The Political Economy of Political Philosophy: Discretionary Spending by Senators on Staff

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With respect to expenditures from the public purse, politicians play two roles: first, in conjunction with other members of the legislative body, they vote on a wide variety of appropriation measures and, second, in order to carry out their official duties, each politican is allocated a fixed amount of public funds for specific purposes to spend at his own discretion. Although considerable attention has been given to the maximizing behavior of politicians in the voting process in the economics literature, no one, to our knowledge, has investigated the expenditures of public funds under the direct control of politicians.[1] This paper attempts to alleviate this deficiency by investigating the expenditures for staff by U.S. senators in fiscal year 1978. In section 1, a brief discussion is given of senate staff spending and budgets; the hypotheses are developed in section 2 and are tested in section 3. The last section contains the conclusions and policy implications.

1. Budgets and Spending for Senate Staffs

In the U.S. Congress, a number of official allowances are provided to each member. Funds are allocated for hiring employees, travel, telephone expenses, stationery, and so forth. The analysis herein is concerned with the budgets and expenditures for staff, because the allocation for this purpose (1) is largest; (2) cannot be transferred to other uses or legally taken as income (a strict rule against nepotism prohibits hiring anyone with a familial relationship closer than second cousin); and, (3) cannot be carried over from one fiscal year to another. Also, detailed data are available.[2] Each senator's authorized allowance for administrative, legislative, and clerical assistance in fiscal year 1978 was determined by state population, as shown in table 1. In addition, each senator was also permitted to spend $149,286 for legislative assistance on committees. Although the levels of authorized staff allowances vary widely with population, it is apparent that, overall, economies of scale are believed to exist with respect to staff allowances. Salary restrictions are the only constraints placed on the senator's discretionary allocation of the staff budget: one employee's annual salary cannot exceed $49,941; eight others cannot exceed $47,500; and all other employees cannot exceed $30,807 per year. Staff are employed for a variety of purposes: to assist with legislative matters

TABLE 1.   Authorized Staff Allowances for U.S. Senators, Fiscal Year 1978

Population (in millions)	Allowance	Population (in millions)	Allowance
<2	$481,331	⩾10 < 11	$716,537
⩾2 < 3	495,293	⩾11 < 12	757,349
⩾3 < 4	528,995	⩾12 < 13	788,495
⩾4 < 5	572,263	⩾13 < 15	828,495
⩾5 < 7	607,705	⩾15 < 17	867,971
⩾7 < 8	644,937	⩾17 < 19	907,709
⩾8 < 9	664,627	⩾19 < 21	937,423
⩾9 < 10	685,391	⩾21	967,137

Source: U.S. Congress, Congressional Handbook (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 22.

(legislative aides), to respond to constituents' complaints and inquiries (case workers), to deal with the media (press aides), to operate area offices in the home state (state assistants), and to supervise the coterie of clerks, interns, typists, secretaries, and assorted factotums associated with a senatorial office. In general, the staff serves as the politician's "right hand" in performing the duties of public office.[3] By serving constituents and dealing effectively with the media, staff members can significantly influence the likelihood of their senator's reelection.

There is a broad consensus that the utility of an incumbent politician is enhanced by reelection (see, for example, Fiorina and Noll 1978). Given that staff services can contribute to the senator's standing with constituents which can influence voters, economic logic (and common sense) dictates that virtually all of the allocation for staff would be spent by every senator. This is not the case, however. In table 2, the ten senators who returned the largest percentages of their staff allocations are compared to the ten with the smallest percentages. For each senator, political party is reported along with three measures of the "conservativeness" of political philosophy: the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the American Conservative Union (ACU), and the AFL-CIO labor union scorecards which tally for each senator the percentage of "correct" votes.

