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## *Recorded Votes as Attention Booster: How Opposition Parties use Roll Calls and Nonrecorded Votes for Position Taking in the German Bundestag, 2017–21*

The article investigates roll-call request and its effects on opposition-voting behavior. It argues that parties use roll-call votes (RCVs) as a position-taking instrument to boost public attention for issues they care about. This argument implies that RCVs are requested strategically but opposition behavior should not differ systematically between recorded and nonrecorded votes. Studying all voting activities of the 19th German Bundestag (2017–21), the analysis shows that RCVs are more likely on high-salience issues, more important motion types, and to some extent opposition motions. Voting conforms to the position-taking model as opposition parties are less likely to vote with the government on their own motions and more important motion types. However, opposition behavior does not differ systematically between recorded and nonrecorded votes suggesting that parties act consistently across all votes. Thus, RCVs provide valid measures for studying interparty competition in parliament despite their selective sampling properties.

Roll-call votes (RCVs)<sup>1</sup> are a crucial source for studying various aspects of parliamentary behavior such as party unity, the dimensionality of party competition, and patterns of interparty cooperation and conflict. Roll-call votes have advantages compared to other data sources as they are available in many parliaments, can be measured reliably, and directly refer to parliamentary outputs. However, in many parliaments, RCVs only occur on a subset of votes, usually when requested by some actor (Ainsley et al. 2020; Hug, Wegmann, and Wüest 2015; Saalfeld 1995a). This raises two obvious questions: why do

<sup>1</sup>Throughout the article, we use the terms “roll-call vote” and “recorded vote” interchangeably.

parties request RCVs on some votes rather than on others, and how does the voting method affect parties' voting behavior?

Previous research has focused on the first question—the determinants of RCV request. Different theoretical accounts explain roll-call vote request as a means to discipline party members, to expose divisions within competing parties, and to advertise one's own position (Ainsley et al. 2020; Carrubba, Gabel, and Hug 2008; Finke 2015; Thiem 2009). The empirical record across several parliaments indicates that the sample of RCVs is unrepresentative of all parliamentary votes with regard to characteristics such as legislative importance, issue area, and level of conflict (Carrubba et al. 2006; Crisp and Driscoll 2012; Finke 2015; Hug 2010; Thiem 2009). The behavioral effects of taking votes by roll call rather than by other voting methods have received less attention. The few existing studies analyze party unity as one specific outcome and find at most small and often statistically insignificant differences between RCVs and nonrecorded votes (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2018; Hug 2010; Yordanova and Mühlböck 2015). However, this research is limited by the fact that party unity is unobservable in nonrecorded votes except under special circumstances. Other potential outcome variables, especially the interaction of political parties in parliamentary voting, have not been studied systematically, even though scholars frequently use RCVs to make claims about patterns of government-opposition dynamics (e.g., Hix and Noury 2016; Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2020; 2021; Tuttnauer 2018; Tuttnauer and Hazan 2023; Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022).

This article contributes to our understanding of RCV request and its consequences in three ways. First, starting from a position-taking logic, we theorize that parties, especially opposition parties, use RCVs primarily as an “attention booster” to highlight issues they particularly care about. This argument implies that the sample of roll-call votes should systematically differ from the sample of votes taken by other means, but at the same time the voting behavior should be similar. Second, we provide the first systematic empirical study of RCV request in the German Bundestag, a parliament in which RCVs are rare and the question of sample selection thus looms large. Lastly, we study the effects of RCVs on a novel outcome variable: the degree of voting conflict between government and opposition parties. This outcome is crucial for understanding interparty competition as a core characteristic of modern parliaments and is observable for RCVs and nonrecorded votes alike. Thus, we can actually investigate whether opposition behavior on RCVs is reflective of opposition-voting behavior in general.

Analyzing recorded and nonrecorded votes during the 19th electoral period of the Bundestag (2017–21), we find that RCVs are more likely on motions with high issue salience, opposition-sponsored motions, and more important types of motions, especially bills.<sup>2</sup> These patterns are in line with

<sup>2</sup>The dataset is freely available for academic use at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H4TJ-9Q94>

our position-taking argument of RCVs as an attention booster for opposition parties. Opposition-voting behavior is partly in line with our expectations as we see more conflictual behavior on bills as the most important motion type and on motions that an opposition party sponsored itself. However, we do not find the expected effects of issue salience and temporal proximity to the next elections. Finally, the analyses demonstrate that opposition behavior hardly differs between recorded and nonrecorded votes. According to our interpretation, this suggests that parties strategically request RCVs but then vote in line with a persistent strategy across all voting methods. Doing so allows them to display consistent voting behavior and avoid accusations of hypocrisy. Methodologically, this finding implies that the descriptively unrepresentative RCV sample does not necessarily lead to selection bias with regard to behavior and outcomes. This strengthens our confidence in making general claims about legislative behavior based on selective roll-call samples.

### **Roll-call request and its behavioral effects: The state of the art**

In most parliaments, roll calls are not the standard voting method (Ainsley et al. 2020; Hug, Wegmann, and Wüest 2015; Saalfeld 1995a). Instead, RCVs are taken when explicitly requested by legislative actors or in some parliaments for specific types of motions (e.g., final votes on bills).

Existing research has identified two main reasons for RCV request (e.g., Ainsley et al. 2020; Carrubba et al. 2006; Carrubba, Gabel, and Hug 2008; Finke 2015): the desire of party leaders to discipline their members and the goal to make the party's position visible to the public. According to the disciplining logic, RCVs make it easier for leaders to observe and potentially sanction deviant voting behavior, which in turn gives rational legislators incentives to toe the party line (Carrubba, Gabel, and Hug 2008). In the position-taking logic, parties use the heightened public visibility of RCVs to communicate their position (and possibly highlight the position taken by other parties) in pursuit of electoral goals (Ainsley et al. 2020; Finke 2015; Thiem 2009). Some literature mentions a third motivation for RCV request: exposing divisions within other parties and, in case of cabinet parties in coalition governments, forcing them to openly vote for a cabinet line that contradicts their own position (Carrubba et al. 2006, 694; Thiem 2009, 138). However, this motivation has received less attention than the disciplining and position-taking logics.

