

Voting in the Chamber – Northern Ireland Assembly

KEY:

N: Narrator

N: MLAs vote in plenary meetings by saying 'Aye' or 'No'. The Speaker decides whether the motion is carried by listening to the volume of the oral vote. If the result is unclear, the Speaker may call for a Division. This means that MLAs walk through corridors, known as Division Lobbies, on either side of the Chamber according to which way they want to vote. 'Ayes' to the Speaker's right, and 'Noes' to the left. Each vote is then counted and the Speaker declares the result.

Most votes are passed if a majority of MLAs vote in favour. However, under the Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement, certain decisions require Cross-Community Support. This prevents certain decisions being made without a specific minimum level of support from both Unionist and Nationalist MLAs. There are two ways of achieving Cross-Community Support.

The first is called Parallel Consent, which requires support from: 50 percent of all those voting, 50 percent of Unionists and 50 percent of Nationalists. This example of Parallel Consent is based on the nomination of the Justice Minister in 2011: 101 members voted. 73 voted 'Aye', which equates to 72.3 percent of the total number of votes. 50 Unionists voted. 36 of the Unionist members voted 'Aye'. This equates to 72 percent of the Unionist voters. 42 Nationalists voted. 29 of the Nationalist members voted 'Aye'. This equates to 69 percent of the Nationalist voters. Nine members who were neither Unionist nor Nationalist, known as 'Others', also voted. The motion met the requirements of Parallel Consent, so it was passed.

The other method is called Weighted Majority, which requires supports from 60 percent of all those voting, and 40 percent of both Unionists and Nationalists. This example of Weighted Majority is based on the Final Stage of the Budget Bill in 2016: 87 members voted. There were a total of 61 'Ayes,' which equates to 70.1 percent of the total number of voters. 48 Unionists voted. 32 of the Unionist members voted 'Aye'. This equates to 66.7 percent of the Unionist voters. 37 Nationalists voted. 27 of the Nationalist members voted 'Aye'. This equates to 73 percent of the Nationalist voters. Two 'Others' voted. The motion met the requirements of Weighted Majority, so it was passed.

MLAs can bring about a Cross-Community Vote on any issue before the Assembly by submitting a Petition of Concern. The petition must be supported by at least 30 MLAs and be submitted at least one hour before the debate is due to take place. The mechanism is intended to prevent domination of one side of the community by the other, and effectively gives a veto to any group of 30 or more members.