

Political Hedgehogs

The Geographical Sorting of Refugees in Sweden¹

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Abstract

In sharp contrast to how admitted refugees are being placed in comparable European countries, refugees in Sweden have been disproportionately placed in peripheral and rural areas with high unemployment and rapid native depopulation where the prospects for integration, both socially and economically, are poor. We explore and evaluate some potential reasons for this outcome. Factors such as an intimidating political and intellectual climate in favor of receiving large numbers of asylum seekers and immigrants and the economic support given by the central government to municipalities that accept refugees are not sufficient to understand the actions of rural local governments. Instead, we argue that Tetlock's fox/hedgehog model of predictive style may provide a useful approach for understanding the seemingly irrational actions of local politicians in rural and peripheral municipalities, and of other policymakers in other similar situations.

Introduction

In recent years, Sweden has received unusually large numbers of refugees. In 2015, the top year for refugee admission, 162,900 asylum seekers arrived in the country, which corresponds to 1.6 percent of the total population and exceeds the number of native births by almost 50 percent. In sharp contrast to how admitted refugees are being placed in comparable European countries,² refugees who

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2 For example, in Germany, refugees are concentrated in the most densely populated and urban areas of the country (Katz et al. 2016).

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have been granted a residence permit in Sweden have been disproportionately placed in peripheral and rural areas with high unemployment and rapid native depopulation, where the prospects for integration, both socially and economically, are poor. Relative to their populations, peripheral and rural municipalities with declining populations have received more refugees than growing urban municipalities with expanding employment opportunities.

As we explore at length in an extended working paper version of this article that is available open-access (Wennström & Öner 2019), which presents the above-mentioned empirical results in detail, this pattern seems both counter-intuitive and counterproductive given that labor market integration is more likely to be achieved in larger and more diverse labor markets. In the current study, we explore and evaluate some potential reasons for why the pattern has manifested itself.

It can be partly explained by the fact that Sweden in international comparisons “has been ranked in the group with the politically and functionally strongest local government forms in Europe” (Wollmann 2004: 647). Thus, and in the absence of legislation forcing municipalities to receive large numbers of refugees per capita, metropolitan municipalities have simply been able to choose to accept fewer refugees. However, the question remains why governments of peripheral and rural municipalities would voluntarily accept more refugees per capita than governments of urban municipalities with better labor market prospects.

We first consider whether a structurally oriented rational choice theory can offer an exhaustive, or, at least, a proximate explanation. However, we argue that factors such as the disciplinary political and intellectual climate in favor of receiving large numbers of asylum seekers and immigrants and the economic support given by the central government to municipalities that accepted refugees—clearly considerations that rational agents would need to address in this context—are not sufficient for understanding the actions of rural local governments, particularly if the assumed rationality of politicians is interpreted in non-egotistic terms. Indeed, given that a vast literature on urbanization and social capital (reviewed in Wennström & Öner 2019) predicts that the chances of refugees being successfully integrated into villages and small towns are slim or nonexistent, it appears irrational for local politicians to accept disproportionate numbers of refugees. Thus, we have to turn from structural to psychological levels of analysis.

We maintain that the chosen course of action is best explained by the views of the politicians, which diverged sharply from the views of the general public on refugee reception. However, most existing theories within political science fail to offer an account of how ideas and other psychological forces can induce irrational behavior in politicians and human actors more generally: “Most political scientists continue to be environmental determinists, believing that

human behavior is entirely the product of environmental forces.” (Hibbing & Smith 2007: 6–7). In the current study, we focus on one promising attempt that we have encountered within social psychology: Tetlock’s (2005) fox/hedgehog model of predictive style, which shows that “hedgehogs” are poorer forecasters because they make bold predictions stemming from a single central vision while “foxes” perform better because they are more guarded and flexible in their thinking.

