**Race, the Ballot, and Hegemony: What the Struggle over Immigrant Voting Teaches us about Rightwing Mobilization in the U.S.**

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**Abstract**

While there has been an increase in rhetoric and efforts block expanding voting rights to noncitizens around the United States, there is a relative lack of academic research examining the ideology, political actors, and strategy behind such efforts.  In addressing this gap, we explore anti-immigrant voting rights campaigns as they relate to broader rightwing mobilization and voter suppression efforts. We draw upon the literature on Gramsci’s conception of hegemony to document and analyze efforts to use state power to change constitutions and election laws in ways that politically disenfranchise working class people of color in order to institutionalize white minority rule.  We explore the nature of this political project and how more conventional rightwing actors dovetail with grassroots extremism by examining both historical and contemporary cases. We show how these networks have employed a mix of legal, administrative, and violent tactics during the turn of the 20th century as well as in the contemporary period to politically realize a common, exclusionary ideology to shape the electorate and polity. We argue struggles over noncitizen voting rights reflect debate about distinct visions of who properly constitutes “the people” and what is and should be the nature of the American polity: are we a white Anglo Christian republic or a multiracial egalitarian democracy? In so doing, we argue the rise and fall – and reemergence – of noncitizen immigrant voting rights in the U.S. represents a microcosm of the broader “voting wars” embroiling the nation.

**Noncitizen Voters and Election Fights**

Somewhere between three to five million – that is the figure of undocumented people that then-President Trump claimed had voted illegally in the 2016 election. Perhaps scoffed at or ridiculed by many, largely because the documented incidence of voter fraud is infinitesimal, the idea motivating the former President’s false claims has generated a series of state-level laws, Constitutional amendments, and lawsuits all aimed at enshrining the notion that the franchise is solely for citizens.[[1]](#footnote-1) Specifically, since 2018, conservative groups and legislators have brought lawsuits to block laws that allow noncitizens to legally vote in local elections which have been enacted in San Francisco, New York, Vermont, and Washington D.C, and they have successfully banned noncitizen immigrant voting rights in Florida, Alabama, North Dakota, Ohio, Louisiana, Colorado, and Arizona, promising to do the same in another dozen states.[[2]](#footnote-2)

What motivates these efforts? One common take is that such efforts are meant to drive up turnout at election time, ginning up support among conservative voters and the right. While perhaps partly true, this understanding misses the extensive work done by the network of rightwing actors who actively fundraise and mobilize grassroots support for political projects beyond voting. Moreover, as we document in this article, far from merely an elite-led, top-down effort, these efforts are part of a broader movement of networked interested groups and individuals from around the United States who have made targeting the rights of noncitizen migrants a priority. We also show how this kind of mobilization is not new, but has appeared over the course American history. What emerges as especially key today is how laws governing elections have become critical focal points of contention.

We argue that ongoing efforts to suppress noncitizen voting ought to be read in the context of larger struggles led by rightwing forces who seek to protect “electoral integrity.” To get at the meaning of these struggles, we draw on the work of Gramsci, and his many interlocutors regarding the nature and uses of ideology. As we argue, comparing present day struggles with past voter suppression efforts, what motivates rightwing actors is a common ideology of white supremacy. This ideology motivates and undergirds the strategy and tactics employed by rightwing groups that seek to repress noncitizen immigrants and other people of color to insulate white minority rule. Furthermore, the “common-sense” conception of voting, as something reserved for citizens, provides a way for the right to simultaneously galvanize support as well as to mainstream other forms of authoritarian politics including violence.

We make our argument over the course of this article’s four sections. In the first, we introduce the Gramscian concept of hegemonic bloc, which describes and explains how elites and grassroots supporters connect through common ideologies and strategic visions that allow different tactics to be deployed to advance a political project. In the second section, we focus on how private and public right wing political actors in the U.S. have employed a mix of violent, legal and administrative tactics to politically realize a common, exclusionary ideology to shape the electorate and polity. This historical discussion highlights how immigrant voting is not a new practice and controversy, but one that has periodically galvanized pro- and anti-immigrant and democratic forces over the course of American history. The next section highlights the post-Civil Rights Movement period, showcasing how struggles to expand and constrict voting rights have evolved at state and local levels, situating the case of immigrant voting rights within these broader struggles. In the fourth section, we conduct a case study of contemporary efforts in Florida. Florida represents a critical case, specifically with respect to how it has gone from being an electoral “battleground state” to being effectively one-party GOP rule where a nascent authoritarianism has taken root that includes the vilification of noncitizen immigrants and voter suppression.

Struggles over noncitizen voting rights represent distinct visions of who properly constitutes “the people” and what is and should be the nature of the American polity. Viewed from this lens, our study of the rise and fall – and reemergence – of noncitizen immigrant voting rights presents a microcosm of the broader “voting wars” embroiling the nation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Struggles over the ballot – where some states enact election reform that expands access to the vote and others engage in “voter suppression” – reflect fights that go beyond the minutia of election rules and practices. More fundamentally, these struggles reflect a long running debate about the nature of America: are we a hierarchical white Anglo Christian republic or a multiracial inclusive egalitarian democracy?[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The Evolving Role of Race and Ethnicity in Shaping Citizenship and Suffrage Struggles**

Democracy is just as much about choosing one’s leaders as it is about defining who is included in the group that is doing the choosing. Such debate has characterized American political development since slavery triggered protracted debates during the time of the Constitutional Convention.[[5]](#footnote-5) Initially, the new nation provided voting rights to only white men with property, highlighting the racial, gender and class exclusions animating America's founding.[[6]](#footnote-6) That framework, along with the displacement and genocide of Native Americans that enabled territorial and economic expansion, tied suffrage in ways to a form of settler colonial and white supremacist ideology that has been reproduced over the course of U.S. history in ways that continue to influence contemporary politics.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Yet, a countervailing democratic thrust animating the American Revolution has also been present.[[8]](#footnote-8) Following the Constitutional Convention, previously excluded groups eventually fought their way into the franchise, from the agitation of the propertyless who saw the elimination of property qualifications in the 1840s and the struggle of Abolitionists who won enfranchisement of African American men after the Civil War, to the decades long struggle by women to win the vote in 1920, the Civil Rights era struggles by African Americans into the 1960s, and to the struggle by young people who won the 26th Amendment to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 in 1971.

