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Journal of Comparative Economics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jce

Beyond the last term: Analyzing politicians' responsiveness in a no-term-limit context[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

JEL Classification:

D72

D78

H11

Keywords:

Reelection incentives

Term limits

Accountability

Elections

Political representation

ABSTRACT

We investigate the willingness of politicians in the German Bundestag to interact with voters, drawing on data capturing direct interchanges between citizens and their elected representatives to measure their responsiveness. In a setting without term limits, we examine whether electoral incentives influence politicians' engagement with citizens. Our theoretical model predicts, and empirical results confirm, that politicians who are not seeking reelection become *less* responsive to voters, especially as election day approaches. This decline is attributed to a behavioral response resulting from a decrease in intra-party standing, rather than to a change in motivation or personal ideological convictions. Politicians retiring due to age or health reasons maintain consistent levels of interaction with voters, in contrast to those leaving due to pressure within their party or due to career changes, who exhibit decreased engagement with voters. Our findings offer novel insights into the role of incentives and constraints for political behavior in countries without mandatory term limits.

1. Introduction

To what extent do reelection prospects influence politicians' behavior towards citizens while in office? Classical models of electoral accountability posit that the possibility of reelection significantly motivates policymakers to align their decisions with constituent interests and to abstain from opportunistic behavior (Barro, 1973; Ferejohn, 1986; Banks and Sundaram, 1998). Empirical studies typically exploit exogenous variation in reelection incentives arising from term limits, overwhelmingly demonstrating pronounced last-term effects: politicians approaching their final term exhibit distinct behavioral patterns. They tend to decrease their legislative activity, such as bill introductions and committee participation, show increased absenteeism in roll-call votes (Fourinais and Hall,

[☆] We thank Andrea Knabe-Schönemann for providing us with the data from *Abgeordnetenwatch*. We have benefited from feedback on seminar presentations at the University of Bayreuth, University of Leipzig, the Danish Public Choice Workshop 2023, the 2nd Behavioral Economics workshop at TU Clausthal, the Conference of the European Public Choice Society 2024, the Aarhus-Kiel Workshop on Behavioral and Experimental Economics, and the ETH Workshop on Democracy 2025. Special thanks go to Mario Gilli for extensive comments.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2026.03.004>

Received 16 August 2024; Received in revised form 11 December 2025; Accepted 11 March 2026

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2022; Titiunik, 2016), allocate public resources less responsibly (Ferraz and Finan, 2011), and exhibit lower overall accountability (Schelker, 2018).¹ Nevertheless, last-term effects are not exclusively tied to formally imposed (potentially *exogenous*) term limits; instead, they may also emerge whenever politicians anticipate the end of their political careers. Importantly, as we emphasize theoretically and empirically, personal motivations to retire voluntarily from office yield very different responsiveness patterns toward voters compared to externally imposed constraints, such as legal term limits or a lack of party support. Thus, the impact of reelection incentives on politicians' responsiveness to voters, *absent* formal term limits, remains both theoretically ambiguous and empirically understudied.

We aim to address this research gap and complement the literature that typically focuses on term limits. We conceptualize responsiveness as a politician's willingness to engage directly with citizens while in office.² Empirically, we measure responsiveness using a behavioral indicator: whether members of the German Bundestag answer citizen-submitted questions on a widely used public online question-and-answer platform.³ As Germany lacks a constitutional constraint on the number of terms a member of parliament can serve, this paper enhances the understanding of politicians' behavior toward voters in a setting that has *no* binding term limits. From a theoretical perspective, uncertainty about the endpoint might be sufficient for electoral incentives to have a disciplining effect on politicians' behavior (Telser, 1980). However, there are reasons to anticipate that the last-term effect may persist when politicians themselves are relatively certain that they will not stand for reelection due to retirement or a lack of party backing. Nevertheless, such reasons are usually not clearly discernible for researchers as they conflate personal choices (selection effects) with pressure to withdraw due to intra-party competition (outside constraints). We develop a theoretical model in which politicians decide whether to run for reelection, and we derive distinct hypotheses from this model. We then empirically test these hypotheses using data on individual politician-voter interactions of MPs from the German Bundestag between 2005 and 2021.

As endogenous selection is a significant concern, the literature has focused on term limits as a source of exogenous variation. Yet, this approach overlooks electoral races in which term limits are absent. We address this gap by examining such neglected scenarios; moreover, we contribute to disentangling the diverse motivations that potentially influence politicians' decisions regarding responsiveness. Our empirical results align with our theoretical predictions: Politicians who do not seek reelection tend to reduce their efforts in responding to voters. This trend is particularly pronounced as election dates approach, i.e., responsiveness declines over the course of the legislative term. Notably, the change in politicians' behavior is observable only *after* they officially announce their decision not to run for reelection. In essence, compared to their counterparts who seek reelection, politicians who have decided against running again demonstrate a marked decline in performance concerning responsiveness towards voters. Similarly, shirking, as measured by absences from parliamentary debates, becomes most evident *after* politicians have officially declared their intention not to seek reelection.

Surprisingly, their behavior towards voters after announcing their withdrawal shows substantial heterogeneity, which we can theoretically explain. Most importantly, our findings reveal that the diminished responsiveness of politicians to their constituents is *not* directly tied to individual motivation or ideological convictions.⁴ In fact, our analysis provides no support for the common view that suggests self-selection plays a significant role. Rather, the alteration in political conduct appears to be almost solely attributable to constraints imposed by their political parties. Such constraints typically emerge either when parties reduce support for an MP's reelection campaign or when an MP is defeated by a rival within the same party. This insight highlights the significance of an MP's standing within their party and subsequent support as a crucial variable influencing their responsiveness to the electorate, aligning with the key predictions of our theoretical framework. Our data allows us to distinguish relatively subtle differences in the reasons politicians give when announcing that they will not run for reelection, and we show how these reasons impact their responsiveness to voters. Politicians who exit the reelection race due to personal reasons, such as age or health issues, show *no* statistically significant reduction in their responsiveness toward voters (before and after announcement of their decision to withdraw). This suggests that their dedication to citizens remains strong, even as they prepare to leave Parliament. Conversely, politicians who withdraw due to internal party dynamics or in pursuit of different career opportunities exhibit a marked decline in their responsiveness. This differentiation highlights the interplay between political ambition, party dynamics, and responsiveness.

Our paper focuses on the responsiveness of MPs, exploring it in a no-term-limit context to complement the existing literature on term limits. Responsiveness is closely linked to campaigning in practice. Still, they represent conceptually distinct dimensions of political behavior. Responsiveness refers to a politician's conduct while in office, particularly how they react to citizens' preferences, questions, and demands (e.g., Pitkin, 1967 for a discussion or Kläy et al., 2025 for an application). It extends beyond the realm of mere electoral campaigning, which is primarily focused on activities aimed at securing (re)election, such as public appearances or advertising. Here, we conceptualize and measure responsiveness as the willingness of elected politicians to engage with citizens by answering their questions – even in the absence of immediate electoral incentives and rewards. While our measure does not evaluate whether politicians ultimately act in accordance with citizens' substantive demands, it captures their willingness to acknowledge, engage with, and constructively address those demands through direct public communication.

