

# Electoral Context and Presentation of Self

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## Abstract

We explore the relationship between constituencies' characteristics and candidates' presentation of self to uncover what drives candidates' balancing of ideological and personalistic appeals. More specifically, we ask the question: as electorates become more partisan, do candidates highlight their policy positions at the expense of more personalistic appeals? As electoral competition increases, in both the primary and general election, are candidates more or less likely to portray themselves as ideologues? Using an original data set cultivated from recent U.S. Senate candidates' campaign websites, we classify and quantify presentation of self. With this new data, we find that ideologically favorable electorates, intense primary competition, and weak general election competitiveness are associated with candidates presenting themselves more ideologically.

Key words: Congressional campaigns; Presentation of self; Partisan electorates; Primary competition; General election competitiveness

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# 1 Introduction

While elections may serve as instruments of democracy that transform citizens' preferences into desired policies (Miller and Stokes 1963; Powell 2004), the representation relationship is not exclusive to an ideological dimension (Eulau and Karps 1977, Harden 2013). Members of Congress routinely present themselves to their electoral districts as something more than a simple policy delegate (e.g. Grimmer 2013a; b). To be sure, much ideological heterogeneity, low levels of political knowledge, and external pressures may exist in one's electorate. Such forces often move representatives away from the traditional median of the district, leading to different conceptions of representation. Rather, legislators employ various home styles, or presentations of self, to connect to the voter, attempting to be evaluated on the terms that will best increase the chances of election.

Different types of electorates desire different benefits from their representatives (Grant and Rudolph 2004). If candidates for office are attuned to these varying expectations, they will present themselves accordingly. Hence, if a constituency's policy preferences are clear, it is reasonable for legislators to explain their own positions, employing partisan and ideological symbols (Franklin 1991). Conversely, when reliance upon issue congruence may not be most favorable, elites will attempt to cultivate support through emphasis of personal traits, or valence characteristics (Groseclose 2001; Stone and Simas 2010). In this way, they encourage voters to view representation as more than simply the enactment of policies.

In this paper we use original data to investigate whether electoral context affects the ways in which candidates for Senate present themselves to the voters. The research question is: as constituencies become more partisan, are candidates for legislative office more prone to speak in policy terms? As electoral competition becomes more intense between two parties, are candidates less likely to portray themselves as partisans and ideologues? The results of this study suggest that ideologically favorable electorates and intense primary competition lead candidates to portray themselves in ideological terms, while competitive general elections are associated with candidates attempting to be less partisan and ideological.

## 2 Theory

### 2.1 Rational choice model of convergence and constituency pressure

The origins of candidate posturing literature lie in the work of Downs (1957) and Black (1958). Both start with the assumption that parties and candidates are motivated by electoral incentives. In order to achieve this goal, the candidate must undertake a strategy that maximizes her popularity. Parties should maximize votes by offering the policies that voters believe would be the least amount of cost (Hinich and Munger 1996). Assuming a unidimensional policy scale, candidates would then move as close to the median voter as possible. Voters will choose the candidate that is closest to their policy preferences based on the candidates' announced positions (Merrill III and Grofman 1999). If the candidates have perfect information about the voter preferences, traditional public choice theory would imply that each should appeal to the median voter (Davis, Hinich, and Ordeshook 1970). That is, in equilibrium the parties and candidates converge on the same set of policy proposals, providing little choice outside of candidate personalities and partisan labels. It may also be the case that rather than move to the middle, candidates could engage in an obfuscation of their image. Rather than appeal to the median voter, they simply speak in vague terms, presenting policy ideas as indistinct from the median.

Members of Congress take and announce their positions to their constituents strategically (Mayhew 1974; Kingdon 1989). Ideological posturing is done in a manner that will be most beneficial to retaining one's seat. Empirical evidence suggests that challengers and incumbents who are ideologically aligned with their districts do quite well in elections. For example, Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002) find that as incumbents' roll call behaviors become more extreme, their electoral advantages decrease. Similarly, Carson et al. (2010) find that voters are much more responsive to ideology and roll call voting than partisanship during Congressional elections. If candidates are single-minded re-election seekers, they

must present themselves to their districts in a manner that is ideologically acceptable to the median voter.

While the motivations (i.e. electoral incentives) of the median voter approach to campaigns are clear, the microfoundations are not. Less is understood about what drives deviations from the general election median voter. A great body of evidence suggests that the canonical approach of median voter convergence is not always the case in elections. Some have shown that voters are no longer as uninformed as they once were. Rather than simply rely on partisan cues, they care a great deal about certain issues (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979). Thus, to attract policy-minded voters, politicians must take a stand on certain issues which will often times lead them to sway from the ideological midpoint.

Additionally, Downs and Black were writing in a period where party primaries were not a regularity. Primaries were first introduced into American politics with progressive reforms in the early Twentieth Century. Still, party elites played a major role in determining outcomes (Hernnson and Gimpel 1995; Jacobson 2009). Once the candidates were chosen by competitive primaries, they had to campaign in public rather than deal with professional members of the party. This publicizing of their campaign meant that promises to the party would be more public. Thus, they could not campaign towards the middle with as much as they once did (Burden 2001; 2004).

Primaries should influence how candidates for office interact with their electorates. The fraction of voters who participate in primaries tend to be much more partisan, more ideologically extreme, and much more attentive to political affairs (Jacobson 2009). To be sure, when faced with the scenario of both a primary and general election challenge, strategic candidates should stake out positions closer to the median of their party and at least some distance from the general election median (Aronson and Ordeshook 1972, Owen and Grofman 2006). If voters in primaries have more divergent issue-positions and more ideologically extreme perceptions, they should reward candidates that align to those perspectives. Evidence regarding the effects of primaries on incumbents is somewhat mixed. Brady, Han, and

Pope (2007) find that more extreme candidates are less likely to draw quality challengers in a primary and that their overall vote share in primaries is higher. Yet, Hirano et al. (2010) find no evidence that primary election results are associated with divergences from the median voter. Rather, they find that such divergent positioning is related to weaker general election results.

