



Escaping collective responsibility in fluid party systems: Evidence from South Korea

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ABSTRACT

How does the public evaluate politicians' reactions to crises that damage their party's image? Using an experimental survey design and the 2016 South Korean political scandal, we explore which strategies allow politicians to avoid electoral accountability for corruption in their party. The scandal prompted some politicians from the president's party to participate in protests calling for her impeachment, make statements criticizing her leadership, or join a new splinter party. We find that all of these strategies both increase electoral support and decrease perceptions of corruption. However, leaving the party is the least successful at increasing electability and politicians are more likely to gain votes if instead they take a clear position against corrupt politicians. Our findings have implications for accountability in weakly institutionalized party systems, where politicians, faced with a party brand crisis, have incentives to switch parties to escape electoral consequences, as opposed to reforming the party from within.

1. Introduction

In response to political crises that threaten the image of their parties, politicians often engage in a range of behaviors to distance themselves from the party and mitigate electoral consequences they may personally face at the ballot box. What types of actions allow them to do so most effectively? This paper draws on Hirschman (1970)'s seminal concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty to examine which strategy – leaving the party or trying to fix the problem within the party – is perceived as being more responsive to the electorate. Using an experimental survey design, we explore this question in the context of the 2016 political scandal in South Korea surrounding former President Park Geun-hye, which has generated heterogeneous responses from the ruling Saenuri Party (New Frontier Party; SP) politicians. In the aftermath of the scandal, some SP politicians voiced their concerns by participating in anti-Park protests and/or making statements that criticized Park, while others left the SP and created a new party called the Bareun Party. The remaining SP members decided to change the party name to Liberty Korea Party to dissociate themselves from Park's corruption scandal.

In post-transition South Korea (1987-present), political parties and party leaders hold inconsistent and often contradictory policy positions given the impediments to party development under military rule (1961–1988) and bigger role played by civil society (and lesser role

played by the opposition parties) during the democratic transition process (Wong, 2015). Whenever these parties foresaw or experienced an electoral setback, they responded with party merges, splits, and name changes to create a new image and secure new voters.

While scholars have documented the volatility of the party system in South Korea (e.g., Wong, 2015; Choi, 2012), to our knowledge, no study has actually examined the public perceptions of such strategies at the micro level. If these tactics offer an effective way for politicians to distance themselves from a party with a deteriorating brand and preserve personal reputation, then arguably voters might be providing incentives for politicians to pursue strategies that further weaken the party system. We contrast the exit strategy with two other ways of distancing oneself from a party engulfed in a corruption scandal without leaving the party organization – taking a clear public stance against implicated politicians and joining mass protests. We find that all of these strategies are effective in both increasing electoral support and decreasing perceptions of corruption. However, leaving the party is the least successful strategy at increasing electoral support and politicians are more likely to gain votes if instead they speak out against those found guilty of corruption.

This paper contributes to several strands of literature. First, we contribute to the growing literature on corruption and political scandals and provide evidence that party switching and taking a public stance can help politicians distance themselves from the scandal and increase

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their electability. Furthermore, while research on party systems and democratic consolidation has focused primarily on politicians' opportunistic behavior in explaining low institutionalization of party systems in the post-transition period, our findings illustrate that public perceptions of politicians' behavior, if translated into voting behavior, may actually reward political strategies that would contribute to weak parties and unstable partisan identities in new democracies. Lastly, existing work does not tell us much about how voters evaluate politicians' involvement in public protest, which is common in times of crisis and upheaval at both national and local levels. Our findings suggest that voters perceive politicians' legislative and non-legislative behavior differently, and analyzing attitudes towards extra-institutional strategies can help us better understand political communication between politicians and their electorates, especially in moments of political crises that polarize the public.

2. Literature

The performance of a party organization is subject to deterioration due to various structural and random factors, including corruption. There are two options as “mechanisms of recuperation,” which are exit and voice (Hirschman, 1970). In the context of a party organization, for individual politicians, the exit option is to quit the party and the voice option is to publicly express one's dissatisfaction with the party leadership (Kato, 1998).

Party labels (or brand names) – the “actions, beliefs, and outcomes commonly attributed to the party as a whole” (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, p. 102) – have electoral value for voters as they solve the collective action problem of information (Aldrich, 2011) by providing low-cost cues about politicians associated with the party (e.g., Snyder and Ting, 2002, 2003; Geys and Vermeir, 2014). Moreover, voters use party membership when estimating the ‘quality’ of politicians (Jones and Hudson, 1998). However, party brands can be a double-edged sword for politicians since “all members automatically enjoy (or suffer) a party's reputation or performance in government” (Desposato, 2006, p. 64). Political crises such as scandals taking place at the national level can not only impact political careers of the implicated politicians, but also those who belong to the party involved in a scandal, including local politicians (Daniele et al., 2017). When individual electoral interests of politicians diverge from those of their party – for instance, when a scandal within the party threatens to negatively affect politicians' personal reputations – they have incentives to weaken or break their association with the party.

It is well established in the literature that voters punish incumbent politicians who engage in corruption (e.g., Besley, 2006; Ashworth, 2012), but that this relationship is complicated by the attribution and clarity of responsibility – the extent to which those who are responsible can be identified (e.g., Powell and Whitten, 1993; Powell, 2000). If politicians can credibly weaken the link between themselves and actors implicated in corruption, facilitating attribution of responsibility, they will be less likely to suffer electoral punishment (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2016). Politicians, motivated to avoid blame, can use a number of different strategies, including “blame management” through excuses and justifications (McGraw, 1990, 1991; McGraw et al., 1995), passing the blame or deflecting it by supporting a politically popular alternative (Weaver, 1986), which could be a new political party (see Section 2.1) or a mass mobilization (see Section 2.2).

2.1. The electoral consequences of party switching (exit)

In countries with weakly institutionalized party systems in Asia, Latin America, and post-communist Europe, politicians frequently switch political parties either by forming new parties or moving to a different existing party. Desposato (2006) shows that in Brazil, where party switching is very common, legislators use membership in parties to maximize pork, ideological consistency, and short-term electoral

success. Lupu (2013) finds that when parties converge – making party brands less distinguishable – partisan attachment weakens as a result. Similarly, party switching, if pervasive, can effectively render party labels meaningless.

