

Just like me? Testing descriptive attributes as voting heuristics

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ABSTRACT

The lack of candidate diversity and the descriptive under-representation of groups such as women and young people in parliaments is a recurring concern in both public and academic debates. While prior studies have examined whether voters prefer candidates who share their gender or age, findings remain mixed and are often based on experimental designs. Using conditional logit models and combined survey-candidate data from the 2021 German Federal Election, we assess whether voters considered gender and age similarities with district candidates when casting their votes. This election, shaped by heightened media focus on under-represented groups and public discourse around gender and age, offers a strong case for exploring group-based voting behavior. Despite this context, our results show no general effect of gender or age similarity on vote choice. Gender cues do not influence candidate preferences, even among women or left-leaning voters. While age similarity has no overall impact, younger voters on the left are more likely to support younger candidates, whereas their right-leaning counterparts favour older ones. These findings suggest that identity-based cues matter only for specific subgroups under certain conditions. Our study highlights the limits of affinity voting in information-rich settings compared to the stronger effects often found in experimental research.

1. Introduction

Representative democracy rests on the principle that citizens elect individuals who reflect their political beliefs and interests (Dahl 1971). However, representation involves more than just ideological alignment or informed preferences (Pitkin 1967). Shared group affiliations, such as partisanship, religion, social class, ethnicity, or gender² inform political preferences and vote choices (e.g., A. Campbell et al. [1960] 1980; Converse 1964; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Rahn 1993). These affiliations provide cognitive shortcuts and serve as cues for political alignment. Individuals tend to perceive members of their in-group as more similar to themselves, which fosters the belief that these individuals are more likely to understand and represent their experiences and interests (R. Campbell and Heath 2017; Thau 2021).

Voters use such perceived similarity as a heuristic when evaluating

candidates. Group cues, whether deliberately sent or unintentionally signalled through observable characteristics, help them infer alignment on interests and experiences. When these cues are tied to visible social traits, such as gender or age, they are particularly accessible and can facilitate descriptive representation. A form of representation based on the idea that representatives share social characteristics with the represented to generate representation (Pitkin, 1967).

Building on this literature and drawing on theories of social identity and descriptive representation, this study examines whether voters rely on descriptive cues like age and gender³ when choosing a candidate, and whether these effects vary by the voter's own group membership. Specifically, we examine *whether voters prefer candidates who share their age or gender, and whether this affinity-based preference is more pronounced among underrepresented or politically marginalised groups*. Many existing studies examining descriptive cues on voting are based on experiments (Rudolph et al., 2022; Arnesen et al., 2019; R. Campbell and Cowley,

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² Zaller and Feldman, 1992 In this study, gender refers to socially and culturally shaped roles, identities, and expectations. Although data constraints require the use of a binary (male/female) classification, this does not imply an essentialist or fixed understanding of gender. We acknowledge the diversity of gender identities beyond this binary classification and recognise this limitation where relevant.

³ While ethnicity or migration background is highly likely to be another impermeable feature that shapes vote choice (Bergh and Björklund, 2011; Joshua N. Zingher 2023; Joshua N. Zingher and Farrer 2016; Lublin and Wright, 2024), we have refrained from including ethnicity due to the lack of an objective measure on candidates' ethnicity in our data.

2014) or focus on favouritism rather than vote choices (Kurz et al., 2025). Observational studies on vote choices typically find only modest effects (Ferland, 2022; Sevi, 2021; Webster and Pierce, 2019; Brians, 2005; Menzner et al., 2025). We contribute to the existing research by analysing whether shared group membership can influence voting behaviour, even in contexts where a wide range of (policy) information is available, and group memberships are politicised.

During the 2021 German federal election, gender and age were prominent candidate cues. These were clearly visible to voters through campaign posters and, in the case of gender, were also indicated on the ballot paper. These features were not only underrepresented in parliament, but also politicised and salient due to societal developments and public discourse. The campaign context was shaped by heightened public attention to group-based inequalities (e.g., Hassenkamp, 2020; Röder, 2021; Mika, 2021; Wollscheid, 2020; Kassel, 2021; Sammann, 2021; Heise, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2021). This attention contributed to the salience of identity-based grievances, particularly among women and younger citizen. This setting gives us the opportunity to examine the role of these two descriptive features on candidate choice under favourable conditions.

Using data from the German Longitudinal Election Study cross-sectional survey (GLES, 2023) and official candidate lists with descriptive group characteristics, we apply conditional logit models to test whether age and gender cues significantly influence voting decisions. The results suggest that voters' concerns about resemblance to representatives are not only secondary to issue or ideological voting, but generally do not play a significant role in the wider electorate. Although conditions for affinity voting were favourable, we only find statistically and substantially significant effects for specific young voters. In particular, young split-voters and young left ideologists are more likely to vote for young candidates. Young right ideologists are more likely to vote for older candidates. These effects are not observed for other cues or voter subgroups. Overall, our findings indicate that descriptive representation effects observed in experimental studies may not generalize to high-information contexts. Voters at large either did not perceive group cues from candidates or did not take them into consideration when casting their vote. Affinity voting rather seems to be dependent on subgroup characteristics, indicating a need for a more nuanced understanding of when and for whom descriptive cues matter.

2. Group cues and descriptive features

Voters rely on cues as informational shortcuts to compare their political beliefs and preferences with those of political elites (Webster and Pierce, 2019; Arnesen et al., 2019; A. Campbell et al. [1960], 1980). These cues do not offer specific reasons for taking a stance on issues but signal ideological or partisan alignments (Zaller and Feldman, 1992). Group cues are particularly relevant, as they convey political preferences based on social group membership and allow voters to categorise candidates as in- or out-group members. Cues may be unintentional, such as gender or ethnicity, or intentional, such as self-identified labels or explicit group associations. Political actors often reinforce intended cues to increase support from particular groups (Thau, 2021; Huber, 2022). However, voters need to pay attention to media or elite communication to obtain information about appeals, which are relatively easy to interpret compared to issue positions (Thau, 2021; A. Campbell et al. [1960], 1980). The more accessible the information or visible a group characteristic of a political actor, the fewer resources voters need to categorise candidates as ingroup or outgroup members. This visibility increases the likelihood that group membership will be used as a voting heuristic (Thau, 2021).

While visibility increases the likelihood of identifying group affiliations, it does not necessarily affect voters' sense of belonging or salience of their affiliations. Individuals are motivated by psychological and cognitive needs to identify with social groups. This identification shapes how they perceive shared interests and can trigger behaviours that

protect or promote the ingroup (Tajfel et al., 1971; Turner et al., 1994; Hogg and Abrams 1988; Hogg and Smith, 2007). Research shows that shared group characteristics thus often serve as voting heuristics (McDermott, 2009; Goodyear-Grant and Tolley, 2017; Valenzuela and Michelson, 2016; Tilley, 2015; Thau, 2021; Webster and Pierce, 2019; Lublin and Wright, 2024). While individuals belong to multiple groups simultaneously, not all group identifications influence political behaviour (Valenzuela and Michelson, 2016; Baysu and Swyngedouw, 2020; Huddy, 2001). Politicised identifications that are associated with a strong group attachment, external threats, grievances, or are generally salient are most likely to influence political behaviour (e.g., Huddy, 2001; Simon and Klandermans, 2001). Public debates, media attention to political and social conflicts, and mobilisation efforts by political actors reinforce group salience (Thau, 2021; Deckman and McDonald, 2022). When group identities are emphasised by elite or media communication or grievances, individuals are more likely to recognise their group membership and adopt a politicised identity (Chernyha and Burg, 2012). Simultaneously, to affect voting decisions, voters must have access to information about candidates' group memberships (McDermott, 2005). For group-cue-based voting to occur, two conditions should therefore be met: group identity should be politicised, and group membership must be recognisable.

