

(NASA-Case-GSC-13541-1)
DOUBLE-DRIVEN SHIELD CAPACITIVE
TYPE PROXIMITY SENSOR Patent
Application (NASA) 24 p

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NASA CASE NO. GSC 13,541-1

PRINT FIG. 2

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Serial No.: 08/008,426
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AWARDS DIGESTDOUBLE-DRIVEN SHIELD CAPACITIVE TYPE PROXIMITY SENSOR

Shown in Figure 2 is a capacity type proximity sensor comprised of a capacitance type sensor 16, a capacitance type reference 22, and two independent and mutually opposing driven shields 18 and 20 respectively adjacent the sensor 16 and reference 22 and which are coupled in a bridge circuit configuration 24 as shown in Fig. 4 and driven by a single frequency crystal controlled oscillator 26. In addition to the capacitance C_S , C_{REF} , C_{SH1} and C_{SH2} of the sensor 16, the reference 22 and the shield elements 20 and 22, the bridge circuit 24 includes a pair of fixed electrical impedance elements C_{S1} and C_{R1} which form adjacent arms of the bridge and which comprise a pair of capacitors; however, when desirable, a pair of precision resistors can be used. Detection of bridge unbalance provides an indication of the mutual proximity between an object 14 and the sensor 16. Drift compensation is also utilized to improve performance and thus increase sensor range and sensitivity.

Novelty is believed to reside in the additional use of a reference capacitance element and a second shield element along with a capacitance sensor and a shield element, with the aforementioned elements being connected in a bridge circuit configuration.

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Employer: National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Evaluator:

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DOUBLE-DRIVEN SHIELD CAPACITIVE TYPE PROXIMITY SENSOR

Origin of the Invention

This invention was made by an employee of the United States Government and accordingly may be manufactured and used by or for the Government for governmental purposes without the payment of any royalties thereon or therefor.

Background of the Invention

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to capacitive type proximity sensors and more particularly to a capacitive type "capaciflector" proximity sensor
5 which includes a driven shield element behind the sensor.

Description of the Prior Art

Capacitive sensors used for proximity sensing and collision avoidance are generally known. However, such
10 sensors do not adequately control stray capacitance and consequently do not perform with an adequate range and sensitivity for many applications such as docking and berthing in outer space.

In U.S. Patent 5,166,679, entitled "Driven Shielding
15 Capacitive Proximity Sensor", John M. Vranish, which issued November 24, 1992, the teachings of which are incorporated herein by reference, there is disclosed a capacitive sensing element which uses a capacitively controlled oscillator to drive the sensor element as well
20 as a voltage follower driven shield member located behind

the sensor element to reflect energy toward an intruding object to substantially increase range and sensitivity. The intruding object forms an additional capacitive path to ground which in turn alters the frequency of the oscillator. This frequency change is converted to a DC output signal by a frequency to voltage converter.

Such a proximity sensor, however, includes several inherent limitations which include, for example: the central frequency of the oscillator tends to drift as a function of changes in temperature and humidity; the frequency to voltage converter is relatively large in size and consumes a substantial amount of power; and the components and their connections as well as the arrangements in front of a relatively high gain output amplifier presents a source of low frequency drift, and since the signal output is in the low frequency region, this has a tendency to reduce sensor range and sensitivity.

Summary

It is an object of the present invention, therefore, to provide an improvement in capacitive type proximity sensors.

It is a further object of the invention to provide an improvement in capacitive type proximity sensors which include a driven shielding member.

It is still another object of the invention to provide a proximity sensor which will sense the proximity of humans or unexpected structures at a range sufficient to provide collision avoidance such as during docking and berthing operations in outer space.

It is yet another object of the invention to provide a proximity sensor which can be used to determine the location of pins, holes and edges in equipment with sufficient accuracy to permit alignment prior to docking and berthing.

And it is still yet another object of the invention to provide an improvement in proximity sensors which will permit machines and/or astronauts to guide payloads precisely into latching devices and to anticipate touch-down just prior before it occurs so as to permit a very soft mating process during a docking and berthing procedure in outer space.

Briefly, the foregoing and other objects are achieved by a capacity type proximity sensor comprised of a capacitance type sensor, a capacitance type reference, and two independent and mutually opposing driven shields respectively adjacent the sensor and reference and which are coupled in a bridge circuit configuration and driven by a single frequency crystal controlled oscillator. The bridge circuit additionally includes a pair of fixed

electrical impedance elements which form adjacent arms of the bridge and which comprise either a pair of precision resistances or capacitors. Detection of bridge unbalance provides an indication of the mutual proximity between an object and the sensor. Drift compensation is also utilized to improve performance and thus increase sensor range and sensitivity.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The following detailed description of the invention will be more readily understood when considered together with the accompanying drawings in which:

Figure 1 is a diagram illustrating the electric field distribution of a capacitance type proximity sensor in accordance with the known prior art;

Figure 2 is a diagram illustrative of the electrical field distribution of a proximity sensor in accordance with the present invention;

Figures 3A-3D depict a set of equivalent circuits for the capacitance elements shown in Figure 2;

Figure 4 is an electrical schematic diagram illustrative of the elements shown in Figure 2 connected in a bridge configuration;

Figure 5 is an electrical schematic diagram depicting a first preferred embodiment of the subject invention;

Figure 6 is an electrical schematic diagram illustrative of a second preferred embodiment of the invention;

Figure 7 is an electrical schematic diagram illustrative of a third preferred embodiment of the invention; and

Figure 8 is an electrical schematic diagram illustrative of a fourth preferred embodiment of the subject invention.

