

2021 MUNICIPAL ELECTION OFFICIAL TRAINING

Office of the Attorney General Official Opinions



- Chief legal officer and advisor for the State of Mississippi on both civil and criminal matters.
- General Fitch's responsibility is to represent public officials and governmental agencies and to issue legal opinions that interpret state law. Most importantly, she represents the people of the State of Mississippi.
- Bachelor of Business Administration and a Juris Doctorate at the University of Mississippi.
- She has over 30 years of both private and government law experience.





Keeping Minutes

Are election commissioners required to keep minutes?

Are they to keep their minutes in a bound volume?

What should the minutes contain?

Should they not record all members in attendance and those who fail to attend, and all proceedings that took place at a meeting?

In whose physical custody are the minutes to be kept?



Keeping Minutes

Election Commissioners are public bodies, required to keep meeting minutes.

Miss. Code Ann. § 25-41-11 requires minutes to contain the following:

- > The members present and those absent,
- > The date, time and place of the meeting,
- An accurate recording of final actions taken at the meeting,
- A record, by individual member(s), of votes taken, and
- Any other information the public body requests be included or reflected by the minutes. MS AG Op., *Robinson* (March 14, 2008)



Keeping Minutes

"While we do not find any specific requirement that minutes be kept in bound volumes, we are of the opinion that official minutes should be in bound form." If they are not maintained in bound form, they must be kept in a form which preserves such records completely and ensures the public ready access. MS AG Op., *Robinson* (March 14, 2008)

The minutes of the commission should be available as a public record in the office of the Municipal Clerk.



Electronic Minutes

May the City forego the use of physical minute books and store all minutes electronically?



Electronic Minutes

A municipality may forego the use of physical minute books and store all minutes electronically; provided, however, all requirements of Miss. Code Ann. §§ 21-15-11, et seq., inclusive of the signing and seal requirements of § 21-15-3, are satisfied and the minutes are publicly available for review and inspection. MS AG Op., *Smith* (July 31, 2020)

➤ To ensure the public's free access to municipal meeting minutes which may be electronically stored and maintained, the municipal clerk's office must be equipped with a public-access computer terminal. MS AG Ops. *Barber* (December 7, 2018) and *McKenzie* (October 30, 2015)



Precincts and Polling Places

Is the City required to have the same number of polling places as wards?

No. There is no statutory requirement that the City have the same number of polling places as wards. MS AG Op., *St. Pe'* (April 22, 2016)



Precincts and Polling Places

Does the City have the legal authority pursuant to Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-557 to pass an ordinance dividing the entire city into three (3) precincts and reducing the number of polling places to three (3)?

Yes. Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-577 "ties" the number of polling places to the number of precincts as opposed to the number of wards and gives municipal governing authorities flexibility in establishing precincts and polling places to "locate and establish such polling places, without regard to precinct lines, in such manner as in the discretion of such authority will better accommodate the electorate and better facilitate the holding of the election." MS AG Op., *St. Pe*' (April 22, 2016)



Precincts and Polling Places

Does the City have the authority to create one (1) precinct for the entire city and have one precinct for voting for the entire city with the understanding that the one (1) precinct would be partitioned or divided by wards?

Yes. Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-221 clearly contemplates that a municipality may have only one (1) precinct. MS AG Op., St. Pe' (April 22, 2016)



Municipal Election Commission Contracting with County Election Commission

A city council, board of aldermen or other governing . . .

- > shall adopt an ordinance,
- ➤ declaring its intention to enter into an agreement with the municipality's county to have the county election commissioners conduct municipal elections,
- > effective on and after a date fixed in the ordinance
 - > must be at least thirty (30) days after the ordinance is adopted. and
 - > on the first day of a month.
- > published once a week for three (3) consecutive weeks in at least one (1) newspaper published in the municipality and having a general circulation therein.
 - ➤ with the first publication not less than twenty-eight (28) days before the effective date fixed in the ordinance, and
 - > the last publication made not less than seven (7) days before such date.
- > posted at three (3) public places in the municipality
 - > for at least twenty-one (21) days during the time of its publication in a newspaper.