Descriptive features, such as gender, age, or ethnicity, often fulfil both criteria. They are highly visible, socially meaningful, and strongly tied to group boundaries and experiences. As relatively stable traits that structure social interactions, they allow voters to easily classify political candidates and reinforce perceptions of group difference and stability (Huddy, 2001, 2013; Jackson et al., 1996). Gender and age in particular are likely to function as group cues in political decision-making, as they shape not only social roles but also partisan alignments and policy preferences.

As group cues, gender and age are not only visible but also politically informative. Gender, for example, is associated with differences in party support (Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2004), policy preferences (Dingler et al., 2019; Barnes and Cassese, 2017; Huddy et al., 2008; Gottlieb et al., 2018), and candidate perceptions (Kosiara-Pedersen and Hansen, 2015; Dolan, 2010), making it a strong signal of political alignment. It is not only descriptive marker, but also conveys information about likely ideological positions or representational priorities. A behavioural expression of this dynamic is affinity voting, which describes the tendency to favour candidates perceived as ingroup members who are assumed to better understand and represent voters' interests (McDermott, 2009; Dolan, 2008; Montoya et al., 2022; Brians, 2005; Sanbonmatsu, 2002).

Comparable differences are observed across age or generational cohorts. Generations tend to share political preferences shaped by their socialisation and formative experiences (Inglehart, 1997; Mannheim, 1928), which influence their behaviour (van der Brug and Rekker 2021; Furlong and Cartmel, 2012; van der Brug 2010; Lichtin, van der Brug, and Rekker, 2023). Beyond similarities among generations, age groups may also align based on common life-stage interests. Ageing alters attitudes due to the varying importance of policy issues, such as pensions or education, across different life phases (Furlong and Cartmel, 2012; Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Busemeyer et al., 2009; Peterson et al., 2020). Recently, age has even been suggested to be an uprising social cleavage (Ford and Jennings, 2020). There is increasing evidence that cohorts influence vote choices (Lichtin, van der Brug, and Rekker, 2023; Rekker, 2024; Mitteregger, 2024) as well as political attitudes (Munger, 2022; Inglehart, 2018; Phillips, 2022). Age has rarely been considered as an indicator of group membership so far (for an exception see Kurz et al., 2024; Munger, 2022; Munger and Plutzer, 2024). Nevertheless, developments over the past decade and the increasing salience of

generational conflicts in politics suggest that people are increasingly likely to identify with their cohort.⁴ While similar dynamics of group interest alignment and membership visibility might apply to other characteristics, we focus here on how gender and age function as descriptive cues in voter decision-making.

2.1. Gender cues in the 2021 German federal election

Gender is not only a visible marker of group identity, it can also serve as a shortcut for political alignment. When citizens observe persistent inequalities and underrepresentation, they may turn to gender as a signal of shared social experience and political interest. Despite 16 years of female chancellorship, the 2021 election campaign in Germany highlighted persistent gender inequalities. Annalena Baerbock, the only female chancellor candidate, faced gendered media coverage that focused more on her personal background than on policy content (Abels et al., 2022; Lang, 2023). Although gender equality was not a major policy issue in the 2021 campaign, pandemic-related debates around care work, corporate gender quotas, and candidate list parity further contributed to the salience of gender-based inequalities (Roßmann, 2020; Fortin-Rittberger and Kröber, 2021; Lang, 2023).

Previous research shows that voters often apply gender stereotypes, perceiving men as more qualified (Bauer, 2015; Schneider and Bos, 2014). These perceptions are particularly pronounced among right-wing voters (Dolan, 2010, 2014; Saltzer and McGrath, 2024, 2022; Sevi et al., 2019; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Findings from Finland and the Netherlands, countries comparable to the German political context, show gender stereotypes to have little effect on voting behaviour (Lefkofridi et al., 2019; Pas et al., 2022). Given Germany's extensive experience with female politicians and leaders, stereotypes are not suggested to have been a dominant driver of candidate choice in the 2021 election. While gender stereotypes may have played only a limited role in voter decision-making, gender-based inequalities remained politically and socially salient. In such contexts, the idea that voters prefer candidates of their own gender, the so-called affinity hypothesis, becomes particularly relevant. In societies where gender disparities are visible and public awareness is high, voters are likely to view gender as indicative of shared perspectives and experiences, thus supporting the affinity hypothesis (Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Arnesen et al., 2019; R. Campbell and Heath, 2017; Brians, 2005). The empirical evidence on the gender-affinity hypothesis is however mixed (R. Campbell and Heath, 2017; Goodyear-Grant; Croskill 2011; Dolan, 2008; Saltzer and McGrath, 2022).

Contextual settings (Lefkofridi et al., 2019), levels of gender consciousness (Bittner and Goodyear-Grant, 2017) and descriptive representation (Goodyear-Grant and Croskill, 2011) have been found to shape same-gender vote choices. Women are particularly likely to vote for female candidates based on experienced inequalities, a sense of linked fate and to improve descriptive representation. Men, on the other hand, may feel compelled to defend their social group status, perceiving their advantages to be threatened, which influences their behaviour (Boyer et al., 2022). Another reason for men to vote for same-gender candidates is that, similar to women, they perceive themselves as being better represented by an ingroup member (Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Bejarano et al., 2021). This implies that both men and women may use gender as a heuristic in candidate selection, expecting that same-gender candidates are better positioned to address their group concerns. Consequently, one can expect that voters are more likely to choose a same-gender candidate with their candidate vote (H1a).

Beyond these arguments for general gender-affinity voting, research suggests that particularly women who are aware of their underrepresentation are less likely to support men (Sanbonmatsu, 2003; Brians,

2005; Dassonneville et al., 2021) and are more likely to become politically active when their interests are challenged (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo, 2023). These findings indicate a strong tendency for women to translate their group membership into political action. Additionally, women are the marginalised group within this conflict. Marginalised groups are more likely to perceive a linked fate with ingroup members, increasing their awareness towards grievances (McClain et al., 2009; Bejarano et al., 2021). Given the descriptive underrepresentation of women, their grievances, and likely heightened sense of group membership we expect women to have a higher probability of voting for same-gender candidates than men (H1b).

Even when group membership is politicised, individuals are likely to differ in their group consciousness⁵ (Miller et al., 1981; van Zomeren, Kutlaca, and Turner-Zwinkels 2018). Hence, public awareness does not necessarily mean that individuals prioritise the interests of particular groups (Miller et al., 1981; Huddy, 2001; Bittner and Goodyear-Grant, 2017). Group consciousness is enhanced by salience of, and involvement in, group politics (Masuoka, 2006; Miller et al., 1981; McClain et al., 2009). People who are conscious of group politics commonly align their attitudes and values accordingly (Mason, 2015; van Zomeren, Kutlaca, and Turner-Zwinkels 2018). Additionally, the relation between group consciousness and linked fate perceptions of people (McClain et al., 2009; Schildkraut, 2015) supports the idea that group conscious people are more likely to consider group characteristics when casting their vote. Elite polarisation may reinforce such alignment (Levendusky, 2010).

