

Research Article

Democracy and Electoral Absenteeism on the Ivory Side: Analysis from the 2015 Presidential Scrutiny in the Community of Yopougon (Abidjan District)

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Abstract: This study examines the social logics of the Yopougon population's abstention from voting in the 2015 presidential election. The study used a dual qualitative and quantitative approach with appropriate survey tools, namely semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire addressed to a category of actors. This has allowed us to achieve the following results: The combination of socio-anthropological, rational, institutional and conjunctural factors are as much decisive for the successful conduct of an election. The socio-political actors of Yopougon, through the systems of relations, participate in the construction of electoral abstentionism. The exclusion of certain social categories deconstructs any will and leads them to refrain from any electoral activities. In short, electoral absenteeism, a manifestation of the crisis of democracy, is explained by a lack of trust between the population and political actors.

Keywords: Abstentionism; Democracy; Voting; Social representation.

INTRODUCTION

Freedom and equality between citizens requires men to establish a just social organization on the basis of a social contract (Rousseau, 1762). In this perspective, democracy is intended to be an instrument for expressing popular sovereignty through voting (UN, 1948). It is a traditional form of political organization, presented as "the government of the people, by the people and for the people" (Lincoln, 1865). Consequently, electoral voting, an indicator of democracy, requires the development of institutional electoral systems and the participation of the people to ensure political legitimacy (Lincoln, Idem). Indeed, the participation of citizens of voting age is a crucial criterion for assessing the democratic process (Lipset, 1960). Abstention would be detrimental to the effectiveness of the elections. Elsewhere in the West, abstention from voting has become an increasingly common practice (Brecht, 2007). This is the case in Russia, where the average abstention rate in the presidential elections (2008 -2012) was 34%. This is 46.05% according to the Russian Electoral Commission (2016) during the parliamentary elections (2011 -2016). In Africa, particularly in Egypt, the abstention rate in

the 2014 presidential election was 52.5% compared to 48.15% in 2012 (Supreme Court of Egypt, 2014). In Nigeria, the abstention rate in the 2015 presidential election was 57.24% (INEC, 2015). Yet the act of electing or voting is a civic right and duty to which every citizen should answer. It is also a means of expressing the popular will, their support for the leaders' project for a society, and an instrument for measuring their legitimacy. However, in Côte d'Ivoire, like in African countries, it is well known that participation in elections, electoral abstention is a phenomenon in decline and is a common occurrence in elections; because, following the multi-party system, the 1990 presidential election attracted the enthusiasm of Ivorian citizens who voted massively, with a participation rate of 69.2% and an abstention rate of 30.8% (CEI, 1990). But, from 1995 onwards, the vote will decline. During the 1995 presidential election, there was an abstention rate of 43.80%. (IEC, 1995). In 2000, this rate increased to 62.6% (CIS, 2000), as did the 2010 rate, which was around 50%. But these remarkable participations have been marred by post-election crises (CEI, 2010). To restructure social ties and promote effective participation in the 2015

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elections, several NGOs have organized themselves to raise public awareness about voting. This is the case of the organization of active women in Côte d'Ivoire (OFACI) and the Club Union Africaine. Their mission was to get the population interested in voting through meetings and campaign days entitled "Support for the democratic process" (Koné, 2015). The government has also set up public awareness campaigns on voting through posters, leaflets, banners, meetings, billboards and media. It has also set up programmes and commissions: the CDVR, the PNCS, which has become a ministry, and CONARIV to restore trust between citizens and electoral institutions (Kone, idem). However, despite all these efforts, the October 2015 presidential election did not achieve the expected results. Out of 6,301,189 registered in the first round at the national level, 3,129,742 people voted, representing a general abstention rate of 47.14% (CIS, 2015). This observation is made specifically in many localities of the country, notably Abidjan, more particularly in the commune of Yopougon. In this commune, in addition to the actions of the State and NGOs, the management of the local radio station has initiated a caravan called "we are one", with the aim of encouraging the population of the said commune to participate massively in the elections.

