# UUID vs ULID as Primary Keys in PostgreSQL: Performance Comparison

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***Abstrak***

*Dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, Universally Unique Identifiers (UUID) semakin populer sebagai kunci primer dalam basis data. Namun, kebutuhan akan skalabilitas dan kinerja telah mendorong munculnya jenis identifikasi unik baru yang disebut Unique Lexicographically Sortable Identifier (ULID), yang menggabungkan keunikan UUID dengan keuntungan pengidentifikasi berurutan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk membandingkan kinerja UUID dan ULID dalam basis data berbasis PostgreSQL. Pengukuran kinerja UUID dan ULID dilakukan pada empat jenis operasi: insert, select, update, dan join. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ULID secara umum memberikan kinerja yang lebih baik dibandingkan UUID sebagai kunci primer dalam basis data. Keunggulan ULID terlihat dari peningkatan kinerja pada berbagai operasi. Temuan ini menyoroti potensi ULID untuk meningkatkan skalabilitas dan kinerja dalam sistem basis data, memberikan wawasan berharga bagi praktisi dan pengambil keputusan yang mempertimbangkan pilihan kunci primer pada basis data PostgreSQL.*

***Kata kunci****— basis data, performa, ULID, UUID, kunci utama*

***Abstract***

*In recent years, Universally Unique Identifiers (UUID) have gained popularity as primary keys in databases. However, the need for scalability and performance has led to the emergence of a new unique identifier known as Unique Lexicographically Sortable Identifier (ULID), which combines the uniqueness of UUID with the advantages of sequentially ordered identifiers. This study focuses on comparing the performance of UUID and ULID in PostgreSQL-based databases. Performance measurements were conducted across four key operations: insert, select, update, and join. The findings demonstrate that ULID generally outperforms UUID as the primary key in databases. ULID's superiority is observed through its improved performance in various operations. These results highlight the potential of ULID to enhance scalability and performance in database systems, providing valuable insights for practitioners and decision-makers considering primary key choices in PostgreSQL databases.*

***Keywords—*** *database, performance, ULID, UUID, primary key*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Databases are an essential component of modern applications, allowing for the efficient storage and management of large amounts of data. The selection of a primary key, which uniquely identifies each record in a table, is an important aspect of database design [1]. The primary key is critical for data integrity, consistency, and performance because it ensures that each record is uniquely identified and quickly retrieved.

Databases have traditionally used integer-based primary keys, which are sequentially ordered and simple to generate. However, as databases grew in size and complexity, the limitations of integer-based primary keys became clear. Integer-based primary keys, for example, can cause performance issues when scaling horizontally because they may require coordination among multiple servers to ensure uniqueness. Furthermore, in distributed systems, integer-based primary keys may not provide enough entropy to ensure uniqueness.

In recent years, Universally Unique Identifiers (UUIDs) have been a popular choice as primary keys in databases to address these limitations. UUIDs are 128-bit globally unique identifiers that are generated using a combination of time and node-specific information [2]. They provide a high level of uniqueness because the likelihood of producing the same UUID twice is extremely low [3]. They are also simple to generate, do not require coordination among multiple servers, and can be used across multiple systems and networks. UUID represented in 32 characters hexadecimals value.

There have been a few research that compares the performance of integer ID vs UUID. Such as [4] that benchmarked the performance of UUID vs integer ID on write operation. The research shows that integer ID have a better performance compared to UUID partially due to ordered nature. Another research [5] also shows that in insert operation integer ID have a better performance compared to UUID, while in other operation the performance difference is negligible. Numerous studies have attempted to compare the performance of SQL and NoSQL databases [6]–[8], but the results are inconclusive as the choice of database technology largely depends on the specific use case and data storage requirements, including indexing and data storing strategies, which may differ significantly between the two types of databases.

