

# Disparities in California’s Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Youth, Language Preference and Military Status

The California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP) recently published an issue brief examining reasons for Vote-by-Mail (VBM) ballot rejection in the state of California and the methods taken at the county level to help voters correct VBM ballot issues.<sup>1</sup> Utilizing detailed voter registration data from 36 California county election offices, this brief breaks down the analysis of the state’s rejected ballots by age, language preference and military status for the 2012 General Election.<sup>2</sup>

Key findings include the following:

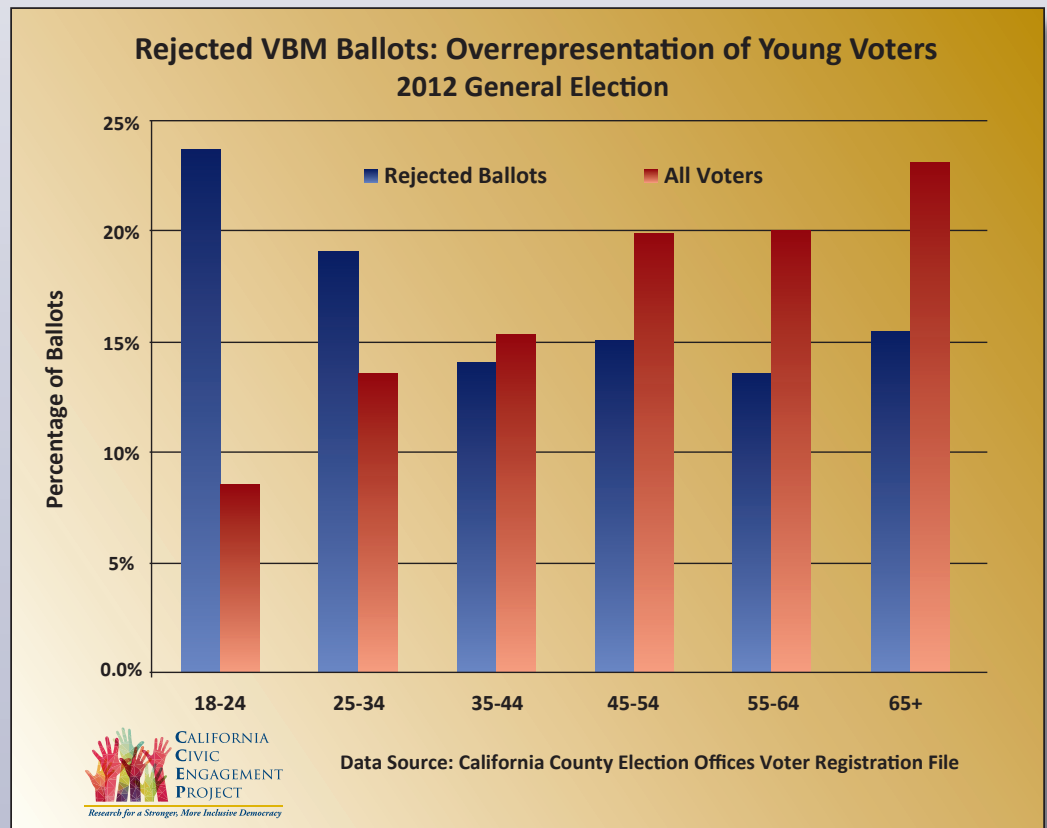
- Youth and non-English language voters are more likely to experience VBM ballot rejection.
- Missing signatures are a major reason non-English ballots are rejected.
- Military and overseas voters experience a higher likelihood their VBM ballots will go uncounted.

