The Case for More Parties | Boston Review

A path beyond our broken two-party system.

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Robert F. Kennedy Jr. had no chance of becoming president, but he was not wrong when he said last fall that “Americans are angry at being left out, left behind, swindled, cheated, and belittled by a smug elite that has rigged the system in its favor.” Fewer than one in four Americans think the country is heading in the right direction. More than two in three think the political and economic system needs major changes. Eight in ten are worried about the future of American democracy in the 2024 election. More than one in four view both parties unfavorably.

The stakes of this election are extremely high, but the pathologies of American politics will endure no matter the outcome. Antisystem alienation and hyperpartisanship are reinforcing each other in deeply destabilizing ways that can’t be repaired simply by selecting better candidates. We face a systemic problem that requires a systemic solution—and that solution, I contend, is to break out of our broken two-party system.

Nearly two-thirds of Americans want “a third major party”—a record high in twenty years of tracking.

I make my case in two parts. The first explores how the U.S. party system lies at the root of our political dysfunction. The party system is the whole ballgame—it determines how citizens understand and engage in politics, the nature and tone of conflict, and the health and stability of democracy. When that system doesn’t work properly, the politics that emerge from it will be broken, too—and other kinds of democratic reform will have only temporary impacts at best.

The way forward, I argue in the second part, is to introduce more parties and break the two-party doom loop, specifically by reviving *fusion voting*: an electoral system that allows multiple parties to endorse the same candidate for a public office. I say “revive” because fusion voting was once common in U.S. politics, before it was banned in the early twentieth century by the dominant parties. Though the state-by-state specifics varied, the broad motivation was simple: they didn’t like all the added competition fusion enabled.

Today fusion voting remains legal only in two states, New York and Connecticut. Reviving it across the country would allow third parties to be legitimate players on the electoral scene—not just spoilers or bystanders. It would empower Americans who have long felt disillusioned with the two major parties—or disconnected from politics altogether—to have a real say. And it would pave the way to an important longer-term reform: proportional representation.

At this moment of hyperpartisanship, it may seem paradoxical to conclude that more parties are the solution. But modern representative democracy *is* party democracy; we need to make it work, not try to circumvent it. Reinvigorating the party system, with more and better parties, is the best place to start.

Part 1: It’s the Party System, Stupid

The right prescription to our ailing democracy depends on the right diagnosis, so it is important to get the story right about how we got to this moment.

The most common view is a classic decline-and-fall narrative. On this account, there was once a time when American democracy worked, before partisan polarization messed it all up. Moderates dominated; partisans disagreed, but they worked out differences in a spirit of constructive bipartisanship and remained close to the political center.

This golden age allegedly peaked in the 1950s or early 1960s, and maybe even continued through the 1980s—but then things all went downhill starting in the 1990s with new confrontational politics pioneered by Newt Gingrich, the archetypical villain of this story. The tone in politics turned nasty and dysfunctional; cable news and talk radio, and then social media, destroyed everything. Most of the good, reasonable, compromise-minded politicians either left politics or got primaried by extremists.

"You might not feel inspired by *us*," party leaders effectively tell us, "but *they* are terrible for the issues you care most about."
This explanation is a good first approximation of what has gone wrong, and I have told versions of it in the past. But it oversimplifies in significant ways—and because it oversimplifies, it invites the wrong solution. If we want to fix things, this story suggests, we have to re-empower the "exhausted majority" in the middle—the mass of voters who just want stuff to get done, unlike the ideologues and extremists of left and right. In other words, we need to force parties to be more responsive to the "median voter."

Behind this metaphor of the "middle" lie several assumptions. One is that voters have consistent ideological preferences—formed independently of political parties—that can be specified on a single axis running from the extreme left to the extreme right. Another is that voters decide who to vote for by accurately selecting the party "closest" to them on this ideological spectrum—and that parties, too, can be classified in this one-dimensional way. Still another is that there really is a sizable group of voters in the political center.

When we talk in these terms, we are applying what political scientists call the "median voter theory" to American elections. And it's little surprise that we do so. As Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson put it, this model has been the "master theory" of U.S. politics for half a century, at least among political scientists. Partly (but not only) for that

reason, it is the analytical water in which much political analysis now swims.

