

The Impact of Lower Preference Votes on Irish Parliamentary Elections, 1922-1977

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Précis: This paper examines the electoral impact of the counting and transfer of lower preference votes on Dáil elections since 1922. The relationship between transfers and constituency size is assessed, and it is shown that a constituency size of at least five members is needed before transfers have an even chance of affecting the final result. Only Fine Gael has benefited significantly in net terms from transfers, while both Fianna Fáil and Independents have lost. On only one occasion has the number of seats changing hands as a result of transfers been so great as to significantly affect the relative strengths of the various parties in the Dáil.

I INTRODUCTION

Inherent in the concept of the single transferable vote used in Irish parliamentary elections is the transferability of votes from candidate to candidate. Almost invariably, the counting of votes in any constituency involves several stages, as votes are transferred from eliminated candidates or from those who have already secured a seat to those who still retain a chance of being elected. An earlier article (Gallagher, 1978) demonstrated that transfers have considerable academic value, enabling certain conclusions to be drawn about the political parties and the changing relationships between them, but left open the question of whether the transfer of votes has actually had any electoral impact. This latter issue will be considered in this paper.

As a result of the transfer of lower preferences, a candidate with a high first preference total may be overtaken by one who received fewer first preferences but has been lifted into a winning position by attracting a significant number of transferred votes. In general, it can be said that if, in an n -seat constituency, the candidates who occupied the first n positions on the first count are eventually elected, lower preferences have had no impact

on the result; in such cases the outcome would have been the same had first preferences only been taken into account.¹

In this paper the impact of transfers will be examined, using the evidence provided by the results of all general elections and by-elections held in the Irish Free State and Republic between 1922 and 1977 inclusive. Particular attention will be paid to consideration of the relationship between transfers and constituency size, often regarded as the key variable in the operation of electoral systems. In addition, it will be asked whether any particular parties have tended to suffer or to benefit particularly from the transfer of lower preference votes.

II TRANSFERS AND CONSTITUENCY SIZE

Constituency size, or "district magnitude", is often regarded as a very important determinant of proportionality, and it has been suggested that proportional representation electoral systems in particular "depend in large measure upon district magnitude for their efficacy" (Rae, 1971, p. 124). Several writers have been of the opinion that the single transferable vote system is unlikely to produce proportional results unless constituencies return at least five members (Hermens, 1941, p. 15; McCracken, 1958, p. 69).

Clearly, disproportionality is likely to be lower in large constituencies than in small ones and, for the same reason, it may be expected that the transfer of lower preferences has tended to affect election results more frequently in large constituencies than in small ones.² It must first be pointed out, though, that there is no necessary relationship between the impact of transfers and proportionality. The election due to transfers of a candidate with a low number of first preferences may represent (i) the rationalisation of the strength of a large party whose first preferences were unevenly divided between a strong and a weak candidate, (ii) the concentration upon one candidate of a small party's votes, initially spread among several candidates, or (iii) the ability of a non-party candidate to attract lower preferences on personal or localistic grounds from the supporters of other candidates. Whether the distribution of seats reflects the distribution of first preferences more or less proportionately than if no transfers had been made will vary from case to case.

1. It is not, of course, being suggested that the outcome would, therefore, have been the same under an electoral system in which first preferences only were taken into account; clearly, if voters had known in advance that only their first preference would be examined, it could not by any means be assumed that they would have cast their votes as they did under the STV system.

2. For an examination of the effect of constituency size on the relationship between votes (first preferences only) and seats in Irish elections, see Gallagher (1975).

The first question to be considered is that of the number of votes of which preferences other than the first are actually examined. To answer this question, the results of four elections over the 1922–1977 period – those of 1922, 1937, 1954 and 1977 – have been analysed in detail. These are equally spaced, being the first, seventh, thirteenth and nineteenth to be held since the Treaty was signed, and there seems no reason to suppose that they are not typical in this respect of all nineteen elections; certainly there is little variation in the patterns exhibited within this small sub-set.

