

Random seating in Parliaments

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Background

Commenting on the “influence of architecture and structure upon human character and action”, Winston Churchill is quoted as saying that “we make our buildings and afterwards they make us” (1924 cited by Saia 2017). Physicality matters. Where we are influences how we act. This is evident in the different forms of communication that arise from people online using social media versus those engaged in face-to-face interaction (See, [Deliberation](#)). The physical nature of decision-making spaces used by groups also has an impact.

Parliaments meet face-to-face and use very formal seating arrangements. Some favour a semi-circular arrangement, for example in the US and Australia, with the intention, no doubt, enabling communication and cooperation, but also ensuring civility. The UK arrangement is not the same. There, government and opposition face each other directly, thereby reinforcing their differences. In all of these examples and more, how elected representatives come to sit where they do will be a consequence of allocation or personal preference. Inevitably politicians sit with like-minded politicians. The impact of proximity to an opponent in a legislative chamber has been studied, demonstrating the impact that this has on willingness to understand another’s views or even the language that is used or mirrored (Saia 2017).

Changes to long-term arrangements are possible. For example, it was reported in Malta in 2013 that Members of Parliament had agreed that all members should sit in a Hemicycle rather than in the previous Westminster arrangement. "Circular chamber (encourages) consensus rather than confrontation" was the reason behind the change (Times of Malta 2013).

The general public observes parliamentary confrontation with alarm as abuse is hurled across the chamber. Voters are wearying of this behavior and often comment upon the need for government and its opponents to work together to resolve pressing societal and environmental issues (ABC News 2018). Without attending to this behaviour, the distrust felt by voters will inevitably grow. If politics is, indeed, a competition between partial truths, then any attempt to build understanding would seem to be a worthwhile pursuit.

What is the question?

Is it possible to create a seating arrangement that would reduce the destructive or negative behaviours which cause voters to disengage and that are of limited productive value in helping parliaments make trusted decisions for the community?

What alternatives to the prevailing methods could be used to improve civility and cooperation across the aisles?

One of the authors, Alessandro Saia (2017) has analysed examples of changing the seating arrangements through the use of a lottery, one historical, the other contemporary. The following two examples suggest that changing the seating arrangements in this way can have an impact on members’ willingness to be influenced by others. One is the US House of Representatives in the 19th century, the other is Iceland, an example that has been in place for 100 years. Here’s how they work.

USA

From 1800 US Congressmen in the House of Representatives chose their own seating and the latecomers struggled to hear or be heard in the din caused by poor acoustics. In 1845 they decided to have a page draw their names at random and each Congressman chose his seat in the order of the draw. Therefore, they may or may not have ended up in a homogenous grouping. Note that Congressmen could still choose where to sit; they were not allocated a specific seat. However, they were likely to be “exposed to other Congressmen with different ideas and/or from different parties” (Saia, 2017, p.5). Though reluctant at first, the method became popular and attracted media coverage. In 1865 the page was blindfolded prior to the draw.



Source: <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/House-Chamber/Desk-Assignments/>

This is no longer the system, of course. No blindfolded assistants. The random allocation of seats behind a desk disappeared in 1908, for pragmatic reasons. An official building with offices was constructed. Allocation of those offices was chosen by lot. But, now, no desks were cluttering up the chamber and the acoustic problems was solved.

“Through the 20th century and into the 21st, the office lottery remained the only vestige of the desk assignment tradition.” (History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, 2019).

Iceland

Iceland’s Legislative Chamber, or the *Althingi*, is the national Parliament of the Republic of Iceland. It is a unicameral system and one of the oldest extant parliaments in the world – first established in 930 (Saia, 2017, p.9). A lottery system for selecting seating arrangement began in 1915 and has endured until today.

At the start of each session (four per year, for their four-year term) the 63 representatives select their seats by lot. The exception is the ministerial arrangement which looks like most other parliaments—in Australia known as the front bench. All others’ seats are chosen at random. The Speaker chooses the first ball (somewhat reminiscent of Ancient Greek

kleroterion), which determines the first representative (each has been allocated a number). Then the Speaker goes down the alphabetical list from there, matching numbers (as they are drawn) to listed names (Magnusson 2014 cited by Saia 2017, p.10).

Why has this arrangement endured for a century? According to Magnusson (2014, p.4)

“Although members disagreed on its introduction there has been abroad consensus on the system for decades. This is reflected in the fact that although the Standing Orders have been revised numerous times over the past one hundred years no proposal has ever been made to change or discontinue this arrangement.”

How were these two examples studied and what are the findings?

Using historical seating plans of the House of Representatives from 1879 until 1897, Saia (2017) shows that U.S. Congressmen seated with those from the opposing party (i.e. Democrats seated on the Republican side, and vice versa) were more likely not to toe their own party line. Moreover, results also show that, after the introduction of the lottery mechanism in 1845, the ideological distance between representatives of different parties was lower in the House of Representatives than in the Senate, where the lottery had not been introduced.

While indicative these results do not necessarily imply the existence of a causal link. For example, one valid concern is that legislators more prone not to comply with their own party line, may (systematically) choose to sit among fellows from the opposing party (i.e. endogenous group formation). In other words, while the introduction of the lottery mechanism to determine seating arrangements increased the probability of being exposed to other Congressmen with different ideas and/or from different parties, it did not imply the full randomisation of seating.

To address these concerns, Saia (2017) investigates the role of peer influence on voting and speech behaviour of Members of Parliament (MPs) within the context of the Icelandic Parliament, where the allocation of seats is random. The random allocation of seats in the Assembly Hall forces MPs to sit (randomly) near to others with different ideas and/or from different parties.

An analysis of all votes held in the Icelandic Parliament over the last 18 years, shows that the likelihood of an MP failing to toe the party line is around 30 percentage points higher when all peers seating nearby cast a vote that is different from her own party line. Likewise, using data on the full set of speeches given in the Icelandic Parliament over the last decade, results show that peer influence accounts for around 15% of an MP's party's tendency to use a certain word.

These findings show that social interaction has an important impact on legislators' behaviour. The implications of the existence of social spillovers may be particularly important when attempting to mitigate conflict in the political arena. If repeated contact reduces differences between groups, then face-to-face interaction and exposure to members of other parties can ultimately play a role in improving inter-party relations. In other words, physical proximity in the Chamber, by affecting the likelihood of interaction, can affect the political distance between parties

Reduced physical distance increases the chances of cross-party interaction and helps creating interpersonal ties. Thus, the higher the number of politicians from an opposing

party seated nearby, the higher the agreement rate between members of the two parties will be.

What is still unknown or untested?

Although the random assignment of seats, by forcing legislators to interact, may facilitate a more informal exchange of ideas and can mitigate the ideological divide between parties, we should nevertheless point out that the effects of random allocation of seats are not only related to the political divide, but might affect various other aspects of the legislative process, such as voting outcomes and legislative efficiency. However, the system offers opportunities for constructive and intriguing experimentation.

Finally...

Saia’s research offers a modest proposal, addressing seating arrangements only. It has withstood the test of time. Such a modification requires no legislative change. The simple act of being open to a test such as this would be well received by a voting public hoping to see improvements in the functioning of our parliaments. The only requirement is a willingness by decision makers to trial something different, something that has been used for a century elsewhere.

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