

Research Briefing

9 August 2023

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House of Commons: Hours Sat & Late Sittings



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Summary

This briefing explores trends in sitting hours of the House of Commons since 1979. It looks at both the length of parliamentary sessions and the number of hours sat and the frequency of late sittings. Data is also included for Westminster Hall, a second chamber which the House of Commons has sat in since 1999. Information is not provided on committees which sit separately from the House.

[A session of parliament is a parliamentary 'year'](#). It starts with the State Opening of Parliament, where the government's legislative agenda is presented, and is ended by prorogation. [Prorogation brings parliamentary business to an end](#). Legislation is not carried over unless specific provision is made, but it can be brought again to a new session.

Since 1979 the House of Commons has sat for shorter days, resulting in fewer overall sitting hours per session. This is in part due to major changes to sitting hours, aligning them more closely with normal working hours. This has had a marked effect on the standard parliamentary day: proceedings now begin earlier, and are interrupted (finish) earlier. The number of late sittings (where the House rises after ten o'clock in the evening) has fallen significantly.

Other changes came about as a result of the [Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011](#), which, coupled with the moving of the State Opening of Parliament to the springtime, led to more consistent session lengths. The Fixed-Term Parliaments Act was repealed in March 2022 with the [Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022](#).

The overall trend since 1979 has been a general reduction in the sitting hours of the House in each parliamentary session and a shortening of the average length of a sitting day: from 8 hours 55 minutes in 1979-80 to 7 hours 37 minutes in the latest 2021-22 session.

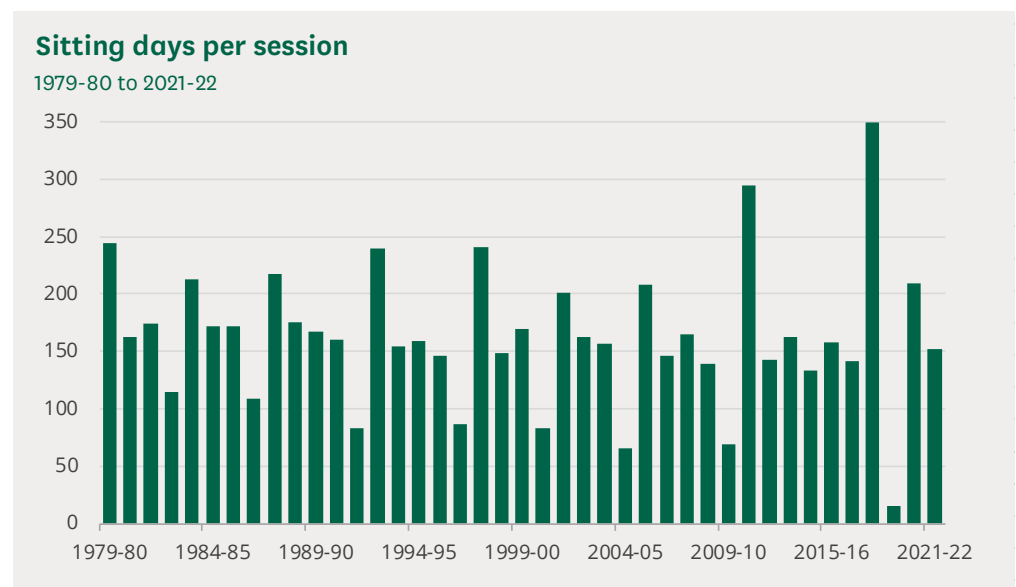
Data for this publication comes from the [House of Commons Sessional Returns](#), available from the Parliament website, which has information dating back to the 1997-98 session. Data for the sessions 1979-80 to 1986-87 came from the House Returns and data for the sessions 1987-88 to 1996-97 came from the Sessional Returns, both of which are only available in hard copy.

The data used can be found in our downloadable Excel file.

