
Analyzing governance through local leaders' perceptions: Comparative surveys, academic networks and main results (review article)

El análisis de la gobernanza desde las percepciones de líderes locales: encuestas comparativas, redes académicas y resultados principales

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Abstract

For about 20 years, a group of scholars organized into the standing groups on Local Government and Politics (LOGOPOL) of the European Consortium of Political Science (ECPR) and/or the European Urban Research Association (EURA) have carried out surveys on political leaders performing different roles within local government (mayors, councilors and CEOs). The main aim of these surveys has been to shed light on issues such as values, policy priorities, behavior, role definition, perception of self-influence, patterns of recruitment, leadership style or attitudes towards local government reforms of these political leaders. It has attempted to identify patterns of similarities and differences among these political leaders and the factors influencing them. This contribution depicts the trajectory and research approach of this joint endeavour as well as their main results; among them, the building of typologies on local government, the decline in the power of assemblies or the different notions of democracy leaders express.

Keywords: local government, local government reforms, local political leaders, mayors, councilors, urban politics, comparative political leadership.

Resumen

Durante veinte años, un grupo de académicos organizados en los Grupos Permanentes sobre Gobierno y Política Local (LOGOPOL) del Consorcio Europeo de Ciencia Política (ECPR)

y/o la Asociación Europea de Investigación Urbana (EURA) han llevado a cabo encuestas sobre los líderes políticos que desempeñan diferentes papeles dentro del gobierno local (alcaldes, concejales y directores ejecutivos). El principal objetivo de estas encuestas ha sido aportar luz sobre asuntos como los valores, prioridades de política, comportamiento, definición de papeles, percepción de autoinfluencia, patrones de reclutamiento, estilos de liderazgo o actitudes hacia las reformas del gobierno local de estos líderes políticos. Se ha intentado identificar patrones de similitudes y diferencias entre estos líderes políticos y los factores que los influyen. Esta contribución describe la trayectoria y el enfoque de investigación de esta empresa conjunta, así como sus principales resultados; entre ellos, la construcción de tipologías sobre el gobierno local, la disminución del poder de las asambleas o las diferentes nociones de democracia que manifiestan los líderes.

Palabras clave: gobierno local, reformas del gobierno local, líderes políticos locales, alcaldes, concejales, política urbana, liderazgo político comparado.

WHY CONDUCT COMPARATIVE SURVEYS FOCUSED ON THE LOCAL LEVEL?

Cross-national surveys were developed as a fundamental instrument for social research. They are often used as sources for political studies on many core issues of political life —such as electoral behavior, trust in institutions, evaluations or perceptions of policy outcomes, and personal characteristics ranging from wealth, health, and quality of life to political values. Nevertheless, since the 1960s, when Verba and Almond (1963) launched the “Civic Culture Survey”, the academic community has increasingly refrained from applying this instrument. Surveys are used, but they are mainly conducted by statistical offices, pollster organizations, and consultancy firms, in some cases jointly with academic researchers. The “World Values Survey” and the “Quality of Life Survey” and the “European Values Survey” in the European context, remain as exceptions. An obvious reason for scholars’ retreat from carrying out cross-national surveys covering many countries is the cost of such endeavours. Presumably it is also an effect of the rejection of positivist inheritance and of the questioning —since the 1970s and especially among European scholars— of the political culture approach, as it developed in American political science, and of the notions of development or modernization that it promoted: cross-national surveys are considered to be a legacy of an obsolete academic attitude.

The absence of cross-national surveys on local politics is particularly evident. In the World Values Survey or in the Quality of Life Survey, for example, the population investigated is always the “citizens”, yet their relationship with their local government is not taken into consideration. The same applies to localities as specific governance arrangements but also as social units in which people’s identity is formed. Galton’s problem is verified: in these cases, the focus on the “nation’s name” hides many local factors that contribute to the construction of social phenomena.

Against this background, an international academic network started twenty years ago to collect survey data on local European political and administrative leadership. In spite of the mainstream resistance to the survey as a research instrument and the traditional distance between local government studies and surveys, the network decided to exploit as fully as it could the opportunities offered by the local level to gather quantitative data on the current state of European democracy.

