



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Indigenous Representational Choices: Results from a Large Qualitative Survey on Māori Electoral Roll Choice

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## Abstract

Different participatory mechanisms for the representation of Indigenous peoples have been proposed across states. Since their creation in 1867, the Māori electorates in the national Parliament have led to dedicated representation for Māori (Indigenous peoples of New Zealand). However, only half of Māori choose to vote on the Māori roll, the remainder choosing to vote on the General roll, illustrating that roll choice is not based simply on group representation. This survey aimed to ask Māori ( $N = 1,958$ ) in their own words why they made their roll choice. Through a deductive codebook thematic analysis, a range of codes were constructed around the reasoning behind roll choice. Māori on the Māori roll made their choice because they valued Māori representation; as an expression of their identity; to support the electorates; as a strategic choice; or they had been influenced by others or through education. Those on the General roll felt their roll was the default or a more familiar option; the Māori roll had less of an impact; it was a strategic choice, or they appreciated greater candidate variety; or they valued the smaller geographic electorate size. Some felt Māori no longer needed separate representation or felt less connected to their identity as Māori. The results have implications for both Māori and Indigenous representation through dedicated representational mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Indigenous; Māori; Māori electorates; representation; voter enrolment

Indigenous peoples around the world are asserting their rights to representation in colonially established bodies (Geddis, 2022). Internationally, using reserved seats to represent a specific group—whether Indigenous people, an ethnic group, a religion, or gender—has been suggested as a method to increase a marginalized group's representation (Bird, 2014; Lončar, 2015; Zuber, 2015). However, past work has argued Indigenous representation is different. Indigenous people, rather than simply being marginalized ethnic minorities, hold a different relationship with the

state including some (often limited) recognition of sovereignty and the experience of colonization by the majority group in society (Williams & Schertzer, 2019). Furthermore, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) acknowledges the explicit rights of Indigenous peoples to participate fully in national politics: reserved seats may be a useful mechanism to fulfil this right (Krook & O'Brien, 2010; Xanthaki & O'Sullivan, 2009). Aotearoa New Zealand is unique in that it has had reserved Māori (the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand) electorates since 1867 (Atkinson, 2003). Following changes to the electoral system in 1993, Māori have been able to choose between the Māori roll or General roll through the 5-yearly Māori Electoral Option. The change of electoral system also included a change to how the electorates were calculated and determined: an increase in the proportion of Māori on the Māori roll usually means an increase in the number of Māori seats, and a near-guaranteed increase in Māori representation (Atkinson, 2003; Geddis, 2006). Indeed, if everyone of Māori descent was on the Māori roll, there would be 13 Māori electorates, yet there are only 7 (Barnett & Sporle, 2019). An increase in Māori electorates means more dedicated representatives, and probably more political power: so why do Māori make their electoral roll choices? And what are their reasons for not opting for the roll that would guarantee an increase in the power of their Indigenous group?

The case of the Māori electorates illustrates how representation and choice can be complicated for Indigenous peoples and provides a case study to explore participatory mechanisms in the representation of Indigenous groups. Māori roll choice can be an illustration of how identity, representation, and sovereignty interact, and how legal and policy choices around representational mechanisms can shape their impact and meaning over time. It has been suggested that the Māori roll is an expression of Māori identity, of sovereignty, and important to Māori rights and increased representation (Independent Electoral Review, 2023a; Royal Commission, 1986; Sullivan, 2003; Waitangi Tribunal, 1994). Alternatively, some have argued that the theoretical underpinnings of the modern New Zealand state, enrolment, and voting are not consistent with Te Ao Māori (Māori world/worldview) or self-determination (*rangatiratanga*) (Iorns Magallanes, 2005; Xanthaki & O'Sullivan, 2009). This paper explores these reasons using a qualitative survey of a diverse range of Māori ( $N = 1,968$ ). The aim was for Māori to describe *in their own words* why they made their roll choice. Although these results are specific to the New Zealand context, they also speak to a range of features important to Indigenous politics such as representation, identity, and sovereignty. The paper proceeds with an introduction to the Māori Electoral Roll, including past literature on electoral roll choices, before moving to the aims and positionality of the work.

## The Māori Electoral Roll

Māori, the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, settled in Aotearoa New Zealand from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Anderson, 2015). Political life before contact with Europeans followed a series of *tikanga* (values, laws) and primarily took place in *hapū* (kin-based groupings; Anderson, 2015). Colonization by the British largely occurred in the 18th century, where the British used a variety of disruptive strategies to acquire Māori land (Anderson et al., 2014). Some Northern Māori chiefs declared

Western-style sovereignty over New Zealand in 1835, before many Māori chiefs signed a Treaty with the British in 1840 (Hayward, 2018). Te Tiriti o Waitangi (used to refer to the te reo Māori [Māori language] version)/The Treaty of Waitangi (the English language version) is a crucial constitutional document. Debates over its translation and interpretation continue, although the Māori language version is viewed as the authoritative text (Hayward, 2018). Mainstream contestation has related to Article 1 and the extent to which Māori ceded sovereignty (the Treaty) versus the right for the British to have governance (te Tiriti). In Article 2, te Tiriti guarantees “tino rangatiratanga” which has been translated as independence and control over lands and other things important to Māori (Hayward, 2018). Finally, Article 3, of both versions guarantees equal rights/equity for Māori and non-Māori (Hayward, 2018). Te Tiriti remains deeply important to many. It is seen as a foundation for politics in Aotearoa, and used as a basis for the continuation of the Māori electorates (Mutu, 2018).

However, te Tiriti/the Treaty was cast aside for many decades, and events led the British to impose a Westminster-style parliament to NZ from 1851 (Atkinson, 2003). Four Māori electorates “stumbled into being” (Ward, 1995) in 1867, at a time when only British male subjects aged over 21 who owned or leased land of a certain value could vote (Atkinson, 2003; Royal Commission, 1986). It became apparent that Māori land would not be converted into individual title as the colonizers wanted, and thus Māori taxpayers were not being represented in Parliament (Walker, 2004; Wilson, 2009). The four electorates, intended to be temporary, enfranchised all Māori men (except so-called “rebels against the Crown”; Waitangi Tribunal, 1994, p. 5), aged 21+, of at least 50% Māori blood quantum (Atkinson, 2003; Wilson, 2009). It is clear that these four electorates were “tokenistic”: the Māori population was around 56,000 at the time for the four electorates, while the European population of 171,000 was represented by 72 electorates (Royal Commission, 1986; Walker, 2004).