Despite all these efforts, the abstention rate was 63.06%, or more than half of all people of voting age, compared to 13.5% in 2010 (CIS, 2015). In view of this situation, it is important to consider the socio-political factors behind the Yopougon population's abstention from voting in the 2015 presidential election. What is the social context that contributes to electoral abstentionism in Yopougon? What are the social logics underlying the production of this phenomenon in this municipality? What are the social practices linked to abstention? What are the social representations of the population of Yopougon with regard to the 2015 presidential election?

I. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study was carried out in the commune of Yopougon, more precisely in Yopougon 2. According to the division of the Independent Electoral Commission, this area includes: sicogi, sogefia, 16th arrondissement, terminus 40, saguidiba etc. The choice of this subdivision is explained by the representation of the country's ethnic groups. Documentary research, observation, and interview were used as techniques for data collection. Thus, a questionnaire was sent to 308 individuals of voting age, ten (10) interview guides

were prepared and intended for heads of households, organizations, political party leaders, mayoral officers and polling officers. The data analysis was carried out from a historical and comprehensive perspective.

II. RESULTS

II.1 The social context linked to electoral abstention

II.1.1.1. the Family

The family is the basic unit where the individual learns to forge a personality. It is the place where the first opinions and political interests of the child are born and crystallize under the influence of the most politicized. As such, it is a variable that contributes to the construction of abstentionism. In the family, the most politicized tend to influence ideologically the least politicized. This means that in the family, if these influential members do not take part in the vote, then they lead other family members to imitate them. Similarly, conflicting pressures between different opinions in the family may lead some members to abstain. These contradictions sometimes create confusion in the minds of individuals and lead them to consider politics as a complex activity, reserved for a particular category of person. A reality that leads them to withdraw from electoral activity. (where is the evidence from your investigation? Here, a speech or statistical data confirming the political affiliation of the family will make your argument strong).

II.1.2. Unemployment

The dependence of adults or low professional integration contributes to electoral abstention. For this category of actors, abstention is a response to the social frustration of which they are victims and the difficulties of creating a social balance. This is what E's comments tell us: "They only think about themselves, and when we want to get by, they stop us by raising taxes every day or tearing down our SMEs". These words of this respondent establish a comparison of the standard of living, they also highlight the nature of the relationships, the question of trust of the leaders. Indeed, the unemployed represent the most vulnerable social stratum. And because of this vulnerability, they are most often considered as electoral livestock for politicians, who, once in power, ignore promises made against them. They therefore feel excluded from the functioning of the social system in which they are integrated. Consequently, symbolic violence, exercised on these young people and/or adults in Yopougon by the regime, is a determining variable in their abstentionist behaviour.

ii.1.3. Ethnic and Political Affiliation

Political membership Ethnic membership	non-response	IDR	DPIC	IPF	HDP	others	EAN	TOTAL
Akan group	0	0	0	2	0	0	4	86
Mandé group	0	0	6	0	0	0	30	56
Gour group	0	0	0	9	0	0	20	29
Krou group	5	0	0	112	0	10	10	137
Total	5	0	26		20	10	94	308

Source : *author data*

In view of this table, it can be seen that the REIT is strongly represented in the Krou group, the Akan group and a little less so in the Gour group. Unlike the PDCI and RHDP which are present in the Akan and Mande groups. The electorate of this party is the one that abstains the most (49.67%) due to the arrest of political prisoners, the credibility of the CIS, the internal crisis within the party, and the inability of the party leaders to win power. As for the PDCI and the RHDP, they are present in the Akan and Mande groups and constitute 14.93% of abstentionists. They abstain because of the difficulties encountered in carrying out certain acts with a view to participating in elections. Indeed, citizens wishing to participate in the election must perform a certain number of acts because if the right to vote is granted to citizens of voting age (18 years), it only makes sense if other formalities are fulfilled. Others correspond to abstentionists from the other parties and represent 3.24%. We find them in the Krou group.

