The Ballots We Never See

Guide 1.3 / Public opinion, political socialization and voting

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On election night in fictional Harbor Junction, the newsroom is ready to report that the city opposed Measure 8, a $48 annual parcel fee to fund two late-night bus routes. Students are the editors who decide what the ballots warrant, then test what a different voting window would change.

ALL ELIGIBLE ADULTS

55%

440 of 800 favored the measure in the model poll.

BALLOTS CAST

49%

196 of 400 voted Yes in the model election.

What students should be able to explain

Given a private preference poll, ballot totals and a replay, students will explain why the majority among eligible adults can differ from the majority among voters. They will distinguish social learning from who joins a circle, trace what one person can change, and test an access claim in a new election.

Assign it

Use as introductory U.S. government homework. Give students the standalone HTML. Ask them to open it in a browser, choose **For Class**, and enter their name and section. **Case tools** holds the glossary and save controls. **Records for this response** keeps the evidence at hand. **Return to response** brings students back to the same draft. Students type responses and can paste within the same answer. **For Fun** offers practice without a submission report. Share this answer key separately.

Work	Planning estimate
Read the local case and research records	8-10 min
Make forecasts, run replays and compare evidence	13-15 min
Write four checkpoints, 255 words minimum in all	20-23 min
Save, open and check the submission PDF	4-7 min

Plan on 45-55 minutes. Actual completion time still needs a student pilot.

Canvas instructions to share

> Play in **For Class** and record all four responses. Open your completed report and select **Download PDF**. You can also select **Print or save as PDF** and choose **Save as PDF** in the print dialog. Open the saved file and check your name, all answers and the final page. Upload that PDF to Canvas and confirm your submission there. A progress backup is for resuming the activity.

Terms students use

Opinion is what someone thinks about an issue. **Preference** is which option they favor. **Turnout** is taking part in an election, often measured as the share of eligible people who vote. **Ballot choice** is what a voter selects. **Political socialization** is how people learn political views and habits. **Bounded agency** is the ability to act among the choices available. A **causal effect** is the difference an exposure or action makes compared with what would happen without it.

The model, by hand

Worked checks for both replays and the new case

Harbor Junction, fictional. The private poll contains a Yes or No preference from every eligible adult. Voters cast their stated preference. Within a schedule, the same turnout rate applies to both preferences in both circles. Real elections may depart from these assumptions.

Circle and work schedule	Eligible	Poll Yes	Poll No	Standard Yes / No	Evening Yes / No
Break Room / fixed	320	240	80	60 / 20	120 / 40
Break Room / flexible	80	60	20	45 / 15	45 / 15
Block Chat / fixed	80	28	52	7 / 13	14 / 26
Block Chat / flexible	320	112	208	84 / 156	84 / 156
Total	800	440	360	196 / 204	263 / 237

Standard window. For fixed shifts, 67% prefer Yes and 25% vote. For flexible shifts, 43% prefer Yes and 75% vote. The Break Room fixed cell contributes 240 × 0.25 = 60 Yes and 80 × 0.25 = 20 No. Overall turnout is 400/800 = 50%. Yes is 196/400 = 49% of ballots and 244/400 = 61% of modeled nonvoters.

Personal replay. Coworker coverage is available to both residents, who each earn $18 an hour. Alex covers the lost wage from $120 in savings and votes Yes (197-204) with either request for coworker cover. Casey would be $18 short on bills and votes No (196-205) only if using the sister's $18 offer. Casey's attempt without family money and each resident's choice to keep the shift leave the tally at 196-204. Either new ballot raises turnout to 401/800.

Evening hours. This replay restarts from the standard rule. Fixed-shift turnout rises to 50% with preferences and flexible-shift turnout held constant. Standard-hours voters still vote. The 100 added voters include 67 Yes and 33 No. Yes wins 263-237, with 52.6% of 500 ballots. Turnout is 62.5% of 800.

Socialization or selection? Within each schedule, 75% of the Break Room circle and 35% of the Block Chat circle favor the measure. The comparison puts schedule on equal footing. People could learn from others, choose circles that match prior views, or share experiences such as commuting by bus. In the fictional volunteer pilot, both groups start at 20/40 in support. After random assignment, 26/40 with the endorsement and 20/40 with facts only support it. The 15-point gap estimates the short-run effect of that cue among the volunteers.

Meadow Crossing school board, fictional

Schedule	Eligible	Poll Ortiz / Lee	Standard Ortiz / Lee	Evening Ortiz / Lee
Fixed	80	24 / 56	6 / 14	12 / 28
Flexible	120	72 / 48	54 / 36	54 / 36
Total	200	96 / 104	60 / 50	66 / 64

The replay adds **6 Ortiz ballots and 14 Lee ballots**, 30% and 70% of the 20 added ballots. Ortiz remains ahead and the margin shrinks from 10 to 2. Use the evidence guide on page 5 to discuss the late coach endorsement.

