

Risk vs Reward strategies in indirect presidential elections: Political parties and the selection of presidential electors in Germany, 1949-2017

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Abstract

Parties across parliamentary republics compete fiercely over capturing the presidential office. However, they are often torn between seeing their preferred candidate elected and exploiting the election for publicity purposes. The German case, specifically parties' ability to nominate extra-parliamentarian electors (EPEs) as part of the electoral college, offers a particularly interesting perspective on how parties balance these competing goals. While EPEs allow parties to boost their profile and strengthen ties with selected groups, they also present a risk factor as their voting behaviour is more difficult to predict. Based on a novel data set on party delegations in German presidential elections, 1949-2017, the analysis shows that – contrary to traditional assumptions – competition in the electoral college did not play a role in EPE nominations. Rather, party strategies were influenced by the varying signalling power of the elections. Parties were more risk-averse and nominated fewer EPEs during grand coalitions, when they were part of the federal government, or when federal elections approached, yet nominated more EPEs when they had a larger support base to reward. The results call for further comparative research on indirect elections and different types of EPEs in Germany.

Keywords

electoral college; Federal President; Germany; party strategy; presidential election; indirect election

The indirect election of presidents in parliamentary democracies is more than a merely ceremonial affair for political parties. Even in countries where presidents only play a marginal role in everyday politics, parties compete fiercely to see their candidate elected (see e.g. Billing, 1995; Clementi, 2014; Huang, 2002). Thereby, any party seeking to implement their policies or defend the status quo has a vested interest in influencing the selection of the head of state. Indirectly elected presidents can be key to tipping the political balance in one's favour where majorities are fragile (Hloušek, 2013; Tavits, 2008); furthermore, they are effectively agents of parliament (or electoral colleges; see Köker, 2017; Nikolenyi, 2014; cf. Tavits, 2008) and therefore rarely act against the preferences of their electoral majority (Köker, 2017). However, competition is not solely motivated by parties' desire to determine the next president. Presidential elections are also publicly observed and debated events – they allow parties to send specific policy signals to voters as well as position themselves with regard to upcoming elections (Decker and Jesse, 2013; Sieberer, 2013). Thus, these elections serve a dual purpose and require careful strategizing by political parties. Yet how do political parties strategically approach the indirect election of presidents? Specifically, what value do parties place on capturing the presidency compared to signalling their voters?

The case of Germany – where intense competition over the presidency is equally commonplace (Braun, 1993; Billing, 1995; Decker and Jesse, 2013; Gloe, 2010; Henkel, 2009) – offers a particularly interesting perspective on the question of how political parties strike the balance between electoral success and exploiting the election's publicity potential. The German president is elected by the *Bundesversammlung* (Federal Convention), an electoral college consisting of the members of the Bundestag and an equal number of electors nominated by *Länder* (state) parliaments. Thereby, parties'

Länder delegations can also include nominees who are not members of state legislatures (extra-parliamentarian electors – EPEs). In fact, delegations have consistently included a substantial share of EPEs since the first presidential elections in 1949, although this has varied considerably over time (Figure 1). Given that EPEs are not subject to the same kind of political socialisation or institutional pressures as deputies and information on their political preferences is often limited, their voting behaviour is considerably more difficult to predict. Nevertheless, EPEs can act as celebrity advocates for political parties (cf. Arter, 2014) and provide an opportunity to strengthen ties with affiliated organisations or reward local campaigners. Therefore, this article argues that the share of EPEs in party delegations – and variations thereof – presents an indicator of the relative importance that parties place on capturing the presidency (fewer EPEs) versus exploiting the process for publicity and reward (more EPEs), and allows for assessing the determinants of their strategic considerations.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

This article is structured in four sections. First, I briefly explain the regulations governing presidential elections in Germany and review relevant scholarship on the Federal Convention and indirect presidential elections. I then discuss the practices of nominating electors in the *Länder* and their consequences for the inclusion of EPEs. The second section proposes an explanatory framework for variations in the share of EPEs in state delegations. I argue that parties are predominantly interested in seeing their preferred candidate elected president; EPEs are a risk factor in this context as their voting behaviour is considerably less predictable than that of deputies and their public statements are more difficult to control. Nevertheless, EPEs also allow parties to boost their public profile by

co-opting celebrities for their cause and to reward long-standing grass-roots members and affiliated organisations. To achieve these goals, parties are willing to tolerate a certain degree of risk, yet less so the more realistic their chances of capturing the presidency become.

The subsequent analysis is based on a novel data set of the share of EPEs in all parties' state delegations from 1949 to 2017. Federal-level factors emerge as the best predictors of EPE nominations, showing that parties acted more risk-averse (i.e. nominated fewer EPEs) during grand coalitions, when they were part of the federal government or when federal elections approached. Conversely, they included more EPEs when the supported candidate was a co-partisan and when they had a larger support base to satisfy within their federal state. Contrary to expectations, likelihood of victory and candidate competition in the Federal Convention did not appear to play a role.