II.2 the Exclusion of a Political Leader in Electoral Competition and Ethnic Catch-Up

The political behaviour of individuals is always structured around an ideology, embodied by some political leaders. Thus, the participation of individuals in the political game is part of a construction logic to promote this ideology or to bring the incarnate leader to power. This variable remains significant in understanding the abstention of populations during the 2015 election. This is perceptible in the comments of the respondents. Indeed, for P: "I voted for Gbagbo, now that he is not here. Who do you want me to vote for? If we bring Gbagbo back, we'll all vote." Gbagbo is the leader in whom individuals recognize themselves and who motivate their political actions. Only its presence can encourage them to engage in electoral activity. Voting is an act of expression, which reflects the approval of a social project and is consistent with societal values as perceived by the individual. From then on, the absence of the Leader embodied in the electoral competition, while reflecting the non-existence of a social project that integrates his vision, deconstructs any motivation for voting activity. In addition to this variable, it is noted that sometimes individuals from ethnic groups, who are different from members of the current regime, are excluded and disadvantaged in the search for employment. That's what R says: "Right now the guys

from the West are guards. One time he was a policeman, today he's vigilant. We have a lot of children, we have grown children who have done nothing. Nothing is going well. So, he adds: "When you see those in power, the names of two baoulé are mentioned, the rest there are only them. It's too closed, it's even closed. These comments highlight the difficulties to which populations are exposed, the inclusion of ethnic, regional and political criteria. Indeed, in the labour market, some individuals are harmed or expelled because of their ethnicity. Faced with such a reality, however, individuals still adapt their political opinions to those of the group to which they belong. Consequently, these subjective and arbitrary criteria demonstrated by the regime are factors that explain the abstention of the populations in the commune of Yopougon.

ii.3. within Opposition Political Parties

The contradictions within the opposition parties demonstrate the difficulties in agreeing on the same vision and building a strong common identity. The Ivorian opposition often has difficulty in giving itself a homogeneous image, so that there is a divergence of opinion. A difference of opinion, while creating a dysfunction within the party, obscures the readability of the political scene with the consequence of increasing the abstention rate. Indeed, the opposition's difficulties in agreeing on a single candidate demotivate the activists, who therefore do not find it necessary to take part in the vote. The differences of opinion that arise within the party and the unbalanced nature of some leaders of the opposition party undermine the confidence of the militants. It is therefore not uncommon for relations between opposition parties and the government to be accused of deception, the aim of which is to satisfy personal interests at the expense of the well-being and will of citizens.

ii.4. the Registration Period

The registration period is not a time of great popular mobilization such as the election campaign, which is characterized by large and multiple meetings organized by political parties, or the 2010 election. This justifies to some extent why the timing of voter registration does not attract much attention from some citizens.

Indeed, it is a process whose success is largely linked to the quality of the political environment. However, a political environment that is not very active during the period of listings is not likely to stimulate citizens' registration since it does not imply a possibility of great competition between political actors. Consequently, the timing of voter registration is not likely to encourage citizens' participation in elections, which makes it difficult to perceive the issues at stake. To this end, Siegfried states that "combat elections" are favourable to electoral participation while "appeasement elections" (Siegfried, 1995) are favourable to abstention.

Yopougon	2010	2015
registered	449.809	447.389
participation rates	86,05%	36,94%

Source : author data

Table of Registered Voters in the 2010 and 2015 Presidential Elections in Yopougon

With regard to the table, there is a low participation of the population in the registration process on the 2015 electoral list, 36.94%. This suggests that the registration period is not a time of great mobilization. This also highlights the lack of interest of the people of Yopougon in voting. This is due to the absence of the preferred candidate.

III. SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS RELATED TO THE ELECTIONS

III.1 Electoral Issues

The election issue is supposed to stimulate voter turnout. However, this is only possible if political actors are divided on its definitions and solutions. These divisions and proposals must be clearly visible to the public. The more competitive the election, the higher the stakes and the tighter the margin of victory, the freer the electorate is to go to the polls. One of the most striking realities in Côte d'Ivoire is the lack of political debate, given that the parties have little knowledge of the fundamental problems of society. Political debates allow the electorate to appreciate the stakes of the current election. Moreover, the Michigan school presents three conditions to crystallize the relevance of an issue on the citizen, namely that it must be known to the voter, provoke a reaction in him and he must finally perceive one of the parties as having positions on this issue closer to his own. The issue is considered close to the voter if he feels it with questions from his daily life, otherwise he will be presented as distant. However, the issue emerges through the political programmes that constitute the basis for electoral mobilization. However, they are the ones who define the mobilizing objectives, make you want to participate in the vote and vote for a candidate, a party, thus allowing you to distinguish yourself from other trends. If the voter is not convinced by the ability of the political system to improve his or her condition of existence, he or she will cultivate an

attitude of indifference towards politics and will tend to avoid electoral participation, hence abstentionism.