## Youth More Likely to Experience VBM Rejection

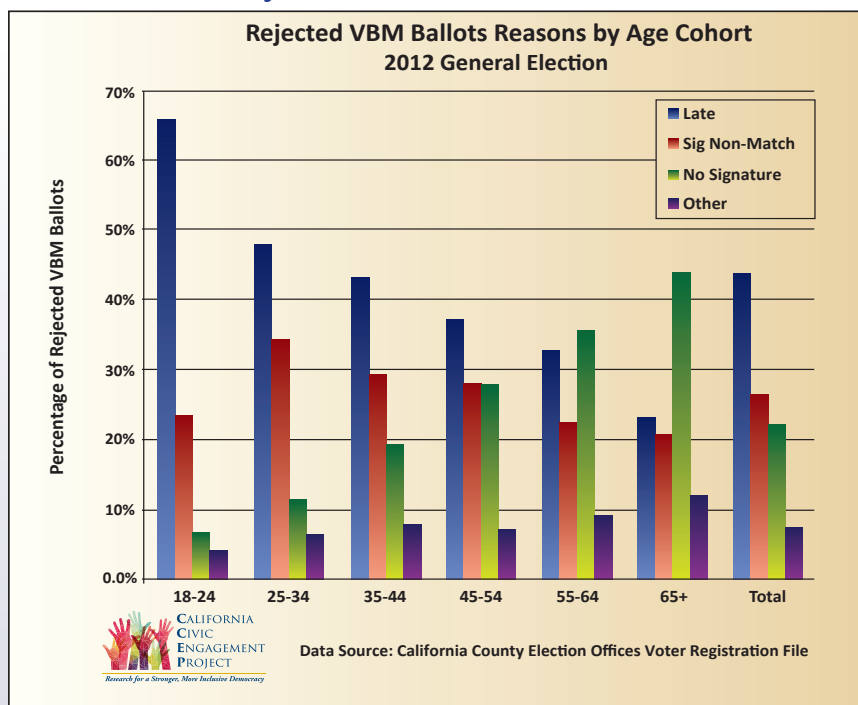
California’s youth were more likely to have their VBM ballots rejected versus older voters.

In November 2012, nearly 69,000 VBM ballots, or 1% of the state’s total VBM ballots, were rejected by county election offices, effectively disenfranchising these voters. VBM ballots can be rejected by county election offices for a variety of reasons. In our CCEP VBM issue brief, “California’s Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Identifying Variation in County Processing”, we found the three most common reasons are: ballot arrived late, the ballot envelope signature does not match the signature on file, and there is no signature on the ballot.<sup>3</sup> However, not all age groups have the same likelihood of having their VBM the ballots rejected and uncounted.

The ballots of young (age 18-24) voters comprise a disproportionately large share of rejected ballots compared to their share of all votes cast (VBM ballots and polling place ballots combined). Twenty-three percent of the rejected VBM ballots in California’s 2012 General Election belonged to youth voters, while youth voters made up only 8.1% of all votes cast (counted and rejected combined). Thus the largest absolute number of rejected VBM ballots of any age group were from young VBM voters.



## Youth Ballots Rejected due to Lateness



A higher proportion of youth VBM ballots were rejected than non-youth VBM ballots for arriving too late at county election offices. Sixty-five percent of rejected youth VBM ballots were late in 2012, while 23% of rejected VBM ballots belonging to youth were not counted due to non-matching signatures. Almost 7% of youth ballots were rejected due to not having signatures at all.

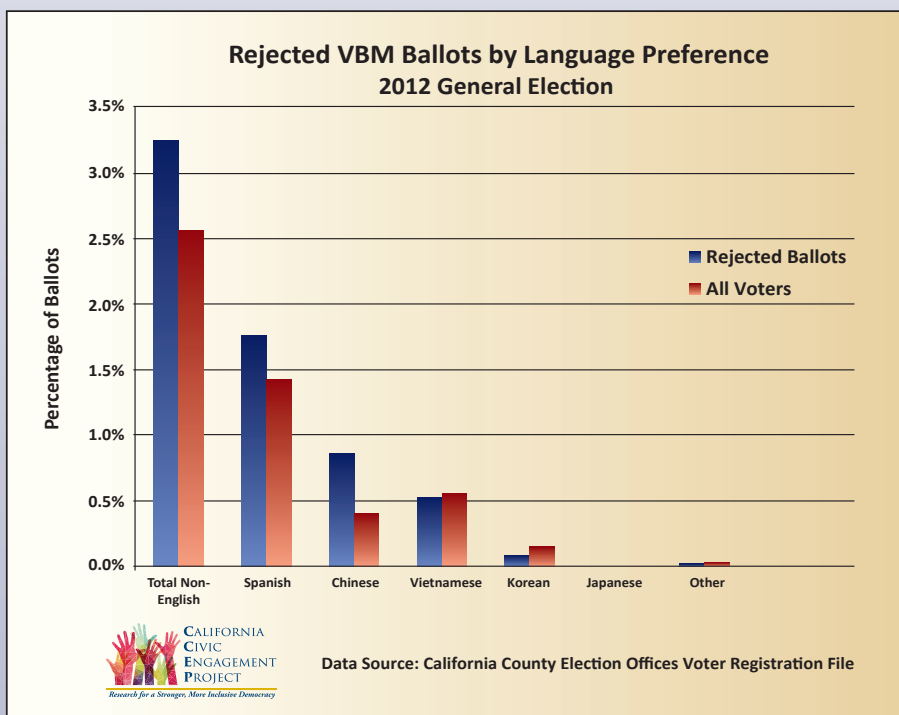
By contrast, a greater proportion of older voters saw their VBM ballots rejected due to missing signatures. The most common reason for rejecting the VBM ballots of older voters was the lack of signatures. Thirty-four percent of ballots of voters age 55-64, and 44% of ballots of voters age 65 plus, were rejected due to missing signatures.

