



If you don't want Trump's tweets to matter, then shrink the government

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The political world was on the edge of its seat during former FBI Director James Comey's testimony last week, both for the political intrigue of any under-oath revelations and because President Trump insinuated that he'd be live-tweeting his reactions.

Under Trump's reign of Twitter, he's frequently made official proclamations that have been reported to take some of his closest advisers by surprise. He's contradicted the statements of his own White House. It's largely reported that, while some of Trump's missives are run through the standard channels, he delights in taking his message direct to the platform without getting the green light from his staff.

Entire businesses have sprung up around the presidential Twitter account, selling to big companies the idea that there's a proper crisis-response to his mentions of their brand. Some have devised algorithms that short the stock of any company mentioned by Trump. Never before have 140 characters held so much power.

This is not without cause.

The United States presidency is the most powerful office in the entire world. Trump can and does make policy with 140 characters. For most people, Twitter is an off-handed communication medium to follow celebrities and jot down odd thoughts for all the world to see.

In the hands of the president, whoever it may be, it's something that could portend an investigation, a regulation, an international agreement or a piece of legislation.

In any world, and with any form of government, presidential tweets would be important. But what we've done in the past 50 years is imbue the office of the presidency with such inordinate power that Trump's Twitter handle has a lot more power than it could have.

Congress has ceded so much policymaking responsibility to the White House that it matters more if the president tweets about issues where executive agencies like the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission and the Food and Drug Administration hold a lot more power now than they ever had before.

The concentration of power in the executive branch has been a bipartisan exercise for many years now. Our first two presidents this century, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, were widely assailed for happily taking over in policymaking matters when Congress wouldn't. Members of Congress, preferring to demagogue about power grabs than to actually take responsibility for policymaking, were only too happy to allow this to happen.

Cato Institute scholar Gene Healy described the problem as "the cult of the presidency," and that people have been all too happy to allow it to happen. The executive expansions of Bush and Obama have given more power to Trump than the presidency has ever had, to the worry of members on both sides of the aisle.

Tweets from the president are always going to matter. But wouldn't it be nice if, to safeguard our republic against the specter of a man with an itchy Twitter finger, we took a little bit of power back from the executive branch and had the legislative branch, the rest of our elected representatives, have a bit more say in the matter?