This party fluidity, especially in new democracies, contributes to electoral volatility and undermines voters' ability to use party labels to effectively hold governments accountable for policy outcomes. Focusing on the case of Poland, Zielinski et al. (2005) show that for politicians whose party becomes associated with poor economic performance, switching parties is electorally beneficial, allowing them to escape electoral accountability and “hide behind the collective reputation of their new party” (p. 390). Fragmentation of the party system impedes the clarity of responsibility, which in turn shapes both the incentive for politicians to engage in corruption and voters' ability to punish corrupt politicians (Tavits, 2007). This is because it “complicates for voters the task of attributing responsibility for corruption” and makes it harder to coordinate to “employ electoral choice effectively to oust corrupt incumbents” (Schleiter and Voznaya, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, politicians in weakly institutionalized party systems can likely avoid collective responsibility for corruption in their party by switching parties, but in doing so, are likely to further destabilize the party system.

In contrast, consolidated party systems have institutionalized parties that “provide a stable means for channeling the interests of social groups and a mechanism for citizens to hold government accountable” (Hicken and Kuhonta, 2015, p. 1). Exit is not an easily available strategy in highly institutionalized party systems because the costs of new party formation are higher and voters have stronger partisan identities. However, in those contexts, politicians can still engage in voice strategies we detail below in order to distance themselves from the implicated party leader or corrupt fellow party members.

2.2. The electoral consequences of scandals and distancing (voice)

Research shows that blame avoidance strategies by political parties and policy makers are widely used and take various forms (Giger and Nelson, 2011; Kang and Reich, 2014; Wenzelburger, 2014), and suggests that they are effective in mitigating voter backlash. Using cross-national evidence from Latin America, Lee (2014) argues that in presidential systems, president's party can strategically distance itself from an unpopular president and minimize its electoral losses by refusing to cooperate with the president's legislative agenda. Similarly, studies on the United States Congress show that when parties lack formal institutional power, legislators use strategic communications outside of Congress such as public statements to build public support (Grimmer, 2013; Groeling, 2010; Sellers, 2010). Groeling (2010) finds that the public is relatively more influenced by partisan messages made by politicians from their party, as well as when the opposition party praises the president or the president's party criticizes him. In this context, speaking against one's interest enhances personal reputation even at the expense of weakening the overall party brand.

Another form of exercising voice is through protest participation, a less conventional form of communication for politicians than a public statement. The classic social movement theory operationalizes protest as citizens making claims on the state (Tilly et al., 2001; Tarrow, 2011). Traditionally understood as “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1983), protests constitute a public, time consuming, and risky act of political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Schussman and Soule, 2005). In this dichotomy and in treating the state as a unitary actor, this approach overlooks the possibility of those occupying positions within the state joining the mass mobilization to express their discontent with other members of the establishment.¹ Yet “parties and movements are

¹ There are a few notable exceptions such as Radnitz (2010)'s study of elite-led mobilization in Central Asia.

overlapping fields” and many political actors have intersecting movement-party identities and are willing to use both institutional and contentious tactics to advance their goals (Heaney and Rojas, 2013, p. 8, p. 22).

For example, studies on “institutional activists” (Santoro and McGuire, 1997; Pettinicchio, 2012) or “activists in office” (Watts, 2006) find that activists elected to public offices can successfully advocate for movement goals through formal channels (Santoro and McGuire, 1997; Rootes, 2003; Banaszak, 2005, 2010; Böhm, 2015; Kruszezka, n.d.). Research also shows that political candidate's activist background serves as a signal of their ideological position and, in case of some movements, makes the candidate more likely to be perceived as honest and better at representing voters' interests (Kruszezka, n.d.). Less is known, however, about politicians who cross the boundary between institutional and contentious politics. In times of “movement society,” with protest routinized and normalized as a form of political participation (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998), it is not unusual for politicians to join street demonstrations to express solidarity with protesters' cause. How does the public perceive the use of outsider tactics (such as protest) by regime insiders?

3. Context

3.1. Legislative elections and party system in South Korea

Since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, South Korea has had a unicameral legislature called the National Assembly (*gukhoe*). The National Assembly elections have been held under a mixed-member majoritarian system since 2004. About three-quarters of the assembly seats are filled by elected members via a single-member-district system and the rest (approximately one-quarter) of the seats are allocated by proportional representation.

Despite the fact that South Korea is considered one of the most consolidated new democracies, the country's political system is characterized by high electoral volatility, unstable (or fluid) party organizations, and weak roots in society (Croissant and Völkel, 2012).² A total of 53 parties have competed in the six legislative elections in 1987–2007 and only three parties among them continue to exist (Park, 2010, p. 531). In comparison, in 22 OECD democracies surveyed in 1960–2002, on average, only 1.4 new parties emerged in any given election (Tavits, 2006, p. 106). According to Kim (2016), “the instability of the party system was so great that in almost every election up to the early 2000s an average South Korean had no choice but to vote for a new party, because the previous party for which they had voted would no longer exist in the following election” (p. 94). Indeed, since 1987 the average life span of a Korean political party has been about five years (Kim, 2014, p. 77). The Liberty Korea Party (LKP; formerly Saenuri Party) has the longest life span – 18 years. This is significantly shorter than the life spans of the oldest parties of other East Asian democracies – Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (62 years) and Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT; 98 years). Moreover, Korean parties are mired by frequent splits, merges, and name changes. The main conservative LKP has changed its name around 10 times while the main progressive (center-left) party (currently the Minjoo Party) has changed its identity 20 times since 1955 (The Wall Street Journal, 2016).

3.2. 2016 South Korean political scandal

In 2016, President Park Geun-hye was embroiled in a corruption

² Korean parties tend to be more personalistic, region-based, and less differentiable by ideology or policy platform (Choi, 2012; S. Kim, 2009; Wong, 2015). While Korea exhibits relatively stable voter-party linkage at the regional level since 1988, the voter loyalty is directed toward political leadership of the parties, not the parties themselves (Croissant and Völkel, 2012, p. 248).

scandal that led to her impeachment. According to the prosecution, Park colluded with her confidante Choi Soon-sil to extort money from major corporations, including Samsung, for personal gain. She also allegedly allowed Choi to have access and input into important state affairs. Starting October 29, civil society organized candlelight protests demanding the impeachment of Park Geun-hye (known as the Candlelight Movement), reaching their peak on December 3, in which 1.7 million citizens (about 3.4 percent of Korean population) joined the protest.³ This was the largest protest in South Korea's political history, surpassing the size of the mass gatherings during the 1987 June Democratic Uprising. Moreover, the Candlelight Movement had a direct impact on formal political processes of the impeachment (Lee, 2017, p. 22). In December 2016, in response to the mass protests, members of the National Assembly overwhelmingly voted to impeach Park and in March 2017 the Constitutional Court issued a unanimous ruling, confirming the impeachment proposal by the National Assembly and thereby removing Park from office.