Meanwhile, more youth are seeing their ballots rejected for lack of a signature than are most other age groups. But signature non-matches are also an issue. In the 2012 General Election, young VBM voters experienced

the second largest absolute number of rejected VBM ballots due to signature non-matches, when measured against all age groups.

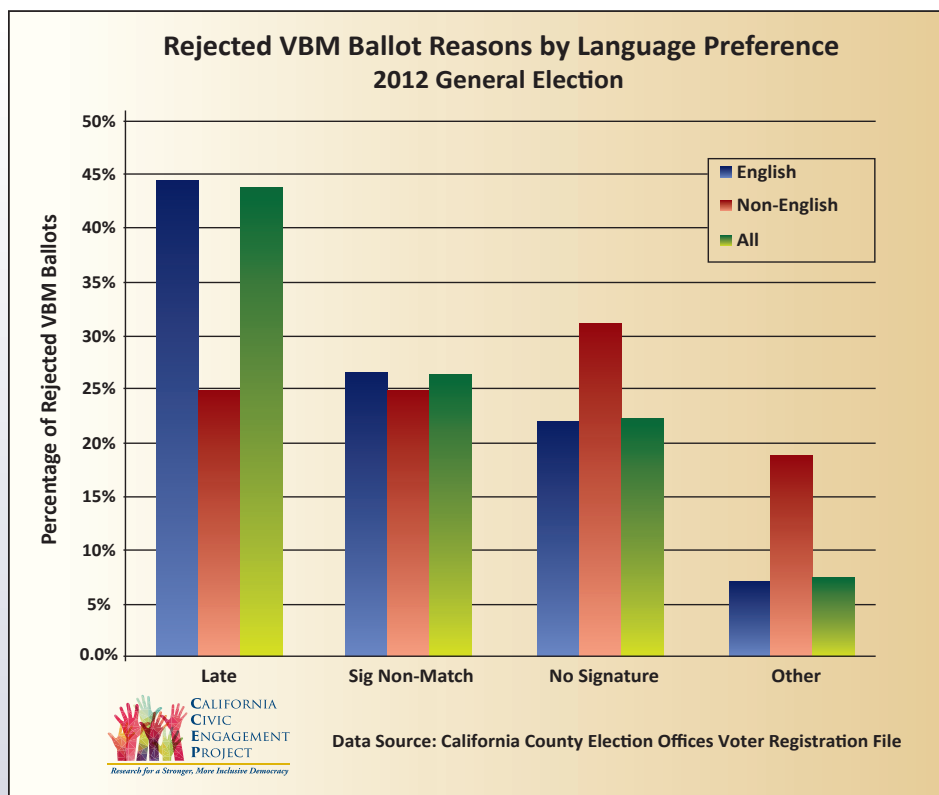
## Non-English-language Ballots More Likely to be Rejected

Voters who indicated a preference for ballot materials in a language other than English experienced a higher VBM ballot rejection rate than voters with English-language ballots. In the November 2012 election, voters with non-English-language ballots accounted for just over 2.5% of all votes cast. At 3.3%, they accounted for a slightly higher percentage of rejected VBM ballots in the election. Broken out by language, Spanish-language ballots made up the largest proportion of rejected non-English-language VBM ballots (Spanish-language voters were also the largest segment of non-English-speaking voters). The other most common language groups, except groups speaking Vietnamese and Korean, were also slightly overrepresented among language groups with rejected VBM ballots.