Compensation Pursuant to Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-221

If the governing authorities of a municipality adopt an ordinance abolishing its municipal election commission and thereafter enter into an agreement with the County Election Commission to conduct its municipal elections pursuant to Miss. Code Ann. Section 23-15-221, what compensation would the county commissioners receive for conducting those municipal elections?

If the municipal governing authority adopts an ordinance pursuant to Section 23-15-221 by which to enter into an agreement with the county election commission to conduct its municipal elections, compensation of the county election commission would be in such amount as agreed upon by the municipal governing authorities and the county election commission as authorized by said statute. MS AG Op., *Glaskox* (June 5, 2020)



Executive Committee Member - Convicted of a Felony

<u>Section 44(1)</u>, <u>Mississippi Constitution of 1890</u>, [n]o person shall be eligible to a seat in either House of the Legislature, or to any office of profit or trust, who shall have been convicted of bribery, perjury, or other infamous crime;

Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-115(1), [n]o person shall serve on any temporary municipal executive committee, municipal executive committee, temporary county executive committee, county executive committee or state executive committee if the person has been convicted of any criminal violation of the Mississippi Election Code, has been convicted of an election crime in this state or any other state, has been convicted of any felony in this state or any other state, has been convicted of an election crime under federal law, has been removed from public office pursuant to Section 25-5-1, or who has resigned from office as part of a plea agreement.



Executive Committee Member - Convicted of a Felony

Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-221(3), [a] person who has been convicted of a felony in a court of this state or any other state or a court of the United States, shall be barred from serving as a member of a municipal executive committee.

<u>Section 99-19-35</u>, [a] person convicted of bribery, burglary, theft, arson, obtaining money or goods under false pretenses, perjury, forgery, embezzlement, or bigamy, shall not be allowed to practice medicine or dentistry, or be appointed to hold or perform the duties of any office of profit, trust, or honor, unless after full pardon for the same.

MS AG Op., *Martinson* (June 26, 2014), one who has a felony conviction of forgery in a court of the State of Mississippi and has not received a full pardon is not eligible to serve on a political party executive committee.

MS AG Op., *Phillips* (December 19, 2014), if he is serving on an executive committee, it is incumbent on the committee to remove him in accordance with the political party's constitution and bylaws.



Executive Committee Member - Seeking Elected Office

Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-263(2), [a] member of a county executive committee shall be automatically disqualified to serve on the county executive committee, and shall be considered to have resigned therefrom, upon his qualification as a candidate for any elective office. The provisions of this subsection shall not apply to a member of a county executive committee who qualifies as a candidate for a municipal elective office.

Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-171, . . . the municipal executive committee shall perform the same duties as are specified by law and performed by members of the county executive committee with regard to state and county primary elections ...



Executive Committee Member - Seeking Elected Office

- > Any elected official may serve on either a county or municipal party executive committee.
- ➤ An elected municipal official serving on a municipal executive committee, upon qualification as a candidate for re-election or election to another municipal office is, by operation of law, automatically removed from said municipal executive committee.
- ➤ An elected municipal official serving on a county executive committee, upon qualification as a candidate for re-election or election to another municipal office, may continue to serve on said county executive committee.
- An elected county or state official serving on a municipal executive committee, upon qualification as a candidate for a municipal office is, by operation of law, automatically removed from said municipal executive committee. MS AG Op., *Walker* (August 15, 1990)



<u>Executive Committee Member -</u> <u>Serving as Primary Election Poll Worker</u>

May members of a county political party executive committee lawfully serve as poll workers in a primary election conducted by said committee when a sufficient number of workers cannot be found?

It would be an inherent conflict of interest for members of a party executive committee to serve as poll workers in an election that their committee is conducting and is therefore prohibited.

Should members of a party executive committee actually serve as poll workers in an election that their committee is conducting, they would be doing so contrary to law and would not be entitled to any compensation. MS AG Op., *Brunini* (December 7, 2007)



Notice of Municipal Executive Committee

You state that Isola has no Municipal Democratic Executive Committee. The qualifying deadline for the upcoming municipal elections was Friday, March 8, 2013. As of that date, Candidate A had filed his petition as an independent candidate for mayor while Candidate B filed a statement of intent and paid a filing fee to be a candidate in an anticipated Democratic Primary.

