Pacific Journal of Mathematics

A COMBINATORIAL PROBLEM IN FINITE FIELDS. I

Gerald Ira Myerson

Vol. 82, No. 1 January 1979

PACIFIC JOURNAL OF MATHEMATICS
Vol. 82, No. 1, 1979

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GERALD MYERSON

Given a subgroup G of the multiplicative group of a finite field, we investigate the number of representations of an arbitrary field element as a sum of elements, one from each coset of G. When G is of small index, the theory of cyclotomy yields exact results. For all other G, we obtain good estimates.

This paper formed a portion of the author's doctoral dissertation.

Let $p = 2n + 1$ be an odd prime. Consider the 2^n sums represented by the expression

$$\pm 1 \pm 2 \pm 3 \pm \cdots \pm n .$$

How do these sums distribute themselves among the residue classes modulo p? The answer is, as uniformly as possible; in fact, if we define $N(a)$ as the number of ways of choosing the signs so that $\pm 1 \pm 2 \pm \cdots \pm n \equiv a \pmod p$ then we have

THEOREM 1.

$$N(a) = \frac{1}{p}\left(2^n - \left(\frac{2}{p}\right)\right) \text{ for } a \not\equiv 0 \pmod p ,$$
$$N(0) = \frac{1}{p}\left(2^n - \left(\frac{2}{p}\right)\right) + \left(\frac{2}{p}\right) .$$

Here $(2/p)$ is the Legendre symbol, that is,

$$\left(\frac{2}{p}\right) = \begin{cases} 1 \text{ if } 2 \text{ is a quadratic residue } \pmod p \\ -1 \text{ if } 2 \text{ is not a quadratic residue } \pmod p . \end{cases}$$

Our proof of Theorem 1 will rest on the following lemmas.

LEMMA 2. *If $ab \not\equiv 0 \pmod p$ then $N(a) = N(b)$.*

Proof. Assume $\sum_{k=1}^n u_k k \equiv a \pmod p$, with $u_k \in \{1, -1\}$. Since $ab \not\equiv 0 \pmod p$ there is a c such that $ac \equiv b \pmod p$. Thus we have $\sum_{k=1}^n u_k ck \equiv b \pmod p$. Now for $k = 1, 2, \cdots, n$, let $ck \equiv u_k' m_k \pmod p$, where $1 \leqq m_k \leqq n$, $u_k' \in \{1, -1\}$; these conditions determine m_k and u_k' uniquely. Thus,

$$b \equiv \sum_{k=1}^n u_k ck \equiv \sum_{k=1}^n u_k u_k' m_k \equiv \sum_{k=1}^n u_k'' m_k \pmod p ,$$

with

$$u_k'' \in \{1, -1\} .$$

Now, the m_k are all distinct: if $m_k = m_h$, then $ck \equiv \pm ch \pmod{p}$, so $k \equiv \pm h \pmod{p}$, so $k = h$ (since $1 \leqq k \leqq n, 1 \leqq h \leqq n$). Therefore, $b \equiv \sum_{k=1}^{n} u_k'' m_k \pmod{p}$ is a representation of b, corresponding to our original representation of a. Multiplication by c', where $cc' \equiv 1 \pmod{p}$, returns us to the original representation of a. We have established a one-to-one correspondence between the set of representations of a and the set of representations of b, and this shows that $N(a)$ is independent of a for $a \not\equiv 0 \pmod{p}$.

Now let N denote the common value of $N(a)$, $a \not\equiv 0 \pmod{p}$, and note that

$$N(0) + (p - 1)N = 2^n$$

by counting the total number of expressions two different ways. We now obtain a second linear relation between $N(0)$ and N through the use of a generating function. Let θ be any primitive pth root of unity.

LEMMA 3. $\prod_{k=1}^{n} (\theta^k + \theta^{-k}) = \sum_{a=0}^{p-1} N(a)\theta^a = N(0) - N$.

Proof. In expanding the product into a sum of powers of θ each term is of the form $\theta^{\pm 1 \pm 2 \pm \cdots \pm n}$. The number of occurrences of θ^a, $0 \leqq a \leqq p - 1$, is therefore the number of choices of signs for which $\pm 1 \pm 2 \pm \cdots \pm n \equiv a \pmod{p}$, which is $N(a)$. This proves the first equality. The second follows from Lemma 2 and the observation that $\sum_{a=0}^{p-1} \theta^a = 0$.

If we can evaluate $\prod_{k=1}^{n} (\theta^k + \theta^{-k})$ then we will have two equations for $N(0)$ and N.

