

The De- and Re-Chancellorisation of Voting Behaviour in German Bundestag Elections

The Development of the Electoral Impact of Chancellor Preference between 1991 and 2021

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Abstract

Are chancellor candidates becoming increasingly important for voting behaviour in Germany? While Ohr (2000) indeed shows a growing relevance of chancellor preferences in German federal elections, most studies conclude that there is no “chancellorisation” of voting behaviour (e.g., Brettschneider 2002). In contrast, we are the first to even argue in favour of a “de-chancellorisation” taking place. In recent decades, the German party system has become increasingly fragmented and voter support for the SPD and the CDU/CSU has declined markedly, yet these were still the only parties nominating candidates until 2021. Considering these developments, for the electorate as a whole, chancellor candidates should become ever less important for the voting decisions.

To test our thesis of de-chancellorisation, we use the Forsa Bus from 1991 to 2021, which allows for analyses on a weekly basis with roughly 2,500 respondents (cumulating to an overall sample of about 3.8 million respondents). We show that there is a substantial decline in the relevance of the chancellor preference for voting behaviour – an observation that holds irrespective of controlling for other established determinants like valence issues and past voting behaviour. We attribute our deviating finding mainly to the fact that previous studies essentially explain the decision between the two parties CDU/CSU and SPD, whereas we consider all parties running for election.

Following our argumentation, the trend toward de-chancellorisation should be halted when additional parties nominate promising politicians, as the chancellor candidates will then once again represent a larger part of the electorate (“re-chancellorisation”). Accordingly, having a Green candidate as another option alongside the CDU/CSU and SPD candidates in most of 2021 increases the chancellor candidate effect in the respective weeks counteracting the negative general trend.

In the Forsa Bus, chancellor preferences are surveyed all year and not only in the immediate run-up to federal elections. It enables us to identify additional determinants of the effect of chancellor preference: candidates are most important in the electoral campaign and in the weeks after election, getting officially nominated is pertinent for a candidate to impact voting behaviour and incumbents are only slightly more influential than challengers.

1. Introduction

The term personalisation is used in political science to describe the increasing importance of politicians. It can refer to the campaigning of political parties, the reporting of mass media, as well as the voting behaviour of citizens. In the latter case, which is the focus of this paper, one sometimes speaks of behavioural personalisation. This refers to the growing importance of candidate evaluations for individual voting decisions. It is usually expected that the strength of the effect of candidate evaluations increases not only in absolute terms, but also relative to the effects of party identification and issue orientation.

For Germany, behavioural personalisation has usually only been examined with respect to the candidates for chancellor, who until 2021 were nominated exclusively by the two major parties SPD and CDU/CSU (Klingemann/Taylor 1977, Kaase 1994, Ohr 2000, Brettschneider 2001, 2002, Brettschneider/Gabriel 2002, Brettschneider et al. 2006, Debus 2012).

Personalisation was thus essentially understood as the “chancellorisation” of the electoral decision. The state of research to date is not unambiguous: while the majority of empirical studies conclude that a chancellorisation of voter behaviour cannot be observed in German parliamentary elections (e.g. Klingemann/Taylor 1977, Kaase 1994, Brettschneider 2001), Ohr (2000) was able to show an increase in the importance of the evaluations of the chancellor candidates for the election decision.

The possibility that the importance of the chancellor candidates for the election decision *decreases* over time has played no role at all in previous research. This is surprising insofar as support for the SPD and the CDU/CSU in the German electorate has declined significantly over time and the German party system has become more differentiated. Against this background, it seems reasonable to assume that the importance of the SPD and CDU/CSU chancellor candidates for the electoral decisions of the electorate as a whole should decline.

In this paper, we thus test the hypothesis of an ongoing de-chancellorisation of voter behaviour in German federal elections. We attribute the deviating findings of the previous state of research to the fact that so far essentially only the decision between the two parties CDU/CSU and SPD has been explained, but not the electoral decision with respect to the entire range of parties available for selection. However, if empirical analyses focus only on the choice between the SPD and the CDU/CSU, then their chancellor candidates will still be of considerable importance for the electoral decision even if the two parties can each only attract a small share of the votes. In terms of the voting behaviour of the electorate as a whole, however, they would nevertheless be of only minor relevance. The trend toward de-

chancellorisation should be broken at the moment when other parties also begin to nominate promising candidates for chancellor, as the set of candidates then once again is relevant for the votes of a larger part of the electorate. Therefore, with the nomination of Annalena Baerbock as the Green Party's candidate for chancellor in the 2021 Bundestag election, a process of re-chancellorisation of voting behaviour in German federal elections should start.

Our database is made up of the surveys conducted every working day by the polling institute Forsa for the period 1991 to 2021, which we have cumulated into a single data set with a total of 3.8 million cases. A special feature of this survey series is that chancellor preferences are surveyed continuously and not only in the immediate run-up to federal elections. As a result, hypothetical candidates for chancellor who have not (yet) been officially nominated by their respective parties are also surveyed. In addition to all the other questions to be examined here, this opens the possibility of testing whether the strength of the effect of the chancellor preference is also influenced by the formal nomination as chancellor candidate. The database we use also opens good possibilities for identifying incumbency effects as well as candidate-related mobilization cycles.

2. The Changing Impact of (Chancellor) Candidates on Voting Behaviour in Germany

This paper builds on the tradition of the Michigan model by Campbell et al. (1960).

According to this approach, the vote decision can be understood as the result of long-term party identification and short-term candidate and issue orientations. One difficulty for electoral research is to disentangle the effects of these three determinants, since they are theoretically and empirically strongly intertwined, and the causal priorities between long- and short-term factors have not been conclusively clarified (Jagodzinski/Kühnel 1990: 6p.; Klingemann/Taylor 1977: 306): On the one hand, it is plausible that long-term partisanship colours short-term orientations towards candidates and issues. However, the opposite direction, in which partisanship is the result of short-term factors, cannot be ruled out. In the empirical section, we will address the question of how to deal with this "separation problem".

For several decades, electoral research has been dealing with the question of whether voting behaviour is becoming more and more personalised. The literature suggests three main reasons for this increase in the importance of candidates (e.g. Garzia et al. 2022: 312): Firstly, media coverage has become increasingly person-centred (especially since the introduction of private television). Secondly, the parties themselves are increasingly pursuing a strategy of putting their political personnel at the centre. Finally, the decline in party identification

(dealignment) should also lead to an increase in the importance of short-term factors (and thus of candidate orientation) in the decision calculus.

A number of studies have examined the role of candidates for voting behaviour in Germany with such a longitudinal perspective (Klingemann/Taylor 1977; Ohr 2000; Pappi/Shikano 2001; Brettschneider/Gabriel 2002; Brettschneider 2001, 2002; Brettschneider et al. 2006; Debus 2012)¹. With the exception of the study by Pappi and Shikano (2001)², these analyses have in common that they focus on the chancellor candidates, i.e. they limit the analysis to the candidates of the SPD and the CDU/CSU and neglect the leaders of smaller parties such as the FDP. Strictly speaking, these studies examine what we call „*chancellorisation*“ of the voting decision (and not personalisation in a broader sense). Apart from Debus (2012), there are other similarities between these studies in terms of their analytical approaches that need to be highlighted: The papers of Klingemann and Taylor (1977) and Ohr (2000) proceeded to exclude voters from other parties from the analysis by operationalising the vote as a two-party choice (CDU/CSU vs. SPD). While the subsequent studies by Brettschneider (2001, 2002), Brettschneider and Gabriel (2001) and Brettschneider et al. (2006) included voters of other parties in their analysis, they did so only as a diffuse middle category in their trichotomous dependent variable (-5 CDU/CSU, 0 ‘other’, +5 SPD).

