

# Lab: Millikan's Oil-Drop Experiment

# AP Physics

## Background

From 1909 to 1913, Robert Millikan performed a series of experiments designed to measure the charge of an electron. His general strategy was to place charges (electrons) on very small drops of oil, and then place those oil-drops in an electric field. By considering the Force of gravity, the electric Force, and the drag Force (air friction) acting on the drops, Millikan collected enough data that he was able to determine that the fundamental quantity of charge (the electron) is  $-1.60 \times 10^{-19} C$ . For his experiments, Millikan won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1923.

## Objectives

To observe the motion of charged particles in an electric field (a modified version of Millikan's experiment), and to perform a data analysis of information "collected" in a statistical simulation of Millikan's experiment.

## Equipment

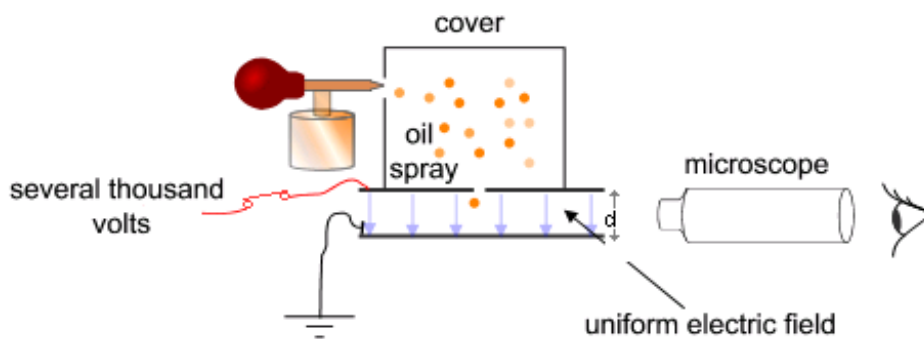
Millikan oil-drop device (set up in class)  
Group "data" collected in a classroom simulation  
Excel or similar spreadsheet software

## Procedure

### Part A. Millikan's Device

#### 1. Examine the device that has been set up for this lab.

A schematic diagram of Millikan's apparatus is shown here (from *wikipedia.org*):



#### 2. Read this explanation of the device's basic operation

To determine the fundamental unit of electric charge ( $e^-$ ), Millikan sprayed droplets of oil into a chamber exposed to an electric field  $E$ . The droplets, which are charged by friction in the spraying process, experience an electrostatic force  $F_e$  according to the equation  $F = qE$ .

The drops also experience a downward force due to gravity,  $F_g$ , and a force of air friction  $F_{\text{drag}}$  when in motion. By analyzing the motion of the drops both in the absence of the  $E$  field, it is possible to determine a droplet's mass  $m$ .

With this same oil drop, if the Electric field is adjusted so that the droplet is suspended motionless, then the electrostatic force  $F_e$  will be just equal to the  $F_g$ .

$$F_e = F_g$$

$$qE = mg$$

$$q = \frac{mg}{E}$$

For a given oil-drop, there will be only one electric field that will suspend it. The strength of the field depends on the mass of the droplet as well as the net charge of that droplet, and a given mass can have a wide variety of different charges, depending on how many electrons have been added to it (or subtracted from it) in the charging process.

How, then, did Millikan determine the magnitude of the fundamental electric charge? (Rhetorical question—we'll see how in the lab.)

3. **Examine the Java applet that simulates the oil drop experiment.**  
<http://www.crashwhite.com/ap/materials/lab/millikan/millikan.html>
4. **Draw a free-body diagram** of the forces acting on an oil drop in static equilibrium in an Electric Field. Include field lines in your free-body diagram.

## *Part B. Data Analysis*

1. **Get an individual data set of Electric field strengths and charge mass.**  
Your individual data set is listed at <http://www.crashwhite.com/ap/materials/lab/millikan/data.txt> . Load the page, select your data, and copy it into Excel for analysis.
2. **Analyze your data to determine the fundamental quantity of charge, i.e. the charge of an electron.**
  - a. How will you calculate the charge on a given droplet, floating motionless in a given electric field?
  - b. Create a bar graph showing the charges of the different droplets. Are there any patterns immediately evident?
  - c. Copy the column of charges that you've calculated, and paste just the values into a new column, then sort them. What does a bar graph of the charges look like now? Are there any patterns evident?
  - d. Discuss with the instructor additional ways to pull meaningful data from your results.