LEMMA 4.

$$\prod_{k=1}^{n} (\theta^k + \theta^{-k}) = \left(\frac{2}{p}\right) .$$

Proof. $\theta + \theta^{-1}$ is a unit in the ring of integers in $Q(\theta)$; in fact, $(\theta + \theta^{-1})(\theta + \theta^5 + \theta^9 + \cdots + \theta^{2p-1}) = 1$. The numbers $\theta^k + \theta^{-k}$ are conjugate to $\theta + \theta^{-1}$, thus are also units; hence, $\prod_{k=1}^{n} (\theta^k + \theta^{-k})$ is a unit. By Lemma 3 this product is a rational integer, hence it must be 1 or -1. We have

$$\prod_{k=1}^{n}(\theta^k + \theta^{-k}) = N(0) - N\,, \quad \text{(Lemma 3)}$$

$$N(0) - N \equiv N(0) + (p-1)N \pmod{p}\,,$$

$$N(0) + (p-1)N = 2^n\,,$$

$$2^n \equiv \left(\frac{2}{p}\right) \pmod{p} \quad \text{(Euler's criterion).}$$

Thus $\prod_{k=1}^{n}(\theta^k + \theta^{-k}) \equiv (2/p) \pmod{p}$; but since the product must equal 1 or -1, it follows that $\prod_{k=1}^{n}(\theta^k + \theta^{-k}) = (2/p)$.

Proof of Theorem 1. We now have two linear equations in $N(0)$ and N;

$$N(0) + (p-1)N = 2^n\,,$$

$$N(0) - N = \left(\frac{2}{p}\right),$$

where the second equation is a consequence of Lemmas 3 and 4. Simultaneous solution of these equations yields Theorem 1.

We now present a generalization of the problem solved above; the remainder of this paper is an attempt to solve the generalized problem. We fix the following notation: e and f are positive integers such that $ef + 1 = q = p^\alpha$ is a prime power, and F_q is the field of q elements. The multiplicative group of units of F_q, denoted F_q^x, is generated by the primitive element g. The subgroup G, consisting of all the eth powers in F_q^x, is generated by g^e. The cosets of G in F_q^x are denoted and defined by $G_k = g^k G$, $k = 0, 1, \cdots, e-1$. In particular, $G_0 = G$. For each $x \in F_q$ define $N(x)$ to be the number of solutions of $\sum_{k=0}^{e-1} s_k = x$, with $s_k \in G_k$; that is, $N(x)$ is the number of representations of x as a sum of elements, taking precisely one from each coset. $N(x)$ depends, of course, not only on x but on e and f as well; it is, however, independent of the choice of the generator for F_q^x.

With this notation, our problem is, find $N(x)$.

We note that the case $e = (p-1)/2$, $f = 2$, where p is prime, is our original problem; if $e = (p-1)/2$ then $g^e = -1$, $G = \{1, -1\}$, and the cosets of G are the sets $\{k, -k\}$, $k = 1, 2, \cdots, (p-1)/2$.

We now try to solve our new problem by following the solution of the old one. We first note that if $s_k \in G_k$ and $s_h \in G_h$ then $s_k^{-1} \in G_{-k}$ and $s_k s_h \in G_{k+h}$, where the subscripts are to be reduced mod e.

LEMMA 5. *If* $xy \neq 0$, *then* $N(x) = N(y)$.

Proof. Assume $\sum_{k=1}^{e-1} s_k = x$, $s_k \in G_k$. Since $xy \neq 0$ there is a $z \in \boldsymbol{F}_q^x$ such that $xz = y$. Thus, $\sum_{k=0}^{e-1} zs_k = y$. But multiplication by z merely permutes the cosets G_k, so this gives a representation of y. Multiplication by z', where $zz' = 1$, returns us to the original representation of x, so we have a one-one correspondence between the two sets of representations.

Now let N denote the common value of $N(x)$, $x \neq 0$, and note that

$$N(0) + (q-1)N = f^e \,, \tag{1}$$

by counting the number of sums $\sum_{k=0}^{e-1} s_k$, $s_k \in G_k$, in two different ways.

To generalize Lemma 3 we need an analogue for the expressions $\theta^k + \theta^{-k}$. Letting θ be a primitive complex pth root of unity we define the *periods* $\eta_k = \sum_{x \in G_k} \theta^{Trx}$, $k = 0, 1, \cdots, e-1$. Here Tr is the trace map, $Tr: \boldsymbol{F}_q \to \boldsymbol{F}_p$; the elements of $\boldsymbol{F}_p \simeq Z/pZ$ are identified with representatives of the cosets of pZ in Z; the value of θ^{Trx} is independent of the choice of representative since $\theta^p = 1$. We note that η_k depends on the parameters e and f, and also on g: a different choice of g would permute the η_k among themselves. Note that in the case $q = p$ we can simply define $\eta_k = \sum_{a \in G_k} \theta^a$, $k = 0, 1, \cdots, e-1$. In particular, if $f = 2$ the periods are seen upon renumbering to be the numbers $\eta_k = \theta^k + \theta^{-k}$ of our previous discussion.