Over the proceeding decades, glaring disparities have persisted between the Māori and “European” (later “General”) rolls, described as a “careless, if not convenient, neglect” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 172) of the Māori electorates. Inequities included the lack of a secret ballot until 1937 (introduced in 1890 for the General roll), fewer polling booths, huge and hard-to-manage electorate sizes, and being fixed at four electorates until 1993, despite Māori population growth (Waitangi Tribunal, 1994; Wilson, 2009). Disparities continue, including that the Māori electorates are not entrenched in the same way the General electorates are, and could potentially be abolished by a simple majority of Parliament (Wilson, 2009). With this long history of inequities in the voting system, many Māori have turned away from enrolment and voting, or seek rangatiratanga (self-determination, sovereignty) through different forms of participation, in the face of top-down attempts at inclusion (Bargh, 2013; Greaves & Hayward, 2020; Independent Electoral Review, 2023a; Waitangi Tribunal, 1994).

One controversial inequity has been limited opportunity for Māori to move between electoral rolls. Up until 2023, Māori were only able to choose rolls on initial enrolment and then every 5 years during the 4-month Māori Electoral Option (Electoral Commission, 2018). Data for the current paper were collected before the law changed. However, from 2023, Māori have been able to choose between rolls

whenever they want, except for a period of 3 months before a general election, local elections, or after a by-election is formally called by the Speaker (“Electoral (Māori Electoral Option) Legislation Act 2022,” 2022). The reasons for these remaining restrictions have been suspicions over Māori gaming the system in some way or having an extra vote or influence by virtue of this roll choice. The main suspicion is that this extra choice could mean Māori use the ability to change rolls to move to a closer race and therefore sway the final result or switch before a by-election and gain an ‘extra’ vote (Independent Electoral Review, 2023b). While politicians and commentators have raised strategic switching as a possibility, it is unclear whether this would occur in reality (Independent Electoral Review, 2023a). The current paper allows for an exploration of strategic roll choice, through gaining an understanding of whether and why strategic roll choice may occur.

Past work has identified several quantitative predictors of choosing one roll over another (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2007; Greaves *et al.*, 2017, 2023). These papers all used survey data with a fixed, ‘tick-box’ format, and sought to explore the relationship between being on the Māori roll (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2007; Greaves *et al.*, 2017) or support for the Māori roll (Greaves & Hayward, 2020) and demographic variables (such as gender, education, other ethnic identities, and age) or variables relating to political views or Māori cultural identity. While this work has shown *who* is more likely to be on the Māori roll—those who do not additionally identify as Pākehā (European descent), those who have higher political efficacy, are more critical of their MP, have a stronger and more positive cultural identity, and are more pro-Treaty (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2007; Greaves *et al.*, 2017)—it provides less insight into *why* they made the choice.

Two works have gone into more depth. Firstly, a randomly-sampled survey of 118 Māori on the General roll showed that those on the General roll endorsed the statements that: “There is more choice of candidates on the General roll” and “Māori don’t all think the same and it’s good to have Māori on both electoral rolls” (Bargh, 2020). The survey asked what would make participants move to the Māori roll and 57% agreed they would if it supported more Māori in Parliament, 55% would if the electorates were smaller and the MPs could therefore offer “better” representation, and 52.6% would change if there was more variety in candidates. These results suggest lack of access to knowledge plays a part in roll choice, as more Māori moving to the Māori roll *would support* more Māori in Parliament. Secondly, a master’s thesis explored qualitatively what young Māori ( $n = 6$ ) thought of the Māori electoral roll (Kearney-Parata, 2021). The work found that participants had little access to information or education about the Māori roll, resulting in important knowledge gaps, and that participants had also been party to misinformation about roll choice, such as who had the roll choice or how to change rolls. Participants also perceived that the electorate size (there are now seven to cover the whole country) and location, the will to increase Māori representation, and feelings/connection were important factors in roll choice. In summary, while past work has been useful to explore the correlates of choice, or started to go into depth around decision-making, this paper will expand on the literature by asking a diverse variety of Māori why they made their roll choice.

The existing work hints at two other important points in roll choice. First, forces of assimilation mean that many descendants of Indigenous peoples do not actively

identify with their Indigenous lineage (Greaves, Lindsay Latimer, et al., 2023). Māori identity for electoral roll purposes is intentionally broad: to join the Māori roll one has to be “a person of the Maori race of New Zealand; and includes any descendant of such a person” (Electoral Act, 1993, s3). Identifying as Māori descent on the roll is by choice, with no proof required: this is (in part) due to the common experience of severed knowledge. As many as one fifth of those with Māori descent do not know their genealogical (whakapapa) ties such as to Iwi (tribe/s or nation/s) (Greaves, Lindsay Latimer, et al., 2023). Indeed, identity likely matters for roll choice: those who do not identify ethnically as Māori tend to be less likely to opt for the roll, as are those who identify less with different scales of Māori identity relating to pride in their identity, belief in the continued importance of historical injustice, or connection to other Māori, their land or ancestors (Greaves et al., 2023; Greaves et al., 2017). Second, there may be ‘rational choice’ involved, that is, pragmatic reasons for roll choice (Blais, 2000). Māori are politically diverse and may want a broader array of candidate choice (Greaves et al., 2018; MacDonald, 2016; Sheed & MacDonald, 2017). Not all parties stand candidates in the Māori electorates; Māori who want to vote for right-wing candidates may therefore choose the General roll. In summary, existing literature suggests an array of reasons why Māori may choose a roll, some based on complex histories, while other reasons may be less considered.