If legislative actors request RCVs strategically (for whatever reason), roll calls should be an unrepresentative sample of all legislative votes. Available empirical studies support this claim. RCVs in the European Parliament are biased descriptively regarding the issue area of the vote and are much more prevalent for votes with low legislative importance for the period 1999–2000 (Carrubba et al. 2006) and 2004–2005 (Thiem 2009, Chap. 8). Furthermore, parties differ in their requesting behavior. A multivariate study for the period 2004–2009 confirms the findings on party differences and bias regarding issue area but finds no significant differences based on

legislative procedure (Finke 2015). On the national level, recorded votes in Argentina and Mexico are significantly more likely on motions introduced by the president and on motions preceded by extensive debate, both of which give parties strong position-taking incentives (Crisp and Driscoll 2012). In Switzerland, RCV request in the period 1995–2003 is systematically affected by the formal type of motion (Hug 2010). In Germany, the topics of RCVs feature many highly salient issues, but it remains unclear whether such topics are also overrepresented in nonrecorded votes on which no data is available (Bergmann et al. 2016).

Turning to how the voting method affects legislative behavior, research focuses on party unity as dependent variable and asks whether findings on the level and determinants of party unity obtained in roll-call analyses generalize to all parliamentary votes.<sup>3</sup> This straightforward question is difficult to answer empirically because party unity is usually unobservable for nonrecorded votes on which individual voting behavior is not documented.

Some studies circumvent this problem by formally modelling the effects of RCVs on party unity and assessing model implications via simulations. Conceptualizing RCV request as a disciplining device, Carrubba, Gabel, and Hug (2008) show that unity in the RCV sample is likely to differ from unity on nonrecorded votes. Their model indicates that the size and direction of the bias depend on party size, heterogeneity of the chamber, the status quo, and the way in which the voting agenda is set. Ainsley et al. (2020) model RCV request as a position-taking tool and conclude that the focus on roll calls likely leads to biased inferences about party unity.

Two studies of the European Parliament (EP) analyze selection bias empirically by comparing unity on motions that are always voted by RCV and those on which RCVs must be requested. This research design utilizes a rule change in 2008 that made RCVs mandatory on final legislative votes. Studying the first 18 month of EP6 (prior to the rule change) and the first 18 month of EP7 (after the change), Yordanova and Mühlböck (2015) find that party unity on final votes increased compared to amendments after the reform. By contrast, Hix, Noury, and Roland (2018) only find substantively small and sometimes statistically insignificant differences in party unity using a difference-in-differences approach over the entire voting record from EP6 and EP7.

Hug (2010) exploits a unique opportunity in Switzerland where parliament recorded all votes but only published a subset of them, some automatically and some on the request of parliamentary party groups. Thus, he can measure party unity on nonpublished votes and assess directly how vote visibility affects individual voting behavior and party unity. For most parties, unity was considerably lower on nonpublished votes compared to automatically published RCVs while only small differences existed between nonpublished votes and RCVs published on party request. A Heckman selection

<sup>3</sup>We use the term “party unity” to refer to the observed level to which members of the same parliamentary party vote in unison (Sieberer 2006b). Some of the studies we cite employ different terms, especially using “party cohesion” and “party unity” interchangeably.

model that accounts for sample selection by including factors that drive the publication of RCVs (here the type of motion) yields predicted unity scores that are (marginally) closer to the true value on all votes than the scores observed on the subset of published votes.

Previous research thus suggests two general lessons. RCVs are requested strategically and do not constitute a representative sample of the universe of all legislative votes. At the same time, voting behavior on RCVs does not differ strongly from other methods regarding party unity. However, we know little about the effects of RCV request on other outputs.

This article shifts attention to a different outcome variable: the voting behavior of party groups rather than individual legislators. Several studies have recently used parties' voting behavior on RCVs to measure government-opposition dynamics of competition and compromise (Hix and Noury 2016; Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2020; 2021; Tuttnauer 2018; Tuttnauer and Hazan 2023; Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022). Given the very high levels of party unity in parliamentary democracies (Coman 2015; Kam 2014; Sieberer 2006b), such interparty dynamics are arguably more important for our substantive understanding of many legislatures than intraparty dynamics. Furthermore, this outcome has the methodological advantage that it is generally observable (albeit very cumbersome to measure) in recorded and non-recorded votes whereas party unity usually cannot be observed for nonrecorded votes.

### **Roll-calls as attention booster: Theory and hypotheses**

#### *Position taking, roll-call votes, and opposition behavior*

This section develops our theoretical argument of roll-call votes as attention booster and derives testable hypotheses on roll-call vote request and its effects for opposition-voting behavior. We conceptualize roll-call votes as a position-taking device that opposition parties use to draw attention to issues and to position themselves towards the government as the main agenda setter (Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2020). This focus does not imply that other motivations for requesting RCVs were theoretically implausible. However, for several reasons we consider them secondary in our empirical case, the German Bundestag. The Bundestag is characterized by very high levels of party unity (Sieberer et al. 2020) and majority cabinets in which coalition partners always vote in unison (Debus, Döring, and Ecker 2021). Thus, the voting outcome is a foregone conclusion because a unified governing majority always gets its will irrespective of the voting method.<sup>4</sup> Under these conditions, party leaders do not need RCVs as a disciplining device but use them to highlight their own

<sup>4</sup>In the four-year period we study, the governing majority did not lose a single vote in the Bundestag.

position on issues. Similarly, the constantly high levels of unity and perfect coalition voting (i.e., both coalition parties always voting together) at least suggest that exposing intraparty and intracoalition conflicts is not the core determinant of RCV request, even though this motivation may be relevant on specific votes.<sup>5</sup>