10 Detailed Description of the Invention

Referring now to the drawings and more particularly to Figure 1, shown thereat is an electrical field distribution system of a driven shield capacitance type sensor, also referred to as a "capaciflector" sensor which is shown and described in detail in above referenced U.S. Patent No. 5,166,679. In such a sensor system, a piece of apparatus 12 which may be, for example, the skin of a robotic arm and which is to be protected from the presence and position of an intruding object 14, includes a sensor element 16 which comprises a thin sheet of conductive material which is driven by an electronic circuit, not shown, and which acts as one electrode of a capacitor, the second electrode of which is provided by the intruding object 14. The capacitor thus formed controls the frequency of an oscillator, also

not shown, which operates so that when an object for some reason or another intrudes, the output frequency of the oscillator changes. The grounded objects in the vicinity of the conductor sheet 16 and the lead wires between the circuit and the sheet 16 create a large fixed parasitic 5 capacitance which reduces sensor sensitivity to the intruding object 14.

To increase the sensitivity of the capacitance type proximity sensor by reducing the parasitic capacitance exhibited by the electric field shown in Figure 1, the 10 prior art system shown and described in U.S. Patent No. 5,166,679 provides for the insertion of a second relatively thin sheet 18 of conductive material which is substantially wider than the sensor 16 and is located 15 between the sensor 16 and the apparatus being protected 12. This generates an electric field distribution such that the member 18 acts as a shield for the capacitive sensor 16 where the field concentration is centered between it and the object 14, with a substantially 20 smaller field returning directly to the grounded apparatus 12.

The shield member 18, furthermore, is driven at the same instantaneous voltage as the capacitor sensor 16, however, it is not frequency sensitive to nearby objects 25 as is the sensor 16. Thus the sensor 16 is shielded from

nearby ground, i.e. the apparatus 12, such that the capacitance between it and the arm is substantially reduced.

Referring now to Figure 2, shown thereat is an improvement in the driven shield configuration of Figure 1 and comprises a double driven shield configuration which includes a second shield 20, also comprised of a relatively thin sheet of conductive material, located beneath the shield 18 and above the apparatus being protected 12. Also, there is a reference sensor element 22, similar to or identical to the thin sheet of conductive material forming the sensor element 16, located intermediate the second shield member 20 and the apparatus 12. The second shield member 20 isolates the reference sensor 22 from the field of interest and is unaffected by the intrusion of the object 14 into the field of interest.

Referring now to Figures 3A through 3D, there is disclosed the capacitive components of C_S , C_{Sh1} , C_{Sh2} and C_{Ref} associated with the sensor 16, the first shield member 18, the second shield member 20, and the reference sensor 22, respectively.

With respect to the capacitance C_S , as shown in Figure 3A, it is comprised of three capacitances, the capacitance C_{S0} connected in series to the capacitance

C_{og} which is shunted by the capacitance C_{sg} , where C_{so} is the capacitance between the sensor 16 and the object 14, C_{og} is the capacitance of the object 14 to ground and C_{sg} is the capacitance between the sensor 16 and ground. As
5 shown in Figure 3B, the capacitance C_{sh1} associated with the shield 18 is comprised of the series combination of C_{sh1o} and C_{og} shunted by capacitance C_{sh1g} and C'_{ref} , where C_{sh1o} comprises the capacitance between the shield 18 and the object 14, C_{og} comprises a capacitance between
10 the object 14 and ground, C_{sh1g} is the capacitance of the shield 18 to ground and C'_{ref} is a negative capacitance indicative of a current source for a bridge circuit arrangement shown in Figures 4-8, to be described. The second shield capacitance C_{sh2} , as shown in Figure 3C, is
15 the combination of four capacitances, the first being C_{sh2g} which is shunted by a series combination of C_{sh1sh2} , and C_{sh1o} with the latter being further shunted by the capacitance C_{sh1g} , where C_{sh2g} comprises the capacitance between the second shield 20 and ground,
20 C_{sh1sh2} comprises the capacitance between the two shields 18 and 20, C_{sh1o} comprises the capacitance between the first shield 18 and the object 14 and C_{sh1g} comprises the capacitance between the first shield 18 and ground. Finally, C_{ref} comprises a single capacitance as shown in

Figure 3D and comprises the capacitance between the reference element 22 and ground.

As shown in Figure 4, the four elements 16, 18, 20 and 22 represented by their capacitances are connected in adjacent arms of a bridge circuit 24 which also includes a pair of fixed impedances represented by capacitances C_{S1} and C_{R1} in opposing adjacent arms. The bridge circuit is shown being energized by a single signal source 26 which comprises a crystal controlled oscillator. The crystal controlled oscillator 26 outputs a highly stable single frequency signal. Following bridge balance, intrusion by the object 14 into a region of interest in the vicinity of the sensor 16 forces the bridge 24 out of balance.

