

Gaggle - Vote Splitting.mp3

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:00:03] Let's say there's a ballot with several candidates seeking the same seat, and you like most of them, but you can only pick one because that's what the rules say. When that happens, the vote in a multi-candidate race is split, and the outcome often is that the candidate you least liked wins. This is called vote splitting. A phenomenon that happens when a race attracts at least three candidates who have similar positions, or maybe similar demographics. This makes it attractive for a contrasting candidate to benefit from the divided vote and prevail. It's happened time and again across the nation and here in Arizona. Think Paul Gosar. He emerged from an eight candidate field in 2010 to win the GOP primary in a heavily Republican district. It cemented his standing as an incumbent, and he hasn't lost since. There's a move afoot to stop vote splitting by introducing what is called approval voting, a system where voters could vote for all of the candidates in a given race who appeal to them, and they could do that without having to rank them. Welcome to The Gaggle, a politics podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. I'm Mary Jo Pitzl. I cover state politics and policy. Ron Hansen is out today. In this episode, we're examining the effect of vote splitting, the potential issues it can cause, and some of the unintended consequences of the practice. We'll also talk about the related practice of ticket splitting, which factored prominently in the 2022 general election. To explain all this, we've reached out to the center for Election Science, a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit focused on voting reform. Joining us via zoom from the center are Nina Taylor, the organization's CEO, and Chris Raleigh, director of advocacy and communication and the specialist in campaign management. Welcome to you both.

Nina Taylor [00:02:16] Thank you, and thanks for inviting us.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:02:18] So first off, let's get some definitions. Give our listeners a plain English description of vote splitting and how it works.

Nina Taylor [00:02:27] Sure. There is a difference between a split ticket voting and vote splitting. And so vote splitting occurs when you have multiple similar candidates that have their support split among the same voter base, making it more likely that a dissimilar and sometimes less popular candidate will win. Split ticket voting refers to the situation in which voters cast ballots for candidates from different political parties for various offices in the same election. So an example would be a voter might choose a Democrat candidate for president, but then elect the Republican candidate for governor and mayor. And so both occur in our current voting system, which is called plurality voting. And, when it comes to vote splitting, it really does plague American elections. And it has throughout times in recent years, congressional primaries have become more and more crowded. And the more candidates who enter the race, the greater the opportunity for vote splitting, especially when those candidates share similar policy ideology as well as background.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:03:26] So is split ticket voting a form of vote splitting?

Chris Raleigh [00:03:31] So one is a scenario and one is what voters choose to do. So vote splitting has these three ingredients. You have to have lots of candidates. Second thing is some of those candidates need to be the same. And the third thing is you can only choose what. In that scenario almost more times than not. What happened is the candidates that are similar voters put someone A and someone B, and they both do worse. So someone was going to get 60% and then my twin brother comes. We're both going to get 30%. It nearly always happens. And it could be we could be from the same town. We could have the same views. Doesn't matter. Voters are used to maybe hearing

stealing votes from each other. The last thing that happens more times than not, the winner gets less than 50%. So when you have a lot of people and kind of people are putting them in different buckets, you're going to get somewhat less than 50%. So you need all those three ingredients. But when you have all those three ingredients, you're almost guaranteed to get the outcomes that I was explaining before. Vote splitting is not good. Split ticketing is what voters choose to do. So if you feel very strongly that a Republican should be president, but you really like the Democratic candidates for mayor or Senate, or maybe you like the Republican nominees for Congress, you could split. Ticketing is a phenomenon where voters. It almost seems weird in 2024. How could. How can people do that? It's actually that's how elections used to be. Voters used to split tickets at a far, higher rate in the past than in the 20 tens and 2020s. And part of the reason for that is, you know, people used to say all politics is local. That's something we've all heard, right? What happens is, and I've seen this as a campaign manager working at the local level and at the congressional level. And the pass is that even those things get nationalized, right? What's happening for mayor? You used to say maybe, hey, I like the mayor, the mayor's Democrat, I'm a Republican, but the mayor's doing a good job. Now, today, even the mayor. You say the mayor is a Democrat, and so maybe we need a Republican mayor. Whereas in the past, the local ties mattered more to a voter for those lower races than maybe they did for for president.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:06:14] So what's the origin of vote splitting? This is something that grew up organically. Was it, you know, cooked up in some smoky back room at a in a political headquarters?

Nina Taylor [00:06:27] I don't think that it was kind of cooked up. I think it's just the outcome of the current system that we have when it comes to running our elections. The entire.

