Negativity Effects in Impression Formation: A Test in the Political Arena

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Negative information has a stronger influence on impressions of others than positive information, a tendency known as the negativity effect. The hypothesis that this effect would characterize impressions of presidential candidates was tested using National Election Study surveys from 1984 and 1988. Respondents rated the presidential candidates on a number of personality traits. Aggregate-level analyses revealed that personality characteristics that the nation, on average, judged to represent character weaknesses were more predictive of overall evaluations and voting than characteristics judged to represent strengths. At the idiographic level, it was found that a trait was significantly more predictive when it fell below an individual's average trait rating for a candidate than when it was located above this mean. Thus, character weaknesses were more important than strengths in determining the public's evaluations of the candidate and the ultimate vote.

Each presidential election year, the American public must choose among a group of contenders for the nation's highest office. Through strategy and blunder, these candidates project their personalities to the American voter. Living-room witnesses of the campaign must be able to reconcile an abundance of sometimes contradictory information about the candidates as they form their impressions in anticipation of their election day decisions. These judgments concerning candidate character have been shown to be highly predictive of candidate choice (Kinder & Abelson, 1981; Kinder & Sears, 1985).

As citizens are exposed to the positive and negative aspects of the candidates, which characteristics color impressions the most? Candidates may take great strides toward projecting positive images to the public, but are these the aspects of the candidate that will have the greatest weight in final judgments, or are the negative aspects of the candidate, illuminated by campaign mishaps, past misdeeds, and mudslinging opponents, most important to voters?

A great deal of psychological research suggests that it is the negative aspects of a candidate's character that will have the greatest influence on final judgments. Numerous studies of impression formation have found that negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information as impressions of others are formed; negative items appear to have a stronger "pull" on overall impressions. This tendency, known as the *negativity effect* or the *negativity bias*, characterizes impressions formed from trait information (Anderson, 1965; Hamilton & Huffman, 1971; Hamilton & Zanna, 1972; Van Der Plight & Eiser, 1980; Warr & Jackson, 1977; Wyer, 1970), as well as from behavioral information (Briscoe, Woodyard, & Shaw, 1967; Richey, Bono, Lewis, & Richey, 1982). In fact, Richey, Koenigs, Richey, and Fortin (1975) demonstrated the power of negative information in their finding that one negative behavior could neutralize five positive behaviors.

Why is it that negative information has such a strong influence on our impressions of others? Correspondent inference theory suggests that any behavior that deviates from socially prescribed norms will be seen as indicative of "true" personality (Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & McGillis, 1976). Because social norms generally mandate and reward prosocial or positive behaviors, negative actions incur costs to the actor and are thus perceived as more reflective of dispositional characteristics. Similarly, figure-ground and expectancy-contrast theories propose that the negativity effect occurs because negative actions are contrasted against the generally positive expectations that we have of others (Sears, 1983; see Kanouse &

Author's Note: This research was partially funded by the University of Michigan's Rackham Predoctoral Fellowship. I gratefully acknowledge Donald Kinder, James Hilton, Jon Krosnick, Laura Klem, Frank Andrews, and Keith Smith for their guidance of this work.

PSPB, Vol. 17 No. 4, August 1991 412-418

Hanson, 1972, or Skowronski & Carlston, 1989, for a review of theories of negativity).

If these processes underlie the negativity effect in routine impression formation, they may operate in the development of impressions of political candidates as well. Presidential candidates are generally expected to behave in a positive manner and to possess positive characteristics; personal achievement, talent, and hard work are among the factors that produce the final crop of presidential contenders. Furthermore, negative actions certainly have costs. The history of American electoral politics is replete with examples of campaign downfalls brought about by candidate wrongdoings. Thus, presidential candidates are expected to engage in behaviors that reflect a positive image. Against this backdrop of positive expectancy, negative actions might loom large in voters' minds.

