

Quarterly Profile

OF NEW MEXICO CITIZENS

A UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER REPORT

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FOCUS: POLITICS IN NEW MEXICO

Introduction

This *Quarterly Profile* is somewhat different from previous ones because it does not focus on particular issues like gaming or public land use. Instead, we seek to uncover how New Mexicans think about politics and the political process in general.

To examine the political landscape in New Mexico, we asked questions that probed New Mexicans' political knowledge and beliefs. The first question was how much New Mexicans know and *think* they know about the political process. We asked New Mexicans how effective they think they are in political arenas and how responsive government officials are to their concerns. We also learned whom New Mexicans hold responsible for education, crime, and environmental concerns. In addition, we took an early look at whom New Mexicans favor in the 1996 presidential election, and discovered New Mexicans' views of the Presidential Election Campaign Fund.

Political Knowledge

Many polls and surveys about political topics are conducted every year. These surveys assume that respondents have some knowledge about politics and political issues. We tested this assumption by asking respondents how much they *thought* they knew about the American political process and presidential elections, then gauging their knowledge about specific political facts.

We asked survey participants to rate their knowledge of the American political process and presidential election procedures. The majority of respondents perceived themselves to be only *somewhat* knowledgeable about both the American political process (54%) and the process for electing presidents (53%). Only 14% of our respondents rated themselves as *very* knowledgeable about our political process, whereas more than a quarter (27%) perceived themselves to be only *slightly* or *not at all* knowledgeable. With regard to U.S. presidential elections, a quarter of respondents said they perceived themselves to be *very* knowledgeable about this process, and only 17% rated themselves as only *slightly* or *not at all* knowledgeable.

We also asked four factual questions pertaining to American politics and three factual questions pertaining to New Mexico politics. For most of the U.S. knowledge questions, respondents fared rather well. Table 1 lists the wording of each question and the

TABLE 1
New Mexicans' Knowledge of Political Facts

Question	Correct Answer	Percent Answering Correctly
Who ran against Bill Clinton in the 1992 Presidential election?	Bush & Perot	11%
Are the United States Supreme Court Justices elected by the people or appointed by the President?	Appointed	79%
Which political party has the majority in the US House of Representatives?	Republicans	71%
How long is a Senator's term of office in the United States Congress?	6 years	31%
Who is the current governor of the State of New Mexico?	Gary Johnson	79%
Which political party has the majority in the New Mexico House of Representatives?	Democrats	52%
Is the New Mexico Attorney General elected by the people or appointed by the Governor?	Elected	51%

percent of respondents answering correctly. When asked who ran against Bill Clinton in the 1992 presidential election, only 11% of New Mexicans knew that it was *both* Ross Perot and George Bush.¹ The other question in this section that posed difficulty to the respondents was the term of U.S. Senators: 31% of respondents answered correctly that the term is six years, but 29% of respondents thought senators' terms lasted only four years.

Table 1 also shows that a majority of respondents answered correctly each of the three questions about New Mexico politics. Seventy-nine percent of respondents were able to name the governor of New Mexico, but the remainder failed to do so, even though we had identified Johnson as governor earlier in the survey.

Although it was interesting to see how many people were able to answer each of the questions correctly, we also wanted to see how many people could answer all of the questions correctly. Of 570 respondents, 185 (32%) answered the four U.S. politics questions correctly, and 179 respondents (31%) correctly answered the three New Mexico government questions. One-fifth of all respondents (20%) answered all seven questions correctly.

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¹ Fifty-four percent of respondents answered that George Bush was in the election, and 5% said that Ross Perot ran against Bill Clinton. In the analyses that follow, we treated these answers (of only Bush or only Perot) as correct.

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Political Efficacy

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Aside from what they *know* about politics, do New Mexicans feel that they can understand politics? Do they feel that they are effective at making government officials represent their interests? These two broad questions represent the concept of “political efficacy.” There are two dimensions of political efficacy: feelings of personal effectiveness and system responsiveness. Personal effectiveness refers to how competent individuals consider themselves in the political arena. Can citizens understand current issues and reach sound judgments

about them? System responsiveness is the degree to which citizens believe the political system responds to their concerns. Previous research suggests that citizens lacking political efficacy withdraw from the political process, so measuring political efficacy can help us gauge the health of New Mexico’s civic culture.