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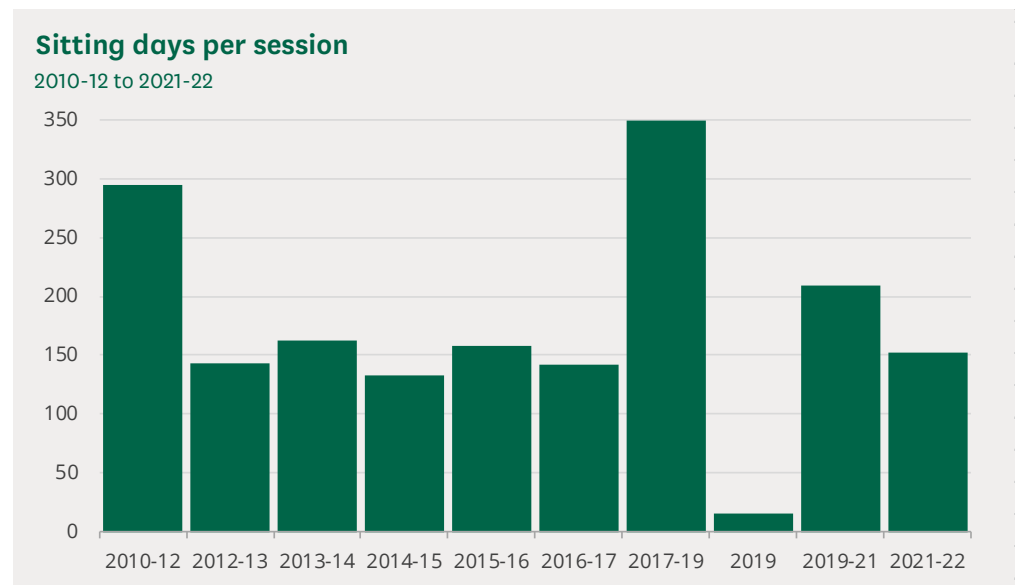
Sitting days per session

The following chart shows that, up until 2010, the number of sitting days in a session was mainly affected by the occurrence of general elections. With elections being held roughly every four to five years, the first session after an election tended to be longer, with a shorter session running from the November to springtime before an election. Prior to the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act (FTPA), sessions generally ran autumn to autumn and elections were generally held in Spring.



Source: Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Sessional Returns](#): various years; Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Factsheet M7: Parliamentary elections](#): May 2010

With the introduction of five year fixed-term parliaments, sessions were more regular in length. The charts above and below show that, following the longer 2010-12 session introduced to allow for the change in parliamentary timetable, the remaining sessions of the 2010 – 2015 Parliament were of roughly equal length.



Source: Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Sessional Returns](#): various years; Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Factsheet M7: Parliamentary elections](#): May 2010

However, as can be seen in the chart above, from 2017 onwards sessions became much less regular in length. This period includes the longest session (2017-19, with 349 sittings) and the shortest session (2019, with 15 sittings) since 1979. In fact, the 2019 session was the shortest since the 1920s,¹ and the 2017-19 session was the longest since the English Civil War.²

Both sessions after 2019 ended in spring due to the FTPA. This meant that the 2019-21 session was longer than 12 months in order to return to schedule, as in the 2010-12 session.

Historical convention prior to the FTPA dictated a session length of around 12 months, with the exemption of those affected by general elections. However, it is not guaranteed that this convention will continue now that the FTPA has been repealed, as shown by the session at the time of writing (session 2022-), which has lasted more than a year.³

¹ Commons Library research briefing SN-04653, [Number of Commons sitting days by session since 1900](#) (parliament.uk)

² Commons Library Insight, [Is this the longest parliamentary session ever?](#), 10 May 2019 (accessed 5th July 2023)

³ BBC News, [Rishi Sunak extends time to pass current crop of laws](#), 15 December 2022 (accessed 19th July 2023)

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Sitting hours

A variety of changes were made to the sitting hours of the House of Commons between 1997 and 2012. For example, the introduction of non-sitting Fridays, and sittings which start in the morning (previously the House of Commons sat from 2.30pm on Monday to Thursday and from 9:30 on Friday mornings).⁴ These changes did not alter the scheduled duration of normal sitting hours.

The following table shows the normal sitting hours at the beginning of the 1997-98 session and at the beginning of the 2012-13 session.

Normal parliamentary sitting hours		
Changes made from 1997 to 2012		
	1997	2012
Monday	2.30pm – 10.00pm	2.30pm – 10.00pm
Tuesday	2.30pm – 10.00pm	11.30am – 7.00pm
Wednesday	2.30pm – 10.00pm	11.30am – 7.00pm
Thursday	2.30pm – 10.00pm	9.30am – 5.00pm
Friday	9.30am – 2.30pm	9.30am – 2.30pm

Source: Commons Library research briefing SN-06380, [Sitting Hours](#); Commons Library research briefing SN-02854, [Modernisation: Sitting Hours](#)

The pattern of sitting hours per session broadly follows that of the number of sitting days, due to the consistency of the average length of a sitting day, as discussed in the next section.

In particular, there was commonly a peak in the number of sitting hours following a general election. However, after the 2001 and 2005 elections, this pattern becomes less pronounced.

During the session of 2017-19, the House of Commons sat for the most hours recorded in a single session,⁵ however this is accounted for by the length of the session which lasted for more than two calendar years.

