

CONSUMER RESPONSE TO UNSATISFACTORY PURCHASES: A SURVEY OF PERCEIVING DEFECTS, VOICING COMPLAINTS, AND OBTAINING REDRESS

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A survey of consumer reactions to common purchases was conducted in 1975. Consumers perceive problems with many products and services, and voice complaints concerning about one-third of those problems. Third-party complaint processors play a very small role in buyer-seller disputes. Household status and type of problem influence perception of problems and choice of action or inaction. Satisfactory resolutions occur in somewhat more than half of voiced complaint cases. To increase voicing and fair handling of complaints, procedural changes at the buyer-seller level are suggested; to improve treatment of complaints that are not resolved at the buyer-seller level, improvements in community small claims courts are suggested.

This report investigates the "tip-of-the-iceberg" notion that the complaints people make about their purchases of products and services represent only a fraction of the problems they perceive concerning those purchases. Knowing the dimensions and contours of the rest of the iceberg may lead to useful conclusions about the effectiveness of the ways in which consumer complaints are handled by sellers and by various complaint-processing institutions.

The life cycle of consumer complaints can usefully be divided into three stages: perception of a problem, voicing of a complaint,

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resolution of the complaint. Problems that people perceive but do not present as complaints to sellers or others can be called "un-voiced complaints." The data describing the second stage, voicing complaints, may offer the most direct lessons for those who advocate improvements in the complaint process. By detailing the modes of action people choose when they decide to speak up, the data may provide an appropriate context for discussions of both the current state of the complaint process and possible reforms.

"Complaint process" is a term that needs a clear definition. It can be thought of as simply the transactions that take place when buyers complain to sellers about shortcomings in purchases. A broader definition would add actions taken by buyers who voice complaints to sellers but are dissatisfied with the resolutions offered by sellers, actions such as appeal to third parties. But perhaps, the most useful definition of what should be studied is based on the belief that complaints are a means by which sellers can fulfill their obligations to buyers. Sellers owe buyers delivery of whatever is offered and bought; when this delivery is not accomplished, for whatever reason, the buyer has been disserved, and a process, probably involving the making of a complaint, ought to operate to alert the seller to the fact that it has not yet met its obligations to the buyer.

A seller interested in providing its customers with a product whose performance will fully meet both the needs of the latter and the representations made by salespeople or in advertisements might be able to establish a system of quality control that would eliminate the risk that deficient products would be delivered to customers. An alternate approach would be to use less stringent quality control practices and compensate buyers for defects in products and services when buyers discern those defects and complain about them. This alternative, or course, is the choice of virtually all sellers and manufacturers. That business relies on the individual to perceive deficiencies in products and services and to complain about them demonstrates the importance of knowing actual patterns of perception and complaint. Similarly, the performance of third-party complaint handlers can only be evaluated if we know the extent to which the complaints that reach them represent the universe of perceived purchase failures.

The hypothesis of this research is that businesses and third parties are wrong to believe that dealing with voiced complaints fairly discharges their responsibilities towards the public as a whole. This report examines the following propositions: consumer dissatisfaction is widespread; many problems are never complained about and are therefore never remedied by sellers; sellers

monopolize the handling of the complaints that people do voice; third parties play a very small role in consumer complaint handling; third parties are thus hindered in planning their own activities; third parties currently allow sellers nearly complete freedom to select standards of dispute resolution; throughout the complaint process people of low education, income, and social status are underrepresented; problems that involve relatively low cost purchases or depend upon ideas about general improvements in products and services are underrepresented among the complaints presented to businesses and third parties.

To examine these propositions, 2,419 respondents in 34 cities were interviewed by telephone in February and March, 1975. They were asked about their experiences with 34 typical consumer products and services (see Appendixes for a description of the methodology and the text of the questionnaire).

I. PERCEIVING PROBLEMS

One limitation of this research should be mentioned at the outset. Many serious deficiencies in products and services are virtually impossible for consumers to discern; examples are automobiles designed with inadequate provision for occupant safety in crashes, foods or drugs containing harmful substances, or unnecessary surgery. The reaction of consumers to this broad class of problems is outside the scope of this research. Nonetheless, considering only problems which are within the ordinary range of consumer knowledge and perception, it seems reasonable to suppose that consumers will observe many problems after purchasing products and services. A further hypothesis is that perception of problems will be hindered by factors such as the buyer's lack of interest in consumer issues, or low socioeconomic status, the complexity of certain types of problems, and the feeling of some buyers that it is wrong to suffer consumer problems.

Households perceive various kinds of problems with their purchases. Respondents were asked if they or anyone in their households had purchased each of 34 products and services in the last year or so. For each item that had been purchased, the respondent was asked a general question, "Was it satisfactory, somewhat satisfactory, somewhat unsatisfactory or unsatisfactory?" Next, a further question was asked about each item purchased to obtain more detail and to make sure all dissatisfaction was recalled and reported. The wording of this follow-up question depended on the response to the general satisfaction question. If a respondent said that a member of the household had found a purchase to be unsatisfactory or somewhat unsatisfactory, the

follow-up question was: "What was the problem?" If a respondent reported that a purchase had been satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory, the follow-up question was the probe inquiry: "How could it have been better for your household?" Often, people answered this probe question with simple statements such as: "No way it could be better," or: "It was fine." However, in about one out of every six cases, respondents who had rated a purchase as satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory did report problems that were similar to the problems mentioned in response to the question: "What was the problem?"

In subsequent discussion, it will sometimes be desirable to treat these two broad classes of responses separately. We will refer to problems mentioned in conjunction with an unsatisfactory or somewhat unsatisfactory rating as "strong problems" since they were mentioned without a probe. We will refer to problems mentioned after a probe as "weak problems." A second issue with respect to the definition of problems is how to deal most fairly and accurately with comments about the cost of purchases. The spring of 1975 was a time of high inflation and high unemployment. Thus, it is to be expected that when respondents were asked: "How could it have been better. . . ?" a substantial number would reply that any purchase would have been better had it cost less. This expectation is borne out in the data. To separate problems about the specific nature of products and services from the more general problem of the nation's economy, we will characterize problems as either "price-only" or "nonprice." Price-only problems are defined problems whose subject is limited to price or cost. Problems that do not refer to price or that refer to price along with a comment on a nonprice subject are called nonprice problems.

Data on the frequency with which purchases lead to perceptions of price-only and nonprice problems are shown in Table 1. Additionally, the table reports these problems as either "strong" or "weak." We have also established three summary categories: services, infrequently purchased products, and frequently purchased products, distinguishing between the latter two by estimating whether a household would be likely to make more than one purchase of the product in a single year. Some products were easy to categorize, such as food, clothing, washer-dryer, camera, and vacuum cleaner, but categorization of others was difficult and arbitrary. This distinction is made primarily because of concern that in the case of frequently purchased items, although our interviewers were trained to ask respondents about their single most recent purchase of that item, some respondents may have reviewed many recent purchases and reported whichever one involved a

TABLE 1

PRICE-ONLY AND NONPRICE PROBLEMS BY PURCHASE CATEGORY
AND STRENGTH OF PROBLEM

(In order of strong nonprice problem within each group of items; percentages represent fraction of total purchases of item that fall within that category of response)

	<i>Weak</i>		<i>Strong</i>		Other and no answer	(N)
	Price-only	Non-price	Price-only	Non-price		
<i>Infrequently purchased products</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Denture/hearing aid	2.8	7.7	0.7	14.8	0.7	142
Car	3.0	18.5	0.5	13.8	0.7	827
Vacuum cleaner	2.5	14.4	—	12.4	0.3	355
Eyeglasses	3.2	8.6	0.7	12.2	0.9	834
Tape/stereo	1.2	9.9	0.2	11.0	0.2	564
Washer/dryer	0.8	12.2	—	10.6	0.8	254
Camera	1.4	6.5	0.3	10.5	0.3	354
Bicycle	1.6	14.9	—	10.0	0.9	430
TV set	1.6	11.1	0.2	9.7	0.2	495
Calculator	2.0	7.9	0.2	9.1	0.4	494
Floor covering	2.3	10.7	—	7.8	0.4	522
Air conditioner	1.1	12.0	—	7.4	1.2	175
Tires	4.7	6.2	0.5	5.8	0.2	1041
Radio	2.2	8.0	—	5.1	0.7	414
Lamps	1.2	5.9	—	2.6	—	340
TOTAL	2.5	10.4	0.3	9.5	0.5	7241
<i>Frequently purchased products</i>						
Mail order	0.9	11.7	0.2	19.4	1.7	537
Toys	1.9	14.8	0.1	15.9	1.1	1049
Clothing	5.5	14.9	0.6	13.2	1.4	2135
Jewelry/watch	0.9	7.8	0.4	12.7	1.1	803
Furniture	3.5	12.2	—	11.2	0.6	690
Grocery items	28.1	15.2	8.1	10.6	2.7	2402
Pots/pans	2.1	7.0	—	9.4	—	710
Book/record	2.5	6.9	0.1	5.8	1.0	1566
Blanket/sheets	3.5	6.3	0.1	5.3	0.3	1069
Tools	2.2	6.8	0.3	4.2	0.5	650
Cosmetics	4.7	5.7	0.4	3.5	0.5	1939
TOTAL	7.7	10.5	1.6	9.6	1.2	13550
TOTAL PRODUCTS	5.9	10.5	1.2	9.5	0.9	20791
<i>Services</i>						
Car repair	5.8	13.5	1.4	21.5	2.2	1277
Appliance repair	5.2	9.6	2.3	19.9	2.1	563
Home repair	4.4	9.8	0.4	18.6	1.2	537
Car parking	10.3	8.2	6.0	15.2	3.1	683
Film developing	3.8	9.4	0.7	9.1	1.2	1250
Legal services	3.6	7.2	3.1	8.2	1.0	388
Medical/dental care	6.4	8.3	1.5	6.6	1.2	1910
Credit	5.5	4.6	2.0	6.0	1.6	1191
TOTAL SERVICES	5.7	8.9	1.9	12.0	1.6	7783
TOTAL PRODUCTS AND SERVICES	5.8	10.0	1.4	10.2	1.1	28574

problem, particularly in response to the probe question. Presentation of these data separately allows the reader to keep this possible overreporting in mind.