We asked respondents to react to three statements about personal effectiveness and three statements related to system responsiveness. For each statement, interviewees said whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

Overall, responses to our questions were mixed, but they showed that the majority of New Mexicans considered themselves somewhat competent in the world of politics, and they believed that they can have political influence, even when public officials appear unresponsive at first. Forty-eight percent of those surveyed believed they were “better informed about politics and government than most people.”² A bare majority (51%) despaired that “sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can not understand what’s going on.” However, it appeared that issues only *sometimes* overwhelm respondents: 77% said that, in general, they “have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.”

Not only did most New Mexicans believe they were often well informed, but they also believed that they had the ability to influence government through their actions. Fewer than one-in-three respondents (31%) agreed with the statement, “People like me do not have any say about what government does.” Instead, 73% believed that there exist “many legal ways for citizens to successfully influence what the government does.” In fact, a majority (54%) believed that one can make public officials listen to their concerns, even “if public officials are not interested in hearing what people think.”

There were some striking differences between the majority of respondents, who felt politically efficacious, and those who felt less knowledgeable and effective in the political world. To demonstrate these differences, we created a classification scheme that distinguished among respondents with low, medium, and high levels of overall political efficacy.³

² Forty-eight percent might seem high at first, but technically, on any given subject, 49.9% of all people are better informed than “most others” (i.e., the other 50.1%). Consequently, this statistic suggests that New Mexico citizens’ self-appraisals were accurate.

³ Low efficacy was defined as having an average score below the midpoint on the six efficacy items we studied (n = 135). Respondents with average scores above 3.0 on the four-point efficacy scale were treated as having high efficacy (n = 213), and those between high and low had medium efficacy (n = 148).

TABLE 2

Political Habits and Opinions of New Mexicans with Low, Medium, and High Political Efficacy

Political Habit or Opinion	Political Efficacy		
	Low	Medium	High
Registered to vote	72%	80%	86%
Currently supporting a candidate in the 1996 Presidential election	31%	41%	48%
Approve of public officials’ job performance	31%	36%	43%
Approve of police’s job performance	49%	54%	71%
Strongly identify with a political party	20%	23%	31%
View themselves as liberal or conservative	20%	30%	35%

We immediately noticed stark demographic differences among these three efficacy groups. Forty percent of those with low political efficacy reported a household income under \$20,000, compared to only 31% of those with medium efficacy and 19% of those with high efficacy. The plurality (46%) of Anglos reported high efficacy, whereas a narrow plurality (37%) of Hispanic respondents had low efficacy. The majority (52%) of men surveyed had high efficacy, whereas women were evenly divided among the low, medium, and high efficacy groups. For example, 61% of males believed they were “better informed about politics and government than most people,” whereas only 39% of females believed they were better informed than most others.

Partly due to these demographic differences, the three different efficacy groups varied considerably in their political habits and opinions. Table 2 shows that respondents with a low sense of political efficacy were less likely to be registered and less likely to support any of the current presidential candidates. Low efficacy New Mexicans gave lower approval ratings to public employees and the police, were less likely to label themselves as liberal or conservative, and less likely to strongly identify with a political party.

Although some of these differences are stronger than others, the overall trend is clear: among New Mexicans, higher levels of political efficacy are positively linked to greater partisan political engagement, as well as stronger support for government and the political system as a whole.

Assigning Political Responsibility

Determining who is responsible for creating public policy is no easy task in a complex political system such as ours, yet giving credit and laying blame are important citizen roles in the political process. Evaluations of public officials’ past actions and future plans sometimes translate directly to how the public votes in re-election campaigns.

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Assigning Political Responsibility

(continued from page 2)

To address this issue, we asked New Mexicans to compare the relative responsibilities of senators and governors, senators and presidents, and presidents and governors. Perceived responsibility was measured for six policy areas: kindergarten through twelfth grade education, national defense, election campaign reform, the New Mexico economy, protecting the environment, and helping the poor.