Chris Raleigh [00:06:36] You know, choose.

Nina Taylor [00:06:37] One candidate on the ballot. And as we expand in kind of our belief systems and how people are voting, and to Chris's point, you know, folks aren't voting just down ballot for their party sometimes. And look at the qualifications. Do we trust that this person will have my interests in mind? And so the way that the current system is set up, the vote splitting happens. But vote splitting in itself is just bad for democracy and undermines the very reasons that we have elections. And that's why we believe that. Well, it's hard to see and that it's often not named or actually, the emphasis isn't placed on vote splitting, as it should. It's the root of many of our problems, especially in elections. You end up with these spoilers, right? So you have winners where the community gets this winner that actually doesn't represent them, it doesn't represent their interests. And then the vote splitting could happen where, you know, you might knock out the candidates that, really do represent your interest in in that third candidate, that didn't come to your community, speak to you, doesn't understand the issues that are so much more important to you, ends up winning with a very slim margin of the vote. And so it is something that I think we need to address. One of the reasons that I joined the center for Election Science is the fact that we need reform. When it comes to the way that we elect our officials, we lobby and then advocate for approval voting. So you're able to select all of the candidates that you like and none of the ones that you don't, rather than having to, almost force your hand in voting for a single candidate.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:08:14] Do you have examples of vote splitting here in Arizona?

Chris Raleigh [00:08:18] What makes Arizona interesting is you have us pulling on both sides of the aisle here, which is not necessarily the case in every single state. Imagine someone in Congress where you just say, how the heck to that person get in there. But I like to have the audience imagine that before I mentioned the people that I mentioned. So some of the folks that have big name ones in the last 14 years, Paul Gosar 2010, had eight candidates, got 31% of the vote. And Ruben Gallego, 2014 for Congress for candidates got just under 50% of the vote. Senate. In 2012, three candidates, 40% of the vote. Eli Crane in 2022. Seven candidates, 34% of vote. Andy Banks, 2016. For candidates 30% of the vote and then Kari Lake, 2022 for candidates 48% of the vote. And I don't know that aspects of every single one of these races. But why it's interesting to think about this is I guarantee that there was a solid coalition, probably against each one of these candidates and each one of their races, Democrat or Republican. That coalition can't solidify, right? If there is an anti this candidate coalition, there's usually five of those candidates and then the one candidate who's hard to beat. So when we think about splitting, when we think about partizanship, when we think how the heck did Congress break down so badly? Go back to the source, go back to the origins. Go back to the the race where they could be beat, which was these primaries. And in those race you'll say, oh wow, maybe there was an anti coalition against this person. But there were nine of them, seven of them, and there was the one candidate. So and this happens all over the place and it happened. And also look at the presidential races in 2016 and 2020. Both candidates the for 2024. That was their kind of origin right. Was those races. Look at the first primaries for both Trump and Biden. They won the first contest with less than 40% of the vote. I don't have the numbers off the top of my head, but remember, there were 17 and 18 candidates each in those races. It's a mathematical fact. More people voted against Trump and Biden in those early races than voted for them. And that's the core why vote splitting is bad. 60% of people voted for something else, but 40% of people get what they want. And that's where we kind of want to leave you all with. It's like, is that right? Is that how it should be? Should that be a tactic? Should dividing and adding more people, more candidates to the race to split the vote? Should that be a tactic or should should it be a game of addition of voters who can get the most voters? Who can be the most approved? Who has the broadest approval? And those are the people and I but, Mary Jo, you have you had a question about getting the people in power to like this? What I'll say to that is Democrats want the best Democrat and Republicans want the best Republican. And I'll, you know, and I, I feel pretty strongly that whatever party figures this out first, that this is a way to do that. They'll have an advantage for a while. Don't. Both of them right now. Yeah, that is fair warning. But if you did approve of voting to pick your candidate and your nominee had 70% approval and theirs was some some person who got 30% in some. Demolition derby primary. You know, who do we think would win? Right. And, the last, last thing I want to leave you with is there was a candidate in Saint Louis. So they in Saint Louis. What they used to do is they should do the system we have, which is plurality voting. And there is. Candidate called to charge us such charge. Owens runs for mayor in 2017. There are multiple black candidates. One white candidate. One white candidate went. We have nothing against her. Besides that. She won with votes. Right. She got 32% charge. Jones got 30% of the vote, 2021. The city of Saint Louis has proven very. Chicago. Same candidate running again gets 57% approval. Do you do anything magic? But the voters could finally say what they wanted. There was vote splitting and it was impacting who won, and it was making the city even more divided than it already was. It's very divided place already. And so why we like it, why we like approval voting is we we've seen what it does. We've seen like the hope. And most people walked away from that election going like. Yeah, that sounds about right. Right. When you. What did we as Americans kill to have that kind of, like reaction? Whereas instead of. It's like, no, we got a we got to fight a war to to protest these results. That's what we're trying to get across, is

like, we want the elections to feel like they pick the right person for the community, and we want to incentivize those candidates to go across the community and not stay in their bubbles, whether that bubbles ideology or geography or or anything else.