The table shows that about four out of five purchases of infrequently purchased products were perfectly satisfactory; non-price problems appear in 20 percent of purchases. Only two-thirds of purchases of frequently purchased products were perfectly satisfactory, but as can be seen in the first column of the table, this is because the probe question generated a large number of price-only problems. This was particularly the case for groceries, which were experiencing rapid and well publicized price inflation at the time of the survey. Setting these aside, 20.1 percent of frequently purchased products generated nonprice complaints, a figure virtually identical to that for single purchase products. Services have a similar nonprice problem rate, 20.9 percent.

Despite the stability in the nonprice problem figures across the major purchase groupings, there is considerable variation within groups. Several categories have nonprice problem rates of 30 percent or more, including cars, mail order purchases, toys, and car repairs, which last had the worst record, more than one in three purchases. Several other categories exceeded 25 percent, including vacuum cleaners, clothing, grocery store items, and appliance and home repairs. The conventional belief that consumers suffer frequent problems with purchases is amply supported by the survey data.

If complaining about purchase shortcomings can be assumed to carry significant economic and psychological costs, it might be expected that households of low socioeconomic status and low interest in consumer affairs would voice complaints relatively infrequently. This expectation leads to a further hypothesis which can be tested with our data: households of low socioeconomic status and low consumer interest may perceive problems with their purchases less frequently than do other households. To explore this possibility, each respondent household was assigned an index of socioeconomic status (SES) based on a combination of its income and the household head's education and occupational prestige.¹ By means of this index households were grouped in four categories, from lowest to highest status. A problem perception rate was then calculated for each respondent household. This rate is defined as the ratio of products and services with nonprice problems to total products and services purchased, expressed as a

1. Occupational prestige was quantified in accordance with the 1960 Hodge-Siegel-Rossi prestige scores as modified by the National Opinion Research Center (1972).

percentage. For example, a household that reported purchases in ten categories and reported nonprice problems for two purchases would have a problem perception rate of 20 percent.

The data show that problem perception rates are lowest for households with low socioeconomic status (see Table 2). The table also shows an effect of race: in the highest SES category, households in which our respondent was black have a problem perception rate of 15.4 percent, while households in the same SES category in which our respondent was white have a rate of 21.8 percent.

TABLE 2
MEAN PROBLEM PERCEPTION RATES BY SOCIOECONOMIC
STATUS AND RACE

	<i>Socioeconomic status</i>							
	Low		Lower middle		Upper middle		High	
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
Black	16.8	143	17.4	47	18.1	56	15.4	46
White	15.7	418	18.0	346	20.2	574	21.8	652
Black, white and other	15.8	586	17.9	400	20.1	646	21.6	714

It is not known whether households in all SES categories purchase goods and services of similar quality. But it would strain credulity to explain the relatively low rate of problem perception in households within the lowest SES category by suggesting that the products and services they buy give better performance than the purchases made by households in higher SES categories. Indeed, it is more likely that these households deliberately purchase less expensive goods and services which are of poorer quality than those purchased by higher SES households and contain more defects. The lower problem perception rate in lower SES households is thus not a mirror of reality but an exaggerated under-reporting of defects. There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon: lower SES households, and black households compared with white, may expect the goods and services they purchase to be shoddy, and fail to perceive such shoddiness as a defect; and those households may see themselves as abused by the system and powerless to protest a defect they perceive.

To test the hypothesis that households showing interest in issues related to consumerism would be especially prone to perceive deficiencies in their purchases, the respondents were asked if there had been discussion at home of five topics: shopping for bargains, quality of car servicing, cost of electricity, ingredient labeling on foods, and consumer protection laws. Table 3 reports the relationship between problem perception rates and the consumer interest of households. The number of consumer topics discussed in a household is positively related to the household's problem perception rate for all SES categories. The effect of the consumer interest measure is more marked, however, for households in the two highest SES categories. Comparing households that discussed none, one, or two of the topics with households that discussed three, four, or all of the topics shows a general pattern of higher problem perception by the households more interested in consumer issues.

TABLE 3

MEAN PROBLEM PERCEPTION RATES BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND NUMBER OF CONSUMER ISSUES DISCUSSED

<i>Number of issues discussed</i>	<i>Socioeconomic status</i>							
	Low		Lower middle		Upper middle		High	
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
0	10.6	49	15.9	16	11.0	24	11.9	14
1	16.1	54	13.2	16	16.2	32	13.9	29
2	16.8	90	18.3	69	14.6	81	19.8	95
3	17.0	132	16.1	104	19.8	156	22.6	175
4	14.8	146	18.1	120	22.6	217	22.2	213
5	16.7	123	20.0	85	21.2	151	23.0	203

It is reasonable to expect that perception of problems might be related to general attitudes towards the suffering of consumer trouble. To inquire into this possibility, the respondents were asked, "Do you think you and your household have more, less, or about the same number of problems as other households have?" If replies are skewed away from a normal distribution in favor of reports of fewer than average consumer troubles this may indicate the resistance of people to identify themselves as having many of the problems they do, presumably, encounter.

The middle of the road reply, "about the same," was given by 62.7 percent of respondents, 32.3 percent said "less," and 3.4 per-

cent said "more" (1.6 percent did not reply). Even though the mean problem perception rates of various groups of households vary, as shown in Table 2, and many individual households have problem perception rates well above average, 95 percent of households believe that, compared with other households, they experience fewer or about the same number of consumer problems. Certainly many more than 3.4 percent of our sample would have been correct to reply that they suffer more problems than do other households. These data show that many households are either ignorant of how their consumer experiences compare with those of their neighbors or are unwilling to state that they do, in fact, have more trouble as consumers than many of their neighbors. Both possible explanations could well be related to feelings that it is wrong or illegitimate to be a victim of unsatisfactory purchase transactions.

The very nature of the deficiency in a product or service may affect people's perception of the deficiency as a problem. The shortcomings of a purchase can be clear-cut or manifest, and thus easy to identify and acknowledge. On the other hand, deficiencies can be complicated or ambiguous, and therefore relatively difficult to perceive clearly and state with assurance. Examples of problems that can be termed manifest would be breakage of a product or improper initial performance of a service. Problems that may involve judgment would include observations about product design or the kinds of procedures the provider of a service uses in its business.

Since our data contain reports of both strongly perceived and weakly perceived problems, it is possible to calculate for each type of problem a percentage representing the number of times the problem was strongly perceived, expressed as proportion of all the times it was mentioned. If a problem was most frequently mentioned in response to the probe question, this suggests that it is a problem people are reluctant to express. Table 4 presents the data on problem types and their proportions of mentions as strong problems. The problems with the highest percentages of strong mentions are those that can be thought of as generally unambiguous, such as breakage, loss of customer's property, or provision of a wrong product or service. In contrast, problems with low percentages of mentions as strong problems are topics that involve the exercise of more individual judgment, such as cost, design, selection of materials, durability, and ease of use.

In summary, the data concerning the initial stage of the complaint process, problem perception, tend to show that many purchased products and services have deficiencies that their buyers observe. Further, certain households seem to be hampered in per-

TABLE 4
INTENSITY OF PROBLEM PERCEPTION BY PROBLEM TYPE

	Total mentions	Percent of mentions as strong problem
Total breakage	316	72.8
Loss of customer's property	75	69.3
Wrong product or service furnished	167	68.9
Service required more than one attempt	451	64.5
Irritation or allergic reaction	41	61.0
Partial breakage	828	59.7
Shrinking or fading	81	59.3
Misrepresentation	334	58.1
Workmanship	606	57.9
Clerical error/improper billing	102	57.3
Fit or size	185	56.2
Human relations	92	55.4
Too slow, late or not received	402	54.2
Durability	562	50.7
Stitching	162	49.2
Freshness	189	47.1
Ease of use	138	47.1
Safety	25	44.0
Other (related to quality of item or service)	919	42.7
Selection of materials	271	42.4
Design of item or way of providing service	810	38.1
Other (not related to quality of item or service)	184	35.3
Cost	2609	25.8

ceiving problems with purchases. And for consumers in general, the data show a disinclination to be identified as a victim of consumer problems, and show that complicated problems are perceived less strongly than simple problems.

