

THE 1987 GENERAL ELECTION IN SCOTLAND

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Introduction

In our report on the 1983 General Election in Scotland we noted that the results deviated sharply from those in England and Wales⁽¹⁾. Amongst other features peculiar to this part of Britain two obvious and significant differences were noted. The first was that the two major parties (Labour and Conservative) together obtained a much smaller share of the votes in Scotland than they did in England and Wales. The second difference was the growing Labour domination in Scotland in contrast to Conservative progress in the rest of the country.

Between 1970 and 1979 the combined Labour and Conservative share of the votes here had fallen from 82.5 percent to 73.0 percent (having gone as low as 61.0 percent in October 1974). Over the same period their share in England and Wales fell from 91 percent to 83.7 percent over the decade (with the lowest being 77.6 percent in February 1974). So, although the decline in the two-party share of the vote was a British-wide phenomenon, the fall was much steeper in Scotland. There is no great mystery about the reason for the growing differential. Unlike most of the rest of the country Scotland had a four-party system and increasing electoral support for the SNP accounts for the bulk of the difference. Of perhaps greater significance and certainly more intriguing in retrospect, is the growth in Labour support in Scotland compared with its dismal failure elsewhere. The decade began with Labour having a lead of 6.5 percentage points over the Conservatives in Scotland and, with some variation, it ended with Labour 10.2 points ahead. In England and Wales, on the other hand, Labour had a deficit of -3.1 points in 1970 and this rose to -8.9 in 1979.

The results of the 1987 election show that Scotland continues to diverge in both of these respects. The two major parties together continue to have a lower level of support here than in England and Wales (Table 1), although the gap has narrowed a little. The slight revival in the fortunes of the SNP was, in this context, more than compensated for by the decline in Alliance support. The most striking and certainly the most newsworthy aspect of the 1987 General Election in Scotland, however, was the advance by Labour and the further decline of the Conservatives. The former's lead over the latter rose from 6.7 points in the election of 1983 to 18.4 points in 1987; this compares with a Labour deficit of almost 15 points in England and Wales. In respect of the gap between the Conservatives and Labour,

then, the divergence between Scotland and the rest of the country has increased. In 1983, the difference between the Conservative lead in England and Wales and the Labour 'lead' in Scotland was a massive 24 points. In 1987 it was a staggering 33 points. Without survey evidence it is impossible to be sure about the sources of Labour's increased share of the vote but it seems likely that most of it came from former Alliance voters, although some seepage from the Conservatives cannot be ruled out.

Table 1: Scotland's Electoral Divergence 1983-1987

	SCOTLAND			ENGLAND & WALES		
	1983 %	1987 %	1983-87 %	1983 %	1987 %	1983-87 %
Con	28.4	24.0	-4.4	45.1	45.3	+0.2
Lab	35.1	42.4	+7.3	27.6	30.4	+2.8
All	24.5	19.2	-5.3	26.2	23.5	-2.7
SNP	11.7	14.0	+2.3	-	-	-
Lab lead	+6.7	+18.4	+11.7	-17.5	-14.9	-2.6
Con + Lab	63.5	66.4	+2.9	72.7	75.7	+3.0

Indicators of trends in party support in Scotland between 1983 and 1987, if carefully read, suggested that Labour would make significant advances in Scotland in 1987. There were no parliamentary by-elections here between 1983 and 1987 but it seems unlikely, given the recent votability in by-elections, that these would have provided a very reliable guide to voting trends in Scotland. Opinion polls, certainly over a lengthy period, provide a better view, but even their results must be treated with caution in the periods between elections. The MORI polls which are published regularly in the *Scotsman* and the results of which are presented in Table 2, cannot be said to be inaccurate because we have no way of checking the figures against 'reality', but they do seem to exaggerate the level of Labour support, underestimate that of the Conservatives and, allowing for sampling error, get the Alliance and SNP shares more or less right over the period. But even though there may be some dispute about the precise figures, the trends as compared with the 1983 election were correct, that is Conservative decline, Labour advance, Alliance loss and SNP progress.

