

ERC Starting Grant Project - Research Proposal Summary

November 2022

Participation and Representation in the Digital Age (PRD): Participation Repertoires in an Era of Unequal Representation

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Planned project duration: 2023-2028 (60 months)

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PROJECT ABSTRACT

This project addresses the question of how people incorporate increasingly prevalent nonelectoral political acts into individual-level repertoires of participation; and how well represented these different types of political participators are. At a time of growing concern about unequal representation in democracies, two conflicting global trends over the last several decades highlight the importance of these questions: a clear decline in voter turnout, especially among lower status groups; and evidence of increased nonelectoral participation, especially among higher status groups. To assess how these trends in political participation affect patterns of representation, PRD's theoretical framework integrates new approaches for investigating the links between individuals' participation repertoires (i.e., how individuals combine voting, protest, online activism) and objective and subjective representational outcomes.

PRD's work packages employ a multi-method approach: "Political acts and political participators" (WP1) analyzes separate surveys and a harmonized dataset and includes methodological innovations using new techniques for identifying participation repertoires. "Participation-representation connection" (WP2) investigates the connections between the political acts and political participators analyzed in WP1 and representational outcomes, and integrates these findings with qualitative fieldwork with activists who focus on unequal representation. Finally, "Mobilizing and organizing low-status groups" (WP3) conducts novel experimental studies using Twitter panel data and field experiments to identify interventions with the potential to produce more equal representational outcomes in the future. By combining an original theoretical framework and methodological innovations, PRD will conduct a uniquely comprehensive empirical investigation of participation repertoires, with a focus on mechanisms that can reduce inequalities in participation and representation.

Section a. EXTENDED SYNOPSIS

a.1. Challenge and Research Questions

How do people incorporate increasingly prevalent nonelectoral political acts into their individual-level repertoires of political participation? And how well are these different types of political participators represented in both objective and subjective measures of representation? These questions are of utmost importance in an era marked by concerns about unequal representation (Bartels 2018; Lupu & Pontusson, in press; Lupu & Warner, in press-a, in press-b) and democratic erosion (Dahlberg et al. 2015; Kriesi 2020; Lührmann & Lindberg 2019; Waldner & Lust 2018; Wuttke et al., in press). Two conflicting trends in political participation worldwide over the past several decades highlight the importance of conducting robust empirical investigations of these questions: a clear **decline in electoral-oriented participation**, particularly among lower status groups (Blais & Rubenson 2013; Kostelka 2017; Kostelka & Blais 2021; Scarrow et al. 2017); and evidence indicating **an increase in nonelectoral political participation**, which tends to be concentrated among higher status groups (Dalton, in press; Esaiasson & Narud 2013; Jenkins, in press; Monforte & Morales 2018; Theocharis & van Deth 2018). Research suggests that the apparent increase in the forms and prevalence of nonelectoral political acts (e.g., protest, online activism) is motivated, at least in part, by participants' interest in influencing representational outcomes. However, there is surprisingly little evidence about how different types of political participation affect objective or subjective measures of representation.

The Participation and Representation in the Digital Age (PRD) project's primary objective is to understand how individuals' broad repertoires of political participation relate to representational outcomes in an era marked by concern about unequal representation and democratic erosion. Two distinct yet potentially conflicting democratic ideals lie at the heart of this investigation. The first is **responsiveness** to the expressed will of the people, meaning that representational outcomes should reflect the messages communicated by the public. The second central democratic ideal to be considered is **equality of representation**, even of those who are not politically active. Given the well-established finding that people who are the most politically active also tend to be advantaged socioeconomically (Dalton 2017; Oser, in press-a; Schlozman et al. 2012; Teorell et al. 2007; Verba et al. 1978), a strong link between nonelectoral participation and representational outcomes could potentially contribute to unequal representation. Although achieving the democratic ideal of responsiveness to the expressed will of the people (e.g., through voting and additional acts of political communication) may enhance the representation of the politically active, there is also a risk that it will exacerbate documented patterns of unequal representation of society at large, potentially eroding the public's perceptions of democratic legitimacy. These central and potentially contradictory ideals of responsiveness and equality of representation lead to the last question motivating PRD: **How can traditionally lower status groups be mobilized and organized to reduce identified inequalities in contemporary patterns of political participation and representation?**