II. VOICING COMPLAINTS

The costs of presenting complaints to sellers or to other potential complaint processers might be expected to discourage people from speaking up about many of the problems they perceive with the products and services they purchase. It has already been seen that even at the first stage, many potential complaints are excluded from the complaint process because the people who have suffered the purchase shortcomings do not observe or acknowledge the shortcomings. If the problem is recognized, possible responses include inaction, voicing the complaint to a seller, consciously deciding to transfer patronage (exit), and presenting a dispute to a third-party complaint handler. If it is true that complaining is difficult, and that many complaints are unvoiced, then

TABLE 5

RESPONSES TO PERCEIVED PROBLEMS BY PURCHASE CATEGORY

(In order of likelihood of some action within each group of items; percentages represent instances of this response as a percentage of all responses to this item)

	No action	Exit only	Seller voice only	Third party voice only	Other voice	Other	(N)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	
<i>Infrequently purchased products</i>							
Denture/hearing aid	32.4	5.4	62.2	—	—	—	37
Tape/stereo	41.3	1.6	55.6	—	—	1.6	126
Bicycle	41.7	8.7	47.0	—	0.9	1.8	115
Car	41.8	5.7	46.8	1.0	3.3	1.3	297
TV set	42.9	3.6	48.2	0.9	4.5	—	112
Air conditioner	43.2	—	51.4	—	—	5.4	37
Eyeglasses	48.1	4.8	44.8	—	1.9	0.5	210
Washer/dryer	49.2	4.9	44.3	—	1.6	—	61
Camera	53.0	1.5	45.5	—	—	—	66
Calculator	55.2	1.0	42.7	—	—	1.0	96
Tires	63.9	3.9	31.1	—	0.6	0.6	180
Vacuum cleaner	65.4	6.7	26.9	—	—	1.0	104
Floor covering	68.2	—	30.0	1.8	—	—	110
Radio	78.1	1.6	20.3	—	—	—	64
Lamps	78.8	10.2	9.5	—	—	1.4	285
TOTAL	51.8	4.1	41.6	0.4	1.3	0.8	1648
<i>Frequently purchased products</i>							
Mail order	40.9	1.1	55.1	2.3	—	0.6	176
Furniture	44.4	3.7	48.1	1.6	2.1	—	189
Jewelry/watch	50.0	4.9	44.5	—	—	0.5	182
Book/record	52.2	2.8	43.4	—	0.8	0.8	251
Clothing	65.8	7.0	26.0	0.1	0.9	0.1	757
Tools	68.2	3.4	28.4	—	—	—	88
Grocery items	70.7	11.0	16.5	0.3	1.2	0.3	1541
Toys	76.8	1.7	21.0	—	0.3	0.3	353
Cosmetics	78.9	10.2	9.5	—	—	1.4	285
Pots/pans/utensils	79.5	3.8	15.9	—	0.8	—	132
Blankets/sheets	81.8	1.2	15.8	—	0.6	0.6	165
TOTAL	67.0	7.1	24.3	0.1	0.8	0.4	4119
TOTAL PRODUCTS	62.7	6.2	29.3	0.3	1.0	0.5	5767
<i>Services</i>							
Home repair	36.9	4.0	46.0	6.3	5.8	1.1	176
Car repair	38.9	8.7	48.4	0.7	2.9	0.4	550
Appliance repair	42.1	0.5	51.4	2.3	2.8	0.9	216
Credit/charge accounts	55.2	7.4	34.3	0.4	1.7	0.9	230
Film developing	60.9	8.2	29.9	—	0.6	0.3	294
Medical/dental care	63.7	9.3	22.5	0.2	0.9	3.5	454
Legal services	68.6	7.0	20.9	1.2	1.2	1.2	86
Car parking	77.9	3.4	15.5	0.3	1.4	1.4	290
TOTAL SERVICES	54.4	6.8	34.4	1.0	2.1	1.3	2296
TOTAL PRODUCTS AND SERVICES	60.3	6.4	30.7	0.5	1.3	0.7	8063

the most common responses would be inaction, and when buyers do take action, we would expect them to present their complaints to the seller. The other possible active responses, changing purchase patterns and using third parties, would likely be made less frequently.

Once respondents in the survey indicated that they had perceived a problem in a purchase category, they were asked, "Did you or anyone in your household do anything about it?" If the answer was "yes," the respondents were then asked, "What was done?" The interviewers recorded replies verbatim. Up to three actions per purchase were coded for analysis.

The actions consumers took in response to perceived shortcomings in purchases are reported in Table 5. Some kind of action was reported to our interviewers in 39.7 percent of perceived problems. The most common action (taken in 30.7 percent of the problems perceived) was to voice a complaint to a seller (either a local retailer or service outlet, or a manufacturer). In their communications with sellers, consumers asked for refunds, replacements, repairs; sometimes they refused to pay or delayed payment. Of all the techniques consumers used in voicing complaints to sellers, returning the item was the action most frequently specified (about one-third of consumers' contacts with sellers). Consumers delayed or refused payment in 2.3 percent of the instances in which they voiced complaints.

"Exit," the changing of seller patronized or brand purchased, was the exclusive response to 6.4 percent of the purchase shortcomings perceived. In about half of these exit actions, consumers switched brands or service providers. In the remaining instances of exit, they changed buying habits to avoid the purchase that had caused the problem. For example, exit in response to problems with grocery store items could be a decision to stop shopping at a particular store or to buy a different brand of a particular product.

The overall totals in Table 5 show that about one in six of all actions taken in response to problems is an exit action. However, exit actions are not evenly distributed among various purchase categories. Since exit is a forward looking action, we might expect it to be employed in situations where the perceived problem can be tolerated in the present and avoided in the future; where the immediate problem is more serious, and avoiding it in the future is not a realistic alternative, exit should rarely be chosen. Of consumers who observe problems with cosmetics, for example, Table 5 shows that about half of those who take action voice complaints, and about half simply exit. Of consumers who have problems with

home repairs, about nine out of ten who take action report voicing, and only one reports exit. An unsatisfactory cosmetic can be thrown away with small financial loss. An unsatisfactory home repair, however, has failed to remedy a problem that was serious enough initially to require professional attention.

TABLE 6
EXIT ACTIONS AS PERCENTAGES OF ALL ACTIONS BY TYPE OF
PURCHASE AND TYPE OF PROBLEM

	<i>Weak problems</i>		<i>Strong problems</i>		All problems
	Price-only	Non-price	Price-only	Non-price	
Products	79.6	14.5	67.1	10.0	20.4
Services	33.7	26.5	32.4	16.6	19.7
Products and services	68.0	14.3	52.5	12.6	20.2

Table 6 reports instances of exit as a percentage of consumer responses (other than inaction) to problems with all products and all services, distinguishing between strong, weak, price-only, and nonprice problems. Exit constitutes 10 percent of the actions in response to strong nonprice problems with products and 79.6 percent of actions in response to weak price-only problems with products. Price-only problems can readily be remedied by exit: to change seller or brand is to solve the problem (if only in the short-run, for the individual buyer).

The third major classification of action in response to perceived problems is voicing a complaint to a third party. Households used third parties as complaint handlers in 1.2 percent of all cases in which consumers perceived problems with purchases, and 3.7 percent of all instances in which consumers who noticed problems voiced complaints. Table 7 presents the distribution of complaints among third parties. More than half of these complaints to third parties had not previously been presented to businesses, but were brought to third-party complaint handlers in the first instance. People used complaint handlers this way in circumstances where the seller was inaccessible, for instance, where it had gone out of business, was a mail order company that did not ship merchandise ordered, or was a doctor or hospital. In some cases, people with a general problem, such as a price believed to be excessive, contacted third parties without discussing the matter with any seller.

TABLE 7
DISTRIBUTION OF COMPLAINTS AMONG THIRD PARTIES
(Multiple mentions permitted)

	Number of cases
Better Business Bureau	22
Consumer affairs department	16
Lawyer or court	16
State or local agency not an Attorney General or consumer affairs department	6
Doctor ^a	6
Professional association	5
Elected official	4
Federal agency	4
Attorney General (state)	4
Post office	2
Social worker or welfare agency	2
Media-related complaint handler	2
Single issue pressure group	2
Utility company	2
Police department	2
Union	1
Bank	1
Insurance company	1
TOTAL	98

a. Doctors mediated between patients and hospitals or insurance companies.

Even if all appeals to third parties represented instances of consumer dissatisfaction with the way the seller treated the complaint, businesses would have little to fear from third-party intervention given the small number involved. But in fact the data show that only 45 percent of cases brought to third parties can be so interpreted. Thus sellers have a near perfect monopoly on complaint handling. They can feel free to impose their own standards for complaint resolution confident that consumers will not make use of the third-party mechanisms to review their actions.

The data on the choice between voice and exit may provide a partial explanation of how individuals choose to employ the most difficult and specialized kind of voicing, the use of third parties. Where the lingering effects of a problem are significant, use of a third party is most likely. Scanning Table 5, we can see that purchase categories with relatively high use of third parties include home repairs, cars, appliance repairs, furniture, floor covering, legal services, and mail order items. With the possible exception of mail order items, these purchases are significant enough to require a retrospective remedy for perceived problems rather than a forward looking technique of exit or avoidance.

Medical/dental care problems are also voiced to third parties relatively frequently, although their voicing rate in general is low. Analysis of the particular cases presented to third parties supports two notions. General importance of a purchase is related to voicing, and people are generally reluctant to complain directly to doctors about their work. When consumers complain about health care to third parties, they will often do so *directly*: they do not voice their concerns to the providers of the services, but choose instead to have an intermediary handle the dispute—often another doctor or a medical society.

The decision to take any voicing actions concerning a perceived problem is made against the background of widespread knowledge that complaining can be difficult and costly. This suggests that factors associated with a greater probability of complaint voicing include high cost of product or service, high cost of the deficiency in the purchase, and importance of the purchase. Where high cost or particular importance of a purchase is at stake, complaining may seem most worthwhile. Also, the simplicity of complaint voicing should be related to variations in voicing rates. If one impediment to complaining is difficulty in ascertaining who is responsible for the problem, it might be predicted that services will have higher rates of complaint voicing than products; when a product is not satisfactory, a buyer may be unaware of whether the seller, manufacturer, or distributor is at fault, but when a service is improperly performed, it is ordinarily easy to identify the service provider as the appropriate target of a complaint.