Respondents considered some policy areas to be clearly state or federal responsibilities. For example, responsibility for the New Mexico economy was clearly a state issue. When the President was compared to both the New Mexico Senators and the Governor, respondents viewed state elected officials (the Governor and our Senators) as more responsible. Table 3 shows that over two-thirds (69%) of New Mexicans believed that the Governor was more responsible than the President for the condition of New Mexico's economy. And when the President was compared to Senators, nearly three-fifths (59%) of New Mexicans said that their Senators had greater responsibility. When the two different types of state officials were compared, over half (51%) of those surveyed indicated that the Governor was more responsible for New Mexico's economy than New Mexico Senators, whom only 11% of New Mexicans held responsible for the economy.

National defense was another issue that respondents appeared to consider along national versus state lines. Table 4 shows that the President was clearly responsible for national defense, although Senators also played an important role. When the President was compared to the Governor, nearly three-quarters (74%) of our respondents indicated that the President was more responsible for national defense. When the President was compared to Senators, however, two-fifths (40%) of New Mexico citizens indicated that

the President was more responsible for national defense, whereas nearly half (46%) indicated that national defense responsibility was shared between the Senators and the President. This finding is consistent with both the Constitutional authority of the President as Commander-in-Chief and the unique role the Senate was given in foreign affairs through its Constitutional authority to approve treaties with other nations.

Citizens had a harder time identifying a single responsible party for other policy areas. On both helping the poor and protecting the environment, over half of New Mexicans indicated that responsibility is shared equally among all three offices studied. Overall, these findings show that many New Mexicans distinguish between national and state concerns, and they often make a distinction between legislative and executive responsibilities. For some issues, though, citizens hold all major elected officials responsible and see no sharp delineation between federal versus state and executive versus legislative responsibilities. (continued on page 4)

TABLE 3

"Who is more responsible for New Mexico's economy?"

President	8%	President	10%	Governor	51%
Governor	69%	Senators	59%	Senators	11%
Shared Equally	23%	Shared Equally	31%	Shared Equally	38%
Total Percent	100%	Total Percent	100%	Total Percent	100%
Sample Size	519	Sample Size	494	Sample Size	513

TABLE 4

"Who is more responsible for national defense?"

President	74%	President	40%	Governor	16%
Governor	9%	Senators	14%	Senators	61%
Shared Equally	17%	Shared Equally	46%	Shared Equally	23%
Total Percent	100%	Total Percent	100%	Total Percent	100%
Sample Size	518	Sample Size	517	Sample Size	504

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UNM INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The Institute for Public Policy serves New Mexicans as a non-partisan forum for research, analysis, data collection and training. The Institute's Survey Research Center conducts surveys and research on the policy preferences and political attitudes of New Mexico citizens. The *Quarterly Profile* is distributed to federal, state, and local New Mexico policy makers, corporate and civic leaders, private organizations, the media and interested citizens.

SURVEY DATA

The UNM Institute for Public Policy conducted its survey of New Mexico citizens through telephone interviews with 570 adult New Mexicans in November of 1995. The telephone numbers were selected randomly by computer. The results of the poll have a four percentage point margin of error at a 95 percent level of confidence, which means that 19 out of 20 times the findings should be within four percentage points of the results that would be obtained if all New Mexico households were surveyed. The margin of error is larger for subgroups of the sample because of the smaller number of observations. As with any survey a potential source of error is the possibility that variation in the wording of questions or the order in which questions are asked could produce different results.

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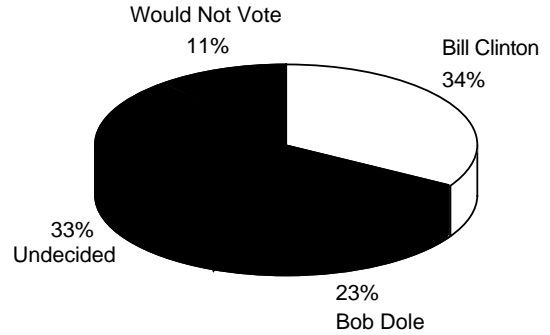
Presidential Preferences

(continued from page 3)

In November 1996, the United States will hold presidential elections, and President Bill Clinton will be the incumbent running on the Democratic ticket. At the time of our November survey, the Republican nomination had not yet been secured. Senator Robert (Bob) Dole seemed to be the clear front-runner among a pool of Republican hopefuls. Just before we conducted our survey, Colin Powell was considering running for President but withdrew his name.