⁴ Commons Library research briefing SN-06380, [Sitting Hours](#); Commons Library research briefing SN-02854, [Modernisation: Sitting Hours](#)

⁵ Commons Library Insight, [Is this the longest parliamentary session ever?](#), 10 May 2019 (accessed 5th July 2023)

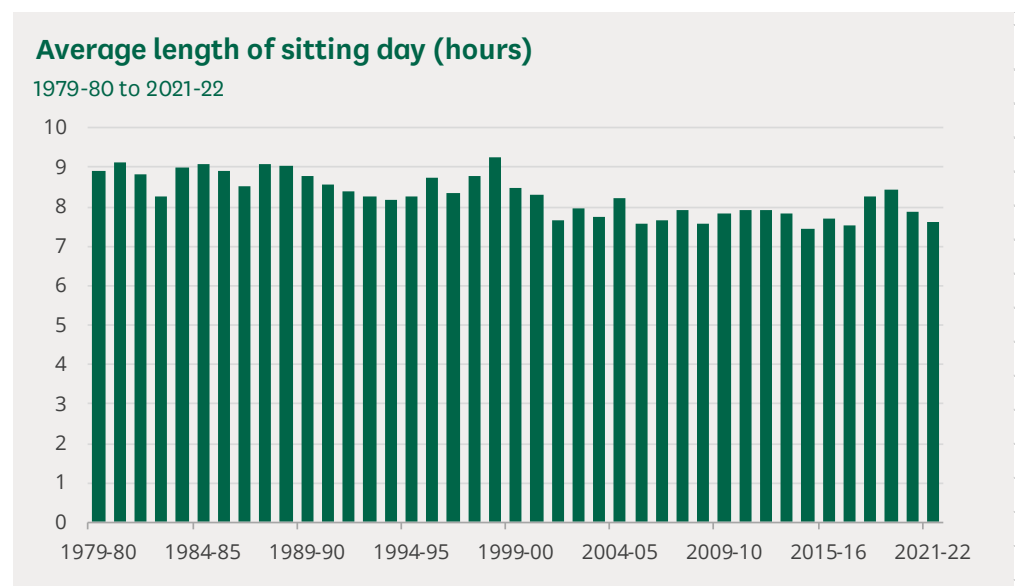
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Average length of a sitting day

The chart below shows that average sitting hours per day have remained relatively stable from the 1979-80 session to the 2021-22 session, with only small differences from session to session. The greatest change in sitting hours occurred between sessions 1998-99 and 1999-00, with a difference of 46 minutes. The sitting day of the 1998-99 session was also the longest in this period, at nine hours and fifteen minutes.

The limited variability of the length of sitting days also explains the close relationship between the number of sitting days and hours in a session.

There has been a long-term decrease in the average length of a sitting day from around 9 hours to just under 8 hours. Some periods have not followed this trend, including sessions 1995-96 to 1998-99 and sessions 2017-19 to 2019 where the average hours increased.



Source: Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Sessional Returns](#): various years; Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Factsheet M7: Parliamentary elections](#): May 2010

4 Late sittings

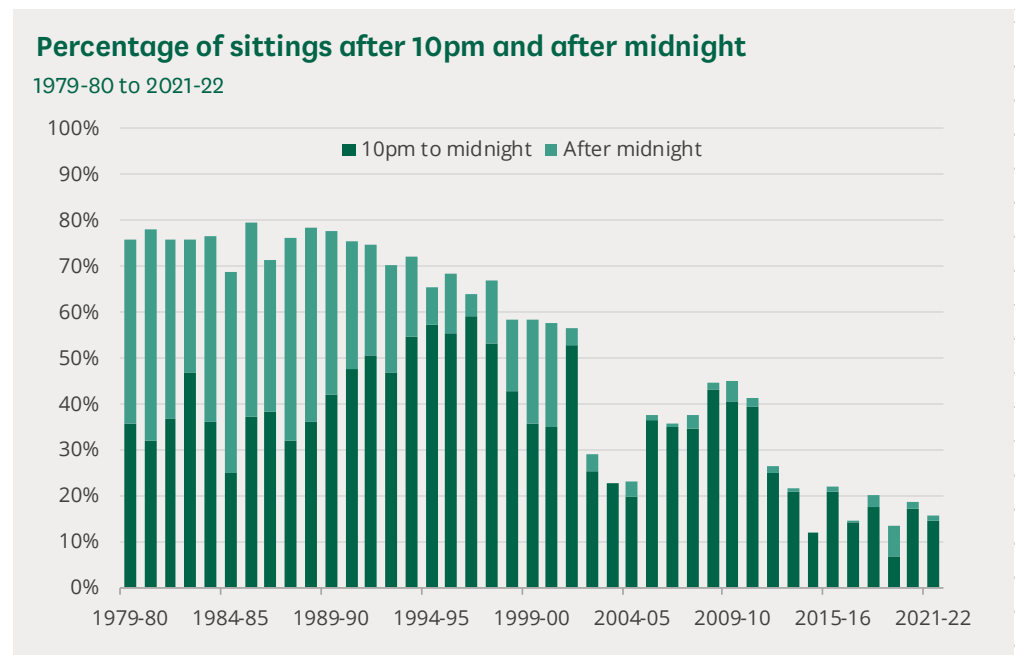
The number of late sittings – those where the House sits until after 10pm – has declined greatly in the last 20 years. With changes made between 1997 and 2012, the normal sitting hours of the Commons have been moved closer in line with normal business hours, for reasons including making Parliament more family friendly.⁶ In particular, as the commencement of proceedings moved to the morning from the afternoon on most days, it is now much less likely for the House to sit after midnight.

