

Issue Advocacy in Elections*

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Abstract

I examine how issue advocacy by an interest group or political party alters the strategies of candidates in an election. I model this interaction with a basic Colonel Blotto model of an election with two candidates, with either an interest group or a political party.

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In the most competitive races, candidates no longer control much of the communication with voters. Political parties, interest groups, and individuals are permitted to spend unlimited (and undisclosed) money in support or opposition to particular candidates. The support or opposition often takes the form of issue advocacy, which does not expressly call for the election or defeat of a candidate, but makes clear which candidate is favored or opposed. In such a race, a candidate may essentially be faced with two opponents—or a potential ally who does not share the same priorities.

1. Introduction

There has been a marked increase in outside money in recent U.S. congressional elections. As a result of Federal Election Commission rulings, as well as various court decisions, parties have increased their use of issue advocacy in competitive elections.¹ At the same time, interest groups have spent more money on issue advocacy in the competitive campaigns.²

Parties and interest groups are restricted (by the Federal Election Campaign Act) in the amount of money that they can contribute directly to or spend in behalf of a candidate.³ Contributions made directly to a candidate are commonly called “hard money.” Issue advocacy avoids the contribution limits because the advertisements are ostensibly about issues, and not for or against any particular candidate. Indeed, the only real guideline for issue ads is that they contain none of the “magic words” listed in a footnote in *Buckley v. Valeo*.⁴ When any advertisement does not contain such words, it is protected as First Amendment speech, and no restrictions may be placed on it. Both parties and interest groups have pushed these rulings to the limit, creating issue advertisements that are little more than thinly disguised candidate advertisements. For example, instead of stating “Vote for Candidate A,” an advertisement will suggest that the voter “Call Candidate A, and tell her to keep up the good work.” The only other guideline for

¹David B. Magleby, “Outside Money: Soft Money & Issue Ads in Competitive 1998 Elections,” Pew Charitable Trusts.

²Annenberg Public Policy Center 1996 and 1998 Issue Advocacy Advertising Reports.

³Interest groups may spend unlimited resources on independent expenditures, but are restricted in how they may raise funds for those expenditures.

⁴From *Buckley v. Valeo*: “This construction would restrict the application of § 608(e)(1) [regarding hard money] to communications containing express words of advocacy of election or defeat, such as ‘vote for,’ ‘elect,’ ‘support,’ ‘cast your ballot for,’ ‘Smith for Congress,’ ‘vote against,’ ‘defeat,’ ‘reject.’ ”

issue advocacy is that it must be engaged in independent from any candidate coordination.⁵ Empirically, parties appear to implicitly coordinate with candidates, and interest groups at times implicitly coordinate, and at other times, ignore the candidates. In fact, at times, outside money appears to hurt the candidates it is supposed to help.⁶

One advantage of issue advocacy is that there are much higher (or no) restrictions placed on how much a party (or interest group) may spend, and there are no restrictions on how much each donor may contribute. Within a party (or interest group), the party can more easily allocate the money to different races so that it does not waste money on an uncompetitive election.

The increased use of soft money and issue ads by parties and interest groups are reinforcing. As interest groups (and other parties) threaten to spend more money in an election campaign, parties (and their candidates) feel they need to have more money on hand to combat that potential threat.

One difficulty that is a result of outside money is that candidates have less control over the campaign. An interest group can place an issue on the campaign agenda that would not have been there otherwise (*e.g.*, term limits). And parties may not even spend the money how the candidate would most like it. In addition, issue advocacy is often more negative in tone than regular candidate advertisements.

In this paper, I attempt to better understand outside money through some modified Colonel Blotto games. In the next section, I introduce the basic game. In section 3, I include an interest group in the game. And in section 4, I include a party. Section 5 concludes.

2. A Colonel Blotto Election Game

In this game, there are two candidates, C1 and C2. There are also three voters: D[emocrat], I[ndependent], and R[epublican]. Each candidate has three units of resources that it may allocate to the voters in integer units. The candidate that

⁵The Republican party is currently litigating a case arguing that they should be able to “generally” coordinate, but not “specifically” coordinate campaign activity.