As databases grow in size and complexity, the need for scalability and performance grows. To address this, the Unique Lexicographically Sortable Identifier (ULID) has emerged as a new type of unique identifier. ULID is intended to strike a balance between distinctiveness, scalability, and performance. It's a 128-bit identifier made up of a 48-bit timestamp and an 80-bit random number [9]. The timestamp provides the identifier's sequential ordering, which is important for efficient database indexing and querying, while the random value ensures the identifier's uniqueness. ULID is represented in 26 characters Crockford’s base32 [10]. While ULID is a relatively new identifier, its unique properties have helped it gain popularity in recent years. However, research on its performance in comparison to UUIDs has been limited. Therefore, the objective of this study is to evaluate and contrast the effectiveness of UUID and ULID as primary keys within databases that utilize PostgreSQL.

PostgreSQL is an open source object-relational database system (ORDBMS), that supports features such as secondary indexing, sorting, and range queries [11]. In addition to those features, PostgreSQL also supports transactions, concurrency control, and referential integrity, making it a powerful tool for managing complex data sets. It also supports a variety of programming languages and interfaces, making it highly extensible and flexible. In addition to those features, PostgreSQL also supports transactions, concurrency control, and referential integrity, making it a powerful tool for managing complex data sets. It also supports a variety of programming languages and interfaces, making it highly extensible and flexible. In PostgreSQL, there are various types of indexes, including B-tree, Hash, GiST, SP-GiST, and GIN [12]. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will adopt the default B-tree as our chosen index strategy.

We evaluate UUID and ULID performance in four operations: insert, select, update, and join. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights into the performance of these identifiers in various database operations, which will help guide the selection of the best primary key for specific database requirements. Furthermore, this research advances our understanding of the properties of ULID and its potential advantages over other identifiers.

# 2. METHODS

This section describes the methodology used to compare the performance of UUID and ULID in PostgreSQL-based databases. We first describe the hardware and software environment used in the experiments. Then, we present the database schema used in the experiments and the indexing strategy. Finally, we describe the experimental setup and the metrics used to measure the performance of UUID and ULID in different database operations.

## 2.1 Environment

Figure 1 Docker configuration for PostgreSQL

1 │ version: '3.7'

2 │

3 │ services:

4 │ postgres:

5 │ container\_name: postgres

6 │ image: postgres

7 │ environment:

8 │ POSTGRES\_USER: ${POSTGRES\_USER:-postgres}

9 │ POSTGRES\_PASSWORD: ${POSTGRES\_PASSWORD:-postgres}

10 │ PGDATA: /data/postgres

11 │ volumes:

12 │ - postgres:/data/postgres

13 │ ports:

14 │ - "5432:5432"

15 │ networks:

16 │ - postgres

17 │ deploy:

18 │ resources:

19 │ limits:

20 │ cpus: 1

21 │ memory: 4G

22 │ restart: unless-stopped

23 │

24 │ networks:

25 │ postgres:

26 │ driver: bridge

27 │

28 │ volumes:

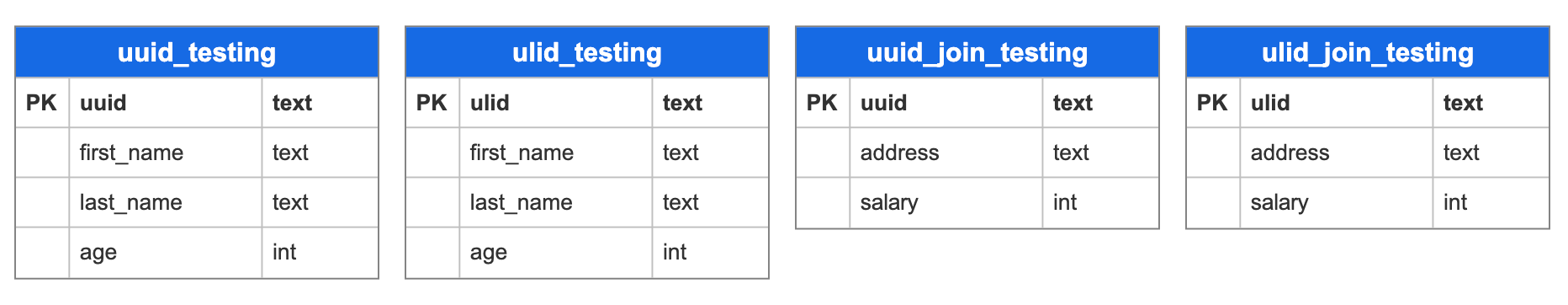
29 │ postgres:

The experiments were conducted on a system equipped with an Intel Core i7-8750H CPU, 16 GB of RAM, and a 512 GB NVMe SSD. The machine runs MacOS 13.1 Ventura. Additionally the test were run on Docker based container using PostgreSQL 15.2 image with 1 CPU and 4 GB memory resource limit configuration as shown in Figure 1. The CPU resource limitation was selected since the experiment was conducted using only a single thread, thereby utilizing only one CPU. Similarly, the memory resource limit was determined based on the observation that, throughout all the test cases, the memory usage never surpassed 4 GB.

## 2.2 Database Schema

We used four tables in this research, two table for each identifier type UUID/ULID. The first table for each identifier have a text primary key, two text column, and one integer column. The second table we used for join operation consists of text primary key, one text column, and one integer column. For generating UUID we used uuid-oosp extension, and for generating ULID we used pgulid library. The database overall schema can be seen in Figure 2.

## 2.3 Indexing Strategy

Figure 2 Testing database schema

To ensure efficient querying of the database, we used B-tree indexes on the primary keys of each table. B-tree indexes are a common type of index used in PostgreSQL, which are efficient for range queries and can handle large datasets.

*2.4 Experimental Setup*

To evaluate the performance of UUID and ULID, we conducted tests involving four different operations: insert, select, update, and join. For each of these operations, we ran 1 million queries and recorded the total amount of time required to complete them using PostgreSQL "timing" command. We repeated each operation 10 times and then calculated the average results.

* Insert: We inserted 1 million records into each table using both UUID and ULID as primary keys.
* Select: We executed queries to retrieve records from each table based on the primary key. We randomly selected 1 million primary keys and executed queries to retrieve the corresponding records.
* Update: We updated 1 million records in each table based on the primary key. We randomly selected 1 million primary keys and executed queries to update the corresponding records.
* Join: We executed queries to join the "uuid\_testing" table with the "uuid\_join\_testing" and "ulid\_testing" table with the "ulid\_join\_testing" based on the primary key.

# 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the experiments conducted to compare the performance of UUID and ULID in PostgreSQL-based databases.

