Moroccan tertiary students’ civic engagement

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ABSTRACT

There is strong belief that democracy is sustained by civic and political participation (Sherrod, 2005; Sherrod and Baskir, 2007). This high importance of civic engagement explains the need for new ways to prompt greater involvement of our university students in their community. Another reason that accounts for this growing interest in active citizenship is the widespread concern about the decline in civic engagement and low participation by youth in the political process as well as the reluctance of these young people to show interest in their communities. Based on the findings of a huge body of research, it is not surprising that the enhancement of active citizenship has become recurrent in the public and academic discourse. This also explains why in the last decades, citizenship education has been at the front of both educational research and curricula designs. The mission of universities should transcend technical formation to include what is referred to as “third mission”. The latter underlines engagement in non-academic activities that target preparing students for responsible leadership and citizenship roles. The purpose of this study was to explore Moroccan university students’ different forms of engagement. To achieve this objective, a study was conducted using a quantitative research method. The sample involved 242 undergraduate English studies students from four Moroccan faculties.

Key words: Active citizenship, civic engagement, community engagement, political engagement, third mission.

INTRODUCTION

There is an extensive amount of academic literature on citizenship/civic education, which generally follows the traditional view of citizenship (Golubeva, 2018). Much less research has looked for various ways to understand citizenship from a larger perspective. In the traditional understanding, citizenship is regarded as a set of political rights and duties, with citizens taking part in the life of a nation state. In the same vein, it is equated with belonging to or identifying with a specific nation or country. However, in today’s globalized world this understanding seems to be too narrow. Citizenship as a concept has traditionally been researched by scholars from certain fields such as civics, education, political science, social sciences or social psychology. This has brought to surface a new perspective to discussions of citizenship by placing an emphasis on attitudes, values and the sense of belonging. These fields have precious knowledge to deliver, and it would be appropriate and efficient to develop a multidisciplinary approach so as to study the variables which influence citizens’ attitudes with the aim of achieving social, political and civic engagement. ‘Active citizenship’ is a convoluted and multidimensional notion, which can only be understood if diverse perspectives are adopted and insights are gained from various fields such as education, political science, psychology, sociology and other social science disciplines.

According to Golubeva et al. (2018), active citizenship can be defined as “participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and
democracy”. This definition seems to be exhaustive in nature and includes such key notions as participatory activities, attitude of mutual respect, valuing of non-violence, human rights and responsibilities, and democracy. Critical thinking is another component, which can be considered as crucial or even a primary condition for active citizenship. The development of critical thinking skills as a tool for understanding, and acting upon information is highly important in an era when social media is playing a decisive role in influencing and shaping public opinion and people’s political views and behavior. In other words, active citizenship education should embrace the enhancement of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding.

In summary, active citizenship – as the crucial outcome of active citizenship education (both formal and informal) – cannot be regarded as simply social, civic or political participation; it should incorporate an interior process of personal growth that involves the enhancement of democratic values; an upgrading of cultural diversity, human rights and responsibilities; attitudes of mutual respect and open-mindedness; openness to dialogue and to change; empathy; co-operation skills; knowledge of related issues; and critical thinking. Therefore, active citizenship education should be conceptualized as a lifelong learning process (Bagnall, 2010).

Given this paramount importance of civic engagement, this study tried to find out to what extent our university students are politically and socially involved. The study also delved into the different types of civic engagement and attempted to tackle the conspicuous decline in civic participation among Moroccan students at the tertiary level and suggested some recommendations to make such engagement vibrant. For this purpose, the study focused on the English student departments belonging to four faculties, namely Ben M’sik, Ain Chock, Mohmedia, and Abu Chouaib Doukali in El Jadida.

