

# Candidate Ethnic Identification in Post-Soviet Latvian Elections

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## **Abstract**

Many political parties and candidates campaign on promises to represent the interests of their ethnic communities. This paper explores the success of those appeals, and argues that a group's demographic status is likely to determine whether or not voters support such a proposal. Campaigning as the champion of a specific ethnic group may win coethnics support, but it is also likely to alienate voters outside the ethnic group. In campaigning to an ethnic base, majority groups sacrifice little, but by constricting their support to a small coethnic base, minority groups risk political irrelevance. This creates a direct link between the electoral viability of an overt ethnic appeal and the size of the ethnic community in the voting population. Using a candidate-level analysis of post-Soviet Latvian elections during the period of democratic consolidation, I identify which candidates employ ethnic appeals to voters during electoral campaigns and which do not, and examine the relative success and failure rate of such appeals. The findings suggest that ethnic majority Latvian candidates and ethnic minority Russian candidates use explicit ethnic identification differently. While the over-time trajectory for ethnic Latvian candidates is to increase their use of ethnic rhetoric in campaigning, ethnic Russian candidates abandon their ethnic appeals to focus on more universally acceptable issues of human rights, social equality, and economic populism.

In many ethnically diverse democracies, politicians campaign for office as representatives of their own ethnic communities. These would-be leaders build bases of political support by pledging not to represent the interests of all citizens equally, but rather to defend a specific subset of the country defined in ethnic terms. In this paper I propose an argument as to why such appeals are successful in some cases, but not others. By explaining the circumstances under which candidates who promise to represent their ethnic community are successful in winning office, I hope to advance our understanding of how democracies function in ethnically divided societies.

The paper argues that ethnic campaigning benefits ethnic majority groups. In this way, it diverges from much of the literature in ethnic politics, which has focused on the issues representing minority groups. In this approach, “ethnic parties” are those like the Māori Party of New Zealand, the Bloc Québécois in Canada, or the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, which mobilize ethnic minority voters to elect coethnic leaders who will facilitate their political representation despite their minority status. This approach sees minority politics as a unique category of political or electoral contestation—not the opposite of “majority politics,” but rather a subset of politics more generally. I argue that this approach may at times be misleading, and risks underappreciating the complexity of ethnic campaigning. Democracy is a system of majority rule. As such, ethnic minorities know at the outset of any campaign that in a pure ethnic census vote—i.e., an election where ethnicity perfectly maps to voting behavior—they will lose. For this reason, ethnic minority communities have the greatest incentives to avoid politicizing ethnic cleavages. Ethnic minorities may be able to campaign on region, class, ideology, or any other social cleavage in order to build political blocs large enough to win office, but the ethnic cleavage is one where they are guaranteed to lose.

This paper documents the divergent incentives for ethnic campaigning between majority and minority groups in the case of post-Soviet Latvia. As a result of Soviet-era migration policies, Latvia has an extremely large ethnically Russian minority population living alongside the ethnic Latvian majority. Using an original data set of every candidate for the Latvian parliament between 1995 and 2014, I show the ways in which political

entrepreneurs have employed appeals to represent ethnic communities in their campaign promises during Latvia's period of democratization and democratic consolidation. The results show that over time, ethnic appeals to the majority group are far more common than appeals to minority groups. During this period, appeals to represent majority-group Latvians become a more common characteristic of winning candidates, regardless of position in other policy areas. Appeals to ethnic minority groups, on the other hand, effectively disappear from Latvian mainstream politics by the early 2010's. I also show that individual candidates who contest multiple elections in a row and change their positions in between elections are far more likely to adopt positions appealing to ethnic majority group members, or to abandon appeals to ethnic minority group members in favor of positions advocating civic nationalism, or multi-ethnic populism. These patterns are consistent with political entrepreneurs acknowledging that actions which politicize ethnicity ultimately benefit the members of the ethnic majority group at the expense of the minority.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I outline a general argument of why political entrepreneurs from majority and minority groups have divergent incentives to actively support politicizing ethnic cleavages during electoral campaigns. In section 2, I discuss the Latvian case specifically, and why it presents an important opportunity to test this argument. Section 3 outlines the dataset that I use to conduct the analysis of ethnic appeals in political campaigns in section 4. Section 5 concludes.

## **1 The Choice of Ethnic Mobilization**

This paper argues that appealing to voters on the basis of their ethnic identities is a viable strategy for electoral candidates when two conditions are met. First, ethnic political representation must offer voters something desirable. An appeal to an ethnic identity is essentially a promising to represent coethnics' communal interests in parliament to the detriment of other groups, and this promise must meaningfully differentiate insiders from outsiders, otherwise representation along some other social cleavage or identity category

is likely to be more appealing to voters. Secondly, it must be clear that attaining such ethnic representation for the group is feasible. Some groups are electorally viable, while others have virtually no chance of winning elections. Neither voters nor candidates want to expend valuable resources mobilizing for an inevitably lost cause. In this section, I explain how institutional and demographic factors can cause these two elements—the potential benefits of ethnic representation and the likelihood of attaining it—to vary independent of one another.

There are several reasons that voters may find it advantageous to elect ethnic representatives to office. At the most basic level, seeing the group and its members in office may be desirable in and of itself. Scholars of social identity theory (Tajfel 1978), and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell 1987) argue that individuals understand their own role in the world and the value they offer to society through their membership in larger groups. This link is partially instrumental but also emotional, as individuals may derive their own sense of self-esteem and self-worth from the perceived prestige and worthiness of the group as a whole. In voting for a party that campaigns on a platform of representing a single ethnic group, voters may be seeking the “psychic benefits” associated with group representation (Horowitz 1985, Chandra 2004). Voters may also desire group representation because of the rewards in policy-making and public goods provision, especially with regards to policies governing language, culture, region, and religious practices. In modern, industrialized economies, states have strong incentives to foster linguistic and cultural homogeneity (Weber 1976, Gellner 1983), and thus may encourage linguistic and cultural assimilation. In addition to the loss of prestige and cultural validation associated with speaking a subaltern language, those who do not incur these costs and develop language skills risk social exclusion, political disenfranchisement, and economic deprivation (Csérgő 2007, Liu 2015, Stepan 2015). Minority and traditionally underrepresented groups may also share common preferences for decentralization, human rights protection and low state capacity (Rovny 2014). Ethnic representation could therefore be a way to gain an advantage in inter-group societal conflicts, and help group members avoid assimilation and subjugation. Ethnic representation

may also facilitate patronage relationships within ethnic networks (Fearon 1999). In campaigning on promises of representing a specific ethnic group, especially in the so-called “patronage democracies” where the state primarily redistributes services and benefits to political supporters in exchange for votes (Chandra 2004), parties suggest that voters should support them by virtue of their ethnic identity because they will favor coethnics once in office.