Within this overall discussion of struggles over voting rights, scholars have argued that citizenship has been both inclusionary and exclusionary at times, much like race and class.[[9]](#footnote-9) Examples include the racist underpinnings of the 1880s Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1920s National Origins Act that sought to promote the migration of Northern Europeans at the expense of people of Asian and Southern and Eastern European descent.[[10]](#footnote-10) The motives and techniques of the disenfranchisers of African Americans in the Jim Crow South is widely acknowledged and documented, accomplished via poll taxes, literacy tests, White primaries, grandfather clauses and felon laws.

Yet, few scholars acknowledge how a similar set of practices have been part of voter suppression techniques in the North and West, including by enacting restrictive residency requirements, onerous voter registration procedures, extreme gerrymandering, anti-fusion laws, and other forms of voter suppression, to disenfranchise millions of poor, low-income, urban and immigrant groups that contributed to their marginalization.[[11]](#footnote-11) And again, similar to what African Americans have experienced, efforts to disenfranchise noncitizen immigrant voters was accompanied by forms of violence and intimidation.[[12]](#footnote-12) Our discussion of the contentious politics surrounding noncitizen voting adds to this literature, noting how an ideology of white supremacy motivates rightwing struggles against immigrants as much as it has targeted citizens.

In this way, we speak to the literature that analyzes how groups and movements participate in and affect electoral politics and law, documenting the role of social movements and elite groups in shaping “critical elections” and “party realignments,”[[13]](#footnote-13) as well as those who argue that interest groups exert significant influence over parties and politics.[[14]](#footnote-14) What most studies of electoral politics lack – and what the phenomenon of noncitizen voting helps illuminate – is the ideological underpinnings of how movements, parties, and elites work together, sometimes explicitly, other times, without directly engaging one another in meetings and engagements. The complex web of actors that aim to restrict the voting rights of noncitizen immigrants helps us document particularly examples of the latter.

In teasing out the dynamics of such explicit and implicit mobilization, we turn to Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Concretely, hegemony highlights the ways ideological frameworks animate and connect grassroots groups and elite actors in political processes.[[15]](#footnote-15) As applied to studies of American politics, the ideology of white supremacy has been linked to efforts to disenfranchise people of color.[[16]](#footnote-16) As part of a “political project” as well as what has been called the practice of a “racial dictatorship,”[[17]](#footnote-17) white supremacy has generated deep divisions in society, even while uniting people across class. In more popular language, the “wages of whiteness[[18]](#footnote-18) have helped create effective voting blocks in the past, whether in support of the Democratic Party in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, or in support of the Republican Party during recent decades.[[19]](#footnote-19) An additional element within this ideology is how it naturalizes certain ways of acting and behaving. In what Gramsci calls “common sense,” people unquestionably adhere to certain beliefs, neither interrogating their meaning, nor the forces that may have had a hand in producing them. Part of a Gramscian critique of ideology, therefore, is exposing what is taken as common sense, showing how what is considered natural is actually the result of conflicts.

In following Gramsci and his interlocutors, we explore how voter suppression and snuffing out noncitizen voting functions as a tactic in building right-wing hegemony by linking actors from political and civil society. The strategic importance of the electoral process is more than simply a means to increase turnout of supporters or decrease turnout of opponents at election time. Historically and increasingly in the contemporary period, “electoral integrity” serves ideological and tactical purposes around to not only guard against nonexistent “vote fraud,” but also to “unite the right,” borrowing the term from the infamous rally that preceded the deadly mobilization in Charlottesville in 2017. Ideologically, racist nativism functions to connect different actors, some of whom take more explicitly white supremacist views, while others choose to espouse a “color-blind” approach. Such an ideological perspective allows rightwing actors to divide so-called “producers'' from “takers,” or “parasites” as well as to frame the contours of “the people.”[[20]](#footnote-20) To implement this strategy, tactically, groups mobilize in the streets, guarding voting locations as well as filing lawsuits.

Our work dynamizes conceptual discussions instead of focusing on static definitions. Or rather, as we draw upon social movement studies and the contingent nature of political struggle to show how battles over noncitizen voting exist as hegemonic visions over who counts as the people by shaping the electorate. We illustrate such dynamics by examining past and present voter suppression and incorporation campaigns in the United States, which exemplify broader strategies to promote institutional designs, norms and goals. To focus on noncitizen voting draws out these dynamics, which we highlight in the following sections.

**Hegemonic Struggles over Noncitizen Voting in the Pre-Civil Rights Era**

Although surprising to most Americans, the U.S. has a long tradition of allowing noncitizens to legally vote before obtaining citizenship. In fact, forty states allowed noncitizens to vote at some point in time between 1776 and 1926.[[21]](#footnote-21) Historically, immigrants who were not U.S. citizens could legally vote not just in local elections, which is what occurs today in cities in Maryland, Vermont, New York City, and San Francisco, but also in state and federal elections. Immigrants could also run and hold office.“Alien suffrage,” as these laws and practices were called, flowed from the democratic thrust of the American Revolution and an extension of the revolutionary cry “No taxation without representation!” The emerging republicanism and liberalism in early America made noncitizen voting difficult to challenge. In short order, “alien suffrage” became seen as a way to promote citizenship for “Americans in waiting,” not a substitute for naturalization and citizenship.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**[Figure 1 about here]**

