

The gay-rights week that was

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

May 14, 2012

Last week was a momentous one for gay and lesbian issues. On Sunday Vice President Biden said on NBC's Meet the Press that he is "absolutely comfortable with the fact that men [are] marrying men, women marrying women," and he thinks they "are entitled to ... all the civil rights" of heterosexual couples.

On Tuesday the electorate in North Carolina [voted overwhelmingly](#) for a constitutional amendment that proscribes same-sex marriage and civil unions, despite the fact that the state already has a law against it.

Most momentous of all, President Obama [told ABC's Robin Roberts on Wednesday](#) "that for me personally it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married."

On Thursday Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney apologized for [a youthful indiscretion](#) in which he and some other boys wrestled a classmate to the ground and cut off his hair. The boy subjected to this bullying turned out to be gay.

The biggest news was Obama's revelation about his new stance on gay marriage. His rationale for the change was a bit of a jumble. After a passing reference to Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, the president invoked the Golden Rule. If his point was that Jesus not only died for our sins but also offered his teaching and life as an example of how we should live, point well taken.

Obama then quickly jumped to talking about his family's impact on his discernment process. His daughters have friends whose parents are same-sex couples, and it just doesn't occur to the Obama girls that these families should be treated any differently from traditional families. And clearly, his wife Michelle was out ahead of him on this issue and had influenced him to take a stand.

Obama's experience reflects several realities about how people go about changing their mind about gays and lesbians and same-sex marriage. It underscores the fact that most social change is generational. Young adults and youth think differently

than their parents and grandparents.

Even [evangelical youth](#) show signs of being [more hospitable toward gays and lesbians](#). A friend of mine teaches at an evangelical college that staunchly defends a traditional view of sexuality and marriage. While she supports her college's position, she estimates that 60-70 percent of their students either disagree with the college's stance or have reservations about it.

Few people I know have actually thought their way into a new position on homosexuality. Like Obama, most people have had some kind of personal experience that has compelled them to change their position. Then they come up with a rationale to explain this change. If the heart changes, the head is sure to follow.

The principle of familiarity is important in shaping peoples' attitudes. If you know someone or are related to someone who is gay, or if you know a same-sex couple who defy your stereotypes, you are more likely to conclude that old ways of looking at these people no longer hold up.

Last week may not even deserve a footnote in the history books. But the week certainly underscores the fact that profound social change happens in fits and starts, often with two steps forward and one step back.