

Gone, but not forgotten?

The German federal election 2021 and the effect of an incumbent who didn't run

Holger Reinermann
JGU Mainz
reinermann@politik.uni-mainz.de

Fabio Best
JGU Mainz
best@politik.uni-mainz.de

Sascha Huber
JGU Mainz
huber@politik.uni-mainz.de

Robert Welz
JGU Mainz
welz@politik.uni-mainz.de

Abstract

The German federal election in 2021 was remarkable in many ways, among them the fact that there was no incumbent chancellor running as the front-runner of their party. Moreover, Angela Merkel was still very popular but did not figure very prominently in the campaign, a circumstance that was widely discussed. Eventually, the CDU/CSU incurred a historically bad result, ending its 16 years of taking the senior role in government. We study the direct and indirect influence that Angela Merkel (and her absence in the campaign) had on the election result in general and the electoral fortunes of the CDU/CSU in particular. Specifically, we distinguish two phenomena: First, her effect on the citizens' likelihood to vote for the CDU/CSU is likely to diminish as the election draws closer, while Laschet's effect is likely increase ("washing off"). Second, apart from her effect on her party there is a considerable effect of her evaluation on Laschet's ("rubbing off"), which opens up a pathway for an indirect effect on the CDU/CSU. To show these phenomena, we employ observational and experimental data: we examine the dynamics of the campaign using the panel and rolling cross section components from the *German Longitudinal Election Study*. Additionally, we rely on a large-scale survey experiment ($N = 2173$) we conducted in June 2021 and in which we compare voters with and without a prime about Angela Merkel's departure, which allows us to causally identify the rubbing off effect of Merkel on Laschet.

1 Introduction

The German federal election in 2021 was remarkable in many ways, among them the fact that there was no incumbent chancellor running as the front-runner of their party. In fact, the only other election when this was the case was the very first election of the newly founded federal republic in 1949, when there simply was no outgoing government. Moreover, Angela Merkel was still very popular but did not figure very prominently in the campaign, a circumstance that was widely discussed. However, this discussion only

goes to show that she was far from completely absent from the debate surrounding the election: her early decision not-to run again in the election was widely seen as ‘the end of an era’ and discussions of her legacy’ were ubiquitous. Nonetheless, the CDU/CSU incurred a historically bad result, ending its 16 years of taking the senior role in government. This was to a large extent attributed to Armin Laschet lacking the popularity of his predecessor. However, there also were a lot of commentators speculating whether Merkel could have changed her party’s fortunes had she played a more active role in the campaign.

Against this backdrop, we study the direct and indirect influence that Angela Merkel (and her absence in the campaign) had on the election result in general and the result of the CDU/CSU in particular. While incumbency and candidate effects have been studied in the political science literature in great depth, research on the effects of incumbents who do not run again is relatively scarce and not exhaustively theorized. Building on advances by Hainmueller and Kern (2008) and Elis *et al.* (2010), we distinguish between the incumbent’s effect on the succeeding candidate on the one hand and on vote choices on the other hand in an election in which an incumbent did not run. Our specific focus is thereby on a potential dynamic effect over time. In our analysis, we uncover two phenomena: first, the effect of Merkel on citizens’ likelihood of stating a CDU/CSU vote intention decreases over time as the election approaches, a process we label *washing off*. At the same time, Laschet’s effect increases, arguably because either voters learn more about him during the campaign or only incrementally realize that Merkel would not be available for another term in office. Second, Merkel has a considerable and persistent positive effect on Laschet’s evaluation which, following Hainmueller and Kern (2008), we call *rubbing off*. Taken together, our findings suggest that more outspoken endorsements of Laschet from Merkel and more joint campaign appearances, might have affected the CDU/CSU result favorably.

Our analysis rests on both observational and experimental data: On the one hand, we examine the dynamics of the campaign, and specifically how voters’ assessments of Merkel affected their party preferences and attitudes differently over time, by making use of two very well-suited components of the *German Longitudinal Election Study* (GLES): while the Rolling-Cross-Section Study (RCS) gives us the short-term perspective on the election campaign, we use the GLES online-panel to look at longer time trends. Additionally, we rely on a large-scale survey experiment ($N = 2189$) we conducted in July 2021 and in which we compare voters with and without a prime about Angela Merkel’s departure. This experimental design allows us to examine a potential causal effect of the saliency of Angela Merkel as an incumbent on voters’ attitudes towards Laschet.

In the following, we first review the relevant literature and discuss some theoretical arguments about the effects of *washing off* and *rubbing off*. Next, we present our data and analyses, discussing the evidence for both phenomena in turn, before we conclude. Because we analyze three different data sets, we take a large part of the

operationalization and data processing out of the main text and summarize it in the appendix, thus focusing on our immediate findings.

2 Candidate and incumbency effects in the German federal election of 2021

Considering the role an outgoing incumbent plays in an election, two distinct effects are conceivable. First, if one assumes voters to be somewhat retrospective in their decision-making, the assessment of the incumbent should, to some degree, affect their electoral behavior. However, over the course of a campaign, voters are expected to gather information about and form opinions of the running candidates and his or her effects on vote choices should eventually superimpose the incumbents' influences (Elis *et al.* 2010). Second, since candidates in parliamentary systems do not run on their own, but merely as front-runners of their parties, organizational linkages might play a decisive role in how voters perceive the candidates. As partisanship is a valuable heuristic, a new candidate is likely to be perceived as the successor of the policies of an incumbent, especially if the latter endorses the former (Hainmueller and Kern 2008). We discuss both influences in greater detail below.

2.1 Washing-off: Diminishing influences of outgoing incumbents

There is an extensive discussion on the personalization of politics in parliamentary systems and a supposed increase in candidate-centered voting, both in general (Quinlan and McAllister 2022, Costa Lobo and Curtice 2015, Huber 2015) and with regard to Germany (Kaase 1994, Gschwend and Zittel 2015), said to be precipitated, in part, by a decrease in partisan identification (documented, e.g., by Arzheimer 2006). Chancellor candidate effects, although not particularly pronounced, were observed early on (Klingemann and Taylor 1977) and studied systematically by e.g., Wagner and Wessels (2011). Candidate effects can come about for a variety of reasons, including their perceived experience, political competence, or personality traits (Norpoth 1977). While a lot of the debate has focused on how strong chancellor candidate effects are in comparison to other influences on the vote and whether that strength changes over time (Ohr *et al.* 2013), their general existence can be seen as confirmed.