The importance of active citizenship

Active citizenship transcends the traditional understanding of citizenship as merely referring to a legal status. Active citizenship makes prominent dimension of citizens’ participation in community life, be it social or political activity (Peucker and Ceylan, 2017). Many recent studies have been concerned with the various ways in which citizens are involved in the social and political life of their societies (Albanesi et al., 2015; Barkas and Chrysssochou, 2017). Social sciences are, according to Eckman et al. (2016), the area of research that is the most common way to approach the subject. Also, the problem of decline in civic activity among the youth population is of special interest and has been a focal issue in a considerable body of research following Dalton (2002). For the United States, it has been contended by Robert Putnam that involvement in voluntary civil society has dropped, leading to a decrease in social capital and democratic citizenship. Similarly in Morocco, this concern has gained ground largely in debates and forums as a consequence of the recent decline in voter participation rates. This is shown by IDEA International (2017) - The voter turnout reached 85.34% in 1970; whereas in 2016 it did not exceed 42.98%.

A government alone cannot solve complex social problems. Instead, by involving citizens in the public services, by decentralizing power and by providing more opportunities for civic participation, hopefully an active citizenry will play a greater part in addressing issues that impact communities. In this respect, civic engagement empowers young people to play an active part in their communities’ development, while gaining the experience, knowledge, values and life skills required for success in careers, education and community life.

The young who are involved in service to their communities harvest precious, real-world skills that facilitate their employability in our era’s highly competitive labor markets, thus fighting the continuously high rates of the young’s unemployment. What makes also civic engagement distinctive is the focus on individual’s responsibility; this means responsibility for results and for their consequences. Connected with it is also the awareness that one’s activities and their results have an impact on others’ activities.

Community engagement also amplifies young people’s sense of citizenship and civic pride, and it bestows on them an increased sense of their efficaciousness and lowers their likelihood to take part in high-risk behaviors. By engaging young people and amplifying their sense of social responsibility, young people’s civic participation programs strengthen civil society. Beside the benefits to young people themselves, youth civic participation is a valuable resource for addressing a range of social challenges. As part of government, civil society, university and/or international initiatives, young people can improve literacy and public health, support relief teams after natural disasters, conduce to re-building war-ravaged communities, and help constructing understanding, social cohesion, and social capital. More importantly, political engagement sustains democracy and guarantees legitimacy of governing institutions. Over the past decade, there has been growing anxiety within political circles that people in Morocco and especially youth are becoming increasingly disengaged from the formal political life and from democratic institutions.

Definitions

Active citizenship can be perceived in a very large sense of the term “participation” and does not put emphasis merely on the political process. It ranges from cultural and political to environmental activities, on local, regional, national, and
international levels. It includes new patterns of active citizenship such as responsible consumption as well as the more traditional shapes of voting and adherence and membership in political parties and NGOs. Activities in which persons take part should back up the community and should not flout principles of human rights and the rule of law.

The definitions that limit civic engagement to signify community service put emphasis on voluntary work in the local community. However, definitions of civic engagement as collective action assumes that such engagement most often comes in the shape of collaboration or co-ordinate action to ameliorate conditions in the civil sphere. Other definitions focus on the political aspect of “civic”, and consequently equate civic engagement with “activities that are not only collective but that are specifically political (that is, that involve government action)” (Adler and Goggin 2005: 238).

According to Ehrlich (2000):

Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes. (p. vi)

When analyzing citizens’ levels of engagement, Putnam covered just about everything from reading newspapers, political participation, social networks and interpersonal trust to associational involvement. All of this was called civic engagement and the latter was very simplified that it tended to equate with a functioning democracy and market economy (Putnam et al., 1993).

**Types of public engagement**

According to Ekman (2012), the types of civic engagement in the contemporary democracies seem to be formally non-political or semi-political on the surface. In other words, it is about activities not directly aimed at influencing the people in power, but activities that entail involvement in society and current affairs. Generally, people discuss politics, consume political news in papers and on TV or on the Internet, or debate societal issues. People are aware of global problems, like environmental issues and the poverty or HIV situation all over the world. People have political knowledge and skills, and hold informed opinions concerning politics. Some people write to editors in local papers, debating local community affairs. Others express their opinions on-line. Moreover, people with such attention to societal affairs take more active part in society as well, in different ways. In summary, there are the manifest formal forms of “actual” political participation, such as voting or being a member of a political party, as well as more protest oriented or “new” forms of political participation, such as taking part in demonstrations, engaging in political protests, or boycotting and political consumption.

