

HyperText Transfer Protocol
Internet-Draft
Intended status: Standards Track
Expires: 14 November 2026

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13 May 2026

The No-Vary-Search HTTP Caching Extension
draft-ietf-httpbis-no-vary-search-05

Abstract

This specification defines an extension to HTTP Caching, changing how URI query parameters impact caching.

About This Document

This note is to be removed before publishing as an RFC.

The latest revision of this draft can be found at <https://httpwg.org/http-extensions/draft-ietf-httpbis-no-vary-search.html>. Status information for this document may be found at <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/draft-ietf-httpbis-no-vary-search/>.

Discussion of this document takes place on the HTTP Working Group mailing list (<mailto:ietf-http-wg@w3.org>), which is archived at <https://lists.w3.org/Archives/Public/ietf-http-wg/>. Working Group information can be found at <https://httpwg.org/>.

Source for this draft and an issue tracker can be found at <https://github.com/httpwg/http-extensions/labels/no-vary-search>.

Status of This Memo

This Internet-Draft is submitted in full conformance with the provisions of BCP 78 and BCP 79.

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1. Introduction

HTTP caching [HTTP-CACHING] is based on reusing resources which match across a number of cache keys, with the most important one being the presented target URI (Section 7.1 of [HTTP]). However, sometimes multiple URIs can represent the same resource. This leads to caches not always being as helpful as they could be: if the cache contains a response under one URI, but the response is then requested under

another, the cached version will be ignored.

The "No-Vary-Search" response header field defines a caching extension, as described in Section 4 of [HTTP-CACHING], that tackles a specific subset of this general problem, for when different URIs that only differ in certain query parameters identify the same resource. It allows resources to declare that some or all parts of the query component do not semantically affect the served response, and thus can be ignored for cache matching purposes. For example, if the order of the query parameters do not affect which resource is identified, this is indicated using

No-Vary-Search: key-order

If the specific query parameters (e.g., ones indicating something for analytics) do not semantically affect the served resource, this is indicated using

No-Vary-Search: params=("utm_source" "utm_medium" "utm_campaign")

And if the resource instead wants to take an allowlist-based approach, where only certain known query parameters semantically affect the served response, they can use

No-Vary-Search: except=("productId")

Note that "cache busting" by sending unique query parameters to avoid retrieving a cached response can be made ineffective by the No-Vary-Search header field.

Section 3 defines the new response header field No-Vary-Search, using the [STRUCTURED-FIELDS] framework. Section 4 and Section 5 illustrate the data model for how the field value can be represented in specifications, and the process for parsing the raw output from the structured field parser into that data model. Section 6 gives the key algorithm for comparing if two URLs are equivalent under the influence of the header field; notably, it leans on the decomposition of the query component into keys and values given by the application/x-www-form-urlencoded (<https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-urlencoded>) format specified in [WHATWG-URL]. (As such, this header field is not useful for URLs whose query component does not follow that format.) Finally, Section 7 explains how to extend Section 4 of [HTTP-CACHING] to take this new equivalence into account.

2. Conventions and Definitions

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP 14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

In this document, the terms "URI" and "URL" are used interchangeably, depending on context. "URI" is used in the context of [URI], [HTTP], and [HTTP-CACHING], whereas "URL" is used in the context of the algorithms specified in [WHATWG-URL].

This document also adopts some conventions and notation typical in WHATWG and W3C usage, especially as it relates to algorithms. See [WHATWG-INFRA], and in particular:

- * its definition of lists, including the list literal notation 束 1, 2, 3 損.
- * its definition of strings, including their representation as code units.

(Other concepts used are called out using inline references.)

3. HTTP header field definition

The No-Vary-Search HTTP header field is a structured field [STRUCTURED-FIELDS] whose value MUST be a dictionary (Section 3.2 of [STRUCTURED-FIELDS]).

It has the following authoring conformance requirements:

- * If present, the key-order entry's value MUST be a boolean (Section 3.3.6 of [STRUCTURED-FIELDS]).
- * If present, the params entry's value MUST be an inner list of strings (Section 3.1.1 of [STRUCTURED-FIELDS]).
- * If present, the except entry's value MUST be an inner list of strings (Section 3.1.1 of [STRUCTURED-FIELDS]).
- * The except entry MUST NOT be present if the params entry is also present.