Outside of primaries, both parties must strategize to maximize their votes. If the primary drives both campaigns away from the median general election voter, a similar move to the general election median would be a potential strategy in the general election campaign to increase the number of votes. However, candidates want to avoid the charges of being a flip-flopper. Once they move towards their own party median in the primary, they are inhibited from making a move back to the general election median. Therefore, a different strategy may be adopted. One possible strategy is to change the issues discussed in the campaign. The candidate could talk about those issues upon which her party is seen as “strong” (Petrocik 1996). Candidates may also choose to cultivate a personal vote during a difficult general election campaign (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987).

## **2.2 Presentation of self as a campaign strategy**

Few deny that policy preferences play a role in the elite-citizen relationship. Yet some suggest, as Miller and Stokes (1963) argue, for different levels of representation across policy dimensions, citizens and legislators view their partnership in various manners; the connection is built upon more than pure ideological congruence. Eulau and Karps (1977) hold that in addition to containing an element of policy responsiveness, the connection between legislators and citizens is comprised of three other components: service (241; e.g. Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987, Hibbing 1991), pork-barrel appropriation politics (e.g, Fiorina 1989; Shepsle and Weingast 1994), and symbolic responsiveness (Eulau and Karps 1977, 241).

Although position taking may be used as a tactic to pursue reelection, it is one that comes with great uncertainty. Since a political audience may be in disagreement with a candidate’s

true preferences, it may serve the legislator to change the representation dimension to one that is more favorable. Fenno (1978) describes how representatives develop a “home style” to cultivate support among their constituencies. Legislators and candidates manipulate their “presentation of self” to control the response of voters to leave the most desired impression. In addition to creating an environment of support from the constituents, members also seek to foster a sense of legitimacy. These efforts all work towards establishing trust and confidence among the citizenry that will ultimately build a sufficient coalition of re-election support.

As should be clear, home styles are used to increase the probability of reelection (Mayhew 1974). Yet, many citizens still hold Congress’ aggregate policy outcomes (e.g. Nyhan et al. 2012) and individual roll call votes (e.g. Ansolabehere and Jones 2010, Roberts and Smith 2013) as important guides in their evaluation of representation. Members of Congress are aware of this dilemma as well and adjust their Washington and home style behavior accordingly (Arnold 1990). Since the home style is related to increasing the number of votes one receives, members of Congress must find the appropriate balance of messaging between policy positions and personal characteristics (Serra 2010). Grimmer (2013a; b) provides strong evidence that home styles and presentation of self are heavily influenced by partisan composition of the electorate. Analyzing the content of press releases, he finds that those incumbent senators who represent states with many constituents of the opposite party will more heavily promote non-policy attributes, such as the appropriations they are able to secure for the state. Those senators representing more friendly partisan states are more likely to devote greater attention in their press releases to the positions they take in Congress.

Since candidates for office are motivated to win elections, they will present themselves in a manner that optimizes their probability of winning. Voters tend to reward those candidates that are most closely aligned to their own preferences. As a result, candidates have an incentive to tailor their messaging strategy in a way that best fits their electoral district’s ideology.

Candidates who are campaigning in ideologically friendly regions will tend to promote their divergence from the traditional ideological center. Similar to Grimmer’s findings (2013a; b), their presentation of self will tend to focus on issue position taking that clarifies their conservative or liberal perspective. That is, with more copartisans in an area, the candidate has an incentive to appeal to those voters by positioning themselves accordingly. Conversely, in those electoral districts where a candidate has fewer copartisans among the voters, she will adopt a different strategy. In such scenarios, the candidate will focus more attention on personal vote cultivation. This setting should encourage the candidate to highlight her issue positions less frequently and provide less attention to her ideological label. This reasoning leads to our first hypothesis:

**Partisan Composition Hypothesis:** Candidates in electoral districts with higher percentages of copartisans will provide greater emphasis to their issue positions and ideological identity in their presentation of self.

Strong primary challengers should force incumbents to legislate and campaign to the base of the party (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007). Such primary campaigning to the base often limits the candidate from reaping the benefits of centrist campaign in a general election (Aronson and Ordeshook 1972; Burden 2001). As Carey and Polga-Hecimovich (2006) note, primaries attract “hardcore partisans, who tend to come from ideological extremes of the two big parties and [they] choose candidates of limited appeal to the middle of the road voters who dominate the general electorate” (530). It may be that primaries elect candidates who are not centrists, but candidates must present themselves as non-centrists to win the partisan voters (Adams and Merrill III 2008). Thus, competitive primaries should move candidates from the ideological median of her general election constituency. Those candidates that do not face such challenges will feel less pressure to campaign away from the ideological center of the general election.

**Primary Competition Hypothesis:** Candidates facing competitive primaries will provide greater emphasis to their issue positions and ideological identity in their presentation of self.

The literature also finds that the competitiveness of elections alters candidates campaign tactics. One of the necessary assumptions for the Downsian model’s prediction of campaigning to the median vote is parity in competition (Burden 2004). Admittedly, incumbency often scares off the highest quality candidates that could possibly raise the resources to even reach the median voter with a persuasive campaign (Cox and Katz 1996). Nonetheless, as an election becomes more competitive, candidates have an incentive to become less ideological and appeal to more moderate voters. We argue that as a candidate anticipates a strong general election challenge, she will adopt a less ideological campaign. She will provide less attention to issue positions that signal a divergence from the district’s median voter and she will attempt to appear as less of an ideologue and partisan.

**General Election Competition Hypothesis:** Candidates facing competitive general election contests will provide less emphasis to their issue positions and ideological identity in their presentation of self.

### 3 Data & Methods

The dependent variable for this project is presentation of self. Previous studies employ various methods to measure the presentation of self in ideological terms. Some rely on NOMINATE legislative scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; 2007), others interview candidates (Barrett and Cook 1991), and many use metrics founded on national surveys administered to all candidates, such as the Candidate Ideological Survey (CIS), the National Political Awareness Test (NPAT), or Project Vote Smart (Burden 2004; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Rogowski 2014). While value lies in these measurements, we have chosen to forgo such tactics for the following reasons. First, NOMINATE prevents one from identifying the ideological positions of non-incumbents. If this study is to be meaningful, it must measure the ideological presentation of all those studied on the same ideological scale. Second, legislative votes, interviews, and surveys are all filtered in a way that does not fully capture how the candidate presents herself to the public.