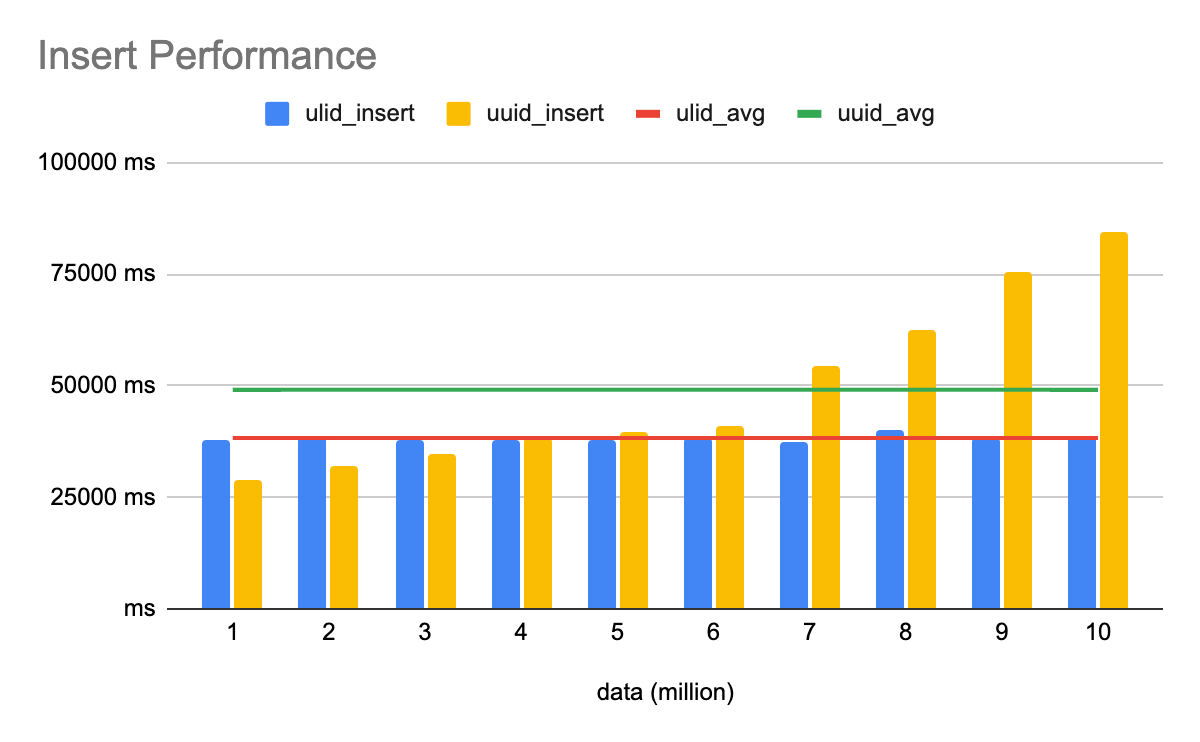
*3.1 Insert Performance*

The results of our performance comparison study are presented in Table 1, which details the time taken to incrementally insert one million records using UUID and ULID as primary keys. Our findings indicate that, initially, UUID had faster insertion times than ULID, up until approximately three million records were added. However, after the addition of four million records or more, ULID's insertion time remained relatively constant, while UUID became increasingly slower, as depicted in Figure 3. The average insertion time for UUID was 49,106 ms, whereas ULID had an average insertion time of 38,286 ms.

The superior performance of ULID in terms of faster and more consistent insertion times can be attributed to its lexicographically ordered nature. As a result, when new data is inserted, there is less B-Tree balancing required, leading to a more efficient insertion process. Conversely, UUID has a random nature, which means that each new data ID is not lexicographically ordered, resulting in a more significant amount of B-Tree balancing. This can cause a slower insertion process, especially as the number of records grows.

Table 1 Insert performance

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Data Count (million) | ULID Insert Time | UUID Insert Time |
| 1 | 37880 ms | 28790 ms |
| 2 | 38939 ms | 31934 ms |
| 3 | 37880 ms | 34663 ms |
| 4 | 37818 ms | 38347 ms |
| 5 | 37804 ms | 39532 ms |
| 6 | 38067 ms | 40795 ms |
| 7 | 37372 ms | 54567 ms |
| 8 | 40082 ms | 62473 ms |
| 9 | 38487 ms | 75378 ms |
| 10 | 38533 ms | 84585 ms |

Figure 3 Insert performance

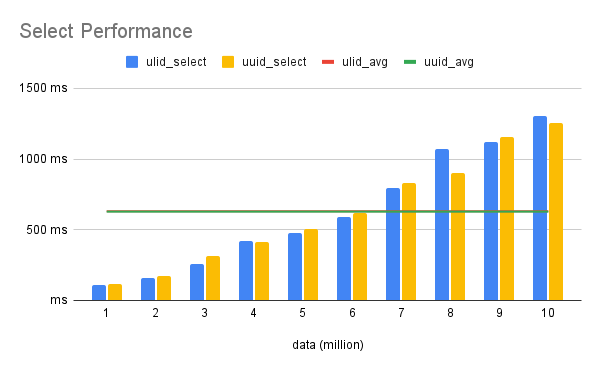
*3.2 Select Performance*

In our investigation of the performance of using UUID and ULID as primary keys for locating records within progressively increasing data counts, Table 2 illustrates the time required to select one million records using either primary key type. The data suggests that the time difference between using UUID and ULID for data retrieval is minimal. In fact, the results indicate that there is not much difference between the two methods, and any difference that is present is insignificant. Figure 4 provides a more detailed visualization of this finding, showing that the difference in the time required for selecting data using UUID and ULID as primary keys is negligible.

