



CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT
FUND

BREAKING AWAY

Exploring the Third Party Millennial “Protest” Vote
of 2016

Key Focus Group Findings

June 2017

METHODOLOGY

Civic Engagement Fund commissioned Brilliant Corners Research & Strategies to conduct targeted qualitative research among “protest” voters with an emphasis on millennials of color, who voted 3rd party or did not vote in 2016, but previously voted for Barack Obama.

This research was conducted in Fort Lauderdale, FL and Milwaukee, WI on May 2 - 4, 2017.

Focus groups

All groups previously voted for Obama in 2012.

Group	Location	Audience	Voted in 2016
1	Fort Lauderdale, FL	Mixed race men and women ages 25-45, college graduates	3 rd party
2	Fort Lauderdale, FL	Minority / non-white men and women ages 25-45, college graduates	3 rd party
3	Milwaukee, WI	White women ages 21-35, college graduates	3 rd party
4	Milwaukee, WI	African American men and women ages 25-45, no college	Did not vote

CEF: Why this study?

This post-mortem of the 2016 presidential election shows that “holding Obama’s youth coalition performance alone would have won the election for Democrats in 2016.”

Building multicultural, millennial coalitions is necessary for the future success of any political movement. The party that empowers these coalitions and addresses their top 3 issues will increasingly gain electoral dominance. According to this study in Florida and Wisconsin these issues are:

1. Criminal justice reform
2. Economic opportunity and jobs
3. Quality affordable healthcare

Why this study?

Defining the needs of our communities determines what we stand for.

CEF: Elections based on issues

The post-election storm of congressionally-focused phone calls, town halls, and protests has succeeded in alerting elected officials to the new scrutiny under which they operate.

The next step is engaging these officials in proactive conversations on the issues that matter most, to help build policies that truly reflect the will of the people in a constructive, mutually supportive process.

By 2020, millennials will be the largest voting block in the United States. As of 2015 44.2% of millennials were people of color.

Imagine an election season driven by the issues that matter most to this group. If not engaged, the risk of drop-off and protest voters increases dramatically going forward.

CEF: Next steps

This study is the beginning of a foundation on which to build issue-based, multicultural, millennial coalitions that can influence policy platforms across the country in the 2018 and 2020 election seasons.

But first, we need to listen to real people in order to understand how to regain their faith in politicians and our overall government—and then respond with authentic, culturally competent voices.

With this goal in mind, we seek to foster collaboration between new and established organizations that fight for criminal justice reform, economic opportunity, and quality healthcare, to best serve the needs of multicultural communities across the nation.

Let's get to work.