Further details on the changes to the normal sittings of the House can be found in the Library briefing papers [Sitting hours \(parliament.uk\)](#) and [Modernisation: Sitting Hours \(parliament.uk\)](#).

The chart on the next page shows that late sittings were very common through to 2001-02. In all sessions 1979-80 to 2001-02, 71% of all sittings finished after 10pm, and in over a quarter of sittings the House rose after midnight. In the 1980s, 10% of sittings lasted until after 2am, although sittings this late became much rarer after 1991. In contrast, since 2002-03, with the reforms of sitting hours, 27% of sittings finished after 10pm, and only 2% after midnight.

In the most recent completed session, 2021-22, only 15% of sittings lasted until after 10pm, and 1% after midnight.

⁶ Commons Library research briefing SN-06380, [Sitting Hours](#); Commons Library research briefing SN-02854, [Modernisation: Sitting Hours](#)



Source: Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Sessional Returns](#): various years; Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Journal](#): various years

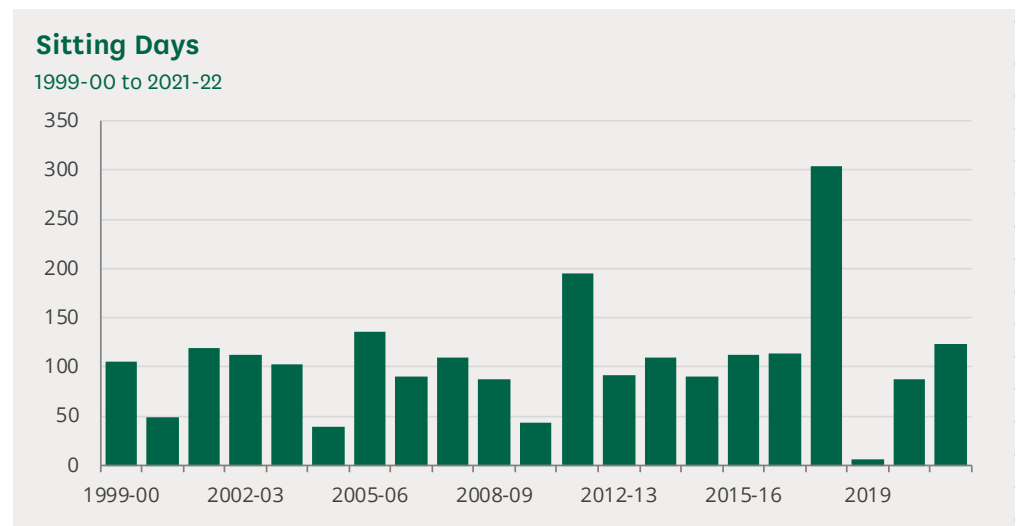
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Westminster Hall sittings

The Westminster Hall Chamber is an additional chamber for the House. The Commons has sat in Westminster Hall, in addition to the main Chamber, since 30th November 1999.⁷

Debates are held in Westminster Hall on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Additional debates can be held on Mondays for members to debate petitions or e-petitions if agreed with the Petitions Committee.⁸

The following chart shows the number of sitting days in Westminster Hall since its inception. As in the main chamber, the number of hours in Westminster Hall is closely related to the number of hours.



Source: Parliament.uk, [House of Commons Sessional Returns](#): various years

⁷ Commons Library research briefing SN- 03939, [House of Commons sittings in Westminster Hall](#)

⁸ Parliament.uk, [Westminster Hall debates](#) (accessed 28th July 2023)

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