a.2. Theoretical Framework and Innovations

To answer these questions, I propose **four innovations** to political science scholarship's central conceptual model of the "Chain of Responsiveness," as articulated by G. Bingham Powell (2004: 92). Powell's model draws links between four stages of democratic responsiveness: (Stage 1) citizen preferences, (Stage 2) citizens' voting behavior, (Stage 3) selecting policymakers, and (Stage 4) public policies and outcomes. In this section, I summarize the fundamental theoretical, methodological, and empirical innovations that PRD introduces to this classic model to more fully investigate the participation-representation connection in contemporary democracies. The **first innovation** entails moving beyond the conventional focus on voting to assess individuals' broader participation repertoires to comprehensively examine the chain of responsiveness in contemporary democracies. The **second** innovation, informed by research on the increasing centrality of online

and digital behavior in social and political processes, incorporates online measures of political behavior and communication into a theoretical framework grounded in mainstream political science scholarship. **Third**, to comprehensively assess democratic responsiveness, PRD integrates the literature's standard focus on objective measures of representational outcomes with a focus on measures of subjective responsiveness. A **fourth** innovation, informed by the increasingly salient topic of unequal representation, investigates causal mechanisms that may expand individuals' participation repertoires, particularly among lower status groups.

The introduction of these innovations to the standard conceptual model of the chain of responsiveness creates a theoretical framework that enables PRD to **synthesize two theory-based expectations in the literature** that have not yet been brought into dialogue with each other in research on nonelectoral participation and democratic representation. First, a **communication** hypothesis, prominent in scholarly research in the United States, views participation beyond the electoral arena as a potentially effective channel of political communication that may enhance the representation of those who are politically active in multiple ways (e.g., Griffin & Newman 2005; Schlozman et al. 2018). Second, a contrasting **grievance** argument, prominent in studies of nonelectoral participation by European scholars, is based on the observation that recent increases in nonelectoral participation may be attributable primarily to political frustration and anti-system attitudes that do not translate into enhanced representational outcomes for the politically active (e.g., Bremer et al. 2020; Klandermans 2014; Kurer et al. 2019). Notably, an assessment of the communication and grievance hypotheses requires analyzing objective measures of representation, as well as individuals' subjective perceptions of how well they are represented, as evident in attitudes such as political efficacy (e.g., Campbell et al. 1954; Oser, in press-b). The **innovations I propose in PRD's theoretical framework** create an opportunity to test the theory-based expectations from these two heretofore unconnected strands of scholarship, thereby clarifying the implications of increased nonelectoral participation for contemporary representational processes.

a.3. Scientific Background and PRD's Three Main Research Questions

A core idea in political theory is that democratic governance should be sensitive to the will of the people (Dahl 1961; Mill [1861] 1962; Pitkin 1967). Several decades of empirical research have produced strong evidence of an **opinion-representation** connection in advanced democracies (Miller & Stokes 1963; Rasmussen et al. 2019; Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Yet the causal mechanisms underlying the link between "opinion" and "policy" remain subject to debate (Shapiro 2011: 999). Building on scholarship on the opinion-representation nexus, research on the **participation-representation** connection has focused primarily on the act of **voting**. Yet the empirical evidence on the relationship between voting and representational outcomes has been mixed (e.g., Ellis et al. 2006; Griffin & Newman 2005). **A critical step forward was recently taken to answer the question of whether voters are better represented than nonvoters** in Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe, and Oser's (2021) cross-national investigation of policy responsiveness. Focusing on social policy, this study of 36 OECD countries between 1980 and 2017 established that governments are responsive to voters but not to all citizens. However, the study's test of causal mechanisms found that electoral turnout is not a causal factor that induces policy responsiveness, thus concluding that while voters are better represented than nonvoters, researchers have yet to identify the mechanisms by which voters obtain enhanced representation. A prominent theory discussed for decades in the literature, that has yet to be systematically tested empirically, is that voters tend to express their political voice through multiple acts of participation in addition to voting (Verba & Nie 1972; Verba et al. 1995). A new line of research has taken advantage of recent advances in data collection and research designs to provide **some evidence in favor of the communication hypothesis**, at least for some types of political acts, certain policy issues, and in specific country contexts (Gillion 2012; Hooghe & Oser 2016; Htun & Weldon 2012; Leighley & Oser 2018; Rasmussen & Reher 2019; Wasow 2020; Wouters & Walgrave 2017). While this body of work provides some evidence supporting the communication hypothesis, a definitive

assessment will require a systematic, longitudinal investigation of the connections between political participation, broadly defined, and both objective and subjective representational outcomes.