Candidate orientations are operationalised in these studies on the basis of the sympathy scalometer (scale from -5 to +5). The sympathy scores of both candidates are then used to calculate a candidate differential (evaluation of the SPD candidate minus evaluation of the CDU candidate).³ The other independent variables of the Ann-Arbor model were also coded as differentials reflecting the differences in evaluations between the SPD and the CDU/CSU. Thus, again, only the SPD and the CDU/CSU were compared. The studies examine the effect of candidate orientations at the time of a federal election and together cover a total of 14 Bundestag elections between 1961 and 2009.

Overall, the empirical evidence for the personalisation of voting behaviour in Germany is rather weak. Most of the aforementioned analyses do not show an increasing effect of candi-

¹ Other related studies, such as Schoen (2004a), which have a longitudinal perspective but do not focus on the personalisation of voting behaviour, are not included in this research review. The analyses by Brettschneider (2001, 2002) and Brettschneider and Gabriel (2001) are based on the same data but use a slightly different analytical strategy. The study by Brettschneider et al. (2006) extends these analyses to the 2002 and 2005 federal elections.

² In contrast to the other studies presented here, the analysis by Pappi and Shikano (2001) is based on a rational choice model.

³ Issue orientations are measured on the basis of valence issues, while the long-term factor is measured in different ways. Klingemann and Taylor (1977) use a party scalometer, the study by Ohr (2000) the standard item to measure party identification and Brettschneider (2002) uses both

dates over time (Klingemann/Taylor 1977; Kaase 1994⁴; Pappi/Shikano 2001; Brettschneider/Gabriel 2002; Brettschneider 2001, 2002; Brettschneider et al. 2006; Debus 2012). Rather, the effect of candidates varies from election to election. Or to put in the words of Kaase (1994: 222): “The conclusion from these findings must be that it is the specific combination of candidates and political context which defines the candidate impact for each individual election [...]” Only the study by Ohr (2000) finds an increase in the importance of candidate orientations for voting behaviour between 1972 and 1998. It should be noted, however, that the candidate effect was estimated while only controlling for party identification (due to inconsistent measurement of issue orientations). Therefore, the results from Ohr (2000) may reflect a possible confounding of candidate and issue orientations.

3. Hypotheses

In the period covered by Klingemann and Taylor (1977), the two mainstream parties, the CDU/CSU and the SPD, together won more than 80% of the vote (Klingemann/Taylor 1977: 302). Starting in the 1980s, however, the previously strong integrating power of the two Volksparteien began to erode, and the fragmentation of the German party system substantially increased. However, if the two mainstream parties attract a smaller and smaller share of the vote, then the effect of their chancellor candidates should also diminish over time. In addition, in an increasingly fragmented party system it becomes less certain that the candidate of the party with the highest vote share becomes chancellor. This should decrease the impact of chancellor candidates further. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1a: Chancellor candidates became less important for voting behaviour in Germany (*de-chancellorisation hypothesis*).

Parties can only credibly field a candidate if the formation of a coalition under their lead is a somewhat likely scenario. This was the case for the first time for a third party in the run-up to the 2021 Bundestag election, as the Greens had long held higher vote shares in the opinion polls than their traditional coalition partner, the SPD. Accordingly, potential Green candidates were considered for the chancellor preference in surveys and eventually the party put forward their first own candidate. Our expectation of a de-chancellorisation is primarily based on the waning voter support for the CDU/CSU and the SPD. Thus, if the field of candidates reflects

⁴ Jagodzinski and Kühnel (1990) have complemented the analysis of Klingemann and Taylor (1977) with data for the federal elections of 1980, 1983 and 1987. Kaase (1994) uses this extended time series which also shows no trend towards personalisation.

the fragmented party system more accurately again, this trend might be halted or even reversed. This suggests that the novel situation of a three-candidate contest might have led to a re-chancellorisation of voting behaviour:

H1b: Having more than two chancellor candidates mitigates the de-chancellorisation (*re-chancellorisation hypothesis*).

Throughout a typical legislative period, several possible challengers to the incumbent chancellor are discussed in the media and considered in the polls and it is only a party's nomination that brings the final decision among these intraparty competitors. As the official presentation of a chancellor candidate is a widely reported public event, many voters take note. For candidate voting, this is important because the parties eventually commit to their candidate with this nomination, i.e., only then can it be assumed that a vote for the party is also a vote for the respective candidate. It is known that this person will be the central politician in that party for the election at hand, considering that parties have never switched between candidates after nomination. Since longitudinal research on chancellor candidates has so far focused only on election campaigns, just analyses of individual elections have contributed to our knowledge of the effects of being nominated: Most recently, Klein et al. (2022: 28) showed that evaluations of the eventual chancellor candidate of the Greens in the 2021 Bundestag election, Annalena Baerbock, shaped voting behaviour noticeably, but only after she was officially nominated. We expect this to be a general pattern:

H2a: Getting nominated strengthens a candidate's effect on the vote intention for his or her party.

Chancellors receive significantly more coverage in Bundestag election campaigns than their challengers (e.g., Reinemann/Wilke 2007: 102; Ohr/Paasch-Colberg 2015: 398). Incumbents shape the political agenda, are the face of key political decisions and take centre stage in the event of crises (see Gerhard Schröder regarding the Elbe flood of 2002 as the prime example). Apart from the general increase in the chancellor's notoriety and popularity, these aspects may lead citizens to conclude that a decision for or against the incumbent's party is also a decision for or against its most important political representative. Moreover, it is easier to judge a candidate's qualification for office if he or she has already held it. Thus, voters who prefer the incumbent chancellor may perceive their judgment as less uncertain, potentially resulting in a higher propensity to base their vote choice on it (Ohr et al. 2013: 211). In Germany, comparisons so far only focused on few elections. For example, according to Ohr et al. (2013), there was no evidence that Angela Merkel as an incumbent in 2009 had more

influence on voting behaviour than she did as a challenger in 2005. Regarding the theoretical arguments as more relevant than the sparse empirical evidence, we expect:

H2b: Incumbents are more influential for the vote intention than challengers.

In election campaigns, parties and the media increasingly focus on political personnel (Brettschneider 2009: 518). As a result, candidates are primed, i.e., attitudes towards them are more present in voters' minds and thus more likely to enter into their electoral calculus (e.g., Ohr/Paasch-Colberg 2015). In line with this, Mayerl and Faas (2018) showed for party leaders in the 2009 and 2013 Bundestag elections that respondents become quicker to rate party leaders over the course of an election campaign. This increased accessibility – absolutely and compared to other determinants of voting – seems to be reflected in voting behaviour: For the 1980 to 2002 Bundestag elections, Schoen (2004a; 2004b) showed that, while there is variance across candidates and elections, the chancellor preference is on average less important at the beginning compared to the end of a campaign. The effect of the election campaign should be all the more apparent when the entire legislative period is considered:

H3a: In the electoral campaign, chancellor candidates are most important for voting behaviour.