Nina Taylor [00:14:12] Look at vote splitting, right. And so in 2022, an impacted Arizona Senate race, as well as four congressional districts, and we actually have a vote splitting map on our website, elections, science talk. And I'd also like to encourage listeners to look into approval voting and other reform methods, and start asking questions and getting involved in town halls around reform and, and learn more about how voting reform can enhance your voting power, especially to combat issues like vote splitting.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:14:50] Well, I wanted to go back a little bit because it does sound like at least split ticketing is a manifestation of voter choice, but you see vote splitting as different. But you know what's wrong with the voter choosing, you know, making their choice among maybe array of five candidates who might be somewhat similar.

Chris Raleigh [00:15:11] Absolutely. What I would say to that is if you look at a population and you say the population is 90% Latino and there are eight Latinos running for mayor, the one non-Latino everyone knows, the one non-Latino probably has the best chance of winning. Anecdotally, you go to a community. People see that, right? It sometimes is weaponized. So center for Election Science has done a lot of work with the city of Saint Louis. Saint Louis is pretty close to being half white and half black. And what would happen in the past in these elections is there would be multiple black candidates who ran, and there was a history of finding and maybe even paying candidates to run that were black, to split the vote even further to help the white candidates. This happens all the time. There's a very famous example in Florida where they found someone and put him on the ticket, who had the exact same name as one of the candidates to try to steal the vote further. So one can be kind of manipulated. The second thing, vote splitting leads to this thing called the center squeeze effect. So what does that mean? Well, the center squeeze effect is when there are multiple candidates who are moderate and one candidate who's a partizan fire breather, the advantage goes to the hyper partizan person. So in primaries, that's where the ingredients that we're talking about for votes splitting are most likely right. There's lots of people. They're all kind of the same. And you can only pick one. And in all these races, you know, I think a lot of Americans are saying, where are the moderates? Where are the moderates in Congress? What happens is a lot of moderates run for these primaries. And then there's 1 or 2 folks that are maybe say, hey, I want to burn it all down, and they'll get 30% of the vote. And all the monitors, the 4 or 5 moderates will split. They'll get 25, 20, 22. You see this every day. I guarantee if there is someone in Congress and you're like, how the heck did that person get in there, like in their primary history? Like you'll see nine times out of ten there were multiple people in the race and they didn't get 50% of the vote. So that's one of the reasons that it's not votes, but it's not good. Is that kind of lowers the bar for the really hyper partizan people to get in these seats. And then, you know, once they're an incumbent, it's really hard for them to lose.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:17:47] Understood. So the way you describe that, that sounds like that happens somewhat organically. But are there cases where there's like organized efforts to get people to vote a certain way in a crowded race, or does it mostly happen organically?

Chris Raleigh [00:18:05] Part of your question, Mary Jo, is how one how common is this? And two is like it didn't necessarily used to feel this way. I think a lot of people would argue that now point to primaries, because primaries are a big deal in the United States for for president, for Congress, for Senate. You have to remember the 1800s, first half of the 20th

century. There were these gatekeepers who said when when someone who was maybe not ready to run for Congress said, I want to run. Someone would put an arm run in and say, no, we're going to find you another seat, right? We're going to find you a city council or something like that. The party's traditionally had that gatekeeper role, and also the media. The media could say, pay attention to these folks. They're legit. Don't pay attention to these folks. They're not legit. Since 2010 to 2020 and key primaries throughout the United States, we've seen an absolute explosion in the number of candidates driven 40%. Why has it risen 40%? You have the internet. You don't have these traditional gatekeepers to say, oh, I'm going to. I'm the one who controls the money. You have to go through me, or I'm the one who gives you attention. You have to go through me. What has happened is a lot of people feel like they can run for these offices, and. And they don't have as many people telling them no as they used to. On one hand, that's great. That's awesome. There's a lot of people who would have been who have been in marginalized communities, who have not had the opportunity because of these gatekeepers. On the other hand, you're seeing races with five, ten, 20, 25 candidates. There's one congressional race this year that has 21 candidates in it and another state. What choice do you have? There's 21 candidates. The voters ability to influence the election with every new person also goes down right. If it's too great, it's going to be 5050. But once it's three, four, five, it starts to become a crapshoot. And that's the complete opposite of what elections should be. It shouldn't be a lottery. It should be what do people want? And we could clearly see that.