The theory first came to prominence in Anthony Downs's 1957 book, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Having just finished a PhD in economics at Stanford, Downs deployed the tools of rational choice theory to explain why two-party politics might converge in the middle. It was not a crazy idea for the time. In the years following World War II, the two major parties *had* largely converged across a wide range of policy areas. Simultaneously, the academic study of politics was undergoing a sea change as a new generation of scholars embraced economic modeling for its apparent rigor. Unlike the thick methodologies of the field's past—which drew heavily on sociological and institutional theory—the new, "thin" models, it was argued, could be tested with data.

Both inside the academy and out, the median voter theory came to stand for an ideal as well as a natural state of politics. It provided a baseline against which commentators could analyze politics, campaign strategists could promote winning strategies, and political scientists could test hypotheses. A simplistic version flourished in the public sphere, offering a narrative that was both easy to understand and delightfully boosterish about the American two-party system. Array everyone on a single-axis line, assume most people are close to the middle, and voilà! You get an American success story: a stable two-party democracy of moderation and broad consensus.

In reality, Downs's argument hadn't been quite so simple. A two-party system "cannot provide stable and effective government," he wrote, "unless there is a large measure of ideological consensus among its citizens." This caveat proved prophetic. In September 1957 President Dwight Eisenhower federalized the National Guard in Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect nine Black teenagers who wished to attend Central High, which until then had been an all-white school. An angry

white mob, backed by Governor Orval Faubus, showed up to prevent the teens from doing so. The background “consensus” that postwar U.S. politics had banked on suddenly seemed to dissolve—not least because it had depended on excluding a larger number of Americans from politics entirely, including African Americans in the Jim Crow South.

The only place where minor parties *aren’t* weak are the states that still allow fusion.

What median voter theorists had interpreted as two-party convergence along a single axis was actually the result of a deeper, multidimensional process. Both parties had always contained multitudes—a mix of liberals, moderates, and conservatives of many types—and they competed with each other almost everywhere throughout the postwar era. We really had something like a hidden four-party system, with liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats alongside conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. This factional diversity produced system-wide moderation: holding together the interests of multiple, overlapping groups prevented either of the two parties from swinging into extreme partisanship.

But this arrangement came under serious strain in the 1990s. As liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats began disappearing from Congress, U.S. politics became much more of a nonoverlapping two-party system. The result, as we all know now, has been disastrously divisive. The Democratic and Republican parties began to diverge, staking out increasingly distinct visions of American identity drawn from increasingly separated cultural and geographical bases.

Influential political analysts and reformers *should* have taken this divergence to mean that the median voter theory is wrong. Unfortunately, that hasn’t happened. On the contrary, they have offered endless rationalizations for the gap between prediction and

reality, and as a result median voter theory still gets prominent intellectual billing among columnists and mugwumps, who blame parties and partisanship for “distorting” politics. In doubling down on the one-dimensional “pulling apart” story, these commentators miss the real reason for the apparent disappearance of the political middle: the collapse of a de facto four-party system into a two-party system.

What caused this collapse? It started in the late 1960s with the rising salience of “social” issues around race, gender, and religion and the gradual disappearance of an older world of local party organizing. During the 1970s parties had only thin national networks—in which candidates could act relatively independently—but by the 1980s, the national apparatuses had grown financially stable and increasingly relied on consultants, ad makers, and ad buyers to shape their messages and candidates. Parties were thus transformed from local operations rooted in communities across the country into distant, national fundraising juggernauts helmed by a professional political class. Today they bring in hundreds of millions of dollars each year—most of which goes straight to advertising and direct marketing.

Meanwhile, single-issue advocacy groups with strong policy views and financial backing began to proliferate and press their demands in Washington, and party leaders learned to arbitrage among them, shaping new coalitions by accumulating new stakes into politics. Business organizations became especially dominant. Starting in the 1990s, as politics became thoroughly nationalized around social and cultural issues, the country saw significant internal migration: Democrats abandoned rural and exurban areas, and Republicans abandoned urban areas. This geographic sorting in turn led to shrinking partisan competition in many areas—and the disappearance of party organizations along with it. After all, in a system of winner-take-all elections, why invest in places where support is below

40 percent? This geographic sorting atop single-winner districts was the central mechanism that drove the collapse of the de facto four-party system into only two parties.

