Research Note

The Emotional Foundations of Political Support: How Fear and Anger Affect Trust in the Government in Times of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Crises like the current coronavirus pandemic evoke negative emotions in the general public. To date, however, little research has been conducted on the influence of these mental states on trust in the government – the uncontested key player in times of crises. Drawing on the appraisal and affective intelligence theories of emotions, we argue that fear and anger as the two crucial negative emotions in times of crises have divergent effects on trust in the government: Whereas fear leads to a rally-'round-the-flag effect increasing trust in the government, anger attributes blame for the adverse circumstances to the government. We present empirical evidence for our arguments with an original three-wave online panel survey of 1’600 Swiss residents during the unprecedented times of the coronavirus pandemic. Our analysis provides empirical support for our arguments and further shows that the relationship is strongest for right-wing respondents.

Zusammenfassung: Krisen wie die aktuelle COVID-19-Pandemie rufen in der Bevölkerung negative Emotionen hervor. Bislang ist jedoch wenig erforscht, wie diese Emotionen das Vertrauen in die Regierung – den unbestrittenen Schlüsselfaktor in Krisenzeiten – beeinflussen. Unter Heranziehung der ‘appraisal theory’ und der ‘affective intelligence theory’ argumentieren wir, dass Angst und Wut als die zwei zentralen negativen Emotionen in Krisenzeiten divergierende Effekte auf das Vertrauen in die Regierung haben: Während Angst zu einem ‘Rally-'round-the-Flag-Effekt’ führt und somit das Vertrauen in die Regierung steigert, schreibt Wut der Regierung die Schuld an den widrigen Zuständen zu. Wir testen unsere Argumente mithilfe einer eigenen dreiwelliger Online-Panelerhebung, welche während der Krise mit 1’600 Teilnehmenden aus der Schweizer Wohnbevölkerung durchgeführt wurde. Unsere empirische Analyse unterstützt unsere Argumente und zeigt darüber hinaus, dass die Beziehung bei rechten UmfrageteilnehmerInnen am stärksten ist.

Résumé: Des crises telles que l'actuelle pandémie de Covid-19 suscitent des émotions négatives dans le grand public. Cependant, peu de recherches ont été menées jusqu'à présent concernant la manière dont ces émotions affectent la confiance dans le gouvernement – le facteur clé incontesté en temps de crise. En s'appuyant sur la ‘appraisal theory’ et la ‘affective intelligence theory’, nous soutenons que la peur et la colère, qui sont les deux principales émotions négatives en temps de crise, ont des effets divergents sur la confiance dans le gouvernement : alors que la peur entraîne un effet ‘rally-'round-the-flag’ et augmente ainsi la confiance dans le gouvernement, la colère impute au gouvernement la responsabilité des conditions défavorables. À l’aide de notre propre enquête de panel en trois vagues menée en ligne pendant la crise auprès de 1’600 participants issus de la population résidente suisse, nous fournissons des preuves empiriques qui étayent nos
arguments. Notre analyse apporte un soutien empirique à nos arguments et montre en outre que la relation est la plus forte pour les répondants de droite.

KEYWORDS: Emotions, Political trust, Coronavirus pandemic, Rally-'round-the-flag effect

Introduction

Crises pose “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions” (Rosenthal et al. 1989: 10). The key actors undertaking these vital decisions are governments, which are placed under greater scrutiny. As a result, research has taken a keen interest in how crises affect people’s individual trust in governments, defined as the “basic evaluative orientation toward the government [...] founded on how well the government is operating according to people’s normative expectations” (Hetherington 1998: 791). Dramatic international events and natural disasters frequently result in a so-called “rally-'round-the-flag effect”, i.e., a short-term increase in people’s support for and trust in their government (e.g., Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Chanley 2002; Mueller 1970). The coronavirus pandemic can be considered as such a dramatic international natural disaster – it poses a threat to societies that is unprecedented in living memory (Weible et al. 2020). Extant literature on this pandemic, which is still in its infancy, comes to a similar conclusion (e.g., Bol et al. 2020; Esaiasson et al. 2020; Partheymüller et al. 2020). However, there are also arguments that such crises may affect government support negatively: Following Ashworth et al. (2018), crises provide citizens with new information about the incumbents through the quality of crisis preparedness and response. Insufficient crisis management may reverse the effect and lower trust in the government (Gasper and Reeves 2011), for instance when exposure to the coronavirus in the personal network is high (Amat et al. 2020). Then what drives trust in government in times of crises?