LEMMA 6. $\prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k = \sum_{x \in F_q} N(x)\theta^{Trx} = N(0) - N$.

Proof. In expanding the product into a sum of powers of θ each term is of the form, $\theta^{Tr(s_1+s_2+\cdots+s_{e-1})}$, $s_k \in G_k$. The number of occurrences of θ^{Trx} is therefore the number of representations of x as $\sum_{k=0}^{e-1} s_k$, $s_k \in G_k$, which is $N(x)$. This proves the first equality. The second follows from Lemma 5 and the observation that

$$\sum_{x \in F_q} \theta^{Trx} = 0 \,.$$

Lemma 6 gives a linear relation between $N(0)$ and N which, together with (1), can be used to evaluate $N(0)$ and N if we can evaluate $\prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k$. For fixed values of e, it is often possible to obtain formulas for $\prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k$ using the theory of cyclotomy.

In the next section, we give the definitions and quote the theorems we need from cyclotomy. The reader is referred to [7] for a detailed exposition with proofs.

Cyclotomy. We begin by defining the cyclotomic constants.

DEFINITION. The cyclotomic constant (k, h) is the number of elements $s \in G_k$ such that $1 + s \in G_h$.

The constants (k, h) depend on our parameters e and f; also, a different choice of generator g, by permuting the cosets G_k, will permute the constants (k, h). Their importance in the problem under consideration stems from the next two propositions.

PROPOSITION 7. *$\eta_0\eta_k = \sum_{h=0}^{e-1} (k, h)\eta_h + fn_k$, where n_k is defined by*

$$\begin{aligned} n_0 &= 1 \text{ if } f \text{ is even} , \\ n_0 &= 1 \text{ if } p = 2 , \\ n_{e/2} &= 1 \text{ if } f \text{ and } p \text{ are odd} , \\ n_k &= 0 \text{ in all other cases} . \end{aligned}$$

PROPOSITION 8. *$\eta_m\eta_{m+k} = \sum_{h=0}^{e-1} (k, h)\eta_{m+h} + fn_k$, where the subscripts are to be interpreted modulo e.*

Repeated applications of Propositions 7 and 8 will enable us to evaluate $\Pi\eta_k$, provided we know the constants (k, h).

The constants are given, in the cases $e = 2, 3$, and 4, by the following theorems.

PROPOSITION 9. (*Dickson* [3, p. 48]). *Assume $e = 2$.*

If f is even, the cyclotomic matrix $M^{(2)}$ is given by $M^{(2)} = \begin{pmatrix} A & B \\ B & B \end{pmatrix}$, where $4A = q - 5$, $4B = q - 1$.

If f is odd, $M^{(2)} = \begin{pmatrix} A & B \\ A & A \end{pmatrix}$, where $4A = q - 3, 4B = q + 1$.

PROPOSITION 10. (*Storer* [7, p. 35]). *Let $e = 3$. Let c and d be defined by $4q = c^2 + 27d^2$, $c \equiv 1 \pmod 3$, and, if $p \equiv 1 \pmod 3$, then $(c, p) = 1$; these restrictions determine c uniquely, and d up to sign. Then*

$$M^{(3)} = \begin{pmatrix} A & B & C \\ B & C & D \\ C & D & B \end{pmatrix}, \text{ where } \begin{aligned} 9A &= q - 8 + c , \\ 18B &= 2q - 4 - c - 9d , \\ 18C &= 2q - 4 - c + 9d , \\ 9D &= q + 1 + c . \end{aligned}$$

PROPOSITION 11. (*Storer* [7, pp. 48, 51]). *Let $e = 4$. Let s and t be defined by $q = s^2 + 4t^2$, $s \equiv 1 \pmod 4$, and, if $p \equiv 1 \pmod 4$, then $(s, p) = 1$; these restrictions determine s uniquely, and t up to sign.*

If f is even, then

$$M^{(4)} = \begin{pmatrix} A & B & C & D \\ B & D & E & E \\ C & E & C & E \\ D & E & E & B \end{pmatrix} \quad \text{where} \quad \begin{aligned} 16A &= q - 11 - 6s , \\ 16B &= q - 3 + 2s + 8t , \\ 16C &= q - 3 + 2s , \\ 16D &= q - 3 + 2s - 8t , \\ 16E &= q + 1 - 2s . \end{aligned}$$