Another proposed source of negativity that has relevance to the political arena is the cost orientation, or risk aversion, explanation, which argues that people are risk oriented and motivated to avoid loss (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972). Although we might hold generally positive opinions of others, we might also be quite sensitive to the negative consequences they may bring. Supporting this notion, a great deal of literature describes us as particularly attuned to potential loss when making decisions that involve risk. In a variety of domains, we are risk averse; we are more concerned with the likelihood of negative outcomes than positive outcomes (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Kogan & Wallach, 1967; Rettig & Rawson, 1963; Slovic, 1969; see Abelson & Levi, 1985, for a review). Given that the president has the power to affect the personal lives of the electorate in a number of ways —for example, by sending troops to a foreign land, by proposing a budget that would raise taxes, or simply by influencing national pride—it seems likely that citizens might be cost oriented in their voting decisions.

The purpose of the present study is to test for negativity effects in the two most recent presidential elections. Some evidence already exists that negativity characterizes political judgments. Lau (1982, 1985), in his analysis of the 1968, 1972, and 1980 National Election Studies, found that reasons offered by respondents for disliking a candidate were more predictive of overall evaluations than reasons for liking a candidate were. In support of the figure-ground explanation, Lau found that voters who held the government in high esteem (and therefore were likely to hold positive expectations of politicians) showed a greater negativity bias in their evaluations of candidates than voters who held negative opinions of the government. In support of the cost-orientation explanation, Lau found that respondents who cared most about the outcome of the election showed the greatest negativity.

The 1980 National Election Study contained a trait inventory in which voters were asked to indicate how well each of four positive and three negative traits described each of the major candidates. Lau (1982) found that responses to negative trait items were more predictive of overall evaluations than responses to the positive items. Although Lau's analysis provides support for negativity in judgments of candidates, there are problems with employing the 1980 trait inventory to test for negativity. The negative trait items may have been more extreme than the positive items, or they may have tapped dimensions that were more important to respondents in 1980 than dimensions tapped by the positive traits. In addition, Lau's analysis examined the relationship between these trait ratings obtained *before* the election and a measure of overall evaluation obtained *after* the election. It is likely, however, that postelection evaluations are influenced by the election outcome. Positive and negative trait impressions may have a differential impact on ratings of a viable candidate for office and ratings of a candidate who is either defeated or victorious.

The 1984 and 1988 National Election Studies each included a trait inventory of entirely positive traits. As in 1980, voters were asked how well each trait described the candidate. Thus, respondents could indicate a perceived character strength by saying that the trait was descriptive of the candidate, or they could indicate a perceived weakness by saying that the trait was not descriptive of the candidate. This allows for a test of the prediction that perceived personality weaknesses are more predictive of evaluation than perceived personality strengths. Ordering the positive traits according to how descriptive each is of a particular candidate should produce a distinct profile for that candidate, reflecting his own personal strengths and weaknesses. It is possible that some traits are simply more important to voters, regardless of whether those traits are seen as strengths or weaknesses of any particular candidate. The prediction based on negativity, however, is that perceived weaknesses will matter most, regardless of which particular traits are perceived as the candidate's weakest. In other words, the position of a trait in the candidate's profile, rather than the inherent meaning of the trait, will determine the importance of that trait.

The purpose of the present study is to test for negativity in the 1984 and 1988 presidential elections. Thus, this investigation will attempt to extend Lau's findings to our two most recent elections. In addition, the analyses reported below will examine negativity by defining candidate strengths and weaknesses in two novel ways. The first, as mentioned above, will be to look at the relationship between trait ratings and trait predictive power. Mean trait ratings will be used; thus, this analysis will test

for negativity at the aggregate level. That is, it will address the question "Are traits that the *public*, as a whole, judges to reflect the weaknesses of a candidate more predictive of final evaluations and voting than traits that reflect strengths?"

The second set of analyses will take into account idiographic, or individual, differences in judgments of candidate character. Each respondent has his or her own vision of a candidate's personality profile. For example, one person might believe that Ronald Reagan is very moral but not at all intelligent, while a second person might believe that he is very intelligent but not at all moral. If negativity characterizes impressions of candidates, then intelligence should have a larger influence on evaluations of Reagan for the person who believes he lacks intelligence than for the person who views him as highly intelligent. In addition, morality should be of greater importance to the respondent who sees Reagan as lacking morality than to a person who sees him as very moral. The idiographic analyses presented below will allow an examination of the negativity effect by comparing respondents who had a positive evaluation of a trait relative to their other trait judgments with those who had a relatively negative evaluation of that trait. It is predicted that, for each trait, those respondents who view the trait as a negative portion of a candidate's profile will weigh the trait more heavily than respondents who view the trait as a positive portion of that candidate's profile.

