Sex Scandals, Corruption, and Political Ideology:
Liberal and Conservative Responses to Scandal

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Abstract
Recently, sex scandals involving high-profile politicians dominate the headlines of major U.S. news outlets. Sex scandals may sell newspapers, but public opinion research finds citizens rarely punish politicians implicated in a sex scandal. Still observational data reveals that some politicians have better luck surviving sex scandals than others. In this research note we ask: Do voters punish politicians for sex scandals? In this research note, we argue that yes—some voters do. Whereas liberals are inclined to view a sex scandal as a personal matter—unrelated to a politician's job performance—conservatives are more likely to view sex scandals as moral outrages that disregard traditional values, threaten the social order, and that are worthy of punishment at the polls. Using evidence from a survey experiment designed to isolate the effect of the type of scandal (i.e., corruption vs. sex), we investigate heterogeneous treatment effects by political ideology. Consistent with prior research, we find that voters are generally unforgiving of corruption. When it comes to sex scandals, however, liberals tend to be more forgiving whereas conservatives tend to punish sex scandals on par with corruption scandals. Our findings have important implications for understanding voters' reactions to recent sex scandals.

Do voters punish politicians for engaging in sex scandals? Although there is substantial evidence to indicate that voters punish politicians who are implicated in corruption (Beaulieu 2014; Fackler and Lin 1995; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013), research indicates that voters are far less likely to punish elected officials for moral transgressions such as sex scandals (Barnes, et al. 2018; Doherty et al. 2011; 2014; Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde 2000). That said, some politicians have better luck surviving sex scandals than others (Vonnahme 2014), with women politicians frequently held to different standards than men (Bauer 2015; Krupnikov and Bauer 2014). The public's response to extramarital affairs ended the political careers of John Edwards and Elliot Spitzer and resulted in the South Carolina legislature censuring Governor Mark Sanford. At the same time, Donald Trump's supporters have seemed unfazed by allegations that in 2006, the president had an affair with the adult film star, Stormy Daniels, and then paid the actress $130,000 in hush money shortly before the 2016 election.[1] These examples point to inconsistencies in the way voters respond to scandals involving moral transgressions. Indeed, despite conventional wisdom suggesting that voters are more forgiving of moral transgressions—and do not punish politicians for sex scandals— analysis of 38 sex scandals in the U.S. reveals that voters are willing to support candidates in their bid for reelection following a major sex scandal only 40% of the time.[2] This mixed evidence regarding voters' responses to sex scandals raises the question: Does the public punish politicians for sex scandals? And in particular, do some people care more about sex scandals than others?

In this research note, we argue that although some voters are likely to see sex scandals as politically irrelevant, others are likely to penalize incumbents at the polls for moral transgressions. Below, we argue that although many voters may be more forgiving of sex scandals than corruption, on average, conservative voters will be less forgiving of sex scandals than their liberal counterparts,

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[1] https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/1/17/16901602/trump-stormy-daniels-hush-money-scandal-porn.

[2] https://wapo.st/1ixpBGM?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.4ec6bf726ff9

and that conservatives should be more likely to punish women for sex scandals. We test our expectations using a survey experiment designed to isolate the effect of the type of scandal (corruption vs. sex) and candidate sex, and we investigate heterogeneous treatment effects by political ideology. We find that voters readily punish corruption, but when it comes to sex scandals, liberals tend to be more forgiving of any sex scandal. And, while conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish women for sex scandals, conservatives punish men and women for sex scandals at similar rates, on par with their willingness to punish men for corruption.

Sex and Corruption in Politics

A number of factors shape the public's response to scandals. To begin with, the length of time since a scandal occurred shapes voters' reactions (Doherty et al. 2014; Pereira and Waterbury 2018), as does exposure to different types of media outlets (Peterson and Vonnahme 2014). Voters make clear distinctions between corruption and sex scandals: On average, voters view sex scandals as less relevant to candidates' job performance (Barnes et al. 2018) and therefore do not punish them absent an abuse of power (Doherty et al. 2011; 2014). Doherty et al. 2014 show, for example, that tax evasion scandals are more damaging for politicians than any type of moral scandal (Doherty et al. 2014, 360).

