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“Plus-Minus” Amendments to Regular Appropriations Measures

“Plus-Minus” Amendments

In current practice, the House of Representatives typically provides for Members to offer amendments during the initial consideration of regular appropriations bills. Among the various types of amendments that Members may offer are so-called “plus-minus” amendments. These amendments are typically drafted in such a way that no substantive changes would be made to the text of the bill. Instead, such amendments provide for an amount of funding to be both added to and subtracted from a specified account or activity. By offering an amendment of this type, Members can obtain floor time to speak during the consideration of an appropriations measure. Many Members use their remarks to signal informal support for an agency to use its existing discretion to allot funds in a particular manner or to highlight a particular issue related to the appropriations measure.

In recent years, Members have offered an increasing number of plus-minus amendments. This In Focus addresses the changing role that these amendments play in the House’s consideration of regular appropriations measures. It provides an overview of the amendments’ typical form and principal functions in the House’s current appropriations process, outlines several key procedural considerations related to their use, and provides statistics about their use and disposition during the 113th-116th Congresses.

Typical Form and Function

Plus-minus amendments have a unique form, which distinguishes them from other types of amendments that are offered during the House’s consideration of regular appropriations measures. The text of a plus-minus amendment proposes to modify the amount of budget authority provided in an appropriations measure by inserting two parenthetical phrases that would increase and decrease a dollar amount by equal and offsetting amounts. The following plus-minus amendment offered during the House’s consideration of H.R. 4502 (117th Congress)—an omnibus measure containing the text of seven FY2022 regular appropriations bills—provides an illustrative example of their typical form:

Page 71, line 8, after the dollar amount insert “(reduced by \$10,000,000) (increased by \$10,000,000).” (*Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 167 (July 27, 2021), p. H4064)

Even if they are agreed to on the floor, plus-minus amendments would not change the amount of funding provided by an appropriations measure, nor would they

impose any statutory conditions on the use of the appropriation by an agency.

Instead, these amendments allow Members to speak during the floor consideration of an appropriations measure. After offering a plus-minus amendment on the floor, Members are recognized to speak on their amendments and may use their floor remarks to highlight a particular issue or request an agency to use its existing discretion to allot an appropriation for a specific purpose (e.g., to submit a report to Congress, allocate funds in a certain way, or take a specific administrative action). These types of remarks allow Members to publicly signal their spending priorities in a way that would not substantively modify the text of an appropriations measure.

Members have also used plus-minus amendments to make more general floor remarks (e.g., making general comments about the bill under consideration, advocating for a particular issue or policy change, or marking a significant anniversary or historical event). For example, a Member offered an amendment to H.R. 3055 (116th Congress)—the Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2020—that proposed to increase and decrease the National Space Council’s appropriation by \$1,969 dollars (H.Amdt. 394). Once recognized, the Member who offered the amendment used his floor remarks to comment on the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission. (*Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 165 (June 19, 2019), p. H4888).

The dollar amount specified in a plus-minus amendment may be chosen to reflect the costs associated with a Member’s request to an agency, or it may be chosen for its symbolic value, as in the example above. It is also common for Members to offer plus-minus amendments with nominal increases and decreases of a single dollar. (See amendments number 20 and 31, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 165 (June 26, 2019), p. H5177).

Procedural Considerations

A procedural advantage of plus-minus amendments is that because the amendment has no net budgetary effect and does not include any substantive language concerning the use of funds or agency duties or authority, these amendments are consistent with the requirements of House rules.

Although the majority of plus-minus amendments are agreed to by the House, these amendments do not impose any statutory requirements on the agency receiving an appropriation or change the amount of funding provided by an appropriations measure. Any text inserted by plus-minus

amendments is typically removed before the underlying appropriations measure is enacted into law. As a result, plus-minus amendments will not affect the text of an appropriations measure that is enacted into law. Any substantive impact that a plus-minus amendment has is the result of the informal influence resulting from a Member’s floor remarks.

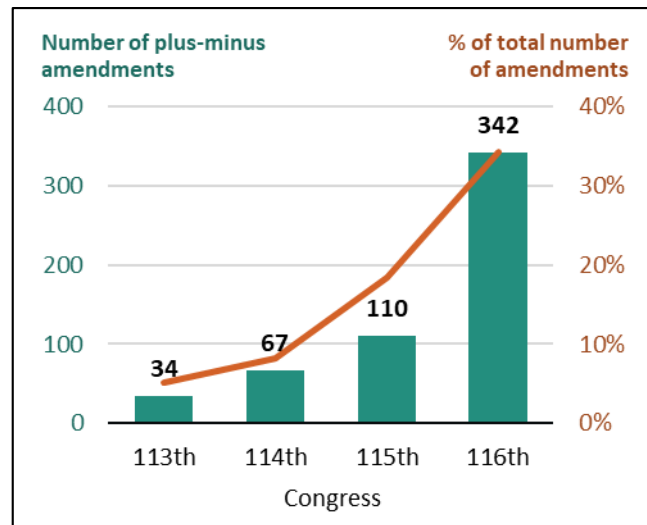
Frequency and Disposition in Recent Congresses

Since the start of the 115th Congress, the House has exclusively used *structured special rules* to set the procedural terms and conditions for the initial floor consideration of regular appropriations measures. Under the terms of such special rules, the Rules Committee determines which amendments are made in order for a measure’s floor consideration, including plus-minus amendments. Members wishing to offer an amendment under a structured rule need to submit such an amendment to the Rules Committee for its consideration and approval.

The number of plus-minus amendments has grown rapidly in recent Congresses, and these amendments account for a growing share of the floor amendments offered to regular appropriations bills. In the 113th Congress, such amendments were 5% of the total number of amendments offered to regular appropriations bills during their initial floor consideration. That percentage increased to 8% in the 114th Congress and to 18% in the 115th Congress. During the 116th Congress, 34% of all amendments offered to regular appropriations measures during their initial floor consideration were plus-minus amendments.

In total, 553 plus-minus amendments were offered to regular appropriations measures over the previous four Congresses, out of a total 3,077 offered amendments: 34 were offered during the 113th Congress, 67 were offered during the 114th Congress, 110 were offered during the 115th Congress, and 342 were offered during the 116th Congress.

Figure 1. Plus-Minus Amendments, by Congress



Source: Congressional Research Service’s analysis of amendment information available on *Congress.gov*.

Of the total 553 plus-minus amendments that were offered to appropriations measures during the 113th-116th Congresses, 95% received a vote and 5% were withdrawn. Among those amendments that received a vote, 96% were agreed to and 4% were not agreed to. Of the plus-minus amendments receiving a vote, 83% were disposed of via a voice vote, and the remaining 17% were disposed of via a roll call vote.

Finally, 338 (64%) of the plus-minus amendments receiving a vote were considered and disposed of “en bloc,” i.e., they were grouped together with other amendments and disposed of via a single vote. Of these amendments, 295 (87%) were disposed of via a voice vote and the remainder were disposed of via a roll call vote.

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