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June 20, 2013

HUFFPOST GAY VOICES

Obama's and America's Remarkable Evolution on Gay Rights

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In 1935, when President Franklin Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act, giving workers the right to unionize, he described it as a matter of "common justice." He did so as workers around the country were engaged in mass protests and strikes. Union organizers soon began telling workers that "The president wants you to join the union," triggering a major upsurge in union membership and collective bargaining victories.

When Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency in November 1963, as the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, he called on Americans "to eliminate from this nation every trace of discrimination and oppression that is based upon race or color." The next year, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. The following year, as protestors continued to march and demonstrate, LBJ addressed Congress and embraced the movement's "We Shall Overcome" slogan, paving the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Historians will no doubt view President Barack Obama's announcement Wednesday favoring same-sex marriage as an equally historic statement, parallel to those of FDR on workers' rights and LBJ on civil rights.

But like FDR and LBJ, Obama's public endorsement was due to a combination of personal belief and political opportunity. Gays and lesbians are an important Democratic constituency in terms of both voting power and financial contributions. Although nobody believes that homophobia has disappeared, public support for gay rights in general and same-sex marriage in particular has been steadily growing among every demographic group. Even so, Obama took some risks in coming out for same-sex marriage in an election year where a few thousand votes in ten key battleground states could determine the outcome of November's election.

In explaining his changing views on gay marriage, Obama gave credit to his daughters, Malia and Sasha, who have friends whose parents are same-sex couples. "It wouldn't dawn on them that somehow their friends' parents would be treated differently," Obama explained. "It doesn't make sense to them and frankly, that's the kind of thing that prompts a change in perspective."

The gay rights movement has won Americans' hearts and minds. The tide has turned. Opponents can try, but they can't push it back.

This change is the result of two overlapping trends. First, is the dramatic change in attitudes over generations. Support for gay marriage is much higher among younger Americans. A [Pew Research Center poll](#) conducted in April found that 30% of Americans born between 1928 and 1945 support same-sex marriage. Among Americans born between 1946 and 1964 -- the baby-boom generation -- 39% favor same-sex marriage. Among so-called Generation X -- those born between 1965 and 1980 -- 50% support legalization of gay marriage. Among Americans born after 1981, 63% believe that gay marriages should be legal.

Second, and equally important, many Americans have, like Obama, changed their views about same-sex marriage and other issues regarding gays and lesbians. Many people who were born in the 1940s through the 1960s have been forced -- by the rise of the gay rights movement and changes in the broader culture -- to struggle with attitudes towards homosexuality that they once took for granted. The Pew survey shows significant shifts in opinion within each age cohort. For example, since 2001 support for same-sex marriage has increased from 23% to 30% among those born between 1928 and 1945, and from 32% to 39% among the baby-boomers born between 1946 and 1964.

The Pew survey found that overall support for same-sex marriage has increased from 35% in 2001 to 47% this year, while opposition has dropped from 57% to 43%. (Ten percent had no opinion). A national [Gallup poll](#) conducted earlier this month found that 50% of Americans support same-sex marriage and 48% opposed. This is a dramatic change from the 27% of Americans who favored gay marriage in Gallup's 1996 poll.

Surveys conducted by the [Washington Post and ABC News](#) reveal that 52% of Americans now say it should be legal for gay and lesbian couples to marry, up from 37% in 2003.

In the Gallup poll, 65% of Democrats, 57% of independents, and 22% of Republicans favor same-sex marriages. Among religious groups, 51% of Catholics, 38% of Protestants, and 88% of people with no religious identity support legalization of same-sex marriage.

These poll results indicate that the future belongs to the advocates, not the opponents, of same-sex marriage. Soon, conservative politicians and groups will no longer be able to use gay marriage as a "wedge" issue to stir controversy and win elections.

The battle for gay marriage is often compared with the struggle to end the prohibition against marriage between blacks and whites. In fact, Americans' attitudes about same-sex marriage changed much more quickly.

In 1948, when California's Supreme Court legalized interracial marriage (the first state to do so) in *Perez v Sharp*, most Americans opposed it. In the 1950s, when half the states still had laws prohibiting interracial marriage, over 90% of Americans still considered it wrong. By 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Loving v. Virginia*, knocked down state anti-miscegenation laws everywhere, 16 states still had such laws on the books and 72% of the public still opposed interracial marriages.