Numerous sources are available to gather information on the transformation of local politics and policies. Nevertheless, surveys on the elites of the “political leadership network” are based on the conviction that the interrogation of key local players is a particularly useful research strategy in urban political science¹. The reason resides in the lack of data on certain dimensions that are increasingly crucial for the analysis of politics —not only local politics. Compared to documentary analysis, secondary analyses of national studies, or expert interviews, surveys of local leaders yield more direct information on the key issues challenging the scientific analysis of politics today: these issues often concern the interpretations of the situation by these leading figures.

Representatives contribute to forming requests and preferences: moreover, representation is viewed as a constructive, responsive, transformative process (see e.g. Ankersmith, 2002). Such dynamics can be read more easily at the local level. One of the recognized “qualities” of the local field —the “propinquity” between the political and the social actors interacting in a geographically close context— offers a double advantage. Firstly, it is easier to work on decision-making processes and on relational networks —usually with case studies as the preferred method. Secondly, propinquity facilitates the tracking of the effects of the different strategies and of the different decisional paths, and it grants more pertinence to any evaluative approach. The traditions and instruments of different areas of research in local government studies may help to comprehend how the representative process is changing and how the classic representative institutions react to the challenges of the citizens' new demands: that is, the analysis of coalitions and urban regimes, of the role of parties and associations in the formation of the agenda and of policies, of the notions of democracy, of the interpretation of the institutional roles, and of the corresponding mechanisms of recruitment and careers. In such areas of research, local leaders are the primary source of information, and they must be interrogated on their behavior, on their attitudes and values, and on their relations with the other actors in the local political arena. Analyzing the

1. By using the term ‘urban political science’, we aim to emphasize the interdisciplinary character of these studies. Decisive convergence among disciplines in the study of the local level of political systems can be observed over recent decades: the borders among urban studies, political science, and political sociology are increasingly difficult to trace. One decade ago, Peter John coined the expression ‘urban political science’ to denote this process (John, 2006). Abandoning the label ‘local’, traditional in European research, he adopted the label ‘urban’, typical of a North American body of research where the focus is more often on the policies in their relations with the social structure, but he used the term ‘political science’ to suggest renewed attention to the analysis of local government institutions.

transformation of representation also means furnishing new stimuli to research the professionalization of politics in its different possible definitions.

A further set of themes on which survey-based empirical research clearly assumes an irreplaceable function is defined by the current and intense processes of rescaling of political systems. Such research makes it possible to gain awareness of actors' interpretation of these reforms but also to understand the power the different levels of government have acquired in the formal and informal definitions of the relationships among them and how they have gained such power. They enable inquiries into the channels of political-administrative innovation and their degree of rhetorical and effective homogeneity in different geographical and cultural contexts.

Cross-national surveys on local elites may eventually have the healthy effect of developing the interest in the "intrinsic logic of cities" (Löw, 2012). They may do so not only because the comparison between background national data highlights and questions contextual specificities, which it tries to reduce with the help of reference typologies, but also and mainly because it constantly suggests assessing the usefulness of these typologies in evaluating public policies and institutional engineering. In the early 1990s, Dogan and Pelassy (1990: 5-13) replied to the question "Why compare?" by presenting comparison as a powerful means to "escape ethnocentrism". It improves the researcher's critical capacities by allowing him/her to experience different contexts. Years later, scholars of local politics often underlined the necessity to compare to uncover generalized trends of change (e.g. Denters and Rose, 2005). Today, paradoxically, comparison is becoming valuable in view of the predominance of "universal" interpretative models, because it obliges the researcher to emphasize contextual specificities (see e.g. Frank *et al.*, 2014).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ACADEMIC NETWORK AND ITS SURVEYS

For about 20 years, a group of scholars organized into the standing groups on Local Government and Politics (LOGOPOL) of the European Consortium of Political Science (ECPR) and/or the European Urban Research Association (EURA) have carried out surveys on actors performing different roles within local government². The main aim of these surveys has been to shed light on issues that cannot be specified