⁶In the 1998 elections, the National Republican Congressional Committee [NRCC] announced that it would spend \$37 million in issue ads for 13 vulnerable Republican incumbents, and for 29 (competitive) Republican challengers. This money was spent to (re)elect Republicans. Some commentators believe that NRCC’s efforts to connect the Lewinsky scandal to congressional races backfired.

expends the most resources on a voter receives the vote of that voter. A voter that receives equal resources from each candidate will abstain from voting. A candidate wins if she receives more votes than the other candidate. If both candidates receive equal votes, then a coin toss determines the winner. With three units of resources and three voters, there are ten actions that each candidate can take (assuming that all resources are allocated). Each action is denoted by how many resources are allocated to each voter. For example, the action “2D1I” means that a candidate allocated 2 units to voter D, 1 unit to voter I, and 0 units to voter R. The candidates allocate their resources simultaneously. This game, then, is a form of a Colonel Blotto game.⁷ The game is in Table 2.1. As this is zero-sum game, only C1’s payoffs are given (C1’s payoff = −C2’s payoff).

A payoff of +1 indicates that C1 wins the election, a payoff of −1 indicates that C2 wins the election, and a payoff of 0 indicates a tie or stalemate (or that a coin is tossed for the election result). There is only one pure strategy Nash equilibrium: {1D1I1R, 1D1I1R}. There are an infinite number of mixed strategy Nash equilibria. To find these, first note that the strategies 3D, 3I and 3R are weakly dominated by 1D1I1R (for both candidates). The reduced game is in Table 2.2. Note that in any mixed strategy, the strategies 2D1I, 2I1R and 2R1D must be played with equal probability (possibly zero), and the strategies 1D2I, 1I2R and 1R2D must be played with equal probability (possibly zero). Let the probabilities of playing 2D1I, 2I1R and 2R1D be p (for each), and let the probabilities of playing 1D2I, 1I2R and 1R2D be q (for each), and let the probability of playing 1D1I1R be r . The Nash equilibria can be characterized as:

$$0 \leq p \leq \frac{1}{3}$$

$$0 \leq q \leq \frac{1}{3}$$

$$0 \leq r \leq 1$$

$$3p + 3q + r = 1$$

There are no Nash equilibria in which either candidate allocates all of her resources to one voter (*i.e.*, no candidate puts all of her eggs in one basket). In fact, in all Nash equilibria, there is positive probability that any given voter will receive resources from a specific candidate. Thus, in this game, each voter has

⁷O. Gross and R. Wagner, *A Continuous Colonel Blotto Game*, Research Memorandum RM-408, Santa Monica: RAND, 1950.

Table 2.1: Colonel Blotto Election Game

		C2									
		3D	3I	3R	2D1I	2I1R	2R1D	1D2I	1I2R	1R2D	1D1I1R
C1	3D	0	0	0	0	-1	0	0	-1	0	-1
	3I	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0	0	-1	-1
	3R	0	0	0	-1	0	0	-1	0	0	-1
	2D1I	0	0	+1	0	-1	+1	0	0	0	0
	2I1R	+1	0	0	+1	0	-1	0	0	0	0
	2R1D	0	+1	0	-1	+1	0	0	0	0	0
	1D2I	0	0	+1	0	0	0	0	+1	-1	0
	1I2R	+1	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0	+1	0
	1R2D	0	+1	0	0	0	0	+1	-1	0	0
	1D1I1R	+1	+1	+1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Notes: C1's payoffs in table.

C2's payoff = -C1's payoff.

Table 2.2: Colonel Blotto Election Game, Reduced

		C2						
		2D1I	2I1R	2R1D	1D2I	1I2R	1R2D	1D1I1R
C1	2D1I	0	-1	+1	0	0	0	0
	2I1R	+1	0	-1	0	0	0	0
	2R1D	-1	+1	0	0	0	0	0
	1D2I	0	0	0	0	+1	-1	0
	1I2R	0	0	0	-1	0	+1	0
	1R2D	0	0	0	+1	-1	0	0
	1D1I1R	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Notes: C1's payoffs in table.