The dictionary MAY contain entries whose keys are not one of key-order, params, and except, but their meaning is not defined by this specification. Implementations of this specification will ignore such entries (but future documents might assign meaning to such entries).

```
| As always, the authoring conformance requirements are not
| binding on implementations. Implementations instead need to
| implement the processing model for URL variation configurations
| (configs) given by the obtain a URL variation config algorithm
| (Section 5.2).
```

4. Data model

A `_URL variation config_` consists of the following:

no-vary params

either the special value `*wildcard*` or a list of strings

vary params

either the special value `*wildcard*` or a list of strings

vary on key order

a boolean

The `_default URL variation config_` is a URL variation config whose no-vary params is an empty list, vary params is `*wildcard*`, and vary on key order is true.

The obtain a URL variation config algorithm (Section 5.2) ensures that all URL variation configs obey the following constraints:

- * vary params is a list if and only if the no-vary params is `*wildcard*`; and
- * no-vary params is a list if and only if the vary params is `*wildcard*`.

5. Parsing

5.1. Parse a URL variation config

To `_parse a URL variation config_` given `_value_`:

1. If `_value_` is null, then return the default URL variation config.
2. Let `_result_` be a new URL variation config.

3. Set `_result_`'s vary on key order to true.
4. If `_value_["key-order"]` exists:
 1. If `_value_["key-order"]` is not a boolean, then return the default URL variation config.
 2. Set `_result_`'s vary on key order to the boolean negation of `_value_["key-order"]`.
5. If both `_value_["params"]` and `_value_["except"]` exist or neither exists, then return the default URL variation config.
6. If `_value_["params"]` exists:
 1. If `_value_["params"]` is not an array, then return the default URL variation config.
 2. If any item in `_value_["params"]` is not a string, then return the default URL variation config.
 3. Set `_result_`'s no-vary params to the result of applying parse a key (Section 5.3) to each item in `_value_["params"]`.
 4. If any item in `_result_`'s no-vary params is an error, then return the default URL variation config.
 5. Set `_result_`'s vary params to `*wildcard*`.
7. Otherwise, if `_value_["except"]` exists:
 1. If `_value_["except"]` is not an array, then return the default URL variation config.
 2. If any item in `_value_["except"]` is not a string, then return the default URL variation config.
 3. Set `_result_`'s vary params to the result of applying parse a key (Section 5.3) to each item in `_value_["except"]`.
 4. If any item in `_result_`'s vary params is an error, then return the default URL variation config.
 5. Set `_result_`'s no-vary params to `*wildcard*`.
8. Return `_result_`.

| In general, this algorithm is strict and tends to return the
| default URL variation config whenever it sees something it
| doesn't recognize. This is because the default URL variation
| config behavior will just cause fewer cache hits, which is an
| acceptable fallback behavior.

| However, unrecognized keys at the top level are ignored, to
| make it easier to extend this specification in the future. To
| avoid misbehavior with existing client software, such
| extensions will likely expand, rather than reduce, the set of
| requests that a cached response can match.

| The input to this algorithm is generally obtained by parsing a
| structured field (Section 4.2 of [STRUCTURED-FIELDS]) using
| field_type "dictionary".

5.2. Obtain a URL variation config

To `_obtain a URL variation config_` given a response
(<https://fetch.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-response>) `_response_`:

1. Let `_fieldValue_` be the result of getting a structured field value (<https://fetch.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-header-list-get-structured-header>) [FETCH] given 'No-Vary-Search' and "dictionary" from `_response_`'s header list.
2. Return the result of parsing a URL variation config (Section 5.1) given `_fieldValue_`.