Two separate strands of emerging research on participation and representation clarify that it has become increasingly important to focus on socio-economic inequalities in research on the participation-representation connection. **First, recent scholarship on unequal representation** has concluded that the opinion-representation advantage of higher status groups first documented in studies on the United States (Bartels 2018; Gilens & Page 2014) is also clearly evident in Europe and worldwide (Lupu & Warner, in press-a, in press-b; Schakel & van der Pas, in press). **Second, new research on digital technology and politics** indicates that digital transformations of policymaking are meaningful and worthy of careful investigation by scholars of political and social processes (e.g., Gilardi, in press). In this realm of inquiry, research has established that usage of digital and social media reinforces existing socioeconomic inequalities in political participation (Oser & Boulianne 2020; Schlozman et al. 2010). Further, research has shown that social media plays an increasingly vital role in international politics, providing both opportunities for online activism and exposure to political content (Lotan et al. 2011; Tufekci 2017). Innovative studies on social media as a causal pathway through which political communication affects individuals' behaviors and attitudes (e.g., Bail et al. 2018; Bond et al. 2012) also suggest the importance of integrating research on political content exposure through social media with mainstream scholarship on political participation and representation.

Informed by these literatures, the project's first research question is **(RQ1)**: "How do people incorporate increasingly prevalent nonelectoral political acts into their individual-level repertoires of political participation?" Research on participation repertoires leads to the second research question **(RQ2)**: "How well are different types of political participators represented in both objective and subjective representational outcomes?" While the first two research questions focus on phenomena best studied through observational data gathered in the past, the third research question shifts the focus of inquiry to investigate possible future pathways to mitigate existing patterns of unequal participation and, potentially, unequal representation. Thus, the final research question asks **(RQ3)**: "How can traditionally lower status groups be mobilized and organized with attention to reducing identified inequalities in patterns of political participation and representation?"

a.4. Methodology and Work Packages

I translate these research questions into three work packages that include the following types of scholarly **contributions**: manuscripts for publication in peer-reviewed journals (n=16); findings reports (n=6) that will disseminate open access findings using data visualization of key results along with replication files that use best practices for reproducibility (e.g., Alvarez & Heuberger 2022); and a harmonized dataset that will be maintained throughout the course of the project using best practices of active maintenance (Peer et al. 2021). The creation and analysis of the harmonized dataset in the first two work packages will be informed by my co-authored article on social policy responsiveness to voting (Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe & Oser 2021); by harmonized variables produced by the Survey Data Recycling project (SDR 2021; Wyszumłek 2019); and by input from PRD expert network member Prof. Markus Gangl, PI of the ERC Advanced project POLAR, whose project is creating a harmonized dataset on related topics of economic inequality and polarization. PRD's harmonized dataset and its analysis will provide a fundamental contribution to the literature on political participation and inequality, and the broad geographic scope of the analysis will test the generalizability of the findings across diverse contexts.

WP1. Political Acts and Political Participators

In WP1, we will conduct the most comprehensive cross-national investigation to date of participatory inequalities of electoral and nonelectoral participation. We will conduct this investigation by analyzing political acts in multiple cross-sectional and panel survey datasets (**Objective 1a**) and one originally

