

Abstentions

Abstentions cause confusion disproportionate to their simplicity. An abstention is a privation—an absence. Holes are privations of dirt; abstentions are privations of votes.¹

Just as any member may vote in favor or against any motion, any member may abstain from any vote. It's really easy to do. Here's a two step guide:

Step 1: When the Chair asks for those in favor to say 'Aye!', close your mouth and do not open it.

Step 2: When the Chair asks for those opposed to say 'Nay!', close your mouth and do not open it.

Notice that the Chair didn't utter the word 'abstention'. This is because, ahem, *the Chair should never ever EVER call for abstentions*. That would be like calling roll by asking those absent to so indicate.

But, you may protest, how are we to count them? Setting aside why you'd want to do such a thing, it's easy. Add the total number of votes in the affirmative to the total votes in the negative, now subtract that number from the number of members present at roll call. That's the number of abstentions.

But what if someone was in the bathroom and missed the vote? Easy. They abstained.

If that seems odd, the slow poison of treating abstentions as a kind of a vote may have been dripped into your ear. The cure is simple: An abstention is not a kind of vote. It is the absence of a vote. The dispute between the weak-bladdered faction and the disagreed-but-didn't-want-to-cast-a-negative-vote faction has no relevance to the Senate or the outside world.

Okay, maybe just this once....

C'mere. Shhhh..... Promise to not tell Adam? Okay....

There is precisely one situation in which the Chair may want to *report* the number of abstentions in the minutes or other documents (modulo Reporting votes).² Here's a very trumped up example:

Suppose 100 members are present. The motion is so controversial that only 1 member votes in the affirmative. For whatever reason, no member wants to be seen voting in the negative. The motion passes. If the vote count is reported in the minutes, it would be represented as Passed 1-0. In this situation, it may be wise to indicate that 100 members were present.

Notice that this didn't involve calling for abstentions. *The Chair should never ever EVER call for abstentions.*

By the way, another area of confusion created by abstentions lies in determining whether the motion passed. If it struck you as strange in the example above that the motion passed, please revisit the earlier discussion of How many votes do we need?

Reporting votes

[Warning: Polemic ahead]

Some bodies call for abstentions so they can make a distinction in how the motion is reported. They should not do this.

For example, a self-effacing and self-undermining Senate might report resolutions as passing 'unanimously' versus 'without dissent' where the presence of abstentions makes the difference. Calling for abstentions would be the only way to distinguish between the two on matters decided by voice-vote.

If this distinction is required by local standing rules —not just tradition, but actual rules of order that have been approved— then the Chair should, conscious of the evil she does and with a heavy heart, call for abstentions. If approved words requiring this abomination cannot be located, the Chair should resolutely refuse to allow the hateful word 'abstention' to pass her lips.

Such practices are the limit case of minority rule. Something passing ‘unanimously’ and ‘without dissent’ carry different connotations (otherwise why have the practice). This violates IT TAKES TWO by allowing 1 member to determine the will of the body. If 99 members favor an action and 1 member can change its connotation by not even voting against the action, that grants unacceptable power to the single member.

More generally, I believe vote totals should (almost) never be reported. The body as a whole is the agent of the resolution; we should not care whether it was divided within itself. Indeed, it disincentivizes a dissenting member from shaping the resolution into something she can get on board with. When totals are reported she can independently express her opinion by hijacking the collective action of the body. That is a fairly weak disincentive and, in most cases, a fairly inconsequential hijacking. It is a disincentive and a hijacking nonetheless.

¹ Poverty the privation of means. Death the privation of life. Evil the privation of good. Are you sensing a theme?

² With pandemic zoom or otherwise conducting votes remotely, having an abstention option can help serve as a signal that voting is complete. Okay, fine. Though it is of course in order to abstain from clicking ‘abstain’. Either way, abstentions are not counted in the denominator when determining whether something passed.