**Political engagement**

Political science research on citizens’ engagement in politics has traditionally put emphasis on electoral participation (Brady, 1999; Van Deth 2001). Political engagement has been defined as “activity influences government action either directly by affecting the designing or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba et al., 1995: 38). By this token, voting is the most important activity within this domain. Accordingly, voting was perceived as the primary way for a citizen to make his or her voice heard in the political system, and voting turnout has been described as the most widely used measure of citizen participation. Citizens vote in the general elections, so as to support some parties or candidates, or to make sure others will not gain too much influence. This type of participation is referred to as formal or conventional political participation. However, this type may also includes activities such as working for a candidate or party, trying to convince someone how to vote, or working (individually or collectively) to affect the making or carrying out of public policies by officials. Also, for “formal” collective forms of political behaviour, the typical example would be membership: in a political party, or any organisation with a distinct political agenda, e.g. human rights advocacy groups, peace organisation, or environmental groups.

**Civic engagement**

In contrast to political engagement, civic engagement is defined as organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others. It includes a broad range of work undertaken alone or with others to effect change. Active participation in society apparently encourages citizens to participate further, promote their knowledge of society and its issues, and renders them more tolerant of and linked to their fellow citizens. Social engagement is of paramount importance and if people are engaged in their communities many of the society’s ills would disappear. Proponents of civic participation argue that it would result in reducing crime rates (McCarthy et al., 2002; Rosenfeld et al., 2001), more efficient and responsive democratic governments (Putnam et al., 1993: 4; Ray, 2002), and an empowered and vibrant citizenry, including young people (Youniss et al., 2001). This type of engagement falls into two categories of participation. Firstly, there is
participation in voluntary associations. This engagement involves some kinds of voluntary activities in associations, namely membership of, participation in, giving money to, and voluntary work for associations of different concerns, such as consumer, cultural, environmental, humanitarian, and social issues. The second type is informal helping behavior; this type of engagement measures providing help for others and at the frequency with which participants say they do so. It differs from the activity of welfare associations in being individual and personal, rather than organized and institutionalized by a charitable association.

**Political engagement vs civic engagement**

The forms of political engagement differ in many ways: in the goals, the targets of activity, the institutions or venues in which they take place and the level of effort invested. As described earlier, political engagement is an activity which aims at influencing government policy or affecting the selection of public officials. Most of the time, this means participating in the electoral process, usually by voting. Civic engagement, on the other hand, refers to participation aimed at achieving a public good, but usually through direct hands-on work in cooperation with others, and rarely extends to electoral politics. The most noticeable example of this kind of participation is volunteer work in one's community.

People are disgusted with politics in a lot of countries and view democratic processes as messy, inefficient, unprincipled, and filled with conflict (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Voluntary associations offer an alternative that provides a conflict-free environment. “For young people eager to make a difference, but living in a culture that regards politics with distrust and disgust, service may present a welcome way of ‘doing something’ without the mess and conflict of politics” (Walker, 2002: 187). People can feel good about doing something to help their community even as they disengage from the political system itself. There is a premise proposed by social capital theorists that voluntary association membership increases generalized trust. People learn to trust the members of their associations, and this trust then gets generalized to the population as a whole. It is this generalized trust, according to social capital theorists, that ultimately makes the economy and the democratic system run smoothly.

However, it is in the political sphere where important policy decisions are made that will have a crucial effect on people, young and old. Volunteering to give food to the hungry people will help these hungry individuals in a town but will do nothing to solve larger problems of homelessness and poverty. In fact, these issues need government. But a careful review of the empirical research proves that many people lack the incentives to engage generally in civic life and specifically in politics. Universities should create a culture and define values that are community-oriented and incorporate these values into their mission statements, they will have a solid basis upon which objectives can be built, and processes can be set in motion. The universities’ employees must become familiar with the mission, so that they can further communicate it, and implement it in daily activities.