These benefits are impossible to deliver without first winning office, and ethnic identities are also useful in conveying information on the likelihood of electoral victory both to voters and to political entrepreneurs. Ethnic identities are, by definition, those which are associated with descent. They are generally not only highly visible, but enduring (Chandra 2011). Almost all voters are keenly aware of their own ethnic identity, and can easily observe ethnic identities in others from their speech, clothing, physical appearance, names, and mannerisms. Given the high visibility of ethnic markers, and their relative stability over the short-term, ethnicity provides a useful resource in election forecasting. In deciding how to campaign to voters, politicians know that appealing to a specific group will almost certainly alienate voters who are not members of that group. From this, they can estimate the ceiling that an ethnic appeal puts on their potential voter base. If that ceiling is so low as to make election unlikely or even impossible, then attempting to mobilize the ethnic group is not a viable strategy (Chandra 2004, Posner 2004).

These two conditions—the benefits and the feasibility of ethnic representation—can vary between groups even in the same country. The benefits of ethnic representation are at their highest when ethnicity serves to make the most meaningful distinctions between “insiders” and “outsiders.” When there are lots of outsiders, insiders not only stand to benefit from the extra protections against discrimination and expropriation, but can also reap the windfalls of favorable treatment in distribution of resources. Taxing a large base of out-group members to provide for a small group of in-group beneficiaries makes for a much higher per-person pay-off (Riker 1962). However, smaller groups face much higher barriers to entry. Even though they may benefit more than larger groups, democracy is fundamentally a system of majority rule, and the smaller a political group is, the more

difficult it is to win elections.

Candidates trying to win elections face a difficult balancing act: the larger the group, the more potential voters to court, but the less those voters stand to benefit from ethnic representation. The smaller the group, the more it stands to gain from ethnic representation, but the harder it will be to actually win. Understanding when candidates are likely to claim to represent an ethnic group requires understanding this balance, and appreciating that larger groups and small groups face fundamentally different strategic challenges.

## 2 Ethnic Campaigning in Latvia

Political candidates in Latvia must balance this tension when campaigning to voters. Latvia is a recently democratized country, having seceded from the Soviet Union in 1991. It is also an ethnically diverse society, with ethnic Latvians comprising a majority 61.2% of the population. Approximately 26.9% of the population is ethnically Russian, with the remaining proportion composed mostly of other Slavic peoples such as Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Poles (Centrālā Statistikas Pārvalde 2015). This diversity is largely the result of Soviet-era migration, which saw ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Slavs moving into Latvia to work in new industrial centers (Misiunas & Taagepera 1993, Lieven 1994).

Like many other post-communist and third-wave democratizing countries, Latvia inherited an extremely weak civil society and a legacy of single-party political control. Needing to rebuild political institutions from scratch (Elster, Offe & Preuss 1998), the decision was made by the transitional administration to “restore” the interwar constitution of 1922 that had been in place before the Soviet era. As a result, Latvian political institutions predate the country’s ethnic diversity. There are no institutional protections for ethnic or linguistic minorities, and no formal acknowledgment of the country’s current ethnic and linguistic diversity. The reinstated electoral system is highly proportional, dividing the country into five electoral districts which elect anywhere from thirteen to thirty

members of parliament through an open party list ballot.<sup>1</sup>

Although ethnic Latvians constitute a majority of the country, the size of the ethnic Russian community is very large. Policies which protect the interests of ethnic Latvians only would therefore exclude a very large number of people. Redistributing resources away from ethnic Russians to ethnic Latvians is potentially an extremely lucrative opportunity, since the two groups are near parity in size. Latvians therefore have strong incentives to desire ethnic representation. Likewise, ethnic Russians also have strong reasons to desire group representation in parliament. As a minority group in a nationalizing state, they are the most likely to see their language diminish in importance.

The two groups diverge, though, in the likelihood of actually obtaining power on the basis of ethnic mobilization. By campaigning to represent the interests of ethnic Latvians over other ethnicities, a party limits its appeal to roughly three-fifths of the voting population. By appealing to Russian speakers, a party limits itself to two-fifths of the vote. As such, ethnic Russian candidates pay a steeper price when appealing to coethnics, and impose a greater limit on their support than ethnic Latvian candidates do pursuing the same strategy. In other words, under perfect ethnic census voting—where all Latvians voted for one party and all Russians voted for another—ethnic Russians would be permanently excluded from power. Because ethnic Latvians constitute an absolute majority of voters, ethnic mobilization ultimately benefits Latvians more than Russians.

Both groups have strong reasons to want the benefits that could come from ethnic representation in policy making. But the ethnic Latvian community has a much higher ease of access to actually winning power than the ethnic Russians do. Since ethnic Latvians are high on both dimensions, while the Russians are high only on one of them, ethnic voting should be most likely among ethnic Latvians, not Russians. Ethnic Latvian candidates who appeal to coethnic voters on the basis of ethnicity therefore have much

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<sup>1</sup>Two changes from the 1922 constitution have been implemented. The first, passed in 1995, was an electoral threshold of 5%. This was done partially to avoid the enormous party fragmentation that created extremely fragile coalition governments in the interwar era composed of very large numbers of very small parties (Smith-Sivertsen 2004). An electoral reform passed in 2009 also altered the electoral code, eliminating the ability of candidates to enter the electoral lists in multiple constituencies in a single election. The thought was that eliminating this provision would electorally reward leaders who had close ties to their constituents in the regions, rather than party loyalists in the capital. See Millard (2011).