Although negative emotions play an important role in people’s reactions to crises (Fetzer et al. 2020; Huddy et al. 2005; Marcus et al. 2019; Vasilopoulos et al. 2019), they have been largely neglected in the extant literature on the effect of crises on trust in the government. In this paper, we analyze how fear and anger, the two key negative emotions for threat (Marcus et al. 2019), affect trust in the government during the coronavirus pandemic. Building on cognitive appraisal theory as well as affective intelligence theory, we argue that fear leads to a “rally-'round-the-flag” effect increasing trust in the government (see also Schraff 2020), whereas anger attributes blame for the adverse circumstances to the government, thus decreasing trust. Following recent research highlighting that conservative individuals react more strongly to threatening stimuli of the environment, we argue that this effect of emotions should be particularly strong for right-wing respondents (Vasilopoulos et al. 2018). To test these arguments, we employ an original three-wave online panel survey in Switzerland with over 1’600 respondents. One panel wave was conducted at the initial height of the pandemic, another after the first relaxation of shutdown measures and the final one during the summer of 2020. Our results confirm the hypothesized relationships.

Emotions and Trust in the Government in Times of Covid-19

Two explanations for the emergence and consequences of emotions for political attitudes are predominant in the literature: cognitive appraisal theory and affective intelligence theory (AIT). Cognitive appraisal theory (e.g., Lazarus 1991; Scherer 1999; Smith and Ellsworth...
focuses in particular on our understanding and interpretation of a situation we experience and how different emotions arise from such appraisals. Appraisals are understood as “the brain’s assessment of some internal or external situation” (Brader and Marcus 2013: 172), meaning that cognition precedes emotion. Emotional reactions, which evolved to allow for flexible responses to the complex conditions of life, are based on how individuals appraise a certain event or situation, i.e., evaluate what that event or situation means for their well-being in terms of potential harms or benefits. Depending on how a threat or dangerous situation is perceived, it may trigger different emotions, such as fear and anger. In particular, the appraisals of attribution and control are important in this regard. Fear is more likely to arise when the source of the threat is ambiguous and the individual does not perceive to be in control, resulting in harm-avoidance behavior. Anger, in contrast, is more likely to be evoked when someone is accountable and can be blamed for the threat and when the individual feels in control, resulting in actions targeted at removing the source of harm from her or his environment.

The key insights of the AIT (e.g., Marcus et al. 2000; 2011) instead focus on how information processing takes place and what role emotions play in this regard. AIT takes a functional neuroscience perspective (e.g., Davidson et al. 2000; Gray 1987) by incorporating evidence about the physical location of different emotions in the brain. It argues that two distinct neural systems trigger different emotions and thus different information processing: The disposition system monitors subconscious behavior, learned routines and habits and reacts with positive emotions such as enthusiasm or negative emotions such as frustration, depending on whether these habits are successful in achieving the desired goals. The surveillance system monitors the environment for new, unknown or potentially dangerous events, triggering fear if such events are detected or relaxation otherwise. Fear then prompts people to stop relying on routines and heuristics and instead to search for new information and to process this new information systematically, enabling a learning process. Newer research also highlights that, as a separate appraisal resulting in different emotions, the disposition system also monitors the existence of threats to known norms and practices (MacKuen et al. 2010; Valentino et al. 2011; Vasilopoulos et al. 2019).1 If such threats are detected, anger is evoked, making people more reliant on preexisting convictions to secure their goals. AIT holds that these three systems function simultaneously and largely independently, meaning that multiple emotions can be evoked simultaneously and that the most prominent one will determine the course of action taken at any given time (Vasilopoulos et al. 2018).

