

Electoral Messiah or Party Label? Quantifying and Identifying Leader-Party Relationships and Causal Pathways in German Federal Elections

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Abstract

Personalization in parliamentary systems has supposedly been growing over the past 50-years. Personalization is en-vogue, whether it be institutional rules privileging individuals over the party, increasing media coverage of candidates/party leaders, swelling leader power within parties, or election campaigns centered on party leaders. While the personalization thesis has assumed conventional wisdom status, the distinct impact of party leaders on vote choice (i.e., *behavioral personalization*) remains the subject of debate. Germany is a valuable case to explore vote/leader dynamics given the media's incessant focus on the race for Chancellor and the open contest in the 2021 election. Our contribution illuminates on the literature on behavioral personalization and contributes to comprehending the role of leadership in the 2021 German election. In a first step, we look at leader inclined and party inclined voting in German Federal

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elections spanning contests between 1998-2021. It enables us to situate the impact of leadership in the 2021 Federal election in a historical context. In a second step, we disentangle the distinct effect of leader popularity from party popularity in the 2021 election to offer a more nuanced and definitive estimation of the decisive impact of party leaders on vote choice independent of their party. Our results show that the impact of leadership in 2021 does not support the idea of *Germany at a Crossroads*. Evidence shows that parties matter more and have a stronger impact on the vote than leaders. Nevertheless, leaders, at least in the person of Olaf Scholz, had a significant impact and could have made an even more decisive difference in the election, considering the two percentage point difference between the SPD and the Union.

1 INTRODUCTION

Meine Damen und Herren, Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz. It was not the scriptwriters' original intent for *Wahl 2021* and arguably represented one of the greatest surprises in German electoral history. For Olaf Scholz, Finance Minister in the outgoing Merkel Große Koalition (GroKo) and the man who had ignominiously failed to win his party leadership in 2019, was not seen as a frontrunner. Initially, he was considered the bookmakers' outsider, taking on the unenviable role as SPD Chancellor candidate with the party anticipating a historic and catastrophic defeat. In the run-up to the 2021 contest, all the forecasts three months out from polling day, the traditional prediction range, be they the opinion polls (Graefe 2022), structurally inspired predictions based on a fusion of history, economics, and public opinion (e.g., Jérôme et al. 2022) or combinations of both approaches (Gschwend et al. 2022), implied a Christian Democrat-led administration and electoral disaster for the SPD. The Greens, who consistently outpolled the SPD since autumn 2018, were inspired to nominate a Chancellor candidate for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic and were expected to be the CDU's primary challenger. However, September 26, 2021 – election night – defied the pundit expectations. The SPD emerged as the largest party. The Union scored their worst result in history, dropping to second place, and the Greens, while achieving a historic high, fell below initial expectations.

So how did it happen? Some commentators highlighted leadership (e.g., Der Tagesspiel 2021a; Heescher 2021; WDR 2021). At face, the 2021 German contest was unconventional on this dimension vis-à-vis previous contests. Leadership was all the more salient in 2021 with the retirement of long-standing popular Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Green Party's selection of a Chancellor candidate for the first time, and the late vote surge of the SPD, supposedly credited to its performance Chancellor Candidate Olaf Scholz. Nonetheless, while pundits assume leadership was the key to understanding the surprise 2021 result, the academic evidence of leaders' effect on the vote (e.g., *behavioral personalization*) is modest. While there is a consensus that leaders are not unimportant to the vote, the extent and circumstances when what we call leader inclined voting (Quinlan & McAllister 2022), independent of party popularity, takes root, is still debated.

Germany and, in particular, the 2021 contest offers an interesting test case to explore behavioral personalization. The specific leader dynamics of the 2021 contest with new candidates contesting and an incumbent prime minister retiring allows us a novel opportunity to circumvent the challenge of separating incumbency from personality. Germany itself offers somewhat of a contradiction on personalization. On the one hand, the country's fascist past has meant less emphasis on individuals. Conversely, the system's focus on Chancellor candidates, what one broadcast program referred to as *Präsidialkanzler*, at least in the campaign, highlights the individual, creating a pseudo-presidential type contest. But for 2021, media pundits have opined that the leader effect was definitive. Did 2021 mark a new departure for German politics? And is Germany now conforming to the so-called conventional wisdom that behavioral personalization is especially prominent now?

Our contribution has two goals. First, based on German election studies 1998-2021, we create a descriptive index disentangling leader and party motivations. In the vein of Quinlan and McAllister (2022), this provides a descriptive index quantifying the extent of behavioral personalization to see if leader-inclined voting is becoming more prevalent. For the 2021

contest, if leaders were as critical as commentators assume, for leader inclined voting to increase. This strategy enables us to situate the impact of leadership in the 2021 Federal election in a comparative and over-time perspective and see if 2021 stands out. Second, and more innovative, we disentangle the distinct effect of leader popularity from party popularity in the 2021 election. We leverage the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), which includes repeated measures of respondents over time and captures respondents' attitudes towards party and leader at separate intervals. Attempts to unravel the distinct pathways between the party and leader motivations have been few and far between, primarily hampered by a lack of relevant panel data.

Comprehending the influence of leaders on the vote is valuable for several reasons. First, the authority and responsibility prime ministers and presidents are imbued with means they are deserving of investigation. Second, political parties (and the media) give much attention to who leads them. However, is such focus justified? Should parties care so much about who they select as their standard-bearer, or would their attention best be shifted elsewhere? Third, some scholars focus on normative problems. Some counsel that if the electorate is too attentive to leaders, it might result in the heart ruling the head, and too much emphasis is placed on style and personality, and not enough on substance and competence (e.g., D'Arma 2015). Thus, a study on leaders' impact on electoral behavior over time and cross-nationally has the potential to contribute to all these real-world questions.

Our key finding is that parties matter more. The evidence from the cross-sectional and panel data is that attitudes towards the parties significantly affect vote choice more than the attitudes towards the leaders. Few voters align their vote with the favorite leader solely, and the impacts of the leader, in terms of strength of the effect and impacts on the aggregate level vote shares, lagged that of the party. Regarding our hypotheses, we only find support for H_{2a} demonstrating that leader inclined voters were indeed more likely to vote for the SPD in 2021 highlighting the positive impact of Olaf Scholz on the SPD's election outcome. In conclusion,

behavioral personalization is a phenomenon in Germany. However, it is a much smaller splendor than common sense assumes.

2 Behavioral Personalization: The Story So Far

It started with *Trudeaumania* – Pierre Trudeau’s dalliance with the Canadian electorate in 1968, a phenomenon which essentially kickstarted the academic interest in the particular role of the leader in parliamentary systems in harvesting votes for his party. Personalization – the idea that the individual, be it the candidate, or the leader, trumps the party brand was born. At face, such enthusiasm for the concept in politics seems plausible considering institutional rules privileging individuals over the party, swelling leader power within parties, greater media focus of party leaders, and increasingly leader-centered election campaigns more common (e.g., Poguntke & Webb 2005; Rahat & Sheafer 2007; van Aelst et al. 2012; Webb & Poguntke 2013; Renwick & Pilet 2016). Little wonder that the conventional wisdom, in large part driven by media, has it that leaders are essential, perhaps the critical ingredient for electoral success today with partisanship in many democracies waning and a volatile electorate. Nevertheless, despite this prevailing narrative and the extraordinary efforts parties go to in choosing a standard bearer for them, the impact of leaders on electoral outcomes and citizen vote choice – behavioral personalization, is mired in debate. There is consensus that leaders can be influential but academic debates center on how and when they matter, and as to what is the extent of their influence.

The how, in part, relates to what type of effect leaders’ exhibit: direct versus indirect (King 2002). Direct effects assume the leader themselves – their popularity, competence, personal characteristics, or performance in debates, directly correlates with the vote. Indirect effects assume the impact of the leader is transmitted to the vote through another variable – think of a leaders’ impact on the policy stance of his party, with the latter influencing the vote. The most enthusiastic strand of literature, the *leaders matter school* invoke both types of effect,

although arguably there is a greater reliance on the indirect effects. Proponents claim that leaders' impact on the vote is substantial (Hayes & McAllister 1997; Bittner 2011; Costa-Lobo & Curtice 2015; Garzia 2011, 2014; Garzia & De Angelis 2016), while the indirect impact of leaders on the vote, channeled through media has also been observed (Aaldering et al. 2018; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2019). Some research (e.g., Garzia 2014; Garzia & De Angelis 2016) even argues that leadership effects have been continually underestimated by the implicit acceptance of the *Michigan model of voting behavior*, which gives pride of place to partisanship. Such acceptance is considered by some to ignore the potential reciprocity between leaders and partisan identification and overlook that voters' attitudes towards parties are strongly influenced by their evaluation of those parties' leaders. This school also points out that leaders benefitted from the decreasing role of partisan attachments for the vote, creating opportunities for other short-term factors to become more influential (Garzia et al., 2022, p. 313), with some research implying leaders are powerful for unattached voters (e.g., Mughan 2009; Holian & Prysby 2014). Relatedly, the leaders matter school is associated with the premise that behavioral personalization is growing (Garzia et al. 2022).

However, the *leaders' minimalist school* are more reserved about the electoral impact of leaders. This school gives particular attention to the direct effect of leaders on the vote. While this strand acknowledges leaders can dominate the media and election campaigns, they find leaders' direct impact on the individual vote choice and election outcomes remains modest (e.g., King 2002; Brettschneider et al. 2006; Dinas 2008; Aarts et al. 2011; Quinlan & O'Malley 2018), and that the party – be it in terms of likeability or identification with, tends to have a stronger direct influence. Such sentiments have been buoyed by recent research by Quinlan and McAllister (2022), who attempted to quantify the segment of voters principally driven by their favorite leader, and found that the number of voters aligning their vote with their favorite leader solely was about 1 in 5, while for party it was 1 in 3. Furthermore, this strand of research is associated with the conditionality of the leader effect, with leader effects being more pervasive

in particular situations and among specific segments of voters (e.g., Barisione 2009; Mughan 2015; Quinlan & McAllister 2022). Also, growing behavioral personalization, especially in recent years, is contested (Karvonen 2010; Aarts et al. 2011; Bittner 2018; Quinlan & McAllister 2022).

Personalization research on Germany is copious. One popular way to investigate the direct effects of the leaders is the showcase televised debates between party leaders which have been a feature of German elections since the 1970s, and institutionalized as *TV-Duelle* between Chancellor candidates since 2002. While popular in terms of audience share watching (Maier & Faas 2011; Maier 2017; Maier et al. 2022), research on the impact of TV-Duels on the vote remain contested. While the literature shows that televised debates have a real effect on voters' preferences and voting behavior (Blais & Parrella 2008; Maier & Faas 2011; Faas & Maier 2017; Baboš & Világi 2018; Glinitzer & Jungmann 2019; Maier et al. 2022), the effects tend to be small (Daron 1999; Erikson & Wlezien 2012; Le Pennec & Pons 2019) or not long-lasting and do not carry over to voting intention shortly before the election (Faas & Maier 2017; Lindemann & Stoetzer 2021).

