

A proposal to ban secondary amendments

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Question

Every parliamentary system seeks to balance the competing goals of efficiency and freedom of debate. When it comes to amendments, most systems compromise by allowing both amendments to motions (primary amendments) and amendments to amendments (secondary amendments), while prohibiting amendments to amendments to amendments (tertiary amendments).¹ With each level of amendment, both freedom and confusion increase, and most authorities appear to believe that allowing secondary amendments while prohibiting tertiary amendments strikes the right balance.

But does it?

Robert's Rules and *American Institute of Parliamentarians Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure* both allow secondary amendments but concede that they can be confusing. They try to work around that by putting extra burdens on the chair and supplying a diagram. See below.

By contrast, *Modern Parliamentary Procedure* and *Democratic Rules of Order* simply forbid secondary amendments. The George Mason University Faculty Senate meeting of July 2025 temporarily forbade secondary amendments. And if memory serves, the Faculty Senate made it through all of academic year 2025-2026 without recourse to this tool.

I suggest that the Faculty Senate adopt a standing rule to disallow secondary amendments. Under Robert's 2:23, this requires a simple majority vote.

Options

Maintain the status quo

As noted above, secondary amendments are allowed by most systems, so they have the virtue of familiarity. If they have other virtues, I am unaware of them. By contrast, I have repeatedly witnessed confusion as the result of secondary amendments, leading to repeated questions about what is being debated. If you have ever asked, "What are we voting on?" or "Didn't we already vote on this?" a secondary amendment is likely to blame.

Suspend secondary amendments on an ad hoc basis

This was the approach taken by the Faculty Senate for its July 2025 meeting. My sense is that it allowed the Faculty Senate to consider multiple alternatives while reducing confusion. As noted by Keesey, below, a body can still effectively amend amendments; it simply needs to approve amendments and then amend further, so that only one amendment is pending at any given time.

¹ Saul Levmore, "Parliamentary Law, Majority Decisionmaking, and the Voting Paradox," *Virginia Law Review* 75, no. 5 (1989): 983.

Proposed: Adopt a standing rule permanently prohibiting secondary amendments

In this case, a prohibition on secondary amendments would become the default. However, for any given meeting the Faculty Senate could vote (by a two-thirds majority) to suspend the rule and return to allowing secondary amendments. (Robert's 25:14)

Keeseey, *Modern Parliamentary Procedure* (quoted below) prohibits secondary amendments but, unfortunately, fails to offer a concise rule for modifying amendments. A rule based on that work would read:

No formal motions for secondary amendments are allowed. After an amendment to a main motion or a substitute motion has been discussed, the presiding officer may propose that it be modified by general consent. If any member objects to that modification, the Faculty Senate will proceed with debate and a vote on the amendment or substitute as originally worded. After that vote, the presiding officer may call for additional amendments to the main motion.

Appendix 1. Systems using secondary amendments

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 12th edition, 2020 (emphasis added)

12:33. In stating the question on each motion in any series involving amendments, and again when putting the motion to a vote, the chair should take care that the members understand which motion is under immediate consideration, as well as the effect of adopting or rejecting it.

12:34. Therefore, when stating the question on an amendment, the chair may find it advisable to employ three steps:

- 1) State the question as for any other motion: "It is moved and seconded to..."
- 2) Read the main motion (or the portion affected by the amendment) as it would stand if the amendment were adopted: "If the amendment is adopted, the main motion will read..."
- 3) Make clear once more that it is the amendment that is under immediate consideration: "The question is on..."

12:35. Assume that the main motion "That the Society purchase the property adjoining the present Headquarters" is pending.

MEMBER A (obtaining the floor): I move to add the words "and convert it into a parking lot." (Second.)

CHAIR: It is moved and seconded to add the words "and convert it into a parking lot." If the amendment is adopted, the main motion will read, "That the Society purchase the property adjoining the present Headquarters and convert it into a parking lot." The question is on adding the words "and convert it into a parking lot."

12:36. Similarly, when putting to a vote the question on an amendment, if debate or consideration of other motions has intervened since the amendment was stated, the chair may find it advisable to employ a comparable set of three steps:

- 1) Repeat the amendment: "The question is on..."
- 2) Read the main motion (or the portion affected by the amendment) as it would stand if the amendment were adopted: "If the amendment is adopted, the main motion will read..."
- 3) Take the vote in such a way as to make clear it is the amendment that is to be voted on: "Those in favor of..., say aye. [Pausing for response.]... Those opposed, say no."

CHAIR: The question is on adding the words "and convert it into a parking lot." If the amendment is adopted, the main motion will read, "That the Society purchase the property adjoining the present Headquarters and convert it into a parking lot." Those in favor of adding the words "and convert it into a parking lot," say aye. [Pausing for response.]... Those opposed, say no.

12:37. After taking the vote, the chair announces the result of the vote on the amendment, and then states the question that consequently becomes immediately pending:

CHAIR: The ayes have it and the amendment is adopted. The question is now on the main motion as amended, "That the Society purchase the property adjoining the present Headquarters and convert it into a parking lot."