Research has shown that fear and anger have diverging effects on political participation (Best and Krueger 2011; Valentino et al. 2009; 2011), preferences in anti-crime policies and action against terrorism (Huddy et al. 2005; Petersen 2010), authoritarian attitudes, populist attitudes and support for the far-right (Hameleers et al. 2017; Marcus et al. 2019; Rico et al. 2017; Vasilopoulos et al. 2018; 2019) as well as the willingness to deviate from party identifications and compromise (MacKuen et al. 2010).

We hypothesize that fear and anger are relevant emotions with opposite effects on trust in the government in times of the coronavirus pandemic. First, we assume that the novelty and uncertainty of the pandemic particularly triggers fear, as other pandemics such as

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1 While older works generally regard anger/aversion as part of the disposition system (Marcus et al. 2000: 165), recent literature has seen a shift in this perspective: Some still regard anger/aversion as a distinct appraisal that is part of the disposition system (e.g., Marcus et al. 2019: 117; Vasilopoulos et al. 2018: 562), while others have suggested that it may be a separate third neural system (e.g., Vasilopoulos et al. 2019: 681).
Ebola, Swine flu and SARS did before (Taylor 2019: 23ff.). In this regard, the threats posed by the Covid-19 crisis are multi-layered and include not only concern about infection but also the threat of financial hardship and the loss of social relationships. Following cognitive appraisal theory, fear should be more prevalent amongst persons who evaluate the pandemic as an external threat that cannot be controlled by others. Given that fear increases pessimism and risk-avoidance behavior (Angie et al. 2011; Lerner and Keltner 2001), fearful individuals should be more prone to support precautionary measures and to approve actions aimed at prevention and protection to mitigate the danger (Brader and Marcus 2013; Huddy et al. 2005). Governments implementing measures aimed at limiting the spread of the pandemic may thus see increased trust from such a “flight into security” (Oesterreich 2005). In addition, following AIT, fearful individuals are more willing to compromise and focus on policy issues instead of their party identification (MacKuen et al. 2010). In times of severe external crises, governments often receive increased support even from the national opposition, one important mechanism for the rally-‘round-the-flag effect (Frieden et al. 2013; Lai and Reiter 2005). It may thus be fearful people who overlook political differences and increasingly trust the government in times of the pandemic. Finally, fear decreases people’s confidence in their own preferences and choices and make trust in external actors such as the government more likely (Albertson and Gadarian 2015). Overall, we hypothesize that, confronted with a pandemic threat, fear should lead to a rally-‘round-the-flag effect and increase trust in the government (see also Schraff 2020).

H1: Fear is positively related to trust in the government.

Second, we assume that the circumstances surrounding the crisis cause anger. Following cognitive appraisal theory, anger should increase amongst those who blame a concrete other for the adverse conditions of the crisis. Those experiencing anger may perceive the crisis as controllable and be unsatisfied with crisis management. Since anger increases optimism and risk-seeking behavior (Angie et al. 2011; Lerner and Keltner 2001), these persons may consider the shutdown measures as excessive and favor more laissez-faire policies instead. Others may support more punitive measures (Cassese and Weber 2011) against those spreading the virus and thus regard the measures taken by the government as insufficient. In addition, the crisis challenges, at least temporarily, norms and freedoms that are considered fundamental to the social or political order. Following AIT, if the perception of such a threat predominates, this evokes anger targeted at the government for not upholding the established norms. Overall, we thus argue that anger leads people to attribute blame for the adverse circumstances during the pandemic to the government and decreases trust in it.

H2: Anger is negatively related to trust in the government.

However, we do not expect that all individuals are equally affected by fear and anger. In particular, we argue that the proclivity of fear and anger to affect trust in the government may be higher for ideologically right-wing respondents. Research has shown that right-wing individuals react more strongly to threatening stimuli of the environment – especially physical threats (Crawford 2017), which are predominant in times of a pandemic –, both in terms of psychological as well as the associated physiological responses such as disgust (Hibbing et al. 2014; Inbar et al. 2009; Oxley et al. 2008). During threat, they exhibit a

\[\text{H1: Fear is positively related to trust in the government.}\]