2. This group consists mainly of scholars from the following countries: Austria (Werner Pleschberger), Belgium (Herwig Reynaert and Kristof Steyvers), Croatia (Dubravka Jurulina Alibegovic), the Czech Republic (Daniel Čermák and Dan Ryšavý), England (Colin Copus and David Sweeting), France (Eric Kerrouche), Germany (Björn Egner and Hubert Heinelt), Greece (Panos Getimis and Nikos Hlepas), Hungary (Gabor Soós), Italy (Annick Magnier), the Netherlands (Bas Denters and Pieter-Jan Klok), Norway (Lawrence E. Rose and Signy Irene Vabo), Poland (Pawel Swianiewicz), Spain (Carlos Alba, Xavier Bertrana, Jaume Magre, Lluís Medir, and Carmen Navarro), Sweden (Henry Bäck, David Karlsson, and Anders Lidström), and Switzerland (Daniel Kübler). Not all the scholars mentioned in brackets were involved in all the surveys.

either by comparative analysis of the institutional set-up of the local government or by comparative case studies on individual cities in different countries; that is, issues like problem perceptions or attitudes towards the administrative reforms of mayors, councilors, or high-ranking appointed employees as well as their values, policy priorities, behavior, role definition, perception of self-influence, and role behavior, including leadership style. Furthermore, little comparative information was available at the time on these actors' social profile. The same applies to their notion of democracy and whether and how it differs among countries, how differences in their notions of democracy can be explained, and whether different notions of democracy matter for instance with respect to role definition and role behavior or attitudes towards administrative reforms. Moreover, no information was available to determine whether problem perceptions and notions of democracy (a) differ among mayors, councilors, or high-ranking appointed employees as well as (b) among councilors from different levels of local government (i.e. municipalities and the so-called "second tier" of local government, like counties, provinces, and departments) and (c) whether they have changed over time.

The composition of the academic network and the themes that it addresses correspond to the current mixed configuration of "urban political science", namely the convergence among different approaches in political science and sociology, as more or less explicitly illustrated in many of the international assessments of the state of the art (e.g. Mossberger *et al.*, 2012; Loughlin *et al.*, 2012). From the very beginning, the different teams worked in collaboration from the definition of the research design (the research questions and the sampling strategy), through the construction of the instrument (the questionnaire), to data control and processing. This means that the design reflects a variety of academic and civic interests corresponding to different national and disciplinary contexts. The completion of the design finalization thus became a very delicate phase. The questionnaire was the best possible result of long negotiations, although it was not fully satisfactory for any partner. This patchwork structure was, nevertheless, one of the questionnaire's distinctive features aimed at answering different questions.

The first survey was focused on municipal executive officers (CEOs) or the highest-ranking appointed and non-elected civil servant or employee at the municipal level³. As it was supported by the UDITE (*Union des dirigeants territoriaux de l'Europe*), it was called the UDITE survey⁴. The next survey—named the POLLEADER ("political leader") survey—dealt with European mayors from municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants⁵. It followed a survey to councilors from municipalities

3. This survey covered not only European countries but also Australia and the United States.

4. The results of this survey were published by Dahler-Larsen (2002); Klausen and Magnier (1998), and Mouritzen and Svava (2002); see also Magnier (1997) and Heinelt and Haus (2002) for the results of the survey in Italy and in Germany

5. The comparative results of the POLLEADER survey were published by Bäck *et al.* (2006), whereas the results for single countries or particular issues were published separately. See Egner and Heinelt (2008) for mayors' perception of the role of municipal councils.

TABLE 1.

SURVEYS ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS (NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS BY COUNTRY AND TIME WHEN THEY WERE CARRIED OUT)

Country	Municipal CEOs (1995-1997) ¹	Mayors (2002-2004)	Municipal councillors (2007-2008)	Councillors (at the second tier of local government) (2012-2013)	Mayors (2014-2016)
Albania	–	–	–	–	30
Austria	–	40	408	No second tier	34
Belgium	352	140	634	336	148
Croatia	–	–	233	331	34
Czech Republic	–	78	624	85	61
Denmark	200	108	–	No second tier	48
Finland	324	–	–	No second tier	–
France	266	188	720	308	69
Germany	414	636	894	1,672	592
Greece	–	145	235	233	99
Hungary	–	82	–	133	71
Iceland	–	–	–	–	5
Ireland	21	20	–	No second tier	–
Italy	541	256	1,201	131	251
Lithuania				No second tier	30
Netherlands	404	234	1,222	–	125
Norway	324	–	1,134	226	46
Poland	–	229	328	120	220
Portugal	104	41	–	No second tier	82
Romania	–	–	–	177	–
Serbia	–	–	–	–	50
Slovenia	–	–	–	No second tier	24
Spain	366	155	520	188	303
Sweden	224	142	1,346	1,225	158
Switzerland	–	94	1,616	No second tier	100
GB/England	284 ²	123 ²	700 ³	140 ²	43 ²
Total	3,824	2,711	11,815	5,285	2,623

¹ In Germany the survey was carried out in 1999.

