

# Partisans use emotions as social pressure: Feeling anger and gratitude at exiters and recruits in political groups

Party Politics

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## Abstract

Political collective action requires assembling and motivating supporters. Many theories view emotions as functional tools for managing relationships, including within groups. We study what leads citizens to use the emotions anger and gratitude as social pressure. Specifically, we test what determines the use of these emotions to prevent potential exiters from leaving a political group and to encourage potential recruits to join. Because parties are enduring social affiliations (compared to transient or issue-focused groups), we predicted that partisans would express stronger emotions. We tested this proposition in two separate studies—one an observational study featuring a representative sample of US adults and one an experimental study conducted in Denmark. As predicted, people with a partisan mindset, whether naturally occurring or experimentally manipulated, felt more anger and gratitude at potential exiters and recruits. Citizens strive to fortify and expand their ingroups and sometimes use emotions as social pressure to do so.

## Keywords

emotions, partisanship, political psychology

Without enough supporters, political parties and interest groups cannot win elections, pass legislation, lobby politicians, or survive over the long-term. Elites in these groups use many tactics to increase and maintain support, such as providing special benefits to members (Hicken, 2011) and appealing to voters' identities or emotions (Brader, 2006; Herrnson et al., 2003). Yet in large groups, such as national political parties, it is unlikely elites alone can build membership or limit abstention by rank-and-file members.

To fill this gap, group members themselves might step in, helping to build and maintain the group. But what tactics

might they use? We test whether rank-and-file supporters use social pressure. Social pressure encompasses rewarding or punishing others, arguing with them, or appealing to emotions (for political examples, see Delton et al.,

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2018b; Gerber et al., 2016; Panagopoulos, 2010, 2011). Importantly, past work has mostly focused on the attitudes and behavior of those who *receive* social pressure (e.g., Gerber et al., 2008). Less studied—but our focus here—is to understand *when citizens themselves are willing to exert social pressure on others*. Not only is this important for understanding political mobilization but, as we return to in the discussion, our approach helps arbitrate between theories of partisanship.

We focus on emotions—specifically, voters’ willingness to use *anger* and *gratitude* (e.g., Groenendyk and Banks, 2014; Knack, 1992; Panagopoulos, 2011). In particular, we examine emotions felt toward potential *exiters* (who might leave a political group) or potential *recruits* (who might join). We predict that it is especially *partisans* who will feel anger and gratitude at exiters and recruits.

Emotional social pressure encompasses at least three stylized steps. First, a person feels an emotion. Second, they express that emotion toward others. Third, those others change in response. Past work has validated the final two steps, showing (a) that people who feel these emotions are likely to express them and (b) that others change their behavior in response (see above cites and review in Delton et al., 2018b). We focus on the first step. Thus, we study *what determines whether people will feel these emotions toward exiters and recruits*.

Our first study is observational; in a representative US sample, we compare partisans to independents. Our second study is an experiment; in a sample of Danish students, we recruit only party supporters and randomly manipulate whether they have a heightened or dampened partisan mindset. There are substantial differences between the studies, including design, nationality, and whether of partisanship was naturally occurring or experimentally manipulated. Finding similar results in both would be strong evidence that partisans are more inclined to use emotions as social pressure.

### *Using anger and gratitude to motivate exiters and recruits*

Parties compete to elect candidates. Trade associations compete to pass favorable laws. Environmentalists and developers compete over construction projects. These groups provide benefits to their members when successful, but these groups are difficult to maintain (Olson, 1965). One challenge is preventing current members from *exiting* (Hirschman, 1970). A second challenge is *recruiting* new members (Cimino and Delton, 2010). Group members invest time, money, and energy. If members exit or never join, their contributions are lost.

Consider a recent elite example: Congressman Justin Amash made headlines in 2019 when he defected from the Republicans and joined the Libertarian Party, becoming the first Libertarian in the House. President Donald Trump

responded by angrily tweeting, “Great news for the Republican Party as one of the dumbest & most disloyal men in Congress is ‘quitting’ the Party . . . A total loser!” But Libertarian Party Chair Nicholas Sarwark was delighted, writing to Amash and other potential recruits, “I’m happy to see that Representative Amash has come home . . . If more . . . joined him, we could see a caucus of legislators who are able to work for the American people instead of conflicting teams of special interests” (Welch, 2020).