When Gallup first asked about black-white marriages in 1958, only 4% approved. It wasn't until the 1990s that even half of Americans said they approved of marriage between blacks and whites. In [Gallup's most recent poll](#) on the topic -- conducted last August -- 86% of Americans (84% of whites and 96% of blacks) supported interracial marriage. It may be shocking to some that 11% of Americans still disapprove of black-white marriages (3% had no opinion), but the shift in public opinion over five decades has been steady and irreversible. On this issue, too, the change reflects generational attitudes. Only 66% of Americans over 65 support black-white marriages, but 97% of 18-to-29 year olds do so.

The civil rights movement laid the foundation for the gay rights crusade, which adopted many of its strategies and tactics, including grassroots organizing, protest and civil disobedience, fighting for justice in the courts, lobbying for legislation, and campaigning to elect sympathetic candidates.

After the gay rights movement burgeoned in the 1970s, it took time for public opinion about homosexuals to shift. But as gay activism accelerated, and more and more people (including public figures) came out of the closet, attitudes changed, reflecting a profound transformation in public opinion.

In 1977, when he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Harvey Milk was the first openly gay person to win a major public office. By 1991, 49 openly gay and lesbian Americans served in public office. In 2009, that number had increased to 445, according to the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. Gays and lesbians have been elected mayors of Houston, Providence, Chapel Hill, Cambridge, and Portland, Oregon. There are currently four openly gay House members -- Democrats Tammy Baldwin, David Cicilino, Barney Frank, and Jared Polis.

As more and more public figures -- politicians, entertainers, teachers, judges, journalists, businesspersons, athletes and clergy -- acknowledged their homosexuality, TV sitcoms began to have openly gay characters, and businesses began to appeal to gay consumers, stereotypes were shattered. In 2002, the *New York Times* began to publish announcements of same-sex civil unions and weddings.

As advocates began to put specific issues on the agenda, public support increased for such questions as allowing openly gays and lesbians to teach in public schools, providing health benefits for gay partners, permitting gay couples to adopt children, ending anti-sodomy laws, outlawing job and housing discrimination against gays, funding for research to combat AIDS, and imposing penalties for people who commit hate crimes against gays. In 1993, for example, only 44% of Americans believed that gays should be allowed to openly serve in the military, according to a [Washington Post/ABC News poll](#). By 2010 -- the year that Obama prevailed on Congress to repeal the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" law -- 77% approved of gays serving openly in the military.

A growing number of Americans began realizing that they knew gay people. By 2004, 58% of Americans said that had a friend, relative, or coworker who is gay or lesbian. The last time [Gallup asked that question](#) -- in 2009 -- the number was the same. Gallup discovered that people who know someone who is gay or lesbian are much more likely to support same-sex marriage than people who do not personally know anyone who is gay.

People began to confront their own values and views about a subject that was once taboo in their own lifetimes.

Until the late 1990s, gay marriage wasn't even an issue, and most pollsters didn't bother asking the public how they felt about it. (One exception was the Field Poll, which first asked Californians in 1977 if they approved of extending marriage laws to same-sex couples. By a 59% to 28% margin, they said no.)

But eventually the question of gay partnerships -- civil unions and marriage -- emerged as a topic of public debate and private conversations in every corner of the country. Not surprisingly, in the past decade, support for legalizing gay partnerships has skyrocketed. Initially, the idea of civil unions broke the comfort zone barrier. Americans are still more supportive of civil unions than of gay marriage, but the positive trend for both is indisputable.

Legalization of gay marriage depends not only on public opinion but also on the willingness of politicians and judges to tackle the issue. Gay marriage is now legal in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, New York and Washington, D.C. In February, Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire signed a bill that would legalize same-sex marriage beginning in June, but opponents hope to block the bill and called for voters to decide the issue. In Maryland, Gov. Martin O'Malley signed into law a bill that permits the state's same-sex couples to wed as of January 1.

