



University of Vermont
Center for Community News

Assignment Template: Covering ballot measures

The Center for Community News' mission is to grow and support partnerships between college reporting programs and local news outlets. CCN has created a series of sample templates for faculty to give to students to contribute local news to their community. Faculty are welcome to use any and all of these and amend them as they see fit for their classes. For questions about this template, contact CCN Program Coordinator Sarah Gamard at sarah.gamard@uvm.edu.

Notes for Faculty

WHAT: Ballot measures are a direct way for voters to make their voices heard without depending on their elected officials to truly represent them in office. In essence, they are a democratic shortcut to often controversial policy changes such as marijuana legalization, LGBTQIA+ protections and criminal justice.

WHY: What newsrooms always want – and almost never get – is an accurate picture of its readers' leanings approaching any election, including when it comes to ballot measures. What percent are for or against the issues on the ballot, and why?

HOW TO USE THIS TEMPLATE: This assignment can be a photo essay, a series of vertical video clips or a plain series of written stories, depending on how you want to format it.

It can be used for beginners or more experienced students:

1. For beginners: In this case, this assignment is a great opportunity to do man-on-the-street interviews with voters in local communities.
2. For advanced students: Man-on-the-street interviews with some additional analysis, including speaking to political experts, advocacy groups, elected officials or those directly affected by the issues being voted on via the ballot measures.

About CCN

The [Center for Community News](#) at UVM is a nonpartisan organization that is working to grow and strengthen university-led reporting programs around the country, to create a more sustainable future for local news outlets and the communities they serve.

Assignment: Covering ballot measures (beginner version)

Instructions

Step 1: Study up on the ballot measure(s). See what coverage has already been done. Consider the effects of this measure if it fails or passes. Who will be affected? Who could benefit, or be hurt by it? **Note to faculty:** You can include links to the ballot measure language or existing news coverage.

Step 2: Interview three people. Ask them the questions below, making sure you identify yourself properly. Make sure they know they are on the record and where the story could be published. Get their names, residence, age and occupation.

Step 3: Condense the interviews. Take the key points they said and summarize them into a story. You can use a couple of their direct quotes.

People you can interview:

- Strangers in public spaces

Note to faculty: If students are new, explain that their First Amendment rights allow them to document or interview people in public spaces, such as on the street, but if they try to approach and interview strangers in a private establishment, such as a restaurant or grocery store, they could be kicked out.

People you *can't* interview:

- Fellow students
- Family members
- Friends or acquaintances

Questions you can ask:

- May I interview you for a story for XXX, and may I record it?
- What is your name, and the full spelling?
- How old are you, what do you do for a living and what area do you live?
- Do you know about the ballot measures? (If they don't, explain the measures.)
- Do you support Ballot Measure No. 1 to XXX? Why or why not?
- Do you support Ballot Measure No. 2 to XXX? Why or why not?
- Do you support Ballot Measure No. 3 to XXX? Why or why not?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add before I let you go?

Note: Do not use these interviews as a way to debate with the interviewees on their views; a journalist's job is to report what they see and hear, no matter if they agree with it or not. Be kind and listen!

Definitions

- **Ballot measure:** a law, issue or topic placed on a statewide or municipal ballot for voters to decide through an election

Note to faculty: You can also use this to summarize each ballot measure.

Word Count / Video Length:

Deadline:

A note to faculty who do not have journalistic training: the Journalistic Learning Initiative's [Murrow.ai](#) is an AI-powered writing coach to help students and faculty edit their stories for free. CCN Program Coordinator Sarah Gamard can also help you get your bearings on editing student stories. Contact her at sarah.gamard@uvm.edu.

Note to faculty on covering politics: It can be hard to find sources who might be resistant to talking about controversial topics, such as a high school sports coach who could speak on issues related to transgender athletes if that is a ballot measure in your community. One option is to be transparent about the story you are writing and why you are writing it, and that their perspective could be beneficial to the story by cutting through political rhetoric and better informing voters. In some cases, these people could be afraid to speak for fear of losing their jobs; use your judgment and take advantage of the opportunity to teach students when it's OK to use anonymous sources who do not give their full name for fear of losing their jobs, etc.

Assignment: Covering ballot measures (intermediate version)

Step 1: Study up on the ballot measure(s). See what coverage has already been done. Consider the effects of this measure if it fails or passes. Who will be affected? Who could benefit, or be hurt by it? **Note to faculty:** You can include links to the ballot measure language or existing news coverage.

Step 2: Divvy up reporting tasks. Each reporter needs to do their own slice of reporting to make this story whole. This story will need someone to interview regular voters, someone else to interview advocates for or against the ballot measure, someone else to interview a local official and someone else to do research on other states that are considering or have already implemented similar laws. Decide who will do what before proceeding to Step 3.

Step 3: Interview your assigned people. Ask them the questions below, making sure you identify yourself properly. Make sure they know they are on the record and where the story could be published. Get their names, residence, age and occupation.

Step 4: Condense the interviews and add them to a collaborative document to share with your fellow reporters. Take the key points they said and summarize them into a section of the greater story.

People you can interview:

- Strangers in public spaces
- Advocates for the ballot measure
- Advocates against the ballot measure
- A local official
- One or two people are directly affected by the ballot measure

Note to faculty: If students are new, explain that their First Amendment rights allow them to document or interview people in public spaces, such as on the street, but if they try to approach and interview strangers in a private establishment, such as a restaurant or grocery store, they could be kicked out.

People you *can't* interview:

- Fellow students
- Family members
- Friends or acquaintances

Questions you can ask:

- May I interview you for a story for XXX, and may I record it?
- What is your name, and the full spelling?
- How old are you, what do you do for a living and what area do you live?
- Do you support Ballot Measure No. X to XXX? Why or why not?

- Is there anything else you'd like to add before I let you go?

Note: Do not use these interviews as a way to debate with the interviewees on their views; a journalist's job is to report what they see and hear, no matter if they agree with it or not. Be kind and listen!

Definitions

- **Ballot measure:** a law, issue or topic placed on a statewide or municipal ballot for voters to decide through an election

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