In line with, for example, Mitchell and Tetlock’s (2010) application of the fox/hedgehog model to judicial decision-making and Tirole’s (2017) application of the model to the economics profession, we argue that this framework can be applied in diverse settings and that it may provide a useful approach for understanding the actions of local politicians in rural and peripheral Swedish municipalities. This is an exploratory study, which does not aim to establish a causal relationship between quantifiable municipal characteristics and refugee placement. Our purpose here is to introduce our “Tetlockian” interpretation of the erratic policy of refugee placement building on observed empirical regularities, adding to attempts to go beyond the analytical confines of rational choice theory (e.g., Blyth 2003), which may have implications for the understanding of political behavior more broadly. In particular, the analysis may shed additional light on why many politicians embarking on major policy changes do not appear to think ahead and be able to predict negative consequences (Forstedt 2018), and often are reluctant to perform sophisticated policy assessments (Nilsson et al. 2008).

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we provide information about asylum immigration to Sweden and the terms under which refugees are placed in municipalities, as well as a brief summary of our empirical findings. We then offer our discussion of those findings.

Asylum Immigration and Its Geographical Distribution

Sweden has experienced a significant influx of refugees during the 2000s and 2010s. The first surge in asylum immigration during this period occurred between 2005 and 2008—peaking in 2006, when approximately 25,000 refugees were granted permission to stay—because of the large migration into Europe following the Iraq War and its aftermath. The second surge in asylum immigration occurred after 2011, when the “Arab Spring” sparked political turmoil across the Middle East, leading to civil war in Syria.

Until 2016, the number of asylum seekers continued to increase drastically, from 29,000 in 2011 to approximately 81,000 in 2014. In 2015, that figure was doubled when 162,900 asylum seekers arrived in Sweden. During the autumn of the top year 2015, more than 9,000 people applied for asylum each week.

The largest group was Syrian refugees. However, the growth came to a halt the following year after Sweden strengthened its border controls and enacted new temporary legislation in the summer of 2016 that makes it more difficult for asylum seekers to obtain a permanent residence permit and be reunited with their families in Sweden. Before the enactment of this law, the default was that Sweden granted permanent residence permits and that Syrian refugees were prioritized. An agreement on migration policy struck in 2011 between the center-right minority government of 2010–2014 and the Green Party also included the right to healthcare for undocumented immigrants and the right to elementary education for their children, which was a strong signal that Sweden encouraged immigration.

Per capita, Sweden has received more asylum seekers than any other EU member country, exceeding the reception in France and Germany by a factor of 4.5 in 2015. Such a staggering difference (see further Henrekson et al. 2019) raises the question of where to house the refugees who have been granted a residence permit in Sweden.

The process of placement is initiated once a refugee is permitted by the central government to stay permanently in Sweden. He or she is offered a place in a municipality unless he or she can arrange housing for him- or herself. It became mandatory for all municipalities to accept refugees based on prescribed annual quotas determined by the central government and relevant agencies in March 2016 but before that it was voluntary. No sanctions for noncompliance were imposed in conjunction with the new law.

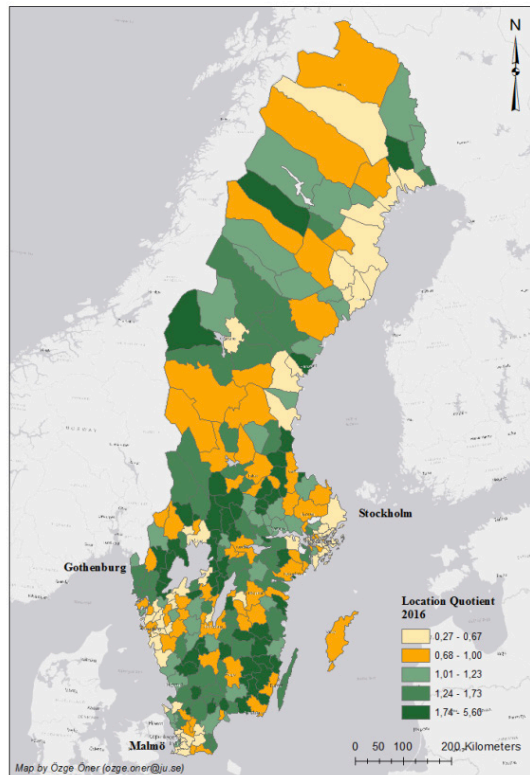
The municipalities are financially compensated by the central government for receiving refugees. The main grant is a flat-rate compensation for each new refugee arriving in the municipality of SEK 133,200 (USD 14,000), or roughly one-fourth of the average annual income (including mandatory social security) for full-time workers, which is intended to cover all direct costs incurred by the municipalities during the first two years. There are also certain forms of ex post compensation that municipalities can apply for, which mainly cover social assistance.