Group consciousness, however, is not evenly distributed among individuals. It is shaped by contextual and ideological factors, including how strongly individuals prioritise equality goals. Ideology, in this sense, approximates individuals' prioritisation of policy goals and thus their group consciousness and conflict recognition. Gender equality policies aim to achieve equal rights and opportunities for all genders. Equality issues are historically owned by left-wing parties. Left-wing ideology is associated with Schwartz (1992) basic values like universalism and self-expression, in contrast to right-wing ideology which is more strongly aligned with conservation values such as tradition, conformity, and security (Caprara and Vecchione, 2017). These values are moreover associated with gender equality positions of individuals (Stefani and Prati, 2021). Similarly, does the overlap between ideology and postmaterialist suggest that left-wing ideologists are likely prioritising equality (Inglehart, 1997). Consequently, gender group consciousness is likely higher for left than right ideologists. For instance, American women who position as liberal, for instance, showed higher levels of linked fate beliefs in comparison to conservatives (Stout et al., 2017). Similar dynamics have been observed in Germany: left-leaning women are more likely to vote for female candidates (Rudolph et al., 2022), pointing towards a greater sensitivity to gender representation and inequality.

At the same time, it is not clear whether ideological orientation shapes gender affinity voting directly. Ideology may influence how voters respond to gender cues in ways that counter, rather than reinforce, affinity patterns. For instance, voters with egalitarian or feminist orientations, regardless of their own gender, may consciously oppose persistent gender biases by supporting female candidates as an expression of equality norms, not group identity. Conversely, among right-leaning voters, traditional gender role orientations might suppress same-gender preferences, especially for women. Research suggests that gender policy for example is polarised between rightist and leftist individuals, not between their gender (Boyer et al., 2022). Similarly, are left-wing voters more supportive for female candidates than right-wing

⁴ Munger and Plutzer (2024) shows this identification with generations in the USA.

⁵ Group consciousness describes an individual's salience towards the politicisation of a group identity. Group-conscious individuals identify with a politicised group through a set of ideological beliefs about the social status of their group (McClain et al., 2009).

voters (Erzeel and Caluwaerts, 2015). Thus, ideology may mediate or even reverse expected gender-based affinities, operating through the normative lens of equality rather than group identification per se. We refrain from formulating a directional hypothesis. Instead, we treat the relationship between ideology and same-gender voting as an exploratory question, examining whether and how ideological orientation, particularly left–right self-placement, structures gender-related voting patterns.⁶

2.2. Age cues in the 2021 German federal election

Age-related affinity voting is likely due to shared experiences, greater opinion congruence, and the salience of intergenerational conflicts that activate group cues. An increasing number of younger legislators, for example, influences public spending on age-related issues rises (Baskaran et al., 2024), suggesting opinion congruence between young voters and legislators. Research on candidate preferences in Japan demonstrated a general preference for younger candidates compared to older ones (Eshima and Smith, 2022; McClean and Ono, 2024). These findings challenge the stereotype hypothesis which would suggest older candidates to be favoured as age is likely associated with political experience. While similarity in age had been found to be desirable to younger as well as older voters (Kurz et al., 2024), other studies show no or very small effects of candidate age on voters' preferences (Dobbs, 2020; Sevi, 2021; Roberts and Wolak 2022; Webster and Pierce, 2019; Pomante and Schraufnagel, 2015). Nevertheless, the conditions of the 2021 election, suggest that age is likely to influence vote choice. Generational conflicts have become a prominent topic of public and political debate in Germany (Kurz et al., 2025; Dostal, 2021). Youth-led climate protests, pandemic-related burdens on younger generations (e.g., school closures), and public discourse on intergenerational justice increased awareness of age-based inequalities (von Zabern and Tulloch 2021; Lobo, 2021; Kulms, 2021). Descriptive underrepresentation reinforced this awareness: before the 2021 election, only about 3 % of MPs were under 30, and only 31 % women (Stockemer and Sundström, 2022; Fortin-Rittberger and Kröber, 2021). These dynamics made age not only visible, but also a meaningful identity dimension likely to be used as a decision heuristic by voters. This is driven by the desire to enhance or protect the representation of group interests, which may arise from material concerns, a sense of shared identity or a belief in linked fate (Munger and Plutzer, 2024). Consequently, we anticipate that voters are likely to choose candidates close to them in age during the 2021 German parliamentary election (H2a).

Recent research on US citizens suggests that members of the youngest generations largely identify with their generation and explicitly position themselves in opposition to “old white men” and the “Boomer Generation” (Munger, 2022; Munger and Plutzer, 2024). They also demonstrate a preference for younger candidates over older ones (McDonald and Deckman, 2023). Young Germans are significantly averse to older candidates in comparison to other age groups (Kurz et al., 2024). The descriptive underrepresentation of younger individuals (Sundström and Stockemer, 2020; Stockemer and Sundström, 2022) attracted public attention before the election in 2021 (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Heightened awareness of this representation gap, combined with disadvantages faced during Covid-19 and shared traits with other

marginalised groups, suggests that young people were especially likely to politically identify with their age group, beyond generational affiliation. Consequently, we propose that *young voters were more likely to cast their votes for candidates close to their own age compared to older voters (H2b)* because their group consciousness is likely higher due to their marginalised status and the politicisation of age-related issues.

Voters are likely to differ in their consciousness towards age group conflicts in politics not only based on their generation, but their interest in group politics and equality. Individuals with strong concerns about policy issues related to intergenerational conflicts, such as education, pensions, or climate change, are potentially more aware of these conflicts and more likely to identify with their age group than others. The effect of age closeness on vote choice could therefore be stronger for left-wing voters who are more likely to prioritise issues such as environmental and social issues, which are particularly relevant to younger people (Munger and Plutzer, 2024; Poortinga et al., 2023; Kissau et al., 2012). This difference may also reflect broader ideological divides in the salience of group-based inequality and discrimination: left-wing voters tend to be more sensitive to structural inequalities and more supportive of policies that aim to address them. In contrast, rightist voters may be less concerned about these issues, leading to a weaker effect of age closeness on their vote choice (Jost et al., 2009). At the same time, left-wing ideologists may also favour younger candidates regardless of their own age, reflecting a broader commitment to equality and descriptive representation rather than group identity per se (Weissman, 2025). Given the competing expectations regarding whether ideology reinforces or counterbalances age-based affinities, we examine exploratorily how left–right self-placement moderates age-based affinity voting, assessing whether ideological orientation shapes the relationship between voter–candidate age proximity and vote choice.⁷

3. Research design

We base our analysis on the German federal election 2021. The German electoral system with its two-vote-structure allows citizens to vote on the composition of seats in parliament with their party vote (“Zweitstimme”), and to vote for a local candidate to represent their constituency with their candidate vote (“Erststimme”). Seats in parliament are determined solely by the share of party votes. Though voters often align both votes with the same party (see Appendix A; Table A.1), the system still enables an analytical separation between party-driven and candidate-driven choices. This structural setup is useful for identifying the impact of descriptive cues: while the party vote reflects ideological or issue-based preferences, the candidate vote can capture heuristic-based decisions tied to candidate characteristics like age or gender. In combination, and given the heightened awareness towards gender and age-related issues in the 2021 election, this context makes Germany in 2021 a likely case to identify the usage of gender and age group cues as voting heuristics. Although the electoral system is unique, similar public debates worldwide suggest that comparable but smaller effects could be found in other contexts.

We analyse our expectations using the post-election cross-sectional survey of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES, 2023) and full census data on candidates for the 2021 German Bundestag election provided by the Federal Returning Officer and the Federal Statistical Office. The GLES post-election survey is based on a multi-stage register

⁶ In the original version of this manuscript we operationalised group consciousness via gender equality attitudes rather than ideology and formulated a directional hypothesis linking gender equality preferences to the likelihood of voting for same-gender candidates. In the current version we build on the original framework and generalize the original reasoning for ideological orientation as a broader indicator of gender-equality related group consciousness. To avoid implying a priori expectations we refrain from formulating a hypothesis. Results for the original analysis using gender equality preferences and the current analysis using ideology lead to similar results.