Analysis of the results of these elections, as presented in Table 1, shows that 57.8 per cent of voters need not have bothered to award second or lower preferences to candidates, since only their first preference played any part in the count. Only just over half of the remaining 42.2 per cent saw their vote actually transferred according to a second or lower preference they had expressed when the candidate to whom they had given their first preference was eliminated. The 24.5 per cent of voters who cast their first preference for a candidate elected on the first count had the satisfaction of knowing that their vote was examined and the second preference it expressed was taken into account when the distribution of the candidate's surplus was calculated, but fewer than one in four of these votes were actually transferred. These figures do not vary in any significant way with constituency size. In all, 23.2 per cent of votes were transferred at least once, a proportion which could be expected to be large enough to have a substantial impact on election results.

Table 1: *Votes transferred at the general elections of 1922, 1937, 1954 and 1977*

	<i>N</i>	<i>per cent</i>
Total first preferences cast	4,884,265	100.0
of which		
(1) First preferences cast for eliminated candidates	865,035	17.7
(2) First preferences cast for candidates whose first-count surplus was distributed	1,195,141	24.5
(3) Votes transferred from candidates elected on the first count	269,118	5.5
(4) Votes examined for lower preferences ((1) + (2))	2,060,176	42.2
(5) Voters whose votes were transferred ((1) + (3))	1,134,553	23.2

However, as Table 2 demonstrates, in a majority of constituencies the eventual outcome of an election is unaffected by transfers. In about three-fifths of the cases those candidates with the most first preferences were elected, while in almost all of the remainder just one of the initially well-placed candidates was overtaken on transfers by a candidate whose first preference total placed him outside the top n positions. In only a handful of cases have two positions been affected by transfers.

The task of assessing the relationship between the impact of transfers and constituency size is made difficult by the fact that, although contests have been held in constituencies returning from one to nine members, the number of cases falling into the nine categories is uneven. Only one contest has ever been held in a six-seat constituency (in 1922), the eight- and nine-seat constituencies were abolished in 1935, and contests for two seats, usually arising from the automatic return of the Ceann Comhairle in a three-seat constituency, have also been rare. The number of contests for one, three, four, five or seven seats, on the other hand, is sufficiently large to enable conclusions to be drawn.

Table 2 confirms the expectation that transfers have affected results more frequently in large constituencies than in small ones. Nearly 90 per cent of contests in single-seat constituencies and over 70 per cent of those in three-seat constituencies have remained unaffected by transfers, while it has proved unusual for transfers not to affect the result in a constituency returning more than five members. Just under half of the contests in four-seat constituencies and just over half of those in five-seat constituencies have been affected by transfers. Experience shows, in other words, that a constituency size of at least five members is needed before transfers have an even chance of influencing the final result — a finding which lends itself to, while not directly bearing out, the earlier suggestions that no electoral system can be guaranteed to produce proportional results unless average district magnitude is at least five.

Table 3 shows that only about one TD in nine owes his election to the transfers he has received and that the remaining eight-ninths would have been elected even had no transfers taken place. There is no relationship at all with constituency size in this respect, the figures being similar for all categories, except for those with very few cases. These figures do not conflict with those in Table 2; they merely reflect the fact that if transfers tend to affect the destiny of, for example, one seat in each eight-seat constituency and of one seat in every alternate four-seat constituency, the same proportion (one-eighth) of TDs elected from each type of constituency will owe their election to the transfers they have received.

The opportunity to make international comparisons is limited by the fact that no other country, apart from Malta, employs the single transferable vote in multi-member constituencies, and Maltese election results do not appear yet to have received systematic analysis. The STV system was used in Northern Ireland for the Assembly and Convention elections, but a total of only 24 constituencies is available for examination. The Northern Ireland experience accords with that of the Republic; of the 156 members elected to these two bodies, in which average constituency size was 6.5 members, 22 (14.1 per cent) owed their election to the transfers they received while the

Table 2: Seats affected by transfers in each constituency

	Constituency size									Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
No seats	83 (87.4)	6 (60.0)	209 (70.6)	84 (55.5)	63 (43.4)	0	12 (31.6)	1 (5.9)	0	458 (60.4)
One seat	12 (12.6)	4 (40.0)	87 (29.4)	66 (43.4)	78 (53.8)	1	21 (55.3)	13 (76.5)	4	286 (37.7)
Two seats	—	0	0	2 (1.3)	4 (2.8)	0	5 (13.2)	3 (17.6)	0	14 (1.8)
<i>Total</i>	95	10	296	152	145	1	38	17	4	758

