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# Rhapsody in Beige: The Impact of SPD Candidate Evaluations on Vote Choice in the 2009, 2013, and 2017 Federal Elections

MICHAEL A. HANSEN and JONATHAN OLSEN

*Previous research has shown that in addition to party identification chancellor candidate evaluations play an important role in determining vote choice in German federal elections. In this article, we evaluate the impact that such evaluations had on vote choice in 2009, 2013, and 2017 using the German Longitudinal Election Study. In contrast to a popular narrative that Chancellor Merkel was less of a factor in 2017 than she had been in the two previous elections where the Union parties ran especially personalised campaigns around Merkel, we find that the* Kanzlerbonus *(incumbency benefit) and Merkel's attractiveness to voters was strong in all three elections, especially among non-party identifiers. More importantly, we find that increasingly the Social Democrats had chancellor candidates unattractive to voters and perceived as bland across all of these elections, and demonstrate that this was a factor which significantly weakened their vote. Thus we conclude that beyond the structural weaknesses of the Social Democrats over the last three election cycles the lack of appeal of the party's chancellor candidates has played a significant role in the SPD's lack of electoral success.*

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars of German politics are well aware of the fact that chancellor candidates have often played very significant roles in their parties' campaigns, indeed ever since the first post-war national elections. After all, the Christian Democrats' (CDU/CSU, or simply the Union) main slogan in the 1953 national election was 'Germany votes for Adenauer', in 1969 the Union campaigned with their candidate Kurt Georg Kiesinger on a message of 'Auf den Kanzler kommt es an' (it all comes down to the chancellor), and in 1980 one of the Social Democrats' main campaign slogans was simply 'Helmut Schmidt. Therefore SPD'. More recently, the Union parties ran especially personalised campaigns in 2009 and 2013, capitalising on the (then) huge popularity of Angela Merkel. Indeed, both of these campaigns were notable for their almost singular focus on Merkel, even going so far as to sell Merkel as 'Angie' during the election, with the accompanying Rolling Stones' song at campaign events. Subsequently, in addition to the longstanding 'Chancellor Bonus' in German politics – the incumbency advantage all German chancellors are said to benefit from – the significant popularity of Merkel has been identified as one of the chief factors responsible for the Christian Democrats decisive victories in these two elections (Schoen 2011; Schoen and Greszki 2014; Mushaben 2018; Wiliarty 2018).

Less explored in the literature is the effect weak chancellor candidates have had on vote choice for the main opposition party. Over the last three election cycles that opposition party has been the SPD, which has seen its share of the vote fall precipitously. The electoral decline of the SPD since 2005 has often been traced to socio-demographic and structural factors common to most, if not all, social democratic parties throughout Europe (Green-Pederson 2007). In addition, there have been situation-specific factors of the SPD, which arose during the chancellorship of Gerhard Schröder, that have had electoral repercussions for the party (Conradt 2006, 2010; Paterson and Sloam 2010).

In this article, we examine whether the SPD's last three disappointing election results cannot only be traced to long-standing structural problems and the challenges in dealing with the legacies of Schröder-era reforms, but also to a problem with their chancellor candidates. It is important to note at the outset that the 'funnel of causality' (Wagner and Wessels 2011) in vote choice is complex, with ideology and incumbency (among other things) but also personal characteristics of the candidates as key factors. We approach our question in this article through an examination of the role of candidate evaluations on vote choice in the federal elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017 using the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES).[1] The GLES study is an ongoing election study since 2009, which surveys respondents both before and after Germany's Federal Elections. It provides us the best, most up-to-date data from which to draw conclusions about voters in these elections. To our knowledge, our study is the first one conducted across all elections involving Angela Merkel's chancellorship using the GLES. Our conclusion is straightforward: while we do not deny or minimise the impact of structural factors as well as the specific dilemmas of the SPD on the party's recent electoral fortunes, we demonstrate that weak chancellor candidates have also contributed significantly to the Social Democrats' poor showings in the last three successive federal elections. In other words, they have played a significant additive role.

Although our primary research question concerns the role of the Social Democrats' candidates in 2009, 2013, and 2017, we also of necessity examine the particular role of Chancellor Merkel (her popularity and potential to attract women voters) and the chancellor bonus in these elections and its effect on vote choice for the Union as well. Undoubtedly connected to the SPD's problem in picking competitive Chancellor candidates, we find that Angela Merkel had a similar effect on vote choice in 2017 that she did in 2013 and 2009: she was unquestionably an electoral asset to the CDU/ CSU. The chancellor bonus thus appeared to be as alive and well in 2017 as it was in previous elections. However, we find little evidence for a 'gender gap' benefitting the Union. This is consistent with previous literature (see for example Debus 2017), which has examined a possible gender gap and refuted an 'Angela Merkel Effect'. That is to say, despite the potential attractiveness of a *Kanzlerin* for female voters, we find that women were in fact not more likely to vote for the CDU/CSU.

## THE DECLINE OF THE SPD: STRUCTURES, SITUATIONS, AND PERSONALITIES

As noted above, the electoral decline of the SPD is often traced to factors common to most if not all social democratic parties throughout Europe. These factors include the declining number of blue-collar workers that once made up the party's core

constituency. However, as Kitschelt (1994) has suggested the decline in raw numbers of blue-collar workers in European democracies is too crude a measure to explain social democracy's problems. Instead, he argues, a decline in the number of workers is less important than the shift in attitudes among workers who once supported social democratic parties in much greater numbers. Thus, the problem of blue-collar workers could be considered a subset of the decline of party attachments generally (dealignment) and the growth of free-floating, unattached voters. The decline of party attachments, in turn, has been linked to the erosion of socio-cultural milieus, which have affected all catch-all parties, including Christian Democratic/Conservative parties (Sloam 2009; Conradt 2010; Paterson and Sloam 2010). Individualisation, pluralisation of lifestyles, a decrease in industrial employment and the increase in the service sector, and the process of secularisation found in all modern/post-modern democracies is traced to the erosion of these milieus (Inglehart and Hochstein 1972; Green-Pederson 2007; Saalfeld 2009). Accordingly, value-oriented followers of specific parties are 'replaced by floating voters … characterized by many different socio-economic backgrounds and whose attachment to parties is barely, if at all, discernible' (Jun 2011, 207).

The challenge for all catch-all parties is that they have to try to obtain the dominant share of these new unattached voters, many in the middle of the political spectrum, while retaining the party's remaining core/milieu voters (Kreikenbom 1999). As Sloam (2009) notes, this problem has been especially acute for the catch-all parties in Germany because of greater voter volatility in the wake of unification, the depth of post-materialist value change in the German electorate, and the subsequent growth of more political competitors on the right and left. Yet social democratic parties, such as the SPD, face greater political challenges than their Christian Democratic rivals, for they are torn between the need to compete with their conservative competitors for free-floating voters in the middle of the political spectrum while retaining their vocal left-wing, union-friendly core; otherwise, they risk losing this group to left-wing challengers. Until the very recent electoral surge of the AfD, the CDU/CSU feared no serious rival on the right as it sought free-floating voters in the centre; the SPD, on the other hand, has had to contend with both the Greens (starting in the 1980s) and the PDS/*Linke* (starting in the 1990s), both of whom became firmly anchored in the German party system. In recent elections the SPD has failed to attract (or even retain) voters on any part of the spectrum, shedding votes to the left (the Greens and *Linke*), the right (AfD) and the centre (CDU/CSU and FDP). In addition, Kitschelt (1999; see also Olsen 2007; Egle 2009; Paterson and Sloam 2010; Turner 2018) broadens his analysis to include other aspects of the social democratic 'dilemma' beyond its electoral one. Social Democratic parties also face a political-economic dilemma (pursuing centrist economic policy so that the party appears acceptable to financial markets which in turn risks losing support from core voters favouring redistribution policies) and an organisational dilemma (retaining traditional mass party structures which make the party more stable but are far from nimble in securing floating voters).

