TCP Congestion Control

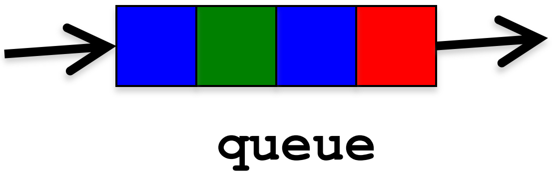
Kyle Jamieson

COS 461: Computer Networks

www.cs.princeton.edu/courses/archive/fall21/cos461/

Network Congestion: Context

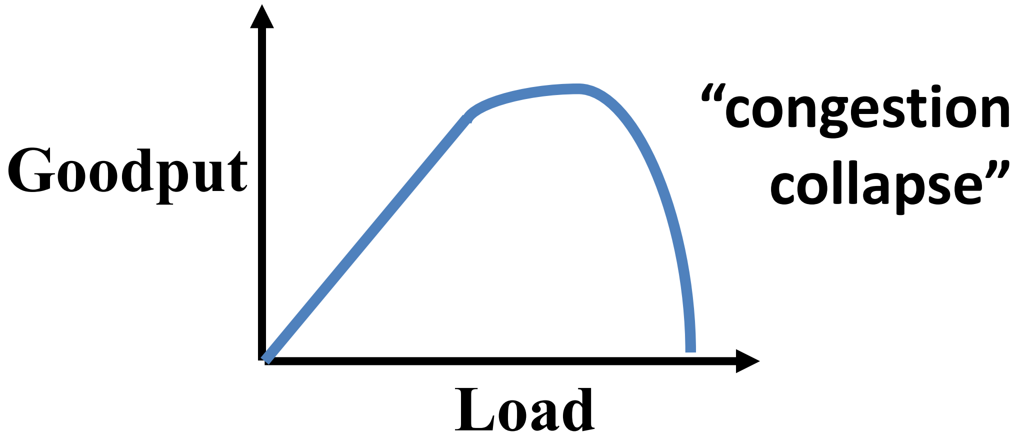
- Best-effort network does not "block" calls
  - So, they can easily become overloaded
  - Congestion == "Load higher than capacity"
- Examples of congestion
  - Link layer: Ethernet frame collisions
  - Network layer: full IP packet buffers



- Excess packets are simply dropped
  - And the sender can simply retransmit

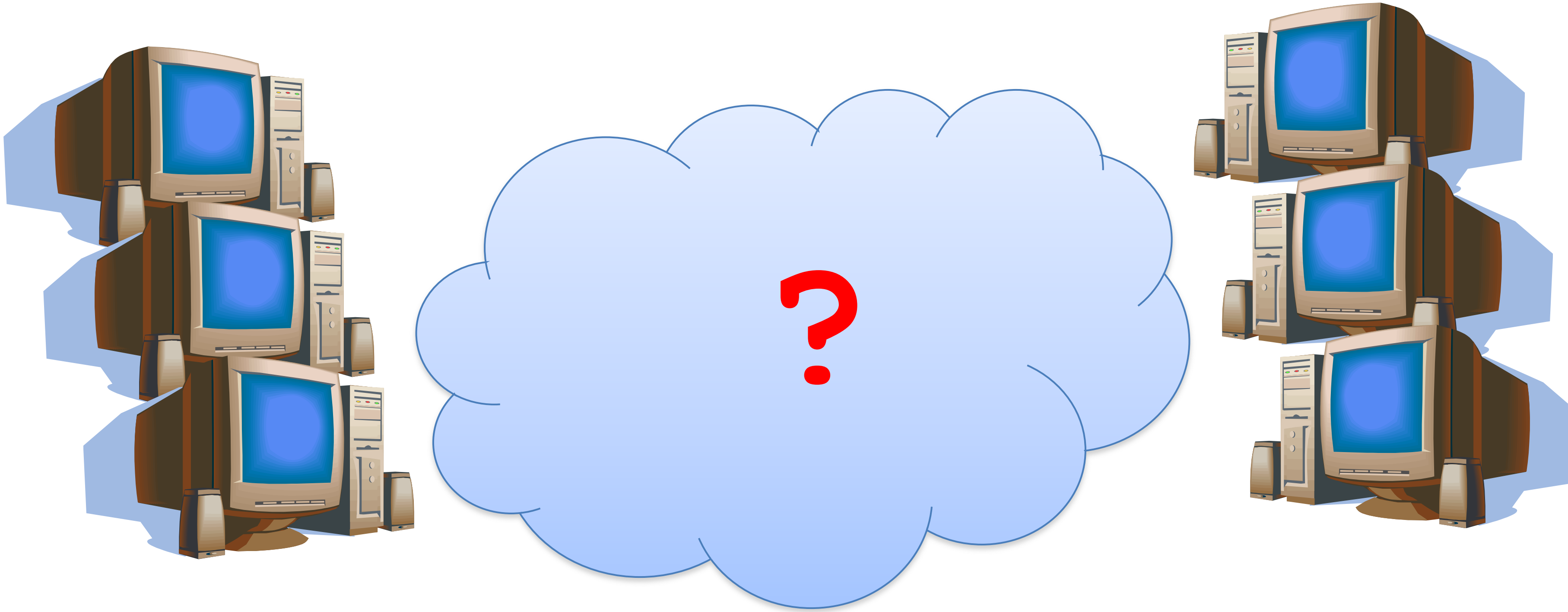
Problem: Congestion Collapse

- Easily leads to *congestion collapse*
  - Senders retransmit the lost packets
  - Leading to even *greater* load
  - … and even *more* packet loss



Increase in load that results in a *decrease* in useful work done.

Detect and Respond to Congestion



- *What does the end host see?*
- *What can the end host change?*
- **Distributed Resource Sharing**

Detecting Congestion

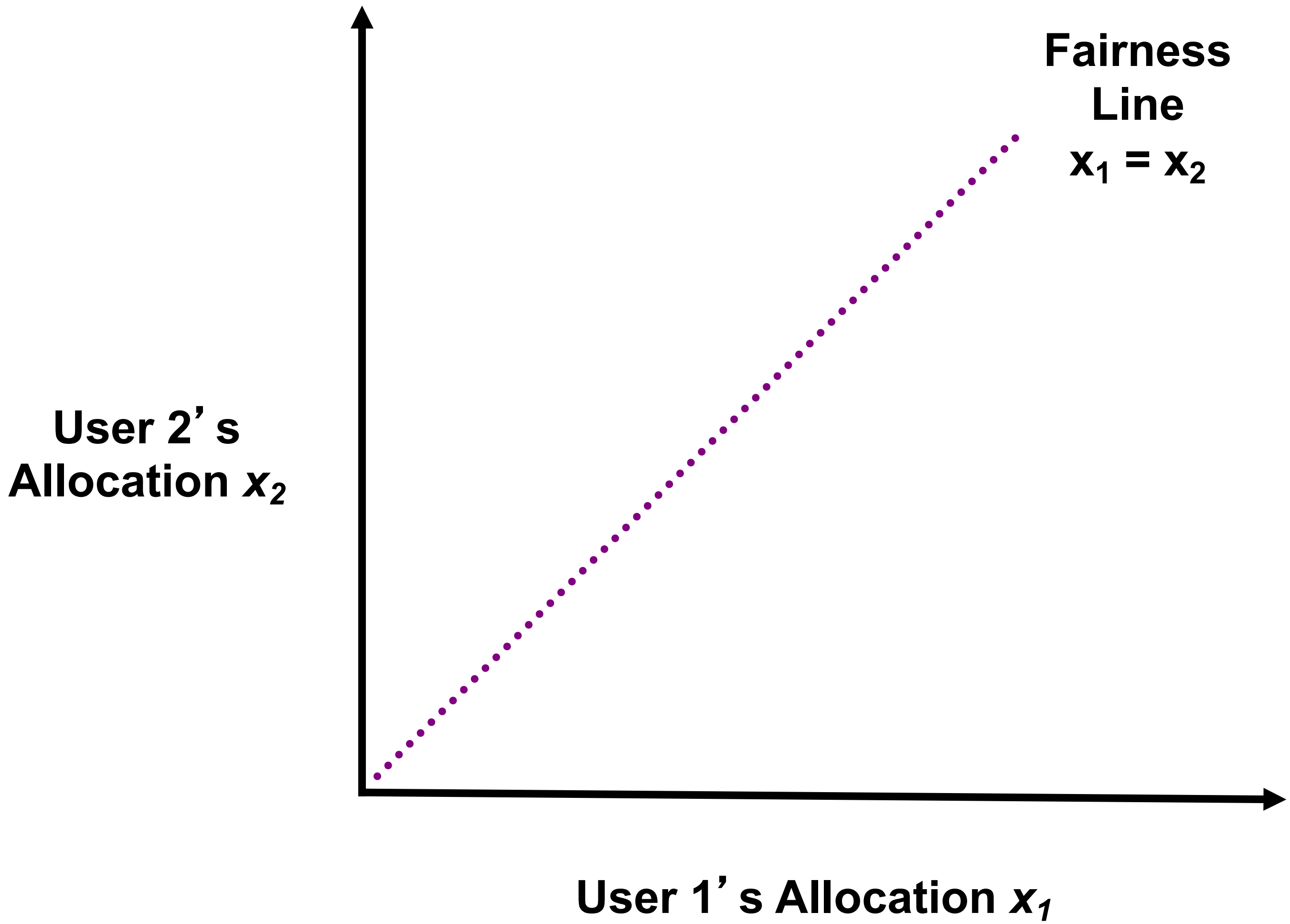
- Link layer
  - Carrier sense multiple access
  - Seeing your own frame collide with others
- Network layer
  - Observing end-to-end performance
  - Packet delay or loss over the path