Note: Percentage shares in parentheses

Table 3: TDs elected due to transfers

	Constituency size									Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Elected due to transfers	12 (12.6)	4 (25.0)	87 (9.8)	70 (11.5)	86 (11.9)	1 (16.7)	31 (11.7)	19 (14.0)	4 (11.1)	314 (11.3)
Would have been elected had no transfers taken place	83 (87.4)	16 (75.0)	801 (90.2)	538 (88.5)	639 (88.1)	5 (83.3)	235 (88.3)	117 (86.0)	32 (88.9)	2,466 (88.7)
<i>Total</i>	95	20	888	608	725	6	266	136	36	2,780

Note: Percentage shares in parentheses.

remainder had occupied one of the first n positions on the first count. The only detailed study with results comparable with the Irish figures is that carried out by Rydon (1968) who examined the results of federal and state elections in Australia over the period 1937–1962 where the electoral system (the alternative vote) is the same as that which operates in Ireland at by-elections in which only one seat is to be filled.

Votes in Australian elections are not valid unless they list preferences for all candidates, which might suggest that lower preferences are more likely to influence results than in Ireland where many voters do not list preferences for candidates outside their own party and thus permit seats to go by default to candidates with the highest first preference totals (see Gallagher, 1978, pp. 10–12). However, it appears that it is unusual for preferences even to be counted in Australia, let alone to affect a result. In federal elections, preferences were counted in only 19.2 per cent of the constituencies and affected the result in only 5.3 per cent (Rydon, p. 194), figures considerably lower than those for one-seat contests in Ireland. The reason for the minimal impact of transfers in Australia is, apparently, that the parties have tended to make pre-election agreements on the nomination of candidates in particular constituencies rather than allow the outcome to hinge on lower preferences (Rydon, pp. 192 and 195).

Table 4 makes it possible to assess a candidate's prospects of election, given his first count position. Among other things, it reinforces the belief that a candidate's first preference total is of greater importance in small constituencies than in constituencies returning five or more members. No candidate whose first count position was lower than eighth has ever succeeded in winning election in a constituency of four or fewer members, while candidates as low as fifteenth on the first count have been elected in five-seat constituencies. In the smaller constituencies, it has proved difficult for a candidate not occupying one of the highest places on the first count to win election because those candidates whose first preferences put them in one of the top n positions have not been very vulnerable to transfers. In three-seat constituencies, for example, almost every candidate occupying either first or second position on the first count has been elected, and almost all of those in the top three positions in four-seat constituencies have gone on to secure election. Even though the third candidate in three-seat constituencies and the fourth candidate in four-seat constituencies have proved rather more vulnerable, the success rates of these candidates is much greater than those of candidates occupying lower first count positions. In the larger constituencies, the differences in the success rates of those occupying the n th and $n+1$ th positions, respectively, on the first count are much less marked, to the extent that in the admittedly small number of eight-seat constituencies candidates finishing ninth on the first count have actually fared better than those finishing eighth.

Table 4: Electoral success by candidates' first count position

	Constituency size									Total TDs
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	83 (87.4)	10 (100)	295 (99.7)	152 (100)	145 (100)	1 (100)	38 (100)	17 (100)	4 (100)	745 (98.3)
2	11 (11.6)	6 (60)	285 (96.3)	149 (98.0)	145 (100)	1 (100)	38 (100)	17 (100)	4 (100)	656 (86.5)
3	1 (1.1)	4 (40)	221 (74.7)	140 (92.1)	138 (95.2)	1 (100)	35 (92.1)	17 (100)	4 (100)	561 (74.0)
4			75 (25.3)	97 (63.8)	125 (86.2)		38 (100)	17 (100)	3 (75)	355 (46.8)
<i>First</i>			10 (3.4)	49 (32.2)	86 (59.3)	1 (100)	32 (84.2)	13 (76.5)	2 (50)	193 (25.5)
<i>count</i>			2 (0.7)	18 (11.8)	51 (35.2)	1 (100)	28 (73.7)	14 (82.4)	4 (100)	118 (15.6)
<i>position</i>				2 (1.3)	24 (16.6)	1 (100)	26 (68.4)	12 (70.6)	4 (100)	69 (9.1)
8				1 (0.7)	3 (2.1)		16 (42.1)	10 (58.8)	4 (100)	34 (4.5)
9					4 (2.8)		8 (21.1)	12 (70.6)	3 (75)	27 (3.6)
10th or below					4 (2.8)		7 (18.4)	7 (41.2)	4 (100)	22 (2.9)
<i>Total</i> <i>(Constituencies)</i>	95	10	296	152	145	1	38	17	4	758/2,780

Note: Percentage shares in parentheses.