Electing the German president: Procedures, party strategies and electors

Indirectly elected presidents and their election are hitherto understudied in political science. The German Federal President is a welcome exception in this regard as both the institution of the presidency and its incumbents have received considerable coverage in the literature. Although the prerogatives of the office are generally limited, the presidency fulfils more than just a ceremonial function and incumbents provide an active check-and-balance on government and parliament (Helms, 1998). Following more descriptive/summative discussions of the office and its incumbents (Braun, 1993; Jäger, 1989; Kaltefleiter, 1970), scholars have more recently endeavoured to map the practical role and significance of the Federal President in the German polity, in particular vis-à-vis a strong chancellor and disciplined parties (Helms, 1998; Höreth, 2015; Jäckel, Möller

and Rudolph, 1999; Oppeland 2001; Rudzio, 2000). Furthermore, the term of Horst Köhler (2004-2010) triggered an ongoing critical-normative engagement with the president's role and prerogatives (Rütters, 2011; Strohmeier, 2008; Strohmeier and Wittlinger, 2010). While there is as of yet little political science research that seeks to set these discussions in a more comparative context, this is also true for scholarship on indirectly elected presidents in general.

The electoral system and its consequences

Since 1949 German presidents have been elected by the *Bundesversammlung* (Federal Convention), an electoral college consisting of the members of the Bundestag and electors nominated by *Länder* parliaments. This mode of election was introduced as a direct result of the failure of the Weimar Republic, which was among others ascribed to the powerful directly elected presidency (Braun, 1993). Fearing that equipping the head of state with a popular mandate would proliferate populism and be detrimental to democracy, the constituent assembly (*Parlamentarischer Rat*) agreed on an indirect election in a 'national convention' that combined the Bundestag and representatives from the *Länder* (Braun, 1993; Helms, 1998). The total number of state electors is equal to the number of members of the Bundestag at the time of the Federal Convention's convocation.¹ The number of electors for each state is then based on population figures and entirely proportional, contrasting states' representation in the *Bundesrat* (Federal Council).

Political parties are the dominant political actors throughout the process (cf. Helms 1998; Nikolényi, 2014) and competition has hitherto been largely driven by the two *Volksparteien* Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD). However, due to non-concurrent elections of *Länder* parliaments and the varying strength of political parties in individual states, the partisan composition of the Federal Convention

can differ significantly from that of the Bundestag and can create alternative majorities that do not include any or only one of the government parties. Furthermore, candidates can be nominated at any stage of the election process and only require an absolute majority to be elected in the first two rounds of voting. If no candidate succeeds, a relative majority suffices in the third and final round, further facilitating the formation of alternative majorities. To date, ten elections have been conducted in just a single round and only three elections required three rounds (yet none resulted in the election of a president with less than 50% of votes cast).

Starting with Braun's (1993) seminal work scholars have consequently primarily analysed the partisan constellation in the Federal Convention and (in)stability of government coalitions. Most prominently, authors emphasized how the majority of CDU/CSU and Free Democrats (FDP) in the *Länder* facilitated the election of their candidates Karl Carstensen in 1979 (Billing, 1995; Helms, 1998; Rudzio, 2000) and Horst Köhler in 2004 (Jesse, 2004; Gloe, 2010; Strohmeier and Wittlinger, 2010) despite the FDP's participation in the federal government in 1979 and the CDU/CSU's opposition status in the Bundestag on both occasions. Furthermore, in-depth descriptions of the candidate nomination process have highlighted frequent appeals from opposition parties to support a joint candidacy or the struggle within government coalitions to agree on a candidate, both being complicated by the potential of alternative coalitions in the Federal Convention (e.g. Braun 1993, Billing, 1995; Henkel, 2009; Jesse, 2004).

Scholars have also repeatedly emphasized the 'signalling power' of the presidential election in paving the way for a new coalition government (Billing, 1995; Decker and Jesse, 2013; see also Oppeland, 2001; Sieberer, 2013). While parties generally seem to have placed greater emphasis on such signals as warranted by their effect (Decker and

Jesse, 2013), the elections' publicity value for political parties should not be underestimated. The election puts candidates – and their parties – in the spotlight, so that all parties proposing a candidate (even those with no chance of winning) benefit from increased media attention. Last, although authors have hitherto failed to make this connection, the potential for majorities that do not include (all) government parties in its composition challenges conventional assumptions that indirect presidential elections may 'reflect the parliamentary balance of powers rather than chang[e] it' (Schleiter and Morgan Jones, 2009, 508: see also Sieberer, 2013). Overall, the German case therefore supports Nikolenyi's (2014) assertion that government coalitions are less likely to capture the presidency if the rules for its selection diverge from those for electing the prime minister.

Selecting electors in the Länder: Between party politics and parity

In contrast to the party constellations in the Federal Convention, state electors and their selection in *Länder* parliaments have hardly received any scholarly attention. *Länder* parliaments elect their delegates using d'Hondt (GG Art. 54.3; BPWahlG §4.3), yet this is implemented differently depending on standing orders and parliamentary arithmetic. Where the number of electors can be divided between party groups without remainder, state legislators often only vote for an all-party list that contains electors from all parties according to their parliamentary strength. Where electors cannot be evenly divided among parties, parties act strategically and join forces with others by submitting joint lists to pool decimal remainders and gain additional seats.

The practice of joint lists² highlights the high value of electors for political parties. Interestingly, despite fierce competition, the process is still governed by a consciousness for democratic norms. Even the smallest party groups (sometimes also independents) are

supported in nominating electors – either by lending votes to help them cross the threshold or by including them in joint lists.³ Nevertheless, where the number of delegates is limited, larger parties have also exploited their dominant position. Parties are the only actors involved in the nomination of electors – extra-parliamentary parties or groups have no right to nominate delegates – and have exclusive access to this resource, making it even more valuable. As electors must only satisfy criteria for active suffrage to the Bundestag, parties have almost free reign in who to nominate.

