

Spoiler effect

The **spoiler effect** is the effect of vote splitting between candidates or ballot questions^[n 1] who often have similar ideologies. One **spoiler candidate's** presence in the election draws votes from a major candidate with similar politics thereby causing a strong opponent of both or several to win.^{[1][2][3][4]} The minor candidate causing this effect is referred to as a *spoiler*.^[n 2] However, short of any electoral fraud, this presents no grounds for a legal challenge.

The spoiler effect is a problem in plurality voting systems because they enable a candidate to win with less than half of the vote.

The problem also exists in instant-runoff voting,^{[3][5][6][7][8][9]} though it is reduced, because voters are allowed to rank their candidate choices, with their vote transferring to their second choice if their first choice does not win, and to their third choice if their second choice does not win, and so on. Other preferential voting or ranked ballot voting systems also suffer from variations of the spoiler effect, as they fail the IIA criterion (see §Mathematical definitions).

The problem does not exist in cardinal voting methods like approval voting, score voting, or majority judgment, since the rating of each candidate is independent of the ratings of other candidates.

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Relationship with other effects

The spoiler candidate takes votes away from a more viable^[n 3] candidate or candidates, a common effect called vote splitting. Where one opposing candidate is ideologically or politically similar and therefore receives far fewer votes than other opposing candidates to the spoiler candidate, then the vote splitting has a spoiler effect.

In some cases, even though the spoiler candidate cannot win themselves, their influences upon the voters may enable the candidate to determine deliberately which of the more viable candidates wins the election — a situation known as a kingmaker scenario. With a first-past-the-post voting system, this is particularly feasible where a spoiler candidate recommends tactical voting or runs on a false manifesto to bolster the prospects of their secretly preferred winning candidate.

In a preferential voting system, a voter can feel more inclined to vote for a minor party or independent as their first choice and they can record a preference between the remaining candidates, whether they are in a major or established party or not. For example, voters for a minor left-wing candidate might select a major left-wing candidate as their second choice, thus minimizing the probability that their vote will result in the election of a right-wing candidate, or voters for an independent candidate perceived as libertarian, or simply as the voter prefers that ideology might select a particular libertarian candidate as their second choice, thus minimising the probability of an authoritarian candidate being elected. Approval voting and proportional representation systems can also reduce the spoiler effect.

One of the main functions of political parties is to mitigate the effect of spoiler-prone voting methods by winnowing on a local level the contenders before the election. Each party nominates at most one candidate per office since each party expects to lose if they nominate more than one.^[n 4] In some cases, a party can expect to "lose" by "suffering a rival elected opponent" if they nominate more than zero, where two opponents exist and one is considered a candidate they can "work with" — a party may prefer the candidate who would win if the party nominates zero.^[n 5]

Thus, empirical observations of the frequency of spoiled elections do not provide a good measure of how prone to spoiling a particular voting method is, since the observations omit the relevant information about potential candidates who did not run because of not wanting to spoil the election.

Mathematical definitions

Possible mathematical definitions for the spoiler effect include failure of the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) axiom, and vote splitting.

Arrow's impossibility theorem states that rank-voting systems are unable to satisfy the independence of irrelevant alternatives criterion without exhibiting other undesirable properties as a consequence. However, different voting systems are affected to a greater or lesser extent by IIA failure. For example, instant runoff voting is considered to have less frequent IIA failure than First Past the Post (also known as Plurality Rule). The independence of Smith-dominated alternatives (ISDA) criterion is much weaker than IIA; unlike IIA, some ranked-ballot voting methods can pass ISDA.

A possible definition of spoiling based on vote splitting is as follows: Let W denote the candidate who wins the election, and let X and S denote two other candidates. If X would have won had S not been one of the nominees, and if (most of) the voters who prefer S over W also prefer X over W (either $S > X > W$ or $X > S > W$), then S is a spoiler. Here is an example to illustrate: Suppose the voters' orders of preference are as follows:

33%: S>X>W	15%: X>S>W	17%: X>W>S	35%: W>X>S
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The voters who prefer S over W also prefer X over W. W is the winner under Plurality Rule, Top Two Runoff, and Instant Runoff. If S is deleted from the votes (so that the 33% who ranked S on top now rank X on top) then X would be the winner (by 65% landslide majority). Thus S is a spoiler with these three voting methods.

Spoiler effect in American elections

A 2014 analysis by Philip Bump for *the Washington Post* found that 1.5% of general election races in the U.S. from 2006 to 2012 were spoiled by third-party candidates.^[10]

Presidential elections

Historically, the Democratic and Republican parties have benefited from the alleged spoiler effect created by the existing U.S. plurality voting system.^{[11][12]} This benefit is based in the theory that not voting for other parties and for independents and that third parties and independent candidates themselves declining to run, means to avoid "wasting votes" or splitting the vote causing an election result not wanted.

