

The wrong question, but still the right answer

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Early this week, the same video kept popping up on my Facebook wall. It's from a press conference in Greensboro, at which North Carolina NAACP president William Barber (whom the *Century* profiled [here](#)) made a crucial point: "How do you feel, personally, about same-sex marriage?" is the wrong question. The right question is about equal rights under the U.S. Constitution and federal law:

By midweek, my Facebook wall was overwhelmed with comments (and [links](#)) about President Obama's decision to [give the right answer to the wrong question](#). Personally, the president supports same-sex marriage. As a matter of public policy, he says he wants to leave it to the states (since that's always proved a foolproof way of moving the equal-rights ball forward). This is essentially [what Dick Cheney said in 2004](#).

It's hard to predict the political fallout here. Sometimes it takes presidential leadership to get something done; other times the president's name is enough to make an initiative politically toxic. Obama's incrementalism here might be enough to avoid turning same-sex marriage into a major election-year issue, or even to pump up parts of his base without alienating too many folks who might otherwise have voted for him. But it could also lead to a worst-of-both-worlds situation: the same political backlash as if he'd announced plans to aggressively defend same-sex marriage at the federal level, but with none of the policy victories that might come from actually doing that.

Yet the more I pay attention to what gays and lesbians are saying about this, the more I get it: it's a powerful and important thing for the president of the United States to go on TV and say, unequivocally, that he believes that people deserve to be treated as full and equal citizens--people who have long suffered vitriol from their opponents and a low spot on their ostensible allies' priority lists. Public opinion is changing, and Obama--whether in his heart and/or his political calculation--is changing with it. That hopeful arc is worth celebrating, even if the step Obama took yesterday is all symbolism and no policy substance. Ultimately, [change takes plenty](#)

of each.