Immigrant voting, however, also facilitated colonization and the ideology of White Supremacy as the country expanded. When Congress created new territories from land it acquired by the displacement and genocide of Native Americans, it provided access to voting rights and land to lure European migrants to settle the Midwest and Western parts of the U.S. And when these territories became states, noncitizen voting was kept intact. Meanwhile, Indigenous people were not granted suffrage until 1924. As such, the roots of immigrant voting reveal contradictory purposes; at once a way to include the participation and cultivate a certain colonial ideology among new Western European Americans, it also functions in part to exclude and unsettle Indigenous people. Alien suffrage was also sometimes used by dominant political factions to block or delay the enfranchisement of African Americans and women for partisan advantage, as we discuss below. In these ways, alien suffrage could serve exclusionary and inegalitarian goals and outcomes in some cases.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Far from immutable, noncitizen immigrant voting rights became the subject of conflicts concerning suffrage during periods of political conflict. Shortly after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, when the new states allowed white male immigrants with property to vote, nativist groups moved to restrict “alien suffrage.” For example, the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 were passed by the Federalists partly in response to fears that Frenchmen entering America would “infect” the people with radical revolutionary ideas, prompting anti-French forces to restrict immigrant voting rights in New York.[[24]](#footnote-24) The War of 1812 slowed and reversed the spread of alien suffrage, in part by raising the specter of foreign “enemies” leading the following states to eliminate immigrant voting rights in these years: New Hampshire (1814) Indiana (1816) Connecticut (1818) Virginia (181) New Jersey (1820) Maine (1820) Maryland (1821) Massachusetts (1822), and Delaware (1831).

Leading up to the Civil War, leaders across Southern states opposed immigrant voting because many new immigrants opposed slavery, particularly the Irish and Germans. One of the first planks in the Confederate Constitution was to exclude voting for anyone who was not born in the U.S. (there would be no “naturalization”). The first Klan, which emerged after the Civil War, used force to keep newly enfranchised African Americans from the polls, as well as northerners who migrated to the South. The second wave Klan, which emerged in the 1910s and sought to be more mainstream, still deployed violent rhetoric to intimidate immigrants, particularly Catholics.[[25]](#footnote-25) Such cases show how restricting immigrant voting was strategically tied to particular political projects, often according to explicit racist and nativist ideologies that united political elites with grassroots citizen groups. Moreover, that such issues were the subject of political contestation reveals that change is possible.

After the Civil War and during Reconstruction, nevertheless, alien suffrage spread in the South – imposed by Reconstructionists – and especially in the Midwest and West with the growing economy that generated the need for new labor. Immigrant voting was practiced most widely during the 1870s and 1880s. During this period, immigrant voters – who comprised as much as one quarter to one third of the total voting populations of many states and locales – factored into electoral outcomes, propelling Labor, Populist, and Socialist candidates and parties to power in areas where they were concentrated. Not only were they involved, but were courted by leftwing politicians for their causes.

As the number of immigrants grew and became a sizable portion of the population - and became voters – they injected issues into political campaigns and increasingly factored into strategic calculations by parties and candidates on salient questions of the day. Immigrants voted and agitated for anti-slavery and anti-temperance causes as well as for labor rights and progressive social policy, while business groups, elites, nativists and anti-immigrant groups vied to restrict immigration and immigrant rights – all of which affected party dynamics, electoral outcomes, and policy. In so doing, immigrant suffrage played a role in facilitating immigrant inclusion, incorporation and progress for millions of Europeans.[[26]](#footnote-26) Such processes have variously been characterized as immigrant “assimilation” or “empowerment.”[[27]](#footnote-27) At the same time, immigrant engagement and empowerment – particularly by non-Northern and Western Europeans and radicals – posed a threat to dominant social, economic and political groups at both the elite and mass levels.

These developments, in turn, contributed to the strategic importance of restraining immigrant voting by rightwing political groups who tied suffrage to white supremacy. As the twentieth century approached, when large numbers of Southern and Eastern Europeans came to the U.S. — who were not universally seen as “white” in the taxonomy of the day — rightwing groups mobilized to roll back immigrant voting rights and impose new restrictions on immigration. The growing number of newer immigrants, coupled with the rise of mass social movements and third political parties (e.g., Labor, Populist, and Socialist), posed a potential threat to the dominant political and social order. In response, elites and rightwing groups attacked the growth of political machines tied to immigrants by enacting a host of restrictive election procedures, from the imposition of literacy tests and grandfather clauses to restrictive residency requirements, onerous voter registration procedures and rolling back noncitizen voting rights state by state. The anti-immigrant backlash at the turn of the twentieth century and wartime hysteria during World War I led to the elimination of this long-standing practice in 1926, with Arkansas the last state to end the practice.

Like today, elites and certain civil society groups employed a familiar strategy to justify the enactment of voting restrictions – alleging rampant vote fraud by immigrants and “party machines.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Here, one can see another example of “common sense” at work - the appeal is to protect the ballot from those seeking to vote illegally. But such simple claims cloud and obscure deeper political struggles and projects. Elections were more than selecting leaders to take office; they functioned as moments to represent certain groups as integral parts of American society that required special protection. Although historians acknowledge we cannot totally dismiss the charges of fraud by appealing to the “facts” (since there is little documented evidence), they nevertheless point out that what often passed as “evidence” of fraud was highly suspect.[[29]](#footnote-29) Moreover, they and other scholars argue, charges of fraud—and the restrictive and disenfranchising laws they helped create—reflected nativistic ideologies aimed at excluding new urban immigrants who were tied to party machines of their competitors.[[30]](#footnote-30) As such, suffrage was at once about amassing votes to forward one’s cause as well as about constituting the people. The most frequent charges of fraud came during the years of the heaviest immigration and the largest number of states that allowed noncitizen voting (1870s through the 1920s). Much writing was “openly condescending, moralistic, and prejudiced toward the new arrivals.” Election fraud, in sum, was used as a political cudgel against the mugwump-progressive reform movements.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Tactically, nativist groups and movements, from the Know Nothings in the 1840s and 1850s to the KKK at the turn of the 20th century, actively used violence to shore up elite efforts to roll back immigrant voting rights. The 1834 midterm elections, for example, were particularly violent, as Whigs used anti-immigrant rhetoric as their supporters engaged in three days of riots against “illegal voting.”[[32]](#footnote-32) On election day in 1844 in Philadelphia, William McMullen, an Irish immigrant from Moyamensing who served as the “bookman” for his district, was charged with “checking residency requirements of prospective voters and distributing ballots” but whose “actual job was to keep opposition voter from the polls” with the use of violence.[[33]](#footnote-33) As Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace have shown in their book *American Violence*, “In many districts immigrants were stopped from voting entirely.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Other scholars detail violence against and lynchings of Italians, Jews, Chinese, Mexicans, and “others” who were perceived to be “Between White Men and Negroes.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Racial and nativist ideologies blended in leading civil society groups to join with elites in blocking noncitizens from the ballot.