Experience suggests that, in Scotland at least, local government elections are very important indicators of trends; not local by-elections, but the biennial District and Regional elections. The 1986 Regional election results (Table 3) one year before the General Election certainly confirmed the trends suggested by opinion polls and, in addition, as can be seen later, made it possible to make reasonable projections as to the electoral status of individual constituencies. National shares of votes in local elections are a

Table 2: Party Support in Mori Scotsman Polls 1984-1987

	Con %	Lab %	Alliance %	SNP %	Other %
1984 March	28.0	49.0	13.0	10.0	*
May	27.0	47.0	13.0	12.0	1.0
September	26.0	46.0	14.0	14.0	1.0
November	28.0	46.0	12.0	13.0	1.0
1985 May	22.0	47.0	18.0	13.0	*
September	21.0	42.0	24.0	13.0	*
November	24.0	42.0	23.0	11.0	*
1986 March	22.0	41.0	24.0	13.0	*
May	21.0	45.0	19.0	14.0	*
November	26.0	45.0	16.0	13.0	*
1987 March	19.0	47.0	21.0	12.0	1.0

* Less than 0.5%.

crude measure because they do not take account of the differing numbers of candidates put forward by the parties. In 1986, for example, the Conservatives had 70 fewer candidates than the SNP, Labour had 13 fewer and the Alliance 85 fewer. The second column in Table 3 attempts to eliminate the biases caused by these differences by showing the results in the 165 regional divisions in which the Labour, Conservative, Alliance and SNP parties all promoted candidates. The trends revealed are much the same. The figures coincide almost exactly with those of a MORI poll published in the *Scotsman* at the time of the regional elections. Perhaps more surprisingly the party shares of the votes relate quite closely to those obtained at the subsequent General Election.

Table 3: Party Shares of votes in 1986 Regional Election

	Scotland %	Four-Party Contests %
Con	16.9	20.8
Lab	43.9	45.8
All	15.1	18.5
SNP	18.2	14.9

Studying local elections is always worthwhile because they can give a picture of the state of party morale and organisation. The failure of the Conservatives to contest a large number of regional seats was perhaps a reflection of low morale and/or weak organisation at local level and this in turn had implications for the General Election. The 1987 results should,

therefore, have come as no great surprise to those who had kept an eye on inter-election indicators of electoral trends.

The Scottish Results 1987

Although Scotland produced the most spectacular results of any 'region' in Britain in relation to Conservative losses and Labour gains, it is salutary to note that the level of Labour support is greatest in the North region of England and that Labour received a larger share of the vote in Wales than in Scotland. The North region also boasts a higher proportion of Labour seats than does Scotland. Nevertheless the attention paid to the 1987 results in Scotland is justified because it was here that the greatest Conservative losses were suffered in share of votes (-4.4 points) and in seats (-11) and where Labour made its greatest gains with a 7.3 increase in its share of the votes, more than double that in England as a whole. Scotland also accounted for over half of the Conservative loss of seats in Britain, and for nearly half of net Labour gains. The Alliance too, suffered their biggest loss of support in Scotland and Wales (-5.3).

Table 4: Party Share of Votes by Standard Region

	Con %	Lab %	All %	SNP/PC %	Other %
North	32.3	46.4	21.0	-	0.3
Yorkshire & Humberside	37.4	40.6	21.7	-	0.3
East Midlands	48.6	30.0	21.0	-	0.4
East Anglia	52.1	21.7	25.7	-	0.5
Greater London	46.5	31.5	21.3	-	0.7
Rest of South East	55.6	16.8	27.2	-	0.5
South West	50.6	15.9	33.0	-	0.5
West Midlands	45.5	33.3	20.8	-	0.4
North West	38.0	41.2	20.6	-	0.2
Wales	29.5	45.1	17.9	7.3	0.2
Scotland	24.0	42.4	19.2	14.0	0.3

The Conservatives had their worst results this century in terms of share of the vote in Scotland but Labour is still some way short of its best result achieved in 1964 with 48.7 percent of the votes, and it has not yet achieved the 50 per cent which the Conservatives had in 1955, admittedly in an era of weak 'third' parties. The Conservatives held on to only 10 of the 72 seats in Scotland, their worst performance since 1910 when, in the face of a Liberal triumph, they got nine.