This scandal dealt a major blow to the ruling Saenuri Party, an authoritarian successor party that has effectively remained intact since democratization (Loxton, 2015). While the dominant conservative camp has traditionally remained united throughout the post-transition period, opposition parties have been largely fragmented and weak due to factionalism and defection (Korea Exposé, 2017). In the aftermath of the 2016 corruption scandal, SP splintered into two parties. During the impeachment scandal, 30 members of SP left the party in January 2017 and formed a new conservative party called the Bareun (or Righteous) Party (BP). The pre-existing SP renamed itself as Liberty Korea Party (LKP) in February 2017. In preparation for the upcoming presidential election in May 2017, both LKP and BP made efforts to distance themselves from Park and the corruption scandal. The two also equally claimed to represent the conservative voices of Korea.

4. Hypotheses

This study focuses on a case of a weakly institutionalized party system, in which all strategies are available to politicians because leaving a party and joining or forming a new party is relatively low cost. In this context, we hypothesize both voice and exit to be effective strategies, both in signaling less corruption and in increasing the likelihood that the candidate will be elected relative to the baseline of staying in the party and not taking a stance on the scandal (i.e., loyalty). We expect that by joining a new party or speaking out against their party, politicians will be able to avoid blame for the party and evade electoral sanction.

We consider two strategies for voice: protest participation and statement of criticism. We expect participation in candlelight protests – mass demonstrations calling for Park's impeachment – to be a more effective strategy in signaling less corruption and increasing the probability of the candidate's electability. The conventional wisdom is that talk is cheap in electoral campaigns and legislative decision making (e.g., Austen-Smith, 1990). Participation in street demonstrations, on the other hand, is a public, time consuming, and risky act of political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Schussman and Soule, 2005). While protest participation by a politician can be perceived as a costly signal to the electorate, the existing literature is unclear as to whether the public finds that signal to be credible. Instead, voters may perceive protest – a noninstitutional form of political participation – to be the domain of the citizens, and therefore prefer elected officials to limit themselves to the conventional channels of influence. However, in the past, voters in post-transition South Korea have rewarded dissident candidates for their activism in the pro-democracy movement (Kim

³ It is important to note that these protests were peaceful since research has shown that nonviolent movements are more likely to win public support (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Huff and Kruszezka, 2016).

et al., 2013; Shin and Chang, 2011).⁴ From this logic, we derive the following hypotheses⁵:

Hypothesis 1. Voice v. loyalty: Protest and criticism will both translate into higher support and lower perception of corruption for the candidate s corrupt than relative to staying in SP, (now LKP).

Hypothesis 2. Criticism v. protest: Protest will increase support for the candidate and decrease perception of corruption more than statements of criticism.

Hypothesis 3. Exit v. loyalty: Leaving SP to join Bareun Party will increase support and decrease perception of corruption for the candidate relative to staying in SP (now LKP).

5. Experimental design

We test these hypothesis using a survey experiment. The experimental approach allows us to address the self-selection bias in observational studies of blame avoidance. The choice to use blame avoidance strategies depends on the politicians' perception of the risk of being punished (Wenzelburger, 2014). Politicians who remain in the party in the aftermath of a scandal may differ on a number of observable and unobservable dimensions from those who decide to leave or to express their criticism with public statements or protest. These characteristics might affect both their strategy and their chances of election. For example, politicians who decide to leave may have high name-recognition and personal reputation that allows them to believe that they will be successful in a new party. Or politicians who stay may do so because of their strong positions within the party structures. An experiment allows us to disentangle those characteristics from the behavior undertaken in response to a scandal.

In the experiment, respondents were asked to read a vignette about a politician affiliated with Saenuri Party (SP), President Park's party. In the vignette, we randomized the politician's response to the decline in party quality: voice, which took the form of either public criticism of President Park or participation in candlelight protests calling for her impeachment, and exit: leaving the party to join Bareun party (BP), a new splinter party. We also included a control condition: remaining in SP (now Liberty Korea Party) and not taking a stance on the crisis. In the aftermath of the recent political crisis in South Korea, SP-affiliated politicians pursued all of these strategies.⁶ Although we recognize that in practice, the exit and the two voice options are not mutually exclusive – for example, candidates can engage in both protest and statements of criticism or join a new party *and* protest, this stylized set-up allows us to test the *effectiveness of each strategy*. The vignette was phrased as follows:

Please consider the following hypothetical scenario. Some parts of the description may strike you as important; other parts may seem unimportant. Please read the details very carefully. After describing

⁴ From 2000 to 2008, over 30 percent of the National Assembly consisted of past activists who were members of pro-democracy social movement organizations (Kim et al., 2013).

⁵ Hypotheses, as well as the study design and analysis, were all pre-registered on Evidence in Governance and Politics (<https://egap.org/registration/2480>) prior to data collection.

⁶ Given the existence of pro-Park and non-pro-Park factions within the former SP, it is possible that the respondents' reactions to the strategies can reflect their assessments of the pro-Park and non-Park factions of the former SP. In the aftermath of the scandal, there were more pro-Park faction members staying in the SP and more non-pro-Park faction members pursuing exit and voice strategies. However, there were exceptions to this case. There were non-pro-Park faction members who stayed in the SP (e.g., Na Kyung-won and Kang Seok-ho) and at least one pro-Park faction member (e.g., Lee Hag-je) who left the SP and joined the BP. Kang Hyo-sang is an example of a pro-Park faction members who participated in the candlelight protest.

the situation, we will ask your opinion.

