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If Only Obama Would Just Mail it in

Matt Welch | January 25, 2011

Gene Healy is always worth reading on SOTU day.

Today is no different:

Today's presidents are, by their nature, "dividers, not uniters," argues University of Maryland political scientist Frances Lee. Her data shows that when presidents highlight a given issue in the State of the Union, they significantly increase the chances it will be decided by a party-line vote.

The modern president has become a lightning rod for partisan sentiment. In large part, that's because the modern presidency has become too prominent and far too powerful.

The original SOTU was a modest affair, in keeping with the constitutional requirement that the president give Congress "Information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient."

The idea was, with a full-time executive and a part-time legislature, the president would be well-placed to gather facts that would help Congress's deliberations. As President Zachary Taylor put it in 1849, "the Executive has the authority to recommend (not to dictate) measures to Congress."

But today's SOTU has become an imperious sermon befitting an Imperial President, short on "Information," long on pomp and circumstance, and larded with exorbitant demands on the public purse. Shaking up the seating chart won't help.



Some say that, given modern technology, there's no going back to the humble communique that the Framers envisioned, and that 19th-century presidents used to have copied and messengered up to the Hill.

But Obama's said to be inseparable from his Blackberry. Couldn't he do us all a favor and just text it over?

As an aperitiv for tonight's lock-in, re-read Healy's 2008 *Reason* classic "The Cult of the Presidency."