The electoral fallout wrought to the SPD by former chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Hartz IV reforms (which among other things, toughened rules on unemployment benefits, infuriating the party's base) is another situation-specific factor impacting the SPD's electoral misfortunes and also illustrates how these social democratic challenges are crystallized within the party. The SPD's inability to fully navigate its political-

economic dilemmas led directly to the loss of many of its core left-wing voters. Any attempt, however, to reverse the Schroeder economic reforms have threatened the SPD's credibility with both economic elites (who trace Germany's favourable economic situation directly to these reforms) and centrist voters (who would rightly question what the party actually stands for). Splitting the difference between these two unattractive scenarios, however, also does not seem to be a recipe for success. At the very least, however, managing (if not taming) the party's dilemmas has called for a successful communication strategy, and beyond this a dynamic, credible, and assertive communicator at the helm of the party. In other words, the SPD has needed a strong and assertive chancellor candidate who leads a unified party with a consistent and bold vision.

So what does the existing literature tell us about the effect can a chancellor candidate have on vote choice in a German federal election? The evidence here is nuanced but also clear. On the one hand, there is significant evidence that, over time, there has been no linear trend towards the increasing importance of candidate evaluations for voting behaviour (Kaase 1994; Brettschneider 2002; Norpoth and Gschwend 2003; Schulz and Zeh 2005; Brettschneider, Neller, and Anderson 2006; Pappi, Kurella, and Bräuninger 2018). On the other hand, Norpoth and Gschwend (2003) and Schoen (2007, 2011) have argued that the Michigan model of voting behaviour – long-term party attachments or party ID explains voting behaviour, especially in party-centered political systems such as Germany – cannot completely account for vote choice in German Federal Elections. In short, 'candidate orientations make a difference in vote choice' (Schoen and Greszki 2014). To be sure, candidate effects on voting behaviour in German federal elections have been varied and election specific, with for example Kellerman (2007) finding that in German elections between 1990 and 2005 candidate evaluations were pivotal for the Social Democrats, but of far less importance for the Christian Democrats. Similarly, Blumenberg and Blumenberg (2018), in a comparative study of German regional elections in 2016, found that candidate evaluations played dominant roles in several of these elections, but far less of a role in others. This fits in with previous findings of Debus (2010), Pappi and Shikano (2001), and Krewel, Schmidt, and Walter (2016), which have found that candidates have an impact on elections, but that this 'varies across levels, regions, and other contextual determinants' (Blumenberg and Blumenberg 2018, 360).

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Our goal then is to test the role that SPD and CDU/CSU chancellor candidates played in their parties' electoral fortunes in the last three German Federal Elections. The data used for the empirical analysis are the German Longitudinal Election Studies (GLES) conducted in 2009, 2013, and 2017.[2] The surveys represent the largest collection of individual-level data related to the German Federal Elections currently available. Furthermore, the longitudinal dimension to the study includes a consistent set of questions that ask respondents to evaluate the two main chancellor candidates from the CDU/CSU and SPD in each election year ($i$). In particular, the surveys ask respondents to evaluate the candidates in regards to their assertiveness and leadership, trustworthiness, likability, and economic competence. The responses are coded as follows: $-2 =$ strongly disagree, $-1 =$ disagree $0 =$ neither agree nor disagree, $1 =$ agree, $2 =$ agree

strongly. The data will allow us to compare and explore the relative evaluations of Merkel throughout this time period to the three SPD chancellor candidates: Frank-Walter Steinmeier in 2009, Peer Steinbruck in 2013, and Martin Schulz in 2017.[3]

A few preliminary words on the German electoral system will help explain our initial methodology. As scholars of German politics are well aware, voters in Germany are allowed to cast two ballots. The first vote cast is for a particular candidate in single-member districts using plurality electoral rules. The second vote is for a party, with this vote filling the remaining seats through proportional representation if a party meets a 5 per cent threshold. While this second vote determines the overall proportion of seats a party gets in the Bundestag, the first vote (supplemented by party lists) determines who will fill these seats.[4] Empirical research has demonstrated that first-past-the-post elections tend to lead to two-party systems (Riker 1986). Under this logic, voters cast their votes for the party that has the best chance of winning. In proportional representation systems, voters tend to be less strategic and simply cast a vote for their most preferred party since it stands a better chance of representation than in plurality/ majoritarian systems. In Germany's two-vote system this means two logics operate. Although most voters vote for their preferred party on both the first and second vote, when voters split their vote they often cast their first vote for their preferred candidate (of their party) and their second vote for a party which they want to see represented in parliament. Of course this conclusion only holds if a voter believes a party will achieve the 5 per cent vote threshold Germany sets as minimum requirement for entry into the Bundestag (Cox 1997). Since the mechanisms that explain vote choice for these two votes might be different, our investigation explores both votes as separate dependent variables in the analysis.

In order to fully investigate the role of chancellor candidate evaluations in German Federal Elections, the empirical analysis is split into four parts. First, an initial investigation is conducted where descriptive statistics are explored. We investigate how respondents rated Merkel on the four candidate characteristics in comparison to the SPD candidate in the three election cycles. After that we explore respondents' evaluation of the candidates on these four characteristics by respondent party identification (ID) in order to view if any clear trends exist.

The second part of the empirical analysis specifically explores predicting respondents' evaluations of the candidates. In particular, we take the four chancellor candidate characteristics, and through factor analysis estimation, a singular latent 'overall candidate evaluation' measure is created for each candidate ($j$) in each election year ($i$). Following this estimation, linear regression models are estimated in order to predict respondent overall evaluation. The analysis is conducted in order to further explore the variables that correlate with candidate evaluations. To our knowledge, our analysis will be the first instance where the data is explored in this fashion. The models will allow us to determine whether attitudes towards candidates are simply a product of party ID, or whether there are other explanatory variables at work that determine evaluations of candidates.

The third part of our empirical analysis involves the estimation of multinomial logistic regression vote choice models for the first and second vote ($g$) in each of the three years ($i$). The models are estimated in order to understand the impact that respondents' overall chancellor candidate evaluations has on vote choice.[5] In addition, after the

estimation of the multinomial vote choice models, average marginal effects plots are presented so that the impact of candidate characteristics can be better understood (see, Appendix B in regards to model choice). Previous research has explored the impact of each of these individual candidate evaluations on vote choice in 2009 and 2013 (Schoen 2011; Schoen and Grezski 2014).[6] However, previous research has not explored how an overall measure of evaluation performs when predicting vote choice, calculated the substantive effects of the evaluations on vote choice, or conducted a comparative analysis of these three elections, elections which Merkel and the CDU/ CSU dominated.

