

# [***Inside the Oscars' 'Highly Political' Seating Plan***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BHB-BD81-JBR6-92SP-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** Ryan Smith

**Highlight:** "The ***politics*** of 'where I am going to sit?' affects Hollywood award shows like the Oscars now more than ever," filmmaker Stefano Da Frè told Newsweek.

**Body**

When the [*96th Academy Awards*](https://www.newsweek.com/how-watch-2024-oscars-time-date-host-nominees-1876826?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) air on Sunday, it will serve as one of the few moments when many of the world's biggest stars happily serve as background players from their coveted seats in the audience.

As viewers, we've all become so used to seeing the front rows of awards ceremonies packed to the brim with famous faces, making it forgivable to overlook just how much work goes into placing these stars in their designated spots.

With such names as Robert De Niro, [*Bradley Cooper*](https://www.newsweek.com/bradley-cooper-maestro-leonard-bernstein-carey-mulligan-netflix-1854109?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), Emily Blunt, Carey Mulligan, Emma Stone, Robert Downey Jr., Ryan Gosling, Jodie Foster, and Annette Bening populating the crowded field of this year's acting nominees alone, calling the soirée a star-studded affair is by no means a stretch.

And then there's the presenters, whether it be revered filmmaker Steven Spielberg, or the plethora of acting talent that includes Michelle Pfeiffer, [*Rita Moreno*](https://www.newsweek.com/rita-moreno-tells-heights-critics-cant-you-just-wait-while-1601072?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), Sally Field, Jennifer Lawrence, Octavia Spencer, Jessica Lange, Michael Keaton, Al Pacino, Forest Whitaker, [*Anya Taylor-Joy*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/anya-taylor-joy?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), and Charlize Theron, to name just a few.

These are all people who, at many points in their careers, have been the most famous person in the room. So how does this work for priority seating at the [*Oscars*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/oscars?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), where each boasts enough star power to out-dazzle the other? One major factor is logistics.

While Hollywood's Dolby Theatre offers over chunks of its 3,300 seats to prominent Academy members and behind-the-scenes power players, the front rows from where the stars laugh (and cringe) their way through the show are usually reserved for the most famous of the ceremony's participants.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, there has long been a traditional hierarchy when it comes to the Oscars seating chart. The most recognizable faces are seen in the first few rows of the orchestra levels, while those nominated in the bigger of the categories are usually placed near the aisles or at the very front.

Otto Spoerri, who oversaw seating stars at the Oscars for more than 20 years before he passed away in 2008, told New Jersey newspaper *The Record* in 2001 that placement made for a smoother broadcast.

"Every second counts," Spoerri [*said*](https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-spoerri4-2008dec04-story.html) at the time. "If it takes 25 seconds for the winner just to get on stage, the producer starts tearing his hair out."

Spoerri further told National Public Radio in 2002—the same year he retired—that he often predicted who would get the trophies. "We try to play our own little guessing game as to who might be the winner and try to put them on an aisle," he said.

Those who are nominated in the crafts categories are usually seated farther back. This is why it's not unusual to see those winning for their works in costume, sound, or production design taking on lengthier hikes toward the big stage.

**Golden Tickets**

Crunching the numbers, nominees alone in recent years take up about 200 of the coveted golden tickets. However, with each receiving two tickets and having the opportunity to request an additional pair (enough to accommodate a star wishing to bring their partner, parents, and agent), this number swells to around 800. Presenters and hosts each are also usually given a pair of tickets.

There are also blocks of seating reserved for [*ABC*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/abc?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), which broadcasts the show, telecast sponsors, such dignitaries as local politicians, Academy Museum Of Motion Pictures donors, accountants, the media, and the production and legal teams. Movie studio executives also get designated seating among the well-heeled crowd.

For the remainder, seat-fillers are tasked with occupying the areas where cameras have created obstructed views. And then there's the Dolby Theatre's trio of mezzanine levels, where there's likely a shared joy of simply being in the building. Among those might be some of the almost 10,000-strong Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences members, who enter lotteries each year to purchase tickets. The mezzanine levels, one academy member told the *Times*, is where attendees need to "be OK with the thinner oxygen."

"The seating at awards shows is as scripted as the movies and shows that landed the stars there in the first place," Evan Nierman, CEO of global PR firm [*Red Banyan*](https://redbanyan.com/), told *Newsweek*. "Hollywood is filled with big personalities with high expectations, and that includes titans of the entertainment industry and not just the celebrities themselves. Preferences are often communicated in advance through publicists and other insiders, and the more powerful the person, the more seriously their seating requests are taken.

"Maintaining clear camera shots is crucial to capturing real-time reactions to the big reveal of who wins in each category, and the best way to ensure this is strategic seating."

"Great pains are taken to meet the expectations of the attendees, and there are a range of considerations that go into the decisions of who sits where," Nierman continued. "Keep in mind that the awards shows themselves are live television programs that will live forever online, so crucial elements like lighting, camera angles and proximity to the stage are vital to consider. To move people seamlessly to the stage it's best to have nominees seated in aisle seats and near the front of the room to shorten the distance they must walk."

