

Who's afraid of Sahra – Understanding the shift in votes towards Germany's Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht

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Abstract

The emergence of the left-authoritarian Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) has profoundly disrupted the German party system. Within a remarkably short time frame, the BSW has achieved significant electoral success, prompting a lively debate concerning the political origins of its voter base. A central question remains: to what extent can the BSW attract supporters from other parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) or Social Democrats (SPD)? This study employs recent data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) panel to investigate voter flow dynamics and the issues motivating shifts towards the BSW. Our findings reveal that while the BSW struggles to attract core AfD supporters, the party has been notably more effective in appealing to recent AfD supporters. Overall, opposition to Ukraine support is the single most important issue that drives voters towards BSW.

Keywords

Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, EU election, voter migration, left-authoritarianism, populism, Ukraine war, panel data, GLES

Introduction

Amid prolonged speculation and rumours, former The Left politician, Sahra Wagenknecht, officially established her political party, the *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW), in January 2024. Since its inception, the BSW has successfully participated in the European elections, as well as the state elections in Eastern German Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg, achieving double-digit results from the outset. This electoral success, combined with the party's purportedly distinctive left-authoritarian orientation (Thomeczek, 2024) has significantly disrupted Germany's political landscape (Wurthmann and Wagner, 2024).

Yet, there is a widespread belief that much of the voter mobilisation for the BSW primarily comes from the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party (Left), rather than the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (Spiegel, 2024). This argument only examines voter movement between the last federal election in 2021 and compares those numbers to voting for the European election in 2024. Thus, it is based on a calculation that uses the AfD's

result in the German federal election, where it secured 10.3% of the vote, as a starting point. However, by October 2023, the AfD had surged to 23% in the polls, the highest level ever recorded for the party at that time – even before the announcement of the new party. Thus, the assumption that the BSW's success stems solely from left-wing parties may not fully account for the complex vote-shifting dynamics between the two elections.

In this study, we aim to provide a nuanced analysis of vote-shifting patterns since the last German federal election,

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focussing on the origins and sources of support for the newly emergent BSW party. This analysis is particularly relevant given the rarity of successful left-authoritarian parties, which have long been theorised to compete with the radical right for working-class votes but remain underexplored in practice (Steiner and Hillen, 2021). Leveraging German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) panel data, we offer detailed insights into voter transitions towards BSW, a party that has emerged in a highly unusual context – midway through the regular life cycle of the German parliament and under notably personalistic leadership.

By examining these dynamics, we contribute to understanding the challenges of comparing votes cast in 2024 with those from 2021, given the complex political developments over the intervening years. This research thus addresses not only the immediate significance of BSW's rise but also engages with broader theoretical and empirical debates about voter realignment, the interplay between left-authoritarianism and radical right support, and the mechanisms of electoral change. In doing so, it extends beyond the confines of German politics to offer insights of relevance to comparative studies of party systems and voter behaviour, filling a critical gap in the literature that has been noted but insufficiently addressed (Wurthmann et al., 2021).

BSW in Germany's two-dimensional political space

In a two-dimensional framework, socioeconomic positions on the left typically support welfare expansion and progressive taxation, while right-wing positions advocate for reduced state intervention in markets and increased individual responsibility (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The sociocultural dimension, meanwhile, delineates the divide between conservative and progressive stances on issues such as immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and alternative lifestyles (Dassonneville et al., 2024). This model has been widely accepted as an accurate representation of the German party system (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Thomeczek et al., 2024) (see Figure 1). Parties such as SPD, Greens, and The Left occupy the left-liberal quadrant, while the CDU, CSU, and AfD are situated in the right-conservative quadrant, with the FDP representing the right-liberal segment. Despite consistent electoral demand for a party combining left-wing economic policies with traditionalist-conservative values (Hillen and Steiner, 2020; Rosset and Kurella, 2021; Steiner and Hillen, 2019), the left-conservative quadrant has long remained unclaimed by any major political force (Wagner et al., 2023).