⁷ In the original version of this manuscript we operationalised group consciousness via specific policy positions on education and pensions. However, due to a lack of data available on these policies, we refrained from formulating a hypothesis. In the current version we build on the original framework and generalize the original reasoning for ideological orientation as a broader indicator of age-based group consciousness. To avoid implying a priori expectations we refrain from formulating a hypothesis and instead treat the analysis as exploratory.

sample of the German population aged 16 and older and consists of a total of 3431 respondents. During the sampling, no age or gender quotas were applied. The data are not fully representative of the eligible voting population in Germany (see Figure A.6.1 in Appendix A.6.1). However, since our analytical focus is on the relationship between shared characteristics of candidates and voters and voting behaviour rather than on absolute vote shares, the GLES post-election survey remains suitable for examining affinity voting effects in the German context.

Each respondent in our data is matched to all candidates standing in their electoral district. A total of 3,360 district candidates ran in the 2021 German federal election, with the number of candidates per district ranging from a minimum of 7 to a maximum of 18, and a median of 11 candidates per district. Among these candidates, 28.6 % were female (see Figure A.3.1 in Appendix A.3) and 24.4 % were under the age of 35 (see Figure A.3.2 in Appendix A.3). 47 % of respondents are women, 35 % of them voted for female district candidates. Women more frequently voted for women, more so since they were only able to vote for a female candidate in 30 % of all cases (see Table A.2.1 in Appendix A.2). Most candidates are between 30 and 50 years old, they received most votes across all age groups (see Table A.2.3 in Appendix A.2).

3.1. Model choice

Every candidate runs in only one electoral district. Hence, different voters are faced with different choice sets of candidates in each district. This allows us to examine voters' candidate preferences independently of their general party preferences, as each party fields a diverse range of candidates with varying characteristics across districts. Our research design reflects voters' choice between different district candidates by modelling candidate votes as discrete choices dependent on candidate as well as voter characteristics and the combination thereof. We do so by employing conditional logit regressions using the *mlogit* package in R (Croissant, 2020).

In detail, the conditional logit model (McFadden, 1974; Train, 2009) assumes individuals i to face a finite set of candidates campaigning for a fixed set of parties j from which they choose the parties' candidate yielding the highest latent utility U_{ij} . The utility for voter i to vote for party j 's candidate is defined as:

$$U_{ij} = \alpha_j + x_i^\top \beta_j + z_{ij}^\top \gamma + \epsilon_{ij}$$

, where α_j are alternative-specific constants, capturing the average popularity of each party j , x_i are voter characteristics, β_j are party-specific coefficients applied to x_i , capturing systematic differences in each parties' constituency, z_{ij} are candidate characteristics that individual i encounters for party j , γ are alternative-invariant coefficients applied to z_{ij} , capturing systematic effects of candidate characteristics across parties, and ϵ_{ij} is the unobservable component of utility that voter i derives from party j 's candidate. The probability for each individual i to choose alternative j is then given by:

$$P_{ij} = \Pr(y_i = j) = \frac{\exp(U_{ij})}{\sum_{k=1}^J \exp(U_{ik})}$$

Modelling the choice sets like this respects the mutually exclusive character of German federal elections and permits candidate- and voter-level attributes to enter the same specification. The conditional logit model is well-suited to study individual voting behaviour in candidate-centred electoral systems, where voters choose among multiple, context-specific alternatives (Alvarez and Nagler, 1998; McFadden, 1974). It accommodates the empirical reality that both candidate characteristics and voter traits influence electoral choices, while also allowing for systematic variation across party lines through alternative-specific parameters. Crucially, by enabling interaction terms between voter and candidate traits this framework enables us to analyse affinity voting by

estimating how shared attributes between voters and candidates, such as age or gender, shape vote probabilities (Cutler, 2002).

3.2. Measurements

Our dependent variable in these models is the respondent's candidate vote. Our main independent variables comprise candidate and voter gender and age, as well as shared characteristics that relate to these variables - common gender and common age between candidates and voters. Voters likely derive cues from candidates' appearance, providing opportunities to translate them into voting heuristics.

Gender and approximate age are characterised by highly visible external features. Individuals may infer information about a candidate from physical features, gestures, speech, voice, clothing, or names. Candidates' full names alongside their occupation and party are printed on ballot papers, making them highly visible to voters. Apart from the ballot paper, most voters are exposed to candidates' features through posters or other campaign materials (see Figure A.4.1 in Appendix A.4), which further increase the visibility of gender and age cues. If we accept the premise that voters engage in affinity voting, it follows that they at least occasionally seek information or are informed about these candidate traits. Conversely, a lack of awareness would imply that affinity voting on these traits is not relevant for large segments of the electorate.

We measure gender as a binary variable distinguishing between male and female candidates and voters using dummy variables for the female gender. To observe how shared gender affects voting decisions, we calculate interactions between voter and candidate gender. Candidate and voter age is measured as their age in years at the time of the election. Shared age is measured as the log of the distance in age in years. This measure allows us to account for the expected non-linear relationship without including artificial cut-off points. To differentiate the effect of shared age for younger and older voters, we also calculate interactions between shared age and voter age.

To test for any ideological effects on affinity voting, we include voters' self-positioning on the left-right scale. We measure left-right positioning on a rescaled 11-point scale ranging from 0 "left" to 1 "right". To test whether ideology affects affinity voting, we calculate two- and three-way interactions between ideology, candidate and voter gender or age, and the combinations of these variables.

Since our main interest lies in affinity voting with respect to age or gender, potential confounding variables are all variables that are linked to voters' preferences and simultaneously affect either what kinds of candidates get to stand in any district or affect voters' gender or age. In our setup, such confounders include factors that influence both the composition of candidate pools across districts and individual-level vote choices. Confounders must therefore be prior causes of both the treatment (shared age or gender between voter and candidate) and the outcome (vote choice). Besides our main independent variables, our models therefore include only variables that plausibly shape both, which kinds of candidates a voter encounters, and the voters' propensity to vote for these candidates (Cinelli et al., 2024; Pearl, 2009).

On the candidate side, the models control for candidate age, gender, and incumbency status. While parties as well as voters may have a latent gender bias in fielding and voting for candidates that may furthermore vary by party, candidate age as well as incumbency both relate to candidate experience, a factor that is both advantageous in party nomination processes as well as gaining voter support. These characteristics accordingly all vary between male and female as well as old and young candidates and shape electoral appeal (e.g., Fulton, 2012). To capture whether a candidate ideologically appeals to a voter, we further control for what we call the voter's consideration set. The consideration set is supposed to include candidates of all parties the voter arguably may consider voting for. We operationalise the consideration set as all candidates of parties that come within two scale points of the voter's preferred party according to party rating scales (scale from 0 to 10).