² The survey was carried out in England.

³ The survey was carried out in GB.

Source: own elaboration.

with more than 10,000 inhabitants —called the MAELG (Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance) survey. It was based on a stratified sample taking into account the regional distribution of the total number of municipal councilors in a country⁶. The next survey concerned the second tier of local government —or more precisely councilors as well as executive heads (like prefects) and the highest-ranking appointed and non-elected civil servant or employee acting at this level of local government. Unfortunately, only data for councilors could be used for comparative analysis, because there were too few responses from executive heads and the highest-ranking appointed civil servant or employee in most countries. The latest survey focused again on European mayors from municipalities with more than 10 000 inhabitants (therefore, it was called POLLEADER II). It was carried out between the end of 2014 and the summer 2016 in close cooperation with the COST project: “Local Public Sector Reforms. An International Comparison”⁷. This survey covered more countries than those shown in table 1 (namely Cyprus, Ireland, Latvia, Slovakia, and Romania). However, only countries with more than 20 responses each were included in the comparative analysis, with the exception of Iceland, where the survey attained a response rate of 83.3%⁸. The contributions to this monographic section of the *Spanish Journal of Political Science (Revista Española de Ciencia Política)* are based on the responses of Spanish mayors to this common questionnaire.

OUTLINE OF THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE SURVEYS

It is hard to select the main results from the analysis based on the above-mentioned surveys. The lines below mention only a few of the many findings obtained in these years.

One finding is not really surprising, but we are now able to highlight it with empirical evidence —i.e. that the social profile of mayors and councilors as well as of the highest-ranking appointed employees at the local government level is characterized by what can be called “the 3M-mantra” of elite research: male, middle-aged and middle class (see Steyvers and Reynaert, 2006; Steyvers and Medir, 2018). Based on the results of the survey on councilors for the second tier of local government, it could be clearly shown how important quota mechanisms are in achieving a higher representation of women (Navarro and Medir, 2016). Furthermore, it could be presumed that a higher

6. The comparative results of the MAELG survey were published in a special issue of *Lex Localis* (2012: Vol. 10, No. 1) and a special issue of *Local Government Studies* (2013: Vol. 39, No. 5) as well as in Egner *et al.* (2013b). For a comparison of attitudes towards administrative reforms among countries, see Krapp *et al.* (2013). In addition, the partners involved in the survey published national results (like Egner *et al.*, 2013).

7. LocRef; see <http://www.uni-potsdam.de/cost-locref/>.

8. The comparative results of this last survey can be found in Heinelt *et al.* (2018).

representation of women in line with the idea of “descriptive representation” (Navarro and Medir, 2016) is important because female councilors pursue particular policy objectives slightly different from those of their male colleagues (Navarro and Medir, 2016).

Also, over more than two decades, the various surveys followed the deep and different waves of reforms of the local institutional settings enforced in all the European countries. In the 1990s and at the beginning of the Millennium, in almost all the European countries, for different reasons and in different forms, reforms were launched to strengthen the local executives, especially the figure of the mayor. The surveys highlighted their impact on autonomy, political careers, the power structure within local governments, role interpretations, the relations among the main institutional actors, and those between main institutional actors and the local society.