Although this example involves elites, we suspect that similar forms of social pressure will be used by members of the public. Party elites can motivate supporters through mass media like television, podcasts, and op-eds. Typical citizens do not have these tools. Instead, they are most likely to apply social pressure within smaller circles of friends and family, in person and through social media. Although each individual’s reach is small, collectively their actions can have large effects on party success.

Many tactics are effective as social pressure. For instance, people are more likely to vote if informed their friends voted (Bond et al., 2012). And in field studies, the possibility of being shamed or receiving gratitude causes people to vote (Gerber et al., 2008; Panagopoulos, 2011). In those studies, the researchers themselves manipulated social pressure and observed whether people became more active. Less research exists, however, on whether citizens use such pressure on each other. Early work using the American National Elections Studies showed that people voted more when they had friends or family who would be angry at abstention (Knack, 1992). More recent work finds that people will themselves use anger or gratitude as a pressure tactic to encourage turnout (Delton et al., 2018b). We build on this to test whether people use anger and gratitude to prevent exiters and gain recruits.

Indeed, emotions constitute a crucial tool for exerting social pressure. Specific emotions have evolved for specific functions, including to organize and maintain group cooperation (e.g., Clifford, 2019; Lopez, 2016; Marcus et al., 2000; Tooby et al., 2008). Many emotions are hypothesized to manage *relationships*, as we detail next.

### *The functions of emotions*

Our research was motivated by functional theories of emotions that view emotions as a series of relatively discrete information processing mechanisms, each one tailored to solve different problems faced throughout human evolution (Cottrell and Neuberg, 2005; Delton and Sell, 2014; Ekman, 1992; Forster et al., 2017; Keltner and Haidt, 2001; Marcus et al., 2000; McCullough et al., 2013; Neuberg et al., 2011; Neuman et al., 2007; Sell, 2011; Sell et al., 2017, 2009; Smith et al., 2017; Sznycer, 2019; Sznycer et al., 2012; Sznycer and Cohen, 2021; Tooby et al., 2008).<sup>1</sup> Some research programs, such as the Theory of Affective Intelligence (e.g., Marcus et al., 2019, 2000;

Neuman et al., 2018), have used this functional framework to make advances in how people search out information and understand their political environment.

Other programs have used this framework to study how emotions solve problems related to social valuation (Cosmides and Tooby, 2000; Tooby and Cosmides, 1990), including in politics (Del Ponte et al., 2021; Delton et al., 2018a, 2018b; Petersen et al., 2012). For instance, when you realize that you have been treating others more poorly than you would like, guilt is activated. When you become concerned that information is spreading that will cause others to value you less, shame is activated.

The emotions we studied here are gratitude and anger. For instance, people become angry when treated more poorly than they expect (Sell et al., 2017). Anger signals to the other person to change her or his behavior, so as to repair the relationship. Thus, exiters should elicit anger; the threat of anger potentially prevents exiting. Similarly, people become grateful when treated especially well (Smith et al., 2017). Gratitude signals recognition of good treatment and strengthens the relationship. Thus, if a potential exiter stays or a potential recruit joins, they may receive gratitude that reinforces their choice.

### Strengthening the party with emotions

We suggest that *partisans* will be especially likely to use emotional social pressure. Importantly, partisanship is unique compared to other political activity. Many people do not like members of the outparty and refuse to compromise with them (Mason, 2018). People also commit to parties for the long-term (Green et al., 2002). This is because partisans want to win, not just for one-off policy gains, but to raise their party's status (Huddy et al., 2015). Political partisanship appears to be a special form of group membership, representing an enduring attachment that provides long-term benefits and a source of conflict over reputation.

This identity component separates parties from transient or issue-focused groups. Psychologists have shown that the mind recognizes distinct types of groups (Lickel et al., 2000). Some are viewed as existing briefly for specific tasks, others as enduring groups that exist to enable continuing, diffuse projects (Tooby et al., 2006). When successful, these enduring groups can provide immense benefits to members. This dramatically raises the stakes of maintaining and building party strength, which implies that members of parties should use greater social pressure on behalf of their enduring partisan alliances.