We asked respondents whom they would vote for if the election were held immediately and allowed them to say anyone they chose. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said they would vote for Bill Clinton, and 12% supported Bob Dole. A very large
(continued on page 5)

FIGURE 1
Whom New Mexicans Would Vote For if the Presidential Election Were Held Today



"...the federal government has been shut down...over the federal budget. ...whom do you hold responsible?"

In this survey, we were able to determine whom New Mexicans held accountable for a specific policy action. In November the federal government closed down due to the government's inability to reconcile the federal budget. This shutdown

occurred just after we began our survey, so we decided to poll respondents to see whom they held responsible for the shutdown. Prior to November 20, we asked, "As you may have heard, much of the federal government has been shut down. This is due to a disagreement between the President and the Republican Congress over the federal budget. We would like to know whom you hold responsible. Is it entirely the President, mostly the President, mostly the Congress, entirely the Congress, or are both equally responsible?" After November 20, when the federal government reopened, we altered the wording of

our question to reflect that the shutdown was over. Of the 439 respondents asked about the shutdown, 28% said they felt that Congress was mostly or entirely responsible, compared to 19% of respondents who assigned either

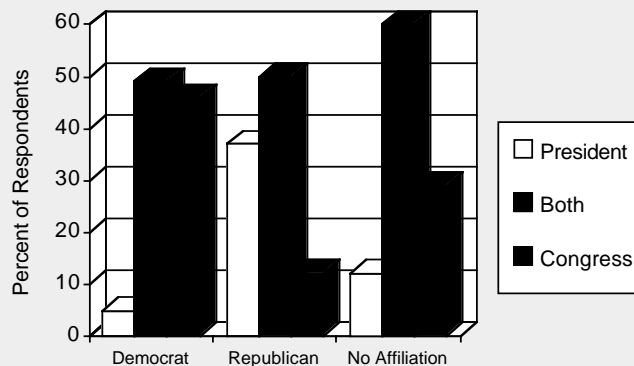
our question to reflect that the shutdown was over.

Of the 439 respondents asked about the shutdown, 28% said they felt that Congress was mostly or entirely responsible, compared to 19% of respondents who assigned either

Responses varied considerably, however, when broken down among Democrats (n = 171 respondents), Republicans (n = 159), and those with no affiliation (n = 77). Figure 2 shows that 46% of Democrats held Congress responsible versus only five

percent who blamed President Clinton for the shutdown. By contrast, 37% of Republicans said the President was responsible and 12% thought Congress was responsible. A more telling finding is that New Mexicans with no political party affiliation leaned toward the Democratic view, with 29% blaming Congress for the shutdown and 12% holding President Clinton responsible. It is this reality—seen nationwide in similar polls—that may have

FIGURE 2
Percent of Respondents of Each Political Affiliation Placing Responsibility for the November Shutdown with the President, the Congress, or Both



most or all of the blame to the President. The majority of respondents (52%) said that both the President and Congress were equally responsible for the government shutdown.

forced the Republicans to seek a budget compromise in late January, retreating from their earlier threats of continued budget gridlock until November 1996.

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Presidential Preferences

(continued from page 4)

proportion of our respondents said they did not know whom they would support (33%) and another eight percent said that they would not vote. Two other people were named often, even though neither was a potential candidate: Colin Powell was endorsed by 7% of respondents, and 3% chose Ross Perot. Phil Gramm, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, Steve Forbes, Alan Keyes, George Bush, Jerry Brown, and Pat Buchanan were all named by more than one person, although each was endorsed by fewer than 2% of respondents.