In the weeks and months to follow an election, the impressions of the campaign are still relatively fresh, i.e., the same cognitions are to some degree still primed, and respondents in polls often times continue to be asked about the same set of candidates. As government formation in the Bundestag always took at least about a month and up to half a year, it takes time for policies to be advanced that might accelerate change of voters' calculi. Thus, we expect a fading out of the campaigns' effects resulting in a still increased relevance of chancellor preference compared to non-electoral times:

H3b: In the weeks following an election, the impact of chancellor preference on voting behaviour is higher than at any other time outside of an election campaign.

4. Case, database and analytical strategy

Naturally, the relevance of chancellor candidates can only be examined in Germany. However, in order to contextualise the findings within the international state of research, it is important to know whether the conditions in Germany favour the preference for the government leader as a determinant of voting behaviour. Throughout the period under study, Germany is a parliamentary democracy with a (more and more fragmented) multi-party system, partially publicly funded campaign financing and a dual media system. These are

generally rather detrimental factors for personalisation (Barisione 2009: 475ff.). However, the mixed proportional electoral system for German Bundestag elections favours voting with the preferred chancellor candidate in mind. Crucially, the distribution of parliamentary seats among parties results from the national party list vote shares, while the candidate votes decide who represents a constituency. Thus, voters can focus their attention on the national contest – including the chancellor candidates – when casting their list vote. Another factor that makes the inclusion of chancellor candidates into the vote calculus more sensible is that the chancellor is relatively powerful compared to prime ministers of other parliamentary democracies (O'Malley 2008: 17). These ambivalent aspects may explain why, in terms of the strength of the candidate effect, Germany finds itself in the middle between Great Britain and the USA in one of the few international comparisons (Brettschneider 2002: 132f.).

We base our empirical analyses on the so-called Forsa-Bus, a population survey conducted by the opinion research institute Forsa since August 1991. For this series of surveys, Forsa regularly interviews 500 randomly selected citizens by telephone every working day. Data collection is only paused during a brief Christmas break. The data collected on each individual day is representative of the German population, allowing researchers to conduct their analyses on a daily basis. However, depending on the aim of the analysis and the desired sample size, the data can also be summarized by week, month or year. We use the survey data from August 1991 to December 2021 and cumulated it into a single data set.⁵ It contains a total of 3,798,334 cases.

Due to the large number of interviews carried out each day, the Forsa-Bus questionnaire is rather short. However, it regularly contains key questions for electoral research, such as voting intention, recalled voting behaviour in the last federal and state elections, issue competence and chancellor preference. With regard to chancellor preference in particular, the continuous consideration must be emphasized, as it is usually only asked for during an electoral campaign. Party identification is the most notable omission from the questionnaire.

⁵ GESIS (www.gesis.org) provides the Forsa-Bus as annual cumulations. The following data sets are included in our overall data set (GESIS study number in parentheses): Forsa-Bus 1991 (ZA3380), Forsa-Bus 1992 (ZA3300), Forsa-Bus 1993 (ZA2982), Forsa-Bus 1994 (ZA3063), Forsa-Bus 1995 (ZA2983), Forsa-Bus 1996 (ZA2984), Forsa-Bus 1997 (ZA2985), Forsa-Bus 1998 (ZA3162), Forsa-Bus 1999 (ZA32890), Forsa-Bus 2000 (ZA3486), Forsa-Bus 2001 (ZA3675), Forsa-Bus 2002 (ZA3909), Forsa-Bus 2003 (ZA4070), Forsa-Bus 2004 (ZA4192), Forsa-Bus 2005 (ZA4343), Forsa-Bus 2006 (ZA4514), Forsa-Bus 2007 (ZA4552), Forsa-Bus 2008 (ZA4876), Forsa-Bus 2009 (ZA5049), Forsa-Bus 2010 (ZA5293), Forsa-Bus 2011 (ZA5631), Forsa-Bus 2012 (ZA5694), Forsa-Bus 2013 (ZA5927), Forsa-Bus 2014 (ZA5996), Forsa-Bus 2015 (ZA6280), Forsa-Bus 2016 (ZA6704), Forsa-Bus 2017 (ZA6705), Forsa-Bus 2018 (ZA6706), Forsa-Bus 2019 (ZA6850), Forsa-Bus 2020 (ZA7758) and Forsa-Bus 2021 (ZA7889).

Our analytical strategy consists of two steps. First, we estimate how strongly the chancellor preference affects respondents' vote intentions for each candidate in each week. Second, we explain what determines the strength of this chancellor candidate effect.

In our first step, we pool respondents for each of the 1,561 weeks studied, resulting in an average of 1,715 voters per week. For each candidate separately, we estimate logistic regressions with a dependent variable that distinguishes between voting for a candidate's party (1) and voting for another party (0). Our main independent variable is whether a respondent prefers the chancellor candidate under study (1) or (one of) the other contender(s) or no candidate at all (both 0). We use the pseudo- R^2 value (McFadden) for this baseline model with no other predictors as an optimistic estimate of the chancellor effect. Here, we overestimate the importance of the chancellor preference by attributing explained variance to it that belongs to other determinants (for details, see chapter 2). Thus, we additionally implement the "improved-prediction strategy" (King 2002: S.17), which places candidate orientations at the bottom of the causal hierarchy, in two varieties: first, we calculate how much pseudo- R^2 increases when the chancellor preference is added to a model that initially just accounts for issue competence.⁶ Second, we add the chancellor preference to a model that not just already includes issue competence but also recalled voting behaviour in the last federal and state elections.⁷ This is our most conservative measurement of the impact of chancellor candidates on voting behaviour. Providing optimistic and pessimistic estimates in such a way was introduced by Jagodzinski and Kühnel (1990). With it, we establish upper and lower bounds for the – not directly observable – real chancellor effect.

In table A1 in the appendix, we exemplify the process for one week in 1998. For the two candidates Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder, we estimate five models to get the optimistic and the two pessimistic estimates. Here, our results show e.g., that the true pseudo- R^2 for the candidate of the CDU, Helmut Kohl, is in the interval of 14.2% to 47.0%. For Gerhard Schröder, the corresponding values are 11.2% and 33.4%. Even though the estimates for the individual candidates are quite imprecise, it can be seen that at this point in time a preference

⁶ Precisely, we consider whether a respondent attributes the greatest potential for solving the most important political problem in Germany to the candidate's party (1) or to no or another party (0).

⁷ Here, respondents who voted for the candidate's party in the last state election and in the last federal election (1) are distinguished from the remaining respondents (0). In some articles we discussed before, researchers consider party identification instead of recalled voting behaviour. In the run-up to the 2002 Bundestag election, party identification was included in the Forsa-Bus for some time. Klein and Rosar (2005: 176) showed that there was a high degree of overlap between recalled voting decisions, as we coded them, and party identification. These variables were also similar in their effect on voting decisions (see also Ohr et al. 2013: 214). We therefore consider it justified to use this variable as a surrogate for party identification in our analyses.

for Helmut Kohl has a stronger influence on the election decision than a preference for Gerhard Schröder.