You state that on or about March 22, 2013 you received a letter from the chairperson of the Humphreys County Democratic Executive Committee which stated that the county committee, acting as the temporary municipal executive committee pursuant to Mississippi Code Annotated § 23-15-313(2), had certified Candidate B as the Democratic Nominee for Mayor for the June General Election.



Notice of Municipal Executive Committee

It is the responsibility of each political party to determine if it wishes to conduct a municipal primary election in advance of the qualifying deadline. If a party decides to conduct such primary, *it is the party's obligation to inform the municipal clerk of that decision in writing* for potential candidates to know what options are available to them in seeking municipal elective office. MS AG Op., *Ashford* (April 22, 2013)



Notice of Municipal Executive Committee

For the municipal clerk to promptly supply all necessary information and pay over all fees received to the secretary of the proper municipal executive committee as required by Section 23-15-309(3), the clerk should ascertain if a legitimate municipal committee is in place *before accepting the statement of intent and filing fee of a potential candidate* for a party's nomination.

If no regular municipal executive committee was elected in the party's last primary, the clerk should advise such potential candidate that there will be no party primary unless a legitimate temporary committee is formed pursuant to Miss. Code Ann. §§ 23-15-313(1) and 23-15-315, or, in the alternative, the county executive committee informs the clerk in writing that it will act as the temporary municipal executive committee pursuant to Section 23-15-313(2) prior to the qualifying deadline. MS AG Op., *Ashford* (April 22, 2013)



Temporary Municipal Executive Committee

While Paragraph (2) of Section 23-15-313 provides that the appropriate county party executive committee may act as the temporary municipal party executive committee, a legitimate committee must be in place prior to the qualifying deadline.

Here, the qualifying deadline was March 8, 2013, and the letter certifying Candidate B from the Humphreys County Democratic Executive Committee was received "on or about March 22, 2013." We are therefore of the opinion that the decision by the County Democratic Executive Committee to act as the temporary municipal executive committee was not timely and that the filing fee should be refunded to Candidate B. MS AG Op., *Ashford* (April 22, 2013)



If an independent candidate for alderman files a candidate petition with the wrong election date or which does not specify the ward in which he is running, may the names on the petition pages on which such deficiencies appear be counted towards the number of signatures required by law to qualify for office?



If signatures on an independent candidate's petition for alderman representing a ward appear on pages which lack the ward of the office sought or which misstate the date of the election, those signatures may not be counted towards the number of signatures required by law. MS AG Op., *Sorrell* (March 23, 2009)

In *City of Clinton v. Smith* 493 So.2d 331 (Miss. 1986), the Mississippi Supreme Court held that, for signatures on petitions for ballot referenda to be counted, they "must appear upon a page which contains language expressing in an intelligible manner the desire of the signing party" to seek a referendum, with "language sufficient that one reading it before signing would not likely be misled as to the effect and import of his or her signature."



In our opinion to *Bourgeois* (April 8, 1992), we opined that the principles enumerated by the Mississippi State Supreme Court in *Smith*, were, by analogy, applicable to petitions calling for an election on bond issues.

In Wiggins (April 26, 2005), we opined that, those same principles were applicable to petitions of political candidates for office and that the Smith case was sufficient authority to support the language on the petition form in question.



As you may be aware, form petitions are provided by the Secretary of State's office, which contain general language at the top of each page for the candidate to fill out, with blanks to fill indicating the name of the candidate, the office sought, the date of the election, and other matters.

If a petition is filed in a timely manner by a prospective candidate for commissioner, and the petition contains the requisite number of signatures of qualified electors from the district as described in the statute, but the petition does not indicate, on any of its pages, the name of the candidate for which the petition was circulated and to which the voters subscribed their names, is the petition sufficient to comply with the provision of the law which states that "Candidates … shall qualify by filing … a petition … requesting that they be a candidate …"

Must the qualifying petition, in order to be sufficient and valid, name the actual candidate on each page thereof or at the top of the first page thereof?



According to the facts as presented, the candidate petition does not include the candidate's name on any of the petition pages. Based upon the Court's rationale in *Smith* and earlier Attorney General Opinions, signatures on petition pages which do not contain the candidate's name may not be counted toward the number of signatures required under applicable Mississippi law. Thus, a candidate's name must appear on every page of the petition containing signatures in order for those signatures to be counted. MS AG Op., *Wolfe* (July 13, 2012).