Despite its failure to break through to 50 per cent of the vote, the geographical distribution of its support and the operation of the electoral system ensured that Labour did much better in its tally of seats. It gained

eight seats from the Conservatives, one from the Alliance and two from the SNP to reach 50 for the first time, a figure only bettered this century by the Liberal's 58 in 1910.

Although the Alliance suffered a five point decline in its share of the vote compared with 1983, it emerged with a net gain of one seat resulting from two gains from the Conservatives and the loss of one to Labour, giving a total of nine seats. The SNP's modest improvement in its share of the vote brought it a net gain of one seat, from two to three, having lost two to Labour and gained three from the Conservatives.

Regional Variations in Scotland

As usual, as shown in Table 5, there were considerable regional variations within Scotland. Labour's great strength in the central belt was confirmed and reinforced. It had an absolute majority of the votes in Strathclyde, almost 50 percent in Central region and around 45 percent in Fife. Labour's poorest region remains the Borders and it continues to be weak in the relatively urbanised regions of Grampian and Tayside. The greatest increases in Labour's share of the vote are to be found in its heartland of Strathclyde, Fife and Central, but it made progress in all regions. From a nationwide perspective commentators have noted that Labour's advance was most marked in its 'heartland' areas like Scotland and the North of England. But even within Scotland there was a tendency for Labour to do best where it was already strong.

Table 5: Party Shares of Votes in Regions

	Con %	Lab %	Alliance %	SNP %	Other %
Borders	33.6 (-0.9)	10.0 (+2.5)	49.6 (-4.6)	6.8 (+3.0)	-
Central	22.9 (-2.8)	48.9 (+7.7)	12.6 (-7.5)	15.8 (+2.8)	0.2
Dumfries & Galloway	41.2 (-3.4)	19.3 (+3.0)	16.4 (-2.2)	22.5 (+2.0)	0.7
Fife	23.4 (-5.2)	44.5 (+9.0)	21.7 (-5.1)	10.4 (+2.2)	-
Grampian	32.6 (-5.2)	22.5 (+3.6)	25.2 (-1.5)	19.7 (+3.1)	0.1
Lothian	27.3 (-3.0)	41.6 (+6.0)	20.5 (-5.8)	10.2 (+2.8)	0.4
Strathclyde	19.3 (-4.9)	53.3 (+9.2)	15.7 (-6.8)	11.5 (+2.6)	0.2
Tayside	30.6 (-3.1)	26.7 (+5.9)	11.0 (-4.9)	31.6 (+2.2)	0.1
Highlands & Islands	19.5 (-7.3)	23.1 (+7.3)	41.6 (-2.9)	12.7 (-2.9)	3.1

Table 6: Distribution of Seats in Regions

	Con	Lab	Alliance	SNP
Borders	-	-	2	-
Central	1	3	-	-
Dumfries & Galloway	2	-	-	-
Fife	-	4	1	-
Grampian	1	2	1	2
Lothian	2	8	-	-
Strathclyde	2	30	1	-
Tayside	2	2	-	1
Highlands & Islands	-	1	4	-
TOTAL	10	50	9	3

The Conservative share declined in every region. Their best region was Dumfries and Galloway where they gained 41 percent of the vote, but with only two seats it can contribute little to their parliamentary strength.

The Alliance share also declined in every region; they lost the majority which they had in the Borders, although they are still close to 50 percent, but again this is a small region with only two seats and can make only a modest contribution to the tally of seats. Apart from the Borders, the best Alliance territory is Grampian where its share fell least and where it still holds around a quarter of the vote.

The SNP, like Labour, increased its share in every region and it is strongest in Tayside with getting on for a third of the vote, but only one seat.

Grampian is the only truly competitive four-party region and the only one in which all the parties have a member of Parliament.

Constituency Results

The 1987 General Election was fought on the same constituency boundaries as existed in 1983, so a direct comparison of performances in individual constituencies is possible.

One important item for comparison between the two elections is the parties' share of the vote in each constituency. Although there are large variations in the size of changes in shares from one seat to another (which could be treated as swing if four-party politics did not make this a poor measure), there is a striking consistency in the direction of change. The Conservative share of the vote fell in all but one of the seventy-two constituencies, (the exception being Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale with an increase of 0.7 percent); Labour's share rose in all but one, (Banff

and Buchan -0.3 percent); the Alliance share declined in sixty-four, and the SNP improved its vote in sixty seats (excluding Orkney and Shetland which it did not contest in 1987, and Fife North East where it remained the same).