The elimination of immigrant voting rights was accompanied by two related xenophobic fueled and racist developments that reflected clear visions by dominant groups regarding who rightly constitutes the “people” and who should have the vote: (1) enactment of national policy that sharply limited entry of non-Western Europeans, beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 through the 1924 National Origins Act (Johnson-Reed Act), which shaped the ethnic and racial makeup of the U.S. and advanced White Supremacy; and (2) the imposition of restrictive electoral reforms by state and local elites that disenfranchised other poor and minority groups, including poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, restrictive residency requirements and voter registration procedures, which combined to limit more democratic and progressive possibilities for American political development for decades.

This complex and fraught history of alien suffrage has implications for debate about the nature of immigrant political incorporation both historically and today. When it behooved economic and political elites to encourage European immigration that supplied cheap labor and populated new territories and states, they readily conferred suffrage before citizenship. Some groups and parties, such as the Knights of Labor and Socialists, managed to incorporate immigrants in meaningful ways according to their political ideology. In these ways, alien suffrage helped facilitate voter participation, eventual citizenship, and progress for millions of European immigrants. But when “other” kinds of immigrants arrived (Chinese, Southern and Eastern Europeans), nativist fears of immigrants wielding political power flared and made noncitizen immigrants into enemies. Such sentiments were also politicized to restrict ballot access, as well as pass sweeping laws that would change the nature of elections and citizenship more broadly.

Overall, nativist, anti-migrant groups with vigilante impulses have emerged regularly throughout US history to police elections and general social norms. Immigrant voting played a strategic role in different political projects generated by elites, as nativist civil society groups have routinely resorted to violent tactics to restrict the franchise.[[36]](#footnote-36) Uniting these groups, we find common nativist and sometimes racist ideologies animating such political projects. Periodically, as well, leftwing, more inclusionary ideals function to expand the electorate in the effort to also champion certain policies. As such, the rise and fall of alien suffrage provides insight into these broader processes that shaped the contours of American political development.

**Post-Civil Rights Era Struggles over Immigrant Voting: Renewed Focus on State and Local Politics**

The Civil Rights Movement helped sweep away many barriers to the franchise with passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, while also contributing to immigration reform (1965 Hart-Cellar Act) that opened the doors to immigrants from Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean, the Middle East and Africa for essentially the first time. It also helped usher in a revival of immigrant voting, which was first restored in New York City in 1968 and later in Maryland during the Sanctuary Movements of the 1980s and 1990s.[[37]](#footnote-37) Today, seventeen jurisdictions allow immigrants to vote in local elections: ten towns in Maryland[[38]](#footnote-38); three towns in Vermont (Montpelier, Winooski and Burlington); San Francisco and Oakland CA; New York City; and Washington D.C.

An additional dozen jurisdictions have enacted local laws – or have considered restoring immigrant-voting rights – including five localities in Massachusetts,[[39]](#footnote-39) six in California,[[40]](#footnote-40) Maine, and another town in Vermont (Table 1). Globally, 45 countries allow immigrants to vote at the local, regional, or national level on nearly every continent, primarily in the European Union and Latin America.[[41]](#footnote-41)

**[Table 1 about here]**

Immigrants and voting rights advocates are rediscovering the history of alien suffrage and they are waging campaigns to restore its practice in dozens of jurisdictions in the U.S. Recent immigrants seek to write themselves into this history, not as a colonial settler project, but rather to assert themselves as legitimate stakeholders in the political process in order to gain equitable inclusion. In response to these growing immigrant voting rights initiatives, conservative groups have mobilized to block such efforts and rollback laws allowing noncitizens to vote legally according to similar ideological tropes that have been used in the past. Their strategies, tactics, and ideology parallel what has been seen during earlier periods of U.S. history, bringing together political elites and civil society actors in coalitions that seek to restrict suffrage.

Scholars have documented conservative actors who seek to overturn local laws, whether by bringing lawsuits or state action to challenge, undermine, or overturn local laws, including local sanctuary laws and other policies that seek to expand rights and benefits for immigrants. For example, Patrick Flavin and Gregory Shufeldt’s empirical analysis shows that states where Republicans have power, that have more politically conservative citizens, a high percentage of people of color, and “a stronger conservative interest group presence pass more laws that preempt local policymaking.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Moreover, their results demonstrate, “state preemption efforts are more closely associated with political and demographic factors and less associated with institutional forces.”

Republicans and grassroots rightwing groups have promoted restrictive measures in the name of ensuring “election integrity” to guard against the danger of “vote fraud,” staunchly opposing efforts to make voting easier, from the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (“motor voter”) to the For the People Act in 2019 (HR 1), even though the incidence of actual vote fraud is infinitesimal and allegations of widespread fraud have been roundly debunked. As such, election integrity functions as an ideology, with claims of fraud mobilized as a way to create a form of common sense around the sanctity of suffrage. Put clearly, groups on the right represent noncitizen migrants as criminals. Groups and individual on the right then arrogate to themselves the prerogative to protect the ballot. To strengthen their claims, conservative groups frequently allege that noncitizens and urban voters (read, people of color) are voting illegally (committing vote fraud) – or that noncitizens would be able to vote illegally if such reforms were enacted – in order to justify their opposition to such measures, which would expand opportunities for working class people of color to vote.[[43]](#footnote-43)