### Aims and Positionality

As this is an Indigenous-led project that uses reflexive thematic analysis, it is important to state the aims and positionality of the work (Walter & Suina, 2019). Our aims are twofold: (1) to contribute to the academic literature in the area; and (2) to give voice to Māori views in this area, contributing to policy and community developments that continue to seek sovereignty, or at least, greater participation and partnership in government. As discussed, the project developed from the need for more research on the Māori roll. However, the project was also driven by the experiences of the lead author when trying (but failing) to move from the General roll to the Māori roll during a Māori electoral option window. The feelings of disenfranchisement started a decade-long journey in research, leading to this paper. We collected data on roll choice from a diverse group of Māori using an online survey, asking them to express their roll choice *in their own* words (i.e., qualitative data). The answers on roll choice were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis does not seek objectivity, rather, it asks researchers to critically examine their biases, positionality, epistemologies, and worldviews to understand how they form codes. The research team for the data coding consisted of one senior Māori research project lead and two Māori research assistants who created the coding scheme and classified the data, the group was aided by a research assistant of white, North American settler descent. Our academic backgrounds include political studies, psychology, sociology, and Indigenous studies; the results were also interpreted with the aid of other Māori advisors and researchers. The work aimed to take a strengths-based lens to interpreting the data, and focused on the structural drivers of inequity in participation (Walter & Andersen, 2013). The paper now moves to a description of the survey methods, before discussing the results, then

moving to a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the analysis and concluding.

## Method

Survey questions were based on past literature and designed with the advice of a six-person advisory group (five Māori, one Pākehā), from a variety of professional backgrounds, including policy, research, and working with Māori communities. Before the survey was launched, it was tested with 17 pilot participants, who provided feedback which was incorporated into the survey to make it more understandable and user-friendly. The survey was conducted online (hosted through Jotform), with the brand, website, and recruitment materials designed by a Māori design firm: Ariki Creative. Participants were able to choose between English and te reo Māori throughout. The survey was translated by a professional translator, and checked by an additional professional translator, and two te reo speakers. We have translated and analyzed te reo Māori answers in the results.

The survey had three components that participants could choose to complete: the first asked about roll choice; the second component asked about past roll choices, voter preferences, political attitudes, and identity; the third was a six-question multiple choice quiz to test electoral roll knowledge, and explore where participants got their roll information from and would like to in future (a case study of the methods is published elsewhere; Greaves & Waymouth, 2024). The data used in this paper were drawn from the first component of the survey, which asked multiple branching questions: first, whether a participant was enrolled to vote; then which roll they were on. If they were too young to enroll (i.e., aged 16) or not enrolled, they were asked which roll they *would* choose. After participants selected the Māori roll or General roll, they were asked to type in why, in their own words. The survey then asked for demographics including age, gender, ethnicity, education, employment, and profession. Participants could enter a prize draw for vouchers (NZ\$5,000 total prize pool). The research was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (reference number UAHPEC22714).

The aim of the survey was to gain a diverse range of responses, therefore the work relied on a convenience sample. This choice was made in the context of traditional Western survey methods often not meeting the needs of Māori, alongside declining response rates to postal surveys, meaning that a representative survey would likely be costly and potentially not garner a reasonable sample size (Greaves *et al.*, 2023; Kukutai & Cormack, 2018). The population of interest was those aged 16 or older (of or approaching enrolment age), of Māori descent (the basis for having roll choice). Participants were recruited through a range of methods including emails and direct messages, paid Facebook and Instagram advertising, social media posts, follow requests, printed flyers and posters, university online learning platform announcements, and other snowball sampling. The university media team issued a press release, and the research leader used their media networks to promote the survey, leading to 8 interviews and columns. Past work has identified that social media is an active space for Māori political participation and connection (O'Carroll, 2013; Waitoa *et al.*, 2015), the choice to use social media advertisements followed this reasoning. These paid advertisements also allowed for targeting based on gender

and age: it became clear that women and older people were participating at higher rates, so targeted advertisements were used to encourage men and younger people to participate.

The survey data collection was open from the 20<sup>th</sup> of July to the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2022. In 2021 it was announced that central government had made changes to the process for creating Māori wards in local government, this meant that councils could create Māori wards without needing to go through a controversial referendum process, which had meant many Māori wards were disestablished (Beehive.govt.nz, 2021). In the 2022 local body elections, if Māori wards had been established in one's local area, then a voter on the Māori roll had to vote in the Māori wards instead. It is not clear what effect this law change will have had on electoral roll choice, and at the time of the local elections, Māori were not able to change rolls. Shortly after our data collection (in November 2022), it was announced that Māori would be able to change rolls more often, that is, any time except for the three months before a local or general election, or if a by-election had been formally called by the Speaker of the House ("Electoral (Māori Electoral Option) Legislation Act 2022,"). These changes came into force in April 2023, allowing a window for changing rolls before the October general election. However, challenges remain: the three month close out window may be exactly when people are most likely to want to change, as they are engaged with electoral politics at this time (Independent Electoral Review, 2023a). Future work could explore who changes rolls and when, and the number of shifts over time, but this was not possible with the current data. For the purposes of the current project, these law changes are worth noting as a limitation.

### Sample Details

The initial sample consisted of 2,052 people; however, some incomplete cases were removed including those who: did not identify Māori descent; were under 16 years of age; had duplicate responses; had a high degree of missing data (including on the roll choice question); or gave mischievous answers, leaving 1,958 participants. The sample consisted of 1,183 women/wāhine (60.5%), 725 men/tāne (47.1%), 32 who identified as gender diverse or takatāpui (gender and sexuality diversity); 4 gave an un-codeable answer, 11 did not wish to answer. The youngest participant was 16, the oldest 88 ( $M = 40.9$ ,  $SD = 16.4$ ). People only qualified for the survey if they were of Māori descent (98.2%,  $n = 1,922$ ) or did not know (1.8%;  $n = 36$ ). Ethnicity was presented using the Census question where participants could tick multiple boxes: 97.3% were Māori ( $n = 1,906$ ), 58.1% Pākehā/NZ European ( $n = 1,138$ ), 6.4% Pasifika ( $n = 125$ ), 1.7% Asian ( $n = 34$ ), and 1.1% Middle Eastern, Latin American, or African ( $n = 21$ ); 0.7% typed in that they were a "New Zealander" ( $n = 13$ ).

