

The Presidential Candidates' Campaign and the Millennial Voters' Perception: A Case Study of the 2024 Indonesian General Election

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the campaigning strategies employed by the three presidential candidates in the 2024 Indonesian general election and how the millennial voters perceive the strategies and cast their votes accordingly. Notwithstanding the controversies that shadow the eventual victory of Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, we argue that an attention paid to how the three candidates present their political promise on social media would provide a useful insight into the understanding of why Prabowo-Gibran achieve a landslide victory against the other two candidates, securing an unprecedented 58% of voters in just one round.

The study presents several dominant themes from each candidate pairs. These themes, in the context of voters' political choice, can be argued to reflect distinctive ideological stance and political aspiration of their endorsers. Prabowo-Gibran's victory, in turn, can be said to represent the current, mainstream ideals aspired by the majority of Indonesian millennial voters. Indonesia

Keywords: election, Indonesia, millennials, political campaign, voters

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian General Election held on February 14, 2024, marked a new chapter in Indonesian politics. Particularly, this is due to the presence of Millennial vice-presidential candidate, Gibran Rakabuming Raka. Aged 36 years old at the time of the election, he achieved the feat of being the youngest ever vice-presidential candidate in the history of Indonesian politics. His young age means that Gibran is believed to be politically immature and lacking significant political experience. Furthermore, his success in winning the 2020 mayoral election in Surakarta (Solo) was viewed as owing to his father's (Joko Widodo) popularity as the nation's president.

Gibran's entry into the General Election was equally controversial, since it necessitates the changing of Indonesian Constitution. In the Constitutional Court decision Number 90/PUU-XXI/2023, the Constitutional Court established that any heads of regional government under 40 can nominate themselves as presidential or vice-presidential candidates provided that they have served or are currently serving in the government. Put differently, Gibran attracted much controversy for benefiting from political dynasties and nepotism. On the other hand, Prabowo Subianto drew no less controversy for the alleged human rights violations he conducted while serving

as a military officer under the New Order regime, whose leader, Soeharto, was also his father-in-law.

For all the existing political parties in Indonesia, the 2024 presidential election presented a novel challenge in terms of the increasing number of millennial voters, whose figure reached 66,822,389 or 33.60 % of the total 204,807,222 voters^[1]. Many political experts and observers view the presence of Gibran as providing a new element to the campaign, primarily since the millennials constitute a significant portion of the potential voters. As a comparison, the other two vice presidential candidates – Muhaimin Iskandar (58 years old) and Mahfud Md (67 years old) – are typically classified as belonging to Gen X, thus pointing to the perceived generational distance between them and the younger generation.

Considering this intriguing phenomenon, the research questions can be stated as follows: (1) What is the political campaign strategies employed by the three presidential candidates in the 2024 presidential election? (2) How does Prabowo-Gibran's distinctive campaign appeal to the majority of voters?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus on millennial voters is inspired by the emerging discussion on their significant role in influencing and determining the outcome of elections worldwide.^[2-4] The millennials, generally understood as the generation emerging from the 1980s to the early 2000s with a perceived apathy in terms of political commitment or participation,^[5] have steadily become the key participants in politics, especially concerning the prediction of Statistics Indonesia that the period of 2020-2045 will produce a demographic bonus in the labor market.

Whereas in the past the millennials were neglected by political elites for their statistical insignificance, the historical victory of millennials-backed Barack Obama in the 2008 U.S. presidential election profoundly shaped the political

landscape worldwide.^[2] Understanding voting not merely as a civic responsibility but mainly as a personal political choice, the millennials' dispositions and preferences are now considered essential for any potential success in politics.^[6-7] Subsequently, the next paragraphs will delineate the pertaining issues with regard to the relationship between politics and youth, in particular, the forms of political engagement and their contents.