While municipalities will not profit from accepting these grants, they are intended to ensure that refugee reception does not end in a financial loss. However, as observed by a recent public inquiry (SOU 2018:22), the current flat-rate compensation does not necessarily cover actual costs incurred and applications for ex post compensations are slow to be granted, causing some municipalities to suffer financially.

Our empirical analysis shows that refugees who have been granted a residence permit are disproportionately placed in peripheral, depopulating municipalities in the vast northern part of Sweden and the industrial hinterland in the south. The principal metropolitan areas—Stockholm and Uppsala in the east, Gothenburg in the west, and Malmö and Lund in the south—receive

relatively few refugees (see FIG. 1). The relationship between population size and refugee reception first turned negative after 2006 and became even more pronounced after 2010, when Sweden experienced unprecedented levels of asylum immigration. In 2016, the municipalities with the most rapid population decline received on average double the national average of refugees per capita. There are even examples of depopulating municipalities that received four to five times the national average.³ Our analysis shows a similar negative relationship between the municipal employment rate and refugee reception, suggesting that an increase in population and/or the employment rate is associated with a decline in the relative reception of refugees. Finally, we observe a substantial positive association between higher levels of relative refugee reception in a municipality on the electoral support for the immigration-critical Sweden Democrats between the 2010 and 2014 national elections.⁴

Figure 1. Refugee concentration calculated by location quotients (LQ) in 2016.



- 3 At the same time, the variance within the group of depopulating municipalities is large, with several of the municipalities receiving refugees well below the national average; we come back to this point in the discussion.
- 4 The same effect is seen in Mehic’s (2019) study of refugee reception and the electoral support for the Sweden Democrats between the 2014 and 2018 elections.

Discussion

How can we explain the counterintuitive decision of rural and peripheral municipalities with declining populations to accept disproportionate numbers of refugees? In line with Shapiro's (2005) seminal discussion about "problem-driven" versus "theory-driven" research, we approach this question by asking whether an existing theory that has been widely applied to the study of political decision-making can shed light on the motivations of rural local governments and how, if at all, it is counterproductive in this case. If this theory fails to explain the actions of rural and peripheral municipalities, we ask whether there is an alternative explanation.

Our theoretical point of departure is rational choice. In its simplest form, rational choice theory assumes that individuals act consistently in line with their preferences. Thus, given individuals' desires and the information available to them, their actions must be assumed to be the best possible actions among all feasible alternatives (Hindmoor & Taylor 2015). Green and Shapiro (1996: 267), well-known skeptics of the universal applicability of rational choice theory, identified Taylor's (1996) "threefold requirements that the number of options be limited, their costs and benefits clear to the agents, and the stakes high" as reasonable conditions for when rational choice is likely to apply. It would not be unreasonable to assume that such conditions were present in our case and, therefore, that the actions of rural local governments are consistent with rational choice.

THE POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE

In the early 2000s, the two major left and right parties, the Social Democrats and the Moderate Party, constituted a restrictive axis in asylum and immigration issues. However, both parties gradually changed their stance and became as committed to generous immigration policies as the five smaller left- and right-wing parties. By 2010, the year in which the negative relationship between population growth and the rate of refugee reception became even more pronounced, all mainstream parties, from left to right, had officially embraced a liberal stance on asylum seekers and immigration in general.

Except for the Sweden Democrats, which entered parliament in that year's election, the collective left and right now also considered it inappropriate to question or criticize immigration to Sweden. Regardless of the individual characteristics of immigrants and the number of refugees arriving in the country, the mainstream parties all claimed that immigration represents a positive cultural and economic contribution to Sweden (e.g., Sanandaji 2017). Any politician, including cabinet ministers and members of parliament (MPs), who did not seem to toe this line in public was severely criticized, even by his or her party. Moreover, national borders were explicitly said to be undesirable

by several of the political parties on both sides of the left–right spectrum,⁵ and then Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt of the Moderate Party (2006–2014) claimed that Sweden lacked a national culture of its own that is worthy of preserving.⁶