A member of National Assembly is running for re-election. (S)He has been affiliated with the Saenuri Party. In response to the political crisis surrounding President Park, (s)he [participated in anti-Park Geun-hye candlelight protest//criticized President Park and called for her impeachment//did not take a stance on Park's impeachment and remained in SP, now Liberty Korea Party//left SP to join Bareun Party, a new party which emerged out of SP.]

After reading the vignette, respondents were asked two questions designed to test the hypotheses presented above in a randomized order:

- On a scale of 1–7, where 1 is “not likely at all” and 7 “very likely”, how likely would you be to vote for this candidate?
- On a scale of 1–7, where 1 is “not corrupt at all” and 7 “very corrupt”, how corrupt do you think is this candidate?

After answering these two questions, respondents were asked an open-ended follow-up question, requesting them to explain their response in few sentences. The purpose of the question was to provide the opportunity to explore possible mechanisms through which treatment of a particular strategy adopted by a politician affects variation in the voting outcomes. The open-ended question read:

In a previous question, you indicated how likely you would be to vote for the candidate. What are your reasons for supporting / not supporting this candidate? Please write a few sentences justifying your answer.

The survey was conducted from April 24–May 4, 2017 with respondents recruited by Macromil Embrain,⁷ one of the largest survey companies in South Korea, which uses a large online opt-in panel.⁸ The fieldwork was completed after the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment of Park Geun-hye on March 10 and before the presidential election on May 9.⁹ The survey lasted approximately 10 minutes and involved 1,000 adults (eligible to vote) who were non-probabilistically sampled to resemble the South Korean population across age, gender, and region.¹⁰ The final number of respondents (N = 1,000) represents all who passed a pre-treatment attention check and completed the survey. Tables 1 and 3 in the Appendix provide a demographic summary of all respondents. Although the respondents resemble the South Korean population in demographic and regional characteristics, the sample is skewed slightly toward the highly educated, which is common in online panels.

In terms of partisanship, 45% of our sample reported supporting the Minjoo Party (MP) in the last election and about 21% the Saenuri Party (SP), with the remaining respondents sympathizing with People's Party (15%), Justice Party (3%), and 16% identified as independent or

⁷ <http://embrain.com>.

⁸ Macromil Embrain was engaging with over 1,200,000 panelists at the time of our survey.

⁹ It is possible that the Constitutional Court's decision to uphold Park's impeachment on March 10 impacted our respondents to perceive loyalty strategy (i.e., remaining in SP) in a more negative way. While we were fielding the survey, there were three presidential debates that were held on April 25, April 28, and May 2. On May 2, 13 BP members defected from their party and declared that they will support the LKP presidential candidate. This event may have affected how our respondents perceived the exit strategy. However, only 10 out of 1,000 responses (1%) were recorded between May 2 and May 4. And among those 10 respondents, only two were assigned to the exit strategy scenario (0.2% of our entire sample).

¹⁰ Macromil Embrain uses proportional quota sampling based on population data (gender, age, regions) of statistical yearbooks in April 2017. Panelists were recruited through web portals banner advertising, radio broadcasting of current issues, and panel member's recommendation, and compensated financially for their participation.

supporting other parties. This is in line with public opinion polls conducted around the time we fielded the survey and thus, despite asking about past behavior, likely reflects SP's plummeting popularity at the time. According to a Gallup Poll conducted on May 1–2, 2017, 36% supported MP, 16% PP, 15% LKP (formerly SP), 5% BP (a splinter party from SP), 8% JP, and 20% were independent or supported other parties.¹¹

6. Results

The results of our study are two-fold. First, all of the strategies are effective in both increasing electoral support and decreasing perception of corruption relative to the baseline of staying in the party affected by the scandal.¹² When the brand of the party deteriorates due to a corruption scandal, it is electorally beneficial for politicians to distance themselves from the party, be it through voice or, to a lesser extent, exit. Second, contrary to our expectations, participation in protest makes a politician neither more likely to be elected nor seen as less corrupt than the other type of voice – critique of President Park and calling for her impeachment. As we demonstrate below, criticism is actually more effective than exit in winning over political support. In the remainder of this section, we describe the results in turn and discuss why we might be observing these patterns.

6.1. Voting and perceptions of corruption

For both the voting and the corruption questions, we use the responses on 1–7 scale to code binary variables *Candidate Supported* and *Corrupt Candidate*. The first variable takes on a value of 1 if the declared likelihood of voting for the candidate is above the midpoint (i.e. greater than 4) and 0 otherwise. Likewise, the second variable is coded as 1 if the respondent's perception of corruption of the candidate is above the midpoint (i.e. greater than 4) and 0 otherwise.¹³ We test our hypotheses with two-sided difference in means tests, using an alpha (α) level of 0.05.

Our results support *Hypothesis 1* and *Hypothesis 3*, but not *Hypothesis 2*. We find that all strategies employed by politicians to distance themselves from the party following the scandal increase electoral support relative to the baseline of loyalty – remaining in SP (LKP) and not taking a stance on Park's impeachment. As *Fig. 1* shows, relative to the baseline of 16%, attending a demonstration against Park increases support for the candidate by about 12%. Criticizing Park and calling for her impeachment increases support by about 16% and leaving the party to join BP by about 7%. However, for exit, unlike for the other strategies, the results are not statistically significant at

$\alpha = 0.05$ level, though they are at the $\alpha = 0.1$ level.

Similarly, all of the strategies allow politicians to escape blame for the corruption scandal in the party. Distancing oneself from the SP in any way resulted in decreased perception of corruption as *Fig. 2* shows. Relative to the baseline of loyalty (71.6%), by putting some distance between themselves and President Park, politicians boost their personal reputation by decreasing the perception of corruption by over 14% through voice (both protest and criticism) and nearly 17% through exit. All of the results are statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

6.2. Are some strategies more effective?

Figs. 3 and 4 present the results when voice and exit strategies are compared not against loyalty but against each other. As *Fig. 3* shows, voice – through criticism – is the most effective electoral strategy. Respondents were nearly 10% more likely to say they would vote for a politician who took a stance supporting Park's impeachment than a politician who left SP to join a new party. However, as *Fig. 4* shows, there is no statistically significant difference in the effectiveness of strategies in decreasing perception of corruption. Against our expectations outlined in *Hypothesis 2*, we also do not find that protest is a more effective strategy to distance oneself from the party than criticism.