Estimating the strength of the chancellor preference effect for each candidate-week combination, enables us to test our hypotheses about its determinants in the following chapter. Here, we regress our optimistic and pessimistic estimates on the date of the survey, characteristics of candidates and the time in the electoral cycle. For this second step, the unit of analysis are 4,244 candidate-week combinations, when we use the optimistic estimate. For the pessimistic estimates, the number of observations drops to 4,070 and 3,838, respectively. The reason for this is that the Forsa-Bus did initially not include issue competence (before 19th week of 1993) and voting behaviour in the last state election (before 1995). We have more cases than 1,561 weeks times two because in 28% of the weeks several sets of candidates were considered and in 6% of the weeks there was also a candidate of the Greens to choose from apart from the CDU/CSU and the SPD candidate. In five weeks, a maximum of four different three-way constellations were queried resulting in twelve cases for each of these weeks.

5. Empirical Analyses

Starting with a visual inspection, Figure 1 shows patterns consistent with most of our hypotheses. Here, we plot the optimistic estimate over time for the different chancellor candidates (for the pessimistic estimates, see Figures A1 and A2).⁸ First of all, it is clear that chancellor candidates became less important for voting behaviour over the period under study (H1a). However, the phases in 2020 and 2021, where green lines are added because a candidate of the Greens is also queried, are generally characterized by increased candidate effects (H1b). Thus, if the choice for the chancellor preference more accurately reflects the party system, it is more consequential which candidate a respondent favours.

[Figure 1]

With regard to the second pair of hypotheses, these bivariate findings are also in line with our expectations: The vertical dashed lines indicate the time at which the challenger was appointed as chancellor candidate, while the solid lines mark the dates on which federal elections are held. We see across the board that once a person is officially nominated, he or

⁸ In Figures 1, A1 and A2, candidates are referenced by their initials. Table A2 lists which person are referred to by which initials. It also documents the extent to which each individual chancellor candidate was associated with voting for or against his or her party.

she is more strongly associated with votes for the nominating party. In cases where the nomination is the starting point of being considered in the questionnaire (e.g., Frank-Walter Steinmeier in 2009), preference for her or him has a stronger effect on voting for the respective party than it is the case for the politician considered before (H2a).

There are different ways to evaluate the incumbency effect (H2b). First, incumbents, indicated by the underlined initials in Figure 1, can be compared to their challengers. Here, it shows that they generally shape voting behaviour for their respective party to a higher degree. However, the difference is a lot more pronounced when the challenger is not officially nominated, as is the case most of any legislative period. Second, eventual chancellors can be observed in their progression from non-nominated, to nominated candidate and finally to incumbent. Past chancellors in our sample are Helmut Kohl (1982-1998), Gerhard Schröder (1998-2005), and Angela Merkel (2005-2021), with Olaf Scholz (since 2021) being the current incumbent. Using this intrapersonal comparison, it does not seem to be the case that incumbency makes a clear difference compared to just being a nominated candidate. However, the patterns may be confounded by the general trend towards de-chancellorisation, as winning the election for the first time logically came at a later point in time than being nominated and no former chancellor was nominated again after being voted out of office.

Regarding the electoral cycle, the association between candidates and their party tends to increase towards the election date (H3a). The effect immediately after the election remains at a high but somewhat reduced level (H3b). While the most recent election in 2021 seems to be an exception with its small effects of the chancellor preference in the aftermath of the election, it remains to be seen if in the middle of the election period the effect of the chancellor preference might even drop further.

This graphical overview obviously does not allow for any control variables and does not enable the quantification of effects on the strength of the chancellor's preference. In addition, for the sake of clarity, only one candidate constellation per week is shown, i.e., the constellation that has been surveyed continuously for the most weeks at a given time. In the multivariate analyses, documented in Table 1, these deficits are addressed using multiple linear regression with *all* candidate-week combinations as the units of investigation allowing for a more appropriate evaluation of our hypotheses.

[Table 1]

Our first set of models (m1) strongly supports the idea of a de-chancellorisation (H1a): Using the optimistic estimate, in a timespan of four years – roughly one regular legislative period – pseudo- R^2 decreased by 3.4 percentage points. With the more pessimistic and the most pessimistic estimate, at first sight, the association seems to be clearly less pronounced with a reduction of 2.2 and 0.6 percentage points respectively. However, as the average pseudo- R^2 for the optimistic estimate is 22.6, while it is 12.0 for the first and 5.7 for the second pessimistic estimate, the effects actually are comparable.

In our second model variation (m2), we add the information whether respondents were asked about their chancellor preference with two or three candidates to choose from. As expected, in weeks with an additional candidate the chancellor preference is a better predictor of voting behaviour and controlling for this variable further strengthens the negative time trend. This speaks in favour of the re-chancellorisation hypothesis (H1b). It is noteworthy that candidates from the Greens – the only party that fielded an additional candidate – generally affect voting for or against their party more strongly than CDU/CSU- and SPD-candidates. However, the effect of three chancellor candidates is estimated controlling for the candidates' party affiliation, so in the respective weeks the pseudo- R^2 increases for candidates of all parties.

Finally, the third set of models (m3) include the effective number of electoral parties calculated anew for every week on the basis of the voting intentions of our respondents.⁹ This addition has a strong reductive effect on the negative time trend suggesting that the de-chancellorisation is indeed largely due to a more fragmented electorate.

Focusing on the candidate status, nominated candidates are more influential in shaping voting behaviour for or against their party than non-nominated candidates (H2a). Depending on the specific model composition, there is an impressive “nomination advantage” of seven to eight percentage points for the optimistic estimate, and comparable values for the pessimistic estimates, given their respective means.

However, it cannot be stated with sufficient certainty that incumbency has an additional positive effect, compared to mere nomination (H2b): Using optimistic estimates, additional (up to) 2.5 percentage points are compatible with the “Kanzlerbonus”, i.e., an incumbency advantage for chancellors. In some models, however, the results for the pessimistic estimates

⁹ The effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) is calculated as 1 divided by the sum of the squared vote shares of each party (Laakso/Taagepera 1979: 4).

fail to reach statistical significance.¹⁰ This pattern matches arguments made in the literature: The evaluation of an incumbent who represents his or her party over a long period of time may contribute to the assessment of the party itself (Klingemann/Taylor 1977: 315). Thus, not attributing the part of the variance explained by both – party and candidate – to the candidate, might specifically bias results against an incumbency advantage.

