

The 2012 Election and the Sources of Partisan Polarization: A Survey of American Political Attitudes

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Despite the hope that President Obama's clear victory last November might lead to a reduction in partisan polarization, the results of a new survey indicate that Americans are as divided as ever. In addition, Americans are divided not just over candidates or even political programs, but also over the fundamental purposes of government and the definition of America. Finally, despite the hope that an Obama presidency would reduce racial divisions, attitudes toward race greatly influence attitudes on a range of political questions.

To better understand these divides, the Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College participated in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (more information at <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces>). Undergraduate students in Government 208: Political Parties and Elections, taught by Professor Philip Klinkner, developed a module of questions surveying attitudes over a range of issues. The CCES survey was conducted as an online survey by YouGov/Polimetrix in two waves: pre and post-election. Analysis of the survey results was conducted by Hamilton students Nick Anastasi, Jack Cartwright, Matthew Creeden, Will Rusche, Jesse Stinebring, and Hashem Zikry under the supervision of Professor Klinkner.

The Hamilton component of the pre-election wave surveyed 1000 people between October 1 and November 5, 2012. The post-election wave surveyed 837 of the pre-election wave respondents between November 7 and December 9, 2012. The margin of error for the pre-election wave is approximately +/- 3.1 percent and for the post-election wave approximately +/- 3.4 percent. All results have been weighted for accuracy.

Key Findings:

Racial Attitudes Are Crucial to Political Divisions

Running for president in 2008, Barack Obama talked about the possibility of healing the nation's racial and ethnic divisions. But rather than seeing a post-racial age, Americans today are even more divided by racial attitudes than they were four years ago.

To gauge these racial attitudes, the survey included four questions commonly used by social science researchers to measure what is known as racial resentment. These questions are:

"Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors."

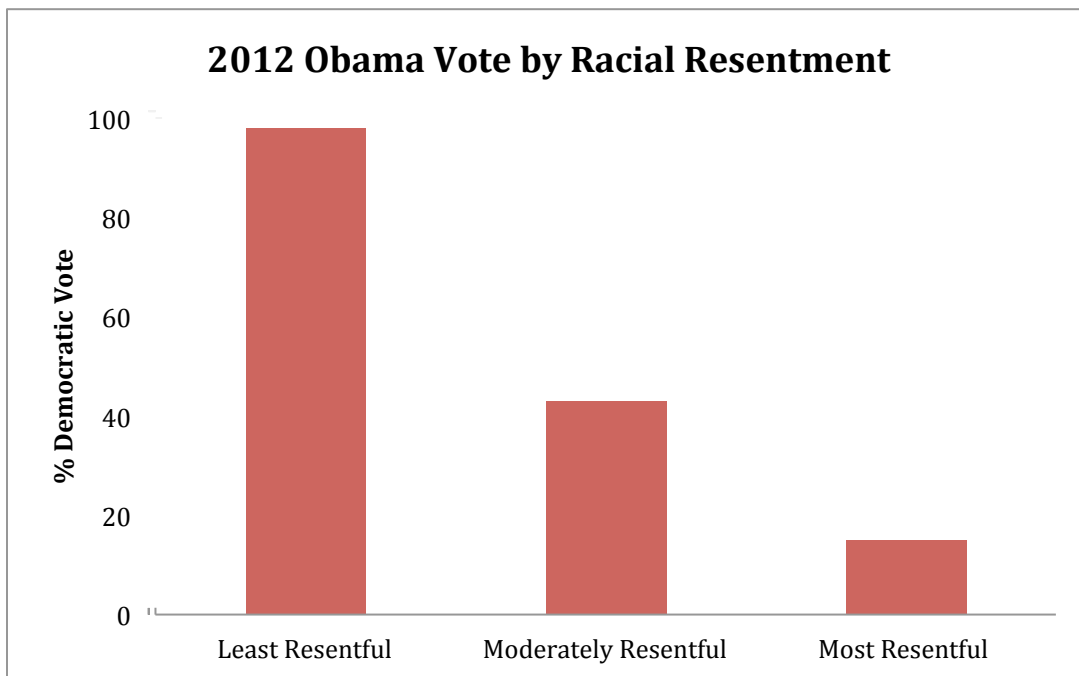
"Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class."

"Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve."

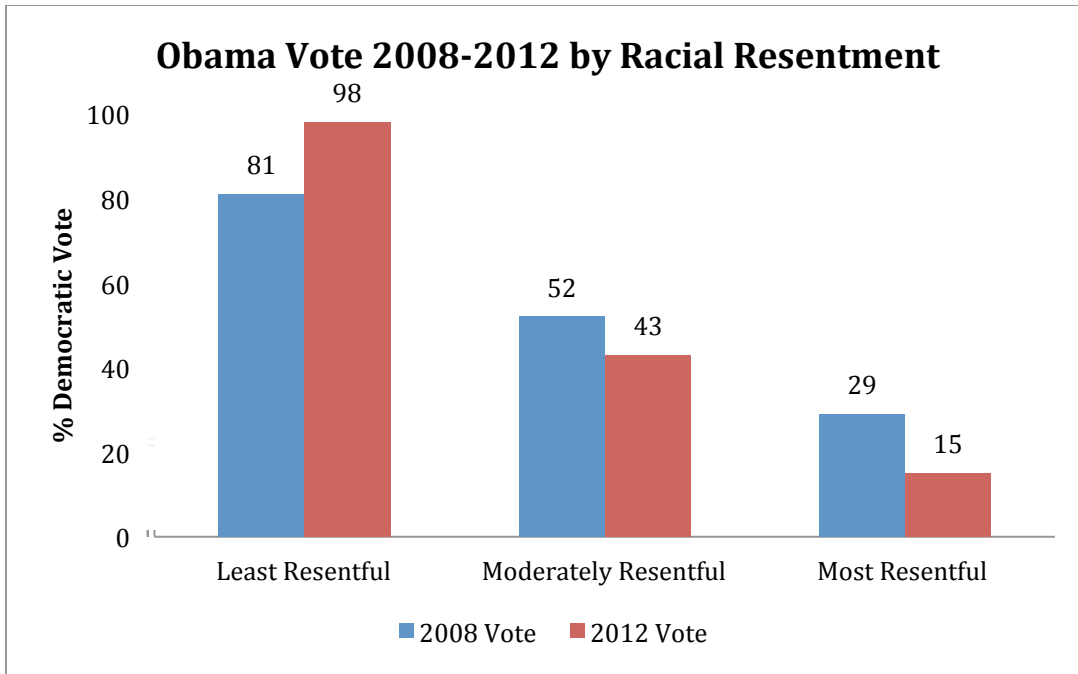
“It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.”

Respondents were then asked if they agreed strongly, agreed somewhat, disagreed strongly, or disagreed somewhat with each statement. Responses were then compiled into an index of racial resentment, ranging from the most to least resentful.

The results of our survey show that racial resentment significantly influenced the presidential vote in 2012, with Obama winning overwhelmingly among the approximately one-third of voters with the least amount of racial resentment, running about even among those with moderate levels of resentment, and losing in a landslide among those with the highest levels of racial resentment.



In addition, we looked at how these results compared to 2008, which we obtained from the 2008 American National Election Study. We found that racial resentment had a bigger impact in 2012 than in 2008. Among the least resentful, Obama's 2012 vote actually increased compared to 2008. On the other hand, Obama lost votes among those with moderate levels of resentment and lost even more among those with the highest levels of resentment.



Birtherism is Alive and Well.

Despite releasing his long-form birth certificate in 2011, rumors about President Obama’s place of birth have persisted and are as strong as ever. Respondents were asked, “Where was Barack Obama born?” and gave the following responses:

Where was Barack Obama born?	
In the United States	58%
Outside of the United States	21%
Don't Know/Not Sure	20%

The 58 percent who believed that President Obama was born in the United States is approximately the same as in 2011 at the height of the “birther” controversy and just prior to the President’s release of his birth certificate¹, suggesting that birtherism is perhaps as strong as ever.