Other studies of behavioral personalization on Germany have been equally mixed. Like televised debates, research on personalization in Germany focuses more on the candidates for Chancellor, therefore so far mostly on the Union and the SPD, and less often on all candidates/leaders (Gabriel & Neller 2005; Westle 2009; Debus 2010; Klein & Rosar 2013; Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014; Blumenberg & Blumenberg 2018). German research supports that leaders influence voting behavior and increase the probability that voters will choose the candidate's party (Schmitt & Wüst 2006; Debus 2010; Rohrschneider et al. 2012; Wagner & Weßels 2012; Rosar & Hoffmann 2015; Blumenberg & Blumenberg 2018; Glinitzer & Jungmann 2019; Jungmann et al. 2022). Jungmann et al. (2022) demonstrate that Chancellor candidates have a direct effect on the vote, or rather vote switching (see also Rattinger & Wiegand 2014; Preißinger & Schoen 2016). Nevertheless, the German literature tends to be mostly seeded in the leaders' minimalist

school. Findings highlight the importance of party evaluations and partisanship (Anderson & Brettschneider 2003; Weßels & Wagner 2013; Schoen 2014; Jungmann et al. 2022). Weßels and Wagner (2013), for example, demonstrate that party evaluations are more important than leader evaluations. Jungmann et al. (2022) find, in addition to a direct effect, that candidate effects are also moderated by partisanship. Similarly, Schoen (2014) supports this by highlighting the importance of partisanship and its stabilizing impact on the vote. Nor does the work on long-term personalization suggest that behavioral personalization in Germany is increasing over time (Kaase 1994; Gabriel & Neller 2005; Schoen 2007; Pappi & Shikano 2001; Schmitt-Beck 2011; Kriesi 2012; Wagner & Weßels 2012). Literature providing evidence for such a trend is rare (Ohr 2000; Schell 2019). Schell (2019) examines personalization trends in West German state elections from 1962 to 2012. The results, based on either leader popularity or leader preferences, support personalization effects on the vote over time for the Union. For the SPD, personalization is not increasing over time using the popularity measure and even decreasing using leader preferences. Hence, the overall take of personalization literature on Germany is that whilst leaders do have an influence on voting behavior, an increasing trend of such influence cannot be observed.

3 2021 CONTEST: WHY WOULD LEADERS MATTER?

There are several points suggesting that the 2021 Bundestag election might have provided new opportunities for leader effects to take hold.

First, for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, the incumbent Chancellor, in this case Angela Merkel (CDU), did not stand for re-election. Therefore, none of the candidates had an advantage of incumbency, and the government's performance record played only a minor role – retrospective voting made little sense given that the incumbent was not

running again.³ As another unprecedented novelty, all three nominated candidates for chancellorship, Annalena Baerbock (Greens), Armin Laschet (CDU) and Olaf Scholz (SPD) had reasonable chances of winning the election at the outset of the campaign (Horst 2021, p.7; Infratest dimap 2021a). In July 2021, three quarters of voters were unsure who to vote for (Neu & Pokorny 2021). This was reflected in clear swings in the election polls. From April to September, party leadership in the *Sonntagsfrage*, Germany's national election polls, changed three times: from the Union to the Greens, back to the Union and finally to the SPD. The race for chancellorship between the nominated candidates was thus far more open than in previous elections (Horst 2021).

Second, the 2021 election was impacted by the still on-going COVID-19 pandemic. This did not only influence voters' preferences regarding the parties' policies and democratic governance (Florack et al. 2021) but more importantly the nature of the election campaign. Because of the pandemic, fewer in person activities and events were scheduled, and campaigning did primarily take place online and in the media, voters' main source of information. Potentially related to the pandemic and to provide enough stage to all three candidates, three TV debates instead of just one as common for the Merkel-era were organized. These TV debates were the outstanding events of the 2021 election campaign as a lot of German voters watch those TV debates or get at least informed about them (Maier et al. 2022). Even though the effects of TV debates on the vote are still a subject of discussion, the increase in number highlights the media's attention paid towards the Chancellor candidates, and the overall focus of election campaigns on frontrunners rather than on parties and issues on their own (Kriesi 2012; Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014; Horst 2021). This is in line with some anecdotal evidence suggesting that it was rather unclear what the most important issues of the election campaign 2021 actually were in the eye of the voters (Horst 2021). Based on the media's focus on the

³ If at all, incumbent minister of finance and SPD candidate Scholz highlighted his experiences in government, pointing at some guaranteed stability voters were expected to get with his ticket.

Chancellor candidates, one could argue that citizens' voting decisions in the 2021 election were impacted significantly by the candidate question.

Third, due to the openness of the race of chancellorship and the significant media attention on frontrunners, even single (and sometimes minor) incidents showcasing the three candidates' behavior might have proven consequential for the election outcome. While Scholz delivered a solid performance during the election campaign, his two opponents Baerbock and Laschet did not always show such a flawless behavior. In May 2021, polls on Chancellor preferences suggested that Baerbock was ahead in the race. However, after negative press reports concerning plagiarism allegations on her recent book, accusations on an embellished curriculum vitae and a subsequent declaration of undisclosed supplementary income, she and the Green party experienced a massive downfall (Der Tagesspiegel 2021b; Handelsblatt 2021a; Welt 2021). After those shortcomings on Baerbock's side, Laschet surpassed his competitors and was slightly ahead in the polls in June. But after some misbehavior, most prominently by a laughing fit during a condolence speech by the German president held in one of the towns most severely hit by the 2021 flood, Laschet and the Union dramatically lost voter support (Handelsblatt 2021b; Reuters 2021; Spiegel 2021; Süddeutsche Zeitung 2021), putting Scholz in pole position in the Chancellor's race. This sequence of events and their successive reflection in the polls suggests that losses of the Union and the Greens were likely attributable to the negative assessment of their frontrunners.

Overall, the 2021 federal election was hence characterized by considerable personalization, facilitated by the openness of the election outcome, considerable media attention on candidates amplified by restrictions on in-person activities by Covid-19, and potentially impactful incidents of candidate behavior – bringing all three parties running for Chancellor significant shifts in opinion polls. Because of the above elaborations, we expect to see an increase in behavioral personalization in 2021. The respective directly observable consequences of this expectation let us hypothesize that:

H₁: The proportion of leader inclined voting will be higher in 2021 compared to previous elections.

Further, if frontrunners mattered more in 2021, we expect that the Social Democrats benefitted most from this effect, given Olaf Scholz' solid and consistent bearing throughout the campaign. Altogether, Scholz likely profited from the mistakes of his two opponents, leading him to be the candidate that was viewed to be the most suitable candidate for the chancellorship. Indeed, an exit poll by Infratest dimap suggests a significant leader impact on the vote, with 48 percent of SPD voters stating that they had not voted for their party without Scholz. This suggests that the SPD frontrunner appealed to a wider audience than the Social Democrats' core support base.⁴ Additionally, half of the overall electorate credited Olaf Scholz with the SPD's success in a snap poll conducted one day after the Bundestag election (Infratest dimap 2021b), while 50 percent held Armin Laschet responsible for the Union's poor performance. Voters' attribution of the significance of candidate effects on the election outcome should be grist to the mills of the *leaders matter school*, which assumes behavioral personalization is increasing overall and especially so for unattached voters. If they are right, we expect that:

H_{2a}: In 2021, leader inclined voters are more likely to have voted for the Social Democrats (SPD) than for any other of the major parties.

H_{2b}: In 2021, leader inclined voters exert the greatest influence on the vote.

Even if leaders will turn out to be less impactful than assumed at first glance, we test an alternative argument (Garzia 2014; Garzia & De Angelis 2016) that challenges the traditional wisdom of the Michigan model by arguing that attitudes towards leaders influence individuals' vote decisions much earlier. This work argues that the impact of leaders has been underestimated in previous research as it needs to be examined with regard to party evaluations,

⁴ In German: "Ohne Olaf Scholz würde ich nicht die SPD wählen" (Tagesschau 2021). Contrastingly, only 10 percent of Union and 6 percent of Green voters said the same about their frontrunners.

both of which influence each other. As a safeguard, we will test this notion for the German 2021 election as well.

H₃: In 2021, leader effects are stronger than party effects on the vote.

For one, the presumable increase in personalization in 2021 should be a most favorable case to highlight the importance of leaders and hence provide an easy threshold. Second, disentangling leader from party effects requires them to be measured at different time points, and such data is available from a pre- and post-election panel survey in 2021, as we will show below. This brings us back to the seminal question: Did the 2021 election really mark a departure in German elections historically? Is Germany at a crossroads?

4 BEHAVIORAL PERSONALIZATION: WAS 2021 A CROSSROADS ELECTION?

Our first task is to answer whether the 2021 election marked a crossroads concerning behavioral personalization. Our starting point is to put the popularity of leaders and parties into historical context (H_1). For this analysis, we turn to a series of German post-election cross-sectional studies featured in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project dating back to 1998, which offers an ideal time series to explore these dynamics.⁵ The 1998-2013 studies come from the CSES Integrated Module Dataset (2020) and were fused with the German 2017 study extracted from the fourth advance release of CSES Module 5 (2022), and the 2021 post-election cross-section from GLES (2022a).⁶ In these studies, respondents have been consistently asked to rate leaders and the parties on a 0-10 popularity scale, with a score of 0 indicating they did not like the actor and a score of 10 indicating they like the entity a lot. We classify respondents who scored a party/leader 0-3 as “disliking” that entity, those rating 4-6 as “neutral”, and those scoring 7-10 as “liking” them. Respondents who respond “don’t know” or “haven’t heard of

⁵ Since 2009, the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) has fielded the CSES.

⁶ The 2002 election was omitted as leader evaluations were unavailable for the two studies pertaining to the contest.

the party/leader” are excluded. We focus on the proportion of respondents rating each party and leader unfavorably (i.e., those who scored either of the actors 0-3). From this, we create an index for the five main parties, namely the Union, SPD, Greens, FDP, and Left.⁷

In Figure 1, we display this index displaying the proportion of respondents who dislike the party more than the leader (positive values arrived at having taken the proportion of voters expressing dislike for the leader from the proportion expressing dislike for the party). Negative values indicate the leader of the said party was more disliked by voters than the party. Notable in Figure 1 is the first contest in our measures dating back to 1998 where no leader can trump his party’s popularity, with all either having similar levels of unpopularity to their party or trail far behind. However, what is most striking from Figure 1 is the unpopularity of Union standard bearer Armin Laschet in 2021, who was disliked more than his party by 30-points.⁸ Historically speaking, Mr. Laschet lags significantly behind all previous CDU Chancellor candidates since 1998. Only for the second time (the other instance being Angela Merkel in 2005) is the CDU leader lagging behind the rating of his party. More notably, historically Laschet’s unpopularity is only bested by the unfavourability of Gregory Gysi (1998) and Oskar Lafontaine (2005), leaders of the Left party.⁹ Thus, the unpopularity of the Union standard bearer in 2021 traditionally stands aside from recent previous contests.