Note, the sample overrepresented those with higher levels of education and in professional occupations. We asked participants to tick or enter their highest qualification: 6.3% ( $n=122$ ) had no qualification, 28.4% secondary/high school ( $n = 553$ ), 18.7% a trade certificate or pre-university diploma ( $n = 365$ ), 23.5% tertiary/university ( $n = 459$ ), and 22.4% postgraduate level ( $n = 437$ ). 73.1% were in paid employment of some kind ( $n = 1,432$ ), while 7.9% were retired ( $n = 154$ ), 5.3% caregivers ( $n = 104$ ), 6.7% receiving welfare/benefits ( $n = 131$ ), and 23.2% current students ( $n = 455$ ; participants could select multiple categories). Participants

described their occupation, which we coded according to the International Labour Organization's (2008) standard, of those in employment who answered: 0.3% were in the armed forces ( $n = 3$ ), 11.0% managers ( $n = 117$ ), 60.3% professionals ( $n = 634$ ), 6.5% technicians/associate professionals ( $n = 69$ ), 4.2% clerical support ( $n = 45$ ), 6.6% services and sales ( $n = 70$ ), 0.9% skilled agricultural/forestry/fishery ( $n = 10$ ), 4.8% craft and related trade workers, ( $n = 51$ ), 3.1% plant and machine operators ( $n = 33$ ), and 1.2% elementary occupations ( $n = 13$ ). The next stage of the project seeks to remedy these sample biases by including roll choice questions in the representative national election study, albeit with a smaller sample.

Questions branched off an item which asked participants if they were enrolled to vote, 94.6% were enrolled ( $n = 1,853$ ), 2.0% were not enrolled ( $n = 39$ ), 2.3% did not know ( $n = 45$ ), and 1.1% did not answer ( $n = 21$ ). Those who were enrolled to vote were then asked which roll they were on: 61.9% selected the Māori roll ( $n = 1,150$ ), 36.7% the General roll ( $n = 682$ ), and 1.3% did not know ( $n = 25$ ). Of those not enrolled to vote ( $n = 95$ ) or too young to enroll ( $n = 6$ ), 53.5% would choose the Māori roll, 13.9% the General roll, and 32.7% did not know. The analyses comprise those who provided an answer as to why they would choose a roll: 1,130 answers for the Māori roll and 634 for the General roll. The survey overrepresents those who chose the Māori roll (52% were on the Māori roll after the 2018 Māori Electoral Option; Electoral Commission, 2018), a group that past work has underrecruited (Greaves & Waymouth, 2024).

### **Data Coding**

The roll choice question led to qualitative data that needed to be coded for analysis. This progressed through two steps: (1) creating a codebook, and (2) coding the data. The codebook was created through a thematic analysis approach with reflexive components (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Codebook thematic analysis is defined as a process rather than a standalone method, in which researchers develop a set of codes prior to coding the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The codebook provides researchers with a starting point and a schema to follow. Reflexive thematic analysis is a process where coder(s) interact with the data and develop themes as they progress through the sample and revisit codes throughout theme development and writing (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

To create the codes, one researcher was assigned the General roll answers, another the Māori roll answers. The researchers created multiple-level codebooks with parent and lower-level child codes, which were reviewed and refined by the rest of the team across four versions of the codebook. These codebooks were generally data-driven, and sought to group similar responses, rather than based on the (scant) academic literature. There were multiple drafts and iterations of the codebooks over the course of several months of progression. Finally, the results were coded according to the final version of the codebook; the research assistants swapped rolls and coded the data. Agreement between coders at the lower-level child codes for the General roll was between 86.6% and 100% (an average of 94.5%) and between 77.6% and 99.8% for the Māori roll child codes ( $M = 93.6$ ). Response length ranged from 1 to 478 words (20 answers were over 100 words) with a mean length of 18 words for the Māori roll and 23.2 words for the General roll. Given variation in length and



depth, responses could be represented by more than one code. Around half of responses contained one child code (52.4% of the Māori roll answers, 56.1% General roll), but some contained two (26.4% Māori roll, 34.8% General roll), three (9.3% Māori, 6.4% General), or four to seven child codes (3.4% Māori, 2.3% General). We present representative quotes in the results which have been edited for spelling and punctuation errors, but not grammar.

## Results

### *Māori on the Māori Roll*

Through the coding process described above, five parent codes were created, plus an ‘other’ category (see Table 1).

#### *The Māori Roll Represents Māori People, Culture, Values, and Self-Determination*

Participants expressed that they chose the Māori roll to represent various elements of being Māori, Te Ao Māori, and Māori communities. The code was present 588 times (or 52.0% of the reasons given for being on the Māori roll) and was categorized through four child codes. First, many explicitly referenced that the Māori roll was a *voice for Māori, for Māori interests, and a Māori worldview* ( $n = 272$ ) to exercise a distinctly Māori political voice, either individually or collectively, to “speak” for their people: “Because I feel it is important for Māori and any indigenous voice to be heard :);” “I identify as Māori, we are tangata whenua [people of the land, Indigenous] and we deserve own voice, which is not subsumed into mainstream. Voting on the Māori roll helps to protect that voice.”; “Māori electorates, Māori seats, Māori voice”. Others chose the Māori roll as they felt the representatives take a Te Ao Māori perspective, or center what they viewed as Māori interests: “Māori values and view at decision making table”; “I value Te Ao Māori and want Māori values, perspectives and ways of being in political representation”; “Because I wanted to make my vote count as Māori, for people who are going for seats that represent Māori aspirations”.

Some chose the roll as *support for Māori representatives and representation* ( $n = 107$ ), these participants briefly referenced the importance of “representation.” Examples included: “Because I want more Māori representation in our country”; “Guaranteed seats for Māori representation”; and “Because I think independent Māori representation is important.” Many of these answers did not explicitly refer to technicalities such as the number of seats increasing with the proportion of Māori on the roll, that features in a later code (“To tautoko (support) the Māori electorates”); these answers were less specific. Some referenced that this representation was not perfect, but it was a good stopgap measure: “We need more Māori representation in our government until we create our own. For now, it’s what we have so need more to get in and vote for Māori to get our people in that whare [house]”. Similarly, some chose the Māori roll because they felt *Māori representatives better reflect me* ( $n = 109$ ), referring to their shared descent, experience, or culture. Some participants highlighted that non-Māori politicians would have difficulty understanding and supporting Māori-specific issues. One participant stated: “because I feel I can have a vote on issues that Māori face that