We argue theoretically that parties initiate recorded votes to highlight motions that are important for positing-taking purposes. Such position taking is essential for electoral competition in which parties seek to draw attention to issues that are important to their electorate and on which they are perceived as competent (“issue ownership”; see Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Wagner and Meyer 2014).<sup>6</sup> RCVs receive heightened public attention because they are frequently referred to in the media and are published visibly on the website of the Bundestag. Furthermore, parties and individual legislators frequently disseminate graphs displaying detailed voting patterns on RCVs via social media. By contrast, nonrecorded votes are noticed only by following the debate as it happens or via the printed minutes. Thus, interested actors, including the media and ordinary citizens, must invest more effort to find out how parties voted. Accordingly, a party that wants to highlight its position on a motion has incentives to request an RCV. At the same time, RCVs are costly as they require members to be physically present and consume precious plenary time (legislators manually cast ballots in urns, which will take about 20 minutes including the time for counting). Furthermore, public attention is limited so that the position-taking purpose can be diluted if RCVs are too frequent. Thus, it is plausible to assume that parliamentary party groups select the motions for RCVs strategically.

<sup>5</sup>Aside from votes on which the party leadership explicitly waived party discipline (“free votes”), we have only 18 observations of government parties with a Rice Index below 0.9 on RCVs. Ten of those were decisions on foreign troop deployment that are always taken by roll call due to a strong convention. Six of the eight remaining observations occurred on highly salient topics so that a position-taking logic is at least as plausible as an attempt to expose tensions within other parties. We are quick to acknowledge that there are individual cases in which opposition parties introduce motions and request RCVs to force the government or one governing party to take an unpopular position. For example, shortly before the 2009 elections, the Left party introduced a motion requesting a general minimum wage that was virtually identical to a pledge from the governing Social Democrats’ election manifesto. As the Social Democrats were bound to coalition discipline and their governing partner, the Christian Democrats, rejected a minimum wage, the party had to vote against the proposal, which was difficult to defend in the upcoming election campaign (Sieberer 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, such maneuvers are rare. A current whip of an opposition party group in the Bundestag confirmed that their party requests by far the most RCV to promote issues they want to communicate to the public whereas disciplining their members and forcing other parties to take unpopular positions is of minor importance (Interview with Ulrich Sieberer, November 20, 2023).

<sup>6</sup>Unfortunately, we cannot investigate the effect of issue ownership directly because we lack data on the precise issues covered in the more than 8000 motions studied below.

Our argument focuses on the position-taking incentives and the resulting voting behavior of opposition parties.<sup>7</sup> Opposition parties can use voting in parliament to highlight their agreement with the government (e.g., to present themselves as a potential future coalition partner or to appear responsible in times of crisis) or take a confrontational stance (e.g., to promote their own policy agenda, to present themselves as an alternative to the government, or to cater to voters who are critical of the government). Current research argues that opposition parties determine their legislative behavior strategically based on its expected effects, especially electoral returns (e.g., Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2020; Tuttnauer 2018; Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022).

Conceptualizing RCVs as an attention booster for opposition parties raises two core questions: First, under what conditions do opposition parties have heightened position-taking incentives and should thus be more likely to request roll-call votes? Second, how do these conditions affect the propensity of opposition parties to vote with the government, and how does voting behavior differ between recorded and nonrecorded votes? For both questions, we discuss four conditions: (1) the topic of the motion in question, (2) its type and legislative importance, (3) its sponsor, and (4) the timing of the vote. We derive hypotheses for RCV request and the effect of the voting method on opposition voting behavior in turn.

### *Hypotheses on RCV request*

First, the position-taking argument implies that parties are more likely to request RCVs on politically more salient topics. Previous studies find that the use of RCVs differs across policy areas (Carrubba et al. 2006; Finke 2015; Thiem 2009). Salient issues provide opposition parties with stronger incentives to highlight their own position for electoral purposes, and RCVs offer a means to create this extra visibility. This yields the first hypothesis:

H1. Publicly salient topics are more likely to be voted by RCV than nonsalient topics.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Government-opposition relations in the Bundestag are also affected by potential veto power of opposition parties in the second chamber, the Bundesrat (Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2021). We ignore this aspect because the majority in the Bundesrat did not vary over the period we cover.

<sup>8</sup>More specifically, RCVs should primarily occur on motions that are highly salient for the party that requests the RCV (unless the goal is to force other parties to take visible positions on matters that are important for them but may be unpopular with voters or coalition partners). Unfortunately, it is often unclear which specific party requested an RCV. Thus, our analysis must rely on the general salience of a topic for party competition.

Second, position taking and thus RCV request should be more likely on important motions. A motion's importance is usually measured via its formal type. In particular, legislative bills are considered more important than other motions because they have direct policy consequences. The other main types in the German case encompass regular motions and resolutions, which primarily serve as declarations of intent without direct policy effects. Finally, there are votes on reports, petitions, and committee referrals, where casting a "yes" vote signifies acknowledgment without necessarily expressing any substantive position. Previous studies find differences in RCV request depending on motion type, albeit in different directions (Carrubba et al. 2006; Crisp and Driscoll 2012; Hug 2010; Thiem 2009). In the Bundestag, all party groups can introduce bills, and opposition parties regularly present their own bills that highlight policy priorities and substantive expertise (Sieberer 2006a). Accordingly, we expect that bills are more likely targets for RCVs than other motions types in the German case. Thus:

H2. Bills are more likely to be voted by RCV than other types of motions.