5.2.1. Examples

The following illustrates how various inputs are parsed, in terms of their impact on the resulting no-vary params and vary params:

Input	Result
No-Vary-Search: params=("a")	no-vary params: 束 "a" 損 vary params: *wildcard*
No-Vary-Search: except=("x")	no-vary params: *wildcard* vary params: 束 "x" 損
No-Vary-Search: params=()	no-vary params: (empty list) vary params: *wildcard*
No-Vary-Search: except=()	no-vary params: *wildcard* vary params: (empty list)

Table 1

The following inputs are all invalid and will cause the default URL variation config to be returned:

```
* No-Vary-Search: key-order="not a boolean"
* No-Vary-Search: params="not an inner list"
* No-Vary-Search: params=(not-a-string)
* No-Vary-Search: params=?0
* No-Vary-Search: params=?1
* No-Vary-Search: params=?1, except=("x")
* No-Vary-Search: params=("a"), except=("x")
* No-Vary-Search: params=(), except=()
* No-Vary-Search: except="not an inner list"
* No-Vary-Search: except=(not-a-string)
* No-Vary-Search: except=?1
```

The following inputs are valid, but somewhat unconventional. They are shown alongside their more conventional form.

Input	Conventional form
No-Vary-Search: key-order=?1	No-Vary-Search: key-order
No-Vary-Search: except=("x"), key-order	No-Vary-Search: key- order, except=("x")
No-Vary-Search: params=()	(omit the header field)
No-Vary-Search: key-order=?0	(omit the header field)

Table 2

5.3. Parse a key

To `_parse a key_` given an ASCII string `_keyString_`:

1. Let `_keyBytes_` be the isomorphic encoding (<https://infra.spec.whatwg.org/#isomorphic-encode>) [WHATWG-INFRA] of `_keyString_`.
2. Replace any 0x2B (+) in `_keyBytes_` with 0x20 (SP).
3. Let `_keyBytesDecoded_` be the percent-decoding (<https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#percent-decode>) [WHATWG-URL] of `_keyBytes_`.
4. Let `_keyStringDecoded_` be the UTF-8 decoding without BOM (<https://encoding.spec.whatwg.org/#utf-8-decode-without-bom>) [WHATWG-ENCODING] of `_keyBytesDecoded_`.
5. Return `_keyStringDecoded_`.

5.3.1. Examples

The parse a key algorithm allows encoding non-ASCII key strings in the ASCII structured header field format, similar to how the `application/x-www-form-urlencoded` (<https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-urlencoded>) format [WHATWG-URL] allows encoding an entire entry list of keys and values in a URI (which is restricted to ASCII characters). For example,

```
No-Vary-Search: params=("%C3%A9+%E6%B0%97")
```

will result in a URL variation config whose vary params are 束 "辿 羅". As explained in a later example, the canonicalization process during equivalence testing means this will treat as equivalent URIs such as:

- * `https://example.com/? 氣=1`
- * `https://example.com/?+氣=2`
- * `https://example.com/?%C3%A9%20氣=3`
- * `https://example.com/?%C3%A9+%E6%B0%97=4`

and so on, since they all are parsed
(`https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-urlencoded-parser`) [WHATWG-URL]
to having the same key " 氣".

6. Comparing

Two URLs (`https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-url`) [WHATWG-URL] `_urlA_` and `_urlB_` are `_equivalent` modulo variation config_ given a URL variation config `_variationConfig_` if the following algorithm returns true:

1. If the scheme, username, password, host, port, or path of `_urlA_` and `_urlB_` differ, then return false.
2. If `_variationConfig_` is equivalent to the default URL variation config, then:
 1. If `_urlA_'s` query equals `_urlB_'s` query, then return true.
 2. Return false.

In this case, even URL pairs that might appear the same after running the application/x-www-form-urlencoded parser (`https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-urlencoded-parser`) [WHATWG-URL] on their queries, such as `https://example.com/a` and `https://example.com/a?`, or `https://example.com/foo?a=b&&c` and `https://example.com/foo?a=b&c=`, will be treated as inequivalent.

