

Party splits remain on abortion

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The high profile vote on Iraq on 31 October obscured another interesting division which took place on the same day. Conservative MP Nadine Dorries introduced a ten-minute rule bill that, among other things, would have reduced the time limit for legal termination of pregnancy from 24 to 21 weeks. Her bill failed by 108 votes to 187. The subject of abortion used to be a perennial topic of debate and vote within the Commons – there were, for example, 15 attempts to reform the abortion law between 1969 and 1987 – although the topic has somewhat faded from the political radar in recent years, since the last reform in 1990. Dorries' bill stood no realistic chance of success – even if she had won the October vote, the bill would not have reached the statute book, such is the ease with which controversial private members' bills can be blocked – but it was perhaps a sign that the issue is about to return to the political agenda.

This short briefing paper looks at the voting patterns displayed in the vote, and at the way men and women MPs behaved.

Party divisions

For all the talk about issues such as abortion being 'non-party', there are usually clear party divisions evident in the voting. The absence of the party whip rarely leads to the absence of clear party blocks within the divisions lobbies. Table 1 below shows the way the major parties split over abortion.

1. Major party divisions over abortion reform, 31 October 2006

Labour				Conservative				Liberal Democrat			
For		Against		For		Against		For		Against	
N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
5	4	130	96	85	81	20	19	9	20	35	80

The vast majority of Labour MPs to vote (96%) opposed the bill, being faced by 81% of Conservative MPs in the other lobby. Some 80% of Liberal Democrat MPs joined the majority of Labour MPs in the no lobby. Among the other parties, the SNP split 4/1 in favour while the only Plaid Cymru member to vote, voted against the bill. Dr Richard Taylor and Clare Short also voted against the bill. Apart from the solitary PC member, the only united parties came from Northern Ireland: six DUP MPs joined one SDLP member in the aye lobby.

Given that abortion has historically been an issue to cause relatively large splits within the PLP, it is noteworthy that this particular vote produced relative unity within its ranks, with the PLP being the most cohesive of the three main parties. Just five Labour MPs supported the bill, while some 130 Labour MPs entered the no lobby.* Part of the explanation for this, however, may lie in turnout. Just 135

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* They were: Frank Field, Andrew Mackinlay, Jim McGovern, Stephen Pound and David Taylor.

Labour MPs took part in the vote (38%), compared to figures of 53% of Conservative MPs and 70% of Liberal Democrat MPs. Many of the 'pro-life'/ 'anti-choice' (delete according to choice) Labour MPs appear to have absented themselves from the vote.

Gender divisions

In a system in which the ties of party normally swamp any other differences, the issue of abortion has been one of the few to produce a gendered dimension in the voting. Women MPs have, all other things being equal, been less likely to support reductions in the availability of abortion.

The fact that this particular bill was being introduced by a woman MP (which was, we think, the first legislative attempt by a woman MP to reduce the availability of abortion) will not, in itself, have altered that. We might have expected women MPs to be more likely to participate in the vote, and to have been more likely to vote against the Dorries bill.

In fact, overall, women MPs were *less* likely than male MPs to vote on the issue – an apparently counterintuitive finding given the literature on the substantive representation of women. Some 42 per cent of women MPs voted, compared to 47 per cent of men. This, though, was at least partly because of the low turnout of Labour MPs in general noted above, given that Labour is the party with the vast majority of women MPs. Within the PLP, the turnout of female MPs was 40%, marginally higher than that of men.[†] Yet within the other two parties, women MPs were marginally less likely to participate in the vote than men: 41% of Conservative women MPs voted, compared to 55% of men; within the Liberal Democrats, the figures were 66% for women, 70% for men. In other words, although the raw figures are somewhat misleading, there was no great tendency for women MPs to be more likely than men to take part in the vote.

There were, however, the expected differences in the voting. Again, the headline figures are misleading. Of the male MPs to vote, a majority (58%) voted against the Bill but a significant minority (42%) supported it. Compare that to women MPs, where just 11% voted for the bill, compared to 89% against. This looks like a huge gender effect – men being almost four times more likely to support the bill than women - but this is (again) largely because of the huge preponderance of women on the Labour benches. Break the figures down by party, and the picture becomes more complex. Whereas 100% of Labour and Liberal Democrat women who voted voted against the bill (all the Labour and Lib Dem MPs to support the bill were men), the majority of Conservative women MPs to vote voted for the Dorries bill. Yet, as Table 2 shows, there is still some evidence of a gender effect once we control for party.

2. Gendered voting over abortion reform, by party, 31 October 2006

	Women		Men	
	For (%)	Against (%)	For (%)	Against (%)
Labour	0	100	5	95
Conservative	71	29	82	18
Lib Dem	0	100	24	76

[†] They included ten members of the Government (one minister, and nine PPSs).

In every case, the women MPs of each party were more likely to vote against the Dorries bill than the men of the same party. Even on the Conservative benches, where the majority of Conservative women MPs voted for the bill, Conservative women were less likely to vote for the bill than were Conservative men.

The relatively small number of women in the Commons outside of the PLP (and even inside the PLP the figure is still just over 25%) mean that it is difficult to perform all but the most rudimentary analysis. But the abortion vote did yet again confirm both the overall importance of party, even when the whip is off, as well as the ability of gender to influence voting. Such influence, though, is a matter of degree not direction, and still needs to be seen through the prism of party.