Still, there is variation among voters in how individuals perceive and respond to scandals. Individuals with high political knowledge, for instance, are more likely to discount a morality scandal when a "competent" candidate is implicated (Funk 1996). And, voters are less likely to suspect (Barnes and Beaulieu 2014) or to punish (Anduzia et al. 2013; Solaz et al. 2018) co-partisans for scandalous behavior.

Political Ideology and Public Reactions to Scandal

In addition to political knowledge and co-partisanship, we also expect political ideology to influence voters' reactions to scandals. Although previous research finds that voters are far less

likely to punish politicians for sex scandals than corruption (Doherty et al. 2011; 2014; Funk 1996), there is evidence to indicate that voters' ideological positions structure their responses to sex scandals. For example, individuals who oppose abortion and gay marriage respond more negatively to infidelity scandals than individuals who support these social policies (Doherty et al. 2011). Similarly, individuals who exhibit strong sexist attitudes are more likely to punish politicians—and particularly women politicians—for sex scandals (Barnes et al. 2018). Specifically, Barnes et al. (2018), posit that individuals who endorse hostile sexist attitudes—a set of beliefs that are antagonistic toward women—are more likely to punish women (but not men) politicians for sex scandals. By contrast, those who endorse benevolent sexist attitudes—a set of beliefs that seek to sustain traditional gender relations in society—punish both men and women for engaging in moral misgivings. Combined, these studies suggest the need to consider how voters' ideological positions shape responses to sex scandals.

Liberals and conservatives rely on different psychological and emotional foundations when making moral judgments (Graham et al. 2009; Graham et al., 2012; Haidt and Hersh 2001). Whereas, conservatives are more likely to moralize and condemn deviant or sexual acts (Haidt and Hersh 2001), liberals are more likely to consider these same acts as private affairs that are not subject to moral judgments in the first place. Unlike liberals, conservatives have a broader moral foundation that draws on evaluations of loyalty, authority, and purity and sanctity, whereas liberals only moralize acts that are unfair or that directly harm other people (Graham et al. 2009).

Given the different underpinnings of their moral foundations, conservatives may find sex scandals to be more egregious than do liberals. Whereas liberals are more inclined to view a sex scandal as a personal matter, unrelated to job performance, conservatives are more likely to view sex scandals as moral outrages that disregard traditional values, threaten the social order, and that are thus worthy of punishment. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: *Compared to liberals, political conservatives will be more likely to punish a politician who has been implicated in a sex scandal.*

Candidate Gender and Voters' Political Ideology

Conservative voters may look especially unfavorably on women politicians implicated in sex scandals. In society women and men are held to different standards (Bauer 2015; Krupnikov and Bauer 2014), particularly when it comes to sexual behavior and promiscuity (Crawford and Popp 2003). Traditional gender stereotypes, for example, portray women as more honest and moral than men (Kahn 1996), and as having "a quality of purity that few men possess" (Glick and Fiske 1996). Thus women implicated in a sex scandal may be subject to especially hostile reactions for violating expectations about women's morality and purity (Cassese and Holman 2018a). Similarly, Barnes et al. (2018) demonstrate that individuals who endorse hostile sexist attitudes are more likely to punish women than men for involvement in sex scandals. As liberals are unlikely to punish sex scandals in the first place, we should not observe differences in their likelihood of punishing women and men. Yet conservatives, who we posit are more prone to punish sex scandals, may find a sex scandal involving a female incumbent, to be especially problematic. We test the following hypothesis:

H2: Whereas liberals are unlikely to punish anyone for sex scandals, political conservatives will be more likely to punish women for involvement in a sex scandal than men.

Testing the Effects of Political Ideology: A Survey Experiment

In April 2017, we administered an online survey with embedded experimental treatments on using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. The samples drawn from MTurk are more representative than student samples, are as representative as other Internet-based samples (Buhrmester et al. 2011), and consistently replicate results based on representative samples (Berinsky et al. 2012). Thus, MTurk survey experiments are gaining popularity with social scientists (e.g., Bauer 2017; Holman, Schneider, & Pondel 2015; Krupnikov & Bauer 2014). Using the randomizer

function in Qualtrics, we randomly assigned participants to one scandal treatment (corruption, sex scandal, no scandal) and one gender treatment, creating a 3X2 factorial design. Specifically, all participants were told that a U. S. Representative is up for reelection and that his/her term had been relatively unremarkable except for a corruption/sex scandal/no mention of scandal. Then, everyone is then asked, "If this were your representative, how likely would you be to vote for him/her in the next election."

