

African Americans' Success in Alabama Before Obama: 1988-2008

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Submitted: 24 Feb 2023; Accepted: 06 Mar 2023; Published: 28 Mar 2023

Citation: Murty, K. S. (2023). African Americans' Success in Alabama Before Obama: 1988-2008. *J Huma Soci Scie*, 6(3), 94-101.

Abstract

The period between 1988-2008 represented an era of distinct contrasts for African Americans in Alabama. Although African Americans had considerable success following the Civil Rights Movement by 1990, many of their children still attended all-black schools in poor racially isolated crime-ridden communities, and 38% of blacks lived in families with incomes below the poverty line, compared to an 18% state average. Politically, the period saw significant gains by African Americans. By the early 1990s the state had more than 700 black elected officials, one of the nation's highest, which led to calls to create a district to elect an African American congressman. In 1992, such a district emerged, Alabama's seventh as a result of a federal court-approved redistricting plan. Earl Hilliard, a state senator for Birmingham was elected to the seat becoming the first African American congressman since reconstruction. However, redrawing the seventh district proved costly to Democrats because it made two other congressional districts pro-Republican by taking away large chunks of black voters from the second and sixth districts. This paper examines the continuing challenges facing Alabama's African American community at the close of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first centuries.

Keywords: African Americans, Civil Rights, Academic Success, Political Success, Blackbelt, Socioeconomic Indicators.

Introduction

The period between 1988 and 2008, represented an era of distinct contrasts for African Americans in Alabama. On one hand, African Americans have made significant gains in the years following the Civil Rights Movement. For example, the percentage of blacks receiving a minimum a high school diploma has increased from 20 percent in 1960 to 78 percent in 2008, yielding an overall gain of 289 percent [1]. However, many African American children still attended all-or-mostly black schools. For example, Public Schools in Birmingham are 95 percent black, and 90 percent of the students are receiving free or reduced lunches. To cite another example, Hannah-Jones (2014) wrote that, "In Tuscaloosa today, nearly one in three black students attends a school that looks as if Brown v. Board of Education never happened [2]." On the other hand, the period saw significant political gains by African Americans. By the early 1990s, the state had more than 700 black elected officials,

one of the nation's highest. This chapter focuses on these aspects.

Disparities in Socioeconomic Indicators

In 2007-08, Alabama had a total enrollment of 743,778 students in public elementary and secondary schools, of whom 58.8 percent were white, 35.7 percent black, 3.5 percent Hispanic, 1.1 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.8 percent American Indian/Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education 2010:29). Table 1 shows that the black-white score gaps in Alabama for 4th- grade reading and math were 25 and 26, indicating that white students in public schools scored at least 25 points on average over black students. This gap was similar for 8th- grade reading, but even greater for math, where white public school students scored on average 32 points higher than their black student counterparts. Stated differently, black students achieved the lowest composite math and reading score (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2012) [3].

Table 1: The Black-White achievement score gaps for 4th- and 8th grade public school students in Alabama, 2007.

	Grade	Black	White	Gap
Mathematics	4th	213	238	25
	8th	246	278	32
Reading	4th	201	227	26
	8th	236	261	26

Source: Compiled from U.S. Department of Education, Achievement Gaps (NCES 2009-495), 2009, Appendix, Pp.8-9. [<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2009495.pdf>]

Similar black-white gaps were apparent in Alabama across all indicators of education for the state of Alabama. A comparison of white and black students between 2000 and 2008 revealed that although there was slight progress in the educational attainment and the school enrollment among blacks, the racial gap remains significant at every level (Table 2). Additionally, the high school graduate rates in "majority minority" districts was lower (57%) than the "majority white" districts (63.6%) and the state's average [4]. The student hardships are further compounded when school districts indulge in fraudulent practices. For example, in the spring of 2000, the Birmingham school system expelled 522 high school students (5.6% of the city's total) for an alleged cause of "lack of interest." What became clear later was that the school district feared being taken over by the state if the already low SAT scores of the system fell any lower. Therefore, they kept the low per-

forming students on the rolls for the first 40 days in the second semester, regardless of their actual attendance, in order to comply with state regulations for school funding based on the size of student enrollment. Once they met that requirement, on the 41st day, the students were administratively withdrawn as they were perceived to be a liability to SAT scores. Steve Orel, who worked in a Birmingham tutoring program, blew the whistle and exposed the sham, and as was terminated as a result. Contrary to the school system's accusation of students for "lack of interest," Orel said, "I have yet to meet a single student who woke up one morning and consciously chose to leave school. My experience has been that the school system left them. Whether it is poverty or the drive to raise test scores, both of which leave students with a sense of low self-confidence and low self esteem, they continue to feel coerced and pushed out of school".