¹ Another focus in the literature is the effect of (lacking) reelection incentives on policy outcomes (e.g., Besley and Case, 1995, or Alt et al., 2011; see Ashworth, 2012 for a review of the literature).

² Broad and classical conceptualizations of responsiveness include 'acting upon them [views, needs, and preferences of one's constituents] in some way that goes beyond mere formal acknowledgment or superficial attention' (Pitkin, 1967, 158).

³ Specifically, we use data from *Abgeordnetenwatch*, which is an online platform that facilitates citizen interactions with individual members of the German Bundestag through a question-and-answer portal. We have obtained data from that that online platform for this article.

⁴ Ideological motivations may prevent rather than cause opportunistic behavior of politicians (see Lott, 1987 or Dougan and Munger, 1989).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section II provides a theoretical model to guide the empirical analysis. Section III presents the data, and empirical results are presented in Section IV. Section V concludes.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

To inform and motivate our empirical analysis, we set up a model of a politician's behavior regarding responsiveness toward voters. We present the main intuitions and predictions in this section, while the relevant parts of the formal analysis are relegated to Appendix A.

In our model, the current legislative term is divided into two stages, $t = 1$ and $t = 2$, before and after the politician's decision to renew her candidacy. At the beginning of each stage t , politicians choose their level of costly effort $x_t \in [0, \bar{x}]$ for the respective stage, i. e., they choose their responsiveness towards voters. Politicians receive utility from holding office and derive benefits from exerting effort, capturing the idea that they value advancing their political ideas at least to some extent.

First-stage effort x_1 impacts a politician's prospects of reelection through its influence on her 'standing' $s > 0$ in an intra-party candidate selection process.⁵ At some point in the legislative term, the politician's intra-party standing is realized. Together with the effort provided in stage 2, the standing realization \hat{s} determines the politician's chances to successfully run for reelection. After the standing is revealed, the politician decides on her candidacy in the next election and chooses her effort level x_2 for the remainder of the legislative term, $t = 2$. Fig. 1 provides a timeline for illustration.

We assume that a politician's motivation to exert effort is influenced by the gain-loss utility associated with the realized standing \hat{s} .⁶ Specifically, we assume that a negative realization of \hat{s} relative to a politician's exogenously given expectation p of experiencing a standing gain increases the probability of losing motivation, which we model as a greater cost of effort. If \hat{s} is unfavorable from the point of view of the politician, she may find it optimal to not run again, even though she planned to do so at the beginning of the legislative term, until the intra-party selection process happens. Therefore, even if she showed a high x_1 , her effort level x_2 can be low due to the loss of standing. In particular, politicians with higher values of p are more at risk of losing motivation linked to a negative realization of \hat{s} , and thus have a higher propensity to reduce their responsiveness compared to low- p politicians.

To summarize, our model emphasizes politicians' expectation (p) of receiving their party's nomination for reelection. Politicians who retire for personal reasons and consequently have low p (e.g., due to health reasons) remain largely unaffected in their responsiveness to voters, whereas politicians with high expectations (high p) facing political constraints may experience diminished motivation and adjust their responsiveness to voters. The empirical analysis will operationalize this concept and provide robust evidence supporting these distinctions.

It is important to note that the effort in our model, as operationalized empirically through responsiveness on an online platform, where politicians can respond to voters' questions, reflects behavior while in office rather than classical campaign activities. Thus, the empirical counterpart to our theoretical framework will capture a dimension of accountability rooted in active responsiveness through public dialogue, distinct from vote-seeking behavior during campaigns.

Our theoretical model yields the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Holding personal ideological convictions constant through politician fixed effects,

1. the responsiveness of all politicians is the same in $t = 1$.
2. responsiveness levels decrease over time, i.e., responsiveness in $t = 1$ is higher than in $t = 2$.

Hypothesis 2. Politicians are, ceteris paribus, more responsive to voters in $t = 2$ if they run for reelection, compared to politicians who do not run again for reelection.

Hypothesis 3. Politicians with high expectations regarding their standing in the party (high- p politicians)

1. are more likely to exhibit a reduction in effort provision from stage 1 to stage 2,
2. provide lower effort in $t = 2$ compared to low- p politicians, conditional on not running for reelection.

Intuitively, hypotheses 1 to 3 can be motivated as follows: Ceteris paribus, politicians exhibit equal responsiveness before party nominations ($t = 1$). However, overall responsiveness decreases afterward ($t = 2$), driven by two factors: the incentive to enhance intra-party standing for reelection purposes disappears, and some politicians experience a loss of motivation (corresponding to increasing their effort costs), leading to lower responsiveness. Thus, we expect ceteris paribus, to observe (1) lower responsiveness over the legislative term of politicians who are not running again for reelection, (2) decreases in responsiveness for politicians who are not running for reelection as the election approaches and, in particular, after their announced decision not to run again, (3) lower responsiveness for politicians who are not running for reelection due to low support in their party. These predictions pertain to

⁵ In Germany's political system, for example, key outcomes of this process are a candidate's position on the party list or the strength of party support for a district candidate. Relatedly, Louwse and Van Vonn (2022) find that Dutch MPs who exert more effort have a higher probability of being reelected to party candidate lists.

⁶ This is in line with the prospect theory pioneered by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) as losses in standing loom larger than gains (see Appendix A).

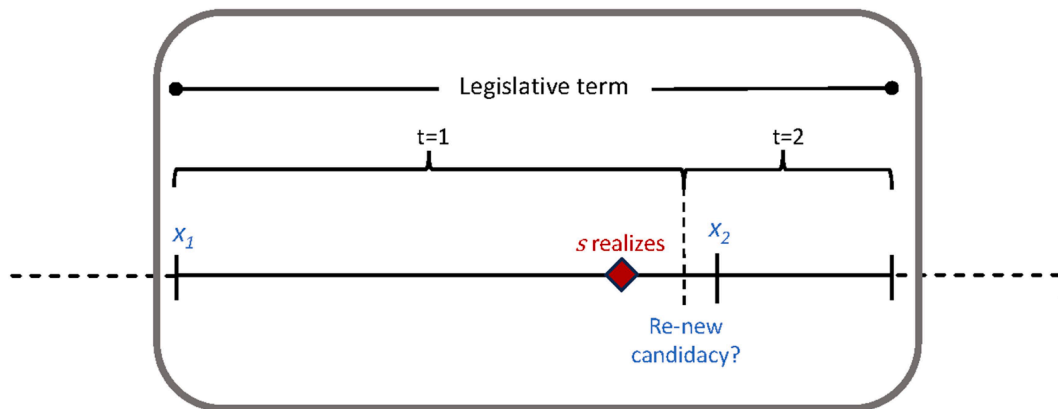


Fig. 1. Timing of decisions made by a politician within a legislative term.

responsiveness as the dependent variable, whereas electoral campaigning would suggest that all politicians running for reelection show *increased* engagement with voters as the election nears. We test the above hypotheses regarding the responsiveness of German Bundestag members towards voters through their interactions on the online platform *Abgeordnetenwatch*.