As illustrated in Figure 5, there the bridge circuit 24 is redrawn in order to further disclose the inclusion of a pair of operational amplifiers configured to operate as high input impedance/low output impedance voltage follower circuits 28 and 30, which are coupled to the crystal controlled oscillator 26 through the capacitances C_{S1} and C_{R1} to drive the shields 18 and 20 (Figure 2) forming the capacitances C_{Sh1} and C_{Sh2} . Bridge balance is detected by means of a differential amplifier 32 coupled across the bridge circuit nodes 34 and 36 and where circuit node 38 common to the resistances C_{S1} and

C_{R1} are connected to one side of the crystal oscillator 26, with circuit node 40 being connected to ground along with the opposite side of the crystal oscillator 26. The differential amplifier 32 provides a voltage signal output V_{sig} at terminal 42.

In accordance with classic voltage divider bridge detection circuits, if the impedances of the capacitances C_S and C_{ref} are equal as well as the capacitive impedances of C_{S1} and C_{R1} , then $V_{sig} = 0$. As the sensor element 16 shown in Figure 2 approaches an object 14, or vice versa, C_S increases and with it the current across C_{S1} . This unbalances the bridge and increases V_{sig} . The closer the object 14 comes to the sensor 16, the larger V_{sig} becomes.

Further as shown in Figure 5, an operational amplifier 46 having one input grounded is coupled to the circuit node 36 and provides a reference voltage output of KV_{ref} at terminal 48, where K is the amplification factor of amplifier 46. Because amplifier 46 is connected to the other side of the bridge 24, movement of the object 14 relative to the sensor 16 V_{ref} is not affected. Upsetting the balance in the bridge means that $KV_{ref} > V_{sig}$. This, in turn, results in current leakage from the reflective shield 20 behind the reference element 22 to the reflective shield 18 behind the sensor

element 16. However, the shield 20 behind the reference
sensor 22 is slaved to the reference capacitance C_{ref} by
the voltage follower 30. The shield capacitance C_{sh1} is
similarly slaved to the capacitance of the sensing
5 element C_s via the voltage follower circuit 28. Thus any
leakage current cannot affect either V_{ref} or V_{sig} , thus
enhancing performance.

It is to be noted that KV_{ref} is precisely defined
throughout all operations. Ground is made an integral
10 part of the structure by virtue of the apparatus 12 being
grounded and is precisely located with respect to the
capacitance C_{ref} and its reflecting shield capacitance
 C_{sh2} . The second shield element 20 isolates the
reference element 22 from the effects of the object 14
15 and the sensor 16 and thus KV_{ref} is clearly defined no
matter how the system is mounted and no matter what is
occurring with respect to the relative position of the
sensor 16 and the object 14.

The circuit elements are specifically designed to
20 compensate for any changing environment, such as by
selecting precision capacitors with like characteristics
for the capacitances C_{s1} and C_{r1} and being located next
to one another so that they are subject to the same
variations in temperature. The amplifiers 28, 30, 32 and
25 46 are also co-located on a common printed circuit board

and become part of a common structure which is equally affected by the changing environment.

It is also to be noted that the circuitry shown in Figure 5 also provides a technique for drift measurement and is accomplished by locating the output amplifier 32 adjacent the amplifier 46. Since the main source of drift would be temperature induced variations in the components, the gain K of amplifier 46 is measured at the start of an operation and is given a value K_0 . Since C_{ref} and C_{r1} changes relatively little during operation, particularly if the reference currents are kept low, any observed variation in the output of KV_{ref} will be caused by a variation of gain K in the high gain amplifier and thus provide a measure of drift.

While the circuitry shown in Figures 4 and 5 disclose the concept of a simple differential amplifier 32 for detecting any change in the bridge circuit 24, the concept of peak detection can also be utilized when desirable, and comprises a preferred method of detection. This method merely requires the addition of a pair of peak detectors to the bridge output terminals. Accordingly, a pair of peak detector circuits 50 and 52, as shown in Figure 6, are coupled to the bridge circuit nodes 34 and 36, with the output to the peak detectors 50

and 52 then being fed to the two inputs of the differential amplifier 32 as before.

Referring now to Figure 7 where there is shown another preferred embodiment of the invention, in addition to the peak detectors 50 and 52, the fixed capacitors in adjacent arms of the bridge 24 and comprising the capacitances C_{S1} and C_{R1} are replaced by precision resistors having fixed resistance values R_S and R_{Ref} , respectively. The trade off would be determined by the relative temperature characteristics of the capacitive components as opposed to resistive components in adjacent arms of the bridge, including the shielding elements and the sensor elements shown in Figure 2.

Also, phase discrimination can be used in place of peak detection, for example, as shown in the embodiment of Figure 8, where a phase comparator 54 is utilized in place of the peak detectors 50 and 52, shown in Figure 6. When desirable, the same substitution can be used for the embodiment shown in Figure 6.

With respect to the selection of the capacitors or resistors for adjacent arms of the bridge 24 providing the impedances R_{Ref} , R_S and C_{S1} , C_{R1} , respectively, the fixed resistor arrangement shown in Figures 6 and 7 provide a bridge circuit which acts as a simple voltage divider, with both the left and right sides of the bridge

being in phase no matter how large or how small the output signal. The capacitors can be built into the printed circuit board and thus make the sensor extremely compact with each component being mutually referenced
5 with respect to the other.