There is a similar but a less pronounced pattern for the Greens to the Union. Their Chancellor candidate Annalena Baerbock was more unpopular than her party. Her -9 score on our index was due to 27 percent of respondents “disliking” her party, but 36 percent disliking her, meaning Ms. Baerbock was the most unpopular Green leader since Jürgen Trittin in 2013. These negative scores contrast to the Greens’ position in the 1998, 2005, and 2017 contests, where their leader was more popular than the party.

⁷ We exclude the AfD from this analysis as the party has only contested three of the previous contests. We disregard party and leader placements of the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU) because the party does not contest nationally.

⁸ Sixty percent rated Mr. Laschet in the 0-3 range, while only 30 percent rated the CDU in the same range.

⁹ Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel, AfD leaders in 2017 and 2021 respectively also polled worse than Mr. Laschet.

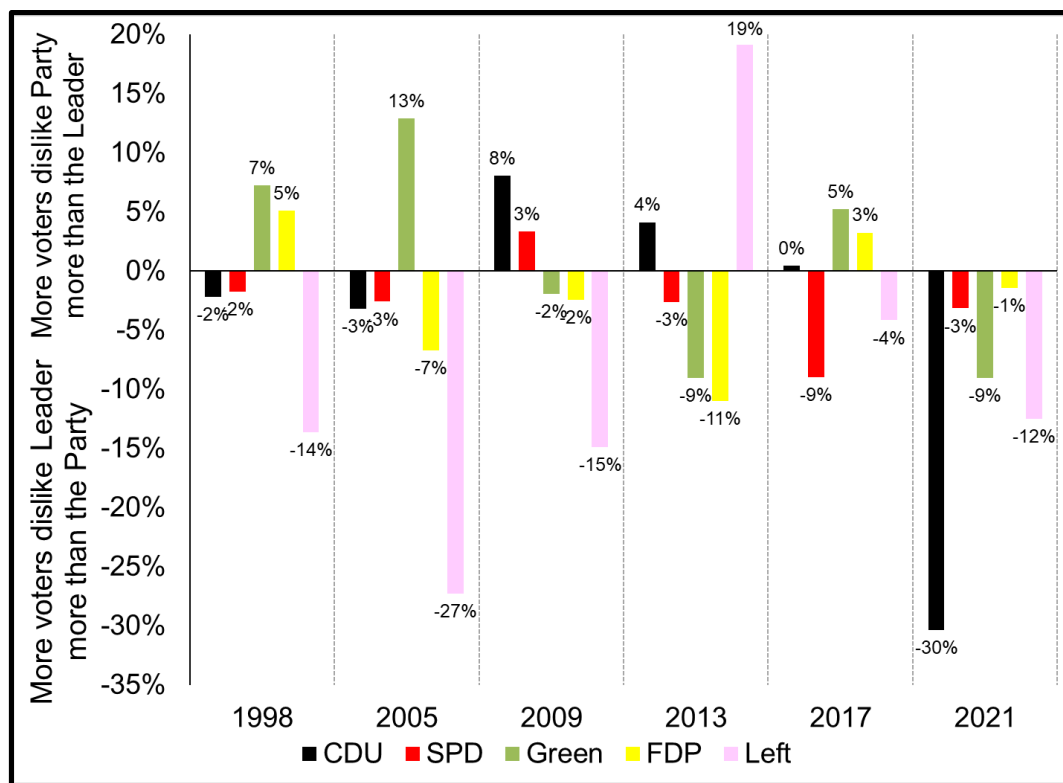


Figure 1 Party-Leader Popularity Index of the five main parties in German Federal Elections 1998-2021. *Source of data:* Time Series 1998-2021 dataset. *Note:* Index calculated on the proportion of respondents who say they dislike party minus the proportion who say they dislike the leader of that party. Positive scores indicate more people dislike party than the leader of that party. Negative scores indicate more people dislike leader of the party than the party.

Turning to the SPD and FDP, there are strikingly similar levels of likeability between their parties and their leaders in 2021. Put another way; there was no difference between the images of the party and the leader. For example, Olaf Scholz's unpopularity score of -3 is based on 17 percent of respondents saying they dislike the party, and 20 percent saying they dislike him.¹⁰ This may somewhat go against conventional wisdom that Mr. Scholz was much more popular than his party – the evidence here is that both were held in high esteem by the electorate. Indeed, besides the 2017 contest, it has been a consistent pattern concerning the SPD since 1998, with party and leader popularity mainly in sync. Similarly, Mr. Lindner's score of -2 in 2021 is based on 26 percent saying they “dislike” the FDP and 28 percent saying they dislike

¹⁰ The SPD/leader popularity score (i.e., respondents rating both 7-10 on the popularity scale) was 54 percent rating the party positively, and 51 percent rating the leader likewise.

him, with little differentiation between the leader and party favorability. And finally, for the Left, Figure 1 shows its leaders have traditionally been more unpopular than their party (besides Gregor Gysi in 2013), and 2021 was no exception with its leader Dietmar Bartsch having a higher unpopularity than that of the party to the tune of 12-points.

In sum, most parties' leaders and party popularity in the 2021 contest aligned with the traditional trajectory. There was little difference between the SPD and FDP, and the Left followed its traditional trajectory of the leader trailing the party, while the Greens, which have flipped between elections on this metric, this time having a more unpopular leader than the party. However, the feature that stands aside in 2021 is the unpopularity of Mr. Laschet, the Union's Chancellor candidate. His unpopularity far outstripped his party, making him the most unpopular Union standard-bearer.

Having unpacked popularity historically, we turn to putting behavioral personalization (i.e., the link between leaders, party, and the vote) into historical perspective. To do this, we follow the lead of Quinlan and McAllister (2022) who pioneer a descriptive index quantifying the proportion of voters who align their vote with their favorite leader and their preferred party. The goal of the index is two-fold. First, it provides a quantification of the extent of leader motivated voting – i.e., behavioral personalization. Second, it is a means of teasing out more concretely the distinction between leader and party, a means of alleviating, although not eliminating the endogeneity challenges. Importantly, the index can be considered a means of teasing out the observable implications of the behavioral personalization premise. If behavioral personalization is prevalent and dominant as some assume, the “strongest support for behavioral personalization is when the leader favorite and vote choice align” (Quinlan & McAllister 2022, p.27).

We follow their approach and classify six groups of voters, distinguished by the association between their vote choice and their respective party and leader evaluations. The first group, the *Leader-inclined voters*, are those who voted for a party whose leader they consider

as their favorite, but who did not rank the leader's party as their favorite. *Leader-leaning voters* provide a slightly mitigated indication for behavioral personalization, as this group considers both the party they voted for and the associated leader as their favorite, awarding the leader a higher score. Similar to the previous group, *Party and leader inclined voters* rank both the party they voted for and the party's leader as their favorite, but award an identical rating to both, making party and leader motivations indistinguishable from one another. *Party-leaning voters* in turn voted for the party which and whose leader they favor most, granting a higher score to the party than the leader. *Party-inclined voters* are those who voted for their favorite party although they did not rank the party's leader as their favorite. Hence, the latter group constitutes the most directly observable implication for the notion that party's matter more than leaders for the vote (as suggested by the leaders minimalist school). Lastly, *incongruent voters* voted for a party which they do not consider as their favorite, and whose leader they did not prefer over others either. Following Quinlan and McAllister (2022), sole and joint favorites were considered. We assess vote-choice based on the party-list vote (*Zweitstimme*), as the latter is decisive for the relative strength of parties represented in the Bundestag. We detail an example of how the classifications work in practice in Appendix B.

Figure 2 presents the index in Germany from 1998-2021. As we might have expected, we observe some behavioral personalization in all German elections, as evidenced by voters aligning their vote solely with their favorite leader (and not their favorite party). However, as Figure 2 shows, this segment of voters is consistently the smallest of the six groups across the seven contests ranging from 6 percent (2013) to 11 percent (1998). In the 2021 election, just 7 percent of voters were leader inclined voters.

That said, remember that leader inclined voters represent the most direct pathway for the leader. Some argue leader leaning voters need to be factored into the equation too. Even though it is impossible to say in this instance whether leader or party is more crucial, as the respondents give stronger scores to the leader, it is safe to assume that the leader effects are

stronger. More German voters have traditionally fallen into this category than the leader inclined voters, ranging from between 8 percent to 19 percent. Yet, 2021 marks the lowest number of voters falling into this category, a drop of four points compared to 2017, and 11-points on the 2013 contest. If we sum together leader inclined and leader leaning voters to decipher what we might call respondents principally aligning their vote with leaders, we see that just 15 percent of voters in the 2021 contest do so, the lowest proportion across the seven elections under analysis. It compares to 26 percent in 1998 who fell into this category.

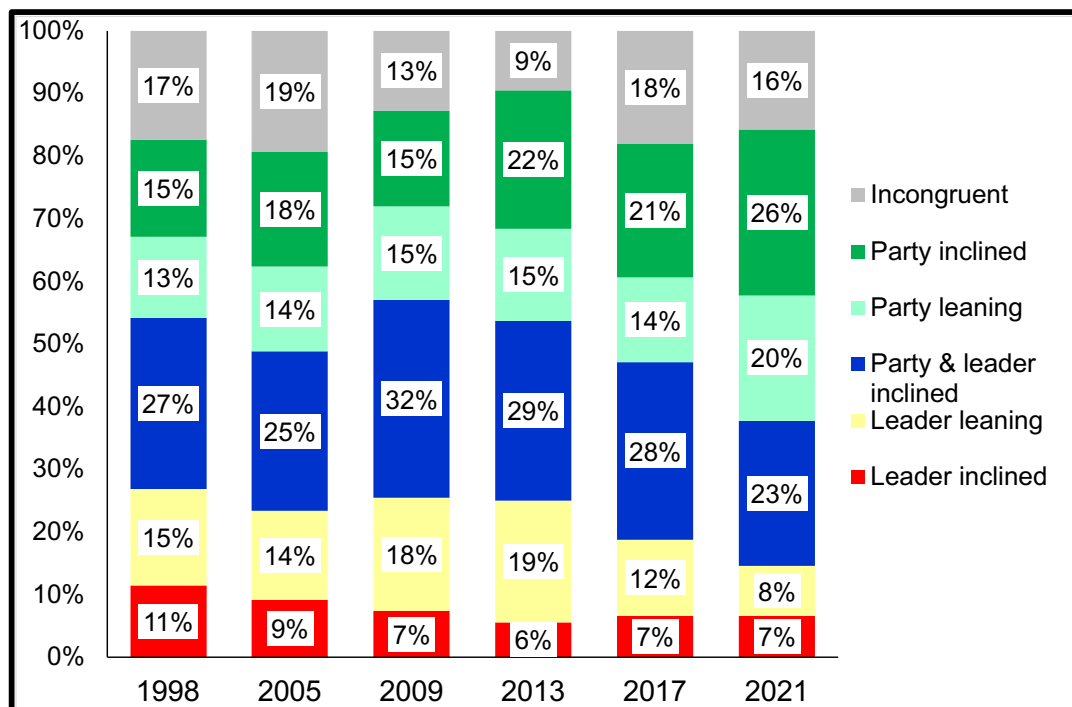


Figure 2 Descriptive index of alignments of Vote Choice with Leader/Party Favorite groups in German Federal Elections 1998-2021. *Source of data:* CSES and GLES. *Note:* The 2002 election was omitted as leader evaluations were unavailable for the two studies pertaining to the contest.