We found that the average time required to select data using UUID as a primary key was 628 ms, while it was 630 ms for ULID as the primary key. These findings suggest that both primary key types perform similarly in terms of data retrieval. This similarity in performance can be attributed to the fact that both UUID and ULID are designed to be globally unique identifiers, optimized for fast lookup operations. Although they differ in their structure and method of generating unique identifiers, they are both highly efficient when used for locating records.

Table 2 Select performance

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Data Count (million) | ULID Select Time | ULID Select Time |
| 1 | 107 ms | 114 ms |
| 2 | 160 ms | 176 ms |
| 3 | 256 ms | 315 ms |
| 4 | 422 ms | 416 ms |
| 5 | 477 ms | 506 ms |
| 6 | 589 ms | 615 ms |
| 7 | 791 ms | 830 ms |
| 8 | 1073 ms | 900 ms |
| 9 | 1122 ms | 1154 ms |
| 10 | 1304 ms | 1257 ms |

Figure 4 Select performance

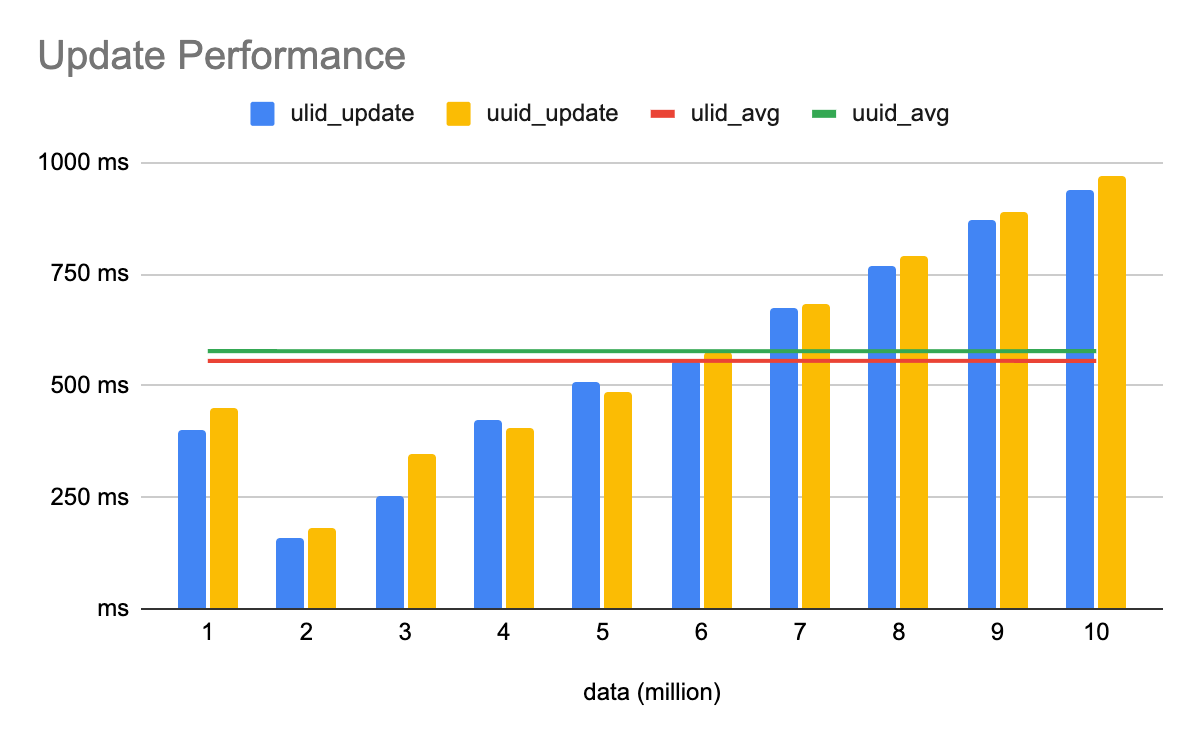
*3.3 Update Performance*

We examined the performance of using UUID and ULID as primary keys for updating records within progressively increasing data counts, Table 3 presents the time required to update one million records using each primary key type. Our findings suggest that the difference in update performance between using UUID and ULID as primary keys is minimal. While ULID performs slightly better than UUID on average, the difference is negligible, as demonstrated by Figure 5.