More recently, Republicans and rightwing groups have increased efforts and spending to “safeguard the ballot” by promoting such false allegations to justify enacting a range of restrictive election measures that in effect “suppress” the registration and voting of eligible voters, which disproportionately disenfranchise low-income, people of color and urban voters who tend to register as and vote for Democrats.[[44]](#footnote-44) Again, “safety” functions as an ideological tool to galvanize support and represent their efforts as natural, or rather, as apolitical. GOP officials and rightwing groups have promoted and enacted hundreds of strict voter ID laws, conducted excessive and indiscriminate purging of voter rolls, limited early voting, vote-by-mail, drop boxes, the number of polling stations, and have employed partisan poll watchers to “challenge” voters’ eligibility at the polls – all of which effectively intimidate and disenfranchise poor people of color.[[45]](#footnote-45)

So crucial is the narrative that nefarious groups are committing vote fraud, rightwing actors continue to double down on these big lies. A 2023 internal report prepared by the Republican National Committee (RNC) proposes creating a permanent infrastructure in every state to boost “election integrity” activities, continuing to allege widespread fraud.[[46]](#footnote-46) Moreover, these efforts have been amply funded by actors such as the Heritage Foundation.[[47]](#footnote-47)

One key actor is the late John Tanton who was partly responsible for making nativist ideology a central mobilizational device for conservatives. Tanton helped found and promote numerous anti-immigrant organizations, including some that eventually staffed the Trump Administration. One such organization is FAIR - the Federation for American Immigration Reform - has supported anti-immigrant voting efforts as part of its overall mission to reduce the number of immigrants entering the United States. Reece Jones traces the long history of immigration restrictions that are rooted in the racist fear of the “great replacement” of whites with non-white newcomers, from the Chinese Exclusion laws of the 1880s and the “Keep America American” nativism of the 1920s, to the “Build the Wall” chants fostered by Trump in 2016. In so doing, Jones documents connections between anti-immigration hate groups and the Republican Party, revealing intersections between white supremacist ideology and anti-immigration xenophobia.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Setting the stage for the burst of right-wing activity at the state and local levels during the past decade, a half dozen groups have repeatedly made unfounded allegations of rampant vote fraud by noncitizens to promote a host of voter suppression reforms and to overturn or block immigrant voting rights, including The American Civil Rights Union, True the Vote, the Honest Elections Project (offshoots of Leonard Leo’s Federalist Society), The American Project (started by Mike Flynn and the CEO of Overstock.com), the Heritage Foundation, Public Interest Legal Foundation [and](https://www.heritage.org/staff/hans-von-spakovsky) Citizen Voters, Inc. Several key figures, most with ties to the Republican Party, helped spearhead dozens of ballot initiatives around the country, including to ban noncitizen voting, same-sex marriage, require balanced budgets and school choice. For example, Tim Mooney has been working to ban noncitizen voting since 2017 “when associates said he shared results of a national poll showing that the concept resonated with many voters…” In an email to *The Washington Post*, Mooney said he is planning a nationwide campaign, with work underway to change state constitutions or laws in the following states: Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio and West Virginia.[38] Similarly, Paul Jacob, a Virginia-based strategist who worked on a citizen-only voting amendment in North Dakota and on a similar but failed effort in Maine, said the measures could “put Democrats in a political box.” In September 2020, Americans for Citizen Voting, a nonprofit org led by Christopher Arps, sent emails and certified letters to 208 incumbents and 174 candidates for the general assembly asking them a simple question: Will they sign a pledge supporting an amendment to the Georgia state constitution that says ONLY U.S. citizens can vote in our elections – at all levels of government. Tim Mooney, who is the head of a conservative consulting firm in Arizona, worked with Paul Jacob, a conservative organizer specializing in ballot initiatives, on the Florida effort and the successful 2018 effort in North Dakota, according to *The Washington Post*. The effort in Maine was a target of a national push.[[49]](#footnote-49) In October 2023, Americans for Citizen Voting launched an effort to amendment the Texas Constitution to require citizenship to vote in Texas state elections, banning the possibility of restoring immigrant voting rights that existed in Texas from 1869 to 1921.[[50]](#footnote-50)

To date, conservative groups have banned the practice of allowing noncitizens to legally vote in state and local elections in seven states (Colorado, Florida, Alabama, North Dakota, Arizona, Ohio and Louisiana), and they have brought lawsuits challenging local laws in five municipalities (New York City, San Francisco and Oakland California, and Winooski and Montpelier Vermont).[[51]](#footnote-51)

One of the first acts of the GOP led House of Representatives in 2023 was to pass a measure barring a Washington D.C. bill that would have allowed legal permanent residents voting rights in local elections.[[52]](#footnote-52) Rep. James Comer (R-Ky.), a sponsor of the measure, said “Today the House took the first step to prevent… D.C. Council’s irresponsible and dangerous… [law] from going into effect…[that would] disenfranchise American citizens in our nation’s capital.” Similarly, Hans Von Spakovsky said “This bill is an insult to the residents of D.C., particularly its Black voters, who struggled in the civil rights movement to achieve the ability to vote. Yet this bill will dilute the value of their votes by allowing foreigners to vote.”[[53]](#footnote-53) And former FOX News’ personality Tucker Carlson, who regularly whipped up xenophobia and popularized “replacement theory,” told his audience of millions about what he sees as an existential threat to the country: “We have tens of millions of illegal aliens… living in the United States, and our elections are determined by tens or hundreds of thousands of votes. So, if they can all vote, we’re done!”[[54]](#footnote-54) In response, Eleanor Holms Norton (D–D.C.) D.C.’s nonvoting representative said, “I can only conclude that the Republican leadership believes that D.C. residents, the majority of whom are Black and Brown, are either unworthy or incapable of governing themselves.”[[55]](#footnote-55) These developments and actors parallel a host of related anti-immigrant legal changes at the state and local levels.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Immigrants have repeatedly been singled out by the MAGA movement for attack, reviving a long history of American nativist ideology, from the exclusion of Chinese forged in California in the 19th century, to the racist 1920s national origin quotas in U.S. immigration law, to the deportation of Mexicans during the 1940s to 1960s, to the mass detention and deportation of migrants today. Although the Republican Party historically supported policies that expanded immigration, largely to support businesses aligned with the GOP, it has embraced a virulent anti-immigrant nativist, racist ideology during the past decade. What has emerged as a critical lynchpin in this effort is foregrounding election security as that which requires defense.

