TO THE EDITOR:

D. B. Johnson and J. R. Gibson, in their "The Divisive Primary Revisited: Party Activists in Iowa" The American Political Science Review, 68 (March, 1974), 64–74, have attacked a perennial issue in an imaginative manner. It seems to me, however, that they have made several errors in logic which detract considerably from their methods and conclusions.

The authors present their data indicating that three-quarters of those primary workers who supported losing candidates became less active in the autumn, as "... confirming the assumption that there is a loss of talent to the overall campaign effort after a divisive primary" (p. 72). That 60 per cent of those who supported primary losers intended to split their ticket in the general election is also brought to support the premise of the divisive nature of primary elections (p. 73).

In addition, further "evidence" for the authors' conclusion is brought from data indicating that large numbers of those who supported primary losers would either not support the party's candidate in the fall, not vote at all, or vote for the opposition. The authors conclude: "... (the) data confirm some divisive effects of the direct primary election..." (p. 76). Particularly, "... confirming the frequently made but previously unsupported assumption that the loss of working talent to a party after a primary is substantial..." (p. 77).

By and large, Johnson and Gibson have made the ancient logical error of confusing association with causation. They state or imply that the loss of party workers in the general election is a result of the divisive primary. That their data indicate such a loss of talent is clear. That this loss is due to the primary election is much less clear. Such a conclusion would require that those self-same workers would have been active in the general election for the winning candidate had there been no primary but "... were so embittered by the outcome of the primary election that they bolted..." (p. 77). This is an erroneous proposition at best. It may well be that had their favorite not entered the primary, these supporters would never have been involved. Once their candidate was defeated they either lost interest or became active in other races (as indeed 56.9 per cent did—see Table 4, p. 74). The loss of party activists after the primary, therefore, need not at all have been the result of the primary per se. Perhaps one ought not refer to this as a loss to the party, for the party cannot lose that which it never had.

Interestingly, the data presented in the article seem to confirm the proposition that those who dropped out of the campaign after their candidates lost in the primary election did so for reasons other than bitterness and the divisiveness of the primary itself. In the first instance, most of those questioned were introduced to the campaign either at the candidate's request or their own application. Only 16 per cent were introduced by the party (p. 70). This implies a strong personal commitment to a given candidate from the outset. It also implies an involvement whose motivation will naturally end with the candidate's defeat irrespective of any properties inherent in the nature of a primary. No doubt the authors might have tested this proposition by simply asking respondents whether they would have been active in the campaign had their candidate not entered the primary. The given data imply that they might not have.

In addition, Johnson and Gibson offer a description of those supporters of losing candidates who have been alienated (the authors refer to them as "bolters") by the effects of a divisive primary. They are largely "political amateurs" with weak party affiliations. What, then, should be expected of such activists when the object of their activity—their chosen candidate—is defeated. The loss of such workers is far more likely to be the result of their motivation than of the primary. Indeed, it is surprising that any of them stay at all! It should be noted that Johnson and Gibson make weak reference to such a contingency in two brief, post-hoc sentences (p. 76) and then continue on their predetermined path, ignoring some of the evident implications of their data.

Finally, the above comments are not meant to question the divisive characteristics of a closely contested primary election. It may well be that a primary does cause bitterness, alienation, and a subsequent loss to party organization and unity. However, Johnson and Gibson—no matter how imaginative their approach or meticulous their statistical computations—cannot confirm this "... frequently made but previously unsupported assumption..." with their data.

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TO THE EDITOR:

The erroneous assumption underlying David Schnall's letter seems to be that the activists who worked for the candidates in our study were not necessarily party members, that they were merely friends recruited by the candidates—persons who would not have been involved in the campaign if these particular candidates had not been running. This is incorrect; we acknowledged that primary campaign organizations frequently are candidate organizations, but this certainly does not mean they were made up largely of workers unaffiliated with the parties in Iowa.

The facts were, as the data on page 69 revealed,