



## Obama and gays: a marriage of convenience

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*This is the first of a series of three articles on the issue of same-sex marriage.*

When President Obama made his, by now historic, announcement that he now supports same-sex marriage the reaction nation-wide ranged from praise, relief, to condemnation; an expected mixed-bag on such a hot-button issue.

But, despite the White House's statement that the president had reached the conclusion of his "evolving" position after much deliberation, and consultation and discussion with his wife, and even daughters; and, in particular, Vice-President Joe Biden's own televised remarks of support, nothing could be further from the truth.

No presidential decision is made on the fly, in a vacuum, or in reaction to what any Vice-President, or even what the First Lady said, or didn't say – what actually occurred was the president sending Biden out as a "trial balloon" of sorts, on a major network news program, to gage what the reaction would be; and when would be the right time to actually make his own announcement of support – something which was planned far in advance of the vice-president's scheduled appearance on "Meet the Press."

While the modern vice-presidency may have advanced far from what John Nance Garner, FDR's "veep", thought it was: "not worth a bucket of warm spit"; it hasn't been empowered to steer the president to make a major political announcement.

The Obama campaign knowing that modern presidents need two terms to advance an agenda, are not taking anything by chance with his re-election efforts, and the president himself, and his advisors, were well aware that he needed to shore up his base with two constituents: swing voters, and gays.

Both of these groups had indicated that he hadn't moved far enough to the left of center to gain their votes. In fact, many gay leaders, and their supporters, had publicly expressed their disappointment with the president regarding his handling of issues important to their community such as ending "Don't Ask Don't Tell" and the repeal of the "Defense of Marriage Act" repeal.

As Fred Sainz, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign commented to the New York Times, "He's been on this evolution since November 2011, and it's been getting kind of awkward", and "the word evolution signifies change that has an ending at some point."

Obama's public face may be one of reserve, but privately, as the record has proven, he watches the polls, and knew that this was an area that he needed to improve upon.

**Campaigning v. Leading: Obama's lesson**

In the not too distant past, Candidate Obama was seen by many as one part Abe Lincoln, two parts Messiah, and three parts savant; but that devotion, and ebullition faded as he saw both the realities of the office, and just how much one can realistically do in hide-bound Washington, as evidenced by a recalcitrant partisanship that threatens not only his legislative agenda, but also his legacy.

Modern presidential campaigns aren't cheap and there is a lot of gay money being harnessed to help win not only local elections, but national as well.

Indeed hundred of gay donors travelled to Washington late last month to help “plan strategies and marshal financial commitment for state and federal elections around the country, according to people with knowledge of the meeting” as it was reported in the New York Times.

<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/leading-gay-donors-to-plot-strategy-in-washington/>

These top “bundlers” as they were identified in the Times, are those who volunteer to gather checks from well-heeled friends and associates are a group that the president needs to solidify a base that some observers said was shrinking in light of what many saw as “foot-dragging.”

### **Illinois reacts to the news from its favorite son**

In Illinois, the president's home state, reaction from local officials has been in ideological lock step (also as planned), with Gov. Pat Quinn the first elected official to publicly support the president; and after his own well-documented “hesitations”, he told NBC Chicago that his support was bolstered, in part, because of the success of civil unions. He said, “We've had more than 3,700 civil unions in almost every county in Illinois. I think it's working very well.”

<http://www.care2.com/causes/illinois-gov-finally-takes-stance-supports-gay-marriage.html#ixzz1vFN8AKTC>

While a bill supporting gay marriage was introduced in February by State Reps. Greg Harris (D-Chicago), Kelly Cassidy (D-Chicago), and Deb Mell (D-Chicago), it was withdrawn last month by Harris who said simply said the votes were not there.

Harris's withdrawal of the bill points to the continuing legislative focus on the fall-out of the Great Recession on the Illinois state budget: a deficit of \$8 billion dollars, an amount which includes unfunded pensions of \$83 billion, a still uncomfortably high unemployment rate of 8.8% (although falling in consecutive months) and a draconian reduction in human services that has made Joe and Jane Six-Pack, more nervous than ever about their economic survival.

The bill's language, according to Cassidy's press release, said, in part:

“House Bill 5170 — the “Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act” — would provide same-sex couples and their children with the same marital legal protections, rights, responsibilities, and status as opposite-sex couples. Currently, same-sex marriage is legal in Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, and Washington D.C. The legislation filed on Wednesday would not impact religious institutions.”

<http://www.care2.com/causes/illinois-lawmakers-introduce-gay-marriage-legislation.html#ixzz1vFdgaBpc>

If all politics are local, then Illinois, and its queen city Chicago, are in the thicket of politics on same-sex marriage.

To gain a closer look at marriage equality in Illinois, we spoke with Randy Hannig, Jr. Director of Public Policy, for Equality Illinois, who said that their immediate goal, on the path to marriage equality, is to focus on seeking, and electing “pro-marriage” candidates, through a vetting process that includes questionnaires, personal interviews and community input.

In response to our query why this issue is important to gay and lesbian people Hannig had this to say:

“Because the issue of marriage equality is now front and center in the minds of many Illinoisans, the average person understands just how important full marriage equality is to gay and lesbian couples who want to strengthen their family bonds. As we move closer to making marriage equality a reality in this state, lawmakers and other stakeholders realize that this issue is about committed, loving couples who simply want to be a part of an institution as it already exists.”

**Also, on the record as supporting marriage equality is State Sen., Sara Feigenholtz, who issued this statement through her office, in response to our query, “As a longtime ally of the LGBT community and unequivocal equal rights for LGBT individuals, I am elated that President Obama and Governor Quinn have both committed their backing for marriage equality. This support has been a long time coming, and I am proud that they are demonstrating true leadership in this civil and human right issue.”**

### **Benefits of marriage**

For many, when the word marriage is mentioned it creates thoughts of bridal gowns, elaborate receptions, and often beleaguered budgets; traditionally of the bride’s father, but now a cost shared by both families, not to mention the couple themselves.

But, behind the scent of orange blossoms, and Uncle Lennie on the reception dance floor, the reality is that over 1,138 benefits are conferred on married couples - make those heterosexual married couples.

Many of them are financial, with the most salient being survivor benefits of social security; tax breaks for employers and employees on benefit packages; tax benefits for children, especially the Earned Income Tax Credit, but also the Child Tax Credit; tax gains from the sale of principal homes; family medical leave rights; and health benefits through the COBRA program from previous employers, and many others.

For a summary of the federal benefits of marriage, see this page on the Human Rights Campaign website: <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/an-overview-of-federal-rights-and-protections-granted-to-married-couples>

*The next installment will take a closer look at the benefits of marriage for same-sex couples, Illinois’ previous attempts at marriage equality bills; and lessons learned from both Iowa and New York State, both of whom have successfully produced same-sex marriage equality.*