**Table 1.** An overview of the parent and child codes for the Māori roll and their representation in the data

Parent code	Child code	<i>n</i>	%
The Māori roll represents Māori people, culture, values, and self-determination			
	A voice for Māori, for Māori interests, and a Māori worldview	292	
	Support for Māori representatives and representation	286	
	Māori representatives better reflect me	111	
	As embodying Māori concepts of sovereignty and self-determination	85	
	<i>Total number of participants expressing code</i>	588	52.0
“He Māori ahau”: To express their identity as Māori			
	I am Māori	235	
	I am proud to be Māori	72	
	Recognition of tūpuna (ancestors) and whakapapa (genealogy)	87	
	As a political acknowledgement of a Māori identity	105	
	<i>Total</i>	420	37.2
To tautoko (support) the Māori electorates			
	To increase the Māori roll or number of Māori electorates	113	
	To protect the Māori roll or number of Māori electorates	99	
	I have the right to choose a roll	58	
	<i>Total</i>	255	22.6
“Because I wanted to vote for . . .”: A strategic choice or preference			
	Strategic choice	179	
	Lives away from Iwi rohe, tūrangawaewae (their peoples’ territory)	5	
	<i>Total</i>	182	16.1
“My Nan told me to”: Learning, influential relationships, and administration			
	Influenced by others	66	
	Had an opportunity to learn about the Māori roll	15	
	Did not have an opportunity to learn about the Māori roll	41	
	Automatically enrolled on the Māori roll	6	
	Has always been on the Māori roll	13	
	<i>Total</i>	126	11.2
Other			
	It is something that I feel	19	
	Wants to change rolls	14	
	Other	26	
	<i>Total</i>	57	5.0

cannot be understood by non-Māori”, and another said: “because I think Māori understand Māori needs more adequately.”

Others chose the roll *as embodying Māori concepts of sovereignty and self-determination* ( $n = 85$ ). Many of the terms they used do not have English language equivalents but draw on themes of governance, authority, self-determination, and sovereignty. These included *mana motuhake* (self-determination, autonomy), *tino rangatiranga* (absolute sovereignty, control, power), *mana whenua* (those with local territorial rights), and *tūrangawaewae* (one’s place to stand/where they have rights of belonging). Examples included: “because I am *tangata whenua*. This allows me to assert my *mana motuhake* and *tino rangatiratanga* absolutely”; “continue in the *whānau* tradition and exercise our *mana motuhake* as *takata whenua* [Indigenous]”; “because I think it’s important to have as many Māori on the Māori roll to assert our *Rangatiratanga*”, and: “I believe being on the Māori roll helps shape the future for all Māori, representation, *Tino rangatiratanga*, *tūrangawaewae*”.

#### *“He Māori ahau”: To Express their Identity as Māori*

This code ( $n = 420$ ; 37.2%) was for responses that referenced a relationship between a participant’s own identity as Māori and their enrolment on the Māori roll. The child code *I am Māori* ( $n = 235$ ) was used when participants simply stated they were Māori. The second child code *proud to be Māori* ( $n = 72$ ) covered when participants stated pride in their identity: “because I am Māori and anything Māori, I am PRO”; “because I am proud of my heritage, and I believe we should be able to vote for our own Māori members”. *Recognition of tūpuna (ancestors) and whakapapa* ( $n = 87$ ) was when participants mentioned their *whakapapa* (lineage, descent) and/or *tūpuna* as to why they are on the Māori roll, examples included: “because I am Māori and I believe my *tūpuna* would want me to be on the Māori roll as they fought for this in the NZ wars and the world wars for my equal citizenship”; “My *tūpuna* chose ‘ME’ ‘I AM THEIR DNA’”; and “To be able to represent my *whakapapa* and ancestors whilst being engaged in our democracy.” Lastly, *as a political acknowledgement of a Māori identity* ( $n = 105$ ) was where participants stated being on the Māori roll was an expression of a political sense of Māori identity, examples included: “Because it affirms my place in Aotearoa as *Tangata Whenua*”; and “It is part of my identity, allows me to vote for people I believe will have a positive impact on societal changes”.

#### *To Tautoko (Support) the Māori Electorates*

*To tautoko (support) the Māori electorates* ( $n = 255$ ; 22.6%) represented those who expressed the need to be on the roll to ensure it continues, to increase the number of electorates, or expressed support for their own right to choose. This was distinct from the ‘*support for Māori representatives and representation*’ theme above as participants referenced utilizing the system to increase Māori representation, such as through the mechanism that allows the number of electorates to increase. Some wanted *to increase the Māori roll or number of Māori electorates* ( $n = 113$ ). This code was used when participants specifically stated a desire to increase the number of voters on the Māori roll and/or the number of Māori electorates in Parliament. Reasons included: “because I wanted to increase the number of Māori seats”;

“because I wanted to optimize the number of Māori seats in Parliament, we need MPs who are explicitly there to represent Māori interests”; “because it is better for Māori to do so. The more Māori on the Māori roll, the more seats. The more seats, the more say parliament”. Similarly, others wanted to *protect the Māori roll or number of Māori electorates* ( $n = 99$ ). These participants had a similar view to those who wanted to increase the roll, but positioned their reasoning around the idea that the roll or electorates could be taken away if Māori do not support them: “Use it or lose it. I see it as a way of ensuring Māori representation”; “because I am Māori and I believe if we as Māori do not utilize this tool that has been hard fought for by our tūpuna, we will lose this privilege” and “because National some time ago were considering scrapping the Māori roll”. Lastly, *I have the right to choose a roll* ( $n = 58$ ) was used when participants invoked their ability to choose which roll to be on as their reasoning for being on the Māori roll. Statements within this code included: “because it is a unique opportunity available to me and I want my voice heard”; and “it is my right”.