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|-------|---|
| $H_1$ | Ethnic appeals to Latvians should increase or remain high over time.  |
| $H_2$ | Ethnic appeals to Russians should decrease or remain low over time.   |
| $H_3$ | Candidates who make appeals to ethnic Latvians will continue to do so.  |
| $H_4$ | Candidates who make appeals to ethnic Russians will change their appeals.   |
| $H_5$ | Candidates who make non-ethnic appeals will be more likely to change to ethnic Latvian appeals than ethnic Russian appeals. |

Table 1: Hypotheses

more to gain than ethnic Russian candidates would by pursuing a similar strategy.

This produces several testable hypotheses of Latvian party system consolidation. Successful ethnic appeals made by candidate to ethnic Latvians should increase or remain high over time, since those voters have much to gain through ethnic representation, and a relatively high likelihood of winning. Ethnic appeals to Russians, on the other hand, should decrease or remain low over time, since Russians are less likely to be able ultimately to enact the policies which would benefit their coethnic constituents. Since a candidate who makes appeals to ethnic Latvians is likely to find those appeals rewarded at the polls, those candidates are likely to continue to follow that strategy. Candidates who make appeals to ethnic Latvians will therefore continue to do so over time. A candidate who makes appeals to ethnic Russians, however, is likely to find those appeals ultimately futile, so those candidates will likely change strategies to make non-ethnic appeals. And candidate who starts by making non-ethnic appeals has no incentive to change to supporting an ethnic minority position, but may see reasons to support the ethnic majority group. Those candidates will therefore be more likely to change to ethnic Latvian appeals than ethnic Russian appeals. A list of these hypotheses is presented in Table 1

### 3 Measuring Ethnic Campaigning in Latvia

To measure ethnic campaigning and voting Latvia, I rely on an original data set of all political parties and candidates in all elections between 1995 and 2014. Each candidate



is coded by whether or not they made an appeal to represent the interests of a specific ethnic group.

One of the biggest challenges to measurement is Latvia's extremely volatile party system. Latvian political parties frequently form *de novo*, or as the result of consolidations and mergers of existing parties. In fact, of the 118 parties that appeared over all elections in this study, 90 contested only a single election. Moreover, individual candidates frequently change parties as the parties reform, merge, and dissolve. In the context of this fluid party system, the standard for assessing party continuity are relatively unclear.

To resolve this issue, I rely on a unique institution in Latvian elections: the pre-electoral party program. In Latvia, candidates must join a party list, and that party must submit a party platform. These pre-election programs are not only part of the public record, but are distributed to media to be published in newspapers and broadcast on TV and radio, and provided to voters on election day when they receive their ballots (Ikstens 2017). As a result, these programs are not just a bureaucratic hoop that parties and candidates must jump through, but represent state-sponsored free advertising. They are the only legal way that a party can communicate to voters when they are actually in the voting booth, and parties have strong incentives to portray themselves in the best possible light. These programs are limited by law to 4,000 Latvian-alphabet characters, meaning that Latvian political programs are extremely short by international standards.<sup>2</sup> The logic behind this decision is relatively simple: shorter party programs are readable and accessible to everyday citizens, who are likely to have many parties to compare. Four thousand characters can easily be printed on a pamphlet, and read relatively quickly by a typical voter, and Latvian citizens are far more likely to have seen and considered official party programs than their counterparts in other democratic countries. The character limit also forces parties to identify only their most important policy issues and those political areas that they think is most important to communicate to voters. The character limit also facilitates comparability across parties for the purposes of comparative research, as

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<sup>2</sup>For comparative purposes, the German Christian Democratic Union's 2017 party program was over 150,000 characters. The American Republican Party's platform for the 2016 election was over 240,000 characters. The anti-establishment Five Star Movement in Italy had even more than that in its 2018 platform with well over 350,000 characters. This page contains 2,284 characters.

it forces all parties, regardless of electoral viability or professionalization, to identify only their most important campaign themes and present them to voters.

I first obtained party platforms from all elections since 1995 directly from the Latvian Election Commission in Riga. I then hand-coded a total of 118 programs over all electoral cycles from 1995 to 2014 according to pre-determined coding criteria. In coding parties, I employ the definition of “ethnic party” developed by Chandra (2004). For a party to be classified as ethnic in this dataset, it must clearly identify itself with a specific ethnic group. It must also exclude other ethnic groups from their agenda, making it obvious who the “outsiders” are who will not benefit from the policies enacted by the party once in power. The party must also make its ethnic identity a central component of its platform, with advancing ethnically-defined group interests as an important mission of the party’s political agenda. The standard employed is whether or not a reasonably intelligent voter would be able to clearly and quickly identify which ethnic group a party claimed to support using information made readily available by the party itself. These data were then mapped to the full candidate lists and vote totals for all candidates registered to contest national-level parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, candidate lists from the 1995 election are not publicly available, and so while party programs from that election are coded, candidate-level data from that election is not included in the dataset. The resulting data contains 8,767 observations listing every candidate who contested elections in the period surveyed, and whether or not they explicitly identified with a specific ethnic group in each electoral contest.

This is not the first study to approach Latvian party programs as primary data sources. The Manifesto Research on Political Representation Project (“MARPOR,” formerly the Comparative Manifestos Project and the Manifesto Research Group) has analyzed a subset of the same primary source documents according to their cross-country generalizable coding set. This project departs from the MARPOR data set in two main ways. The first is in scope. MARPOR analyzes the party platforms only of those parties which win seats in Parliament. While this approach is entirely appropriate for a research agenda interested in the programmatic positions of political actors as they relate to policy out-

comes or coalition formation, it is not appropriate for one focused on the use of ethnic appeals to voters. Since the purpose of this study is to determine when ethnic appeals are successful and when they fail, it is important to include those parties which fail to clear the threshold for representation in parliament. This number is not insignificant in Latvia. As a highly fractured party system with as many twenty parties contesting a single election, the potential for coordination failure and vote wasting is quite high in the Latvian context. This is especially true in the early democratizing period, as many parties lacked organizational capacity, voters lacked political sophistication, and candidates had little in the way of reputational resources to campaign on. Over the six electoral cycles in this study, 9.04% of votes went to parties which ultimately failed to win any seats in parliament. There is also (consistent with expectations of varying voter sophistication and party capacity during the period of democratic consolidation) a substantial decrease in wasted votes over time. Nearly 16% of votes went to parties that failed to win seats in 2002, but only 5% of votes were “wasted” in this way in 2014. Including all parties in the dataset—regardless of their ability to win seats in parliament—reflects the total range of political choices available to voters at each election, and is more appropriate for the purposes of this study.

