

The Perfectly Logical Pirates

History and provenance

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A documented popular account

Ian Stewart published *A Puzzle for Pirates* in the May 1999 issue of *Scientific American* [1,2]. The article describes the puzzle as having circulated for at least a decade and discusses an extension associated with Steve Omohundro. Stewart should therefore not be credited as its inventor merely because this article is well known.

Variants that change the answer

Retellings vary in the number of pirates and coins, whether exactly half the votes is enough, and what an indifferent pirate prefers. Those details change the backward-induction calculation.

This page uses 100 pirates, 10,000 coins, a threshold of at least half the votes, and pirate 1 as the strongest. It states the preferences and says that an indifferent pirate rejects a proposal. The accompanying answer applies to these rules.

The story now uses “thrown overboard” rather than explicit killing language. That change does not change the mathematical preference for remaining aboard.

Sources

[1] Ian Stewart, A Puzzle for Pirates, *Scientific American* 280(5) (May 1999), 98–99.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-puzzle-for-pirates/>

[2] Ian Stewart, A Puzzle for Pirates: archived article PDF.

https://steveomohundro.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/stewart99_a_puzzle_for_pirates.pdf

Sources checked September 7, 2026. A documented appearance is not necessarily the earliest appearance.