Responding to Congestion

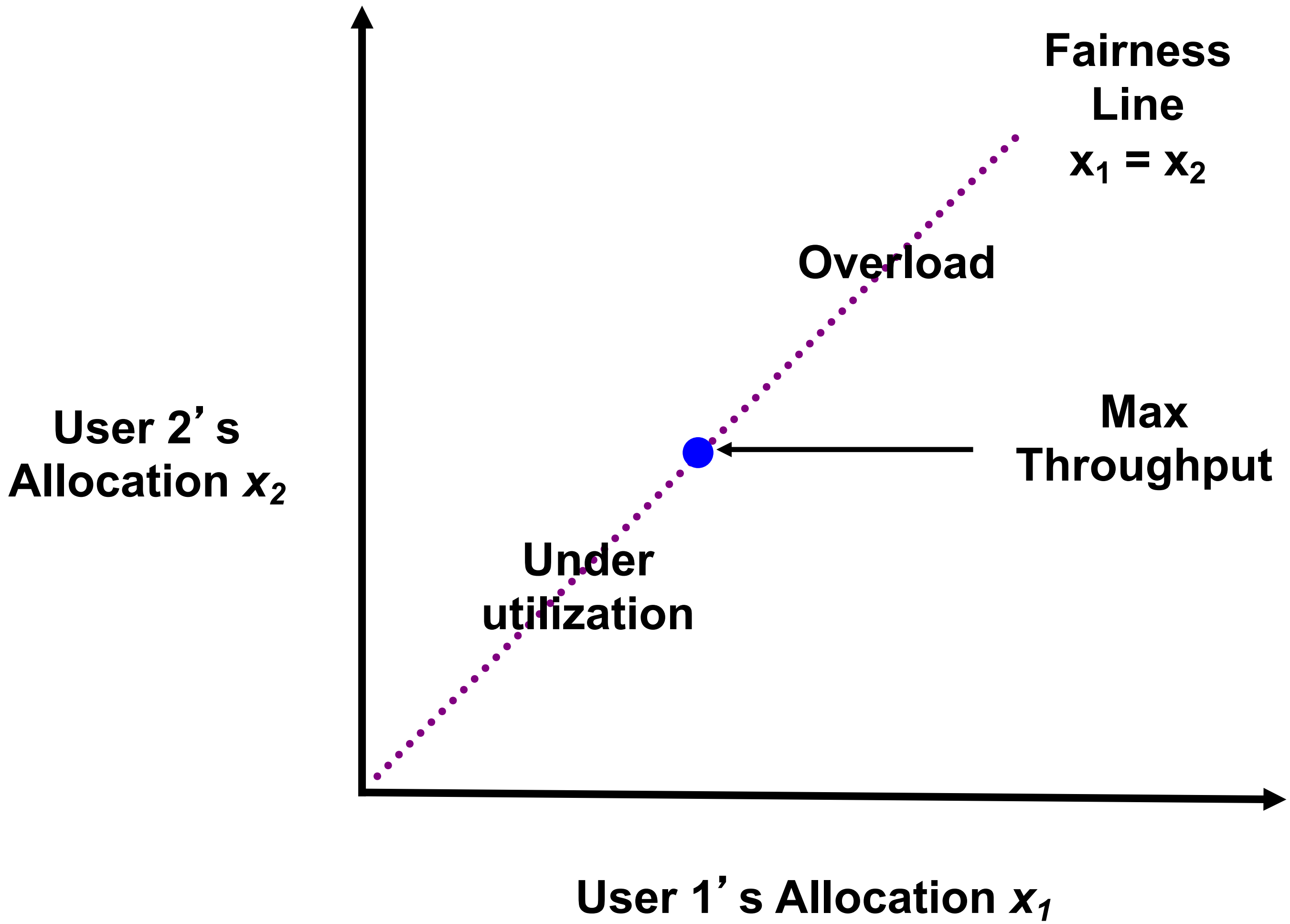
- Upon detecting congestion
  - Decrease the sending rate
- But, what if conditions change?
  - If more bandwidth becomes available,
  - … unfortunate to keep sending at a low rate
- Upon *not* detecting congestion
  - Increase sending rate, a little at a time
  - See if packets get through

TCP seeks “Fairness”