The role of an outgoing chancellor is less straightforward, and hinges on how we conceive of voters' style of information processing. Purely prospective voters should pay no heed to politicians who can or will not take office anymore. On the other end, voters who only decide retrospectively will not, or only to a very small amount, incorporate newly running candidates into their decisions. These two extreme scenarios both seem implausible: prospective as well as retrospective evaluations are likely to play a role in voters' judgments, albeit to different degrees depending on the situation and point in time, as Elis *et al.* (2010) argue in their treatment of the US presidential elections of 2008. These elections took place in a very similar configuration as the one we are

studying here insofar as George W. Bush was not able to run as a candidate anymore, and the Republican party fielded fresh candidates. Elis et al. argue that because voters learn more information about the current candidate as the election draws closer, the effect of the current candidate should increase over time while that of the incumbent should decrease, a process we label as *washing off* of the incumbent’s effect for the purpose of this article.

2.2 Rubbing off: Candidates benefiting from outgoing incumbents

While we expect the incumbent’s direct influence on vote choices at least to some extent to wash off over the course of a campaign, it is conceivable that a popular incumbent might still be of use for his or her party and successor. The literature on incumbency effects stresses the advantages office holders hold compared to their challengers and it seems reasonable to assume that the cards are not completely reshuffled when an incumbent leaves the arena.

The origins of such incumbency advantages are manifold. Besides effects of mere candidate quality of the incumbent (Zaller 1998, Fowler 2016) and, consequentially, the deterrent of potential challengers (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008), previous research points to substantive advantages in media coverage (Prior 2006, Green-Pedersen *et al.* 2017) on which incumbents can build their prominence (Druckman *et al.* 2020) which eventually will favor them over their challengers at the ballot box (Ansolabehere *et al.* 2000).

However, candidate-specific and system-level factors are not the only sources of incumbency bonuses, but voters’ attitudes might play an important part as well. As Eckles *et al.* (2014) argue, familiarity with the incumbents, their positions, and style of politics prompts risk-averse voters to prefer office-holders over their challengers. Furthermore, Morisi *et al.* (2021) find that aversion to lesser known alternatives and status quo bias is more pronounced among conservative than liberal voters.

Again, it is not obvious how the outgoing of the incumbent might alter such effects. The argument by Fowler and Hall (2014) on personal and partisan incumbency advantages provides one persuasive answer. They argue that voters’ do not only favor the incumbent herself but attribute the actions of representatives to their parties or that retiring representatives systematically help new candidates from their party. (p. 502) However, the authors themselves do not find such partisan incumbency effects investigating U.S. state elections and evidence from other studies at different levels is mixed (see Salas 2016). In systems of proportional representation, parties are still the most important political object, as they structure the political competition, choose their leaders rather independently and prime ministers or chancellors being dependent on their parties once they are in office. In parliamentary elections, parties are on the ballot and not potential candidates for prime minister or chancellor. We therefore think that the proposed partisan incumbency effect is particularly plausible in the parliamentary system of Germany and the level of chancellors. When the personal component of

incumbency is omitted due to an outgoing incumbent, there is still the office-holding party and a succeeding leading candidate in the pursuit of continuity. In that situation, the obvious option for citizens satisfied with the outgoing incumbent seems to be a vote for the incumbent’s party. Evidence on incumbency effects in PR systems is still scarce but clearly points to some advantages (see Jankowski and Mller 2021 for a recent review).

In sum, it is plausible that a popular incumbent’s reputation rubs off’ on the next candidate her party puts forward after she decides to retire (especially if she explicitly endorses the candidate) (Hainmueller and Kern 2008, 217). To contrast this transmission of popularity from the *washing off* effect discussed above, we label this the *rubbing off* effect.

2.3 Context of the German federal election of 2021

Having been chancellor in Germany for 16 years, Angela Merkel was still remarkably popular in 2021. After being successful in four federal elections since 2005 and having had a great impact on the electoral fortunes in all of those elections (Schoen 2011, Schoen and Greszki 2014, Hansen and Olsen 2020), she decided not to run again, which is a very unusual choice in German politics. Armin Laschet became her successor as party leader and as front-runner in the 2021 election. He was widely described as being her’ candidate, particularly in comparison to his CDU rival Friedrich Merz, who had fallen out with Merkel early on in his career. But after the decision for Laschet as party leader of the CDU his path for candidacy was not yet clear as controversy arose if he or his counterpart Markus Soedder as party leader of the Bavarian sister party CSU would have better prospects as front-runner of the two parties which traditionally campaign with a joint candidate for chancellorship. Eventually, Laschet emerged the winner of the power struggle, but the dispute itself as well as endorsements by CDU politicians for the CSU leader Soeder gave the impression of discord about Laschets abilities and harmed his image. Furthermore, Merkel was largely mute about the 2021 election, only doing a few campaign events for Laschet. Many observers were puzzled about her apparently lackluster support for her party and Laschet in the 2021 election (Jesse 2021, Faas and Klingelhoef 2022). A rubbing off effect of her popularity on Armin Laschet is therefore less than straightforward.

On the one hand, Laschet was always considered to be close to Merkel and perceived to be an ally in some intra-party struggles. Moreover, he had a similar style of politics, refraining from being too confrontational. Most importantly Merkel did voice her support for his candidacy. On the other hand, Merkel was not very present in the campaign: being the chancellor of a grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD, she had a very long working relationship with vice chancellor Olaf Scholz, who was now the chancellor candidate for the SPD and therefore the main rival for Laschet. Scholz tried to stress the prospect of continuity in government with him in charge and get some rubbing off from Merkel’s popularity as well (Schmitt-Beck 2021). Given this rather unfavorable

context, we expect only a moderate rubbing off effect of Merkel’s popularity on Armin Laschet.

Nevertheless, Angela Merkel’s popularity at the end of her tenure could still have a direct effect on vote intentions for the CDU/CSU in the 2021 election, without necessarily helping Armin Laschet to become more popular himself. After all, in the parliamentary system of Germany, voters cast their vote for parties instead of candidates. Retrospective voters could still use their evaluation of Merkel as a simple cue for their party choice, even if she was not running anymore. According to this view, Merkel’s popularity should still have helped the CDU/CSU in this election. We expect, however, that this effect should be more pronounced when voters have not yet learned much about the candidates for chancellor in this election. As outlined above, Merkel was not very present during the campaign and as election day came closer the three candidates for chancellor – Armin Laschet (CDU/CSU), Olaf Scholz (SPD) and Annalena Baerbock (Greens) stood more and more in the spotlight. For instance, there were various TV-debates between these three, which got very high audience ratings (Statista 2022). By the end of the campaign, we expect voters to rely less on their evaluation of Merkel in making their vote choices and more on their evaluations of the actual candidates. Put short, we expect a strong emphwashing off effect during the campaign with only a small direct effect of Merkel remaining at the end.