Measures of political philosophy are included in table 2 because the difference in philosophy between individuals in either of the two spending extremes is striking. On the average, the senators who returned the highest percentage of their staff budgets are significantly more conservative than the most "profligate" politicians, regardless of the indicator of political philosophy.[4] Without exception, the top ten spenders are Democrats, but only four of the most frugal belong to that party. Each group differs considerably from the mean percentage returned by all 96 senators, 15.1 percent.[5]

From an economic perspective, the wide variation in the proportion of staff budget returned to the Treasury among senators is consistent with utility-

TABLE 2. The Ten Senators with the Smallest and the Largest Percentages of Unspent Staff Budgets Returned to the Treasury in Fiscal Year 1978 with Party Affiliation, Home State, and Three Measures of Conservative Ranking

Smallest Proportion Returned					Largest Proportion Returned				
Senator (party, state)	Percentage Returned	Conservative Ranking			Senator (party, state)	Percentage Returned	Conservative Ranking		
		ADA	AFL-CIO	ACU			ADA	AFL-CIO	ACU
Anderson (D, MN)	0.0	65	13	0	Scott (R, VA)	62.2	90	84	97
Clark (D, IA)	0.0	10	12	3	Zorinsky (D, NE)	53.1	75	72	73
Gravel (D, AK)	0.0	30	19	10	Pearson (R, KS)	50.2	70	61	14
Riegle (D, MI)	0.2	15	8	5	Burdick (D, ND)	42.5	45	16	24
Hart (D, CO)	0.2	35	20	5	Byrd (I, VA)	41.4	90	88	92
Haskell (D, CO)	1.4	50	24	8	Stafford (R, VT)	40.0	45	30	17
Melcher (D, MT)	1.8	55	26	24	Young (R, ND)	36.7	95	77	72
Stone (D, FL)	2.5	75	49	38	Chafee (R, RI)	32.2	45	46	22
Durkin (D, NH)	3.2	35	9	13	Randolph (D, WV)	29.8	70	25	32
Culver (D, IA)	3.8	15	11	3	Stennis (D, MS)	29.6	90	78	59
Mean	1.3	38.5	19.1	10.9	Mean	41.8	71.5	57.7	50.2
Standard deviation	1.45	22.24	12.22	11.70	Standard deviation	10.69	20.28	26.50	32.03

Source: U.S. Congress. Senate. *Report of the Secretary of the Senate,* 1978a, 1978b.

maximizing behavior only if utility, *ceteris paribus,* is enhanced by frugality
with public funds, i.e., some senators must derive satisfaction from returning
funds to the public purse. In general parlance, politicians who oppose ''exces-
sive'' government spending are considered conservatives. Thus, an interest-
ing hypothesis is whether a senator who is viewed as conservative in making
collective decisions is also conservative in the management of taxpayer's
money under his direct control. Or, equivalently, *ceteris paribus,* a conserva-
tive who practices what he preaches publicly should be parsimonious and
should return a greater proportion of staff allocation unspent. In short, are
conservatives fiscally conservative?

2. Determinants of Spending on Staff

Although indicative, the information shown in table 2 on staff expenditures
does not apply to all senators, but only to those in the highest and lowest
extremes. Further, factors other than political philosophy influence the pro-
portion of budget spent on staff, and these factors must also be taken into
account. These include the socioeconomic characteristics of the senator's
constituents, the characteristics of the senator himself, and various dimen-
sions of the political market served by the senator.

　　Since the total amount of staff appropriations available to each senator
depends upon the population of the senator's home state, the variable of
interest is the proportion of staff budget returned to the Treasury, *R/B,* where
R = unused staff allowance, and *B* = staff budget. The model estimated by
ordinary least squares to test the hypothesis that conservatives are fiscally
conservative with regard to staff spending is shown in equation (1).

$$(R/B)_i = \alpha_0 + \sum_{j=1}^{5} \beta_j C_{ij} + \sum_{j=1}^{12} \gamma_j S_{ij} + \sum_{j=1}^{3} \delta_j P_{ij} + e_i \qquad (1)$$

where

C_{ij} = vector of characteristics of senator i;
S_{ij} = vector of socioeconomic variables pertaining to the senator's
　　　constituency;
P_{ij} = vector of variables controlling for various dimensions of the
　　　senator's political market; and
e_i = random error term.