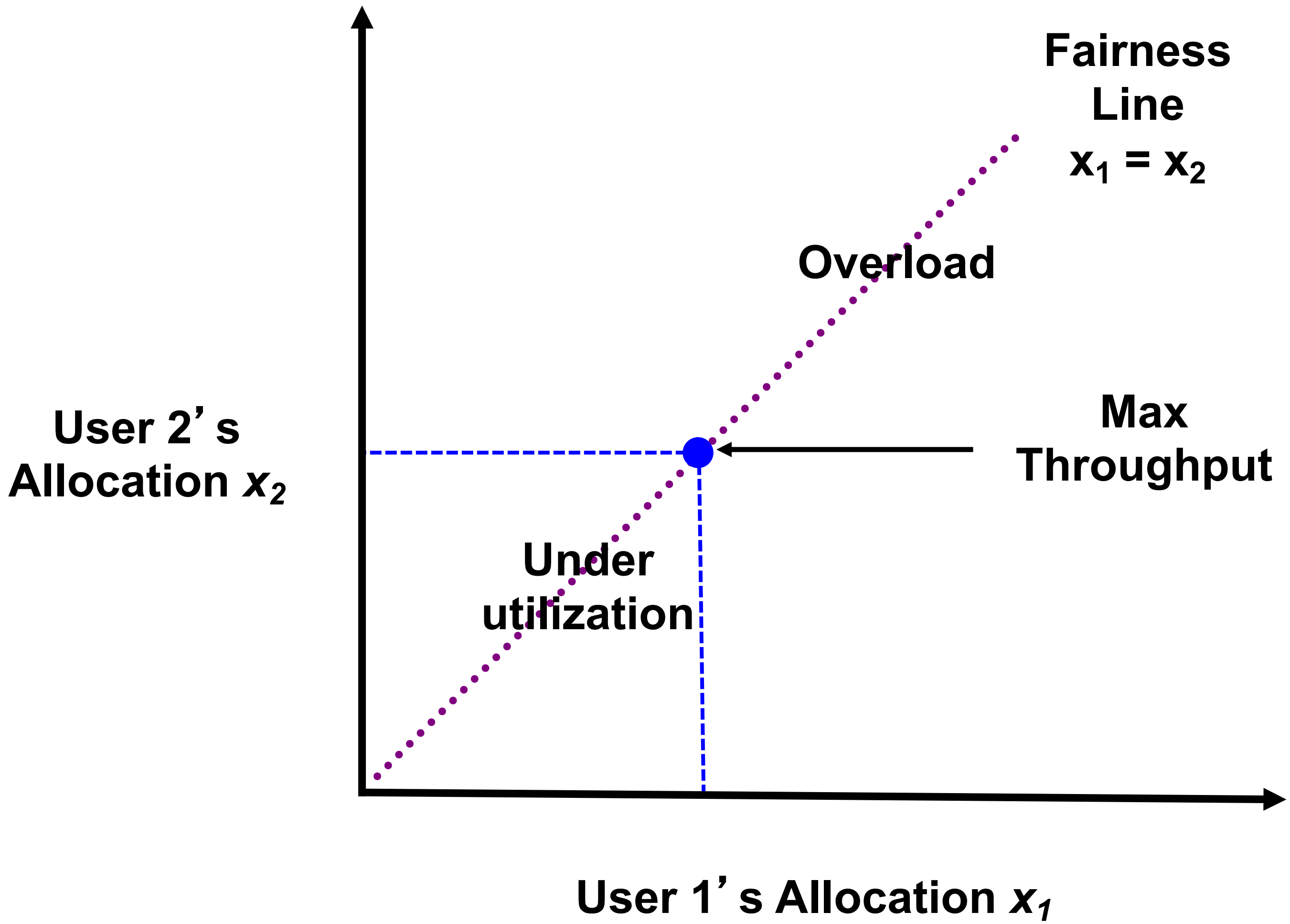
Phase Plots


Fairness Line $x_1 = x_2$
User 2's Allocation x_2
User 1's Allocation x_1

Phase Plots

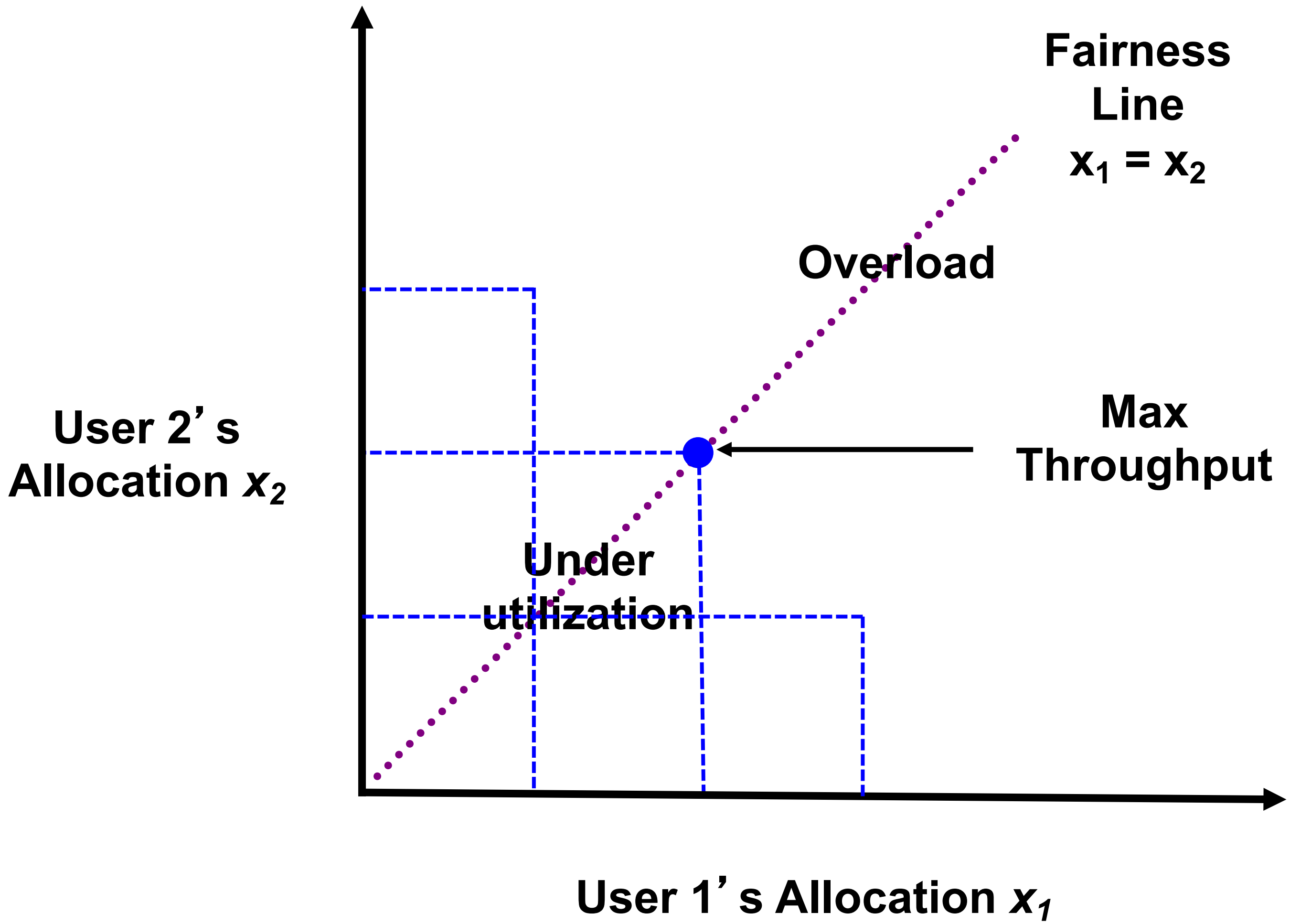

Fairness Line
$x_1 = x_2$
Overload
Max Throughput
Under utilization
User 2's Allocation x_2
User 1's Allocation x_1

Phase Plots



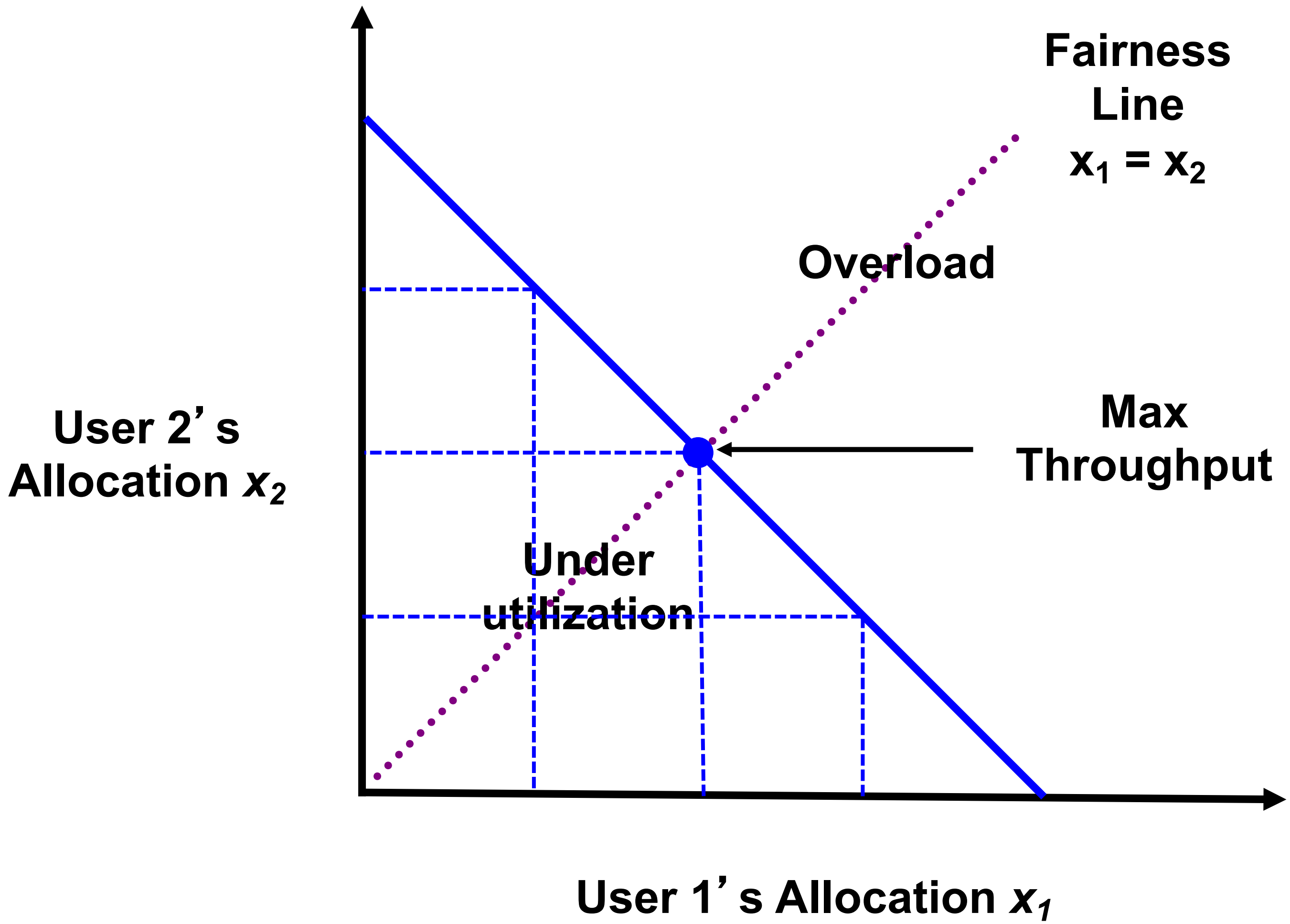
Fairness Line
$x_1 = x_2$
Overload
User 2's Allocation x_2
Max Throughput
Under utilization
User 1's Allocation x_1