Since a single frequency is utilized, frequency stabilized crystal controlled oscillators can be employed and became desirable because frequency drift over long periods of time is substantially reduced, thus permitting
10 indefinite operation in space. This also permits narrow band filtering where required, which improves signal to noise and thus range and sensitivity.

The circuitry employed in the present invention becomes relatively simple inasmuch as the frequency to
15 voltage conversion apparatus which consumes far too much power and typically utilized in the prior art is eliminated. In addition to eliminating the frequency to voltage converters, only a few elements are utilized and these comprise peak detectors, resistors and operational
20 amplifiers which are relatively simple and compact. Capacitors, moreover, can be built into the printed circuit board and so are also extremely compact. Since all the components can be built into the same circuit board structure, these elements can be precisely located
25 with respect to one another, thus drastically reducing

parasitic capacitances and losses, while those that do remain are repeatable and predictable. Furthermore, drift minimization and control are easily implemented.

Having thus shown and described what is at present
5 considered to be the preferred embodiment of the invention, it should be noted that the same has been made by way of illustration and not limitation. Accordingly, all modifications, alterations and changes coming within the spirit and scope of the invention are herein meant to
10 be included.

ABSTRACT

A capacity type proximity sensor comprised of a capacitance type sensor, a capacitance type reference, and two independent and mutually opposing driven shields respectively adjacent the sensor and reference and which
5 are coupled in an electrical bridge circuit configuration and driven by a single frequency crystal controlled oscillator. The bridge circuit additionally includes a pair of fixed electrical impedance elements which form
10 adjacent arms of the bridge and which comprise either a pair of precision resistances or capacitors. Detection of bridge unbalance provides an indication of the mutual proximity between an object and the sensor. Drift compensation is also utilized to improve performance and
15 thus increase sensor range and sensitivity.

