

COMMENT ON
"A FAILURE TO VALIDATE
THE LOST LETTER TECHNIQUE"

BY STANLEY MILGRAM*

The interesting thing to note in Wicker's data (Allan W. Wicker, "A Failure to Validate the Lost Letter Technique," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, pages 260-262 of this issue) is the depression of the McCarthy letter returns relative to the control letter, and the consistency with which it appears in each of the cells of his design. This indicates that opponents of McCarthy hindered the return of the pro-McCarthy letters ($\chi^2 = 12.6$, $df = 1$, $p < .005$). With these data Wicker has, in fact, validated the basic premise of the lost letter technique: namely, that lost letters have a probability of being returned that depends on the political and social attributes of the organization to which they are addressed. The precinct analysis attempted by Wicker is simply too subtle for the coarseness of the technique. Can the lost letter technique predict the outcome of an election? In a crude way, yes.

The 1964 presidential election provided an opportunity to check the return rate of letters against an exact criterion, namely the voting results in the election. I distributed the following letters in four election wards of Boston: Committee to Elect Goldwater, Committee to Defeat Goldwater, Committee to Elect Johnson, and Committee to Defeat Johnson.¹

In each of the wards the letter returns predicted a Johnson victory. Although the technique identified the trend, it badly underestimated the strength of Johnson support. Over-all, it gave Johnson a scant 10 per cent lead over Goldwater when the actual lead in these election wards was closer to 60 per cent. What this suggests is that *the difference in return rates of letters will always be weaker than the extent of actual difference of opinion in the community*. Even if a person plans to vote for Johnson he may be a good enough fellow to mail a pro-Goldwater letter. Beyond that, some letters are picked up and mailed by children, illiterates, and street cleaners. There is a good deal of unwanted variance in the returns.

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¹ Stanley Milgram, "The Lost Letter Technique," *Psychology Today*, June 1969.

Several types of placement were also used in the Johnson-Goldwater study. As in Wicker's study, the letters placed under car windshields provided the best results. There would seem to be two reasons for the superior predictive power of windshield letters. First, it is more likely that adults, and therefore voters, will encounter them. Second, a letter found on a car windshield, as opposed to a public area, seems more in one's personal possession and therefore is more likely to be disposed of according to the car owner's wishes.

Some advice to persons who wish to employ the lost letter technique:

1. In order to get significant differences between control and experimental letters, they must be distributed in sufficiently large numbers. No fewer than 100 and preferably as many as 200 letters should be assigned to each cell of the experimental design. There is much uncontrolled variance and it can only be transcended by using large numbers.

2. The lost letter technique is not very good for subtle issues, or in connection with issues that do not arouse very strong feelings. It only works for issues in which there is clear-cut polarization, and which arouse a high level of emotional involvement.

3. There is no simple way to estimate population parameters from the differential response rates. On the whole, the procedure should not be used where sample survey technique is equally convenient or applicable, but primarily when the respondents' knowledge that he is involved in a study seriously distorts his response. For example, William and Melissa Bowerman, graduate students at Harvard University, distributed anti-Nazi letters in Munich, and found a depression in the return of anti-Nazi letters in specific neighborhoods of that city, thus pin-pointing the areas of strongest neo-Nazi sentiment. I hope other investigators will continue to use the technique in such stimulating ways.