

# Social Media's Influence on Party Differences & Political Knowledge: 2020 Candidates

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## **Abstract**

Electronic communication, specifically social media, has had an increasing role in distributing political news and influencing political knowledge within the United States over the last two decades. Social media reaches millions of Americans daily and is capable of influencing how much citizens know about potential and current leaders. This study analyzes the role of social media in providing accurate knowledge regarding 2020 presidential candidates, and how this amount of knowledge differs by preferred party. The study will be conducted through a survey-based current events quiz that draws on quantitative data from Americans that identify with different parties. The purpose of this study is to introduce new knowledge concerning the role of social media in the current (2020) presidential election, as well as how informed different parties are about these candidates.

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## 1. Historical Context: The Evolution of Social Media's Role in Modern Politics

In a research article over social media's contribution to political misperceptions in United States presidential elections, R. Kelly Garrett, professor of communications at Ohio State University, discusses the new "reliance on social media for political news" and its continued growth. In 2012, two in five Americans "reported using social media for political purposes, and about one in three said they had encountered messages on social media promoting one of the candidates in the months leading up to the [presidential] election" (Garrett 2019). In addition to increased social media usage for political purposes, the 2008 Barack Obama campaign marked the first time social media was incorporated into presidential political marketing, and his successful election is often credited to this new technique, as reported by Stanford marketing professor, Jennifer Aaker (Aaker 2009). Since Obama's initial campaign, presidential candidates have turned to social media as their main form of marketing and relied heavily on its wide outreach.

As Americans continue to turn to social media for news and a new necessity for candidates to hold an online presence emerges, social media's role in providing *political knowledge* becomes increasingly important. Political knowledge, as defined by Lindsay Hoffman for *Oxford Bibliographies*, is the "political sophistication or political expertise...knowledge generally defined as holding correct information—whether that is civic, issue, or candidate information." In addition, political knowledge typically leads to "political discussion, or it may moderate the relationship between media use and political participation" (Hoffman 2017).

## 2. Literature Review

Bloomsburg University Professor of Mass Communication, Dr. Chang Sup Park, in his analysis of how using different types of social media for news predicts political knowledge, presents a definition that outlines the general significance of studying political knowledge. Park defines the “normative theory of democracy, [in which] a democratic system works better when citizens are politically knowledgeable” (Park 2017). With political knowledge as a vital asset to United States democracy, it is important to address how political knowledge is attained and what factors contribute to this learning. Park, after analyzing data from the *Global Web Index*, decided to research Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter, later finding that social media’s impact (when used for news) on political knowledge “aligns with the [specific] informational features of each type of social media” (Park 2017). Based on Park’s findings, my study aims to find if individual political parties turn to one particular social media platform, in addition to levels and accuracy of political knowledge.

In regards to outside factors, a research journal written by Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” analyzes the most recent election and the impact of new media technology on American democracy. This study presents a critical point regarding the foundation of my research. The study references how (when analyzing political knowledge) “education, age, and total media consumption are strongly associated with more accurate beliefs” (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). These factors are consistently noted throughout other social media analyses and are incorporated in my analysis of data in an attempt to focus on party affiliation.

An additional research journal that inspired my own research and led to a clear knowledge gap, was American journalist Tom Rosenstiel's report for the *Pew Research Center* on the public's political knowledge. This study was conducted through an interactive knowledge quiz, utilizing questions first written by the national poll. Rosenstiel's analysis of demographic data and quiz scores show a partisan gap in worldly economic awareness, a knowledge age gap in which younger people struggle with current events in comparison to older age groups, and a correlation between higher levels of education and higher scores (Rosenstiel 2010). Rather than selecting a specific area of political expertise, this study analyzes worldly current events including both politics and economics. In terms of addressing a partisan gap, the study fails to mention if social media plays a role in tested knowledge and how it differs in regards to solely focusing on current presidential candidates.

Each of these studies emphasize the importance of political knowledge in a properly functioning democracy, yet none address the extent of social media's influence on domestic political knowledge by party affiliation, or how this has evolved in regards to the upcoming 2020 election.