Read the class report

A 12-point rubric for the four writing checkpoints

Award one point for each criterion below, up to three per response. Use first commitments and hint history to understand revisions. Grade the current response against its printed prompt and edition. For earlier prompts, score 3 for complete reasoning, 2 for one missing link, 1 for a relevant observation and 0 for missing or unsupported work.

1. Edit the headline / 60 words minimum

Write one short headline the records can support, then add an editor's note. Give both Yes percentages and say who each percentage counts. Explain how differences in who voted could produce both results.

Full credit. 1 Gives 49% of ballots and 55% of eligible adults. **1** Writes a headline supported by the records. **1** Explains how Yes supporters could be underrepresented among voters. A sound composition explanation from the opening earns credit. Under the model assumption, 244 of 400 nonvoters favored Yes (61%). Schedule evidence is introduced later.

2. Explain the circle gap / 65 words minimum

Use both Yes percentages for people on the same work schedule. Explain how talking in a circle could shape opinion. Give a competing explanation based on who joins or what residents stand to gain or pay. Name a finding that would favor one explanation. Say how your follow-up could observe it or how you would improve the plan. Explain what would still be uncertain.

Full credit. 1 Uses 75% and 35% within one schedule. **1** Explains learning and a rival. **1** Links a predicted finding to a follow-up that could measure it and names a limit. Accept a repair of the initial plan. The initial prediction is formative. The separate pilot estimates a short-run cue effect.

3. Compare two kinds of change / 55 words minimum

Use the ballot totals after your resident's choice and after the evening-hours replay. Say what helped or constrained your resident. Explain which voters the extra hours added and how that mix of ballots changed the winner. Name what the model held fixed and why the mix of new voters matters. Name one way residents could work together to make it easier to vote. Who has the authority to approve it, and what barrier could still remain?

Full credit. 1 Uses the selected personal tally and 263-237. Ties the personal change to coverage, savings or family help. **1** Explains why the 67 Yes and 33 No fixed-shift entrants can flip the winner while preferences and flexible-shift turnout stay fixed. **1** Names a plausible joint action, decision-maker and remaining barrier.

4. Meadow Crossing memo / 75 words minimum

Compare both leads and the votes each candidate gained. Judge the claim that later hours always widen the leader's margin. If easier voting drove the change, whose turnout would increase? What would happen to their private preferences? Describe how you would ask the same eligible adults privately before and after the endorsement, including people who did not vote. Say whom you would compare. How would you tell if a voter heard the coach before casting a ballot? What change in support for Lee would point to the endorsement? Give one reason to be cautious about crediting the coach.

Full credit. 1 Uses 60-50 and 66-64 (lead from 10 to 2), with 6 Ortiz and 14 Lee added votes, to reject "always." **1** Links increased fixed-shift turnout and stable preferences to access. **1** Proposes a confidential comparison over time that includes nonvoters, checks pre-ballot exposure for voters, specifies greater movement toward Lee among comparable exposed adults, and names a limit.

Research and discussion

Evidence ledger, debrief questions and design rationale

Jennings, Stoker and Bowers (2009). *Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined.* JOP 71(3), 782-799. A U.S. three-generation panel links consistent political cues in politicized families to greater parent-child transmission. Accounts of the Harbor Junction circles remain separate from the panel finding. Article and abstract

Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus (2013). *How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation.* APSR 107(1), 57-79. Two U.S. survey experiments on drilling and immigration show that polarized elite cues can increase the influence of party endorsements on expressed opinions. The outcome is issue opinion. Article and abstract

Brady, Verba and Schlozman (1995). *Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation.* APSR 89(2), 271-294. Time, money and civic skills help explain participation. The task treats work flexibility as one resource and leaves the effects of income and wealth unestimated. Article and abstract

Gerber, Green and Larimer (2008). *Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment.* APSR 102(1), 33-48. In the August 2006 Michigan primary, 29.7% voted in control (191,243 individuals) versus 37.8% in Neighbors (38,201 individuals), a +8.1 percentage-point difference. The mailing warned that turnout would be shared with neighbors. Households were randomly assigned. Administrative records show who voted. The contrast estimates the effect of assignment to that mailing. Full article, Table 2

Pew Research Center (2025). *Behind Trump's 2024 Victory, a More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Voter Coalition.* Lower family income describes 23% of validated 2024 voters and 46% of nonvoters in the weighted sample. Each percentage is a share of its own turnout group. Pew adjusts family income for household size and local living costs, and retains missing income responses. Report, p. 17 and pp. 54-55

Optional enrichment. College roommates' views grew modestly more alike over time. Strother et al. (2021) Campus cultures emphasizing financial gain helped shape students' economic views. Mendelberg et al. (2017)

Evidence status. Both towns' records are synthetic, with complete preferences and two options. Each published study has its own population and outcome.