In addition, in the wider political debate, the consensus at the time was that it was an expression of racism to question immigration (see, e.g., the recollections of the former leader of the Liberal Party Lars Leijonborg 2018). As a prominent journalist (Hedenmo 2017: 6) later explained, “anyone who raised the issue of the size of immigration found him- or herself out in the cold.” Ekengren Oscarsson (2013) famously coined the term “opinion corridor” to describe this phenomenon of a quickly narrowing public discourse. An opinion poll documented that it had even affected private discussions. Individuals with a conservative or nationalist outlook were less likely to share their views on issues such as immigration outside a small circle of friends than individuals with a liberal or left-wing outlook (Santesson 2015).

Given the political and intellectual climate, which prohibited views on immigration that diverged from the norm, and the fact that both political blocks at the national level were committed to generous asylum and immigration policies, it would have been costly for local politicians in rural and peripheral municipalities to reject refugees. Certainly, all municipalities faced pressure from the central government to accept refugees, but rural municipalities with declining populations had plenty of vacant housing and thus lacked a credible reason for not accepting refugees. Therefore, it would have been more costly for smaller, peripheral municipalities to challenge the *Zeitgeist* by attempting to reject refugees.

Thus, governing local politicians had little to gain by not assenting to large-scale refugee reception in their own municipalities. At the same time, local politicians could contend that they were not personally responsible for the consequences given that their choices had, in effect, been highly constrained by the political and intellectual climate. Arguably, this climate made the reception of disproportionate numbers of refugees appear to be the rational and strategically appropriate option to most politicians.

Moreover, it is conceivable that some local politicians interpreted the economic support from the central government as “pork barrel” (Evans 2011) that would boost the local economy in the form of taxable income for any salaried staff who would have to be employed and large profits for property owners and other service providers, which, in turn, would be spent on local consumption.

5 See the political programs of the Center Party (Centerpartiet 2013), the Liberal Party (Liberalerna 2013), the Green Party (Miljöpartiet 2013), and the Moderate Party (Moderaterna 2011).

6 See “Reinfeldt: What is purely Swedish is barbarous” (Dagens Nyheter 2006).

To some degree, this perception could have alleviated whatever concerns local politicians might have had about accepting large groups of refugees.

THE QUESTION OF ELECTORAL SUPPORT

While these factors are highly relevant, they nevertheless overlook an even more significant issue, namely, that large-scale refugee reception is an unpopular policy among large voter groups. Since 1990, approximately half of the Swedish population has advocated that fewer refugees be accepted. During peaks in Sweden's refugee reception, this share climbed to above 50 percent and even above 60 percent while only between a quarter and a third has been in favor of accepting more refugees (Demker 2017).

Hence, local politicians faced the risk of eroding their electoral support by accepting disproportionate numbers of refugees. Indeed, research suggests that growing shares and regional concentrations of immigrants (including an increase in perceived exposure to immigrants) increase electoral support in both national and local elections for immigration-critical political parties and adversely affect electoral support for parties promoting liberal immigration and asylum policies (Belluci et al. 2019; Halla et al. 2017; Harmon 2018; Lubbers & Scheepers 2001; Otto & Steinhardt 2014; Rydgren & Ruth 2011). The effect seems to be strongest in regard to non-European immigrants with low education levels (Edo et al. 2019). Our empirical analysis suggests further evidence of the existence of such an effect.

Although rational choice theory has made considerable advances since Downs' (1957) claim that politicians are exclusively vote-maximizers, acknowledging that politicians have both policy-seeking and office-seeking motives, rational choice theorists still assume that politicians have "at least one eye upon the prevailing public mood" (Hindmoor & Taylor 2015, 69). Hence, we should expect some ideological divergence but not the flight from the position of large voter groups that took place in Sweden. For several years, only the Sweden Democrats represented the view on refugee immigration of roughly half the Swedish population. How can we reconcile this with rational choice theory?