On voter side, we control for gender, age, education, income, and

residence in East Germany. We measure education continuously on a rescaled 5-point scale ranging from 0 'Finished school without certificate' to 1 'Higher education entitling to study at university'. Income is measured as monthly household income on a rescaled 13-point scale ranging from 0 'less than 500 Euros' to 1 '10000 Euros or more'. All these variables are logically independent from the choice of candidates a voter faces and therefore do not confound our regression results, but help improve precision of our estimates and correct for any sample imbalances (Lin, 2013; Gelman, 2007). There are no factors that cause gender or age to confound the hypothesised affinity relationships, so no further voter characteristics require statistical adjustment. Consequently, incorporating additional controls would not enhance identification and could only marginally impact the efficiency of our estimates, potentially diminishing precision by introducing unnecessary variables (Cinelli et al., 2024).⁸

3.3. Sample restrictions

The conditional logit models are based on a finite and fixed set of alternatives available to each voter. We therefore reduce our sample to include only candidates from parties that competed in nearly all electoral districts and received the overwhelming majority of candidate votes. These parties are CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Die Linke and AfD. Candidates from these parties accounted for 92.7 % of the candidate votes in the 2021 federal election ("[Kurzbericht über die Ergebnisse der repräsentativen Wahlstatistik zur Bundestagswahl 2021](#)" 2022). In total, we excluded 1,575 of 3,360 candidates; however, only 3.7 % of respondents voted for these excluded candidates. Since the AfD did not field candidates in 6 electoral districts, we also removed observations from those districts, reducing our sample by 183 observations.

Not all individuals in our sample have the opportunity to vote for candidates of different gender or age. For some of these voters, all candidates of their district may be of similar gender or age, for others, the same may apply not to all, but to all ideologically close candidates they may consider. For these individuals, we cannot expect any affinity voting effects. To have a fair evaluation of voters' tendency to apply affinity voting, we define what we call 'Choice Samples'. These samples exclude all voters for whom all candidates within their consideration set were either of similar age or of similar gender. We defined candidates to be of similar age if all candidates within the consideration set were not more than 15 years apart from each other. Based on distributions of key variables, we have little reason to believe that these restrictions could significantly alter our results (see [Appendix A.6.2](#)).

3.4. Model specifications

We calculate separate models for gender-based and age-based affinity voting. To test for general affinity voting, we include either interactions between candidate and voter gender or the logged age difference between voters and candidates, alongside all previously mentioned candidate and voter control variables. To analyse potential differences between young and old voters, we additionally calculated models interacting voter age with logged age differences. Finally, to test ideological effects on affinity voting we calculated models including voters' left-right positioning alongside two- and three-way interactions between left-right positioning and the relevant gender or age variables and interactions. Each model was run on the respective choice sample, the full sample, as well as a split-voter sample - a sub-sample of the choice sample including only voters that voted for different parties with their party and candidate votes. The rationale is that, since most German voters cast both votes for the same party, affinity voting effects may be

more likely to emerge among voters who split their party and candidate votes between parties.

As our main regression sample comprises only a subset of the overall survey sample, we chose not to apply survey weights to control for potential sample imbalances. Instead, the included voter-level control variables correspond to those used to construct the survey weights in the GLES post-election survey (GLES, 2023), thereby addressing potential bias from sample composition (Lin, 2013; Gelman, 2007). This approach ensures that any systematic differences between our analytic sample and the broader population are accounted for within the regression framework.

Given the complexity of the multinomial regression model as well as the additive nature of our interaction terms, regression coefficients are difficult to interpret and do not directly convey the relationship between candidate gender, age, and voting probabilities (e.g. Mize, 2019). Therefore, rather than presenting regression tables in the main text, we report predicted probabilities and first differences for relevant scenarios. These were estimated using Monte Carlo simulations (King et al., 2000), applying an observed value approach in which all control variables were held at their empirically observed values (Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan 2013). Full regression tables for all models are displayed in the Appendix ([Appendix B](#)).

4. Results

[Fig. 1](#) displays the predicted probabilities for male and female voters to choose a male or female candidate of different parties, alongside first differences between these outcomes for our choice sample, the full sample, and the split voter sample. Across all parties and voter groups, the predicted probability of voting for a male candidate is slightly higher than for a female candidate. However, these differences are consistently small and not statistically significant. The strongest effect is a 2.5 percentage point lower probability for female voters to vote for a female rather than male SPD candidate in the choice sample (CI: 6.3 - 1.5). Based on these results, we reject hypotheses 1a and 1b. Neither men nor women have a significantly higher probability to vote for a candidate of similar gender.

[Fig. 2](#) explores the likelihood of male and female voters at opposite ends of the left-right spectrum to vote for a female rather than a male candidate. Again, all differences fail statistical significance in either sample. While we see a slightly higher bias towards male candidates for right-wing ideologists of either gender compared to left-wing ideologists, differences in probability to vote for a female rather than male candidate again were small and not statistically significant across all groups. During the 2021 German federal election, candidate gender did, at most, play a very minor role in voters' candidate selection.

Turning to age-based affinity voting, [Fig. 3](#) displays predicted probabilities and first differences in the probability of voting for a candidate of the same age versus a candidate with an exemplary 33 year age difference. It shows that the probability of voting for a candidate of the same age is generally slightly higher, but not statistically significant for the choice and the full sample. For split voters the difference in probability to vote for a candidate similar in age compared to a candidate with a 33 year age difference only very narrowly fails to be statistically significant on the 95 percent level with the estimated difference in voting probability being as high as 8.3 percentage points for voting for candidates of CDU or CSU (CI: .2 - 17.2).

The differences in voting behaviour become more apparent when young and old voters are considered independently. [Fig. 4](#) shows that while older voters do not discriminate between candidates of different age, younger voters especially in the split voter sample do. For a 27-year-old voter we estimate a sizeable, but not statistically significant difference to vote for a 27-year-old candidate versus a 60-year-old candidate of about 8 percentage points for SPD candidates (CI: 2.3 - 16.4) and 4.9 percentage points for CDU/CSU candidates (CI: 1.5 - 9.9). While we do not observe any sizeable or statistically significant differences in the full

⁸ Descriptive statistics on all variables used in our analysis are provided in [Appendix A.1](#).

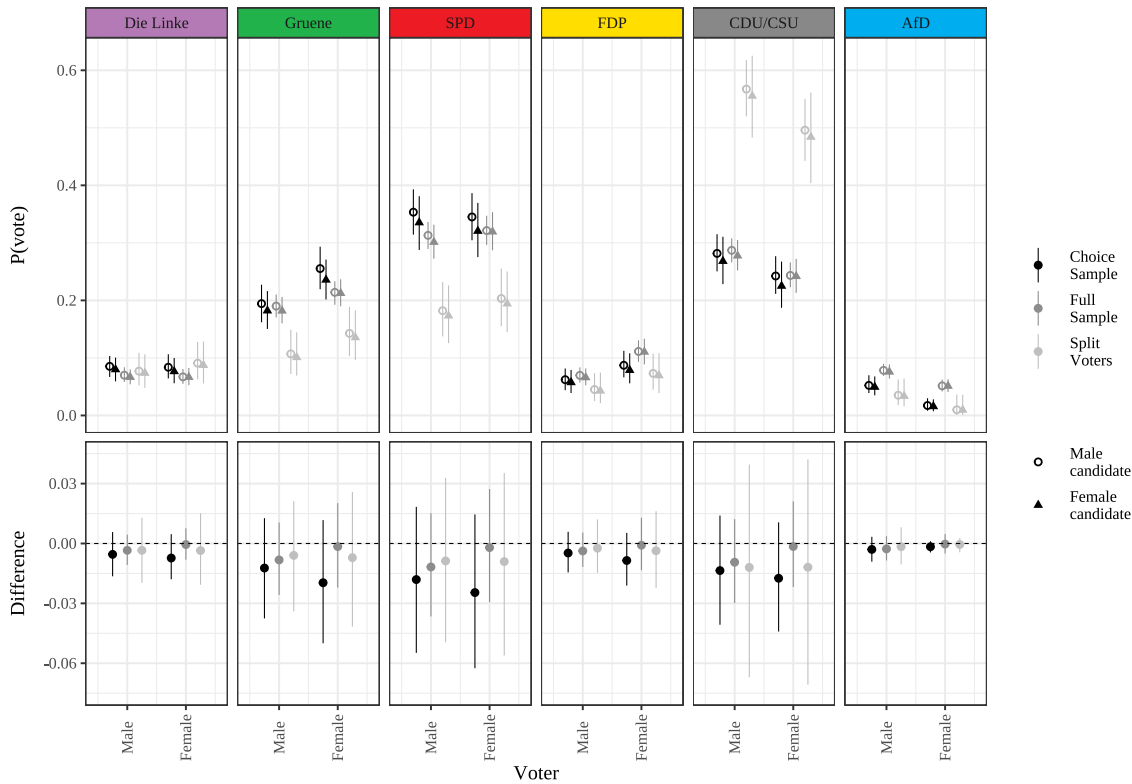


Fig. 1. Gender differences and candidate vote - Predicted probabilities and first differences.