Hence, we are using as our unit of analysis campaign websites, particularly the “About Me” section. Campaign websites have been found to demonstrate candidates’ priorities as well as the language and approach they take to presenting themselves to the voters (Druckman et al. 2009). We have chosen to focus on solely the “About Me” page for the following reasons. First, such a page is a commonality in all websites for the years chosen (2010, 2012, and 2014). Second, such a site provides candidates an opportunity to not only introduce themselves to the voters, but also a means by which to identify their campaign in their own terms, emphasizing what they feel to be their best characteristics. Finally, third, it is the one space in which both valence and policy characteristics are juxtaposed. Most often, issue positions are relegated to harder to find pages. “About Me” pages, however, are more prominent and involve the candidate deploying both valence and ideological language.

The sample of websites in the data analysis are confined to those belonging to major candidates for the U.S. Senate during the general elections of the 2010, 2012, and 2014 cycles. We have done so for the following reasons. First, a given Senate election represents a wider variety of interests than a given House election. Therefore, it is likely that a greater number of issues will be addressed. Second, due to their more competitive nature, Senate campaigns are more likely to be professional. That is, candidates will rely upon more mainstream methods to connect with the electorate than a lopsided House district.

Data were scraped from an internet “crawl” service known as the *Wayback Machine*. This service takes extensive cache’ photographs of entire websites periodically, storing them for future use. For consistency, we chose to use the saved page closest to election day, typically the weekend before the first Tuesday in November. The final total number of observations coded was 210. While it is possible that these “About Me” pages change as the election cycle progresses, the *Wayback Machine* does not provide an easy measure of website editorial activity. Though future work should consider examining this issue further, our own examination of these pages throughout the course of the election cycle found almost no intra-candidate variation.

### 3.1 Dependent variables

Three different measurements were used for the dependent variable of presentation of self. First, we created a measure of how much candidates presented themselves with respect to their issue positions, relative to valence characteristics. The method for this calculation is as follows: first, we counted every reference that the “About Me” page made to specific positions on issues which signaled movement away from the ideological center. For further explanation of this measure, Table 1 outlines the coding scheme. If a candidate is from a given party and they indicated that they took a “pro” position on an issue with a “+” symbol, they were coded as having taken an issue position. Similarly, if they took an “anti” position for an issue for which their party was generally against, those issues which have a “-” symbol, they were also coded as having taken an issue position.

For example, if a Democratic candidate indicated that she would protect a woman’s right to choose, fight the NRA, and prevent the privatization of social security within her “About Me” section, she would be credited with a “3.” Similarly, if a Republican promised to repeal Obama Care, pass a Balanced Budget Amendment, and protect the sanctity of marriage, he would also be coded as having taken “3” issue positions.

To further understand this method, consider the biographical section from the website of Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY):

Mike Enzi and his wife Diana have lived in Gillette for more than 40 years. Together, they raised their three children Amy, Emily and Brad while operating three small businesses, NZ Shoes. Enzi served eight years as Mayor of Gillette during a major boom that doubled the size of the population and grew Wyoming’s energy industry exponentially. He has also worked as an accountant and safety training manager in oil well servicing. Enzi was elected to the state legislature where he served as a State Representative and State Senator. As a member of the U.S. Senate, **Enzi has been a relentless champion of Wyoming’s energy industry, promoting coal and natural gas while fighting back burdensome rules and excessive regulations.** He’s helped pass legislation that allowed for the development of the coal bed methane gas industry in Wyoming. Enzi has used his senior role on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee to improve access to quality education and healthcare. **A steadfast opponent of Obamacare, Enzi has fought**

Table 1: Coding Scheme for Issue Positions

Democrats	Issue	Republicans
+	Abortion Rights	-
+	ObamaCare	-
+	Gun Control	-
+	Obama Supreme Court Nominations	-
+	Medicaid Expansion	-
+	Gay Marriage	-
+	Repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell	-
+	Immigration Reform	-
+	Increasing Minimum Wage	-
+	Equal Pay Laws	-
+	Increasing Environmental Regulations	-
+	Stimulus Package	-
+	Dodd-Frank/Wall Street Oversight	-
+	Affirmative Action	-
+	Card Check legislation	-
+	Trade Tariffs	-
-	Medicare Reform	+
-	Keystone Pipeline	+
-	Patriot Act	+
-	Balanced Budget Amendment	+
-	Bush Supreme Court Nominations	+
-	Tax Cuts	+
-	Privatization of Social Security	+
-	Iraq War	+
-	Defense Spending Increases	+

**to repeal, defund and dismantle the law at every opportunity.** He's helped pass bills that allow small business owners to grow and expand and been **an outspoken advocate for 2nd Amendment rights.** Enzi has worked to promote state's rights and been a relentless defender of the constitution. As a member of the Committee on Finance, **Enzi is also working on tax reform.** In addition to the HELP Committee and Finance Committee, Enzi serves on the Committee on Budget, Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs. Enzi is an avid fly fisherman and proud grandfather to Megan, Allison, Trey and Lily.

Those portions of the section in bold represent the issues taken by Enzi within his biography. He makes it clear that he is an opponent to excessive environmental regulations and the Affordable Care Act. Additionally, he highlights his support for 2nd Amendment rights and

tax reform. As a result, Enzi would be coded as taking “4” positions.

It should also be evident that these informational sections contain a wide range of non-political material that is used to cultivate a personal vote. For example, Enzi bookends his narrative with his family, mentioning his wife and children in the opening sentences and closing with names of his grandchildren. Furthermore, he makes references to key features of the state of Wyoming: his residence in Gillette, his championing of its energy industry, and his affinity for its recreational opportunities. Finally, Enzi touts his personal background in business and government to present himself as competent, qualified, and understanding of the challenges faced by the states’ residents: he owned a small business, served as mayor of a major Wyoming city, and he holds important positions with the U.S. Senate. Still, for a personal biography, Enzi makes it clear that he is a political and ideological actor.