3. Institutional setting and data

3.1. The federal electoral system in Germany

Germany's electoral system follows the "principle of proportional representation combined with the personal election of candidates" (Art. 1 German Federal Election Law). Elections for the Bundestag take place every four years. In this mixed-member system, voters cast two ballots: a first vote (*Erststimme*) for a constituency candidate and a second vote (*Zweitstimme*) for a party list. With the first vote, voters choose a candidate in their single-member constituency; the candidate with the plurality wins a direct mandate. These directly elected representatives formally account for half of the Bundestag's statutory size.⁷ The second vote determines each party's proportional share of seats at the state level, provided it surpasses the 5% national threshold or wins at least three direct mandates. The number of direct mandates won by a party in a state is subtracted from the seats allocated based on second votes, and remaining seats are filled from the closed state party lists. When a party wins more direct mandates than its second-vote share entitles it to, the surplus ("overhang") seats are retained; since 2013, levelling seats have been added to restore proportionality. As a result, the Bundestag regularly exceeds its statutory size. In our sample, 44.3% of representatives hold direct mandates and 55.7% entered via party lists, a pattern reflecting levelling seats and replacements during the legislative term (e.g., due to death). For a more detailed presentation of Germany's electoral and party system, see, e.g., Capoccia (2002), Kitschelt (2003), and Frank and Stadelmann (2021).

For the upcoming analysis, it is important to note that each party can nominate only one direct candidate per constituency. Typically, parties represented in the Bundestag present a direct candidate in all constituencies, even if they have little chance of winning a plurality of votes. Selection is decentralized and typically carried out by local party members or district-level delegates. In most constituencies, members or delegates from several local party branches jointly nominate the party's candidate (Reiser, 2022). State party lists are closed, and rankings are determined at state party branch conferences in the months preceding the election. Since nomination – particularly in safe districts or on favorable list positions – can be virtually equivalent to election, the selectorate's preferences may outweigh those of voters (e.g., Manow, 2007).

Dual candidacy, in which a candidate runs both as a constituency candidate and appears on the state party list, is common. 84.6% of all representatives in our sample are dual candidates. Being nominated as a district candidate often strengthens a politician's position in these list-ranking decisions, as local prominence and demonstrated support within the party are valued. In both the constituency and list selection processes, standing within the party is a central determinant of candidates' election prospects.⁸

While their routes into parliament differ, representatives elected via direct mandates and those elected through party lists do not differ in their legislative functions or incentive structures. Consistent with this institutional symmetry and with the widespread use of dual candidacy, prior research finds no major differences in their parliamentary behavior (e.g., Manow, 2013; Frank and Stadelmann, 2021).

⁷ As of 2002, there are 299 constituencies. Constituencies are confined to state borders and are designed to contain roughly equal numbers of citizens. Article 3 of the Federal Election Law allows deviations of up to 15%, but no more than 25%.

⁸ Berz and Jankowski (2022) identify party service, localness, and incumbency as key selection criteria.

3.2. Data

We draw on the online platform *Abgeordnetenwatch* for a measure of politicians' behavior towards and interactions with citizens corresponding to one crucial aspect of responsiveness (cf. fn. 3). *Abgeordnetenwatch* is a non-profit organization promoting transparency in politics and public dialogue. The platform increases transparency by making an extensive array of information on politicians easily accessible, including their voting behavior and absenteeism in roll-call votes, committee work, and activities and earnings outside the parliament. Importantly, the platform's main innovation is a question portal where citizens can ask questions directly to individual members of the German *Bundestag*. This platform was launched in 2005. Questions to politicians often cover requests to outline their personal as well as their party's position on current topics or relate to current legislative initiatives. Still, they also concern behavior in parliament, outside activities, or issues in their local constituencies, among other things. Usually, questions are asked anonymously, i.e., citizens do not reveal their identities when asking questions. Questions undergo an internal review and are published online if they comply with the platform's code of conduct. The individual politician profiles on the platform show all published questions and summarize the number of questions they receive during the legislative term and how many are answered. Politicians' answers are added online to the respective questions and are then visible to the public. If politicians respond to questions, we consider this an indicator of their responsiveness to voters. While such questions need not influence politicians' behavior in parliament, answering them goes beyond mere formal acknowledgment of voters (Pitkin, 1967), thus representing a form of responsiveness. It is noteworthy that members of the *Bundestag* have personal offices with staff and interns. From our communications, we know that staff members may also draft responses to questions on the online platform, which politicians then edit and approve before being made public. In this way, these responses function similarly to short press releases or other forms of written communication (e.g., personal letters), but they are specifically tailored to address public requests from voters, thereby serving as a visible indicator of political engagement. While such a form of political responsiveness may also be electorally motivated, it would be difficult to generally interpret German MPs' responses on the online platform analyzed as direct campaigning efforts. The responses are typically tailored to the specific queries and are neither superficial nor like campaign advertisements. Receiving and answering questions occurs throughout the legislative term, with heightened attention before elections.

For additional tests, we also use absenteeism as an indicator of politicians' commitment to their work and as an inverse measure of shirking (see Frank and Stadelmann, 2021). While different from responsiveness, this measure also represents elements related to effort in line with our model.

For the analysis, we concentrate on the four full legislative terms from 2005 to 2021 in the German federal parliament (*Bundestag*) for which data from *Abgeordnetenwatch* are available. For that period, we received data on all questions on the online platform, the question dates, the politicians addressed, and the politicians' time-stamped answers. The sample encompasses all questions posed on the platform to members of parliament who have served their entire term. In total, the final sample includes 115,252 questions, of which 16.5% were not answered by the politicians to whom they were addressed. The 2005 to 2009 legislative term has the most questions (39,000), while the 2013 to 2017 legislative term has the fewest questions (18,000). The large number of questions overall underscores that the platform is actively used by citizens to contact politicians directly and publicly. The relatively high proportion of questions answered suggests that politicians generally regard *Abgeordnetenwatch* as an appropriate channel for interacting with citizens and as a measure for responsiveness. We create a binary variable *Answered* that takes a value of one for a question that is answered and a value of zero for an unanswered question to measure politicians' responsiveness towards citizens. *Answered* serves as our main dependent variable and can be associated with effort in our theoretical model.

We link the platform's data to general information on the politicians compiled from several data sources (Bergmann et al., 2018a; Bergmann et al., 2018b; Frank and Stadelmann, 2021; Frank and Stadelmann, 2023). We retrieve various pieces of information about each politician, such as party membership, tenure, mandate type, constituency, and positions in government, parliament, or the party. The sample includes data on a total of 2433 politicians who were members of parliament for a full legislative term between 2005 and 2021. 1280 individual politicians are elected to parliament more than once. On average, a politician receives 47.37 questions in one legislative term, with a concentration of questions towards the end of the term, i.e., prior to the election, which we systematically control for in our empirical specifications. The minimum number in the sample is two questions and the maximum is 1545 questions, revealing a high variance among politicians.