3 Data & analysis

We rely on two survey data sets from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) to evaluate the effects discussed above: the GLES panel (GLES 2021, 2022a,b,c, waves 1-18) and the Rolling Cross-Section (RCS, GLES 2022d) . In the case of the *rubbing off* effect, we also present results from a survey experiment that we ran in July 2021, which strengthens our causal claim. Due to the multitude of data sets we use, we relegate much of the concrete operationalization and specification for our analyses of observational data to the appendix (see tables 1 and 2) and only give a general introduction to the data and what purposes they serve in the context of this article.

Containing information that has been collected in eighteen interview waves from 2016 onwards, the GLES panel is perfectly suited both to investigate the long-term trajectories of Angela Merkel’s effect on the electoral prospects of the CDU/CSU as well as to compare the effect of Merkel’s popularity on vote intentions in the 2021 federal election with the 2017 federal election. In this comparison, the 2017 results can be considered a baseline-model revealing the incumbency effect of Merkel to which the results from the 2021 election can be compared. The panel further allows us to investigate the effect of Merkel’s popularity on her possible successor Armin Laschet in the early days of the election campaign 2021. To ensure comparability between waves, we have limited our analysis to those 887 respondents who have valid entries for all

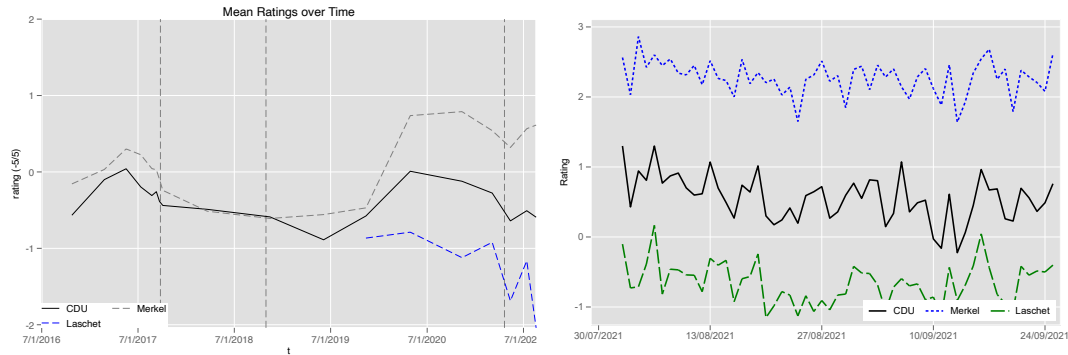
independent and dependent variables in all eighteen waves. Thus, we implicitly assume that both wave-nonresponse and item-nonresponse occur at random.

While the GLES panel gives us a picture of the longer time frame from one election to another, we zoom in on the very last weeks of the campaign using the RCS. RCS surveys are specifically designed to examine changes in how different variables affect citizens' party preferences over the course of an election campaign (Johnston and Brady 2002). By spreading out the drawing of a sample over the campaign, and randomizing interview dates, researchers obtain daily snapshots of how the campaign unfolds. This makes the GLES RCS well suited to examine Merkel's effect on the CDU/CSU's fortunes and Laschet's favorability at this crucial point of the campaign. We also take a look beyond this focus by estimating a multinomial logit model of vote intentions to look at how both of them affected vote choice more generally.

Our own survey-experiment was fielded from 12 to 31 of July 2021 in a very early stage of the campaign before the incisive changes in the run-up to the elections. To illustrate: at field time, polls located CDU/CSU well above both the second-placed Greens and the Social Democrats. Over the course of the campaign, the Christian Democrats forfeited popularity and eventually came in second behind the SPD. This development has been quite often ascribed to a downward spiral of bad campaigning by Laschet. However, it is conceivable that during our survey in July, citizens' perceptions were mostly unaffected by campaign dynamics and their judgments of the chancellor candidates were not yet concluded. This setting enables us to test a potential *rubbing off* effect of Merkel, independent of potential confounding influences.

Some first descriptive impressions from our observational data show that one condition for a favorable influence of Merkel on the CDU/CSU, i.e. a high degree of favorability, was certainly met: the two plots in figure 1 show the average ratings of Merkel, Laschet and the CDU, across panel waves (left) and campaigning days (in the RCS; left), respectively. Before the 2017 federal election, the incumbent Angela Merkel was evaluated slightly better than her party, possibly aiding the CDU/CSU in winning the election. After a period in which this gap disappeared, she started to be seen more

Figure 1: Ratings of Angela Merkel, Armin Laschet, and the CDU, across GLES panel waves (left) and per day of the GLES rolling cross-section (right).



positively than her party again after her announcement to not run for reelection in late 2018. The biggest gap between her and her party, however, emerged during the pandemic: From 2020 onwards, she has constantly been seen positively while her party and especially Armin Laschet – prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia at that time – had a net negative rating. Interestingly, his ratings even dropped after his nomination as joint chancellor candidate of CDU and CSU, which might be a result of the struggles between him and Soeder. After this dip, it seemed as a momentum was beginning to build with rising ratings but as soon as August his favorability dropped again, presumably because of unfavorable public appearances, e.g. a picture of Laschet laughing during a condolence speech of president Steinmeier in the Ahrtal after a flood disaster in the region was prominent subject in the media.

The general pattern from the panel is carried forth and turns up remarkably stable in the RCS (right panel of figure 1). Neither Merkel’s party nor its actual candidate is able to match her rating. Laschet, on the other hand, is much less popular than his party: in fact, the scatter plots in figure 2 suggest that while both Merkel’s and Laschet’s ratings correlate positively with that for the CDU, Merkel was a boon for her party, Laschet was more of a liability: the plots show that even among respondents who evaluate the CDU negatively, Merkel was predominantly well liked. For Laschet, the picture is reversed: Even those who give the CDU high ratings are mostly skeptical of him. On this basis (and in comparison to Armin Laschet), it appears that Merkel’s high popularity may have helped the CDU/CSU in the 2021 election.

3.1 Washing off: Changes in Merkel’s and Laschet’s effects on CDU/CSU vote intention over time

Figure 3 displays the influence of Angela Merkel and Armin Laschet on vote intentions for the CDU/CSU in the GLES panel. The logit coefficients, derived from eighteen independent regressions (one per wave)¹ indicate that Merkel had a positive impact on the prospects of the CDU/CSU throughout the covered timespan. Her influence on vote intentions for the CDU/CSU dropped from the time of the federal election of 2017 to 2021 but is still far from absent. Thus, it appears that voters do not completely disregard Merkel as the outgoing incumbent. However, the figure clearly shows that her influence declined which is in line with the expectation of a *washing off*. On the contrary, Armin Laschet’s influence on vote choices only starts to rise from insignificance for his party’s fortunes after being nominated as the official CDU/CSU candidate in April 2021. The last available wave of the GLES panel, fielded in August 2021, indicates that both politicians had a positive and roughly equivalent effect on vote intentions for the CDU/CSU. Even though Merkel’s effect on vote choices washes off to an extent, it is remarkable that she still played a part for intended vote choices only about a month prior to the election.