6.3. Why are some strategies more effective?

6.3.1. Why doesn't exit win over votes?

Why is exit strategy just as effective at decreasing the perception of corruption but less effective than criticism at increasing support for the candidate? We use responses from the open-ended question to investigate the micro-mechanism behind vote choice. In the study, 251 respondents were randomly assigned to consider the scenario in which the SP candidate pursued the exit strategy after the corruption scandal. Out of the 251 respondents, 57 (approximately 23%) declared likelihood of voting for the candidate to be above the midpoint. Of these, 25 clearly articulated why they are more likely to support the candidate. The remaining either misunderstood the follow-up question or provided an unclassifiable answer. As *Table 1* shows, the 25 open-ended responses broadly fell into three categories.

The first and largest category included people who discussed the candidate's character as their reason for why they would vote for the candidate. They are described as being brave, responsible, and acting on his or her own beliefs (against the corruption) for leaving the SP. The second category included partisan responses. These responses cited the candidate's previous affiliation with the SP as the reason behind their vote choice. Some stated that they would vote for the candidate because s/he is no longer in the SP, a party that they dislike, and others answered that they would vote for this candidate for having been an SP member in the past. Lastly, the third category included respondents who perceived the candidate to be new, fresh, clean, and unrelated to the corruption scandal. The newly-created splinter party's name "Bareun" means proper or righteous in Korean. With its party name and party slogan of "Clean and Warm Conservatism," Bareun Party distanced itself from the Saenuri Party and the corruption scandal. This branding strategy may have helped the BP candidate to appear less corrupt than the SP politician.

At the same time, a good number of respondents stated in their open-ended responses that both BP and SP are ideologically conservative parties and their political traits and fundamental values are non-differentiable.¹⁴ As *Table 2* shows, 44 (approximately 36%) provided such partisan reasons for not supporting the exit candidate. ("SP and BP are pretty much the same." or "I don't believe that one's political

¹¹ Gallup Korea Daily Opinion No. 257, www.gallup.go.kr.

¹² The effects go in the same direction when analyzed for SP supporters, main opposition Minjoo Party (MP; Democratic Party) supporters, and respondents who participated in candlelight protests. See *Figs. 2–13 in the Appendix*. We initially expected respondents who are more likely to be sympathetic to protest as a political tactic (i.e., MP voters and candlelight protesters) to reward the protest strategy more but that is not the case. We expected this for MP voters because many former pro-democracy activists joined the current and/or predecessor parties of the MP. For example, in 2016, out of the 234 nominated MP candidates, 62 candidates (26.5%) have been arrested during the authoritarian period for their involvements in student and labor movements that were a part of the larger democracy movement (*Joongang Ilbo*, 2016). We might also expect the respondents' view of the scandal to affect their vote choice. As *Fig. 10 in the Appendix* shows, there's no statistical difference in vote choice for loyalty vs. protest and loyalty vs. exit among those who attended the candlelight protests – those who are more likely to have been critical of the scandal.

¹³ Using the ordinal variables for *Candidate Supported* and *Corrupt Candidate* produces substantively and statistically similar results, as does using logit models. Incorporating covariates such as gender, age, partisanship, ideology, education, and protest participation produces equivalent results. See results in the Appendix.

¹⁴ BP's presidential candidate, Yoo Seong-min, put forth more left-leaning economic policies than the LKP candidate Hong Jun-pyo, but maintained traditional conservative stances on national defense and security issues.

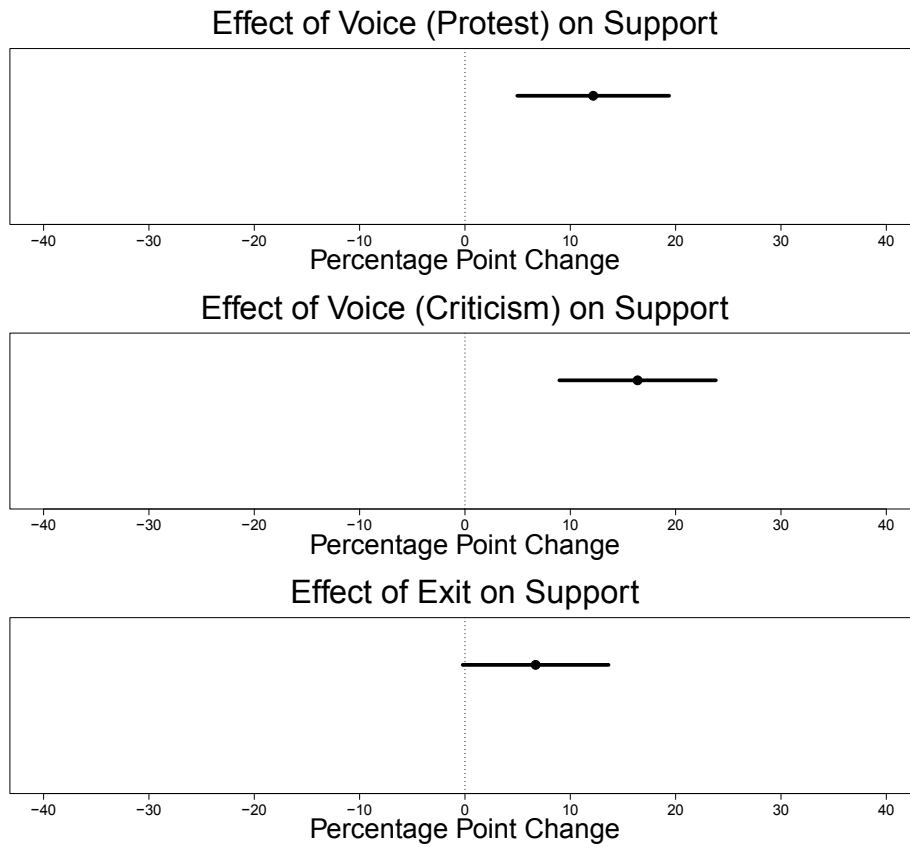


Fig. 1. The percentage point change in support for a politician by strategy with loyalty as a baseline. Full sample of respondents. 95% confidence intervals.