In fact, these initial results may actually understate the level of birtherism. Respondents who said that they believed that President Obama was born outside of the U.S. or said that they didn’t know or weren’t sure of his place of birth were also asked where they think he might have been born. Among those who said they didn’t know or weren’t sure, responses fell into the following categories:

¹ <http://today.yougov.com/news/2012/02/03/birthers-are-back/>

If you think Barack Obama might not have been born in the United States, where do you think he might have been born?

Africa	38%
Asia	5%
U.S	11%
Other	2%
Don't Know	36%
Don't Know/Birther	7%

These results show that many of those who said they didn't know or weren't sure about President Obama's birthplace, actually believe that he was born outside of the United States. Of these, 38 percent cited somewhere in Africa (Kenya was the most common response), 5 percent said Asia, and 2 percent said somewhere else in the world. Approximately 7 percent gave don't know responses, but included comments indicating that they believe that the President was born outside of the United States. Examples in this category include responses like these:

"Good question -- let's see the real birth certificate "

"Don't know, but he's did not have an American upbringing ."

"I have not seen any proof he was born in the US, too many conflicting statements."

"I feel he could have been born in any one of many American English speaking countries from South "

"Not sure, but for some reason he sure is hiding things."

Taking all those who indicated in either question that they believe President Obama was born outside of the U.S., we find that approximately 29 percent of Americans fall into the birther category.

But what does it mean to be a birther? Are birthers just expressing a willingness to believe and say negative things about President Obama, or do they really think that he is constitutionally ineligible to serve as president? To answer this question, we asked those who said that they believed that President Obama was born outside of the U.S. or said that they didn't know or weren't sure of his place of birth the following question:

"Do you think that if Barack Obama was born outside of the United States that makes him ineligible under the US Constitution to be president?"

Among the 29 percent in the initial birther category mentioned above, 81 percent answered yes that they believe President Obama is ineligible to serve as President, 16 percent said no, and 12 percent were unsure or didn't know. Overall, 24 percent

of all respondents believe that President Obama was born outside of the United States and that this makes him ineligible to serve as president.

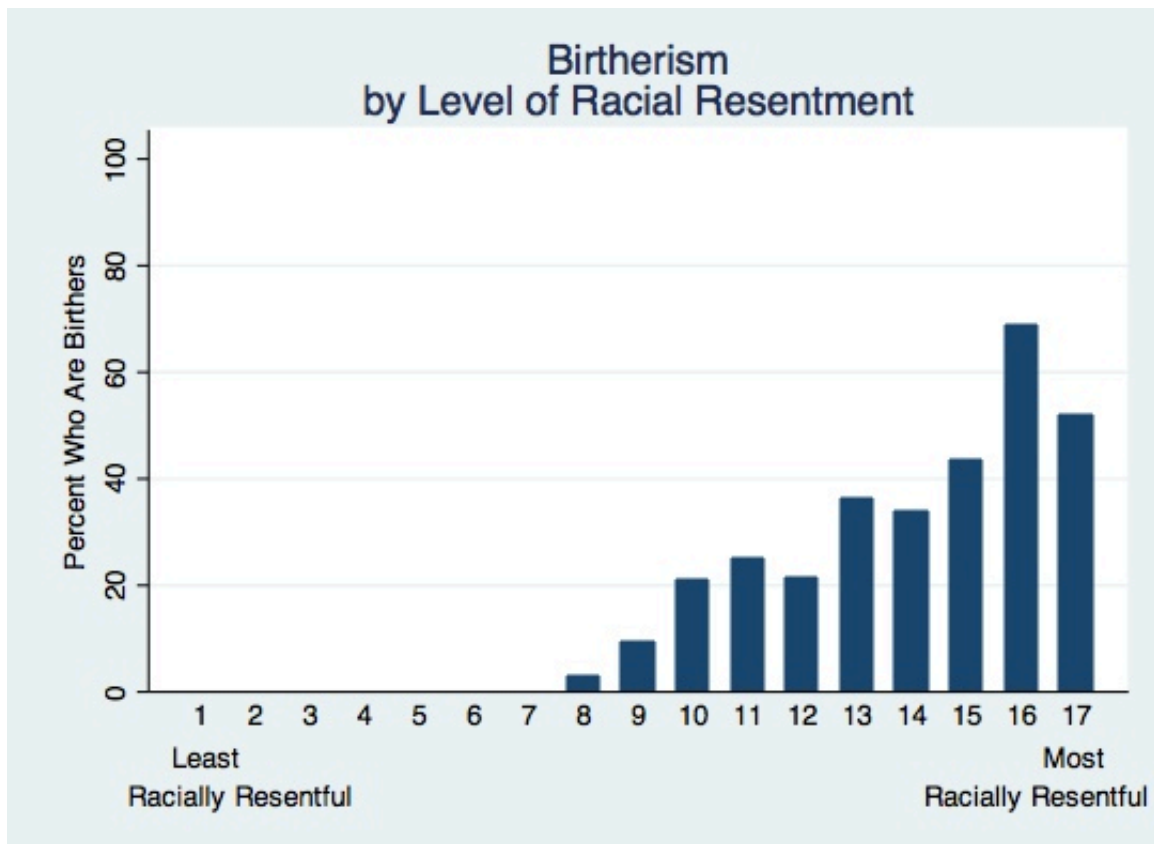
This 24 percent of Americans that we classify as birthers are most heavily concentrated among Republicans. In fact, over half of all Republicans identify as birthers, compared to only 18 percent of independents and just 3% of Democrats.