¹ Our models control for the standard sociodemographic variables age, gender, and education, the respondent’s left-right placement (and its squared value), and whether respondents stated having a CDU/CSU party identification (PID) in the first panel wave.

Figure 2: Ratings for the CDU, contingent on Merkel (left) and Laschet rating (right), GLES RCS.

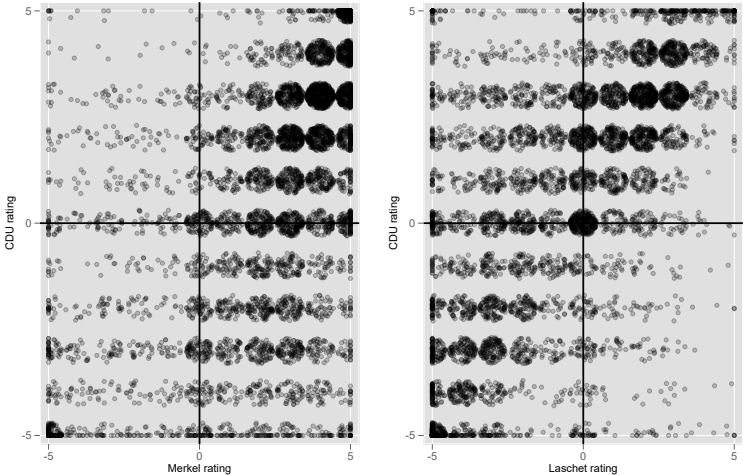
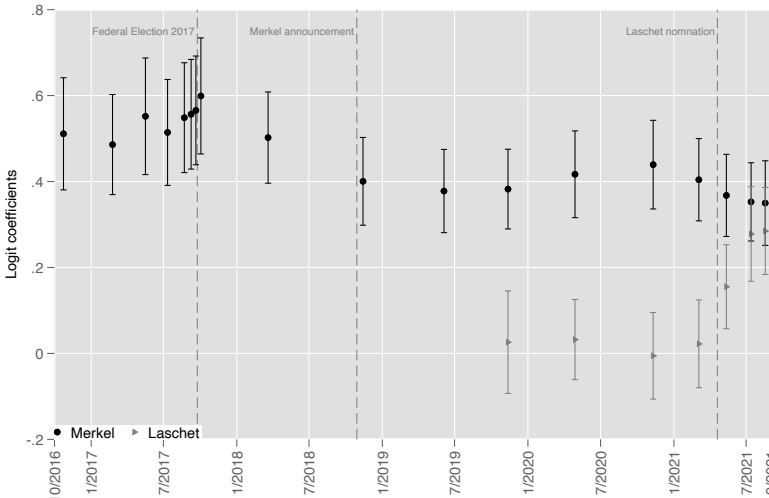


Figure 3: Effect of Merkel (black) and Laschet (grey) ratings on CDU vote across GLES panel waves.



To further examine the washing off effect, we also estimate logistic regressions in the GLES RCS data set with the intention to vote for the CDU/CSU being the dependent variable, with standard errors clustered by interview days. To examine the dynamics of Merkel’s and Laschet’s effect, we include fixed effects for the calendar weeks and interact those with the two politicians’ ratings. Both models we present control for the standard socio-demographics (age, education, and gender), the second model adding whether or not the respondent has a CDU/CSU party identification (PID), her left-right position and a with a squared term of left-right added (see table 3 in the appendix for detailed regression results). Figure 4 shows, for both models, the respective conditional marginal effects of Merkel’s and Laschet’s evaluation on the probability to vote for the CDU/CSU.

In contrast to what we find in the GLES panel, Laschet’s effect is larger than Merkel’s in the RCS which further attests to the *washing off* effect. In the second model, Merkel’s effect also ceases to be statistically significant in part, although that may be due to the reduction in statistical power brought about by the time trend we include here (see the additional models without the interaction effect in table 3). To gauge how substantial these effects are, we use the estimates from the dynamic models to compute the predicted probability of a CDU/CSU vote for two illustrative scenarios, i.e. (1) a respondent that places Merkel at the neutral point of the scale and (2) one who gives exactly the average rating found in the regression sample (2.28; see figure 5).² Depending on model specification, this difference induces a probability of roughly 2-3 or 1 percent, which, while arguably welcome from the perspective of party strategists, can of course not be expected to decisively change the outcome for the party.

3.2 Rubbing off: The effect of Merkel on Laschet’s favorability

We start our analysis of the *rubbing off* effect with results from our survey experiment, carried out in July 2021. A necessary condition for the evaluation of an outgoing incumbent to alter citizens’ assessment of running candidates would be that citizens do take the incumbent in account when contemplating potential successors. In a natural campaign context, whether citizens have the incumbent in mind or not is hard to observe, let alone to examine causally. To approximate the relevant counterfactual, we tried to stimulate the consideration of Merkel in the assessment of the running chancellor candidates.

Participants were recruited via Facebook ads using demographic targeting on age and gender (Neundorf and Öztürk 2021) and were randomly assigned to either a control ($N = 1,086$) or treatment group ($N = 1,103$). Respondents in both groups were asked to rate the three leading candidates for chancellorship on an eleven-point scale from -5 to +5. For the treatment group, the question was introduced with a short sentence

² Probabilities in both scenarios were predicted for a women of average age and neither high nor low education, with no CDU PID, who positions herself in the middle of the left-right scale. The conditional marginal effects in figure 4 were computed with the same parameters, and Merkel’s and Laschet’s ratings at their respective means.

Figure 4: Effect of Merkel (black) and Laschet (blue) on CDU vote, over calender weeks, GLES RCS

