Lesson 3 - Voters and Elections

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Please visit http://www.ncee.net/civics. You can post a review of the lesson material. You’ll also find online and print lesson plans to extend and reinforce this lesson.

Note: This lesson is currently undergoing field testing. If you purchase the “Focus: Understanding Economics in Civics and Government” book in the spring of 2009 (and we hope you will), there may be slight changes between this lesson and the final version.
LESSON 3
Voters and Elections

INTRODUCTION
Candidates for elected office often change positions during the course of their campaigns in hopes of receiving votes from more than half the voters. The importance of the median voter—or swing voter, in political parlance—is well known in the political arena. In addition to winning over the median voter, turning out the vote is another key issue in winning an election. This lesson investigates both of these issues.

LESSON DESCRIPTION
The students participate in a median voter demonstration. They explore “moderate” economic positions between two extreme political views. They examine the costs and benefits of voting to figure out why people choose to vote. They speculate about why certain people vote while others do not.

CONCEPTS
• Benefit
• Elections
• Median voter (or swing voter)
• Opportunity cost

OBJECTIVES
Students will be able to:
1. Explain how the median voter may influence the result of an election.
2. Recognize how some economic issues can be illustrated by two extremes.
3. Explain that the median voter’s position on an economic issue is probably between the two extremes.
4. List the costs and benefits of voting in an election.
5. Weigh costs and benefits to predict whether a person is likely to vote.

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CONTENT STANDARDS

Economics (NCEE Standards)

• Costs of government policies sometimes exceed benefits. This may occur because of incentives facing voters, government officials, and government employees, because of actions by special interest groups that can impose costs on the general public, or because social goals other than economic efficiency are being pursued. (Standard 17)

Civics and Government (NSCG Standards, 9-12)

• Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions about the roles of political parties, campaigns, and elections in American politics. (Standard III. E. 4.)

• Students should be able to evaluate, take and defend positions about the means that citizens should use to monitor and influence the formation and implementation of public policy. (Standard V. E. 3.)

TIME REQUIRED

90 minutes

MATERIALS

• A transparency of Visuals 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, and 3.8
• One copy of Activity 3.1
• Nine copies of instructions for Activity 3.2. One voter card from Activity 3.2 for each of nine students
• Two copies of activity 3.3
• Nine small slips of blank paper

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**PROCEDURE**

1. Tell the students that in this lesson they will analyze the behavior of two politicians running for president during the course of a campaign. Display Visual 5.1. Explain that the big issue in the campaign is whether the country should have a minimum wage. Select two students to represent the politicians competing for election. (Try to select students who will give good speeches!)

2. Give each of the two politicians a speech from Activity 5.1. Tell the politicians to read over their speeches to themselves and prepare to give a rousing stump speech. Allow each politician to see only his or her own speech. Do not allow them to read their opponents’ initial speech.

3. Select nine students to be voters. Give each voter a card and instructions from Activity 5.2. Have the voters line up in front of the class. **Important: The voters should stand in numerical order (person 9 on the left, person 1 on the right).** You may want to set up nine chairs for the students to sit in as they listen to the speeches and discussions. Tell the students they are to play the role of the voter as described on their respective cards. Tell the voters to cheer if they hear a politician say things that they support, or to boo if a politician says things that they do not support.

4. Ask the candidates to read aloud the speeches that are written for them on Activity 3.1. Remind the voters to cheer or boo based on what they hear.

5. Tell the politicians that it is now time to conduct a public opinion poll. Remind the voters that they prefer the candidate whose minimum wage proposal is closest to their desired minimum wage. Ask the voters to raise their hands if they prefer candidate Weber. Ask the voters to raise their hands if they prefer candidate Hayes. *(The results should show 6 for Hayes and 3 for Weber.)*

6. Distribute a copy of Activity 3.3 to the candidates and see if they want to revise their speeches. Since candidate Weber was most likely losing in the public opinion poll, it is advisable that she revise her position according to the instructions in Activity 3.3. While the candidate prepares for the new speech, ask voters 1 and 9 why they favored the candidate they did. *(Their explanations should reflect opinions that are far apart on what the minimum wage should be.)*

7. Ask candidate Weber to give a new speech to the voters. Ask the voters once again to react with cheers or boos. The candidate should end the speech with a different (lower) minimum wage proposal. If the candidate does not lower the proposed minimum wage, you may want to hint that lowering it might be a good strategy if he or she wishes to be elected.
8. Tell the politicians that it is now time to conduct another public opinion poll. Ask the voters to raise their hands if they prefer candidate Weber. Now ask the voters to raise their hands if they prefer Hayes. Ask the students if anything has changed. (Depending on how much the candidate has changed the proposal, the vote should have gotten closer; it may even have changed in favor of Weber.)