C2's payoff = -C1's payoff.

positive probability that a candidate will allocate resources to him. Depending on what strategies are played, each candidate wins the election an equal amount of the time, and stalemate the rest.⁸

3. Election Game with an Interest Group

The interest group in this model spends a great deal of money on a campaign trumpeting its issue (negatively) to the electorate.⁹ Such negative advertising often has the effect of demobilizing the electorate.¹⁰ For this model, I will assume that the interest group focuses its efforts on voter I, and demobilizes him from voting. Thus, any resources allocated to voter I are essentially wasted. The game is in Table 3.1. In the table, +2 means that C1 wins both voters, although this is essentially the same as getting +1, since C1 wins the election either way. (It would make no difference in the analysis if the +2 was changed to +1, and -2 to -1.)

Since the interest group demobilizes voter I, the game is fought over two voters. First, note that 3I is strongly dominated by 2R1D (or 2D1R). Also note that 2D1I, 2I1R, 1D2I, 1I2R and 1D1I1R are weakly dominated by 2R1D (or 2D1R). Thus, any strategy that allocates resources to voter I is dominated (strongly or weakly) by a strategy that divides its resources between voters R and D. The remaining strategies (3D, 3R, 2R1D, 1R2D) all yield a payoff of 0. The reduced game is in Table 3.2. Since all payoffs are 0, any (remaining) action or mixture of the actions constitute a Nash equilibrium.

The important point to note here is that it is no longer a (weakly) dominated strategy to allocate all resources to one voter. If negative advertising demobilizes independent voters, then candidates will spend their time focusing on the other voters. In addition, this game indicates that with an outside group spending money on its own issue, the election will be a stalemate.¹¹

⁸Unless the pure strategy Nash equilibrium {1D1I1R, 1D1I1R} is played, in which case, there is always a stalemate.

⁹Alternatively, the interest group could denounce a candidate.

¹⁰Stephen Ansolabehere, Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon, and Nicholas Valentino, "Does Attack Advertising Demobilize the Electorate?" *American Political Science Review* 88:829-838.

¹¹Or more generally, that either candidate will win outright less often.

Table 3.1: Election Game with Interest Group

		C2									
		3D	3I	3R	2D1I	2I1R	2R1D	1D2I	1I2R	1R2D	1D1I1R
C1	3D	0	+1	0	+1	0	0	+1	0	0	0
	3I	-1	0	-1	-1	-1	-2	-1	-1	-2	-2
	3R	0	+1	0	0	+1	0	0	+1	0	0
	2D1I	-1	+1	0	0	0	0	+1	0	-1	0
	2I1R	0	+1	-1	0	0	-2	0	-1	-1	-1
	2R1D	0	+2	0	0	+2	0	+2	+1	0	+1
	1D2I	-1	+1	0	-1	0	-2	0	0	-2	-1
	1I2R	0	+1	-1	0	+1	-1	0	0	0	0
	1R2D	0	+2	0	+1	+1	0	+2	0	0	+1
	1D1I1R	0	+2	0	0	+1	-1	+1	0	-1	0

Notes: C1's payoffs in table.

C2's payoff = -C1's payoff.

Table 3.2: Election Game with Interest Group, Reduced

		C2			
		3D	3R	2R1D	1R2D
C1	3D	0	0	0	0
	3R	0	0	0	0
	2R1D	0	0	0	0
	1R2D	0	0	0	0

Notes: C1's payoffs in table.

C2's payoff = -C1's payoff.

4. Election Game with a Party

The party in this model spends money mobilizing its voter.¹² Thus, let the party allocate 1 unit to voter D in behalf of C1. The game is in Table 4.1. The game is solved by iterated elimination of weakly dominated strategies. For C1, 3D and 3I are weakly dominated by 2I1R; 3R is weakly dominated by 1I2R; and 2D1I and 1R2D are weakly dominated by 1D1I1R. In the next iteration, for C2, 1D1I1R, 3I and 3R are weakly dominated by 3A; 2R1D is weakly dominated by 1R2D; and 1R2I is weakly dominated by 2D1I. In the next iteration for C1, 1D2I is weakly dominated by 2I1R; and 2R1D is weakly dominated by 1I2R. In the final iteration for C2, 3D is weakly dominated by 2D1I. The remaining game is in Table 4.2.