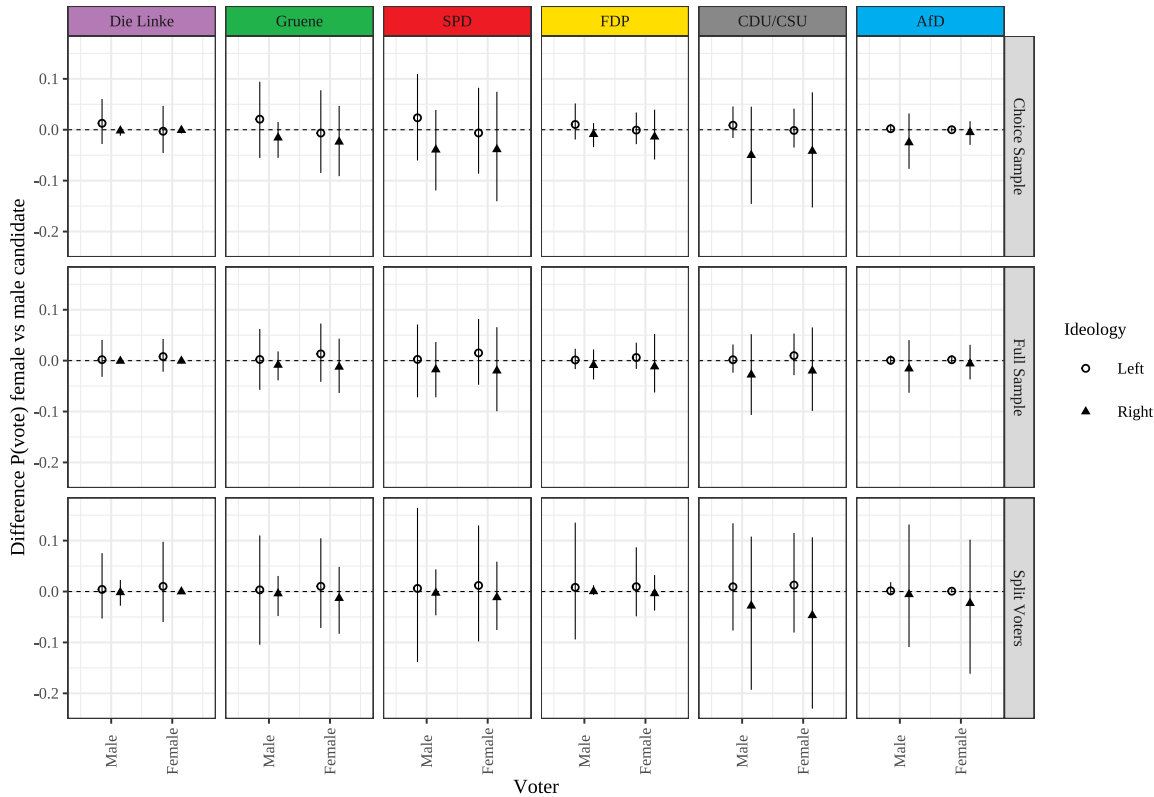


Fig. 2. Gender differences, left-right positioning, and candidate vote - First differences.

sample, young split voters have a significantly higher probability to vote for a candidate their own age. The estimated difference is as high as 18

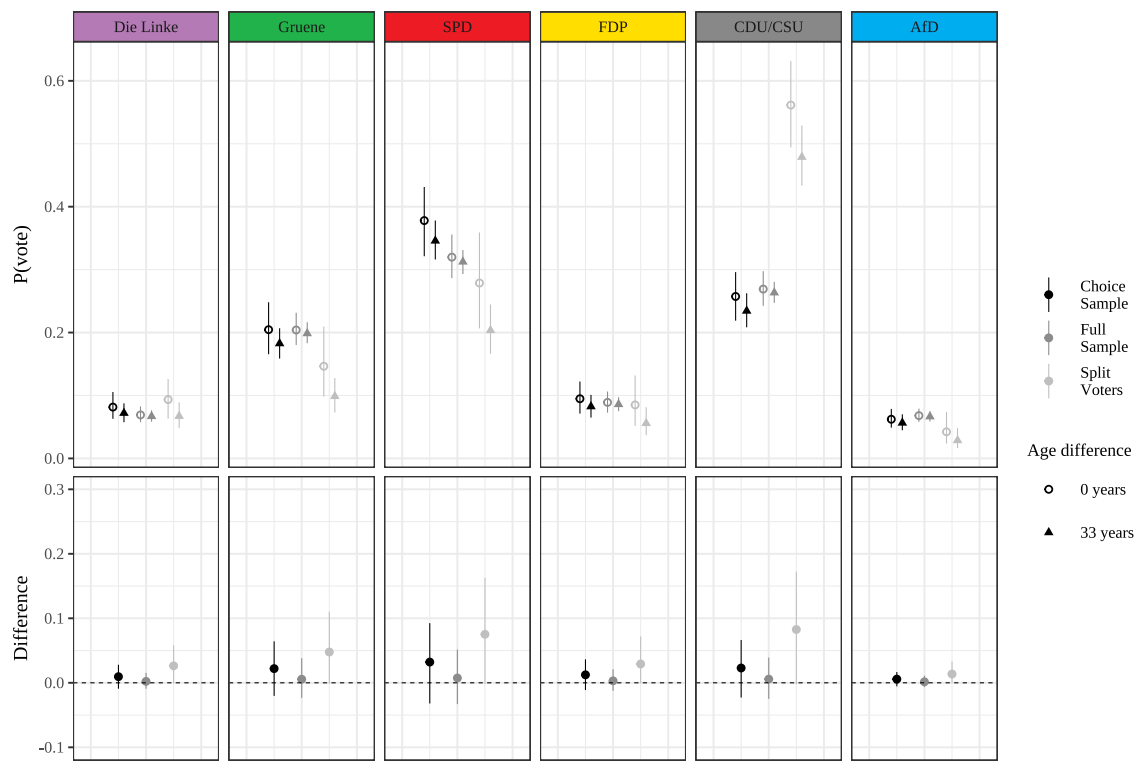


Fig. 3. Age differences and candidate vote - Predicted probabilities and first differences.