　　The independent variables are defined in table 3. To determine whether
the proportion of staff funds unexpended is related to a senator's conservative
or liberal leanings in making collective decisions, an indicator of each sena-
tor's political philosophy is required. Four are considered in this study: the
Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the American Conservative Union

TABLE 3. Factors Determining Proportion of Staff Budget Unused

Variable	Expected Sign	Definition
ADA	+	Americans for Democratic Actions' measure of conservatism
AFL-CIO	+	AFL-CIO's conservatism measure
ACU	+	American Conservative Union's conservatism measure
PARTY	+	Dummy variable for political party = 1 if Republican, 0 if Democrat
TEN	+	Number of years in office
REELECT	−	Dummy variable = 1 if senator faced reelection in 1978, 0 otherwise
COM	−	Number of committee memberships
CHAIR	?	Number of committees chaired
AREA	−	Square miles in the senator's state
DIST	−	Distance from Washington, D.C. (miles to the state capitol)
POPCH	?	Percentage population change
URBAN	−	Percent urban population
NONW	−	Percent nonwhite population
FAM	−	Number of families
HSGRAD	−	Percentage of high school graduates
YCAP	−	Income per capita
POOR	−	Percentage of families living in poverty
VET	−	Number of veterans
UNEMP	−	Unemployment rate
OVER65	−	Percentage of population over 65 years of age
W	?	Dummy variable = 1 if western state, 0 otherwise
S	?	Dummy variable = 1 if southern state, 0 otherwise
NC	?	Dummy variable = 1 if north central state, 0 otherwise
C		Constant

(ACU), and the AFL-CIO labor union scorecards which tally for each senator the percent of "correct" votes in the view of each organization, and political party. Political party is a dummy variable which takes the value of one for a Republican senator and zero for a Democrat.[6] The ACU index rates "ultra-conservatives," e.g., Helms and Laxalt, at 100 and "ultraliberals," e.g., Inouye and Case at 0. The ADA and AFL-CIO ratings, as might be anticipated, rank liberals at 100 and conservatives at 0. To make these three rankings consistent measures of conservatism, the ADA and the AFL-CIO ratings were subtracted from 100.[7] It is interesting that, with the exception of political party, all four measures of conservatism are highly related, as shown by the matrix of simple pairwise correlation coefficients in table 4. Thus, even

TABLE 4. Simple Correlation Coefficients among Four Measures of Political Conservatism

Rating	ACU	ADA	AFL-CIO	Party
ACU	1.0	0.878	0.908	0.590
ADA	—	1.0	0.880	0.508
AFL-CIO	—	—	1.0	0.634
Party	—	—	—	1.0

among these diverse organizations, there appears to be a general consensus regarding which senators are liberals and which are conservatives.

A priori, it is expected that the larger the number of committees on which a senator serves (COM), the smaller the percentage of staff budget that is returned to the Treasury. Different committees deal with different types of legislation which should require more assistance and expertise from legislative specialists. With regard to the number of committee chairmanships, (CHAIR) two forces are at work simultaneously.[8] A committee chairman in the Senate wields enormous power in directing (or obstructing) the course of large numbers of bills submitted to the committee for consideration. Such responsibilities might be expected to require substantial staff resources which could create a drain on the chairman's staff budget. However, some committees and many investigative subcommittees have permanent staffs, e.g., the Joint Economic Committee and the Majority Policy Committee, which a shrewd chairman might be able to, at least partially, commandeer for his own purposes. Thus, it is not clear that the number of committee chairmanships will either increase or decrease the percentage of staff budget returned.

The anticipated sign of the committee chairmanship variable is further complicated by the fact that the tenure of senators may play an important role independent of whether a given senator has acquired sufficient tenure to chair a committee. But, since committee chairmanships are assigned almost exclusively on the basis of tenure, the years ot tenure (TEN) and the number of committee chairmanships are interrelated. (The simple correlation coefficient between TEN and CHAIR is .572.) Senators who have enjoyed a long tenure in office are better known to their constituents than freshman senators, and in some cases, have become almost political institutions in themselves. Therefore, for such senators, less staff effort should be required for the principal objective of most staff activity: the reelection of the senator. Moreover, senators with many years in office have acquired clout in dealing with the bureaucracy and their staffs have gained valuable experience in resolving the problems of constituents. Other things equal, a staff member in the office of a senator with long tenure should be more effective than in the office of a junior senator. An economic interpretation of this is that "older" incumbents have already invested in the production of "political information"—information regarding what benefits they have bestowed upon their constituents. Competing political entrepreneurs or younger incumbents who may have yet to prove how productive they are require more staff effort to convey information regarding the quality of their (political) product. Thus, just as older, established firms in an industry (e.g., Holiday Inn) have an advertising advantage over newer firms (e.g., Travelodge) due to their past service record, older incumbents have an advantage over younger ones in the form of a higher level of "output" per staff member.

