

The History of Partisan Seating at the State of the Union

**There is no rule that mandates partisan seating at the State of the Union—but it has become part of the time honored tradition of the House of Representatives.*

- 2011 January 25** - Representatives and Senators from both parties break 98 years of tradition and sit together for the State of the Union.
- 2011 January 19** - Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tells George Stephanopoulos that she “absolutely” would sit with Republicans¹ if she were still serving in the U.S. Senate.
- 2011 January 19** - Illinois Senators Dick Durbin (D) and Mark Kirk (R) decide to sit together at the SOTU.²
- 2011 January 16** - On NBC’s Meet the Press, Senators from both parties—Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Tom Coburn (R-OK)—endorsed the idea of bipartisan seating. “We hope that many others will follow us,” Sen. Schumer said. “Now, that’s symbolic, but maybe it just sets a tone and everything gets a little bit more civil. We believe in discourse in America. We believe in strenuous discourse. We don’t sweep differences under the rug.”
- 2011 January 14** - House Republican Whip Kevin McCarthy announces his support for sitting with members of the opposite Party.³
- 2011 January 12** - Sen. Mark Udall (D-CO) sends a “Dear Colleague” letter to every member of Congress asking Senators and Representatives to end nearly 100 year tradition of partisan seating at the SOTU.⁴ *Note: A current list of co-signers to the letter is available on Senator Udall’s website <<http://markudall.senate.gov/>>.*
- 2011 January 10** - Third Way President Jon Cowan sent an open letter to Congressional leadership suggesting that bipartisan seating at the State of the Union could improve the state of political discourse in Washington.⁵
- 2002** President George W. Bush delivers his SOTU before a divided Congress, which is made available for the first time via web video.⁶
- 1983** Democrats mockingly applaud President Ronald Reagan during a line in SOTU, helping to create the aura of partisanship that surrounds speech.⁷
- 1965** First evening State of the Union Address delivered by President Lyndon Johnson—watched by millions on television. Considered first “modern” SOTU.⁸
- 1947** President Harry Truman delivers State of the Union on television for the first time. Divided government seen live by public. Representatives and Senators continue to be seated by party.⁹
- 1923** President Calvin Coolidge delivers his State of Union before a divided Congress—millions listen on the radio for the first time.¹⁰
- 1913** First time since Thomas Jefferson, President Woodrow Wilson personally delivers State of the Union before a joint session of Congress—Representatives and Senators observe the House’s partisan seating tradition.¹¹
- 1845** Partisan Seating begins. Democrats on one side and Republicans on the other becomes common practice/tradition in the House of Representatives.¹²

Citations:

1 George Stephanopoulos, "Hillary Clinton Endorses Mixed Seating at State of the Union," ABC News, January 19, 2011, Available at: <http://blogs.abcnews.com/george/2011/01/hillary-clinton-endorses-mixed-seating-at-state-of-the-union.html>.

2 Daniel Strauss, "Illinois senators to sit together at State of the Union," *The Hill*, January 21, 2011. Available at: <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/138761-illinois-senators-to-sit-together-at-state-of-the-union>.

3 Naftali Bendavid, "Will House Whips Sit Together for State of the Union?" *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2011. Available at: <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/01/14/will-house-whips-sit-together-for-state-of-the-union/>.

4 Senator Mark Udall, "Letter to Congressional Leadership Regarding Bipartisan Seating at the State of the Union Address," *The Huffington Post*, January 14, 2011. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sen.-mark-udall/letter-to-congressional-l_b_809430.html.

5 Jonathan Cowan, "An Open Letter to the Bipartisan Leadership of the U.S. Congress" *Third Way*, January 10, 2011. Available at: <http://thirdway.org/publications/360>.

6 United States, House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, "House History: State of the Union Address," 112th Congress, 1st Session, Accessed January 21, 2011. Available at: http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/stateunion.html.

7 Walter Shapiro, "State of the Union Preview: The New Drive to Eliminate Partisan Rancor," *Politics Daily*, January 13, 2011, Available at: <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2011/01/13/state-of-the-union-preview-the-new-drive-to-eliminate-partisan/>.

8 United States, House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, "House History: State of the Union Address."

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Charlotte Saikowski, "State of the Union addresses go back to George Washington," *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 1986, Print.

12 Lori Johnston, "Q&A on the News," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 13, 2010. Available at: <http://www.ajc.com/news/q-a-on-the-774869.html>.