These are third-party candidates who have been accused of denying victory to a major nominee in U.S. Presidential Elections; a notable case among these is the 1912 election, where Progressive Party candidate Theodore Roosevelt won almost 700,000 votes more than did the Republican incumbent, William Howard Taft,^[13] and thus it could be said that Taft was the spoiler for Roosevelt in that election. This argument worried Republicans, who, after Woodrow Wilson won the 1912 election, became concerned that Roosevelt might return to split the Republican vote again.^[14]

In 1968, George Wallace ran for president as the American Independent Party's nominee. He received numerous votes from Southern demographics that typically voted for Democratic candidates, thereby undercutting the candidacy of that election's Democratic nominee, Hubert Humphrey.^[15]

Bush, Gore, and Nader (2000 U.S. presidential election)

The 2000 U.S. Presidential election is often cited as an example of the spoiler effect. In that election, Al Gore, the Democratic candidate, received more popular votes than George W. Bush, the Republican candidate, but lost in the electoral college. In the state of Florida, the final certified vote count showed Bush with just 537 more votes than Gore.^[16] Because Bush defeated Gore in Florida, he won the state, received more votes in the electoral college, and became president of the United States.

Gore supporters argued that had candidate Ralph Nader, a liberal, not run in the election, the majority of the 97,421 votes he received in Florida would have been cast for Gore. Thus, they contend that Nader's candidacy spoiled the election for Gore by taking away enough votes from Gore in Florida to swing the election to Bush. Their argument is bolstered by a poll of Nader voters, asking them for whom they would have voted had Nader not run, which said 45 percent of Nader voters would have voted for Gore, 27 percent would have voted for Bush, and the rest would not have voted.^[17]

Nader himself and many of his supporters argued that most Nader voters would either have chosen another minor party candidate or abstained from voting, had Nader not been on the ballot. It should also be noted that all other third party candidates on the ballot in Florida received more than the 537 vote difference between Bush and Gore.^[18] Still, some observers began to refer to the spoiler effect as the "Nader effect" after the 2000 election.^{[19][20][21]} A 2006 study found that

at least 40% of Nader voters in Florida would have voted for Bush if Nader had not run, while the other 60% would have voted for Gore. The study concluded that this 60% "did indeed spoil the 2000 presidential election for Gore but only because of highly idiosyncratic circumstances, namely, Florida's extreme closeness."^[22]

Other US elections

- In the Oregon gubernatorial election, 1934, Republican Peter Zimmerman ran as an independent, receiving 31.7% of the vote compared to Democratic victor Charles Martin's 38.6% and Republican nominee Joe Dunne's 28.7%. Altogether, the Republicans received 60.3% of the vote.
- A similar trend was seen in the Oregon gubernatorial election, 1990, when conservative activist Al Mobley ran as an independent, receiving 13% of the vote. Democrat Barbara Roberts defeated Republican David B. Frohnmayr 45.7% to 40%.
- In 1994, moderate Republican Marshall Coleman ran for the U.S. Senate as an independent, receiving over 11 percent of the vote in an election where Democrat Chuck Robb defeated Republican nominee Oliver North by only three percent of the vote.
- In 2008, Democrat Al Franken was elected the junior senator from Minnesota, defeating Norm Coleman by only 0.1%. Independent candidate Dean Barkley received over 15% of the vote, and a 2014 analysis by Time found that without Barkley in the race, Franken would have lost the election to Coleman.^[23]
- In 2010, Green Party candidate Bill Scheurer ran for Illinois 8th Congressional District against Democratic incumbent Melissa Bean. Republican Joe Walsh won the election in a surprising upset with only a 291-vote (0.1%) difference with Bean, while Scheurer received 6,494 votes (3.2%).
- As a result of the 2011 Wisconsin protests and subsequent recall elections, the Wisconsin Republican Party has encouraged spoiler candidates to run in the recall elections on the Democrat ticket in order to force the Democrats into a Primary election. Republicans argued that this will even the playing field in the recalls, as incumbents facing recall did not have the time to campaign due to their work load in the state senate.^[24]
- Maine politician Eliot Cutler, an independent, has been accused of siphoning enough votes from Democratic candidates to allow Republican Paul LePage to win the 2010 and 2014 gubernatorial elections with pluralities of the vote.^{[25][26][27][28][29]}
- Several races in the 2014 election cycle were allegedly influenced by spoiler candidates, most notably Hawaii's gubernatorial elections and the Kansas senatorial race. In the Mississippi senatorial Republican primary, a paper candidate, Thomas Carey, who received less than two percent of the vote prevented both top contenders, incumbent Thad Cochran and challenger Chris McDaniel, from avoiding a runoff. Had the spoiler (Carey) not run, the race between McDaniel and Cochran would have avoided a runoff.
- In both the 2013 Virginia Gubernatorial Election and the 2014 Virginia US Senate Election, Libertarian Robert Sarvis received a number of votes greater than the difference between the Republican and Democratic candidates.^{[30][31]} Given the similarity in Republican and Libertarian views, it is likely that the Republican would have won each election if not for the inclusion of Sarvis on the ballot.
- In the 2016 New Hampshire Senate election, conservative independent candidate Aaron Day won about 18,000 votes. Given his political leanings, it is likely that the vast majority of his voters otherwise would have voted for incumbent Senator Kelly Ayotte, who lost to Governor Maggie Hassan by about 1,000 votes, thus costing Ayotte reelection.

