

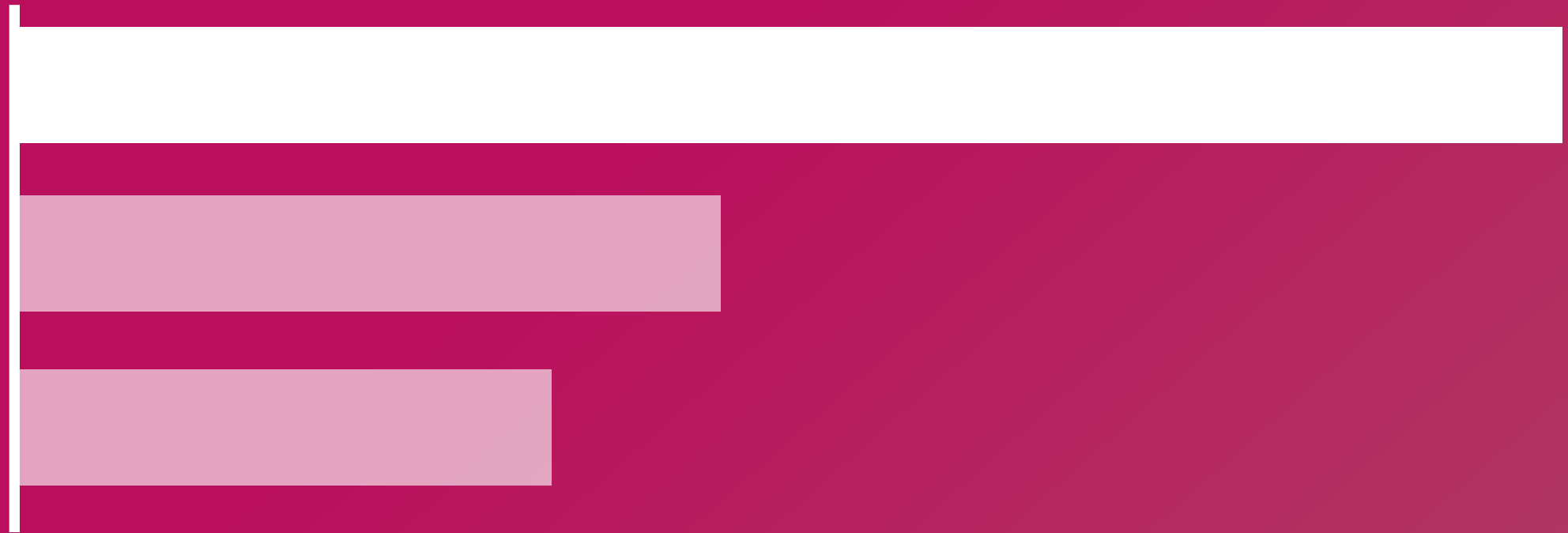


SPOILING YOUR VOTE?

An explainer on protest voting, and
what it means to spoil your ballot

*Disclaimer: This is a voter education explainer, and is
not an endorsement of vote spoiling or protest voting.*

WHY VOTERS CAST PROTEST VOTES OR SPOILED VOTES



Protest voting is a means of exercising choice in what a voter might feel as a “no-choice” elections. Critically, a significantly large enough spoiled vote count can serve as a **strong signal of the electorate’s disillusionment and dissatisfaction** with:

- 1 The Political and/or Voting System
- 2 The Available Slate of Running Candidates



Protest voting is a form of “tactical voting” where votes do not vote based on their *sincere* preferred Party or Candidate preference, but to prevent or protest a likely but undesirable outcome. Protest voting is common when voting is mandatory.

TYPES OF PROTEST VOTINGS

1

Voting for fringe “unwinnable” candidates

e.g. voting for a “fringe” candidate, instead of two mainstream candidates

This can take the form of voting for “insurgent” or unlikeable candidates or third-parties with no chance of winning against the mainstream or establishment candidate.







Protest voters vote for fringe “insurgent” parties and candidates not because of what they represent, but rather “**because of what they are not**”.¹

2

Casting blank, invalid, or spoiled votes

If there are no alternative candidates, or alternative candidates are very unlikeable, protest voters might also cast blank, nulled, spoiled votes.

Spoiling your vote essentially represents a “None of the above” (NOTA) option. An official NOTA option in the ballot is standard in many countries, such as Canada, India, Indonesia, Sweden, etc, but not in Singapore.