Debrief

Where did agency appear? Compare what Alex or Casey could accomplish with what the rule change made feasible for many residents. Ask what would make personal choices or organized shift swaps available to more people, including resources and scheduling power.

How would you know what changed? Ask how to distinguish the learning of a view, the selection of a circle, a turnout response and a switch in candidate preference. Income is a flow of money. Wealth captures accumulated assets and debt. Either could affect work flexibility through a specific mechanism that would need evidence.

Design options compared

Format	First move and tradeoff	Seven axes	Total
Newsroom replay	Commit to a headline, inspect the denominators and reset access. Opinion and turnout drive one loop.	4/4/3/3/3/3/4	24
Field experiment desk	Choose which groups to compare in Michigan. This sharpens causal inference about turnout.	3/4/3/2/3/2/3	20
One resident's time budget	Pick a feasible voting plan. The personal constraint works as a short replay.	3/2/4/3/2/3/2	19

Design scores are AI paper-design judgments in order of format, rigor, agency, language, access, art and feasibility (four points each). The model was checked by hand. Actual student timing and learning remain open.

Read the evidence checks

Answer keys and prompts for reasoning beyond the tally

The report lists machine-scored study and calculation checks separately from the 12-point writing rubric. Use the first and current scores to see what a learner reconsidered. Restored 1.0 research records can have three study checks because the fourth was added in 1.1.

Research answers

Item	Expected answer
Turnout experiment	Michigan mail experiment. Randomized households and recorded individual voting test whether the message changed turnout.
Neighbors minus control	37.8% minus 29.7% gives 8.1 percentage points.
Issue opinion experiment	Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus. Survey experiments vary political cues and measure reported issue opinions.
What Pew's percentages count	Pew's lower family income tier was a larger share of nonvoters (46%) than of validated voters (23%). Each share describes the composition of a turnout group. The comparison leaves the tier's turnout rate and the effect of income unresolved.

Which finding would support the explanation?

Start with the prediction the learner selected before feedback. A one-time survey links discussion frequency and current opinion. Its questions cannot establish what people believed before joining. The follow-over-time plan measures prior views, costs and bus needs and follows similar nonjoiners. The randomized volunteer pilot tests immediate responses to one message. Its result leaves open the long-run influence of belonging to a circle.

Explanation	Finding that would strengthen it
Social learning	New members shift toward their circle's views after joining. Comparable people who stayed out change little. An outside event could still matter.
Selection	Earlier views predict which circle a person joins and views move little after joining.
Material stakes	The gap shrinks among people with similar preexisting bus needs and exposure to the fee.

Separate access and persuasion in Meadow Crossing

Check turnout by work schedule and voting window. Include eligible nonvoters in a confidential panel. Ask the same people before and after the endorsement and record when they heard it, including whether voters heard it before casting a ballot. Compare net movement toward Lee among similar exposed and unexposed people. Self-selection into hearing the message or another campaign event may weaken the attribution. Aggregate stability can hide opposing switches. Turnout-only mobilization can also resemble easier access.

> **Check the arithmetic.** With later hours, fixed shifts contribute 12 Ortiz and 28 Lee ballots. Flexible shifts still contribute 54 Ortiz and 36 Lee. Those counts give 66 Ortiz and 64 Lee ballots overall.

After the memo

Optional extension and examples for grading

Same tally, another explanation

If the live tally were 66-64, it could fit either story. The access-only replay adds 6 Ortiz and 14 Lee ballots. An alternate mix adds 8 and 12, with two people who would otherwise vote for Ortiz choosing Lee before casting a ballot. Both add 20 fixed-shift voters who follow their survey preferences, and the alternate allows at most 18 new Ortiz ballots (24 original supporters minus the 6 who already voted). Ask what new evidence could distinguish the stories. The challenge and final headline choice are optional.

Compare the resources behind a choice

Casey's two attempts hold coworker coverage constant. With family help the tally is 196-205, and without that help it stays 196-204. Ask what data would show which residents have access to savings, relatives who can help, or coworkers who can cover. A network might also encourage participation or change an opinion. What different evidence would each claim need?

For the agency criterion, residents can petition the election board for evening hours. The board controls the hours, and residents whose shift still overlaps the polls may remain excluded. A second defensible plan has coworkers organize coverage with supervisors' approval. The lost $18 can remain a barrier.

Two answers to calibrate on

Sound alternative. Workers who need a late bus may already favor Measure 8 and choose the Break Room circle. Ask workers with similar commutes before and after a randomly assigned discussion invitation. Compare all who were offered an invitation with all who were not, including invited workers who skipped the discussion. This measures the effect of the offer.

Fluent but unsupported. "The mail experiment proved the Break Room changed opinions." The Michigan experiment measured turnout. A claim about opinion formation needs a measure of preferences.