Table 2: Education Indicators of Alabama for white and black students, 2000 and 2008

Education Indicators	2000			2008		
	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black
Less than High School Diploma	24.7%	21.9%	33.0%	19.7%	17.2%	25.6%
At least High School Diploma	75.3%	78.1%	67.0%	80.3%	82.8%	74.4%
At least Bachelors Degree	19.0%	21.2%	11.5%	21.4%	24.0%	12.4%
Graduate & Professional	6.9%	7.6%	4.0%	7.9%	8.9%	4.1%
% School Enrollment (3-24 years)	75.5%	75.9%	76.3%	74.1%	75.1%	72.7%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census. *American Community Survey 2008*.

Apart from regional and racial differences, Alabama as a whole performed consistently below the national average over the years, and in 2008, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education gave the state a low or failing grade for all the five key indicators of education (Table 3).

Table 3: Measuring Up 2008: The Alabama State Report Card on Higher Education

Key Indicators	Grade	Explanation
Preparation	D+	Alabama's underperformance in education its young population could limit the state's access to a competitive workforce and weaken the state's economy.
Participation	D+	College opportunities for young and working-age adults are poor.
Affordability	F	Higher education has become less affordable for students and their families
Completion	C-	Alabama's performance in awarding certificates and degrees is only fair compared with other states.
Benefits	C	A small proportion of residents have a bachelor's degree, and this weakens the state economy.
Learning	I	Like all states, Alabama receives an "Incomplete" in Learning because there is not sufficient data to allow meaningful state-by-state comparisons.

Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2008). *Measuring Up 2008*. [www.highereducation.org]

Education is not the only area that blacks trail behind whites in Alabama (as well as in other states). Their median income in 2008 was lower (\$20,477) than that of whites (\$29,764); their life expectancy was lower (74.6 years) than whites (75.5 years); and therefore, their overall human development index (a composite measure of wellbeing and opportunity that combines indicators in three fundamental areas; i.e., health, education, and standard of living into a single number) was lower (2.53) than that of whites (4.44) on a scale of 0 to 10 (Measure of America 2008). Forty-two percent of black children lived in poverty compared to 14% of white children; and, 38 percent of blacks lived in families with incomes below the poverty line, compared to an 18 percent state average, as of 2009. Fourteen percent of black teens aged 16-19 years were not in school and working, compared to 9 percent of their white counterparts in 2007. Further, the five-year (2007-2011) averages indicate that 40 percent black children compared to 78 percent of white children live in areas (census tracts) with poverty rates of less than 20 percent, indicating a significantly higher number of black children live in high poverty-concentrated areas.

Child poverty has a significant adverse impact on educational attainment. For example, Mayer (2002:164) found that an "increase in economic segregation would increase the gap in educational attainment between high- and low-income students." Logically, parental (or household) characteristics determine the economic condition of a child, which in turn affects his or her choice of residence, and the school district in which a child resides is in turn affected by the region's level of economic development, school funding policies, and support for quality education. Basically, if a poor child lives in poor communities, where schools are poorly funded then the quality of education is low. To substantiate this theory, Mayer (1991:321-341) found that students who attend high-SES schools are less likely to drop out of high school between the tenth and twelfth grades and that girls who attend high-SES schools are less likely to have a child between the tenth and twelfth grades than students who attend lower-SES schools. Among black students, the effect of attending predominantly black schools on both dropping out and teenage fertility is largely accounted for by the low mean socioeconomic status of these schools. Thus, a change in school SES has a greater absolute effect on dropping out and teenage fertility for low-SES students than for high-SES students.