Historic and contemporary conflict over immigrant voting laws can be viewed as a microcosm of larger contests over immigrant rights and voting rights that are currently playing out in states and locales across the country. Political battles over who can vote reflect awareness of a key axiom of politics: regulating who has access to the franchise can affect electoral outcomes, the balance of political power, and the direction of public policy. Like debate about other electoral reforms—from voter identification laws and gerrymandering to early voting and vote-by-mail programs, which are variously characterized as “voter suppression” or efforts to expand voter participation—contemporary discussion about immigrant voting is highly contentious and partisan. Conflict over immigrant voting rights reflects broader ideologically driven political contests, such as whether the Census Bureau should count non-citizens and if non-citizens should be eligible for public benefits. At a time when population projections predict the United States will become a “majority minority” country in the next few decades, such contemporary public debate cuts to the heart of questions about who “real” Americans are and what is the essential nature of America. Are we a cosmopolitan multi-racial egalitarian democracy or a white Christian nationalist republic? Similar to earlier periods in American history, the outcome of these conflicts will shape the contours of American political development and patterns of immigrant incorporation for years to come.

In what follows, we explore the nature of this strategy and how more conventional rightwing forces dovetail with extremist efforts by examining developments in Florida. Focusing on Florida helps us tease out the dynamics of how noncitizen voting has functioned as a powerful tool used by rightwing elites and movements. Moreover, the case shows how ideology bonds different civil society organizations with elites in and out of government.

**Building Rightwing Hegemony Between State and Civil Society in Florida**

Years of rightwing electoral success has made Florida into a place for exclusionary, white supremacist ideology to develop. President Trump won the state of Florida in both 2016 and 2020. In fact, he improved his margin over his Democratic challenger in 2016, besting Hillary Clinton 49% to 48%, and then Joe Biden four years later 51.2% versus 47.8%. Meanwhile, Governor Ron DeSantis won election as governor in 2018, winning reelection in 2022. The Florida State Senate and the House of Representatives has been held by Republicans since 1999, and the GOP has also controlled the Governor’s office since 1999, with the exception of 2010 when Governor Charlie Crist switched from being a Republican to an “Independent,” giving Republicans steady one-party rule in the state for more than two decades.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Targeting undocumented immigrants - not simply with allegations of voting fraud - have become regular elements in Florida’s political climate. The most recent example is SB1718, which was signed by Governor DeSantis in May, 2023, entering into effect in July. The legislation mandates that employers use the E-Verify system to ascertain a workers’ legal status, makes it a felony for someone who knowingly transports an undocumented person in their vehicle, and dedicates millions to transport migrants out of state to cities with sanctuary policies, among other provisions.[[58]](#footnote-58) Nothing new, DeSantis made immigration policy central to his first campaign to serve as Florida’s governor also in 2018.[[59]](#footnote-59) The Governor resoundingly defeated rival Charlie Crist in 2022 with much the same message, along with targeting “woke” culture and teachers’ unions.

Buttressing elite anti-immigrant positions, Florida has seen a variety of far-right groups emerge and gain political traction. The Southern Poverty Law Center claims that 53 hate groups were active in the state in 2021.[[60]](#footnote-60) Two of these groups are explicitly anti-immigrant - Floridians for Immigration Enforcement (FLIMEN) and Legal Immigrants for America.

Beginning in 2004, FLIMEN is active throughout the state, becoming particularly involved in passing anti-sanctuary legislation in 2019. The group is also a state contact for FAIR. FLIMEN has also been actively involved in mobilizing around anti-immigrant voting. Their Facebook page routinely posts anti-immigrant stories, some on voting, others that link undocumented migrants to identify theft or receiving COVID stimulus payments.[[61]](#footnote-61) This material allows the movement advocate, openly, an anti-immigrant ideology. FLIMEN’s website also has a special tab on voter fraud, which includes links to articles, as well as to rules on who can legally vote in the US. The ideology of electoral integrity, for FLIMEN, includes an important anti-immigrant element.

Another link on FLIMEN’s page is to the organization, True the Vote. This Houston-based group emerged from the Tea Party organization, the King Street Patriots. True the Vote has also made election integrity its principal issue. According to the organization's website, “Election integrity requires constant engagement. True the Vote is here to help you and guide you to do exactly that: constantly engage.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Such materials showcase efforts to disseminate information widely, especially on social media, representing the organization as a champion of voting rights against immigrants who threaten the sanctity of the franchise. Social media, along with practical, on-the-ground efforts, popularize the ideological character of electoral integrity.

The “constant engagement” that True the Vote advocates and FLIMEN endorses includes various tactics. For instance, True the Vote features materials on their website links with pages that allow access to voting laws by county and state. These links are innocuous, or rather, appear as standard tools concerning civic engagement. Other resources that the group makes available have a more ambiguous nature. For one, there are links to IV3, a downloadable application that allows users to verify their state’s voter rolls. Groups in states such as Georgia have used the app to check thousands of voter registrations. True the Vote also encourages state governments to enroll in ERIC - the Electronic Registration and Information Center, ostensibly to facilitate state governments to verify their rolls against a federal database. Another resource made available by True the Vote is a “toolkit for Sheriffs.” The toolkits feature videos, as well as particular recommendations for what law enforcement officials should do concerning election integrity.

Taken together, these resources blur the line between non-violent civic tactical engagement and extremist authoritarian political action that could turn violent. For instance, a close inspection of the “toolkit for sheriffs'' boasts items that are not specific to law enforcement. Specifically, in recommendations, True the Vote lists confirming drop box locations and operational dates, increasing patrol activity around drop box locations, and confirming that there is video surveillance around drop boxes. There is also a link to an “election integrity hotline,” which sheriffs are told to distribute to citizens if the latter suspect any suspicious activity. “Patrolling and confirming drop box sites,” while recommended for Sheriffs, can be done by anyone - there is nothing on the website claiming otherwise. Making the information accessible online invites vigilantes to “constantly engage” as if they were law enforcement officers. Furthermore, to enlist sheriffs and citizens in the same activity - using the hotline - intentionally blurs the line between state and society by unifying public and private actors on the right. Election integrity is the “common sense” idea that bonds these actors together against immigrants.