While it is widely studied that youth political disengagement is one of the main issues facing contemporary democracies, several scholars have argued otherwise. One comparative study finds that "youth engagement in different modes of political participation varies significantly across distinctive democracies, where individuals situated in established EU democracies are more likely to be politically active".^[8] Thus, it points out that the issue of (dis)engagement is only meaningful when considered contextually. Similarly, although Internet advertisements are increasingly regarded as necessary in securing the success of contemporary elections, another study demonstrate that "a combination of information and voting reminder ads was effective, but only for voters in competitive districts".^[9] In the context of Indonesian voters, it is also argued that the candidates' images and religious beliefs partially mediate the relationship between social media marketing and voting intention.^[10] Notwithstanding all these contextualized variations, they point to the unquestionable fact that the increasing influence of social media logic in current politics has stimulated the marketization as well as the professionalization of political campaigning, particularly in the third-world, emerging democracies like Indonesia.^[11]

Although the brief literature review above elaborates on the forms of youth engagement with political participation, a no less important focus should also be directed to the content of such engagement. In the Indonesian context, political communications are suffused with culturally

oriented symbols as a means to build grassroots-level trust and, in turn, to stimulate political participation in the public sphere. The symbols are presented and distributed, for instance, through the strategic use of local Javanese dialect or a distinctive style of dress, which could potentially situate a candidate as belonging to the masses or as a tough leader with iron-fist but benevolent approach.^[12] Another study that aims to explore the commodification process of Islamic piety amongst political actors is even more explicit when concluding that “[political] candidates are political symbols or commodities among Indonesian voters”.^[13] The dialectical dynamics between symbols and politics is equally true in the context of nation-building. To give one example, the “communist imaginary” still plays a defining role in evoking emotionally powerful feelings of perpetual fear of a demonized Other.^[14] Such an imagination could be extended to not only communism but also the imagined political figure as “belonging to the ordinary people” or “the authoritarian-but-benevolent savior.” In other words, “the imaginary is a collective structure that organizes the imagination and the symbolism of the political”.^[15] Another interesting point is that Indonesia’s elections in the local and national level prefer festive rallies and campaigns, inviting famous figures to entertain the crowd. In the Indian context, one study notes that the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party could be explained by looking at the election rallies as the focal point of its campaigning strategy.^[16] Another study also argues that a debate event full of festivity positively impacts youth voters’ interest in U.S. elections.^[17] More recently, a study on symbols and the entertaining potential that they occasionally possess has analyzed, among others, Donald Trump’s pistol hand gesture, arguing that it not only conveys a metaphorical pistol that signifies masculine power, but also encompasses a comedic element that entertains the audience.^[18] Thus, taking the cue from a classic study on

the symbolic uses in the political realm, it can be argued that people think in symbols to help them organize and find meanings in everyday life.^[19]

MATERIALS & METHODS

Semarang was chosen as the setting of this article because it is the capital city of Central Java Province, where former Governor and presidential candidate Ganjar Pranowo served two consecutive terms but found himself losing badly to Prabowo-Gibran (7.8 million voters versus 12 million voters). This fact was expressed colloquially as *kalah di kandang sendiri* [losing in one’s home ground]. Furthermore, the fact that Semarang serves as the gubernatorial seat for Ganjar is also linked to the fact that it constitutes PDIP’s political bastions in Central Java, a province where PDIP emerged triumphantly in the last decade. Therefore, understanding how voters eventually decided to direct their votes away from the incumbents is sociologically more interesting than, say, attempting to understand why they won in places where Prabowo and his political party, Gerindra, had established a solid base.

Choosing Semarang as the site of fieldwork is in line with the principle of convenience sampling,^[20] which opts for feasibility and ease of access as the main rationale for conducting research. Subsequently, the objective of this article is not to propose a generalizable conclusion but, instead, to provide a more nuanced analysis of voters’ political choice. Put differently, even though the controversies surrounding Prabowo-Gibran’s political journey might lead to the conclusion that the 2024 presidential election was rigged from the start, such a conclusion runs the risk of dismissing the political agency of the majority of voters and perceiving them as suffering from false consciousness.