**Public voice and cognitive engagement**

A part from political and civic activities, there are two other types of public engagement. One is public voice- the various ways citizens express their views on public issues. There are different activities that go under this type, such as signing petitions, engaging in e-mail campaigns, starting or contributing to political blogs, writing letters to the editor, or contacting public officials. Notably, the expression of public voice is characteristic of both political and civic activists. The fourth type of activity is cognitive engagement which consists of paying attention to politics and public affairs. Cognitive engagement includes such activities as following the news in newspapers, talking about politics with friends and family, or simply being interested in public affairs. Although cognitive engagement is necessary it is not sufficient on its own for effective citizenship. Moreover, participation stimulates cognitive engagement, and it, in turn, prompts people to take further action, whether civic or political. For young people who are yet to develop habits of political participation, attention to politics and public affairs may be a significant indicator of possible future participation. In the same vein, this likelihood can be increased if higher education institutions take full responsibility in what is referred to as their “Third mission”.

**Third mission of higher education institutions (HEIs)**

While higher education main activities and concerns have conventionally focused on research and innovation, and teaching and training, a third area of significant importance emerged, namely the role tertiary education institutions play in community development (Goddard, 2007). It is now commonplace for annual evaluations of faculty members to include a review of community service beside a review of scholarship contributions and teaching performance.

In the body of literature, missions have often been presented as the foundation upon which institutions construct their strategic plans, and that they should be given priority before designing the strategy. The main purpose of any institution’s strategy is to differentiate the institution, in this way acquiring and maintaining a favorable position, compared to the competition (Gilligan and Wilson, 2009). To achieve this, higher education institutions can start by carefully designing their mission, in order to build a strong identity, and to convey a well
defined set of values to their publics (Paina and Bacila, 2004). This can be a good way to make the institution distinguished and able to establish a strong market position. The role that universities play within a society is an important one; therefore, mission statements increasingly emphasize their third dimension – service to society (Laredo, 2007; Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008; Montesinos et. al., 2008). The fundamental function of this third dimension of any mission refers to transferring knowledge from the academic environment to the whole society so as to back up teaching and research (Jongbloed et al., 2008), from workshops, professional development courses, to establishing partnerships between educational institutions and the business community (Montesinos et. al., 2008). Jongbloed et al. (2008: 307) view a university’s mission as a reflection of how the institution outlines its interest and contribution and interest in society’s issues. These issues should be included into the institution’s activities and applied to the relationships that the institution has developed with its partners, so that it can accomplish its role, and make a significant contribution to society (Alves et al., 2010).

Even the teaching and research activities are increasingly being asked to prove their contribution to the knowledge society (Jongbloed et al., 2008), to the economic and social development. Jongbloed et al. (2008) suggest that universities’ third mission refers both to the knowledge transfer, and to the significant role that higher education institutions play within the community. They also point out that the institution’s involvement in society must be done through teaching and research, and not independent of these activities. Therefore, the third mission should ideally give rise to a wide variety of principles and strategies for economic, political and social development (Jongbloed et al., 2008). In this respect, universities should create a culture and define values that are community-oriented and incorporate these values into their mission statements, they will have a solid foundation upon which objectives can be built, and processes can be set in motion. The universities’ employees must become familiar with the mission, so that they can further communicate it, and implement it in daily activities.

**METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS**

In the autumn of 2017, I had a series of small group discussions with my students of semesters two and three at the faculty of Letters and Humanities - Ain Chock; we used to talk about their communities, how they spend their time, and their views on citizenship and politics. It was found that most of the students who took part in the discussions were comfortable talking about their communities, their day-to-day activities, or their (mostly negative) opinions about politics and politicians. They also talked easily and openly about the sometimes episodic, sometimes regular volunteer work that some of them engaged in. When we turned the discussion to more explicitly political forms of public engagement, however, it was a very different story. Few were able to describe their own political lives. Most had not thought much about it. Asked if citizenship carried any responsibilities, the few students who answered spoke mostly of good conduct, looking after one’s family, and staying informed, and occasionally being a good neighbor. Surprisingly few mentioned voting.

Bearing in mind that the conclusions and findings that emerged from the foregone admittedly unrepresentative discussions are not solid enough, a quantitative study was conducted in the spring of 2018; total of 242 students, of semester six, aged between 18 and 35 responded to a questionnaire based on the some indicators .The participants belong to four different Moroccan faculties and all are students of the English department. The objective was to provide a more comprehensive assessment of the current state of public engagement among the students of the English departments in the foregone faculties. For this reason, a set of survey questions was used to cover interrelated dimensions of activity described earlier as political, civic, and expressive (public voice), in addition to cognitive engagement (Figure 1).