Phase Plots



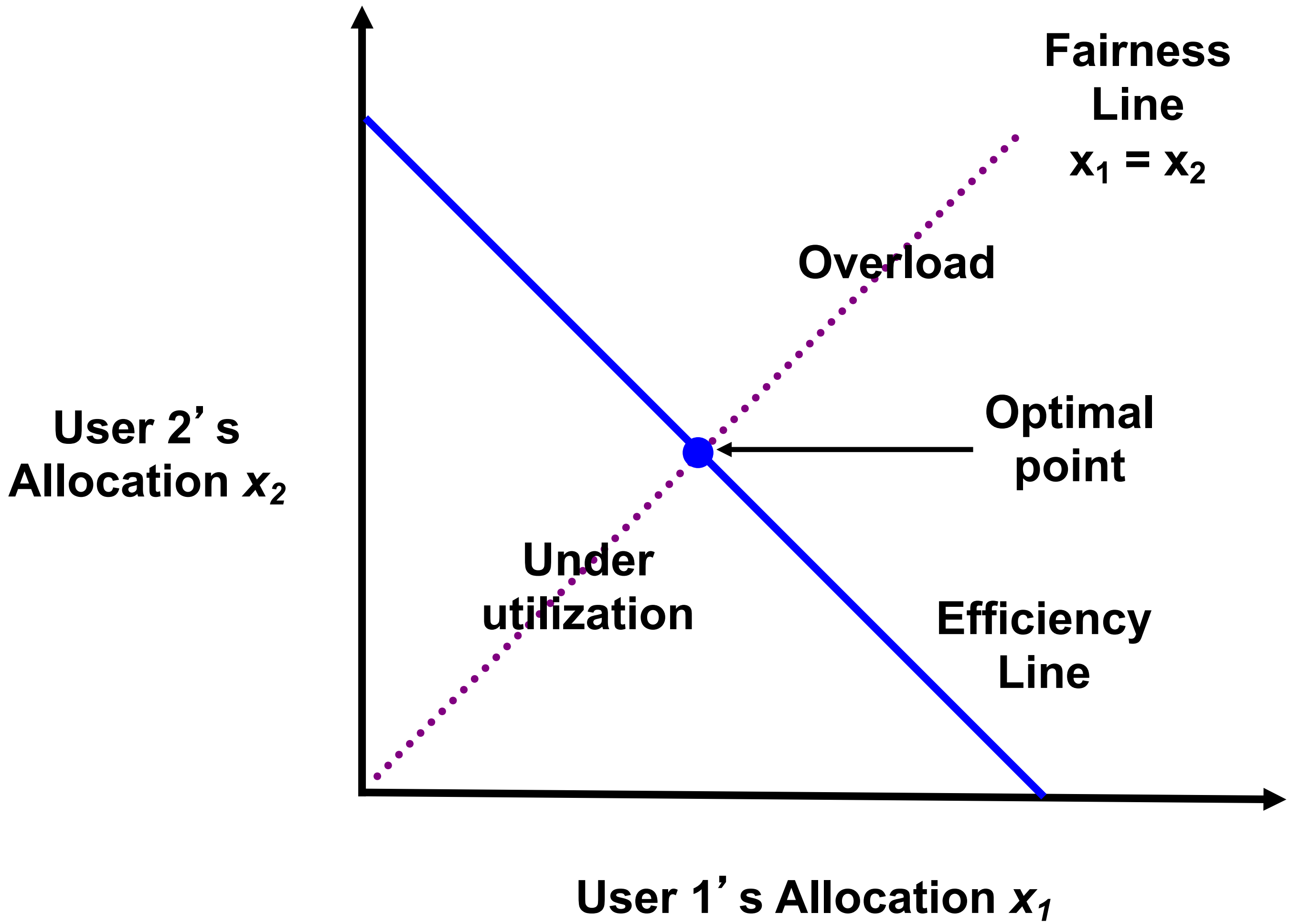
Fairness Line
x1 = x2
Overload
User 2's Allocation x2
Max Throughput
Under utilization
User 1's Allocation x1

Phase Plots



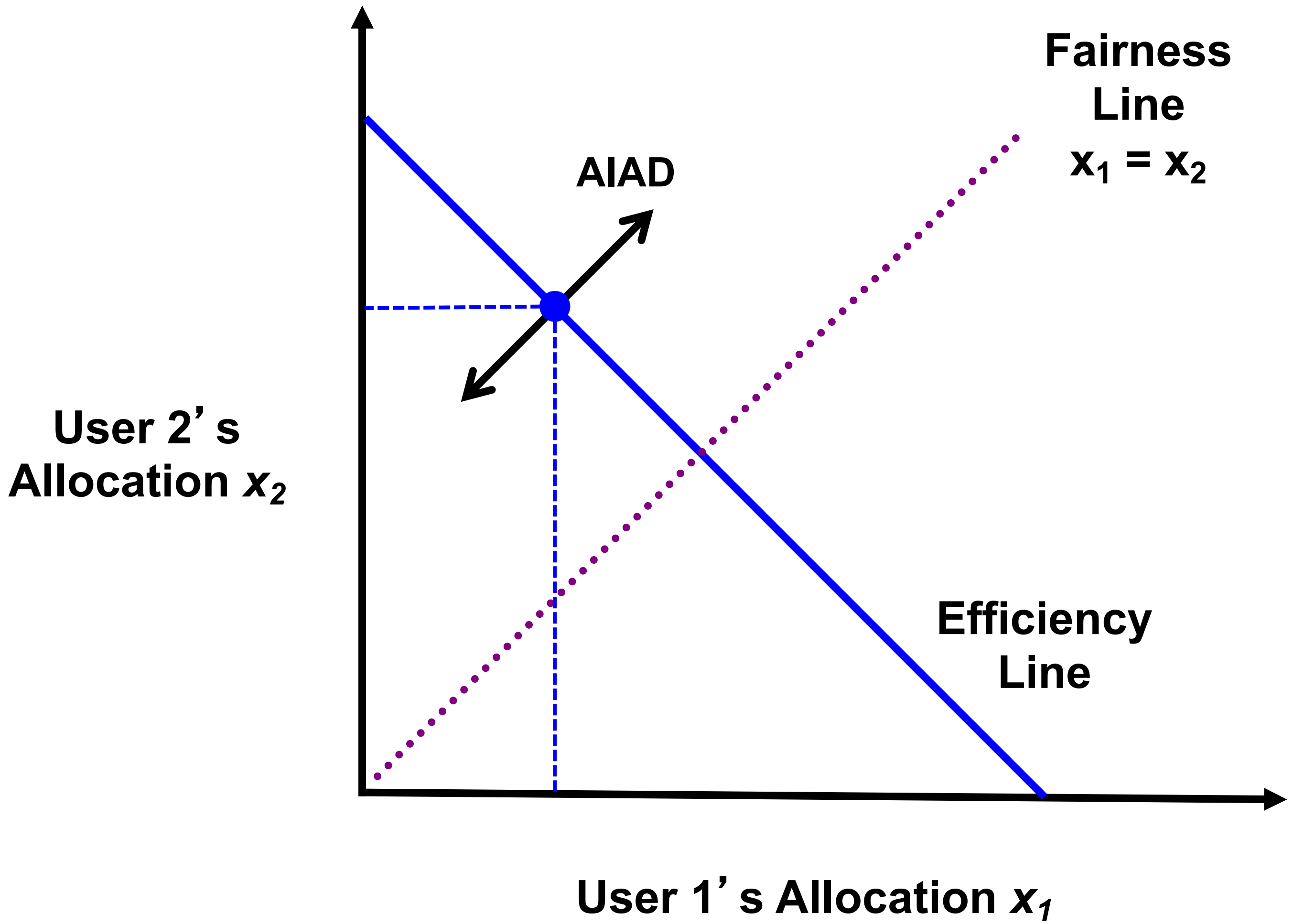
Fairness Line
$x_1 = x_2$
Overload
Max Throughput
User 2's Allocation x_2
Under utilization
User 1's Allocation x_1

Phase Plots

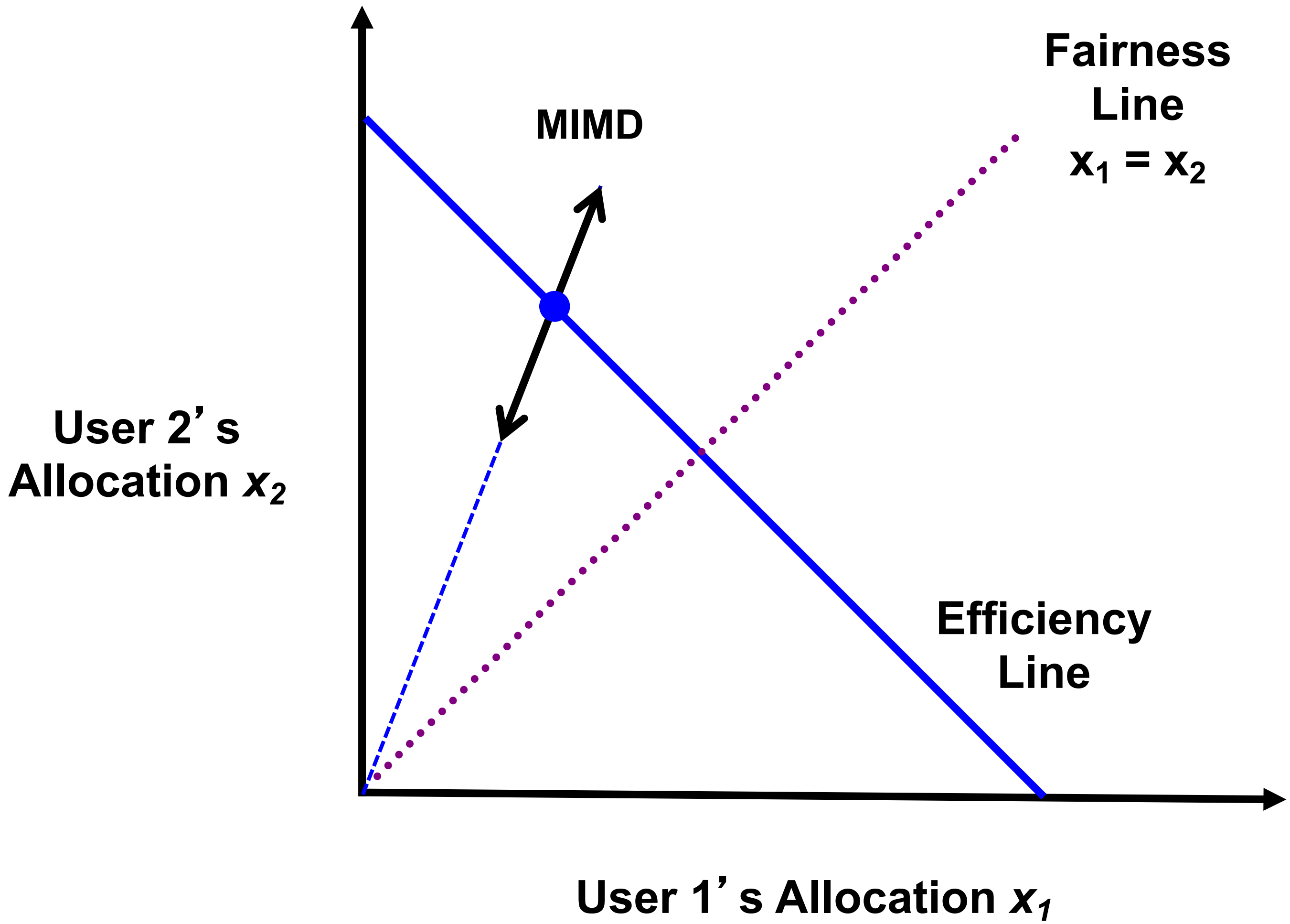


Fairness
Line
x1 = x2
Overload
Optimal
point
User 2's
Allocation x2
Under
utilization
Efficiency
Line
User 1's Allocation x1