BSW's manifesto explicitly addresses systemic inequalities, emphasising the need to prioritise the welfare of ordinary citizens over the interests of elites (Franzmann

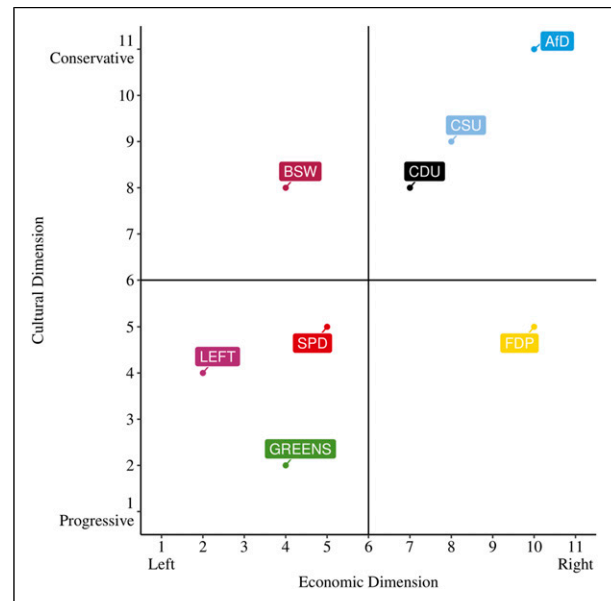


Figure 1. Germany's political landscape. Based on expert survey data (Thomeczek et al., 2024). AfD: alternative for Germany; CDU: Christian democratic union; CSU: Christian social union; FDP: free democratic party; SPD: social democratic party; BSW: Sahra Wagenknecht alliance.

et al., 2024). Central proposals include increases in minimum wage, affordable housing initiatives, and stronger workers' rights and protections. On sociocultural issues, the party aligns with conservative positions, calling for stricter immigration controls, and opposing green policies. By combining left-wing economic policies, such as economic interventionism and increased social welfare funded by the wealthy, with more conservative stances on sociocultural matters, the BSW positions itself as a potential political force to fill the left-conservative gap in the German party system (Thomeczek et al., 2024; Wagner et al., 2023). Additionally, on foreign policy, BSW argues for halting arms deliveries to Ukraine and pursuing a negotiated settlement in the Russian-Ukraine conflict (Franzmann et al., 2024; Wurthmann and Wagner, 2024).

The BSW experienced notable success in the 2024 European elections, securing 6.2 percent of the vote and placing ahead of Die Linke, the party from which Wagenknecht defected. While European elections have often been considered second-order elections (Plescia et al., 2020), some studies suggest that the increasing significance of EP elections could ultimately result in them being viewed as first-order contests (Gattermann et al., 2021). In their voting decisions, BSW voters placed particular emphasis on the party combining social welfare policies with anti-immigration stances, prioritising peacebuilding with Russia, opposing further weapon deliveries to Ukraine, and expressing dissatisfaction with Germany's

national-level politics (Tagesschau, 2024; Wurthmann and Wagner, 2024).

The BSW has been particularly successful in attracting voters from Eastern Germany, where disillusionment with mainstream parties is high, especially among the working class (Roose, 2024). In this region, citizens tend to be more critical of immigration, more supportive of social welfare, and more strongly opposed to further weapon deliveries to Ukraine compared to their counterparts in the West (Wurthmann and Wagner, 2024). In particular, the BSW's sceptical stance on Ukraine and arms deliveries seems to have contributed to its electoral success (Spiegel, 2024). This issue transcends the traditional two-dimensional political spectrum, acting as a proxy for both energy and economic precarity, as well as anti-immigration sentiments (Wurthmann and Wagner, 2024). BSW voters are overall less satisfied with their lives in comparison to the overall German population (Roose, 2024). The BSW's ability to secure seats in the EP elections and achieve third place in the 2024 state elections in Eastern Germany's Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia, coupled with its involvement in forming the state governments in Brandenburg and Thuringia, highlights the growing significance of this party. Understanding what groups of voters are likely to be mobilised by this newly formed left-authoritarian party (Wagner et al., 2023) is essential to fully disentangle the potential of this new party but also to understanding mobilisation of parties aiming to fill the left-authoritarian gap in Western European party systems.