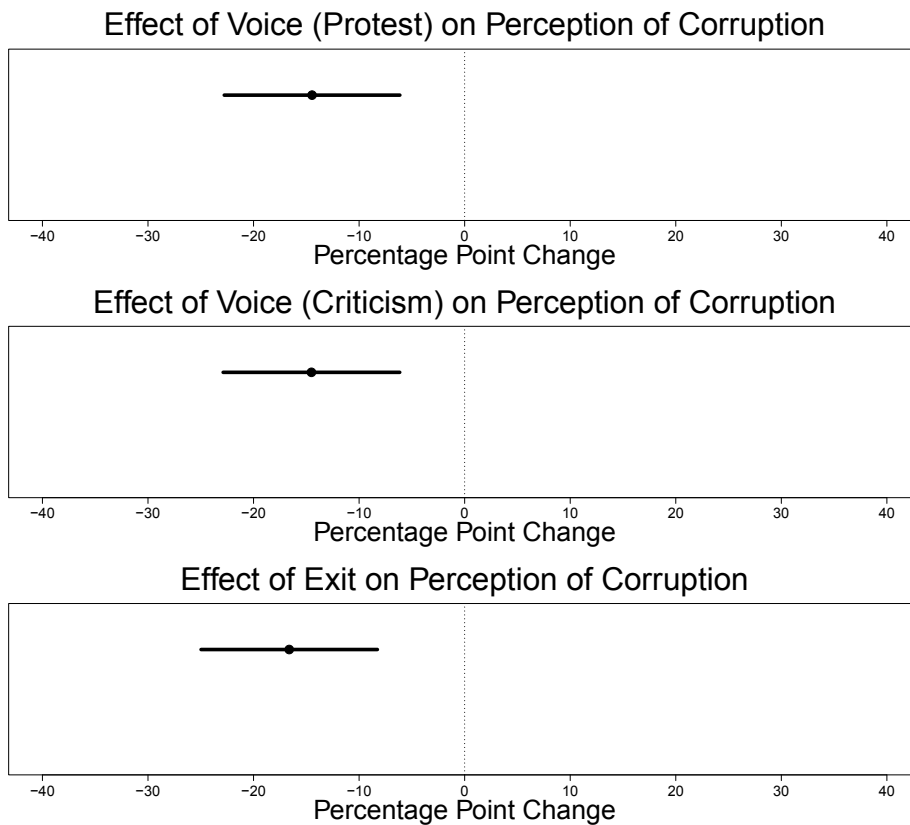


Fig. 2. The percentage point change in perception of a politician as corrupt by strategy with loyalty as a baseline. Full sample of respondents. 95% confidence intervals.

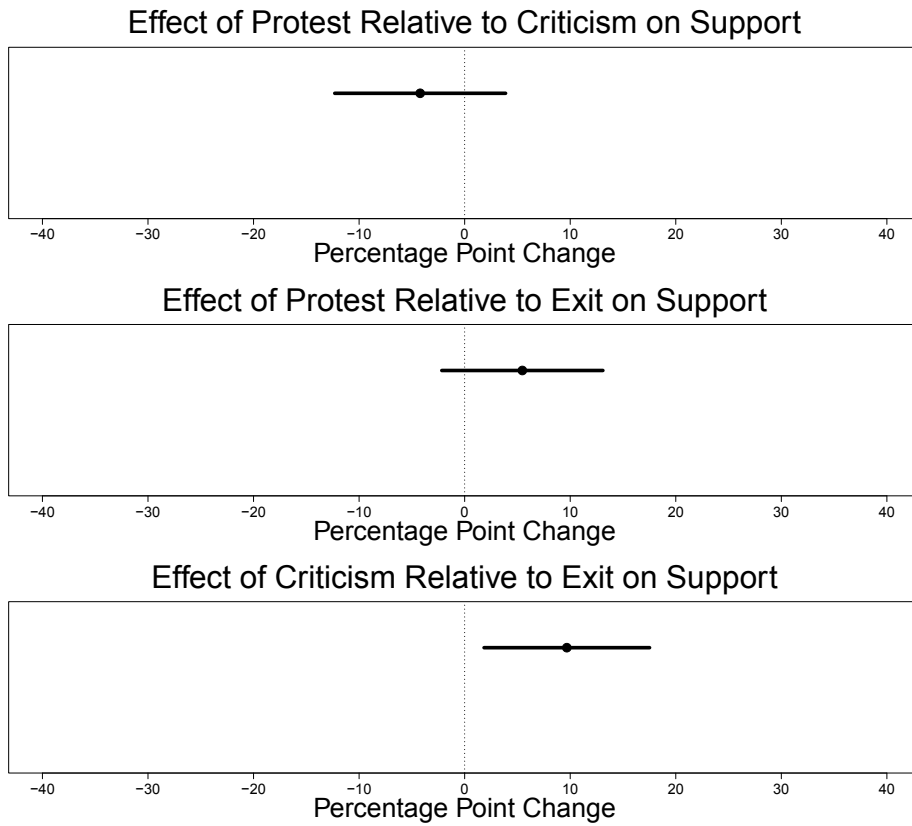


Fig. 3. The percentage point change in support for a politician by strategies compared. Full sample of respondents. 95% confidence intervals.

