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African Americans respond to Obama's shift on DOMA

By Krissah Thompson and Hamil Harris
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When same-sex marriage was upended in California by popular vote in 2008, gay rights activists pointed to one factor: religious African Americans who came out in record numbers for [President Obama](#) but who also largely [voted against](#) the marriage proposal, according to exit polls.

Two and a half years later, religious African Americans are having a more nuanced response to an announcement last week by the Obama administration that the government will no longer defend a federal law banning same-sex marriage.

Some say the decision is dismaying, though not damning. Others may be rethinking their views, given the influence Obama has in the African American community. And there are those who don't seem to care much at all.

"I don't think that this is a deal breaker in terms of whether we are going to support the president ... but it doesn't help," said Cheryl Sanders, pastor of a small church in the District, who described herself as fairly conservative theologically.

She is among the 68 percent of churchgoing African Americans who oppose same-sex marriage and among the 90 percent who support Obama.

As a question on its own, churchgoing African Americans are against same-sex marriage. But when the issue is wrapped up into a larger political context, it becomes just one of many and generally not the deciding one, said the Rev. Al Sharpton, an Obama ally.

"I remember in 2003 when I said I was for gay marriage. I got a lot of outrage from my fellow ministers," Sharpton said. "I've been on my radio show and on conference calls with other pastors, and I haven't heard any outrage on this position."

Still, blacks remain the ethnic group least likely to support same-sex marriage. Only 30 percent say they back the unions, compared with 53 percent of all Democrats, 44 percent of whites and 41 percent of Hispanics, according to polling from the Pew Research Center.

Anthony Evans, a minister who heads the National Black Church Initiative, had a strong negative reaction to the [announcement](#) that Obama no longer believes the Defense of Marriage Act, called DOMA, is constitutional. After Obama told [Attorney General Eric Holder](#) to stop defending it, the

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minister put out a statement condemning the decision.

"The president has harmed himself on this issue," he said. "He has openly offended the black church, and he didn't need to do it." But Evans plans to continue to support Obama on other issues, such as preventing a rollback of health care reform.

Rev. Henry P. Davis, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Highland Park in Landover, was lukewarm on the issue, saying the issue of gay rights doesn't resonate with his parishioners. "I know that there is a great wrestling nationally around this issue, but [here] people are still mainly concerned about their everyday economic existence, those issues are much larger," Davis said.

An open question, said J. Kameron Carter, an associate professor in theology and black church studies, is whether Obama's shifting policy on same-sex marriage will impact black attitudes on the issue.

"The fact that these initiatives are coming from the government - and not just that - from Obama and Holder, two African American family men, is going to generate conversation among African Americans," Carter said. "This can open a very fruitful and interesting dialogue."

Such conversation is already taking place, said black ministers and church leaders, who have watched Obama's gradual moves on the issue.

Since emerging on the national scene, Obama has carefully handled the issue, saying in 2008 marriage was between a man and a woman. On the eve of the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" last year, he found a new formulation: He was "evolving" on the issue as he met more same-sex couples.

"I think he's showing leadership here, and the leadership will certainly be shown in the [black] community," said Cornell Belcher, a pollster who advised Obama in 2008. "In the community, he's not simply a political leader for black and brown audiences, he's a cultural leader. It's something larger. So he gives [gay rights] a platform that it would have not tended to have."

Patrick Egan, an assistant political professor at New York University, said research indicates that President Bill Clinton was able to bring along a healthy share of his supporters on "don't ask" in the 1990s.

"Given that a subshare of black voters are so loyal to Obama, and he commands a fair amount of respect, my instinct is that a public change of heart on his part to support gay marriage could have a substantial impact on black voters," Egan said.

Sharon Lettman-Hicks, executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition, which advocates for gay rights, praised Obama's decision, saying it makes clear "there is not just one moral authority in the black community."

Rev. Joseph Lowery, the civil rights leader who prayed at Obama's inauguration, has long supported civil unions and predicted black churchgoers will continue to support Obama even if he backs same-sex unions.

"The president has overwhelming support from the black church because people are looking at the bigger picture," Lowery said. "He will not be hurt by one issue."

Sanders agreed, remembering the 1996 political fight over the Defense of Marriage Act.

"I personally don't really remember a whole groundswell of support from African Americans for the Defense of Marriage Act [when it] passed. That was a white evangelical issue," said Sanders, who also teaches Christian ethics at Howard University. "We are tolerant and that might not be a bad thing. It may be ethically messy, but I think that's the best you can do."

Staff writer Perry Bacon Jr. and polling manager Peyton M. Craighill contributed to this report.

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