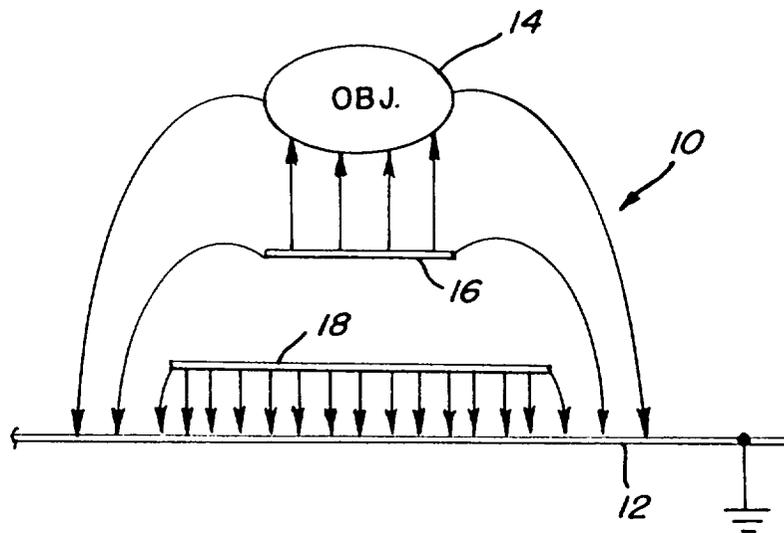


FIG. 1
PRIOR ART

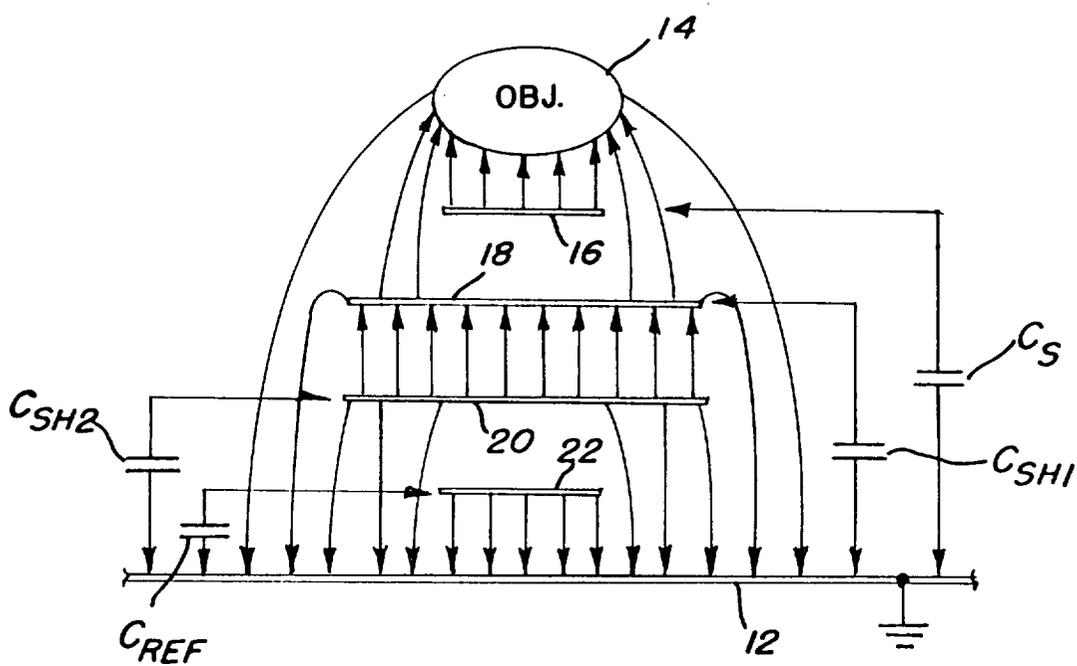


FIG. 2

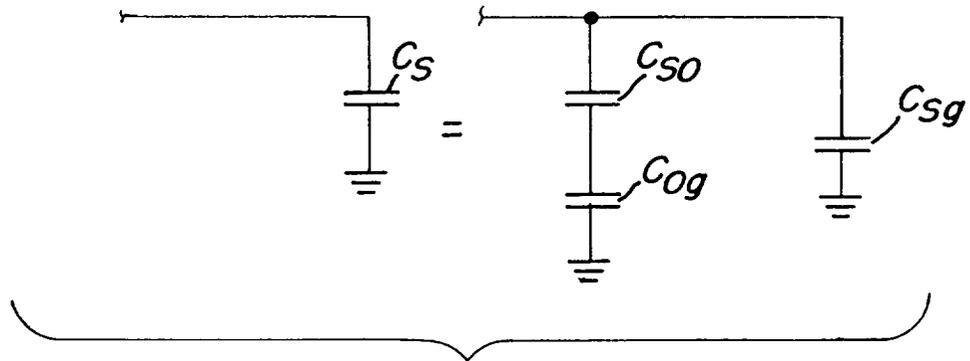


FIG.3A

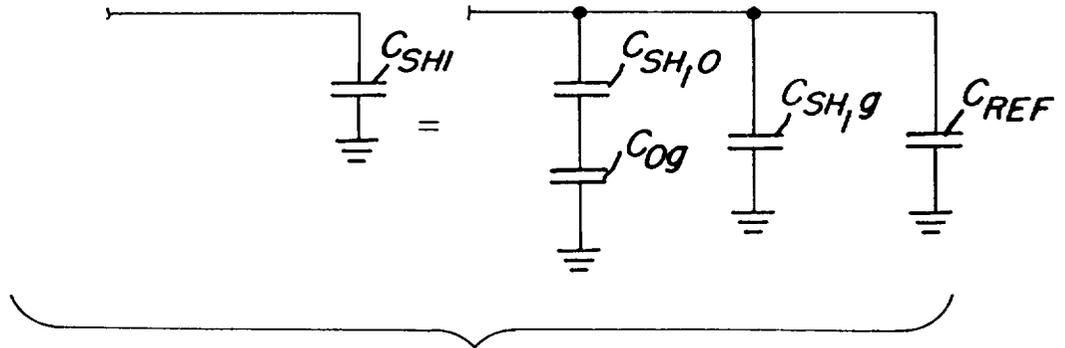


FIG.3B

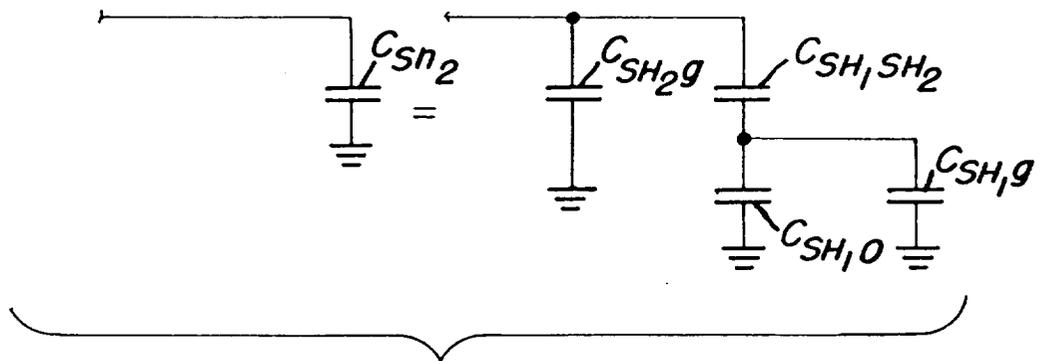
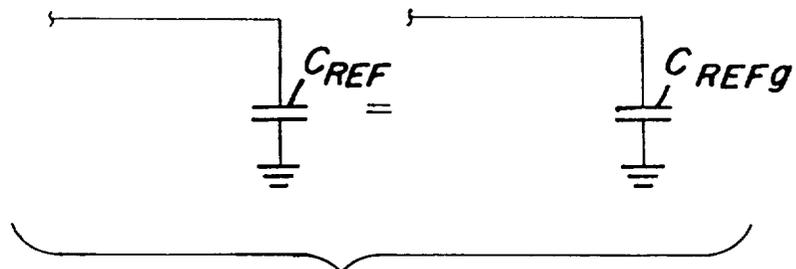