The final section of our empirical analysis conducts an original exploration that specifically targets voters that indicate that they do not identify with any of the five political parties who gained seats in the Bundestag in 2009 and 2013 and six – the AfD – who were expected to gain seats – in 2017 (i.e. 'other party identifiers'). Since in the surveys respondents who indicate that they do not identify with any of these parties make up between 31 (2013) and 47 (2017) per cent of the sample, it is well worth exploring the impact that evaluation of the chancellor candidates has on this large group of voters. Here, due to data limitations we isolate voting for the CDU over the SPD, since this is the main relationship that the article is interested in. Therefore, logistic regression models are estimated for each vote ($g$) and year ($i$) in order to verify whether candidate characteristic evaluations have an impact on unaffiliated voters – here described simply as other party identifiers – vote choice for the CDU/CSU over the SPD. In addition, predicted probabilities are also presented for candidate evaluations in order to fully explore their substantive impact.[7]

## INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

When estimating multivariate models, all relevant control/independent variables needed in political behaviour and elections studies broadly, and German election studies in particular, are included. There are a number of socio-demographic and attitudinal variables explored in our analysis as independent variables.[8] First, a number of socio-demographics are included in the analysis. Those included represent all of the basic socio-demographics that should be in a study exploring vote choice: age, gender, education, income, employment status, and union membership. When estimating models for the evaluation of chancellor candidates, we also include political interest and political knowledge. In addition, an Eastern Germany variable is included in the analysis since previous research has demonstrated an East/West dynamic in German political behaviour (Schoen 2011; Schoen and Greszki 2014; Dilling 2018; Hansen and Olsen 2018).[9]

The second sets of independent variables included in the analysis are attitudinal variables. First, political ideology is included in the analysis since ideology has a clear relationship with vote choice.[10] Second, we include satisfaction with democracy as an attitudinal measure. Third, voter volatility in any given election could be explained by the state of the economy and voters' anxieties about their own financial situation. Therefore, a variable is included that attempts to measure prospective respondent attitudes about financial security. Fourth, political interest is included as a control since it could be related to a range of attitudes. Finally, party identification (ID) is included

as an independent variable since it is traditionally a predictor of vote choice across Western democracies.[11]

## RESULTS

### Respondent Evaluation of Candidate Characteristics

Figure 1 presents descriptive statistics of respondents' evaluations of Merkel and the three SPD candidates in the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections. The figure conveys two striking trends.[12] First, viewing the extreme responses (strongly) to the candidate traits questions tell an interesting story. To take one example, only a small fraction of respondents indicate that they strongly disagree that either Merkel or the SPD candidate do not fit any of the four characteristics. Furthermore, where there are gaps in the percentage of people of responding that they strongly disagree that Merkel and the SPD candidate fits the characteristic, the gaps are quite small. The largest percentage gap exists between Merkel and Steinbrück when comparing the two on likability, and the gap is only 5 per cent.

On the other hand, different sets of observations emerge when exploring the category 'strongly agree' for evaluating candidate trait embodiment. On average, across all traits and comparisons, there is a 10.73 per cent gap between Merkel and the SPD candidates. In addition, in every single pairwise comparison a higher percentage of respondents indicated that they strongly agree that Merkel fits the trait when compared to the SPD candidate. Further, when comparing Merkel to each candidate in isolation on this category, we see that the gap gets larger over time. On average, Merkel had an 8.9 per cent positive advantage in the strongly agree category over Steinmeier. The average

FIGURE 1
RESPONDENT EVALUATION OF CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS
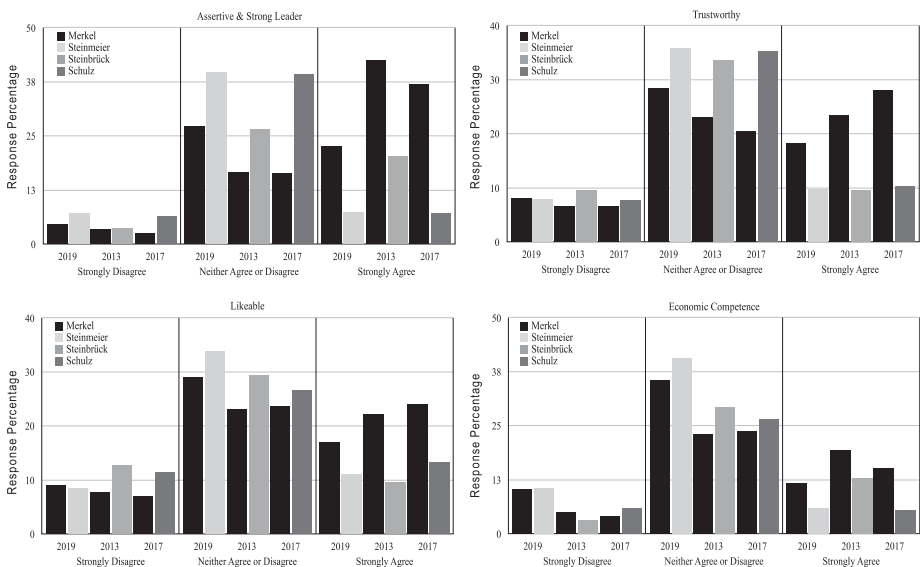
positive gap between Merkel and the SPD candidate rose 13.75 per cent when comparing Merkel to Steinbrück on the four candidate traits. Finally, when comparing Merkel and Schulz in the strongly agree category there is an average gap of 17.03 per cent in favour of Merkel. The trend would indicate that, at least initially, the SPD is facing a crisis of chancellor candidate quality, and that the crisis has been getting worse over time. Moreover, it indicates that Merkel could have been as much if not more of an asset to the Union in 2017 than in previous elections.

The other important trend in Figure 1 to acknowledge involves exploring the 'neither agree or disagree' category. Based on the descriptive statistics here, one could make a claim that SPD candidates are not doing enough to stand out or be known to the voters. Across all candidate traits, in each pairwise comparison between Merkel and the SPD candidate, the SPD candidate has a higher percentage of respondents indicate that they neither agree nor disagree that the chancellor candidate holds a trait (9.49 per cent on average). Also, we see the same pattern exist when comparing Merkel to each SPD candidate in isolation, which is that the gap has increased with each election cycle. The gap between Merkel and Steinmeier was 7.43 per cent, Merkel and Steinbrück was 7.7 per cent, and Merkel and Schulz increased to 13.35 per cent on average across the four items. The trend is important because it could hardly be expected that a candidate could inspire a citizen to cast a vote for their party if the person does not know whether the chancellor candidate holds these important traits.