#### *“Because I Wanted to Vote for . . .”: A Strategic Choice or Preference*

This code related to voter strategy, partisanship, personal political actions, or values that influenced participants’ decisions ( $n = 182$ ; 16.1%), rather than strategically seeking to increase Māori representation through their roll choice. Of particular interest is that relatively more participants chose the General roll (36.6%) for strategic reasons, which is explored in the General roll results section. Some stated that being on the Māori roll was a part of *a strategic choice* ( $n = 179$ ), including statements such as a belief their vote was more impactful on the Māori roll, a certain political outcome was believed more likely via enrolment on the Māori roll, that they thought the Māori electorate had a closer race than the General roll equivalent, or that enrolment simply better suited their preferences (without further expansion). Examples included: “because I believe my vote will be more effective on the Māori roll”; “because probably a majority of Māori don’t vote, so I want to make my vote count”; and “my Māori electorate is far more marginal than my general electorate, so my vote has greater significance there”. Other examples include those who liked a particular candidate or party, or disliked them, so chose a roll based on this support/dislike: “I wanted Nanaia Mahuta to win . . . not the Māori party who were siding with National”; “To make sure Hone Harawira didn’t get elected”. Additionally, five expressed that they *live away from their iwi rohe, tūrangawaewae* and this influenced their decision, although they remained on the Māori roll, for instance: “I am on the Māori roll because I am Māori. I want to be Māori and vote Māori. I wish I could vote for where I’m from instead of where I live. I know that can get tricky but it doesn’t feel right making decisions on other people’s whenua.”

#### *“My Nan Told Me To”: Learning, Influential Relationships, and Administration*

This code occurred 232 times (20.5%). *Influenced by others* ( $n = 66$ ) was when participants chose the Māori roll because of influence from their whānau (family/extended family), friends, or others: “because my mum said to”; “Continue in the whānau tradition and exercise our mana motuhake as takata whenua”; and “Whānau: We had a whānau discussion about why it was important to choose the

Māori Roll. I didn't really understand but what I got from my dad (not Māori) is that it was BIGGER picture important". Other codes included those who mentioned their choice in joining the roll was after they *had an opportunity to learn about the Māori roll* ( $n = 15$ ) or expressed that they previously *did not have an opportunity to learn about the Māori roll* but nevertheless ended up on it ( $n = 41$ ). Examples of learning about the roll included: "... I was at school and the roll people came around. Made sense ... ." or "encouraged to join the Māori roll by Electoral Commission Advisors when they were doing secondary-school outreach+enrollment". Others described a lack of access to information: "I don't know I thought I had to"; "Mostly because I was told that it is important for Māori to be enrolled in the Māori roll but I'm still not sure why". Some expressed they have always been on the Māori roll ( $n = 13$ )—which may have come from a time when there was no choice (prior to 1975)—or said they were automatically enrolled on the Māori roll ( $n = 6$ ).

### **Māori on the General roll**

We followed the same process for the answers of those who chose the General roll, again with a total of 5 parent codes and an "other" category (see Table 2).

#### *"It was the Default Option": Greater Exposure, Information, and Familiarity*

Some participants said they found it easier to be on the General roll, whether it be through the availability of more information on the roll and candidates, or a general perception that the General roll is the default roll ( $n = 244$ ; 38.5%). *Lower levels of knowledge or access to education about the Māori roll* appeared 144 times, and covered where participants mentioned their choice was influenced by not knowing about the Māori roll, the differences between the two rolls, or when to register for the Māori roll: "didn't understand the difference between the two rolls" and "didn't know what the Māori roll was". Some also referenced incorrect myths that circulate about roll choice, such as: "received misleading information that had to be enrolled with iwi to be on Māori roll" (i.e., that they needed to be enrolled with their Iwi first) and "heard that it's harder to change back to the General roll from the Māori roll".

Two codes were based around the idea that being on the General roll is the easier, default option. *More familiar with the general roll, easier access to information* ( $n = 72$ ) was where participants said they were most familiar with this roll, including: "More candidates to vote for and they are in the media more, so I know who they are."; and simply: "General roll is more well-advertised". Some expressed they ended up on the roll "by default"; or their interest in politics was more passive: "I learn my political news passively through the news ... I don't know enough about Māori politics or politicians to make an informed decision." Some were *influenced by others* ( $n = 47$ ); participants stated teachers, friends, whānau, Electoral Commission officials, or unspecified 'others' recommended they go on the General roll: "because I was advised by people sent to our school from the Electoral Commission to enroll on the general roll and then I could change later". Another stated: "all my friends went general roll so I thought I would too."

**Table 2.** An overview of the parent and child codes for the General roll and their representation in the data

Parent code	Child code	<i>n</i>	%
“It was the default option”: Greater exposure, information, and familiarity			
	Lower levels of knowledge or access to education about the Māori roll	144	
	More familiar with the general roll, easier access to information	100	
	Influenced by others	47	
	<i>Total number of participants expressing code</i>	244	38.5
“Māori seats are safe seats”: Strategic choices			
	Strategic choice	157	
	More variety	90	
	<i>Total</i>	232	36.6
“No Access”: Access, representation, and connection			
	Better access to MPs, Māori electorates are too large	22	
	Not connected to the Māori roll, did not feel represented by them	76	
	Not mana whenua (no territorial rights) in their Māori electorate	11	
	<i>Total</i>	96	15.1
“I don’t see why Māori need separate representation.”			
	The Māori roll as separatist or divisive, not needed	47	
	We should all be one people, have one roll	48	
	The Māori roll is racist toward tauwiwi (non-Māori)	38	
	<i>Total</i>	95	15.0
“Because I’m more Pākehā (New Zealand European) than Māori”			
	Doesn’t feel Māori enough to be on the Māori roll now	23	
	Didn’t feel Māori enough to be on the Māori roll when enrolling	25	
	Māori by descent, but does not identify as Māori	25	
	<i>Total</i>	95	15.0
Other	Wants to change rolls	60	
	Other	22	
	<i>Total</i>	80	12.6

#### “Māori Seats are Safe Seats”: Strategic Choices

This parent code ( $n = 232$ ) included those who had made a strategic choice and considered electoral outcomes or how to maximize the impact of their vote when choosing a roll. *Strategic choice* ( $n = 157$ ) included those who stated they chose the General roll because they believed their vote “counted more,” voting on the Māori roll was akin to “wasting” a vote or wished to vote in a closer race. One stated:

“whilst proud of my heritage and whakapapa, I chose to enroll under the general roll to be part of the majority voice as a posed to the minority voice”. Another said: “the general roll is the only roll that actually makes an impact on what happens politically (sad fact but we live in Te Ao Pākehā [the Pākehā world] & it’s not designed in our favour)” and one simply stated: “Māori seats are safe seats”. Some answers misconstrued how the voting system works, for example: “because I want to be able to choose my local MP, and affect who ends up as prime minister”. *More variety* ( $n = 90$ ) included those who had chosen the General roll because there were more options or a candidate that they particularly liked: “I prefer the candidates on the general roll”; “because I didn’t like the Māori candidates running on the Māori roll”; “didn’t like the parties on the Māori roll”; or simply: “more choice”.

