

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



February 24, 2011

Gay Marriage Seems to Wane as Conservative Issue

By **MICHAEL D. SHEAR** and **SHERYL GAY STOLBERG**

WASHINGTON — President Obama's decision to abandon his legal support for the Defense of Marriage Act has generated only mild rebukes from the Republicans hoping to succeed him in 2012, evidence of a shifting political climate in which social issues are being crowded out by economic concerns.

The Justice Department announced on Wednesday that after two years of defending the law — hailed by proponents in 1996 as an cornerstone in the protection of traditional values — the president and his attorney general have concluded it is unconstitutional.

In the hours that followed, Sarah Palin's Facebook site was silent. Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, was close-mouthed. Tim Pawlenty, the former governor of Minnesota, released a Web video — on the labor union protests in Wisconsin — and waited a day before issuing a marriage statement saying he was “disappointed.”

Others, like Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker, and Haley Barbour, the governor of Mississippi, took their time weighing in, and then did so only in the most tepid terms. “The Justice Department is supposed to defend our laws,” Mr. Barbour said.

Asked if Mitch Daniels, the Republican governor of Indiana and a possible presidential candidate, had commented on the marriage decision, a spokeswoman said that he “hasn't, and with other things we have going on here right now, he has no plans.”

The sharpest reaction came from Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor, in an interview here during a stop to promote his new book, who called the administration's decision “utterly inexplicable.”

A few years ago, the president's decision might have set off an intense national debate about gay rights. But the Republicans' reserved response this week suggests that Mr. Obama may suffer little political damage as he evolves from what many gay rights leaders saw as a

lackluster defender of their causes into a far more aggressive advocate.

“The wedge has lost its edge,” said Mark McKinnon, a Republican strategist who worked for President [George W. Bush](#) during his 2004 campaign, when gay marriage ballot measures in a dozen states helped turn out conservative voters.

Mr. Obama’s move provoked some outrage, especially among evangelical Christians and conservative groups like the Family Research Council. In a [statement](#) Wednesday, Tony Perkins, president of the council, condemned the president’s decision as pandering.

But Republican strategists and gay rights activists said on Thursday that the issue’s power as a political tool for Republican candidates is diminishing. While surveys suggest that Americans are evenly divided on whether the federal government should recognize gay marriages, opposition has fallen [from nearly 70 percent](#) in 1996.

Prominent Republicans like [Dick Cheney](#), the former vice president, and Barbara Bush, daughter of the former president, have defended the right of gays to marry. And Mr. Obama has been emboldened by the largely positive response to his recent, and successful, push for Congress to repeal “[don’t ask, don’t tell](#),” the military’s ban on gays serving openly.

At the same time, the rise of the [Tea Party movement](#), and the success that Republicans had last year in attacking Democratic candidates on economic issues, has pushed the debate over abortion and gay rights to the back burner.

“I don’t think this is the issue that it once was,” said John Feehery, a Republican strategist. “I think that the economic issues are so big that this one pales in comparison.”

In his first two years in office, Mr. Obama drew criticism from gay rights advocates who thought he was dragging his feet on their issues. Those same advocates see the shift as evidence that with an eye on the 2012 campaign, the president has calculated that the benefits of responding to his base outweigh the risks of upsetting conservatives who wouldn’t be voting for him anyway.

Among them is John Aravosis, the founder of [Americablog.com](#), who in a 2009 blog post called the administration’s first legal brief in a Defense of Marriage Act case “despicable” and “homophobic.” Mr. Aravosis said on Thursday he is “much happier” with Mr. Obama, adding: “I think the gay community got to him. I’m not convinced we got to his heart, but I think we got to his political head.”

Others, like Kerry Eleveld, editor of [EqualityMatters.org](#), a new Web site, say Mr. Obama appears to be evaluating the politics of gay rights issues differently since the positive response to the don't ask, don't tell repeal from people on the political left, many of whom have criticized him over issues like health care, [climate change](#) and [immigration](#).

“He got this big bump from it in terms of the progressive base, and didn't get a whole lot of heat, and I think that has given him a little more heart in feeling like L.G.B.T. issues aren't as toxic as a lot of people have been painting them for the past 20 years,” she said.

While Mr. Obama has changed his legal position on the Defense of Marriage Act, his personal views on [same-sex marriage](#) — he opposes it, but favors civil unions — have not changed, the White House says.

A big question is whether they will. Mr. Obama has said his views are “evolving,” and some expect he will announce his support for same-sex marriage as he campaigns for re-election. But that could complicate Mr. Obama's efforts to appeal beyond his liberal base.

“It's still part of Obama's record now,” said Kevin Madden, a Republican strategist, who has advised Mr. Romney. “It's one where it looks like he's changing his position.”

Ashley Parker contributed reporting.