

Our Policy When Members Answer “Present”

Members of Congress occasionally declare "present" rather than "yea" or "nay" on roll call votes. Our policy is to equate "present" with "not voting." We do not regard "present" as an actual vote because it does not affect the numerical tally. The following scenario illustrates the point: If an ongoing House roll call were tied at 217-217 and the only member not yet accounted for were to push the "present" button, the tally would remain 217-217. Had that 435th member actually voted, the final tally would have been 218-217 or 217-218.

We do not report that members answering "present" were physically absent, only that they were not voting.

The Congressional Record lists a House member's "present" not among the yeas and nays but under the heading "Answered Present." House Rule III, adopted in 1789, states: "Every member shall be present within the Hall of the House during its sittings, unless excused or necessarily prevented; and shall vote on each question put, unless he has a direct personal or pecuniary interest in the event of such a question."

As that original House Rule contemplated, members over the centuries have declared "present" mainly to avoid personal or financial conflicts of interest. But in recent Congresses, particularly in the House, "present" has been used primarily to register protest over the content of a measure or the procedure by which it was brought to a floor vote.

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