METHOD

The National Election Study (NES) surveys from 1984 and 1988 were analyzed to test the prediction that a negativity effect characterized impressions of candidates in these two elections. The NES uses a random probability sampling technique to select respondents, thus creating a representative sample of eligible voters in the United States. The 1984 and 1988 preelection interviews were carried out in person, from September to election day. The analyses presented below included only those respondents who could indicate how well each trait described the candidate and assign a thermometer score (a number indicating favorability) to the candidate. This resulted in a sample size of 1,779 for the 1984 Pre-Election Study and 1,523 for the 1988 Pre-Election Study.[1]

In the 1984 survey, respondents were asked how well each of the following 12 traits described Walter Mondale and Ronald Reagan: hard-working, decent, compassionate, commands respect, intelligent, moral, kind, inspiring, knowledgeable, sets a good example, cares about people like you, and provides strong leadership. These traits were included as measures of the domains of candidate competence and integrity. Respondents indicated that the trait described the candidate "extremely well," "quite well," "not too well," or "not well at all." In the 1988 Pre-Election Study, respondents were asked to rate George Bush and Michael Dukakis on 9 traits: intelligent, compassionate, moral, inspiring, provides strong leadership, decent, cares about people like you, knowledgeable, and honest. The response scale from the 1984 Pre-Election Study was repeated.

The thermometer score, a measure of overall evaluation of each candidate, was obtained in the surveys. Respondents were asked to indicate how favorable or unfavorable they felt toward the candidates on a 0-100 scale, higher numbers indicating feelings of warmth or favorability and lower numbers indicating feelings of coldness or unfavorability. Candidate preference was obtained by asking respondents whom they intended to vote for in the upcoming election.

RESULTS

Aggregate-Level Analyses

The first step required in these analyses was to generate a measure of predictive power for each trait. To this end, a regression equation was specified in which the thermometer score was regressed on each trait rating with race, sex, party identification, and political ideology held constant. In addition to these control variables, it was necessary to include a measure of character judgment as a control for impressions of character, above and beyond which the predictive power of each trait could be measured. To provide this control, a trait was selected that was highly and indiscriminantly correlated with the other traits in the inventory. In 1984, the trait *sets a good example* was selected, and in the 1988 study, the trait *cares* was selected.[2]

A series of regression analyses was conducted, one for each trait (excluding the control traits) for each candidate. For example, the power of intelligence ratings to predict the thermometer score was measured by regressing the thermometer score on intelligence, controlling for race, sex, party identification, ideology, and the control trait. The unstandardized slope coefficient was used as the measure of trait predictive power because of the insensitivity of this parameter to variance differences among the traits (Lewis-Beck, 1980).[3]

For purposes of comparison and ease of interpretation, the thermometer scores and the 4-point trait scales were converted to a 0-to-1 scale, higher numbers indicating greater favorability.

A negative relationship between trait predictive power, represented by the slope coefficients generated for each trait, and trait ratings was predicted. Traits that were