Third, RCV request should depend on who sponsored the motion in question, especially whether a motion was introduced by the government or an opposition party. Previous research shows that opposition parties request the largest share of RCVs in the German Bundestag (Bergmann et al. 2016). Work on the EP also finds that European party groups request RCVs to different degrees (Carrubba et al. 2006; Finke 2015; Thiem 2009). While the EP does not have a clear government-opposition divide, one study finds that a party group is more likely to request an RCV on the floor if it voted against the motion in committee (Thierse 2016). This can be interpreted as functionally similar to being an opposition party in a parliamentary democracy. In parliamentary systems, opposition parties have strong incentives to generate additional visibility for their own proposals by requesting RCVs. For opposition parties, their own initiatives are the most promising tool to draw public attention to their ideas (e.g., Bräuninger and Debus 2009; Breunig, Guinaudeau, and Schnatterer 2021; Brunner 2013). RCVs enhance this publicity compared to nonrecorded votes. By contrast, government parties generally enjoy higher public attention and can generate publicity for their issues in other ways making RCVs less essential. Opposition parties may also use government proposals to signal their political position to the electorate. However, compared to opposition proposals, government proposals more often deal with technical matters, whereas opposition parties can tailor their motions to the specific substantive positions they want to communicate. Thus, we expect that motions introduced by opposition parties are

more likely to be voted as RCVs compared to motions by the governing parties.<sup>9</sup>

H3. Motions introduced by opposition parties are more likely to be voted by RCV than motions introduced by government parties.

Fourth, incentives to create visibility via roll-call votes should vary over the course of an electoral period. As elections approach, parties seek to highlight their position (Bergmann et al. 2016; see also Bräuninger and Debus 2009). Thus, RCV request should be more likely over time:

H4. The closer the date of a vote is to the next scheduled election, the more likely the vote is taken by RCV.

#### *Hypotheses on opposition voting behavior on recorded and nonrecorded votes*

The second question is how opposition parties behave towards the government and whether this behavior differs systematically between recorded and nonrecorded votes. In general terms, opposition behavior depends on an opposition party's policy preferences and its overarching strategy vis-à-vis the government with a view to future elections. Building on recent work (Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022), we assume that opposition parties overall seek to differentiate themselves from the government for electoral purposes and use parliamentary votes for this purpose. However, not all votes are equally useful for this purpose. Theoretical arguments and previous research on government-opposition voting in the Bundestag suggests that the conditions we discussed for RCV request should also affect the incentives to take a confrontational stance towards the government (Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2020). From a position-taking perspective, opposition parties have stronger incentives to differentiate themselves from the government when (a) the topic of the vote is more salient to the public, (b) the motion is substantively more important, (c) the motion is sponsored by the party itself, and (d) the vote is taken closer to the next elections. This leads to four well-established hypotheses on opposition voting in the Bundestag:

H5a. An opposition party is less likely to vote with the government on highly salient motions.

<sup>9</sup>Ideally, one would analyze whether the RCV was requested by the party that sponsored the motion. However, information on RCV initiator is often lacking, forcing us to rely on the sponsor of the motion instead irrespective of who initiated the RCV. For all Bundestag RCVs since 1953 for which we know who requested the RCV, every roll call on an opposition motion was requested by the motion's sponsor itself (own analysis based on the BTVote dataset; Sieberer et al. 2020). Thus, it is highly plausible to assume that RCVs on opposition motions are indeed requested by the opposition party that sponsored the motion in line with our position-taking argument.

H5b. An opposition party is less likely to vote with the government on bills compared to other types of motions.

H5c. An opposition party is less likely to vote with the government on motions that it sponsored itself.

H5d. An opposition party is less likely to vote with the government in the year prior to the next elections.

Previous research on opposition behavior has focused almost exclusively on recorded votes. Studying recorded as well as nonrecorded votes, as we do in this article, raises the question of how the voting method affects opposition behavior.

Our conceptualization of RCVs as an attention booster leads us to expect no systematic differences in voting behavior: parties strategically select the votes for which they seek increased public attention via RCVs. However, the determinants of their voting behavior, that is, their policy preferences and their overall strategy towards the government, should not differ systematically between recorded and nonrecorded votes.

Put differently, we expect parties to act strategically when requesting RCVs but sincerely when it comes to voting. Sincere voting is a rational strategy because parties seek to build and preserve a reputation for consistency and reliability towards their voters, interest groups, and other political parties. Acting differently on recorded and nonrecorded votes would invite criticism of hypocrisy from political competitors. Thus, we expect:

H6a. The likelihood that an opposition party votes with the government does not differ between RCVs and nonrecorded votes.

H6b. The effects of motion salience, motion type, motion sponsor, and vote timing on the likelihood of voting agreement with the government do not differ between recorded and nonrecorded votes.

An alternative to our attention-booster argument could claim that RCVs not only increase visibility but also provide opposition parties with incentives to act more confrontationally towards the government than they would if the vote was not recorded. According to this argument, parties strategically request roll calls *and* strategically adapt their voting behavior depending on the voting method used. As argued above, such a strategy has reputational costs, which is why we do not expect to observe it. However, this is ultimately an empirical question.

## Research design and data

### *Case: The German Bundestag, 2017–21*

The German Bundestag is a particularly interesting case for studying roll-call vote request. Roll-call data is readily available for a long period of time (Sieberer et al. 2020), and many studies have used this data to assess various aspects of legislative politics (e.g., Frank and Stadelmann 2021; Mai 2022; Saalfeld 1995b; Sieberer 2010; Sieberer and Ohmura 2021; Zittel and Nyhuis 2019). However, the danger of selection bias looms large because only a small fraction of votes is recorded. A vote in the Bundestag is taken by RCV if requested by one parliamentary party group or at least 5% of all members. On rare occasions, RCVs are used for votes with qualified majority requirement in order to have an exact vote count (Bergmann et al. 2016). Descriptive patterns in the timing, topics, and initiators of roll calls suggest that RCVs are indeed requested strategically (Bergmann et al. 2016); however, this has not been studied systematically because there has previously been no data on nonrecorded votes.

We analyze the most recent 19th electoral period of the Bundestag (2017–21) under a Grand Coalition cabinet of Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) led by Chancellor Angela Merkel that controlled 56.6% of the seats. Opposition parties were the radical-right AfD (13.3% seats), the liberal FDP (11.3% seats), the socialist Left (9.7% seats), and the ecological Greens (9.4% seats). Ideologically, the cabinet was centrally located with two opposition parties to its left (the Left Party and the Greens) and to its right (the Liberals and the right-wing extremist AfD) (Jolly et al. 2022).