Research design

Data and estimation technique

We analyse vote-shifting patterns and their explanatory factors using the latest GLES panel data (wave 26), collected in June 2024 after the EP election (Roßteutscher et al., 2024). To unpack the vote-shifting dynamics since the last federal election, wave 20 from September 2021, taken just post federal election, as well as the previous wave from October 2023 (wave 25) was included (GLES, 2023, 2024). In October 2023, the party was announced during the survey being in the field; however, the BSW had not been officially launched yet. The three waves contain 8469 participants who participated in all three surveys.

Our dependent variable was vote choice for BSW in the European election (1 = voting for BSW and 0 = voting for another party or non-voting). Due to the binary character of the dependent variable, we run logit models in the upcoming analysis. For all analyses involving voter transition, we use the reported vote choice for the last state election and the vote intention in October 2023 as reported in GLES waves 20 and 25.

Independent variables

In our analysis, we include immigration and welfare preferences as well as positioning on Ukraine and perceived economic deterioration. Anti-immigration sentiment was measured by asking respondents if immigration opportunities should be made easier (1) or stricter (7). Pro-welfare state opinions were measured by asking if they preferred lower taxes and fewer benefits (1) or higher taxes and higher benefits (7). To cover the perception of economic development, we calculate the difference between the evaluation of the general economic situation in September 2021 and in October 2023; higher values indicate that respondents view the current economic situation as worse than in September 2021.

To operationalise the anti-Ukraine support dimension, as it is a new and dynamic issue, we include all 5 questions asked in the GLES survey on the support of Ukraine, foreign policy position towards Russia, and opinions on defence policy and supplying weapons and run a factor analysis. The factor analysis shows that indeed these 5 items are closely correlated forming one single political issue (results in Table A2 in the Appendix). To then combine these 5 questions, we calculate a single anti-Ukraine support item by combining them weighted by their factor loading from the factor analysis (see weight value in Table A2) where (1) indicates strong pro-Ukrainian sentiment to (5) strong anti-Ukrainian sentiment.

Additionally, we include the perception of Sahra Wagenknecht in the factor analysis to identify whether the attitude towards her alone constitutes a relevant factor. The analysis, however, shows that liking Wagenknecht was part of the anti-Ukraine support cluster. Given this, and due to the inability to control for reverse causality (i.e. is positive perception caused by alignment with anti-Ukraine position or vice versa) as this question was not asked in September 2021, we exclude this indicator from our models.

To account for ideological predispositions, we include the ideological self-placement on a scale from (1) left to (11) right (see Appendix Table A1 for details).

Controls

We include control variables as these factors influence voting decisions (Smets and Van Ham, 2013). These are the age of the respondents, their biological sex understood as (1) female and (0) male, and their place of residence divided into Eastern Germany (1) and Western Germany (0); furthermore, we controlled for church attendance (1 more than once per year, 0 if less), union membership (1 if member, 0 if not), and the self-identification as blue-collar worker (1 = yes and 0 = not).

Analysis

Our empirical analysis is divided into three parts. First, we analyse the issues pushing voters towards the BSW. Then

we offer a descriptive overview of shifts in vote intentions. Third, we discuss several models that explain the issue drivers towards BSW for each major party to understand the vote-shifting patterns observed.

Issue model

Figure 2 shows the results of a multinomial logistic regression with loyal voters as the reference category (0). A loyal voter is a respondent who voted for the same party in the EU election in 2024 as they did in the last federal election in 2021. BSW defection is, therefore, coded with (1) when respondents voted for the BSW in the EP election, defection to another party groups together (2) all other vote defections compared to the federal election in 2021.

The issue model in Figure 2 indicates that the opposition towards Ukraine support is the single most influential driver to vote for BSW. The opposite effect is present for other defectors. Here a more pro-Ukrainian stance increases the probability of defecting to another party than the BSW compared to loyal voters. This is in line and supports earlier findings showing the opposition towards support for Ukraine constitutes a separate policy appeal for the BSW (Wurthmann and Wagner, 2024).