The decline-and-fall narrative of American democracy—that it once worked, before partisanship messed it all up—is wrong.

In short, the two parties grew "hollow," in the apt phrasing of Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld: they have come to be floating presences disconnected from most citizens, run by pollsters and messaging gurus. As a result, more and more citizens have become frustrated bystanders in national politics, and a growing share of citizens have rejected partisan conflict entirely. In some cases the major parties have responded by trying to fit more issues and groups in their coalitions, but mostly they have taken to demonizing the other side. You might not feel inspired by *us*, party leaders effectively tell voters, but *they* are terrible for the issues you care most about—abortion, as the Democrats emphasized, or religious "freedom," according to the GOP.

The cumulative effect of these changes has been disastrous. Partisan conflict is a blasted terrain, but voters who don't like it have nowhere to go. An overwhelming messaging machinery tells voters that even if they don't like their party, the other side winning would be far worse—and that losing, therefore, is unacceptable. It is under these conditions—high partisan division, low system legitimacy, high citizen disaffection—that democracies typically crumble.

If this is so, why aren't the critics of partisanship right? Their mistake is to see partisan polarization as the root cause of these ills. In fact, it is just a symptom of a significantly diminished partisan landscape. In modern representative democracies, partisan identity is not a distortion of some pre-partisan reality, and citizens are not the idealized, independent actors of rational choice models. On the contrary, study after study has shown that the vast majority of voters

are partisans first: they derive their policy positions *from* the party they identify with, not the other way around. The more informed and engaged voters are, the more they know exactly what they should think as loyal partisans. The cleverer they are, the more they can reinterpret any fact pattern to explain why their party is right and the other party is wrong. More and better information—often proposed as a remedy to polarization—actually reinforces it.

To be a Democrat or a Republican (or a member of any party) means being part of a team, and when you see yourself as part of a team, you tend to be loyal to it. All of our collective identities—whether religious, ethnic, regional, or cultural—operate this way. We defend our teams when they are attacked, cheerlead when they succeed, and subscribe to the collective values that they promote. We look to our fellow group members to see what we should think about events in the world and update our views accordingly. We tend to self-segregate into the teams we want to be a part of—and when we don't see a team we want to be a part of, we sit things out.

These facts play out in perverse ways in our limited, two-party system. After January 6, for example, newly retired or defeated Republican members of Congress could have spoken up against Trump. Why didn't they? After all, they were no longer facing re-election. But with only two partisan "teams" to choose from, defection from the majority on your own side risks severe social isolation from friends and family and professional networks built up over years—a dark leap into harassment, loneliness, and professional demise.

In a recent interview in the *Atlantic*, former Representative Adam Kinzinger offered this explanation for why so many of his fellow Republicans went along with Trump: "I have come to learn that people fear losing their identity and losing their tribe more than they come to fear death." Of course, there is nothing special here about Republicans. Today our two major parties operate like super-powerful

magnets, pulling and scaring people into their respective corners. Family background, historical memory, religion, geography, education, TV and social media viewing habits—all combine to keep us from straying to the other side, let alone creating a new side entirely.

In response to this state of affairs, many have proposed that we combat hyperpartisanship, perhaps by doing away with political parties entirely. Mickey Edwards, for example—a former Republican member of Congress—has argued that we should just view ourselves as Americans, not as members of a political team. Antipartisanship is the guiding principle behind No Labels, the organization Edwards cofounded that (as its name suggests) advocates for eschewing partisan labels.

Parties are now distant fundraising juggernauts helmed by professionals. But they were once rooted in communities.

But even “no label” is still a label; there is simply no escaping labels in politics. Moreover, there is little evidence that voters disillusioned with the two major parties are united in holding more or less the same centrist views. Most self-described “independents” are closet partisans, voting reliably for one party. (Many hold views even more extreme than partisans; they dislike parties because they see them as *too* compromise-oriented.) Similarly, “moderate” is the default category for people who don’t identify as liberal or conservative—which doesn’t mean that their views land in the metaphorical “middle” of the two camps. These two groups—self-identified independents and moderates—overlap somewhat, but the overlap is much smaller than critics of partisanship suggest. More than anything else, what holds them together is a sense that the system is broken.