Since candidate evaluations and party ID are correlated, Figure 2 presents the breakdown of the percentage of positive evaluations of the four candidate traits for the candidates by party ID. Three observations are apparent when viewing Figure 2. First, respondents identifying with the CDU/CSU, FDP, and the category of other party identifiers consistently rate Merkel higher on all four candidate traits when compared to the

FIGURE 2
RESPONDENT EVALUATION OF CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS BY PARTY ID (PERCENT POSITIVE EVALUATIONS)
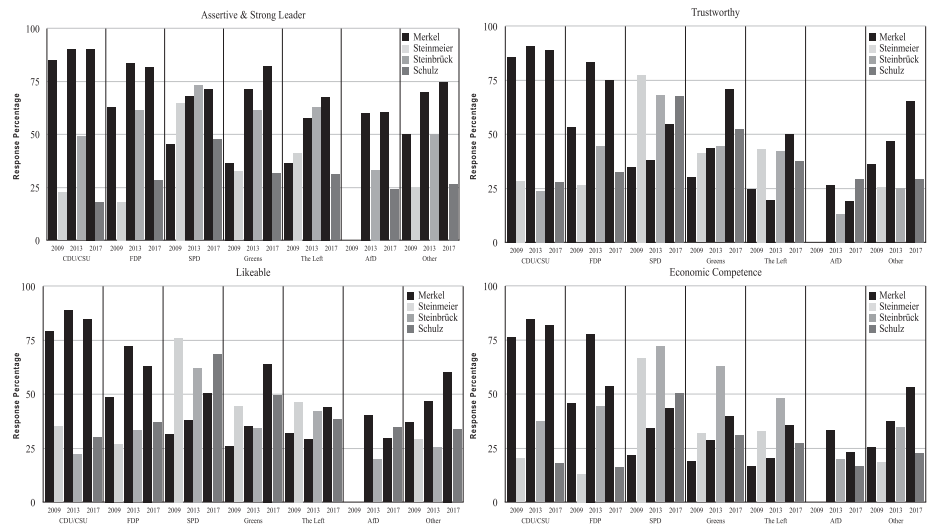
three SPD candidates. Further, the gaps between Merkel and the SPD candidates are quite large. On average, the gap across the four traits for CDU/CSU party identifiers is 57.67 per cent, 53.08 per cent for FDP identifiers, and 21.36 per cent of other party identifiers. If strategic voting was occurring in these elections, than it is quite likely that FDP identifiers or other party identifiers would cast a vote based on a comparison between the chancellor candidates. Here, we show that party ID is related to evaluations (i.e. CDU/CSU identifiers rate Merkel higher), but there are also caveats to this observation.

The second observation worth discussing deals with Green and the Left party identifiers. In 2009 and 2013, Left party identifiers rated Steinmeier and Steinbrück higher than Merkel on all four candidate traits, and Green party identifiers rated Steinmeier and Steinbrück higher than Merkel on most (but not all) of these four candidate traits. Since the Green and Left parties are closer to the SPD than the CDU/CSU on the ideological spectrum, and could serve as possible coalition parties with the SPD, one would expect that these respondents would rate the SPD chancellor candidate higher than Merkel, even if this was a little weak in 2013 for Green supporters. However, in 2017 the narrative was very different. In 2017, both Green and Left party identifiers rate Merkel higher than Schulz on all four candidate traits.

Finally, there are rather surprising trends when exploring how SPD party identifiers evaluate the chancellor candidates, which also lends some evidence for the idea that the SPD has been increasingly putting up weaker candidates over this time period. The observation holds especially when we compare how SPD identifiers rate Merkel over the time period. On all four candidate traits, SPD identifiers rate Merkel higher with each consecutive election (10 percentage points higher with each subsequent election). In 2009, the average positive evaluation across all four indicators was 33.23 per cent. In 2013, the average positive evaluation of Merkel across the indicators was 44.48 per cent. Finally, in 2017 a majority of SPD party identifiers rated Merkel positively across the four indicators (54.98 per cent). The conclusion we can draw is that over these three elections Merkel has gained in stature or approval amongst even SPD identifiers. Conversely, approval for the SPD chancellor candidates is less than would be expected. Clearly, the party's chancellor candidates are not inspiring the party faithful.

*Prediction of Overall Candidate Evaluations*

Since the goal of this article is to explore how overall candidate evaluations might impact an election, we take the four chancellor candidate traits and estimate one latent evaluation measure for each candidate ($j$) and each election year (i). The latent measure was created through the factor analysis estimation. In Appendix E, the output from factor analysis estimation is presented. Overall, the four items load quite well, and the proportion of the variance explained with one factor loading is, on average across the six latent measures, 0.586. According to the output, trustworthiness loads the highest, then likability and economic competence alternate for the second highest loadings, and assertiveness and strong leadership loads as least important for creating the latent measure. Therefore, if one were to extrapolate from the findings in order to create a good chancellor candidate, the candidate should be trustworthy and an assertive and strong leader first and second, and then seen as likable with economic competence. Following the creation of our new measure, linear regression

TABLE 1
MODELS PREDICTING OVERALL CANDIDATE EVALUATIONS

| | Merkel 2009 | Steinmeier 2009 | Merkel 2013 | Steinbrück 2013 | Merkel 2017 | Schulz 2017 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Intercept) | −1.02* | −0.03 | −1.44* | −0.62* | −0.97* | 0.29 |
| | (0.09) | (0.12) | (0.14) | (0.18) | (0.18) | (0.22) |
| Age | 0.00* | 0.00 | 0.01* | 0.00 | 0.01* | −0.00 |
| | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) | (0.00) |
| Gender | 0.14* | 0.11* | 0.18* | 0.03 | 0.17* | −0.12* |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| College Degree | 0.04 | 0.00 | 0.12* | −0.04 | 0.11 | −0.25 |
| | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.14) | (0.14) |
| Income | 0.02* | 0.02* | 0.01 | 0.05* | 0.05* | 0.00 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Unemployed | −0.15* | −0.18* | −0.20* | 0.19 | −0.52* | 0.19 |
| | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.16) | (0.17) |
| Union Member | −0.11 | 0.04 | −0.04 | −0.06 | −0.17* | −0.07 |
| | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| East Germany | 0.30* | −0.04 | 0.07 | 0.13* | 0.06 | −0.24* |
| | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| Political Interest | 0.06* | 0.00 | 0.02 | 0.08* | −0.03 | 0.00 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Political Knowledge | −0.02 | 0.03 | −0.03 | 0.06* | 0.07* | 0.04 |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Political Ideology | 0.05* | −0.05* | 0.10* | −0.06* | −0.02 | −0.06* |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Party ID – CDU | 1.06* | NA | 1.11* | NA | 0.92* | NA |
| | (0.05) | | (0.06) | | (0.11) | |
| Party ID – SPD | NA | 1.02* | NA | 0.92* | NA | 0.80* |
| | | (0.05) | | (0.07) | | (0.12) |
| Party ID – FDP | 0.37* | −0.22* | 0.70* | 0.19 | 0.32* | −0.04 |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.22) | (0.24) | (0.14) | (0.16) |
| Party ID – Green | −0.13 | 0.14 | 0.17 | 0.38* | 0.23* | 0.30* |
| | (0.07) | (0.08) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.10) | (0.13) |
| Party ID – The Left | −0.26* | 0.10 | −0.19* | 0.17 | −0.06 | −0.08 |
| | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.09) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.14) |
| Party ID – Other | 0.10* | −0.02 | 0.27* | 0.18* | 0.35* | −0.00 |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.10) |
| Party ID – AfD | NA | NA | −0.22 | −0.52* | −0.76* | −0.03 |
| | | | (0.23) | (0.25) | (0.14) | (0.16) |
| N | 3117 | 3082 | 1417 | 1388 | 1294 | 1266 |
| $R^2$ | 0.32 | 0.22 | 0.39 | 0.22 | 0.17 | 0.16 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.32 | 0.22 | 0.38 | 0.21 | 0.16 | 0.15 |

