

Leading by following

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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President Obama seems to be moving in the direction of openly supporting same-sex marriage. But when he spoke in New York last week, he [stopped short](#) of endorsing it--despite pressure from the audience:

As Obama spoke a handful of people shouted out "marriage!" And Obama said, "I heard you guys." He never directly mentioned gay marriage.

Obama said there were those who shouted at him at events about other causes of the gay community, such as the need for anti-hate crimes legislation and for the repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" ban on openly gay military service, and both of those have since been achieved.

In response to an [earlier comment](#) from the White House, Andrew Sullivan [says what we're all thinking](#): "I have no actual doubt that Obama supports marriage equality. His public demurrals are pure politics." Sullivan's analysis is right, too: if LGBT rights advance significantly during Obama's presidency,

He will have *presided* over [that advance], not *led* it. I think that's how he sees the presidency as a whole. As a national community organizer, whose job it is to guide, shape but follow.

I don't, however, agree with the (mild) criticism implicit in Sullivan's remarks. As Ezra Klein [points out](#), "the model of the persuasive president inspiring the country to support what they previously opposed has virtually never been borne out in American political history." Instead, presidential leadership tends to be about recognizing an opportunity in the existing political landscape and skillfully seeing it through. I'd add that this is not only inevitable but desirable in a representative democracy. (Sure, it'd be problematic to let popular opinion determine something as complex as military strategy or fiscal policy--though it's not like leaving it to the experts has produced thrilling results, either.)

It comes down to [theories of change](#): Obama emphasizes a bottom-up approach rather than top-down. There are situations in which this doesn't work well for him, but it's not clear that this is one of them: would it even be helpful for marriage equality if a Democratic president offered his public support before the populace came around?

Americans are coming around, [and quickly](#). Marriage equality [has arrived in New York State](#), and it's on the horizon nationwide--even if Obama doesn't publicly endorse it until he's getting out his pen to sign a repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act.