Braun (1993, 124, 211) speculates that parties will let more ‘normal citizens’ (i.e. EPEs) participate in the election if the result of the election is clear beforehand, yet will send more state deputies when majorities are narrow. Deputies, she contends, are more reliable and their voting behaviour can be sanctioned more effectively by demoting them to a lower list position in the next election. Nevertheless, she does not test this argument beyond superficial comparison or give any further details (e.g. on how deviating voting behaviour could be sanctioned given that voting in the Federal Convention is secret), and fails to discuss why parties nominate EPEs in the first place. The next section follows from Braun’s (1993) argument, yet builds a somewhat more comprehensive explanatory framework and develops a number of testable hypotheses.

Risk vs reward: When and why parties nominate EPEs

Indirect presidential elections are never a routine act for political parties and, given the potential of the office, they care strongly about who is chosen (Nikolenyi 2014). At the same time, these elections are publicly observed events and the process in itself may be almost as valuable to political parties as the eventual result (cf. Decker and Jesse 2013; Ganghof and Bäuninger 2006; Sieberer 2013). The question of when and why parties

nominate EPEs is emblematic of the tension between these competing goals – EPEs may put the election of party’s preferred candidate at risk, yet simultaneously offer the most efficient way to capitalise fully on the high-profile nature of the election.

Risks of including EPEs

Party unity is essential to the functioning of modern legislatures (Bowler, Farrell, Katz, 1999; Carey, 2007). This applies not only to the passage of bills but also to elections in parliament – when high offices are at stake, parties rely on their deputies to vote for their chosen candidate (Sieberer 2013). Thereby, deputies are subject to a number of established mechanisms ensuring they vote in line with party leadership. For instance, they follow institutional and intra-party incentives to guarantee their (re)selection, to obtain a safe list place (or district) in the next election, or to be promoted to a higher office (Bowler, Farrell, Katz, 1999; Depauw and Martin, 2009). Concurrently, unity in voting behaviour is achieved through socialisation into norms of party loyalty – often preceding the election to parliament – as well as a set of shared preferences (Hazan 2003). For party leaders, deputies’ voting behaviour is therefore relatively predictable and they can rely on co-partisans to vote along party lines even when votes are secret.

EPEs have not been subject to the same political socialisation as deputies and remain unaffected by the same institutional and intra-party pressures. Moreover, party leaders’ knowledge on EPEs’ political preferences is generally limited. Given that the secrecy of the vote further limits incentives to vote for their nominating party’s candidate,⁴ the voting behaviour of EPEs is considerably less predictable than that of deputies. Although parties may try to nominate ‘reliable’ electors or remove those from their lists that indicate diverging preferences, such ‘due diligence’ is not always possible.⁵

In a worst case scenario, deviations from the party line can cost parties the presidency. Even smaller deviations, not to mention cases where they cause a second or third round of voting, can negatively affect parties' public image and their use of the election's 'signalling power' for their benefit (cf. Ganghof and Bäuninger 2006; Sieberer 2013). Thus, even an eventual victory can be tarnished by subsequent news reporting. The latter is best exemplified by the 2010 election – although CDU/CSU and FDP commanded a clear majority in the Convention, their candidate Christian Wulff was only elected in the third round, which subsequently became the focus of reports in national and international media (see e.g. Fischer and Weiland, 2010; Waterfield 2010). Last, EPEs' public statements can likewise be a potential source of reputational damage to parties. For instance, socialite Gloria Fürstin zu Thurn und Taxis caused a scandal in 2004 when she revealed that she voted for SPD-Greens candidate Gesine Schwan despite having been nominated by the CSU in Bavaria (Tjong, 2012). Likewise, in 2009 actor and Greens-EPE Jasmin Tabatabai revealed that she voted for the rival DIE LINKE-nominee Peter Sodann (Müller 2017). For EPEs there is no consequence to such behaviour, thus increasing incentives (or rather decreasing disincentives) to engage in it.

Rewards for including EPEs

Members of the Federal Convention receive extensive coverage in national and local media. Broadcasts from the Convention regularly feature interviews electors and media outlets tend to focus on prominent athletes, singers, writers, actors, and socialites among EPEs when reporting on individual members. This is also the greatest reward of EPEs in terms of publicity and exposure. Although research on celebrity candidates indicates that these first and foremost attract a personal than a party vote, it is their recruitment that invariably attracts media attention for the party as a whole (Arter, 2014; see also Street,

2012). Newspapers regularly publish lists with the abovementioned types of celebrity electors in the run-up to presidential elections (see e.g. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2012; Rohleder, 2017), thus revealing a similar increase in media attention compared to celebrity parliamentary candidates. Increased exposure, together with the prestige of being nominated, also appears to be the key incentive for VIPs to participate in the process. Last, parties regularly vie to nominate the youngest candidate of the Federal Convention who tends to be an extra-parliamentarian (normally a youth party activist) and in turn receives specific attention in local and national media (see e.g. *Spiegel Online*, 2012).