9. Repeat procedure steps 7 and 8 as many times as necessary to achieve some convergence between the minimum wages proposed by the candidates. While the two candidates will not propose the same minimum wage, there will most likely be a reduction in the gap between the minimum wages as initially proposed by the candidates.

10. Tell the candidates that it is now time to conduct the election. Give each voter a small slip of paper and a pen or pencil, and tell each candidate to make one final speech featuring a proposed minimum wage. After the speeches, conduct the election with a secret ballot. Announce the winner. (The vote will most likely be close.) Congratulate the winner. The candidates can return to their seats; the voters should remain where they are (or sit in the chairs that were prepared for them).

11. Ask the candidates who they think their supporters are among the voters. (They should have realized that the supporters are in a line based on the level of their support for the minimum wage. If not, point this out to them.)

12. Ask the candidates which voter is most important in terms of winning the election. (They should realize that the median voter [the fifth, in this case] holds the key to who will win the vote.)

13. Define the median voter as the one whose position is in the middle of a group of voters. If all the voters cast a ballot according to their preferences, then the candidate who wins the vote of the median voter will win the election. Tell the students that most politicians are very aware that the median voter is most important. During elections, most candidates will moderate their arguments to appeal to the median or “swing” voter. Explain that the median voter is not necessarily the average between the two extremes. In this case, the median voter preferred a minimum wage of $6.00, which is lower than the average of $10.00 of the extreme positions.

14. Remind the students that presidential elections in the United States differ from other elections. In a U.S. presidential election, the Electoral College elects the president. The Electoral College is primarily a state-by-state, winner-take-all election. However, to win each state, the presidential candidates must appeal to the median voter in the state, and so the principle of the median voter is also

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important in presidential elections. The Electoral College is unique to U.S. presidential elections; it does not apply to elections of senators, congressional representatives, or those competing for state and local offices.

15. Display Visual 3.2. Tell the students that the visual shows two ends of the spectrum on economic issues. Ask the students what a median position might be. *(It is the voter whose position is in the middle of a group of voters.)* Again, note that the median voter need not be in the logical middle of the spectrum, but may be closer to one end or the other.

16. Inform the students that the position of the median voter along a spectrum is often a good predictor of what policy will be adopted. Explain, however, that making predictions based on the median voter has limitations. Display Visual 3.3, which identifies conditions under which the median-voter model might not work in an election.

17. Ask the voters to imagine a case in which candidate Hayes has proposed a minimum wage of $6 per hour and candidate Weber has remained at $20 per hour. Ask the voters who would vote for Hayes *(should be seven votes)* and who would vote for Weber *(should be two votes).* Ask one of those who would vote for Hayes if it would matter—that is, affect the final outcome—if he or she decided not to vote. *(The answer should be no, since the candidate has a large majority.)* Ask those who are voting for Weber if their votes matter. *(They should answer no, since they are in the minority and are unlikely to see their favored candidate win.)*

18. Tell the students that there are costs associated with voting. Explain that the opportunity cost of doing something is equal to the highest-valued alternative given up in doing one thing as opposed to something else. Ask the voters what they might do on Election Day instead of voting. *(Many answers are possible, including working, shopping, sleeping, etc.)*

19. Display Visual 3.4, which refers at the outset to Amendment 24 to the U.S. Constitution. Note that while there are no monetary costs attached to voting in a federal election, the list that concludes Visual 3.4 identifies some other costs that voters may incur. Note that most of these costs—the opportunity costs of voting—involve the time it takes to register, learn about the candidates, and then vote.