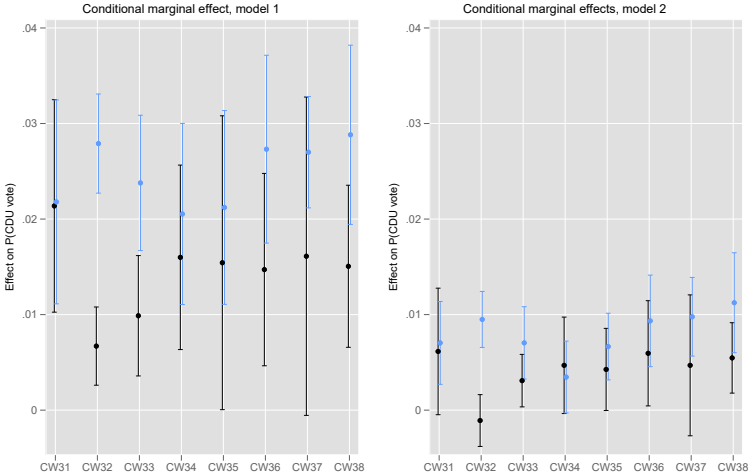
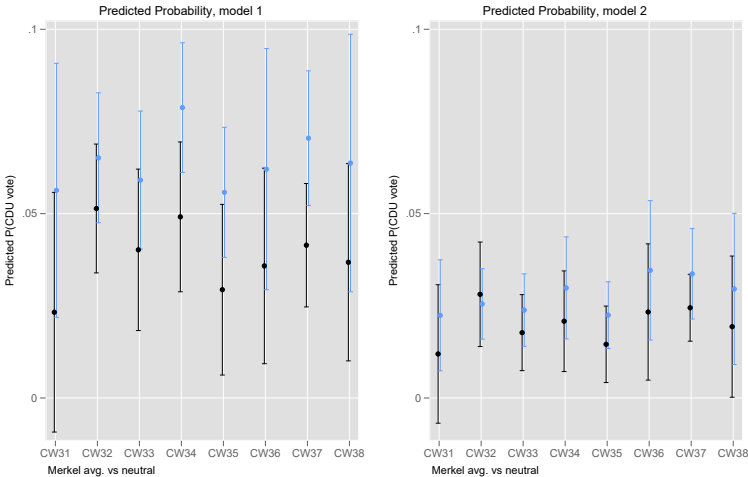


Figure 5: Predicted probability of CDU/CSU vote intention for neutral (black) and average (black) Merkel rating, over calender weeks, GLES RCS.



about Angela Merkel: “The upcoming federal election will be the first in 16 years in which Chancellor Angela Merkel will not be running.” This sentence was omitted in the item for the control group. One should keep in mind that in this experimental setting we were not able to actively prevent participants in the control group to consider Merkel when making up their minds about the candidates, but just did not mention her. However, we primed considerations about her in the treatment group. Consequently, differences between the two groups do not depict the whole effect Merkel could have had on candidate ratings but display more of a conservative tendency.

Figure 6 displays the mean ratings of Armin Laschet and Olaf Scholz, for comparison, for the two groups. Starting with the former, it is observable that Laschet is rated higher when chancellor Merkel was mentioned in the question text than without her presence in the item wording. For a one-tailed t-test, this difference reaches statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). This finding is in line with the expectation that Merkel’s incumbency status and potential related advantages (could have had) spilled over on Laschet. The mere mentioning of Merkel in the treatment resulted in a higher rating for her fellow party member. Turning to Scholz, Figure 6 shows the opposite pattern: the candidate of the Social Democrats was rated lower by respondents in the treatment than by those in the control group. This effect is also statistically significant in a one-tailed t-test ($p < 0.05$).

Regarding the question about the potential of incumbency bonus as well as popularity rubbing off on succeeding candidates, the findings suggest that they might do. Furthermore, it seems that there was not only potential for her parties’ leading candidate to ride on the incumbency bandwagon but that his Social Democratic competitor Scholz could have lost approval. This contradicts some popular claims that the vice-chancellor and minister of finances in Merkel’s cabinet benefited by making himself appear as a successor of the chancellor’s style of politics (Schmitt-Beck 2021). Instead, it seemed that party allegiances mattered more than cabinet colleagueship regarding a rubbing-off.

The *rubbing off* effect of Merkel on Laschet also turns up in the observational data, and in a remarkably stable manner: regressing the evaluation of Armin Laschet on his predecessor’s turns up similar effects both in the GLES panel and the RCS, as figures 7 and 8, based on linear regressions with Laschet’s rating as the dependent variable, show. This indicates that Laschet did indeed profit from the good reputation of Angela Merkel. Linear predictions for a neutral evaluation of Merkel and one at the sample mean (see figure 10 in the appendix) show that this differential coincides with a change in the rating of Laschet of around 0.5-0.75 scale points, indicating a considerable effect. Interestingly, in contrast to the finding that Merckels’ direct effect on vote choices washes off to an extent, this rubbing off effect is rather stable over time. Even in the decisive stages of the campaign it mattered for citizens’ assessments of Laschet, how they view his predecessor Merkel.

Figure 6: Mean differences between control and treatment group in Laschet and Scholz ratings in the survey experiment.

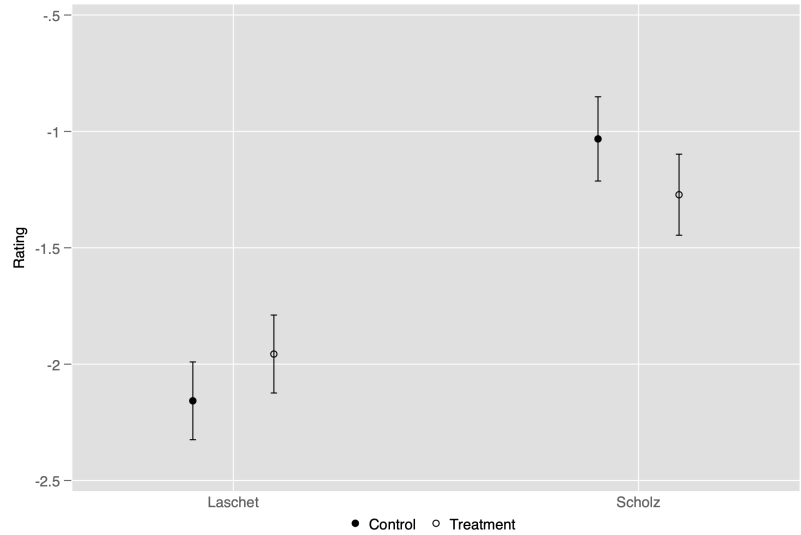


Figure 7: Effect of Merkel on Laschet rating across GLES panel waves.

