

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

Refer To: PS, CPB-1
September, 1968

Fluoridation Referenda

Insights on factors defeating fluoridation in referenda, despite popular support as revealed by opinion polls, are contained in an article by Robert P. Abelson titled, "Computers, Polls, and Public Opinion--Some Puzzles and Paradoxes," which appears in the September 1968 issue (Vol.5, No. 9) of Trans-action, published by Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Abelson is Professor of Psychology at Yale and Associate Director of the Yale Program in Communication and Attitude Change.

Information in the article may be helpful to persons conducting educational campaigns on the public health measure of fluoridation prior to referenda. Dr. Abelson points out that before a campaign starts more positive than negative arguments are known, but negative arguments become more widely available in the last two weeks and influence persons not strongly committed to the "pro" side to switch to the "anti" side. He further indicates that concrete issues such as fear, gain heavily near the conclusion of a campaign when pitted against an abstract principle such as fluoridation. The effect and importance of emotional orientation and support from others sharing the same opinion are brought out.

These research findings point to the need for constant, continuing emphasis of positive information, recognition of the interests and feelings of recipients of messages, and consideration of the use and effect of reference groups (such as family, close friends, and other respected sources) in disseminating information.

The article further suggests that there is an "on-the-fence" group which vacillates from one side to the other of an issue when no information is made available to them. The implication seems to be that there is a need for special effort to disseminate persuasive information continually and constantly to reach this otherwise undecided group.

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