3. Let `_searchParamsA_` and `_searchParamsB_` be empty lists.

4. If `_urlA_`'s query is not null, then set `_searchParamsA_` to the result of running the application/x-www-form-urlencoded parser (<https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-urlencoded-parser>) [WHATWG-URL] given the isomorphic encoding (<https://infra.spec.whatwg.org/#isomorphic-encode>) [WHATWG-INFRA] of `_urlA_`'s query.
5. If `_urlB_`'s query is not null, then set `_searchParamsB_` to the result of running the application/x-www-form-urlencoded parser (<https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-urlencoded-parser>) [WHATWG-URL] given the isomorphic encoding (<https://infra.spec.whatwg.org/#isomorphic-encode>) [WHATWG-INFRA] of `_urlB_`'s query.
6. If `_variationConfig_`'s no-vary params is a list, then:
 1. Set `_searchParamsA_` to a list containing those items `_pair_` in `_searchParamsA_` where `_variationConfig_`'s no-vary params does not contain `_pair_[0]`.
 2. Set `_searchParamsB_` to a list containing those items `_pair_` in `_searchParamsB_` where `_variationConfig_`'s no-vary params does not contain `_pair_[0]`.
7. Otherwise, if `_variationConfig_`'s vary params is a list, then:
 1. Set `_searchParamsA_` to a list containing those items `_pair_` in `_searchParamsA_` where `_variationConfig_`'s vary params contains `_pair_[0]`.
 2. Set `_searchParamsB_` to a list containing those items `_pair_` in `_searchParamsB_` where `_variationConfig_`'s vary params contains `_pair_[0]`.
8. If `_variationConfig_`'s vary on key order is false, then:
 1. Let `_keyLessThan_` be an algorithm taking as inputs two pairs `(_keyA_, _valueA_)` and `(_keyB_, _valueB_)`, which returns whether `_keyA_` is code unit less than (<https://infra.spec.whatwg.org/#code-unit-less-than>) [WHATWG-INFRA] `_keyB_`.
 2. Set `_searchParamsA_` to the result of sorting (<https://infra.spec.whatwg.org/#list-sort-in-ascending-order>) [WHATWG-INFRA] `_searchParamsA_` in ascending order with `_keyLessThan_`.

3. Set `_searchParamsB_` to the result of sorting (<https://infra.spec.whatwg.org/#list-sort-in-ascending-order>) [WHATWG-INFRA] `_searchParamsB_` in ascending order with `_keyLessThan_`.
9. If `_searchParamsA_'s` size is not equal to `_searchParamsB_'s` size, then return false.
10. Let `_i_` be 0.
11. While `_i_ < _searchParamsA_'s` size:
 1. If `_searchParamsA_[_i_][0]` does not equal `_searchParamsB_[_i_][0]`, then return false.
 2. If `_searchParamsA_[_i_][1]` does not equal `_searchParamsB_[_i_][1]`, then return false.
 3. Set `_i_` to `_i_ + 1`.
12. Return true.

6.1. Examples

Due to how the `application/x-www-form-urlencoded` parser canonicalizes query strings, there are some cases where query strings which do not appear obviously equivalent, will end up being treated as equivalent after parsing.

So, for example, given any non-default value for `No-Vary-Search`, such as `No-Vary-Search: key-order`, we will have the following equivalences:

First Query	Second Query	Explanation
null	?	A null query is parsed the same as an empty string
?a=x	?%61=%78	Parsing performs percent-decoding
?a=	?a=%C3%A9	Parsing performs percent-decoding
?a=%f6	?a=%ef%bf%bd	Both values are parsed as U+FFFD ()
?a=x&&&&	?a=x	Parsing splits on & and discards empty strings
?a=	?a	Both parse as having an empty string value for a
?a=%20	?a= &	%20 is parsed as U+0020 SPACE
?a=+	?a= &	+ is parsed as U+0020 SPACE

Table 3

7. Caching

If a cache [HTTP-CACHING] implements this specification, the presented target URI requirement in Section 4 of [HTTP-CACHING]:

the presented target URI (Section 7.1 of [HTTP]) and that of the stored response match, and

is replaced with:

the presented target URI (Section 7.1 of [HTTP]) and that of the stored response match or are equivalent modulo URL variation config, and

Cache implementations MAY fail to reuse a stored response whose target URI matches only modulo URL variation config, if the cache has more recently stored a response which:

- * has a target URI which is equal to the presented target URI, excluding the query, and
- * has a non-empty value for the No-Vary-Search field, and
- * has a No-Vary-Search field value different from the stored response being considered for reuse.