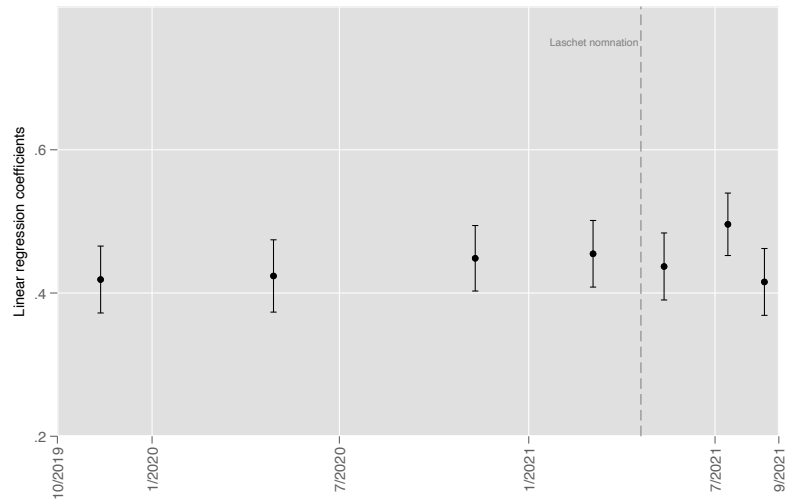
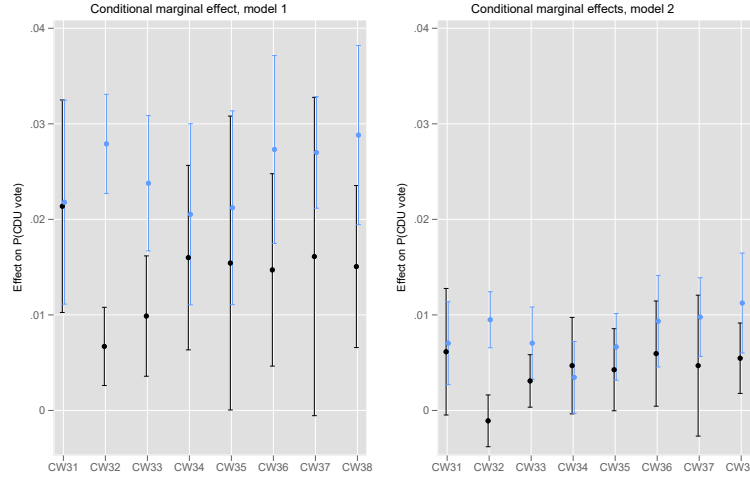


Figure 8: Effect of Merkel on Laschet rating, over calendar weeks, GLES RCS

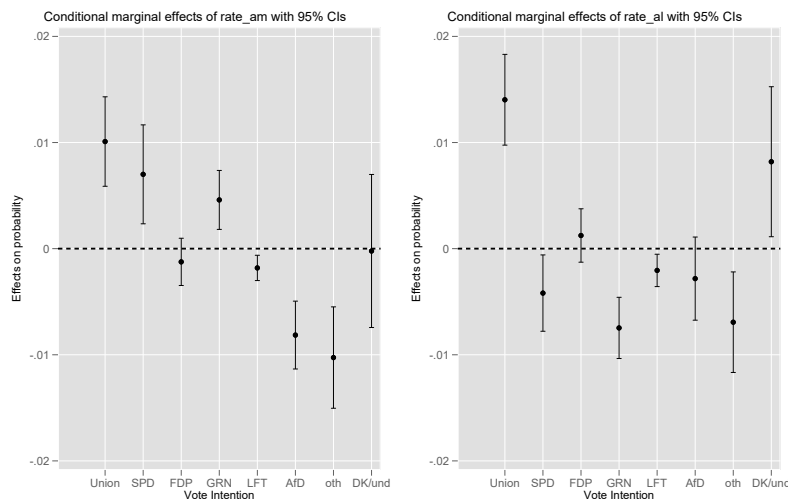


3.3 The big picture: Merkel’s and Laschet’s effect on vote intentions

Having specifically examined the *washing off* and *rubbing off* effects above, we take a step back again and look at how Merkel’s impact compared to Laschet’s impact on vote intentions more generally. Again, we use the GLES RCS dataset, but dispense with the dynamic perspective and instead estimate an overall multinomial logistic regression model to analyze respondents’ likelihood of stating one of the six Bundestag parties, other, or either don’t know or undecided as their vote intention. The model again controls for age, sex, and education, respondents’ left-right position and party identification with each of the six larger parties.

Figure 9 presents the conditional marginal effects of Merkel’s rating on the likelihood of each response category, contrasted with those from the analogous model with Laschet’s rating as the main independent variable. Merkels rating had a significant positive effect on CDU/CSU vote intentions. Controlling for party identification and ideology, Merkel still had a considerable positive effect for the CDU/CSU. Interestingly, we see a rather similar effect for Merkel on vote intentions for the SPD and the Greens. This is quite an unusual finding: sympathy for a politician of one party not only increased the likelihood of voting for that party but also for two other parties. This may imply that respondents who were very fond of Merkel, but, were not very keen on supporting the CDU/CSU, primarily regarded these two parties as their alternative. Looking at the analogous graph for the effect of Laschet’s rating on vote intentions, the results are much different and more familiar. Voters with a positive evaluation of Laschet were more likely to choose the CDU/CSU, yet significantly less likely to choose SPD, Greens and the Left party. For FDP and AfD vote intention, Laschet had no meaningful effects

Figure 9: Effect of Merkel (left) and Laschet (right) ratings on Vote intention.



4 Conclusion

The Bundestag election of 2021 and the CDU/CSU's result induced both finger-pointing and soul-searching for the CDU and the CSU: many were blaming Armin Laschet for the loss, but some were also blaming Angela Merkel, the process of how she organized the transition from her leadership to her successor, and her contribution to the 2021 campaign.

We combined different data types in this article to get a better understanding of whether and how an incumbent in a parliamentary system who is not running anymore may still have an impact on the election outcome. Taken together, our results demonstrate that, first, Angela Merkel was indeed immensely popular at the end of her term not only with her own party supporters but across many voters from different parties. Second, although she was not competing and not being particularly visible in the campaign, she still had an impact on vote intentions. Third, the direct effect of Merkel on a CDU/CSU vote intention washed off the closer the election was drawing even though it was far from disappearing fully at the end. Fourth, Merkel apparently also had a positive effect on the personal evaluation of her successor Armin Laschet: this *rubbing off* effect was shown in both our simple experiment with only a subtle Merkel prime and the GLES survey data. Laschet never became very popular but still benefitted from Merkl's popularity interestingly this effect was also quite stable during the whole campaign. Finally, looking at the effect of Merkel on vote intentions for all parties and not only the CDU/CSU, we find the interesting pattern that voters sympathizing with Merkel were not only more likely to vote for her party but also for the center-left parties of SPD and Greens. Merkl's popularity was thus not exclusively helping the CDU/CSU.

While we cannot ascertain whether or not the CDU/CSU would have obtained a

better result if Merkel had been more visible in the campaign, our findings suggest a pathway for how she could have brought that about, namely by endorsing and promoting her successor more aggressively. While never being evaluated positively, Armin Laschet benefitted from the popularity of his predecessor, and arguably could have done so even more. Given that the CDU/CSU only fell short of the top position by 1.7 percentage points, and the important role that this position plays in the government formation process in Germany, even a statistically small effect may have turned out to be substantially important.

Although our analysis focused specifically on the 2021 federal election, we still think that this German case contributes to the wider literature on incumbency, candidate effects and vote choice. 2021 was the first Bundestag election without the sitting chancellor running as the lead candidate of his or her party, but comparable situations occur very frequently in other countries and contexts, and even on other levels of the German federal elections (Hainmueller and Kern 2008, Gschwend and Zittel 2015). Differentiating the incumbent's effects on the party on the one hand and the candidate on the other hand, and taking their dynamics over the election campaign into regard will improve our understanding of the mechanisms behind incumbency and candidate effects and may also increase the precision with which we estimate them in the future.

