**What is your “big picture” theoretical question? You should think about this as the first few sentences of an abstract to the paper produced from this research. (Sometimes people say their question is “problem driven.” In academic work, a problem is something we cannot explain given existing work, more akin to a puzzle. Ask yourself, what is the puzzle or question we can't answer now, and why is answering it important?)**

Direct democracy has been hailed both as a barrier to interest group capture, and as equally susceptible to capture as representative democracy due to lack of voter competency and monetary influence. The empirical evidence to date suggests that interest groups have less influence under direct than representative democracy, yet interest groups continue to spend enormous amounts of money on informational campaigns designed to sway ballot initiatives. Is direct democracy a net boon or burden for business interests? How easily can voters be “captured” in a direct democratic setting such as a ballot initiative, and can unbiased information act as a potential check to capture?

**How do you plan on operationalizing this theoretical question in your experiment?**

The political economy literature has identified three key mechanisms for capture in the context of ballot initiatives: (i) initiative summaries are purposely written to be unclear and confuse voters, (ii) interest group advertising and informational campaigns, and (iii) interest groups hire canvassers to collect signatures in order to meet minimum signature requirements for initiative qualification.

We hope to test (i) through a survey experiment that randomizes the wording of actual initiative summaries and measures hypothetical vote, (ii) through a survey experiment, then a lab and/or field experiment that randomizes viewership of campaign advertisements (lab) or information provision, then measures actual vote choice. (iii) presents a more challenging identification problem. Existing observational studies only show correlations between amounts spent and changes between vote shares and pre-election polls. We could leverage existing datasets to perform additional (observational) work that examines the likelihood of ballot qualification by initiative source (this is a work in progress that will not be discussed further in this memo).

**What has prior work in this domain found? How is this experiment an advance over the prior work?**

* Ballot initiatives literature
  + Theory and (some) empirical evidence claim that people are better able to avoid capture and partisan considerations than elected officials.
  + Political economy literature claims that direct democracy will not fare better than representative democracy and shows that massive amounts of money spent are spent on ballot initiative campaigns by interest groups.
  + The only experiments on the wording of ballot initiatives (to our knowledge) have looked at status quo bias. We would look at the complexity/clarity of the wording. This echoes a lot of press articles and accusations, but has not been tested experimentally to our knowledge.
* Persuasion literature
  + The few experiments on ballot initiatives show small effects from campaigns and advocacy groups reaching out to voters, but effects are larger than the (null) results in candidate elections.
  + Advocacy groups represent the only source of information used as a treatment in ballot initiative settings. We would use interest groups and neutral/policy analysis messaging.

**What will a critical reviewer think of your theoretical contribution? What can you do at this point to avoid these criticisms?**

* Does our design get us much more than the existing literature on persuasion?
  + We can make it clear in the literature review that we need more evidence in the context of ballot initiatives + we are adding treatments that have not been tested before (clarity of the wording, interest group informational campaign, providing of neutral/scientific information). These are the primary mechanisms focused on in theoretical literature and the popular press, but have not been tested empirically.
* Are we actually testing all the ways in which capture can occur in ballot initiative settings?
  + No, but we are looking experimentally at two of the most often cited mechanisms, and we are hoping to improve the quality of observational studies on the 3rd mechanism
* Is scientific information provision actually a potential fix for capture, or does a countervailing effect simply prove that capture does not happen?
  + Data on ballot initiative spending shows that corporate spending dwarfs all of the spending sources. Even if treatment effects are larger for policy analysis information than business information, the number of individuals “treated” with such information in the real world is therefore likely much smaller. We may be able to estimate this using observational data.

**What is your proposed treatment? What does it manipulate and how does this connect to your bigger theoretical picture? Relatedly, how do you know that it is manipulating only that mechanism and not others? (The assumption that a treatment works by perturbing one theoretical construct but not any other is the exclusion restriction. You should be prepared to explain how your treatment will be perceived and why you are sure that is the correct interpretation.)**

* A 2x4 factorial design in a survey experiment would help us address the first two mechanisms of capture.
  + First treatment arm: the wording of the proposal.
    - Control: unclear, confusing proposal. Treatment: same proposal, but rewritten in a clearer way.
  + Second treatment arm: information provision.
    - Control: no information. Treatment 1: business/interest group information. Treatment 2: partisan information. Treatment 3: scientific/neutral information.

The survey experiment would also serve as a potential pilot for a field experiment. If we find a small or null effect of information provision on people’s vote in the survey setting (where effects are likely to much larger), then we would stop with the survey experiment (and perhaps conduct a lab experiment to test other forms of information provision, such as watching commercials). If the effects in the survey experiment are large enough, we could try to conduct a field experiment during the 2020 election.

The treatments for this field experiment would focus on information provision: we would send voters information about one proposition on the ballot in California or Oregon. We would randomize whether we would send (i) interest groups information or (ii) neutral/scientific information. Whether the treatment is operationalized as mail, email, or canvassing, whether we will need to partner with 3rd party organizations, and whether we would conduct the experiment at the precinct level (with actual votes as the outcome measure) or at the individual level (with surveys as the outcome measurement tool) are still open questions.

**What is your outcome measuring? How is this connected to your bigger theoretical picture?**

* First and main outcome: vote on the ballot initiative (yes or no). This is the direct theoretical outcome of interest. In the field experiment, this will be measured either through data at the precinct level or through a survey of individuals in our analysis.
* In the survey experiment, we could also ask a couple of factual questions about some of the policies participants had to vote on. This would allow us to get into some mechanisms behind the voting outcome: did people vote differently (if they did) because they understood the proposal better?