One other group that also blurs this line between state and society are the Proud Boys. which boasts seven chapters in Florida. Henry “Enrique” Tarrio, who was one of the group’s national leaders, is from Miami, where he also became Florida state director of Latinos for Trump. In 2022, Tarrio pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy with respect to the January 6th insurrection and was subsequently sentenced to 22 years in prison.[[63]](#footnote-63) Also, in line with True the Vote’s directives, the Proud Boys have made local engagement to ensure electoral integrity a key tactic. Three members were hired as poll workers in Miami-Dade County. Not only to sit by and guard elections, members of the Proud Boys - as well as Governor Ron DeSantis - supported three school board nominees on an “anti-woke political platform.” Across the state, in Broward County, a school board representative embraced support from the Proud Boys as they sought to connect members of the LGTBQ movement to the trafficking of children and “grooming.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Such themes concerning children have been central to QAnon conspiratorial thinking, which is linked to promoting Anti-Semitism.[[65]](#footnote-65) Regardless, the Proud Boys actually deploy many of the tactics that groups such as True the Vote advocate. There is a certain division of labor here among the right; some groups develop and disseminate ideas, whereas other put those ideas to work in practice.

These activities have also been part of the Oath Keepers efforts in Florida. Two of its members in Florida were charged and convicted for seditious conspiracy in their role in the January 6th insurrection.[[66]](#footnote-66) The Florida chapter boasts 2,700 members, with 11 active police officers, 6 service people, 2 first responders, and 1 elected official (Richter and Kunzelman 2022). Such occupational diversity among the group’s ranks is typical, as the organization has made a point to bridge law enforcement and formerly active military into one movement with civilians. Such a move is almost exactly True the Vote’s dream, if we take the “Sheriff’s Toolkit” as not so much about law enforcement officials, but potentially a tool for civil society groups. Regardless, more so than groups such as the Proud Boys, this explicit effort to join law enforcement and first responders makes the Oath Keepers an organization with paramilitary qualities, akin to militias.

Tactically, the Oath Keepers have made getting involved in electoral politics critical to their work. In 2016, the organization called for doing so in the run up to Trump’s successful Presidential bid.[[67]](#footnote-67) The group also called on members to protect schools around the country to protect students from gun violence. The editorial board of the Miami Herald, in noting that far right groups in the state are overrepresented in comparison with other states, faults the rhetoric of state politicians such as DeSantis for enabling them. In addition to rhetoric, actual policies have generated the far right’s support in the state. Schools board elections, for one, have featured Oath Keepers members running as candidates.[[68]](#footnote-68) While not explicitly referencing the Oath Keepers, Florida governor Ron DeSantis has proposed something similar in the formation of a civilian-based military force that would exist parallel to the national guard.[[69]](#footnote-69)

In terms of voting specifically, the state passed SB 524, the Election Administration Act, which empowers state officials to investigate election crimes and increase penalties for violating the state’s elections laws.[[70]](#footnote-70) Besides strengthening state power in terms of giving the governor the power to investigate alleged crimes and prohibit the use of rank choice voting, the law also provides rules for election observers.[[71]](#footnote-71) Local police officers have arrested 20 people under the authority of this law for alleged voting crimes that were committed during the 2020 election, even though it appears due to a lack of understanding instead of intent. According to this legislation, government and civil society divisions are blurred to exclude certain groups. The law concerning elections, moreover, targets immigrants among other groups, using the power of the state in doing so. Furthermore, this law makes state power work for what civil society groups were doing more informally – upholding a certain ideological view concerning electoral integrity.

Forwarding an ideology surroundingelectoral integrity has also been critical to another Florida-based group, “Citizen Voters,” which was started by the former state senator of Missouri, John Loudon. While not listed as a hate group by the SPLC, Citizen Voters was integral in passing the 2020 amendment to the state constitution to ban immigrant voting. Citizens Voters has funded many of the state campaigns nationally that seek to ban noncitizen voting by enacting amendments to state constitutions via ballot initiatives. In 2019, Citizen Voters announced plans to finance ballot measures to ban noncitizen voting in up to 14 states (Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio and West Virginia).[[72]](#footnote-72) Loudon had ties to organizations that support President Donald Trump’s 2020 campaign and was a past advisor to America First Policies, which is a group that supported Trump. Furthermore, Loudon and his wife, Gina Loundon, who live in West Palm Beach, were delegates for Trump at the 2016 convention and belong to Trump’s Mar-a-Lago Club. Gina Loudon is a West Palm Beach-based political commentator who proclaimed Donald Trump to possibly be the "most sound-minded" president in the nation's history and boasted about spending time with him on Air Force One.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Concerning immigrant voting particularly, the Loudons became prominent figures in the push to put the question on Florida’s ballot.[[74]](#footnote-74) They raised $1.4 million towards doing the same in Colorado, according to public filings.[[75]](#footnote-75) During the 2020 election cycle in Florida, Citizen Voters contributed $8.3 million to the “Florida Citizen Voters” committee that funded Amendment 1, which was enacted with the support of a majority of voters, with $5.8 million through in-kind contributions.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Loudon’s efforts parallel the work of DeSantis, as well as the positions endorsed by groups such as True the Vote. All these efforts are backed by grassroots groups, such as the Oath Keepers that are active in the state. Their allies, such as FLIMEN provide an important strategic flank in their rightwing hegemonic project in the state, making credible the threat to immigrants according to a racist, nativist ideology. Moreover, how civil society groups work in tandem with the sanction of public officials. Such dynamics should help explain why protests of Neo-Nazis in Florida could spread antisemitic messages while also vowing support for Governor DeSantis.[[77]](#footnote-77) Rightwing networks carry similar ideologies, breaking down the state/society divide.