The second main difference between this and the MARPOR approach is that the coding scheme is tailored specifically for Latvian political and social context. Rather than relying on a single left-right policy spectrum, this paper follows Zulianello (2014) by reanalyzing party manifestos from scratch in way sensitive to a specific policy or substantive area. As the focus is the variation in ethnic appeals over time within a single country, the coding scheme embraces cultural, social, and political issues specific to the Latvian context. This results in a deeper and more specific assessment than the CMP data provides, and one that more closely reflects how Latvian voters are likely to understand the appeals made to them in the programs. An illustrative example is the divergent codings between my data set and the MARPOR data regarding the National Alliance. The National Alliance is regarded by many journalistic and academic sources as one of Europe’s far-right populist parties. It is a vocal anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, anti-LGBT, ethnic national-

ist party (Mudde 2014, Martyn-Hemphill 2016, Zakharov & Law 2017). The MARPOR coding, though, includes several determinations of “Multiculturalism: Positive”, the same code assigned to Harmony, a party which dominates Latvia’s ethnic Russian community. The source of the confusion is that the National Alliance technically makes ethnic appeals to other ethnic groups in its pre-election program. Specifically, they promise that “We will strengthen the role of the Latvian language, especially in the media and in commerce. We will ensure the preservation of the Livonian language, the Latgalian culture, and the dialects of the Latvian language”. While this technically is an appeal to multiculturalism, it is important to understand exactly *which* cultures the appeal is directed towards. Livonian is, practically speaking, a dead language, its last native speaker having died in 2013 at the age of 103 (Charter 2013). The Livonians are regarded as an indigenous people native to the northwest coast of modern Latvian territory, and thus the preservation of the Livonian language is a largely academic and cultural exercise in preserving Latvia’s ancient (and therefore obviously pre-Soviet) history. Likewise, Latgalian is considered by many scholars to be a historical antecedent of modern standardized Latvian. It is mutually intelligible with Latvian, and sometimes used in an official capacity in the Latgallia region. While the appeal to Livonian and Latgalian languages may technically be an appeal to a form of multiculturalism, it almost certainly would not be perceived as a tolerant and welcoming stance to the ethnic Russians who are unlikely to speak either of those languages, and who actually form a local majority in many areas of Latgallia. Likewise, when PCTVL, a Russian interest party, advocates for more university instruction conducted in Russian, such an appeal is also technically a form of “multiculturalism.” Yet it is likely to be perceived as a direct challenge to ethnic Latvian nationalists, who view Latvian as an endangered language that must be preserved by state authority. In this example, classifying both types of policy proposals as “multiculturalism” misses the fact that by appealing to specific language communities, these two policies are extremely divisive and appeal only to a narrow ethnically-delineated set of voters.

For this reason, the coding scheme employed separates not based on whether an appeal is ethnic or non-ethnic, but which specific group it is an appeal towards. The

two examples discussed above would therefore not be coded as multicultural appeals, but cultural appeals to specific linguistic groups: Latvians, Livonians, Latgallians, and Russians. This distinction allows for appeals which are truly multicultural to be coded as such, as is the case with the Free from Fear, Hate and Anger party's assertion that: "Nationality and language differences are no obstacle to a united country. The people should not be divided by national origin. Everyone has the right to their own identity, to build their own societies and schools."

Under this measurement strategy, a party can make ethnic appeals to Russians, or not. It can make ethnic appeals to Latvians or not. In this way the classifications are qualitative, not quantitative, relying on a system of dichotomous variables. This is against the advice of some scholars who argue that issue salience is a crucial component of understanding ethnic voting, especially since voters may be basing their decision on the degree to which parties make the ethnic issue central to their brand more than the actual position they take (Meguid 2008, Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2009). The logic behind this decision is based on the particularities of the data environment in Latvia and the relationship of the data to the research question. Because parties are limited to only 4,000 characters, many platforms do not dwell on any single issue, instead trying to convey as many policy positions as possible in the fewest words. Ethnic Latvian parties especially will often establish their ethnic credentials in the very first paragraph of the platform, before moving on to discuss tax or spending policies they would implement if elected. A measure of party salience based on coverage in the platform would likely therefore under-report the degree to which political parties rely on ethnic messaging. Moreover, this dichotomous measure may more accurately reflect the way voters understand party platforms. A party that represents itself as an advocate of ethnic interests first and foremost is likely to be understood as an ethnic party by voters, regardless of what percentage of their text allotment they dedicate to espousing these positions.

This measurement strategy also ignores other positions that parties take with regards to other issue dimensions. Under my coding scheme it is possible to claim to be an ethnic party representing the interests of ethnic Latvians, but also espouse a pro-business agenda

centered on low levels of redistribution, laissez-faire economics, and property rights. It is also possible to claim to represent the interests of ethnic Latvians but argue for high taxation, guaranteed employment, state control of the economy, and high social spending. This is not to say that these other dimensions are unimportant. But to include all possible interactions between ethnicity and other policy areas sacrifices statistical power in a study using within-country data. As the main question asked here is when political elites have incentives to mobilize along ethnic identities, I employ a measurement system that remains agnostic as to the role of other issue dimensions. In this, I follow Protsyk & Garaz (2013) in treating ethnic identification as a completely separate axis of political competition, independent of traditionally-understood left/right positioning on economic and social issues.

## 4 Ethnic Appeals over Time in Latvia

The analysis of electoral appeals over time reveals a number of trends. First, making ethnic appeals to Latvians becomes a more common characteristic of those who win seats in Parliament. Secondly, making ethnic appeals to Russians becomes a less common characteristic of those who win elections. Instead, candidates switch to making non-ethnic appeals, either appealing to multiculturalism and civic nationalism, or ignoring ethnic identities all together. This trend is evident both in the aggregate, looking at the party-system level, and at the level of individual candidates. When candidates change the type of appeal they make between elections, they are far more likely to adopt a platform that appeals to ethnic Latvians or ignores ethnic appeals entirely than they are to adopt a position representing ethnic Russians. These trends are also evident among new candidates. Candidates who contest elections for the first time over the period of study are far more likely to espouse an ethnic Latvian platform or a multiethnic platform than an ethnic Russian platform.