One explanation that has often been suggested is that the mainstream parties did not realize that they had lost public support for their generous asylum and immigration policies (e.g., Leijonborg 2018). However, a more plausible explanation, given the stability of the public's views on refugee immigration over time, is that the growth of the Sweden Democrats hurt the traditional blocks to roughly the same extent. Indeed, in the party's breakthrough election in 2014, in which it obtained almost 13 percent of the popular vote, SD gained voter shares from both the left and the right (Oscarsson 2016). Hence, it could be argued that a prisoners' dilemma-type situation emerged in which it was deemed preferable by both the left and the right to stay the course rather

than risk being punished by their opponents for changing position on refugee immigration before the other political block had also done so. If this was the choice that the mainstream parties made at the national level, then it is plausible that local politicians were under great pressure not to take any initiatives on their own, and, arguably, it was rational for them to conform and not upset the cart.

Only in the autumn of 2015, when it was evident that the country had exceeded its capacity to receive more refugees, could both political blocks escape this dilemma by simultaneously switching positions, which they did. As Leijonborg (2018: 319), who was a cabinet minister in the successive center-right coalition governments of 2006–2014, recounted: “In the autumn of 2015, the pendulum in immigration policy swung back with full force. [...] Now Sweden’s refugee policy would meet the EU’s minimum standard, the bridge across the Oresund Strait would be closed and [Social Democratic] government ministers talked about chartered planes leaving Sweden with rejected refugees.”

Cast in game-theoretic terms, the breakdown in refugee reception in late 2015 escalated to a Schelling point (Schelling 1960) that provided the window of opportunity that allowed both the left and the right to reverse their previous stance without risking being branded as racist or inhuman by their opponents; a mutual policy shift was thus rendered possible without the need for explicit coordination. Hence, it could be argued that only at that point would it have been rational for local politicians to refuse to accept disproportionate numbers of refugees and that rational choice theory therefore holds as an explanation for the actions of rural and peripheral municipalities.

NON-EGOTISTIC RATIONALITY

However, as, for example, Lichbach and Zuckerman (1997: 24) have observed, rational choice theory “is not bound by the utility or wealth-maximizing assumptions that characterize economics” and “does not even require the assumption that individuals are self-interested.” The addition of non-egotistic considerations increases the complexity of the analysis but is not ruled out (see, e.g., Ostrom 1990). If we, in line with this observation, instead interpret rationality in politicians’ behavior as doing what is most beneficial for the people they represent, any interpretation in line with rational choice becomes more problematic.

As argued at length in Wennström and Öner (2019), refugees have little chance of integration into the local community and the labor market in rural and peripheral areas. Briefly summarized, this is due to the different economic functions of small communities and large cities and to the different kinds of social capital that exist in rural and metropolitan areas. Instead, a large influx of refugees who are unlikely to find work in rural and peripheral municipalities

risks exacerbating an already severe unemployment problem, fueling a growing sense of alienation between inhabitants of rural and urban areas, and creating an ethnic conflict over scarce resources between the native population and the refugees.

Previous research has also demonstrated that immigrants, including refugees, constitute a net cost to the public sector in Sweden (Ekberg 1999; 2009). This is mainly because the employment rate of immigrants, even those of working age, is substantially lower than that of the native population but also because employed immigrants on average have lower annual incomes than natives (Sanandaji 2017). These costs are likely to be felt even more keenly in rural and peripheral municipalities where employment opportunities are scarcer.

Given these factors and the non-egotistic interpretation of rationality we have suggested, it would seem that the actions of most rural local politicians are, in fact, irrational. While it is beyond the scope of this study to adequately account for why some peripheral municipalities with declining populations have not accepted large numbers of refugees, it is likely against this background that they have adopted a comparatively more moderate approach to refugee reception.

Certain northern municipalities with significant population decline but fewer refugees per capita, e.g., Härjedalen and Gällivare, can be compared to Buchanan's (1965) concept of "economic clubs," which are characterized by exclusivity and bonding social capital. Most plausibly, such municipalities have been intent on not disturbing the social order, and the fact that several of them have been governed by a single party (the Social Democrats) most of the time has likely made local politicians more immune to political pressure to receive more refugees. In comparison, several of the municipalities with declining populations that received the greatest numbers of refugees, e.g., Lessebo and Hylte in the south of Sweden, have been governed by intermittent coalitions of Social Democrats, Greens, and center-right parties.