Another result was the building of a typology of local government systems. To analyze the UDITE Leadership survey data, Mouritzen and Svava proposed one of the current reference typologies of local government systems built from the “horizontal” perspective. Observing that the structural features of municipal government in any specific country reflect a balance or compromise among three organizing principles—layman rule, political leadership, and professionalism (Mouritzen and Svava, 2002: 50-51)—they distinguished four different corresponding institutional arrangements: the strong mayor, the committee leadership, the collective and council manager form. Independently from the electoral rules, often changed in this wave of reform through the introduction of the direct election of the top local political leader, and the apparent success of the strong mayor form, especially the two surveys on European mayors documented common directions of the revision of role interpretations on the one hand and persistent strong path-dependency effects that steered the subsequent adaptive processes of the local institutions on the other hand. Some studies used the data gathered among mayors to show for example—concerning the countries of a “consensualist” tradition—that in such contexts this strengthening of the executive mainly followed the scheme of a progressive and mild “presidentialization” respectful of the main principles of relations among the traditional institutional leading figures (Steyvers, 2012).

A general decline in the power of assemblies has also been confirmed, with few exceptions (Denters *et al.*, 2006): local councilors themselves widely acknowledged an insufficient capacity to influence the overall activity of the local authorities (Egner, 2013). At the apex of the local executives, a long-term movement towards some forms of professionalization has increased the distance between the “amateur” positions in the assemblies and the steering executive positions: mayors dedicate themselves full time to the charge more and more often, with a heavy workload in terms of hours spent. The growing complexity of the decision-making process in the so-called context of governance, the changing structure of local authorities’ budgets, and the decentralization of decisive policies require specific types of leadership that are deeply engaged in agenda setting, long-term visioning, and networking activities. Also required is entrepreneurial leadership that is particularly committed to finding opportunities for

local development (Getimis, 2016). Such developments have been associated in North American research with exclusive agenda attention to projects supposed to foster the economic growth of the local community and its level of economic well-being in a context of open competitiveness between localities (Logan and Molotch, 1987).

The successive analyses of the European local agenda through the cross-national surveys (Cabria *et al.*, 2018; Egner *et al.*, 2013; Magnier *et al.*, 2006; Ramírez Pérez *et al.*, 2008) propose a more moderate assessment. They show that the large majority of local European mayors combine this developmental perspective with other priorities, mainly regarding social welfare provision, which has increasingly influenced the agenda during the persistent economic crisis. The most recent survey hence “confirms the significant presence of a third way agenda, beside the pro-growth agenda and the maintenance of one which forms the basis of the American theorization on urban regimes” (Stone, 1989). This European third way stresses redistribution and deprivation removal and has recently appeared to be linked to a slightly more attentive consideration of environmental protection (Cabria *et al.*, 2018).

Perceptions of problems with respect to the functioning of local government administration and attitudes towards administrative reforms were the themes of a number of articles resulting from the various surveys (Alba and Navarro, 2006; Egner and Heinelt, 2006; Krapp *et al.*, 2013). The main finding of the surveys on mayors, councillors, and the highest-ranking appointed employees can be summarized as follows: reforms have not been implemented following a widespread and strong belief in NPM ideas. In other words, it seems that these actors had already realized that NPM “was driven by lofty ideas, ideals and principles rather than by practical experiences” (Brunsson, 2011: 66). If something like a belief in a straightforward reform path according to NPM ideas has existed at all at some point in time, it has increasingly been replaced by pragmatic searches for a better—and this means mainly a more context related—way to change administrative practice. For sure, “such searches for more context-related solutions will lead to a diversity of post-NPM reforms² (Heinelt and Krapp, 2016: 50).

Furthermore, it can be shown “that the picture of support and refusal of NPM ideas in Europe is quite differentiated” (Heinelt and Krapp, 2016). This picture is obviously related to the existence of different local administrative systems in Europe, which can be explained by “organizational, cultural, and civil service-related features” (Kuhlmann *et al.*, 2018).

Another output of these survey series is the finding of clear differences in the understanding of democracy among the local actors analyzed (Haus and Sweeting, 2006; Heinelt, 2013; 2016; Vetter *et al.*, 2018). These differences can be related to the distinction between the two notions of democracy that can be found in a broader debate in political theory (see Heinelt, 2013)—namely a liberal or representative notion of democracy and a participatory one. These two notions of democracy are distinct because of their different axiomatic ideas of human nature and appropriate political behavior, as emphasized by Barber’s (1984) distinction between a “thin” (i.e. representative) democracy and a “strong” (i.e. participatory) democracy. Both notions

of democracy can be found among European mayors and councilors from both tiers of local government in all countries, although the proportion of proponents of the two notions of democracy differ slightly among countries and have changed only a little over time in most countries (as demonstrated by Vetter *et al.*, 2018).