Specifically, the average time required to update records using UUID as a primary key was 577 ms, while using ULID it was 556 ms. These results indicate that both UUID and ULID are highly efficient for updating records, and the difference in performance between them is insignificant.

Table 3 Update performance

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Data Count (million) | ULID Update Time | UUID Update Time |
| 1 | 402 ms | 450 ms |
| 2 | 159 ms | 181 ms |
| 3 | 253 ms | 346 ms |
| 4 | 422 ms | 403 ms |
| 5 | 507 ms | 488 ms |
| 6 | 559 ms | 575 ms |
| 7 | 675 ms | 682 ms |
| 8 | 770 ms | 790 ms |
| 9 | 872 ms | 888 ms |
| 10 | 938 ms | 971 ms |

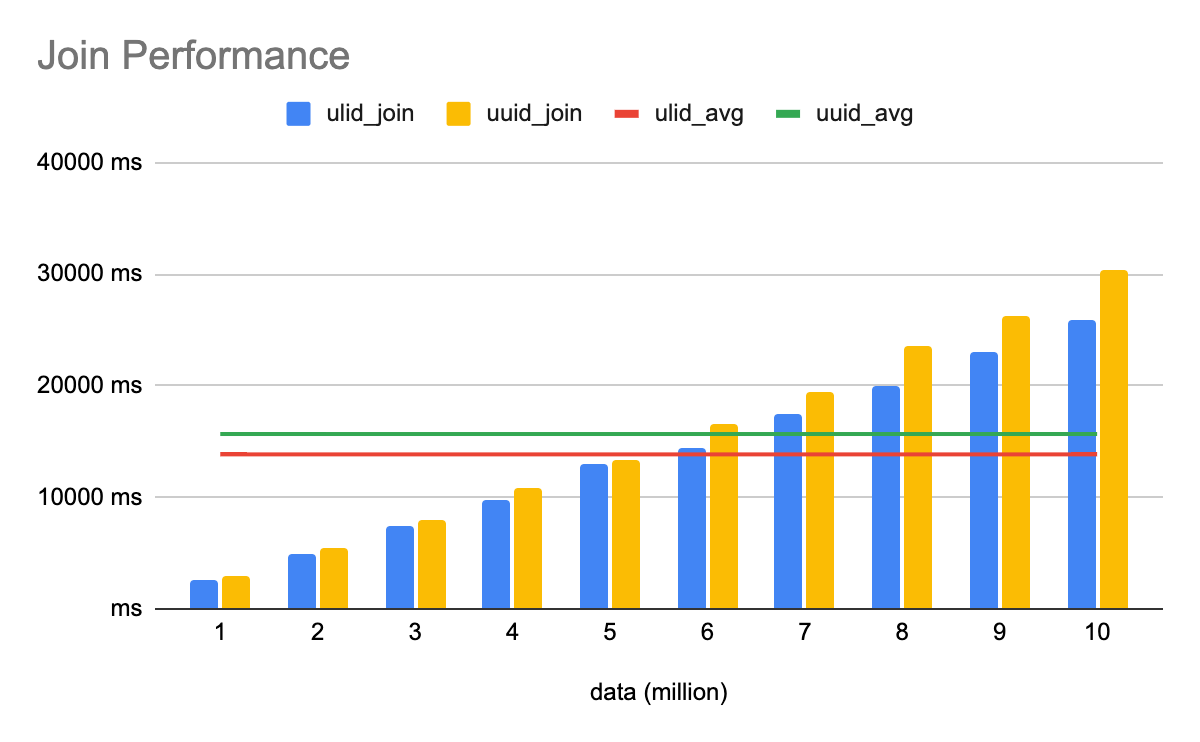
Figure 5 Update performance

*3.4 Join Performance*

Table 4 shows the time taken to perform a join operation on two tables while progressively increasing the data count using UUID and ULID as primary keys. As the data count increases, ULID performs progressively better than UUID, as displayed in Figure 6. The average time taken to perform a join operation using UUID as primary keys was 15672 ms, while using ULID, it was 13848 ms. The better performance of ULID primary keys is possibly due to the shorter representation of ULID compared UUID which causes faster string matching that happen a lot in join operation.