**Civic indicators**

**Active membership in a group or association:**

-Do you belong to any groups or associations, either locally or nationally?

**Volunteering for a non-election organization:**

- Have you ever spent time participating in any community service or volunteer activity?

Volunteer activity means actually working in some way to help others for no pay. Students sometimes volunteer for environmental organizations; civic or community organizations involved in health or social services—this could be an organization to help the poor, elderly, homeless, or a hospital; organizations involved with youth, children, or education. One of the objectives was to find out if these volunteering activities were done within an association or on individual basis.

**Political indicators**

**Regular voting**

-Did you vote in the last local and national elections?
-Do you intend to vote in the next elections?
-Have you ever volunteered for candidate or political
organizations: running for office?

**Indicators of public voice**

**Contacting officials**

- Have you ever contacted or visited a public official—at any level of government to ask for assistance or to express your opinion?
- Have you ever contacted printed or online media to express your opinion on an issue?

**Protesting**

- Have you ever taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration?
- Have you ever signed any e-mail petitions?
- Have you ever written petitions?

**Talking with family and friends about politics:**

- Do you talk about current events or things you have heard about in the news with your family and friends?

**Attention to the news media**

- Do you follow news on written and online platforms?

The responses to the questionnaire confirmed the conclusions obtained from the already mentioned discussions. In fact, few students see themselves in explicitly political terms and expressed their disengagement—both behaviorally and psychologically in the world of candidates, campaigns, public policy debates, and the like. This is not to say they are disconnected from the wider world, or are apathetic about the problems facing society. But if they are socially engaged at all, it is done through individual civic activity rather than through formal one. Concerning membership in social organisms, 21% said they are members of associations and non-governmental organizations; however only 13% said they have already done volunteering activities organized by social organisms. This percentage increases up to 38% as concerns helping others in an informal way, that is, on an individual basis. This shows that our students have the will and tendency to help those in need of help. However, in order to further maximize this will and tendency, associations should
approach these students and prompt them to work in a formal setting where they can learn the necessary skills and strategies of serving their communities.

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Concerning membership in social organisms, 21% said they are members of associations and non-governmental organizations (Figure 2); however only 13% said they have already done volunteering activities organized by social organisms. This percentage increases up to 38% as concerns helping others in an informal way (Figure 3), that is, on an individual basis. This shows that our students have the will and tendency to help those in need. However, in order to further maximize this will and tendency, associations should approach these students and prompt them to work in a formal setting where they can learn the necessary skills and strategies of serving their communities.

Similarly, the students are not so keen on manifest formal political behavior, but prefer to do it in a more latent way. In other words, students seem to be reluctant to be directly engaged in political activities, such as voting. As Figure 4 shows, only 8% said they voted in the last 2016 elections and 95% expressed their unwillingness to vote in the next elections (Figure 5). Not only is the number of the young voters low, but it emerged from the responses that this figure is unfortunately expected to plummet. This is to be partly accounted for by the participants’ mistrust of politicians and their failure to keep the promises they ambitiously voice during their electoral campaigns.

When asked whether the participants have already helped a candidate in her/his electoral campaign or not,
15% answered positively as shown in (Figure 6).

The score seems to be considerably high in comparison with the figure related to voting as shown in Figures 4 and 5. This is to be explained by the fact that some students do help candidates in their campaigns not out of political convictions, but because they are paid for the help they rendered to the candidates. This behavior is by no means surprising because some of the candidates themselves join political party at the last moment after coming from another political party for electoral reason, hoping to win a seat in the parliament. Thus, both the candidates and the young who help them in the election campaigns are driven by their own interest not by that of the common good.

However, the students showed more enthusiasm to be active latently via voice and cognitive engagement. In fact, the scores seem to be higher as compared with formal manifest political participation; the results proved that 20% of the participants have already signed petitions as showed in Figure 7, and 19% have already taken part in legal demonstrations as illustrated in Figure 8. This means that our students are engaged and do this by voicing their opinion via signing petitions and participating in legal demonstrations, but not necessarily via voting. These types of engagement come to the fore thanks to the use of social media platforms that host activists who post petitions for signature or summon and coordinate efforts to organize demonstrations.