### **3. Methodology**

This research aims to answer how social media's influence on political knowledge regarding 2020 presidential candidates differs by party affiliation by analyzing quantitative data collected through causal-comparative research. I chose to use a causal-comparative research method as its emphasis on "naturally formed groups" reflected my study of varying political parties. In addition, causal-comparative research consists of identifying an independent variable,

but not manipulating it. In this case, social media (usage and platform) was my identified independent variable. Finally, causal-comparative research measures the effects of the independent variable on the dependent. As this method encompasses both naturally formed, pre-existing groups and identification without manipulation of an independent variable as well as later measuring the effects of this variable upon the dependent (political knowledge), I saw that this would best fit my study.

On December 28th and 29th, 2019, I conducted an online survey of 100 U.S. adults using SurveyMonkey, an online survey development software available for public and professional services. I originally selected to use this platform after observing and dissecting how it was used in Allcott and Gentzkow's study "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," as mentioned in my literature review. In comparison to my potential alternative, Google Forms, this platform offers the option for targeted audiences and provides post-survey insights and analyses. In addition, I was able to change my survey to a 'quiz setting' that automatically scored each respondent, whereas Google Forms did not offer this. The respondents were "drawn from SurveyMonkey's Audience Panel, an opt-in panel recruited from the more than 30 million people who complete SurveyMonkey surveys every month (as described in more detail at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/audience/>)" (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

The survey consisted of three sections. First, I asked a series of demographic questions, including age, education, and party affiliation. These demographics typically factor into political knowledge and need to be taken into consideration when analyzing data (Rosenstiel 2010). Second, I asked about social media consumption, including time spent on social networking websites and which platform (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, other) respondents utilized most

often. As mentioned in my literature review, different social media platforms have previously had a direct impact on social media's total influence on political knowledge (Park 2017). Finally, each respondent was presented with a five question political knowledge quiz modeled after the format of the previously mentioned *Pew Research Center* current events quiz, which asked a series of ten multiple choice questions in an effort to measure the American public's knowledge of international current events. I also "received age and income categories, gender, and census division from profiling questions that respondents had completed when they first started taking surveys on the SurveyMonkey audience panel" (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) .

The quiz questions were selected from 4 leading Democratic candidates: Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren, as well as the current president and leading Republican candidate, Donald Trump. These candidates were selected after analyzing *The New York Times'* weekly online article, titled "Current State of the Race." This page presented frequently updated political data and analyses in order to track the Democratic presidential candidates and their live progress. At the time the survey was put out on December 28th, the selected candidates matched the leading national polling averages: Joe Biden led with 27%, followed by Sanders with 19%, Warren with 16%, and Buttigieg with 9% (Lee et al. 2020). Each of these candidates also led the 12 Democratic candidates (at the time) in weekly news coverage. Therefore, I felt as though asking questions regarding these candidates would produce the most accurate results.

**Figure 1**

|   | AVERAGE | CONTRIBUTIONS† | COVERAGE |
|---|---------|----------------|----------|
|  Joseph R. Biden Jr. ✓ | 27%     | \$37.6m        | #1       |
|  Bernie Sanders ✓      | 19% ↑   | \$61.5m        | #4       |
|  Elizabeth Warren ✓    | 16%     | \$49.8m        | #2 ↑     |
|  Pete Buttigieg ✓      | 9% ↓    | \$51.5m        | #3 ↓     |

December 28, 2019 screenshot displaying (left to right) national polling average, individual contributions, and weekly news coverage from: Jasmine, Lee C., et al. "Which Democrats Are Leading the 2020 Presidential Race?"

*The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia, 20 Mar. 202,*

[www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/elections/democratic-polls.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/elections/democratic-polls.html).

