

Senate Chamber Desks

Along with the original gavel, the chamber desks are the institution's oldest and most symbolic relics. A New York cabinetmaker fashioned forty-eight of them in 1819 to replace desks destroyed when British troops burned the Capitol five years earlier.¹ The highly polished mahogany desks are arranged in the chamber in four semi-circular rows, with a center aisle dividing the Republican members, who sit to the presiding officer's left, and the Democrats, who sit to the right. When the balance of party membership shifts, desks are repositioned across the dividing aisle.

The principle of seniority determines members' seating options and office space assignments. Freshmen senators are assigned seats in the back row and near the sides of the chamber. Most also receive Senate office building assignments to quarters that are smaller and somewhat less accessible to the Senate chamber than those of their more senior colleagues.² Although not all members consider a seat closer to the center aisle and nearer to the front of the chamber to be a choice perquisite, most do exercise the option of moving from the traditional back-row precincts of freshmen to a more central location as they rise in seniority.

Since the 1930s, the move of both party floor leaders to permanent assignment in front-row desks on either side of the center aisle has motivated other members to seek seat assignments closer to the center of the chamber. (Until 1971, the absence of a voice amplification system also drove members away from remote corner locations.) The front-row seating of the majority and minority leader has allowed them to exercise the tactically vital privilege—accorded to their role as party floor leaders beginning in the late 1930s—of gaining the presiding officer's recognition ahead of all other members.

The Senate maintains a record of desk assignments with information extending back into the nineteenth century. By virtue of their previous occupants, some desks convey greater status than others. Several desks formerly assigned to illustrious senators are specially reserved for the senior senator from that predecessor's state. Missouri Senator Harry Truman consecutively occupied ten desks during his decade of service from 1935 to 1945. In more recent times, when a Democratic senator happens to gain the assignment of one of Truman's former desks, a press release is almost certain to announce to a home-state audience that the senator now sits at a desk once assigned to a future Democratic president.

The process of compiling a roster of previous occupants has been made easier by the Senate tradition under which members proudly inscribe their names in their desk drawers. While some have executed the task with pen and ink, others have sought a more permanent medium by carving their names deeply into the supple wood.

One desk, located near the most heavily used entrance to the chamber on the Republican side, in recent decades has taken on the added function of holding a constantly replenished supply of candy. The so-called "candy desk" serves as a gathering spot for senators who may be more interested in counting heads during a closely contested roll-call vote than in satisfying a late-afternoon need for an energy boost.

Today, all one hundred desks are being sent in groups of ten, during extended recess periods, to a Boston conservator who is restoring them and seeking to determine which of these institutional

treasures were among the original forty-eight.

California senators are permanently assigned large suites because of the sizeable staffs needed to meet the heavy constituency demands of their state—the nation’s largest. Senators’ budgets for staffing and expenses are determined by the size of the state represented rather than the individual member’s seniority.