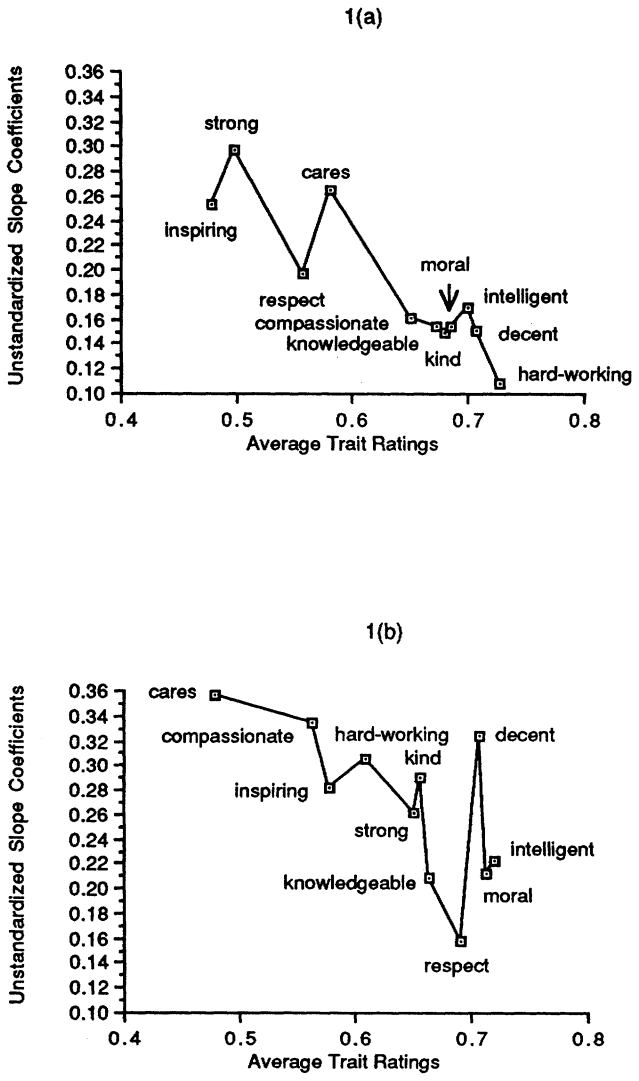

Figure 1 Relationship between trait ratings and trait predictive power in the 1984 presidential election for (a) Walter Mondale and (b) Ronald Reagan.

judged by the nation to represent character weaknesses were expected to be more predictive of overall evaluation and voting than traits judged to represent character strengths.

The 1984 election. The relationship between trait predictive power and trait ratings was assessed for both Mondale and Reagan. As Figure 1 shows, this relationship is a negative one for both candidates; traits that received favorable ratings were less predictive of overall evaluations than traits that received unfavorable ratings. The (unstandardized) slope of the relationship between trait ratings and trait predictive power was $-.63$, $p < .001$, for Mondale and $-.56$, $p < .05$, for Reagan.[4]

It is also noteworthy that the candidates had quite different personality profiles. Mondale's greatest weaknesses were in the leadership domain; he was not seen as very inspiring or as a strong leader. Reagan's greatest weaknesses were in the empathy domain; he was seen as not very caring or compassionate. In spite of these profile differences, it was the case for both candidates that weaknesses were more important than strengths.

The 1988 election. To evaluate negativity in impressions of Dukakis and Bush, eight regression equations were computed for each candidate. As Figure 2 shows, negativity characterized impressions of these candidates. The relationship between trait ratings and trait predictive power was $-.74$, $p < .05$, for Dukakis, and $-.37$, $p < .05$, for Bush.

Vote preference. To examine the relationship between trait ratings and the predictive ability of each trait for vote choice, the analyses above were repeated using logit regression (Aldrich & Nelson, 1984). Again, a negative relationship emerged between trait ratings and trait predictive power. The slopes for Reagan and Mondale in the 1984 Pre-Election Study were -8.88, $p < .01$, and -6.43, $p < .05$, respectively. In the 1988 Pre-Election Study, the slope for Bush was -5.34, $p < .05$, and for Dukakis, -8.9, $p < .05$.

Idiographic-Level Analyses

The idiographic analyses sought to discover whether traits that an individual respondent rated negatively would be more predictive of overall evaluations than traits rated positively. In other words, given that each respondent had a mean trait rating for a candidate, would traits that fell below this mean be more powerful predictors than traits that stood above this mean?

To answer this question, it was necessary to split the sample as each trait was analyzed according to whether the trait was rated above or below each individual's mean. For example, when analyzing the trait *intelligent*, a mean was calculated for each respondent based on the trait ratings for all traits except *intelligent*. This mean was then subtracted from the trait rating for *intelligent*. Thus, a positive number indicated that the trait was rated higher than the average trait rating, and a negative number indicated that the trait was rated below the average trait rating. The sample was then split into those with a score above zero and those with a score below zero. The same regression equations specified for the aggregate analyses were then repeated for both samples. Using this technique, it was possible to see whether a trait that represented a negative portion of an individual's evaluation of a candidate was more predictive than a trait that represented a relatively positive portion of the evaluation.