Holding anti-immigration but pro-welfare state views increases the probability to defect to the BSW compared to loyal voters and defectors to other parties. Identifying oneself as more politically left also increases a defection to the BSW compared to the two other groups for which no significant effect is identified. One might, therefore, assume to observe a left-authoritarian policy profile in BSW defectors.

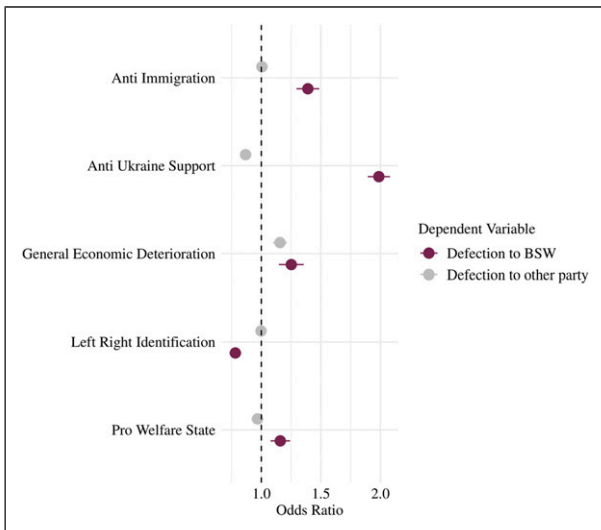


Figure 2. BSW issue model. Multinomial logit model (90% CI level) with gender, age, Eastern Germany, church, union membership, and blue-collar worker controls. Reference category 'no party defection'. Model details in Appendix Table A4.

Furthermore, a more pessimistic view on the general economic situation also increases the likelihood to transition to the BSW but this effect is also present for defection to other parties indicating that this is a factor that drives people away from their former party in general.

Voter flow

Figure 3 illustrates the movement of voters to the BSW in the European election, based on panel participants' responses from waves 20, 25, and 26. A total of 237 respondents indicated that they voted for the BSW in the EP elections and had participated in both waves 20 and 25. This allows us to present a diagram showing the political origins of BSW voters. Due to their ideological heterogeneity, respondents who indicated a preference for a party not represented in the Bundestag were excluded.

The starting point of the flow diagram is the vote recall from the last general election in September 2021 collected in wave 20. The middle node shows the vote intention in October 2023 (wave 25) prior to BSW launch. The final node is the vote recall for the European election in June 2024 (wave 26).

The figure reveals that the path to voting for the BSW is complex. The two largest groups of new BSW voters since October 2023 come from the right-wing AfD and Sahra Wagenknecht's former party, The Left, followed by smaller shifts from the Union (CDU/CSU) and SPD. Contrary to the inflow from October 2023 the majority of BSW voters indeed voted for the SPD in the last federal election and only a fraction for the AfD. This is supported by other analyses focussing on the transition from the last federal election to

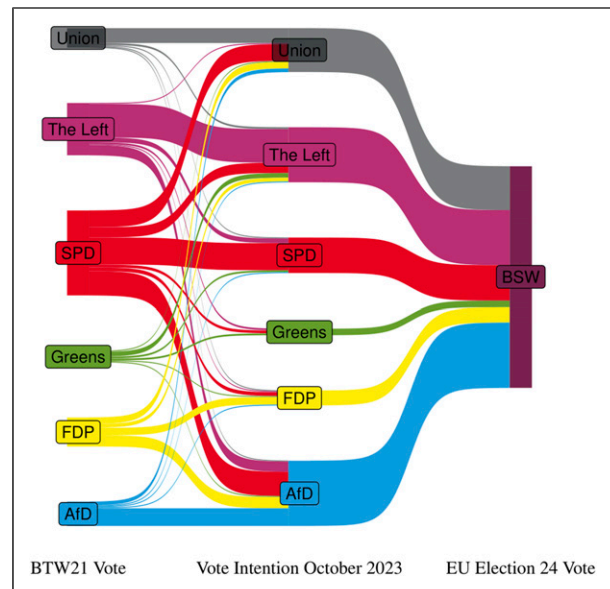


Figure 3. Voter deflections to BSW from Federal election 2021.