This article focuses on the impact of the political campaigns by the three presidential candidates to the political preference of Millennial voters and how they rationalized the political choice. We conducted in-depth

interviews in the period of March–December 2024 among 23 individuals aged between 18 and 29. The age range is set in order to determine those who could be classified as millennials. The objective is to understand how a particular generation perceive and process the information they received regarding political campaign and then decided to cast their votes accordingly. The informants were chosen through purposive sampling to specify those who were deemed most likely to provide appropriate data for the article's objectives.^[21-22] The preliminary phase of searching for the potential informants was conducted through snowball sampling until the search reached a saturation point.^[23] In the initial stage, questionnaires were distributed amongst college students in one central public University in Semarang on their political choices during the 2024 election. Subsequently, we followed up the findings through in-depth interviews about the correlation between the campaigning contents and their voting decision. Afterward, based on the referral from the select participants, we interviewed the subsequent informants excluded from the

initial research phase. Therefore, snowball sampling helps identify hard-to-reach populations.^[23]

Aside from the background questions about age, gender, and occupational status, we also inquired about their motivation for voting. We also inquired about their economic status (classified into upper, middle, and lower class) and political background (defined in terms of previous experience in electoral voting) (see Table 1).

The interviews took place on campus and in various public spaces. All the interviews were recorded, and notes were taken to outline the analytical categories as well as the interpretations of the data.^[24] The interviews unfolded in a semi-structured way in order to provide a relaxed atmosphere when talking about sensitive topics like politics and lasted approximately 1–1.5 hours. Furthermore, we also provide a list of topical questions asked during interviews (see Table 2). Afterwards, we apply the method of initial and focused coding of the informants' statements^[25] to categorize the recurring themes (see Table 3).

Table 1. Informants' Backgrounds

Informant	Gender	Age	Occupational Status	Voting Motivation	Experience in electoral voting	Economic Status
1	Female	20	College student	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	First-time voter	Middle class
2	Female	24	Private employee	Desiring major change	Vote for Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin in 2019	Middle class
3	Male	29	Entrepreneur	Desiring major change	Vote for Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno in 2019	Middle class
4	Male	24	Entrepreneur	Desiring major change	Abstention from voting	Middle class
5	Female	26	Private employee	Desiring major change	Vote for Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin in 2019	Middle class
6	Male	21	College student	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	First-time voter	Lower class
7	Female	28	Private employee	Desiring major change	Vote for Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno in 2019	Middle class
8	Male	26	Entrepreneur	Desiring major change	Vote for Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin in 2019	Middle class
9	Female	22	College student	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	First-time voter	Middle class
10	Female	24	Private employee	Desiring major change	Abstention from voting	Middle class

11	Female	19	College student	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	First-time voter	Lower class
12	Male	28	Entrepreneur	Desiring major change	Vote for Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin in 2019	Middle class
13	Female	19	College student	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	First-time voter	Middle class
14	Male	23	Private Employee	Desiring major change	Abstention from voting	Middle class
15	Female	24	Private Employee	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	Abstention from voting	Middle class
16	Male	26	Entrepreneur	Desiring major change	Vote for Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno in 2019	Middle class
17	Female	27	Private employee	Desiring major change	Vote for Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno in 2019	Middle class
18	Male	19	College student	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	First-time voter	Lower class
19	Male	23	Entrepreneur	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	Abstention from voting	Middle class
20	Male	23	Private employee	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	Vote for Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin in 2019	Middle class
21	Female	24	Private employee	Desiring major change	Abstention from voting	Middle class
22	Female	20	College student	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	First-time voter	Lower class
23	Male	27	Entrepreneur	Sympathetic to Prabowo-Gibran	Vote for Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin in 2019	Middle class

Table 2. Topical Questions Asked During the Interview

1] What motivates you to vote in the 2024 Presidential election?
2] Tell me about your experience in the Indonesian regional or national election!
3] What, in your opinion, distinguished the 2024 election from the previous ones?
4] When were you first attracted to the candidates' political campaigns, and why?
5] In your social milieu, do you find more (or less) people agreeing with your political choice?
6] Can you elaborate on the decision to vote for Prabowo-Gibran instead of other candidates?
7] How do you understand their gestures, speeches, debates, and political promises?
8] How do you compare it to the other candidates?
9] How do you view the feasibility of the promises from all those candidates being implemented?
10] How do you see Indonesia in the next five years regarding its economic and political future?