For a comparison, consider the “About Me” section for Senator Mark Begich (D-AK):

A small business owner since he was a teenager, Senator Begich’s top priority is continuing America’s economic recovery through targeted investments and cutting wasteful federal spending. He is an independent leader in the Senate who works across party lines, and he’s already made an impact as a fierce advocate for Alaska. This Congress, he secured a place on the Appropriations and Indian Affairs committees and continues his service on the Commerce Committee, chairing the Subcommittee on Oceans, Fisheries and the Coast Guard, the Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security committees. At the beginning of the 113th Congress, he also became chairman of the Homeland Subcommittee on Emergency Management, Intergovernmental Relations and the District of Columbia. Mark has quickly gained clout in the Senate, rising to 5th in the senate leadership. He has used his leadership position and committees to successfully expand services for Alaska veterans, restart Arctic energy development, fight for small business tax reform and bring back local control under No Child Left Behind. Anchorage born and raised, Mark’s parents moved to Anchorage in the Alaska Territory to teach in 1957. When Mark was 10 years old, he lost his father, Congressman Nick Begich, when his plane went down over the Gulf of Alaska. In 2008, Mark was elected to the Senate after serving as Mayor of Anchorage for nearly six years, where he oversaw the biggest building boom in Anchorage in a generation, balanced the city budget while earning top grades from bond rating agencies, and strengthened relations with Alaska Natives and other minority groups. As a former Mayor, he understands the need to get things done and strives to bring common sense solutions to Washington. Senator Begich is married to Deborah Bonito, a successful Anchorage businesswoman who owns

several small retail stores in Anchorage. Together, they have a son, Jacob.

Begich, a Democrat representing a rather conservative Republican state, spends much of the text in his biography avoiding issues that indicate he is ideologically to the left. In fact, he is coded as taking “0” issue positions. Instead, Begich devotes much of his “About Me” to highlighting his ability to reach across the aisle to Republicans. Furthermore, he notes his support for many conservative positions. For example, he promotes his commitment to cut spending, reform taxes, help veterans, increase Arctic energy production, and return education control back to the state.

Rather than focus on his adherence to party, Begich provides much space to his connection to the state. The son of the state’s one-time sole Congressman, Begich has devoted his life to serving the state, starting as mayor of its largest city. In that role, he gives prominence to his ability to forge bonds with Alaskan natives. As senator, he notes his important position on the powerful Appropriations committee, as well as having input on maritime and fishing policies that are essential to the state’s economy. Although he has taken on a role in the party’s leadership, he conspicuously omits that it is the Democratic party’s leadership. Rather than use this position to put forth a national policy agenda, he associates his prestige as a means to benefit the state. Finally, he closes with information regarding his family.

Enzi, the position taker, and Begich, the personal vote cultivator, represent two ends of the presentation of self spectrum. Yet, as should be clear from Enzi’s biography, even position takers provide much of the home style that is characteristic of personal vote cultivators. As such, we have chosen to not use the sum of issue positions as the dependent variable, but rather the amount of positions advertised per word of the “About Me” description. Much variation exists with respect to the length of these personal narratives, with the shortest being 42 words and the longest being 2,052. A candidate taking 3 issue position in 2,000 words should not be considered the same as a candidate taking 3 positions in 400 words. The latter devotes much more of her narrative to ideological positions, while the former likely concentrates more on personal characteristics and background. Thus, to examine

what drives variation in these presentations, we have chosen to create a measure of balance of issue positions within the about me. For each candidate the dependent variable is the sum of the issue positions she takes divided by the words in the biography. We have chosen to multiply this ratio by 100:

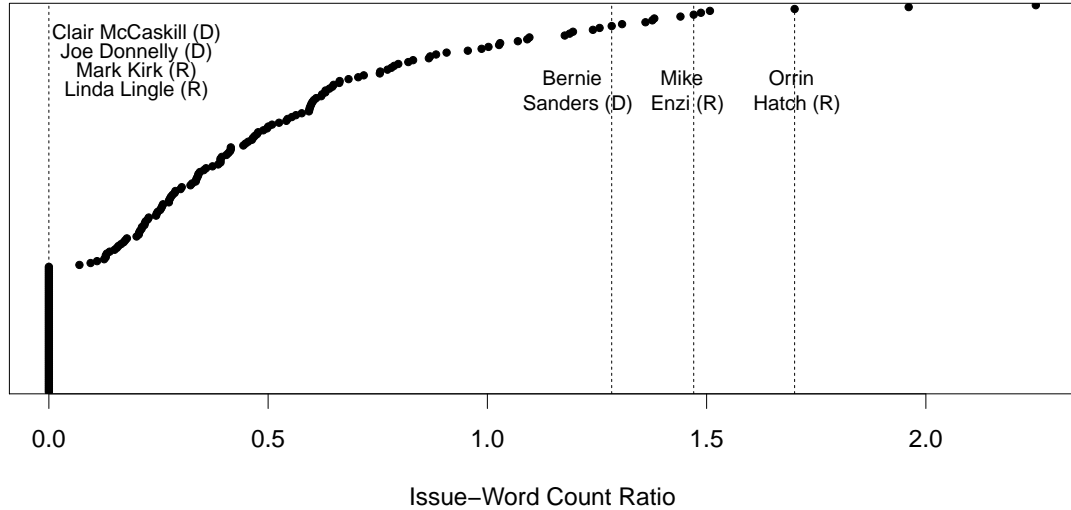
$$\text{Issue-Word Count Ratio} = \frac{\sum \text{Issue Positions}}{\text{Word Count}} \times 100.$$

Figure 1 displays the sample’s values for this outcome variable. Each dot represents a value of issue-word count ratio. The values are sorted in descending order so that the top row represents the largest value.

First of all, the figure reveals that there is substantial variation in the ratios among the candidates in our data. Moreover, in many ways the results pass a preliminary validity test with respect to the hypothesis that candidates in states with a greater percentage of partisan allies will spend more time talking about their issue positions. Incumbents (in this case Democrats) from relatively safe states such as Bernie Sanders, Sheldon Whitehouse, and Ben Cardin tend to devote more of their “About Me” to issue positions that represent clear left-right divisions. Republican examples exist, as well. Orrin Hatch, Mike Enzi, and Bob Roberts all represent very conservative Republican states and devote more space to their promotion of traditionally Republican issues. Among others, the issue ratios for Bernie Sanders, Orrin Hatch, and Mike Enzi are presented by the vertical dotted lines in Figure 1.