constructed harmonized dataset (**Objective 1b**), as well as by analyzing types of political participators through advancing methodological innovations in latent class analysis (LCA) (**Objective 1c**). PRD's focus on methodological innovations in LCA will enable the extension of my ongoing collaboration with statistical methodologists Zsuzsa Bakk (Leiden University, Netherlands) and Roberto Di Mari (University of Catania, Italy), who specialize in latent variable and categorical data analysis. Distinct from recent pioneering research that has investigated action repertoires in contentious episodes (Bojar & Kriesi 2021), LCA identifies repertoires at the level of individual political behavior. Based on my prior research using this approach to identify political participator types in one country context (the United States) analyzing cross-sectional data (i.e., single points in time), I expect that we will identify several main types of participators, including all-around activists, specialists in only certain political acts (e.g., electoral-oriented only; nonelectoral only; vote-only), and a completely inactive group (Oser 2017; Oser, in press-a; Oser et al. 2013; Oser et al. 2014). This work has clarified that methodological innovations are needed to conduct valid LCA models using complex data. My work with Bakk and Di Mari has already begun to advance innovations by providing the statistical underpinnings for conducting LCA in multilevel data structures with covariates using a stepwise approach in a co-authored article in *Structural Equation Modeling* (Bakk, Di Mari, Oser & Kuha, in press).

For PRD we will advance three primary methodological innovations. **(1) Multilevel LCA:** develop statistically reliable and computationally efficient estimators to analyze complex datasets in diverse country contexts and over time. **(2) Measurement equivalence:** develop estimators to test differential item functioning in multilevel LCA for specific items/indicators. This innovation will allow us to test, for example, whether the item of "protest" functions differently in individuals' participator repertoires in different country contexts. **(3) Inclusion of covariates in complex multivariate datasets:** develop computational advances in software implementation to enable model convergence. To accompany these methodological innovations, the PRD team will create and disseminate an open-sourced software package (in R) that will allow the implementation of these innovations for the broader community of social science researchers conducting typological analysis. These methodological innovations will equip us to conduct the most comprehensive analysis to date of distinct types of political participators and their correlates over time. The findings will enable us to answer the important question of whether documented increases in nonelectoral participation are due to individuals who are already active in electoral politics adding nonelectoral political acts to their participation repertoires; or whether nonelectoral specialists of various kinds have emerged over time. Additionally, the longitudinal analysis of sociodemographic correlates will provide new insights as to whether suggestions in the literature of increased inequalities in recent years are supported by the best available evidence.

WP2. Participation-Representation Connection

The participator types identified in WP1 allow us to test how well these participator types are represented in objective and subjective representational measures, with attention to testing the **communication versus grievance hypotheses**. Specifically, evidence in favor of the communication hypothesis would indicate that participator types with high scores on nonelectoral participation indicators have a relatively high positive association with objective and subjective representational measures compared to other identified participator types; and this positive association remains stable or increases over time. In contrast, evidence favoring the grievance hypothesis would show that participator types with high scores on nonelectoral participation indicators have a relatively low association with objective and subjective representational measures compared to other identified participator types; and this association remains stable or decreases over time. We investigate representation primarily through the left-right ideology/policy dimension, which is still considered the most salient dimension for individuals across polities (Dassonneville et al. 2021). In addition, informed by recent research on the salience of policy dimensions beyond the left-right axis (e.g., Lupu & Warner, in press-a, in press-b), we will also analyze additional policy dimensions when data are available.

To conduct this analysis, WP2's first objective (**Objective 2a**) of survey-based statistical analysis includes three steps. In **Step 1**, we will merge relevant country-level objective responsiveness indicators with survey datasets analyzed in WP1, including country-year data on welfare spending in OECD countries, as well as other national-level policy and ideology indicators when relevant (e.g., the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, legislator policy positions, and legislative agenda data). In **Step 2**, we will implement an innovative research design that extends the classic **median voter** theory (Downs 1957) that posits that in a representative democracy, the positions of elected representatives will converge to the "median voter's" left-right ideological position. We will adapt this traditional focus on the "median voter" to assess how well the left-right ideological positions of various types of **median participators** are represented in social policy, as measured by OECD spending measures (and potentially for additional policy dimensions, depending on data availability). For example, if participator types with broad participation repertoires (e.g., the "all-around activist") obtain higher levels of representation of their median ideology than the "vote-only" group, this finding would support the communication hypothesis in relation to objective measures of representation. In **Step 3**, we complement this analysis of single country-year datapoints representing the mean ideology of different types of participators to conduct multilevel analyses (made possible through LCA innovations in WP1) of individuals nested in countries. Our synthesis of findings using these approaches will provide an assessment of the communication and grievance hypotheses focused on both objective and subjective representational measures.