Table 3. Initial and Focused Coding

Initial Coding	Focused Coding
Recounting the motivation for voting	The practice of accounting for one's political choice in the election:
Going against either friends' or families' political preference	1] Appreciative accounting:
Being informed of candidates' campaigns via news outlets	"Intentionally sidelining or dismissing the much-published negative aspects of a candidate in favor of acknowledging or emphasizing his other, more positive aspects (e.g., his perceived sincerity, etc.)."
Following the news regularly (especially the five-round national debate) before and after the election day	2] Straightforward accounting:
Discussing the pros and cons of each candidate with select and close friends	"Privileging short-term, concrete, material benefits rather than long-term, abstract, immaterial ones; in other words, favoring those things that are readily imaginable rather than things that are more visionary or strategic."
Making sense of one's	3] Relatedness accounting:

preferred candidate	
Closing the interview session with the hope or prayer that one had indeed chosen wisely for the sake of the nation	“Expressing a feeling of close affinity, particularly to the figure of Gibran, for the main reason that he is regarded as belonging to the same age and generational category as the informants; in other words, a candidate possesses relatedness insofar as he is believed to represent the informants in the most empathetic manner.”

RESULT

In the Indonesian 2024 presidential election, there were 4,646 polling stations in 16 sub-districts in Semarang, consisting of 602,143 male voters and 637,526 female voters. The following tables show how

Prabowo-Gibran won both in Semarang and Central Java despite being pitted against the incumbent governor. The table also compares their campaigning performances and results in other select provinces (see Table 4 and 5).

Table 4. The Election Result in Semarang

Candidates	Number of Votes in Semarang
Anies Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar (1)	140,145
Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabuming Raka (2)	495,015
Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD (3)	395,978

Table 5. The Election Result in Select Provinces

Candidates	Central Java	West Java	East Java	Aceh	West Sumatra
(1)	2,866,373	9,009,674	4,492,652	2,369,534	1,744,042
(2)	12,096,454	16,805,854	16,716,603	787,024	1,217,314
(3)	7,827,335	2.820.995	4.434.805	64,677	124.044

All the informants agreed that there were major differences in campaigning strategies for the 2024 Presidential Election, in particular, the extensive use of technology and social media to reach and embrace potential voters. More specifically, the differences between the 2024 Presidential Election campaign and the previous ones include a heightened focus on globally important issues such as environmental sustainability and quality education. The three candidates also exhibited a stronger integration between offline and online campaigns, and adaptation to changes in voter behavior and preferences. The form of the 2024 Presidential Election campaigns cannot be separated from their

contents. It is a truism that the views of others might significantly influence our own political ideologies.^[26] Sustained activities in social media might present the users with alternative views and ideas that could determine their political preference.^[27] One study remarks that there are still insufficient researches conducted to study the persuasive capability of social media,^[28] while another study similarly concludes that there is yet to be any consensus about the persuasive impact of social media on the users.^[29] In this sense, it is important to note that several key contents of all the candidates' campaigns inevitably influenced the voters' preferences (see Table 6).

Table 6. Distinctive Contents of the Three Presidential Candidates

Candidates	Distinctive Political Campaigns
Anies Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar	“Eradicate illegal online gambling”: catering to the religious sentiment of the Muslim majority who view gambling as forbidden by religious law. “Stressing idea-based and track record-based campaigns”: Appealing to the rational and pro-meritocracy voters by emphasizing their track record and coherent ideas, especially Anies's achievements when serving as the Governor of DKI Jakarta. “Regular shouting of <i>Amin, Amin, Amin</i> as their supporters' slogan”: Ingeniously appropriating the Islamic declaration of affirmation of 'Amin' that certainly appealed