This disconnect is a serious problem—in many ways even more serious than hyperpartisan polarization. According to surveys, political independents are least likely to embrace democratic values or even to support political compromise. This helps to explain why Trump’s rise

within the GOP in 2016 was powered by states with open primaries: he performed much better there than in states where only registered Republicans could vote for the party's nominee. Disconnection and apathy create a political opportunity for demagogues.

So much, then, for the mythical "middle." To connect citizens to politics, we must create more, and better, political parties—not seek to do away with parties altogether. New political parties provide a new identity: a new team that voters can join, a new way of seeing the world and belonging in it, and a new way of exercising power at the ballot box.

Of course, political parties are not the only "teams" that matter to politics. Labor unions are a powerful source of political identity (though less so, today, than they used to be). The same is true of many other civil society organizations. But because elections are the central institutions of modern representative democracy, political parties play a special role in organizing voting and governing power. They are "mega-identities," as political scientist Lilliana Mason describes them—and for that reason, there is no way around them.

Part 2: Getting Out of the Doom Loop

How do we make good on this vision of more and better parties? For starters, we can look to proportional, multiparty systems of the sort that are common in Europe.

In these systems, parties gain a share of legislative seats proportionate to their share of votes. In Sweden's 2022 general election, for example, a far-right political party—the Sweden Democrats—had its best showing ever, winning 20.5 percent of the vote. That means it got around 20.5 percent of the seats in the legislature. But because the Sweden Democrats did not win a majority, the party must bargain and form a coalition with other parties

if it wishes to exercise power—an arrangement that limits its power considerably.

The legislative arm of the U.S. political system, by contrast, is built on winner-take-all congressional districts, which make it much easier for minorities to parlay victories into governing power. Take the MAGA faction of the U.S. Republican Party, defined as voters who believe that the 2020 election was stolen. It accounts for some 60 percent or more of people who voted for Trump in 2016 but only about 37 percent of all voters. Yet because it represents a majority of the GOP, the MAGA faction can convert its minority position across the United States into significant power. Moreover, in our climate of intense two-party polarization, many on the right who were originally reluctant to support the MAGA movement have thrown their lot in with it—since most find it more palatable to vote for a less-than-ideal GOP candidate than to vote for a Democrat.

Two-party polarization is merely a symptom of our too limited partisan landscape.

More parties would make defections easier—without driving people out of politics altogether. What if we could empower non-MAGA Republicans and GOP-leaning independents to forge a distinct political identity, without asking them to waste their votes on a new third party that can't possibly win? Conversely, much of the self-identified left in the United States is deeply at odds with the Democratic Party, as well as with existing third parties. What if they could develop their own power base in electoral politics?

Fusion voting provides a powerful and proven answer. It was once common in U.S. politics, facilitating a vibrant political culture with many political parties. It can do so again.

Third Parties That Don't Spoil

It’s not hard to understand why third parties fail in our current party system: they are plagued by the “wasted” or “spoiler” vote problem. Voting for a minor-party candidate means voting for a candidate who simply cannot win, and in a close election, voting for a minor-party candidate could mean helping the candidate you least prefer. These facts make our third parties weak. Ambitious political actors channel all their energy into the major parties, while existing third parties attract only fringe candidates and donors.

Nevertheless, polls show widespread support for more than just two political parties. Gallup’s most recent poll on this question found that 63 percent of Americans want “a third major party,” a record high in twenty years of tracking.

Is there any hope for making this a reality? The one place where minor parties *aren’t* weak are the states—New York and Connecticut—that still allow fusion voting. In both, the Working Families Party (WFP) is an independent and relevant actor in both elections and policy making, delivering votes to its major-party ally—some 8 percent of New Yorkers voted for Biden on the WFP line in 2020—while routinely demanding policy concessions for doing so. They don’t win every election, and they don’t get all their policy demands met, but they don’t only lose, either. Non-fusion third parties always lose and thus cannot build power or agency. One might think of the WFP as an independent faction of the Democratic Party, but it’s a faction with a ballot line, and that makes all the difference.

Consider what a fusion ballot could look like for a congressional office in a swing district where Democrats often poll head-to-head with Republicans. Say the Democratic Party nominates Smith, a moderate Democrat, while the Republican Party nominates Jones, a MAGA supporter. Suppose the Green Party and Libertarian Party nominate their own candidates, too.