References

- ANSOLABEHERE, S., SNYDER, J. M. and STEWART, C. (2000). Old Voters, New Voters, and the Personal Vote: Using Redistricting to Measure the Incumbency Advantage. *American Journal of Political Science*, **44** (1), 17.
- ARZHEIMER, K. (2006). ‘dead men walking?’ party identification in Germany, 1977-2002. *Electoral Studies*, **25**, 791–807.
- ASHWORTH, S. and BUENO DE MESQUITA, E. (2008). Electoral Selection, Strategic Challenger Entry, and the Incumbency Advantage. *The Journal of Politics*, **70** (4), 1006–1025.
- COSTA LOBO, M. and CURTICE, J. (eds.) (2015). *Personality Politics? The Role of Leader Evaluations in Democratic Elections*. Oxford University Press.
- DRUCKMAN, J. N., KIFER, M. J. and PARKIN, M. (2020). Campaign Rhetoric and the Incumbency Advantage. *American Politics Research*, **48** (1), 22–43.
- ECKLES, D. L., KAM, C. D., MAESTAS, C. L. and SCHAFFNER, B. F. (2014). Risk Attitudes and the Incumbency Advantage. *Political Behavior*, **36** (4), 731–749.
- ELIS, R., HILLYGUS, D. S. and NIE, N. (2010). The dynamics of candidate evaluations and vote choice in 2008: looking to the past or future? *Electoral Studies*, **29** (4), 582–593.
- FAAS, T. and KLINGELHOEFER, T. (2022). German politics at the traffic light: new beginnings in the election of 2021. *West European Politics*.
- FOWLER, A. (2016). What Explains Incumbent Success? Disentangling Selection on Party, Selection on Candidate Characteristics, and Office-Holding Benefits. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, **11** (3), 313–338.
- and HALL, A. B. (2014). Disentangling the Personal and Partisan Incumbency Advantages: Evidence from Close Elections and Term Limits. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, **9** (4), 501–531.
- GLES (2021). Gles panel 2016-2021, wellen 1-15. GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln. ZA6838 Datenfile Version 5.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13783>.
- (2022a). Gles panel 2021, welle 16. GESIS, Köln. ZA7722 Datenfile Version 2.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13857>.
- (2022b). Gles panel 2021, welle 17. GESIS, Köln. ZA7723 Datenfile Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13852>.
- (2022c). Gles panel 2021, welle 18. GESIS, Köln. ZA7724 Datenfile Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13903>.

- (2022d). Gles rolling cross-section 2021. GESIS, Köln. ZA7703 Datenfile Version 2.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13876>.
- GREEN-PEDERSEN, C., MORTENSEN, P. B. and THESEN, G. (2017). The Incumbency Bonus Revisited: Causes and Consequences of Media Dominance. *British Journal of Political Science*, **47** (1), 131–148.
- GSCHWEND, T. and ZITTEL, T. (2015). Do constituency candidates matter in German federal elections? the personal vote as an interactive process. *Electoral Studies*, **39**, 338–349.
- HAINMUELLER, J. and KERN, H. L. (2008). Incumbency as a source of spillover effects in mixed electoral systems: Evidence from a regression-discontinuity design. *Electoral Studies*, **27**, 213–227.
- HANSEN, M. A. and OLSEN, J. (2020). Rhapsody in Beige: The Impact of SPD Candidate Evaluations on Vote Choice in the 2009, 2013, and 2017 Federal Elections. *German Politics*, **29** (2), 223–243.
- HUBER, S. (2015). What comes first, character traits or political assessments? an experimental study. In M. Costa Lobo and J. Curtice (eds.), *Personality Politics? The Role of Leader Evaluations in Democratic Elections*, Oxford University Press.
- JANKOWSKI, M. and MLLER, S. (2021). The incumbency advantage in second-order PR elections: Evidence from the Irish context, 1942-2019. *Electoral Studies*, **71**, 102331.
- JESSE, E. (2021). Die Bundestagswahl 2021 mit vielen Neuheiten: Kein Kanzlerbonus, erstes Dreier-Bndnis nach 70 Jahren, Isolation der geschwchten Union. *Zeitschrift fr Politikwissenschaft*, **68** (4), 353–377.
- JOHNSTON, R. and BRADY, H. E. (2002). The rolling cross-section design. *Electoral Studies*, **21**, 283–295.
- KAASE, M. (1994). Is there personalization in politics? candidates and voting behavior in Germany. *International Political Science Review*, **15** (3), 211–230.
- KLINGEMANN, H. D. and TAYLOR, C. L. (1977). Affektive Parteiorientierung, Kanzlerkandidaten und Issues: Einstellungskomponenten der Wahlentscheidung bei Bundestagswahlen in Deutschland. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, **18** (2/3), 201–347.
- MORISI, D., JOST, J. T., PANAGOPOULOS, C. and VALTONEN, J. (2021). Is There an Ideological Asymmetry in the Incumbency Effect? Evidence From U.S. Congressional Elections. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, p. 194855062110468.
- NEUNDORF, A. and ÖZTÜRK, A. (2021). Recruiting Research Participants Through Facebook: Assessing Facebook Advertisement Tools.

- NORPOTH, H. (1977). Kanzlerkandidaten: Wie sie vom Wähler bewertet werden und seine Wahlentscheidung beeinflussen. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, **18** (2/3), 551–572.
- OHR, D., KLEIN, M. and ROSAR, U. (2013). Bewertungen der Kanzlerkandidaten und Wahlentscheidung bei der Bundestagswahl 2009. In B. Weßels, H. Schoen and O. W. Gabriel (eds.), *Wahlen und Wähler: Analysen aus Anlass der Bundestagswahl 2009*, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, pp. 206–230.
- PRIOR, M. (2006). The Incumbent in the Living Room: The Rise of Television and the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, **68** (3), 657–673.
- QUINLAN, S. and MCALLISTER, I. (2022). Leader or party? quantifying and exploring behavioral personalization 19962019. *Party Politics*, **28** (1), 24–37.
- SALAS, C. (2016). Incumbency advantage in multi-member districts: Evidence from congressional elections in Chile. *Electoral Studies*, **42**, 213–221.
- SCHMITT-BECK, R. (2021). Wahlpolitische Achterbahnfahrt. Wer wählte wen bei der Bundestagswahl 2021? *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*.
- SCHOEN, H. (2011). Merely a Referendum on Chancellor Merkel? Parties, Issues and Candidates in the 2009 German Federal Election. *German Politics*, **20** (1), 92–106.
- and GRESZKI, R. (2014). A Third Term for a Popular Chancellor: An Analysis of Voting Behaviour in the 2013 German Federal Election. *German Politics*, **23** (4), 251–267.
- STATISTA (2022). Anzahl der Fernsehzuschauer bei den TV-Triellen zur Bundestagswahl 2021 in Deutschland. <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1260419/umfrage/zuschauerzahlen-bei-den-tv-triellen-zur-bundestagswahl>.
- WAGNER, A. and WESSELS, B. (2011). Kanzlerkandidaten – Wie beeinflussen sie die Wahlentscheidung? In R. Schmitt-Beck (ed.), *Politische Vierteljahresschrift Sonderheft 45*, pp. 352–377.
- ZALLER, J. (1998). Politicians as Prize Fighters: Electoral Selection and Incumbency Advantage. In J. Geer (ed.), *Party Politics and Politicians*, Johns Hopkins University Press.