But indifference sometimes leads, according to Mr. Pammet and Mr. Leduc, to a "feeling" of uselessness that is accompanied by a negative opinion about electoral competition, that is, the feeling that their vote will not change the final result. Thus, strategic analysis leads the voter to calculate as a "homo economicus" because he takes into account the electoral campaign with its stakes, its salient themes, the personalities and the gains he can benefit from it. However, when actions to explain the issues are not effective, it is difficult to convince citizens to vote, especially when they doubt the credibility of the election and do not feel some competition on the electoral scene. This is why it is frequently stated that there is a positive correlation between the abstention rate and the degree of openness of the electoral game. This means that citizens' non-voting is often linked to the opacity of the electoral game and the unfairness of electoral competition. However, few citizens are willing to make investments without profit because, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1994), there is no such thing as a gratuitous act. Indeed, the inability of Ivorian political parties to offer voters genuine social projects has contributed to the construction of a non-competitive electoral environment in which only one known party or candidate is able to win, weakening the opposition and demonstrating its inability to drive change, given the absence of a programmatic dimension in political debates. It is for this reason that we recognize that voter turnout declines when the strictly political incentives to participate in elections weaken. The absence of electoral stakes is a determining factor in the abstention of the people of Yopougon. Electoral participation declines when political incentives and community initiatives are absent. The citizens of the municipality of Yopougon are finding it increasingly difficult to perceive the relevance of the election to society's problems and the vague solutions seem to be the same. This can be seen in GA's comments: "you have to change your head, it's the head that's rotting". So he goes on to say: "you vote, you don't vote, it's even something there, we know who's going to win". Under these conditions, abstention in the municipality of Yopougon is the solution that best satisfies the citizens, since it does not imply any hassle for results that are considered to be known in advance.

Clearly, the populations are unable to perceive the stakes of the vote mainly because of the lack of confidence in the voting structures, particularly the independent electoral commission, which is a political commission that reflects the power in place. As proof, to this question, what do you think of the Independent Electoral Commission? One respondent had to say: "it is the same people who are there", referring to the ethnic groups of the ruling power. Moreover, when they see that the ills that have been criticized for years such

as unemployment, insecurity, impunity, capital flight, lack of transparency and the high cost of living persist, it is very difficult for them to vote. Finally, some citizens wishing to participate in the electoral process must perform a certain number of acts because while the right to vote is granted to citizens of voting age (18 years), it only makes sense if other formalities are fulfilled. Otherwise, the citizen (who has not completed these other formalities) does not have the right to vote. Thus, citizens are not entitled to participate in the election if they do not possess a national identity card, a voter's card, no names on the electoral lists if they do not know the procedure and if their residence is not located at their place of registration. This is how it is understood when a respondent states that: *"I could not vote because I did not have my identity card"*.

III.2 Crisis of Legitimacy

The election is considered as a powerful instrument for legitimizing leaders and as a legitimate method of appointing representatives. However, legitimacy is the fact that public and political institutions are accepted by the populations concerned as being in accordance with their wishes and who are then willing to assist them. This implies that democracy cannot survive for long without citizens creating the political culture of participation necessary to build democracy. However, the lack of legitimacy does not exclude the fact that, even in the event of low voter turnout, elected officials remain the representatives of all citizens, including those who did not take part in the vote. This is the principle of the "symbolic coup de force" of representation.

Moreover, a high abstention rate is not likely to affect in practice the stability of the political system, which functions as if all the people had given it their anointing. It should be noted, however, that a regime that does not have a high degree of popular legitimacy may face numerous operations to challenge the legitimacy of political leaders and institutions. This reflects the degree of erosion of the representativeness of political leaders and makes voting a minority expression of the will of the majority.

