A FAILURE TO VALIDATE THE LOST-LETTER TECHNIQUE

BY ALLAN W. WICKER*

Recently Milgram, Mann, and Harter described a novel technique for assessing public opinion:

> The technique consists of dispersing in city streets (and other locations) a large number of unmailed letters. The letters are enclosed in envelopes that have addresses and stamps on them but that have not yet been posted. When a person comes across one of these letters on the street, it appears to have been lost. Thus he has a choice of mailing, disregarding, or actively destroying the letter. By varying the name of the organization to which the letter is addressed and distributing such "lost letters" in sufficient quantity, it is possible to obtain a return rate specific to the organization.[1]

The present note describes an attempt to validate this technique by comparing rate of return of "lost letters" addressed to a political campaign organization with the vote for the organization's candidate in four Milwaukee, Wisconsin, voting wards.

In the week preceding the April 2, 1968 Wisconsin presidential primary, two types of letters were dropped. Experimental (E) letters were addressed to "Educators for Senator Eugene McCarthy, c/o A. Wicker," and a residential address was given. Control (C) letters were addressed to "A. Wicker" at the same address. Sixty E and 60 C letters were dropped in each of the four voting wards. Following Milgram *et al.*, letters were dropped in four locations: street pavements, stores, telephone booths, and under automobile windshield wipers, with "found near car" penciled on the envelope.[2] In each ward, 15 E and 15 C letters were left at each of the four types of location. Letters were dropped singly.

Table 1 reports, by ward and by drop location, the number of letters returned out of the 60 per cell which were dropped. Also given is the percentage of the total presidential vote received by Senator McCarthy in each ward. (Percentage of total vote was considered the most appropriate statistic, since in Wisconsin's open primary, voters can cross party lines to express presidential preferences.)

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1 Stanley Milgram, Leon Mann, and Susan Harter, "The Lost Letter Technique: A Tool of Social Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 29, 1965, p. 437.

2 *Ibid.*

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL LETTERS RETURNED, BY WARD AND BY LOCATION

	Ward					*Location*				
	3	*5*	*11*	*14*	*Total*	*Phone Booth*	*Car*	*Street*	*Store*	*Total*
Experimental	38	47	35	41	161	36	51	26	48	161
Control	49	49	48	49	195	49	54	39	53	195
Total	87	96	83	90	356	85	105	65	101	356
McCarthy Vote	36%	29%	29%	24%						

The C returns provide a baseline against which E returns can be compared within each ward. If the lost letter technique were a valid measure of public opinion, the difference between the E and C returns would be related to the McCarthy vote. However, the two sets of scores are unrelated (Kendall tau = 0).

Chi-square analyses indicate that significantly fewer E than C letters were returned: 67 per cent of all letters addressed to the McCarthy group were returned, compared with 81 per cent for the private person ($\chi^2 = 12.569$, $p < .005$, $df = 1$). Also, the returns were not the same for the four locations: phone booths, 71 per cent; cars, 88 per cent; streets, 54 per cent; and stores, 84 per cent ($\chi^2 = 43.146$, $p < .005$, $df = 3$).

A three-way chi-square test[3] revealed that the four voting wards did not differ in the percentage of all (both E and C) letters returned ($\chi^2 = 3.914$, $p < .50$, $df = 3$), or in the difference between E and C letters returned ($\chi^2 = 2.927$, $p < .50$, $df = 3$).

Thus the present data provide no evidence that the lost letter technique is a valid measure of public opinion toward political candidates when voting is the criterion. While it may be noted that the range in the vote for McCarthy is not great (24 per cent to 36 per cent), it is probably large enough to permit reasonably accurate predictions with traditional polling techniques. The present data do indicate that the lost-letter measure is sensitive, in that the probability of an envelope's being returned depends upon the address. The lower rate of return for E letters could, however, be due to a number of factors: the particular candidate, the fact that he is in politics, the fact that educators were supporting him, etc. In future studies, names of campaign organizations for *all* candidates in an election might be employed, along

[3] Described in B. J. Winer, *Statistical Principles in Experimental Design*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1962, pp. 629-632.

with a nonpolitical organization as a control to determine the influence of generalized attitudes toward politics and politicians.

A major problem with the letter technique is that the sample is unknown. Persons finding letters may not be eligible voters, and they may not be residents of the ward in which letters are dopped. In the present study, for example, some letters were mailed from cities outside metropolitan Milwaukee.