The effects of purchase type on complaint voicing are indicated in Table 8, which reports voicing rates for weak and strong *nonprice* problems for the three major purchase groupings. The range of variation is wide: people voice complaints about 71.9 percent of the problems they perceive in the denture/hearing aid category but only about 14.3 percent of the problems they perceive with cosmetics/toiletries. Complaints about services are voiced at a higher rate than complaints about products. Among the latter, complaints are voiced more often for infrequently purchased products (49.5 percent) than for frequently purchased products (35.3 percent). The service categories with the most problems are repairs of appliances, homes, and cars, perhaps because such repair services usually are costly and their quality can be judged easily in most cases.

The effect of ease of complaining, suggested as a partial explanation of the relatively high rate of complaint voicing for repair services, may also be seen in the low levels of voicing for medical

TABLE 8

VOICING RATES FOR NONPRICE PROBLEMS BY STRENGTH OF PROBLEM
AND PURCHASE CATEGORY

(In order of voicing rate for all problems; complaints voiced as a percentage
of problems perceived)

	Weak problems		Strong problems		All problems	
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
<i>Infrequently purchased products</i>						
Denture/hearing aid	54.5	11	81.0	21	71.9	32
Air conditioner	50.0	20	76.9	13	60.6	33
Tape recorder/stereo	47.3	55	70.5	61	59.5	116
TV set	44.4	54	72.9	48	57.8	102
Car	50.0	151	67.6	108	57.1	259
Eyeglasses	45.1	71	63.7	102	56.1	173
Bicycle	44.4	63	61.9	42	51.4	105
Camera	43.5	23	54.1	37	50.0	60
Washer/dryer	41.9	31	53.8	26	47.4	57
Calculator	21.1	38	68.9	45	47.0	83
Tires	31.3	64	62.7	59	46.3	123
Floor covering	23.2	56	52.5	40	35.4	96
Vacuum cleaner	12.0	50	47.8	46	29.2	96
Radio	24.2	33	23.8	21	24.1	54
Lamps	0.0	20	55.6	9	17.2	29
TOTAL	37.6	740	62.5	678	49.5	1418
<i>Frequently purchased products</i>						
Mail order items	34.9	63	74.5	102	59.4	165
Furniture	40.5	84	77.6	76	58.1	160
Book/record	42.9	105	61.1	90	51.3	195
Jewelry/wristwatch	34.9	63	53.0	100	46.0	163
Grocery store items	32.5	360	41.6	250	36.2	610
Tools	15.9	44	63.0	27	33.8	71
Clothing	26.2	312	40.4	280	32.9	592
Toys	16.1	155	28.3	166	22.4	321
Blankets/sheets	12.5	64	31.6	57	21.5	121
Pots/pans/utensils	10.0	50	23.9	67	17.9	117
Cosmetics/toiletries	11.0	109	19.7	66	14.3	175
TOTAL	26.9	1409	44.6	1281	35.3	2690
TOTAL PRODUCTS	30.6	2149	50.8	1959	40.2	4108
<i>Services</i>						
Appliance repair	45.3	53	75.0	112	65.5	165
Home repair	51.0	51	72.3	94	64.8	145
Car repair	55.2	172	63.0	273	60.0	445
Credit/charge accounts	48.1	54	58.0	69	53.7	123
Film developing	29.3	116	43.4	113	36.2	229
Medical/dental care	28.3	152	38.3	120	32.7	272
Legal services	25.0	28	32.3	31	28.8	59
Car parking	14.3	56	29.0	100	23.7	156
TOTAL SERVICES	38.6	682	54.6	912	47.7	1594
TOTAL PRODUCTS AND SERVICES	32.5	2831	52.0	2871	42.3	5702

or dental care and legal services (32.7 and 28.8 percent, respectively). People are twice as likely to complain about faulty appliance repairs as they are to complain about faulty medical or legal work. The low rates for these two kinds of professional services may reflect the often hypothesized reluctance of individuals to antagonize doctors and lawyers. Consumers may feel that doctors, dentists, and lawyers must be treated with deference, and that it is therefore inappropriate to complain about them.

It was noted above that infrequently purchased products have a higher voicing rate than frequently purchased products. This may be a reflection of the generally greater cost of infrequently purchased products. To study costs more directly, the purchases reported were divided into two categories, usually expensive and usually inexpensive. The types of problems analyzed in the study were also divided into these two categories. Table 9 sets out the distribution of purchase and problem types between these two cost categories. Table 10 reports voicing rates by cost of purchase and cost of problem. Both variables—cost of purchase and cost of problem—affect the rate of voicing directly and significantly.

To explore further the effects of ease of complaining on the likelihood that people will voice complaints about perceived problems, the distinction already discussed between manifest deficiencies and deficiencies that are matters of judgment can be examined in the context of the voicing stage of the complaint process. Manifest problems, such as clerical errors resulting in provision of the wrong item or service or partial and total breakage of products, do not usually involve differences of judgment between buyers and sellers. In these unambiguous situations a buyer need only present the manifest facts to the seller—the item is broken, or it was not delivered—and the buyer can reasonably expect that the right to redress will not be challenged. Where judgment is required, however, buyer and seller may agree on some facts but differ on whether or not they indicate poor design or poor workmanship. Furthermore, some of these problems can be caused by buyers as well as sellers. What seems to the consumer to be the low durability or poor design of a toy may be inherent in the product but may also have been caused by a child's misuse of the toy. An illustration of this concept was reported by a household that had voiced a clothing complaint—"You wear it once or twice and it falls apart"—and was told in reply by the clothing store: "The kids could have ripped them up themselves." For judgment problems, then, a disappointed buyer might reasonably anticipate that mere presentation of the facts may not establish the right to redress. The following are examples of judgment problems: "cosmetics need

TABLE 9

CLASSIFICATION OF PURCHASES AND PROBLEMS AS USUALLY EXPENSIVE AND USUALLY INEXPENSIVE

Usually expensive	Usually inexpensive
<i>Purchases</i>	<i>Purchases</i>
Car	Radio
Tape recorder/stereo equipment	Lamps
Tires	Blankets/sheets
Air conditioner	Pots/pans/utensils
TV set	Tools
Vacuum cleaner	Toys
Washer/dryer	Book/record
Furniture	Clothing
Floor covering	Cosmetics/toiletries
Calculator	Grocery store items
Camera	Mail order items
Jewelry/wristwatch	Film developing
Bicycle	Car parking
Eyeglasses	<i>Problems</i>
Hearing aid/dentures	Partial breakage
Car repair	Ease of use
Home repair	Selection of materials
Appliance repair	Design of product or procedures for furnishing service
Medical/dental care	Human relations
Legal services	
Loans/credit cards/charge accounts	
<i>Problems</i>	
Total breakage	
Slow/late/not furnished	
Wrong product or service furnished	
Misrepresentation	
Clerical error/improper billing	
Loss of customer's property	
Safety	
Irritation/allergy	

TABLE 10

VOICING RATES BY PROBLEM COST AND PURCHASE COST^a

	Usually expensive problems	Usually inexpensive problems	All problems ^b
	%	%	%
Usually expensive purchase	58.1	48.9	52.7
Usually inexpen- sive purchase	41.5	31.7	35.7

a. All rates are computed on bases greater than 275.

b. Includes only problem types categorized in Table 9.

better labels;" "the doctor should have let me see my lab report;" "the hospital should send itemized bills;" "meat should be trimmed better;" "packages of cereal ought to be filled up more;" and "the nylon thread they use doesn't stretch properly [in a dress]."

It is reasonable to assume that it is generally easier to speak up about manifest problems than about differences of judgment. Therefore, if ease of complaining influences complaint voicing, the rate at which manifest complaints are voiced should be higher than the rate at which differences of judgment are asserted. The classification of problems as manifest or judgmental and the voicing rates for each class of problems are given in Table 11. The expectation that manifest problems will be voiced more frequently than judgmental is confirmed for all combinations of product/service/product and service, and strong and weak complaints. Furthermore, the differences are more marked where reinforced by other factors—where problems are weak rather than strong, and where they involve products, responsibility for which may be uncertain, rather than services.

TABLE 11

VOICING RATES FOR MANIFEST AND JUDGMENTAL PROBLEMS BY STRENGTH OF PROBLEM AND TYPE OF PURCHASE

	<i>Weak</i>		<i>Strong</i>	
	Manifest	Judgmental	Manifest	Judgmental
	%	%	%	%
All products	55.9	20.9	66.6	40.5
All services	42.6	35.4	64.8	46.5
All products and services	52.2	23.5	66.1	42.2
<i>Manifest problems</i>				
Partial breakage				
Total breakage				
Freshness				
Slow/late/not furnished				
Wrong product or service furnished				
Loss of customer's property				
Clerical error/wrong billing				
<i>Judgmental problems</i>				
Workmanship				
Design of product or procedure for furnishing service				
Ease of use				
Selection of materials				
Durability				
Stitching				
Fit or size				
Shrinking or fading				
Misrepresentation				

We might expect the difficulty of complaining to be reflected in our data in another way. A consumer who perceives a problem might be more inclined to complain if there is reason to anticipate a favorable response. This hypothesis can be tested in two ways. First, we can see whether voicing rates are related to rates of favorable response by complaint handlers. Second, assuming that individuals who have arranged to pay for purchases with long-term credit perceive themselves as possessing the bargaining tool of nonpayment or delayed payment, we can examine whether they voice complaints more readily than consumers who pay cash. (The present analysis cannot discriminate between the effects of these two variables.)

Presenting detailed data on the results of complaining is beyond the scope of this paper. However, employing a generous definition of satisfactory resolutions, manifest complaints are settled to the satisfaction of consumers in 61.6 percent of cases and judgmental at the lower rate of 50.0 percent. It should be recalled that manifest problems are also voiced more often.