Note: Indicating a language preference on a voter registration card or by calling an election office is optional for voters. Nearly all voters whose records were examined in this study had a language preference designated in their county voter file. Counties use English as the default language in the voter file when no language is specified by the voter. Data presented here for English-language voters likely include some voters who may have preferred a non-English ballot but did not specify this preference with their county election offices.

## Missing Signature a Major Reason for Rejection of Non-English-language ballots



The reasons for VBM ballot rejection vary among English and non-English-speaking groups.

Lateness was overwhelmingly the number one reason English-language VBM ballots were rejected in November 2012, but this was not the case for non-English-language VBM ballots. Not having a signature was the most common reason a non-English-language VBM ballot was rejected. Thirty-one percent of all rejected non-English-language VBM ballots were uncounted due to missing signatures. Another 19% of non-English-language VBM ballots went uncounted typically due to unusual occurrences such as using a wrong ballot envelope, a ballot not being inside a VBM envelope, or uncast ballots being returned by family members. These types of unusual rejection reasons appear to be greater issues for non-English-language voters.

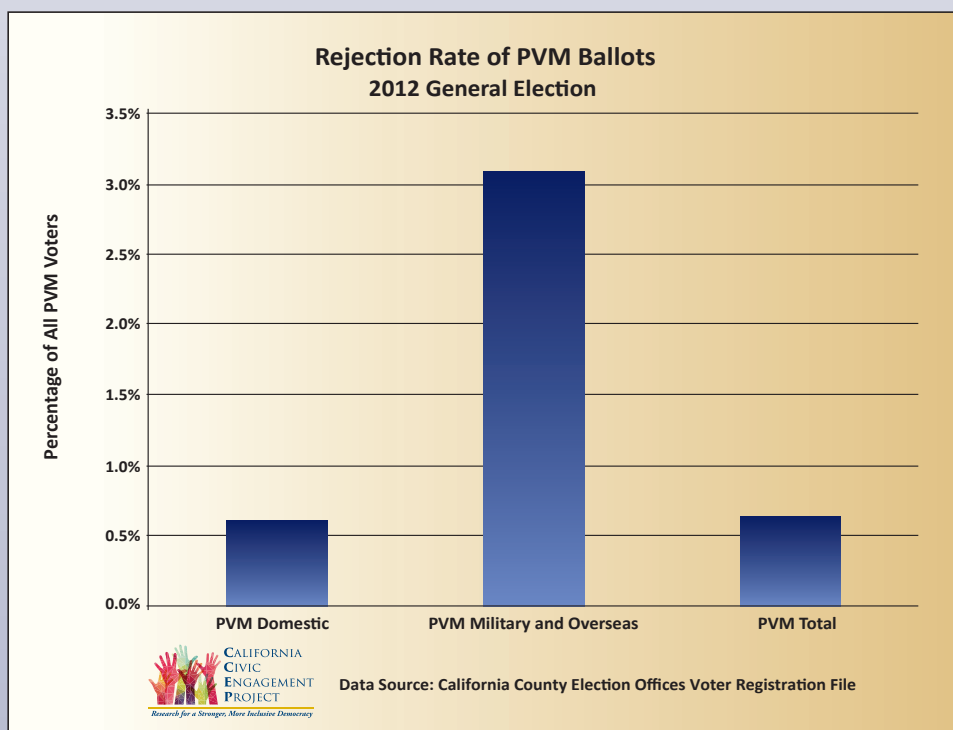
## Military and Overseas Ballots More Likely to be Rejected

Military and overseas voters experience a higher likelihood that their VBM ballots would go uncounted versus PVM domestic voters.