The binary variable REELECT, which takes the value 1 if the senator's seat was contested in the election of 1978, is included to determine if different staff spending behavior occurs among senators who stood for reelection in

1978. Political expedience would dictate that the allocated staff budget could provide useful resources for the campaign.

The volume of constituent services may also be affected by the number of families to be served, whether the state is rapidly growing in population, the degree to which the state is urbanized, the level of education, and the income levels of constituents. A concentration of retired and elderly individuals may create demands from constituents to resolve disputes arising from such problems as Social Security payments, veteran's benefits, and Medicare claims. A disproportionate number of poverty program recipients could increase the need for staff services to untangle the red tape associated with welfare and unemployment benefits. As shown in table 3, ten variables appear in the model (POPCH through OVER65) to capture demographic and socioeconomic factors that may influence the spending for staff services.

The physical characteristics of the senator's state, i.e., his political "marketplace," also influence the requirements for staff, for offices are maintained in the home state to provide direct contact with constituents. As state area increases, more offices and staff should be required to provide convenient access and effective service. Distance from Washington, D.C., to the state capitol is also included in the model. For senators far removed from their constituents, staff provide a substitute "presence" for the senator; a senator whose state is very close to the nation's capital may supplement state office staffs with personnel from the office at the Capitol. Geography and topography also play a role in serving constituents. For example, the distribution of population is important. A large state may have population clustered in a small number of urban centers (e.g., Nevada), whereas the distribution of population may be far more dispersed in others. A mountainous state (e.g., Colorado) may have a number of population centers, but these may not be easily accessible from a central location. Moreover, a given senator's supporters may reside predominately in one section of the state and political prudence might dictate that state offices would be most advantageously deployed in only certain areas. These factors are difficult to quantify, but regional variables are a reasonable way to capture some of the effects, for they tend to occur on a regional basis. Mountainous states are located primarily in the West, as are states with populations mostly clustered in a small number of urban centers. States which, in 1978, had one senator rated as a liberal and the other as a conservative are also regionally concentrated in the West and South: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, Kansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Texas. In such states, there is a greater likelihood that political support is concentrated in certain geographic areas than in states where both senators share the same political philosophy. The coefficients of the three regional dummy variables which appear in the model measure the difference between the average percentage of unspent staff funds for senators in each region relative to the average returned by senators in the Northeast, the omitted region.

The expected signs of the factors influencing the proportion of the staff

budget returned unspent to the U.S. Treasury are summarized in table 3. In some cases, the signs are indeterminate a priori because diverse and offsetting influences come into play. Our principal concern is the ideology variables and, because other factors may also influence decisions regarding staff expenditures, this analysis is suggestive rather than exhaustive.[9]

3. Empirical Findings

The empirical results are reported in table 5, where the estimated coefficients, their associated t-statistics (in parentheses), the coefficient of determination, R^2, and the F-statistic are displayed for each of the regressions which employs a different measure of conservatism to estimate equation (1). Overall, the empirical results for the four regressions are quite similar, which is not surprising given that the four measures of conservatism are interrelated. The independent variables explain about half of the variation in the proportion of staff allocation returned to the Treasury by individual senators. The F-statistics indicate that the predictive power of the equations is significantly different from zero at better than the 99.9 percent level of confidence. The results generally confirm the hypothesis that conservatives return a larger percentage of staff budget than liberals. Each one-point increase in the index of conservatism increases the percentage of staff budget returned to the Treasury by .166 to .219, depending upon the index of conservatism employed. The regression which contains PARTY as the measure of conservatism indicates that Republican senators, on average, returned 9.6 percent more of their staff budgets than did Democrats, all other things equal.

Apparently, there is no significant difference in the percentage of staff budget returned by senators whose seats were contested in 1978 and those whose seats were not. One interpretation of this finding is that incumbents are hesitant to increase staff spending from public funds when they campaign for reelection because their opponent may claim foul play or use evidence of increased staff on the public payroll during an election year as a campaign issue. Alternatively, campaign contributions for incumbent senators may provide adequate resources to hire staff for the campaign, particularly when the role of volunteers is taken into account.