	to the Muslims' religious sensibility, which is implicitly also the acronym of Anies and Muhaimin.
Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabuming Raka	<p>"Building at least 300 medical faculties in Indonesia to ensure the availability of certified doctors across the country": Responding to the urgent task of providing basic health rights to the people.</p> <p>"Emphasizing their closeness to President Joko Widodo, with Gibran as the president's son and Prabowo as the Minister of Defense in the cabinet": Both were often seen together with the former president at various events. The emphasis on closeness provides a great advantage in gaining the sympathy of Joko Widodo's loyal supporters.</p> <p>"Rebranding the figure of Prabowo into an easy-going, funny, and relaxed figure (known colloquially as <i>gemoy</i> – literally means "cute") who liked to crack jokes and dance": Projecting an ex-military officer "tough guy" into "one of the people", thus reducing any perceived class or status difference between him and the masses.</p> <p>"Prioritizing social welfare programs, the most popular one being <i>makan bergizi gratis</i> [free nutritious meal]": Offering concrete and immediate gratification to the people, which is quite revolutionary because no previous governments had ever attempted the program.</p>
Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD	<p>"1 poor family 1 University graduate": Appealing to the lower class by promising a better future through long-term investment in education.</p> <p>"Familiarity with popular culture, such as the three-finger salute identical to the gesture in <i>The Hunger Games</i>": Tapping into a memorable and popular campaigning symbol as well as signifying the open-minded and up-to-date disposition of the candidate.</p> <p>"Emphasizing both the positive and negative aspects of Joko Widodo's government": Appealing to Joko Widodo's loyal supporters by vowing to continue his infrastructural programs while also maintaining critical distance by, for instance, critiquing his bureaucratic flaws.</p>

DISCUSSION

Regarding Anies-Muhaimin's political campaigns, most of the informants stated that what they found as either disconcerting or unsatisfactory pertains to two main issues: the candidate pair's reliance on the over-intellectual discourse and their perceived alliance with the hardline Islamist group. On the first issue, the informants found that what Anies-Muhaimin promised as their planned political programs were still too abstract, in the sense that the programs did not touch upon the more concrete or pragmatic problems faced by people in general. This concern is reminiscent to one study that problematizes the neoliberal logic of giving the man a rod instead of a fish,^[30] meaning that for the informants, the well-celebrated programs of self-empowerment is less desirable than a more immediate fulfilment of daily needs. Contrast this neoliberal logic with, for instance, the populist promise of Prabowo-Gibran to provide free lunch in all schools in Indonesia if they got elected. Although casual observers might lament the

preference for fish rather than rod (to be given free lunch rather than the resource to sustain oneself) as short-sighted, we should also bear in mind that for people living in the structural poverty, some times ensuring that one's daily subsistence is guaranteed by the state is more important than embracing the discourse of self-empowerment.^[30]

On the second issue that puts Anies-Muhaimin in unfavourable condition, the horizontal ethnic-based or religion-based conflicts are quite a common recurrence in Indonesia in the post-Reformation (post-1998) period. Such conflicts, and the cycle of violence they ignite, is in contrast to the cultural ideal of harmony upheld and cherished dearly by most Indonesians.^[12] In this sense, it is understandable that some voters might feel disinclined to vote for them, for they believe that exclusionary identity politics is an old-fashioned style of doing politics that is not suitable anymore in the context of modern democratic life. Thus, even in the case of a promise that, on the surface, appears to be good-willed and has the best of public interest in mind, such as

that of eradicating online gambling, such a promise was eventually perceived as catering to the hardline Islamic sensibility that threatens to undermine the multiculturalist notion of Indonesia as a nation comprised of different ethnic groups and religions.

The case of Ganjar-Mahfud, on the other hand, is in itself intriguing for this is a case where an incumbent party (PDIP, as the political machinery behind the candidate pair's nomination) suffered unprecedented loss in an election. In order to understand this baffling phenomenon, it would be instructive to note the role of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) as the nation's president in the past decade. A businessman turned politician, Jokowi owed his political career to PDIP. Beginning humbly as the mayor of Surakarta, he worked his way slowly into the national scene by contesting in the Jakarta gubernatorial election, which he won decisively. Since his track record as governor is popular among the young generation and the middle-class, he, with the backing of PDIP, decided to contest in the general election in 2014, which he won (he repeated this feat in 2019). The problem arose in 2024 when, unable to contest for the third time, there was a rumour that Jokowi asked the party chairman to include his son, Gibran, in the candidacy, if not as presidential candidate, then at least as the vice-presidential candidate. The chairman dismissed this request, and instead opted for a more seasoned politician in the figure of Ganjar and Mahfud. This prompted Jokowi to ally with PDIP's main opposition, Gerindra, and to endorse his son as the vice-presidential candidate of Gerindra's chairman, Prabowo Subianto. Although Jokowi never openly announced his resignation from PDIP during the campaigning period, the public got the sense that he was no longer among the party's cadres.