We determine from candidate lists whether politicians are running for reelection in the upcoming legislative term. Lists of candidates are provided by the federal election commissioner (*Bundeswahlleiter*) on request. A share of 17.55%, corresponding to 427 politicians in total, does not run for reelection in the upcoming election in one of the four legislative terms under analysis. They account for 12.64% of the questions in our sample.

To identify dates and reasons for not running again for parliament, we systematically searched for press articles in national, regional, and local newspapers (both printed and online) for all these 427 politicians or referred to politicians' public statements. We hand-collected the dates when politicians publicly announced that they would not run for reelection. Sometimes politicians did not withdraw their mandate voluntarily. In these cases, the date of their defeat in the local or regional nomination of candidates is used as the announcement *not* to run again for the *Bundestag*. The reasons for not running again for election can be linked to the 'standing' *s* in the intra-party candidate selection process, and it can be associated with politicians' expectations *p* as modelled by our theory. For example, a politician's intra-party standing may be perceived as lower if they did not receive sufficient party support to run again, leading them to withdraw from the race. This contrasts with situations where withdrawal can be linked to health reasons. Finally, we use election outcomes provided by the federal election commissioner to calculate measures for turnout and electoral competition in the constituencies.

4. Empirical strategy and results

4.1. Baseline empirical strategy

Our theoretical framework leads us in a first step to hypothesize that, on average, politicians seeking reelection will exhibit greater responsiveness compared to those who do not intend to run again. Furthermore, as elections draw near, responsiveness tends to decline among politicians who do not seek reelection. We implement the following econometric specification to more closely analyze differences in politicians' responsiveness. We also focus on the developing gap in responsiveness as motivated by our theory over the course of the legislative term and potential effects of direct mandates vs. politicians elected via party lists:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Answered}_{qit} = & \alpha_1 \text{No reelection}_{it} + \alpha_2 \text{Day question}_q + \alpha_3 \text{No reelection}_{it} * \text{Day question}_q + \alpha_4 \text{Direct mandate}_{it} + \alpha_5 \text{No reelection}_{it} \\ & * \text{Direct mandate}_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + \lambda_i + \mu_t + \varepsilon_{qit}. \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

The dependent variable *Answered* is a binary variable that takes a value of one if question q , in legislative term t is answered by politician i , and zero otherwise. *No reelection* is a binary variable and takes a value of one for politicians who do not compete in the upcoming election, and zero otherwise. *No reelection* captures politician's i responsiveness in conjunction with the interaction term in comparison to politicians who are running for reelection (testing for Hypothesis 2).⁹ To capture that politicians may generally answer fewer questions at the end of a legislative term (testing for Hypotheses 1.1 and 1.2), we include the variable *Day question* for the day after the start of the legislative term, on which question q is published.¹⁰ The interaction term *No reelection*Day question* accounts for the differential trend in answering behavior between politicians who do not run again for reelection versus politicians who continue to compete. To capture whether politicians holding a *Direct mandate* in the plurality tier of Germany's mixed electoral system prioritize constituent contact more than those elected via party lists, we include an indicator for direct-mandate MPs and an interaction term *No reelection*Day question* assesses how their responsiveness varies depending on whether they compete in the upcoming election.¹¹

We account for variables (X_{it}) that potentially influence the politicians' behavior toward citizens. Questions posed to politicians from a *Party in government* may be more relevant, potentially increasing their willingness to answer them. Conversely, questions to politicians from opposition parties may provide them with an opportunity to criticize the government. Politicians with a long *Tenure* may be generally more engaged with citizens. *Ministers* may have priorities other than answering questions from citizens. In addition, whether politicians respond to citizens' questions could depend on how frequently they are addressed. *Number questions* continuously counts the questions received in the respective legislative term. Besides these controls for personal characteristics, a second set of variables relates to electoral outcomes at the constituency level. First, *Turnout* serves as a measure of politicization in the constituency. Second, the *Vote margin* between the winner and the runner-up in a constituency indicates how close the election was.¹² A more competitive environment in the constituency could motivate politicians to respond to more questions. Third, due to the particularities of the German electoral system, a politician may face competition from additional elected representatives from the same constituency, allowing them to be benchmarked against one another. The number of elected politicians from the same constituency is captured in our setting by the variable *Elected competitors*, representing an additional dimension of political competition (see Frank and Stadelmann, 2023).

Importantly, the structure of the data allows us to employ politician-fixed effects λ_i . Thereby, we consider individual characteristics of politicians that are constant over time, such as party membership, gender, education, occupation, travel distance between constituency and the seat of parliament, among other factors that may affect responsiveness and the likelihood of running again for reelection. We also account for time-invariant personality traits such as perceived ideological benefits of holding office or personal expectations as far as they are constant over time. Finally, with politician-fixed effects, we systematically reduce bias from omitted variables, as these account for constant and unobservable characteristics such as a politician's orientation towards citizens or their general willingness to communicate online.

Legislative term fixed effects, denoted as μ_t , control for systematic differences between legislative terms. The error term is represented by ε . We employ an ordinary least squares (OLS) estimator with fixed effects to estimate Eq. (1), but all interpretations remain qualitatively and quantitatively robust when employing a logistic estimator.

⁹ The variable *No reelection* on its own would capture the responsiveness of politicians who have decided not to run again, evaluated at the beginning of the legislative term (i.e., when *Day question* = 0). Note that in specifications without an interaction term, which we also run, *No reelection* reflects the average difference in responsiveness over the entire legislative term between politicians who do not seek reelection and those who do.

¹⁰ For a more convenient interpretation in terms of years, we divide *Day question* by 365.

¹¹ Legislators elected from party lists also have incentives to represent their constituencies (Manow, 2013; Siefken, 2013, 2016). To secure renomination - either as direct candidates or in favorable list positions - they must maintain constituency ties, as local party delegates influence these decisions (see Section III). Still, the mode of election may shape legislators' views on representation and affect choices such as committee memberships (Stratmann and Baur, 2002; Maaser and Stratmann, 2018).

¹² Vote margins are positive when a politician wins a direct mandate for the Bundestag (i.e., the vote margin represents the margin of the winner in direct election compared to the next competitor) and negative for those who competed for a direct mandate but entered parliament via the party list.

4.2. No reelection incentives and responsiveness to citizens

Table 1 provides evidence that politicians without reelection incentives interact less with citizens than those who run again. Moreover, the gap in responsiveness to citizens increases over the course of the legislative term, consistent with our theoretical predictions, thereby providing evidence for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

In the first three columns of Table 1, we analyze a model with the binary variable *No reelection*, which captures only reelection incentives. In columns (4), (6), and (7), we additionally allow for a differential trend as the legislative term progresses by adding the variables *Day question* and the interaction term. Columns (5) and (7) also investigate the interaction between *No reelection* and *Direct mandate*.