Parties can also use EPE nominations to reward committed lower-level party functionaries, including mayors and local campaigners, for their service. Furthermore, EPE nominations are used to strengthen ties with particular groups. Parties regularly nominate representatives of affiliated or ‘friendly’ organisations – for instance, for the last 30 years the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has always nominated the respective chair of the German Trade Union Federation, while representatives of employer organisations were regularly nominated by FDP and CDU/CSU. This way, these groups receive exposure and parties can in turn hope to gain/maintain access to their membership as a voter base. Similarly, parties can use the nomination of EPEs to promote their programmatic profiles or particular aspects of their policies. In the past, press releases accompanying the nomination of electors for instance highlighted parties’ wish to represent the whole population and show its rootedness in society (SPD BaWü, 2009). Furthermore, parties nominated electors without a discernible celebrity status, yet with connections to particular events. For instance, in 2017 Die Linke in Thuringia nominated the daughter of the first known victim right-wing extremist group ‘National Socialist

Underground' to emphasize its continued commitment to combatting xenophobia (Rohleder, 2017).

Striking the balance: When should parties nominate EPEs?

Parties' primary goal is to see their chosen candidate elected in the Federal Convention. The presidential office is a valuable asset and parties compete fiercely to determine its incumbent. Yet, even when parties' candidates have no realistic chance of winning, they can still try to force the election into a second or third round and benefit indirectly from other parties' failure to push through their candidate. At the same time, exploiting the media attention generated by celebrity advocates, distributing intra-party rewards and strengthening of ties with selected groups as well as targeted self-promotion present subsidiary goals that are in conflict with the primary goal of determining the winner of the election. The realisation of parties' primary goal requires high levels of voting unity, whereas subsidiary goals can be achieved most effectively by nominating EPEs and risking a deviations from party line. Given that the election in the Federal Convention is a federal-level contest and shifts in majorities compared to the Bundestag are due to different partisan constellations in state parliaments, it is reasonable to suggest that the nomination of electors is part of a federal-level strategy implement at *Länder*-level.

Keeping these more general considerations in mind, Braun's (1993) speculation that parties will nominate more EPEs when the outcome of the election is foreseeable appears sensible. When competition in the Federal Convention is low, all parties can more easily tolerate larger deviations from their candidates' prospective vote shares as these do not affect the eventual result. Conversely, higher competition increases the need for reliable electors (i.e. state legislators) and voting unity to achieve victory or at least prevent the election of a president in the first two rounds. From this follows:

H 1: Parties nominate fewer EPEs when competition in the Federal Convention is high.

Irrespective of the general competitiveness of the election, parties whose candidate is set to win the election (at least with a relative majority in the third round of voting), are unlikely to risk this by nominating a large number of EPEs. Although large party delegations can theoretically tolerate a higher share of dissenters, they should be reluctant to sacrifice a potential victory for the (less valuable) benefits associated with EPE nomination. In contrast, parties with no chance of seeing their candidate elected (if they field a candidate at all) will be keener to reap the subsidiary benefits of EPE nomination.

Thus:

H2: Parties nominate fewer EPEs when the election of their respective candidate becomes more likely.

The election puts not only candidates in the spotlight, but also their parties. While parties generally achieve the highest utility if their supported candidate is elected or achieves a good result, the benefits of a good result are even higher for a party if the supported candidate holds membership in or was nominated by it. This is because the candidate's result (and previous media reporting) is more readily associated with their own party than any (additional) supporting parties. Although one could argue that parties with their own candidate should nominate fewer EPEs to achieve a better result, the increased visibility through having their own candidate as well as nominating EPEs should outweigh any costs of a less than optimal result. Furthermore, EPEs should feel a greater obligation to vote for a candidate nominated by the same party as themselves than if their nominating party merely supports another party's candidate. Hence:

H3: Parties nominate more EPEs when their supported candidate is a party member or was originally proposed by them.

The ‘signalling power’ of presidential elections is another popular assumption in the context of the Federal Convention (Billing, 1995; Oppeland, 2001; Rudzio, 2000) – the election increases the focus on government parties and their voting behaviour becomes an indicator of conflict and cooperation (also with non-government parties). Although Decker and Jesse (2013) show that there is little evidence for presidential coattails in Germany, parties still attach a great importance to such signals so that it should matter for determining their strategic considerations. Thereby, government parties should perceive themselves to be under greater pressure to display high levels of voting unity. In contrast, opposition parties are free of such pressures; hence, they can rather afford deviations from party line and may also want to nominate more EPEs to increase their media presence vis-à-vis the coalition parties. From this follows:

H4: Parties nominate fewer EPEs when they are part of the federal government.

Naturally, the signalling power of presidential elections also increases with the proximity to the next federal elections. At this time, opposition parties, too, will want to recommend themselves as reliable and unified. Therefore:

H5: Parties nominate fewer EPEs when federal elections approach.

Last, ‘grand coalitions’ between the two major parties provide another indicator of the ‘seriousness’ of elections. As mentioned above, competition in the Federal Convention were hitherto largely contests between CDU/CSU and SPD. Grand coalitions were far from the ideal constellation politically for either party, so that presidential elections provided an opportunity for parties to distance themselves from each other and highlight

potential new alliances (or, conversely, confirm the strength of their cooperation). Furthermore, given the super-majority of government parties during grand coalitions, the importance of the presidency as a check-and-balance increases (Lorenz, 2010). Thus, both government and opposition parties have strong incentives to see their preferred candidate elected:

H6: Parties nominate fewer EPEs when the government is a grand coalition.