If f is odd, then

$$M^{(4)} = \begin{pmatrix} A & B & C & D \\ E & E & B & D \\ A & E & A & E \\ E & D & B & E \end{pmatrix} \quad \text{where} \quad \begin{aligned} 16A &= q - 7 + 2s , \\ 16B &= q + 1 + 2s + 8t , \\ 16C &= q + 1 - 6s , \\ 16D &= q + 1 + 2s - 8t , \\ 16E &= q - 3 - 2s . \end{aligned}$$

Solutions in the cases $e = 2, 3, 4$.

We can now evaluate $\Pi\eta_k$, $N(0)$, and N in the cases $e = 2, 3, 4$.

THEOREM 12. *Let $e = 2$. If f is even, then*

$$\eta_0\eta_1 = -\frac{q-1}{4},\ N(0) = 0,\ N = \frac{q-1}{4} .$$

If f is odd, then

$$\eta_0\eta_1 = \frac{q+1}{4},\ \ N(0) = \frac{q-1}{2},\ \ N = \frac{q-3}{4} .$$

THEOREM 13. *Let $e = 3$. Let c be defined by $4q = c^2 + 27d^2$, $c \equiv 1 \pmod 3$, and, if $p \equiv 1 \pmod 3$, then $(c, p) = 1$. Then*

$$\eta_0\eta_1\eta_2 = \frac{1}{27}((c+3)q - 1) ,$$

$$N(0) = \frac{1}{27}(q + 1 + c)(q - 1) ,$$

$$N = \frac{1}{27}(q^2 - 3q - c) .$$

THEOREM 14. *Let $e = 4$. Let s be defined by $q = s^2 + 4t^2$, $s \equiv 1 \pmod 4$, and, if $p \equiv 1 \pmod 4$, then $(s, p) = 1$. If f is even, then*

$$\eta_0\eta_1\eta_2\eta_3 = \frac{1}{256}(q^2 - (4s^2 - 8s + 6)q + 1) = \frac{1}{256}((q-1)^2 - 4q(s-1)^2) ,$$

$$N(0) = \frac{1}{256}(q - 1)(q - 3 + 2s)(q + 1 - 2s) ,$$

$$N = \frac{1}{256}(q^3 - 4q^2 + 5q + 4s^2 - 8s + 2) .$$

If f is odd, then

$$\eta_0\eta_1\eta_2\eta_3 = \frac{1}{256}(9q^2 - (4s^2 - 8s - 2)q + 1) = \frac{1}{256}((3q+1)^2 - 4q(s-1)^2) ,$$

$$N(0) = \frac{1}{256}(q - 1)(q + 5 - 2s)(q + 1 + 2s) ,$$

$$N = \frac{1}{256}(q^3 - 4q^2 - 3q + 4s^2 - 8s - 6) .$$

Proof. Straightforward calculation yields the results on $\Pi\eta_k$. We present the case $e = 3$ as an example.

By Propositions 7 and 10, we have $\eta_0\eta_1 = B\eta_0 + C\eta_1 + D\eta_2$, whence

$$\begin{aligned}(\eta_0\eta_1)\eta_2 &= B(\eta_0\eta_2) + C(\eta_1\eta_2) + D(\eta_2)^2 \\ &= B(C\eta_0 + D\eta_1 + B\eta_2) + C(D\eta_0 + B\eta_1 + C\eta_2) + D(B\eta_0 + C\eta_1 + A\eta_2 + f) \\ &= (BC + CD + BD)\eta_0 + (BD + BC + CD)\eta_1 + (B^2 + C^2 + AD)\eta_2 + fD .\end{aligned}$$

Substituting for A, B, C, and D the values given in Proposition 10, and simplifying via $4q = c^2 + 27d^2$, we find

$$\begin{aligned}27\eta_0\eta_1\eta_2 &= (q^2 - 3q - c)(\eta_0 + \eta_1 + \eta_2) + (q^2 - 1 + cq - c) \\ &= -(q^2 - 3q - c) + (q^2 - 1 + cq - c) \\ &= (c + 3)q - 1 .\end{aligned}$$

The results an $N(0)$ and N then follow from the simultaneous solution of

$$N(0) + (q - 1)N = f^e ,$$

$$N(0) - N = \prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k .$$

Some special results and some approximations. We present two results of a more specialized nature.

