

IMPEACHMENT AFFILIATION AND LEVELS OF RESPONSE TO LOST LETTERS¹

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Summary.—A study using 75 “lost” letters was designed to test the hypothesis that the rates of return would not vary with the addressees’ affiliation, while the level of response would. 30 letters (40%) were returned in the mail to a Post Office Box in Pensacola, Florida. Returns to a Control addressee, Committee to Support the Impeachment of President Bill Clinton, and Committee Opposed to the Impeachment of President Bill Clinton affiliates were 56.0%, 20.0%, and 44.0%, respectively. Of 314 responses recorded for 30 returns, more passersby chose to “ignore” an apparently lost letter than passersby who “responded to an apparently lost letter but did not take it.” Addressees’ affiliations significantly were associated with both *rates of return* and *levels of response*, as measures of public response using the lost-letter technique.

Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) developed the lost letter technique as a research method for accurately indicating public opinion toward various institutions, political groups, and candidates. It was assumed that a passerby would either ignore the letter, respond to it but not take it, or pick it up and take it with him possibly to return in the mail. Johnson and Powell (1975) reported that “studies which have used only return rates to measure public response to lost letters may have missed a more salient measure of public response, the number of passersby who chose to ignore the apparently lost letter” (p. 378). The present purpose was to test the hypothesis that the level of response would vary with impeachment affiliates as addressees, while rates of return would not.

The present experiment modified the design of Johnson and Powell (1975) by adding new addressee affiliations for the lost letters. The control addressee was renamed Committee to Study the Vote-by-Mail Election Process; the affiliations of other addressees were changed to the Committee to Support the Impeachment of President Bill Clinton and the Committee Opposed to the Impeachment of President Bill Clinton. The content of the letters, dated February 1, 1999, indicated that a \$250 contribution was available if someone from one of the respective committees would drop by and pick it up. Each letter was signed by hand above the name and residential mailing address of one of the researchers who lived in Pensacola.

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A total of 75 lost letters (25 letters per three affiliations for addressees) were distributed in equal numbers on sidewalks and walkways inside and outside malls, restaurants, grocery stores, motels, and other retail business establishments in Pensacola, Florida (Escambia County). Each envelope was individually coded on the back to indicate the location of the letter drop. Each of the 75 letters was systematically observed and level(s) of response recorded until it was picked up and taken away by a passerby. The distribution of letters commenced on February 1, 1999 and was completed by February 8, 1999, a full four days before President Clinton was acquitted of impeachment charges on February 12, 1999. Letter finders were given two weeks after the last letter was dropped to return their lost letters in the mail. Chi-squared was used to assess differences in the distributions of return of the lost letters and level of responses for the addressees.

Of 75 letters distributed, 30 (40.0%) were returned in the mail by the finders (considered an altruistic response). The addressees' affiliation was associated with significantly different *rates of return* of letters. For the 30 letters returned, there were 315 responses observed and recorded under one of three categories of response, i.e., ignore, respond but do not take, or take to possibly mail later. The affiliation of the addressee was associated with significantly different *levels of distribution of response* to letters. The rates of return and level of response in each of the conditions are depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1
RETURNS AND LEVEL OF RESPONSE BY IMPEACHMENT AFFILIATION OF LETTER

Condition (Addressee)	Persons Who								
	Pass By Ignoring*		Respond, But Do Not Take		Take		Pass By	Return	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%
Control	83	66.4	28	22.4	14	11.2	125	14	56.0
Impeachment									
Support	71	87.6	5	6.2	5	6.2	81	5	20.0
Oppose	81	75.0	16	14.8	11	10.2	108	11	44.0
Total	235	74.8	49	15.6	30	9.6	314	30	40.0
χ^2						12.70			7.0
<i>p</i>						.01			.03
<i>N</i>						314			75
Power†						.83			.65
Effect Size†						.201			.306

*Within six feet of letter. †*p* = .05.

Unexpectedly, 'across all kinds of addressees,' affiliations were associated with different *rates of return* of 75 letters. It was expected, 'across kinds of addressees' affiliations, that there might be a difference in the *levels of*

response to the 30 returns. Together these findings are not consistent with those of Johnson and Powell (1975), as addressees' affiliations influenced *both rates of return* and *levels of response*. In contrast, the present analysis showed that more passersby chose to "ignore" an apparently lost letter than passersby who "responded to an apparently lost letter but did not take it." Finally, the records for one *level of response*, i.e., "respond to letter but not take it," to the "pro-impeachment" affiliate seemed similar to its *rate of return* in comparison to the other affiliate conditions. Perhaps *both rates of return* and *levels of response* might be suitable indicators of public response using the lost letter technique.

REFERENCES

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