FIG.3C



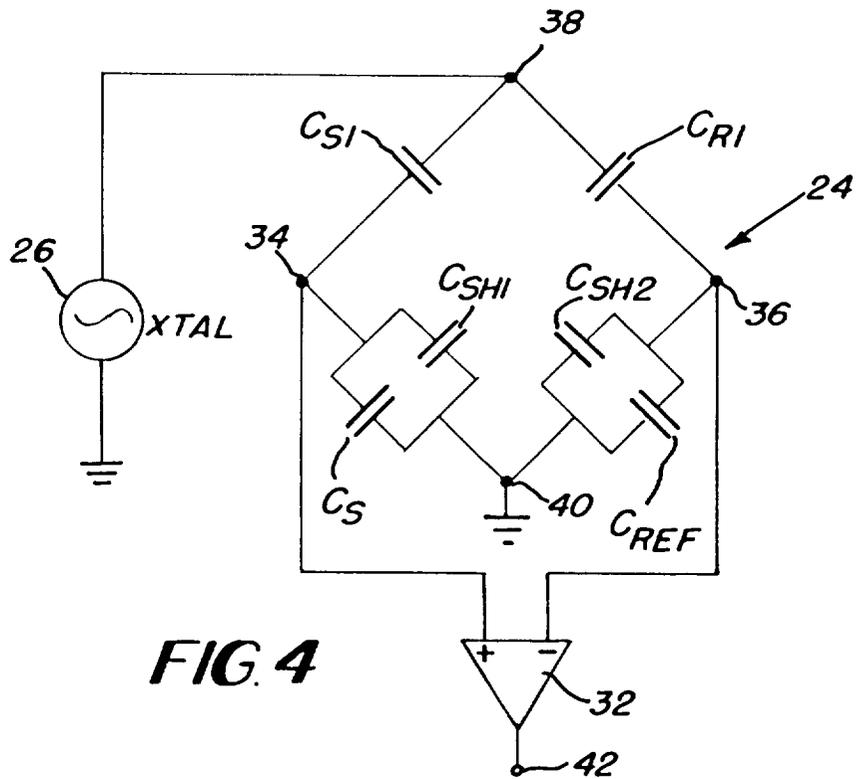


FIG. 4

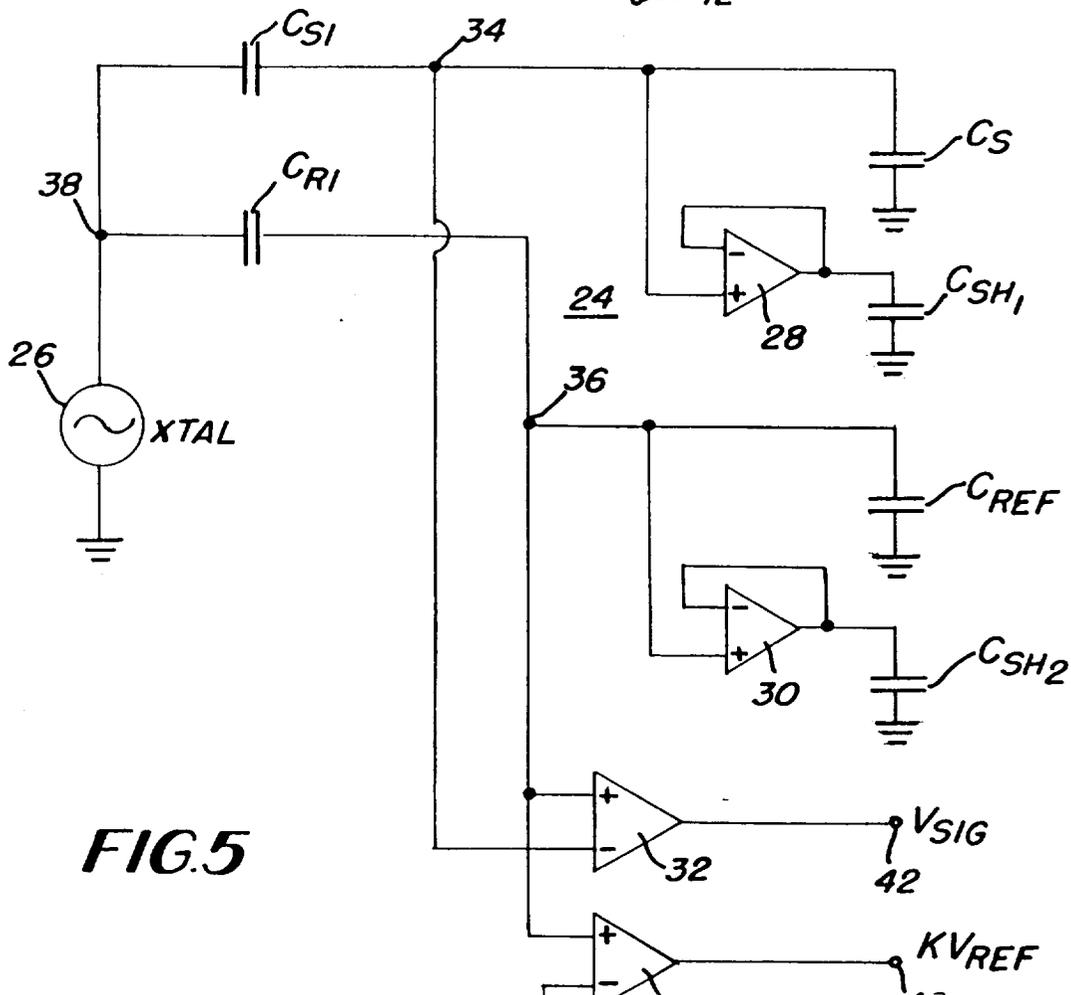