20. Display Visual 3.5, which shows results of a Census Bureau survey of actual reasons people gave for not voting in the 2004 national election. The list is in reverse order, based on the responses of all registered voters. However, the final column lists the percentage of individuals aged 18-24. Ask the students if there

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are any differences between the overall registration percentages and those for the younger population. *(People in the younger group is less likely to be ill, but more likely not to know why they didn’t vote and more likely to be busy. Younger voters also tended to be out of town, perhaps at college, where they are not registered to vote.)*

21. Optional: Ask the students why any citizen would vote when there are opportunity costs attached to voting and when it seems unlikely that his or her vote will change the outcome of an election. *(Answers will vary. Some students may cite a civic duty to vote; others may think it important to express support for certain candidates.)* Comment on these answers: They illustrate what some people have called “the paradox of voting.” The paradox is that many people vote even when their votes are not likely to change the outcome of an election. *(For more information, see the expressive voting entry in The Encyclopedia of Public Choice [electronic resource] / Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, c2004.)* To prompt further discussion of this paradox, display and discuss Visual 3.6.

22. Display Visual 3.7, which identifies various characteristics of voters. Ask the students to speculate about who tends to vote more. Note that the comparisons may not include all groups. In the discussion, challenge the students to think of reasons for the differences indicated. Many examples can be explained by the opportunity cost of voting. For example, lower-income voters may be workers who are paid at an hourly rate, and they may not be able to get away from work to vote without losing a significant amount of pay. Homeowners are more settled than others and so are more likely to know how and where to register and vote; this familiarity with the setting reduces their opportunity cost of time needed to vote. Retirees also may have a lower opportunity cost regarding time, and so may be more likely to vote. Other examples may be explained by the benefits received. One example of a benefit is the sense of satisfaction some people find in meeting their civic duty to vote, which might explain why veterans tend to vote more than non-veterans. Other examples may be more difficult to understand, but even in these cases students often can propose interesting explanations.

*Answer in percentage of citizens:*

*Women (65.4); Men (62.1)*

*White (65.4); Black (60.0); Asian(44.1)*

*Native Born (64.5); Naturalized Citizen ( 53.7)*

*Married (70.7); Never Married (52.0)*

*Divorced (58.4); Separated (47.5)*
High Income (Over $100,000, 81.3); (Less than $20,000, 48.3)
Employed (65.9); Unemployed (51.4)
Bachelor’s Degree (77.5); High School Degree (56.4)
Minnesotan (79.2); Floridian (64.3); Hawaiian (50.8)
Veteran (73.5); Nonveteran (62.6)
Homeowner (68.7); Renter (48.3)
Old (age 65 to 74, 73.3); (18 to 24 years old, 46.7)

Source: Census Bureau, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004,” publication P20-556. A version of this publication is produced for each federal election.

22. Ask the students which groups of voters they would specifically try to attract if they were running for office. (They should note that the voters who tend to turn out more at the polls may have greater sway in forming the politicians’ policies.)

23. Display Visual 3.8. Note that many citizens fail to vote. Ask the students if they plan to register and vote when they turn 18. Remind them of the potential opportunity costs and ask what they think the benefits of voting will be for them.
CLOSURE

Review the following points with the students.

• The candidate who wins the vote of the median voter wins the election in a two-party system; politicians thus may moderate their positions to appeal to this voter.

• Despite the fact that any one vote is unlikely to change the result of an election, many people voluntarily absorb the opportunity cost of voting.

• While opportunity cost is important in understanding why some people do not vote, many people vote despite the opportunity cost in order to gain the benefits—the sense of satisfaction that comes with meeting a civic obligation, for example, or with participating in an effort to affect change—that they associate with voting.
ASSESSMENT
Multiple-Choice Questions

1. A parks commission board has five members. Board members are trying to decide how many new parks to build. The number of parks each member wants to build is as follows:
   10, 9, 1, 0, 0

   According to median voter theory, the proposal which is closest to ____ will be the one chosen by the commission.
   
   A. 1
   B. 4
   C. 5
   D. 9

2. Which is not an opportunity cost of voting in a U.S. federal election?

   A. a fee charged for voting
   B. wages lost while voting
   C. time taken to learn about the candidates and their positions on issues
   D. gasoline used to drive to the polls

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CONSTRUCTED-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Have the students write a short essay supporting or opposing one of the following propositions:

   A. The United States government should pay people to vote in order to increase voter participation.

   B. The United States government should institute mandatory voting as is currently the policy in Australia, where failure to show up to vote can result in penalties (typically a fine of $20).