Other countries

In the German presidential election of 1925, Communist Ernst Thälmann refused to withdraw his candidacy though it was extremely unlikely he would win the election and the leadership of the Communist International urged him not to run. In the second (and final) round of balloting, Thälmann won 1,931,151 votes or 6.4 percent. Centrist candidate Wilhelm Marx won 13,751,605 or 45.3 percent. And independent candidate Paul von Hindenburg, endorsed by the German nationalists, nationalist liberals, and Nazis, won 14,655,641 votes or 48.3 percent.^[32] If most of Thälmann's supporters had voted for Marx instead of the right-wing nationalist Hindenburg, Marx would have won the election. The election of 1925 had great significance because in 1933 Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler as chancellor and then died the following year, giving Hitler unchecked control of the German government.^[33] By contrast, Marx, who was dedicated to republican democracy, lived until 1946.

In New Zealand, there have been two notable cases of the spoiler effect. In the 1984 general election, the free-market New Zealand Party deliberately ran for office in order to weaken support for the incumbent Prime Minister Robert Muldoon. Later on, the 1993 general election saw the New Zealand Labour Party's vote split by The Alliance, which has been attributed to the vagaries of the first past the post electoral system. In response to these problems, New Zealand has since adopted the mixed-member proportional voting system.

Likewise, in France, the 2002 presidential elections have been cited as a case of the spoiler effect: the numerous left-wing candidates, such as Christiane Taubira and Jean-Pierre Chevènement, both from political parties allied to the French Socialist Party, or the three candidates from Trotskyist parties, which altogether totalled around 20%, have been charged with making Lionel Jospin, the P.S. candidate, lose the two-round election in the first round to the benefit of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was separated from Jospin by only 0.68%. Some also cite the case of some districts in which although the right and the far right had more than half of the votes, the left still won the election; they accuse the left of profiting from their split.

In Hong Kong it is a very common for the Pro-democracy camp, and it suffered greatly in many election including the Hong Kong legislative election, 2016 and Hong Kong local elections, 2015. Usually for Pro-Democracy supporters, they have way different ideologies and suffer from factional disputes, which exacerbates after the advent of localist groups. Though have wider aggregate support, the seats earned is even less than the Pro-Beijing camp, like in Kowloon East, Pro-Democracy got over 55% ballots but eventually earn only 2 seats out of 5.

In Canada, in the 2004 federal election, the right-of-centre Conservative Party won power with 29.63% of the popular vote. Its two major competitors, the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party (both left-of-centre), respectively garnered 36.73% and 15.68% of the vote. Similar vote splits between the two major left-of-centre parties continued to assist the Conservative Party in maintaining power in the 2006, 2008, and 2011 federal elections, despite a majority of the national popular vote going to left-of-centre parties in each race.

Also in Canada, in the province of Alberta's 2015 provincial election, the New Democratic Party (a left-of-centre party) won 62% of the seats with 40.6% of the provincial popular vote, following a division within the right-of-centre Progressive Conservative Party that left it with 27.8% of the vote, and its breakaway movement, the Wildrose Party, with 24.2% of the vote. In 2008, the last election in which the Progressive Conservative Party was unified, it garnered 52.72% of the provincial popular vote.

Sports

In sports, the "spoiler effect" refers to a similar phenomenon, in which a team or individual has been eliminated from the possibility of reaching the postseason, but affects the playoffs or finals anyway by beating a more successful team or individual before the end of the season. For example, a baseball team that is ten games out of contention for a playoff berth could defeat a team that has a playoff berth several times. This could cause the would-be playoff team to be passed by in the rankings by the team directly behind it before the final positions at the end of the season are determined.

In individual participant sports, such as automobile racing, a racer with no hope of obtaining a championship title could prevent a racer with a chance at the title by defeating them, preventing the contending racer from earning critical points toward winning the title. Instead, the title would go to the contender directly behind him in the rankings, provided that second-tier racer is close enough to surpass and they win their own competition.

See also

- [Instant-runoff voting](#)
- [Strategic nomination](#)
- [Vote splitting](#)
- [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#)

Notes and references

Notes

- Examples are the [first past the post electoral system](#) and in [single transferable vote](#) or similar systems with a first-preference votes [winning percentage](#).
- A term designed to appeal to a wider section of the public as a result of the widespread, often national support of [political parties](#).
- More viable by common public sentiment which may sometimes be indicated in [opinion polls](#).
- For example, if the Democrats had nominated both [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Barack Obama](#) for U.S. President in 2008, it would have allowed the Republican candidate (John McCain) to easily win; the voters who preferred both Clinton and Obama over McCain could not have been relied on to solve the strategy coordination problem on their own.
- For example, in the United Kingdom, [UKIP](#) have a policy of not standing parliamentary candidates where the incumbent is a committed eurosceptic member of the large [Conservative Party](#); however, one rebel spoiler candidate from the party, Jake Baynes, led to the defeat of [David Heathcoat-Amory](#) in [Wells](#) in the [United Kingdom general election, 2010](#) by the [Liberal Democrats \(UK\)](#).

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