FOXES AND HEDGEHOGS

Rational choice theory should therefore be considered a non-exhaustive explanation. What else might then account for local politicians' actions? One indicator could be the fact that there is an extreme divergence between the opinions of the general public and the opinions of elected politicians in regard to refugee reception. In recurring parliamentary surveys conducted between the years 1994 and 2010, only between 7 and 16 percent of elected MPs favored accepting fewer refugees (see Ekengren Oscarsson 2015). During the period 2002–2010, covering the surge of Middle Eastern refugees between the years 2005–2008, this share varied between 6 and 7 percent.

Although there are no comparable surveys of local politicians' opinions, this large divide between elite and popular opinion, which only widened as Sweden accepted more refugees, was likely also present at the local municipal level. Individual MPs in Sweden need to maintain a close relationship with the party organization in their home districts to be re-elected (Esaiasson et al. 1996), which makes it unlikely that there would be a large divergence in opinion between MPs and local politicians in their home base.

We can instead assume that there was a similar opinion divide over the issue of refugee reception at the local level and should perhaps explore the possibility that this contributed to the reception of disproportionate numbers of refugees in rural and peripheral municipalities. The most promising vehicle for explaining how ideas can induce such irrational behavior in politicians that we have encountered is Tetlock's (2005) model of predictive style.

Tetlock solicited thousands of predictions from several hundred political experts working in academia and government. He classified the experts along a continuum extending between "foxes" and "hedgehogs," a reference to Berlin's (1953) idea that writers and thinkers can be divided into these two categories, and found that foxes are considerably better forecasters than hedgehogs. This is because foxes have a more balanced style of thinking about the world. They are more tolerant of nuance, skeptical of claims that deep laws govern history, and they tend not to reject unpalatable truths to maintain "moral purity" (Tetlock 2005: 106). By contrast, hedgehogs believe in big ideas and governing principles, tend to maintain the same approach in all circumstances. As they do now know "when to apply the mental brakes" (Tetlock 2005: 103), hedgehogs are also more likely to be swept away by their rhetoric and are more prone to making extreme predictions of radical negative or positive change.

Tetlock's (2005) model provides a useful approach for understanding the actions of local politicians in rural and peripheral municipalities. Although determining what particular hedgehog hypothesis regarding refugee immigration may have swayed politicians falls outside the scope of the current study, we can offer a couple of competing suggestions.

One possibility could be a belief that it is always right to choose the option that seems morally good and generous, perhaps supported by "positive asymmetry"—a common way of seeing that "foregrounds or underscores only the best characteristics and potentials of people, places, objects, and events" (Cerulo 2006: 6). Given that different groups or "thought communities prioritize and attend to different categories of people, places, objects, and events" (Cerulo 2006: 12) depending on their goals and values, it is conceivable that the traditional left and right blocks, having converged toward a liberal stance on asylum seekers and immigration, saw only the best in the refugees. The mainstream parties may have received further inspiration from various experts and think-tank scholars who imposed on society and the public debate a

uniform body of allegedly grounded “knowledge” about immigration, which only described positive outcomes and soon became dogma (e.g., Norberg & Segerfeldt 2012).⁷

A different hedgehog hypothesis is that depopulating municipalities must do whatever they can to reverse the trend and increase their populations, which is a widely shared goal among local politicians in Sweden (Syssner 2014). Declining populations are seen as embarrassing and a political failure since “growth for a long time has been the norm in local and regional development policy” (Syssner 2014: 39). The central government has, under various political leaderships, also advocated the idea that all parts of the country should be competitive and prosperous. Given that immigration has often been proposed as a panacea for an aging population in Sweden (Sanandaji 2017), it does not seem unlikely that a large influx of refugees may have offered a perceived short-cut to local politicians to reverse a negative population trend in depopulating rural and peripheral municipalities. As in the alternative scenario, there was support to be had from experts and think-tank scholars who advocated large-scale immigration as a solution to depopulation in rural areas (e.g., Bergström 2014).

In any case, administering Tetlock’s (2005) fox/hedgehog test to politicians could provide a good starting point in future research to determine the motivations of rural municipal authorities in Sweden, and of other policymakers in other similar situations who have failed to look ahead.

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7 How such processes work is described in Koppl’s (2018) work on “expert failure.” For example, experts with dissenting views on immigration had little incentive to offer their evidence, as such views were perceived as morally inferior.

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