Contrasting this to party inclined voters, we see they always outnumber leader inclined voters. The average difference is about 5-points, but in 2021, there were nearly four times as many party inclined voters as leader inclined voters, and 2021 represented the highest proportion across the seven contests under investigation. Moreover, factoring party leaning voters into the equation, there have been consistently more voters aligning their vote principally with the party. Indeed, this proportion grew significantly in 2021 with 46 percent, compared

with 35 percent in 2017. This is three times the number of voters aligning their vote principally with the leader. Of course, we should not overlook that between one quarter and one third of voters align their vote with their favorite leader and party. Naturally, behavioral personalization advocates would contend that these voters too are principally motivated. While such a claim would be dubious, the cross-sectional nature of our data means we cannot fully tease this out at this juncture.

Taken together, our analysis illustrates three things. First, behavioral personalization exists, but much fewer voters align their vote with the favorite leader than do with their favorite party. Second, the prevalence of voters aligning their vote purely with their favorite leader is arguably smaller than the noise and fury often generated by the media about leaders. Third, there is no sign of increasing behavioral personalization over time in Germany (H_1). Quite the reverse with 2021 seeing fewer voters aligning their vote with their favorite leader and far more aligning their vote with their favorite party. Hypothesis H_1 can therefore be rejected. These patterns don't suggest that 2021 represented a Crossroads election concerning behavioral personalization. It also offers the beginning of nuance to the impact of leaders on the 2021 contest, which we will elaborate further on in the next section.

5 BEHAVIORAL PERSONALIZATION AND THE 2021 VOTE

While we documented that behavioral personalization in Germany is modest, and was particularly moderate in 2021, the key question is what role it played in determining the outcome of the contest? To tease this out, we make use of the 2021 pre- and post-election cross-section data from the GLES (2022a), retaining data for the post-election sample only ($N = 3,424$). Fieldwork conducted by Kantar Public started on September 27, the day following the 2021 Bundestag election, and ended on November 21, 2021. The sample was realized as a multistage probability study, based on population registers and is designed to be representative of all German citizens aged 16 and older residing in Germany, with oversampling for Eastern

Germany. Respondents could choose between filling in the questionnaire online or completing a mail-back questionnaire.

Our basis for testing behavioral personalization in the 2021 contest (H_{2a} , H_{2b}) is to use the six voter classifications we discussed earlier and decipher whether voters aligning their vote with parties or leaders correlated with their predilection for a particular party. We begin by looking at the bivariate relationship between our six voter types and reported vote in 2021, detailed in Figure 3. The results are stark. Leader inclined voters, those who align their vote solely with their favorite leader, were substantially more likely to report voting for the SPD – 60 percent of these voters opted for them. Fifteen percent opted for the FDP. Meanwhile, only 7 percent report voting for the Union. Remember, few voters fell into this category, but nonetheless, there was a significant harvest of votes for the SPD.

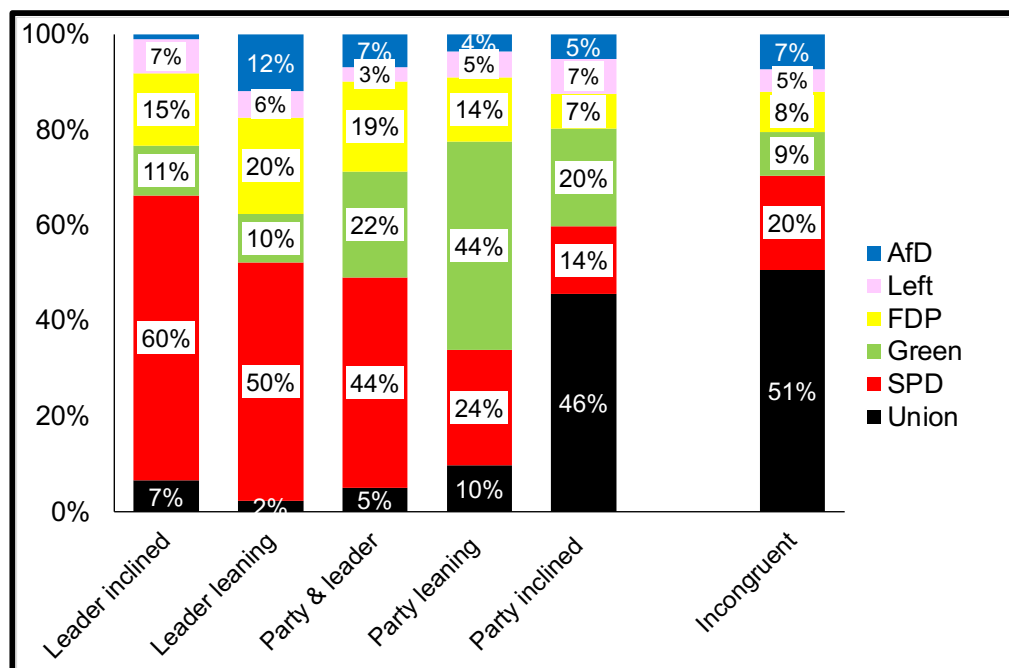


Figure 3 Descriptive index of alignments of Vote Choice with Leader/Party Favorite groups by reported vote choice in 2021 German Federal Election. *Source of data:* GLES Post-Election Cross-Section 2021.

Among the leader leaning voters, a similar pattern emerges – these voters report going with the SPD (50 percent) and the FDP (20 percent), with only 2 percent opting for the Union. Among party inclined voters, there was the mirror image. Nearly half of these voters (46

percent) reported voting for the Union and 20 percent opted for the Greens. The Greens did even better among the party leaners, attracting 44 percent of this group, followed by the SPD at 24 percent. The SPD also did well among the party and leader inclined group, attracting 44 percent of this group, followed by the Greens at 22 percent, and 19 percent for the FDP. Only 5 percent of this group opted for the Union. In a historical context, did leader inclined and leader leaning voters always opt for the SPD and FDP? The answer is no. In 2009, 2013, and 2017, the Merkel years, most leader inclined voters reported voting for the CDU. Not since 2005 has the SPD won over this group. The same pattern is evidenced for the leader leaning types. From this, we can deduce that leader inclined and party inclined voters went different ways in 2021 compared to earlier elections. In 2021, leader inclined voters were more likely to vote for the SPD and FDP while those who aligned their vote primarily with the party went for the Union and Greens respectively. Our second hypothesis H_{2a} is therefore supported.

Foundations exist to suppose behavioral personalization correlated with the particulars of vote choice in the 2021 contest. But to conclusively confirm this assessment, we need to delve deeper with a multivariate analysis. For this, our dependent variable is reported vote choice, which for ease of interpretation is classified into six dichotomous variables capturing whether a respondent voted for the Union, SPD, Greens, FDP, the Left, and the AfD. We base these classifications on the *Zweitstimme* as this vote has a greater impact on the distribution of seats in the German Bundestag and thus in determining the outcome of the national result. Given the media focus on Chancellor candidates, the *Zweitstimme* captures a potential vote for Chancellor rather than the *Erststimme*. Besides our descriptive index, our principal independent variable, our models control for several variables known to potentially influence the vote and leader and party alignments with the vote, to avoid charges of spuriousness. We control for partisanship through a dichotomous variable measuring whether the respondent reported being attached to the said party. We introduce another control in the form of ideological self-placement, capturing where respondents place themselves on the left-right ideological divide.

We also control for respondents' sentiments on the national economic situation. It is a categorical variable, coded as 0 if respondents reported that the economy got either worse or much worse in the past 1-2 years, coded as 1 if respondents state that the economy stayed the same, and coded as 2 if they felt that the economy gotten better or much better. Added to this are the traditional sociodemographic correlates employed in most German voting behavior models, namely respondent age, education, gender, church attendance, and geographic location. Age is a continuous variable reporting respondents' reported age deduced from the reported year of birth, while education is measured through a dichotomous variable classifying whether the respondent attained university level education or not. Gender we capture through classification of a female respondent (1) or not (0). Geographic location is captured by a dummy variable classifying whether a respondent lives in East Germany (coded 1, including Berlin) or West Germany (coded 0). Church attendance is an ordinal variable with six values ranging from a respondent stating to never attend (1) to someone mentioning attending religious services once a week or more often (6). From this we devise a series of logit models. In all models, *party inclined voters* serve as the reference category and our data is weighted with a sample weight adjusting data for the oversampling of Eastern Germans.

Our complete results are detailed in Table E1 in the Appendix E. Our interest is in the impact of the different types of voter alignments on vote choice (H_{2b}). We explore this in Figure 4 which presents the predicted probabilities of voting for the four main parties by each voter type, holding all other variables in the model constant at their observable values. Overall, results are in line with previous findings from bivariate analyses. The predicted probability to vote for the SPD is highest among the group of *leader inclined voters* (0.56) with a downwards trend towards *party inclined voters* (0.20). Hence, the SPD was especially popular among *leader inclined* and *leader leaning voters*, whereas the probability to vote for them was smaller among *party leaning* and *party inclined voters*. The exact opposite is observable for the Union. The predicted probability to vote for the Union was significantly higher among party-oriented voters

(0.33) than leader-oriented voters (0.07). The Greens show a similar trend as the Union, whilst the FDP resembles the pattern observed for the SPD, albeit with much weaker effect sizes. This confirms results from section 4, by showing that Olaf Scholz also appealed to voters who preferred him over the other candidates but did not necessarily rank the SPD as their favorite party. Contrarily, probabilities to vote for the CDU are highest for party-inclined voters, suggesting that the CDU mainly attracted voters from their core-support base, i.e., those that rated the CDU as their favorite party, but did not necessarily prefer Laschet over other candidates.