The study developed data on the effects of form of payment by asking respondents whether payment for each purchase was made "in cash, or within about a month, or with longer payments." The clearest evidence of the effect of credit on complaint voicing can be found by looking at purchases of usually expensive products as defined in Table 9 (thus controlling for the interrelationship between the use of credit and purchase cost), made by households in each of the four socioeconomic status (SES) categories (see text accompanying Table 2). Use of credit leads to a greater probability that a perceived problem will be complained about (see Table 12). This pattern holds for all four SES categories. Credit purchasers are in a continuing relationship with sellers, which may make communication easier. And obviously people who have not yet paid the full price may reasonably believe that their problems will be treated with greater consideration.

The failure of consumers to complain when they perceive problems with purchases may also be explained by a general attitude towards complaining, an attitude that may vary with household characteristics. Households were even more reluctant to characterize themselves as "complainers" than they had been to acknowledge that they perceived problems and thus might be thought of as "carpers" or "sticklers" who detected deficiencies more often than most. Respondents were asked: "Do you think you and your household make more, less, or about the same number of complaints as other households make?" Only 9.1 percent believed that they voiced complaints more often than most, whereas more

TABLE 12

VOICING RATES FOR NONPRICE PROBLEMS WITH EXPENSIVE PRODUCTS
BY METHOD OF PAYMENT AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Household socio- economic status	Method of payment							
	Cash		Short-term credit		Long-term credit		Cash and all credit	
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
All SES categories	48.4	1058	55.4	175	59.0	383	51.7	1616
Low	42.2	154	46.4	28	55.6	72	46.5	254
Lower middle	46.4	153	— ^a	— ^a	60.0	75	52.7	245
Upper middle	47.2	345	53.3	45	53.2	124	49.2	514
High	52.5	406	55.3	85	66.7	112	55.6	603

a. Base is fewer than 25 cases.

than half insisted that they complained less often (compared with the third who claimed that they *perceived* fewer deficiencies). Since many of these responses must be empirically incorrect, Americans must have other reasons for preferring to think of themselves as encountering, and complaining about, bad products or poor services no more often than their fellows. This is a surprising finding, in light of the conventional wisdom that Americans are a highly litigious people.

If voicing complaints is generally disfavored, it is likely that households would be even more reluctant to complain to third parties, an inference that receives indirect confirmation from the very low rate at which third parties are actually used. We would expect to find that those households that do overcome the obstacles of cost, difficulty, and image, are distinguishable in terms of politics, education, and consumer consciousness. In order to explore this expectation, we asked respondents to characterize themselves as radical, liberal, middle of the road, conservative, or strong conservative. As Table 13 shows, politics do not appear to influence the decision to voice a complaint; there is no significant difference in the distribution among political affiliations of those who experience and those who voice. But there does appear to be a significant difference between those who complain in any fashion, and those who complain to third parties: consumers at the middle or toward the right of the spectrum decline in proportions, and consumers toward the left of the spectrum increase. To make this clearer, we calculated a ratio of complaints to third parties divided by any complaints, for each political category (see Table 14). And once again, a significantly higher proportion of those with radical or liberal convictions complain to third parties when

they do complain. If we compare the same ratio (complaints to third parties divided by all voiced complaints) across educational categories, we find a direct relationship: 6.1 percent for high school or less; 8.4 percent for college graduates; and 10.6 percent for postgraduate education. Interest in consumer affairs, as measured by this study (see text accompanying Table 3) also related directly to third-party use.

TABLE 13

PERCEPTION OF NONPRICE PROBLEMS, VOICING OF COMPLAINTS, AND VOICING TO THIRD PARTIES, BY POLITICAL VIEWS OF RESPONDENT
(in percentages)

<i>Political view of respondent</i>	Households with any nonprice problems	Households that have ever voiced	Households that have used third parties
Radical	2.6	2.4	4.4
Liberal	22.3	23.6	31.1
Middle of the road	45.8	45.2	36.7
Conservative	26.7	26.0	25.6
Strong conservative	2.6	2.8	2.2
(N)	(1717)	(1191)	(90)

TABLE 14

LIKELIHOOD THAT A CONSUMER WHO COMPLAINS WILL COMPLAIN TO A THIRD PARTY, BY POLITICAL VIEWS OF RESPONDENT

<i>Political views of respondent</i>	Number of households that have ever voiced	Number that have used third parties	Ratio of third-party use to total complaints
Radical	29	4	13.7%
Liberal	281	28	10.0
Middle of the road	538	33	6.1
Conservative	310	23	7.4
Strong conservative	33	2	6.1%
(N)	(1191)	(90)	

The characteristics that lead to relatively high use of third parties indicate that third-party complaint handling mechanisms, as they now operate, disproportionately serve the better educated, better informed, and politically more active households. Furthermore, the relationship of these social characteristics to third-party use suggests that, throughout the complaint process, people with

lesser educational attainment and lesser knowledge of consumer affairs do not press sellers to respond to their grievances as often as our marketing system requires. The disproportionate use of third parties by liberals and radicals may reflect public belief that complaining to third parties (and perhaps forceful complaining of any kind) is a form of left-wing political activity.

For all the reasons just indicated, and because of the data presented earlier on perception of problems, we would expect the voicing of complaints to be related to socioeconomic status and race. Table 15 confirms this expectation: whites complain more than blacks within each SES category; and within the white population, complaints vary directly with SES (though it is anomalous that among blacks, those in the lower middle SES category complain the most frequently). It has already been shown that socioeconomic status is directly related to *perception* of consumer problems (see Table 2, *supra*). If we combine the effects of socioeconomic status on perception and voicing, then for every 1,000 purchases, households in the highest status category voice complaints concerning 98.9 purchases, while households in the lowest status category voice complaints concerning 60.7 purchases.

TABLE 15

COMPLAINTS VOICED AS A PERCENTAGE OF PROBLEMS PERCEIVED BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND RACE

Race	Socioeconomic status							
	Lowest		Lower middle		Upper middle		Highest	
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
Black	35.4	81	45.0	30	41.5	40	41.9	34
White	39.8	262	37.8	261	42.2	457	46.1	571
Black, white and other	38.4	356	38.7	298	42.5	508	45.8	620

Another discrepancy between the troubles consumers perceive and the complaints they voice involves the nature of the deficiency: voiced complaints overreport some topics and underreport others. Table 16 shows the distribution of types of perceived problems and voiced complaints. Here we see, for example, that design is the subject of 11.6 percent of perceived problems, but only of 6.4 percent of voiced complaints. In general, the principal discrepancy between perceived problems and voiced complaints is the underrepresentation of complaints requiring the consumer to assert a difference of judgment (e.g., about the selection of materials, design, durability, and ease of use) and the overrepresentation of complaints about defects that can be proved objectively and easily

(e.g., clerical errors, furnishing incorrect items or services, and breakage and loss of customers' property).²

TABLE 16

DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN NATURE OF PERCEIVED NONPRICE PROBLEMS
AND NATURE OF VOICED COMPLAINTS

	Perceived problems	Voiced complaints
	%	%
Clerical error/wrong billing	1.5	2.5
Wrong item or service furnished	2.3	3.3
Partial breakage	11.7	16.9
Total breakage	5.2	7.1
Loss of customer's property	1.0	1.4
Slow/late/not furnished	5.9	7.0
Freshness	3.0	3.4
Fit/size	2.7	3.1
Workmanship	9.2	9.4
Misrepresentation	4.9	4.2
Shrinking/fading	1.2	0.9
Stitching	1.8	1.5
Ease of use	1.9	1.4
Durability	7.9	4.6
Design of product or method of furnishing service	11.6	6.4
Selection of materials	3.9	2.0
Other (except price)	24.4	25.0
TOTAL	100.1	100.1
(N)	(7227)	(3227)

This suggests that business and government are currently deprived of a good deal of firsthand information about desired changes in products, services, and marketing practices.

III. RESULTS OF COMPLAINING

This paper's hypothesis that a great deal of consumer trouble currently goes unremedied is borne out by the data on rates of problem perception and complaint voicing. Even if all complaints

2. The discrepancy in the rates at which complaints are voiced is more profound than the small differences in the percentages in Table 16 indicate. In our data, *all* problems perceived by a respondent regarding a purchase are deemed to have been voiced if *any* complaint is made about the purchase. Thus our analysis considers both a design problem and a clerical error as voiced if the respondent states that the seller was contacted, even if the respondent only complained about the clerical error to the seller. It is therefore likely that there is an upward bias in our figures for the voicing of judgmental problems, and that the discrepancies revealed by our data should be taken as indicative of larger differences.

led to satisfactory resolutions, the bulk of consumer problems would not be redressed. However, it is not realistic to suppose that all complaints lead to corrective action that is acceptable to the complainer. Common experience suggests that many complaints are rejected by their recipients. Discovering what happens to the complaints that are voiced is fundamental to understanding the consumer complaint process. To probe this issue we asked each respondent who described any action in response to perceived problems "What was the result?" with respect to each purchase.

Replies were recorded verbatim by the interviewers; up to three responses for each result were coded for analysis. For this inquiry, results were categorized as full satisfaction, full dissatisfaction, or mixed results. In general, factual reports of concrete events were supplied by the respondent; in some instances, though, respondents merely said that a result was "satisfactory," or "not good." Table 17 enumerates the results that were classified as satisfactory and unsatisfactory.