Thus, our expectation is that partisans will feel more anger and gratitude at exiters and recruits. In the same vein, we expect partisans will be willing to show positive encouragement at potential exiters within their party (positive encouragement was designed as a forward-looking measure

of gratitude, see below). In both an observational study and an experiment, we tested three predictions.

Prediction 1: Partisans will feel more anger at a potential exiter.

Prediction 2: Partisans will express more positive encouragement at a potential exiter.

Prediction 3: Partisans will feel more gratitude at a potential recruit.

As it seems less natural to express anger at a potential recruit who fails to join, we did not test such a prediction.

### Overview of the present research

Study 1 used a nationally representative US sample and compared partisans to independents. All respondents imagined a hypothetical presidential election. Specifically, partisans imagined working with their political party to help their party's candidate win, while independents imagined working with like-minded others to help their preferred candidate win. Importantly, although partisans and independents are both working with a group, the nature of the group differs in a crucial way: Partisan groups are an enduring attachment (Green et al., 2002), while groups of independents are likely to be viewed as more transient in nature (Lickel et al., 2000). As a potential drawback to our design, we recognize that many political independents do favor a party and may behave more like a partisan (Klar and Krupnikov, 2016). Nevertheless, per our instructions, and like their partisan counterparts, independents imagined working with a political group. Moreover, if independents do feel an enduring attachment to a particular party, it should reduce any differences between partisans and independents, ultimately rendering our test *more* conservative.

Study 2 was an experiment conducted with a student sample in Denmark. Only supporters of political parties participated. Everyone imagined a hypothetical upcoming parliamentary election; by taking control, they could install a preferred prime minister. Participants were randomly assigned to read the materials and answer the questions either while (1) explicitly thinking of themselves as a partisan or (2) as a neutral observer (Batson et al., 1991; Bolsen et al., 2014; Delton et al., 2018b). The manipulation was modeled after classic studies of perspective-taking (Batson et al. 1991). While there are drawbacks to our "think" manipulation (see the Discussion), it is important to emphasize that the instruction for participants to explicitly think of themselves in some particular way was held constant across condition. All that varied between conditions, in other words, was whether they should think of themselves as partisans or as neutral observers. Thus, any differences between conditions can only be attributed to this specific feature of the manipulation.

As our dependent variables, we asked participants to rate their “anger” and their “gratitude” at exiters and recruits. Importantly, this does not guarantee our measurement maps onto the underlying theory. The emotion theories we draw on are information processing theories about how the mind understands and reacts to important social situations, such as a group member attempting to exit; they are not theories of how laypeople use emotion words. Nonetheless, researchers have labeled putative emotion systems as anger and gratitude because the hypothesized systems seem to match typical uses of these words. Because we needed a brief way to measure emotions, we used the words “anger” and “gratitude” as our measures. Importantly, research shows that the words “anger/angry” and “gratitude/grateful” are correlated with the functional outcomes predicted by the theories we draw from (Lim, 2012; Smith et al., 2017; Szyner et al., 2021). Recent work in a political context also demonstrated this (Delton et al., 2018b, S5): In the context of imagining friends who did or did not vote, people who rated themselves as feeling more anger or gratitude also reported they would express these emotions at their friend and would take actions predicted by the functional theories. For instance, angry people would try to change their friend’s bad behavior and grateful people would use “positive encouragement” to reinforce their friend’s good behavior. In sum, based on the totality of the evidence, we think it is appropriate to use the words “anger” and “gratitude” to measure the underlying emotional systems we are interested in.

Overall, our two studies complement each other. Study 1 was nationally representative and used naturally existing partisanship. Study 2 used an experiment to directly manipulate partisanship, thus permitting causal inferences. Importantly, in Study 2, all participants were party supporters. This makes for a challenging test because party attachment likely resists manipulation.

## Methods

### Study 1

A nationally representative sample of 923 US adults completed our survey over the Internet in 2005 (through Time-Sharing Experiments in the Social Sciences (TESS) via the polling company Knowledge Networks). 70% were partisans and 30% independents (see Supplemental material). Although we focus in the main paper on the difference between partisans and independents, this study (and Study 2) also included experimental manipulations of features of the exiters and recruits. The effects of these manipulations were generally weak; see the Supplemental material.