“Birthers” by Party Identification

Republican (w/leaners)	54%
Independent	18%
Democrat (w/leaners)	3%

In addition to being influenced by party, birtherism is also strongly influenced by the racial attitudes of respondents. Using the racial resentment measure discussed above, respondents were scaled from 1 (least amount of racial resentment) to 17 (greatest amount of racial resentment).

As the graph below shows, birtherism is utterly absent among those in the lower half of the racial resentment scale, but then rises rapidly.



Republicans Suspect Voter Fraud in the 2012 Election

Going into the 2012 election, both Democrats and Republicans expressed concerns about the fairness of the election. Only 15 percent of Republicans and 19 percent of Democrats were very confident that the election would be decided fairly.

After the election, fears about voter fraud abated among Democrats but skyrocketed among Republicans, with a majority (58 percent) of Republicans not confident at all about the fairness of the election.

How confident are you that the 2012 presidential election will be decided fairly?

	Pre-Election		Post-election	
	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)
% Very Confident	15	19	14	82
% Somewhat Confident	52	53	29	16
% Not Confident At All	33	28	58	2

Republicans and Democrats were divided over the possible sources of unfairness in the election. Republicans were somewhat more concerned about possible voter fraud, while Democrats were much more concerned about the impact of voter ID laws.

“How much of an impact do you think the following will have/had on the outcome of the presidential election?”

“Voter fraud and intimidation in big urban areas.”