We then asked those respondents who had chosen someone other than Bill Clinton or Bob Dole whom they would support if their choice was between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole. Thirty-three percent of those 114 respondents supported Bill Clinton, 54% endorsed Bob Dole, 11% said they would not vote, and an additional 3% said they did not know. Combining these results for the full sample of New Mexicans, Figure 1 on page 4 shows that 34% would have voted for Clinton, 23% would have voted for Dole, 33% said they did not know, and 11% would not have voted.

Many things must be taken into consideration when thinking about these results. First, only 79% of respondents said they were registered to vote. Second, of those who said they were registered, only a fraction will actually make it to the voting booth for the primary and general elections. Although Clinton led Dole in our survey, the aforementioned caveats, as well as the uncertainty of the present political climate, make it impossible to predict which candidate will win New Mexico's five electoral votes in November.

Public Financing for the Presidential Campaign

At the top of a federal income tax return, there is a box you can mark if you want three dollars to go toward a general presidential election campaign fund. This federal money is used to help fund presidential election campaigns, in the hope of leveling the playing field for those contenders who do not have extraordinary personal funds or external funding sources. Marking this box does not require anything further from the taxpayer; the three dollars are taken from the taxes already paid.

We asked respondents if they had ever marked this box on their federal tax return. Sixty-nine percent of respondents said they had never marked the box, whereas only 31% said they had done so. Of those 31%, only a narrow majority (53%) said they had marked the box in 1994.

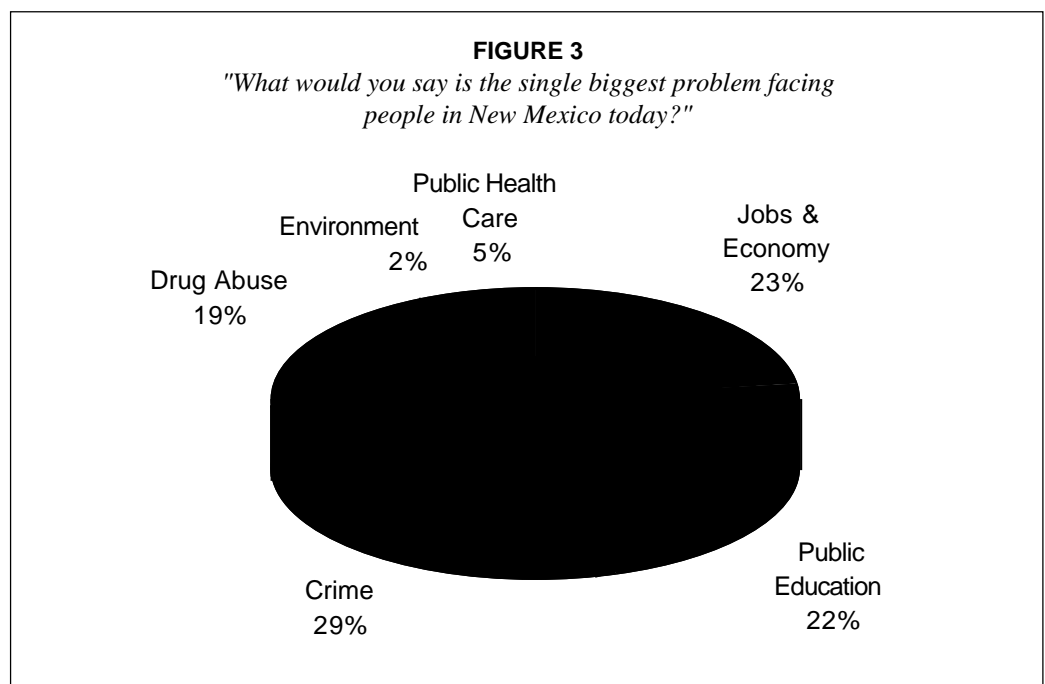
There may be several reasons for low percentages of people contributing to the campaign fund. First of all, it may not be clear to taxpayers what that money will do and that they don't have to pay any *extra* taxes if they mark the box. A second reason may be the perception that three dollars is just a drop in the bucket compared to the millions of dollars needed for a successful presidential campaign. Finally, some citizens simply oppose the notion that tax dollars should go directly to political candidates and decline to mark the box as a matter of principle.