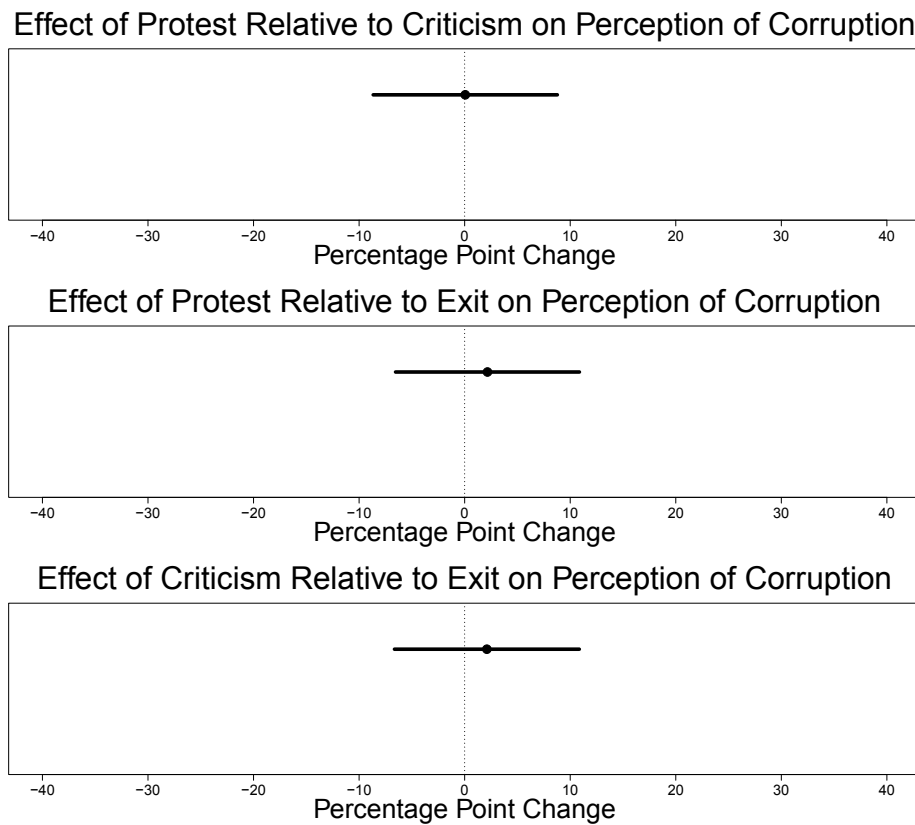


Fig. 4. The percentage point change in perception of a politician as corrupt by strategies compared. Full sample of respondents. 95% confidence intervals.

Table 1
Number and percentage of classifiable open-ended responses based on people's reasons for supporting the exit candidate.

Exit: Reasons for Supporting	
Character	12 (48%)
Partisan	7 (28%)
New, fresh, clean/uncorrupted	6 (24%)
Total	25 (100%)

Table 2
Number and percentage of classifiable open-ended responses based on people's reasons for not supporting the exit candidate.

Exit: Reasons for Opposing	
Partisan	44 (36.1%)
Corrupt/connected to Park's scandal	44 (36.1%)
Character	34 (27.8%)
Total	122 (100%)

character or views change just by entering a new party.”¹⁵ Another 44 (approximately 36%) answered that the exit candidate, by association, is corrupt or connected to the scandal. These responses also included statements such as, “I don't think all [former SP politicians] are corrupt, but I still think they are somewhat responsible [for the corruption].”

This finding – that the two parties are perceived to be similar by the public despite the party split – is consistent with Hellmann (2014)'s argument that Korea's party system is *unevenly* institutionalized with the development of a stable interparty competition based on programmatic/ideological linkages without a formal organizational base. Therefore, one potential explanation is that while the exit strategy may have helped the hypothetical candidate to appear less corrupt (compared to those staying in SP), his/her electability as a candidate of the new party did not increase as much due to the two parties not being ideologically differentiable. As one respondent noted: “Party switching seems to be an act of show, not a result of one's change in political ideology.”

6.3.2. Why is protest no more effective than criticism?

We also use the open-ended responses to explore why, out of the two voice strategies, protest is no more effective than criticism in increasing electoral support and/or decreasing perception of corruption. In the study, 248 and 252 respondents were randomly assigned to the criticism and protest strategies, respectively. For the criticism strategy scenario, 81 of them (approximately 35%) indicated that the likelihood of them voting for the candidate is above the midpoint. Of them, 34 clearly articulated why they would vote for him/her. As for the protest strategy scenario, 71 out of 252 respondents (approximately 28%) were more likely to support the candidate, and 33 of them provided classifiable open-ended responses. When we categorize and compare the open-ended responses, we find that people's reasoning behind supporting the criticism and protest candidates are similar, but their reasons for not supporting these candidates slightly differ. For both scenarios, respondents provided similar types of explanations for their support (see Table 3). While the first three categories were also found in the open-ended responses to the exit scenario, the fourth category was unique to the voice (criticism and voice) scenario.

¹⁵ Out of the 251 respondents who were assigned to the exit scenario, 194 indicated that the likelihood of them voting for the exit candidate is at or below the midpoint. Of the 194, 122 clearly articulated why they are less likely to vote for the exit candidate. The character category includes responses pointing out the candidate's character such as being opportunistic, irresponsible, and/or untrustworthy.

Table 3
Number and percentage of classifiable open-ended responses based on people's reasons for supporting the criticism and protest candidates.

Criticism: Reasons for Supporting		Protest: Reasons for Supporting	
Character	23 (65.7%)	Character	14 (42.4%)
Clean/uncorrupted	6 (17.1%)	Clean/uncorrupted	6 (18.2%)
Partisan	3 (8.6%)	Partisan	7 (21.2%)
Public attentiveness	3 (8.6%)	Public attentiveness	6 (18.2%)
Total	34 (100%)	Total	33 (100%)

The first and largest category is the personal character of the candidate associated with the act of criticism or protest. A candidate who engaged in criticism or protest was perceived as trustworthy, righteous, having conscience, and/or praised for acknowledging the wrongdoing of the president and/or the ruling party. This category included responses such as: “Although this candidate was a member of the SP, s/he expressed his/her own stance by participating in the candlelight protest” or “S/he has the conscience to point out the wrongdoings of his/her own party.” The second category included responses expressing support for the candidate for being clean or unrelated to the corruption scandal. The third category included partisan responses such as “[I am likely to vote for this candidate] because s/he is an SP/conservative candidate.” Lastly, the fourth category, which did not appear in the open-ended responses corresponding to the exit strategy scenario, focused on candidate's attentiveness to public opinion as a reason for support. This category included statements such as: “Instead of blindly following the party's opinion, s/he listened and acted in accordance to the demands of the public [to impeach president Park]” or “I think I'll support this candidate because I think s/he will make the effort to do politics correctly because s/he shares the same interests as the people.” These open-ended responses suggest that unlike the exit strategy, the two voice strategies can signal to the public that the politician is more attentive to the needs of the people, especially in the context of mass mobilization.