Note: Reference category for party ID is competitor party, i.e. SPD for Merkel models.
*$p > 0.05$; Standard errors in parentheses.

models are estimated, which predict overall respondent evaluation of the candidates in each election (*i*).[13]

Table 1 presents the model output from the six models predicting respondents' overall candidate evaluations. It is worth noting that the reference category for the party ID variable is the main competitor party of the candidate. Therefore, the SPD is the party ID reference category for Merkel, which means that all party ID coefficients are in comparison to how SPD party identifiers rate her as a candidate. Four trends stand out when viewing the output. First, women tend to evaluate Merkel higher

when compared to men. Given both Merkel's symbolic significance as Germany's first female chancellor, in addition to the fact that she has been seen as a key figure in advancing the substantive interests of women (on this, see Mushaben 2018; Wiliarty 2018), this is not very surprising. Second, where statistically significant, unemployed respondents statistically rate both candidates lower. The result reinforces a narrative about voter apathy amongst those who feel most alienated from politics.

Third, there is evidence here that political ideology is related to candidate evaluations.[14] In 2009 and 2013, as a person moves right on the ideology spectrum they rate Merkel statistically higher than people on the left. On the other hand, the reverse trend is true for the SPD candidate. As a respondent moves right on the ideological spectrum they rate the SPD candidate statistically lower across all elections. The result indicates that chancellor candidates need to have a broader ideological appeal and be attractive in the middle of the ideological spectrum in order to be successful, as mentioned above in our discussion on the dilemmas of the SPD.

Finally, model output conveys interesting trends with respect to Party ID. Since voters identifying with smaller parties might need to vote strategically for the CDU/CSU or SPD, it is worth exploring how these respondents compare to the main competitor party when evaluating the chancellor candidates. If we isolate the models predicting evaluations of Merkel, four trends appear. First, identifiers for the CDU/CSU evaluate Merkel higher than SPD identifiers, and the reverse relationship exists for SPD identifiers rating the SPD candidate. Second, FDP party identifiers rate Merkel statistically higher than do SPD identifiers, which is not surprising given the FDP's ideology and its status as the main potential coalition partner for the Union. Third, Left party identifiers rated Merkel statistically lower than the SPD in 2009 and 2013, but in 2017 there was no statistical difference. As found before, the result indicates a change in attitudes towards Merkel that occurred through the time period and the weakness of Schulz in 2017.

The final trend is that other party identifiers have a consistently higher statistical evaluation of Merkel when compared to SPD identifiers. However, other party identifiers only have a statistically higher evaluation of the SPD candidate when compared to CDU/CSU identifiers in 2013. If these other party identifiers choose to cast a vote for either of the two main parties based on chancellor candidate evaluations, one would expect based on these results that the CDU/CSU would acquire more votes this group of voters. It will be useful to isolate these other party identifiers and determine whether candidate evaluations have a statistically significant impact on vote choice for the CDU/CSU and SPD in order to see the larger impact of candidate evaluations on vote choice.

*Relationship Between Candidate Evaluation and Vote Choice*

The next stage in the empirical analysis is to determine through the estimation of multivariate vote choice models whether candidate evaluations have a statistical relationship with vote choice. Since we are only focussed on candidate evaluations, and displaying all coefficients for six individual multinomial logit models could get tedious, a summary of only the candidate evaluations coefficients for the six models are presented in Table 2.[15] The reference vote choice category is voting for the CDU/CSU. Therefore,

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF MULTIVARIATE VOTE CHOICE MODELS: CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS
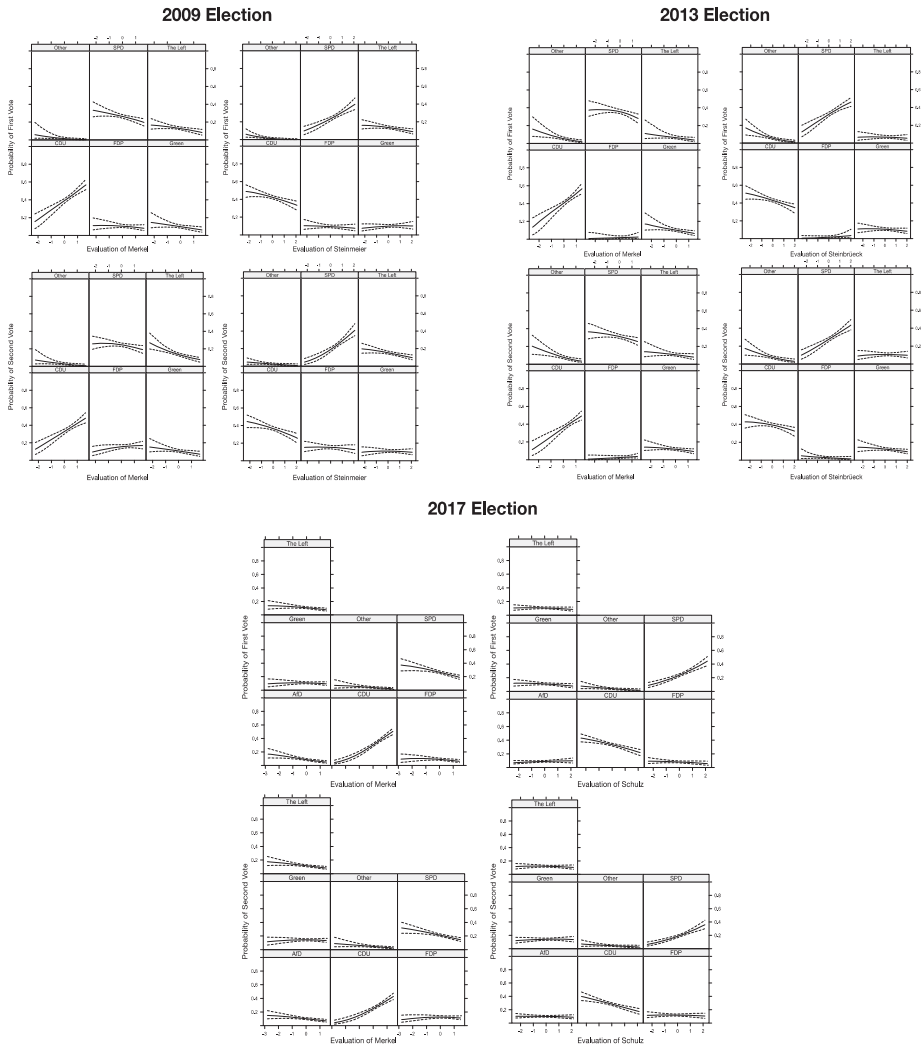EVALUATIONS