I asked respondents to test their knowledge of prominent 2020 candidates and their policies through a short quiz. In order to select which specific topics/policies to ask about, I studied information from *The New York Times*' frequently updated candidate profiles, which log data on news coverage, polling averages, individual contributions, and signature issues. These signature issues were largely taken into consideration when writing questions that test political knowledge. In addition, I watched several videos from another *The New York Times* article, in which candidates were each asked the same questions. After listening to the different responses, I was able to note differences that could be used to test political knowledge rather than drawing on general party values. Finally, I visited each candidate's (including President Trump's) campaign website and official social media campaign accounts to see what messages candidates were directly putting out. I was then able to formulate a series of multiple-choice questions regarding

individual stances on controversial issues, campaign slogans, health care plans, and signature issues. Each of these questions also had a ‘not sure’ option, to eliminate the guess factor. Overall, the data I collected was solely quantitative, as demographic data and scores were categorized into numeric groups and percentages. I chose to work with quantitative data, as it provides the most accurate and reliable trends when measuring knowledge.

With regards to limitations, the SurveyMonkey audience panel is paid, which alters the variety of respondents. However, the online panel is vetted through SurveyMonkey and eliminates bots and fraud, as well as aiming to ensure diversity (SurveyMonkey). In addition, I targeted Americans ages 18-100 and received responses from each United States region (New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific), age group, and income sector. Gender was also divided relatively even, with 42% male respondents and 58% female respondents. Another limitation within the survey was only asking one question per candidate. This limits the measure of political knowledge, as candidates put out a wide variety of opinions and campaign information. Respondents could be more familiar with other leading debates surrounding this election depending on what issues they follow or commonly see. In future studies, quizzing on multiple issues at the center of the election could provide more detailed results. However, I worked to select signature issues that lie at the core of each candidate’s campaign.

#### **4. Data Analysis**

As previously discussed, a total of 100 surveys were returned, and each of these results was included in the final analysis of data. In order to identify further trends and verify those

presented in the literature review (demographics that affect political knowledge), an analysis of age, education, and typical social media platform was conducted for each individual. Table I displays the data set and distribution of age within the surveyed demographic (100 total respondents).

Table I.

| <b>Age Group</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> |
|------------------|------------------------------|
| 18 to 24         | 12                           |
| 25 to 34         | 29                           |
| 35 to 44         | 17                           |
| 45 to 54         | 28                           |
| 55 to 64         | 11                           |
| 65 to 74         | 3                            |

Regarding research presented within the literature review that identifies a trend in which political knowledge increases with education level, an analysis of each individual's highest level of education was conducted (Rosenstiel 2010). Table 2 displays the education levels selected by each of the 100 respondents.

Table 2.

| <b>Highest Level of Completed Education</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> |
|---|------------------------------|
| Did not attend school                       | 0                            |
| Graduated from high school                  | 14                           |
| 1 year of college                           | 10                           |
| 2 years of college                          | 11                           |
| 3 years of college                          | 9                            |

|                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| Graduated from college | 34 |
| Graduate School        | 22 |

Regarding research presented within the literature review that highlights the influence of specific social media platforms on political knowledge, an analysis of each individual's most used form of social media was conducted (Park 2017). Table 3 displays this data set and the distribution of the most used social media platform within the surveyed demographic.

Table 3.

| Social Media Form       | Number of Respondents |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Facebook                | 47                    |
| Twitter                 | 14                    |
| Instagram               | 26                    |
| Other - (not mentioned) | 7                     |
| Other - none            | 6                     |

In order to identify if time spent on social media affects political knowledge, each respondent was asked to clarify how much time they spent on social networking websites in a typical week. Although this question received short answer responses, the responses were coded into 5 groups: none, 1-5 hours, 6-10 hours, 11-20 hours, and 20+ hours. Table 4 reiterates this data set and the distribution of time spent on social media within the surveyed demographic.

Table 4.

| Time Spent in a Typical Week | Number of Respondents |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| None                         | 6                     |
| 1-5 hours                    | 42                    |

|             |    |
|-------------|----|
| 6-10 hours  | 25 |
| 11-20 hours | 18 |
| 20+ hours   | 9  |

Finally, in order to address any differences in how political knowledge differs by party affiliation, each respondent was asked which political party they affiliate with. Table 5 outlines this data set and the distribution of party affiliation within the 100 respondent demographic.