THEOREM 15. *If q and f are both odd then $N(0) > N$.*

Proof. If q and f are both odd then $-1 \in G_{e/2}$. Thus for any k, $0 \leqq k < e/2$, $x \in G_k$ if and only if $-x \in G_{k+e/2}$. Then

$$\eta_{k+e/2} = \sum_{x \in G_{k+e/2}} \theta^{Trx} = \sum_{x \in G_k} \theta^{Tr(-x)} = \sum_{x \in G_k} \theta^{-Trx} = \bar{\eta}_k ,$$

where the overbar indicates complex conjugation. It follows that

$$\prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k = \prod_{k=0}^{e/2-1} \eta_k \bar{\eta}_k = \prod_{k=0}^{e/2-1} |\eta_k|^2 > 0 .$$

But by Lemma 6, $N(0) = N + \prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k$.

THEOREM 16. *Let $e = 4$. If $q - 1$ is a square, then $N(0) - N$ is a square.*

Proof. By hypothesis, $q = 1 + 4t^2$: thus, we can take $s = 1$ in Theorem 14. If f is even then

$$N(0) - N = \prod_{k=0}^{3} \eta_k = \left(\frac{q-1}{16}\right)^2 ;$$

if f is odd then

$$N(0) - N = \prod_{k=0}^{3} \eta_k = \left(\frac{3q+1}{16}\right)^2 .$$

Estimates for $\Pi\eta_k$ and $N(x)$. Cyclotomy for $e > 4$ has been of continuing interest to mathematicians. The reader is referred to [2] for the cases $e = 5, 6$, and 8; also to [9], [10], [4], [8], [1], and [5], for the cases $e = 10, 12, 14, 16, 18$, and 20, respectively. In each of these only the case $q = p$ is discussed. When the problems of cyclotomy have been solved for a given value of e, the methods of the proof of Theorem 13 will evaluate $\Pi\eta_k$ – see, e.g., [6], for the case $e = 5, q = p$. The computations involved are ghastly, as the reader can convince himself by inspecting the references cited above. The author feels that the importance of finding exact expressions for N and $N(0)$ is not sufficient to justify performing these computations. We present instead approximations to N and $N(0)$, based upon a lemma from cyclotomy.

LEMMA 17. (a) *If either f or p is even, then*

$$\sum_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k^2 = q - f .$$

(b) *If f and p are both odd, then*

$$\sum_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k \eta_{k+e/2} = q - f .$$

Proof. These are both special cases of Lemma 9 in [7].

LEMMA 18. (a) *If either f or p is even then η_k is real, $k = 0, 1, \cdots, e-1$.*

(b) *If f and p are both odd then $\eta_k \eta_{k+e/2}$ is real and positive,*

$k = 0, 1, \cdots, e-1$.

Proof. (a) If f is even then $-1 \in G_0$. Thus if $x \in G_k$ then $-x \in G_k$, and $x \neq -x$. Hence, if θ^{Trx} appears in η_k, so does $\theta^{Tr(-x)} = \theta^{-Trx}$. Thus, η_k is real. If p is even then $p=2$. Thus $\theta = -1$ and η_k is real.

(b) This was shown in the proof of Theorem 15.

THEOREM 19. $|\prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k| \leqq ((q-f)/e)^{e/2}$; $|N(0) - f^e/q| \leqq ((q-f)/e)^{e/2}$; $|N - f^e/q| \leqq q^{-1}((q-f)/e)^{e/2}$.

Proof. If either f or p is even then $\sum_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k^2 = q - f$. If both f and p are odd then $\sum_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k \eta_{k+e/2} = q - f$. In either case we may, by Lemma 18, apply the inequality of the arithmetic and geometric means. We obtain $\prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k^2 \leqq ((q-f)/e)^e$, or $|\prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k| \leqq ((q-f)/e)^{e/2}$.

The other two inequalities follow from the first and from the relations $N(0) + (q-1)N = f^e$, $N(0) - N = \prod_{k=0}^{e-1} \eta_k$.

The reader is encouraged to compare the approximations of Theorem 19 with the exact results of Theorems 12, 13, 14 bearing in mind that c in Theorem 13 and s in Theorem 14 can be as large as $2\sqrt{q}$ or $\sqrt{q}$, respectively. The approximations are seen to be quite sharp.

The problem of evaluating $\Pi\eta_k$ as q varies with f, rather than e, held fixed requires very different methods from those of Theorems 12, 13, and 14. We treat this problem in [11].

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11. G. Myerson, A combinatorial problem in finite fields, II, to appear in Quarterly J. Math.

Received April 1, 1978.

SUNY
BUFFALO, NY 14214

Printed in Japan by International Academic Printing Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan

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