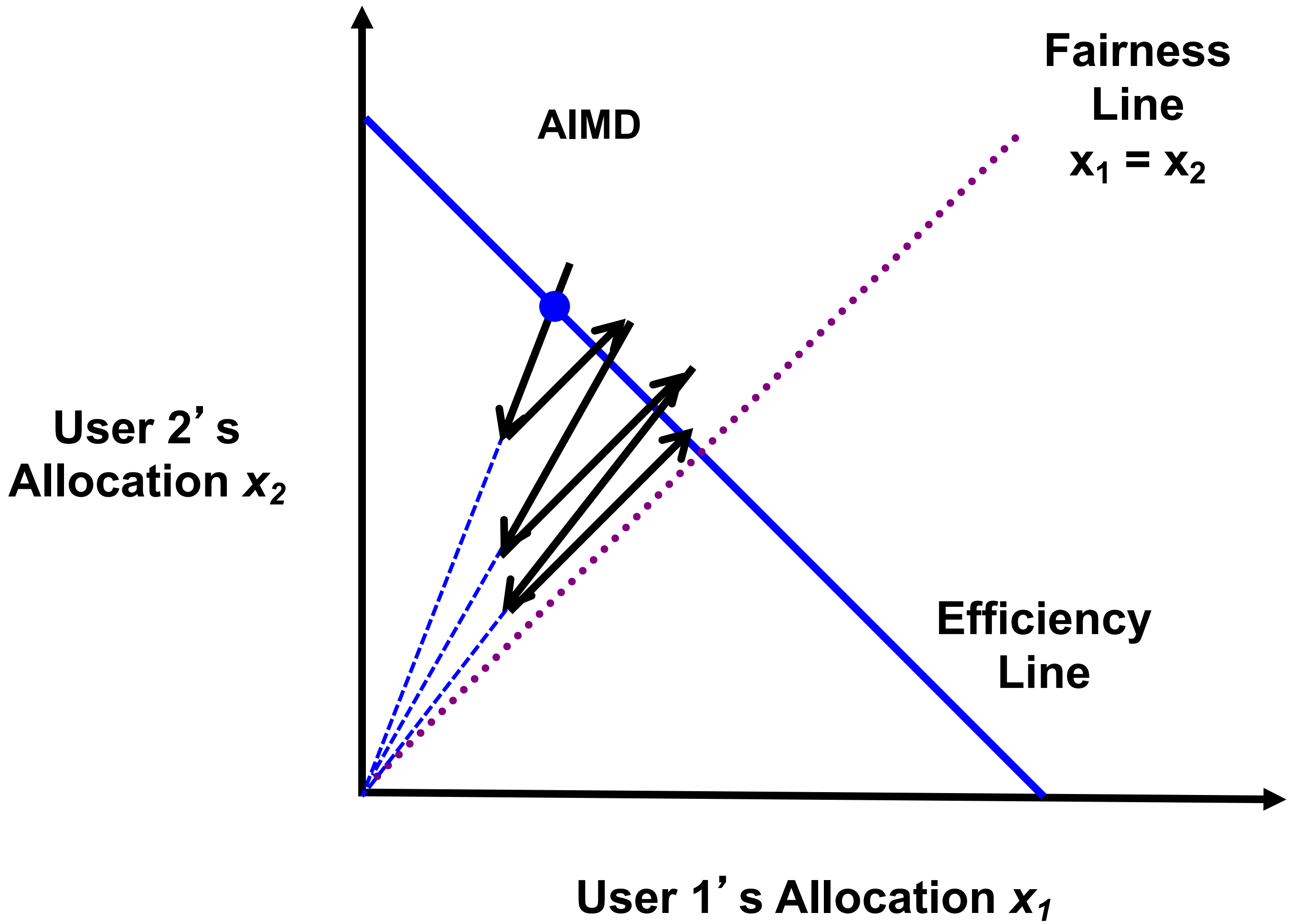
Additive Increase/Decrease



Multiplicative Increase/Decrease

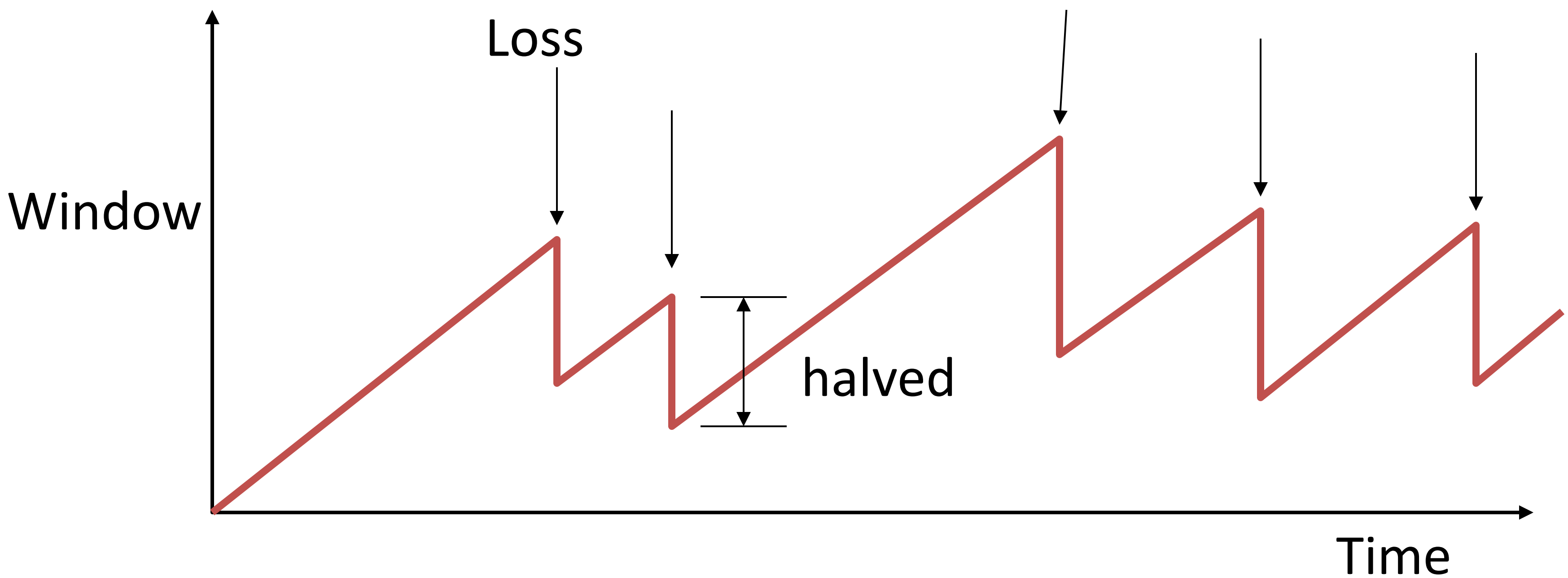


Additive Increase / Multiplicative Decrease



TCP Congestion Control

- Additive increase, multiplicative decrease
  - On packet loss, divide congestion window in half
  - On success for last window, increase window linearly



Why Multiplicative?