In most states, it was the opponents, not the advocates, of gay marriage that forced the issue into the public debate. Hoping to whip up fears and energize conservative voters to go to the polls and help elect Republicans, they put measures on the ballots to ban same-sex marriage. In all 31 states where the issue has been put to the voters, they've rejected legalizing gay marriage. On Tuesday, voters in North Carolina approved an amendment to the state constitution to ban same-sex marriage. Minnesota will vote on a state constitutional amendment similar to the one in North Carolina. In Maine, voters will soon cast ballots whether to support same-sex marriage. The Maine measure is the first time that supporters of same-sex marriage have taken the initiative.

So far the state ballot outcomes have been setbacks in the battle for gay marriage. They do not necessarily reflect public sentiment in those states. Instead, they reflect the effectiveness of the opponents of gay marriage in mobilizing voters, raising and spending on ads and other propaganda, and framing the issue to win over "swing" voters.

This was certainly the case in California. In July 2008, the Field Poll found that California voters approved of same-sex marriage by a 51% to 42% margin. But four months later, California voters approved Proposition 8 -- which banned same-sex

marriage -- by a 52% to 48% margin.

What happened? First, a small number of voters misled pollsters (and perhaps even themselves) in voicing support for same-sex marriage, while others may have mistakenly thought that voting "yes" meant support for marriage equality. Second, too few pro-gay marriage Californians bothered to vote. Third, some lukewarm sympathizers were persuaded by TV ads or flyers to change their minds.

When the campaign was over, there was much fingerpointing, but eventually many gay rights activists began to seriously examine what they did right and wrong. Many of the organizers of the anti-Proposition 8 effort acknowledge that they ran a lousy campaign, especially in terms of generating turnout and responding to anti-gay attack ads. They also conducted thousands of interviews to determine who voted against gay marriage and why. That [study](#) found that between mid-September and election day, approximately 5% of voters -- at least 687,000 -- moved to favor the ban on same-sex marriage, mostly parents with children at home.

Yes, there is a hard core of anti-gay Americans who are fervent in their views. Their activism fueled the campaigns against extending wedding vows to gays and lesbians. But, the study suggested, many people who voted against gay marriage are not haters. They support other aspects of gay rights and may eventually change their views on same-sex marriage.

Gay rights supporters know that for public opinion to influence public policy, it has to be mobilized. A vocal minority can have disproportionate influence if they are well-organized -- a lesson the Tea Party has learned well.

Given these trends, is there any doubt that a substantial majority of Americans will soon favor gay marriage -- even in swing states like North Carolina?

In other words, the time when conservatives can use same-sex marriage as a "wedge" issue is coming to an end. For sure, some politicians -- especially in some conservative states, Congressional districts, and state legislative districts -- will continue to find it useful to bash gay marriage in order to win votes. But the days of gay-bashing as a political strategy are numbered.

We've seen dramatic changes in public opinion before -- on such issues as women's suffrage, sexual harassment, interracial marriages, racial and sexual discrimination in jobs and housing, women's roles at home and work, government's role in protecting the environment, fuel efficiency in cars, and disability rights.

In each case, grassroots movements made a big difference. Their role is to put new issues on the public agenda -- to make people think about things they hadn't thought about before. Initially, this makes people feel uncomfortable. It sometimes even triggers a backlash among some people who resist change. But eventually most people come to accept the reality -- and fairness -- of new ideas and behaviors. The radical ideas of one generation become the common sense of the next.

When children born this year reach voting age 18 years from now, they will surely wonder how it was even possible that America once deprived gays and lesbians the right to marry. They will take same-sex marriage for granted.

Hopefully, however, they will learn in their history classes and on TV about the grassroots movement that catalyzed the dramatic changes in public opinion, laws and court rulings that made America a more humane country, especially for the married gay and lesbian couples they call their neighbors, friends, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, and parents.

Peter Dreier is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His new book, [The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame](#), will be published by Nation Books in June.

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mnyegele

1,493 Fans

1 3

Let's stop using the term "Gay rights." because Obama's decision has nothing to do with so-called "Gay rights." Instead let's use the term "human rights", Obama's decision is an advancement of human rights - something that we must cherish and protect.

The GOP once again is showing that they are on the wrong side of "human rights."

Fave Share [11 May 2012 12:45 PM](#) [Flag](#)

[In reply to: mnvegele](#)

ClintBMD

SUPER USER · 651 Fans · Now where did I leave that Micro-bio again?

Thanks for that.