California voters signed up as permanent vote-by-mail voters (PVM) accounted for 49% of all ballots cast in the 2012 General Election. Eighty-three percent of all returned VBM ballots were from PVM voters, 80% from domestic PVM voters, and 3% from military and overseas voters PVM voters. A total of 0.06% of domestic PVM ballots were rejected compared with 3.1% of military and overseas ballots rejected.

Data for military and overseas ballots include ballots both mailed and faxed to county election offices as allowed under California law.

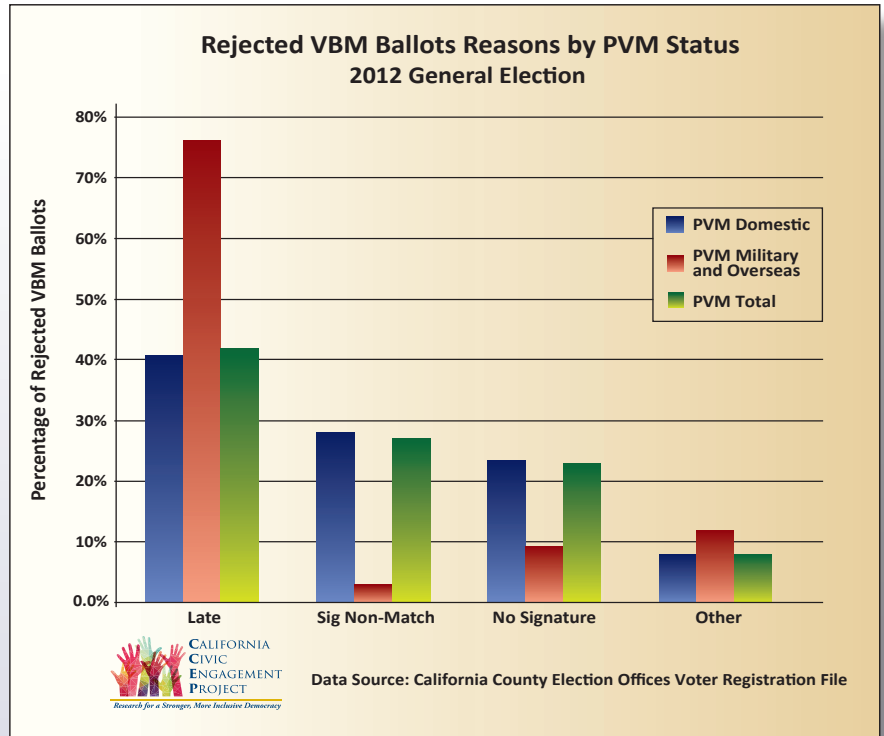
Note: Detailed voter data on rejected ballots was not available from some counties with large military populations. See notes.



## Military and Overseas Ballots are Late

The overwhelming majority of military and overseas ballots in the 2012 General Election were rejected because they were late.

In this same election, California PVM voters experienced differences in the reasons their ballots were rejected based on whether they were domestic voters or if they were military (serving stateside or abroad) or civilian overseas voters. Seventy-six percent of all rejected military and overseas ballots were late compared with just 40.5% of rejected PVM domestic ballots. Nearly 12% of rejected military and overseas ballots combined went uncounted due to other reasons. Lateness appears to be a significant reason for disqualifying military and overseas voter ballots, affecting these voters more markedly than it does domestic voters. Signature issues, however, do not appear to be as pronounced among military and overseas voters, as they are for some domestic voters.



## Actions for November 2014 and Beyond

This study's findings reveal that there are age, language and group membership disparities in mail ballot rejection rates and for the top reasons for ballot rejection. Voters who were young, utilized non-English language ballots, or who were serving in our military or residing overseas all experienced higher VBM ballot rejection rates in the 2012 General Election. Voters saw their ballots rejected for different reasons, based on age, language group and other identifying features, such as whether they lived abroad or were members of the military.

All VBM voters should be educated about the steps they need to take to ensure their ballots are counted. The development of voter education campaigns should consider the differences in VBM rejection reasons by age, language preference and military status found in this report. Young and military/overseas voters are experiencing more issues with late ballots. Meanwhile, older voters and voters with non-English language ballots would appear to benefit from an emphasis on ballot signature awareness. Further, nearly every group examined in this study is experiencing a notable proportion of ballot rejections due to non-matching signatures.

