Comment on "Blotto Politics" by Alan Washburn

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We are pleased to comment on Alan Washburn's "Blotto Politics." In this article, Washburn examines how parties (or candidates) allocate their resources across multiple venues of competition. In this application, the venues are different states and the resources are campaign spending, a situation similar to U.S. presidential elections. Because for most states, the party that wins the most votes receives all of the electoral college votes, this looks similar to a Colonel Blotto game. Washburn examines how the strategies and outcomes of the allocation game changes by allowing one party to have an advantage, changing the order of moves, and manipulating the information available to the parties. We wish to address the last two issues in turn.

As in many competitive games, there is a last-mover advantage: If the first party has allocated all of its resources, and the second party knows where those resources are, then the second party can move its resources to beat the first party. This disadvantage is so great in this model that the first party must have twice the resources of the second party to be competitive. However, there are factors in allocating campaign spending that run counter to this advantage. Washburn, like much of the literature, assumes all spending is of equal value. However, it is not just how much a candidate or ally spends, it is how and when the money is spent. Much of the money spent on campaigns is used for television advertising. The closer one gets to the election (at least in close races where both parties allocate resources, which are the focus of this model as well), the more expensive that advertising is to purchase. This is particularly true for allied third-party groups (e.g. Super PACs) that wish to support the candidate. (As Rick Santorum pointed out in a different context, "Politics is a team sport.") These other groups must often pay a premium to television stations to get their message on the air. Indeed, such Romney-allied groups complained that the Romney campaign bought their television advertising only a week in advance, which is what one would expect if the last-mover advantage held: Romney would want to react to Obama's allocations. But waiting so long made it difficult for those groups to help Romney. In fact, it was Obama's early allocation of resources to voter registration and turnout (the "ground game") that is credited with success, not Romney's late allocation of television advertising. Moreover, early money raised and early expenditures are often interpreted as a marker of candidate viability and seriousness (the "money primary") and have been seen as helpful in raising other money by investing in campaign infrastructure.

In addition to spending, candidates and allies that move first on issues often obtain an electoral advantage. Take, for example, the Swift Boat Veterans For Truth attacks on John Kerry in 2004 and the Gingrich campaign and Priorities USA (Obama-affiliated Super PAC) attacks on Romney for his actions at Bain Capital in 2012. In these cases moving early and moving first was also followed by a tepid candidate response from the candidate being attacked.

An important contribution of the article is considering how disclosure can affect strategy and outcome. Washburn compares the situation when parties spend money secretly to when money spent by parties is revealed. In most elections, it is very difficult to spend money secretly, at least in efforts to interact with voters, which is the central purpose of campaigns. Candidates and their allies purchase the services of advertising trackers (such as the Campaign Media Analysis Group) so that they know when new ads are broadcast, and how often those ads are shown (and how much is spent). Although the "Secret Spending" case is the most like the Blotto Game, it is the least likely situation. Indeed, the prediction that candidates and allies who hide their money will also randomly allocate their money is not borne out in practice. There are not many random spending options in contested elections for reasons identified elsewhere in Washburn's article. The functional number of venues for serious spending is ten to twelve battleground states. But as we move to a more deregulated campaign finance world where some groups do not have to disclose their resources until after the election (so-called IRS Section 501 (c) organizations), players in electoral games may be able to at least partially hide their spending.

There are a few areas that this model could be extended. First, the model assumes a set budget for each party. But the budget is part of the choice made by both parties. A candidate can spend time raising money (creating resources), or spend time campaigning (spending/allocating resources). How should candidates allocate their time when the budget is not fixed? Sometimes these two activities overlap, such as when Obama would attempt to make supporters into donors. Should candidates spend more time raising money from big donors who are few, or small donors who are many and can affect outcomes directly through their votes? This would affect the model's result that the candidate with the most money wins when there is full disclosure.

Second, what happens when third parties, such as interest groups or Super PACs get involved? Is there a first-mover advantage when parties can announce their strategies publicly? How should we model the difference between candidate spending, which often emphasizes the positive aspects of that candidate, compared to outside spending, which often emphasizes the negative aspects of the opponent?

Finally, the article primarily considers presidential general elections, but the puzzle examined here is equally interesting in presidential nominations. In that setting, the model is complicated by the fact that not all states vote at the same time, adding a temporal element to spending. Spending in early states may not be optimal in terms of standing in the polls or money in the campaign account, but the candidate must enter the race before it is effectively determined. Successful candidates have bypassed the first state (McCain in Iowa in 2008) but not both Iowa and New Hampshire, the second state. This forces a campaign to front-load resources.