12:38. Should the amendment fail, the chair's announcement of the result would be as follows:

CHAIR: The noes have it and the amendment is lost. The question is now on the main motion, "That the Society purchase the property adjoining the present Headquarters."

12:39. At this point, regardless of whether the amendment is adopted or rejected, the resolution is again open to debate, and it is in order to offer a different amendment.

12:40. In some cases—depending on the length of the resolution and the amendment, the nature of the subject matter, the conditions of the assembly, etc.—the question may be clearer to the members if the chair restates only the amendment, rather than employing the three steps outlined above. On the other hand, in circumstances of particular complexity, when confusion is otherwise likely, the chair may find it advisable to employ four steps: first, to reread the entire main motion or resolution (or the paragraph or portion that the amendment would affect); second, to read the proposed amendment; third, to read the motion, resolution, or affected portion as it would stand if the amendment were adopted; and fourth, to make it clear once more that it is the amendment that is to be voted on.

12:41. As an example of secondary amendment by inserting, assume that there are pending: (1) a resolution, "Resolved, That the Society purchase the property adjoining the present Headquarters"; and (2) (immediately pending) a primary amendment, "to add the words, 'and convert it into a parking lot.'" (Details as to probable costs of proposed phases of the project are assumed to be known.)

MEMBER X (obtaining the floor): I move to insert in the pending amendment the word "landscaped" before "parking lot." (Second.)

CHAIR: It is moved and seconded to amend by inserting in the primary amendment the word "landscaped" before "parking lot." If the word is inserted, the primary amendment will be, "to add to the resolution for the purchase of the property, the words 'and convert it into a landscaped parking lot.'" The question is on inserting the word "landscaped."

12:42. It should be noted that in the preceding example the chair gives the primary amendment as it would read if the secondary amendment were adopted.

12:43. Debate, if any, must be confined to the issue: If the conversion to a parking lot is to be included in the project at this time, should the lot be landscaped? When this debate has ended, the chair puts the secondary amendment to a vote, announces the result, and states the question before the assembly, as follows:

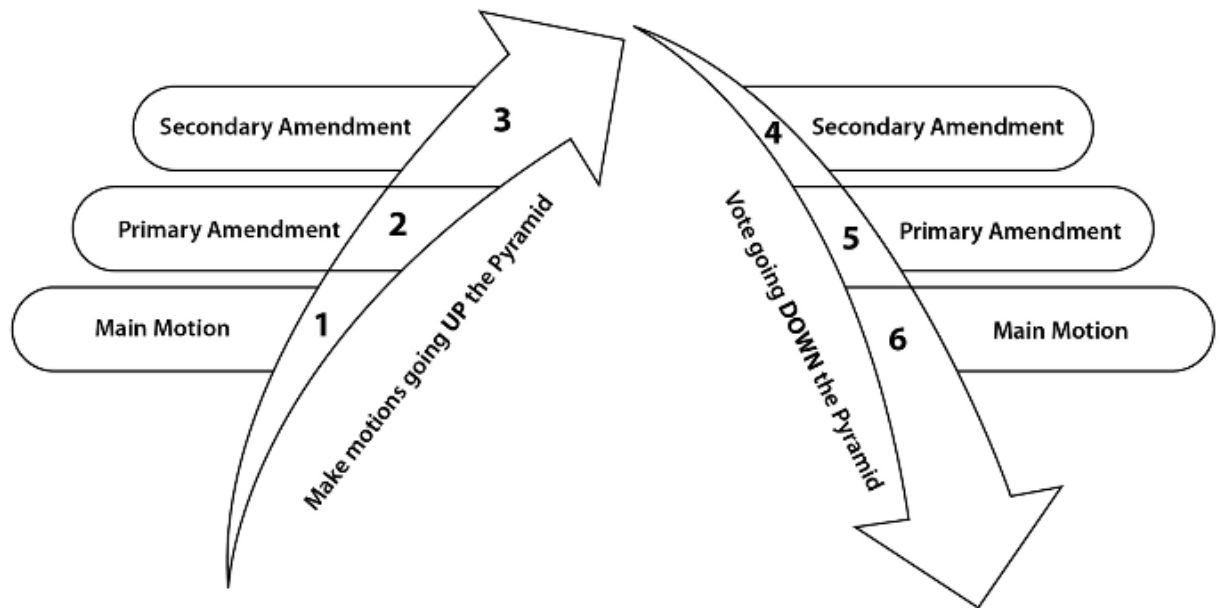
CHAIR: The question is on inserting in the primary amendment the word "landscaped" before "parking lot." If the word is inserted, the primary amendment will be, "To add to the resolution for the purchase of the adjoining property, the words, 'and convert it into a landscaped parking lot.'" It should be noted that this vote will not decide whether a parking lot is to be part of the project. This vote will determine only whether the parking lot will be landscaped if it is constructed. A vote of aye is for landscaping. A vote of no is against landscaping. Those in favor

of inserting the word “landscaped” in the amendment, say aye.... Those opposed, say no.... The ayes have it and the word is inserted. The question is now on the primary amendment as amended, which is, “to add to the resolution the words, ‘and convert it into a landscaped parking lot.’” If the amendment is adopted, the resolution will read, “Resolved, That the Society purchase the property adjoining the present Headquarters and convert it into a landscaped parking lot.” Adoption of this amendment will mean that if the property is purchased by the Society, there will be a parking lot—which will be landscaped. The question is on the amendment.

