issue will dominate the narrative of Obama and marriage equality. That narrative, however, would not be altogether accurate. Many things that seem obvious in retrospect were not obvious at the time; and this is probably true of the president's timing on marriage equality, as well. Despite pressure from many who have been waiting for this affirmation of equality from President Obama up until the time Vice President Biden floated the idea a few weeks ago, it was entirely possible for Obama to have gone through his entire presidency, or at least his first term, without supporting marriage equality and for him to have faced very few consequences for this moral cowardice.

The president chose not to do this. Instead, in the middle of a tough election campaign, Obama chose to do the decent, right and moral thing and to lay down a marker for his party and his country. Importantly, it is now clear that the president did it because it was decent, moral and right but also because it was politically smart. Sometimes politics work out that way.