At the other end of the spectrum, both parties provide examples of being less issue position-prone. For example, Democrats Claire McCaskill, Joe Donnelly, and Blanche Lincoln all ran campaigns for the U.S. Senate in relatively Republican states and advertised none of the traditional Democratic positions noted in Table 1. Likewise, Mark Kirk, Peter Hoekstra, and Linda Lingle ran Republican campaigns for Senate in Democratic states (Illinois, Michigan, and Hawaii, respectively). These candidates also highlighted none of the noted Republican issue positions. Accordingly, the issue ratio for this group of candidates is zero as the vertical line at zero in Figure 1 indicates.

Figure 1: Candidates Issue Ratio



[Notes: The sample’s values for the variable of issue-word count ratio. The values are sorted in descending order so that the top row represents the largest value. The dotted lines represent several example cases.]

The second dependent variable of presentation of self is simpler. It is the invocation of ideological terms within the “About Me” text. Such a reference relies on symbols that are readily recognizable to constituency. If a Republican calls herself a “conservative,” she is coded as “1.” Likewise, if a Democrat mentions she is a “liberal,” she will receive a “1.” Clearly this approach is not without problems. Most glaring is the asymmetric approach the Republican and Democratic party take to their default ideological labels. For historical reasons beyond the scope of this paper, Democrats call themselves liberal less often than Republicans (Ellis and Stimson 2012; Claassen, Tucker, and Smith 2015). Thus, we expand the measurement to include invocations of “progressive” for Democratic candidates. We expect candidates with more copartisans and strong primary challenges to use these ideologically charged terms more frequently, while those candidates in intense general election campaigns will do so less frequently.

Finally, the third dependent variable of presentation of self deals with how candidates promote themselves as middle-of-the-road politicians. Candidates often identify as having the ability to bring people from several dispositions together in order to get things done. References to bipartisanship are used as a signal to voters of moderation on the candidate’s

behalf. For example, in Mark Begich’s extract above, the senator notes how he “works across party lines.” When candidates mention their ability or willingness to reach across the aisle and work with members of the opposite, we code the *bipartisan* variable as “1” and “0” if they omit such references. Harbridge and Malhotra (2011) and Harbridge, Malhotra, and Harrison (2014) find that different types of voters respond differently to invocations of bipartisanship. Independents and weak partisans typically favor incumbents who work with members of the opposite party, but strong partisans often provide negative evaluations for such compromises. For this reason, we expect candidates running in states with fewer copartisans and those not facing intense primaries to refer to their bipartisanship. Additionally, we expect intense general election competition to be associated with use of bipartisanship.

### 3.2 Independent variables

The right hand side of the model consists of indicators for electoral context and competing constituencies. The first variable is the ideological and partisan alignment of the state. As policy congruence between elites and the public converge, the candidate should call greater attention to her stances on the issues. To capture this phenomenon, the empirical models of this analysis include each candidate’s party’s two party presidential vote share in the relevant state from the 2008 general election.<sup>1</sup>

The competitiveness of the primary challenge faced by the candidate should also influence the ways in which candidates communicate with voters. For this measurement, we use the margin of victory each candidate encountered in the primary competition. For those races that involved blanket primaries (i.e. California and Washington), each observations’ value considered the margin over the third place candidate. To operationalize the variable, we use a dichotomous indicator where “1” represents those races in which the margin of victory was less than or equal to 20 percentage points, and “0” for those primaries that were less

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<sup>1</sup>As a robustness check for the effect of the state’s political environment on the presentation of self, we replicated the models described below using a measure of ideology not attached to presidential vote share. Employing the state ideological score derived through multilevel regression poststratification (Tausonovitch and Warshaw 2013), we found similar results.



competitive.

While the measurement of the electoral context of the November contest may be derived in a similar manner, it serves the study well to investigate alternative approaches. General election competitiveness could be calculated using the margin of victory for the November election, yet such a measure possesses possible endogenous characteristics. If we assume that candidate presentation of self influences voters' decision making processes, placing the closeness of the electoral outcome on the explanatory side of the model is problematic. Thus, we have chosen to use the Cook Political Report's ratings for each Senate race in the appropriate years. To maintain consistency across both sets of contests, we chose the ratings published in the first week of June. These classifications are on a four point scale: "Solid," "Likely," "Lean," and "Toss Up." To operationalize this measure, we assigned values of 0 to 3 to these races reflecting the level of increasing competitiveness.

Other candidate and state characteristics may influence the content of presentation. For example, incumbents have a more defined record with policy issues. They may be more likely to identify with ideological positions because it is more difficult to present themselves as otherwise. Conversely, challengers have a greater degree of freedom about how to present themselves to the public. Without a well-documented legislative or executive history, they may be more likely to obfuscate their positions. Thus, we chose to include a dummy variable indicating whether the candidate is an incumbent. Additionally, controls for the year and political party of the candidate are included in the models.<sup>2</sup>in which the margin of victory

### 3.3 Models

Empirical models in this study will estimate the effects of electoral context on candidates' presentation of self. The first dependent variable relies upon a continuous indicator of issue-word count ratio. However, the standard linear model might be a flawed choice because the dependent variable is not normally distributed. As a percentage, by nature the issue ratio

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<sup>2</sup>The party of independent candidates were coded as belonging to those parties with which they would caucus in Congress.

data are bounded by zero and 100. Moreover, they are concentrated at the lower end of the interval and heavily skewed to the right. In this setting, a generalized linear model (GLM) with the gamma link function is an appropriate functional form (Gill 2000).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we have chosen to fit a log-linked gamma GLM model via maximum likelihood estimation. The first model is displayed as follows:

$$E[Y] = \exp(\alpha + \beta_1 \text{Two-Party Presidential Vote Share} + \beta_2 \text{Competitive Primary} + \beta_3 \text{General Election Competitiveness} + \mathbf{bX}), \quad (1)$$

where  $E[Y]$  is the mean response vector of issue-word count ratio. “Two-Party Presidential Vote Share” reflects each candidate’s party’s proportion of votes relative to the other major party in the 2008 presidential election. “Competitive Primary” is a dichotomous variable that takes 1 for a competitive primary, and 0 for a non-competitive primary. “General Election Competitiveness” refers to the rating to the safety of the seat as identified by the Cook Political Report. Lastly,  $\mathbf{X}$  indicates a matrix of control variables, and  $\mathbf{b}$  denotes a vector of the coefficients corresponding to those control variables.