Table 5.

| <b>Party Affiliation</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Democratic Party         | 39                           |
| Independent              | 22                           |
| Republican Party         | 23                           |
| None/Other               | 16                           |

#### 4.1 Scores

The overall average score on the political knowledge quiz section, was 22.2%. While at first glance, this seems low, it's important to note that each respondent typically correctly answered one to two candidates's questions correctly.

In order to verify any trends presented within the literature view or any contributing factors to prior political knowledge, the average scores on the political knowledge quiz for each of the individual variables discussed in the previous section were analyzed (again, independently from other factors). Rosentiel's political knowledge report demonstrates a correlation between higher levels of education and higher scores (Rosentiel 2010). In order to see if this factor

should be taken into account in my final research, this variable was independently analyzed.

Table 6 displays the average quiz scores based on levels of education.

Table 6.

| Highest Level of Education | Average Score |
|----------------------------|---------------|
| High School Grad           | 8.6%          |
| 1 year college             | 24%           |
| 2 years college            | 20%           |
| 3 years college            | 20%           |
| College grad               | 25.9%         |
| Grad school                | 20.91%        |

Based on these statistics, respondents whose highest level of education is a high school degree typically scored lower on the 2020 election political knowledge quiz. However, there does not seem to be a trend across the board when it comes to education. Each education level, with the exception of high school, scored on average around the same percentile. Therefore, education does not hold a strong influence on the surveyed respondents' level of political knowledge, specifically with regards to the 2020 election candidates.

In addition, Rosentiel's political knowledge report demonstrates that younger groups tend to struggle with current events in comparison to older age groups (Rosentiel 2010). To see if this factor should be taken into account in my final research, this variable was also independently analyzed. Table 7 displays the average quiz scores based on age.

Table 7.

| Age   | Average Score |
|-------|---------------|
| 18-24 | 21.7%         |
| 25-34 | 17.8%         |
| 35-44 | 25.9%         |
| 45-54 | 20%           |
| 55-64 | 20%           |
| 65-74 | 33%           |

Based on these statistics, there does not seem to be a trend that correlates with Rosentiel's study. Age does not seem to influence political knowledge scores as an independent variable with regards to the 2020 election. While the 65-74 age group showed a slightly higher average score, it's important to keep in mind that there were only three respondents in this demographic.

In addition, Park's social media and political knowledge analysis presented within the literature review, states that specific features of each individual social media platform can influence levels/accuracy of political knowledge (Park 2017). To determine if this factor should be taken into account in the final conclusions, this variable was also independently analyzed.

Table 8 displays the average quiz scores based on social media platforms.

Table 8.

| Social Media Form | Average Score |
|-------------------|---------------|
| Facebook          | 17.4%         |
| Twitter           | 27.1%         |
| Instagram         | 20.7%         |
| None/other        | 29.1%         |

These scores seem to align with Park's research. Respondents who utilize Facebook had an average score significantly lower than those of other platforms. In addition, respondents who opt out of social media usage or for a more niche platform scored higher on average.

Finally, in order to fully address the independent variable, social media, average quiz scores were calculated for the different times spent on social media per week. Table 9 displays the average quiz scores based on weekly usage.

Table 9.

| <b>Time Spent in a Typical Week</b> | <b>Average Score</b> |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| None                                | 26.7%                |
| 1-5 hours                           | 20.95%               |
| 6-10 hours                          | 25.83%               |
| 11-20 hours                         | 10.59%               |
| 20+ hours                           | 26.67%               |

Based on these calculations, there does not seem to be a trend in scores based on time spent on social media in a typical week. Therefore, social media likely becomes an influential factor that varies based on a specific platform (Facebook, Twitter, etc), not the amount of time spent by an individual.

#### *4.2 Filling in the Gaps: Party Differences*

In order to evaluate how social media's influence on political knowledge regarding 2020 presidential candidates differs by party affiliation, average time spent on social media per week

as well as most common social media platform were calculated for each political party. Table 10 displays the differences between parties.