### *Data and variables*

Our analyses use a newly collected dataset covering the entire universe of votes—recorded and nonrecorded—taken in the 19th Bundestag. The dataset combines information extracted manually from the minutes of the Bundestag with data from the Bundestag’s official “Documentation and Information System for Parliamentary Materials” (DIP) accessed using the R-package “tidybundestag” (Guinaudeau 2022).

Our two dependent variables—RCV request and opposition voting behavior—were coded manually from the minutes. For the voting method, we distinguished between roll-calls (*namentliche Abstimmung*) and nonrecorded votes taken by a show of hands.<sup>10</sup> The voting behavior of each party (yes, no, abstention) was

<sup>10</sup>In addition, the Bundestag uses secret ballots for elections and the so-called “Hammelsprung.” In the latter, MPs leave the plenary hall and cast their votes by reentering through three doors labeled “yes,” “no,” “abstention”, thus providing a clear count of the votes cast without recording individual voting behavior. The procedure is used occasionally when results by a show of hands or the presence of a quorum are unclear (16 votes during our period of study). We cannot use either secret ballots or votes by Hammelsprung because the voting behavior of PPGs is not recorded.

coded as reported by the presidency and recorded in the minutes.<sup>11</sup> From this information, we calculated a dummy variable measuring whether or not an opposition party voted the same way as the government did. In addition, we recorded the date of each vote, the title and official number (*Drucksachenummer*) of the motion, and the outcome of the vote. From the DIP, we attached information on formal motion type, the motion's sponsor, the committees dealing with each motion (including the lead committee in case of multiple referrals), and the keywords used to classify its content. These data are used for our explanatory variables.

To identify highly salient issues (H1 and H5a), we rely on monthly survey data identifying the most important problem (MIP) as perceived by the German public (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2022). According to this data, the single most important problem was migration (until January 2019), the environment (from January 2019 until February 2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic (from February 2020 onwards). Motions on these topics are identified via the DIP keywords “migration,” “environment,” and “health” (as there is no specific keyword for COVID-19). To make sure these topics are at the core of a motion and not just a side aspect, we only code those motions as referring to the MIP for which the parliamentary committee in charge of these topics was the lead (or only) committee.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the vote in question must occur during the period in which the respective topic was the MIP.

We capture the importance of motions (H2 and H5b) by their formal type, distinguishing bills (*Gesetzentwürfe*), regular motions (*Anträge*), and resolutions (*Entschließungsanträge*). Bills are the most visible and consequential type of motion. Within this category, we further single out final debate votes, that is, votes on whether a bill should enter the third and final reading of the legislative process. This variable is preferable to final passage votes because final debate votes are also taken on opposition bills (with the governing majority rejecting a final reading). Besides these types of motion at the center of the parliamentary process, further types include elections, reports, petitions, and committee referrals. These are dropped from our analysis because they were either never voted by roll-call or we lack information on individual parties' voting behavior (for elections taken by secret ballot).

Possible sponsors of motions (H3 and H5c) are the government (including the governing parties in the Bundestag), opposition parties, and a combination of government and opposition parties.<sup>13</sup> In the analysis of

<sup>11</sup>For RCVs, the PPG's decision was coded based on the voting behavior of the majority of MPs. In five cases, the variable was coded missing because no alternative received an absolute majority (50% + 1) within a PPG.

<sup>12</sup>The respective committees are Interior and Home Affairs for migration, Ecology, Environmental Protection and Nuclear Safety for environment, and Health for health.

<sup>13</sup>We dropped 81 cases that we could not clearly attribute to a party in terms of sponsorship. Fifteen of these were originally sponsored by the second chamber (*Bundesrat*) while the rest were issues that the Bundestag must deal with because of procedural rules external to party competition, for example, the suspension of immunity in case of judicial procedures against a member of parliament.

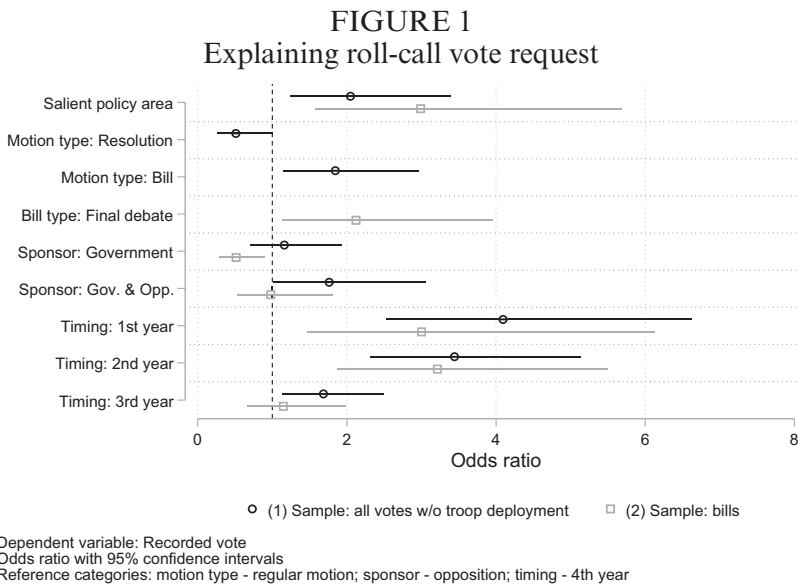
opposition voting behavior, we split opposition-sponsored motions into proposals sponsored by the party whose voting behavior is observed (e.g., the Greens voting on a proposal they sponsored) and proposals sponsored by other opposition parties. We include dummy variables for each year of the electoral cycle (calculated starting with the inaugural session on October 24, 2017) to capture period effects (H4 and H5d); the final year of the legislative period serves as model baseline. Furthermore, our models of opposition voting behavior include dummy variables for the different opposition parties (with the liberal FDP as baseline) to control for party-specific behavioral patterns.