Participants first reported whether they were partisans or independents. Partisans imagined working with *their political party*; independents imagined working merely with *like-minded others*. All independents, whether leaners or

true independents, received the like-minded others version of the survey; thus, we analyzed all independents together.

Partisans read, “There’s going to be a presidential race in the United States . . . You, your friends, and other members of your political party are very worried and angry . . . You and your party want to win back control of the White House.”

Next, they rated their *anger* at a potential *exiter*, rating “how *angry* would you feel towards [voter name] for considering this [i.e., exiting]?” from 0 (not at all) to 100 (very). (Each question was about a unique voter with a unique name).

Then, participants rated how much *positive encouragement* they would use to prevent a different *exiter* from leaving. We designed this as a forward-looking index of gratitude; the English word “gratitude” usually applies to completed acts. They rated “how much positive *encouragement* would you want to give [voter name] to keep [him/her] from doing this [i.e., exiting]?” from 0 (no encouragement) to 100 (a lot of encouragement).

Finally, participants rated how *grateful* they would feel if a potential *recruit* joined their party: “how *grateful* would you feel towards [voter name] if [he/she] decided to do this [i.e., join]?” from 0 (not at all) to 100 (very).

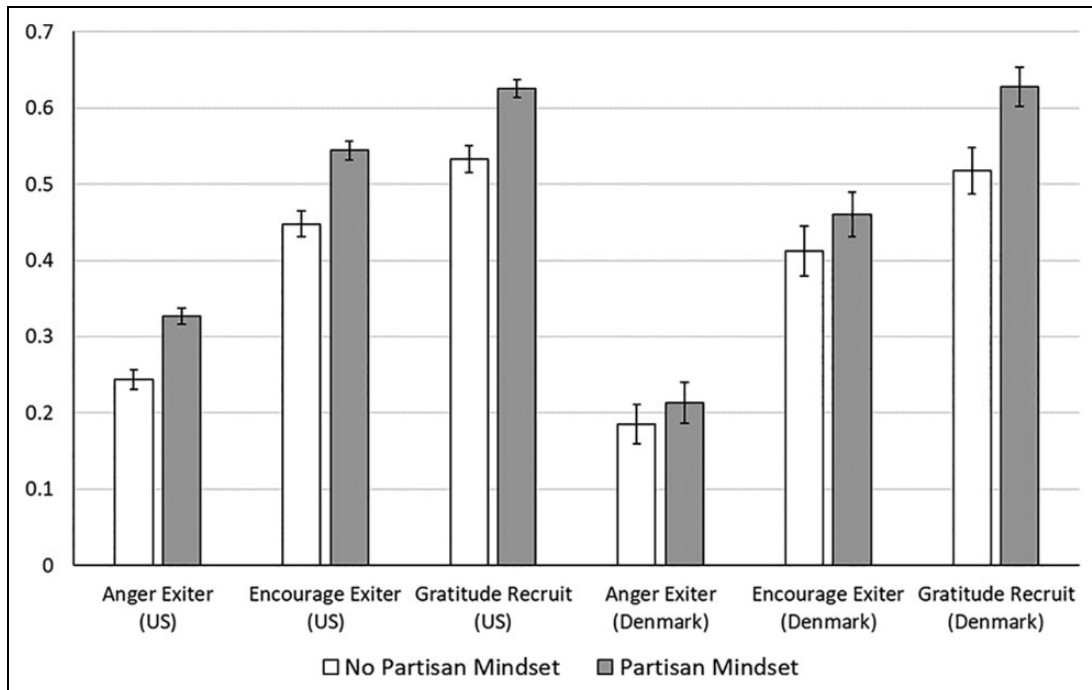
For independents, the materials were similar except that, instead of references to “your political party,” they read “you, your friends, and other *people who share your political values*” (emphasis added), with similar changes throughout.

Thus, both partisans and independents imagined working with a group. However, partisans imagined working with their party—an enduring group—whereas independents imagined working in a transitory, task-oriented group.

In our analyses, we controlled for demographic variables and for the psychological variables of group identification, past contributions to the group, and expected benefits from the group (see Supplemental material). All quantitative variables were recoded to range between 0 and 1. Partisans were dummy-coded as 1 and independents as 0. All *p*-values are two-tailed.