Nina Taylor [00:20:11] I just wanted to add to that point. We did a study in the 2022 primaries, and we compiled all of the statewide congressional and state legislative primaries, and almost 11% of those primaries included a non majority winner. And as we kind of dug into those details, there was this huge prevalence of vote splitting. And it changed significantly based on that level of the election. And so to your your question about like why is this bad? You end up with elected officials that are elected without the support of the electorate. Right. And so that goes into the conversation about the individual voter feeling like there's a kind of a loss of faith in the voting system and that their vote doesn't matter. And so that impacts, of course, voter turnout and then the quality of candidates and then having candidates that do represent their interests in elected offices. And so while it's prevalent on every level of elections, it's something that isn't widely addressed, and it cannot be addressed in the current system in which we vote.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:21:13] Earlier you had referenced approval voting. That's a term that I don't think is in the common parlance. Could talk about how that works and and who's using it.

Nina Taylor [00:21:24] Yeah. So approval voting is a alternative voting method that's currently used in Fargo, North Dakota. It's also used in Saint Louis, Missouri. And approval voting isn't complex. It can actually be completed within the current voting system. It's really just a flip of the switch where votes can essentially go into overdrive. So you can select more than one candidate. So it's not a complex reform. I think it's a great first step to reform. It's easy to tally. It's really just simple addition. And let's say that you like, you know, two candidates. You can select both of those candidates. And in a way none of the ones that you don't like, it removes some of that. The data around the vote splitting in a round, having to just rank, you know, all of these candidates, the 21 candidate did have to rank. So blue voting is really, really easy. And so it really is just a way to reform. And I think put a little bit more power into the voters. The one thing that I really like about approval voting is that it changes how candidates campaign, right? They don't have to just stay in a district and play the map. They have to come to communities and talk to all different types of voters and understand the issues that are really relevant to them,

because it's all about building consensus, but they need consensus approval, in order to be elected. And so we lobby and advocate, for approval voting to be utilized, throughout, the elections. And we are just one of many reforms that exist in this space.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:23:04] How is it different from ranked choice voting?

Nina Taylor [00:23:08] Yeah. So, ranked choice voting, is again, another different, a different type of reform. And if I, if I think about, ranked choice voting, the burden really is on the voter and voting education. Right. So you have to know enough about each candidate to be able to put them in order between one. There's eight candidates in the field. So it's not simple. It's also very expensive for elections administrators to to manage and to run. And sometimes those results go into an instant runoff. And there are states that are already littered with runoffs. The other thing about ranked choice voting that could be problematic in that what we what we've seen is that the goal of ranked choice voting is to get consensus by getting 50% right, so a candidate would have 50% of the vote. And we do this by multiple rounds. But that means that there's some folks that. Their vote won't actually count, right? If their third choice is the choice that ends up getting the majority of their votes put over just to get them over that 50% threshold. And so it slows down elections, which is also problematic as we look at the confidence in our elections. So it could take many days to calculate. We've kind of seen that in New York and again, that trust. And I think it's also a quite expensive on candidates to run as well. And so, we don't advocate for ranked choice voting. It is used in places like Alaska. But those are the major differences. If I was to pinpoint the difference between a people voting and ranked choice voting.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:24:44] Is this approval voting most effective in a primary situation? How does that play out in a general election, especially if you're running on a party ticket and the goal is to have the Democratic candidate, the Republican candidate, the the Green Party candidate.