Despite the dominance of federal-level incentives, the standing of parties in the *Länder* should also play a role in the nomination of EPEs. Seats in the Federal Convention – just like winnable seats on electoral lists – are valuable resources that parties allocate strategically to serve their goals. The more parties resemble a ‘catch-all’ type, the more they need to appeal to a wider support base and represent a cross-section of the electorate in order to be successful. Thus, they will also derive greater benefit from including a larger number of EPEs from their lower party ranks and other friendly organisations. Conversely, smaller parties with a more defined/limited electorate are more likely to use their precious seats to increase visibility for their (less numerous) elected representatives and handpick fewer EPEs for targeted self-promotion. Consequently:

H7: Parties nominate more EPEs when they have a larger support base to serve – both in their respective state and across other Länder.

For the sake of parsimony and given the limits of scholarship on the incentive structure of indirect presidential elections (and the nomination of electors in particular), the above considerations only cover the main determinants of parties’ strategic considerations and do not claim to present an exhaustive theoretical model. Nevertheless, the following

analysis controls for a number of further variables and reveals starting points for more comprehensive theorisation.

Analysing the determinants of EPE inclusion in state delegations, 1949-2017

Until now there has been no systematic scholarly effort to collect and analyse data on the Federal Convention beyond basic figures on the number of candidates or rounds required to elect a candidate (Braun, 1993; Billing, 1995; Ismayr, 2009; Zicht, Fehndrich & Cantow 2017), let alone using more sophisticated statistical models. The analysis in this section therefore builds on a new data set (derived from Deutscher Bundestag, n.d.) covering the composition of all party state delegations from 1949 to 2017.

Variable operationalization

The dependent variable in this analysis is the share of EPEs in parties' individual state delegations, thus achieving a large number of observations despite the limited number of 16 Federal Conventions to date. While percentages can sometimes exaggerate smaller absolute changes, particularly in small delegations, this method still presents the most sensible means of operationalisation.

I measure competition in the Federal Convention (H1) as the effective number of candidates – calculated using Laakso and Taagepera (1978) and included in the model as its natural logarithm – based on the votes shares of candidates' nominating parties. Thereby, the vote share of all parties not proposing a candidate is included as a 'virtual' additional candidate.⁶ In determining the likelihood that a candidate will be elected (H2) we need to take into account that the majority requirement in the Federal Convention drops to a plurality of votes in the third round. Hence, the candidate with the highest

theoretical support from nominating parties is always most likely to win. Therefore, I assign the frontrunner the score of one and every subsequent candidate is assigned a score equal to their prospective vote share divided by that of the leading candidate's support (cf. Golosov 2010).

I use a dummy variable to indicate whether the party's supported candidate also holds membership in said party or not (H3). Dummy variables also specify parties' membership in the federal government (H4) and the existence of a grand coalition at federal level (H6). The closeness to the next Bundestag elections (H5) is entered into the model as the logged number of days since the last election (given variability of election dates, this is a more accurate measure than counting towards the likely date of the next regular election). The model also includes two analogous control variables for parties' membership in the state government and the time since the last state parliament election.

The size of a party's support base within and across states (H7) is the most difficult variable to model, so that I use three variables to proxy different aspects of this factor. A party's vote share in the last state election is used to approximate its regional importance, while the share of state parliaments in which a party is represented (thus accounting for territorial changes in 1951, 1955 and 1990) and the share of party electors from a particular state (including members of the Bundestag) is used to measure demands on parties to reward a larger or smaller support base, respectively.

Last, I introduce a number of further control variables. I use a dummy to account for the early presidential elections in 2010 and 2012 that were triggered by the resignations of Horst Köhler and Christian Wulff, respectively (as could already be seen in Figure 1, the share of EPEs dropped dramatically in these years) and for elections in which an

incumbent sought re-election. Last, I include the logged number of Federal Conventions to control for the development of EPE nominations over time.

Model specification

The dependent variable in this analysis is the percentage of EPEs in state delegations and thus bound between 0 and 1. Therefore, I follow Papke and Wooldridge (1996) and fit a generalized linear model with logit link and robust standard errors (assuming a binomial distribution of errors; Papke and Wooldridge, 1996; Baum, 2008; see also Sieberer, 2013). Model fit is estimated using a number of likelihood measures as well as Efron's pseudo R^2 . Given the comparatively large number of observations ($n=791$) the inclusion of nine explanatory variables and five controls does not pose a problem. Nevertheless, in order to arrive at a parsimonious model, I estimate two model specifications – Model 1 includes all variables, whereas Model 2 only includes variables with statistically significant coefficient estimates (achieved through stepwise reduction of predictors).

Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the results of the two models. The model fit is very good and results for Efron's pseudo R^2 show that slightly more than 58% of variation in the dependent variable is captured by the factors included in both the full and reduced model. In the first model, a majority of coefficient estimates is highly statistically significant and support all but three hypotheses. Most surprisingly, the degree of competition between candidates and the likelihood of victory do not produce coefficient estimates at generally accepted levels of statistical significance. This finding is not only counterintuitive but also appears to contradict both Braun's (1993) assertion and 'common knowledge' (see e.g. Reuters 2010) that parties will rather nominate EPEs when competition (and risk) in the Federal