**What will a critical reviewer think of your experimental design? What can you do at this point to avoid these criticisms?**

* Main concern about the survey experiment: it is just a survey experiment; would it replicate in the field?
  + Ideally, we would replicate in the field and compare the results – but the survey experiment would provide a higher bound on the effect, and we could use it as a pilot to see whether it’s worth considering the field experiment.
  + What if the survey experiment results don’t replicate in the field? It does not necessarily mean that people don’t care about information – it might just be that people get bombarded by information in the field, and therefore that our treatment got drown by other pieces of information.
* Our main concern about the field experiment is that any treatment will be too weak. Relatedly, critics might contend that we cannot test capture because it is necessarily a product of informational bombardment from high spending, which we cannot replicate.
  + The majority of spending is on TV advertising. A lab/survey experiment that treats individuals with actual campaign advertising videos then measures (survey based) actual vote outcome after election day might be seen to represent the highest possible treatment effect from such videos. We could measure these effects both immediately and on election day, as previous research suggests that “that televised ads have strong but short-lived effects on voting preferences” (Gerber, Gimpel, Green, and Shaw 2011).

**What will readers learn if your experiment turns out positive, negative, or null? Will the experiment be interesting and important regardless of how it turns out?**

* Clarity of the wording: a null result would provide evidence against the common/popular press claims that manipulative initiative wording sways voting outcomes. A positive result would confirm the common wisdom and estimate the magnitude of the problem.
* Information provision: a null result in a survey experiment, which should constitute a higher bound, would have theoretical and normative implications about the role information plays in politics.
  + A null result in the field experiment would rise interesting questions as to the replicability of survey experiments in the field. It would open the door for new lines of inquiries, such as whether it means that information doesn’t really matter in the real world, or that voters get too much information and our treatment was too weak?
  + The comparison between the effect sizes of the treatment arms (business/scientific) will also be interesting, regardless of the individual value of the point estimates.

**Write an abstract for a positive finding:**

Direct democracy has been hailed both as a barrier to interest group capture and as equally susceptible to capture as representative democracy as interest groups spend enormous amounts of money on ballot campaigns. Business are hypothesized to capture voters through manipulative initiative wording, advertising campaigns, and spending on initiative signature collection. We test each of these mechanisms using a survey experiment, field experiment, and observational analysis, respectively. We find that voters are susceptible to manipulative wording of initiative summaries, that receiving pro-business campaign advertising increases pro-business voting by X%, and that interest groups are much more likely to qualify initiatives for the ballot than grassroots organizations or individuals. However, we also find evidence that business advertising can be counteracted by information presenting factual third-party policy analysis, providing a potential policy solution to business capture.

**Write an abstract for a negative finding:**

… We find that voters are not susceptible to manipulative wording of initiative summaries, that receiving pro-business campaign advertising decreases pro-business voting by X%, but that interest groups are much more likely to qualify initiatives for the ballot than grassroots organizations or individuals. We therefore find that business efforts to sway ballot campaigns are unlikely to be successful as voters react negatively to business information, calling into question the effectiveness of corporate informational campaigns.

**Write an abstract for a null finding:**

We find that voters are not susceptible to manipulative wording of initiative summaries, that receiving pro-business campaign advertising has no effect on pro-business voting, and that interest groups are no more likely to qualify initiatives for the ballot than grassroots organizations or individuals. We therefore find that business efforts to sway ballot campaigns are unlikely to be successful as voters do not react positively to business information, calling into question the effectiveness of corporate informational campaigns.

**What will your sample be? How do you plan on recruiting them for treatment delivery and outcome measurement?**

* Survey experiment: pilot on mTURK, then run the experiment on Lucid.
* Field experiment:
  + Treatment will be clustered at the precinct level (the smallest unit for which we can get direct measure of our outcome of interest, vote share)
  + Voters will receive either a mail or email (we would probably need to partner with a 3rd party organization for the interest group message).
  + One alternative could be to randomize treatment at the individual level, use canvassers and post-election survey as our measurement tool. This option would be costlier and using a survey to measure outcomes seems sub-optimal, but we could expect larger treatment effects.

**Do you have funding for this plan? If not, have you identified sources of funding?**

* We have access to ISPS money through Angele’s ISPS policy fellowship
* Peter Aronow has offered to fund a mTURK pilot
* We will probably have enough money for the survey experiment, but would need access to other sources of funds if we conduct the field experiment.

**Have you done a power calculation for planning your sample size and budget? How do you justify your assumptions?**

We are still finalizing the design of this study and haven’t conducted a power analysis yet.

**\*[If survey experiment]\* Is a field experiment answering your big picture question feasible? If not, why not? Say more than just a lack of funding.**

As discussed before, we are worried about our treatment being too weak in a field experiment setting (because voters get inundated by so much information). We plan to use a survey experiment as an upper bound before we decide to move forward with the field experiment.

**\*[If survey experiment]\* Would this research be more interesting if conducted as a field experiment than a survey experiment? Why or why not?**

* Yes, in that it would get us closer to a real-world setting.
* No, in that our treatment will be flooded by all the information voters get, and a survey experiment would allow us to cut some of this noise and focus on mechanisms.