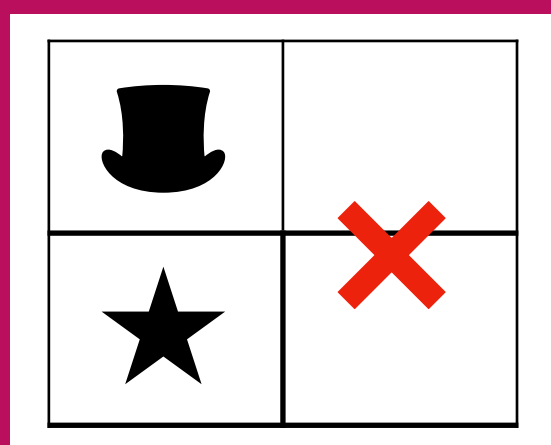
	
	
	

e.g. casting a blank ballot or invalidating the ballot by voting for multiple candidates

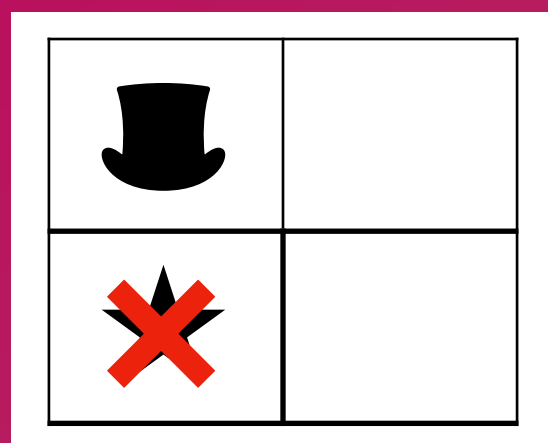
WHAT IS CONSIDERED A SPOILT VOTE

In a blogpost by socio-political commentator Alex Au, describing his experience as a counting agent during the 2011 GE, Au analysed how ballots were rejected as invalid.² We reproduce below some findings on do's and don'ts to get your vote counted.

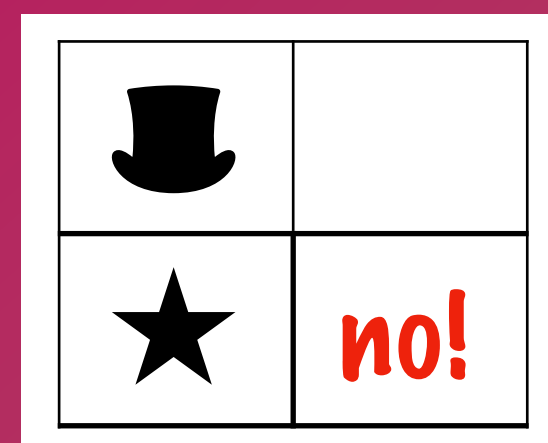
Potentially Valid Ballots for "Star"



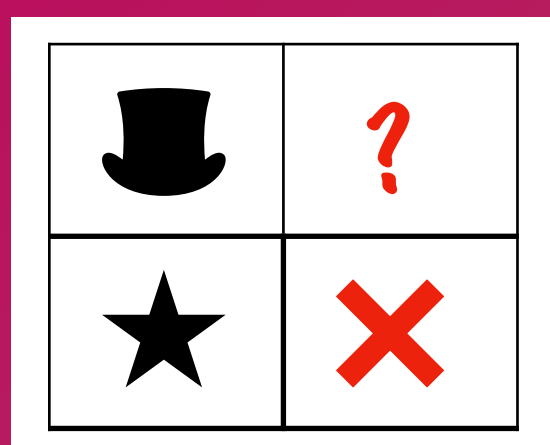
Most of the cross is on the "star" ballot



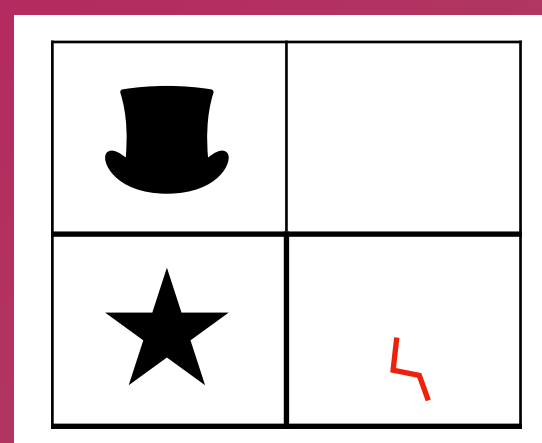
Cross on the "star" icon



Markings in the "star" ballot

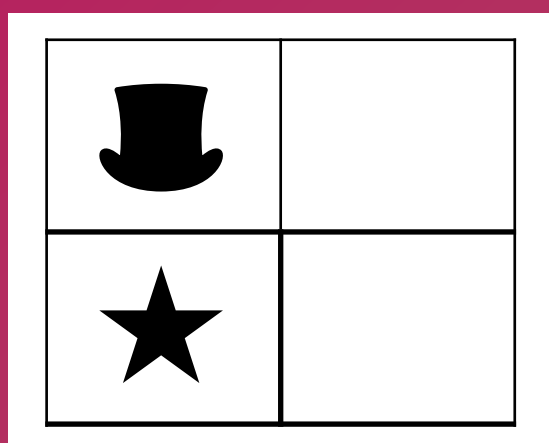


Clear cross in "star" ballot, even if there are other markings for other candidates