During the 19th electoral period, the Bundestag held a total of 8,390 votes, 244 of which (2.91%) were taken by roll call. Since RCVs are limited to three motion types (regular motions, bills, and to a smaller degree resolutions), and we are interested in RCV request and the question of how opposition behavior differs between recorded and nonrecorded votes, we restrict all analyses below to these three motion types. Furthermore, we exclude votes on troop deployments in the analysis of RCV request because these are always recorded by informal agreement. A more detailed overview of the full dataset can be found in the online supporting information.

### *Modeling strategy*

We test our hypotheses using two different model setups. In the first setup, we analyze Hypotheses 1 to 4 on the determinants of roll-call request. For this purpose, we use logistic regression models with votes as the unit of analysis and the binary voting method (RCV vs. nonrecorded vote) as dependent variable. As independent variables, we use the conditions discussed in Hypotheses 1 to 4. We estimate two specifications, one containing all votes on the three motions types covered (except votes on troop deployment) and one that restricts the sample to votes on bills as the most important type of motion.

In the second setup, we analyze opposition voting behavior to test Hypotheses 5a to 5d as well as Hypotheses 6a and 6b. In these models, we use a more disaggregated dataset with opposition party per vote as the unit of analysis and the binary dependent variable “voting agreement with the government” (yes vs. no). We employ multilevel logistic regression models with motions as upper-level units and include random intercepts to capture motion-specific commonalities in voting behavior. We rely primarily on separate models for RCVs and nonrecorded votes to test the hypotheses on the determinants of opposition voting and their differences across voting methods. This split-sample approach makes for easier interpretation. However, we also estimate a combined model of all votes including a binary indicator for the voting method as well as interactions of this variable with the determinants of opposition behavior to test Hypothesis 6a and the statistical significance of differences according to Hypothesis 6b.



## Empirical analysis

### *Strategic roll-call request*

Figure 1 displays odds ratios along with 95% confidence intervals for the two specifications based on all votes except troop deployments (model 1) and only votes on bills (model 2). Full regression tables are available in Appendix I in the online supporting information.

In line with Hypothesis 1, both models show that RCV request is significantly more likely for motions from highly salient policy areas. While we cannot directly compare odds ratios across models due to the different samples, the effect tends to be stronger within votes on bills.

The results also support Hypothesis 2 that expects a higher propensity for RCVs on the more important types of motions. In model 1, we find a higher probability for votes on bills to be recorded compared to regular motions (the baseline category) and resolutions. Furthermore, model 2 shows that within the subset of bills, votes on final debates, which are particularly important from a position-taking perspective, show a significantly higher likelihood of RCV request. Thus, substantive importance of a motion increases the propensity of RCVs.

The models yield mixed findings for sponsorship (H3), where we expect a higher propensity of RCVs for opposition motions (the baseline category in the model). While there is no sponsorship effect significant at the 5% level in the model using all votes, opposition proposals are more likely to be recorded than government proposals once we focus on bills. The hypothesis thus only holds in the case of legislative important votes (bills).

Regarding the electoral-cycle hypothesis, we find that motions are more likely to be recorded in the first two years of the electoral cycle. This finding contradicts Hypothesis 4, according to which position taking via RCVs should become more important as elections approach. These differences are largely due to variation in the overall number of parliamentary votes. While the absolute number of RCVs is stable over the years with only a slightly lower number in the first year, the number of nonrecorded votes is substantially higher in the later years of the legislative period (see [Figure SI.1](#) in the online supporting information).<sup>14</sup> This increase mirrors the policymaking process as proposals take time to be drafted and go through the parliamentary process before being voted in later years. The result is still somewhat surprising because previous work showed a slight increase in the absolute number of RCVs during the third and fourth year of an electoral period compared to the first two years (Bergmann et al. 2016). This deviation may be due to the COVID-19 pandemic that struck during years 3 and 4 of the electoral period.

Overall, the findings are in line with our strategic position-taking model. As expected, parties request RCVs more often for votes on salient issues, more important motions, and—at least for the most important category of bills—for motions sponsored by opposition parties. However, we do not find the expected temporal pattern over the course of the electoral period.

### **Government-opposition conflict in recorded and nonrecorded votes**

To reiterate, we argue theoretically that opposition parties are more likely to vote against the government on votes that are valuable for position taking and show consistent behavior across recorded and nonrecorded votes. Thus, we hypothesize that issue salience, motion type, motion sponsor, and the timing of the vote affect the propensity that opposition parties vote in line with or against the government (H5a to H5d). Furthermore, we expect that opposition behavior (H6a) and the effects of these variables (H6b) do not differ significantly between recorded and nonrecorded votes.

To test these claims, we analyze government–opposition conflict based on 14,824 observations, that is, four opposition parties voting on 3,707 motions.<sup>15</sup> As explained above, we include fixed effects for parties (with the liberal FDP as baseline category) and random intercepts for motions. These motion-specific intercepts are empirically important in all specifications with intraclass correlation coefficients between 0.23 and 0.36. Most explanatory variables are the same as in the previous models. However, the motion-sponsor variable splits up opposition motions into own motions (i.e., motions sponsored by the opposition party whose voting behavior is coded) and motions introduced by other opposition parties.

<sup>14</sup>Among recorded votes, 20.8% occur in year 1, 27.5% in year 2, and 25.8% each in years 3 and 4.

<sup>15</sup>We must exclude 31 motions, for which the voting behavior of at least one party was not reported in the minutes.