However, as already noted previously, this needs to be set into context. Whilst leader inclined voters clearly mattered to the SPD, their share in the general electorate and their impact on the vote (and hence the election outcome) is smallest compared to all other types of voters (combined 21% of voters). As leader effects more generally had not the most decisive impact on the election outcome overall, we reject hypothesis H_{2b} . Focusing primarily on the results of the SPD and the Union, which were most relevant for the election outcome, highlights that if Armin Laschet had been more popular with voters, the Union might have gained significant additional support. Given the election's closeness between the Union and the SPD, it could have impacted the outcome. Effects of behavioral personalization were thus observable in the 2021 election, and given the two-point gap between the major parties in election results, could have made a difference.

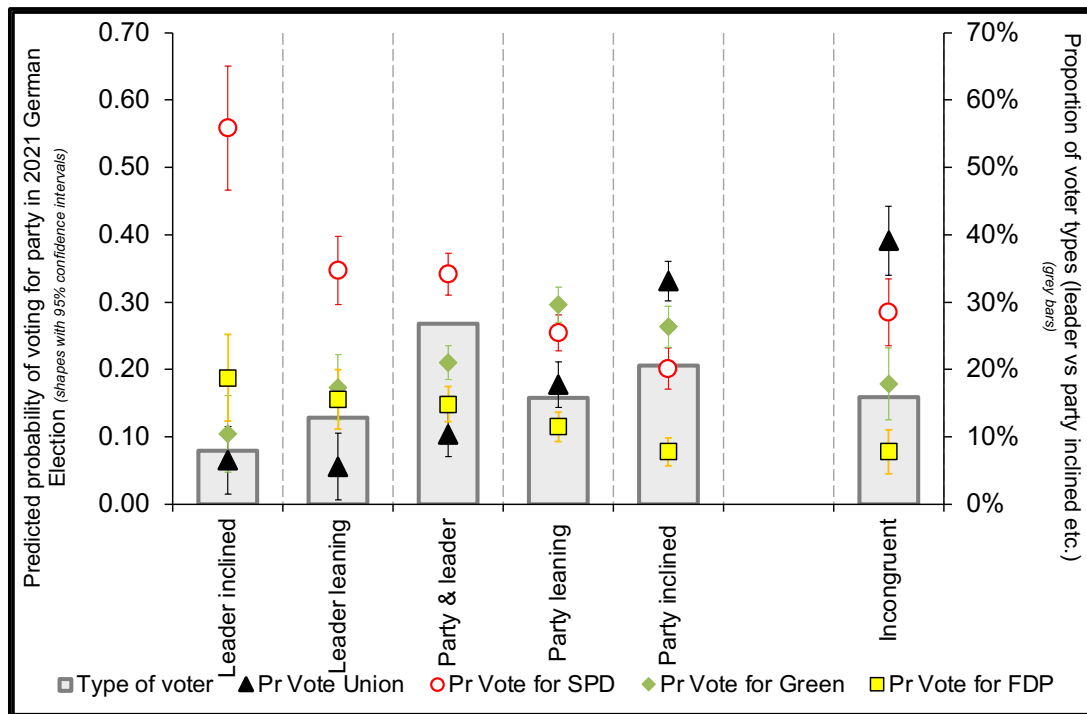


Figure 4 Average predicted effect of aligning vote with party or leader on likelihood of supporting Union, SPD, Greens, and FDP in 2021 German Federal Election. *Source of data:* GLES Post-Election Cross-Section 2021. *Note:* Analysis based on Table E1. Variables held constant at their observed values. Shapes indicate predicted probability of voting for that bloc. The vertical lines around the shape depict the 95% confidence intervals associated with the estimates. Data weighted using the sample weight n_w_ow provided by GLES.

6 LEADER OR PARTY? TEASING OUT THEIR IMPORTANCE

As alluded to earlier, one of the key challenges in quantifying leader effects is to isolate them from party evaluations. Our earlier analyses go some way to do this. Nevertheless, cross-sectional data cannot deal with the endogeneity challenge, and to stand on an even firmer footing, we need leader and party evaluations measured separately from one another. Thankfully, among the array of data products, the 2021 GLES boasts a rolling cross-section (2022b) where participants are interviewed at two different time points - before and after the election. It allows us to evade one feature of the endogeneity challenge of leader and party evaluations being measured simultaneously, allowing for more confidence in our assumptions regarding the effect of each. Thus, we can separate the leader and party effects even further and, in part, test one of the most favorable assumptions of some in the leaders' matter school (H_3). Previous research has posited that attitudes toward leaders come in much earlier in an

individual's vote calculus and much earlier than the traditional Michigan model, the dominant theoretical framework, assumes (Garzia 2014; Garzia & De Angelis 2016). Consequently, this scholarship argues leader effects have been underestimated because of incorrect model specifications. Moreover, most existing research has failed to account for a potential feedback mechanism from previous behavior, potentially leading to citizens adapting their behavior and attitudes to minimize cognitive dissonance.

Before proceeding with our tests, we briefly outline more about the GLES RCS and our modelling approach. The GLES 2021 Rolling-Cross Section is based on a dual-frame telephone survey (60% landline, 40% mobile phone numbers) in which respondents were interviewed up to two times: Once before the election and once after the election. Of the 7,068 respondents from the pre-election survey, 4,446 (62.9%) were re-interviewed in the post-election panel wave. Data collection by Ipsos took place between August 2 and September 25 prior to the election and between September 27 and October 31, 2021, for the panel. The sample is designed to be representative of eligible German-speaking voters living in private households in Germany with a landline or mobile telephone connection. Data are arranged in such a way that each observation in the dataset represents one respondent – with answers at different time points being saved in separate variables. In what follows, we refer to interviews from the pre-election survey as t-0 and to interviews from the post-election panel as t-1.

Our modeling approach takes inspiration from Garzia and De Angelis (2016). They contend that leader and party evaluations should not only be measured at separate time points but ideally before the respondent makes their choice at the ballot box. In this vein, we measure leader likeability at t-0 and party evaluations at t-1, assessing their influence on vote choice with logit models. We acknowledge that this framework does not solve the endogeneity problem but represents a step forward in teasing out the separate effects. We adopt the same control variables for the panel as we did with the 2021 post-election analyses. In general, operationalization for controls follows the specification for the cross-sectional models, with the

following exceptions: In the RCS, respondents were not asked to evaluate the economic situation retrospectively, but to assess Germany's current general economic situation. Further, information on whether respondents' obtained a university degree was not available in RCS, as respondents only provided their highest level of general education (with the highest level being upper secondary). Therefore, we include a four-category ordinal variable on education, ranging from (0) no school leaving certificate, to (3) upper secondary qualification. Coding of all variables are detailed in Appendix A.2, including information on the time of data collection (t-0 vs. t-1). Further, data are weighted with a combined transformation and panel weight, adjusting for different selection probabilities resulting from the dual-frame telephone sampling approach and panel-dropout, respectively.

We detail our models in Table E2 in Appendix E. We can see that leader and party popularity both matter to vote choice. The more popular a respondent found a leader, the more likely they were to report voting for the party, with the same pattern exerted for party likeability. Nevertheless, our interest is in teasing out the impacts of a leader on the vote vis-à-vis party. We avoid comparison of coefficients and instead rely on comparing the predicted probability of each factor on voting for the said party while holding all other variables in our model constant at their observable values. In Figure 5, we tease this out for three of the five main parties, the Union, the SPD, and the Greens.

We see that the impact of party evaluations is more potent than leader evaluations across all blocs. Party trumps leader evaluations in two aspects. The first is the comparative strength of the effect on the likelihood of increasing support for each bloc, evidenced by the more pronounced slope for party evaluations than leader evaluations. The second is that the harvest of votes accruing from party likeability seems to have been more significant (e.g., Union and the Greens) than the leader evaluations, or the same as the leader evaluations (e.g., SPD) based on the distributions. Take the Union, for example. More people thought the party was more popular than Chancellor candidate Laschet. Moreover, the influence of party likeability is most

pronounced among those who liked the party. Taken together, the Union is more likely to have harvested more votes from its party image than its leader image. Taken together with the earlier evidence, this would seem to support the interpretation that party is more important than leader.

Based on this evidence, we reject hypothesis H_3 .

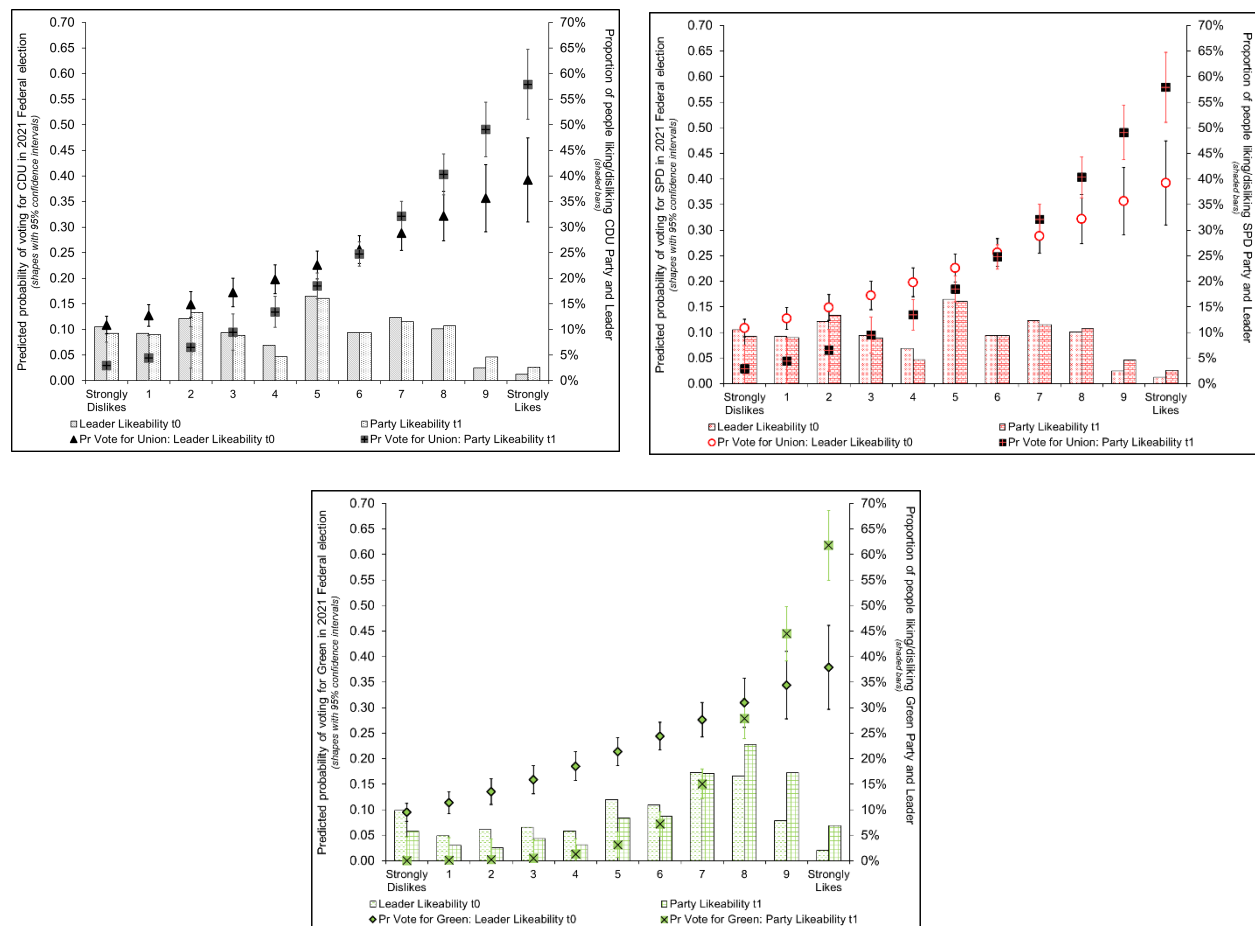


Figure 5 Average predicted effects of respondent evaluations of leader and party on the likelihood of voting for the Union (top left), SPD (top right) and Greens (bottom center) in the 2021 German Federal Election.