Zekeri (2004) listed nine reasons for the poverty concentration in the blackbelt counties of Alabama: (1) Faulty social structure and discrimination - From slavery to sharecropping, to displaced agricultural workers, economic opportunities have systematically curtailed blacks in the area [5]. Additionally, discrimination exists in other elements of the opportunity structure such as education and health services. Consequently, "blacks are trapped in a vicious circle of institutionalized racism as well as overt discrimination that exacerbates the difficulty of avoiding poverty" (Perlman 1976:68-72). (2) High concentration of Female-headed households and single parents - Increase in female-headed families is an important correlate of enduring poverty in Alabama. Female heads of families face many handicaps in terms of securing an adequate living

because of the presence of minor children in the home and labor market discrimination. (3) Lack of jobs and income - Constantly rising per capita cost of providing services, lack of job opportunities, lower wage in rural areas, and the out-migration of companies where they can obtain cheap labor contribute to the Alabama's blackbelt poverty. (4) Business closings - Apart from the decline of the farm sector, other rural based industries such as timber, oil, gas, mining have been adversely affected by national and global economic changes in the 1980s and 1990s. The jobs available in the area are often unstable with few benefits and low wages. Moreover, business closings and firms in Alabama's blackbelt increased the unemployment rates in the area. These conditions forced the better educated residents to migrate to urban areas where their skills and abilities were better compensated. (5) High concentration of children and elderly - The steady increase in the out-migration of youth changed the age structure of the population in the blackbelt Alabama with disproportional sizes of elderly (aged 65 years or older) and young children (6 years or younger). Among African American children under six in female-headed households, 80 percent were in poverty in 2000. (6) Human capital endowment - The low levels of educational attainment combined with low job skills in the blackbelt of Alabama affected them adversely in terms of both human capital and earnings. (7) Physical isolation - Settlement issues and distance reduce the access to needed resources, increases their vulnerability to exploitation in the capital system, and impedes mobilization for self-help, all of which contribute to poverty in Alabama's blackbelt. (8) Globalization - The large multi-site firms in the blackbelt are only interested in maximizing profits by hastening the flow of capital from operations in the blackbelt and converting blackbelt resources as quickly and efficiently as possible into profits for the benefits of investors who frequent reside outside the blackbelt. (9) Poor public goods and services - Many rural communities in Alabama's blackbelt suffer from many quality services such as education, health, recreation, transportation, safety, justice, water, wastewater treatment, solid waste disposal, energy, telecommunications, fire safety, etc. which adversely affect their quality of life and contribute to poverty.

Iaegou (2008) analyzed the relationship between child poverty and education attainment (measured by high school completion) disparity in the state of Alabama between 1990 and 2006. His study revealed that in Alabama, children younger than 18 years of age in 1990 experienced the highest poverty rates (24%) compared to other age groups. In 2000, the child poverty rate was 26.2 percent, but declined to 25.2 percent in 2006. The corresponding poverty rates for the nation were 19.2% and 22.2% for 2000 and 2006, respectively. Child poverty rates varied by county with the lowest rate in Shelby County (7.4%) in 2000 in contrast with Sumter County (in the blackbelt) with a rate of 47.7 percent in 2000. Conversely, Shelby County experienced only 8.3% of persons with less than high school education in the age group of 16-19 years in 2000, whereas the corresponding percentage for Sumter County was 11.4. In general, the teen high school drop out rate declined across the state from 15.0% in 2002 to about 9.0 percent in 2006. Also, 8th grade students' proficiency level score in reading and

math showed improvements as children poverty rate declined by a modest one percent from 24 percent in 2002 to 23 percent in 2006.

Alabama ranked 40th among the 50 states in 2004, in terms of per capita personal income of \$27, 695. Seven of its counties are among the poorest in the nation by median household incomes, and four are among the 100 poorest by per capita income. The Alabama Poverty Project (APP) adjusted poverty rates revealed that 50.1 percent of Alabama's 542,000 poor persons in 2009 lived below 75 percent of the Federal poverty threshold. The gap between the Alabama's richest and poorest is the fifth largest in the nation. As of the late 2000s (2008-2010), the poorest fifth of Alabama households had an average income of \$18,667, while the top fifth had an average income of \$145,704 — 7.8 times as much. This income gap is even more pronounced when compared with the income of the top five percent, \$238,174— 12.8 times as much (McNichol, Hall, & Cooper 2012).