Finally, we test our hypotheses about the dependency of the chancellor candidate effects from temporal proximity to the general election allowing for non-linear effects. As was suggested by the graphical review earlier, at the end of a legislative period, i.e., during the election campaign, the chancellor preference is particularly important for the vote choice (H3a). Shortly after the election, the effect is also more pronounced than in the middle of the legislative period (H3b). For the models m1, we have visualised the average development of the effects within an electoral period (Figure 2). Depending on the estimate, the effect is at least 1.5 times higher in the weeks before an election than in the middle of a legislative period.¹¹

6. Summary and Conclusions

Most longitudinal analyses of the personalisation of voting behaviour in Germany to date have examined the development of the strength of the effect of chancellor candidates on the vote for their party. Since only the SPD and the CDU/CSU fielded chancellor candidates in Germany before the 2021 Bundestag election, the analysis was thus limited to the effect of chancellor candidates on voting for the SPD or the CDU/CSU. Voters of other parties were either not considered at all in these studies (Klingemann/Taylor 1977, Kaase 1994, Ohr 2000) or were pushed into a "middle category" between voting for the SPD and voting for the Union parties (Brettschneider 2001, 2002; Brettschneider/Gabriel 2002; Brettschneider et al. 2006), which was of no substantial interest. Moreover, the other independent variables of the Ann Arbor model were coded as differentials that depict the differences in evaluations between the SPD and the Union parties. Thus, again, only the SPD and CDU/CSU were contrasted. This

¹⁰ Otherwise, the results are fairly consistent across the varying dependent variables and the few differences we observe are not due to the different number of observations: Using only those cases for which the pessimistic estimate 2 is available, the results for the optimistic estimate and for the pessimistic estimate 1 do not change notably (not documented).

¹¹ The electoral cycle also proved to be an important control variable. For instance, our bivariate analysis (Figures 1, A1, and A2) left us with the impression that it is crucial whether an incumbent faces a nominated or a non-nominated candidate. However, the underlying reason for these bivariate differences is that incumbents run against nominated and non-nominated candidates at different phases of a legislative term - phases that vary in their extent of candidate voting.

type of analysis is not necessarily wrong. If one understands the personalisation of voting behaviour as a process in which the chancellor candidates become increasingly important for the decision to vote for one of the two major parties, this analytical strategy can certainly be justified. However, one can have legitimate doubts about this narrow understanding of the concept of personalization. Even if one understands personalization as just described in terms of chancellorisation of electoral decision-making, there is no reason to assume that the chancellor candidates should not also influence the electoral decision of voters from other parties.

Consequently, one can also have a different, broader understanding of chancellorisation of voting behaviour. In this case, the focus of the investigation would be on whether the chancellor candidates increasingly influence the voting decisions of the electorate as a whole over time. Adopting this perspective, however, the commonly held expectation of a rising electoral relevance of chancellor candidates can hardly be justified. After all, as the SPD and the CDU/CSU are less and less successful in mobilising relevant parts of the electoral market, we cannot expect their chancellor candidates to be more influential on the voting behaviour of the electorate as a whole. On the contrary, it is more plausible that the strength of the effect of the chancellor candidates on the electoral decision is declining over time. And this is exactly what we find in our empirical analyses. Over the period studied, 1991 to 2021, chancellor candidates shape voting behaviour less and less. This is true whether one uses optimistic or pessimistic effect estimates. We refer to this process as *de-chancellorisation* in the context of our paper.

The main cause of the de-chancellorisation trend we have identified is the increasing fragmentation of the German party system. This is shown empirically by the fact that, in our explanatory models, the effect of time weakens considerably when controlling for the effective number of parties. The chancellor candidates of the SPD and the CDU/CSU thus represent an increasingly smaller part of the electorate, which makes them less relevant for electoral decisions. Against this background, it is possible to formulate very clear expectations as to when the trend toward de-chancellorisation should be halted. If the support of one of the other parties becomes large enough to allow it to credibly nominate its own candidate for chancellor, a process of *re-chancellorisation* of voting should begin.¹² This is

¹² The nomination of Guido Westerwelle as the FDP's chancellor candidate in the 2002 Bundestag elections did not represent such a turning point, as the FDP was clearly too weak to credibly nominate a chancellor candidate at that time (Spier 2007). Not surprisingly, neither his political opponents nor the public took Westerwelle's candidacy seriously. This was demonstrated, for example, by the fact that Westerwelle was not even considered as a chancellor candidate in the major opinion polls.

because the range of candidates now again appeals to a larger part of the electorate. And indeed, our empirical analyses show that in the case of three competing chancellor candidates, their effect on the electoral decision for all parties is stronger. The decision by Bündnis 90/Die Grünen to nominate its own candidate for chancellor in the 2021 Bundestag election should thus mark a trend reversal.

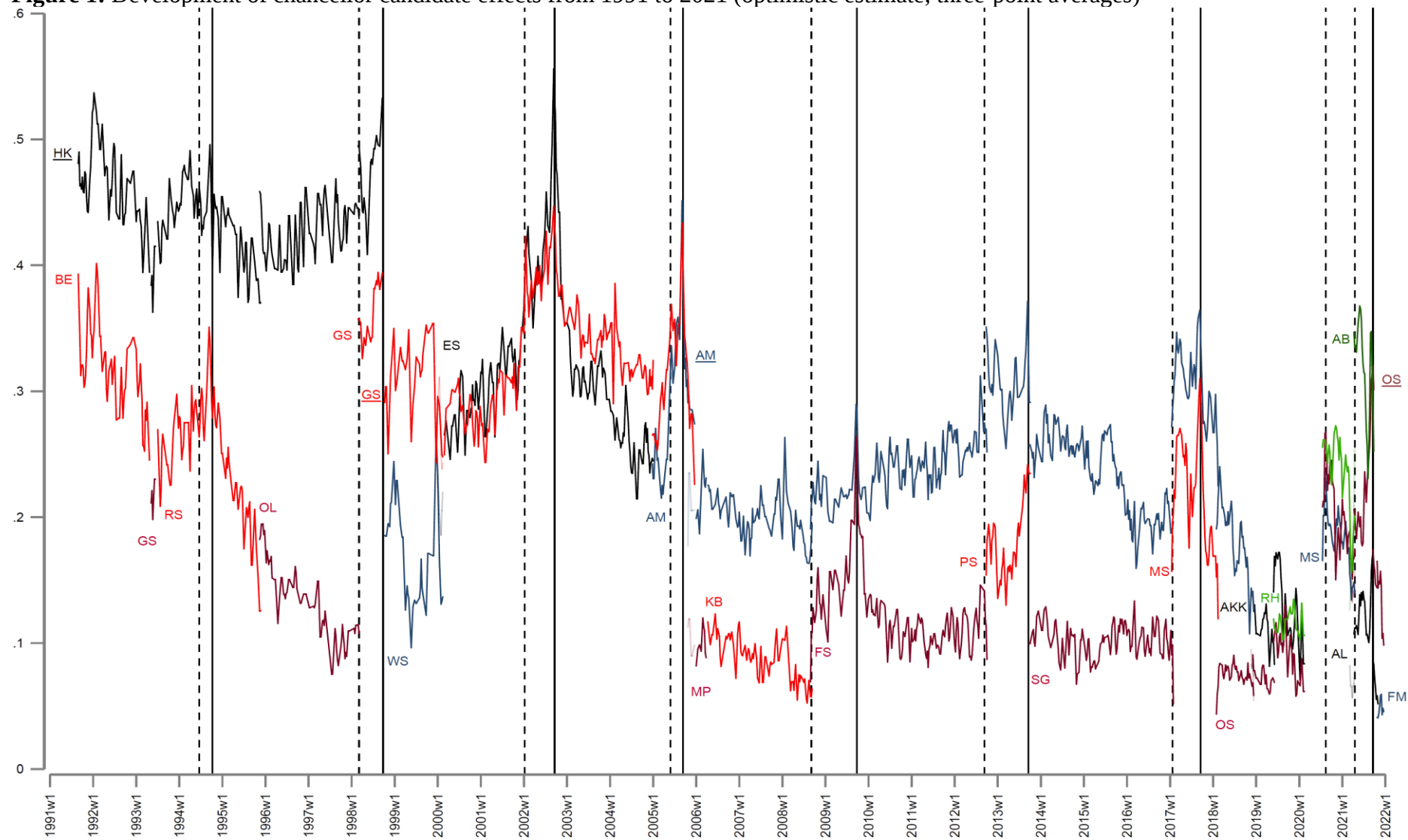
Our empirical analyses provide three other important insights. Since the survey data we use consider chancellor preferences even at times when not all parties have officially nominated someone as their chancellor candidate and, consequently, "hypothetical" chancellor candidates are used in some cases, we were able to examine the effect of a candidate's formal nomination. We find that being nominated indeed significantly strengthens the effect of the preference for a candidate on voting for his or her party. Consequently, the official nomination of chancellor candidates by German parties is more than a purely symbolic campaign gimmick, but is actually perceived by voters and factored into their decision-making. Moreover, with these data we were able to show that the effect of the chancellor candidates on voting is subject to a kind of electoral cycle. This effect is strongest shortly before and shortly after a Bundestag election, then decreases until the middle of the legislative period, and then increases again. Finally, we could not clearly prove the existence of a positive incumbency effect.