   C. The United States government should conduct an advertising campaign to encourage young people to vote.

   (The students should indicate, in responding to any of the propositions above, how the costs and benefits of voting are changed by the proposal in question.)
The economic issue that has dominated this year’s campaign is the minimum wage.

**Advocates for the minimum wage argue that:**

- The minimum wage is necessary to provide a living wage to lower-income workers.
- The minimum wage protects workers from exploitation by employers.

**Advocates opposed to a minimum wage argue that:**

- The minimum wage raises rates of unemployment among young, unskilled workers.
- The market should determine the wage for workers.

**The Candidates:**

- Mark Hayes
- Jasmine Weber
**VISUAL 3.2**

**EXAMPLES OF EXTREME ECONOMIC POSITIONS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>No Minimum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wage of</td>
<td>Wage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20</td>
<td>Set</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Goods</th>
<th>No Goods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supplied by</td>
<td>Supplied by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prohibitive</th>
<th>Free</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Prices</th>
<th>All Prices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set</td>
<td>Set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by the Government</td>
<td>by the Market</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extremely Progressive</th>
<th>Extremely Regressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tax Rates</td>
<td>Tax Rates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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DOES THE MEDIAN-VOTER MODEL WORK EVERY TIME?

Not necessarily. Given certain conditions, the median-voter model may not predict outcomes accurately—for example, when . . .

- Voters cast a ballot for a candidate based on more than one issue.

- An issue or candidate’s position cannot be described by reference to two extremes.

- Voters have two preference “peaks” instead of one.

- For example, a voter prefers either a $20 minimum wage or no minimum wage, but does not like something in between.
VISUAL 3.4
THE COSTS OF VOTING

1. No dollar costs may be imposed by fees or taxation. Amendment 24 to the U.S. Constitution rules out dollar costs:

   Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.

   Section 2. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

2. Other costs. While the Constitution prohibits monetary charges, this does not mean voting is entirely without costs. Voters may incur opportunity costs. The opportunity cost of voting is what a voter gives up in choosing to vote. Here are some of the opportunity costs:

   • Time taken to register.
   • Time to find a voting location, or to vote via absentee ballet.
   • Time taken to vote, which may also mean lost wages for voters who miss work, or babysitting or transportation costs.
   • Time needed to investigate candidates and issues.
## VISUAL 3.5
### TOP TEN REASONS REGISTERED VOTERS GAVE FOR NOT VOTING IN 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>18-24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. Transportation Problems</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Inconvenient Polling Place</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Forgot</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Registration Problems</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Don’t Know or Refused to Answer</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Out of Town</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Didn’t Like the Candidates</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Not Interested</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Illness or Disability</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Too Busy</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2004, citizens aged 18 to 24 made up 12.6% of the voting-age population, but only 9.3% of voters.

VISUAL 3.6
WHY DO PEOPLE VOTE?

- When the election is predicted to be close and a person’s vote may change the election result:
  - People may vote to support a particular politician.
  - People may vote to remove incumbents (“Throw the rascals out”).

- When the election is not predicted to be close and a person’s vote is not likely to change the election result:
  - People may believe it is their civic duty to vote.
  - People may vote to voice their opinions regardless of the likely outcome.
  - People may vote in order to feel that they are a part of winning team.
**VISUAL 3.7**

**WHO VOTES MORE?**

Of all citizens, who voted most, percentage-wise, in the 2004 presidential election?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>or</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>or</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>or</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naturalized Citizen</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>Separated</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minnesotan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Veteran</td>
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<tr>
<td>Renter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Young</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VISUAL 3.8
REPORTED VOTING, 1980-2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Percent of U.S. Citizen Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>.64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>.64.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>.62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>.67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>.58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>.59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>.63.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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ACTIVITY 3.1
INITIAL SPEECHES

Initial Speech for Mark Hayes:
“Ladies and gentlemen, while I firmly believe that workers should be protected, I do not believe that a minimum wage is needed. I believe that we should have laws ensuring the safety of the workers, but the wage for which they work should be determined by market forces. An artificially high minimum wage increases unemployment, and who wants that? Let me be clear: I propose having no minimum wage.”