A second comparable feature is the outcome in marginal seats. In all elections the movement in these is crucial to the overall result. Labour's failure to gain many Conservative marginals and to retain some of its own in England and Wales doomed it to defeat nationally.

If we define as marginal those seats in which the incumbent party had a majority of 10 per cent or less, then on the 1983 results the Conservatives in Scotland had twelve marginals to defend, Labour had three and the Alliance three; neither of the seats held by the SNP were marginal. Six of these Conservative seats were, on the statistics, vulnerable to the Alliance, three to Labour and three to the SNP; in the Labour marginals the Conservatives challenged in two and the Alliance in another; two of the Alliance seats were vulnerable to the Conservatives and one to Labour.

The 1983 Conservative majorities in their marginals ranged from 1.1 in Edinburgh West to 9.9 percentage points in Edinburgh Pentlands. As it happens these were the only two of the twelve that they succeeded in holding and in which the decline in their share of the vote was less than 1 percentage point. Despite the marginality of these two seats the odds were on the Conservatives to hold them. A projection to constituencies of the 1986 Regional election results showed the incumbents ahead in both by roughly the margin achieved in the General Election. On the other hand, all of the Conservative losses, including the non-marginal Argyll and Bute were projected on the same basis⁽²⁾.

Similar projections for the three Labour marginals suggested that none of them was in danger and, of course, they were not only retained but with significantly increased majorities. The one Alliance seat (Glasgow Hillhead) which was vulnerable to Labour showed a clear Labour lead in the Regional results and they duly gained it, but the two in which the Conservatives were challengers produced very much greater shares of the votes for the Alliance incumbents. Although the SNP had no statistically marginal seats it lost the two that it held (whilst gaining three others). But by other than statistical criteria both SNP-held seats were marginals. The Western Isles had been for many years a Labour seat, but a local Labour party row, a general upsurge of support for the SNP and an obviously attractive local candidate enabled Donald Stewart to capture the constituency for the SNP in 1970. His retirement in 1987 left this unique constituency up for grabs again, and Labour reclaimed its inheritance to the surprise of few. The defeat of the SNP leader and incumbent MP Gordon Wilson by Labour in Dundee was, however, a surprise to many. Wilson won this seat in February 1974 and retained it against the odds in three

succeeding elections. Projections from local elections showed this in recent times to be 'really' a Labour seat, but they had been unable to recover it. It is ironic that they should have done so at an election in which SNP fortunes were on an upturn. An exceptional Labour organisation combined with a sensible choice of candidate seem to be the most likely explanation for this gain.

TABLE 7: Parties 'Best' Results

Conservatives Mean Fall in Share of Votes = 4.3

Ten 'Best Con. Results		Ten 'Worst' Con. Results	
Tweeddale, Ettrick & Lauderdale	+ 0.7	Dunfermline	- 14.4
Dumbarton	- 0.1	Ross, Cromarty & Skye	- 14.0
Greenock	- 0.2	Gordon	- 10.1
Perth & Kinross	- 0.7	East Kilbride	- 9.5
Edinburgh Pentlands	- 0.9	Glasgow Hillhead	- 9.2
Edinburgh West	- 0.9	Glasgow Cathcart	- 8.1
Banff & Buchan	- 1.0	Glasgow Govan	- 7.8
Western Isles	- 1.5	Monklands East	- 7.1
Stirling	- 2.2	Kincardine & Deeside	- 7.1
Falkirk East	- 2.3	Eastwood	- 7.1

Labour Mean Increase in Share of Votes = 7.4

Ten 'Best Lab Results		Ten 'Worst' Lab. Results	
Greenock & Port Glasgow	+ 17.1	Banff & Buchan	- 0.3
Paisley South	+ 14.8	Caithness & Sutherland	+ 0.6
Dunfermline East	+ 13.2	Kincardine & Deeside	+ 0.8
Western Isles	+ 12.6	Fife North East	+ 0.9
Strathkelvin & Bearsden	+ 12.5	Galloway & Upper Nithsdale	+ 1.5
Ayr	+ 12.4	Roxburgh & Berwickshire	+ 1.5
Clydebank	+ 12.0	Edinburgh West	+ 2.1
East Kilbride	+ 11.9	Linlithgow	+ 2.3
Glasgow Garscadden	+ 11.5	Angus East	+ 2.8
Glasgow Central	+ 11.5	Argyll & Bute	+ 2.8