Looking more closely at possible explanations for mayors' notions of participatory democracy, Vetter *et al.* (2018) found that especially the mayors' political ideology (left-right), their value orientation, their age, and the size of the municipality in which they serve show significant individual effects. Support for representative democracy, on the other hand, is significantly affected by mayors' value orientation, their gender, and whether or not they are party members. Nevertheless, the explanatory power of the individual-level models remains weak. Considering additional institutional and political culture macro-variables adds only a little to the explanatory power of the models. What seems to affect mayors' support for representative democracy significantly is the respective local government system in which they act—specifically the horizontal power structure, that is, the relation between the mayors, the council, and the local government administration.

The same applies to the understanding of democracy among councilors from the second tier of local government. Instead, the differences among the notions of democracy of provincial councilors can be explained mainly by personal characteristics—like age, gender, self-placement on a left/right political spectrum, and membership of particular parties—whereas the country-specific institutionalized horizontal power structure among the mayors, the council, and the local government administration does not matter (Heinelt, 2013). This may indicate that councilors at the second tier of local government are more spatially detached from the citizenry than those at the municipal level, at which citizens have more opportunities to participate directly in decisions and councilors can act more effectively with citizens to achieve a particular goal. However, what can be seen clearly for mayors and councilors is that their notion of democracy matters to their role definition, role behavior, and attitudes towards administrative reforms. Those who follow a participatory understanding of democracy are more oriented towards relationships with societal actors and to opening policy making to these actors, whereas those who have a representative understanding of democracy are more focused on what is happening in the city hall.

Regarding local leaders and political parties, mayors' party membership rate did not change in most European countries between the early 2000s and 2015 (Egner *et al.*, 2018). This is a clear indication that the party politicization of local government is still relevant in countries where parties have already played a major role in the past. More interesting is the finding on countries where political parties do not play a major role at the local level. As the local actors were asked to place themselves on a left-right scale, it was shown in the case of mayors that the country-wide left-right spectrum was similarly reflected among them. Furthermore, it could be shown that those mayors who declared that they were not a party member represent positions on the left-right spectrum that are not covered by parties in the different local contexts (*ibid.*).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE ADDITIONAL OUTCOMES OF A COMMON ENDEAVOUR

The surveys were only made possible by the close collaboration of national partners in a European network; as a result, some other outcomes were also achieved. This applies firstly to the further elaboration of the existing typologies and the construction of new typologies of local government systems with respect to the embeddedness of local government in vertical power relations as well as horizontal power relations among mayors (political leaders), the council, and the local administrative system (Mouritzen and Svava 2002; Heinelt and Hlepas, 2006). It should be emphasized that such typologies did not previously exist for the second tier of local government (Bertrana and Heinelt, 2011a; 2011b) or in an updated form covering most East European countries (Heinelt *et al.*, 2018).

Secondly, the close collaboration of national partners was not only the precondition for conducting the surveys; it was also the basis for joint international projects funded by the European Union's Framework Programmes for Research and Development—namely the PLUS project (Haus *et al.*, 2005; Heinelt *et al.*, 2006) and the GFORS project (Atkinson *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the close collaboration of national partners in conducting the surveys, jointly analyzing their findings, and publishing the results enabled the German-Greek REPOS project to be conducted (Stolzenberg *et al.*, 2016).

To these two types of outputs—the comparative common analyses and the development of new collaborations between partners—may be added the numerous in-depth analyses of the national and regional cases proposed in a large series of publications, in English or in different national languages, based on the survey data. By emphasizing the different stimulating insights into the context specificities offered through comparison but grounded on local knowledge, and by illustrating a large variety of disciplinary and thematic academic approaches, they often allow a healthy distance to be taken from reductive interpretative models that assume substantial uniformity of trends and use the data gathered to address crucial questions in public debates about local democracy.

All these outputs have been possible thanks to the long-lasting academic collaboration of local government scholars, whose efforts over these twenty years have allowed the building of concepts, typologies, and empirical knowledge to inspire new works on this crucial piece of our political systems, local democracies. Their participants are convinced of the worth of this common endeavor, which will continue to undertake new projects in the years to come.

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