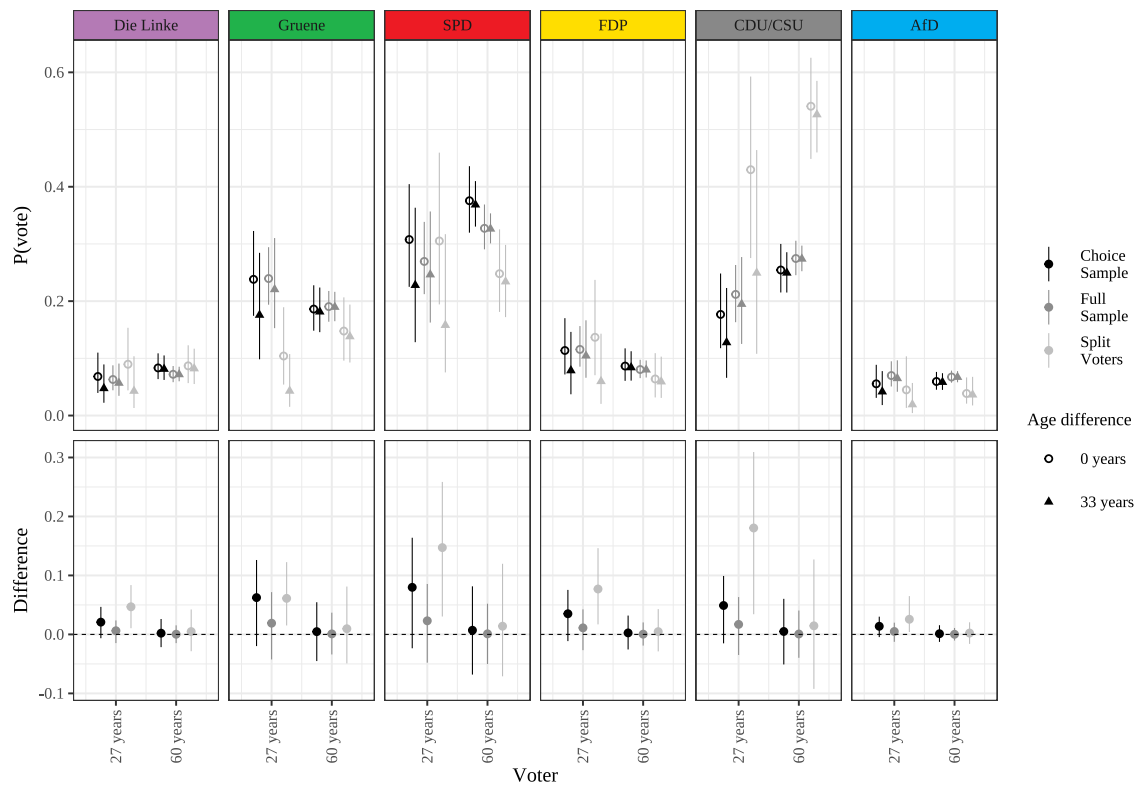


Fig. 4. Affinity voting for young and old voters - Predicted probabilities and first differences.

percentage points for CDU/CSU candidates (CI: 3.4–30.9) and 14.7 percentage points for SPD candidates (CI: 3–25.9).

Concluding from this, we cannot confirm Hypotheses 2a and 2b for the larger electorate. Neither voters in general nor young voters generally were significantly more likely to vote for candidates their own age compared to older or younger candidates. However, we do find effects for split voters. In particular young voters who share their two votes between different parties were more likely to vote for a candidate closer to them in age. This indicates that while affinity voting may not be a general phenomenon among young voters, it may be more prevalent among subgroups of this population.

Finally, we explore left-right differences in age-based affinity voting. Fig. 5 displays first differences between voting for a candidate of similar age compared to a candidate with an age difference of 33 years for voters on the left and right extremes of the ideology scale. Differences in voting probability are close to statistical significance for both left and right ideologists. While left ideologists are estimated to have a higher probability to vote for candidates their own age, right ideologists are estimated to have a higher probability to vote for candidates different in age. Looking at the estimates for young and old voters, it becomes apparent why this may be the case. We estimate that 27-year-old left ideologists are more likely to vote for candidates of a similar age, but 27-year-old right ideologists are more likely to vote for candidates 33 years older. Older voters, again, do not discriminate between candidates of different ages, irrespective of their ideological positioning. These effects do not only hold for the choice sample, but also for the full sample, but not for the split voter sample.

Our findings indicate that young left-wing ideologists tend to support younger candidates, while young right-wing ideologists are more likely to prefer older candidates. This suggests that, irrespective of their ideological positioning, young people consider age to be a politically relevant characteristic. However, ideological position appears to influence how they interpret and act upon this perception. Our results suggest that a left-wing ideological stance does not necessarily increase group consciousness or awareness of intergenerational conflict; rather, candidate age cues serve as heuristic shortcuts signalling ideological

alignment.

4.1. Robustness models

In addition to our main models, we estimated several robustness models using different model specifications or operationalisation of key variables. Regression tables as well as reproductions of all Figures presented in the results section of the main text for all robustness models can be found in [Appendix C](#). To test whether our results are robust against a stricter control for voters' party preferences, we calculate models controlling for voters' party vote by introducing a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent cast their party vote for the respective candidate's party ([Appendix C.1](#)). While party votes may in some cases be causally influenced by voters' candidate preferences and controlling for party vote may therefore absorb parts of the affinity voting effects we are trying to find, the variable nonetheless allows for the most precise control of party preferences available. Results from these models largely support the general patterns found in our main models. As before, we do not find any support for gender-based affinity voting. When it comes to age-based affinity voting, the patterns found in the main models remain, but all previously significant effects lose their statistical significance at the 95 percent level. However, this loss of significance is unsurprising and can likely be attributed to the collinearity of party and candidate votes, which absorb parts of the effect.

We calculated several models alternating the exact cut-off points used to calculate our consideration sets. In addition to the 2-point threshold used in the main models, we defined the consideration sets as all candidates from parties within 1 or 3 scale points from the respondent's preferred party. Furthermore, we defined the consideration sets as all candidates running for one of the 3 favourite parties of a respondent according to party evaluations. Models using these consideration sets are displayed in [Appendix C.2](#). Again, results from these models largely confirm the conclusions drawn from the main models, with the only noteworthy difference between these models and the main