Qualifying Petitions

When, exactly, is the petition considered delivered: when it has been presented to have the signatures of the voters who signed the petition verified or after the signatures have been verified and the certificate of signatures has been attached by the clerk or a deputy clerk?

Who verifies the signatures on petitions for candidates?



Qualifying Petitions

Generally, the unverified petition itself is all that must be filed before the statutory deadline. If the petition is later determined to be sufficient and the candidate meets all other requirements, he would be entitled to have his name placed on the appropriate ballot.

In response to the second question, the circuit clerk, acting personally or through a deputy, is the appropriate official to check a candidate's petition to determine the correct number of qualified electors who have personally signed said petition unless otherwise provided by statute since the circuit clerk as the county registrar is the custodian of the registration books and pollbooks. *See*, *Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-135*. MS AG Op., *Sautermeister* (August 9, 1989)



Signatures on Qualifying Petitions

On or prior to the qualifying deadline, Mr. Pace filed with the City Clerk of Canton his Petition to qualify as a candidate in the upcoming election for the office of Alderman, Ward 3. Mr. Pace's petition purported to contain 50 signatures of persons who lived in Ward 3; however, while validating the names of the qualified voters Mr. Pace's petitions, the Municipal Election Commission discovered that 17 of the names were not qualified voters residing in Ward 3. Based upon these findings, the Municipal Election Commission rejected the Petition of Mr. Pace and informed Mr. Pace by letter that he would not be certified as a candidate for the office of Alderman for Ward 3 in the upcoming elections.

At a subsequent hearing, Mr. Pace filed with the City Clerk the signatures of 20 additional persons he alleged were duly qualified electors residing in Ward 3.



Signatures on Qualifying Petitions

May a proposed candidate amend his qualification petition for a Municipal Ward Election after the date for filing has expired, when after said date certain signatures which appear thereon are found not to be qualified electors residing in said Ward, so as to add signatures to attain the required number of signatures?



Signatures on Qualifying Petitions

No. When a petition is filed with the municipal clerk, the requisite number of qualified electors' names must be upon the petition on the cutoff filing date, and no additional names may be added to supply a numerical deficiency subsequent to the filing deadline. MS AG Op., *Smith-Vaniz* (May 7, 1981)



Qualifying Candidates

Your first question concerns the residency requirements of candidates for municipal office. Particularly, you reference a factual situation in which a candidate for municipal office is in the process of building a new home inside the jurisdiction he seeks to serve but has temporarily moved to another nearby town until his newly constructed home is completed.

Your second question concerns a candidate who submitted a petition with fifty-one signatures that appear to be the signatures of qualified electors of the municipality. We understand that there are allegations that two of the signatures are those of persons who no longer are qualified electors. Is the municipal election commission bound by the municipal clerk's certification that there are fifty-one signatures of qualified electors on the petition and, therefore, required to place the candidate's name on the ballot?



Residency

The general rule on residency for purposes of voting and holding public office is that once a legitimate residency is established, that residency continues until it is abandoned in favor of another with no intent to return. MS AG Op., *Thomas* (February 4, 1992), *citing Hubbard v. McKey*, 193 So.2d 129 (Miss. 1966). Therefore, a candidate for municipal office who had established a legitimate residency within the corporate limits of the municipality may temporarily live outside the municipality provided he or she has not abandoned the municipal residence with no intent to return. MS AG Op., *Herring* (March 31, 2017)



Petition Signatures

While the municipal clerk certifies the number of signatures of qualified electors on a candidate's petition, the municipal election commission must make the final adjudication of the sufficiency of a candidate's petition subject to judicial review. Therefore, the election commission is not bound by the registrar's certification and may consider whether one or more individuals who signed the petition are, in fact, qualified electors of the municipality.

Municipal election commissions make decisions on whether or not to disqualify certain signatures on independent candidates' petitions. Such decisions must be based on factual determinations relating to the validity of such signatures and cannot be arbitrary and capricious. *Edwards v. Wallace*, 143 So.3d 557 (Miss. 2014). MS AG Op., *Herring* (March 31, 2017)



Residency Senate Bill 2030

Any candidate for any municipal, county or county district office shall be a resident of the municipality, county, county district or other territory that he or she seeks to represent in such office for two (2) years immediately preceding the day of election. The provisions of this section shall not apply to any municipality with less than one thousand (1,000) residents according to the latest federal decennial census.