It remains to be emphasised that our finding of a de-chancellorisation of voting in Germany does not contradict a recent study by Garzia et al. (2022), which shows a trend towards personalisation of voter behaviour for fourteen Western European parliamentary democracies (including Germany) for the period 1961 to 2018. Namely, the authors investigate the strength of the influence of all relevant party leaders on the electoral decision in favour of their respective parties. The extent of candidate voting should only depend on the fragmentation of the party system if the analysis is limited to the subset of politicians who actually run for the highest office.

As far as the international transferability of our findings is concerned, similar processes should be expected in many countries. Since the increasing fragmentation of the party system - also due to electoral system reforms (Colomer 2005) - is a characteristic of most developed parliamentary democracies (Best 2010), the vote shares of those parties that have traditionally nominated candidates for the office of head of government should also decline there. As a result, a *de-presidentialisation* of the electoral decision in the sense of a decreasing strength of the effects of the evaluation of candidates for the highest office of the political executive is to

be expected here as well. A subsequent *re-presidentialisation* can be expected when additional parties have become strong enough to credibly nominate a candidate themselves.

Figure 1: Development of chancellor candidate effects from 1991 to 2021 (optimistic estimate, three-point averages)



Dashed vertical lines: challenger nominated; solid vertical lines: Bundestag election; colours of lines show party affiliation: CDU/CSU: black/navy, SPD: red/cranberry, Greens: green; transparent lines: new candidate set, while old constellation is still polled; initials used, for full names, see Table A2; underlined initials: incumbent chancellor.

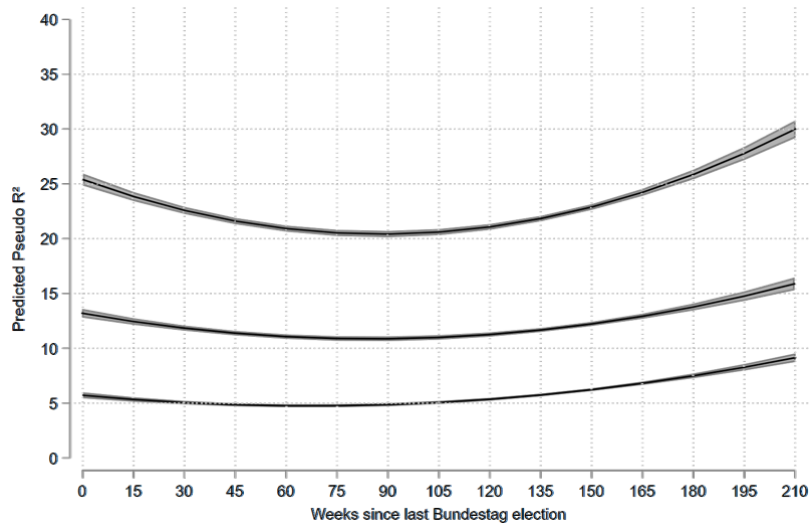
Table 1: Determinants of the effect of the chancellor preference

	m1o	m1p1	m1p2	m2o	m2p1	m2p2	m3o	m3p1	m3p2
Week-ID (effect for each legislative period)	-3.399*** (0.047)	-2.150*** (0.036)	-0.630*** (0.026)	-3.561*** (0.050)	-2.316*** (0.038)	-0.716*** (0.028)	-2.030*** (0.089)	-0.962*** (0.070)	0.474*** (0.050)
Three candidates (CDU/CSU;SPD;Gr.) (y/n)				4.353*** (0.464)	3.975*** (0.334)	1.861*** (0.220)	5.822*** (0.449)	4.969*** (0.317)	2.545*** (0.202)
ENEP							-4.747*** (0.235)	-3.925*** (0.173)	-3.221*** (0.115)
Candidate status (Ref. nominated candidate)	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Non-nominated challenger	-7.835*** (0.456)	-4.440*** (0.329)	-2.779*** (0.220)	-6.786*** (0.465)	-3.520*** (0.333)	-2.314*** (0.224)	-7.179*** (0.444)	-3.750*** (0.314)	-2.650*** (0.205)
Incumbent facing nominated challenger	2.202*** (0.582)	-0.033 (0.419)	0.732** (0.282)	3.185*** (0.585)	0.843* (0.418)	1.160*** (0.284)	2.476*** (0.560)	0.307 (0.395)	0.681** (0.259)
Incumbent facing non-nominated challenger	1.773*** (0.474)	-0.119 (0.342)	0.289 (0.228)	3.043*** (0.488)	1.001** (0.349)	0.849** (0.235)	2.446*** (0.467)	0.610 (0.330)	0.387 (0.215)
Weeks since last Bundestag election (* 10)	-1.132*** (0.001)	-0.550*** (0.000)	-0.288*** (0.000)	-1.187*** (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.000)	-0.003*** (0.000)	-1.150*** (0.001)	-0.597*** (0.000)	-0.305*** (0.000)
Weeks since last Bundestag election (* 10) #	0.064***	0.032***	0.022***	0.066***	0.034***	0.023***	0.063***	0.033***	0.020***
Weeks since last Bundestag election (* 10)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Party (Ref. CDU/CSU)	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
SPD	-4.850*** (0.201)	-0.614*** (0.147)	0.597*** (0.097)	-4.724*** (0.200)	-0.505*** (0.144)	0.647*** (0.097)	-4.824*** (0.191)	-0.578*** (0.136)	0.587*** (0.088)
Greens	8.788*** (0.599)	7.236*** (0.432)	6.413*** (0.280)	5.977*** (0.664)	4.715*** (0.475)	5.248*** (0.310)	6.277*** (0.634)	4.910*** (0.447)	5.438*** (0.283)
Constant	70.945*** (0.822)	41.437*** (0.622)	14.145*** (0.440)	71.780*** (0.818)	42.460*** (0.617)	14.732*** (0.441)	72.693*** (0.783)	42.074*** (0.582)	13.586*** (0.404)
R ²	70.53%	56.47%	41.31%	70.79%	57.51%	41.92%	73.82%	62.85%	52.61%
Number of candidates*weeks	4,244	4,070	3,838	4,244	4,070	3,838	4,244	4,070	3,838

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Models based on the optimistic estimate are denoted by an "o"; for the first pessimistic estimate it is "p1", for the second pessimistic estimate "p2".