\[\text{H2: Anger is negatively related to trust in the government.}\]
greater amygdala–BNST connectivity, a neural connection that is crucial in eliciting a response to persistent or uncertain threats (Davis et al. 2010; Pedersen et al. 2018). In addition, right-wing individuals not only display stronger responses, but also allocate more psychological resources to negative stimuli. This difference in the reaction to negative stimuli and threats between right-wing and left-wing respondents is particularly important because right-wing individuals tend to display greater needs to reduce uncertainty and threat and should thus respond more strongly to emotions such as fear and anger (Jost et al. 2003; 2007; 2017). Finally, left-wing individuals show a greater tendency to change habitual patterns of behaviour (Amodio et al. 2007), which should make it easier to cope with the challenges the coronavirus pandemic poses to established norms. Considering these findings, it may thus be likely that emotions such as fear or anger have a stronger effect on trust in the government for respondents with a more right-wing ideology.

H3: The positive relationship of fear and the negative relationship of anger with trust in the government are stronger for ideologically right-wing respondents.

Methods and Data

In order to test our hypothesized relationships between the emotions of fear and anger on the one side and trust in the government on the other in times of the coronavirus pandemic, we conducted a three-wave online panel survey in Switzerland with over 1’600 respondents. The panel survey was carried out by the survey institute gfs.bern, most respondents were recruited through the gfs.bern access panel “Polittrends” as well as the gfk access panel with a response rate of 52.5 percent (RR5/6 Completion Rate, The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) (2016)). Detailed information on the survey can be found in Table A1 in the online appendix. The first wave was conducted at the first peak of the pandemic between 8 April and 20 April 2020. At that time, Switzerland was a Covid-19 hotspot and the Federal Council (the Swiss government) had enacted the so-called extraordinary situation with far-reaching restrictions to public life, including the closure of non-essential stores and of schools, prohibition of public and private events and gatherings as well as an entry ban for non-resident foreigners (for a detailed timeline of shutdown measures in Switzerland see Table A2 in the online appendix). The second wave took place between 13 May and 19 May 2020, after the first relaxation of shutdown measures: Non-essential stores, restaurants and schools were allowed to open again. The third wave was conducted between 31 August and 9 September 2020. At this time, most restrictions were lifted and the number of infections and hospitalizations was still at a fairly low level (Bundesamt für Gesundheit (BAG) 2020). Of the 1’603 respondents who were recruited in the first wave of our panel survey, 660 participated in wave 2 and 515 in wave 3.3

As to our modeling strategy, we follow two approaches to leverage the panel character of our data. First, we run each wave separately, regressing trust in the government on our measures of the emotions fear and anger as well as a set of control variables. This enables us to analyze our hypothesized relationships at different times during the pandemic.

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3 The target number of interviews was set to 600 in waves 2 and 3 for survey cost reasons. To keep the survey representative, we use readjusted weights for waves 2 and 3 as well as the panel analysis. The composition of the respondents in terms of socio-demographic variables is very similar between the waves, as can be seen in Table A4 in the online appendix.
Second, we include data from all waves in a fixed-effects model with individual- and wave-specific intercepts. The distinct advantage of this specification is that we control for all time-invariant heterogeneity between individuals. This allows estimating with less bias how individual-specific changes in fear and anger over the course of the pandemic have altered trust in the government. This fixed effects model only includes respondents for whom at least two waves were available. To test our interaction hypotheses, we run the same models with interaction terms between our measures of fear and anger as well as respondents’ left-right self-placement. All models use robust standard errors and survey weights adjusting for age and sex interlocked by language region, language region, canton and education.