Additionally, Alabama ranks second (next to Louisiana) among states with funding higher education below pre-recession levels of 2008 (i.e., funding cuts), at -\$4,386 per student after adjusting for inflation. That is, the per-student funding in Alabama is down by more than 35 percent since the start of the recession. As a result, over the past several years, public colleges and universities have cut faculty positions, reduced course offerings, underfunded or shut computer labs, and reduced library and auxiliary services. At the same time, the public colleges and universities in the state of Alabama, on an average, increased the tuition by 1.3%, which swallowed the increased federal student aid and tax credits. The combination of funding cuts and tuition increases strain college affordability, especially for students whose families struggle to make ends meet. Further, they raise concerns related to the diminishing quality of education at the time when a highly educated workforce is essential to improve the state's economy (see for more details, Mitchell and Leachman 2015) [6]. The 2011 Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) survey revealed that education was Alabamians' first choice of the state investment with their tax dollars; and, 56 percent of the respondents were willing to pay more state taxes to prevent budget cuts for education [7].

Black Success in Political Participation

The black participation in the electoral system of Alabama (like in many other southern states) is crucial for American democracy and racial equality. History remembers that blacks in the ex-Confederate states were excluded from electoral participation in the 1950s and 1960s; that is, until the passage of 1965 Voting Rights

Act to end discriminatory policies targeted against blacks, and Alabama was no exception. For example, there were over 150,000 voting-eligible African American in Dallas County of Alabama; and yet, only 156 were registered because many could not pass an oral exam required of them about the U.S. Constitution. On the contrary, two-thirds of the county's white population was registered. Subsequently, the Justice Department filed a law suit against Dallas County registrars, which resulted in the resignation of the country registrars, but the trial judge refused to ban tests on the grounds that the newly hired registrars were yet to discriminate against blacks. During the course of the four-year long law suit, still only 383 of the Dallas county's 15,000 eligible African Americans registered. Similarly, throughout the state only 19.4 percent of the African Americans were registered [8]. Less than ten percent of the eligible blacks registered in 17 of Alabama's 67 counties in 1964; and, two counties with more than 11,000 voting-eligible blacks did not register a single person of color (Blum 2011; Also, see Walton Jr., Puckett & Deskins, Jr. 2012 for county-by-county data on registered voters in 1960.). In March 1965, nearly 600 demonstrators made the first of three attempts to march from Selma to the capitol in Montgomery to demand removal of voting restrictions on black Americans; but were attacked by state and local law enforcement officers as they crossed Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge. As a result, the marchers had to flee back into the city. Strides of this nature and others that African Americans made in Alabama and other states throughout the nation led to President Lyndon Johnson's signing into law the Voting Right Act on August 6, 1965.

Within the next two years, the percentage of black registered voters in Alabama went up from 19.3 percent to 51.6 percent, with the help of federal officials sent to the state. As for the office holdings by elected black officials, Alabama had 70 in 1969, and over one-half of them held municipal offices. In 1970, 86 black officials were elected across the state of Alabama, but none of them were either senators or representatives to U.S. Congress, nor state senators, and only three were state representatives. Since then, there has been a considerable progress, that is, the number of black elected of officials has grown to nearly 10 times to 757 by 2002. Table 4 shows that black elected officials in Alabama increased rapidly by 75.2% in five years from 403 in 1986 to 706 in 1991, and gradually over the next decade by a modest 7.2% to reach a total of 757 in 2002. Black elected officials as a percentage of all elected officials also increased from 9.7% (403/4,160) in 1986 to 16.4% (706/4,315) in 1991; and then, only to 16.7% (731/4,385) in 2000.

Table 4: Number of Black Elected Officials in Alabama for Selected Years

Year	Total	% of All Elected Officials
1986	403	9.7
1991	706	17.1
1993	699	--

1997	726	--
1998	733	16.7
1999	725	16.5
2000	731	16.7
2001	756	--
2002	757	--

Source: Compiled and computed from the annual reports of *The National Roaster of Black Elected Officials*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; and, annual reports of *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.