Figure 2: Effects of chancellor preference on voting behaviour over the electoral cycle (models m1)



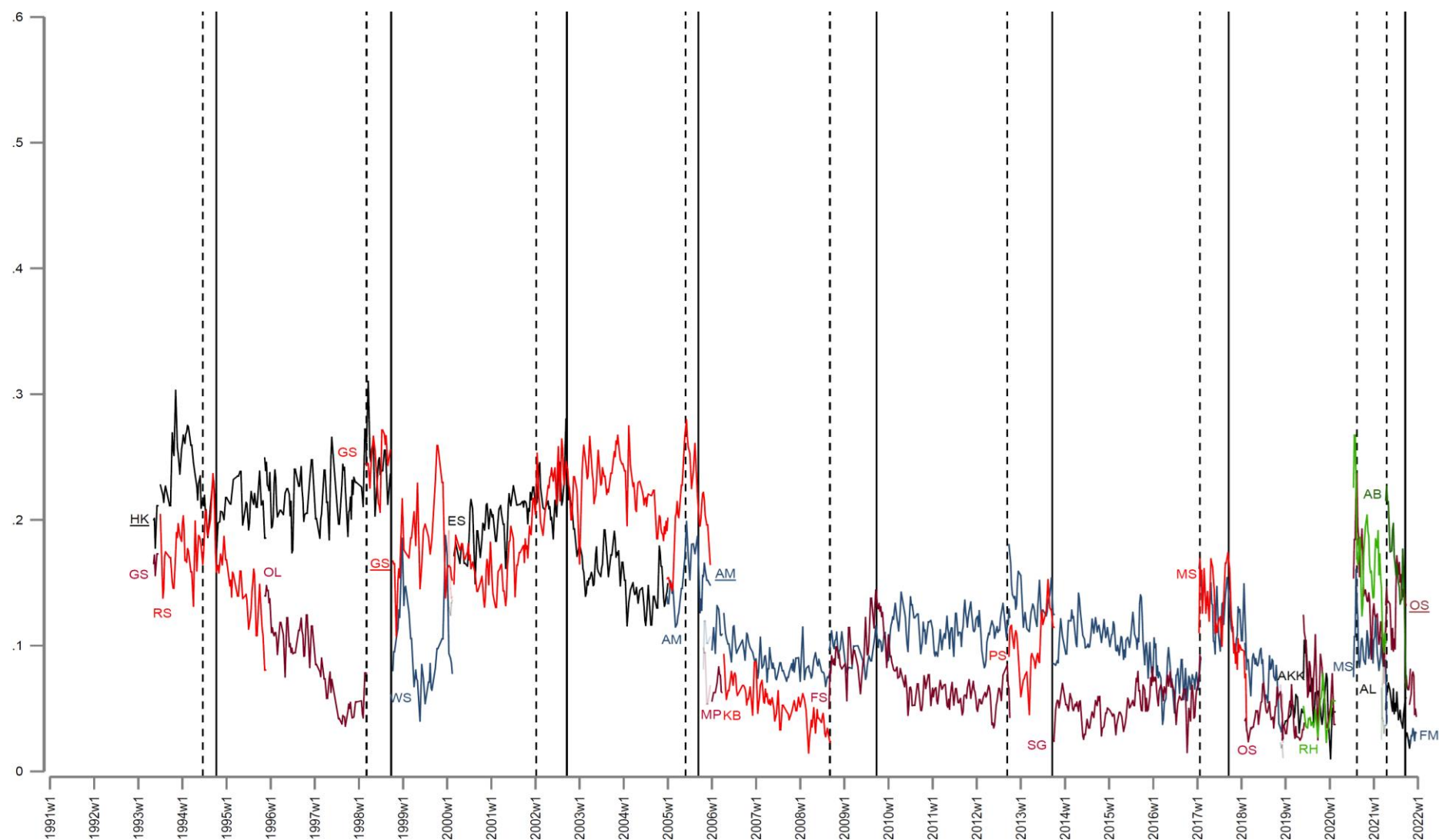
From top to bottom, optimistic estimate, pessimistic estimate 1 and pessimistic estimate 2; shaded area indicates 95% confidence interval.

Appendix

Table A1: Generating optimistic and pessimistic estimates of the chancellor candidate effect for one week (3rd week in 1998)