We began by investigating average responses across our six experimental groups. Consistent with previous research, participants are less forgiving of corruption than sex scandals: 93% of respondents are (very) unwilling to vote for the incumbent involved in corruption scandals compared to 84% who were (very) unwilling to vote for incumbents involved in sex scandals (Table 1).[3] Even though respondents tend to care less about sex than corruption scandals, they still punish incumbents for sex scandals relative to the control group.

Table 1: Responses Across Treatments

Percent Reporting Unlikely/Very Unlikely to Vote for Representative					
Male Corruption	Female Corruption	Male Sex	Female Sex	Male Control	Female Control
93%	93%	86%	82%	38%	39%
N=216	N=245	N=241	N=240	N=241	N=233

Note: Chi^2 test for average effects significant at p<.001. Responses represent percentage of participants "unlikely" or "very unlikely" to vote for the representative.
A series of pair-wise t-tests indicate that each corruption treatment is significant from each of the sex scandal treatments, as well as the controls.

To assess heterogeneous treatment effects by political ideology, we estimated an ordered logit model in which the dependent variable is the participant's willingness to vote for the representative in the next election (Table 2). We include a dummy variable for each experimental treatment ("male corruption" is the reference category), and we control for a number of

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[3] A series of two-sample t-tests shows that average effects for both of the control groups and sex scandal treatments are significantly different (p<.01) from average treatment effects in both of the corruption groups.

**Table 2: Effect of Political Ideology on Reaction to Political Scandals**

	Model 1	Model 2
Female No Scandal	2.872***	3.691***
	(0.206)	(0.529)
Male No Scandal	2.938***	3.149***
	(0.203)	(0.529)
Female Corruption Scandal	-0.070	1.178*
	(0.194)	(0.526)
Male Sex Scandal	0.857***	1.726***
	(0.188)	(0.508)
Female Sex Scandal	1.000***	2.152***
	(0.190)	(0.519)
Lib.-Con. X Female Control		-0.281^
		(0.169)
Lib.-Con. X Male Control		-0.068
		(0.168)
Lib.-Con. X Female Corruption		-0.443*
		(0.173)
Lib.-Con. X Male Sex		-0.301^
		(0.163)
Lib.-Con. X Female Sex		-0.404*
		(0.168)
Liberal-Conservative	-0.077	0.175
	(0.050)	(0.127)
Religiosity	0.005	0.012
	(0.036)	(0.036)
Female Respondent	-0.113	-0.129
	(0.110)	(0.110)
Education	-0.016	-0.017
	(0.041)	(0.041)
Age	-0.005	-0.005
	(0.004)	(0.004)
Income	0.017	0.016
	(0.017)	(0.017)
Work Fulltime	-0.006	0.007
	(0.139)	(0.140)
Work Part time	-0.133	-0.117
	(0.178)	(0.179)
Student	0.033	0.067
	(0.301)	(0.302)
Cut 1	-0.069	0.689
	(0.330)	(0.475)
Cut 2	2.087***	2.856***
	(0.337)	(0.482)
Cut 3	4.874***	5.646***
	(0.369)	(0.506)
Observations	1332	1332

Standard errors in parentheses, ^ $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$
Male corruption treatment is the reference category.

demographic variables. We use the results from our ordered logit model to predict the probability of being "very unlikely" to vote for the representative, for each treatment categories, across the range of political ideology (1= "very liberal" to 5= "very conservative). We present the results for male sex scandal (circles), corruption scandals (squares), no scandal (triangles), in the left panel of Figure 1, and female sex scandal (circles), corruption scandals (squares), no scandal (triangles) in the right panel.