FIGURE 2  
Explaining voting agreement between government and opposition

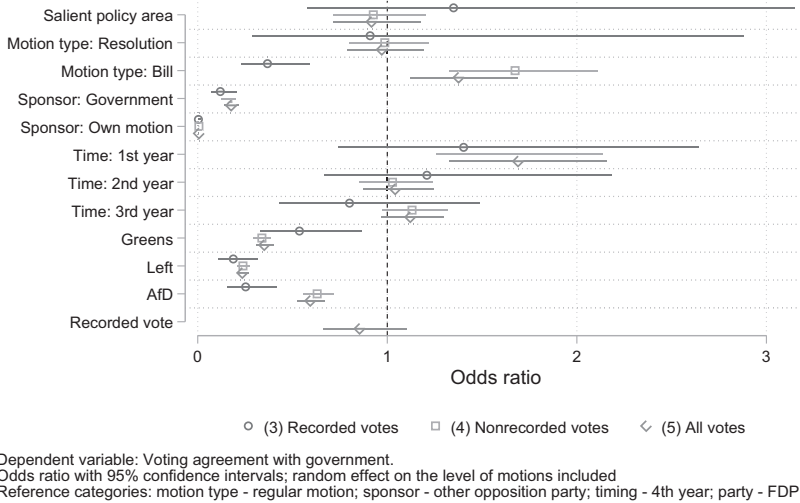
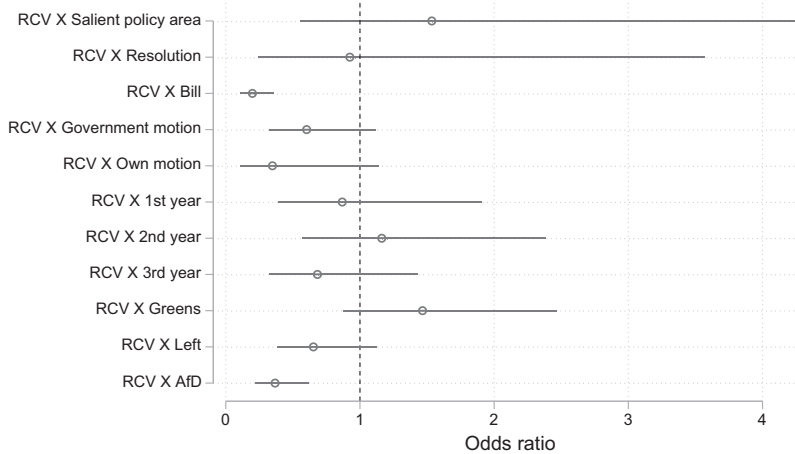


Figure 2 reports the results of three models that explain whether an opposition party votes with the government. The three specifications include only recorded votes (model 3;  $n = 960$ ), only nonrecorded votes (model 4;  $n = 13,868$ ), and all votes along with an indicator variable for the voting method used (model 5;  $n = 14,828$ ). As above, the figure shows odds ratios along with 95% confidence intervals; the full regression tables are available in Appendix I in the online supporting information.

The findings partly meet our theoretical expectations. As expected, opposition parties are less likely to agree with the government on motions they sponsored themselves (H5c) and on votes on bills as the most important type of motion (H5b); however, the latter effect only emerges for recorded votes whereas the reverse effect is visible for nonrecorded votes. The models do not find significant effects for highly salient motions (H5a). Regarding the electoral cycle, we find no support for more confrontational voting prior to elections (H5d). The models also detect some variation between parties with the liberal FDP (the baseline category) voting significantly more often with the government and the Left party and (on recorded votes) the AfD acting the most confrontationally.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>We did not focus on party differences in this article because the single legislative period provides limited variation. Nonetheless, the effects we find are in line with a spatial interpretation of party behavior. According to the general left-right dimension measured by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019 (Jolly et al. 2022), the liberal FDP was ideologically closest to the government position (conceptualized as the weighted mean position of the governing parties) followed by the Greens, the Left, and the AfD. A basic spatial argument as put forward in previous work on opposition voting (e.g., Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2020) expects higher voting agreement with the government the closer an opposition party is in ideological terms. The consistent finding that the FDP acts more consensually than the other opposition parties fits this logic as does the very conflictive behavior of the Left and—on RCVs—the AfD.

FIGURE 3  
The differential effects of explanatory variables between recorded and nonrecorded votes (interaction effects)



Dependent variable: Voting agreement with government.  
Odds ratio with 95% confidence intervals. Main effects and random effect included in the model but not displayed.

Overall, these findings indicate that position-taking incentives are one but clearly not the only explanation for opposition parties' voting behavior in the Bundestag.

Turning to the effect of the voting method, we see that opposition behavior is largely consistent and does not differ dramatically between recorded and nonrecorded votes. Model 5 on the whole sample finds no effect of the voting method, which is in line with Hypothesis 6a. Furthermore, the effects of almost all explanatory variables are similar across the two samples. Figure 2 only reveals two major differences: as already mentioned, bills trigger much more confrontational behavior on RCVs but more consensual behavior on nonrecorded votes. One interpretation of this finding is that recorded votes are primarily taken on a subset of more conflictual bills such as new legislative projects whereas more technical bills (e.g., modifications of existing laws) that trigger less controversy are voted by nonrecorded means. Second, the radical-right AfD acts much more confrontationally on RCVs compared to other votes. This finding is in line with the party's antiestablishment stance that lives off presenting itself as different to the public. The higher agreement rate with the government in nonrecorded votes probably stems from the government and the AfD jointly rejecting motions introduced by the left-leaning opposition parties Greens and Left.

The estimated coefficients of all other variables overlap in their confidence intervals between the two samples suggesting that these factors have the same effect on recorded and nonrecorded votes. We also test this point more technically in the full sample by interacting all explanatory variables with the indicator variable voting method (the full regression table is available in Appendix I in the online supporting information). The interaction effects displayed in Figure 3 lead to the same conclusion: except for the variable "bill"

and the control variable for the AfD, all interaction effects are statistically indistinguishable from zero. Overall, these findings lend substantial support to our Hypothesis 6b and indicate that opposition parties for the most part vote consistently across recorded and nonrecorded votes.

*Do these results generalize beyond the 19th electoral period?*

The 19th electoral period covered in our analysis was special for at least two reasons: the first appearance of the AfD as a radical-right party in the Bundestag and the specific circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic during the last 18 months of the electoral period. Thus, the question arises how well our findings travel to other electoral periods.