Source of data: GLES RCS 2021.

Note: Data weighted using the combined transformation and panel weight provided by GLES (w_panel2). Analysis based on Table E2. Variables held constant at their observed values. Shapes indicate predicted probability of voting for that party. The vertical lines around the shape depict the 95% confidence intervals associated with the estimates. Bars represent distribution of leader and party popularity respectively.

7 CONCLUSION

The seismic shifts in the German political landscape due to the 2021 German Federal election and the unlikely ascent of Olaf Scholz to the Chancellorship have prompted some to question

whether the 2021 election marks a "crossroads", especially for behavioral personalization. Our paper has sought to unpack this. There are three takeaways. First, concerning 2021 as a crossroads, some divergences from the traditional conventions are observable, most notable the unpopularity of Armin Laschet, the most unpopular Union leader within the analyzed 1998 – 2021 period (and indeed one of the most unpopular leaders more generally), and heavily trailing his party. Yet, the evidence that 2021 marks a significant departure concerning leadership effects are underwhelming. In contrast to the prevailing narrative, only 7% of voters solely aligned their vote with their favorite leader, the lowest proportion in 23-years—nearly four times as many citizens aligned their vote with their favorite party (26%). Even factoring in leader and party-leaning voters, the 2021 contest resulted in much fewer voters aligning their vote with their favorite leader than their party. Contrarily, the trend of more voters aligning their vote with their favorite party continued and grew in 2021. Taken together, this is not encouraging news for the premise that personalization is becoming more prevalent in Germany or that leaders are more important in determining the vote than the party. We therefore rejected H_1 .

However, that is not to say leaders were unimportant in 2021 or did not hold meaningful sway. Although a small proportion of the population, leader-inclined voters were substantially more likely to vote for the SPD, a shift from previous elections, as these voters had recently opted for the Union. This finding supports H_{2a} and is in sync with research that shows these voters are most likely to switch their votes (Quinlan & McAllister 2022). Moreover, we demonstrate that had Armin Laschet been more popular, the Union would have potentially gained significant additional support. Given the election's closeness, it would have seen them come out on top. When a contest is this close, anything and everything could make a difference, but it would be folly to deny that leaders were not influential. As such, behavioral personalization exists in Germany and, in 2021, given the two-point gap between the major parties, could have made the difference.

Nevertheless, the key point remains that the party matters more. The overwhelming evidence from the cross-sectional and panel data is that attitudes towards the parties significantly impact vote choice more than the sentiments towards the leaders. Few voters align their vote with the favorite leader solely, and the impacts of the leader, in terms of strength of the effect and impacts on the aggregate level vote shares, lagged that of the party. We therefore rejected H_{2b} and H_3 . In conclusion, behavioral personalization is a phenomenon in Germany. However, it is a much smaller splendor than assumed, and our research suggests some perspective about the allure of leaders and personalization in the voting sphere is required.

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APPENDIX A – VARIABLE OPERATIONALIZATIONS

A.1 – 1998 – 2021 Cross-Sectional Time Series Dataset

A.1.1 Key Dependent Variable: Vote Choice

Vote Choice (“Zweitstimme”):

Respondent's reported vote choice for party list (Zweitstimme) in the current Lower House elections based on the following variables: IMD3002_LH_PL (CSES IMD), E3013_LH_PL (CSES Module 5), q114ab (GLES 2021 Post-Election Cross-Section)

Coding: Dichotomous variables coded for the following parties: CDU/CSU (Union), SPD, FDP, GRUENE, PDS / DIE LINKE, AfD (for 2017 – 2021 only).

- 0. Voted for a different party
- 1. Voted for PARTY

Refusals, don't knows and non-voters were coded to missing.

A.1.2 Additional Variables Used For Creating Voter Types based on Quinlan & McAllister (2022) (see Appendix B for further details)

NOTE: Question-Wording for GLES 2021 available in German only at time of submission. German question wordings are retained but might be updated upon availability of official translations.

Party Likability

CSES IMD (Germany 1998 – 2013, IMD3008) & CSES Module 5 (Germany 2017, E3017):

"I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If I come to a party you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so. The first party is [...]."

- 00. Strongly Dislike
- 01.
- 02.
- 03.
- 04.
- 05.
- 06.
- 07.
- 08.
- 09.
- 10. Strongly Like

- 96. Haven't Heard of Party
- 97. Volunteered: Refused
- 98. Don't Know Enough About/Don't Know Where To Rate
- 99. Missing

Note: All German studies employed an 11-point scale to measure party and leader likability. However, the early 1998 and 2005 studies used scales ranging from 1 – 11, while studies since 2009 used a scale ranging from -5 to +5. Data were harmonized in accordance with the CSES coding scheme above.

Coding: CSES Coding retained, Codes 96 - 99 coded to missing.

GLES 2021 Post-Election Cross-Section (q17):

„Was halten Sie so ganz allgemein von den einzelnen politischen Parteien?“

(11) +5 halte sehr viel von dieser Partei
 (10) +4
 (9) +3
 (8) +2
 (7) +1
 (6) 0
 (5) -1
 (4) -2
 (3) -3
 (2) -4
 (1) -5 halte überhaupt nichts von dieser Partei

(-71) kenne die Partei nicht
 (-99) keine Angabe

Coding: Harmonization in accordance with CSES-Scale, such that scale ranges from 0 (strongly dislike) – to 10 (strongly like). Codes -71 and -99 coded to missing.

Leader Likability

CSES IMD (Germany 1998 – 2013, IMD3009) & CSES Module 5 (Germany 2017, E3018):

CSES Module 1 (Germany 1998):

"And now, using the same scale, I'd like to ask you how much you like or dislike some political leaders. Again, if I come to a leader you haven't heard of or you do not know enough about them, just say so. The first political leader is LEADER A [...]."

CSES Modules 3, 4, and 5 (Germany 2005 – 2017):

"And what do you think of the presidential candidates/party leaders? After I read the name of a presidential candidate/party leader, please rate them on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that candidate and 10 means that you strongly like that candidate."

00. Strongly Dislike

01.

02.

03.

04.

05.

06.

07.

08.

09.

10. Strongly Like

96. Haven't Heard of Party

97. Volunteered: Refused

98. Don't Know Enough About/Don't Know Where To Rate

99. Missing

Note: All German studies employed an 11-point scale to measure party and leader likability. However, the early 1998 and 2005 studies used scales ranging from 1 – 11, while studies since 2009 used a scale ranging from -5 to +5. Data were harmonized in accordance with the CSES coding scheme above.

Coding: CSES Coding retained, Codes 96 - 99 coded to missing.

GLÉS 2021 Post-Election Cross-Section (q18):

„Bitte geben Sie nun an, was Sie von einigen führenden Politikerinnen und Politikern halten.
 Was halten Sie von ...?“

(11) +5 halte sehr viel von dieser Partei
 (10) +4
 (9) +3

- (8) +2
- (7) +1
- (6) 0
- (5) -1
- (4) -2
- (3) -3
- (2) -4
- (1) -5 halte überhaupt nichts von dieser Partei

(-71) kenne die Partei nicht
 (-99) keine Angabe

Coding: Harmonization in accordance with CSES-Scale, such that scale ranges from 0 (strongly dislike) – to 10 (strongly like). Codes -71 and -99 coded to missing.

Party and Leader Likability Trichotomies (used for Figure 1):

Coding: The 11-point party and leader likability scales described above were collapsed into the following three categories:

- 0 - 3. Does not like PARTY/LEADER
- 4 - 6. Neutral
- 7 - 10. Likes PARTY/LEADER

All remaining values were coded to missing.

A.1.3 Control Variables for Cross-Sectional Analysis (based on GLES 2021 Post-Election Cross-Section)

NOTE: Question-Wording Available in German only at time of submission. Hence, German question wordings are retained but might be updated upon availability of official translations.

Party Identification (q75a)

„Und nun noch einmal kurz zu den politischen Parteien. In Deutschland neigen viele Leute längere Zeit einer bestimmten politischen Partei zu, obwohl sie auch ab und zu eine andere Partei wählen. Wie ist das bei Ihnen: Neigen Sie - ganz allgemein gesprochen - einer bestimmten Partei zu? Und wenn ja, welcher?“

- (1) CDU/CSU
- (2) CDU
- (3) CSU
- (4) SPD
- (322) AfD
- (5) FDP
- (7) DIE LINKE
- (6) GRÜNE

- (801) andere Partei, und zwar _____
- (808) keiner Partei
- (-99) keine Angabe

Coding: Dichotomous variables coded for the following parties: CDU/CSU (Union), SPD, FDP, GRUENE, PDS/DIE LINKE, AfD.

- 0. Feels close to a different party
- 1. Feels close to [PARTY]

Refusals, don't knows and non-attached respondents were coded to missing.

Self-Placement on Left-Right Scale (q37)

„Wo würden Sie sich selbst einordnen?“

- (1) 1 links
- (2) 2
- (3) 3
- (4) 4
- (5) 5
- (6) 6
- (7) 7
- (8) 8
- (9) 9
- (10) 10
- (11) 11 rechts

- (-98) weiß nicht
- (-97) trifft nicht zu
- (-99) keine Angabe

Coding: Recode of 11-point scale to 0 (left) and 10 (right) in sync with party and leader likability scales. Codes -97 - -99 coded to missing.