#### *“No Access”: Access, Representation, and Connection*

This code ( $n = 96$ ) included answers relating to the structural barriers Māori electorate MPs face, alongside participants not feeling connected to the Māori roll. Seven Māori electorates cover the entire nation, alongside 65 general electorate MPs. While each MP represents the same number of people, the area Māori roll MPs need to traverse is larger (Bargh, 2020). *Better access to MPs, Māori electorates are too large* ( $n = 22$ ) included those who stated that they were on the General roll as it was easier to access MPs because they had a smaller catchment area, or MPs were in the area more often: “I want an MP who lives in my area and whom I can see at a local office”; “I never see our Māori MPs and they don’t appear to be inclusive”; and “I was on Māori Roll but the candidates were living so far away from the West Coast . . . they had no idea what the issues were on the Coast, what we seriously needed from the government or who the people are.” Others felt as though they were *not connected to the Māori roll, did not feel represented by them* ( $n = 76$ ), these reasons varied widely, such as: “because my representative is a gay man and as a takatāpui I feel more represented by him in the general roll”; or “The MP from a General constituency has a greater community of interest (connection) to my community than a Māori constituency MP”. This code also included *not mana whenua in their Māori electorate* ( $n = 11$ ) which covered when participants mentioned being on the General roll as they felt uncomfortable being on the Māori roll while living outside of their own ancestral lands: “Felt it was wrong to vote for Māori in another iwis rohe”; and “. . . as I’m not resident in my ancestral rohe, I feel more comfortable registering on the general roll”.

#### *“I Don’t See Why Māori Need Separate Representation.”*

Some expressed that opposition to the Māori electorates was part of their roll choice ( $n = 95$ ; 15%). The code, *the Māori roll as separatist or divisive, not needed* ( $n = 47$ ) represents those who claimed that the Māori roll divides the country, examples included: “anti-separatism”; and “the Māori roll is segregationist”. Another stated, “I don’t support racial division. I view our option to have race-based selection of MPs as a mild but hardly benign apartheid”. Some argued that *we should all be one people, have one roll* ( $n = 48$ ), which included language around being ‘one people’ or calling on forms of civic nationalism: “I believe that we are all in this waka [boat] so better to be all moving as one”; “One nation, one roll”; and “because I see myself as a

Kiwi from Aotearoa New Zealand first and foremost”. Lastly, some viewed that *the Māori roll is racist toward tauiwi (non-Māori)* ( $n = 38$ ): “the Māori roll is racist”; “Because I’m not a racist”; and “fair to us Māori people but unfair on others such as white people”.

#### *“Because I’m More Pākehā than Māori”*

This group ( $n = 95$ ) included responses where the participant either did not feel Māori enough or connected enough to their Māori identity to be on the Māori roll when completing the survey; reflected feeling disconnected from their Māori identity in the past when enrolling to vote; or simply expressed not identifying as Māori. *Doesn’t feel Māori enough to be on the Māori roll now* ( $n = 23$ ) included a variety of statements about not being Māori *enough* in various ways: “I look Pākehā and am treated as Pākehā by society.”; “I’m not connected to my iwi or Māori heritage and feel bad putting my vote in for something I’m not connected to”. *Didn’t feel Māori enough to be on the Māori roll when enrolling* was used when participants stated similarly that they used to not feel ‘Māori enough’, but now do ( $n = 25$ ). Lastly, *Māori by descent, but does not identify as Māori* ( $n = 25$ ) included those who were Māori descent but did not identify ethnically or culturally as Māori and therefore were on the General roll. Some examples of this perspective were: “incomplete whakapapa”; “Māori descent over Māori identity”; and “I am a Kiwi”.

## Discussion

We analyzed responses to an open-ended survey item that asked Māori to describe their electoral roll choice in their own words. Our aim of was to explore these choices for a wide, diverse range of Māori, adding to an underexplored topic, and to provide different Māori perspectives on enrolment choice. We did this through reflexive codebook thematic analysis, where we created themes to describe the results. We now discuss the wider interpretation of these results, for theory, the broader Māori context, and lessons for other groups seeking to implement similar representational mechanisms, before concluding.

Most of the answers as to why people choose the Māori roll related to the roll *representing* something Māori, whether it be people, ideas, identity, sovereignty, values, or other concepts. Being Māori has long been associated with political action, and increasingly, the struggle to reclaim rights, language, and other elements of sovereignty as Indigenous peoples (Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Ladner & McCrossan, 2007; Williams & Schertzer, 2019). In examining the answers, these concepts were often used together in answers, illustrating the interwoven nature of these ideas of identity, representation, and sovereignty for Māori. Some also viewed choosing the Māori roll as an expression of sovereignty or self-determination, even though it is an individual-level choice to enroll and is not in any way tied to citizenship or an affiliation with a tribal nation. Past work on Indigenous politics has discussed the irreconcilability of Indigenous sovereignty with colonial politics, and past work within Te Ao Māori has distinguished political acts into a kāwanatanga sphere (governance/government; *i.e.*, voting) and tino rangatiratanga sphere (Indigenous



sovereignty, e.g., engaging in Māori politics through hui [meetings]) (Hiraldo, 2020; Matike Mai, 2016).

Others noted their support of the electorates as a reason for their enrolment choice, reflecting on their ability to ensure that Māori have a ‘seat at the table’ or are present and represented in kāwanatanga politics (Hiraldo, 2020; Williams & Schertzer, 2019). Authors have discussed the idea that Māori get two opportunities for participation in their roll choice, one being their actual vote, and the other being able to “vote with their feet” in either choosing the Māori or General roll, because this choice can increase or decrease the number of dedicated Māori electorates (Riambau, 2018). However, this technical knowledge may not be widely understood, as past work has also shown that Māori on the General roll would be more likely to swap to the Māori roll if Māori knew this meant more Māori representatives (Bargh, 2020). While the potential for an increase in electorates appears to be a less-than-well-known aspect of the Māori roll, it was nonetheless an important part of some participants’ choice. Taken together, the size of the codes in the data that relate to representation show that despite their colonial legacy, many Māori now see the Māori electorates as representing them in some way. Future work could explore if dedicated representation at this time builds trust or faith in democracy, or contributes to the view that voting is necessary and important (Banducci et al., 2004).