Column (1) shows the results from a parsimonious model including the variable for reelection incentives, politician fixed effects, and legislative term fixed effects. The result indicates that politicians who resign their mandate answer questions 5.21 percentage points less frequently compared to politicians with reelection incentives. The coefficient is statistically significant at the five percent level. Including controls for personal characteristics in column (2) and election controls in column (3) does not alter the coefficient size, and it remains statistically significant.¹³ This provides direct support for Hypothesis 2.

While most of the control variables have the expected sign, none of them are statistically significant. We do not find that politicians with a direct mandate are more responsive to citizens than those elected via party lists. This supports the view that legislators elected from party lists still have incentives to maintain ties to constituents (Manow, 2013; Siefken, 2013, 2016) in the German context, likely because they typically run as dual candidates, as described above in our discussion of the German electoral system.

We include interaction terms in columns (4)-(7) of Table 1. For this, we first add the day from the beginning of the legislative term and the interaction term with *No reelection* in column (4). The coefficients of the variable *Day question* indicate that politicians with reelection incentives (i.e., *No reelection* = 0) answer a question with a 1.67 to 1.72 percentage points smaller probability than a question that was asked one year earlier (providing support for Hypothesis 1.2). While responsiveness and campaigning are conceptually distinct, they may be difficult to separate in practice – particularly as elections approach. Nonetheless, the results presented thus far align closely with our theoretical framework centered on political responsiveness, rather than with a view of campaign-driven behavior. Right before the election, politicians might generally focus their resources more on campaigning to engage with their direct constituents rather than the general citizenry. The negative coefficient of the interaction term suggests that the diminishing motivation to respond to questions is *even more pronounced* for politicians without reelection incentives, in accordance with our theoretical expectations: For every additional year in the legislative term, politicians who resign their mandate are 5.09 percentage points less likely to answer a question (as derived from coefficients in column 4), indicating that they are substantially less responsive to citizens than politicians with reelection incentives (consistent with Hypothesis 2). Both coefficients are statistically significant at the one percent level. The coefficient for *No reelection* itself is small in magnitude, has a positive sign now, and is statistically insignificant. This result in combination with the interaction term suggests that politicians with and without reelection incentives tend to interact with citizens to about the same extent in the early part of the legislative term which is consistent with Hypothesis 1.1 (see also Fig. 2 below for further evidence with different time intervals). The gap in responsiveness to citizens evolves as the legislative term progresses, widening as the end of the term approaches which provides support for Hypothesis 1.2.¹⁴ Adding personal characteristics and election controls does not alter the main statistical results or their interpretation (in columns 6 and 7).

Investigating differences in responsiveness of politicians with a direct mandate and those elected via party lists, we also do not observe that directly elected candidates who forgo reelection behave differently toward their constituents when not facing reelection (columns 5 and 7). The interaction term between *No reelection* and *Direct mandate* is never statistically significant. This suggests that our findings are not an artifact of the specific incentives created for directly elected legislators as opposed to those entering the *Bundestag* via party lists.

Finally, the results are not driven by issues of bad controls: when control variables are omitted, the estimates remain qualitatively similar, and the interpretation remains unchanged.

Fig. 2 illustrates the emergence and the progressive divergence in the probability of responding to questions over the course of the legislative term. Starting with the model employed in column (6) of Table 1, we replace the continuous *Day question* variable with the different quarters in the legislative term and interact these with *No reelection*. The first quarter of the legislative term serves as the benchmark. Fig. 2 shows the results for the point estimates and confidence intervals for the interaction terms with these quarters. There are no differences yet between politicians with and without reelection incentives until the end of the third year of the legislative term (Q12) as compared to the first quarter (consistent with Hypothesis 1). The gaps in politicians' behavior toward citizens only start to seriously emerge in the fourth year and increase in magnitude from quarter to quarter. In the last quarter (Q16) of the legislative term, the difference in answer shares between politicians who run again and politicians who do not run again amounts to more than 13 percentage points (consistent with Hypothesis 2).

Fig. 2 highlights that politicians who withdraw from parliament are similarly responsive to voters as politicians who run for reelection during the first half of the legislative term and into the penultimate year before the subsequent election (consistent with Hypothesis 1.1). Differences emerge only in the final year leading up to that election as suggested by Hypothesis 1.2. It seems plausible that withdrawing politicians are as motivated in the first months and years of the legislative term as politicians to gain standing within

¹³ Note that election and competition controls at the level of the constituency are not available for some legislators who run as a candidate on a party list only, but not in a constituency, which reduces the sample size in column (3).

¹⁴ This pattern is again consistent with the argument that our measure captures efforts related to responsiveness rather than classical campaigning.

Table 1
The link between *No reelection incentives* and the responsiveness toward citizens.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Dependent variable							
No reelection	-0.0521** (0.0209)	-0.0554*** (0.0212)	-0.0538** (0.0220)	0.0157 (0.0254)	-0.0589** (0.0249)	0.0144 (0.0260)	0.0094 (0.0320)
Day question				-0.0167*** (0.0042)		-0.0169*** (0.0043)	-0.0169*** (0.0043)
No reelection*Day question				-0.0342*** (0.0089)		-0.0343*** (0.0091)	-0.0342*** (0.0092)
Direct mandate		-0.0082 (0.0230)	-0.0176 (0.0243)		-0.0144 (0.0219)	-0.0180 (0.0247)	-0.0195 (0.0242)
No reelection*Direct mandate					0.0106 (0.0306)		0.0080 (0.0333)
Party in government		-0.0045 (0.0196)	-0.0014 (0.0192)			-0.0059 (0.0191)	-0.0055 (0.0194)
Tenure		-0.0456 (0.0685)	-0.0545 (0.0706)			-0.0506 (0.0713)	-0.0522 (0.0719)
Minister		-0.0460 (0.0404)	-0.0414 (0.0398)			-0.0416 (0.0396)	-0.0415 (0.0396)
Number questions/1000		0.0292 (0.0545)	0.0284 (0.0561)			0.0326 (0.0571)	0.0333 (0.0576)
Turnout			0.3072 (0.4959)			0.3014 (0.4933)	0.2997 (0.4927)
Vote margin			0.1521 (0.1285)			0.1584 (0.1279)	0.1571 (0.1278)
Elected competitors			0.0007 (0.0201)			-0.0003 (0.0203)	-0.0005 (0.0202)
MP fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Term fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	115,252	115,252	113,427	115,252	115,252	113,427	113,427
Number of politicians	1280	1280	1231	1280	1280	1231	1231
R-squared	0.0091	0.0099	0.0108	0.0157	0.0092	0.0174	0.0175

Notes: OLS fixed effects estimation. The unit of observation is an individual politician-question pair. Standard error estimates are clustered at the politician level.