Quotes from focus groups

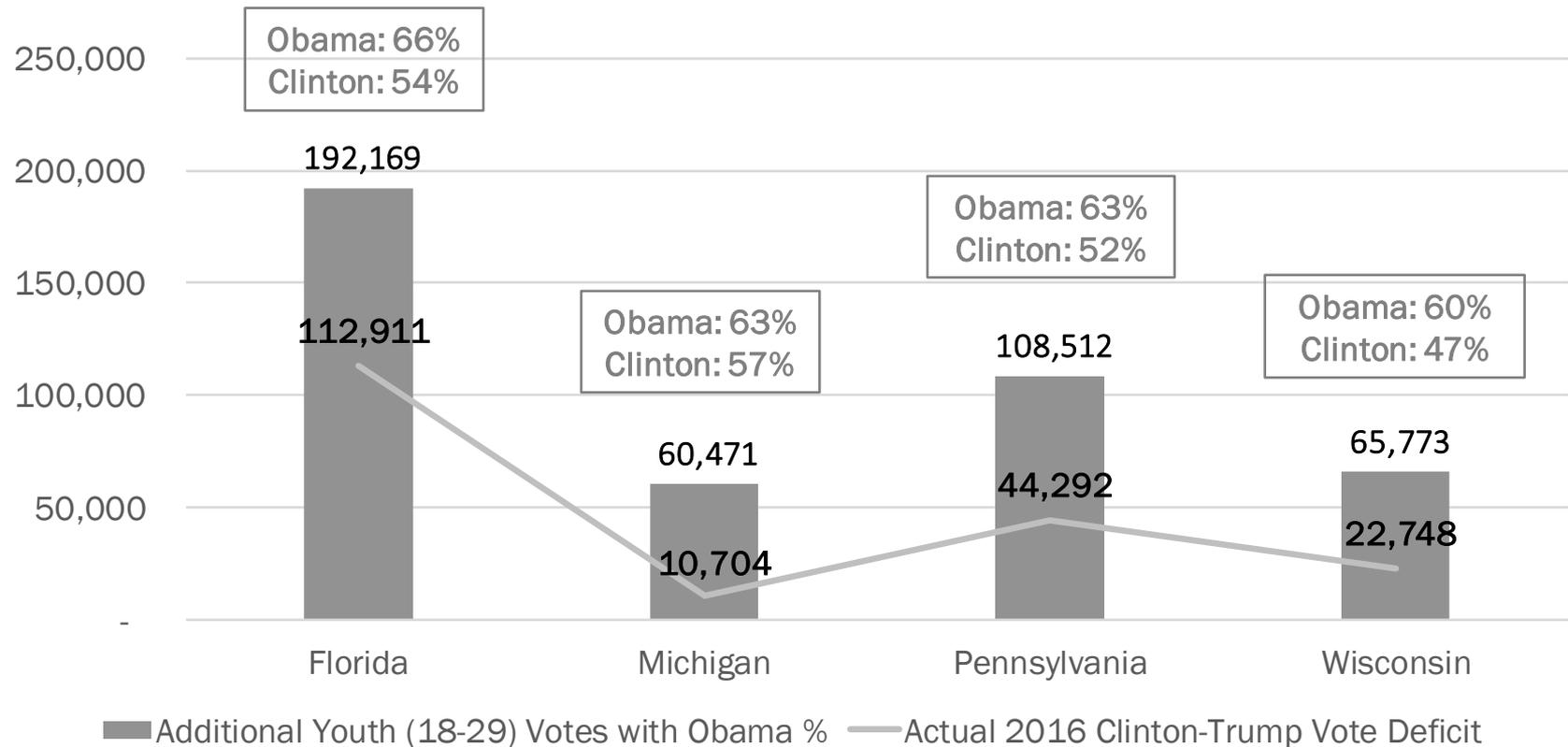
- “Voting for 3rd party does not make Republicans win – it makes both parties change the conversation” *Minority Group, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*
- “I never heard from the [HRC] campaign. They left a bunch of messages at my house but I never really listened. If they wanted to reach me they would have called my cell phone.” *African American Group, Milwaukee, May 4*
- “I really do not care if I don’t know the 3rd candidate, I am going to keep voting for them anyway until they stop trying to force us to choose between the lesser of two evils.” *Minority Group, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*
- “You’re damn right, I don’t have any loyalty to Democrats. If Republicans want to get real about shit that’s happening in my community I would vote for every one of them. Then maybe Democrats would take us seriously too.” *Minority Group, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*

LOSING MILLENNIALS

Why the splintering of the Obama coalition's diverse youth component matters.

Millennials Matter

Holding Obama's youth coalition performance alone would have won the election for Democrats in 2016.



Source: FEC election data and CNN Exit polls from 2012 and 2016

The cost of protest votes

If not for 3rd party “protest voters” Hillary could have reached Obama margins, garnering the electoral votes needed to win the presidency.

States	Clinton	Trump	3 rd Party	Margin '16	Margin '12	Margin '08
Colorado	47.2	44.5	6.3	+2.7	+4.7	+9
Florida	47.8	49.1	2.9 ↔	-1.3	+0.6	+3
Iowa	42.2	51.8	4.4	-9.6	+5.6	+9
Michigan	47.3	47.6	4.7 ↔	-0.3	+9	+16
Nevada	47.9	45.5	3.3	+2.4	+6.6	+12
New Hampshire	47.5	47.3	5.1	+0.2	+5.8	+10
North Carolina	46.7	50.5	2.8	-3.8	-2.2	0
Ohio	43.5	52.1	4	-8.6	+1.9	+4
Pennsylvania	47.6	48.8	3.2 ↔	-1.2	+5	+11
Virginia	49.9	45	3.7	+4.5	+3	+6
Wisconsin	46.9	47.9	4.7 ↔	-1	+6.7	+14