In the results for both rolls, there are answers that suggest the Māori roll does not get the same treatment in national media and education as the General roll. An issue with the Māori roll is that it has been treated as the “poor cousin” of the General roll (Atkinson, 2003, p. 172), in other words, an inferior or second class roll for decades: some may view this as institutional racism (Wilson, 2009). Authors have highlighted that there is often a lack of political will to invest in measures to increase Indigenous political participation (Ladner & McCrossan, 2007; Silver, 2006). This has shown up in our results: many participants reasoned they had more access to information about the General roll, including information about candidates. There was also the presence of misinformation, and the perception that General roll votes were worth more in some way. These issues around financial resources and coverage in education and media show the importance of any representational mechanism not being viewed as *lesser than* the general population version. Lower levels of knowledge of the roll and media coverage are a particular concern (Bargh, 2020; Greaves et al., 2023). These issues have been raised for more than thirty years as a problem (Waitangi Tribunal, 1994) and there is no clear policy direction yet, although some suggest that civic or history education in schools may help (Bargh, 2020; Greaves et al., 2023; Independent Electoral Review, 2023a). Indigenous and marginalized groups deal with discrimination on many fronts, policymakers need to take care that this does not flow through to political representation, or it risks disenfranchising Indigenous peoples.

Identity is a factor in roll choice that goes both ways: a positive sense of identity was cited as a reason for being on the Māori roll, while not feeling Māori “enough” led some to choose the General roll. Past quantitative research has suggested a relationship between aspects of Māori identity and the Māori roll, where Māori who were more highly identified as Māori and with Māori politics were more likely to opt for it (Fitzgerald et al., 2007; Greaves et al., 2023; Greaves et al., 2017). Our results

show this operates in both ways: more strongly identifying as Māori was a reason for choosing the Māori roll, and being less identified as Māori was a reason to opt for the General roll. Similarly, our results indicated that while choosing the Māori roll can be a simple decision for some such as being *Māori* = choosing the *Māori* roll, for others it can involve a deep reflection on the histories of their ancestors. This finding is similar to that of Greaves *et al.* (2023) who found a correlation for young Māori between opting for the Māori roll and feeling the presence of one's ancestors on a day-to-day basis. While they posited that the correlation may be due to the strength of identity (as the ancestor survey item related strongly to a traditional Māori worldview and knowledge system), our results further this knowledge by showing Māori who think about the experiences of their ancestors may be choosing the Māori roll because of these considerations. However, it is also important for policymakers and political scientists to understand that sometimes roll choice can be a simple decision: the name of the roll corresponding to one's ethnic identity meaning they choose that roll.

Being less connected to one's culture and feeling as though one merely has Indigenous descent, was a reason for opting onto the General roll. The idea that some Indigenous people do not identify with the group which they descend from is likely common. These results are similar to a qualitative study of Indigenous Canadian youth which found that those with less knowledge and education around Indigenous rights or exposure to culture were more likely to adopt the political positions of the majority of Canadian youth (Alfred *et al.*, 2007). Our results also showed that a group of participants were opposed to the Māori roll: there will also likely be Indigenous descendants who oppose reserved seats in different states. Similar opposition by Indigenous people occurred for the Voice to Parliament referendum which sought to enshrine a body to make representations on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian constitution (Evans & Grattan, 2024). Other research has raised concerns that any Indigenous-specific platform may be viewed by Indigenous people as run by and for elites within Indigenous groups (Silver, 2006). The ways in which those of Māori descent express political resistance to Māori sovereignty movements remains an area that is underexplored in academic work, but is commonly seen in the views of right-wing, populist Māori politicians (Oldfield & van Veen, 2023). Future work could seek to explore Māori identity, alongside political ideology, representation and the Māori roll in more depth.

Several interesting rationales for roll choice appeared to a lesser extent. Generally, universal theories around rational choice in voter enrolment argue that some seek to maximize their influence on politics (e.g., Blais, 2000). There is no reason to suspect that Māori would be any different, where some informed voters choose to change rolls as a strategy or to vote in a specific race, especially where a contest is close, and one's vote is perceived to make a difference. As discussed in the introduction, the idea that Māori would unfairly bias an electoral race is a reason cited for the three-month close out period for roll choice that now exists before an election. Note that those seeking to change the result of a specific race with their vote were a small subset of these broader codes: our work suggests this is likely to be a small number of people, as even with a highly-educated sample, such level of investment, knowledge, and planning was uncommon, where many more Māori expressed concerns about

knowledge, identity, information, and feeling represented. Future work could model how roll choice relates to the closeness of the race in administrative data over time. A further reason for roll choice that appeared, albeit in a limited number of participants, was the idea of wanting to enroll in the geographic area one descends from. Another way voters (including non-Māori) may be doing this is through enrolling at a different address to where they often live, potentially where they have an additional home or where their family lives (Independent Electoral Review, 2023a). Although this has not been contested in recent years, earlier court decisions have defined one's place of residence as being where they resided most of the time before the election (O'Connor, 1990). In summary, both strategy and the desire to enroll in one's ancestral area were present in the data but to a much lesser extent than other reasons, they may be worth exploring in more depth in future work.

## Conclusion

We explored diverse opinions around the choice to join the Māori roll—a mechanism specifically for the representation of Māori—or the General roll. The main finding was those who chose the Māori roll did so because it represented them: whether as individuals, a collective, their ancestors, their policy positions, identity, or Māori concepts of sovereignty. A smaller group used the roll choice as a political strategy, basically to maximize the impact of their own vote; these participants more often opted for the General roll. Information, familiarity, and access to politicians played a part in roll choice, no doubt due to the history of “careless, if not convenient, neglect” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 172) and facets of institutional racism. Others also argued that they felt the roll constituted discrimination or was divisive or expressed that they do not view the Māori roll as right for them politically or culturally. Overall, this paper showed that Māori roll representation is very important to a large subset of Māori, and while some feel their representation is far from the ideal, the roll has still come to have significant meaning for many. Despite continuing resistance to inequitable, colonial voting systems, in the current day many Māori view the roll as key to their representation, identity, or an expression of sovereignty.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2025.18>

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