Convention is low. At first glance, one may attribute this to the fact that the determinants of candidate competition, such as the presence of an incumbent or parties' strength in the *Länder*, are already captured by other variables. However, omitting these variables from the model (not displayed here) does not change the effect size or significance level of the coefficient estimates. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the 'seriousness' of the election does not play a role at all. The existence of a 'grand coalition' at federal level is positively and significantly correlated with a smaller share of EPEs in parties' state delegations. This supports the assumption that parties in government and opposition alike are more eager to highlight new alliances under these circumstances and that the presidency is valued higher due to its increased importance as a check-and-balance on the (super-) majority of a grand coalition (cf. Lorenz, 2010). Likewise, membership in the federal government and approaching federal elections (measured here as time passed since the last federal election) both significantly decrease the percentage of EPEs in party delegations. These results corroborates the assumption that parties ascribe a 'signalling power' to these elections even if its effect on electoral results is arguably negligible (cf. Decker and Jesse, 2013).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Furthermore, the model shows that candidates' party membership is a further important predictor of EPE inclusion – a party will generally nominate more EPEs when their supported candidate holds membership in said party. In contrast, the size of the support base within and across states that parties need to satisfy shows mixed results. A larger

share of a party's entire state delegation (members of the Bundestag from a state plus all party electors nominated by the state parliament) in the Federal Convention is positively and significantly associated with a higher share of EPEs. Although this would support hypothesis H7, this result could also be attributed to the fact that smaller parties simply run out of places to give to EPEs and therefore rather nominate their leaders than EPEs. In contrast, the coefficient estimate of the share of state parliaments in which a party is represented is only significant at 10% level and the coefficient for the vote share in the last state elections does not produce a significant estimate. A potential explanation for this could be that parties' reward strategies for their constituencies are more long-term and were thus not influenced by (short-term) election results. Nevertheless, it appears that further (qualitative) research needs to be conducted to answer the question of how parties' support bases factor into their nomination strategies.

Last, the state-level variables also show an interesting pattern among the control variables. The coefficient estimates for both membership in *Länder* governments and the state electoral cycle fail to reach statistical significance. This could be interpreted as evidence that the nomination of electors is a federal-level strategy; nevertheless it arguably falls short of providing a satisfactory answer and highlights the need to further theorisation. As could already be expected based on Figure 1, the early elections of 2010 and 2012 led to a significant decrease in EPE nominations. Parties likely perceived these elections as 'more serious', yet might also have had greater problems finding appropriate EPEs to nominate given the shorter time frame. Although this could not be discerned from Figure 1 in the same way, *ceteris paribus* there has also been a significant increase in EPE nominations over time.

Model 2 only includes a reduced number of variables; the variables with the respectively least significant coefficient estimate were consecutively dropped from the model (provided significance was not at least at $p=0.1$ -level). Coefficient sizes in both models are substantively similar and the slight drop in Efron's pseudo R^2 from the full to the reduced model is negligible. Interestingly, AIC and BIC scores would recommend the respective other model as providing the better fit; yet, overall the reduced model can reasonably be accepted as the more parsimonious option.

Two particularly interesting findings emerge from the above analysis. First, the traditional assumption that lower competition in the Federal Convention will lead to more EPEs is not fully supported. Second, the share of EPEs in parties' individual state delegation can be explained relatively well with factors that are not specific to the respective *Länder*. The latter supports the above assumption that the nomination of electors to the Federal Convention is a federal-level strategy that is merely implemented at *Länder*-level. However, there is still surprisingly great variation between states that is not yet fully captured by the variables in the model. Figure 2 highlights the variation in EPE nominations by state using the example of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which has been continuously represented in the Federal Convention and all state parliaments since 1949. In particular, it shows that extremes of EPE nominations (all or no electors are EPEs) are not uncommon. This trend is also visible for all other parties in the data set irrespective of delegation size, state concerned, or any other factor with no clear pattern emerging. A partial explanation, particularly for extraordinary high shares of EPEs, could be the type of EPE nominated – in Bremen and Hamburg, the positions of lord mayor and senator (cabinet minister) are incompatible with membership in the legislature. Thus, although the SPD in Bremen and Hamburg sent (almost) only EPEs in 2017, their share

would be reduced to about 50% when counting lord mayors and senators as parliamentary electors rather than EPEs.⁷ Although the statistical models could already explain a large share of the variance in the data, this finding highlights that there is a need to account more specifically for the different types of EPEs.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The overall results of the analysis demonstrate that there are clearly identifiable patterns of federal level factors that are reflected by the share of EPEs in individual *Länder* delegations. Nevertheless, there may be at least one secondary dynamic at *Länder* level, namely the nomination of party politicians without a parliamentary-electoral mandate, which requires further investigation. For instance, it is conceivable that the share of politicians among EPEs (rather than the share of EPEs as such) varies depending on a party's governing status, the electoral cycle or vote share in the *Länder*. Such a dynamic might also play out in response to general candidate competition in the Federal Convention. Unfortunately, further research would require the collection of detailed data on an enormous number of individual state electors (over 3,000 took part in the last five Federal Conventions alone) which is hitherto unavailable. Yet such a data collection would be worthwhile given that it would not only allow for analysing the presumed dynamics described above (and thus shed new light on parties' nomination strategies and party-society linkages), but also for gauging the prevalence of different types of EPEs.

Conclusion

Parties compete fiercely over capturing the presidency across parliamentary republics. Thereby, parties do not only seek to capture the presidency but are faced with a trade-off between seeing their preferred candidate elected and exploiting the publicity and redistributory potential of the election. In the case of Germany, the latter goals can be achieved most effectively by nominating a larger share of extra-parliamentarian electors (EPEs) alongside state deputies in parties' *Länder* delegations. However, the voting behaviour of EPEs is more difficult to predict and their public statements hard to control so that their nomination presents a risk factor vis-à-vis parties' ultimate goal of determining the next president.