Our dependent variable, trust in the federal government, asks respondents how much they trust the Federal Council (the Swiss government) on a scale from (1) “do not trust at all” to (7) “trust completely”. In order to facilitate interpretation, we have recoded this variable to range from 0 to 1. We opted for a single item measuring trust in the government instead of a composite index of trust in political institutions, seeing as the government is the key player in times of crisis (Bol et al. 2020). Our two key independent variables are measured using a ten-item version of the positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS, see Watson et al. 1988) questionnaire, which has been fruitfully applied in research on cognitive appraisals (e.g., Maier et al. 2003) as well as affective intelligence (e.g., Lerner and Keltner 2001) and was also suggested as a measure of political affect by Marcus et al. (2000: 152–174). This item battery asks the respondents how they feel at the moment of the interview on a scale from (1) “not at all” to (5) “extremely”. For our measure of fear, we combine responses of the two items “afraid” and “nervous” by taking the average. We proceed similarly with the two items “upset” and “hostile” for our measure of anger. Our detailed question wording for our measures of fear and anger as well as translations into all three languages used in our survey can be found in Table A3 in the online appendix. Our moderator, respondents’ left-right self-placement, is measured on a scale from (0) “left” to (10) “right”. In addition, we include several control variables that have been related to political trust (Newton et al. 2018): These include socio-demographics (age (squared), sex, education, income, occupation, citizenship, type of community, language of the interview, canton), self-reported health – an important factor in times of a pandemic –, feelings of being systematically disadvantaged, associational membership as well as a series of dummies for the day of the interview to account for external events of the crisis. Summary statistics for all variables can be found in Table A4 in the online appendix.

**Empirical Analysis**

Figure 1 presents a first look at descriptive statistics and compares levels of trust in the government from our three panel waves with previous levels from the Swiss Election Study Selects 2019 (Bernhard et al. 2020). Trust in the government is generally high: In 2019, it

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4 These adjectives are terms describing emotional reactions that fall under the more general dimensions of fear/anxiety and anger/aversion – albeit to different degrees of intensity (other adjectives that have been used in this regard include “uneasy”, “scared” or “worried” for anxiety and “angry”, “disgusted” or “resentful” for aversion, see Marcus et al. 2000: 152–174). A maximum-likelihood factor analysis of the full PANAS scale indeed shows that these four items load on two separate factors. “Afraid” (factor loading: 0.90) and “nervous” (0.53) form a factor for fear, “upset” (0.80) and “hostile” (0.69) a factor for anger. The full factor loadings can be found in the online appendix in Table A7.
was at a pre-crisis level of 0.66 (on a scale from 0 to 1). At the initial height of the crisis in April, trust in the government increased substantially to 0.70. After that, we observe a substantial decrease to 0.65 in the second wave in May, which is roughly the pre-crisis level, and a further decline to 0.59 in the third wave in September. The differences between the waves are significant.

Figure 2 presents the results for our analysis of the relationship of emotions with trust in the government. It displays individual models for each panel wave as well as a fixed-effects model combining all waves. For ease of presentation, only the coefficients of our key variables fear and anger are shown, the full models can be found in Table A5 in the online appendix. Overall, the data lends support to our hypotheses 1 and 2. The coefficient of fear is positive in all four models, as expected. Holding all other variables constant, raising fear from its minimum to its maximum substantially increases trust in the government from 0.69 to 0.81 in wave 1, from 0.62 to 0.89 in wave 2, from 0.58 to 0.68 in wave 3 and from 0.62 to 0.77 in the fixed effects model. The effect is significant at the 5% or 1% significance level in all models except for wave 3. The non-finding for the third wave can be explained by the timing of the third wave, which took place in the summer, when most restrictions were lifted, infections were still low and there was no immediate threat of the pandemic gaining momentum again. In contrast, the relationship between fear and trust in the government is by far strongest in wave 2, where the first shutdown restrictions had just been relaxed and the consequences of the pandemic were still strongly present in people’s minds (however, a coefficient test shows that this difference between the waves falls short of statistical significance, which may also be due to the low number of respondents in some waves, so these substantial differences should be interpreted with caution). Looking at anger, the coefficient is negative in all four models, again as expected. Holding all other variables constant, raising anger from its minimum to its maximum decreases trust in the government from 0.77 to 0.36 in wave 1, from 0.73 to 0.28 in wave

Figure 1: Changes in Levels of Trust in the Government

Note: Means with 90% confidence intervals, adjusted using survey weights. Reference data from 2019 was taken from the Swiss Election Study (Bernhard et al. 2020) and rescaled to range from 0 to 1.
2, from 0.64 to 0.38 in wave 3 and from 0.66 to 0.57 in the fixed effects model. The effect is highly significant at the 0.1% significance level in waves 1 and 2 and significant at the 5% level in wave 3. In the fixed effects model, however, the effect is insignificant. As with fear, the relationship between anger and trust in the government is strongest in wave 2, showing that emotions played the most important role after the first peak of the pandemic when the first relaxations of shutdown measures were taking place (again, however, the coefficient is not significantly different from wave 1 or 3). One explanation for this could be that the first relaxations increased fear as some people were unsure whether the pandemic was really over, while others were angry that they still had to endure such strict measures despite the situation being less severe.