A brief history of the internal conflict within PDIP presented above paves the way to understand some of the informants' aversion to Ganjar-Mahfud's political campaign. In

Table 6, we have noted that one of this candidate pair's strategy is to endorse some of Jokowi's programs while critically distancing themselves from other programs. Bearing in mind Jokowi's incredibly popular figure among the masses, such a strategy did not sit well with the latter's sensibility. From our informants, we get a glimpse of what this actually entails. For them, Ganjar-Mahfud's decision to partially select a few good programs among the rest of the perceived bad ones in the past decade of Indonesia is equal to undermining or even sabotaging the nation's economic progress. This does not mean that they follow Jokowi blindly; rather, it means that for them, Prabowo-Gibran's promise to continue Jokowi's program constitutes a more feasible option. That is, for them, one can always fix or correct minor problems while striving to continue an established program, but on the other hand, one is decidedly cynical when attempting to vehemently criticize a program without first of all trying to embrace or objectively consider its potential. In other words, the informants' reluctance to cast their votes to Ganjar-Mahfud has its origin in how they view Jokowi is treated and judged unfairly by the opposition: not objectively, but motivated by personal grudge.

CONCLUSION

In a recent critique of Prabowo's political campaign, three main factors contributing to Prabowo's controversial victory in the election are detailed: the radical rebranding of his image (which might be seen as akin to a lack of integrity), mobilization of Joko Widodo supporters (which is synonymous to collusion and nepotism), and mobilization of state resources (a dire violation of law).^[31] Another recent study offers a more conceptual assessment of Prabowo's political campaigns by presenting the phrase fluctuating populism, which they define as "the strategic adjustments made by populist leaders to their rhetoric and ideological messaging across different election cycles in pursuit of electoral victory".^[32] Thus, for

instance, regarding his rather inconsistent target audience, Prabowo's 2014 campaign targeted the low-income workers and the rural poor with a strong socialist spirit, while his 2019 campaign sided with Islamist hardliners, and his latest campaign appealed to Joko Widodo's supporters.^[32]

Our informants all held or will eventually hold a bachelor's degree, and it is expected that they should have known better in deciding what is best for the nation. Nonetheless, a study of the correlation between the length of education and voting behavior in Indonesia has argued that education does influence voters' views regarding the candidates' background or track record.^[33] We mention this study simply to point out the equally important role played by social media contents in shaping voters' preference.

Another study inquires whether Indonesians vote rationally or irrationally through the findings that "voters' experiences in disasters reduced their intention to vote at all".^[34] Through the case study in Semarang, this article argues that voters' political preference goes beyond the rationality-irrationality debate since the statements and answers emerging during the interviews point to the fact that there is indeed a careful deliberation behind their choice. Such circumstances do not necessitate rationality, primarily if the word is defined in terms of objective, factual data.

The study by Susila et al. resemble the focus in this article on studying the subjectivity of voters.^[12] Nonetheless, their analysis puts more emphasis on how symbols are politicized and, subsequently, received and made sense of by individuals in a culturally specific context. On the other hand, the present article does not take the formulation of meaning as something natural or pre-given; that is, as something structural in the sense of "the imaginary".^[15] Instead, the contribution that we wish to offer is to extend the current literature on millennials' voting behavior by considering situations wherein individuals not only decided to vote but meaningfully perceived the campaigning

contents from which they cast their votes for what they believe is in the best interest for the nation's future.

Declaration by Authors

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