Qualifying Candidates

Can the county election commission proceed with its determination of the candidate's "qualified elector" status prior to being certified as the republican nominee for the general election in November 2019?

If the candidate is determined not to be a qualified elector, does the hearing that will follow have to be held by an independent party as the hearing officer?



Qualifying Candidates

An election commission may not proceed to rule upon the qualifications of party nominees until the respective party executive committee certifies its nominees to the commission.

There is no requirement that a hearing officer preside over the hearing upon candidate qualifications required by Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-359(9)*. MS AG Op., *Windsor* (June 7, 2019)

* The municipal counterpart to § 23-15-359(9) is §23-15-361(5).



<u>Qualifying Candidates – Felony Conviction</u>

The person who is requesting to be placed on the ballot for the upcoming general election in June as a councilperson was convicted in California State Court for four (4) felonies (i.e., possession of drugs for sale, transportation/sale of drugs, receiving stolen property and felon in possession of a weapon). It is my understanding that each of these four convictions occurred after 1992.

There were two (2) separate Orders from the same state court entitled, "Orders for Release from Penalties and Dismissal Under California's Penal Code 1203.4 (on probation)" for the receiving stolen property felony and felon in possession of a weapon.



<u>Qualifying Candidates – Felony Conviction</u>

Whether or not a candidate for municipal office is qualified to run for office is a factual determination to be made by either a party municipal executive committee in a primary election or the municipal election commission in a general election. (*See* Miss. Code Ann. §§ 23-15-309; 23-15-361)

If the appropriate municipal executive committee in a primary election or the municipal election commission in the general election makes a finding that the candidate was convicted of a felony in California which is also a felony in Mississippi on or after December 8, 1992, his name should not be placed on the primary or general election ballot unless all of the individual's convictions were expunged, the charges were non-adjudicated or he received a pardon. MS AG Op., *Bassi* (April 22, 2013)



Qualifying Candidates – Felony Conviction

Section 44 of the Mississippi Constitution addresses the ineligibility of persons to hold office due to felony convictions. Generally, persons convicted of felonies in this state are ineligible to hold public office. Pursuant to an amendment which took effect on December 8, 1992, persons convicted of felonies in other states which are also felonies in the state of Mississippi are disqualified from holding office as are persons convicted of felonies in federal courts.

In addition to receiving a pardon, this office has recognized that expungement of a felony conviction as well as non-adjudication of a guilty plea will restore an individual's ability to run for public office. MS AG Op., *Bassi* (April 22, 2013)



Qualifying Candidates – Felony Conviction

A candidate was charged with assault in 1988 and in 1990 the Court retired the case to the file with the provision that it could be recalled in the future. Nothing further has been done. Can this individual be certified as a candidate?

RESPONSE: Yes.

Absent a felony conviction, one is not disqualified, assuming, of course, that he meets all other qualifications to hold the office he seeks. Section 44, Mississippi Constitution of 1890.



Qualifying Candidates – Felony Conviction

An individual has filed to be a candidate for the office of Circuit Clerk. She has at least two prior charges for failure to pay debt and there are two charges in Louisiana for felonies. I am not sure of the outcome of them - whether convicted or not. If these are convictions, would this candidate be qualified?



<u>Qualifying Candidates – Felony Conviction</u>

Section 44(2) of the Mississippi Constitution provides:

No person who is convicted after ratification of this amendment in another state of any offense which is a felony under the laws of this state, and no person who is convicted after ratification of this amendment of any felony in a federal court, shall be eligible to hold any office of profit or trust in this state.

The candidate would be disqualified if she was convicted and the crimes for which she was convicted are also felonies under Mississippi law. MS AG Op., *Walsh* (March 16, 2007)



May a relative be hired by a county board of election commissioners, with the approval of the board of supervisors, to handle various aspects of election work: programming the voting devices, clerical work, for data entry purposes, to work as poll managers or clerks? MS AG Op., Sautermeister (Jan. 11, 1985)



It shall be unlawful...