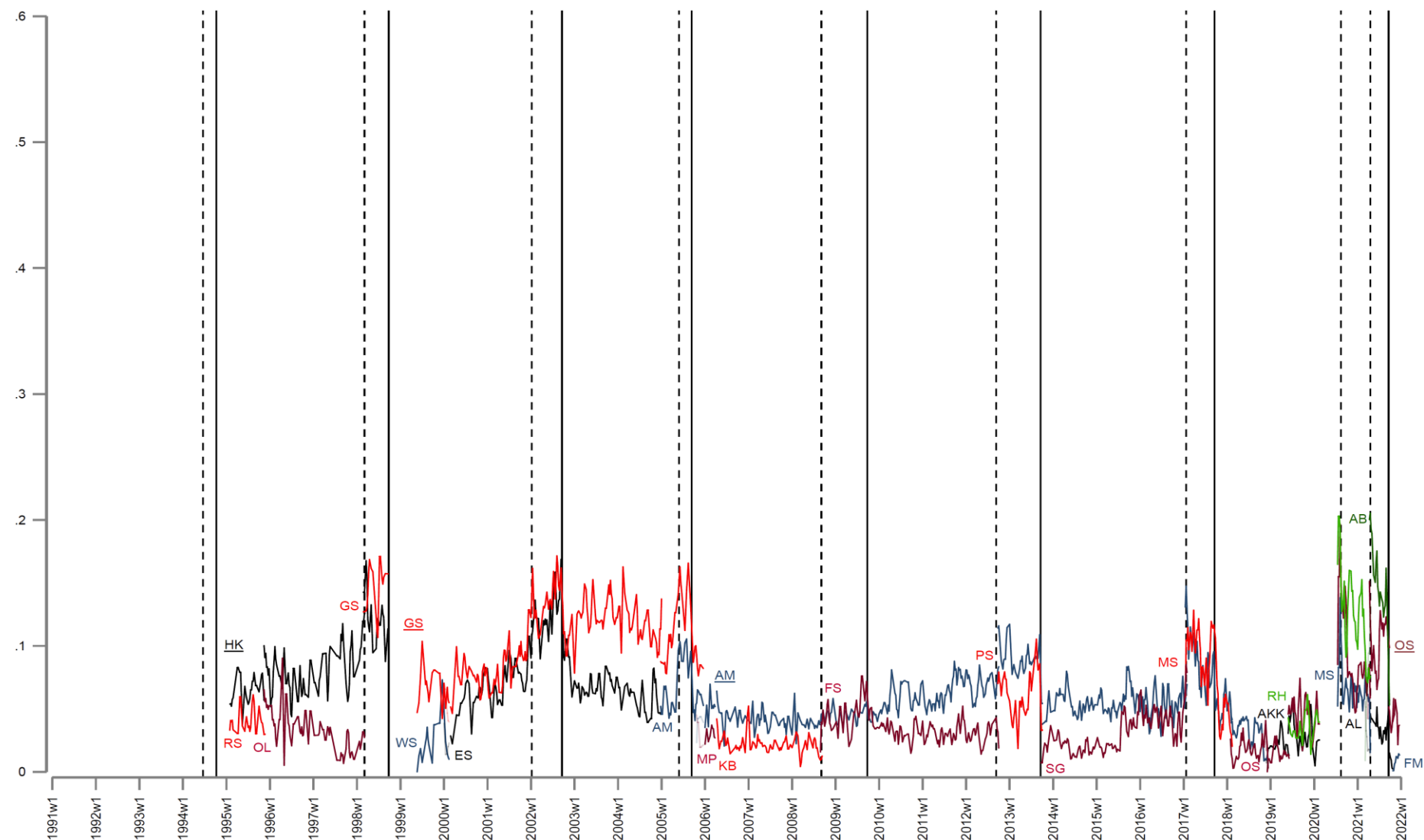
	CDU/CSU candidate Helmut Kohl					SPD candidate Gerhard Schröder				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Chancellor preference	4.359*** (0.002)		3.939*** (0.002)		3.703*** (0.003)	3.125*** (0.001)		2.719*** (0.001)		2.456*** (0.002)
Issue competence		3.288*** (0.002)	2.663*** (0.002)	2.768*** (0.002)	1.944*** (0.003)		2.369*** (0.002)	1.819*** (0.002)	2.276*** (0.002)	1.459*** (0.002)
Supporter of candidate's party				3.818*** (0.002)	3.574*** (0.003)				4.548*** (0.004)	4.145*** (0.004)
Constant	-2.300*** (0.001)	-1.720*** (0.001)	-2.790*** (0.001)	-3.162*** (0.002)	-4.093*** (0.002)	-1.464*** (0.001)	-0.411*** (0.001)	-1.708*** (0.001)	-1.221*** (0.001)	-2.264*** (0.001)
N	1,619	1,507	1,507	1,305	1,305	1,619	1,507	1,507	1,305	1,305
Pseudo-R ²	47.0%	26.8%	54.7%	56.5%	70.7%	33.4%	16.0%	37.6%	42.9%	54.1%
Optimistic estimate	47.0%					33.4%				
Pessimistic estimate 1	27.9 PP					21.6 PP				
Pessimistic estimate 2	14.2 PP					11.2 PP				

Figure A1: Development of chancellor candidate effects from 1991 to 2021 (pessimistic estimate 1, three-point averages)



Dashed vertical lines: challenger nominated; solid vertical lines: Bundestag election; colours of lines show party affiliation: CDU/CSU: black/navy, SPD: red/cranberry, Greens: green; transparent lines: new candidate set, while old constellation is still polled; initials used, for full names, see Table A2; underlined initials: incumbent chancellor.

Figure A2: Development of chancellor candidate effects from 1991 to 2021 (pessimistic estimate 2, three-point averages)



Dashed vertical lines: challenger nominated; solid vertical lines: Bundestag election; colours of lines show party affiliation: CDU/CSU: black/navy, SPD: red/cranberry, Greens: green; transparent lines: new candidate set, while old constellation is still polled; initials used, for full names, see Table A2; underlined initials: incumbent chancellor.

Table A2: Chancellor candidate effects differentiated by individual candidate

Candidate names and initials used in Figures 1, A1 and A2		optimistic estimate			pessimistic estimate 1			pessimistic estimate 2		
		N	mean	sd	N	mean	sd	N	mean	sd
Annalena Baerbock	AB	40	27.2	7.6	40	14.5	5.6	40	12.5	5.4
Kurt Beck	KB	125	8.8	2.1	125	5.3	1.8	125	2.2	0.9
Helge Braun	-	5	3.3	0.7	5	0.9	0.4	5	0.3	0.3
Björn Engholm	BE	86	31.9	4.0	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sigmar Gabriel	SG	323	8.1	2.7	323	4.1	2.0	323	2.1	1.6
Robert Habeck	RH	84	18.5	6.4	84	11.6	6.9	84	8.9	5.4
Helmut Kohl	HK	366	44.2	4.2	279	22.7	3.6	192	8.4	3.4
Hannelore Kraft	-	12	10.0	2.0	12	5.3	1.1	12	1.2	0.5
Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer	AKK	84	11.4	2.8	84	4.8	2.3	84	2.4	1.5
Oskar Lafontaine	OL	117	13.2	3.5	117	8.5	3.6	117	3.2	1.8
Armin Laschet	AL	46	10.0	3.4	46	4.5	1.8	46	2.9	1.7
Angela Merkel	AM	1,161	23.1	4.5	1,161	10.8	2.8	1,161	5.4	1.9
Friedrich Merz	FM	9	4.6	2.4	9	2.7	1.8	9	0.9	0.9
Andrea Nahles	AN	22	6.1	2.0	22	3.2	2.1	22	1.9	1.6
Matthias Platzeck	MP	23	9.8	1.9	23	6.7	1.7	23	2.7	0.9
Norbert Röttgen	-	7	6.0	1.6	7	3.3	1.7	7	1.3	1.4
Wolfgang Schäuble	WS	70	17.0	4.0	70	10.2	3.5	41	2.7	1.7
Rudolf Scharping	RS	126	24.9	4.7	126	16.4	3.3	45	4.1	1.4
Olaf Scholz	OS	228	13.1	6.3	228	8.1	4.7	228	5.0	4.0
Gerhard Schröder	GS	614	30.6	5.2	613	19.1	4.3	578	9.8	3.3
Martin Schulz (SPD)	MS	54	22.4	4.7	54	12.8	3.9	54	8.1	3.7
Markus Söder (CSU)	MS	55	16.4	3.8	55	8.8	3.5	55	5.5	3.2
Peer Steinbrueck	PS	117	12.5	5.8	117	7.1	3.4	117	4.2	2.6
Frank-Walter Steinmeier	FS	213	12.3	3.4	213	7.5	2.6	213	3.5	1.4
Edmund Stoiber	ES	257	31.6	6.6	257	18.2	3.5	257	7.2	2.9
Total		4,244	22.6	11.2	4,070	12.0	6.6	3,838	5.7	3.7

Initials are omitted, when a candidate is not considered in Figures 1, A1 and A2.

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