BSW support in the European election (Tagesschau, 2024). Since the last federal election, a number of SPD voters defected to the AfD, the Union, and to a lesser extent to The Left and then transitioned from there to the BSW in the EP elections. The Left defectors moved directly to the splinter party. Consequently, voter defection to BSW was so far rather dynamic with many voters, especially from the SPD, first defecting to the AfD before switching to the BSW.

We test this effect by running another version of the issue model with two dummy controls indicating if one was a new AfD supporter (no AfD vote in the federal election 2021 but AfD vote intention in October 2023) or a core AfD supporter (AfD vote in the federal election in 2021 and AfD vote intention in October 2023) and found a significant difference between the two groups (results in Appendix Table A4). Additionally, we calculate the marginal effects of anti-Ukraine support on BSW vote probability for the two groups and show that even though the likelihood increased for both groups it was considerably higher for new AfD supporters (see Appendix Figure A1). However, this should not imply that the BSW significantly reduces overall AfD support, as it only attracts a fraction of its supporters (see Appendix Figure A2).

Voter flow analysis and vote gain conclusions should, therefore, consider the party support dynamics between

elections (Müller and Louwerse, 2020). Only focussing on the former general election results misses the inter-election dynamics in which the BSW could indeed convince a considerable amount of then-AfD supporters (for numerical distribution, see Appendix Table A3). In the following section, we therefore now focus on the drivers of these observed vote-shifting patterns.

Defection models

For a more detailed understanding of the inter-election dynamics, we calculate several multinomial models for the main transition routes derived from Figure 3. The main routes of interest are the transition from AfD, Union, and The Left vote in the last federal election in 2021 to the BSW in the EP election in 2024. As seen in the descriptive analysis, mainly SPD voters did not shift directly to BSW but via the AfD. To account for this, we split the SPD transition paths into two groups: those who vote for the SPD in 2021 but switch to supporting the AfD in October 2023 and then vote for the BSW in 2024 (SPD-AfD-BSW), and those who stay loyal to the SPD in October 2023 but later move to the BSW in 2024 (SPD-SPD-BSW). Other transition paths were excluded due to insufficient sample sizes.

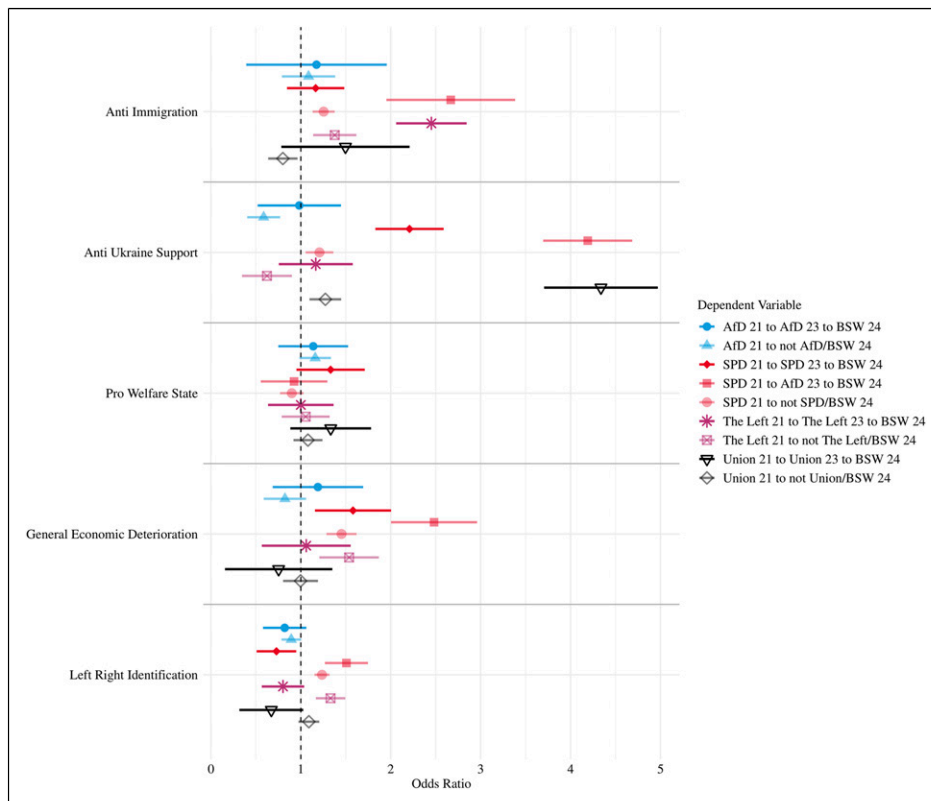


Figure 4. Party defection models. Multinomial logit model (90% CI level) with gender, age, and Eastern Germany controls. Reference category 'no party defection'. Model details in Appendix Table A5.