Sending a message to democrats

- **WE ARE SWING VOTERS.** While these voters were the core of Obama’s back-to-back majority coalition, and are key to the future of both the Democratic Party and progressive movement, they are increasingly participating in elections like traditional “swing” voters. Democrats and progressive organizations need to invest significant time and resources into engaging these critical voters. Democrats need to give them something to vote for, meet them where they are on their issues, provide them multiple pathways to engagement, and empower them to own their participation in the political process. They were Obama voters, not necessarily strong Democrats.
- **YOU TAKE US FOR GRANTED.** Our non-voting African-American participants, in particular, feel neglected and taken for granted by the Democratic Party. Beyond their issues being widely ignored, they also implied that candidates never spoke to them and physically never came to their neighborhoods. These voters feel undervalued and ignored.

Rejecting the binary choice

- **GIVE US BETTER CHOICES.** Participants refused to be “herded” into the binary choice between the “lesser of two evils” or “two sides of the same coin”. Instead, they expect more and better choices and believe the two party system denies them the right to consider those choices. “Not as bad as the GOP” isn’t good enough, Democrats need to become a better choice, not just the lesser evil.
- **NO REGRETS ABOUT ELECTING TRUMP.** Though they hold strong negative views of Trump and feel his presidency is an embarrassment, these voters do not regret voting 3rd Party or choosing not to vote in the 2016 election. They view their decision as an effective means to shake up the system in 2016 and in future elections.
- **YOU HAVE A LEADERSHIP GAP.** While many participants saw Clinton as a flawed candidate, Democrats should not dismiss the splintering of 2016 by laying it entirely at the feet of Clinton’s unpopularity among these voters. Many participants maintain that their 3rd party vote was in fact to send a message to the Democratic Party and to give 3rd party candidates a better chance of winning in the future. Furthermore, many intend to continue 3rd party voting behavior into the future.

No one is helping us

- **NEITHER PARTY, NOR PROGRESSIVES GET US.** Although willing to give Democrats the benefit of the doubt on many issues they care about, there is limited issue advantage on the issues that matter most—and motivate these 3rd party voters to participate. Issues are important, but Democrats must further unfold a value and unifying aspiration frame in order to dull these protest voters' cynicism. Participants express deep anxiety about Donald Trump, race, criminal justice, jobs, and healthcare, but do not feel that these issues are being adequately addressed by either political party, or progressive organizations in a way that resonates with them and their lives. This represents a strong disconnect in messaging and communication to younger Obama coalition voters.
- **VOTING MAKES NO DIFFERENCE.** Similar to their extremely cynical views towards institutions in general, these voters also hold negative views towards both major parties and the political system at large. As a result, they do not differentiate in a meaningful and actionable way right now between the two major parties. For voters that abstained from voting in 2016, this leads to a strong “makes no difference” sentiment toward the process.

Votes within reach

Older, blue collar white voters are further out of reach. However, younger, better educated white voters are much more winnable.

Demographic groups	%Electorate	Clinton	Trump	3 rd Party	2016 Margin
White College Grad					
18-24	5%	54%	38%	7% ↔	+16
25-29	9%	52%	41%	6% ↔	+11
30-39	19%	46%	45%	7% ↔	+1
40-49	20%	40%	53%	5%	-13
50-64	31%	43%	54%	3%	-11
65+	16%	49%	49%	1%	0
White non college					
18-24	12%	37%	52%	9%	-15
25-29	7%	32%	58%	7% ↔	-26
30-39	11%	27%	65%	7% ↔	-38
40-49	15%	22%	74%	3% ↔	-52
50-64	34%	26%	71%	2%	-45
65+	20%	31%	67%	1%	-36

COMMUNITY SENTIMENTS

When given one word to describe Democrats, focus group members used the following:

Elitist | Non-transparent | Corrupt | Dishonest |
Arrogant | Weak | No Conviction | Cannot
Win/Losers | Disconnected | Lazy | Entitled

Communities are worried

I feel _____ about the way things are going in my community these days.