On January 1, 2015, Senate Bill 29 will become law, allowing VBM ballots to be counted if they are received within three days after Election Day and are postmarked, time-stamped or date-stamped on or before election day. Once implemented, SB 29 is expected to significantly reduce the number of VBM ballots not counted by counties due to lateness. While future elections will reveal what SB 29's full impact will be on the state's rejection rate, late VBM ballots should remain an Election Day concern for the November 2014 election given the CCEP's research findings.

Rejection issues due to signature non-matches also remain a concern for VBM ballot rejection. Since counties rely on voter signature images to verify the identity of voters, the quality of these images needs to be better in order to lessen the likelihood of error in the ballot verification process. Currently, images on file in county election offices can sometimes differ from those on vote-by-mail ballot envelopes received from voters due to changes in voters' signatures over time or because the initial images (typically from voter registration cards) were not of high quality or did not accurately represent a voter's signature. Signature images from voters registered through California's new online voter registration system are currently pulled from the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). DMV images can often be old and of poor quality (often made on a signature pad with a stylus) and not representative of voters' current signatures. As online voter registration becomes an increasingly utilized option for voters in California, future research will need to examine any impacts on the state's rejection rates that occur due to non-matching signatures from DMV images.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See the California Civic Engagement Project's Issue Brief #2: California's Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Identifying Variation in County Processing. <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/UCDavisVotebyMailBrief2.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> In order to examine California VBM rejection rates broken by age, language preference and military status we utilized detailed voter registration data files collected from California county election offices. Fifty-five counties supplied data files but data on returned VBM ballots (challenged ballots) were only available from 34 counties: Alpine, Butte, Calaveras, Colusa, Fresno, Humboldt, Inyo, Kern, Lake, Lassen, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, Napa, Orange, Plumas, Riverside, Sacramento, San Benito, San Bernardino, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Sierra, Sonoma, Sutter, Tehama, Tulare, Ventura, and Yuba. These counties hold 41.9% % of the state's registered voter population. Returned ballot data (challenged ballots) is not available in the detailed voter files of the remaining state's counties. The total number of challenged examined in this sample was 25,106. The total number of all challenged ballots in California in the 2012 general election was 68,759.
- <sup>3</sup> See the California Civic Engagement Project's Issue Brief #2: California's Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Identifying Variation in County Processing. <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/UCDavisVotebyMailBrief2.pdf>

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**This research is designed and conducted as a collaboration between the Future of California Elections (FOCE) and the UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP).**

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### About the Future of California Elections (FOCE)



The Future of California Elections (FOCE) is collaboration between election officials, civil rights organizations and election reform advocates to examine and address the unique challenges facing the State of California's election system. FOCE was formed in late 2011 to examine and address the unique challenges facing the State of California's election system. In 2013 and beyond, FOCE will be focused on building on this foundation of consensus and success.

### About the California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP)



The California Civic Engagement Project was established at the UC Davis Center for Regional Change to inform the public dialogue on representative governance in California. The CCEP is working to improve the quality and quantity of publicly available civic engagement data by collecting and curating data from a broad range of sources for public access and use. The CCEP is engaging in pioneering research to identify disparities in civic participation across place and population. It is well positioned to inform and empower a wide range of policy and organizing efforts in California to reduce disparities in state and regional patterns of well-being and opportunity. Key audiences include public officials, advocacy groups, political researchers and communities themselves. To learn about the CCEP's national advisory committee, or review the extensive coverage of the CCEP's work in the national and California media, visit our website at [ccep.ucdavis.edu](http://ccep.ucdavis.edu)

### About the Center for Regional Change (CRC)



Launched in 2007, the CRC is a catalyst for innovative, collaborative, and action-oriented research. It brings together faculty and students from different disciplines, and builds bridges between university, policy, advocacy, business, philanthropy and other sectors. The CRC's goal is to support the building of healthy, equitable, prosperous, and sustainable regions in California and beyond. Learn more! Visit the CRC website at <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu>

**For more information about this research study and the California Civic Engagement Project,  
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