Indeed, electoral legitimacy is more decisive than legality and when this legality does not fit with the will of the majority of citizens, there are risks that it will be called into question. However, this is the situation in which citizens do not feel represented because the unrepresented voter is the one who abstains from voting. The most relevant thing is that an elector who refuses to be represented *de facto* refuses to let others do so on his or her behalf. That is why it tends to question the choice of those who have decided to vote. In any case, abstention is one of the foundations of the "crisis of representation", the concrete expression of the divorce that exists between leaders, political institutions and citizens. From this perspective, between actions and interactions, the legitimacy of political leaders and

institutions is seriously challenged. An illegitimate power is the one in which the social group or community refuses to recognize itself and follow its initiatives. He is then tempted to use force to impose his spontaneous acceptance by the population. It is a power which, following the low turnout of citizens, is not sufficiently representative among the population and faces mistrust on their part and even perpetual rejection. This often forces governments to use force to get their decisions through and accepted.

However, in the case of Côte d'Ivoire, the lack of legitimacy is most acute in areas with the highest abstention rates. This implies that the issue of legitimacy does not arise in the whole country with the same enthusiasm and in the same way. Indeed, it occurs more in some localities than in others. This is mainly the case in the commune of Yopougon considered as a stronghold of the opposition and in many others. The turnout rate in Yopougon commune in the 2010 presidential election was 86.05% and that of 2015 was approximately 36.94%. The problem here is that people who do not vote tend to challenge the established political order. This usually happens during demonstrations. This was the case in October 2015 for the presidential election and in October 2016 in the referendum for the new constitution, which was described as "irregularities", which the demonstrators rather contested. Although the disaffection of citizens for politics makes some political professionals the masters of the national destiny, they are nevertheless confronted with real crises of representativeness and are often led to resort either to seduction or violence to be accepted by populations that have difficulty identifying with them. Indeed, when a person is elected with a high abstention rate, he or she represents only a tiny part of the population. This leads not only to the holding of power by leaders with low representativeness but also to their place and election losing credibility even if legally their election is valid and allows them to exercise their function on behalf of all and for all. Consequently, only the massive vote of citizens is the foundation of representative democracy, since the massive participation of citizens in the vote expresses their attachment to the community to which they belong and reflects their confidence in the political system in place, hence their willingness to support it because it is the expression of their aspirations. Indeed, while legality simply manages to give a formal explanation for the establishment of political power by showing that its holders come from the ballot box, legitimacy is in line with popular aspirations and has the full meaning only if the election results reflect the choice of the majority of citizens. Consequently, it is understandable why the tests of representativeness are the subject of struggle for the interpretation of the results. Moreover, electoral results have no real meaning unless the governed have run *en masse* in elections. To this end, political actors always try to demonstrate their legitimacy by constantly relativising abstention rates,

which for them remain insignificant (see annexes on abstention rates and results by region).

III.3 Crisis of Democracy

The construction of democracy begins with the establishment of rules of electoral competition that are accepted by not all because, if the rules of the game are not unanimously accepted by political actors, the entire electoral process will regularly be called into question. Democracy is a regime whose functioning and legitimacy ultimately depend on the trust of its citizens because without that trust democracy risks losing its legitimacy. The lack of trust between citizens and their democratic system is what some authors have described as: "This is because electoral abstentionism makes democracy lose its credibility because of the lack of competitive competition. Moreover, there is no democracy without competition, since competition is a factor of mobilization and without it, citizens find no stake in the election. It is in this perspective that Mr. Rosanvallon (1991: 8) argues that the lack of major clashes structuring national political life constitutes the "decline of political passions". In any case, the population's lack of interest in the functioning of democratic institutions eventually distorts the election results and ultimately weakens democracy itself. However, the weakening of democracy in Côte d'Ivoire is materialized by the domination of the political scene by the ruling party, leading to a erosion of the contradictory debate and that of the value of the vote. Indeed, democracy cannot be achieved without the existence of a legitimate opposition. As a result, in a competitive system, competitors must exist in order for competition to have its full meaning and flavour. With the arrest of political prisoners and the RHDP coalition, we see that the political "market" is constantly shrinking, leading to a gradual closure of competition. Indeed, pluralism is a way of managing uncertainty. This is the very meaning of democracy. Elections in Côte d'Ivoire rarely have suspense. Moreover, some militants of the ruling party do not hesitate to point out on some occasions that they have no opposition. This is justified by the multiple defeats of the opposition (presidential elections in 2010 and 2015). This is naturally a handicap for democracy. In any case, it is the participatory performance of the actors that determines the performance of the entire system and facilitates the entrenchment of democracy. Abstentionism in some regions and in the municipality of Yopougon illustrates the weakness of electoral competition and therefore a lack of competition. As a result, the low degree of electoral competition is a handicap for democracy. This is all the more so since the vote is no longer of any importance, as some consider it to be incapable of finding solutions to their problems. In short, the electoral abstentionism in the municipality of Yopougon is the result of a combination of several factors. As a result, it can be deduced that there is no single factor that explains the phenomenon, but that it combines socio-anthropological, rational,