Table 4 Join performance

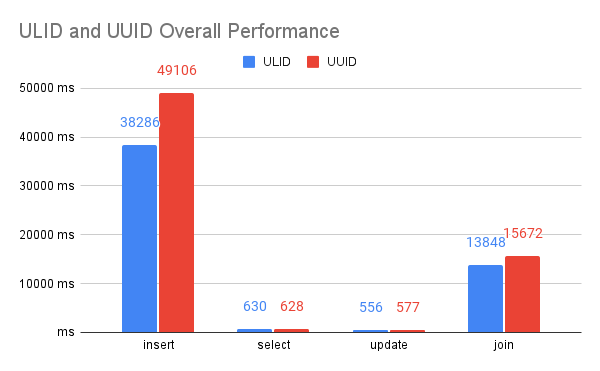
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Data Count (million) | ULID Join Time | UUID Join Time |
| 1 | 2588 ms | 2864 ms |
| 2 | 4903 ms | 5417 ms |
| 3 | 7404 ms | 7983 ms |
| 4 | 9769 ms | 10791 ms |
| 5 | 12897 ms | 13424 ms |
| 6 | 14435 ms | 16517 ms |
| 7 | 17494 ms | 19482 ms |
| 8 | 20007 ms | 23526 ms |
| 9 | 23105 ms | 26318 ms |
| 10 | 25880 ms | 30402 ms |

Figure 6 Join performance

*3.5 Overall Performance*

The overall experiment results in Figure 7 shows that using ULID as primary keys generally results in better performance compared to UUID. This difference in performance is especially apparent in insert and join operations, while find and update operations have similar results.

The performance difference in the insert operation is due to the ordered nature of ULID. ULID is designed to be lexicographically sortable, so not a lot of B-Tree balancing operation is done when performing an insert. On the other hand, UUID generates random IDs, resulting in a lot of B-Tree balancing operation being done behind the scenes. ULID's shorter representation also contributes to better performance in join and update operations. The shorter representation of ULID results in faster string comparison, leading to faster operations overall.

Figure 7 ULID and UUID overall performance

# 4. CONCLUSIONS

This research compared the performance of Universally Unique Identifiers (UUID) and Unique Lexicographically Sortable Identifiers (ULID) as primary keys in PostgreSQL-based databases. The research aimed to evaluate the potential of ULID to enhance scalability and performance compared to UUID. To assess performance, tests involving four key operations insert, select, update, and join were conducted. The experiments consisted of running 1 million queries and recording the total time required for completion using PostgreSQL's "timing" command. Each operation was repeated 10 times, and average results were calculated.

The findings consistently demonstrated that ULID outperformed UUID as a primary key in PostgreSQL databases. ULID's superiority was particularly evident in insert and join operations, while select and update operations showed similar results. The research identified two key factors contributing to ULID's superior performance. Firstly, ULID's lexicographically sortable nature minimized B-Tree balancing operations during inserts, resulting in faster performance. Secondly, ULID's shorter representation facilitated faster string comparisons, leading to improved performance in join and update operations. These results have significant implications for practitioners and decision-makers involved in database systems. The findings provide valuable insights for optimizing performance and scalability by choosing ULID as the primary key in PostgreSQL databases.

Future research can further investigate the performance of ULID and UUID in other database management systems and explore the impact of different configurations and workload characteristics. Additionally, examining the trade-offs between uniqueness, performance, and storage requirements would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the suitability of UUID and ULID in diverse database environments. Overall, this study contributes to the existing knowledge on primary key choices in PostgreSQL databases. The findings highlight the potential benefits of ULID as a primary key and provide insights to inform decision-making in database design and implementation.

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