The analyses that follow use the candidate-year as the unit of analysis. The use of candidate-years allows for an individual to appear in the data set multiple times. If a

candidate appeared on a party list at every election between 1998 and 2014 then that individual appears in the dataset six separate times, and their position on ethnic issues each year are treated as independent observations. Indexing by year has the benefit that candidates are not presumed to be consistent in their ethnic messaging. A candidate can campaign on ethnic appeals in one election, but not in the next, (or vice-versa) and that variation will be captured in this measurement strategy. One advantage of this approach is that it produces a very large dataset. In total 4,508 unique individuals produce 8,767 observations over six separate elections. Of those 4,508, a total of 1,662 individuals contested multiple elections, creating a complete index of the Latvian political class and all possible legislators in the country. These large numbers facilitate analyses using even relatively demanding statistical models requiring large- $n$  data sets.

Moreover, the use of candidate-years is the easiest way to avoid difficult—almost existential—questions about what constitutes a political party in Latvia which could undermine any attempt at systematic study. Given the extremely high volatility, and the frequent occurrence of schisms, mergers, and new party foundations, over-time analyses of parties positioning are extremely difficult. It is not clear, for instance, if a party should be considered a continuation of its previous form if it has a completely new name, new logo, and new platform but nearly all of the same candidates. Given that parties are frequently formed and registered as combinations of multiple loosely-organized factions, factional shifting can create big difficulties for defining party continuity. It is not uncommon for a party to fold and one portion of its candidates go into one party, while the rest go into another. Party-level measurement ignores those dynamics, and require potentially controversial *a priori* decisions about which parties are continuations of previous parties, and which are new.

Using the candidate-year as the unit of analysis, I conduct a regression analysis using a logit model with the dependent variable as a dichotomous indicator of whether the candidate won a seat in parliament, and the independent variable a vector of dummy variables indicating whether the candidate explicitly identified as either a champion of ethnic Latvian interests, ethnic Russian interests, or neither. In order to avoid collinearity,

the coding scheme treats non-ethnic appeals as a residual category. I use the estimates produced by the analysis to generate predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals for each type of appeal at each electoral cycle, which I present in Figure 1. The  $x$  axis on this chart represents each election, while the  $y$  axis represents the estimated probability that a candidate would win that election after making either an ethnic appeal to Latvians, an ethnic appeal to Russians, or no ethnic appeal at all. In 1998, for example, an estimated 6.1% of candidates who made ethnic appeals to Latvians won election to the national parliament, while an estimated 21% of candidates who made ethnic appeals to Russians won, and 2.9% of candidates who campaigned on non-ethnic platforms won.

The predictions are somewhat noisy. This is not particularly surprising, as the measurement strategy puts a large amount of variation into the error term. The classification system measures variation only on ethnic positioning, but no party in this data set takes positions *only* on ethnic identification. Most platforms which explicitly declare for either ethnic Latvians or Russians also articulate positions on foreign policy, taxes, social spending, etc., which these data do not address. Those positions are nevertheless likely highly relevant in the decision-making process of Latvian voters. Many of the most salient issues in electoral politics, such as incumbents versus opposition and retrospective and prospective assessments of candidates, are ignored here. The “bouncing” pattern seen in some of the estimates is likely the result of government turnover, as voters’ support for specific parties ebbs and flows over time. However, there is a clear divergence in the long-term trajectories of the candidate appeals to ethnic Latvian and non-ethnic parties in contrast to ethnic Russian appeals. Consistent with  $H_3$  and  $H_5$ , the success of both ethnic Latvian appeals and non-ethnic appeals increases in the period under study; while there is some variation year-to-year, there is a distinct upward trajectory for both. Russian appeal success, however, drops off, eventually reaching zero. This suggests that a candidate in 2014 making an appeal to ethnic Latvians has a higher chance of winning office as a result of that appeal than she did in 1998, and is consistent with  $H_4$ . The same is true of a candidate making non-ethnic appeals, or ignoring the issue entirely. But the exact opposite is true for a candidate making an ethnic appeal to Russian voters. Whereas in