- > for any person elected, appointed or selected
- > to any state, county, district or municipal office
- > to appoint or employ,
- > as an officer, clerk, stenographer, deputy or assistant
- > who is to be paid out of the public funds,
- > any person related by blood or marriage within the third degree.

Miss. Code Ann. § 25-1-53



May an election commissioner appoint his son as an election manager or clerk pursuant to Mississippi Code Sections 23-15-231 or 23-15-235?

Our office has developed a three-tiered analysis for determining whether an appointment is in violation of the Nepotism Statute:

First, are the parties related within the third degree? Secondly, is the relative who is a public official the appointing authority? And finally, is the position one of the five specific positions listed in the nepotism statute? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then the prospective employment or appointment is not prohibited. MS AG Op., *Cochran* (March 6, 1998)



Applying the analysis, the appointment in question would violate the Nepotism Statute. First, fathers and sons are obviously related within the third degree.

Second, pursuant Miss. Code Ann. §§ 23-25-231 and 23-15-235, election commissioners appoint poll workers, so the related public official is the appointing authority. Finally, as evidenced by the specific language in the statute, an "election worker" is a contemplated position.

However, the Nepotism Statute excepts "election workers" from its coverage when they served in the election immediately preceding the election at issue. MS AG Op., *Miller* (June 17, 2010).



Mississippi Ethics Commission Advisory Opinion No. 07-062-E

Miss. Code Ann. § 25-4-105(1) prohibits a public servant like a poll worker from using his or her position in government to obtain pecuniary benefit for a "spouse, child or parent." A candidate's relative may not serve as a poll worker since such a situation may lead to suspicion among the public about the impartiality of the election process, which should be avoided pursuant to § 25-4-101.



Mississippi Ethics Commission Advisory Opinion No. 07-062-E

Miss. Code Ann. § 25-4-105 provides that "no public servant shall use his official position to obtain pecuniary benefit for himself other than that compensation provided for by law, or to obtain pecuniary benefit for any relative or any business with which he is associated." Relative, for the purposes of this statute, is defined as "spouse, child or parent."



Impartiality of Election Officials

Is it proper or legal for election commissioners to basically endorse a candidate by "liking" that candidate and commenting on a candidate's Facebook page?



<u>Impartiality of Election Officials</u>

While there is no specific statutory prohibition against "liking" or commenting on a candidate's Facebook page, there is an admonition from the Mississippi State Supreme Court that election commissioners must remain neutral and impartial. "Liking" or commenting on a candidate's Facebook page indicates a preference for a particular candidate and is neither neutral nor impartial and must be avoided to protect the integrity of the election process. MS AG Op., *Glaskox* (June 21, 2019)



<u>Impartiality of Election Officials</u>

Perhaps more so than is the case with any other public official, the integrity of the office of Election Commissioner must be totally beyond compromise or even perception of the possibility of compromise. The legislature has enacted that election commissioners shall totally remove themselves from any taint or hint of suspicion of partnership. . .[When a person] assumes the office of Elections Commissioner, he becomes obligated to stay out of any other electoral endeavor for the term of his office, period. If this seems harsh, it is certainly less so than the adverse impact upon the public interest if our people come to doubt the integrity of the system. *Meeks v. Tallahatchie County*, 513 So. 2d 563, 570 (Miss. 1987)



<u>Impartiality of Poll Workers</u>

Prior to election day, can a poll manager show support for a candidate in any of the following ways:

- Attend a rally for a candidate
- Attend a rally for a political party, for many candidates
- Use yard signs and/or signs on a vehicle
- "Like" and/or promote on social media
- Or any other showing of support for a specific candidate?



<u>Impartiality of Poll Workers</u>

It would be an inherent conflict of interest for a poll manager to campaign for any candidate whose name will be on the ballot in an election in which he or she will be, in part, conducting. MS AG Op., *Dionne* (July 10, 2019).



Candidate Withdrawal

Is the withdrawal submitted by a candidate ten days before the runoff election and after the ballots were printed an effective withdrawal?

A written withdrawal after ballots have been printed is not effective, and any votes cast for the candidate attempting to withdraw are valid and must be considered in determining who is the winner of the election. MS AG Op., *Stinson* (October 23, 2019)



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