III THE IMPACT ON PARTIES

Electoral systems are occasionally introduced or modified with the specific aim of helping or hindering the fortunes of a particular party or political tendency. In Northern Ireland, for example, the STV system was abolished by Stormont in 1929, mainly in order to reduce the likelihood that any party other than the Unionist Party would win seats with the help of Protestant votes (Farrell, 1976, p. 111), and was re-introduced by the British in 1973 partly in the hope that "moderate" candidates would benefit by attracting lower preferences from each side of the sectarian divide (Lawrence *et al.*, 1975, p. 19). The alternative vote was introduced for federal elections in Australia in 1918 in order to assist the Labour Party's opponents (Crisp, 1965, p. 122).

In so far as the STV system was introduced in the Irish Free State for the benefit of any particular group, it was to guarantee fair political representation for the Protestant community, which in the event did not form its own political party and scarcely any of whose members have shown any desire to enter parliament. Use of the present system was enshrined by Fianna Fáil in the 1937 Constitution, although the party soon developed doubts about its merits and has made two unsuccessful attempts to persuade the electorate to discard it in favour of the British system. Given its lukewarm attitude towards the system and the fact that since the 1930s it has not only not been party to any agreements on transfers, but has actually been the intended victim of such agreements as have been reached, it could be expected that the operation of transfers has tended to work against Fianna Fáil.

In this paper a party will be said to have gained a seat as a result of transfers if one of its candidates, who would not have been elected had first preferences alone been considered, is eventually elected. For example, if in a three-seat constituency those candidates who finished first, second and fourth on first preferences are elected, the party for which the third-placed candidate was standing may be said to have lost a seat, and the party of which the fourth-placed candidate was a member to have gained a seat, as a result of the transfer of lower preferences.

This operationalisation of the question seems preferable to that employed in a study of the Northern Ireland Assembly election of 1973 (Lawrence *et al.*, pp. 45-46). The authors suggest that a party "can be considered to have gained from STV" if the number of transfers it receives from other parties is greater than the number of transfers it passes to other parties. They proceed to calculate the number of seats a party has "gained from STV" by dividing its total profit in votes by the average quota; at the 1973 local elections, for example, the Alliance party made a net gain of 9,017 transfers and,

since the quota in most constituencies was approximately 900 votes, they conclude that Alliance gained about 10 seats due to transfers.

This approach is of dubious validity for two reasons. First, a party can be said to have made a genuine gain from transfers only if it has acquired extra seats and not merely extra votes, and there is no necessary relationship between a net gain of votes and the winning of extra seats. Secondly, the authors' electoral accounting techniques treat transfers from a party as a loss if they pass to other parties, but ignore them if they become non-transferable, and while the view that a party is best advised to ask its supporters not to express lower preferences for other candidates seems to be fairly widely held, it is not a sound one (cf. Gallagher, 1978, pp. 11-12).

Table 5 confirms that Fianna Fáil has suffered more than any other party from the transfer of lower preferences. Fianna Fáil has sustained a net loss of 26 seats, the only other group to have suffered significantly being Independents who have lost on balance 17 seats. The only party to benefit significantly in net terms has been Fine Gael, which has gained 50 seats. The other parties have on balance scarcely been affected by transfers. It would be easy, though not entirely accurate, to attribute the losses of Fianna Fáil and Independents to their lack of allies, which has meant that they have not been able to rely on receiving transfers from outside their own ranks. Fine Gael, on the other hand, would seem well placed to benefit from transfers in the post-1948 period as the strongest of the parties which made transfer pacts in the 1950s and 1970s.