Alliance Mean Fall in Share of Votes = 5.2

Ten 'Best' Alliance Results

Western Isles	+ 14.9	Greenock & Port Glasgow	- 18.4
Ross, Cromarty & Skye	+ 10.9	Ayr	- 10.8
Argyll & Bute	+ 9.8	Glasgow Maryhill	- 10.4
Kincardine & Deeside	+ 6.9	Clydebank & Milngavie	- 9.9
Gordon	+ 5.6	Dunfermline East	- 9.6
Fife North East	+ 4.6	Dumbarton	- 9.6
Caithness & Sutherland	+ 1.6	Inverness, Nairn & Lochaber	- 9.2
Galloway & Upper Nithsdale	+ 1.5	Stirling	- 9.0
Eastwood	- 0.4	Paisley South	- 9.0
Glasgow Hillhead	- 1.1	Kilmarnock & Loudoun	- 9.0

Ten 'Worst' Alliance Results

SNP Mean Increase in share of Votes = 2.4

Ten 'Best' SNP Results

Kilmarnock & Loudoun	+ 9.2	Western Isles	- 26.0
Tayside North	+ 8.6	Glasgow Provan	- 7.7
Moray	+ 8.0	Dundee East	- 3.6
Clackmannan	+ 7.9	Strathkelvin & Bearsden	- 2.1
Banff & Buchan	+ 6.8	Ross, Cromarty & Skye	- 2.0
Linlithgow	+ 6.5	Dundee West	- 1.8
Angus East	+ 6.4	Kincardine & Deeside	- 1.2
Motherwell South	+ 5.5	Caithness & Sutherland	- 0.7
Inverness, Nairn & Lochaber	+ 5.0	Glasgow Pollock	- 0.3
Paisley North	+ 4.9	Glasgow Central	- 0.3

Ten 'Worst' SNP Results

In purely statistical terms the 'best' Conservative result was against David Steel in Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale, where their share increased by 0.7 percentage points and their worst was in Dunfermline East where it fell by more than 14 points. Better than average results in Edinburgh Pentlands, Edinburgh West and Stirling probably saved them these seats, but the rest of their 'good' results were in a sense, wasted. None of their 10 worst results put any of their seats at risk. Labour's 'best' result was in Greenock and Port Glasgow and their worst was in Banff and Buchan (0.3 points). Above average results were needed to win the Western Isles and Strathkelvin and Bearsden, and these were forthcoming. Otherwise most of Labour's 10 'best' results were in safe Labour seats with the exception of Ayr where they came very close to achieving a coup of considerable proportions. For the Alliance, the 'best' result was in the Western Isles where their share increased by 14.9 percentage points, the largest increase by any party anywhere except for Labour's 17.1 in Greenock and Port Glasgow. Above average performances enabled them to gain Argyll and Bute and Fife North-East, but elsewhere their best performances were either in seats that they held or in those that were safe

for other parties. Apart from Fife North-East, none of the marginals in which they lay second appear amongst their 10 best performances. The 'worst' Alliance performance was in Greenock and Port Glasgow (-18.4 points) and they had poorer than average results in two of their own seats, Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber (-9.2) and Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (-8.6). Otherwise the biggest Alliance losses tended to be in safe Labour seats. The 10 'best' SNP results were very productive in terms of seats, above average performances gaining them Moray, Banff and Buchan and Angus East. The 'worst' result was in the Western Isles (-26.0) suggesting that Donald Stewart had a huge personal vote there.