Table 10.

| <b>Party</b> | <b>Time Spent in a Typical Week</b> | <b>Social Media Form</b> |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Independent  | 5.5 hours                           | Facebook                 |
| Democrat     | 10.04 hours                         | Facebook                 |
| Republican   | 8.2 hours                           | Facebook                 |
| None/other   | 9.33 hours                          | Facebook                 |

To further explain this data, each of the political parties utilizes Facebook the most often, making it a common factor in each of their average scores. However, time spent on social media does vary, with Independents averaging the least amount of time per week and Democrats averaging the most within the surveyed demographic.

Finally, average scores for each party are displayed in table 11, calculated as a reflection of political knowledge regarding the 2020 election and more specifically, its candidates.

Table 11.

| <b>Party</b> | <b>Average Score</b> |
|--------------|----------------------|
| Independent  | 31.8%                |
| Democrat     | 22.6%                |
| Republican   | 14.8%                |
| None/other   | 8.75%                |

This data shows Independent affiliates scoring significantly higher than the remaining, followed by the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and lastly, those who selected “none/other.”

## 5. New Understandings & Data Implications

Based on all collected data and the average scores, the Independent affiliates seem to be the most well informed across the board in comparison to other parties. The Democratic party follows, most likely due to the fact that 4% of quiz questions were about Democratic candidates, in the midst of the party’s process to elect a nominee. The Republican party scored, on average, the lowest scores compared to the available party choices, most likely due to the fact that only one question involved the leading Republican candidate, Donald Trump. Finally, those who selected “none/other” scored the lowest, likely due to the fact that no alternate party candidates were quizzed about, or these respondents may have little to no interest in politics/this election. To dive further into the understandings and implications of these score averages and what they could mean for the candidates, it's important to look into several possible reasons behind the identified party differences and social media’s role.

### 5.1 Facebook

To re-emphasize the claims inferred from the collected data set when analyzing how social media’s influence on political knowledge regarding 2020 presidential candidates differs by party affiliation, social media’s influence comes with specific platforms rather than time. Within the surveyed demographic, Facebook was the most commonly used social media platform for the

general respondent population as well as when individually looking at the parties. This comes as no surprise when compared to larger-scale data, as a study published by the Pew Research Center notes “Facebook remains one of the most widely used social media sites among adults in the U.S.. Roughly seven-in-ten adults (69%) say they use the platform...YouTube is the only other online platform that matches Facebook’s reach.” In addition, this 2019 study reports only 37% of U.S. adults use Instagram and 22% use Twitter (the other two platforms incorporated into my study) (Perrin and Anderson 2019).

When it comes to Facebook specifically, one research article aiming to explore the relationship between Facebook use and political knowledge levels reveals “A greater reliance on...Facebook specifically for news might serve to depress knowledge levels” (Cacciatore et al. 2018). With so many Americans relying on social media for news, and typically opting for Facebook, this leads to a concern for the pure democracy of the country, but also leads to further questions as to why Facebook leads to reoccurring lower scores. Science magazine found “Facebook’s news feed algorithm does indeed create an echo chamber effect,” in which users hold a personalized view of the media that in turn contributes to political polarization. However, the study does report the “power to expose oneself to perspectives from the other side in social media lies first and foremost with individuals” (Bohannon 2015). Despite individuals ultimately holding the power to their own growth in the political sphere, more and more Americans are turning to social media algorithms for news, and my study demonstrates respondents who selected Facebook as their most used form of social media had the lowest average score. Ultimately, Facebook’s news feed is the reflection of one’s own interests and the friends one

follows. The Science report helps clarify that Republicans most likely see Republican-catered news, and vice versa among the parties (Bohannon 2015).

With Independents scoring the highest average in my study, but still utilizing Facebook more than any other platform, it's important to look into what influence social media holds here.

### *5.2 Independents*

To summarize, my collected data shows respondents who affiliate as Independents average the least amount of time on social media (5.5 hrs/wk), use Facebook more than other forms of social media, and score an average of 9.2%-23.05% better than respondents who affiliate with another or no party. As my research leads to the conclusion that social media's influence holds greater weight based on platforms, looking into the Independent affiliates' high scores and the reasons behind these scores is extremely important. My data also showed more Independent affiliates correctly answered Warren and Buttigieg's questions compared to any other party, and followed closely behind with the remaining candidates.