Since the second dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator, we have chosen to use a binomial logistic regression to estimate the effects of competitiveness:

$$\Pr(\text{Ideological Appeal} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\alpha + \beta_1 \text{Two-Party Presidential Vote Share} + \beta_2 \text{Competitive Primary} + \beta_3 \text{General Election Competitiveness} + \mathbf{bX}), \quad (2)$$

where the right hand side variables hold the same as above. Finally, we are also interested

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<sup>3</sup>There is no censoring at the bounds of the data. If there were, we would consider a censored regression model.

in when candidates highlight their bipartisanship:

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(\text{Bipartisan Appeal} = 1) = & \text{logit}^{-1}(\alpha + \beta_1 \text{Two-Party Presidential Vote Share} \\ & + \beta_2 \text{Competitive Primary} + \beta_3 \text{General Election Competitiveness} + \mathbf{bX}), \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

where, once again, the right hand side of the model remains intact, but the dependent variable measures the incidence of a candidate highlighting their ability or willingness to moderate or work with members of the opposite party.

## 4 Discussion of Results

### 4.1 The model of issue-word count ratio

Results provide some optimism for the partisan competition hypothesis. Table 2 provides the output from the first model. The model predicts a strong result with respect to the candidate's party's two-party vote share. The findings indicate that as a candidate encounters a more ideologically favorable electorate, she will identify her traditional partisan issue positions more frequently at the expense of non-ideological material. That is, Republicans running in more Republican states and Democrats running in more Democratic states will make a greater effort to highlight their ideological preferences within their biography.

While the effect of the 2-party presidential vote share is positive and significant, the non-linear nature of the model makes the magnitude of the effect somewhat difficult to interpret. With this in mind, we provide the predicted values of the dependent variable from this model while varying the 2-party presidential vote share of the candidate in Figure 2. The lower end of the scale is .3 and the upper end of the scale is .65. This range covers most observations of the 2-party vote share data. The rug representation in the bottom of the figure depicts the data points of the 2-party vote share.

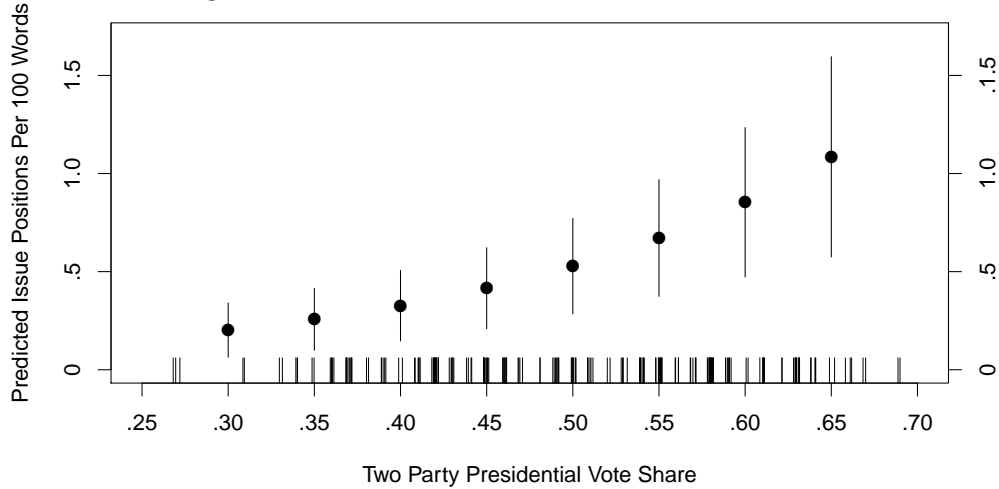
The figure represents a hypothetical candidate who is a Republican incumbent running

Table 2: Predicting Issue Positions Advertised per 100 Words.

	Positions per Word
(Intercept)	-3.60*
	(0.50)
Party Presidential Vote Share	4.80*
	(1.00)
Competitive Primary	0.30
	(0.21)
Competitive General	-0.02
	(0.07)
Incumbent1	0.24
	(0.22)
2012	0.32
	(0.21)
2014	0.38
	(0.21)
Democrat	-0.56*
	(0.17)
$N$	203
$\log L$	67.74

[Notes: Log-linked gamma GLM model. Standard errors in parentheses. \* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

Figure 2: Predicting Issue Positions per 100 Words.



[Notes: Each dot depicts a predicted value for a candidate who is a Republican incumbent running in a non-competitive primary and a non-competitive general election in 2012. Each vertical line represents a 95% confidence interval. The rug presentation in the bottom illustrates the 2-party vote share data. Jitter added data points are presented to prevent over-plotting.]

in a non-competitive primary and a non-competitive general election in 2012. When this candidate is running in a state that is more Democratic, she is predicted to reference less partisan issues. For example, she will reference roughly .26 partisan issues for every 100 words of the biography when she runs in a state where John McCain won with 35% of the two party vote in 2008. If the same hypothetical candidate runs in a state that was favorable to John McCain in 2008, she will highlight considerably more issue positions. For instance, the candidate will make reference to .85 issue positions that are distinctly Republican if she is running in a state where her party won 60% of the two party vote in 2008.<sup>4</sup> When considering the average length of an “About Me” page is 560 words, these predicted values translate into about 4 to 5 ideological issue positions when running in ideological friendly states and about 1 to 2 positions when running in ideologically unfavorable states.

Primary competitiveness is predicted to slightly increase the balance of the biography towards issues as the primary competitiveness hypothesis suggests. However, the precision of such an estimate does not reach acceptable levels of statistical reliability. Thus, the model finds no evidence that competitive primary elections lead candidates to highlight their issue positions more prominently within their “About Me” narratives.

The same story applies to the general election competitiveness hypothesis. The effect of general election competitiveness seems to indicate that more competitive general elections lead candidates to write less about their issue positions, which is consistent with our hypothesis. However, the size of this effect is not statistically distinguishable from zero.