Initial Speech for Jasmine Weber:
“Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that every worker should earn a living wage. While a minimum wage might increase unemployment slightly, I believe that the gains to the rest of the workers are significant and so I believe there should be a minimum wage. Let me be clear: I propose a minimum wage of $20.00 per hour.”
ACTIVITY 3.2
VOTERS’ INSTRUCTIONS AND CARD

Voters’ Instructions:

1. You are playing the role of a voter. The description on your card will tell you your desired minimum wage and the reasons for your view.

2. Candidates for elected office will soon give campaign speeches. Feel free to cheer or boo during speeches, depending on how close the candidate is to your position.

3. When asked for whom you will vote, choose the candidate whose minimum wage proposal is closest to your desired minimum wage. DO NOT reveal your desired minimum wage until the end of the simulation.

   DO share any other information about yourself and your position. You may be creative with your role if you see fit, as long as it is consistent with your written instructions.
VOTERS’ CARDS:

Person 1: You favor a minimum wage of $0.
Reasons: You are a believer in limited government. You believe that the market will
determine a wage that is efficient and result in high employment. You are such a strong
believer in the free market that you do not want any minimum wage, so your preferred
minimum wage is $0. You will vote for the candidate whose proposal is closest to that
minimum wage.

Person 2: You favor a minimum wage of $1.00 per hour.
Reasons: You are a believer in limited government. You believe that the market will
determine a wage that is efficient and result in high employment. But you also think that
no minimum wage at all might be too extreme. You will vote for the candidate whose
proposal is closest to the $1.00 minimum wage that you favor.

Person 3: You favor a minimum wage of $2.00 per hour.
Reasons: You are a believer in limited government. You believe that the market will
determine a wage that is efficient and result in high employment. But you also think that
no minimum wage at all might be too extreme and that workers might be exploited if the
wage is too low. You will vote for the candidate whose proposal is closest to the $2.00
minimum wage that you favor.

Person 4: You favor a minimum wage of $3.00 per hour.
Reasons: You are a believer in limited government. You believe that the market will
determine a wage that is efficient and result in high employment. But you also think that
no minimum wage at all might be too extreme and that workers might be exploited if the
wage is too low. You will vote for the candidate whose proposal is closest to the $3.00
minimum wage that you favor.

Person 5: You favor a minimum wage of $6.00 per hour.
Reasons: You believe that government can be effective in playing a role in labor
markets. You believe that the market will determine a wage that is efficient and results
in high employment. But you also think that a minimum wage is necessary to give low-
wage workers a fair wage. You will vote for the candidate whose proposal is closest to
the $6.00 minimum wage that you favor.
Person 6: **You favor a minimum wage of $7.00 per hour.**  
Reasons: You believe that government can be effective in playing a role in labor markets. You believe that the market will determine a wage that is efficient, but worry about whether a market wage is enough for families to live on. You will vote for the candidate whose proposal is closest to the $7.00 minimum wage that you favor.

Person 7: **You favor a minimum wage of $11.00 per hour.**  
Reasons: You believe that government can be effective in playing a role in labor markets. You believe that the market will determine a wage that is efficient, but worry about whether a market wage is enough for families to live on. You will vote for the candidate whose proposal is closest to the $11.00 minimum wage that you favor.

Person 8: **You favor a minimum wage of $14.00 per hour.**  
Reasons: You believe that government can be effective in playing a role in labor markets. You believe that the market will determine a wage that is efficient, but worry about whether a market wage is enough for families to live on. You seek a wage that you believe is fair. You will vote for the candidate whose proposal is closest to the $14.00 minimum wage that you favor.

Person 9: **You favor a minimum wage of $20.00 per hour.**  
Reasons: You believe that government can be effective in playing a role in labor markets. You believe that the market will determine a wage that is efficient, but worry about whether a market wage is enough for families to live on. You want workers to earn a fair wage and are concerned that executives earn many times what an average wage worker earns. You will vote for the candidate whose proposal is closest to the $20.00 minimum wage that you favor.
ACTIVITY 3.3

CANDIDATES’ INSTRUCTIONS FOR SUBSEQUENT SPEECHES

Your script writer has gone on vacation. You are to adjust your speech, keeping in mind that you may have to compromise. Of course, you do not want to seem like a flip-flopper, so do not change your desired minimum wage proposal by more than half of the difference between your most recent proposed minimum proposal and that of your opponent. Your speech must end with:

“Let me be clear: This means I want a minimum wage of ____________________.”