TABLE 17
RESULTS CLASSIFIED AS SATISFACTORY AND UNSATISFACTORY

Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Item repaired	Seller or manufacturer denies responsibility
Item replaced or service performed again	Nothing was done
Money refunded	Problem has recurred
Money partially refunded	Bought new item
Seller or manufacturer adopted suggestion	Paid for repair
Respondent states that result is satisfactory	Respondent states that result is unsatisfactory

TABLE 18
RESULTS OF COMPLAINTS HANDLED BY THIRD PARTIES,
BY IDENTITY OF THIRD PARTY
(Numbers of cases)

	Satisfactory result	Unsatisfactory result	Pending	No specific request made ^a
Better Business Bureau	4	18	—	—
Consumer affairs department	4	5	6	1
Court or lawyer	5	5	6	—
Others	13	23	4	4
TOTAL	26	51	16	5

a. E.g., a general complaint about high prices.

Of those complaints presented to third parties, a small subgroup of all voiced complaints, about one-third of all resolutions were satisfactory (see Table 18). Pending cases equal about one-fifth of all resolved cases, an indication that many cases may remain unresolved for substantial periods of time.

TABLE 19
SATISFACTION WITH RESULTS OF VOICED NONPRICE COMPLAINTS, BY
PURCHASE CATEGORY

	Satis- factory	Unsatis- factory	Mixed	Other	(N)
<i>Infrequently purchased products</i>					
	%	%	%	%	
Washer/dryer	80.8	15.4	3.8	—	26
Camera	71.4	21.4	7.1	—	28
TV set	61.1	13.0	22.0	3.7	54
Tires	59.3	25.9	14.8	—	54
Calculator	57.9	18.4	15.8	7.9	38
Tape/stereo	57.4	19.7	16.4	6.6	61
Car	56.4	30.5	8.3	4.5	133
Bicycle	56.4	27.3	14.5	1.8	55
Eyeglasses	54.3	19.6	20.7	5.4	92
Vacuum cleaner	48.0	36.0	12.0	4.0	25
Floor covering	46.7	36.7	6.7	10.0	30
TOTAL ^a	57.5	24.3	14.5	3.7	649
<i>Frequently purchased products</i>					
Clothing	75.3	18.7	4.0	2.0	198
Book/record	75.2	17.1	2.9	4.8	105
Toys	69.4	14.3	9.7	5.6	72
Cosmetics	69.2	26.9	3.8	—	26
Mail order	67.5	18.8	2.5	11.3	80
Grocery items	60.1	32.3	4.4	3.2	248
Furniture	59.2	14.5	15.8	10.5	76
Tools	58.3	25.0	16.7	—	24
Jewelry/watch	57.7	22.5	14.1	5.6	71
Blankets/sheets	56.0	40.0	4.0	—	25
TOTAL ^a	65.8	23.1	6.5	4.7	944
<i>Services</i>					
Home repair	52.6	29.5	12.8	5.1	78
Car repair	49.8	36.0	9.2	5.0	261
Credit	49.3	29.0	2.9	18.8	69
Film developing	45.2	38.1	8.3	8.3	84
Appliance repair	35.5	43.9	15.9	4.7	107
Medical/dental care	34.5	46.4	8.3	10.7	84
Car parking	29.8	63.8	4.3	2.1	47
TOTAL SERVICES ^a	43.9	39.7	9.2	7.2	746
TOTAL PRODUCTS AND SERVICES ^a					
	56.5	28.7	9.5	5.3	2339

a. The following purchase categories each have fewer than 13 resolved complaints; they are not listed in the table, but their values are included in the totals: radio, air conditioner, lamps, pots/pans/utensils, hearing aid or dentures, legal services.

Overall satisfaction with complaint resolution by purchase category, for all voiced nonprice problems, is reported in Table 19. A sharp distinction can be seen between products and services. Results for infrequently purchased products were somewhat worse than for frequently purchased products. Not only do service complaints more often lead to unsatisfactory resolutions, but as compared with product complaints, their results take longer to achieve: 10 percent of all voiced service complaints were pending when the respondents were interviewed, but only 7.6 percent of complaints about products.

Comparing the rates at which different types of problems lead to satisfactory resolutions for both product and service purchases suggests that type of purchase is more significant than type of problem in overall effect on the outcome of voiced complaints (see Table 20). In all but one category, problem topics lead to satisfactory results less often for services than they do for products. The two manifest problems that are most frequently voiced as complaints, partial and total breakage, show rates of satisfactory resolution that are relatively high: 64 percent and 63.4 percent, respectively. Among judgmental problems, design complaints lead to satisfactory resolutions in only 36.2 percent of the instances in which they are voiced. Judgmental problems, collectively, lead to satisfactory resolutions in 50 percent of instances in which they are voiced; the comparable figure for manifest problems is 61.6 percent.

We also investigated whether the complainant's socioeconomic status is related to satisfaction with the resolution of the complaint; although the percentage of complaints in which satisfaction was achieved, averaged within the four socioeconomic categories, ranged from 59.3 to 65.4 percent, there was no statistically significant correlation with SES. Yet this lack of bias at the terminus of the complaint process should not blind us to the fact that households in the lower socioeconomic strata perceive fewer problems and complain less often, so that even a completely unbiased response to their complaints would not provide them with a fair share of problem resolutions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Consumers perceive deficiencies in many of the products and services they buy. About one in every five purchases leads to observation of a nonprice problem and for some items, notably cars and some services, the rate of problem perception is considerably higher (about one in three purchases). The acceptability of this distribution of purchase shortcomings is hard to measure,

TABLE 20
SATISFACTORY RESULT RATES BY PROBLEM TOPIC AND TYPE OF
PURCHASE
(in order of satisfactory results for products and services)

	Products	Services	Products and services
	%	%	%
Freshness	81.5	—	81.5
Stitching	76.7	—	76.7
Partial breakage	67.9	37.7	64.0
Total breakage	66.5	— ^a	63.4
Shrinking/fading	62.1	—	62.1
Fit/size	61.3	— ^a	61.0
Clerical error/wrong billing	— ^a	62.5	60.3
Durability	59.3	— ^a	57.1
Workmanship	63.4	50.0	55.8
Slow/late/not furnished	62.2	47.8	53.8
Other (except cost)	57.1	48.3	53.3
Wrong item or service furnished	65.4	34.8	51.0
Selection of materials	45.1	— ^a	41.8
Ease of use	45.5	— ^a	41.5
Misrepresentation	41.3	31.0	38.8
Loss of customer's property	— ^a	35.9	38.3
Design of product or procedures for furnishing service	39.8	31.3	36.2

a. Base less than 25 cases. Reported rates have based ranging from 29 to 826 cases.

because no useful historical comparison exists. To date, only a small number of empirical studies of consumer behavior have been carried out (e.g., Landon and Emery, n.d.; Liefeld *et al.*, 1975; Warland *et al.*, 1975), and these studies tend to examine only one product type (Diener, 1975; Handy and Pfaff, 1975) or one or more especially serious complaints across various purchase categories (King and McEvoy, 1976; Day, 1975). It is apparent, however, that consumers have a lot to complain about. And although it cannot be said whether the findings of this study represent an improvement or a worsening of prior business performance, it is possible to pose a rhetorical question—would any business advertise: “Satisfaction provided to four out of five customers?”

The widespread incidence of purchases with problems clearly establishes that the consumer complaint process can fulfill an important function in compensating the consumer for defective performance; it also suggests that the complaint process can furnish a great deal of information about purchase failures. Unfortunately, the data tend to show that there are significant differences between the problems people notice and the complaints they voice. Consequently, the consumer complaint process is seriously deficient in compensating the buyer or informing the seller. At the

problem perception stage, individuals of low socioeconomic status notice fewer problems. Similarly, low household interest in consumer affairs is linked to low problem perception rates. For all households, simple manifest problems are perceived more strongly than judgmental problems. And almost all consumers are reluctant to acknowledge that they have suffered more than an average amount of trouble with purchases.

At the complaint voicing stage, buyers suppress complaints concerning about two-thirds of the problems they perceive. Not all suppressed complaints are associated with complete inaction. In some instances, buyers may exit; however, these exit actions do not serve to compensate the buyer for the loss incurred nor to inform the appropriate business about its failure (Hirschman, 1970:26). Buyers do present roughly one-third of perceived problems to complaint processors, but these do not accurately represent the full range of consumer problems. Compared with perceived problems, voiced complaints overrepresent problems that are simple, that involve high cost, and that are experienced by high socioeconomic status households. The data show, too, that third parties deal with only a small segment of the problems people perceive and the complaints people voice. This provides an illustration of Stewart Macaulay's thesis (1963) in a consumer setting, although it may be more accurate to say that only a small number of cases reach third parties than to say that involvement of third parties is particularly likely to occur in certain kinds of cases. Because of the pattern of third-party use, businesses are able to impose their own unreviewed standards for decision-making on almost all the complaint cases they handle.

The data on response to complaints show that overall, somewhat more than half are resolved to the satisfaction of consumers. Complaints concerning services do not produce as many favorable outcomes as those concerning products, and there is a similar disparity between complaints about judgmental and manifest problems.

Buyers thus provide business with a subsidy in the form of up to a two-thirds discount on requests for redress, and many voiced complaints are not resolved to the buyer's satisfaction. Perhaps our society is so organized that it can easily tolerate the existence of many unresolved grievances (Felstiner, 1974). On the other hand, feelings of powerlessness in the marketplace may contribute to social distress (Danzig and Lowy, 1975:678; National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968:139-41). Because this question is difficult to resolve with empirical data and is likely to remain unanswered, it is appropriate to look beyond the simple issue of whether *any* large discount given by buyers to sellers is

desirable. Our analysis allows examination of the *particular* discount consumers currently provide in the marketplace; it shows that it is given to business through the systematic suppression of complaints involving personal judgment, complaints involving relatively low cost items, and complaints about purchase failures suffered by people of low socioeconomic status.