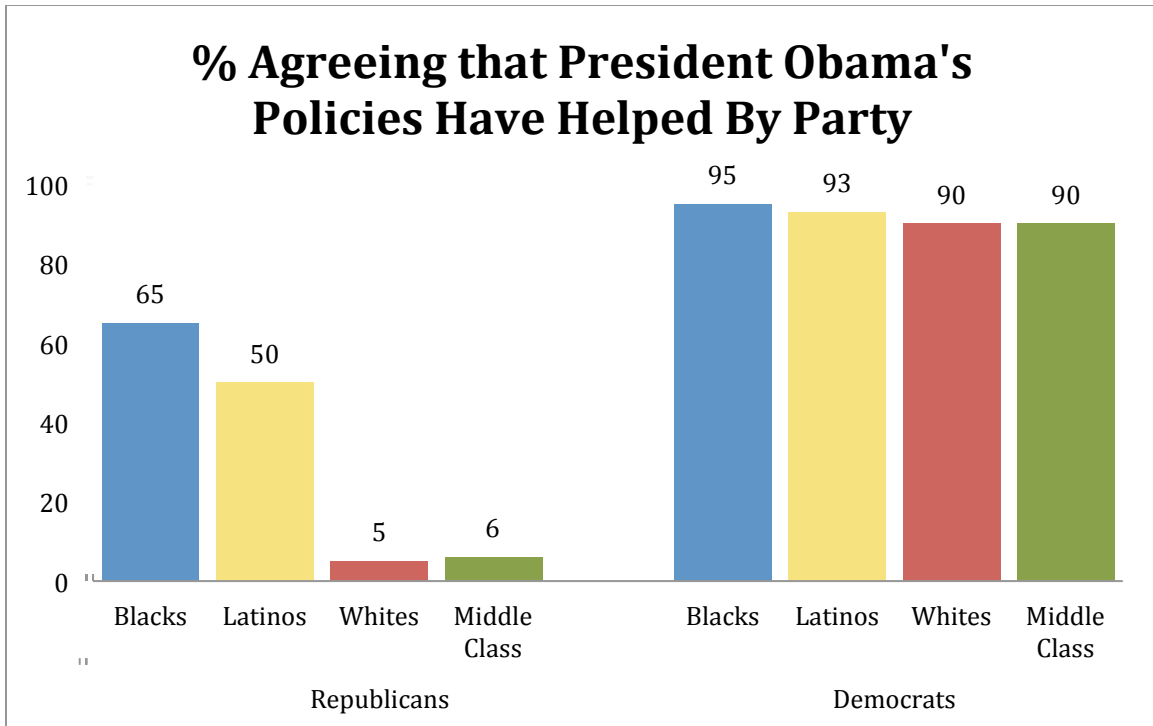
	Pre-Election		Post-Election	
	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)
% Big Impact	27	23	32	6
% Some Impact	55	48	49	36
% No Impact	18	29	19	58

“Laws requiring voters to have a photo ID and other measures that make it harder for people to register and vote”

	Pre-Election		Post-Election	
	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)
% Big Impact	12	41	10	12
% Some Impact	44	50	25	56
% No Impact	44	9	65	32

Parties Divided Over Who Has Benefited From Obama’s Policies

We asked respondents whether they think President Obama’s policies have helped or hurt a variety of different groups. Republicans and Democrats disagree strongly on the impact of President Obama’s policies, particularly when it comes to whether or not they benefit different racial groups. Republicans believe that only Blacks and Latinos have benefited from President Obama’s policies. On the other hand, Democrats think that everyone (Whites, Blacks, Latinos, the middle class) have benefited from President Obama’s policies. Given the huge gap in partisan divisions on the beneficiaries of Obama’s policies, along with the racialized nature of these perceptions, it seems unsurprising that partisan gridlock continues to dominate American politics.



American Exceptionalism:

In recent years, liberals and conservatives have become increasingly divided over the definition of America, the importance of different political and religious ideas, and the reasons for American power and prosperity. To better understand these views, we asked a series of questions about American exceptionalism, the Constitution, and God's influence on America:

The first question asked the following:

“What do you believe is the MOST important reason for why the United States has become so wealthy and powerful?”

The results below show that respondents supported various reasons for American exceptionalism, but this masks some rather large partisan differences. Among Democrats, a plurality ascribed American exceptionalism to its belief in democracy and individual rights. On the other hand, nearly half of Republicans cited free enterprise and private property as the sources of American exceptionalism.

	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)	All
Because of its size, location, and natural resources.	9	29	20
Because of its commitment to political values like democracy and individual rights.	23	41	34
Because of its commitment to free enterprise and private property	47	21	32
Because it is blessed by God.	21	9	14

As the results above suggest, Democrats and Republicans disagree on the role of divine providence in America history, with Republicans much more likely to see American power and prosperity as the result of divine blessing. We examined this question further by asking respondents what they saw as the primary source of inspiration for the U.S. Constitution. Majorities of both Republicans and Democrats believe that divine inspiration played at least some role in the Constitution, but this view was much more widely held among Republicans (77 percent) than Democrats (55 percent).

	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)	All
The US Constitution was inspired by God.	12	6	9
The US Constitution is based solely on human ideas with no inspiration from God.	23	49	38
The US Constitution is a mixture of human ideas and God's inspiration.	65	45	53

Democrats and Republicans also disagree on the role of divine providence in contemporary America. When asked, "Do you believe that God has a plan for the USA?," a large majority (72 percent) of Republicans agreed to some extent compared to the majority of Democrats (51 percent) who disagreed.