The AfD clearly changed the climate in parliament and produced an additional line of conflict that often united all other parties against the radical-right party (Hohendorf and Sieberer 2022). We investigate its impact on our analysis by modeling the closest analogy to a counterfactual Bundestag without the AfD. For that purpose, we drop all observations of the AfD's voting behavior and exclude all motions sponsored exclusively by the AfD.<sup>17</sup> This analysis, presented in detail in Appendix II in the online supporting information, confirms our previous findings. Almost all variables have the same effects regarding size and statistical significance. The only difference is that the behavior of the Greens now differs significantly between recorded and nonrecorded votes. Furthermore, the differences between the Left and the Greens on the one hand and the FDP (the baseline category) on the other hand increase suggesting that some of their prior agreement was due to joint rejection of AfD motions.

Isolating the effects of the Covid pandemic is more difficult because we lack a plausible counterfactual of what party interactions and the legislative agenda would have looked like in "normal" times. The Bundestag continued its regular way of doing business (including plenary votes by RCV and nonrecorded means) during the pandemic with only slight organizational adjustments (in contrast to other parliaments; Griglio 2020). After an initial phase of unusually cooperative interactions, opposition behavior in speeches on COVID-19-related issues returned to typical patterns of government-opposition interaction within a few months (Louwerse et al. 2021). RCVs on COVID-19-related issues did not display unusual opposition behavior for most of the electoral period either (Hohendorf and Sieberer 2022). Our RCV request models found some evidence for temporal patterns with a higher probability that a vote was taken by RCV in the first two years, which runs counter to our theoretical expectation. This finding may be due to the pandemic that made roll calls more costly. Regarding opposition behavior, we do not observe strong temporal patterns. On recorded

<sup>17</sup>This is not a perfect counterfactual because the presence of the AfD may have structurally affected the behavior of the other parties and thus may have led to different behavior also on motions sponsored by other parties. Yet, it is the closest we can do.

votes, we find no significant differences at all, whereas on nonrecorded votes the first and third years of the legislative period contrast with the second and fourth years—a pattern that does not square with the timing of the pandemic. Overall, the available evidence suggests that neither the appearance of the AfD nor the pandemic fundamentally altered opposition behavior in the Bundestag. This finding is in line with recent research on individual voting behavior on RCVs that did not find strong differences between the 19th electoral period and the three previous electoral periods (Mai et al. 2023). Thus, we are confident that our results are transferable to other electoral periods of the Bundestag.

### Discussion and conclusion

This article provided the first analysis of the full voting record of the German Bundestag covering both recorded and nonrecorded votes. It showed that RCVs are a very small subset of the universe of parliamentary votes (less than 3%). Roll-call vote request can be explained by a position-taking logic: opposition parties in particular seek to boost the visibility of votes they care about leading to a higher likelihood of RCVs on issues with high salience, motions of high legislative importance, and important motions sponsored by opposition parties. The voting behavior of opposition parties also meets several expectations of a position-taking model as positioning against the government is more likely on own motions (irrespective of the voting method) and bills as the most important type of motion (if voted by RCV and thus highly visible). Finally, parties' voting behavior is very similar across recorded and nonrecorded votes. Opposition parties do not differ in their overall propensity to vote with or against the government, and variables that explain differences in opposition voting usually have the same effect across both voting methods. Thus, opposition parties largely act consistently across both voting methods. Important differences are only visible for bills that trigger more confrontational behavior on RCVs and for the AfD that acts more confrontationally on recorded compared to nonrecorded votes. Furthermore, our party-based analysis obviously cannot rule out the possibility that intraparty dissent differs between recorded and nonrecorded votes.

These findings have important theoretical, methodological, and substantive implications. On the theoretical level, they call into question established claims about parties' strategic behavior in parliaments. While our analysis suggests that RCVs are indeed requested strategically, it also indicates that voting behavior does not differ by voting methods. This finding is somewhat surprising because standard accounts assume that parties strategically tailor their parliamentary behavior to the (perceived) expectations of their electorate, which would imply behavioral differences between highly visible RCVs and nonrecorded votes that usually run under the radar of public attention. However, this is not what we observe. Instead, opposition parties by-and-large act in the same way irrespective of the voting method. This finding can be interpreted in two ways: parties either assume

that political observers equally perceive RCVs and nonrecorded votes and thus pursue a consistent strategy across all parliamentary votes, or their voting behavior reflects sincere preferences more than strategic positioning. Our own interpretation tends towards the latter option, but this question deserves explicit study in future research.

Methodologically, our analysis shows that research on roll-call votes must distinguish clearly between the representativeness of the RCV sample (sample bias) and the distorting effect that unrepresentative samples may have for studying outcome variables (selection bias). In contrast to a common (though often implicit) assumption in the literature on RCVs, the former does not automatically produce the latter. Our findings clearly show that RCVs are unrepresentative of the universe of all parliamentary votes with regard to several crucial factors. However, at least for our dependent variable—opposition voting behavior—this biased sample yields very similar conclusions compared to an analysis of the entire universe of votes.

Substantively, this finding bolsters the credibility to previous work using RCVs to study opposition behavior in the Bundestag (Hohendorf, Saalfeld, and Sieberer 2020, 2021). Despite descriptive differences between the samples, RCVs provide a valid basis for studying government-opposition dynamics in the Bundestag and produce results that are representative of parliamentary voting behavior beyond RCVs. This is also good news for comparative studies including parliaments with high and low shares of recorded votes (e.g., Tuttnauer and Wegmann 2022). Given the extremely low share of recorded votes in the Bundestag, the chance of finding serious selection bias should at least not be higher (and arguably smaller) in other parliaments that use RCVs more frequently.

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*Data Availability Statement.* The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H739-N939>.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

**Appendix S1.** Supporting Information.

**Data S1** Supporting Information.