In the same vein, a significant number of the participants (67%) have frequently taken part in political discussion (Figure 9) and 22% followed news written in media as shown in Figure 10. There is also a tendency among our tertiary students (19%) to contact online media to express their opinions about public affairs to make their voice heard (Figure 11). Thus, the participants expressed their voice and cognitive and engagement in a more palpable way when compared with their civic and political
engagement. This is to be accounted for by their intellectual level and their mastering of the information and communication technologies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While there are numerous ways to categorize the various kinds of citizen involvement in public life, this study focuses on four types of engagement, namely, civic, political, voice, and cognitive engagements.

The results have not shown a total disengagement of the participants; however it has emerged from the findings that the Moroccan students, at the university level, tend to be engaged in a more informal and latent way. The results showed also that Moroccan University students are more cognitively engaged and tend to voice their engagement via signing petitions, contacting written or online media platforms, talking about politics, or participating in demonstrations. However, the participants seem to be less politically active; especially when it comes to turning out, joining political parties, or contacting political officials. This political reluctance and passiveness at the hand of our students is to be explained by government members' failure to keep their promises voiced prior to elections, unethical conflicts among political parties, their willingness to do anything to win the elections, dissatisfaction with the poor achievement of the government, absence of transparency in elections, and a regime characterized by the centrality of power. All these factors have led to disillusionment with politics and government and eroded youth's trust in the honesty, credibility and integrity of political leaders.

However, this study showed that there is no room for talking about political apathy. All what we have to do is broaden our scope and perception of political and civic participation. In fact, while the young abstain from formal mainstream politics, they remain interested in politics and engage differently. More new and recent forms of engagement appeared- They take part in marches, organize sit-ins, sign petitions and post their opinions and ideas in social platforms.

Basically, as the saying goes `charity begins at home'. This means that individuals should be exposed to socializing experiences early in life, which will enable them to acquire the required skills and attitudes for active citizenship. This exposure will increase their likelihood to be engaged active citizens. This includes being brought up by parents who have the habit of volunteering and hearing frequent political discussions with family members. Both of these contribute to more engagement through the benefits young people gain by having good role models in their lives. To put it in other terms, students who had frequent household political discussions while young and who grew up in homes where someone volunteered are more likely to be involved in social and political activities, and be cognitively engaged than those who grew up without these experiences.

Next comes education. The latter is a real motivator that works both directly and indirectly on engagement. As a result, schools are expected to facilitate and include community service or volunteer work. In addition, the curriculum should include explicit civics and government content, as well as opportunities and incentives to pay attention to public affairs.

Open discussions via great debaters and public speaking contests should also be a regular part of the classroom experience in high schools. Concerning higher education, beside teaching and research, universities should embark on a ‘third mission’ that refers to the knowledge transfer from the academic environment to the whole society. High education institutes should be a venue of reflection of how these institutions outline their interest and contribution and interest in society’s issues. These issues should be incorporated into the high institution’s activities and applied to the relationships that the institution has developed with its partners, so that it can fulfill its role, and make a significant contribution to society. Students who study in such universities develop “social capital” by getting to know people through groups or organizations and are provided with more opportunities to meet others. By doing so, students increase their trust in others and develop habits of reciprocity. Absolutely, universities which adopt ‘Third mission’ strategies for economic, political and social development will yield society that is abundant with social capital; a society whose citizens are not motivated merely by selfish concerns and their vested interest but are aware of and concerned about the needs of others.

Our universities face a crisis of public confidence and the sector needs to find new ways of working together and with their broader society if they are to fulfill their objectives and support the survival of the country’s higher education system. ‘Third mission’ programs and strategies are one way among others to sort out this lack of public confidence. However, these programs cannot be implemented without the involvement of civil society in education as it supports, aid effectiveness and makes policy processes more democratic. This study's argument, in this respect, is that our universities should open up channels of communication and build partnerships with social and non-affiliated political associations to equip our students with the necessary skills of civic and political engagement.

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