institutional, cyclical and many other factors that are equally determining. Nevertheless, the construction of this phenomenon is a problem in the democratic system.

IV. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

According to Poacher, several factors influence the political participation of popular groups. These include: the geographical distance between the populations and their voting place, the social distance linked to the difficulties of registering on the electoral list, a political distance linked to the feeling that the alternation does not bring any improvement in living conditions, and finally a cultural distance which results in the feeling that political issues are not understood, due to the low intellectual level. Thus, for the author, the low politicization of a majority of the population in these neighbourhoods is due to the decrease in social and political ties and a decrease in civic ties: the process of individualization of society and the distance of politicians, from privileged backgrounds, from the working class makes abstention legitimate (Braconier, *et al.*, 2007). In the same way, Duverger (1950) shows that abstention is very dependent on the type of elections. The voting system (a sympathizer of a "small" party will have less incentive to go to the polls in a majority vote because his candidate is unlikely to be elected, whereas he will mobilize more if the vote is proportional), the type of consultation and the frequency of elections have a cyclical influence on abstention. For the author, unemployment, precariousness and social disaffiliation are elements of socio-economic fragility that lead to abstention and non-registration on electoral lists. There are several reasons for this correlation between social integration and electoral participation. Interest in politics depends on social position and level of education, gender and age and the Gaxie context (1978). Before the introduction of universal suffrage, there was a censal suffrage (only those who paid a tax could vote). But while the economic barriers to entry into the political game have now been removed, they still remain in a cultural form. Politicization, understood as "attention given to the functioning of the political field", is indeed unevenly distributed in the social space, and the main explanatory variable is the level of education attained by citizens. Some voters do not really choose at the time of voting to abstain or vote for a particular candidate because they do not have the means to know and master all the issues in the political arena. This deterministic and historical approach is also highlighted by AKindès (2004). For the author, the political field was composed around three characters, each representing a region with a political clan in the popular imagination: Henri Konan Bédié, the heir to the Akan aristocratic myth with an electorate, substantially located in the centre, south and southeast; Laurent Gbagbo, the prophet of the radical break with "houphouetism" and continuator for some, of the work of Krabgé Gnagnbé, symbol of the rallying of the Bete populations and a significant fringe of the

populations of the West, considering himself marginalized in the redistribution of the fruits of growth and finally Alassane Dramane Ouattara, the candidate of the dissident of the PDCI and especially the nationals of the North in majority Muslims. These different writings are decisive for the understanding of our phenomenon under study. However, they addressed the issue of electoral abstention from a dialectical perspective. The aim was to show electoral abstention as the product of apparent contradictions in the functioning of the social system in general. Through this approach, we note that electoral abstentionism is a social fact that is imposed on actors because of their living conditions and their inappropriate environment. However, man is an actor capable of making decisions. It operates in a social system that it deals with events. He takes ownership of events as they meet his needs. For this reason, understanding electoral abstentionism requires that the logic of abstentionist behaviour be highlighted through the comprehensive approach.

CONCLUSION

The understanding of the social logics of the Yopougon population's electoral abstention in the 2015 presidential election was structured in two main points: the social practices related to abstention and the population's social representations of the election. The reasons that led the population of Yopougon to abstain in the 2015 presidential election are linked to the combination of socio-anthropological, rational,

institutional, cyclical and many other factors that are equally determining. The socio-political actors of Yopougon through the systems of relations participate in the construction of electoral abstentionism. There is also the crisis of democracy. This results in a lack of trust that may exist between the people and the regime. There is no democracy without competition. For this reason, the absence of competitive competition gives people a feeling of an election without stakes. A reality that makes democracy lose its credibility and then leads to electoral abstention.

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