- Respond aggressively to bad news
  - Congestion is (very) bad for everyone
  - Need to react aggressively

Examples of exponential backoff:

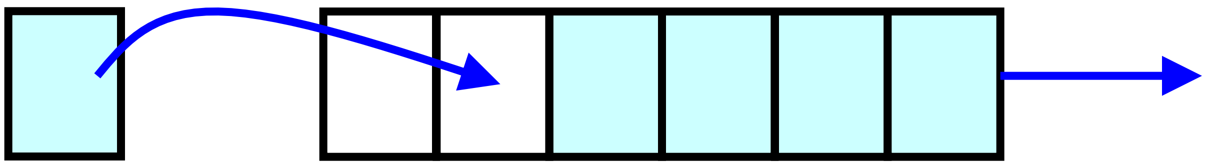
  - TCP: divide sending rate in *half*
  - Ethernet: *double* retransmission timer

- Nice theoretical properties
  - Makes efficient use of network resources

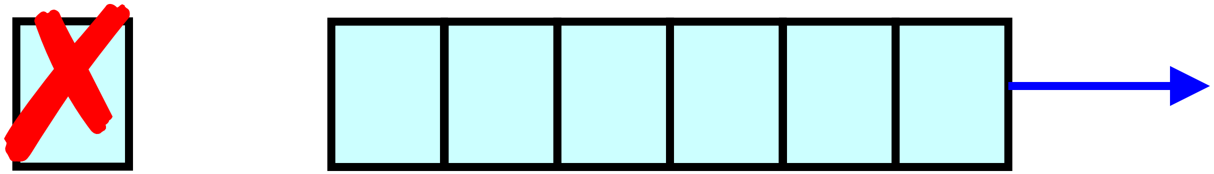
TCP Congestion Control

Congestion in a Drop-Tail FIFO Queue

- Access to the bandwidth: first-in first-out queue
  - Packets transmitted in the order they arrive



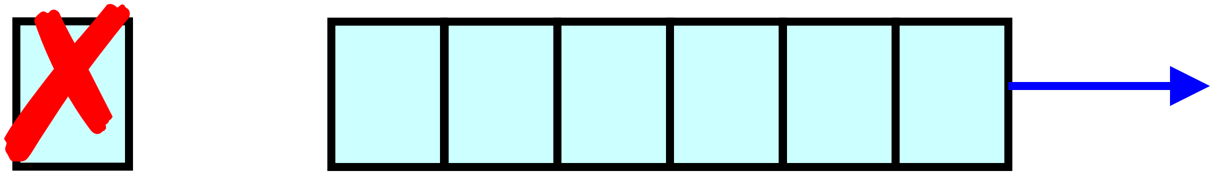
- Access to the buffer space: drop-tail queuing
  - If the queue is full, drop the incoming packet



How it Looks to the End Host

- Delay: Packet experiences high delay
- Loss: Packet gets dropped along path

- How does TCP sender learn this?
  - Delay: Round-trip time estimate
  - Loss: Timeout and/or duplicate acknowledgments



TCP Congestion Window

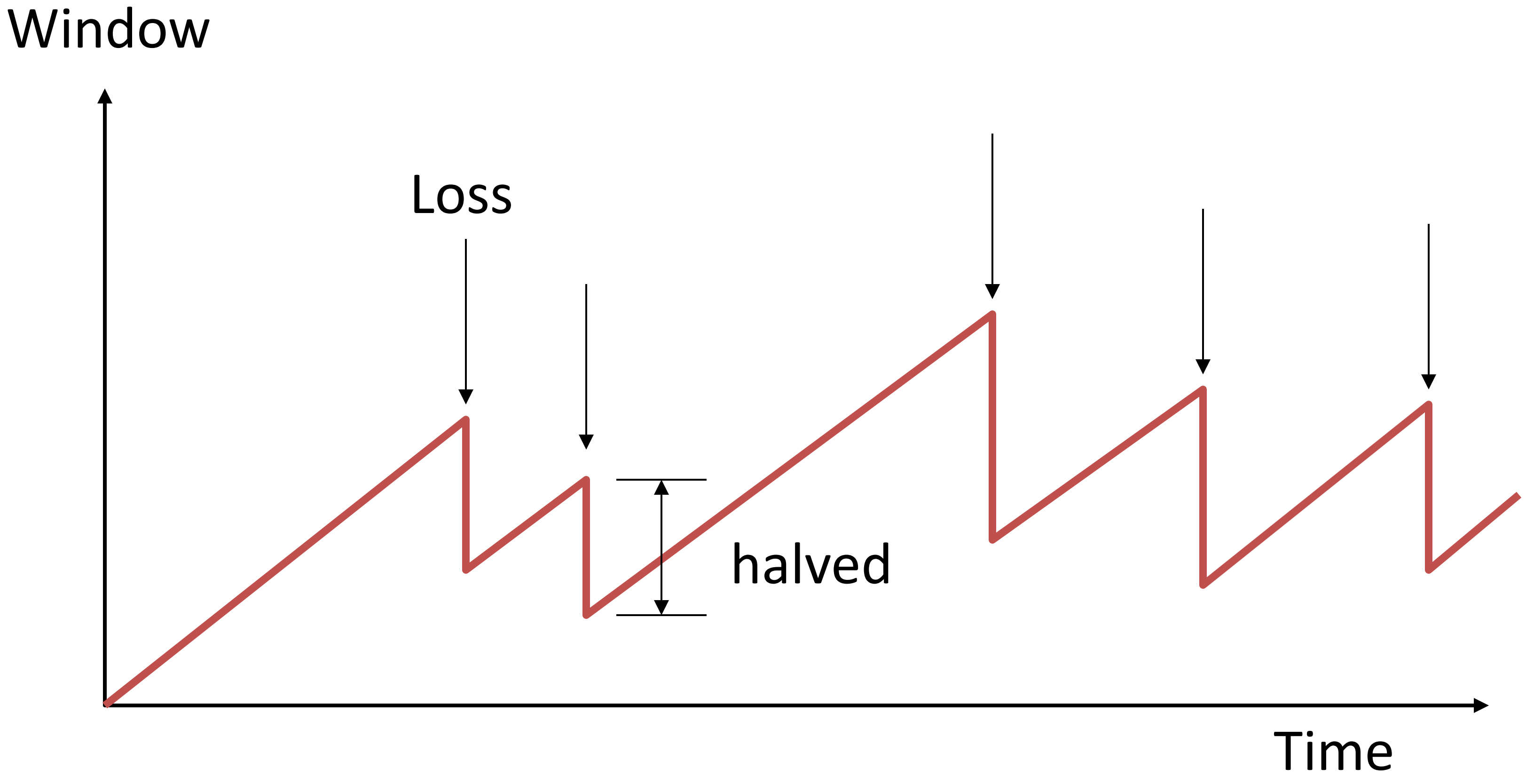
- Each TCP sender maintains a congestion window
  - Max number of bytes to have in transit (not yet ACK'd)
- Adapting the congestion window
  - Decrease upon losing a packet: backing off
  - Increase upon success: optimistically exploring
  - Always struggling to find right transfer rate
- Tradeoff
  - Pro: avoids needing explicit network feedback
  - Con: continually under- and over-shoots "right" rate

Additive Increase, Multiplicative Decrease

- How much to adapt?
  - Additive increase: On success of last window of data, increase window by 1 Max Segment Size (MSS)
  - Multiplicative decrease: On loss of packet, divide congestion window in half

- Much quicker to slow down than speed up?
  - Over-sized windows (causing loss) are much worse than under-sized windows (causing lower thruput)
  - AIMD: A necessary condition for stability of TCP

Leads to the TCP "Sawtooth"



Receiver Window vs. Congestion Window

- Flow control
  - Keep a *fast sender* from overwhelming *a slow receiver*
- Congestion control
  - Keep a *set of senders* from overloading the *network*

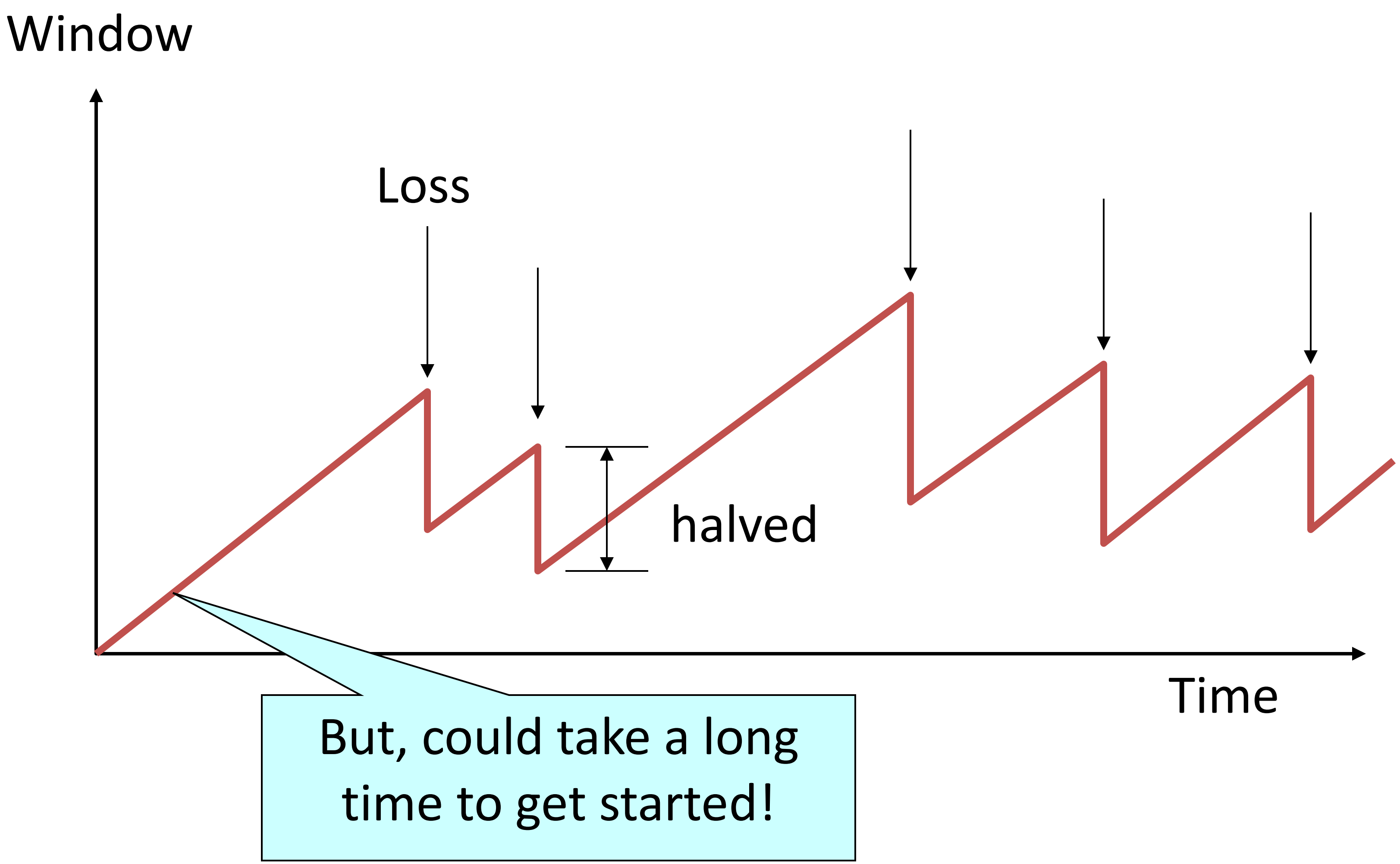
- Different concepts, but similar mechanisms
  - TCP flow control: receiver window
  - TCP congestion control: congestion window
  - Sender TCP window =

    min { congestion window, receiver window }

Starting a New Flow

How Should a New Flow Start?