Figure 3 presents the results of our interaction models. For each panel wave as well as the fixed effects model, it shows the marginal effect of fear and anger at different levels of left-right ideology of the respondents. Below each graph, we also display the coefficients of the interaction terms. The full models can be found in Table A6 in the online appendix.

Overall, our hypothesis is supported by the model of the first wave as well as the fixed effects model. In wave 2 and 3, the coefficients still point in the right direction, but only the interaction with anger in wave 3 is significant. This is likely due to the substantially lower number of respondents in these two waves. Looking at the graphs for wave 1 and the fixed effects model, we can observe that for left-wing respondents, neither fear nor anger are related to trust in the government. In contrast, we observe the strongest effects for the most right-wing respondents. For those choosing the most right-wing option, fear increases trust in the government by 0.096 in wave 1 and by 0.144 in the fixed effects model. Similarly, anger decreases trust in the government for these respondents by 0.168 in wave 1, by 0.158
in wave 3 and by 0.080 in the fixed effects model. This also allows us to reevaluate the barely insignificant negative effect of anger. If we take the left-right self-placement of respondents into account, anger indeed has a significant negative effect, but only for those with a left-right self-placement of 4 or higher. It thus seems that emotions play a much more crucial role for those who lean further to the right side of the political spectrum.

**Conclusion**

How do fear and anger affect trust in the government during the coronavirus pandemic? Using an original three-wave online panel survey in Switzerland with over 1'600 respondents...
respondents, we show that fear and anger have divergent effects, in accordance with arguments from cognitive appraisal and affective intelligence theory: Whereas fear leads to a “rally-'round-the-flag” effect increasing trust in the federal government, anger attributes blame for the adverse circumstances to the government decreasing trust. This effect, however, is contingent on the ideology of respondents. For left-wing respondents, we generally observe no effect of emotions on trust in the government, while extreme right-wing respondents display the strongest effects with trust in government increasing or decreasing considerably depending on their emotional state.

Naturally, we have to acknowledge some limitations of our analysis. The number of respondents in wave 2 and 3 are comparatively low, making comparisons between the waves less precise. In addition, the study was only conducted in a single country, begging the question whether the findings can be generalized to other countries that were more severely affected by the pandemic and do not have a consensus government. As our measures of emotions were operationalized through the general emotional state of respondents and not through emotions specifically related to the pandemic, we might also have underestimated the true effect – although other studies have found similar effects when analyzing the general emotional state (see, e.g., Banks and Valentino 2012). Finally, while the panel nature of our data has the crucial advantage of allowing us to control for all time-invariant heterogeneity between individuals, we still cannot claim that our findings are causal in nature.

Nevertheless, we believe that our findings have important implications for future research. First, we highlight the crucial nature of emotions for trust in the government in times of crises. In particular in the rally effect literature, emotions have been largely neglected, which is unfortunate, because emotions may determine whether crises increase or decrease individuals’ trust in their government. Second, our results add to the burgeoning literature on the political consequences of various kinds of threat, seeing as situations of threat and uncertainty evoke different affective responses leading to different political outcomes. Consequently, future studies must place a stronger focus on which emotions are triggered, as the same threat may evoke different emotions in different individuals. Finally, our study underlines the need to study the psychological and emotional consequences of infectious diseases, since these may have not only short-lived, but also persistent effects on political outcomes (Taylor 2019: 26).

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Open research badges

This article has earned Open Data and Open Materials badges for making publicly available the digitally-shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results. The data is available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/N34GW.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the OSF data repository at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/N34GW.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Supplementary Material

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