This article has analysed how German parties struck the balance between electoral success and exploiting the election's publicity potential. Based on an original data set of the share of EPEs in all parties' state delegations from 1949 to 2017, it showed that – contrary to previous assumptions – the likelihood of a candidate's victory and competition in the Federal Convention only play a subordinate role, if any. Rather, party strategies were influenced by the varying signalling power of elections. In particular, parties acted more risk-averse (i.e. nominated fewer EPEs) during grand coalitions, when they were part of the federal government, or when federal elections approached. Conversely, parties included more EPEs when the supported candidate was a co-partisan and when they had a larger support base to satisfy within their federal state. The greater explanatory power of federal-level variables corroborates the assertion that elector nomination is a federal strategy that is merely implemented at *Länder* level. Nevertheless, this falls short of providing a full explanation as it appears that there is at least one secondary dynamic in the nomination of different types of EPEs (most importantly high-ranking party

politicians without a parliamentary-electoral mandate). A further investigation of this dynamic, together with more general demographic research on state electors, would offer valuable new insights into parties' nomination strategies and clarify the true extent to which celebrity candidates and representatives of affiliated organisations are nominated as EPEs.

The results of this study provide a number of starting points for further research on indirect presidential elections beyond German case. First, while findings once again underline that parties in parliamentary systems compete fiercely over the presidential office, a more in-depth inquiry into the different types of electoral systems employed and their respective incentive structures is needed to assess whether and how parties strategic considerations' differ between countries. Second, Germany is not the only country to elect their president in an extended electoral college (other cases include India and Italy) and/or includes extra-parliamentarian electors in the process (Estonia and Nepal do so, too). However, it is yet unclear whether this is associated with the same shift in majorities and to what extent EPEs pose similar challenges for party strategies in other countries. Last, signalling voters stood out as an important secondary driver of party competition in indirect presidential elections. Future research should assess its importance beyond Germany and analyse whether parties in other countries are likewise torn between electoral success and exploiting the elections' publicity potential.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available via figshare. DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.6263060. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain:

Deutscher Bundestag (n.d.). *Die Bundesversammlungen seit 1949 – Dokumentation*. http://www.bundestag.de/parlament/aufgaben/bundesversammlung/bundesversammlungen_seit_1949 (accessed 6 January 2019).

Biographical statement

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Notes

- ¹ Thus, it also includes overhang seats and compensatory mandates.
- ² Although joint lists have become the norm, they raise a host of legal questions – see e.g. Zicht, Fehndrich and Cantow (2017) with reference to the 2017 Federal Convention.
- ³ For instance, the list of the SPD in Schleswig-Holstein has traditionally included representatives of the South Schleswig Voters' Association (SSW) which represents Danish and Frisian minorities yet typically holds only 1-3 seats in the state parliament.
- ⁴ This even applies to EPEs with stronger partisan ties such as long-time members or lower-level functionaries.
- ⁵ For instance, in 2010 the CDU in Thuringia removed veteran politician Dagmar Schipanski from the list of proposed electors after she voiced support for another candidate (Langenau, 2010). Other parties appear to hold one-on-one interviews with potential EPEs (Müller, 2017).
- ⁶ Although these parties are unlikely to act as one, using a combined vote share provides a better estimate of 'risk' as conceptualised above.
- ⁷ Similarly, the SPD's delegation from Mecklenburg-West Pomerania included the minister-president who, having served in the federal government prior to her appointment, was not a member of the state legislature. Horst Seehofer, then minister-president of Bavaria was an EPE in the Federal Conventions of 2009, 2010 and 2012 for the same reason.