*** $p < 0.01$.
** $p < 0.05$.
* $p < 0.1$.

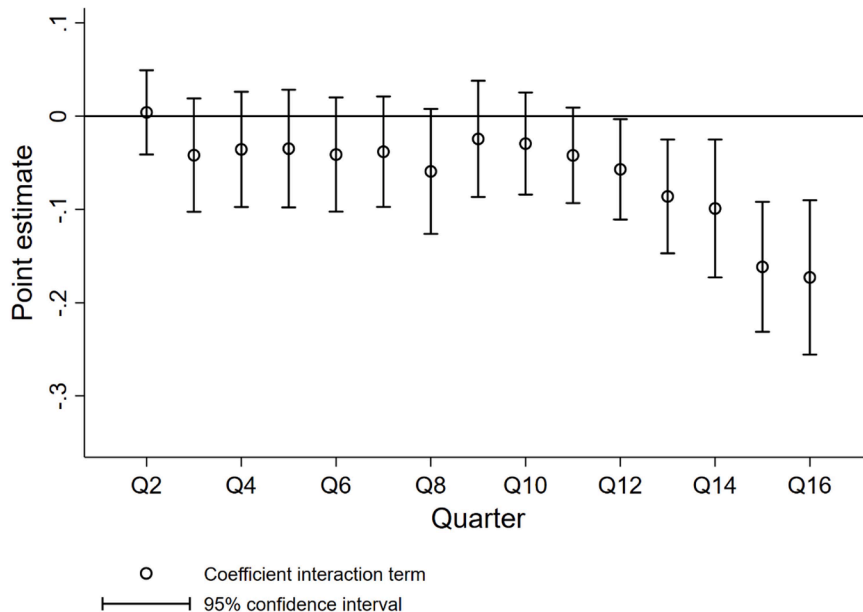


Fig. 2. Interaction terms with time intervals: Reelection incentives become important in the last four quarters prior to the next election. Notes: The point estimates come from an estimated model like (1) but using separate dummies for all quarters of the legislative term instead of the variable *Day Question*.

their parties to get support for the next election, as suggested by our theoretical model. Election campaign considerations at that time, by contrast, are likely to play only a minor role. Later in the legislative term, politicians may realize that their standing is insufficient, prompting them not to run for reelection. It is from that moment onward that their incentives to interact with citizens decline, which is consistent with our model (Hypothesis 2). In the following section, we explore this behavior in greater detail.

4.3. Analyzing the timing of announcements not to run again

In the German Bundestag, there are no term limits. Still, two other possibilities affect reelection incentives and politicians' behavior: (1) politicians decide on their own not to run again (e.g., because of age or health-related reasons) or (2) their party indicates low support for a reelection bid; not receiving a nomination at all represents the most extreme case of this.

Approximately one year before the next election, politicians typically announce their decision whether to run again or not, as illustrated in Fig. 3. The histogram illustrates the timing within the legislative term when politicians either state that they will not seek reelection or fail to be nominated.¹⁵ For the data, we draw on newspaper articles and press statements of politicians. A few politicians already declared in the previous election campaign that this would be their final term and followed through on that announcement; we code them as making their statements at the start of the legislative session. By contrast, the vast majority of politicians who leave parliament at the end of the term announce their decision during the legislative period, often in the run-up to the local nomination of the candidates at the constituency level. This local nomination of candidates usually takes place about one year before the upcoming election. Some politicians make their announcements slightly later in the context of the regional nomination of the candidates on the state party lists. Comparing the timing of these announcements with the results in Table 1 and Fig. 2, we observe that the period when politicians who do not run for reelection decrease their responsiveness toward voters closely coincides with the start of the party nomination process for the upcoming election. Approximately one year ahead of the next election, we also observe the presence or absence of reelection incentives affecting behavior and thus responsiveness towards citizens.

We leverage the heterogeneity in politicians' announcements to resign their mandate or their defeat in the nomination process to further analyze the consequences of absent reelection incentives on responsiveness. In particular, the public announcements allow us to identify two distinct periods within the legislative term for withdrawing politicians: the prospect of running again and the required standing in the party should provide motivation to interact with citizens *before* the announcement. *After* the announcement, the publicly stated decision not to seek another term is expected to be detrimental to motivation (Hypothesis 2). This leads us to estimate the following slightly extended version of Eq. (2) of our previous estimation equation:

$$\text{Answered}_{qit} = \alpha_1 \text{Before announcement}_{it} + \alpha_2 \text{After announcement}_{it} + \alpha_3 \text{Day question}_q + X_{it}\gamma + \lambda_i + \mu_t + \varepsilon_{qit}. \quad (2)$$

We implement the dependent variable *Answered* again as a measure of responsiveness toward citizens. Instead of the *No reelection* variable and its interaction term with the question day, we use two binary variables for the periods before and after the politicians' announcements: *Before announcement* takes a value of one if politician i received question q before the announcement to withdraw and zero otherwise ($t = 1$ in our theoretical model); *After announcement* takes a value of one for questions received after the announcement and zero otherwise ($t = 2$ in our model). Note that the main explanatory variables *Before announcement* and *After announcement* refer exclusively to politicians who resign and publicly announce their intention not to seek reelection. Politicians who run for reelection still serve as the comparison group. To account for the generally lower interaction with citizens at the end of the term we continue to include the *Day question* variable. Further, we employ the same set of additional control variables, politician fixed effects and legislative term fixed effects. In line with our theoretical framework and hypotheses, we expect $\alpha_1 = 0$ and $\alpha_2 < 0$, i.e., politicians are not less responsive towards voters before their announcement not to run again; however, after their announcement, their behavior changes, and they interact less with voters.

The results in Table 2 suggest that absent reelection incentives only matter after the public announcement not to run again consistent with the hypotheses in the theory section of this paper. In the first column, we analyze a parsimonious model with the two binary variables indicating before and after the announcement, politician fixed effects, and legislative term fixed effects. The point estimate for *Before announcement* is negative, but small in magnitude and statistically insignificant. Hence, politicians who leave the parliament are, before the announcement, not different from politicians who compete again (consistent with Hypothesis 1.1). This suggests that their reelection incentives and hence their motivation to interact with citizens are still intact. The decline in interaction with citizens occurs only after the announcement and translates into a large drop (11.1 percentage points) in the average answer share compared to politicians running for reelection (consistent with Hypothesis 1.2). A Wald test for the difference of the two coefficients (*Before minus After announcement*) shows that they are statistically significantly different from each other. Hence, politicians who do not run again answer fewer questions after their announcement to withdraw than they did before (consistent with Hypothesis 2). This suggests that changes in behavior kick in following the public announcement not to run again.