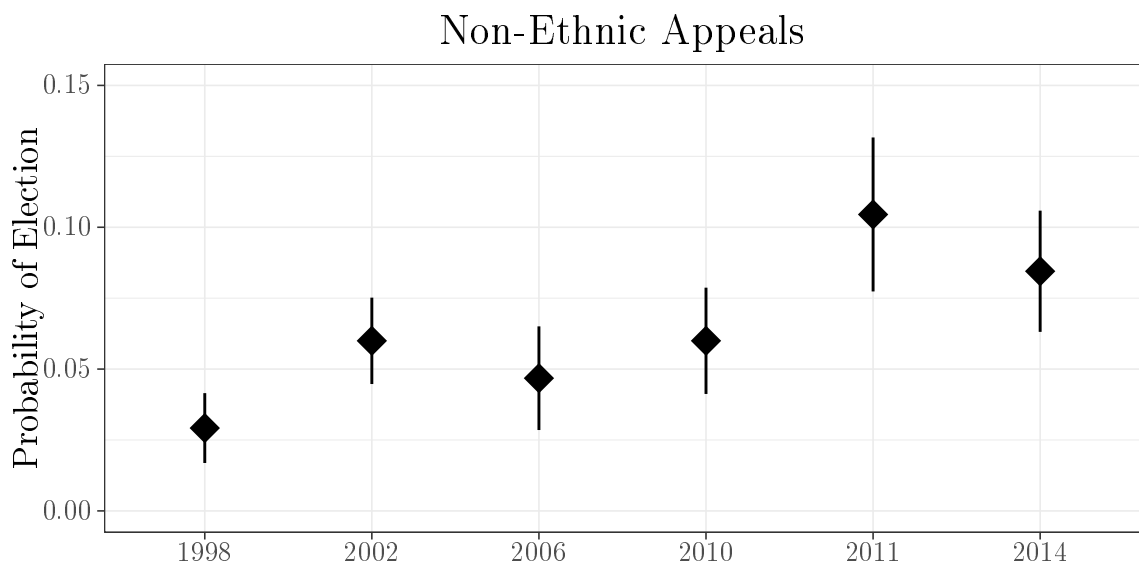
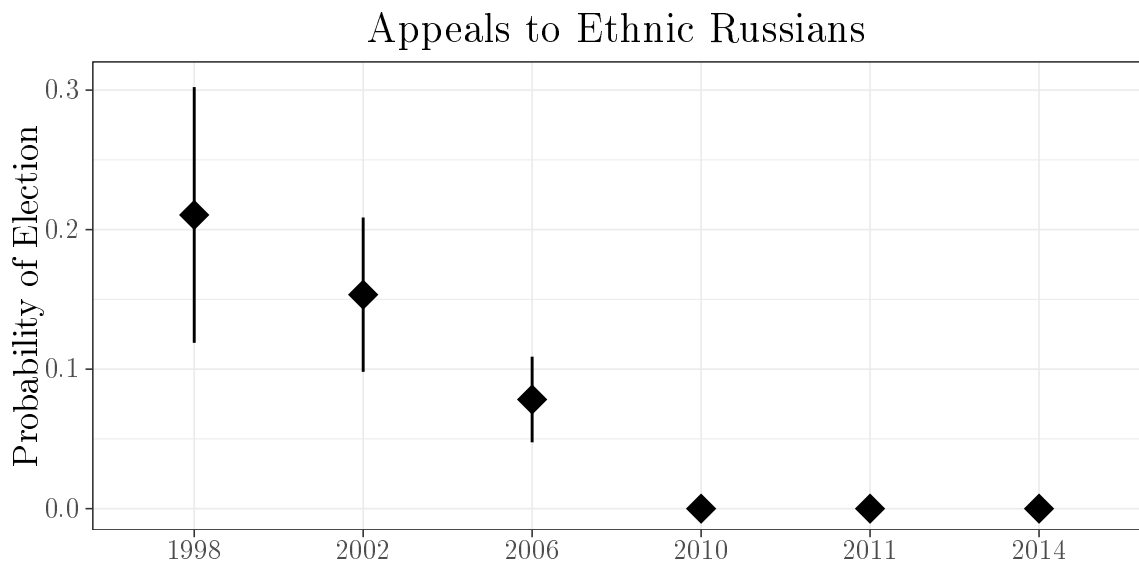
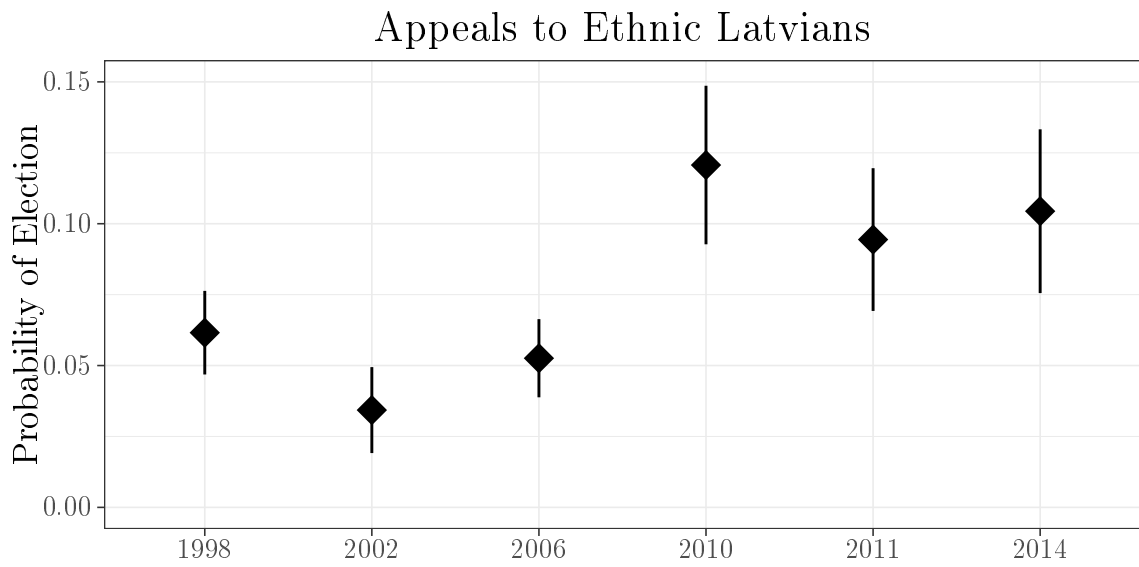


Figure 1: Probability of Election in Latvia by Appeal Type over Time

1998 a Russian ethnic appeal was associated with a comparatively high chance of winning office, in 2014 that chance is, statistically speaking, zero.

Given the different incentives between minority and majority groups, candidates should have incentives to adjust their strategy depending on how they started. Electoral experience should demonstrate that non-ethnic and ethnic Latvian appeals are easier paths to electoral victory than ethnic minority Russian appeals. The data suggest that candidates do respond to these incentives by changing their strategies over time. To test these predictions outlined in  $H_3$ ,  $H_4$ , and  $H_5$ , I look specifically at those 1,241 candidates who ran in multiple elections. Pooling all this data allows for an estimation of the over-time trajectories of candidate strategies and outcomes.

If candidates anticipate that certain types of positions are less likely to result in success than others, then rationally they should adopt or abandon new positions accordingly. If ethnic minority appeals are less likely to be successful, then parliamentary candidates should be more likely to abandon appeals to ethnic Russians in favor of non-ethnic appeals. If appeals to ethnic Latvians are reliable ways to win elections, then candidates abandoning multicultural appeals should be more likely to adopt appeals to ethnic Latvians. Abandoning a non-ethnic or ethnic Latvian appeal to appeal exclusively to ethnic Russians is a strategy that makes little sense, as doing so would narrow one's voting support base, rather than expand it.