FIG. 5

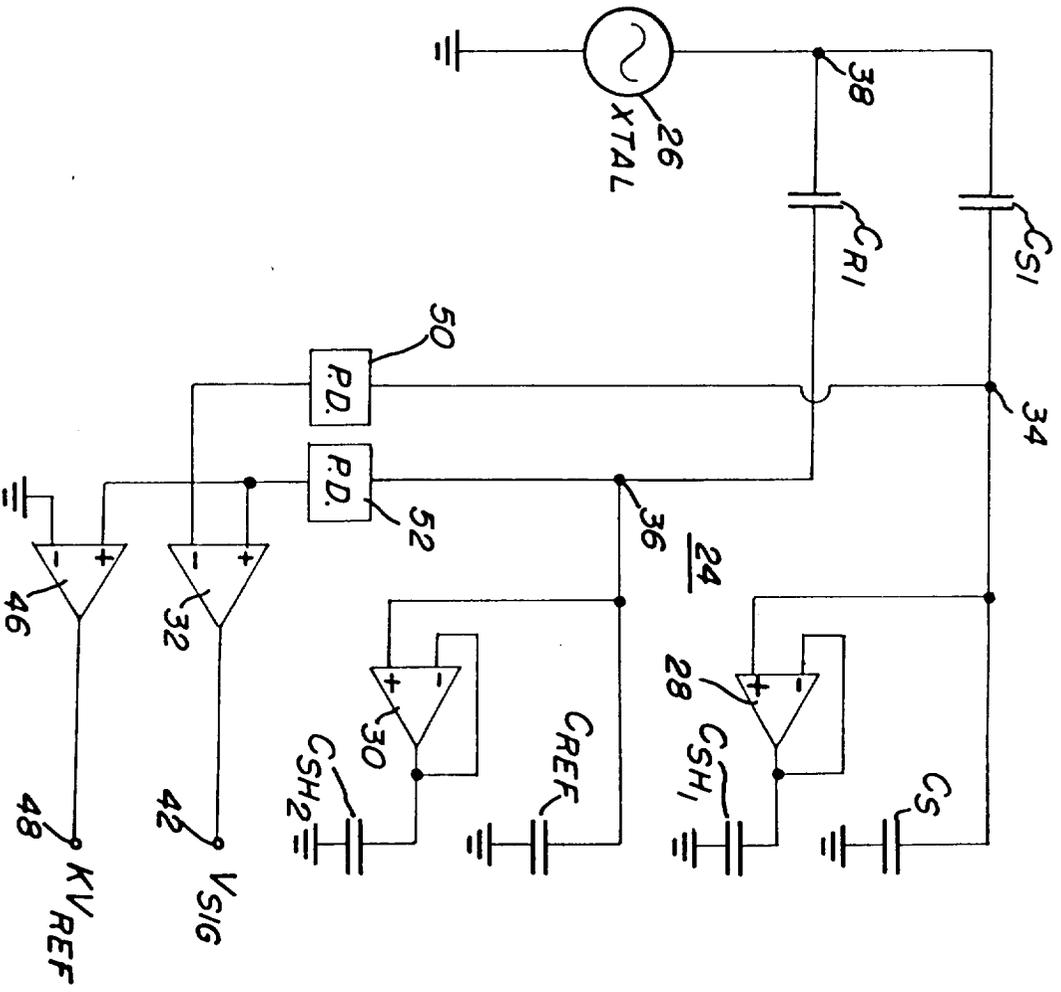


FIG. 6