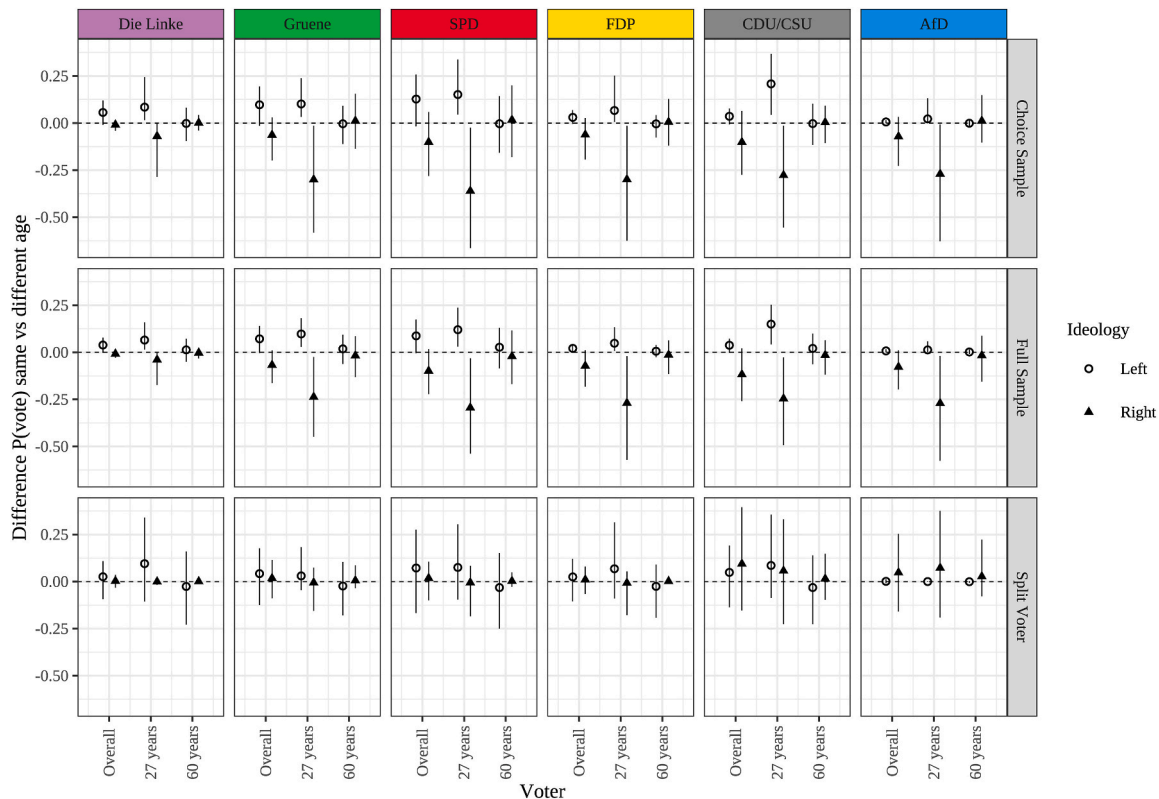


Fig. 5. Age differences, left-right positioning, and candidate vote - First differences.

models being, that increasing the number of parties within the consideration set (either using a scale point limit of 3 or defining the consideration set as all candidates fielding for the 3 favourite parties) reduces the affinity voting effect we find for young split voters. This can most likely be attributed to the larger consideration set not capturing the concept as well and leading to a sample of split voters in which many voters in fact did not have ideologically close candidates of different ages to choose from.

To put our choice sample specification to a test, we alternated the threshold of age difference among candidates in the consideration set needed to be considered in the choice sample. Besides the 15-year threshold used in our main models, we calculated models using a 10 and a 20-year threshold (Appendix C.3). Similar to the models alternating the composition of the consideration sets, these models replicate all main results but the affinity voting effects found for young split voters.

In Appendix C.4, we replaced our operationalisation of age similarity by defining age similarity using dummies indicating a maximum age difference between voter and candidate of 7 or 10 years. Additionally, we used a dummy variable indicating whether voters and candidates were within the same of four different age brackets: 29 and younger, 30–50, 51–65, and 66 and older (Appendix C.4). Findings of these models again generally confirm our main results.

Finally, we tested the sensitivity of our results to potential vote choice misreporting in our sample. Appendix C.5 presents models in which we excluded all respondents who differed from their parties' electorates' mean position on any of the following positional dimensions by more than 2 standard deviations: left-right orientation, immigration, taxation vs social spending, and climate change. Again, these models replicate our main findings.

5. Conclusion

Empirical research on vote choice showed early on that social cues play a major role in decision-making (A. Campbell et al. [1960] 1980). While party cues are the most popular shortcut towards interest representation, descriptive characteristics of candidates have recently attracted increasing attention, and numerous experimental studies indicate that people prefer candidates similar to them in such descriptive characteristics (e.g., Rudolph et al., 2022; Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo, 2023; Magni and Reynolds, 2021; Arnesen et al., 2019). We aimed to determine if cues related to age and gender significantly impact voting patterns in a setting where salience is high but information rather unspecific. Despite our focus on salient, politicised, and highly visible descriptive characteristics, gender and age, in the 2021 German federal election, and a research design aimed at increasing the chances of significant effects, we find no robust evidence that the wider electorate votes for candidates 'like themselves' but that it does have a substantive impact for restricted subgroups. This aligns with findings of other studies on gender and age groups (e.g., Rudolph et al., 2022; Sevi, 2021; Roßteutscher et al., 2017; Ferland, 2022; Pomante and Schraufnagel, 2015).

We find men and women not to show clear preferences on candidates' gender. Women are independent of their ideological position no more likely to vote for female candidates. More generally, our models do not show any significant gender bias among any group of voters, irrespective of gender or ideology. These null results could stem from Germany with its extensive experience with female leadership being a less polarised environment when it comes to gender equality compared to, e.g., the US, where studies on female affinity voting repeatedly find strong effects at least among left-wing voters (Saltzer and McGrath, 2022; Dolan, 2008). Our results, however, contradict findings from other Western countries (e.g., Giger et al., 2014; Ferland, 2022; Good-year-Grant and Croskill, 2011). This suggests three possibilities: either our evaluation of gender as a salient voting heuristic is incorrect, Germany stands out with regard to gender affinity voting, or the general

importance of gender-based affinity voting may be overstated. Our findings highlight the importance of combining experimental and observational data to test hypotheses in different settings. As such, our study contributes to the ongoing discourse challenging experimental studies in the social sciences (Wuttke, 2023; Barabas and Jerit, 2010; Brutger et al., 2023) by showing that despite promising findings in experimental studies, the relevance of descriptive characteristics as voting heuristics found in experiments does not as readily translate to electoral data as one might expect.

Likewise, our results suggest no general age-based affinity voting effects among the wider German electorate. While we do find some significant affinity voting effects for young split voters, a group we consider most likely to employ affinity voting, the statistical significance of these effects does not extend to young voters more generally and is not robust against all alternative model specifications we test. Instead of general affinity voting patterns for young voters, our results suggest that young voters' affinity voting is moderated by ideology. While older voters have similar voting probabilities for candidates of all ages irrespective of their ideology, we find support that young left ideologists are significantly more likely to vote for younger candidates. The opposite, however, is found for young right-wing ideologists, who are more likely to vote for older candidates compared to candidates closer to them in age. This challenges the argument of higher group consciousness of left-wing voters towards intergenerational conflict and inequalities. It rather suggests that young voters do not mainly use candidate age as affinity cue. Instead, young voters may perceive younger candidates to be more ideologically left and older candidates to be more ideologically right. Future research should investigate whether these patterns can be attributed to empirical differences between young and old candidates or provide an example of age being used as ideological heuristic by young voters.

Overall, our findings suggest that most voters in Germany either do not consider descriptive characteristics at all or only consider them peripherally when casting their vote. This mitigates concerns that vote choices evolve too much towards identity rather than issues questions. People seem to care about more reliable cues for their substantive representation than demographic similarity. Nonetheless, we cannot generalize beyond the two characteristics we analysed, age and gender. While age and gender are highly visible characteristics, they are less clear-cut in terms of in-group and out-group membership and group conflict than other social groups. We can furthermore not distinguish if our results are based on a lack of cue perception or a lack of motivation to apply affinity voting once these cues are perceived. Age is a more ambiguous cue than gender, as closeness in age is less clear and may be as easily accessible and not evoke the same sense of in-group or out-group identity. A limitation of our study is hence that we cannot determine whether the limited effects we observe result from a lack of cue perception – especially regarding age – or from limited motivation to apply affinity-based reasoning once these cues are recognised. Findings from a study by Arnesen et al. (2019), however, suggest that this is likely a motivational decision rather than a perceptual one. Future observational research could take this further into account by asking respondents about their knowledge of the descriptive characteristics of the candidates.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Leonie Rettig: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Conceptualization. **Lukas Isermann:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Data curation.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT and

DeepLWrite in order to improve the quality of the writing and ensure correct English spelling and grammar. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2026.103045>.

Data availability

Replication material is available at https://osf.io/b7mjf/overview?view_only=8e67a3a2cfad4ed3a00778140cba5b73.

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