**The Subnational Right, Florida, and the Future of Noncitizen Voting**

In this article, we analyze the dynamics of how rightwing governments and movements work together - according to a common ideology - to politically disenfranchise noncitizen migrants. We place such dynamics in our study of the US case in historical perspective, highlighting developments across the country and in Florida to draw out the processes of strategic action in different political climates during the contemporary period. While Florida may be seen as an outlier, it is worth noting that similar dynamics are underway in Texas under Governor Abbot. There is also the question of how far former President will go in his bid to return to the Oval Office. Our case study helps elaborate how contemporary rightwing ideology informs different groups, as well as public policy. In line with historical dynamics of similar rightwing cases, we find that violence is either used or endorsed. Noncitizen voting rights, furthermore, is not a new issue that galvanizes people across the political spectrum. Nativist ideology bonds actors across the state/society divide, with anti-immigrant sentiment resonating in the greater public and in government.

What is new in our study - which our subnational case study draws out - is how ideology bridges local and elite political actors, especially around the idea of electoral integrity. Rightwing extremists and government officials align on the importance of elections, viewing them as a critical strategic element in their overall nativist, exclusionary ideology and political projects. Politicians enact legislative changes and enroll citizen groups as vigilantes, turning the state into a means to disseminate rightwing propaganda and foster rightwing violence instead of curtailing it. Whereas violence per se has been often documented in studies of rightwing movements, including in the U.S., how the state has played a role in expanding coercion is an under explored and underappreciated area of study.

Although the future is pregnant with great peril that ongoing rightwing movements continue to present, it also contains tremendous promise of achieving truly inclusive democratic practices that progressive movements simultaneously also seek to advance. Similar to earlier periods in American history, the outcome of such conflict will shape the contours of American political development and patterns of immigrant incorporation for years to come.

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2. Although different terms are used to describe immigrant voting, including “noncitizen voting,” “resident voting,” “local citizenship,” and “alien suffrage,” they all mean essentially the same thing: enfranchising or restoring voting rights to residents of a jurisdiction who are currently excluded from the electorate because they are not US citizens. We distinguish between foreign-born immigrants who are “documented” versus “undocumented” as well as immigrants who have naturalized and became U.S. citizens conceptually and empirically where data permits. In 2022, according to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), there were 44.1 million foreign-born persons in the U.S, of which 22.5 million were naturalized (had become citizens of the U.S.). Of the remaining 21.7 million, about half were “legal permanent residents” or have one of more than a dozen visas to reside legally in the U.S. (e.g. employment, student), with the remaining approximately 11. million being undocumented. (CRS, “Citizenship and Immigration Statuses of the U.S. Foreign-Born Population.” July 18, 2022.<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesec/IF11806.pdf>.). See also Nicole Ward and Jeanne Batolova, “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States.” (Migration Policy Institute. March, 14, 2023).<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/print/17664> (accessed October 19, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Richard L. Hasen, "The 2016 U.S. Voting Wars: From Bad to Worse," *William & Mary Bill*

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   Theoretical Meanings of Alien Suffrage," University of Pennsylvania Law Review 141,

   no. 4 (April 1993): 1391-1470; Keyssar, *The right to vote.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not" A Nation of Immigrants": Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion*. (Beacon Press. 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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9. Michael Goldfield, *The color of politics*. (New York: New York Press. 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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19. Lowndes, *From the new deal to the new right*; Carol Anderson, *One person, no vote: How voter suppression is destroying our democracy*. (Bloomsbury, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Daniel Martinez and Joseph E. Lowndes. *Producers, parasites, patriots: Race and the new right-wing politics of precarity*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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26. Importantly, “alien suffrage” also functioned to advance the displacement and genocide of Native Americans, fostering forms of settler colonialism, and it was used by dominant political factions to block or delay the enfranchisement of African Americans and women in ways that could serve exclusionary goals and outcomes in some cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Richard Alba and Victor Nee, "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration." In *The New Immigrant in American Society*, 2-50. (Routledge, 2014); Catherine S. Ramírez, *Assimilation: An Alternative History*. (University of California Press, 2020). There are key differences between notions of immigrant incorporation versus the problematic concept of immigrant ‘assimilation.’ Scholars concerned with ‘assimilation’ usually focus on social and attitudinal characteristics of the sum of individuals, ‘such as language acquisition, educational attainment, labor market participation, health behavior. If conceived or analyzed at the level of groups, it is often in terms of whether groups converge or diverge in outcomes compared with each other, such as comparing Mexican and Cuban immigrants. Some scholars of immigrant assimilation debate whether immigrants from particular countries enjoy occupational mobility; or whether different national origin groups are converging or diverging in outcomes such as intermarriage, residential dispersion, and educational attainment. Like most contemporary scholars, we reject offensive assumptions and expectations of ‘melting-pot assimilation’ or ‘Anglo-conformality assimilation’ endemic to such studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. While scholars agree about the motives and techniques used in the South to disenfranchise blacks and many poor whites, including how they buttressed activities and violence perpetrated by those creating Jim Crow, fewer scholars acknowledge the role of a similar set of disenfranchising measures enacted in the North. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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30. ibid. Lorraine C. Minnite, *The myth of voter fraud*. (Cornell University Press, 2011); Hayduk, *Gatekeepers to the Franchise*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
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37. New York City allowed immigrants to vote in Community School Board Elections from 1969 to 2002, when the school boards were consolidated and eliminated with the creation of the Department of Education. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Takoma Park, Barnesville, Martin’s Additions, Somerset, Garrett Park, Chevy Chase, Chevy Chase Section Three, Chevy Chase Section Five, Hyattsville, Glen Echo and Mount Rainer. Most of these towns have allowed immigrants to vote in local elections since the 1990s. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Amherst, Cambridge, Brookline, and Newton Massachusetts. Boston has explored a bill. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. San Jose, Santa Ana, Pasadena, Richmond, and Los Angeles. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
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