Voting on Amendments 14.35.

Amendments are voted on in the reverse order of their proposal. Note in the following illustration the main motion is made first, followed by a primary amendment and a secondary amendment, made in that order.

14.36. The secondary amendment is voted on first. The vote is then taken on the primary amendment and, finally, on the main motion.



14.37. If a debatable motion, a primary amendment, and a secondary amendment are pending, the procedure for disposing of them is as follows:

1. Discussion is called for on the secondary amendment, and when discussion is complete or debate is closed, a vote is taken on it.
2. Discussion is then called for on the primary amendment, either as amended if the secondary amendment has been adopted, or as originally proposed if the secondary amendment was defeated.

Other secondary amendments may be moved at this time. When discussion of the primary amendment is complete or debate is closed, a vote is taken on it. A vote adopting an amendment to a main motion—even an amendment that completely replaces the original motion with an entirely new motion—does not adopt the motion, and a final vote on the adoption of the motion itself is required as shown in step 3.

3. Discussion is called for on the main motion, either as amended if the primary amendment has been adopted or as originally proposed if the primary amendment is defeated. Other amendments may be moved at this time. When discussion on the main motion is complete or debate is closed, a vote is taken on the main motion.

Appendix 2. Systems not using secondary amendments

Ray E. Keesey, Modern Parliamentary Procedure, Second edition. (American Psychological Association, 2018) (emphasis added)

The process of further modifying a proposed amendment to a main motion deserves special attention. Members must be free to effect as many changes in a motion as are required to make it state accurately the wishes of the assembly. **The procedure for change should be easy for the average person to follow. For this reason, the confusing and redundant process of formally amending a pending amendment is not used in this manual.**

This does not mean that it is impossible to amend an amendment. It means either that suggested changes in a proposed amendment are accepted by general consent without debate or a formal vote, or that the originally proposed amendment is voted on first and the suggested change to it is offered later as another proposed amendment. Thus, only one proposed amendment is pending at a time.

An experienced presiding officer will have little difficulty with this procedure. In most cases, a suggested change in a proposed amendment may be incorporated simply by the presiding officer's asking permission of the body. If the suggested change is of questionable merit in the minds of some members, the presiding officer may state, "After the proposed amendment is voted on, opportunities will be given to present other suggestions as separate amendments" and proceed with discussion of the pending amendment.

In brief, changes in a proposed amendment are agreed to by general consent; if the proposed change is not accepted in this fashion, it can be offered later for separate consideration. In this limited sense, proposed amendments may be further amended, although the process is better described as modification than as an amendment.

This procedure is already being used by many small groups under, for example, 40 members. And it should always be used by groups of only 10 to 15 and by committees. In practically all cases, it saves time that would otherwise be required for formal consideration and vote on the "secondary amendment," as it has been called. Even if a suggested change in a proposed amendment is later put to a vote as a proposed amendment itself, this process does not make necessary any more votes than would have been required had it been permissible to amend the amendment. Any number of proposed changes germane to an amendment may be accepted before putting the revised form to a vote.

In the case of a substitute motion—a motion replacing the main motion—proposed as an amendment, the procedure outlined above is followed. If entertained as germane, informal changes to the substitute amendment are permitted; if the substitute amendment is adopted, the original main motion is replaced by it, and the new main motion may be further amended before a vote is taken to approve or reject it.

Peg Francis and Fred Francis, Democratic Rules of Order: Easy-to-Use Rules for Meetings of Any Size (New Society Publishers, 2019).

If the mover does not—or cannot, because of objections—make a suggested change to the motion, any member may move an amendment to the original motion. An amendment may delete, substitute, or add words that will modify the original motion but must not negate it or change the intent.

The amendment, when accepted by the chair and seconded, immediately becomes a new motion on the floor, temporarily replacing the original motion. The amendment grants mover's privilege to the mover of the amendment. Any rewording must be acceptable to the chair as not changing the topic. The details of the proposed amendment are discussed (not the original motion), and then the amendment is voted on. An amendment cannot be amended, but it can be defeated and replaced with another amendment.

If the amendment passes, the secretary should read the newly amended motion, which is now a new motion on the floor to be discussed (if desired) and voted on. It cannot be reworded or withdrawn by the mover's privilege now, since it has been partly established by the members, but this new motion can be passed, defeated, or amended again.

If the amendment fails, the previous motion again becomes the motion on the floor. If this previous motion was the original motion (having never been amended), then the original mover regains the mover's privilege. Further amendments are allowed, one at a time.