Economic Performance (Retrospective) (q24)

„Und ist die allgemeine wirtschaftliche Lage in Deutschland in den letzten ein bis zwei Jahren wesentlich besser geworden, etwas besser geworden, gleich geblieben, etwas schlechter oder wesentlich schlechter geworden?“

- (1) wesentlich besser geworden
- (2) etwas besser geworden
- (3) gleich geblieben
- (4) etwas schlechter geworden
- (5) wesentlich schlechter geworden

(-99) keine Angabe

Coding: The five categories above were collapsed into the following 3-point scale:

- 0. *Gotten somewhat / much worse (codes 4 and 5 from above)*
- 1. *Stayed the same (code 3 from above)*
- 2. *Gotten somewhat / much better (codes 1 and 2 from above)*

Code -99 coded to missing.

Gender (d1):

„Zunächst zwei Fragen zu Ihrer Person. Geben Sie bitte Ihr Geschlecht an.“

- (1) männlich
- (2) weiblich
- (3) divers

(-99) möchte keine Angabe machen

Note: GLES randomly assigned respondents identifying as (3) non-binary to (1) male and (2) female.

Coding: Dichotomous variable coded with (0) male and (1) female. Code -99 coded to missing.

Age (d2a)

„Geben Sie bitte an, an welchem Tag, in welchem Monat und in welchem Jahr Sie geboren wurden.“

Jahr:
(1910) 1910
...
(2005) 2005

(-99) keine Angabe

Note: GLES releases respondents' year of birth only due to data confidentiality policies. All respondents born in 1931 or earlier are coded as being born in 1931.

Coding: Respondents' year of birth was subtracted from the election year, i.e., 2021. Code -99 coded to missing.

Education (d8a-m)

„Welchen beruflichen Ausbildungsabschluss bzw. welche beruflichen Ausbildungsabschlüsse haben Sie? Geben Sie bitte alle beruflichen Ausbildungsabschlüsse an, die Sie haben.“

- (A) beruflich-betriebliche Anlernzeit mit Abschlusszeugnis, aber keine Lehre
- (B) Teilfacharbeiterabschluss
- (C) abgeschlossene gewerbliche oder landwirtschaftliche Lehre

- (D) abgeschlossene kaufmännische Lehre
- (E) berufliches Praktikum, Volontariat
- (F) Berufsfachschulabschluss
- (N) Fachakademie-/Berufsakademieabschluss
- (G) Fachschulabschluss
- (H) Meister/in, Technikerabschluss
- (I) Fachhochschulabschluss
- (J1) Hochschulabschluss: Bachelor
- (J2) Hochschulabschluss: Master, Diplom, Magister, Staatsexamen
- (J3) Promotion
- (K) anderen beruflichen Ausbildungsabschluss, und zwar _____
- (L) noch in beruflicher Ausbildung
- (M) keine abgeschlossene Ausbildung

Binary variables d8a – d8m coded as follows:

- (0) nicht genannt
- (1) genannt

- (-97) trifft nicht zu
- (-99) keine Angabe

Note: Answer options listed above represent those for the online survey. Respondents who answered the survey via mail-back were not provided with options N and J1-J3, but were offered a more general option “(J) Hochschulabschluss” as a replacement.

Coding: Dichotomous variable distinguishing between respondents with a university degree and those without such a degree. Specifically:

- 0. Less than a university degree (none of the items H, I, J, and J1-J3 selected)
- 1. University degree (any of items H, I, J, and J1-J3 selected)

Church Attendance (d40):

“Wie oft gehen Sie gewöhnlich zum Gottesdienst?”

- (1) nie
- (2) einmal im Jahr
- (3) mehrmals im Jahr
- (4) einmal im Monat
- (5) zwei- bis dreimal im Monat
- (6) einmal die Woche
- (7) öfter

(-99) keine Angabe

Coding: Coding scheme retained, with the following exception: Codes 6 and 7 were collapsed into a code 6 “Once a week / more often”. Code -99 recoded to missing.

Region (ostwest)

Note: Variable not included in questionnaire but provided by GLES. The following categories apply:

- 0. Eastern Germany (including Berlin)
- 1. Western Germany

Coding: Categories were reversed for this paper, such that (1) refers to respondents from Eastern Germany and (0) refers to respondents from Western Germany.

A.2 – 2021 Panel-Data (GLES 2021 Rolling-Cross-Section)*A.2.1 Key Dependent Variable: Vote Choice***Vote Choice (“Zweitstimme”) at t1 (pos004ba)**

“And which party did you vote for in the federal election?”

- (1) CDU/CSU
- (2) CDU
- (3) CSU
- (4) SPD
- (322) AfD
- (5) FDP
- (7) DIE LINKE
- (6) DIE GRÜNEN
- (801) Other political party, namely _____

- (-83) I cast an invalid vote
- (-84) I didn't cast a vote
- (-85) I didn't vote
- (-93) break-off
- (-95) unit nonresponse
- (-97) not applicable
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Coding: Dichotomous variables coded for the following parties / coalitions: CDU/CSU (Union), SPD, FDP, GRUENE, DIE LINKE, AfD.

- 0. Voted for a different party
- 1. Voted for [PARTY]

Codes -83 to -99 coded to missing.

*A.2.2 Party and Leader Likability***Party Likability at t1 (pos018b - h)**

„Looking now at the political parties in detail, what do you think of the different parties in general? Please use the thermometer from +5 to -5 again. +5 means that you think a great deal of the party and -5 that you do not think much of the party at all. Use the values in between to express your opinion more precisely.”

- (1) -5 I do not think much of the party at all
- (2) -4
- (3) -3
- (4) -2
- (5) -1
- (6) 0
- (7) +1
- (8) +2
- (9) +3
- (10) +4
- (11) +5 I think a great deal of the party

- (-71) I don't have sufficient knowledge about this party
- (-93) break-off
- (-95) unit nonresponse
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Coding: Variables coded for the following parties: CDU/CSU (Union), SPD, FDP, GRUENE, LINKE, AfD. 11-point-scale recoded to range from 0 (I do not think much of the party) to 10 (I think a great deal of the party), in line with the 1998 – 2021 times series dataset. Codes -71 to -99 coded to missing.

Leader Likability at t0 (pre029a - i)

„Please tell me now what you think of some of the political leaders. Please use the thermometer from +5 to -5 again. +5 means that you think a great deal of the politician and -5 that you do not think much of the politician at all. Use the values in between to express your opinion more precisely. If I come to a political leader you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so.“

- (1) -5 I do not think much of the politician at all
- (2) -4
- (3) -3
- (4) -2
- (5) -1
- (6) 0
- (7) +1
- (8) +2
- (9) +3
- (10) +4
- (11) +5 I think a great deal of the politician

- (-71) I don't know enough about this politician
- (-93) break-off
- (-95) unit nonresponse
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Coding: Variables coded for the following parties: CDU/CSU (Union), SPD, FDP, GRUENE, LINKE, AfD. 11-point-scale recoded to range from 0 (I do not think much of the politician) to 10 (I think a great deal of the politician), in line with the 1998 – 2021 times series dataset. Codes -71 to -99 coded to missing.

A.2.3 Control Variables

Self-Placement on Left-Right Scale at t0 (pre018)

„In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1 to 11 where 1 means the left and 11 means the right? Use the values in between to express your opinion more precisely.“

- (1) 1 left
- (2) 2
- (3) 3
- (4) 4
- (5) 5
- (6) 6
- (7) 7
- (8) 8
- (9) 9
- (10) 10
- (11) 11 right

- (-72) I don't know these terms
- (-93) break-off
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Coding: Recode of 11-point scale to 0 (left) and 10 (right) in sync with party and leader likability scales. Codes -72 to -99 coded to missing.

Economic Situation: Current, General at t1 (pos016)

„And how would you evaluate the current general economic situation in Germany: very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, or very bad?“

- (1) Very good
- (2) Good
- (3) Neither good nor bad
- (4) Bad
- (5) Very bad

- (-93) break-off
- (-95) unit nonresponse
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Coding: The five categories above were collapsed into the following 3-point scale:

- 0. Bad / very bad (codes 4 and 5 from above)
- 1. Neither good nor bad (code 3 from above)
- 2. Good / very good (codes 1 and 2 from above)

Codes -93 to -99 coded to missing.

Gender at t0 (pre063):

„What is your gender, male, female or non-binary?“

- (1) Male
- (2) Female
- (3) Non-binary

- (-93) break-off
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Note: GLES randomly assigned respondents identifying as (3) non-binary to (1) male and (2) female.

Coding: Dichotomous variable coded with (0) male and (1) female. Codes -93 to -99 coded to missing.

Age at t0 (pre062)

„Finally, I would like to ask you a few questions about you personally: What year were you born in?“

Year of birth: _____

- (-93) break-off
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Coding: Respondents' year of birth was subtracted from the election year, i.e., 2021. Codes -93 to -99 coded to missing.

Education at t0 (pre064)

„What's your highest level of general education?“

- (1) Finished school without school leaving certificate
- (2) Lowest formal qualification in Germany's tripartite secondary school system, after 8 or 9 years of schooling (“Hauptschulabschluss, Volksschulabschluss”)

- (3) Intermediary secondary qualification, after 10 years of schooling ("Mittlere Reife, Realschulabschluss bzw. Polytechnische Oberschule mit Abschluss 10. Klasse")
- (4) Certificate fulfilling entrance requirements to study at a polytechnical college ("Fachhochschulreife (Abschluss einer Fachoberschule etc.)")
- (5) Higher qualification, entitling holders to study at a university ("Abitur bzw. Erweiterte Oberschule mit Abschluss 12. Klasse (Hochschulreife)")
- (6) Other school leaving certificate
- (7) Still at school

- (-93) break-off
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Coding: Ordinal variable distinguishing between the following categories:

- 0. No school certificate (code 1 from above)
- 1. Lower secondary (8-9 years, code 2 from above)
- 2. Lower secondary (10 years, code 3 from above)
- 3. Upper secondary (entrance requirements to study at a polytechnical college/university, 12 years, codes 4 and 5 from above)

Codes 6 to -99 coded to missing.

Church Attendance at t1 (pos043):

"Generally, how frequently do you attend religious services - never, once a year, several times a year, once a month, two to three times a month, once a week, or more often?"

- (1) Never
- (2) Once a year
- (3) Several times a year
- (4) Once a month
- (5) Two to three times a month
- (6) Once a week
- (7) More often

- (-93) break-off
- (-95) unit nonresponse
- (-98) don't know
- (-99) no answer

Coding: Coding scheme retained, with the following exception: Codes 6 and 7 were collapsed into a code 6 "Once a week / More often". Codes -93 to -99 recoded to missing.

Region (ostwest)

Note: Variable not included in questionnaire, but provided by GLES. The following categories apply:

- 0. Eastern Germany (including Berlin)
- 1. Western Germany

Coding: Categories were reversed for this paper, such that (1) refers to respondents from Eastern Germany and (0) refers to respondents from Western Germany.

