

April 1965

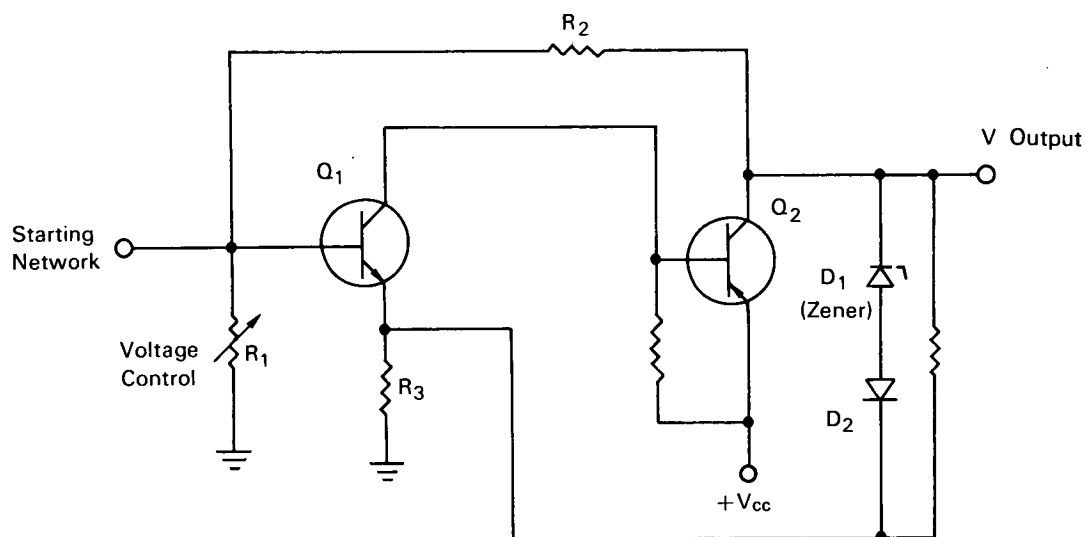
Brief 65-10097

# NASA TECH BRIEF



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## Variable Voltage Supply Uses Zener Diode as Reference



$$V_{\text{out}} = V_z \left( 1 + \frac{R_1}{R_2} \right)$$

**The problem:** Zener-diode regulated power supplies are used to provide accurate and stable reference voltages. These power supplies, however, are somewhat limited in their applications, since a zener diode can provide only a single reference voltage. More complex circuitry is required to provide a variable reference supply.

**The solution:** A simple transistorized circuit, using a zener diode as the reference element, to provide a stable variable reference voltage.

**How it's done:** As shown on the schematic diagram, zener diode  $D_1$  is used as the reference element for the variable reference voltage supply. Voltage control is provided by a two-stage amplifier, consisting of transistors  $Q_1$  and  $Q_2$ . The output voltage can be varied by adjusting resistor  $R_2$ , and is equal to

where  $V_z$  is the breakdown voltage of the zener diode.

A positive starting signal applied to the base of  $Q_1$  is required to activate the supply. Since a positive feedback loop between the transistors is incorporated in the circuit, the starting signal can be removed when the zener diode starts to conduct.

Current flow through  $Q_1$  and  $Q_2$  is controlled by the setting of  $R_1$ . Increasing the resistance of  $R_1$  increases the current flow through the transistors which, in turn, cause an increased current flow through zener diode  $D_1$  and resistor  $R_3$ . The output voltage appears across the series connection of  $D_1$  and  $R_3$ . As the characteristics of the zener diode are fixed, an increased output voltage can be obtained by increasing the voltage (IR drop) across  $R_3$ . The voltage rise at

(continued overleaf)

the emitter of  $Q_1$  limits the positive feedback in the circuit and prevents unlimited increase of the output voltage.

**Notes:**

1. Diode  $D_2$  is included in the circuit to eliminate output voltage dependence upon the emitter-base voltage of  $Q_1$ . It may be omitted from the circuit, if desired.
2. The output voltage may be applied to an emitter follower circuit to obtain higher operating currents.

3. This innovation should be of interest to manufacturers of low-voltage power supplies and to researchers in need of variable voltage reference supplies.

4. Inquiries concerning this innovation may be directed to:

Technology Utilization Officer  
Goddard Space Flight Center  
Greenbelt, Maryland, 20771  
Reference: B65-10097

**Patent status:** NASA encourages commercial use of this innovation. No patent action is contemplated.

Source: R. C. Lavigne and L. L. Kleinberg  
(GSFC-262)