The question of tactical voting got more publicity in 1987 than ever before and more precise guidance was offered to electors about how to deploy otherwise 'wasted' votes than at any previous election. But the tactical voting campaign, which was a frankly anti-Conservative ploy was not, it would appear, very successful. The complex movements of votes which produce the result in an individual constituency cannot be identified from aggregate statistics, but it seems clear that there was, in 1987, far less tactical voting than many had hoped for. There is some evidence of a modest amount of such voting in Banff and Buchan, the second most marginal Conservative seat, which was lost to the SNP. The Conservatives had a majority of 2.3 percent here in 1983 and their share of the vote fell by only 1.0 point in 1987. But this was the only seat in which Labour's share actually declined and, although the fall in the Alliance share was just above average, the bulk of defectors seem to have gone to the SNP. In Renfrew West and Inverclyde, Strathkelvin and Bearsden and Edinburgh South, Labour came from third place in 1983 to gain the seats, hardly evidence of tactical voting, unless voters there had a greater sophistication than that with which they are usually credited. In the other seats that Labour gained from the Conservatives, Aberdeen South, Cunninghame North and Edinburgh South, the SNP share of the vote increased and the decline in the Alliance share equalled the Scottish average in the first and was only slightly above average in the other two.

Apart from Banff and Buchan, the other SNP gains from the Conservatives were also made with no apparent surge in tactical voting. In both Moray and Angus East the Labour share, which had collapsed on previous occasions when the SNP won, actually increased and, whilst the Alliance share fell by slightly more than the average in Moray, it decreased by slightly less than average in Angus East. Nor did the Alliance victories in Argyll and Bute and Fife North-East seem to be the result of tactical voting. In both of these seats the Labour share increased; the SNP vote did fall by a significant margin in Argyll and Bute, but it held steady in North East Fife.

Turnout

Overall, turnout in Scotland was 75.0 percent compared with 72.7

percent in 1983 which was the lowest of the post-war period. It is difficult to know what factors affect turnout. It seems to vary little if at all with the weather, number of candidates, age of the register, demographic structure of the constituency or peoples' perceptions of the likely result. Nor does the amount of publicity given to campaigns in the mass media seem to have much positive effect on turnout. On the whole, turnout has, with a few ups and downs, been declining over the years, although not dramatically.

In only five seats did turnout go down in 1987 compared with the 1983 election and that by a very modest amount. In individual constituencies the highest increase was five percentage points in Aberdeen North which raised it from a lowly 65 in 1983. The greatest drop in turnout was in Monklands West, down by 3.4 points to just about the Scottish average. The highest turnout in 1987 was in Strathkelvin and Bearsden (82.1 percent) which was also in top place in 1983, and the lowest in Glasgow Central (65.6 percent) which occupied the same position in the previous election. Marginality seems not to have had a consistent positive effect on either total turnout or increase over 1983. Only five of the Conservative marginals had turnouts of more than two percentage points above the average, four were below and three were around average. If marginality alone is not an important influence on turnout, competitiveness may be. In four of the five Conservative marginals in which turnout was more than two points above average, the Alliance came a close second in 1983 with Labour not very far behind making contests genuinely three way. In all the other Conservative marginals (except Edinburgh South) only one party was a clear challenger.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the most striking aspect of the 1987 General Election results in Scotland is the extent to which the Scots have continued to turn away from the Conservatives. The Conservative decline between 1983 and 1987 can be readily attributed to the discontent in Scotland, within the Conservative party as well as more generally, over the government's handling of Scottish issues. In matters such as rating revaluation, and the subsequent proposal for a community charge to replace domestic rates, the closure of the Gartcosh steel plant, welfare payments during severe weather and, more generally, unemployment and industrial decline, the government appeared insensitive to Scottish opinion. What is striking about the Conservative decline in Scotland, however, is the fact that it has been in progress almost continuously since 1955. If the process is not arrested the Conservatives are in danger of being obliterated in Scotland.

While Conservative decline is easy to describe it is less easy to explain. Long-term social changes – in housing patterns for example – might be presumed to favour the Conservatives, but they clearly have not. British-wide developments, in particular, the loosening of traditional party ties, have clearly contributed to electoral change in Scotland with the SNP and

the Alliance benefitting at the expense of the major parties. (It should be remembered that Labour's 42.4 percent of the vote in 1987 was *lower* than they received in any election between 1945 and 1970.) Nonetheless the problem remains that in Scotland it is the Conservatives who have suffered most whereas in most of the rest of the country it is the Labour party which has seen its support slump. Has there, then, been something specific to Scotland or to Scottishness that explains this? This, however, is a question that merits more serious consideration than can be offered here.

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References

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