Appendix

Figure 10: Linear predictions of Laschet rating for neutral (black) and average (black) Merkel rating, over calender weeks, GLES RCS.

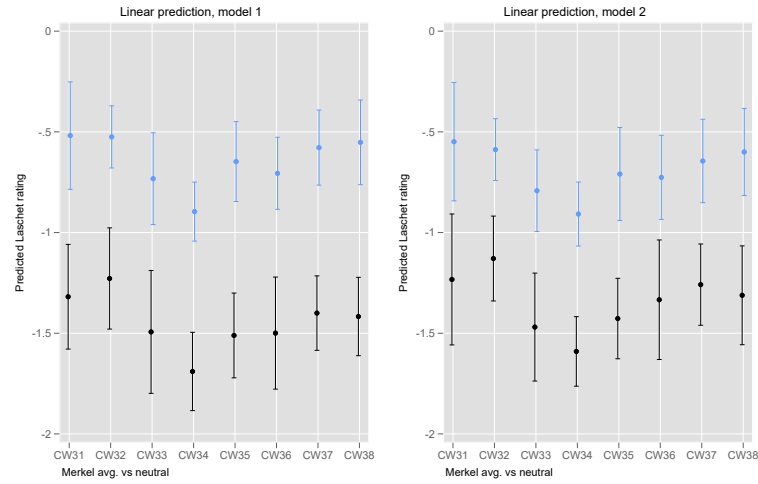


Table 1: Operationalization, GLES panel

Variable	Items	Processing	Range/Values
age	kp_2290s	Constructed through birth year, “1955 or earlier” set to 1955	23 to 66
education	kp_2320	Coded into three groups (“Hauptschule” or lower, Realschule, university entrance qualification)	Dummies
female	kpx_2280	as is	Dummy
PID	kp_2090a	as is	Dummies
vote intention	kp_190ba, kp_200ba (wave 8)	as is	Dummies
Merkel rating	kp_650a	as is	-5 to 5
Laschet rating	kp_650b1	as is	-5 to 5
left-right position	kp_1500	as is	1 to 11

Table 2: Operationalization, GLES RCS

Variable	Items	Processing	Range/Values
age	pre062	Constructed through birth year	18 to 94
education, lower	pre064	Degree Hauptschule or below	Dummy
education, higher	pre064	university entrance qualification	Dummy
female	pre063	as is	Dummy
PID	pre078a	as is	Dummies
vote intention	pre006ba	coded for each party, “don’t know” and “undecided” combined, “would not vote” and “void vote” combined, all other categories excluded	Dummies
CDU rating	pre028b	as is	-5 to 5
Merkel rating	pre029i	as is	-5 to 5
Laschet rating	pre029a	as is	-5 to 5
left-right position	pre018	as is	-5 to 5
week	pre_enddatum	Monday to Sunday	31 to 38

Table 3: Logistic regressions, DV: CDU/CSU vote intention, GLES RCS. Std. Errors clustered by interview date

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	vote_cdu	vote_cdu	vote_cdu	vote_cdu
rating Merkel	0.223*** (6.72)	0.130*** (3.73)	0.402* (2.15)	0.281 (1.28)
rating Laschet	0.411*** (16.57)	0.297*** (10.53)	0.410*** (8.37)	0.321*** (6.31)
female	-0.528*** (-5.84)	-0.346** (-3.00)	-0.530*** (-5.69)	-0.345** (-2.85)
age	0.00993*** (4.23)	0.00982** (3.18)	0.0101*** (4.35)	0.0105*** (3.36)
education: lower	-0.233 (-1.48)	0.000838 (0.00)	-0.216 (-1.37)	0.0343 (0.16)
education: higher	-0.0592 (-0.53)	0.0171 (0.13)	-0.0629 (-0.56)	0.0116 (0.09)
left-right pos		0.212*** (7.07)		0.215*** (7.11)
left-right ²		-0.0206* (-2.01)		-0.0214* (-2.08)
PID: CDU		2.816*** (25.07)		2.876*** (24.37)
week 32			0.854 (1.19)	0.914 (1.12)
ref: CW31				
week 33			0.576 (0.77)	0.388 (0.48)
week 34			0.690 (0.93)	0.428 (0.51)
week 35			0.234 (0.28)	0.188 (0.22)
week 36			0.484 (0.61)	0.653 (0.75)
week 37			0.597 (0.81)	0.716 (0.89)
week 38			0.522 (0.67)	0.538 (0.60)
week 32*Merkel rating			-0.292 (-1.54)	-0.324 (-1.43)
week 33*Merkel rating			-0.224 (-1.13)	-0.148 (-0.65)
week 34*Merkel rating			-0.182 (-0.91)	-0.118 (-0.50)
week 35*Merkel rating			-0.109 (-0.45)	-0.0865 (-0.35)
week 36*Merkel rating			-0.149 (-0.73)	-0.102 (-0.43)
week 37*Merkel rating			-0.156 (-0.72)	-0.136 (-0.57)
week 38*Merkel rating			-0.150 (-0.76)	-0.0900 (-0.38)
week 32*Laschet rating			0.0481 (0.70)	0.0606 (0.87)
week 33*Laschet rating			0.0176 (0.23)	-0.0186 (-0.22)
week 34*Laschet rating			-0.127 (-1.61)	-0.202* (-2.20)
week 35*Laschet rating			-0.00729 (-0.08)	-0.0184 (-0.26)
week 36*Laschet rating			0.0592 (0.74)	-0.0417 (-0.47)
week 37*Laschet rating			0.00208 (0.03)	-0.0210 (-0.22)
week 38*Laschet rating			0.0730 (0.80)	0.0705 (0.66)
Constant	-2.900*** (-16.95)	-3.810*** (-14.95)	-3.489*** (-4.85)	-4.427*** (-5.26)
N	5356	5165	5356	5165

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$