As expected, committee service produces a drain on staff resources, for the estimated coefficients indicate that for each additional committee on which a senator serves, about 4.6 to 5.7 percent less of the staff allotment is returned, depending upon the measure of conservatism used. Committee chairmen appear to be able to divert substantial resources to their own uses, for chairmen return between 6.9 and 10.9 percent more of their staff budgets, *ceteris paribus,* than do senators who do not serve as committee chairmen. Although statistically insignificant, the coefficients for the tenure variable, TEN, are positive, which indicates that with increased length of service, staff effectiveness may increase so that the legislator can conserve on public funds for staff.

TABLE 5. Estimated Coefficients of Equation (1): Percentage of Staff Budget Unused by Individual Senators in Fiscal Year 1978

	Measure of Conservatism			
Independent Variable	ADA	AFL-CIO	ACU	Party
Constant	-4.686 (-0.132)	17.558 (0.511)	1.726 (0.049)	22.189 (0.619)
Conservatism measure	0.219* (4.192)	0.200* (4.545)	0.166* (4.135)	9.550* (3.560)
TEN	0.196 (1.178)	0.194 (1.188)	0.256 (1.550)	0.101 (0.567)
REELECT	0.187 (0.075)	1.032 (0.430)	0.380 (0.153)	1.098 (0.436)
COM	-5.419** (-3.295)	-5.668* (-3.505)	-4.567** (-2.739)	-5.621** (-3.328)
CHAIR	8.258*** (2.557)	9.191** (2.853)	6.910*** (2.186)	10.853** (2.964)
POPCH	0.386 (0.221)	0.577 (0.338)	0.291 (0.167)	1.459 (0.812)
AREA	-0.052*** (-2.486)	-0.049*** (-2.385)	-0.048*** (-2.305)	-0.039**** (-1.826)
URBAN	-0.109**** (-1.698)	-0.105 (-1.653)	-0.110**** (-1.710)	-0.107 (-1.617)
NONW	-0.190 (-0.722)	-0.260 (-0.999)	-0.152 (-0.580)	0.083 (-0.306)
FAM	-0.005 (-0.730)	-0.001 (-0.907)	-0.001 (-0.929)	-0.001 (-1.296)
HSGRAD	-0.108 (-0.303)	-0.379 (-1.074)	-0.246 (-0.689)	-0.197 (-0.540)
YCAP	0.006*** (2.345)	0.007** (2.655)	0.006*** (2.352)	0.006**** (2.170)
POOR	0.124 (0.210)	0.035 (0.060)	0.230 (0.387)	0.223 (0.366)
VET	0.749 (0.548)	0.185 (0.138)	0.826 (0.602)	-0.802 (-0.559)
UNEMPL	-0.297 (-0.436)	-0.656 (-0.984)	-0.548 (-0.807)	-0.655 (-0.941)
DIST	-0.001 (-0.367)	-0.001 (-0.487)	-0.0001 (-0.005)	-0.002 (-0.828)
OVER65	-0.118 (-0.164)	0.315 (0.447)	0.161 (0.225)	0.611 (0.816)
W	-5.401 (-0.923)	-4.482 (-0.791)	-6.397 (-1.075)	-1.564 (-0.269)
S	-1.973 (-0.395)	-4.056 (-0.816)	-4.024 (-0.793)	-0.968 (-0.189)
NC	-2.862 (-0.699)	-5.202 (-1.269)	-3.729 (-0.903)	-2.554 (-0.608)
R^2	0.481	0.498	0.479	0.452
$F_{(19,71)}$	3.479	3.720	3.443	3.097

*, **, ***, **** denote significance at the 0.001, 0.01, 0.05, 0.10 level, respectively.

With respect to the socioeconomic variables, POP, POOR, VET, and YCAP were all found to be positive, but only YCAP was statistically significant. The remaining eight socioeconomic variables exerted a negative influence on the percentage of staff budget unused by senators, but only AREA and URBAN were significant. The coefficients for the regional dummy variables were all found to be negative but insignificant.

These empirical results generally confirm the main hypothesis regarding the politician's utility-maximizing behavior: Conservative politicians apparently derive greater utility from returning funds unspent to the Treasury than do liberals.