Black elected officials expanded their representation in public offices gradually beginning 1980s. Two patterns of black elected officials in Alabama were apparent from Table 5. First, the period between 1986 and 1991 saw a substantial increase of blacks as elected county officials (particularly as members of county governing bodies), municipal officials (particularly as members of municipal governing bodies), law enforcement officials (mostly as magistrates, Justices of the piece, and constables), and as members of local school board. Many of these were traditionally held bases for public offices for blacks. Second, during 1991 to 2000, their growth in these traditional bases had slowed down, but representation in new areas was achieved. For example, black representation

expanded in 1990s was as state legislators. Alabama experienced one black in six members of the House primarily in 1980s due to the redistricting in 1974; and, their representation jumped to one-quarter of the House members in 1990s due to another redistricting. These representations remained stable for the next decade and were almost identical to the proportion of black population in the state.

The African American representation in the Alabama Senate took place initially in 1975 with two blacks out of 35 Senate seats available (5.7%), reached to 5 (14.3%) by 1986, and to 8 (22.8%) by 1995, and remained stable for the next decade.

Table 5: Black Elected Officials in Alabama by Type of Office: 1986, 1991, and 2000

Type of Office	January 1986	January 1991	January 2000	Change 1986-1991	Change 1991-2000
US Congress	0	0	1	0	1
House	0	0	1	0	1
Senate	0	0	0	0	0
State Legislators*	24 (17.1%)	24 (17.1%)	35 (25.0%)	0	11
House	19 (18.1%)	19 (18.1%)	27 (25.7%)	0	8
Senate	5 (14.3%)	5 (14.3%)	8 (22.8%)	0	3
County Officials	53	88	100	35	12
Members of County Governing Bodies	40	73	82	33	9
Other	13	15	18	2	3
Municipal	241	442	445	201	3
Mayors	32	32	40	0	8
Members of Municipal Governing Bodies	208	410	403	202	-7
Other	1	0	2	-1	2
Law Enforcement	38	68	55	30	-13
Judges	10	15	22	5	7
Magistrate, Justices of the piece, Constables	18	41	55 22	23	-22
Sheriff, Police Chief, and Marshalls	6	6	7	0	1

Other	4	6	7	2	1
Education	47	84	95	37	11
Members of State Education Agencies	0	2	2	2	0
Members of Local School Board	46	81	92	35	11
Other	1	1	1	0	0

**Note: Numbers in parentheses represent the percentage of black legislators to total legislators.*

Another area of emerging black representation in 1990s was that of house representation in U.S. Congress. Earl F. Hilliard, a Harvard-trained lawyer and Assistant U.S. Attorney at the Southern Poverty Law Center, was elected from the 7th District of Alabama (which is a single black-majority congressional district that stretched from the Mississippi-Alabama border through Selma to Montgomery covering Pickens, Greene, Hale, Sumter, Perry, Dal-

las, Marengo, Wilcox, Tuscaloosa, Jefferson, Choctaw and Clark counties) as a Democrat to the 103rd through 107th Congresses, and served from January 5, 1993, to January 3, 2003. Table 6 shows the election results of Hilliard for five successive terms to U.S. Congress. As the first African American congressman since reconstruction, he served on three House committees: Agriculture, Small Business, and International Relations, during his 10-years.

Table 6: Election Results of Earl Hilliard for U.S. Congress, 1992-2000.

Year and Election	Hilliard's Vote Share	Total Votes Casted
1992 general	69.5%	207,773
1994 general	76.9%	151,117
1996 general	71.1%	192,113
1998 general	98.0%	139,181
2000 general	74.6%	198,633

Source: Compiled from Ballot Pedia: An Interactive Almanac of U.S. Politics. Accessed on July 10, 2015 [http://ballotpedia.org/Alabama%27s_7th_Congressional_District]