**Avoiding Awkward Encounters**

Once the main stars of the show are seated at the front, it most certainly isn't just anywhere. Consideration also has to be paid to the nominees, and the star's off-camera interpersonal relationships.

When the late Spoerri oversaw Oscars' seating, he learned the importance of placement the hard way back in the mid-1980s, when he gave an actress known for her temper a spot too close to an actor who had recently dumped her.

"I figured out not to do that anymore," he told *The Record* years after the faux pas. "That was early on in my career. Now, I keep up with what's happening."

Reiterating this point, Red Banyan's Nierman told *Newsweek* that much thought "goes into creating distance between performers who don't get along or have past romantic involvement, helping avoid any awkward or unpleasant encounters."

Even where there might be friendly relationships, Spoerri previously stated that he avoided seating nominees in major categories next to one another, explaining to the *Los Angeles Times* that it was "more diplomatic" to keep them apart. "You don't want to see a sad face next to a happy face," Spoerri explained.

Spoerri, whose duties were taken over by the director of the membership department following his departure, also said that stars who attempted to demand their ways into better seating all but guaranteed their quest would be futile.

"I have said 'no' to stars," he told *The Record*. "Those phone calls aren't very pleasant. When people start demanding things, a switch goes off in my head. If they ask first, they have a chance."

Stefano Da Frè, writer and director of the crime drama *Stolen Dough*, likened the seating ***politics*** to high school. "The ***politics*** of 'where I am going to sit?' affects Hollywood award shows like the Oscars now more than ever," the filmmaker told *Newsweek*. "On one hand, there is the human element, meaning certain celebrities want to sit near other celebrities because of close friendships—just like you and I might at a wedding or gala event, for example.

"On the other hand, there are a lot more ***politics*** involved in the seating charts for the Oscars than meets the eye. The Academy Awards is a brand and wants to protect its brand; this means having happy celebrities to cut to on camera makes for a smoother award show.

"Another issue is what films are nominated this year, as it is very common for many celebrities of the same movie to be sitting together to represent a specific film nominated at the Oscars. The drama here is if you have several actors, like Matt Damon or Robert Downey Jr. who are in the film *Oppenheimer*, and then also in another separate film nominated that year.

"Their choice of where to sit is highly political. Just like in high school, it means a lot to sit next to the team, and company, you publicly show your allegiance to. Some things haven't changed that much, just like being in high school. It's part popularity and part ***politics***, all under the surveillance of the public scrutiny."

**Reduced Numbers**

In 2021 and 2022, an increased number of Hollywood VIPs were told "no," thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first of the two years saw the ceremony broadcast in unconventional style from downtown Los Angeles' Union Station. The 62-foot vaulted ceilings of the station's Grand Waiting Room and Historic Ticketing Hall afforded attendees breathing space, while the outdoor patios provided further benefit.

The following year, the show returned to Hollywood's Dolby Theatre, the home of the Oscars since 2002. However, the continued protocols at the time for social distancing saw the venue's seating capacity reduced to 2,500. Rows of seats were removed from the orchestra section and replaced with decked seating.

As we all remember (and the Oscars would probably like us to forget), it is from this front-row placing that [*Will Smith*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/will-smith?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)—positioned prominently ahead of his Best Actor win for *King Richard*—rose from his seat and [*slapped presenter Chris Rock onstage*](https://www.newsweek.com/will-smith-finally-addresses-chris-rock-oscars-slap-jada-pinkett-had-nothing-do-it-1729206?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). Smith shockingly went into attack mode after Rock made a joke about his wife, [*Jada Pinkett Smith*](https://www.newsweek.com/jada-pinkett-smith-will-smith-separation-celebrities-1834457?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships).

As Smith has now learned, being seated front and center at an awards show such as the Oscars comes with great scrutiny.

"Those seated at these shows, especially in the best seats, know that at any moment cameras may be picking up their every move and the footage will later be analyzed and possibly even scrutinized by lip readers," Nierman told *Newsweek*. "To avoid becoming targets of ridicule, they must be incredibly disciplined about avoiding embarrassing gestures, facial expressions, or saying anything that gets caught on tape, which can be difficult over many hours and especially when alcohol is involved."

With Smith [*receiving a 10-year ban*](https://www.newsweek.com/will-smith-banned-oscars-until-2032-slapping-chris-rock-1696088?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)from Academy events for his violent outburst at Rock, there's at least two spots free for attendees over the next few years—just keep the names of other people's wives out of your mouth.

***The 96th Academy Awards will be broadcast live by ABC on Sunday, March 10, from 7:00 p.m. EDT / 4:00 p.m. PDT / 11:00 p.m. GMT / 7:00 p.m. CST.***

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2359677/inside-oscars-highly-political-seating-plan.jpg)

**Graphic**

Inside the Oscars' 'Highly Political' Seating Plan

Photo-illustration by Newsweek/Getty

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