5. Summary and Conclusions

A legislator plays two roles in making decisions about expenditures from the public purse: First, as a participant with other legislators in voting on appropriation bills, and, second, as an individual whose decisions are decisive in spending public monies allocated for specific purposes for his own use. This essay investigates the economic behavior of individual senators in the spending of staff budgets in order to determine if a relationship exists between a politician's political philosophy in collective decision making and his expenditures for staff.

Staff services and the level of funds returned to the Treasury were viewed as arguments in the politician's utility function. It was hypothesized that, other things held constant, one would expect conservatives who publicly eschew "excessive" government spending to gain greater utility by returning larger proportions of their staff allocations than "free-spending" liberals. An empirical model was developed to test the hypothesis that conservatives, *ceteris paribus,* do in fact return a larger proportion of their staff allocations unspent than do liberals. Four measures of conservatism were employed, and the empirical results were generally invariant to the indicator of political philosophy: Senators who are conservative in making collective decisions are also fiscally conservative in spending public funds under their direct control. In contrast to the well-worn dictum of Governor George Wallace, there is, indeed, more than "a dime's worth of difference" between liberals and conservatives. The average senator receives an annual staff budget of slightly less than three-quarters of a million dollars, $712,670. Based on the ADA estimates shown in table 5, an ultraconservative (ADA = 100) would spend about $156,787, or 22 percent less on staff than an ultraliberal (ADA = 0).

This is the first study of which we are aware that addresses the economic behavior of politicians in spending public funds under their direct control. Additional research in a number of related areas would yield fruitful results in terms of a better understanding of the behavior of politicians and political institutions. For example, it would be interesting to determine whether different behavior is observed when public money provided to politicians is more "substitutable" with the politician's income, e.g., travel funds. A second

interesting issue is whether politicians at state and local levels of government follow the same patterns of behavior as those at the national level. Third, an improved specification of the role of political staffs is needed in terms of services to constituents. Research on these issues, among many others, would improve our understanding of the political economy.

NOTES

1. See, for example, empirical work by Danielson and Rubin (1977) and by Silberman and Durden (1976). Examples of theoretical contributions are those made by Buchanan and Tullock (1962).
2. The Secretary of the Senate is required by Section 105 of Public Law 88–454, approved August 20, 1964, to report periodically a full statement of receipts and expenditures of the Senate. The reports, issued semiannually, list every voucher paid, even for expenditures less than one dollar. The salary paid to each staff member is also given by name.
3. At times, congressmen may place individuals on the public payroll to provide services of a more "private" sort, e.g., the widely heralded working relationship between Elizabeth Ray and Congressman Wayne Hayes.
4. A t-test for the difference between the means of each of the three measures of conservatism indicated at the 0.0005 level of significance or better that the ten who spent the lowest proportion of their budget allocation were more conservative.
5. Four senators were omitted from the analysis because they served only partial terms during fiscal year 1978; Humphrey (Minnesota), McLellan (Arkansas), Metcalf (Montana), and Allen (Alabama). The sample size is 96.
6. Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia labels himself an independent, but was considered a Republican, because he dropped his affiliation with the Democratic party. In a comment on Silberman and Durden 1976, Kau and Rubin (1978) employ both party and ADA rankings as a "measure of ideology."
7. Actually, the AFL-CIO reports the number of "right" (R) and the number of "wrong" (W) votes by each senator. An index was generated by calculating the proportion of "right votes," i.e., $R/(R + W) * 100$.
8. Only one senator, Claiborne Pell (Rhode Island), served as the chairman of more than one committee. He chaired the Joint Committee on Printing and the Committee on Rules and Administration.
9. The empirical results reported in table 5 are representative of a wide range of models estimated using a variety of functional forms and incorporating various additional regressors. For example, the percentage of the popular vote received by the senator in the most recent election was included to test whether those senators who won by a small margin spent more on staff; an attempt was also made to capture the ideology of voters as measured by the presidential votes in each state. The findings, in terms of the magnitudes and significance levels of coefficients, were basically invariant to such permutations and combinations. There is, of course, no measure of either the quality or quantity of staff services. Moreover, in state offices, salaries may reflect the cost of living which also varies from region to region, and even among cities in the same state.

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