

RESPONSES TO LOST LETTERS ABOUT A 2000 GENERAL
ELECTION AMENDMENT TO ABOLISH PROHIBITION
OF INTERRACIAL MARRIAGES IN ALABAMA¹

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Summary.—A field study using 621 “lost” letters was conducted in the city of Mobile and in small towns in mostly rural Baldwin County, Alabama. Milgram’s lost letter technique was validated against the actual votes cast during the November 7, 2000 General Election. The technique was successful as an unobtrusive measure useful for predicting patterns of voting behavior. Rates of return of lost letters “in favor of and opposed to legalizing interracial marriage” agreed with the actual election returns (chi-square “goodness of fit”). Community size seemed associated with return of lost letters.

The lost letter technique has been used as an unobtrusive method to assess public attitudes toward political candidates, organizations, and social issues (Milgram, Mann, & Harter, 1965). Milgram, *et al.* addressed stamped letters to fictitious persons and groups, differing from the conventional social norms and dispersed many letters in public places. It was assumed that a passerby would ignore the letter, respond to it but not take it, or pick it up and take it with the intention of returning it in the mail. Presumably, the attitude of the finder toward the particular addressee (person or group) might be related to this decision. Thus, the dependent variable was the number of “lost” letters returned in the mail. Milgram, *et al.* noted that by changing the names of the addressees of the lost letters, the rates of return would vary.

As reported on an Internet site, a public opinion poll conducted September 4-6, 2000 by the University of South Alabama for the Mobile Register newspaper reported 64% were in favor of removing Section 102 of the Alabama State Constitution which on paper prohibits marriages between black and white persons (miscegenation or intermarrying of races). Another 19% said they did *not* want an amendment to Section 102 so they opposed miscegenation or interracial unions, while another 17% of those polled said they would *not* vote on the issue or had no opinion. In the general election of November 7, 2000 Alabama voters removed a 99-yr.-old, unenforceable ban on interracial marriage. Alabama was the last state in the nation to have in its constitution this ban from the era of segregation. The purpose of this

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study was to validate the lost letter technique against actual election outcomes.

The present study modified previous designs (Jacoby & Aranoff, 1971; Bridges, Williamson, Scheibe, & Graves, 1999) by adding new addressees' affiliations and different conditions of community size, i.e., a city and small towns in adjacent counties for geographically disparate counties and precincts. A total of 621 lost letters, i.e., either 135 letters for each of three affiliations of addressees were distributed in public places in the city of Mobile and in small towns in adjacent Baldwin County, Alabama, or 72 letters for each of three affiliations of addresses were distributed in public places in small towns in adjacent Baldwin County, Alabama: 405 letters within the city limits of Mobile (population=200,206) and 216 in 22 small towns, boroughs, and communities based on the U.S. Postal Service mail delivery in Baldwin County (*M* populations=6,713). Public places included the aisles of stores, frequently used sidewalks next to major thoroughfares, phone booths, and automatic (bank) teller machines. The content of the letters in both studies indicated that a \$250 contribution was available if someone from the committee would drop by and pick it up. Letters were distributed during the 2-wk. period prior to the November 7, 2000 Alabama General Election.

Of the 145,113 votes cast by those living in the city and small towns in the two counties of south Alabama, 87,736 (60.5%) voters said "yes" to abolishing the prohibition of interracial marriages and 57,377 (39.5%) said "no." Of the 621 letters distributed, 95 (15.3%) were returned in the mail. Further, of the 405 letters distributed in Mobile and the 216 letters distributed in small towns, 75 (18.5%) and 20 letters (9.3%), respectively, were returned in the mail [$\chi^2(N=621)=8.62, p<.003, \text{power}=.89, d=.12$]. Of these 95 letters returned in the mail, 32 were addressed to AL Voters in Favor of Legalizing Interracial Marriage, 28 were addressed to AL Voters Opposed to Legalizing Interracial Marriage, and 35 were addressed to AL Voters For Marriage Over Same-sex Unions.

Modeling our analysis after that of Jacoby and Aranoff (1971), the percentages of the yes and no votes that the antimiscegenation amendment received in the actual election were used to generate the expected return rates for the lost letters. Given the 60 returned letters, the expected values "in favor of and opposed to legalizing interracial marriage" were 36.3 and 23.7, respectively. Applying a chi-square "goodness of fit" test resulted in a value of 1.01 (corrected for continuity) which, with 1 *df*, was not significant (power=.99, *d*=.42). The rates of return of lost letters "in favor of and opposed to" removal of the antimiscegenation law agreed with the actual election returns from the two Alabama counties. The number and percentage of returns of lost letters for community size and addressee affiliation are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED BY ADDRESSEES' AFFILIATION AND COMMUNITY SIZE

Community Size	Condition						Total	
	Marriage (Control)		Legalizing Interracial Marriage				n	%
	n	%	In Favor Of		Opposed To			
City	27	20.0	27	20.0	21	15.6	75	18.5
Town	8	11.1	5	6.9	7	9.7	20	9.3
Total	35	16.9	32	15.5	28	13.5	95	15.3

The lost letter technique was validated against actual election returns in the city of Mobile and in small towns in mostly rural Baldwin County, Alabama. The unobtrusive technique was successful in confirming the pattern of voting behavior. Even the very small rates of return of the lost letters "in favor of and opposed to legalizing interracial marriage" agreed with the actual election returns. These results agree with some (Bouchard & Stuster, 1969; Milgram, 1969; Shotland, Berger, & Forsythe, 1970) but contrast with others (Wicker, 1969; Jacoby & Aranoff, 1971; Weiner & Lurey, 1973). Also, the significant difference in returns for the city vs small towns seems inconsistent with the 1965 hypothesis of Milgram, *et al.*

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