Chris Raleigh [00:25:01] This is a question we get a lot to be in primaries or should be in the general election. I say, why not both? But primaries are where it's clearly where we could do the most good, probably the fastest. So there's a Democratic nominee and a Republican nominee from the primaries. Independents can participate in each one, but nominally the parties are picking their nominee. That doesn't have to change. That's also why we, like probably nothing else has to change to approve voting. If you had the Republican nomination for governor or Congress, you could use approved voting. Depict that nominee pretty quickly, just whoever gets the most votes. The other question we get is the general election. I don't know about you, but every time I've ever voted for president, there's been more than two people on that race, and especially Arizona. What was the big talk until cinema dropped out was, oh, what's going to happen? Right. Because obviously ego and cinema shared some similarities, and it was pretty clear that that was going to help whoever the Republican was. So these independents are what unfortunately is happening is that they're being what's called spoilers. That's the spoiler effect when somebody is similar and just enough to get a just enough votes, where in reality if it's a two person race team would win. But once it's a three person race, team B would win because A and C still votes from each other. It is really impactful. And if you ever notice the popular vote for president, no one ever gets 50% of the vote. They're not even 50% in the popular vote. So even the presidency and even for Senate and even for House, you'll see that there's always more than two candidates. Well, if there's one myth I can break today that more times than that, go look at elections. There's more than two candidates, way more than there used to be. We're way we're used to that as Americans. When we think of the

word election, we think Republican versus Democrat. But no 99% of elections are different than that, right? Things are changing. And we want to really get that in front of people.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:27:23] It sounds like to make any of these changes, you would have to go to the very people who were elected by our current system to get them to switch to a system that may not be so favorable for them. So how do you attack that?

Nina Taylor [00:27:36] Currently, we actually have a bill in the Maryland Senate, to bring a purple voting should the jurisdictions choose to have it in, in Maryland. And so we took a look at our data and, you know, the areas and throughout the country that vote splitting is most prevalent in Maryland came up as number five. And so we wanted to at least start our efforts beyond what we've been able to do in terms of ballot ballot initiatives with the legislative initiative in Maryland. And so what we found is that there's a lot of education that we're having to do, not only with, the candidates, but also the folks that run our election. So the elections directors and officials, about how approval voting works, how it is different from from ranked choice voting, which, they had had education on that. And the, the cost and the expense of it. Right. And so we are very low cost reform. It's just, you know, allowing overrides when it comes to, to, the voting machines. But there is this component of, voter education. Right? So, our first hurdle is to, to educate folks that we could actually change the way that we vote. Right? The way that we cast your ballot. That was our first hurdle. And the second hurdle was to talk about voting in a way that I think allows candidates to understand that the wants and desires of the electorate, and having an opportunity for voters to feel like they're. Are making the biggest impact. But their vote, their individual vote is powerful and that they are able to vote for candidates that represent them in their communities. And I think you can see that very clearly in Maryland. We are also looking at Ohio and California, as we've got multiple polls there, not only to talk about vote splitting, but the impacts that it has on how people run. Right. And so we've been able to continue to lobby and advocate for our efforts. And we do hope that we'll have several states within the next few years that will adopt people voting just to give the voters, I think, a lot of their power, their voting power back. If we don't address it, vote splitting will continue to be prevalent, especially in minority communities. So in a way, the current system will move into disenfranchizing the vote. And we want to start to counter that as much as possible.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:29:57] Is Arizona on your horizon any time soon?

Nina Taylor [00:30:00] It's on our watch list. And so, one of the conversations I had yesterday is around Arizona being a swing state and understanding what that means. Right. And so you're not only having additional polling and research, but, being able to have conversations with candidates, especially candidates that have lost their races, which quite a few have lost their races this year due to vote splitting. And so we're having those conversations to talk about what went wrong. And so, yes, we are looking into Arizona. We are working with grassroots organizations, to educate them about of people voting and collaborating through partnerships to have additional research dollars as well as interests into Arizona elections and the desires of Arizona voters.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:30:45] Thank you so much. This is really been educational and eye opening. If our listeners would like to follow you on social media, where can they find you?

Nina Taylor [00:30:53] Yeah. So you can tap in with us at ElectionScience.org literally everywhere. And so we'd love to be able to to connect with you.

Mary Jo Pitzl [00:31:08] That is it for this week. Listeners. Do you have questions about today's episode or topics you'd like us to cover on the show? Well, send us a message at (602) 444-0804. Or a voice memo to TheGaggle@ArizonaRepublic.com. That's all one word, all spelled out. This episode was edited and produced by Kaely Monahan with production assistance from Amanda Luberto. Episode oversight is by Kara Edgerson and our news direction is from Kathy Tulumello. Our theme song and music comes from Universal Production Music. Never miss an episode of The Gaggle by subscribing to us wherever you listen. And if you learned something new today, be sure to share this episode with your friends. You can also leave us a review and please rate us five stars. You can follow The Gaggle on social media @azcpodcasts. And I'm @MaryJPitzl. The Gaggle is an Arizona Republic and azcentral.com production. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next week.