### Study 2

A sample of 172 undergraduates at Aarhus University completed our survey over the Internet in 2014. Only students who supported a party participated. The survey was translated into Danish and, because Denmark has a parliamentary system, the survey was modified for that context. For example, the vignette read (in Danish), “You and your party want to *win as many seats as possible in parliament* so that you can achieve your political goals and advance your agenda” (emphasis added). Denmark is a multi-party system and participants supported many parties. Nonetheless, parties can be arrayed along a right–left continuum.



**Figure 1.** Graph of raw means and standard errors of the mean. US = United States nationally representative sample. Denmark = Danish student sample.

Left-wing participants imagined competing against Venstre and right-wing participants against the Social Democrats; these are the most prominent right- and left-wing parties, respectively.

The most important change in Study 2 is that we used an experimental manipulation with two conditions to either heighten or dampen partisanship. In the *Partisan Mindset* condition, the instructions asked participants to respond “while thinking of yourself as a member of your preferred political party” and, while responding, to “think about yourself in explicitly partisan terms.” In the *Neutral* condition, the instructions asked them to respond “as if you were an objective, neutral observer” and, while responding, to “think about yourself as neutral and unbiased.” Participants read the mindset manipulation before any other instructions in the study. They then received a reminder of the mindset right before rating their emotions.

## Results

Do partisans use more anger and gratitude? The results are consistent with our three predictions; see Figure 1. In Study 1, compared to independents, partisans were angrier at exiters, would use more positive encouragement with exiters, and were more grateful with recruits. In Study 2, compared to the Neutral condition, participants in the Partisan Mindset condition were also angrier at exiters, used more positive encouragement with exiters, and were more grateful with recruits. The figure also shows that participants rated the positive sentiments higher than anger, which is perhaps

unsurprising given that a brief, hypothetical survey is unlikely to elicit high levels of anger.

As a formal test of our predictions, in Study 1 we conducted three regressions. In each, we specified one emotion as the outcome variable, with the primary predictor being a dummy variable measuring partisans versus independents. As shown in Table S1 and despite a variety of controls, compared to independents, partisans were angrier and more grateful with exiters and recruits (all  $ps < .05$ ). For both exiter questions, there was a 6 percentage-point increase in anger and encouragement; for the recruit question, there was a 4 percentage-point increase in gratitude.

Whereas Study 1 had a large sample and used existing attachments, Study 2 had a smaller sample size and involved only partisans who received a brief manipulation of partisan mindset. To maximize statistical power, we used a mixed-model ANOVA. This allowed us to test whether, *in general*, the mindset manipulation caused a change in emotions and whether the effect *varies* by emotion. All three emotion measures are included as simultaneous dependent variables and the predictor is the experimental manipulation of partisan versus neutral mindset.

As predicted, compared to the neutral mindset, participants with a partisan mindset had significantly stronger emotional reactions (main effect of mindset manipulation:  $F(1, 170) = 4.5, p = .036, \eta^2 = .03$ ). Importantly, and despite the descriptive differences seen in Figure 1, the size of the effect did not vary by emotion (for the interaction of mindset manipulation and emotion:  $F(2, 169) = 2.1,$

$p = .12, \eta^2 = .03$ ). Although not a formal prediction, we also found that participants expressed gratitude most and anger least (main effect of emotion:  $F(2, 169) = 159, p < .001, \eta^2 = .65$ ). Echoing the observational results, being randomly assigned to a partisan mindset resulted in more anger and gratitude at exiters and recruits.

In different samples, in different countries, with different politics, and with different methods, partisans felt angrier at exiters, used more encouragement with exiters, and felt more gratitude toward recruits.

## Discussion

In two studies we found that partisans—whether compared to independents or manipulated to have a heightened partisan identity—expressed more anger and gratitude at exiters and recruits. We suggest this is because partisanship is special compared to many other group affiliations. Thus, to maintain and enhance the membership of their group, partisans in the mass public may use a variety of emotional appeals. Our findings also add to a debate about the nature of partisanship—in particular, whether partisanship functions as an enduring social affiliation or whether parties are simply vehicles to enact specific policies (Huddy et al., 2015). From the latter perspective, it is unclear why a partisan mindset manipulation should cause a strong emotional reaction. Our findings, therefore, are more consistent with the enduring attachment perspective.

