



# DIVISIONS

### ABSTENTION

MPs cannot register an abstention but may choose to remain seated in the Chamber during a division to signify their abstention.

### NODDING THROUGH

If an MP is within the Parliamentary estate but too ill to reach a lobby their vote may be 'noddled through', i.e. added to the voting total in their absence.

### PAIRING

Pairing is an arrangement between two MPs of opposing parties that allows them to miss occasional votes, with the agreement of their party Whips. MPs are generally only allowed to pair on votes that are not three-line whips. (divisions of the highest importance)

## What is a division?

A 'division' is the parliamentary term for a vote in the House of Commons. When a division is called, Members of Parliament (MPs) register their vote for or against issues by physically going into one of two rooms on either side of the Commons Chamber. These rooms are called the 'division lobbies' and the procedure is known as 'dividing the House'.

### Voting

When a vote is held, the Speaker asks the MPs present in the Chamber to call out whether they agree or not with the question posed. The Speaker will then judge whether there is a clear result. If this cannot be determined, the Speaker calls a division by announcing 'clear the lobbies'.

### Division bells

MPs do not have to participate in a debate to be able to vote and may be elsewhere on the Parliamentary estate. They are notified that a division is taking place by division bells ringing

throughout Parliament and its surrounding premises. These bells have a loud and distinctive ring. When the bells ring, MPs have eight minutes to reach the division lobbies before the lobby doors are locked.

In addition, TV screens across the estate display announcements that a division is taking place. These screens are known as 'annunciators' and provide a specialised information feed on the business of the House.

## Division lobbies and tellers

During a division, MPs divide into either the Aye lobby or the No lobby. As they pass through the lobbies, the MPs have their names recorded by clerks and are counted by four tellers. The tellers are MPs appointed by each side of the House.

Once the lobbies are empty, the results are written down and given to the senior teller. The tellers line up in front of the Table of the House before the Speaker. The teller standing nearest the Opposition despatch box announces the numbers. The written results are then passed to the Speaker who reads the figures again and announces the result. The whole process takes about fifteen minutes.

## Tied votes

If the vote is tied – which is very unusual – the Speaker has the casting vote, taking certain principles into account. These principles are that the Speaker should vote for further discussion where possible; that if no further discussion is possible, decisions should not be taken except by a majority and that a casting vote on an amendment to a bill should leave the bill in its existing form.

## Deferred divisions

In the Commons, instead of holding divisions immediately after the end of a debate, MPs can vote on a series of motions using ballot papers at a convenient time (currently from 12.30pm on Wednesdays). These are known as deferred divisions.

Deferred divisions can be used with motions on statutory instruments and on certain types of motion which are not subject to amendment. Certain types of legislation, such as proceedings on bills, may not be subject to deferred divisions.

## The division list

The division list records the way MPs vote and is usually available to the public the following day in Hansard and on Parliament's website.

## Why aren't divisions electronic?

Plans to introduce electronic or mechanical voting systems in Parliament have been considered but no single alternative has gained great support. Physically congregating in the division lobbies also gives MPs a good opportunity to conduct business with each other and discuss matters of interest with Ministers in an informal setting.

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