Hilliard could not, however, maintain his hold in the 2001 primary because: (1) he generated some controversy between Israel supporters and grateful Arab Americans by publicly criticizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; (2) he voted against a House resolution that condemned suicide bombings; (3) he visited Libya in 1997 when the U.S. classified it as a state sponsor for terror; and, 4) he circulated a flier of what he claimed was from his supporters, which read "Davis and the Jews ... No good for the Blackbelt" along with numerous negative television "slick" advertisements from his opponent Artur Davis which reduced the enthusiasm among the voters [9, 10]. Additionally, the redistricting changes that occurred between 2000 and 2002 also went to Hilliard's disadvantage. In an effort to increase Democratic districts from two to three based on decennial population shifts, Alabama legislators adopted the "Compromise Congressional Plan II" in January 2002,

following extensive deliberations. This plan included more of Jefferson and Tuscaloosa counties in the 7th district; moved Lowndes county into the 2nd district; and, split Montgomery County between the 2nd and 3rd districts. Thus, Montgomery and Lowndes counties were excluded from the 7th district where Hilliard had strong support of African American voters.

Then Artur Davis, who is also a Harvard law graduate and assistant U.S. Attorney, was elected as a Democrat to the 108th through 111th Congresses and served from January 7, 2003 to January 3, 2011. Table 7 shows the election results of Davis for four successive terms to U.S. Congress. He served on four House committees: budget committee; financial services committee; judiciary committee; and ways and means committee [11].

Table 7: Election Results of Artur Davis for U.S. Congress, 2002-2008.

Year and Election	Davis's Vote Share	Total Votes Casted
2002 general	92.4%	166,309
2004 general	75.0%	244,638
2006 general	99.0%	135,164
2008 general	98.6%	231,701

Source: Compiled from Ballot Pedia: An Interactive Almanac of U.S. Politics. Accessed on July 10, 2015 [http://ballotpedia.org/Alabama%27s_7th_Congressional_District]

In 2009, Davis aspired to become the first African American Governor in Alabama but did not succeed. According to Joe Reed, the Chairman of the Alabama Democratic Conference (ADC), many Alabama voters rejected Davis because he opposed Obama's health care plan, objected to comment before the black political organizations in Alabama, particularly ADC (there by losing their endorsement), and his views on African American issues (Martin 2010). In any case, as Brown-Dean et al. (2015:27) pointed out, the state of Alabama has not yet seen an African American governor or senator in U.S. Congress.

Conclusion

African Americans have made considerable progress over the years in terms of participating in electoral process in Alabama. The state reached one of the highest numbers of black elected officials by the turn of the 21st century. Moreover, on February 2, 1988 fourteen Alabama black legislators, led by Rep. Alvin Holmes (D-Montgomery), demanded the removal of the Confederate flag from the State Capitol as it represented "slavery, a defunct sovereign, a nation that had attempted to overthrow the United States government." As they tried to climb the fence that was put up for renovations of the Capitol, they were arrested by the State Capitol police and charged with criminal trespass. Later they sued the state to have the flag removed, on the grounds that a 1895 law prohibits any flag but the U.S. and state flags on the dome; and, won in January 1993. Gov. Jim Folsom Jr. ordered the removal of the Confederate flag from the building in April 1993. This change attracted Mercedes-Benz to open a plant in Vance near Tuscaloosa in May 1994. Thus, Alabama achieved what other states like South Carolina are trying to achieve after over 20 years. However, much remains unfinished. Race continues to be a decisive factor in polarizing political parties, and creating disparities in income, education, health, wellbeing, and human development. African Americans as well as other minorities (e.g. Latinos, and Asian Americans) remain underrepresented in federal, state, and local elected offices. Secondly, despite the progress made in African American voter registration and participation since the 1965 Voting Rights Act, voter suppression efforts by white Republicans are continuing in every election cycle. The reality is that our society is becoming increasingly multicultural and no one public official, regardless of race, can win by solely depending on a single race or by suppressing or excluding voters of any particular race or gender, a mistake that political contestants frequently make. For example, Hilliard lost his election to Davis because he could not garner white votes after the 2000-2002 redistricting of the 7th district; and, Davis could not become the first African American governor because he ignored the black establishment. Therefore, it is important to reach across race lines and work with a broader voter base in order to be successfully elected. Finally, as the Alabama ADC Chairman, Joe Reed, suggested we should remember to participate in politics instead of "politricks"; to sell our services instead of our souls; to make our word be our bond; and, to make our handshake be our contract. Until we reach that point, the business will remain unfinished.

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