TRENDS

Most Pressing Policy Concerns

Once again, New Mexicans cited crime as their most pressing policy concern: 29% of respondents said that crime was their biggest concern. Twenty-three percent said jobs and the economy were their primary concern, and 22% said that public education was the biggest problem facing New Mexico. Nineteen percent said that drug abuse was the biggest state problem. Only 5% of respondents were most concerned about public health care, with another 2% primarily concerned about environmental quality (see Figure 3).

Overall, 48% of New Mexicans view crime and drug abuse as top priorities. An almost equal percentage (45%) see education, jobs, and the economy as the state's most important concerns.



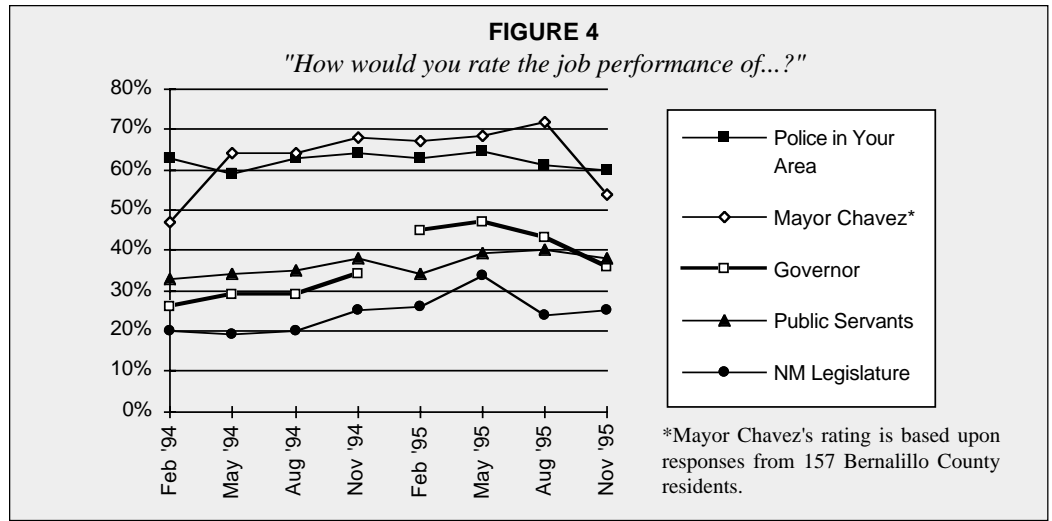
TRENDS

Citizen Approval Ratings

With every *Quarterly Profile*, we ask New Mexicans to rate the job performance of several government officials. Figure 4 shows that public servants, the New Mexico Legislature, and the police all received approval ratings similar to those of the previous (August 1995) *Quarterly*. (Although not shown in Figure 4, Clinton's approval rating was unchanged since August at 28%, and the rating for Congress was stable at 23%.)

Approval ratings for both Governor Johnson and Mayor Chavez, however, dropped from the last *Quarterly*. Governor Johnson's rating fell from 42% in August to 38%. Although this drop is not large, it follows a trend that started when his May approval rating (47%) fell to 42% in August.

The approval rating for Mayor Chavez (based only on responses from Bernalillo county residents) dropped more drastically from a high of 72% in August to 56% in November. It is difficult to interpret this sharp decline until the next *Quarterly*, which will



reveal it either as an aberration or a trend.⁴ One possible explanation is that the Mayor's stratospheric August rating of 72% was impossible to maintain. Any controversial event involving the Mayor could have peeled away the weakest layer of the Mayor's support. In any case, Mayor Chavez is still rated higher than all other public officials, with the exception of local police, who have maintained approval ratings at or above 60%.

⁴Our *Quarterly* surveys no longer include an additional Bernalillo County oversample, which we had previously added to the regular Bernalillo sample for the purpose of calculating the Mayor's approval rating. The loss of the oversample reduces the Bernalillo sample size considerably, which will cause minor, random fluctuations in the Mayor's rating. Nevertheless, the drop shown in Figure 4 is considerably larger than any such fluctuation.

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