Start slow (a small CWND) to avoid overloading network

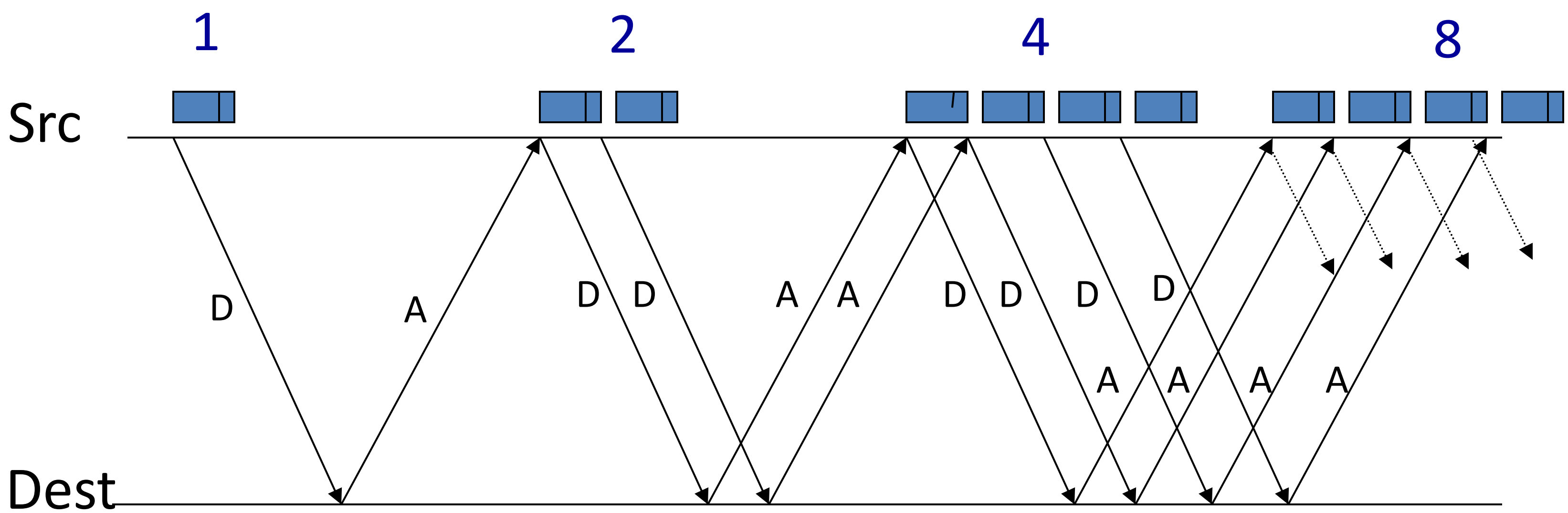


"Slow Start" Phase

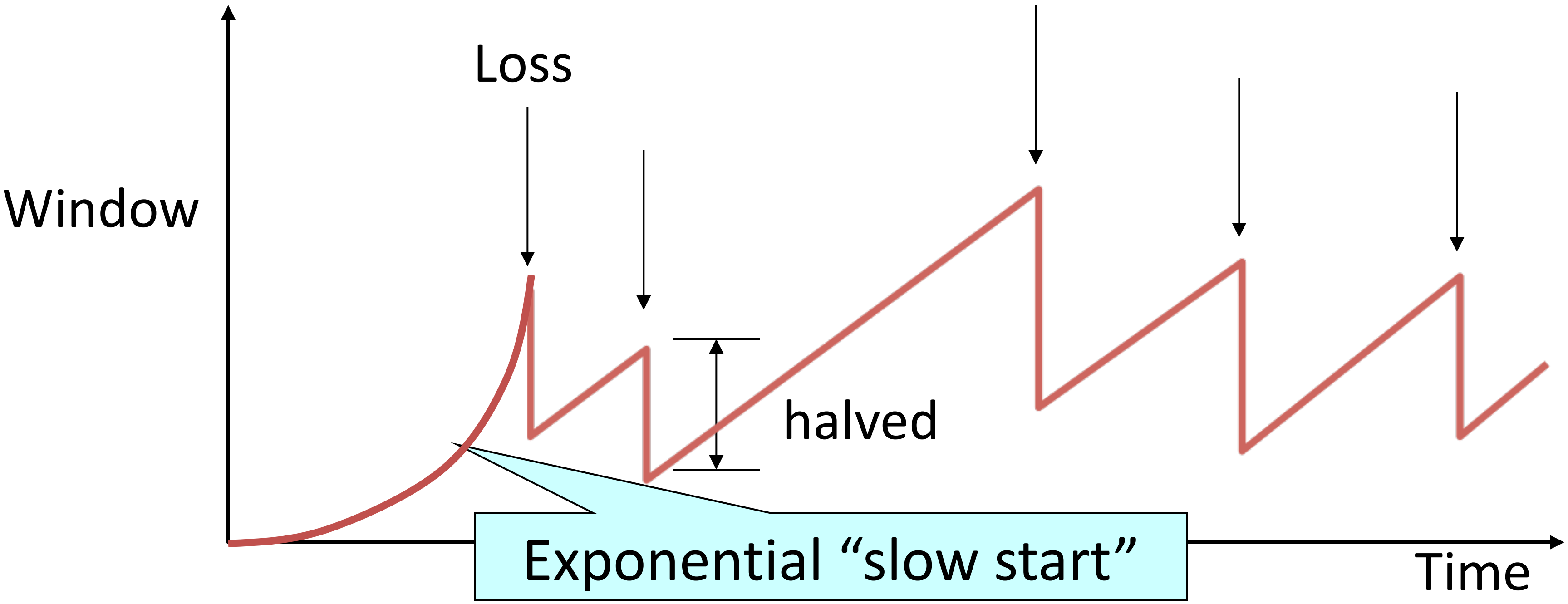
- Start with a small congestion window
  - Initially, CWND is 1 MSS
  - So, initial sending rate is MSS / RTT
- Could be pretty wasteful
  - Might be much less than actual bandwidth
  - Linear increase takes a long time to accelerate
- Slow-start phase (really "fast start")
  - Sender starts at a slow rate (hence the name)
  - … but increases rate exponentially until the first loss