Do you believe God has a plan for the USA?	Republicans (w/leaners)	Democrats (w/leaners)	All
Strongly Agree	36	23	29
Agree	36	25	30
Disagree	21	20	20
Strongly Disagree	7	31	21

Obstruction and Gridlock:

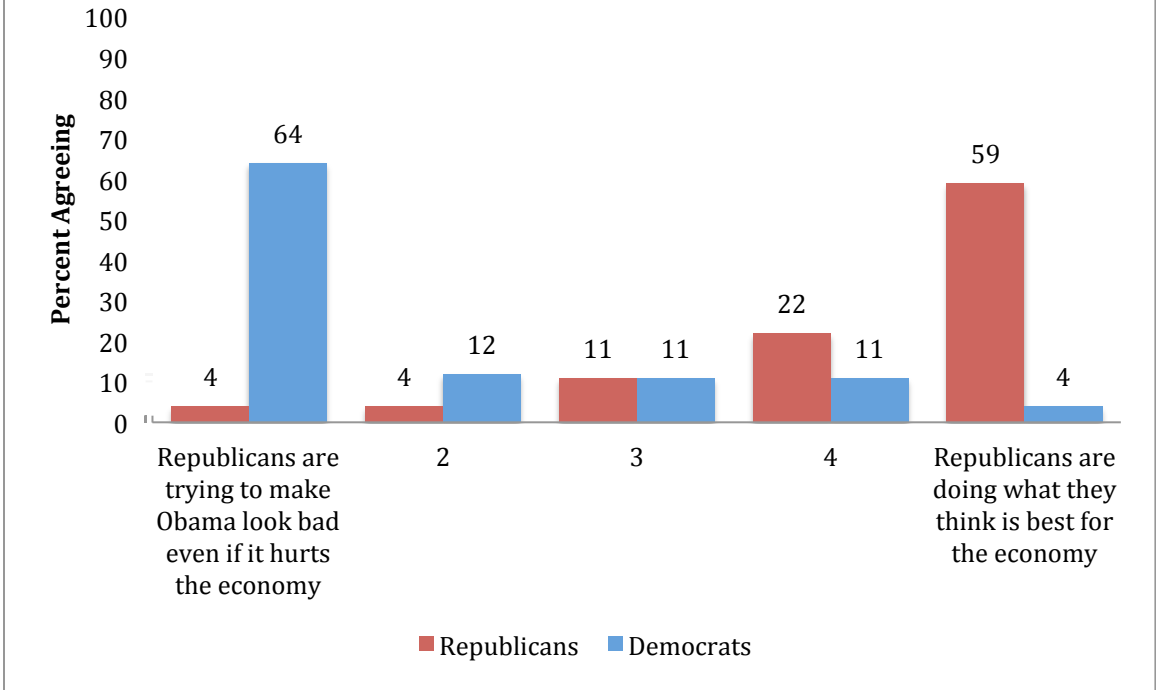
Since Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives in 2010, the United States has seen high levels of partisan conflict and gridlock. Not surprisingly, Democrats and Republicans disagree over the reason for this conflict. Respondents were given the following statements and asked how close they came to their own views:

“Some people claim that Republicans in Congress have opposed President Obama in order to make him look bad, even if it hurts the economy. Other people argue that they have opposed President Obama because they believe his policies are bad for the economy. Which comes closest to you view:

- 1 Republicans are trying to make Obama look bad even if it hurts the economy
- 2 .
- 3 .
- 4 .
- 5 Republicans are doing what they think is best for the economy

The chart below shows that Republicans and Democrats are deeply divided over the reasons for partisan gridlock, with a majority of Democrats believing that House Republicans are trying to obstruct President Obama for political reasons, but a majority of Republicans believe that House Republicans are just doing what they think is best for the economy.

Reasons for Partisan Conflict by Party



Survey Information:

These results are from a survey conducted by the Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College as part of the Cooperative Congressional Elections Study. More information on the CCES is available at <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces>.

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