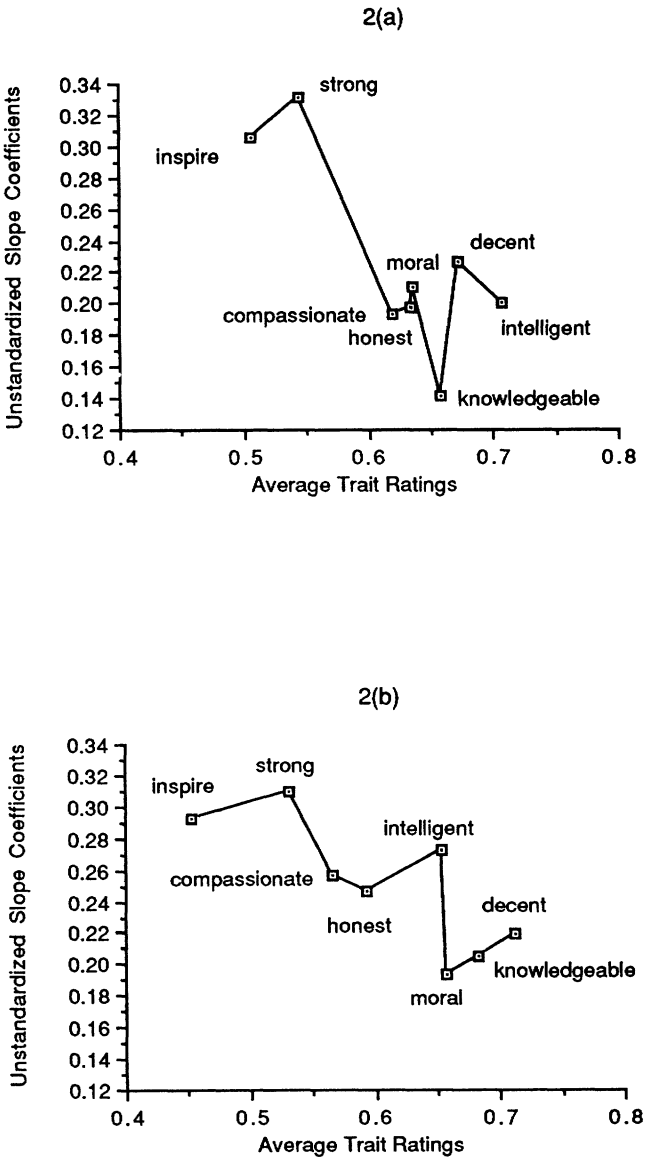

Figure 2 Relationship between trait ratings and trait predictive power in the 1988 presidential election for (a) Michael Dukakis and (b) George Bush.

TABLE 1: Unstandardized Slope Coefficients for Predicting Thermometer Scores for Traits That Fell Above and Below Mean Trait Ratings

	Mondale		*Reagan*	
Trait	*Above Mean*	*Below Mean*	*Above Mean*	*Below Mean*
Hard-working	.12	.51**	.33	.58**
Decent	.14	.65**	.38	.71**
Compassionate	.19	.55**	.46	.53
Commands respect	.23	.35	.19	.56**
Intelligent	.16	.62**	.27	.61**
Moral	.17	.54**	.28	.57**
Kind	.22	.46**	.39	.58**
Inspiring	.39	.34	.33	.53**
Knowledgeable	.21	.47**	.24	.58**
Cares	.27	.44**	.42	.50
Strong	.37	.42	.34	.54**
	Dukakis		*Bush*	
	Above Mean	*Below Mean*	*Above Mean*	*Below Mean*
Intelligent	.21	.62**	.24	.66**
Compassionate	.21	.47**	.35	.45
Moral	.25	.48**	.22	.49**
Inspiring	.36	.44	.50	.36*
Strong	.31	.49*	.38	.47
Decent	.24	.56**	.23	.61**
Knowledgeable	.23	.47**	.23	.44**
Honest	.23	.48**	.22	.52**

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

As Table 1 shows, traits that fell below an individual's average trait rating were more predictive of overall evaluations than traits that stood above the average trait rating. The exception to this pattern was the trait *inspiring* for Mondale and Bush. A series of t tests comparing each pair of slope coefficients was conducted. These tests revealed that 29 of the 38 comparisons were significant in the predicted direction at the $p < .05$ level, 1 (*inspiring* for Bush) was significant in the opposite direction, and 8 were not significantly different.