Group	Sentiments	Notable quote from this group
Mixed race men and women	Proud Worried Scared Helpless Hopeful Divided Afraid Outraged	“Some things worry me but so much of it we have no control over so why even think about it.”
Minority / non-white men and women	Infuriated Hopeless Removed Numb Typical Under Siege Ignored Disgusted	“I’m just numb to it all now. Nothing is going to change. Just nonchalant.”
White women	Frustrated Cautiously Optimistic Hopeful Agitated OK Blah Nonchalant	“Of course I am worried, we put a lunatic in the White House, we’re all worried.”
African American men and women	Infuriated Hopeless Removed Numb Typical Under Siege Ignored Disgusted	“Nobody cares about my community. Local leaders don’t care. National leaders don’t care. Seriously, I’m not just saying that.”

Voter preferences

Democratic favorability reveals a clear advantage over the GOP. However, like swing voters, African American voters in particular are warming up to alternatives.

Rate Each Organization (1-100)	Mean
The Labor movement	82%
Black Lives Matter	65%
The Democratic party	59%
The Green party	59%
Libertarian Party	51%
Dream Defenders	50%
The Republican party	24%
The Tea Party	19%

Priority issues

These include racial profiling, jobs, healthcare, and decriminalizing marijuana.

Most important issue	Total
Working to end police harassment and racial profiling	47%
Creating more jobs and economic opportunity	35%
Investing in quality and affordable healthcare	23%
Legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana	23%
Fighting for immigration reform that provides a path to citizenship	18%
Fighting terrorism and keeping America safe	12%
Ending the privatization of prisons	12%
Reducing student debt and making college more affordable	12%
Protecting American jobs from being shipped overseas	12%
Fighting racism and discrimination	6%
Restricting access to guns	6%
Protecting our right to bear arms	6%
Combating climate change and protecting clean air and water	6%
Securing our borders and eliminating illegal immigration	6%
Protecting a woman's right to choose and rights in the workplace	0%
Reducing student load debt	6%
Increasing wages for working people	0%
Making college more affordable	0%

BREAKING AWAY

Most participants did not regret their decision and would still vote 3rd Party in a do-over election.

Few regrets about voting 3rd party

Key question asked of focus groups: If there was a do-over election today and you knew the outcome how would you participate differently?

Action	Mixed race men and women	Minority/ non-white men and women	White women	African American men and women	Total
Vote for Hillary Clinton	0%	25%	25%	13%	16%
Vote for Democrats down-ballot	60%	50%	0%	13%	32%
Vote 3rd Party	80%	75%	75%	25%	60%
Encourage more people to vote for Democrats	20%	38%	0%	25%	24%
Contribute more time to Democratic campaigns	20%	0%	0%	13%	8%

“The instructions say ‘what would I do different,’ but what if I would just do everything the exact same?” *White, Fort Lauderdale*

[Vote Dem down ballot in do over]
 “It would be good to have more Democrats in Congress just to balance Trump, that’s the only reason why.”
Minority, Fort Lauderdale

[Vote Dem down ballot in do over]
 “I probably would have liked to vote for more Democrats down ballot just because I tend to agree with them more on the issues.”
White, Milwaukee

Reasons given for voting 3rd party

- “I never ever heard people talking about stuff I cared about, all they ever talked about was why the other was so bad. I guess they were both right since I didn’t vote for either of them.” *White Woman, Milwaukee, May 3*
- “I think the President needs to be someone not out of either of the parties – someone who’s not forced to vote by party line or do what the party tells them to.” *African American Woman, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*
- “So many celebrities came out for Hillary, they pushed it down your throat...everyone in my circle...trying to push Hillary Clinton down my throat. Voting for Jill Stein was my way of saying I’m not going to be forced to make a choice. And I feel good about my vote.” *Latina Woman, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*
- “Both parties have just become so polarized on both sides. It’s like the crazies are in charge of the asylum. I am not crazy left or crazy right so it just felt like moderates that aren’t crazy do not really have a home in either party anymore.” *White Woman, Milwaukee, May 3*

Seeking viable path for 3rd party

Participants voted 3rd party to send a message and to give 3rd party candidates a better chance of winning in the future.