Independent voters typically follow and vote for candidates based on issues rather than partisanship (Sorauf and Beck 1988). By this definition, this may lead Independent affiliates to follow presidential elections more closely, rather than automatically voting with a party. In addition, when referring to the previously discussed social media "echo chamber," it is possible that Independents are reading a wider range of news due to studying issues rather than following a partisan set of beliefs. Although these affiliates spend on average 5.5 hours a week on social media, the information consumed in this time could be less biased compared to that of a

Republican, Democrat, or other. In the limited time on social media per week, these users could be receiving a more vast set of information, in turn increasing political knowledge.

Finally, low social media usage and high scores bring questions about outside news sources to the surface. Although the reliance on social media for news in America is growing, further studies should investigate if Independent affiliates, or various parties, opt for other forms of news (ex. Television, paper, etc.) more often, and how this affects political knowledge and elections. Outside news sources were not taken into account within my study, but could play a major role in higher scores.

### *5.3 2020 Candidates*

This study aimed to gather data specifically about political knowledge surrounding the 2020 elections and its candidates at the time the survey was published. After looking at each tested candidate's multiple choice responses, trends among party lines were analyzed. Regarding which party generally knew the candidate (and their specific tested policy) best, more Democrats scored Biden's question correctly, Independents and Democrats tied for Warren, more Democrats scored Sander's question correctly, more Independents scored Buttigieg's question correctly, and more Republicans scored Trump's question correctly (than any other party). This could correlate with the individual candidate's partisan appeal, as Trump is a Republican candidate, and the only candidate in which the Republican respondents outscored other parties. Warren and Buttigieg both had Independent leads, which may demonstrate a more moderate appeal or wider outreach regarding political beliefs and target audience. Finally, Democrats

outscored all other parties on Biden and Sanders's questions, which may demonstrate a stricter Democratic outreach and campaign by the candidates.

This data does reflect later changes in the Democratic race. Buttigieg was the first of the included Democratic candidates to drop the race, on March 1, 2020. As shown in the *The New York Times* live feeds, Buttigieg held the lowest polling average of the four Democrats (9%) (Lee et al. 2020). His question also received the lowest amount of correct responses, with an average score of 6%. Warren dropped the race several days later, on March 5, 2020. She followed in polling averages at 16% (Lee et al. 2020). However, as of May 3, 2020, Sanders and Biden are the only remaining Democratic candidates in the race. Sanders has suspended his campaign, but remains in the race and on primary ballots. When comparing this to data from the December survey, this may correlate with the surveyed Democrats leading in correct responses for these two candidates over Warren and Buttigieg. In addition, Sanders and Biden led in polling averages at the time of this survey (Lee et al. 2020). This may suggest connections between polling averages and candidate success, as well as a politically informed public and candidate success, as Biden's quiz question was the most commonly correctly answered question. Ultimately, different parties knew different candidates better, but success within the Democratic race so far lies in the hands of candidates who appeal to Democratic affiliates more than multiple/other parties.

As previously discussed, presidential campaigns heavily rely on social media. This information is processed by millions of users, and is playing a new, but significant role in what candidates will progress in a race. In addition, partisan appeal plays a factor in this progression,

despite Independent affiliates averaging higher levels of political knowledge based on quiz scores.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study investigated social media's influence on political knowledge, specifically focusing on the upcoming 2020 election candidates, and how this knowledge differs by political party. After surveying 100 American adults, Facebook was the most commonly used social media platform among each party and the general respondent population. Therefore, Facebook's algorithm plays a significant role in consumed information. Independent affiliates had the highest average scores, followed by Democrats, Republicans, and lastly those who selected "none/other." Independents spent the least amount of time on social media per week, suggesting that platform plays a larger role than time spent (when referring to social media). Regarding implications, following polling averages and comparing average scores for each question may suggest that a stricter Democratic appeal on social media is connected to primary success. Future research should survey a wider range of Americans, take into consideration outside news sources (paper, Television, etc.), and use a broader set of questions to receive a more accurate count of political knowledge.

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