Figure 1 Effect of Ideology on Voters' Willingness to Punish Scandals
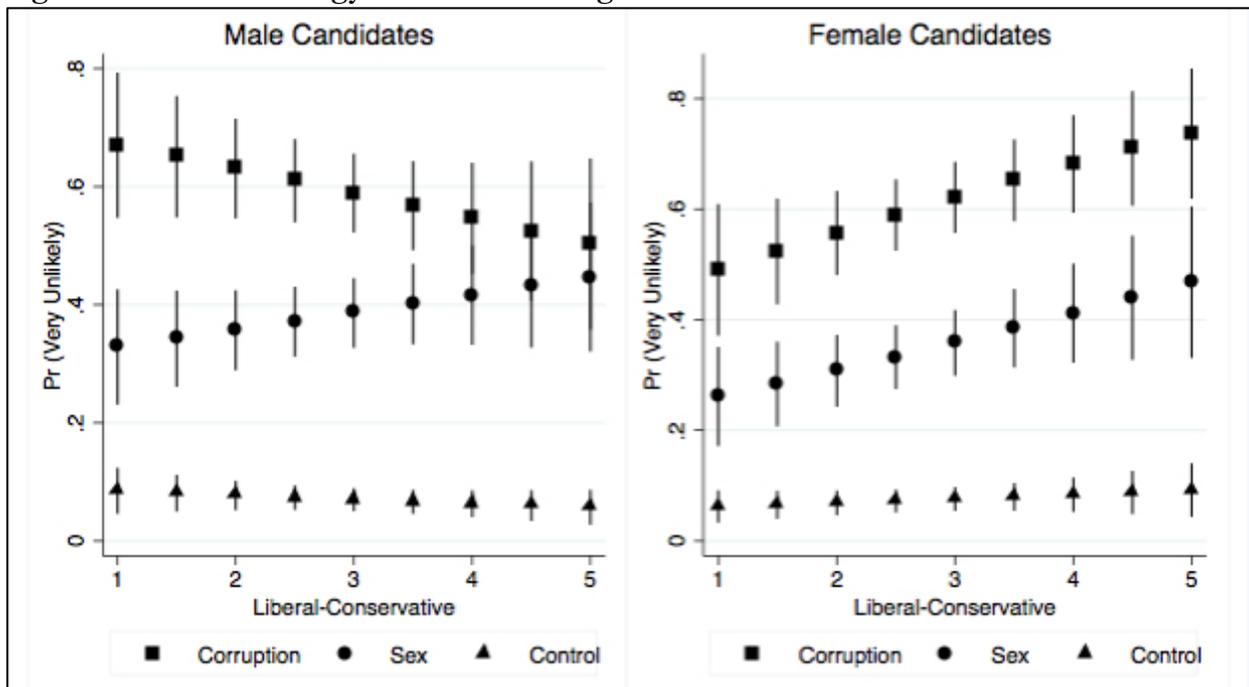
To begin with, liberals are significantly less likely to punish men for sex scandals than for corruption scandals. Figure 1 shows whereas liberals have about a 32% chance of being "very unlikely" to vote for a man implicated in a sex scandal, they have a roughly 67% chance of harshly punishing a man for corruption. Conservatives, by comparison, punish male candidates for sex scandals on par with corruption scandals.

Turning to the "female candidate" panel in Figure 1, liberal and conservative participants

punish women candidates less for sex scandals than for corruption. Importantly, this is not because

conservatives do not care about sex scandals. Indeed, as with male candidates, conservatives are

more likely than liberals to punish women for sex scandals. But, conservatives are also more likely

than liberals to punish women for corruption scandals. Importantly, these results hold even when

controlling for important ideologies such as hostile and benevolent sexism (Barnes et al. 2018;

Beauregard and Sheppard 2018; Cassese et al. 2015; Cassese and Holman 2018b; Glick and Fisk

1996).