Reason to vote 3 rd Party	White Women	
To send a message	100%	“I just wanted to send a message that they cannot just take my vote for granted.” <i>Milwaukee, May 3</i>
To give 3rd party candidates a better chance to win in the future	100%	“I really wanted the 3 rd party folks to actually get to 4% so he can get his message out next time.” <i>Milwaukee, May 3</i>
To vote against both Trump and Clinton	75%	“I honestly feel like it was mostly because I just didn’t like either candidate. If it would have been someone different I probably would have voted for the Democrat.” <i>Milwaukee, May 3</i>
Because I wanted 3rd party candidate to be POTUS	50%	
To vote against both Republicans and Democrats	50%	“I am not a Democrat or a Republican. I don’t really like either of the parties so I voted against them both.” <i>Milwaukee, May 3</i>
I didn't think Trump could win	50%	
To hasten the political revolution	25%	
To disrupt the status quo	0%	“I do just kind of think that if people get fed up enough then they will have a better chance of voting for a candidate like Bernie next time.” <i>Milwaukee, May 3</i>
To punish Democrats	0%	

Being better isn't enough

It's not enough for Democrats to take the preferred position on a given issue as compared to the GOP – even seeing this, these voters still broke 3rd Party.

Choose top 3 most important	Top Box Choice	DEMS better	GOP better	NEITHER
Expanding access to affordable healthcare	4	4		
Legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana	2	2		
Restricting access to guns	2	2		
Honest and trustworthy	2			2
Combating climate change and protecting clean air and water	2	2		
Making college more affordable	2	2		
Fighting racism and discrimination	1	1		
Working to end police harassment and racial profiling	1		1	
Creating more jobs and econ opportunity	1	1		
Fighting terrorism and keeping America safe	1		1	
Has good judgement	1			1
Reducing student debt and making college more affordable	1	1		

*Red ink=issues where Democrats do not have an advantage

Future swing voters

3rd party voters are more likely to vote in future elections, but remain less likely to vote for Democrats.

Vote Likelihood	2018	2020
Almost certain	75%	100%
Probably	25%	0%
50-50	0%	0%
Will not vote	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	0%

Vote Likelihood	2018	2020
Democrat	25%	0%
Republican	0%	0%
3rd party	25%	25%
Don't know	50%	75%

“We don’t like feeling like someone’s telling us what to do – don’t like filling in a box because we’re being forced to do something. We are not going to continue to feel like we have to make a choice. That’s why so many of us voted for the 3rd Party” *African American Woman, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*

The glass is ½ full. 3rd party voters are not fully committed to voting 3rd party in future elections but they are certainly not committed to Democrats either. **They are on the market for good options.**

Still rejecting the binary choice

There is a strong desire to see 3rd party candidates be more viable in the future.

- “This was a good year for 3rd Party candidates. Some of them did really well...Bernie and Trump kind of showed people that you can run against the party norm. I think we will have more 3rd party candidates the next go around.” *White Man, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*
- “I vote 3rd party down ballot too, even if I don’t know who they are because I want them to know they matter.” *White Woman, Milwaukee, May 3*
- “I just want to see the 3rd Party candidate get considered by more people and that all comes down to money and exposure. At least if I keep voting for him then he’ll probably get to 4% and get the public fund. I think he even gets on the debate stage but they didn’t let Gary Johnson debate even when he got there.” *White Man, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*
- “I really do not care if I don’t know the 3rd candidate, I am going to keep voting for them anyway until they stop trying to force us to choose between the lesser of two evils.” *Latino Man, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN VOTE

The African Americans within these focus group voted in 2012 – but not 2016.