Finally, we find some interesting results with respect to the control variables. While the effect of being an incumbent is not statistically related to the issue ratio scale, the partisanship of the candidate is. The model predicts that Democrats are significantly less likely to note their policy positions than conservatives. One explanation for this difference could be the era of the data. In both 2010 and 2014, Republicans made serious gains in seats

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<sup>4</sup>The 95% confidence intervals for these two predicted values– the value corresponding to the 35% vote share and that for the 60% vote share–do not overlap. This reveals that the two predicted values are statistically different at the 95% level.

within Congress. With public mood against the majority party in the Senate, the Democrats may feel pressure to discuss their legislative record less.

## 4.2 The model of ideological labeling

Now, consider the second dependent variable. We evaluate our three hypotheses with regard to whether a candidate for office self-labels as a conservative, liberal, or progressive. Table 3 provides encouraging results for the partisan composition and the primary competitiveness hypotheses though we still find weak support for the general election competition hypothesis.

To begin with, the effect of each candidate's party presidential vote share is significant and strongly positive. That is, the more friendly the electorate is to the candidate's party, the more likely she will self-label as a conservative or liberal. To clarify this finding, we have computed the predicted values based on the estimation results. As in our interpretation for the first model, we employ a hypothetical candidate who is an incumbent Republican running in 2012 and facing a non-competitive primary challenge and a non-competitive challenge in the November election. She is predicted to identify as a conservative with .13 probability when her presidential party vote share was 35% in 2008. When this presidential party vote share is increased to 60% with all other covariates held constant, the model predicts the candidate will identify as conservative with .38 probability. Thus, the model predicts that candidates' self-labeling within biographies will be influenced by the state's partisan composition.

Examining the use of ideological terms as the dependent variable provides support to the primary competition hypothesis. We find that the estimated coefficient of a competitive primary's effect on the likelihood of a candidate referring to herself as in ideological terms is positive and significant. That is, when faced with a difficult primary challenge, a Republican is more likely to call herself a conservative and a Democrat is more likely to describe herself as liberal or progressive.

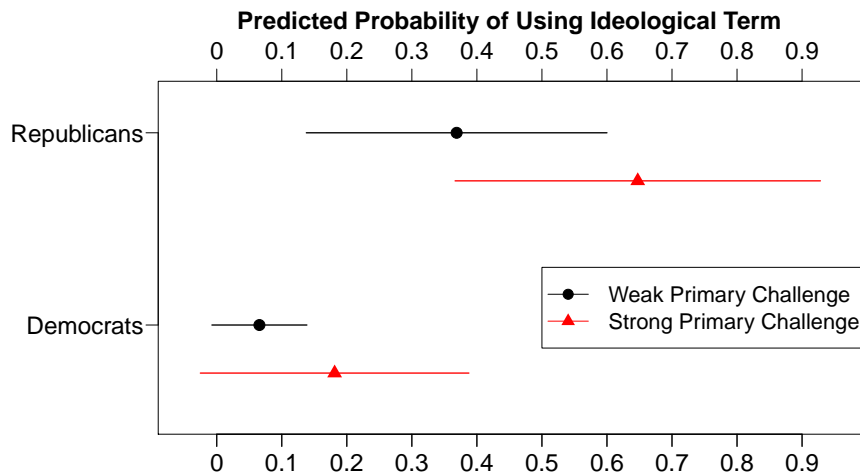
To further explore this finding, consider Figure 3. Here we provide the predicted probabil-

Table 3: Predicting Ideological Labeling

	Calling Self Conservative/Liberal/Progressive
(Intercept)	-3.65*
	(1.17)
Party Presidential Vote Share	5.17*
	(2.37)
Competitive Primary	1.14*
	(0.43)
Competitive General	-0.22
	(0.17)
Incumbent	-0.75
	(0.57)
2012	0.68
	(0.50)
2014	1.05*
	(0.48)
Democrat	-2.16*
	(0.49)
$N$	210
$\log L$	-60.69

[Notes: Logistic regression. The dependent variable is the incidence of candidates self-describing using an ideological term. Standard errors in parentheses. \* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

Figure 3: Predicting Ideological Labeling for Competitive and Non-Competitive Primaries



[Notes: Each dot depicts a predicted value. Each vertical line represents a 95% confidence interval. The figure represents a Democratic candidate and a Republican candidate who are incumbents running in 2012, facing little competition in the general election. Additionally, the 2-party presidential vote share is fixed at its mean level for both sets of predictions.]

ities of using an ideological term in the “About Me” section for Democrats and Republicans separately. Once again, we have chosen to hold other covariates as an incumbent running in 2012, facing little competition in the general election. Additionally, we have held the 2-party presidential vote share at its mean level for both sets of predictions. For Republicans, the model predicts that when facing a weak primary challenge, the incumbent will self-categorize as “conservative” with roughly .37 probability. When this same hypothetical candidate is faced with a significant primary challenge, the predicted probability of calling herself conservative is greatly increased to .65. Similarly, a Democratic incumbent facing a weak primary challenge is predicted to self-label as progressive or liberal with only .07 probability, but one who is facing a competitive primary is predicted to do so with .18 probability.

The 95% confidence intervals corresponding to weak primary challenges and strong challenges overlap when considering Republicans and Democrats separately. However, we find some substantive difference between weak and strong primary challenges if we compare Republicans and Democrats. For Democrats, it is apparent that regardless of primary competition, the penchant to refer to oneself with a traditional ideological terms is predicted to be quite low. The empirical model predicts that Democrats are less likely to refer to themselves as a “liberal” or “progressive” within their “About Me” or biographical pages on their websites. Such a finding should not be surprising, considering the recent history of the mass public having negative views toward the word “liberal,” while embracing the label of “conservative” (Ellis and Stimson 2012). Thus, Democrats will be less likely to pose as ideologues under this measurement strategy, while Republicans should find identifying as a conservative to be much less of an electoral liability. Yet, this difference between Democrats and Republicans may be wiped out by different primary conditions. In terms of the likelihood of using an ideological term, a Republican candidate facing a non-competitive primary is not statistically different from a Democratic candidate facing a competitive primary. By contrast, such a Republican candidate has a significantly higher probability of using an ideological term than Democratic candidates facing a non-competitive primary.