So far, this is just like a typical ballot (at least in a place where third parties are active). But imagine there's a fifth, minor party in the mix, the Common Sense Party, with a base of moderates attracted to bipartisanship, civility, and the rule of law, and they decide to "fuse" with the Democrats for this race by cross-nominating the same candidate, Smith. For example, they might message to their base this way:

We have evaluated the two major-party congressional candidates on their commitment to our values, and we're nominating Smith. She's a Democrat, and we disagree with the Democrats about many things, but on the values we care about, she's far and away best candidate in this race. If you agree these values are important, we urge you to vote for her under the Common Sense Party label. It counts the same as a vote on a major party line, but it lets her know that these values matter to you.

Election Day rolls around, and even though Smith gets fewer votes from Democrats than Jones does from Republicans, her support on the Common Sense line propels her to a narrow victory. The Common Sense Party can proudly claim to have produced the margin of victory. Smith will be most attentive to her own party, but she won't ignore Common Sense voters—and Republicans will be forced to run a more competitive candidate. In this scenario, supporters of the minor "fusion" party do not waste their votes (as supporters of the Green and Libertarian parties do). Instead, citizens vote for the candidate they prefer under the party label closest to their values.

At first glance, this scenario might seem unimportant. Business and civil society groups—unions, corporations, newspapers, organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America—already offer endorsements of major-party candidates without needing a ballot line. Why go through all the trouble of changing ballot rules and forging new political parties? One reason is that a place on the ballot

organizes power in a distinct, tangible way. Votes get counted and can make or break elections; the impact of endorsements are much harder to quantify.

But there is an even more profound benefit to fusion voting than winning elections. As the Working Families Party has demonstrated, parties are essential mechanisms for giving citizens a meaningful voice, organizing power, and building political connections. This is the crucial value of political parties in modern representative democracy: they organize and cohere power at the ballot box, where it matters most. There is more to this vision than just endorsements from already existing civil society organizations. Endorsements can come and go and cannot easily be quantified; political parties are institutions that stick around from election to election. When voters choose to vote for a party, their power gets counted, and when organized power can be measured, it matters more.

Everything Old Is New Again

It is not just the present that we can turn to for inspiration. Though largely forgotten outside New York and Connecticut, fusion is a key part of U.S. history. It was widely used in the nineteenth century, where it created space for new parties to form and elevate issues the major parties preferred to ignore.

In the decades before the Civil War, for example, the abolitionists used many tactics to elevate their opposition to slavery: massive petitions, public assemblies, protecting fugitives from slave catchers, and much more. But before long, it was clear that they had to be involved in politics, so the abolitionists formed antislavery political parties, among them the Liberty Party, the Anti-Nebraska Party, and the Free Soil Party. Where it was possible to win a standalone election for, say, a Free Soil candidate, abolitionists embraced that choice. But

where it wasn't, they used fusion voting brilliantly. In effect, they said to their supporters:

We are backing Hiram Ebenezer Smith, even though we know he is a Whig who is not perfect on abolition, because he's far better than his proslavery Democratic opponent, Ezekiel Frederick Jones. So vote for Smith, but do so on the Liberty Party ticket and let him know he must stand up against the Slave Power.

Among the most famous abolitionists in Congress, and by some reckonings the greatest of all U.S. senators, was Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. He was elected due to the unusual fusion coalition of Free Soil and Democratic state legislators in what was then an indirect election.

Due in no small part to abolitionists' fusion voting efforts, the Whig Party collapsed in 1854 (ending a twenty-year run), and a new major party—the Republican Party—was created on the foundation laid by the Liberty, Free Soil, Anti-Nebraska, Know-Nothings, Know-Somethings, and other abolitionist political actors. As historian Corey Brooks writes, this was "the most important third-party movement in American history."

Fusion would empower those disillusioned with the two major parties to have a real say.

After the Civil War, fusion balloting expanded across the nation. For decades Americans had a vigorous, multiparty system in which citizens who felt their interests were being disregarded by the two major parties could—and did—build minor parties. These parties, bolstered by the ability to tie their interests to major parties through fusion voting, became important voices in the public square: farmers' parties, labor parties, temperance parties, suffragist parties, debtor parties, Black parties, and more.