Drop-off voters

- “Maybe if they would have come and talk about things like healthcare and schooling in the African American community we would have gone and vote, but they came and talked to the rural areas.” *African American Man, Milwaukee, May 4*
- “I feel a little guilty because my people have a responsibility to vote but I still didn’t. But that’s not my fault. They should have given us more to work with. I mean you give us two candidates like this that don’t even come to Milwaukee one time and then it’s my fault for not voting for them. I don’t think so. This is their fault.” *African American Woman, Milwaukee, May 4*
- “To me it just seemed like all they cared about was money. Her speeches, his tax returns...I don’t care about any of that and they didn’t care about what I cared about.” *African American Woman, Milwaukee, May 4*

“It makes no difference”

These drop-off/swing voters do not see much distinction between Democrats and Republicans on many of the below issues – **this is a red flag moment.**

Most important issue	Top Box	DEMS	REPS	NEITHER
Working to end police harassment and racial profiling	8	1		7
Fighting racism and discrimination	5	1		4
Creating more jobs and econ opportunity	4	2		2
Expanding access to affordable healthcare	4	3		1
Honest and trustworthy	3			3
Reducing student debt and making college more affordable	3	2		1
Increasing wages for working people	3	1		2
Protecting a woman's right to choose and rights in the workplace	3	2		1
Legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana	2	1		1
Has good judgement	2			2
Restricting access to guns	1	1		
On the side of people like you	1	1		
Work to make sure hard work pays off	1			
Making sure those who break the rules pay the price	1		1	
Representing my values	1			1
Is inclusive/diverse	1			1

*Red ink=issues where Democrats do not have an advantage

Our votes don't matter

Drop-off voters think their issues were ignored, the system is corrupt, and that their vote didn't matter.

Reason to not vote	African American men and women
They didn't focus on issues I cared about	89%
System is corrupt	89%
Didn't like any of the candidates	75%
Didn't think my vote mattered	75%
Didn't want to waste my time	63%
Tired of Democrats taking my vote for granted	13%
If I participate it means I accept the status quo	13%
I assumed Hillary would win	13%
To punish Democrats	0%

“I mean I honestly feel like the entire thing is corrupt and it doesn't matter if I vote or not”
African American Man, Milwaukee, May 4

“I don't actually think my vote would have even mattered. It wasn't going to change whether Trump won.”
African American Man, Milwaukee, May 4

“I really did, I just assumed she [Hillary] would win. I just didn't think we were stupid enough to elect Donald Trump.”
African American Woman, Milwaukee, May 4

Future behavior of non-voters

Non-voters are less likely to vote in future elections, but if they vote most would vote for Democrats.

Vote Likelihood	2018	2020
Almost certain	25%	25%
Probably	50%	35%
50-50	25%	25%
Will not vote	0%	0%
Don't know	0%	15%

Vote Likelihood	2018	2020
Democrat	75%	63%
Republican	0%	0%
3rd party	13%	12%
Don't know	12%	25%

NEXT STEPS

“Honestly, what difference does it really make. They had a majority and still didn’t do anything for my community. They didn’t even mention police brutality. They didn’t even mention student loans. Why would I want them to have the power again.” *Minority Group, Ft. Lauderdale, May 2*

We must move aggressively with new tactics and strategies to repair the break before it’s too late.

Closing thoughts

1. Our tactics aren't working – we are not effectively reaching these voters.
2. These voters need authentic and persuasive engagement – they are not simply GOTV / turnout targets.
3. Empower them with the tools they need to get involved.
4. They require options and ownership of their participation. Provide multiple pathways for them to engage around causes that matter most to them – creating a marketplace of participation.
5. Democrats and progressives will need to treat this cohort of the Obama coalition like swing voters in order to win them back.

Civic Engagement Fund



ANDREA HAILEY is the Founder of Civic Engagement Fund. A recognized philanthropic and political leader, Andrea's career spans over 40 federal and state campaigns. Her work in media strategy and fundraising garnered Pollie awards in 2008 and 2010, and she raised over a million dollars in under 60 days for the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in 2007. A biracial millennial, she began her career in the office of Rep. Patrick Kennedy. Andrea currently sits on the board of NARAL and serves on the leadership council of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture ambassadors program.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FUND is an inclusive, values-driven organization accelerating innovative grassroots groups and building diverse coalitions that empower voter engagement in the United States.

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