In contrast, in the open-ended responses written by those less likely to vote for candidates pursuing the voice strategies, the criticism candidate was described as untrustworthy or selfish or opportunistic for speaking out against his/her own party. As Table 4 shows, personal characteristics were identified as the biggest reason why respondents did not support the criticism candidate.¹⁶ A good number of respondents assigned to the protest scenario (approximately 24%) also answered that the candidate's character (e.g., opportunistic, cowardly, hypocritical, etc.) made them less likely to vote for the protest candidate.¹⁷ However, unlike in the case of criticism, some respondents (approximately 6%) criticized and did not support the protest candidate because of his/her use of protest itself, not because of the character associated with the act of protest, saying: “Participating in the candlelight protest demonstrates that s/he is incapable of taking care of internal matters [inside his/her own party] and lacks self-cultivation by taking care of the matter from the outside.” or “I will not decide whether I will support this candidate or not based on whether s/he participated in anti-Park candlelight protests. What matters is what s/he has done as a National Assembly member, representing the people.”

¹⁶ Out of 248 who were randomly assigned to the criticism strategy scenario, 167 participants indicated that their likelihood of voting for the candidate was at or below the midpoint. Of them, 109 respondents clearly articulated why they were less likely to vote for the candidate. The remaining either misunderstood the follow-up question or provided an unclassifiable answer.

¹⁷ Out of 252 who were randomly assigned to the protest strategy scenario, 181 respondents indicated that their likelihood of voting for the candidate was at or below the midpoint. Of them, 127 clearly articulated why they were less likely to vote for the candidate. The remaining either misunderstood the follow-up question or provided an unclassifiable answer.

Table 4
Number and percentage of classifiable open-ended responses based on people's reasons for not supporting the criticism and protest candidates.

Criticism: Reasons for Opposing		Protest: Reasons for Opposing	
Character	41 (37.6%)	Character	31 (24.4%)
Corrupted/connected to scandal	37 (34.0%)	Corrupt/connected to scandal	44 (34.6%)
Partisan	31 (28.4%)	Partisan	44 (34.6%)
		Use of protest	8 (6.3%)
Total	109 (100%)	Total	127 (100%)

These responses suggest that the public might not reward the protest strategy because citizens see protest as a political tool for citizens but not for politicians who should focus on their work and responsibilities within the institutional setting. Other responses reveal that voters do not reward protest candidates because they question the sincerity of politicians' engagement in protest; for example, "An SP politician participating in the candlelight protest is probably a political show." or "I think this candidate participated in the candlelight protest to improve his/her own personal image."

Although many respondents have participated in the Candlelight Movement themselves and consider the protests to have had a substantive impact on bringing about Park's impeachment,¹⁸ the open-ended responses suggest to us that because the public regards politicians' primary job to be their political activities inside the legislature and/or considers their participation in protest to be insincere, protest strategy seems to have less of an impact on how citizens evaluate their performance (or quality) as politicians, including their responsibility for corruption.

7. Conclusion

Frequent changes in party arrangements – merges, splits, and name changes – have plagued post-transition South Korea, contributing to a weakly institutionalized party system and high levels of electoral volatility. The common understanding among South Korean politicians is that a change of party name is a way to create a new image and secure new voters. This study finds that changing the name of the party is less effective than leaving the party to form a new organization or taking a stance against the politicians responsible for the decline in party reputation. Although politicians who joined BP, a splinter party with a similar platform to SP (now LKP), are both more likely to be elected and less likely to be perceived as corrupt than those who stayed in the organization, making a statement calling for the President's impeachment is more effective at winning votes.

The findings of this paper suggest that there are a number of ways, in which politicians can put distance between themselves and a scandal in their party and escape collective electoral accountability. Even though voters might unwittingly contribute to the destabilization of the party system by rewarding politicians who switch parties when the brand of their party deteriorates, publicly signaling disapproval of the culpable party colleagues – through involvement in demonstrations or open criticism – is just as or more effective. However, politicians' behavior is shaped by their perception of risk, which may not always be accurate (Wenzelburger, 2014), and politicians who face low costs to party switching may do so if convinced that it will help their reelection prospects, even if other available strategies could be more successful.

¹⁸ Approximately 30% of our respondents participated in the 2016–2017 anti-Park Geun-hye candlelight protests. 77% indicated that knowing or having read about the candlelight protests made them more inclined to support Park's impeachment. When asked "Do you believe that the anti-Park Geun-hye candlelight protests affected the chances of bringing about Park's impeachment?" as many as 80% responded that the protests had a substantive effect.

Moreover, although these strategies might allow some politicians to rescue their individual reputations, it is not clear whether they could also restore the collective reputation of the party.

The 2016 political scandal surrounding President Park Geun-hye that led to her impeachment and decline in incumbent party image is not unique to South Korea as Brazil's first female President Dilma Rousseff was also impeached in 2016 for her involvement in the Petrobras scandal and U.S. President Richard Nixon resigned in 1973 when the Watergate scandal escalated. At the same time, we acknowledge that these results, at least for the exit strategy, may not travel to places where party systems have been institutionalized and partisan identities are consolidated. First, politicians face different incentives in countries where parties are well-established. They will try to reform and repair the party image rather than switch parties because the costs of exit and new party formation are higher both organizationally (as parties are more entrenched in society and have more developed structures) and in terms of ideological cohesiveness (where cleavages are well defined and clearly represented by parties). Second, unlike in fluid party systems, voters have strong partisan attachments and are both more likely to overlook their party's wrongdoing (Anduiza et al., 2013) and less likely to reward politicians for leaving their preferred party. Transaction costs of switching are higher for legislators with partisan constituencies than those with personalistic constituencies (Desposato, 2006). Lastly, the effectiveness of the exit strategy may be context-specific since it likely depends on how different the alternate party is perceived to be from the original organization.

Even in highly institutionalized party systems, politicians may have incentives to criticize their party or party leaders either through verbal statements or by joining protests. Our findings suggest that such blame avoidance strategies are likely to be effective. This is in line with research, which shows that "costly" rhetoric (i.e., rhetoric harmful to politicians' own party) increases credibility and is more likely to move public opinion (Baum and Groeling, 2009). Moreover, party systems are weakly institutionalized and the analyzed behavior is prevalent in many contexts – from Asia through Latin America to Eastern Europe. The results of this study provide insight into voter behavior in light of corruption scandals and politicians' ability to escape electoral accountability in conditions present in many new democracies around the globe. They also need not be limited to corruption scandals and should generalize to other situations of decline in party reputation, which are often accompanied by mass protest, such as introducing unpopular legislation.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.09.006>. Replication data for this article can be found online at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/FV8QQ9>.

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