The most famous was the coalition of farmers and tradesmen known as the People's Party, or Populists. In North Carolina in the 1890s, white yeoman farmers voting for the Populists united with emancipated slaves who voted Republican to elect a multiracial slate of officeholders. They had separate organizations and vastly different cultures and history, but the state's fusion voting rules allowed them to support the same candidates, producing a coalition victory. The fact that this arrangement was later destroyed by Klan violence and Jim Crow Democrats who soon banned fusion voting only underscores how valuable these rules are.

So What Happened to Fusion Voting?

In the late nineteenth century, state governments took over the printing of standardized, so-called "Australian" ballots. Before then, parties had printed and distributed their own ballots to supporters that listed the favored candidates (and only those candidates) or published them in party newspapers for voters to cut out and bring to polling places.

The Australian ballot had much to recommend it: it resulted in less fraud, and it protected the right of voters to keep their votes a secret. But it didn't take long for the dominant parties to realize that if the state controlled the printing of ballots, the party that controlled the state could introduce rules to favor its own interests. Since fusion typically results in an alliance between a minor party and the weaker of the two major parties, the dominant major party in a state or region—in the North the Gilded Age Republicans, in the South the Jim Crow Democrats—had every incentive to prevent such alliances.

Those interests were made crystal clear in one of the earliest state legislative debates about banning fusion. Summarizing his reasons for wanting to outlaw the alliance between Democrats and Populists (or

Prohibitionists), the Republican Speaker of the Michigan Assembly in 1898 put it this way: “We can whip them single-handed, but don’t intend to fight all creation.” As historian Peter Argersinger puts it, the Republicans’ solution was a form of “ballot manipulation”—strategically altering election laws or practices by a political party to undermine the effectiveness of opposing parties’ electoral coalitions. The fusion ban passed and was soon followed by a raft of similar legislation. By the early 1920s most states had passed copycat fusion bans, though a few states only came around later. And with fusion outlawed, minor parties had no good options: they could run a standalone candidate that would not be viable, or they bite the bullet, discard the party’s distinctive identity, and join one of the major parties.

As a result, the United States is the only developed nation in the world that did not see the emergence of a meaningful new national political party in the twentieth century. Ironically—and tragically—the very system that allowed the Republican Party to develop a real alternative to the incumbent parties that were failing the nation in the 1850s is no longer available.

By recovering the dynamic, multiparty strain of U.S. history, we can see the larger story of American democracy: a story of a diverse array of parties rising, fusing, falling, shifting. The language of a one-dimensional political spectrum didn’t enter American political discussions until the 1930s, when third parties fully faded from the scene and Democrats and Republicans truly became dominant, leaving the United States a genuinely two-party system—but with parties that still contained multitudes within them. As U.S. politics nationalized and hyperpolarized in the 1980s and 1990s, the two parties flattened out—leaving us with the destructive system we have today.

How could we get fusion back? Congress could pass legislation tomorrow making it legal for all congressional elections. State legislatures could pass legislation for statewide elections. Ballot initiatives could relegalize fusion. But the most likely immediate pathway is through state-based litigation. Because fusion was once widely legal, and because many state constitutions lay emphasis on freedom of association, litigation offers a direct path to reviving fusion voting in many states. Already, lawsuits in New Jersey and Kansas are in progress; other states will follow soon.

If we don't change the party system we have, the two-party doom loop will only grow worse.

Of course, it will take time for more and better parties to form and flourish—to recruit members, organize an agenda, and build power. And fusion voting is by no means the only structural reform that we need in the United States. Public campaign financing would help to check the profound influence of a small number of very wealthy donors, and in the long term, proportional representation would support a robust and representative multiparty system capable of representing America's pluralism and diversity.

But the bottom line is that there is no nonpartisan "state of political nature" to which we can return. American politics is not in crisis because of too much partisanship but, in a sense, because of too little. Multiple, vibrant political parties are the only way to organize power in modern democracies, and if we don't change the party system we have, the two-party doom loop will only grow worse. Fusion voting plots a clear path out—it hits the sweet spot where impact and feasibility meet, and it is long past time to revive it.

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