| | FDP | SPD | Green | The Left | AfD | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2009 First Vote Choice** | | | | | | |
| Merkel Eval Coefficient | −0.64* | −1.15* | −1.27* | −1.28* | NA | −1.82* |
| | (0.23) | (0.20) | (0.22) | (0.23) | | (0.48) |
| Steinmeier Eval Coefficient | 0.22 | 1.22* | 0.82* | 0.32 | NA | −0.64 |
| | (0.18) | (0.20) | (0.21) | (0.21) | | (0.52) |
| **2009 Second Vote Choice** | | | | | | |
| Merkel Eval Coefficient | −0.15 | −0.91* | −1.12* | −1.60* | NA | −1.66* |
| | (0.16) | (0.18) | (0.21) | (0.23) | | (0.32) |
| Steinmeier Eval Coefficient | 0.24 | 1.20* | 0.45* | 0.15 | NA | 0.46 |
| | (0.14) | (0.18) | (0.19) | (0.20) | | (0.30) |
| **2013 First Vote Choice** | | | | | | |
| Merkel Eval Coefficient | −0.68 | −1.26* | −1.28* | −1.53* | NA | −1.81* |
| | (0.53) | (0.22) | (0.27) | (0.29) | | (0.27) |
| Steinbrück Eval Coefficient | 0.84 | 0.74* | 0.17 | 0.01 | NA | −0.26 |
| | (0.49) | (0.18) | (0.24) | (0.24) | | (0.26) |
| **2013 Second Vote Choice** | | | | | | |
| Merkel Eval Coefficient | 0.07 | −1.01 * | −1.02* | −0.90* | NA | −1.10* |
| | (0.36) | (0.20) | (0.25) | (0.22) | | (0.20) |
| Steinbrück Eval Coefficient | −0.12 | 0.74* | −0.07 | 0.34 | NA | −0.18 |
| | (0.27) | (0.17) | (0.23) | (0.19) | | (0.19) |
| **2017 First Vote Choice** | | | | | | |
| Merkel Eval Coefficient | −0.84* | −1.02* | −0.84* | −1.15* | −1.14* | −1.34* |
| | (0.18) | (0.15) | (0.19) | (0.18) | (0.19) | (0.23) |
| Steinbrück Eval Coefficient | 0.05 | 0.73* | 0.14 | 0.19 | 0.43* | −0.15 |
| | (0.15) | (0.12) | (0.16) | (0.16) | (0.17) | (0.20) |
| **2017 Second Vote Choice** | | | | | | |
| Merkel Eval Coefficient | −0.39* | −1.04* | −0.53* | −0.97* | −0.98* | −0.92* |
| | (0.16) | (0.15) | (0.18) | (0.18) | (0.18) | (0.21) |
| Schulz Eval Coefficient | 0.16 | 0.91* | 0.31* | 0.49* | 0.30 | 0.20 |
| | (0.13) | (0.14) | (0.15) | (0.16) | (0.16) | (0.19) |

*$p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses; CDU/CSU vote in the reference category for the DV.

all vote choice coefficients are displayed in terms or their significance to voting for the CDU/CSU.

When exploring the output in Table 2, it is clear that candidate evaluations have a strong relationship with vote choice throughout the time period under investigation. Across all models, with the exception of voting FDP in three instances, voters for all the other parties are statistically more likely to evaluate Merkel lower than are CDU/CSU voters. The result indicates that the evaluation of Merkel is a strong predictor of vote choice: candidate evaluation plays a significant role in these three elections. On the other hand, the role of the SPD candidate is less clear. In particular, there are several instances where respondent evaluations are statistically the same when comparing CDU/CSU voters and voters for the FDP, Greens, the Left, AfD, and other parties. Theoretically, if there is no difference between how CDU/CSU voters and voters for the other parties evaluate the SPD candidate, the CDU/CSU maybe be able to peel off some of the voters for different parties on the first or second vote as voters sympathetic to Merkel split their votes.

FIGURE 3
CANDIDATE EVALUATIONS MARGINAL EFFECTS ON VOTE CHOICE



In order to fully flesh out the impact that candidate evaluations have on vote choice, average marginal effects plots are displayed in Figure 3. The plots demonstrate the substantive effect that chancellor candidate evaluations have on vote choice. The plots demonstrate that evaluations have a fairly large substantive effect on vote choice. For example, in 2009, a respondent that evaluated Merkel at the highest level on traits has a probability of .5 to .6 of voting for the Union candidate in the first vote when holding all other variables at their median. In comparison, a respondent that rated Merkel at the lowest level on traits has a probability of between .06 and .22. A similar trend holds for the second vote and for both votes in 2013. On the other

hand, Figure 3 demonstrates that someone that evaluated Merkel at the lowest level has a probability of zero for voting for the CDU/CSU. In contrast, a person that rated Merkel at the highest level has a probability of between .55 and .38.

Similar trends are apparent when exploring the substantive impacts that evaluation of the SPD candidate has on vote choice. Across all years and first and second votes, the probability of voting for the SPD increases substantially when going from completely negative to completely positive evaluations of the SPD candidates. It is also worth noting what effect evaluations of the SPD candidates has on voting CDU/CSU. When exploring the plots for the six votes, the change in probability of voting when going from the most extreme negative evaluation to the most extreme positive evaluation of the SPD candidate has a larger impact on voting CDU/CSU than does any Merkel evaluation have on voting SPD. The result indicates that voters evaluating Merkel negatively are not necessarily voting for the SPD. However, those people evaluating the SPD candidate negatively are those people voting for the CDU/CSU. The result indicates that Merkel is able to draw more voters not identified with the CDU/CSU than is the SPD candidate able to draw voters not identified with the SPD.

### Candidate Evaluation and Vote Choice – Other Party Identifiers

The final part of the empirical analysis isolated voting for the CDU/CSU over the SPD for those voters that identify as other party identifiers rather than CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, Left Party identifiers (and AfD identifiers in 2017). Table 3 displays output from the six models across the three election cycles. The results from the previous section on vote choice are confirmed: Evaluating Merkel higher on candidate traits leads to a higher probability of voting for the CDU/CSU in all instances, with the exception of the first vote in 2009. On the other hand, negative SPD candidate evaluation leads to a decrease in the probability of voting for the SPD in all instances. Since the data indicates that more other party identifiers voted for the CDU than the SPD, we can infer that a significant portion of these voters were drawn to Merkel and dissuaded to vote for the SPD by their negative evaluations of SPD candidates.