The more limited data available on online political participation in established survey programs will be complemented by the qualitative fieldwork conducted in **Objective 2b**. The case selected for qualitative fieldwork is the global Occupy protest cycle that began in 2010, which is a particularly useful case study for testing the communication vs. grievance hypotheses for several reasons. It is among the most recent significant waves of globally networked protest (Della Porta & Mattoni 2014); researchers have identified objective outcomes of the protest (Della Porta et al. 2017) but have not yet assessed their perceived impact among protesters; the protests focused on economic claims and on deficiencies in democratic systems (Roos & Oikonomakis 2014); and the action repertoire that emerged from these protests has undergone significant transformations since they began, including the role of electorally oriented and digitally networked political acts (Della Porta et al. 2017). The PRD team's qualitative fieldwork will enable the extension of research currently underway in Israel in the context of my Israel Science Foundation grant project led by research team member Aya Shoshan, who has researched the Occupy protests and their aftermath in Israel and Spain (Shoshan 2018; Shultziner & Shoshan 2018). In Year 1 of the project, the PRD team will launch new fieldwork to include an interview sample in Spain (n=25) and additional interviews in European and EU partner countries that had a meaningful amount of Occupy movement activity, including Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Turkey, and the UK (an additional n=20). The survey instrument will use a semi-structured protocol to examine Occupy activists' perceptions of their changing participation repertoires over the past decade, including digital opportunities for political action, and the effectiveness of their political activism repertoires in achieving representation. This qualitative fieldwork with a cohort of activists for whom we have access to data from over a decade ago is an important complement to the survey data analyzed in WP1 and WP2, which has limited data on the role of online and digitally networked political acts. As the movements born in 2010–2011 were among the first protest cycles to use online social networks to mobilize a globally networked protest and whose movement leaders subsequently developed innovative digital activism tools (Della Porta 2013), this case offers a unique opportunity to study activists' perceptions of the role of digital tools in their broad participation repertoires with a decade of retrospective insight.

WP3. Mobilizing and Organizing Lower Status Groups

The final work package, "**Mobilizing and Organizing Lower Status Groups**" (WP3) shifts the theoretical focus from WP2's attention on assessing the relative strength of historical evidence in favor of the

communication vs. grievance hypotheses to a future-looking focus on identifying communication mechanisms that serve as pathways for mobilizing and organizing lower status groups. The first objective (**Objective 3a**) builds on recent studies that have identified social media as a pathway for exposure to political content (e.g., Bail et al. 2018; Bond et al. 2012) by identifying differential effects of content exposure on political attitudes and behavior for different types of content and different subgroups of the population. This PRD study will enable an important extension of my ongoing collaboration with Nir Grinberg (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel), a computational social scientist, in a project using a unique Twitter panel to identify distinct and prototypical types of political content exposure on Twitter (Shamir, Grinberg & Oser 2022). An empirical key to this study is a newly constructed Twitter panel by Grinberg and colleagues, as documented in Grinberg et al.'s (2019) *Science* article, which used a pilot version of this dataset (comprised of ~16,000 individuals). The currently expanded panel of ~1.8 million individuals is representative of the registered U.S. voting population on Twitter (Hughes et al. 2021) and provides an unprecedented view of the heterogeneity of exposure to political content on social media for distinctive sociodemographic groups, which we will leverage in the following two steps. In **Step 1**, we will develop and validate a state-of-the-art BERT-based machine-learning classifier (Devlin et al. 2019) that will identify distinct types of mobilizing political content and provide first-of-its-kind knowledge of the levels of exposure to mobilizing content for different sociodemographic groups, with particular attention to lower status groups. Relevant types of political content we expect to identify include, for example, affective (emotional) mobilizing content which may have a stronger effect on lower status groups (Iyer & Achia 2021), and informational content related to journalistic “horse-race” reporting (Westwood et al. 2020), which is anticipated to have a stronger effect on higher status groups. In **Step 2**, we will then conduct an experiment to test the causal effect of exposure to different types of mobilizing content during the 2024 U.S. presidential elections, following a design similar to the field experiment used by Bail et al. (2018). The experiment will introduce interventions exposing consenting, randomly assigned participants to mobilization messages on their Twitter accounts and measuring the average treatment effect on key variables of political behavior and attitudes as collected via additional survey waves. In addition to providing new knowledge on the causal impact of mobilizing content on behavior and attitudes, we will produce a findings report to inform public debate on the regulation of modern information systems, including social media.