In fact, this interpretation would not constitute a complete explanation, as can be seen when the major parties' fortunes are examined on an election-by-election basis (see Table 6). While it is true that Fianna Fáil sustained relatively heavy losses when co-operation on transfers among its opponents was quite high (as in 1951 and 1973) and that it made gains when there was very little co-operation (as in 1938, 1944 and 1957), there are also exceptions to the pattern, such as 1937 and 1969, when Fianna Fáil sustained losses even though there was an almost complete absence of co-operation on lower preferences between any parties at these elections (cf. Gallagher, 1978, pp. 15-17). Fine Gael and its precursors have derived benefits from transfers at almost every election, regardless of whether or not coalition arrangements existed.

When Fianna Fáil's losses and gains are viewed in the context of the party's strength in the Dáil relative to the combined strengths of all other groups (see Table 6), it is apparent that transfers have not often had a significant effect on the composition of the party forming the government. At three elections (those of 1937, 1951 and 1973) Fianna Fáil's losses deprived it of an overall majority which it would otherwise have achieved, but in the event it was able to form minority governments after the elections of 1937

Table 5: *Seats gained and lost by each party due to transfers*

Party	Total seats		Won from					Net
	Won	Lost	FF	FG	Lab	Minor parties	Ind	
FF	115	141	27	42	18	15	13	-26
FG	123	73	77	11	11	12	12	+50
Lab	32	34	15	10	1	3	3	-2
Far	5	9	—	1	2	—	2	-4
Won by NL	4	3	1	2	—	1	—	+1
SF	1	5	—	—	—	1	—	-4
CP	3	1	2	—	—	—	1	+2
C na T	6	7	5	—	—	—	1	-1
C na P	8	7	6	1	—	—	1	+1
Ind	17	34	8	6	2	—	1	-17
<i>Total</i>	314	314	141	73	34	32	34	0

Note: Occasionally as a result of transfers, one candidate of a party displaced another candidate of the same party; this accounts for the figures on the major parties' diagonals. No minor party gains were at the expense of the same minor party.

Notation:

- FF — Fianna Fáil
- FG — Fine Gael
- Lab — Labour
- Far — Farmers Party
- NL — National League
- SF — Sinn Féin
- CP — Centre Party
- C na T — Clann na Talmhan
- C na P — Clann na Poblachta
- Ind — Independents

and 1951. On only one occasion, then — at the 1973 general election — can the transfer of lower preference votes be said to have affected the destination of a sufficiently large number of seats that the various parties' Dáil strengths were in turn significantly affected.

There is no clear relationship between constituency size and the impact of transfers on particular parties' fortunes; Fianna Fáil has tended to sustain losses, and Fine Gael to record gains, in constituencies of all sizes. It is notable, however, that Fianna Fáil has suffered most in by-elections, especially since the Inter-Party era was inaugurated by Clann na Poblachta's by-election victories in October 1947. In no fewer than 10 of the 56 by-elections held between that date and 1977, a Fianna Fáil candidate headed the poll but was overtaken on transfers by another candidate. Fine Gael, as the second strongest party in most of the constituencies in which such situations have arisen, has been the main beneficiary. Apart from its losses in by-

Table 6: Seats gained and lost due to transfers by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, by election

	1922	1923	1927(1)	1927(2)	1932	1933	1937	1938	1943	1944	1948	1951	1954	1957
Fianna Fáil	-5	+1	-2	+ 2	-2	-6	-2	+ 5	0	+ 4	- 1	-6	0	+ 5
Fine Gael	+8	+6	+3	0	+4	+7	+5	- 2	-1	- 1	- 4	+4	+ 5	0
Fianna Fáil overall majority	-	-	-	-39	-9	+1	0	+16	-4	-14	-11	-9	-17	+19

	1961	1965	1969	1973	1977	By-elections	Total
Fianna Fáil	+1	0	-2	-8	- 1	-9	-26
Fine Gael	+4	+1	+3	+5	0	+3	+50
Fianna Fáil overall majority	-4	0	+6	-6	+20	-	-

elections, Fianna Fáil has lost only 17 seats in 19 general elections through transfers, an average of less than one seat per election.