We add the *Day question* variable and a set of personal control variables in column (2) and election and competition controls in column (3). The point estimate for *Before announcement* increases marginally in absolute terms and turns statistically significant at the 10%-level in column (2). The point estimate for *After announcement* decreases marginally in absolute terms but remains statistically significant at the one percent level. The difference between the two coefficients is statistically significant in both specifications. In column (4), the number of questions received by the legislator over the whole legislative period is replaced by a variable that measures

¹⁵ Note that we could not find public announcement dates for 29 out of 427 legislators who did not seek reelection. For these legislators, we only know that they did not run again but not the point when the decision was announced.

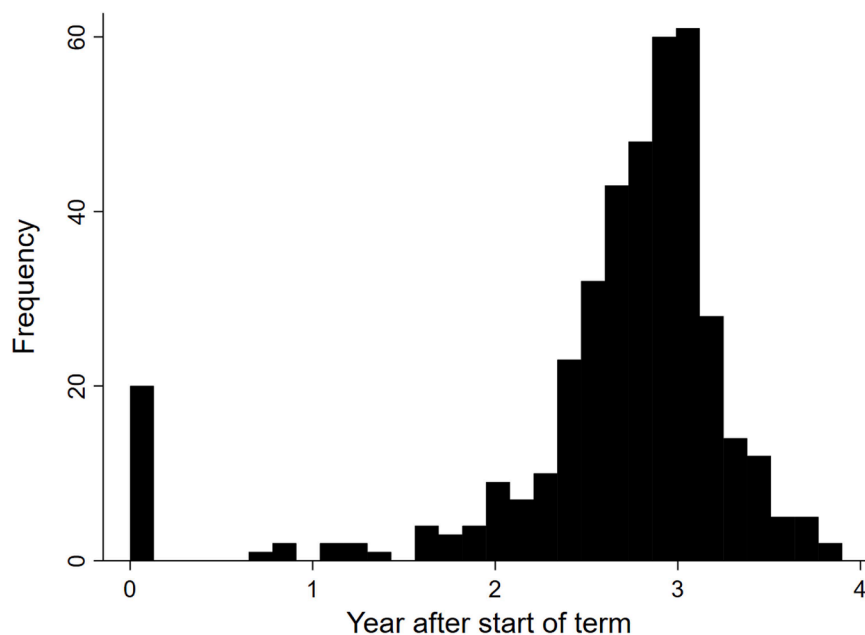


Fig. 3. Histogram for the point in the legislative term when politicians announce *not* to run for reelection.

the number of questions received in the same month as the question under consideration. All our results are consistent with our theoretical predictions: politicians who resign their mandate are comparable to competing politicians before their announcement but answer considerably fewer questions afterward, while the total number of questions asked increases as elections approach.

While party loyalty also shapes parliamentary voting behavior in the German Bundestag, responsiveness measured by politicians' interactions through answering questions on the online-platform likely captures individual rather than party-driven incentives, as suggested by a substantial intra-party variation in our data. Through politician specific fixed effects, we automatically also control for their party affiliations. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the possibility that some individual politicians, facing internal party conflicts not apparent from their stated reasons for not running again, or disagreeing with their party's positions, may strategically choose not to respond publicly.

We test the robustness of our interpretations in Table B1 (Online Appendix B), confirming that our findings are not sensitive to alternative specifications or sample restrictions. The main result, i.e. the decline in responsiveness among resigning politicians after their announcement, remains robust when controlling for office positions, absenteeism, question volume, and when restricting the sample by party or excluding specific terms and low-effort answers. Similar patterns hold across party subsamples, with the effect being most pronounced for CDU/CSU (i.e. conservative) representatives.

In Tables C1 and C2 in Online Appendix C, we extend our analysis to absenteeism in roll-call votes. The insights are broadly consistent with our earlier findings, albeit revealing subtler distinctions before and after the announcement of not running for reelection. We note that absenteeism is a conceptually different measure from responsiveness, but it is still related to effort. Upon expanding the dataset to include records dating back to 1953, it becomes evident that politicians without reelection incentives tend to exhibit higher absenteeism rates in roll calls. Furthermore, the frequency of their absences increases incrementally throughout the legislative term, consistent with both our previous results and theoretical expectations.

4.4. Political constraints vs. self-selection

The empirical analysis indicates that politicians tend to decrease their responsiveness to citizens once their incentives for reelection are removed. This observation aligns with findings from other studies that examine the institutional aspect of term limits to understand the effects of lacking reelection incentives, and it is also consistent with our theoretical model and Hypothesis 1 and 2.

In the German political system, although there is no formal limit to the number of times politicians can seek reelection, their ability to stand as candidates in elections depends on securing support from their political party, which in turn is determined by their standing within the party. Party support is crucial for candidates: at the local level for those aiming to compete as direct candidates in the constituency's plurality tier, and at the regional level for those seeking a (promising) position on the state party list to enhance their prospects in the proportional tier.¹⁶ Therefore, local or state-level party conferences can effectively end a politician's continued tenure in office by denying them another nomination or relegating them to a rank on the party list that is unlikely to succeed. More generally,

¹⁶ Most candidates run in both tiers (see Section III and Frank and Stadelmann, 2023), highlighting the relevance of party support.

Table 2The link between *No reelection incentives* and the time of announcements to withdraw.

Dependent variable	(1) Answered	(2)	(3)	(4)
Before announcement	-0.0247 (0.0211)	-0.0378* (0.0215)	-0.0359 (0.0224)	-0.0364 (0.0224)
After announcement	-0.1107*** (0.0270)	-0.0968*** (0.0272)	-0.0959*** (0.0278)	-0.0964*** (0.0272)
(Before minus After announcement)	0.086**	0.059**	0.060**	0.060**
Day question		-0.0191*** (0.0040)	-0.0188*** (0.0040)	-0.0189*** (0.0039)
Direct mandate		-0.0085 (0.0234)	-0.0177 (0.0248)	-0.0177 (0.0248)
Party in government		-0.0086 (0.0195)	-0.0054 (0.0191)	-0.0048 (0.0186)
Tenure		-0.0473 (0.0687)	-0.0562 (0.0709)	-0.0569 (0.0707)
Minister		-0.0504 (0.0405)	-0.0457 (0.0398)	-0.0432 (0.0421)
Number questions/1000		0.0331 (0.0560)	0.0317 (0.0578)	
Number questions in same month/1000				0.4548 (0.3263)
Turnout			0.3042 (0.4930)	0.2859 (0.5037)
Vote margin			0.1585 (0.1291)	0.1664 (0.1289)
Elected competitors			0.0012 (0.0204)	0.0009 (0.0205)
MP fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Term fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	114,824	114,824	113,009	113,009
Number of politicians	1262	1262	1214	1214
R-squared	0.0113	0.0160	0.0168	0.0170

Notes: OLS fixed effects estimation. The unit of observation is an individual politician-question pair. Standard error estimates are clustered at the politician level.

