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POINTS OF VIEW

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Voting is more complicated than it looks – especially with abstentions

NOW that I've been an MP for a few months, I've had chance to take part in several votes in Parliament. It's a strange experience and not immediately obvious to the public how it all works, so I thought I'd explain what happens.

Votes in the House of Commons are also called divisions. That's because the House is divided on how to answer a question. That question could be on any number of issues. Sometimes it's about a new piece of legislation, and sometimes it's on an amendment to existing legislation or a proposed new law.

Let's say a new law (often referred to as a Bill) is being proposed. It will usually go through various stages of development before it comes to the House of Commons chamber to be debated. MPs are usually given time to make speeches and listen to other MPs before they are asked to vote.

At the end of a debate, the Speaker (or Deputy Speaker) will put a question to the chamber. The language used is rather obscure and old-fashioned but it essentially asks the House of Commons whether MPs are in agreement with what is being proposed.

At this point, there's a little bit of pantomime. All the MPs who agree with the proposal must shout (and I really do mean shout – unlike what we tell our children they should do) "Aye!"

The Speaker/Deputy Speaker then says "Of the contrary, no?," at which point all those opposed to whatever is being proposed must shout "No!"

Sometimes, nobody shouts "No!" This happens when all MPs present agree with moving forward at this point.

It's important to understand that doesn't necessarily mean everyone wants what is being proposed, but just that at this point they are happy for it to go to the next stage.

There can be several opportunities to vote on a Bill. Sometimes, MPs want to see further details before they decide to try to stop it, which is why MPs may not vote against something at first, but may choose to do so later.

But if enough MPs shout "No!" to



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make it clear that there is disagreement, the Speaker will shout "Division!" and instruct the doorkeepers (special staff in the House of Commons) to "clear the lobbies".

By this, the Speaker means the voting lobbies. These are corridors either side of the House of Commons chamber and this is how MPs vote – by walking through one of these two corridors.

It's at this point that bells start ringing across the parliamentary estate. This is called the "division bell" and it's an audible call to vote.

At the same time special TVs, called annunciators, that are found in nearly every room and corridor in Parliament, also display a bell and show that there is a division.

MPs have eight minutes to enter one of the voting lobbies to register their vote. If an MP has not been in the chamber just prior to the vote being called, it's likely that they're somewhere else on the parliamentary estate. They might be attending another meeting, working in their office, or – if it's a late vote – perhaps grabbing some food in one of the cafés. Whatever they're doing, they have to stop it immediately and

get to the voting lobbies if they want to take part in the vote.

After eight minutes, the Speaker instructs the doorkeepers to "lock the doors" to the voting lobbies, preventing any MPs who are late from entering the lobbies to vote.

The voting lobbies can get very crowded, and it can take longer than eight minutes to shuffle through them. From a voting point of view that's fine, as long as you entered one of the lobbies within eight minutes.

It used to be the case that tellers at the far end of each lobby would look up the name of each MP walking past them to record the fact they had voted. But now there are a small number of electronic screens dotted around each lobby. MPs must hold their pass against the screen, much like making a contactless payment, in order to register their vote.

All votes recorded in the "Aye" lobby are voting "aye" (meaning "yes"), while all those in the 'No' lobby are voting "no". There are still tellers at the end of each lobby, but they simply count the number of MPs filing past them.

Once the lobbies have emptied, the results are announced. This is done by the four tellers (two from each lobby) standing in a line in front of the speaker. One of them reads the results from both lobbies and then passes a piece of paper showing the results to the Speaker,

who repeats the results.

As you look at the Speaker's chair at the far end of the chamber when you watch proceedings on TV, the "Aye" lobby is to the left, but from the Speaker's perspective, it's on their right (with the "No" lobby on their left). The results are announced referring to this. So, the Speaker will say something like: "The ayes to the right: 371. The noes to the left: 77."

And that's it. Each vote usually takes about ten to 15 minutes. I would argue that's a very expensive way of doing things, but I'll leave that argument for another day because there's something else I want to explain that's often misunderstood. And that's abstentions.

What do you do as an MP or a political party if you agree with part of a proposal but not all of it and there's no way of amending what's being proposed?

The answer to that depends on how serious your objections are to the proposals and what the consequences are of the proposals going ahead. Of course, you could choose to vote for them, thereby officially endorsing all of the detail. Or you could choose to vote against them, but that might sometimes result in throwing the baby out with the bathwater – rejecting some really good things while preventing the things you don't like from getting through.

There is a third option. You can choose to abstain.

Abstaining is a more nuanced vote. It's sometimes an opportunity to acknowledge that a proposal isn't perfect from your or your party's perspective but it isn't so problematic that at this stage you want to stop it. It can also be a signal to whoever is bringing forward the proposal that you might be persuaded to vote for it later if they make some changes. It's a more complicated vote and made even more so by the fact that MPs can't currently record their choice to abstain.

As described above, there are only two voting lobbies, and MPs are only officially recorded as having voted if they walk through one of those lobbies. It might make some people conclude that MPs haven't bothered to turn up to vote, but that often isn't the case – it's just there's no way of recording an abstention.

By way of an example, let's take the votes in the budget that happened on Wednesday evening last week. There were ten votes in total. The first vote started at 6.58pm and the last one started at 9pm. This is how I and my party voted:

1. Abstain
2. Abstain
3. Abstain
4. Aye
5. Aye
6. Aye
7. No
8. Abstain
9. Abstain
10. No

So, for half of the votes, we chose to abstain and for half of them we walked through one of the two voting lobbies. This included the last vote of the evening where we were concerned about changes to the rates of alcohol duty and its potentially damaging effect on the whisky industry so we voted against it.

The lesson from this is that an MP not being recorded as having voted doesn't necessarily mean they weren't there and taking part.

Like many things in Parliament, things are often more complicated than they first appear to be and I certainly don't blame the public for misunderstanding bits of it.

I'm perhaps less tolerant of those who have experience of how these things work peddling misinformation for political gain. I don't think it's ever right to mislead the public and I will continue to campaign for more transparency and accountability through my work on the Modernisation Committee.

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Marie Goldman
MP