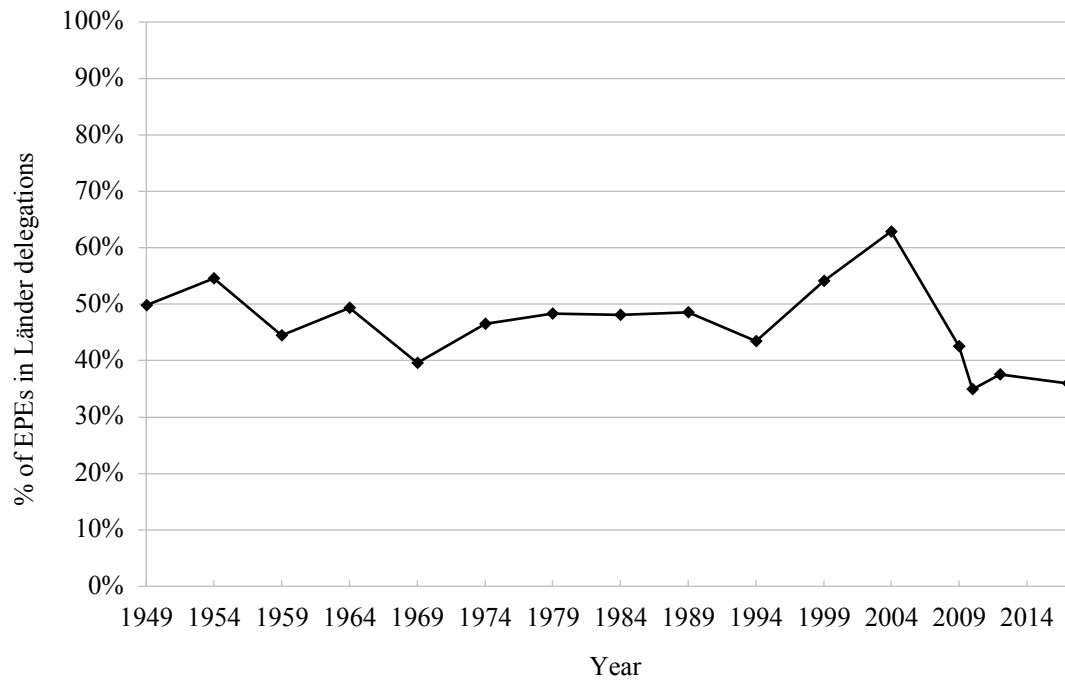
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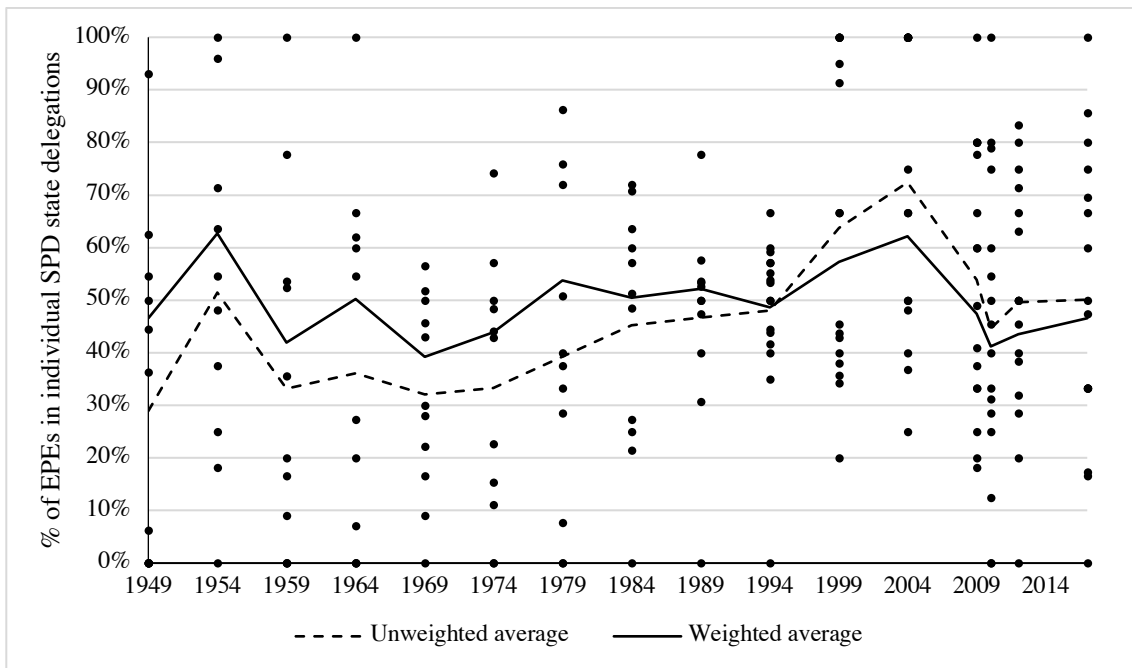
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Figure 1: Extra-parliamentarian electors (EPEs) in Länder delegations to the Federal Convention, 1949-2017



Source: Own visualisation based on Deutscher Bundestag (n.d.).

Figure 2: Variations in EPE nominations by the SPD by state, 1949-2017



Notes: The unweighted average does not take into account delegation size. The weighted average is equal to the share of EPEs across all state delegation.

Source: Own compilation based on Deutscher Bundestag (n.d.).

Table 1: Explaining the inclusion of EPEs in parties' state delegations to the Federal Convention (fractional logit model)

		(1)	(2)
	Hypothesis	Full model	Reduced Model
Effective number of candidates (log)	-	-0.174 (0.171)	
Likelihood of victory	-	-0.303 (0.195)	
Candidate from own party	+	0.324*** (0.123)	0.328*** (0.115)
Party is part of federal government	-	-0.364*** (0.116)	-0.372*** (0.101)
Days since last federal election (log)	-	-0.316*** (0.083)	-0.260*** (0.077)
Grand coalition	-	-0.519*** (0.145)	-0.515*** (0.141)
Vote share in last state election	+	-0.004 (0.004)	
Share of state parliaments in which party sits	+	0.576* (0.338)	
Share of party state delegation in Fed. Conv.	+	4.132*** (0.694)	4.069*** (0.690)
Party is part of state government		0.022 (0.109)	
Days since last state election (log)		0.009 (.057)	
Early presidential election		-0.980*** (0.174)	-0.896*** (0.162)
Incumbent running		-0.004 (0.115)	
Timeset (log)		0.732*** (0.107)	0.680*** (0.106)
Constant		-0.067 (0.653)	-0.225 (0.403)
Log pseudo likelihood		-416.13	-417.17
Efron's pseudo R ²		0.589	0.586
AIC		1.090	1.075
BIC		-4725.10	-4769.74
Observations		791	791

Notes: The dependent variable is the share of extra-parliamentarian electors (EPEs) in parties' individual state delegations to the Federal Convention. Unstandardised coefficients (robust standard errors in parentheses). * $p < 0.10$; *** $p < 0.01$. Binomial error distribution; logit link function.