The operation of the Irish electoral system in by-elections corresponds closely to the Australian experience. The Australian picture, like the Irish, is one of the largest party (Labour) being opposed by two parties (Liberal and Country) which co-operate with each other on lower preferences, and in general it has been the largest party which has suffered when transfers have affected the result.³ 1,025 seats in the House of Representatives were contested between 1937 and 1961, and preferences affected the result in just 55, a proportion much lower than that for Irish by-elections because, as we have noted, it is common for parties to offer no candidate rather than allow the outcome to depend on transfers; on only 39 occasions did each of the three main parties nominate a candidate. When preferences did alter the result, however, Labour was generally the loser, and its candidate was displaced from the top of the poll in 40 of the 55 constituencies (Rydon, p. 201), a record comparable with that of Fianna Fáil which has been the victim on 10 of the 12 occasions on which transfers have affected the result in single-seat constituencies in Ireland.

IV CONCLUSION

On the whole, the electoral impact of the transfer of lower preference votes has been less significant than might have been expected. As was shown in Section II, in most constituencies the candidates eventually elected are those whose first preferences placed them in the highest positions initially, and in only about two-fifths of the constituencies did a candidate not initially in one of the top positions secure election as a result of receiving transfers. It is extremely rare for more than one candidate in any constituency to be elected, or displaced from a leading position, by transfers. In all, about eight in every nine TDs would have been elected if no transfers had been made, and only one in nine has been borne up by transfers into a winning position. There is less likelihood of the initial order being altered by transfers in small constituencies, which have dominated in the post-1948 period, than in large ones.

Although altogether 314 candidates have been affected by transfers, no party has gained or lost greatly. Fianna Fáil, which has not entered into transfer pacts with any other parties since the 1930s, has suffered most, but

3. The unique nature of politics in Northern Ireland precludes the possibility of making meaningful comparisons between the operation of the electoral system there and elsewhere. It may be noted for the record that at the Assembly and Convention elections Loyalist and Unionist parties made a net gain of six seats, centre parties (Alliance and NILP) a net gain of one seat, and other parties (SDLP and Nationalist) a net loss of seven seats as a result of transfers.

its losses have been largely wiped out by its gains, and on average it has lost only about one seat at each election through the transfer of lower preferences; its losses have rarely been significant in relation to its overall strength. Fine Gael has derived most benefit, with a net gain of between two and three seats at each election. At only one general election, that of 1973, can transfers be said to have had a decisive impact on the Dáil strengths of the various parties.

These findings might seem to point to the conclusion that Ireland's political history since 1922 would have been very little different had not a single vote ever been transferred in any constituency — in other words, had elections been conducted under the single non-transferable vote system, as used in Japan. It might seem that the transfer of lower preferences may have enabled the electorate to see that electoral justice was being done, but has played little part in actually ensuring that it was done.

Such conclusions, however, would be simplistic and would rest on the patently false assumption that first preferences would not have been cast differently under a different electoral system. Clearly, the whole approach of both voters and parties to the use of the electoral system would be different if it were known in advance that no votes would be transferred. Neither can it be inferred that because transfers have not had a great electoral impact overall, pacts on the exchange of lower preferences, such as those made by the Fine Gael-Labour coalition in 1973 and 1977, have been unimportant. It may be that in many cases the operation of such a pact has nullified the overall impact of transfers while the absence of a pact would have led to the displacement of one of the candidates in a high first preference position. A well-known example, that of the North Tipperary constituency in 1973, illustrates the point: the three candidates eventually elected were those who had occupied the top three positions on the first count, but had it not been for the very effective operation of the Fine Gael-Labour transfer pact, the Labour candidate, who won the third highest number of first preferences, would have been displaced by a Fianna Fáil candidate.

Besides, the STV system has many advantages over the Japanese system. It guarantees that parties will win seats in close proportion to their votes, and in Ireland the achievement of this has not been at the expense of stable governments or at the price of excessively fragmented parliaments. It relieves parties to a considerable extent of the need to assess their probable support and then indulge in the "voter management" necessary to ensure that votes are not wasted through being concentrated too heavily on a strong candidate or spread too thinly among weak candidates. It provides voters with the possibility of greater participation at elections, albeit at the cost of reinforcing most TDs' already strong inclination to devote almost all of their time to brokerage rather than legislative activity, and also, for better or for

worse, provides academics with richer material for analysis. For all of these reasons, the transferability of votes, despite its limited impact, is an integral and valuable feature of the Irish electoral system.

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