Caches aren't required to reuse stored responses, generally. However, the above expressly empowers caches to, if it is advantageous for performance or other reasons, search a smaller number of stored responses.

That is, because caches might store more than one response for a given pathname, they need a way to efficiently look up the No-Vary-Search value without accessing all cached responses. Such a cache might take steps like the following to identify a stored response in a performant way, before checking the other conditions in Section 4 of [HTTP-CACHING]:

1. Let `exactMatch` be `cache[presentedTargetURI]`. If it is a stored response that can be reused, return it.
2. Let `targetPath` be `presentedTargetURI`, with query parameters removed.
3. Let `lastNVS` be `mostRecentNVS[targetPath]`. If it does not exist, return null.
4. Let `simplifiedURL` be the result of simplifying `presentedTargetURI` according to `lastNVS` (by removing query parameters which are not significant, and sorting (<https://infra.spec.whatwg.org/#list-sort-in-ascending-order>) [WHATWG-INFRA] parameters in ascending order by key, if key order is to be ignored).
5. Let `nvsMatch` be `cache[simplifiedURL]`. If it does not exist, return null. (It is assumed that this was written when storing in the cache, in addition to the exact URL.)
6. Let `variationConfig` be obtained (Section 5.2) from `nvsMatch`.
7. If `nvsMatch`'s target URI and `presentedTargetURI` are not equivalent modulo URL variation config (Section 6) given `variationConfig`, then return null.

- | 8. If `nvsMatch` is a stored response that can be reused,
| return it. Otherwise, return null.

To aid cache implementation efficiency, servers SHOULD NOT send different non-empty values for the No-Vary-Search field in response to requests for a given pathname over time, unless there is a need to update how they handle the query component. Doing so would cause cache implementations that use a strategy like the above to miss some stored responses that could otherwise have been reused.

8. Security Considerations

The main risk to be aware of is the impact of mismatched URLs. In particular, this could cause the user to see a response that was originally fetched from a URL different from the one displayed when they hovered a link, or the URL displayed in the URL bar.

However, since the impact is limited to query parameters, this does not cross the relevant security boundary, which is the origin (<https://html.spec.whatwg.org/multipage/browsers.html#concept-origin>) [HTML]. (Or perhaps just the host (<https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#concept-url-host>), from the perspective of web browser security UI (<https://url.spec.whatwg.org/#url-rendering-simplification>). [WHATWG-URL]) Indeed, we have already given origins complete control over how they present the (URL, response body) pair, including on the client side via technology such as `history.replaceState()` (<https://html.spec.whatwg.org/multipage/nav-history-apis.html#dom-history-replacestate>) or service workers.

9. Privacy Considerations

This proposal is adjacent to the highly-privacy-relevant space of navigational tracking (<https://privacycg.github.io/nav-tracking-mitigations/#terminology>), which often uses query parameters to pass along user identifiers. However, we believe this proposal itself does not have privacy impacts. It does not interfere with existing navigational tracking mitigations (<https://privacycg.github.io/nav-tracking-mitigations/#deployed-mitigations>), or any known future ones being contemplated. Indeed, if a page were to encode user identifiers in its URI, the only ability this proposal gives is to reduce such user tracking by preventing server processing of such user IDs (since the server is bypassed in favor of the cache). [NAV-TRACKING-MITIGATIONS]

10. IANA Considerations

10.1. HTTP Field Names

IANA is requested to enter the following into the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) Field Name Registry

(<https://www.iana.org/assignments/http-fields/http-fields.xhtml>
(<https://www.iana.org/assignments/http-fields/http-fields.xhtml>)):

Field Name: No-Vary-Search

Status: permanent

Structured Type: Dictionary

Reference: this document

Comments: (none)

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11.1. Normative References

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Acknowledgments

This document benefited from valuable reviews and suggestions by:

- * Adam Rice
- * Julian Reschke
- * Kevin McNee
- * Liviu Tinta
- * Mark Nottingham
- * Martin Thomson
- * Valentin Gosu

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