### 4.3 The model of bipartisanship

Finally, we examine the three hypotheses using the incidence of candidates self-describing as bipartisan as the dependent variable. Table 4 provides these results. As has been consistent through this empirical analysis, party presidential vote share is found to be significantly related to presentation of self. Yet, in this context the direction of the relationship is reversed, which is a finding supporting our hypothesis. Candidates running for senate in more partisan-friendly constituencies are *less* likely to call themselves bipartisan or tout their ability and willingness to work with members of the other party. For example, a 2012 incumbent Republican running in a state that voted for McCain with a percentage of 35%, facing a non-competitive primary and a non-competitive general challenge is predicted to tout bipartisanship with a probability of .49. Holding all covariates equal, but shifting presidential vote share to McCain receiving 60% of the vote, the model predicts that the candidate will reference bipartisanship with .19 probability.

The effects of a competitive primary are once again strong on the candidate's presentation of self. We find that those coming out of a competitive primary are significantly less likely to mention their ability to work with members of the opposite party. For example, a hypothetical 2012 Republican incumbent running in a state where the 2008 presidential election ended in a tie,<sup>5</sup> facing little competition in the general election, is predicted to mention bipartisanship with .29 probability when she has faced weak primary competition. This prediction decreases to .09 when the same candidate has faced a primary contest in which she won by less than 20 percentage points. Thus, we conclude that primary competitiveness is substantially associated with the presentation of self.

Concerning the third hypothesis, we find evidence of a relationship between the competitiveness in the general election and presentation of self in the "About Me" biography. Here, the effect is positive and significant, suggesting that more competitive general elections

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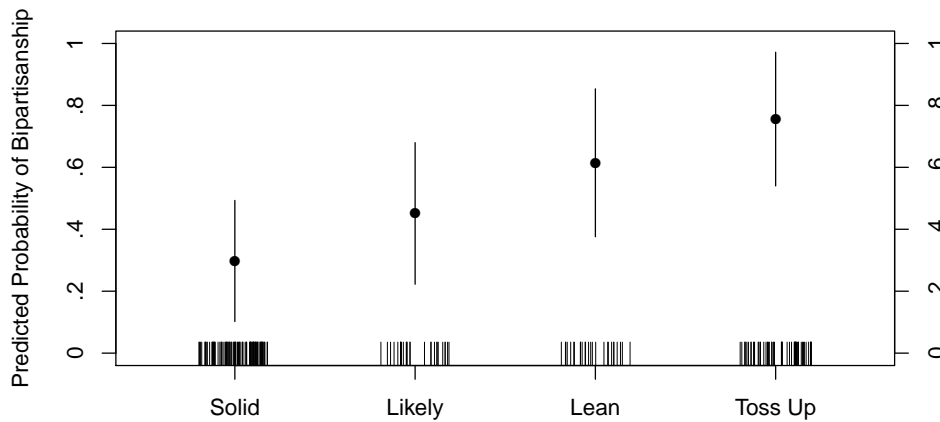
<sup>5</sup>This indicates that we have held the 2-party presidential vote share at its mean level. The mean level is 50.1%.

Table 4: Predicting Advertising of Bipartisanship

	Calling Self Bipartisan
(Intercept)	0.08 (1.01)
Party Presidential Vote Share	-5.42* (2.21)
Competitive Primary	-1.43* (0.52)
Competitive General	0.66* (0.16)
Incumbent	1.67* (0.51)
2012	0.10 (0.42)
2014	0.41 (0.41)
Democrat	1.64* (0.35)
$N$	210
$\log L$	-82.85

[Notes: Logistic regression. The dependent variable is the incidence of candidates self-describing as bipartisan. Standard errors in parentheses. \* indicates significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

Figure 4: Predicting Bipartisanship Labeling by Competitiveness of General Election



[Notes: Each dot depicts a predicted value for a hypothetical candidate who is a 2012 Republican incumbent from a state where the 2008 presidential election ended in a tie and comes out of a non-competitive primary. Each vertical line represents a 95% confidence interval. The rug presentation in the bottom illustrates the general election competitiveness data. Jitter added data points are presented to prevent over-plotting.]

increase the probability that a candidate will emphasize her ability to work with members of the opposition. Figure 4 provides the predicted probabilities for this relationship. For those general election races which are not considered competitive, or “Solid,” the model predicts a 2012 Republican incumbent from a state where the 2008 presidential election ended in a tie, who is coming out of a non-competitive primary, will mention her bipartisanship with a probability of .30. As the competitiveness of the general election contest increases, the predictions indicate that the probability with which the hypothetical candidate invokes a willingness to work across the aisle will significantly increase. For the race which is considered a “Toss-Up,” the predicted probability rises to .76 while other covariates are held constant. The difference between the predicted probability for a “Solid” race and that for a “Toss-up” race is statistically reliable and substantively large. That is, more competitive general elections are associated with candidates presenting themselves less as ideologues and more as middle of the road legislators.

## 5 Conclusion

Candidates present themselves to voters in terms that maximize the probability of attaining office. When engaging with their constituencies, they create an image with respect to policy and personal characteristics that is most favorable for reelection. Previous studies have attempted to measure how voters and elites align, but less is understood in what drives candidates’ balancing of ideological and personalistic appeals. This paper introduces a new data set to attempt to further fill in that gap.

The findings from this analysis suggest that those candidates who hail from ideologically friendly districts are more likely to discuss the issues during the campaign. Furthermore, more partisan electoral districts are associated with candidates embracing partisan and ideological labels and less likely to promote bipartisanship. The empirical results also find evidence that strong primary challenges will lead candidates to identify ideologically. While

the evidence for general election competition is more or less limited, we find that a competitive November race is a strong predictor for the likelihood of emphasizing bipartisanship.

Moving further with this project we have two main goals. First, it is imperative to expand the data collection. Most immediately, we plan to expand the website scraping to those candidates for the House. Significant results could simply be a function of the more typically policy minded senate campaigns (e.g. Fenno 1982). Second, data may also be expanded by furthering the exploration of of online communications. At this time, we have gathered the Twitter feeds of all senate candidates from the 2010-2014 period. It is possible that issue discussion is under-represented in the data because it is the norm to rely upon policy talk outside of the “About Me” section.

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