In the Nash equilibrium of this game, C1 plays its three strategies (2I1R, 1I2R, 1D1I1R) with equal probability. For C2, since 2I1R and 1I2R yield the same payoffs (in the reduced game), those strategies are interchangeable. In the Nash equilibrium, C2 plays its strategies (2D1R, <2I1R or 1I2R>, 1R2D) with equal probability.

C1 implicitly coordinates with the party to assign at least one unit of resource to each voter. She then allocates her remaining unit of resource with equal probability to each voter. C2, who is at a disadvantage with resources, mixes between allocating 2 units to voter D ($\frac{2}{3}$ of the time), and giving up on voter D and allocating 0 units to him ($\frac{1}{3}$ of the time). In addition, with the extra resource, C1 wins most ($\frac{2}{3}$) elections. The best that C2 can hope for is a tie.

5. Conclusion

This paper suggests that the introduction of issue advocacy can change the strategies a candidate takes in an election. Without issue advocacy, candidates have an incentive to allocate their resources across many voters. When issue advocacy demobilizes part of the electorate, candidates are forced to focus their resources on fewer voters. And when issue advocacy focuses on (and mobilizes) one part of the electorate, the advantaged candidate may allocate scarce resources elsewhere, while the disadvantaged candidate must work harder to oppose the issue advocacy efforts, or give up on those voters.

¹²Negative advertising against the opposition party's candidate is often helpful when focused solely at the party's constituents. (Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: how political advertisements shrink and polarize the electorate*, New York: Free Press, 1995.)

Table 4.1: Election Game with a Party

		C2									
		3D	3I	3R	2D1I	2I1R	2R1D	1D2I	1I2R	1R2D	1D1I1R
C1	3D	+1	0	0	0	-1	0	0	-1	0	-1
	3I	0	+1	+1	0	+1	0	+1	+1	-1	0
	3R	0	+1	+1	0	+1	+1	0	+1	0	0
	2D1I	+1	0	+1	+1	-1	0	0	0	+1	0
	2I1R	+1	+1	+1	+1	+1	0	+1	+1	0	+1
	2R1D	0	+1	0	0	+1	+1	+1	0	+1	+1
	1D2I	0	0	+1	+1	0	+1	+1	+1	0	+1
	1I2R	+1	+1	+1	0	+1	+1	0	+1	+1	+1
	1R2D	+1	+1	0	+1	0	0	+1	-1	+1	0
	1D1I1R	+1	+1	+1	+1	0	+1	+1	0	+1	+1

Notes: C1's payoffs in table.

C2's payoff = -C1's payoff.

Table 4.2: Election Game with a Party, Reduced

		C2			
		2D1I	2I1R	1I2R	1R2D
C1	2I1R	+1	+1	+1	0
	1I2R	0	+1	+1	+1
	1D1I1R	+1	0	0	+1

Notes: C1's payoffs in table.

C2's payoff = -C1's payoff.

Indeed, these models only begin to address the complexity that issue advocacy brings to a candidate's decision calculus. Often, parties and interest groups do not spend money on issue advocacy until the final weeks of a campaign, making it difficult for candidates to adjust to their presence. One challenger, who had been supported by interest group issue advocacy, stated that issue ads were a "double-edged sword."¹³ Although the group supported her and denounced her opponent, the group's advertisements upset the balance of positive and negative advertisements the challenger had purchased. In the end, her campaign was seen as too negative.¹⁴

Future work should allow for the possibility that a group or party may or may not engage in issue advocacy, perhaps even allowing this to be a strategic decision by the group across several different simultaneous campaigns.

In addition, in any close election, if one party runs issue ads, the opposition party often does as well. These efforts often cancel out (but are the essence of Colonel Blotto-style games). Future research will allow multiple parties and/or multiple groups to enter the election campaign.

¹³Lily Eskelsen, candidate for the Utah second congressional district, interview with the author, 27 November 1998.

¹⁴Lee Davidson, "Mudslinging may work elsewhere — not in Utah," *Deseret News*, 5 November 1998, A1.