Figure 2: First Difference: The Effect of Political Ideology on Voter's Response to Scandals
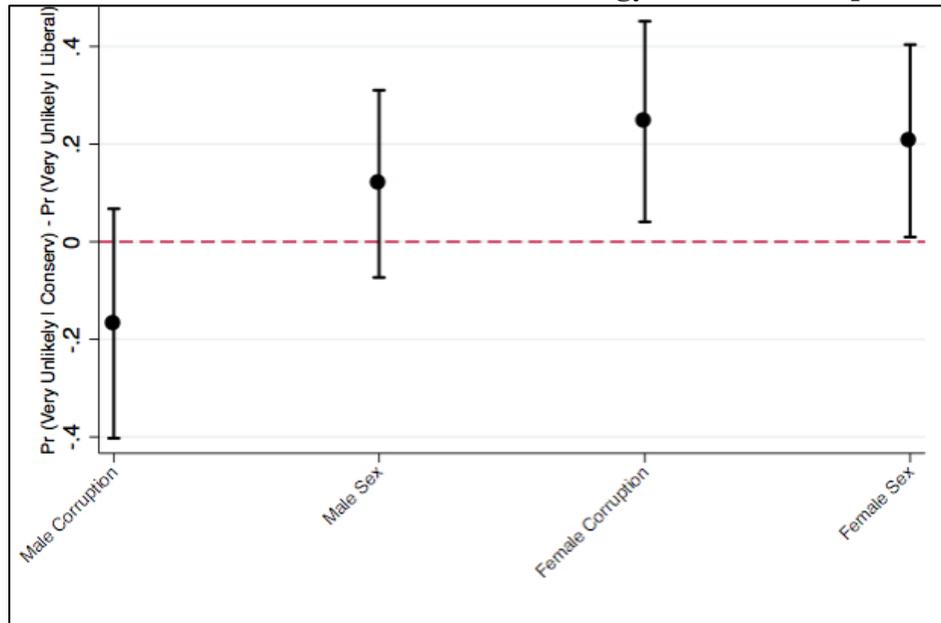
To illustrate these differences, Figure 2 plots the difference between the predicted

probability of conservatives and liberals saying they are "very unlikely" to vote for the politician (i.e.,

the first difference). Positive values indicate moving from "very liberal" to "very conservative"

increases the probability of saying "very unlikely." Where the confidence bars cross zero the

difference is not significant at the 95% confidence level. In partial support for H1, Figure 2 indicates

that conservatives are more likely than liberals to punish women for sex scandals, but they are no

more likely than liberals to punish men. That said, conservatives are also more likely than liberals to punish women for corruption scandals.

Figure 3: First Difference: Politician Sex and Liberal and Conservative Responses
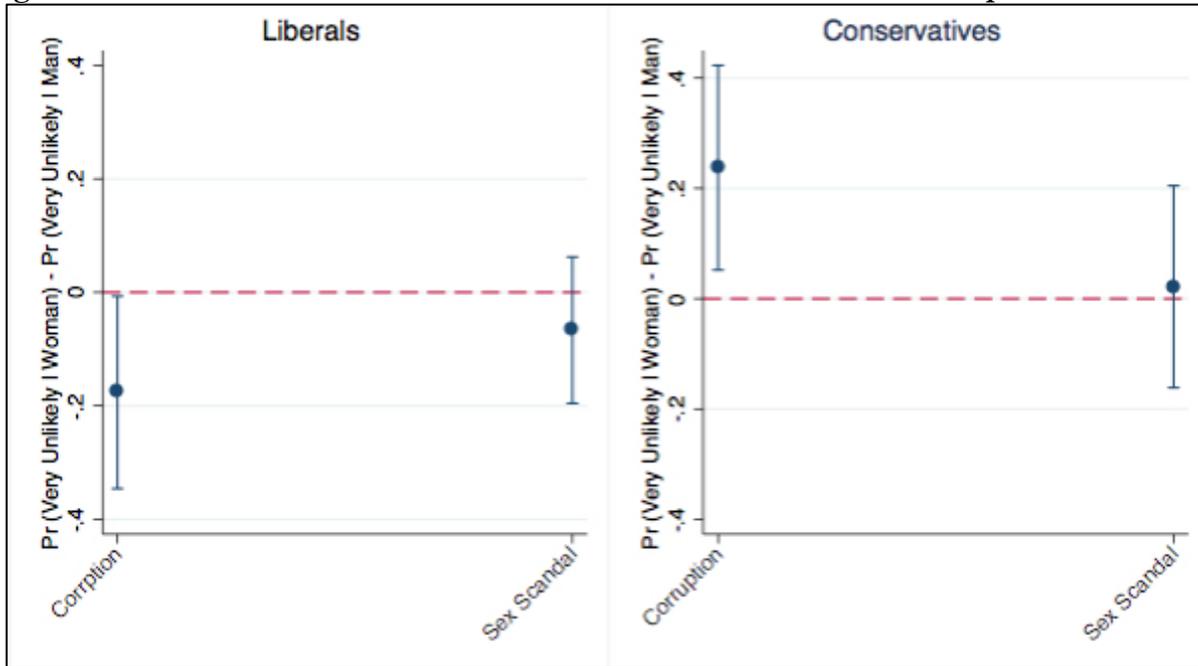
We do not find support for *H2*. Despite that conservatives are more likely to punish women than men for corruption scandals, conservatives are no more likely to punish women than men for sex scandals. Figure 3 plots the difference between the predicted probability that liberals and conservatives will punish male and female politicians for corruption and sex scandals. Positive values indicate that participants punish women more than men for each scandal. As the plots demonstrate, liberals are more likely to punish men than women for corruption. Conservatives, however, are more likely to punish women than men for corruption. Liberals and conservatives both punish men and women for sex scandals at similar rates, as evidenced by the statistically insignificant first difference.