The data suggest that revising one's position on ethnic appeals is quite common among Latvian parliamentary candidates. Of the 1,047 individuals who appeared on party lists in more than one consecutive election in the period under study, 435 of them have changed their position regarding ethnic identification at least once. These changes happen either when a candidate switches parties—moving from a non-ethnic party to an ethnic party, for example—or when a candidate stays within a party which changes its position on ethnic representation. To identify patterns in these switches, I regress whether or not a candidate changed her ethnic identification between elections  $t$  and  $t-1$  on the indicators of the type of appeal made at election  $t$ . The predicted probabilities, plotted in Figure 2, are estimates of the average likelihood of a candidate making a specific type of appeal

## Candidates Changing Ethnic Appeals

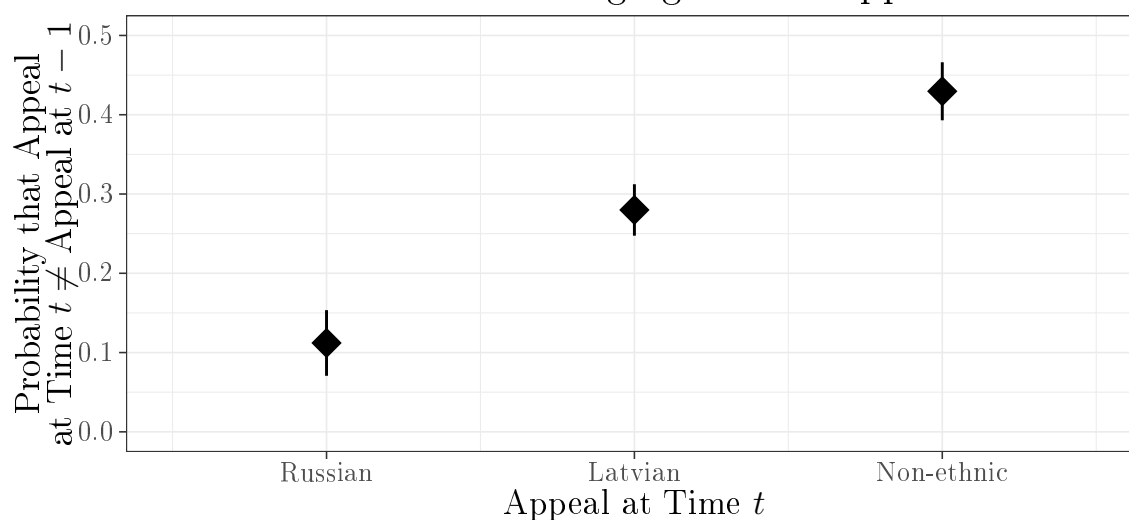


Figure 2: Likelihood of Candidate Changing Ethnic Appeal in Latvia 1998-2014

during an election after having made a different type of approval in the contest before. In other words, the predicted probabilities indicate the likelihood that a candidates will abandon a previous position in order to adopt either an ethnic Russian position, an ethnic Latvian position, or a non-ethnic position. Overall, an estimated 11.21% of candidates making appeals to Russians changed their party platforms in order to appeal directly to ethnic Russians. This is a much lower figure than the estimated 27% of candidates making Latvian appeals, who had switched their position in order to represent ethnic Latvians. The highest rate of change is in those making non-ethnic appeals. Pooling over all the electoral contests under study, the model estimates that 42.95% of the candidates changed their platform to non-ethnic from something else.

These findings may be more intuitively understood by looking at the absolute number of candidates and the ways in which they change their political messaging between elections. I show these in Table 3. The columns show the type of appeal made at election  $t$ , while the rows show the appeal made at  $t - 1$  for all candidates who contested more than one consecutive election. The absolute numbers should not be compared directly, mainly because the total number of candidates in each group is not even distributed. The total numbers reflect the fact that there are simply fewer ethnic Russians than ethnic Latvians in the country, and as a result, the overwhelming majority of candidates in

Latvia are those which make ethnic Latvian or non-ethnic proposals to the electorate. Nevertheless, the table shows some important trends. First of all, the bulk of the candidates are concentrated along the diagonal. This suggests that the majority of candidates stay consistent in their ethnic messaging between elections. Looking at candidates who advocated an explicitly ethnic Russian platform, 21 out of a total of 219 candidates, or 9.6% had previously advocated a multi-ethnic platform. However, among ethnic Latvian candidates, this number is 199 out of 735, or 27.1%. This comports with the general findings of the predicted probabilities derived from the logit model—both these absolute numbers are within the confidence intervals of the predicted probabilities. It suggests that candidates change to ethnic Latvian identification at a much greater rate than they do to ethnic Russian identification.

Perhaps the most surprising finding in this chart is the non-zero number of candidates who switched from Russian ethnic identification to Latvian, and vice versa. These are candidates that started campaigning on platforms of representing ethnic Russians, and then changed to represent ethnic Latvians, effectively a complete about-face of ethnic campaigning. There are a few possible explanations. The first is that these shifts may be driven by tokenism. Ethnic Latvian candidates may have been convinced to join the ballot of parties advocating for Russian interests to lend credibility to claims among moderate ethnic Russian parties that Slavic representation is ultimately a human rights issue.<sup>3</sup> The ethnic switching could also be the result of irrational behavior or strategic miscalculation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that zero candidates move from Latvian appeals to Russian appeals. This further suggests that campaigning to represent the

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<sup>3</sup>In interviews with Latvian political observers, voters, and elected officials, several people expressed concerns about tokenism in Latvian politics. Multiple people told me that they felt that ethnic outsider candidates could possibly arrange for lucrative careers in the party if they were willing to put themselves on the ballot to indicate the party's "enlightened" position, both to voters, and to European Union observers concerned about ethnic discrimination. It is also possible that some ethnic Russian candidates and voters may actually desire assimilation into an ethnonationalist Latvian state. One ethnically Russian candidate from an otherwise mostly ethnic Latvian political party told me during an interview that they were fine with members of their party arguing that ethnic Russians needed no linguistic, cultural, or employment protections from the state. In their view, Latvia was a state for the Latvian nation, and ethnic Russians should either assimilate, accept their status as "guests," or leave. Such a view is hardly typical, and never once did I encounter an ethnic Latvian candidate willing to make similar arguments about the state protecting ethnic Russian interests, but these rare sentiments may help account for this negligible, but nevertheless present, rate of switching between ethnic parties of two different groups.

|                   |            | Appeal made at $t$ |         |            |
|-------------------|------------|--------------------|---------|------------|
|                   |            | Russian            | Latvian | Non-ethnic |
| Appeal at $t - 1$ | Russian    | 198                | 14      | 37         |
|                   | Latvian    | 0                  | 522     | 258        |
|                   | Non-ethnic | 21                 | 199     | 413        |

Figure 3: Count of Candidates who Changed Ethnic Identification Between Elections in Latvia 1998-2014

majority group is much more attractive to candidates than appealing to minority group voters.

