

# A VALIDATION OF THE LOST-LETTER TECHNIQUE

BY R. LANCE SHOTLAND, WALLACE G. BERGER,  
AND ROBERT FORSYTHE\*

Milgram, Mann, and Harter<sup>1</sup> devised an unobtrusive method of obtaining a quantitative measure of a particular attitude in a given population. They called this the "lost-letter-technique."

The techniques 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. The focus of the technique is not on the individual reaction to the lost letters but, rather, on the rate of response for a particular organization relative to other organizations that serve as controls.

Wicker<sup>2</sup> attempted a validation of the technique in four wards in the Milwaukee area during the Wisconsin presidential primary of 1968. His experimental (E) letters were addressed to "Educators for Senator Eugene McCarthy, c/o A. Wicker," with a residential address given. The control (C) letters were addressed to "A. Wicker" at the same address. As Milgram and his colleagues suggested, both E and C letters were distributed on street pavements, stores, telephone booths, and under automobile windshield wipers with "found near car" penciled on the envelopes. Wicker subtracted the number of returned E letters from C letters in each ward and correlated the differences with the actual percentage of votes received by McCarthy in the four wards. He obtained a Kendall tau of .00, thus failing to validate the lost-letter technique in a political setting.<sup>3</sup>

A variation of the approach taken by Milgram, *et al.* and by Wicker was used in the present study to test two separate experi-

\* The authors are doctoral students in the Department of Psychology at Michigan State University. The Department of Psychology provided funds for this research.

<sup>1</sup> S. Milgram, L. Mann, and S. Harter, "The Lost-Letter Technique: A Tool of Social Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 29, 1965, p. 437.

<sup>2</sup> A. Wicker, "A Failure to Validate the Lost-Letter Technique," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 33, 1969, pp. 260-262.

<sup>3</sup> But see Milgram's "Comment," in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 33, 1969, pp. 263-264.

ments in an attempt to validate the lost-letter technique in the presidential election of 1968.

A stamped postcard printed on white stock, designed to appear at first glance like a noncanceled regular-sized envelope, was employed in this study. It was felt this had two advantages over the lost letters. First, it allowed an open and readily accessible message to be displayed on the reverse side of the postcard. Second, there was no reason to tear it open to search for money or "whatever might be in it" and thus lessen the probability of its return for extraneous reasons. The postcard was stamped with a large blue "Arkansas River Navigation" commemorative six-cent stamp. In 14-point bold-faced type, "Voters for Hubert H. Humphrey and Edmund S. Muskie," or "Richard M. Nixon and Spiro T. Agnew," or "George C. Wallace and Curtis E. LeMay" was printed along with a post box number and a Lansing, Michigan address. The message on the reverse side was printed in pica-sized type and appeared as written below:

#### COMMITMENT CARD

I am committed to vote for *Hubert H. Humphrey* and *Edmund S. Muskie* (or *Richard M. Nixon* and *Spiro T. Agnew*, or *George C. Wallace* and *Curtis E. LeMay*), the next Democratic (or Republican or American Independent) President and Vice President of the United States of America.

However, I cannot vote for the Humphrey-Muskie (or Nixon-Agnew or Wallace-LeMay) ticket unless you provide some means of transportation to the polls.

My name and address is written below.

For the first experiment, a fictitious name and a street number on an actual Lansing, Michigan street, with one of the authors' telephone numbers, was handwritten on the card. The middle initial of the fictitious name was varied to code for the returns from the various experimental groups. Thus the postcards when "dropped" looked like a "lost letter" and when picked up like a "form" postcard filled out by some individual and then lost.

The first experiment made use of politically committed or involved Ss. A Nixon, Humphrey, or Wallace postcard was alternately placed on the windshield of automobiles that displayed a partisan bumper sticker for Nixon, Humphrey, or Wallace. (There were not enough automobiles with Wallace bumper stickers to make analysis of the Wallace data feasible.) Another group with nonpolitical bumper stickers was also used. On each postcard the phrase: "found this near your car" was handwritten in pencil. The hypothesis tested was that partisans of a particular candidate (as judged by their bumper stickers) would return a greater proportion of cards

pledged to that candidate. Table 1 presents the return rates of the three types of political postcards by political commitment categories. The hypothesis was supported, with all results in the direction predicted.<sup>4</sup> Nixon partisans returned more Nixon-pledged postcards (48 per cent) than Humphrey-pledged postcards (22 per cent) ( $t = 1.94, p < .05$ ). Humphrey partisans returned more Humphrey-pledged postcards (44 per cent) than Nixon partisans (22 per cent) ( $t = 1.75, p < .05$ ). Likewise, Humphrey partisans returned more Humphrey-pledged postcards (44 per cent) than Wallace postcards (22 per cent) ( $t = 1.75, p < .05$ ). The other relevant comparisons, though in the direction predicted, were not statistically significant.

TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGE OF THREE TYPES OF POLITICAL POSTCARDS RETURNED PER POLITICAL COMMITMENT CATEGORY

<i>Political Postcards</i>	<i>Political Commitment</i>		
	<i>Humphrey</i> ( <i>N</i> = 27) <sup>a</sup>	<i>Nixon</i> ( <i>N</i> = 23) <sup>a</sup>	<i>No Visible Political</i> <i>Commitment</i> ( <i>N</i> = 16) <sup>a</sup>
Humphrey	44%	22%	32%
Nixon	33	48	63
Wallace	22	30	06

<sup>a</sup> *N* = total number returned for each condition. Twenty-two postcards per cell were distributed under the Humphrey and Nixon political commitment conditions; the "no visible commitment" condition received 20 per cell.

The returns of the political postcards placed on automobiles with nonpolitical bumper stickers, such as "Sock it to 'em Tigers," "See the Everglades," were returned in the same order of finish as the final vote tally of the three presidential candidates in the presidential election in the Lansing area.<sup>5</sup>

The second experiment was designed to place the lost-letter technique into actual use in an attempt to predict the presidential election results in ten selected Lansing precincts. The five precincts with the highest percentage of Democratic voters and the five precincts with the highest percentage of Republican voters were chosen on the basis of the 1966 gubernatorial election. The same three types of politically pledged postcards were used as in the first experiment and were "dropped" five to seven days before the election.

<sup>4</sup> The probability values reported for tests between proportions are one-tailed.

<sup>5</sup> The difference between the return rates of the Nixon-pledged postcards and the Humphrey-pledged postcards yielded  $t=1.79$  ( $p<.05$ ); between the Humphrey-pledged postcards and the Wallace-pledged postcards,  $t=1.94$  ( $p<.05$ ); and between the Nixon-pledged postcards and the Wallace-pledged postcards,  $t=3.41$  ( $p<.005$ ).

A sampling technique different from the one used by Milgram *et al.* and by Wicker was utilized. Wicker found that several of the letters returned were mailed in from areas outside Milwaukee. In order to restrict the returns to precinct residents, the present authors decided to use only one variety of "drop." The postcards were placed only in the residential areas of the precincts sampled; they were placed stamp side up on the walks of houses or in driveways next to cars or similar areas around the house so that they would be noticed the first thing in the morning by someone leaving the house. Thirty postcards pledged to each candidate were dropped in each precinct.

As a result of a complete lack of Wallace partisans as measured by automobiles displaying pro-Wallace bumper stickers in the first experiment (6 automobiles with pro-Wallace bumper stickers were located after three days and nights of searching, *vs.* 66 automobiles with bumper stickers for each of the other two candidates), it was concluded that Wallace was not a major factor in the presidential election in the Lansing area. (The actual election returns showed Nixon receiving 52 per cent of the vote, Humphrey 46 per cent, and Wallace 7 per cent.) Therefore, the following hypotheses were tested: (1) A greater percentage of Nixon and Humphrey postcards than of Wallace postcards would be returned from the ten precincts; (2) The difference between the number of Nixon postcards and Humphrey postcards returned will correlate positively with the difference between the total vote cast in the precincts for the two candidates.

The first hypothesis was supported. The percentage of postcards returned from the total dropped for each candidate in the ten experimental precincts was 22.3 for Humphrey, 22.0 for Nixon, and 16.3 for Wallace. The differences between returns for Humphrey and Wallace and between returns for Nixon and Wallace are significant beyond the .05 level.

The difference between the Nixon and Humphrey vote also correlated positively with the difference between the rate of postcard returns for the two candidates across the ten precincts. A Pearson product-moment correlation of  $+0.51$  (8 d.f.,  $p < .15$ ) was obtained.

The results of the two experiments indicate that the lost-letter technique is a viable, unobtrusive means of sampling public opinion on political matters, though, as Milgram has pointed out,<sup>6</sup> it is not very suitable for gauging opinion on subtle issues, or for assessing preferences when these are fairly evenly distributed in the population.

<sup>6</sup> Milgram, "Comment."