Conclusion

Although extant research finds that voters care less about sex scandals than corruption (Barnes, et al. 2018; Doherty et al., 2011; 2014), about 60% of officeholders in the U.S. are voted out

of office after involvement in a major sex scandal. This suggests there may be more to the story. In this research note, we argue that political ideology shapes voters' reactions to political scandals, hypothesizing that political conservatives are less forgiving of sex scandals than liberals. We use a survey experiment to test our expectations.

The results support *H1*: Whereas all participants, regardless of ideology punish politicians for corruption, only the liberals and moderates were less willing to punish sex scandals than corruption. The most conservative participants, by contrast, indicated a willingness to punish sex scandals on par with corruption, especially for male candidates. Second, we did not find support for *H2,* that conservatives would be more willing to punish women for sex scandals than men. Still, interesting gender differences emerged. Specifically, conservatives punished women more harshly than men implicated in a corruption scandal.

With respect to Trump's moral transgressions, at first glance conservatives' responses may appear at odds with our findings that conservatives punish incumbents for sexual misconduct. Trump's conservative base does not seem fazed by his moral misgivings. The conservative Family Research Council even contended that conservative and evangelical voters had given Trump a "mulligan," or do-over for the 2006 affair.[4] This reaction by conservative voters is consistent with prior research showing that *co-partisans* are unlikely to suspect (Beaulieu 2014; Barnes and Beaulieu 2014), or to punish incumbents for illicit behavior (Anduzia et al., 2013; Solaz et al. 2018; Vonnahme 2014). Thus, it is not surprising that the most fervent supporters are unwilling to assign Trump blame.

So, if co-partisans are unlikely to punish elected officials for sex scandals, what do these findings mean for the fates of sexually deviant politicians? Our findings imply that it may be difficult to mobilize conservative voters to turnout when conservative incumbents are involved in sex

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[4] https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/23/politics/tony-perkins-trump-affairs-mulligan/index.html

scandals, and they may even actively punish the incumbent by simply staying home (Chong et al. 2014)—particularly when the scandal is proximate to elections (Vonnahme 2014). With respect to Trump, this suggests that allegations of sexual misconduct might dampen enthusiasm among conservatives who only preferred him to the Democratic alternative (and not to Republican alternatives). The 2018 Alabama special Senate election provides some face validity to this argument. Although Trump won in the presidential election by more than 20% in Alabama, when Roy Moore was implicated for sexual assault (albeit an allegation of illegal conduct, not a consensual sex scandal), "on Election Day, tens of thousands Republican voters across Alabama stayed home." [5] By contrast, when a liberal incumbent is involved in a sex scandal, it may be easier to rally conservative voters to defeat the incumbent by turning out in higher numbers and donating to the conservative challenger's campaign. In a swing district or a particularly tight race, if enough conservative voters abstain from voting for a conservative politician implicated in a moral transgression, then a sex scandal may prove sufficient to end their political career.

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[5] http://s.al.com/eFJbyab

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