APPENDIX B – CODING OF VOTER TYPES FOR 1998 – 2021 TIME SERIES DATA

B.1 – Coding Procedure

Voter types for the 1998 – 2021 times series analysis were created following the typology introduced by Quinlan and McAllister (2022). Data was coded in STATA Version 16.1 based on the following steps:

1. Identifying the maximum value a respondent assigned to any of the six parties CDU, SPD, GRUENE, FDP, PDS/LINKE (1998 – 2021) and AfD (2017 - 2021).
2. Creating binary variables for each of the parties indicating whether the respondent assigned the party the maximum value (from Step 1) or not for all respondents that rated at least one party.
3. Identifying to how many parties the maximum value was assigned.
4. Excluding straightliners from binary variables by coding them to missing (i.e., respondents who assigned all parties the same value.)
5. Coding all binary variables to 0 for respondents who assigned their highest score to more than two parties.
6. Repeating steps 1 to 5 for leader likability scales of CDU, SPD, GRUENE, FDP, PDS/LINKE (1998 – 2021) and AfD (2017 - 2021).
7. Generate the types of voter variable based on binary party and leader favorite variables and vote choice (“Zweitstimme”). Specifically, for the party a respondent voted for...
 - *Leader-inclined vote*: Leader-Favorite = 1 & Party-Favorite = 0
 - *Leader-leaning vote*: Leader-Favorite = 1 & Party-Favorite = 1 & higher maximum score for leader than party
 - *Party and leader inclined vote*: Leader-Favorite = 1 & Party-Favorite = 1 & identical maximum scores assigned to leader and party
 - *Party-leaning vote*: Leader-Favorite = 1 & Party-Favorite = 1 & higher maximum score for party than leader
 - *Party-inclined vote*: Leader-Favorite = 0 & Party-Favorite = 1
 - *Incongruent vote*: Leader-Favorite = 0 & Party-Favorite = 0

B.2 – Some Examples Illustrating Voter Types

Imagine three hypothetical voters (V_1 , V_2 , and V_3) who cast their party-list vote (Zweitstimme) for the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 2021.

V_1 rated parties and leaders as follows:

	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens	Left	AfD
V_1 Party-Placement	10	8	5	0	4	0
V_1 Leader-Placement	8	10	5	0	6	0

V_1 is classified as a *leader-inclined voter* since she voted for the party whose leader she preferred, but not the party she preferred.

V_2 assigned parties and leaders the following evaluations:

	CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens	Left	AfD
V_2 Party-Placement	3	9	5	6	7	0
V_2 Leader-Placement	0	9	5	5	6	0

We classify V_2 as a *party and leader inclined voter* as she voted for the SPD, ranked the SPD and Scholz as her favorite party and leader, and assigned them identical likability scores.

V_3 rated parties and leaders as follows:

CDU	SPD	FDP	Greens	Left	AfD
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V_3 Party-Placement	5	7	1	5	1	1
V_3 Leader-Placement	0	8	1	0	1	0

We classify V_3 as a *leader leaning voter* as she voted for the SPD, marked the SPD and Scholz as her favorites, but scored Scholz higher than the SPD.

APPENDIX C – OVERVIEW OF LEADERS RATED BY RESPONDENTS

Table C1 Party Leaders Rated by Respondents in 1998 – 2021 Cross-Sectional Times Series Dataset

Party	1998	2005	2009	2013	2017	2021
CDU	Helmut Kohl	Angela Merkel	Angela Merkel	Angela Merkel	Angela Merkel	Armin Laschet
SPD	Gerhard Schröder	Gerhard Schröder	Frank-Walter Steinmeier	Sigmar Gabriel	Martin Schulz	Olaf Scholz
FDP	Wolfgang Gerhardt	Guido Westerwelle	Guido Westerwelle	Philipp Rösler	Christian Lindner	Christian Lindner
Greens	Joschka Fischer	Joschka Fischer	Renate Künast	Jürgen Trittin	Cem Özdemir	Annalena Baerbock
Left	Gregor Gysi	Oskar Lafontaine	Oskar Lafontaine	Gregor Gysi	Sahra Wagenknecht	Dietmar Bartsch
AfD	-	-	-	-	Alexander Gauland	Alice Weidel

Table C2 Party Leaders Rated by Respondents at t0 in 2021 Rolling-Cross Section Panel Dataset

Party	Leader rated at t0
CDU	Armin Laschet
SPD	Olaf Scholz
FDP	Christian Lindner
Greens	Annalena Baerbock
Left	Janine Wissler / Dietmar Bartsch ⁺
AfD	Alice Weidel / Tino Chrupalla*

⁺ split-half in 2021 for leader ratings of Left Party leaders. Half of the sample were asked to rate Janine Wissler, while the other half of the sample rated Dietmar Bartsch. Data for both leaders were combined for the analysis.

* split-half in 2021 for leader ratings of AfD leaders. Half of the sample were asked to rate Alice Weidel, while the other half of the sample rated Tino Chrupalla. Data for both leaders were combined for the analysis.

**APPENDIX D –
SUMMARY STATISTICS**

to be included in the final draft

APPENDIX E – RESULTS TABLES

Table E1 Logit models exploring the impact of leader and party likeability alignments with reported vote choice in 2021 German Federal Election

<i>Dependent variable: Reported vote in 2021 German Federal Election for...</i>						
	Union	SPD	Green	FDP	Left	AfD
Voter Type (ref: Party inclined voter)						
Incongruent voter	0.467* (0.234)	0.902** (0.306)	-1.007** (0.391)	-0.005 (0.441)	-0.416 (0.552)	1.454** (0.479)
Party leaning voter	-1.438** (0.217)	0.594* (0.232)	0.318 (0.201)	0.701* (0.294)	-1.159*** (0.335)	-0.171 (0.558)
Party & leader inclined	-2.362*** (0.272)	1.417*** (0.220)	-0.598** (0.230)	1.160*** (0.286)	-1.722*** (0.377)	0.293 (0.485)
Leader leaning voter	-3.220*** (0.595)	1.460*** (0.273)	-1.067** (0.367)	1.245*** (0.349)	-0.439 (0.473)	1.111 ⁺ (0.613)
Leader inclined	-3.019*** (0.545)	2.809*** (0.325)	-2.081*** (0.533)	1.580*** (0.400)	-0.366 (0.604)	-0.696 (0.611)
Female	0.089 (0.173)	0.097 (0.152)	0.117 (0.162)	-0.048 (0.190)	-0.433 (0.285)	-0.671 ⁺ (0.377)
Age	0.010* (0.005)	0.015*** (0.004)	-0.021*** (0.004)	-0.012* (0.006)	-0.001 (0.009)	0.003 (0.010)
University Education	-0.100 (0.173)	-0.074 (0.154)	0.328* (0.162)	-0.159 (0.191)	-0.312 (0.287)	0.115 (0.375)
Church Attendance	0.246*** (0.065)	-0.160* (0.063)	0.076 (0.057)	0.081 (0.074)	-0.101 (0.155)	-0.182 (0.203)
East Germany	-0.111 (0.176)	-0.333* (0.169)	-0.654*** (0.183)	0.218 (0.207)	0.632* (0.284)	1.374*** (0.337)
Partisanship with party	2.702*** (0.176)	3.717*** (0.172)	3.463*** (0.178)	3.810*** (0.232)	3.352*** (0.297)	6.141*** (0.564)
Economy Valence Sociotropic	0.367** (0.114)	0.091 (0.101)	-0.116 (0.110)	-0.076 (0.140)	-0.154 (0.195)	-0.680* (0.292)
N	2017	2017	2017	2017	2017	2017
Pseudo R ²	0.522	0.452	0.463	0.359	0.525	0.620
Log likelihood	-552.799	-681.39	-595.7566	-464.3654	-210.9639	-162.7241
AIC	1133.598	1390.78	1219.513	956.7309	449.9278	353.4482
BIC	1212.129	1469.31	1298.044	1035.262	528.4589	431.9793

Source of data: GLES 2021 Post-Election Cross-Section.

Note: Constant omitted from Table. Standard errors in parentheses. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table E2 Logit models exploring impact of leader and party likeability measured at different time points on vote choice in the 2021 German Federal Election

<i>Dependent variable: Reported vote t_1 in 2021 German Federal Election</i>					
	Union	SPD	Green	FDP	Left
Gender	-0.168 (0.192)	-0.221 (0.176)	-0.138 (0.189)	-0.243 (0.278)	-0.598 (0.498)
Age	0.026*** (0.006)	0.021*** (0.006)	-0.025*** (0.006)	-0.022** (0.007)	-0.027+ (0.014)
Education	-0.147 (0.140)	-0.272* (0.135)	0.962*** (0.189)	0.544** (0.203)	0.487 (0.419)
Church Attendance	0.194** (0.074)	-0.163* (0.068)	-0.090 (0.071)	-0.128 (0.086)	0.189 (0.177)
East Germany	-0.361 (0.238)	-0.080 (0.252)	0.130 (0.240)	-0.511 (0.407)	0.461 (0.613)
Ideology	0.336*** (0.056)	-0.101* (0.045)	-0.062 (0.049)	0.088 (0.066)	-0.297* (0.137)
Economy Valence Sociotropic	-0.202 (0.159)	0.191 (0.162)	-0.013 (0.178)	-0.213 (0.206)	-1.022* (0.454)
Leader Likeability CDU t_0	0.241*** (0.048)	-	-	-	-
Party Likeability CDU t_1	0.476*** (0.051)	-	-	-	-
Leader Likeability SPD t_0	-	0.266*** (0.064)	-	-	-
Party Likeability SPD t_1	-	0.766*** (0.073)	-	-	-
Leader Likeability Greent t_0	-	-	0.252*** (0.066)	-	-
Party Likeability Greent t_1	-	-	0.911*** (0.124)	-	-
Leader Likeability FDP t_0	-	-	-	0.339*** (0.083)	-
Party Likeability FDP t_1	-	-	-	0.689*** (0.135)	-
Leader Likeability Left t_0	-	-	-	-	0.211 (0.163)
Party Likeability Left t_1	-	-	-	-	1.147*** (0.196)
Constant	-8.054*** (0.824)	-8.464*** (0.933)	-10.407*** (1.235)	-8.981*** (1.055)	-10.411*** (1.918)
N	1,017	1,017	1,017	1017	1013
Pseudo R ²	0.3699	0.3188	0.3926	0.3452	0.5499
Log likelihood	-336.6357	-386.0781	-388.5219	-199.9198	-57.18803
AIC	693.2714	792.1561	697.0438	419.8397	134.3761
BIC	742.5175	841.4022	746.29	469.0858	183.5828

Source of data: GLES 2021 Rolling-Cross-Section.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.