Blame for the existence of this pattern cannot easily be assigned. Consumer self-censoring of complaints is not shown by the data to be intentionally fostered by business. However, businesses do benefit from the pattern, and few have sought to change it. The fundamental unfairness of contemporary complaint processing is simple to state: it appears to favor people who have relatively high status and who are able to articulate judgmental problems, a group of consumer "haves" over "have-nots."³

An increase in the rates at which consumers voice complaints could benefit individual consumers, businesses, and society as a whole. Efforts to make consumers more aware of their right to complain are designed to increase the amount of voicing. The Consumer Law Training Center in New York instructs representatives from community groups and social service agencies in how to teach good consumer habits and basic consumer law to members and clients of their organizations (Consumer Law Training Center, 1975). Such a program assumes that consumers remain silent when they encounter a faulty product or inadequate service because they are unaware that they are entitled to a remedy. Although this might be true in some cases, it is possible that other consumers take no action because they have previously failed to obtain satisfaction or generally expect that they will not be capable of securing redress. The low frequency of resort to third parties is further evidence that many consumers view the seller as a court of last resort, who can unilaterally determine the legitimacy of the complaint.

Reforms intended to increase the absolute level, and improve the representativeness, of complaining must decrease the costs to the consumer of voicing the complaint. Maurice Rosenberg (1971) has advocated the establishment of a Department of Economic Justice—a government agency that would immediately pay a refund to a complaining consumer and later recoup these payments through consolidated legal actions brought against offending businesses. Although this Department would be a third party, it would be radically different from those existing third-party reme-

3. These consumer "haves" may exhibit competence in complaining similar to the competence in litigation Galanter describes for business "repeat-players" (1974).

dy agents that are used so infrequently by consumers. Another proposal would require merchants to refund the purchase price or replace an item at the request of a buyer. (Jones and Boyer, 1975:365-66; see also Fleming, 1970; *Consumer Protection*: Hearings before the Consumer Subcommittee of the Committee on Commerce of the United States Senate, on S. 2246, S. 3092, and S. 3201, 91st Congress, 1st and 2d sess. 64, 1969-70, testimony of P. Ellman). The enactment of either of these no-fault systems would be inadvisable, even though each would make complaining simpler for consumers. First, the economic cost might be great. The Department would have substantial administrative costs and since some products might be returned that were not defective, payments to consumers could exceed those recovered from businesses.⁴ The alternative of refund or replacement by the seller would also involve significant costs. Unwarranted returns would result in price increases. Moreover, a merchant required to refund or replace all purchases upon request might well decide that it was not worthwhile to evaluate the problem with a particular product. Sellers' perceptions of problems in products or services would remain distorted.

A no-fault system might also reduce the incentives for consumer awareness concerning the quality and safety of the products they use. The popularity of local self-help groups that work to improve goods and services, as well as to vindicate individual complaints (Hersbergen, 1974), would be diminished.

Without changing the relevant substantive law, certain procedural reforms in transactions between buyer and seller could lessen the apparent costs of complaining without requiring the routine involvement of third parties, either those currently operating or those suggested above. We propose a simple statutory requirement that could increase the incidence of successful complaint voicing with a minimum of economic and psychological cost. It is based on the assumptions that most businesses will deal fairly with a consumer who complains, and that people prefer to return to the place of purchase to voice complaints. We would require that sellers disclose their complaint handling procedures, however rudimentary they may be, and keep a simple record of complaints received and their resolution.⁵ This record, which could be a single notebook in the case of a small store, would be

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4. Most proposals suggest a "spot check" policy to dissuade consumers from collecting except when warranted (Rosenberg, 1971:814). Even if we assume that such a policy would be effective, many returns would still not present a cause of action either because the product was no longer under warranty or because the consumer's interpretation of the facts, however sincere, was incorrect.
 5. This proposal is loosely based on a suggestion made by Lurie (1972).

open to public inspection. Thus, individual buyers or representatives of public interest groups could monitor and publicize the complaint handling practices of businesses.⁶ Broad-based consumer groups specializing in the treatment of consumers by particular industries or kinds of services would be particularly well suited to carry out this function (Leflar and Rogol, 1976; Best and Brown, 1977). Since this record-keeping technique would allow comparison between competing sellers, it might motivate them to deal more fairly with complaining customers. Knowledge that such a complaint system exists might also encourage buyers to register grievances even when they anticipate rejection by the seller, since they would have the satisfaction of knowing that their report would be available to other buyers and to interested consumer groups and officials. This record-keeping system would also improve the ability of law enforcement agencies to act against sellers whose complaint handling practices show a pattern of unfairness. Wide discretion is available to regulatory bodies in defining fair complaint handling policies (*Federal Trade Commission v. Sperry & Hutchinson Co.*, 405 U.S. 233, 1972).

The limited role of third parties suggests that our first priority should be improvement in the way sellers handle complaints. However, consumers clearly do need a remedy in those instances when sellers reject their complaints; the data show that even now, when buyers make relatively few complaints, sellers satisfy only slightly more than half. Our data contain only a small number of complaints to third parties and are therefore only suggestive. But they are consistent with the following analysis: most sellers will respond favorably to complaints when it seems to them fair or expedient to do so. Sellers probably reject those voiced complaints in which there is a real disagreement over facts or their legal implications. These cases of real disagreement are least likely to be amenable to mediation, such as that offered by Better Business Bureaus, since facilitating communication will not help where the parties already know what their dispute involves. Therefore, the most useful third parties for consumers with problems that involve real disagreements would be those empowered to decide the facts and enforce a remedy: small claims courts and binding arbitration.

At present, access to such institutions is limited because they are poorly publicized and operated at inconvenient hours or inconvenient locations. Where they do exist, however, neighborhood small claims courts can provide an authoritative and swift resolu-

6. Although reformers ordinarily focus their attention on treatment of complaints that remain unresolved beyond the buyer-seller stage, the self-interest of businesses may stimulate improvement at the buyer-seller stage itself (Ross, 1975:91-92; Kendall and Russ, 1975:37-39).

tion of factual disputes (Yngvesson and Hennessey, 1975: 270-71). For these reasons, proposals to improve small claims courts, for instance by federal legislation and financing, ought to be supported.⁷

In addition, small claims courts could play an important informational role. The Consumer Product Safety Commission administers a data-gathering system in which selected hospital emergency rooms file daily reports of product related injuries. These reports are tabulated to provide information to the Commission for immediate action and long-range planning (Frye, 1975). If neighborhood courts came to be perceived as providing a consumer justice service analogous to the health care rendered by hospital emergency rooms, a program of monitoring judgments awarded to plaintiffs could provide early warnings of defective products or deteriorating service. Such reports could also help government agencies improve the enforcement of consumer protection laws.

There are, of course, many deficiencies in the operations of small claims courts, of which difficulty in collecting the judgment is probably the most glaring. Since litigation in small claims court requires a significant investment of time, one cannot expect consumers to sue unless there is a reasonable assurance that defendants will pay judgments rendered against them. One solution would be to have the government pay unsatisfied judgments and then seek payment from the defendant, perhaps in lump sums representing many judgments. This is similar to systems of uninsured motorist protection in force in many states. And it improves on Rosenberg's suggestion (1971) in two ways: unmeritorious claims would not be paid, and the government would not have to litigate the liability of the seller.

The findings that voiced complaints are a distorted representation of all consumer problems, and that complaints to third parties are in turn a small and somewhat unrepresentative selection from all voiced complaints contain two lessons for third-party complaint processors. They should seek more complaints, and should rely less on complaints for planning policy. The Federal Trade Commission, for example, has been criticized for using the "mail bag" to set priorities (ABA Commission to Study the FTC, 1969). Our data confirm that such reliance might lead to overlooking entire classes of problems that deserve attention. Agencies charged with enforcing consumer protection laws should develop

7. See, e.g., *Consumer Controversies Resolution Act: Report of the Senate Committee on Commerce on S. 2069 to Regulate Commerce by Establishing National Goals for the Effective, Fair, Inexpensive and Expedient Resolution of Controversies Involving Consumers, and for Other Purposes*, 94th Cong., 2d sess., 1976.

more systematic, proactive methods to discover buyers' true problems. At the same time, these agencies should avoid excessive preoccupation with individual complaints to the neglect of enforcement activities that could help many more people.

One other implication of our data merits emphasis. We have argued that those consumer problems that cannot be resolved between buyer and seller require the intervention of a third party with power to adjudicate or arbitrate. Mediation is of little value in such a situation since a buyer who is sufficiently knowledgeable and aggressive to appeal to a third party has almost certainly already complained to the seller without success. Proposals for a federal consumer protection agency should bear this in mind.⁸ If that agency is to respond usefully to individual complaints, it must have teeth or it will merely provide superfluous information to those complainants who already know how to present their claims (Cahn and Cahn, 1968:984).

In sum, our data show that a large number of consumer problems exist, that many of those problems are never presented as complaints to businesses or third parties, and that many of the complaints that are voiced are not resolved to the satisfaction of the complainants. This pattern is inconsistent with the ideal of the free market: the fair selling of goods by sellers who are accountable to their customers for the quality of those goods and the marketing process. Theoretically, there is some risk that stimulating complaints could set our society upon a self-destructive course of accelerating complaining and litigating. But realistically, the data show that improved complaint processing could make a substantial contribution to meeting the goal of providing buyers with fair value for their money.