Moving from the realm of social media to the domain of global civic organizations, in **Objective 3b** we will conduct field experiments to investigate the effects of the creation of opportunities for meaningful civic action on individuals’ participation repertoires and political attitudes. This study focuses on a currently missing component in scholars’ understandings of what transforms people from being politically apathetic to becoming politically engaged. This study will allow an extension of my ongoing collaboration with Hahrie Han (Johns Hopkins University) on organizing and collective action focused on the U.S. context (Han, Baggetta & Oser, 2022) to conduct field experiments in Europe that will investigate how different opportunities for concrete individual-level civic action, “micro-practices,” may prompt people to become actively involved in civic and political action to communicate their political voices in the public sphere (Han & Kim, in press). The methodological approach in Objective 3b is adapted from Han’s (2016) experimental design in her *American Political Science Review* article on the organizational roots of political activism. Informed by Danielle Allen’s arguments in defense of equality (e.g., Allen 2014; Allen & Somanathan 2020), we hypothesize that, in addition to expanding individuals’ participation repertoires and strengthening their sense of subjective representation, these micro-practices may foster people’s sense of political agency by expanding the sphere of influence in which they experience the autonomy to act. Consistent with PRD’s theoretical framework, the experimental designs will pay particular attention to micro-practices that are effective for mobilizing and organizing lower status groups, with attention to digital and online opportunities for political

engagement. We have begun to design an empirical pilot study to test the theoretical model through a novel survey experiment that assesses whether inviting people to participate in meaningful civic action broadens their participation repertoires and affects several attitudinal measures, including subjective representation, political agency, and support for pro-democratic norms. We have already identified potential partner organizations for launching PRD field experiments in Year 3 of the project. In the Integrative Workshop with expert network members in Year 3, we will synthesize the survey-based and qualitative fieldwork findings from WP1 and WP2 to finalize a series of experimental field designs to be conducted in digital and online frameworks, as well as field experiments that will take place in at least one European country context.

a.5. Impact Assessment and Feasibility

The project's main risk is its complexity, including the need for a relatively large and skilled research team to implement the Integrated Work Plan detailed in B2. Yet as noted in my scientific narrative, I have laid the foundation to overcome this challenge through my involvement in the international academic community. The main challenge at the current juncture is to obtain resources to launch the project's work plan, as the proposed project's work packages cannot be executed without the resources detailed in the project's budget. In an era of growing concerns about the quality of representative democracy and democratic erosion, PRD's theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions have the potential to generate new insights into the participation-representation connection at a particularly consequential moment for representative democracies.

PRD's INTERNATIONAL EXPERT NETWORK

Colleagues who communicated their commitment by January 2022 to serve in an advisory role to PRD:

Stephen Ansolabahere (Harvard University), André Blais (University of Montreal), Russell Dalton (University of California, Irvine), Ruth Dassonneville (University of Montreal); Michael Delli Carpini (University of Pennsylvania), Joshua Dubrow (Polish Academy of Sciences), Aina Gallego (University of Barcelona), Markus Gangl (Goethe University Frankfurt am Main), Rachel Gibson (University of Manchester), Marco Giugni (University of Geneva), Maria Grasso (Queen Mary University of London), Hahrie Han (Johns Hopkins University), Marc Hooghe (University of Leuven), Swen Hutter (Freie Universität Berlin), Shiro Kuriwaki (Yale University), David Lazer (Northeastern University), Jan Leighley (American University), Noam Lupu (Vanderbilt University), Sofie Marien (Leuven University), Daniel Oberski (Utrecht University), Mikael Persson (University of Gothenburg), G. Bingham Powell (University of Rochester), Anne Rasmussen (University of Copenhagen), Brian Schaffner (Tufts University), Frederick Solt (University of Iowa), Yannis Theocharis (Technical University of Munich), Kateřina Vrábliková (University of Bath), Chris Wlezien (University of Texas at Austin), and SDR project PIs: J. Craig Jenkins (Ohio University), Irina Tomescu-Dubrow, and K. Slomczynski (Polish Academy of Sciences).

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