Figure 4 presents the effects of the candidate evaluations on voting for the CDU/CSU over the SPD for other party identifiers. The confidence bounds are rather large in 2009 and 2013 since the number of other party identifiers was statistically lower than in 2017. However, even in 2009 and 2013 we can see a clear trend. In 2009, the evaluation of Steinmeier had an effect on the probability of voting for the CDU/CSU in the first vote anywhere from .15 to .85 when going from one extreme evaluation to the other. In the second vote, both candidates had large effects on vote choice. In the 2013 election, candidate evaluations had relatively small statistically significant effects on vote choice. The effects are important, albeit small in overall probability of vote choice. Finally, in 2017 where a large proportion of citizens responded that they identified with a party other than the six main parties, Figure 1 displays large effects and tight confidence bounds. The result shows that candidate evaluations were important in the 2017 election. In the first vote, when moving from the most extreme negative evaluation of Merkel to the most positive evaluation, there is a difference in the probability of voting CDU/CSU of between .75–.8. In the second vote, the effect of Merkel evaluation drops to between .45–.55. In both votes, when going from the most extreme negative evaluation of Schulz to the most positive evaluation there is only a drop in the

TABLE 3
VOTE CHOICE 'OTHER PARTY IDENTIFIERS:' 1 = CDU/CSU; 0 = SPD

| | 2009 First Vote | 2009 Second Vote | 2013 First Vote | 2013 Second Vote | 2017 First Vote | 2017 Second Vote |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Intercept) | −4.60* | −3.94* | −2.42* | −1.63 | −1.35* | −1.29* |
| | (1.14) | (1.14) | (1.05) | (1.26) | (0.61) | (0.65) |
| Age | 0.01 | −0.00 | 0.00 | −0.01 | 0.00 | 0.01 |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Gender | 0.51 | 0.46 | 0.02 | 0.11 | −0.05 | −0.14 |
| | (0.29) | (0.32) | (0.25) | (0.30) | (0.20) | (0.22) |
| College Degree | 0.33 | −0.82 | 0.14 | 0.15 | 0.28 | −1.33* |
| | (0.35) | (0.43) | (0.31) | (0.35) | (0.94) | (0.64) |
| Income | 0.23* | 0.10 | 0.03 | −0.03 | 0.07 | 0.09 |
| | (0.08) | (0.09) | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.04) | (0.05) |
| Unemployed | 5.45 | 1.13 | −0.51 | −0.19 | 0.03 | −0.31 |
| | (325.51) | (0.81) | (0.61) | (0.68) | (0.61) | (0.59) |
| East Germany | 0.83* | 0.48 | 0.58 | 0.46 | 0.40 | −0.07 |
| | (0.36) | (0.36) | (0.35) | (0.39) | (0.24) | (0.25) |
| Political Ideology | 0.51* | 0.60* | 0.33* | 0.24 | 0.21* | 0.16* |
| | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.12) | (0.14) | (0.06) | (0.06) |
| Satisfaction w/ Democracy | −0.11 | −0.30* | 0.16 | −0.20 | 0.13 | 0.15 |
| | (0.14) | (0.15) | (0.11) | (0.12) | (0.11) | (0.12) |
| Prospective Economic Evaluation | 0.09 | −0.27 | 0.04 | 0.27 | 0.15 | 0.27 |
| | (0.25) | (0.30) | (0.19) | (0.22) | (0.15) | (0.14) |
| Merkel Evaluation | 0.29 | 0.84* | 0.54* | 0.87* | 0.79* | 0.67* |
| | (0.18) | (0.21) | (0.18) | (0.23) | (0.13) | (0.14) |
| SPD Candidate Evaluation | −0.67* | −0.90* | −0.50* | −0.67* | −0.47* | −0.65* |
| | (0.18) | (0.21) | (0.18) | (0.21) | (0.11) | (0.12) |
| N | 153 | 147 | 142 | 116 | 382 | 326 |
| PRE | 0.500 | 0.581 | 0.424 | 0.373 | 0.185 | 0.259 |
| ePRE | 0.424 | 0.501 | 0.298 | 0.308 | 0.319 | 0.313 |
| AIC | 140.46 | 123.48 | 157.58 | 129.34 | 246.67 | 208.57 |

*$p < 0.05$; standard errors in parentheses.

probability of voting CDU/CSU of between .23 to .6. Clearly, evaluation of Merkel was more important for dictating vote choice in 2017.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

What effect do chancellor candidates have on voting behaviour in Germany? Using the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) in the German federal elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017 we found the answer to be simply … quite a bit. Our study, using an original research model which compared the substantive effects of chancellor evaluations on vote choice across three elections, has shown that evaluations of chancellor candidates are especially important for non-attached voters (other party identifiers), which all of the German parties – but especially the two main centrist parties, CDU/CSU and SPD – hope to win. On average, across the four traits evaluated, the gap between Angela Merkel and the SPD chancellor candidates in 2009, 2013, and 2017 was over 21 per cent for these other party identifiers. The gaps between Merkel and

FIGURE 4
CANDIDATE EVALUATIONS EFFECTS ON VOTING CDU > SPD – OTHER PARTY IDENTIFIERS
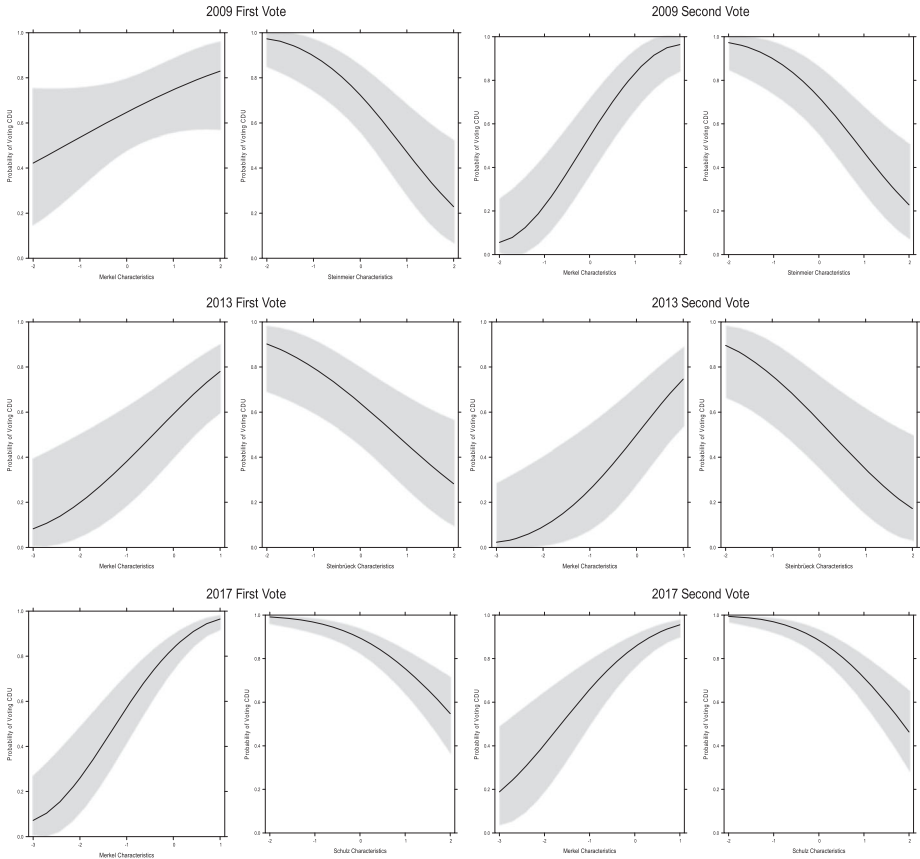


the SPD candidate on the trait of an 'assertive and strong' leader were especially marked. Moreover, while Green and Left Party identifiers for whom the SPD is an expected potential coalition partner rated Steinemeier and Steinbrück from the SPD higher than Merkel across the four traits, in 2017 both Green and LP supporters favoured Merkel over Schulz. Even more surprisingly, a majority of SPD party identifiers rated Merkel positively (around 55 per cent) in 2017, up from 33 per cent in 2009 and 44 per cent in 2013. The conclusion we can draw is that Angela Merkel had a significant impact on voting behaviour in 2017. Conversely, the SPD is not competing as it should in terms of the favorability of its chancellor candidates in the Merkel era. Indeed, the problem seems to have only gotten worse over this time period.