To cover the differences of these voter groups, we calculate multinomial logistic regression models on a subset of the GLES panel containing only the respondents who voted for the respective party in the last federal election in 2021. The reference category is loyal voters who do not leave their party, and each model also includes a category for non-BSW defectors to account for other defections.

The results of the models are visualised in [Figure 4](#).

As one can see, direction and strength of the coefficient varies between the different ‘transition routes’ to the BSW. AfD-to-BSW defectors are not significantly different on any issue from core AfD voters who stayed loyal to their party. We only observe significant effects for AfD-to-non-BSW defectors on Ukraine support and left-right identification. Being more in favour of Ukraine support and identifying themselves as more left leaning makes individuals more likely to defect from AfD to another party but the BSW.

For SPD supporters, anti-Ukraine support and anti-immigration stances are the main drivers to push former SPD voters to BSW; this effect is the strongest for SPD supporters who defected first to the AfD and then to the BSW (SPD-AfD-BSW). In terms of attitudes towards the welfare state, these defectors do not differ significantly from loyal SPD supporters but they view the general economic situation as more dire. However, former SPD supporters that defected first to the AfD and then to BSW (SPD-AfD-BSW) position themselves more right-wing compared to the ones that left the SPD only after 2023 (SPD-to-not-BSW/SPD).

Respondents from the GLES sample who defected from The Left to the BSW (Left-Left-BSW) are only significantly more anti-immigration compared to loyal The Left supporters. For all other issues, we observe no significant effects. Former The Left supporters that defected to another party but the BSW were, on the other hand, also more sceptical towards immigration but more in favour of Ukraine support and generally more right-wing and are more pessimistic about the status of the economy (Left-to-not-Left/BSW).

Defecting from the Union to the BSW (Union-Union-BSW) is mainly driven by opposing Ukraine support. This issue shows a strong and significant effect while the other issues have no significant effect. For Union defectors that did not transition to the BSW, opposition towards Ukraine support is also a significant driver but combined with more pro-immigration stances (Union-to-not-Union/BSW).

Overall the defection models provide evidence of considerable differences among voter groups transitioning towards the BSW. Opposing further support to Ukraine remains the single most influential driver followed by anti-immigration sentiment.

Conclusion

This study investigates the impact of the *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW) on voter behaviour, particularly in

relation to Germany’s Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Contrary to narratives suggesting the BSW could significantly hurt the SPD ([Spiegel, 2024](#)), we provide evidence that a considerable part of former SPD supporters who have now shifted to the BSW, supported AfD in the meantime. Our findings show that, while a significant portion of Left Party voters and new AfD supporters are more inclined to defect to the BSW ([Wagner et al., 2023](#)), long-established AfD voters are comparatively less likely to do so.

We provide evidence of successful voter mobilisation around the Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly among AfD supporters who had only expressed their voting intention for the AfD after the most recent federal election. While the propensity to vote for the BSW increases significantly among those disapproving of Germany’s support for Ukraine, it is important to note that loyal AfD voters remain less likely to defect to the BSW.

Our findings are particularly relevant as they highlight how shifts in voter support between the 2021 national election and the 2024 EP election, alongside the evolving composition of the new BSW electorate, underscore the increasing flexibility and fluidity of European voters. Without analysing voter intentions between election cycles, those voters who had considered voting for the AfD before the emergence of the BSW might be overlooked. Ultimately, our study contributes to a critical discussion on whether the BSW can reduce mobilisation towards the AfD.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

The replication files are available at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/WXSCO9>

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