When the idiographic analyses were repeated with vote preference as the dependent measure, it was again found that traits that fell below the mean were the most predictive. For 34 of the 38 pairs of traits, below-the-mean traits had the highest coefficients. Of the 38 t tests, 26 showed significant differences in the predicted direction at the $p < .05$ level, none showed significant differences in the opposite direction, and 12 were not significantly different.

DISCUSSION

To summarize, the results suggest that a negativity effect characterized impressions of presidential candidates in the 1984 and 1988 elections. Whether character strengths and weaknesses were defined at the aggregate or at the idiographic level, character weaknesses had a greater influence on evaluations of candidates and voting decisions than character strengths. Moreover, the negativity effect in political judgments seems to be robust. It appeared in impressions of both of the party nominees for the last two elections. Coupled with evi-

dence from previous elections (Lau, 1982, 1985), these results suggest that there is now ample evidence that perceptions of negative characteristics have a more powerful impact on voters than perceptions of character strengths.

The analyses presented here focused on later stages of the impression formation process; most of the respondents in these samples had already arrived at opinions concerning the personality attributes of the candidates. Thus, the present research assessed the weighting of previously held trait judgments. Future research should examine how trait judgments are formed. It is quite possible that negativity characterizes evaluations of individual characteristics. For example, if a candidate is heard to make four accurate and thoughtful statements concerning foreign affairs, along with one careless, incorrect remark, it is likely that the negative behavior will have a disproportionate weight on judgments of how intelligent and knowledgeable the candidate is.

It is important to note that the candidates who served as the targets of character judgments in the present analyses were generally held in high esteem by the American public. They were all rated above the midpoint on the thermometer scores, and even their character weaknesses were judged to be near the midpoint of the scale. What we have here, then, is a negativity effect in the relative sense; weaknesses are defined as the lower portion of a candidate's profile, not as weaknesses in the absolute sense. It would be interesting to conduct similar analyses for prominent figures not in favor with the public, such as Khaddafi or Stalin. If the figure-ground and expectancy-contrast theories capture the source of the negativity effect, then one might expect a positivity effect when the target of judgment is held in low esteem by the public.

Furthermore, these results suggest that even when a candidate is quite popular with the public, as was the case for Ronald Reagan in 1984, the negativity effect still characterizes impressions; the personality characteristics that make up the negative end of the candidate's profile will still be the most important to voters. Thus, no matter how much strategy and careful image presentation go into a campaign, when the public weighs the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate, it is the weaknesses that will matter most.

NOTES

1. Sample sizes varied depending on which of the two major candidates were analyzed. The *n*s presented here represent the average sample sizes across candidates. In order to hold sample size constant across candidates within each survey, analyses were also conducted only on respondents who could answer trait and thermometer questions for both of the major candidates. Essentially the same results were obtained from this sample as those reported in the Results section. Analyses were also conducted on only those respondents who expressed a voting preference for one of the candidates. Again, the results were unaffected by this criterion for inclusion in the sample.

2. More specifically, the correlations of each trait with the traits in the two trait domains of integrity and competence were examined for the purpose of choosing a trait that was highly correlated with the other traits in an indiscriminant fashion. The trait was selected that had the highest correlation with traits outside its domain as well as a high correlation within its domain. In 1984, the trait *sets a good example* in respect to Mondale correlated .55 with the other integrity traits and .55 with the competence traits, and for Reagan these correlations were .63 and .60, respectively. In 1988, the trait *cares* in respect to Bush correlated .59 with the other integrity traits and .52 with the competence traits, and for Dukakis these correlations were .56 and .47, respectively. The aggregate analyses presented in the text were also conducted without the control trait. This specification produced trait coefficients that were higher than those produced with the control trait, but otherwise the pattern of results was essentially the same as those presented.

3. Essentially the same results were obtained when beta coefficients or partial coefficients were used as the measure of trait predictive power.

4. These results were replicated in a similar survey conducted by the Center for Political Studies on a weekly basis from January to December of 1984. A new random sample of eligible voters was interviewed each week. Those interviewed between the end of the primary season in June and the November election were included in the analyses. Respondents rated the candidates on the same 12 traits but with different response categories than were used in the Pre-Election Studies. Respondents indicated whether a trait fit their impression of the candidate "a great deal," "somewhat," "a little," or "not at all."

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