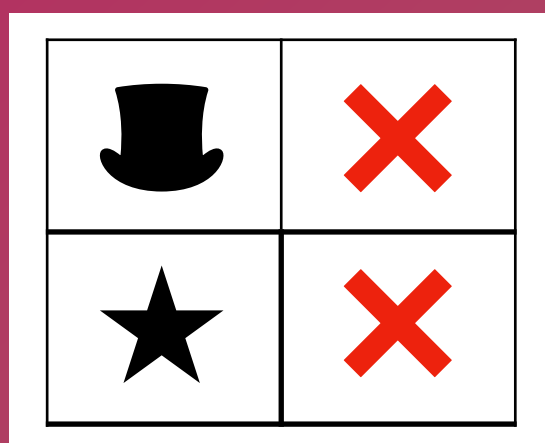


Unclear markings in the "star" ballot

Clear Invalid (Spoilt) Vote



Blank ballot paper



Crosses for multiple candidates



Zoom to read

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CASE STUDIES

Singapore's 1962 Merger Referendum

The referendum was the only case of organised protest voting in Singapore's history. Barisan Sosialis led a boycott of what they called a "sham" referendum, as there were three different "Yes" options but no "No merger" option in the ballot.³

Heading Barisan's call, over 25% of the electorate cast blank protest votes. Nevertheless, the government inserted a clause in the referendum that blank votes would be taken in support of the majority option.³



Other case studies from around the world

Spoiled votes are a commonly studied pattern in compulsory voting systems under authoritarian, military, or dominant party governments. This has been tracked in the Soviet Union, China, and South America.⁴ Elections such as the Argentina's 1957 Constitutional Assembly Election, the run-off of the 2000 Peruvian Presidential Election, and the 2011 Bolivian Judicial Election were case studies where there were significant or even majority protest invalid votes.⁵





IMPLICATIONS OF SPOILING YOUR VOTE

A significantly large count of spoiled votes can be a strong signal of electoral dissatisfaction, but...

1 Spoiled votes can be easily dismissed

Without organised protest voting, spoiled and blank votes tend to be insignificant in numbers. A small spoiled vote count might be easily dismissed as a voting error. **Spoiled votes are also excluded from the vote share calculation,** and will not serve to reduce the establishment candidate's vote share, unlike voting for a "protest" candidate.

2 Spoilt votes can determine close elections

In close elections such as the 2011 Presidential Elections and the 2011 GE Potong Pasir SMC contest, there were more spoilt votes than the difference in votes between the top two candidates. **Spoilt votes also tend to work in favour of candidates or parties who are already expected to win** in an election.



IMPLICATIONS OF VOTING FOR A 'PROTEST' CANDIDATE

Normally, protest voting for 'alternate' or fringe candidates is a straightforward decision for an anti-establishment voter, but this can be complicated by 'extremist' fringe candidates.

1

Endorsing unlikeable or extremist political positions and ideas

If a 'fringe' candidate has espoused views and platforms that are extreme or disagreeable (e.g. discriminatory, incitement of violence), **a protest vote is still a vote**, and might be taken as an endorsement of these views even if you disagree with them.

2

Legitimising and mainstreaming 'extremist' political platforms

A growing vote share, even from protest votes, might serve to further **embolden these views within the political and public arena in the long run**. Such political positions may gain further traction as other parties and candidates might shift their political platforms closer to 'extreme' positions to capture this growing vote share of 'extremist' voters. This was the case of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which was originally a fringe party capturing protest votes, but later precipitated Brexit.⁶

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Should there be an official “None of the above” option in ballots for Singapore’s General and Presidential Elections?
2. Do such forms of tactical voting diminish the value and spirit of electoral and democratic participation?
3. If you’re an anti-establishment voter, what are your considerations in your voting choice?
4. What are your views on the ethics of voting for a highly unlikeable “protest” candidate as a form of protest voting?

Spoiling your vote is not illegal. Furthermore, as voting is secret, spoilt and blank ballots cannot be traced back to the protest voter. An average of 2.3% of votes are spoilt across elections from 1972 to 2015.⁷