Our findings also show how experiments can complement observational studies of partisanship. It is not possible to create enduring party attachments in the lab. But without experiments it is difficult to know what causes what: Does being a partisan cause people to be emotional or are emotional people more likely to become partisans? We provided a partial answer with our experiment, though, of course, we do not claim our manipulation captures the totality of partisanship.

Figure 1 shows larger effects in the US sample than the Danish sample. There are many differences between the two studies, so we cannot be certain what accounts for this difference. One possibility is that the Danish participants were already party supporters and that our mindset manipulation is necessarily weak compared to their enduring attachments. Another possibility is that Denmark has a multi-party system, which might weaken people's attachment to any particular party.

Our survey only asked about a few emotions that were most relevant to our goals. However, a growing body of research suggests that people often experience multiple emotions at the same time; this includes fear as a concomitant of anger (Brader, 2006; Lambert et al., 2010; Lerner and Keltner, 2000; MacKuen et al., 2007, 2010; Marcus et al., 2019; Neuman et al., 2018; Vasilopoulos, 2018; Vasilopoulou and Wagner, 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018, 2019). We did not measure fear, so we cannot

address this issue with our data. Nonetheless, our goal was not to characterize the *entire* emotional experience of people reading our scenarios, but to address certain limited questions about social pressure. Based on the emotions framework we draw from, only anger has the function of regulating the direct relationship between the participant and the (hypothetical) targets; fear is not hypothesized to function to change how others value the self, though it may cause other changes related to attention and concern with danger. Thus, anger is most appropriate to our question of regulating relationships. Nevertheless, future work could attempt to better isolate anger from other negative emotions that may be influenced by a partisan-mindset manipulation.

A related question is whether participants' ratings of "anger" and "gratitude" were influenced by other emotion systems besides anger and gratitude. For instance, a person who experienced fear while reading our stories, but with no way to express it, may have rated their "anger" as high. We acknowledge that this is a possibility. However, based on the data reviewed above, ratings of the words "anger" and "gratitude" do seem to capture important aspects of the functional output of the hypothesized emotions systems.

Another limitation is the experimental manipulation used in Study 2. We asked participants to "think" of themselves as partisans or as objective observers. Some research has suggested that instructions of "thinking" versus "feeling" produce different results (Mayer and Tormala, 2010; Millar and Millar, 1990; Wilson and Dunn, 1986). This work has typically focused on attitudes *within* participants and how those attitudes may or may not change. Our focus, however, is on strategic uses of emotions to regulate relationships *between* people. Thus, we modeled our measures on research that has investigated perspective-taking on social interactions. For instance, our neutral observer condition was closely modeled on classic work by Batson and colleagues (1991) who asked participants to "take an objective perspective, [to be] as objective as possible" (p. 416). To keep the instructions as similar as possible in our two conditions, we used the "think" language in both; otherwise, our manipulation would have confounded think versus feel and partisan versus non-partisan. Another reason for not using "feel" language is that our dependent measures were emotions. Had we asked participants to "feel" what a typical partisan or independent observer would have felt, we might have created demand effects where they tried to guess what emotions we wanted them to report. Using a perspective-taking manipulation that does not mention feelings likely reduces this possibility. Our materials are also similar to recent work on partisan motivated reasoning by Bolsen and colleagues (2014). In a motivated reasoning condition, they asked people to evaluate policies while thinking about their party and why they are a member; in an accuracy condition, they asked people to evaluate policies in an even-handed manner. Still,

it's an open question whether the same results would have obtained had we used "feel" language in both conditions.

In sum, in modern democracies, parties represent a particularly potent relationship, with victory or defeat ultimately hinging on the strength of the party. In finding that partisans are particularly likely to use emotions for this end, our results are consistent with a research tradition that views emotions as psychological tools for managing and maintaining relationships.


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### Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Note

1. Creating a critical test comparing this view of emotions with other theories is beyond the scope of our paper. Critical tests, including for anger and gratitude, have been reported elsewhere (Robertson et al., 2018; Sell et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2017; Sznycer et al., 2016, 2017).

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