Fave Share [12 May 2012 6:06 AM](#) [Flag](#)

luapmi2

375 Fans

1

There is nothing remarkable about the gay "journey" because it is acceptance by fatigue.

In the same way, Americans aren't outraged by another black man in jail..."big deal it's everywhere."

We have become desensitized to the issue, but, we have not come to believe it is good.

Fave Share [13 May 2012 3:59 AM](#) [Flag](#)

[In reply to: luapmi2](#)

woodrow2012

427 Fans · "An Independent Man of True Grit"

I believe the "Aids virus" that came out in the 80's, was the catalyst that put a scare in the general public. It's been somewhat desensitized now, but many people still think that being gay is pretty risky. Lesbianism, on the other hand, is accepted far more, because it doesn't pose any danger. Plus, most men get a "kick" seeing Lesbians.

Fave Share [13 May 2012 10:06 PM](#) [Flag](#)

Steve Faria

SUPER USER · 9 Fans

1

This seems a box of matches issue that should have been left for some other time. Too much at stake for the incumbent. It would appear no real concern for burnt fingers is shown in this move.

There _is_ a grand contingent that sees nothing wrong with homosexuality, true. I've a nephew in that camp that I love to death. Standing up for equality is not my middle name, but I champion the... [Read More](#)

Fave Share [12 May 2012 4:35 PM](#) [Flag](#)

[In reply to: Steve Faria](#)

JimD1

121 Fans

You can't fight the evolution of consciousness. If two people want to get married, what business is it of mine whether they are of the same gender? I simply can't understand why this is a contentious issue for some people.

Fave Share [12 May 2012 11:09 PM](#) [Flag](#)

demisfine

3,639 Fans · Often correct, NEVER right.

The Mormon Church invested heavily into defeating Prop 8 in CA. Mitt cannot twist on this issue.

There is no way, especially since he came out today in his Graduation Speech at Christ U as recognizing Marriage is only meant to be one man, one woman, that Mitt can pivot to be on the side of progress on this issue.
 Another Blog claims that President Obama yielded an edge to Mitt on this. That Blogger was very, very wrong.
 Americans do not want to write hate into legislation.
 Fair for one is fair for all.
 It's why Occupy has been so successful.

Fave Share [12 May 2012 3:40 PM](#) [Flag](#)

istanbulite

206 Fans

Thanks for the great article. You aluded to one point, but let me be more specific about it. Change in opinion was also a result of neighborhoods. When neighbors know and value and socialize together it changes the myths that occur within our culture. That is relevent for all issues of difference among peoples. I can safely say that all of our neighbors (midwest) loved us as a gay... [Read More](#)

Fave Share [12 May 2012 4:37 AM](#) [Flag](#)

EIBruce

726 Fans

"Opponents can try, but they can't push it back."

Don't be surprised. Their hatred runs deep.

Obviously, the trend of history supports it. It's still an open question whether it's a winning issue this year.

Fave Share [12 May 2012 4:24 AM](#) [Flag](#)

Allene Stucki

123 Fans

4

Some folks would refer to this change of heart as cynical political expediency, and if Romney had done it, they'd characterize it as "flip-flopping".

Fave Share [11 May 2012 7:11 PM](#) [Flag](#)

[In reply to: Allene Stucki](#)

EIBruce

726 Fans

2

Obama never claimed to be anything but "on the fence" regarding this. So it's less of a "flip flop" than just a "flop."

If it were Romney, we'd have past statements from him saying he was absolutely against it before he was for it.

Fave Share [12 May 2012 4:25 AM](#) [Flag](#)

[In reply to: EIBruce](#)

Steve Faria

SUPER USER · 9 Fans

No, EIBruce, I suppose that a fence sitter should be considered way more committed than a flip-flopper. < sarcasm alert > I don't recognize you've got much of a point there.

Fave Share [12 May 2012 4:23 PM](#) [Flag](#)

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Out Military

18 Fans

Great report, thank you. Equality still eludes our gay heroes in uniform. Thanks to DOMA legally married same-sex military spouses are denied health insurance, commissary, housing allowance and other base privileges as compared to their opposite-sex married counterparts. For those interested - <http://OUTmilitary.com> has been providing a supportive environment for friending, sharing and networking between Gay active military, vets and supporters since December, 2010.

Fave Share [11 May 2012 1:36 PM](#) [Flag](#)