These repeat candidates are likely the most important political actors in Latvia. Nevertheless, limiting the study only to those who contest multiple elections does exclude the majority of candidates who run for office in Latvia. There are 3,760 candidates who contested a single election only in the period under study. This is a large number, but should be expected. In a party list system like Latvia's, parties may believe it is in their best interest to fill out the entire list of open slots, to maximize their ability to take as many seats as possible. No party has ever won an outright majority in Latvia, and in an electoral system with 100 seats and as many as 20 parties contesting elections, it is extremely unlikely for a single party to need a full 100 candidates on the ballot. Many parties put 100 candidates on their ballot so that it is mathematically possible, albeit highly unlikely, for the party to sweep all seats in Parliament. While the majority of Latvia's parliamentary seats are won by repeat candidates, one-time candidates represent a not insignificant portion of Latvian elected officials. A full 30.33% of the parliamentary seats contested in this study were won by candidates who had never contested elections before. While many elected officials are first-time candidates, most first-time candidates do not win election: only 5.1% of these candidates actually won a seat. The bulk of

## First Time Candidates by Appeal Type

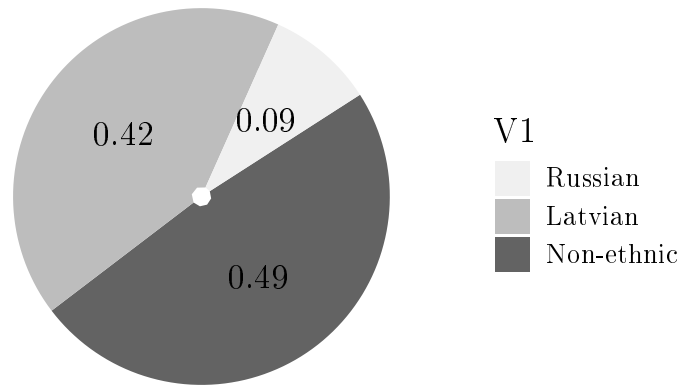


Figure 4: New Candidate Entry in Latvia by Appeal Type 1998-2014

these candidates are placed extremely low on the party list, and likely enter with the full knowledge that they will never be seated in the parliament.<sup>4</sup>

The data indicate that new candidates contesting elections follow the same trends with regards to ethnic campaigning as those candidates which switch their affiliation, only amplified. The pie chart in figure 4 indicates the proportion of new candidates who joined parties making each type of appeal. Candidates making appeals to ethnic Russians constitute 9.22% of first-time candidates, while candidates making appeals to ethnic Latvians constitute 42.05% of the new candidates. This is hardly proportionate to the ratio of Latvians to Russians in the population. There are 1.58 ethnic Latvians for every Russian in Latvia, but a new candidate is 4.55 times more likely to espouse an ethnic Latvian agenda than an ethnic Russian agenda. The ratio is similar for first time candidates espousing non-ethnic party platforms, who comprised 48.72% of all new candidates in the data set.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In interviews, one mid-level party official expressed disappointment at the quality of the lower tier of their party's candidates, and admitted that sometimes it was hard to find candidates who were willing to sign their name to the party platform but wouldn't embarrass the party with their lack of qualifications.

<sup>5</sup>Descriptive statistics are presented here because a logit analysis is not possible. The dependent variable in logit model of new candidate entry would be whether or not a candidate decided to contest an election in a given year. However, this is impossible to observe, since that would require us to identify all the "potential" candidates who chose not to seek election. Since we observe only those candidates who did enter the party lists, it is only possible to describe the relative frequency with which candidates who do enter the lists attach their names to the three types of platforms described here.

Altogether the data show divergent trends between the various types of appeals. Support for ethnic Russian parties diminishes until it is statistically zero, while the proportion of winning candidates making ethnic Latvian and non-ethnic parties increases. Candidates joining parties and contesting elections for the first time are more likely to join non-ethnic parties or Latvian parties than they are Russian parties. Candidates contesting elections repeatedly are more likely to abandon Russian platforms for non-ethnic platforms, and abandon non-ethnic platforms for Latvian ones. Over time, the party system converges on an ethnic cleavage that should really be understood as “ethnic Latvian versus civic nationalist,” rather than “Latvian versus Russian.”

## 5 Conclusion

Ethnicity matters in Latvia. Group identities are strong, and ethnic divides are highly relevant to day-to-day life. Ethnicity also matters to voting behavior, with ethnic divides mapping very closely onto candidate support. Nevertheless the “ethnic politics” of Latvia are more nuanced and complicated than they may first appear. Despite ethnic Russian voters rallying mostly behind a single party, that party purposefully distances itself from claims of representing that ethnic group’s interest, and actively cultivates an image as a multi-ethnic, ideologically-motivated party. Parties which do claim to represent ethnic Russian interests, meanwhile, have failed to attract more than the smallest amount of political support among Russian voters, and are no longer seated in parliament. Ethnic Latvian voters, on the other hand, often vote for parties which make do not necessarily make ethnic representation their primary political identity, but do explicitly claim that ethnic Latvians will benefit from the policies they enact. This asymmetrical use of explicit ethnic identifiers is understandable given the divergent incentives faced by the two groups. Candidates who make appeals to ethnic Latvian identities may provide voters with a highly desirable form of ethnic representation, while appeals to ethnic Russian interests may undercut a politician’s ultimate ability to deliver on those promises. Over time, these incentives have pushed the two ethnic communities in different directions.

More generally, though, the Latvian case illustrates the broader incentives facing political entrepreneurs to actively politicize ethnic identities depending on the relative size of their group in the population. The case also shows that these incentives can be quite strong. In some ways, Latvia is a “hard case” for a theory arguing that minority candidates may have incentives to campaign on non-ethnic issues. Russian identity in Latvia is extremely strong, differentiated from the minority ethnic group by an unintelligible language, a distinct writing system, and a very recent history of immigration. This social environment, combined with an extremely permissive electoral system, could be highly conducive to ethnic campaigning. Nevertheless, ethnic campaigning is common only among majority ethnic Latvian politicians, while ethnic Russians cultivate multi-ethnic bases of support. The findings suggest that the likelihood of ethnic campaigning can be highly variable between groups even within the same country.



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