APPENDIX A

Methodology. This survey of urban households used random telephone interviews of adult household members in thirty-four cities during February and March, 1975. All interviews were conducted by volunteer staff members of Call For Action under the supervision of survey leaders trained at Call For Action's national convention in January, 1975. Call For Action is a national organi-

8. Although the proposals for such an agency that have been passed by the House and the Senate stress the agency's use of complaints as a source of information (see, e.g., *To Establish an Independent Consumer Agency: Hearings before the Committee on Government Operations on S. 200*, 94th Cong., 1st sess. 24-26, 1975), other complaint handling functions have been urged. For example, President Carter referred to the proposed agency in a March 5, 1977, broadcast of conversations with citizens from various parts of the country, saying that "it would let you and I know where to go to register a complaint . . ." (*New York Times*, March 6, 1977, p. 32).

zation, with units in many metropolitan areas, which offers telephone assistance for a wide variety of urban problems. Each local group is associated with a local broadcasting station which provides publicity and pays the group's operating expenses.

Selection of cities for the survey was determined by the location of units of Call For Action. All units were asked to participate and to collect as many interviews as staff resources would permit. Naturally, some groups were able to devote more resources to the project than others.

Telephone numbers of households were selected at random from the most recent editions of the white pages telephone directories of the participating cities. In multiple directory metropolitan areas, numbers were selected from each directory according to its proportion of the metropolitan area's total residential telephone number listings. Nonresidential listings were not included. In the largest cities, numbers from a table of random numbers were substituted for the last two digits of each number that was obtained from a directory to increase the likelihood of reaching households with numbers that are unlisted by request of the household or because the household had moved after the printing of the directory. Up to eight calls were made to each sampled number to increase the chance that an interview would be obtained. Interviews were completed with an adult household member in 80.3 percent of the households contacted. Overall, 2,419 interviews with adults were completed.

At each household contacted the interview was conducted with an adult who served as spokesperson for the entire household, reporting the experiences of all its members. An effort was made to compensate for the greater frequency with which women answered the telephone by asking to interview an adult male in the household and interviewing an adult female only if an adult male was not present or was not willing to be interviewed. This procedure yielded a sample that was 35.5 percent male and 64.5 percent female.

The distribution of interviews by cities is shown in Table 21. As a group, the 2,419 households interviewed are closely representative of the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) in which their cities are located; in turn, the population of these SMSAs is a reasonably valid representation of all the nation's urban consumers. In terms of race and employment, for example, our sample's demographic characteristics are quite close to those of the totality of SMSAs covered in the survey. And although more of the SMSAs are located in the East than would be desirable for perfect geographic balance, there is some evidence to suggest that

geography is not of major importance to the subject of this study. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has conducted a somewhat similar study of consumer experiences with retail food purchases, using a more comprehensive sample than was possible in our effort. That study shows that variables such as type of community or geographic location have less effect on consumer reactions to purchases than do a number of other variables, such as education and income (Handy and Pfaff, 1975:42). Another survey conducted for the federal government has collected data on consumer problems mentioned by consumers who were asked whether a household member had experienced a consumer problem during the past year. This methodology excludes data on any problem a respondent cannot recall without aid. It is also subject to the criticism that

TABLE 21
DISTRIBUTION OF COMPLETED INTERVIEWS BY CITY

Albany, N.Y.	14
Altoona	34
Baltimore	47
Birmingham, Ala.	19
Boston	208
Buffalo	48
Chicago	86
Cleveland	148
Denver	32
Durham	19
Little Rock	51
Los Angeles	20
Memphis	49
Miami, Fla.	29
Milwaukee	26
New Haven	34
New York	371
Oklahoma City	238
Omaha	22
Peoria	34
Philadelphia	208
Pittsburgh	50
Providence	46
Raleigh	22
Sacramento	229
San Diego	49
San Francisco	8
Seattle	47
Syracuse	48
Tacoma	40
Tucson	41
Utica	25
Wheeling	26
Youngstown	51
TOTAL	2,419

by asking initially about problems (rather than about purchases) it allows respondents to overlook purchases that have been unsatisfactory but that they do not wish to call "problem" purchases. Nonetheless, the data show that perception of problems is influenced only slightly by region or by urban versus rural residence, except that residents of the South Central states appear aberrant (King and McEvoy, 1976:25-26). This study found income to be the variable with the most pronounced effect on the decision to take action on complaints, although the data also show a somewhat higher rate of action for Northeastern households (*ibid.*: 46-48).

In order to test for possible biases introduced by the selection of cities, we examined whether there was substantial stability in the critical variables of our analysis. As the data in Table 22 indicate, the results for the key variables, such as number of purchases per household, interest in consumer issues, problem rates, or voicing rates, are generally quite stable.

TABLE 22

DIFFERENCES IN MEAN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS BY CITY IN WHICH RESPONDENT LIVED

	Number of interviews	Mean items purchased	Consumer interest ^e	Political efficacy ^f	Mean problem rate	Mean voicing rate	Mean satisfaction rate
		%	%	%	%	%	%
Small cities ^a	326	11.9	3.3	2.3	17.3	36.7	68.2
Oklahoma City	238	10.6	2.9	2.2	18.3	34.9	58.9
Sacramento	229	11.9	3.3	2.1	19.1	41.5	61.2
Other medium cities ^b	249	11.7	3.4	2.3	16.5	55.6	61.8
Cleveland	148	11.9	3.7	2.4	23.1	40.7	66.6
Other large cities ^c	328	12.7	3.3	2.4	18.5	41.2	61.6
Boston	208	13.0	3.7	2.1	21.3	41.2	67.4
New York City	371	11.0	3.6	2.4	21.9	40.6	55.3
Philadelphia	208	11.3	3.3	2.4	16.6	49.1	63.8
Other very large cities ^d	114	12.9	3.5	2.5	18.4	40.1	45.5

a. Under 150,000 households in SMSA.

b. 150,000 to 299,000 households in SMSA.

c. 300,000 to 799,000 households in SMSA.

d. 800,000 or more households in SMSA.

e. Consumer interest measure is the number of "yes" answers to question 1.

f. Political efficacy is number of "yes" answers to questions 5.a through 5.d in questionnaire (see Appendix B).

Questionnaire. Twenty-six products and eight services were chosen for investigation in this study. Table 23 lists those items. They were selected from the schedule used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States Department of Labor in its Consumer Price Index (CPI) survey. The CPI divides consumption into five categories—food, apparel and upkeep, transportation, housing, health and recreation—all of which are represented in this study's purchase categories.

TABLE 23
PURCHASE CATEGORIES SURVEYED

Car (new or used)
Tires
TV set
Tape recorder/stereo equipment
Radio
Air conditioner
Vacuum cleaner
Washer/dryer
Furniture
Lamps
Carpeting/floor covering
Blankets/sheets
Pots/pans/cooking utensils
Tools
Calculator
Camera
Wristwatch/jewelry
Bicycle
Toys
Books/records
Clothing
Eyeglasses
Hearing aid/dentures
Cosmetics/toiletries
Grocery store items
Mail order items not already mentioned
Car repairs
Home repairs
Appliance repairs
Medical/dental care
Legal services
Loans/credit cards/charge accounts
Film developing
Car parking

In addition to questions about their purchasing experiences, respondents were asked about their attitudes toward complaining, as well as standard questions concerning their socioeconomic characteristics. The questionnaire is set out in full as Appendix B.

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Hello, I'm . . . I'm a volunteer with . . . Call For Action, and we are conducting a survey to help consumers. Your phone number was selected at random. (If speaking to a woman:) I have just talked to several women. To help round out the survey, is there a man available I could speak to? (If no:) Let's continue. We would very much appreciate your help. (If speaking to a man:) We would very much appreciate your help.

1. I'm going to read some topics to you. Please tell me if they have been discussed in your home. a. Cost of electricity; b. Quality of car servicing; c. Ingredient labels on foods; d. Shopping for bargains; e. Consumer protection laws.

2.a. Did you or anyone in your household buy [name of item] in the last year or so?

(If yes, ask b. and c.)

2.b. Was it paid for in cash or within about a month, or with longer payments?

2.c. Was it satisfactory, somewhat satisfactory, somewhat unsatisfactory, or unsatisfactory?

2.d. (If satisfactory or somewhat satisfactory:) How could it have been better for your household? (If somewhat unsatisfactory or unsatisfactory:) What was the problem?

2.e. (If could have been better or if there was any problem:) Did anyone in your household do anything about it?

(If yes, ask f. and g.)

2.f. What was done?

2.g. What was the result?

[Question 3 permitted free response of up to two additional purchase categories.]

4.a. Do you think you and your household have more, less, or about the same number of problems with products and services as other households have?

4.b. Do you think you and your household make more, less, or about the same number of complaints about products and services as other households do?

Now I'd like to read some of the kinds of things people have said in interviews, and ask you whether you agree or disagree. I'll read them one at a time—please tell me whether you agree or disagree.

5.a. People like me don't have much say about what the government does.

5.b. Voting is the only way that people like me can have any say about how the government runs things.

5.c. Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person can't really understand what's going on.

5.d. I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.

Finally, I'd like to ask you some questions about your background.

6. In what year were you born?

7.a. Including yourself, how many people live in your household?

7.b. How many are 17 years old or younger?

7.c. How many are 5 years old or younger?

8. Are you now married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?

9. In what religion were you brought up?

10.a. Are you the head of the household?

10.b. What is the highest grade of school (you) (the head of the household) completed?

10.c. (Are you) (Is the head of the household) currently employed, unemployed, retired, a student, a housewife, or what?

10.d. What kind of work (do you) (does the head of the household) do?

10.e. What is the job title?

10.f. In what kind of business or industry is that?

11. How many years have you lived at your current house or apartment?

12. In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or Independent?

13. In politics, would you say that you are a radical, a liberal, a conservative, a strong conservative, or would you call yourself middle of the road?

14. What is your race—black, white, or something else?

15. Was your family income last year above or below \$15,000? (If above, ask:) Was it above or below \$25,000? (If below, ask:) Was it above or below \$8,000?

Thank you very much for helping in this survey.

16. Subject's sex?

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