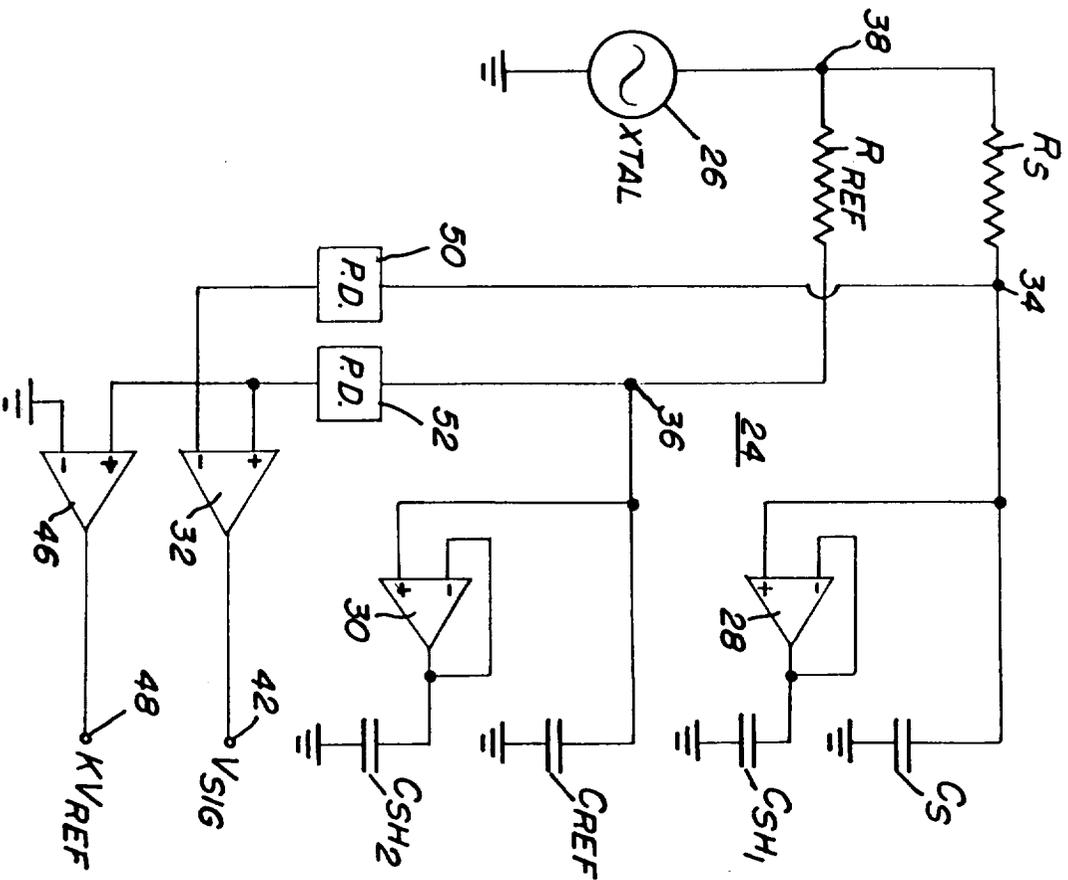


FIG. 7

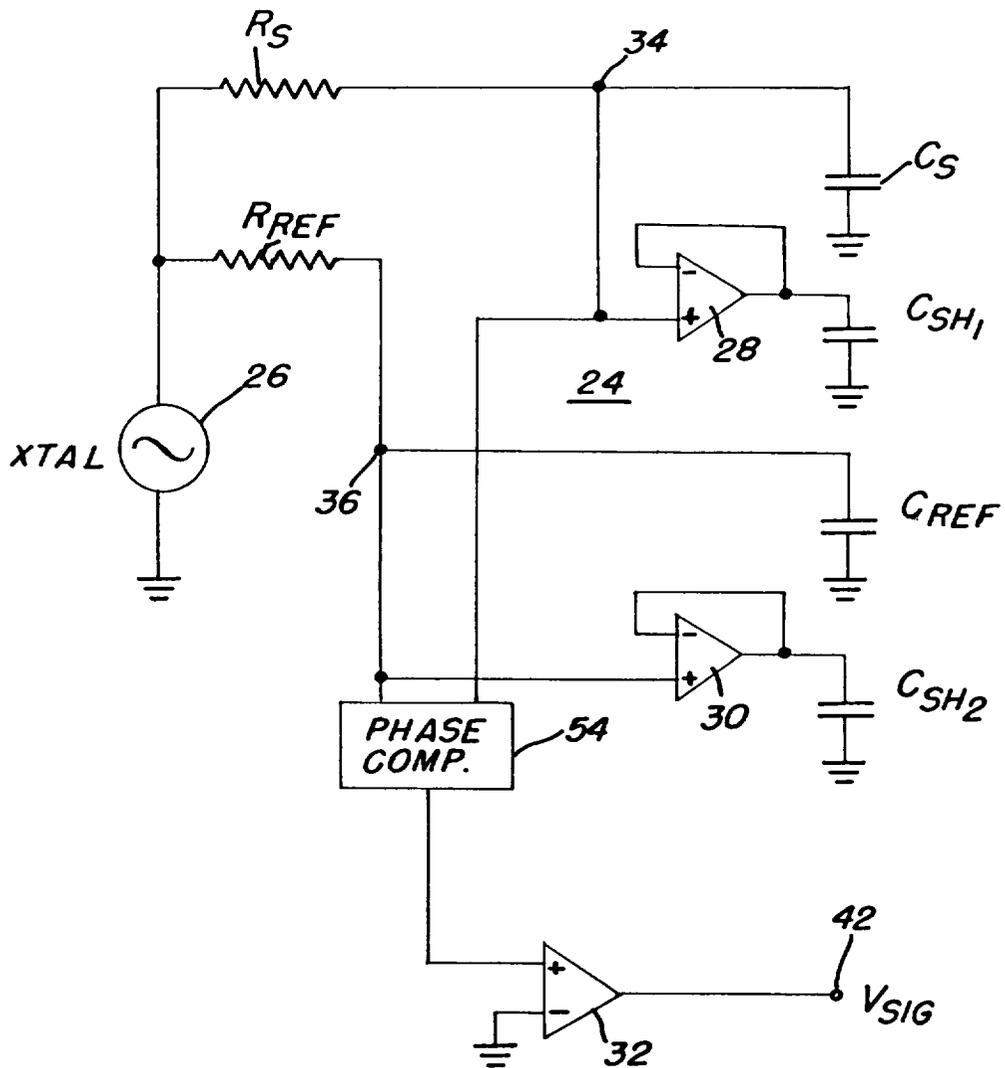


FIG. 8