Furthermore, in all the elections analysed in our study, candidate evaluations were important for vote choice. This was especially pronounced in 2017, where the probability of voting CDU/CSU increased dramatically with higher positive evaluations of her candidate qualities. Estimating multivariate vote choice models, we found that candidate evaluations are a strong predictor of the vote. While the results for Angela

Merkel were striking, the role of SPD candidates was equally so: several of our models demonstrated that respondent evaluations for Union voters on the one hand, and FDP, Green, LP, and AfD voters on the other, were not statistically different. Over the course of three elections, Angela Merkel has been able to draw more voters not identified with the CDU/CSU than SPD candidates have been able to draw in voters not identified with the Social Democrats. We can therefore say with some confidence that the *Kanzlerin-bonus* was alive and well in 2017 and that personalisation played a critical role – independent of party identification – in the elections of 2009, 2013, and 2017. Thus in contrast to a popular media narrative that she was vulnerable and less effective in the 2017 campaign, Merkel – despite a documented decrease in approval ratings – was unquestionably an electoral asset in 2017.

The most important findings in this study arise in regards to the SPD's electoral fortunes. In addition to long-term factors (such as changes in the electorate), and the SPD's continuing inability to appropriately manage the significant policy changes it enacted during the Schroeder era, our study has underscored the fact that the SPD has suffered from a dearth of attractive chancellor candidates. These candidates have been ineffective in their messaging, unconvincing to potential voters (and even sometimes to their own supporters), and lacking in charisma and competence to a broad swatch of the electorate. SPD candidates have clearly been failing to motivate broad portions of the German electorate, including non-attached voters, a fact apparent in the Social Democrats' declining election totals.

Going into 2021, the SPD and Union will face similar dilemmas. For the SPD, the question will be whether to move to the left in order to try to woo disappointed SPD supporters who have gone over to the *Linke,* or to stay in the centre lane to try and win back voters who have deserted it for the Union and FDP. For the Union, the question will be whether to move to the right to try and recapture voters who have gone over to the AfD (apparently the CSU's preferred strategy), or move more to the centre to keep centrist voters and/or to keep the possibility alive for a Union-FDP or even Union-Greens coalition. Both these coalition options are theoretically more likely than a renewal of a Grand Coalition (given the math, of course) in light of the SPD's conviction that Grand Coalitions under Merkel have done the party little good. Both the Union and SPD will also be in a similar situation regarding their chancellor candidates: with no incumbent running, neither party will enjoy a Chancellor bonus. Still, because of their longstanding structural weaknesses finding a dynamic and credible candidate articulating a clear and consistent vision appears more important than ever for the SPD.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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SUPPLEMENTAL DATA AND RESEARCH MATERIALS

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the Taylor & Francis website, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1669020.

NOTES

1. The data used for the empirical analysis are the German Longitudinal Election Studies (GLES) conducted in 2009, 2013, and 2017. The post election studies were utilised for the study since the dependent variables are vote choice.
2. The GLES is the only comprehensive survey that measures German citizens' attitudes towards federal election. The years 2009, 2013, and 2017 were chosen because these are the only years that the survey was conducted. Of course, we would prefer panel data and a longer period of time. However, the GLES study is the most useful, complete data for studying the topic.
3. Relevant models were estimated using post-stratification survey weights.
4. In the German electoral system parties may earn more seats than they are entitled to by the second vote (PR) if their number of first vote seats won in a state exceeds the number of seats determined through the second vote. This is the so-called 'overhang mandate.' Following a German Constitutional Court ruling and a new electoral law, overhang mandates are now compensated through 'Ausgleichsmandaten', which proportionally compensate other parties without overhang mandates so that the seats earned through the election remain proportional.
5. Why are both votes explored? Even though the first vote is for a particular candidate, and that candidate might not be the chancellor candidate, studies have solidly demonstrated that party leadership is utilised as a vote heuristic when casting a vote. Therefore, we have to account for the fact that the chancellor candidate evaluations might impact individual vote for other members of the same party.
6. The inclusion of each individual candidate evaluation item in a vote choice model is problematic for model estimation due to multi-colinearity since the individual items are highly correlated. The lowest bivariate correlation between individual items was .34. The highest correlation was .756. On average, estimating a correlation matrix between the items, the items correlated at .59 or higher. Also, see model selection critique in Appendix B.
7. We must note that the number of observations in 2009 and 2013 are lower than one would hope when estimating binary choice models. In order to explore the robustness of the results, Bayesian binary models were estimated as a potential check using Markov Chain Monte Carlo Simulation (MCMC). The prior means and variance were specified in a number of ways. Overall, the results from the Bayesian binary models indicated that the results were fairly robust.
8. Variable coding and any statistical tests performed for creating the independent variables (i.e. Cronbach's Alpha scores, factor analysis, and binary correlation tests) are provided in the appendices.
9. In order for models to be comparable across elections, model specification must be identical (i.e. independent and control variables). Therefore, the inclusion of election specific issue questions is avoided, since the inclusion in one election and not another would not allow for cross election comparison.
10. The Party Manifesto ideology scores (rile) indicate that the SPD has remained ideologically consistent, while the CDU/CSU has moved around (Volkens et al. 2018). In 2009, SDP was at −18.297 and CDU/CSU was at 8.724. In 2013, the SPD was at −23.568 and CDU/CSU was at 2.564. Finally, in 2017 the SPD was at −21.437 and CDU/CSU was at 2.757. The statistics would indicate that in 2009 the CDU/CSU was its most conservative out of the three elections and was fairly centre right in 2013 and 2017. On the other hand, the SPD has been fairly solid left in all three elections.
11. Appendix B provides a discussion on the independent variables that were excluded from the final analysis.
12. Full candidate evaluation descriptive statistics are provided in Appendix C.

13. It is worth noting that in Supplemental Appendix D (Tables D1–D4) output is provided where linear regression models are estimated in order to predict respondents' evaluations on each of the four candidate characteristics in isolation. Importantly, similar trends are found when predicting each of the four candidate characteristics that are found when predicting the singular, latent candidate characteristic measure.

14. In Appendix F, we include output from models that estimate the impact that ideological distance between the respondent and the candidate has on candidate evaluations. Taking the respondent's ideological positioning and subtracting the position from where they placed each candidate created each measure. Then, we standardised the distance. The findings indicate that respondents evaluate the candidate lower as the ideological distance between the respondent and the candidate increases.

15. It is worth noting that the AfD was not included as a category for the party ID variable or vote choice dependent variables in 2009 and 2013 because there were not enough respondents indicating that they either identified or voted for the AfD in order to include in the multivariate models.

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