Slow Start in Action

Double CWND per round-trip time



Slow Start and the TCP Sawtooth

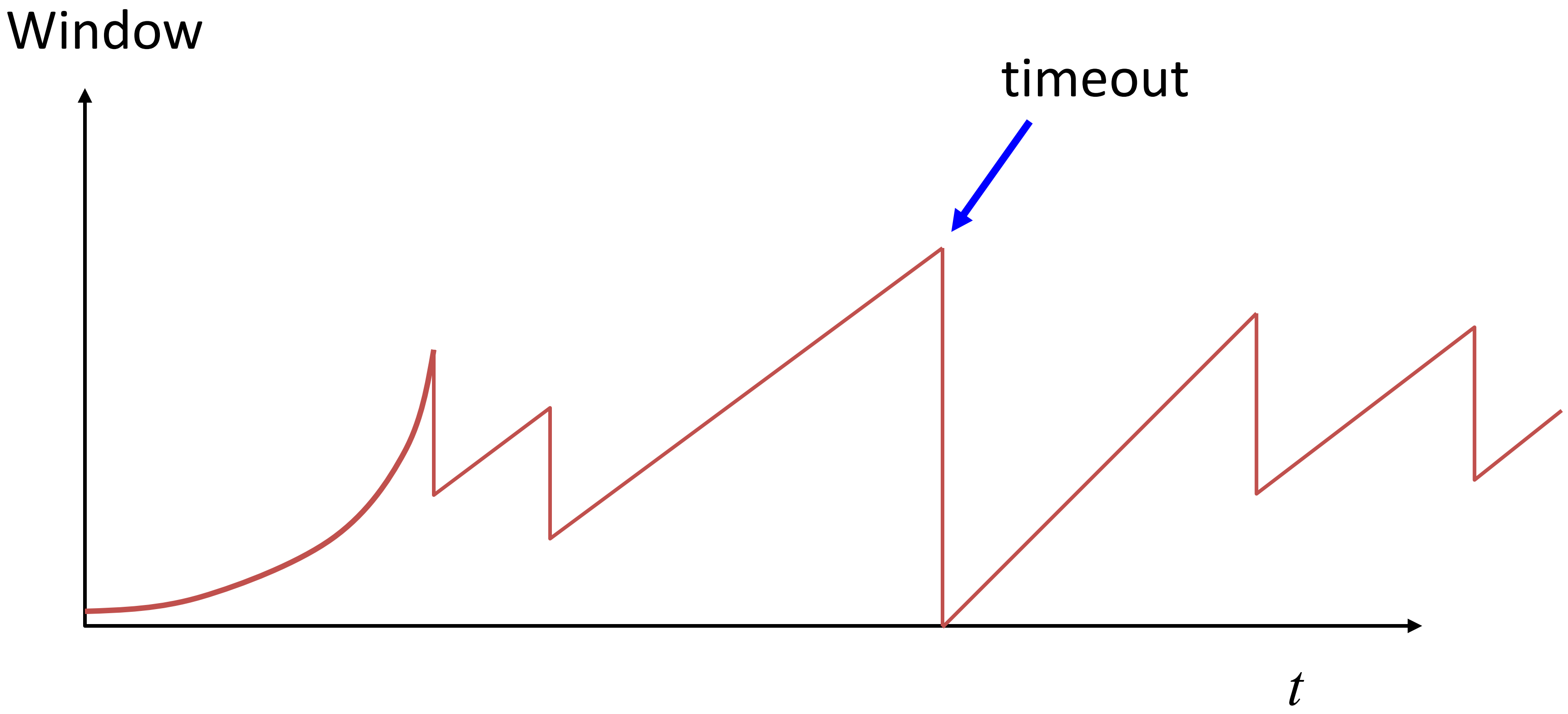


- TCP originally had *no* congestion control
  - Source would start by sending entire receiver window
  - Led to congestion collapse!
  - “Slow start” is, comparatively, slower

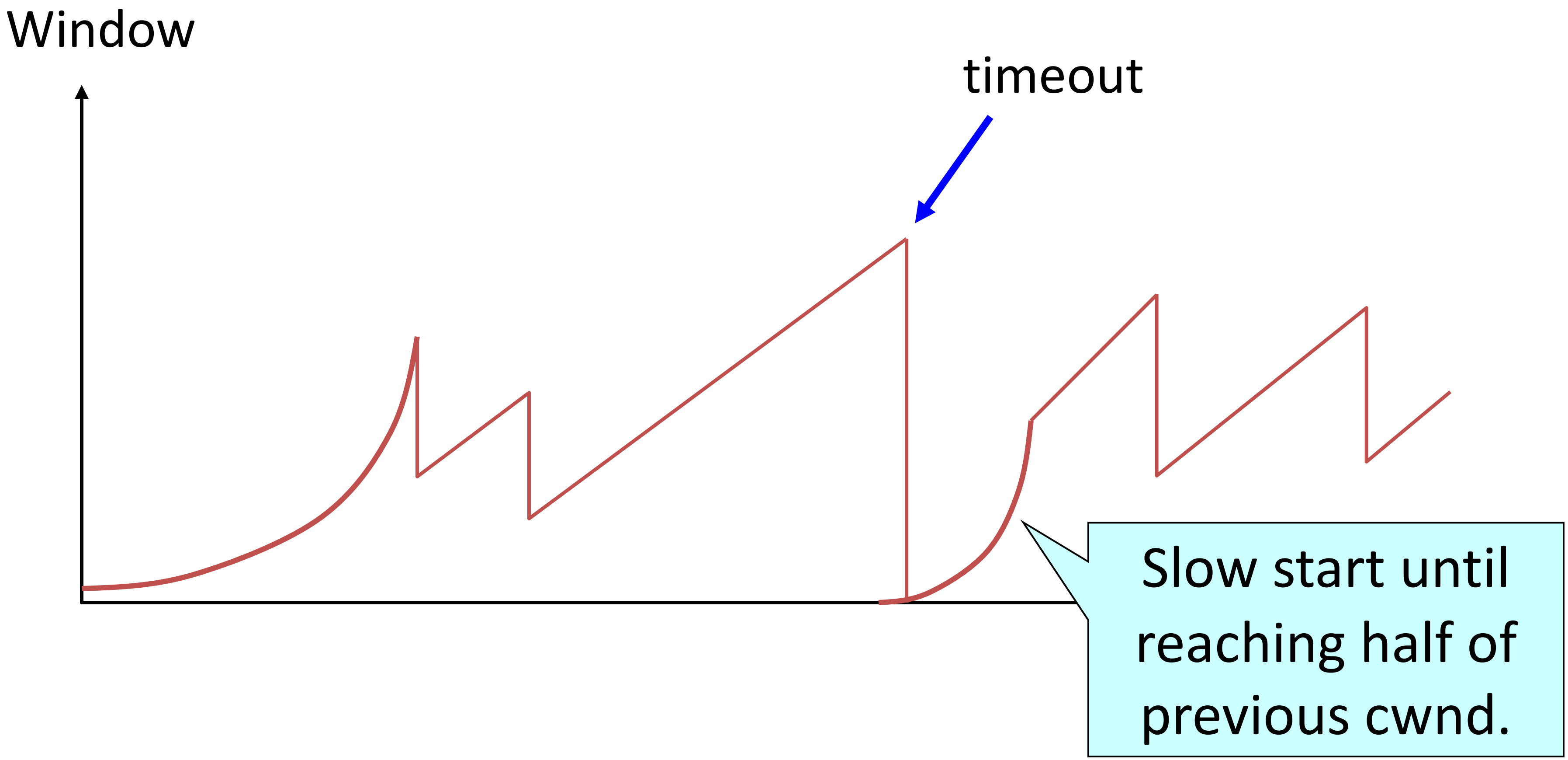
Two Kinds of Loss in TCP

- Timeout vs. Triple Duplicate ACK
  - Which suggests network is in worse shape?
- Timeout
  - If entire window was lost, buffers may be full
  - ...blasting entire CWND would cause another burst
  - ...be aggressive: start over with a low CWND
- Triple duplicate ACK
  - Might be do to bit errors, or “micro” congestion
  - ...react less aggressively (halve CWND)

Repeating Slow Start After Timeout



Repeating Slow Start After Timeout



Slow-start restart: Go back to CWND of 1, but take advantage of knowing the previous value of CWND.

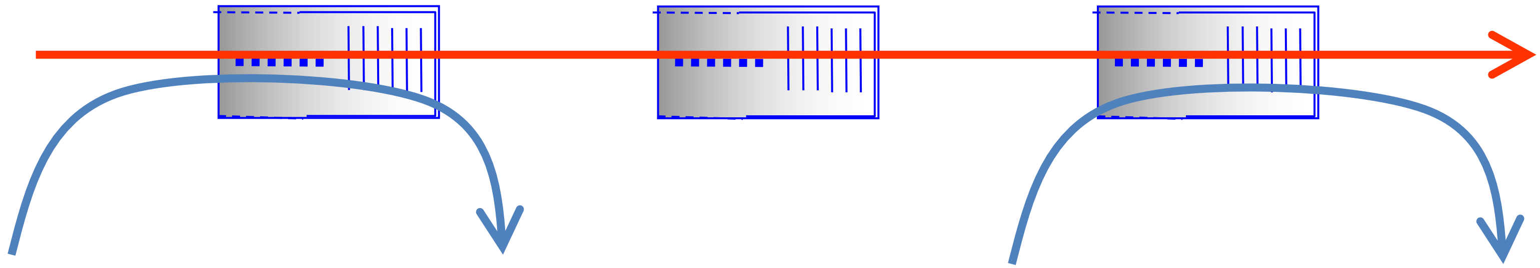
Repeating Slow Start After Idle Period

- Suppose a TCP connection goes idle for a while
- Eventually, the network conditions change
  - Maybe many more flows are traversing the link
- Dangerous to start transmitting at the old rate
  - Previously-idle TCP sender might blast network
  - … causing excessive congestion and packet loss
- So, some TCP implementations repeat slow start
  - Slow-start restart after an idle period

Fairness

TCP Achieves a Notion of Fairness

- Effective utilization is not only goal
  - We also want to be *fair* to various flows
- Simple definition: equal bandwidth shares
  - N flows that each get 1/N of the bandwidth?
- But, what if flows traverse different paths?
  - Result: bandwidth shared in proportion to RTT



What About Cheating?

- Some senders are more fair than others
  - Using multiple TCP connections in parallel (BitTorrent)
  - Modifying the TCP implementation in the OS
    - Some cloud services start TCP at > 1 MSS
  - Use the User Datagram Protocol
- What is the impact?
  - Good senders **slow down** to make room for you
  - You get an **unfair share** of the bandwidth

Conclusions

- Congestion is inevitable
  - Internet does not reserve resources in advance
  - TCP actively tries to push the envelope
- Congestion can be handled
  - Additive increase, multiplicative decrease
  - Slow start and slow-start restart
- Fundamental tensions
  - Feedback from the network?
  - Enforcement of “TCP friendly” behavior?