*** $p < 0.01$

** $p < 0.05$.

* $p < 0.1$.

in the context of German elections to the Bundestag, campaigning efforts by individual politicians without explicit party backing are uncommon and unlikely to be effective. Politicians may also choose not to seek reelection at these conferences if they anticipate strong competition from another viable candidate or face otherwise adverse conditions. In addition to being denied another nomination, a waiver because of bad prospects in the nomination process can also be seen as a constraint imposed on politicians. While clearly not a constitutional term limit, it still serves as a potentially effective constraint.

Politicians might decide against seeking reelection for multiple reasons, including personal factors like age or health issues, which are independent of political strategy. Although our theoretical model does not explicitly predict changes in responsiveness due to voluntary self-selection, it does suggest that politicians retiring for personal reasons (and can thus be expected to have lower levels of p in our model) remain consistently responsive. Conversely, politicians with high expectations (high- p politicians) but constrained by political pressures – such as diminished party support or reduced intra-party standing – are predicted to experience a decrease in motivation, leading them to become less responsive to citizens (see Hypothesis 3). Empirically, we expect that those who choose not to run again for political reasons will show reduced responsiveness after their announcement, compared to those who withdraw for personal reasons. We employ two distinct strategies to distinguish between the relevance of political constraints and self-selection, respectively.

Strategy 1. Exploring the timing of resignation announcements

We investigate the timing of announcements within the legislative term to determine whether politicians decide not to run again due to political constraints or personal choice (self-selection). When considerable time remains before the next election, gauging party support is challenging. Therefore, announcing a decision not to seek reelection early in the legislative term can be viewed as an indicator of a self-motivated choice. Early declarations not only facilitate an orderly transition within the party but also provide more time and opportunity to identify a suitable successor. In contrast, decisions announced closer to election time are more likely to stem from diminished support within the party, suggesting these are decisions driven by political constraints.

We divide resigning politicians into two groups according to their date of announcement. The first group consists of politicians making their announcement in the first half of the legislative term; the second group contains politicians who announce their

withdrawal in the second half or are defeated in the nomination. We apply our main estimation strategy as in Table 2, column (2), for both subgroups separately and use politicians who run for reelection as the comparison group.

Fig. 4 shows the results for the coefficients and confidence intervals for the variables *Before announcement* (Before) and *After announcement* (After) in the two subsamples. In the left graph, we contrast politicians making an early announcement with those who run for reelection. Resigning politicians who announced their withdrawal early in the legislative term interact with citizens to the same extent as those with reelection incentives, both before and after their announcement. On the other hand, politicians with late announcements seem to interact slightly less with citizens before their announcement compared to politicians who compete again, but the 95% confidence interval still includes 0. After the announcement, the point estimate is clearly negative.

This evidence supports the hypothesis that the absence of reelection incentives alone does not lead to behavioral changes.¹⁷ Rather, these changes predominantly affect politicians who are constrained to withdraw due to intra-party pressure. That is, politicians expecting high standing in their parties but not getting party support decrease their responsiveness levels, providing first support for Hypotheses 3.1. and 3.2.

Strategy 2. Exploring the reasons stated in resignation announcements

In Table 3, we directly explore the reasons why politicians refrain from running for reelection. This information is derived from newspaper articles and official press statements. We assign the different reasons to five categories: (1) Age, (2) Health, (3) Generational change, (4) Competition, defeat, and dispute, and (5) Career.¹⁸ A sixth category includes cases for which no concrete reason is provided.

We note that, while subgroup sample sizes tend to be small, all categories include sufficient observations for meaningful statistical analysis. Still, subgroup estimates need to be interpreted carefully, as such a detailed exploration of heterogeneity is demanding and may belong to multiple categories (e.g., they may state that they do not run again due to age and health reasons).

Politicians who cite old age or health issues as reasons for not seeking reelection are believed to be influenced by factors outside of political constraints, choosing to conclude their careers for personal reasons (self-selection). Building on this premise, we hypothesize that these politicians, whose decisions are self-determined, show no significant difference in responsiveness compared to those who seek reelection, nor do they exhibit changes in engagement levels before and after their announcement. Evidence supporting this hypothesis can be found in columns (1) and (2), which compare the responsiveness of politicians stepping down for age or health reasons against those who continue to pursue reelection. Our findings indicate that politicians who resign for personal health or age considerations maintain responsiveness levels comparable to their counterparts motivated by reelection prospects, with no notable difference in responsiveness preceding or following their announcement. Importantly, the statistically insignificant coefficients tend to be small in magnitude and even close to zero. This suggests that these statistically insignificant results are also substantively negligible, i.e., they are most likely not a consequence of low statistical power. Overall, the results align with our theoretical model and hypotheses.

A frequently mentioned rationale for not seeking reelection is the desire for a so-called “generational change” (or “Generationenwechsel” in German). This is where politicians acknowledge the need to make way for younger successors, presumably acting in the best interest of their party. In fact, this reason for stepping down often reflects a blend of personal volition and political constraints. At times, the term “generational change” can serve as a euphemism for the underlying intra-party pressure to allow younger members to ascend. Interestingly, the empirical analysis reveals that the coefficient for the period before the announcement is significantly negative and declines slightly after the announcement, as detailed in column (3). The difference between these coefficients is not statistically significant, suggesting indeed a blend of self-selection and political constraints.¹⁹

Columns (4) and (5) focus on reasons related to political constraints. We categorize politicians who preemptively decide not to run for reelection due to valent competitors or overt conflict with their party into distinct groups. This classification also includes politicians who no longer receive support from their party to seek another term. As anticipated, our analysis reveals no significant difference in the responsiveness of these politicians compared to their peers *before* their announcement. However, a clear distinction emerges post-announcement, as illustrated in column (4), where responsiveness is shown to decrease markedly. Politicians compelled to pursue alternative careers after their term, whether in politics or the private sector, exhibit a similar pattern, as shown in column (5). Here, the relevant coefficients are not only statistically significant but their magnitude is also quantitatively meaningful. These findings bolster Hypotheses 3.1 and 3.2 that motivational factors play a key role in explaining the observed decline in responsiveness toward citizens. Politicians who self-select and decide not to seek reelection do not alter their behavior (low-*p* politicians according to our theoretical model), as evidenced in columns (1) and (2). In contrast, those who are constrained to resign or face external pressures (high-*p* politicians according to our theoretical model) demonstrate diminished responsiveness when reelection incentives are absent, as indicated in columns (4) and (5).

For reasons of completeness, column (6) shows the results for resigning politicians who do not provide any reason for leaving the

¹⁷ It also suggests that campaign considerations related to reelection are unlikely driving the observed behavior.

¹⁸ Note that some legislators provide more than one reason (e.g. Age and Generational change). When interpreting the results, we should keep in mind that legislators might not be fully honest when providing the reasons for their resignation. An exception is category (4) which relies on negative reporting and defeat in the nomination of candidates. However, there is no reason to believe that legislators systematically provide untruthful reasons.

¹⁹ Interestingly, the coefficients in column (3) suggest that the concept of “generational change” might indeed be taken at face value: politicians (self-)identifying with an older generation may exhibit reluctance in adopting newer ways of interacting with their voters.

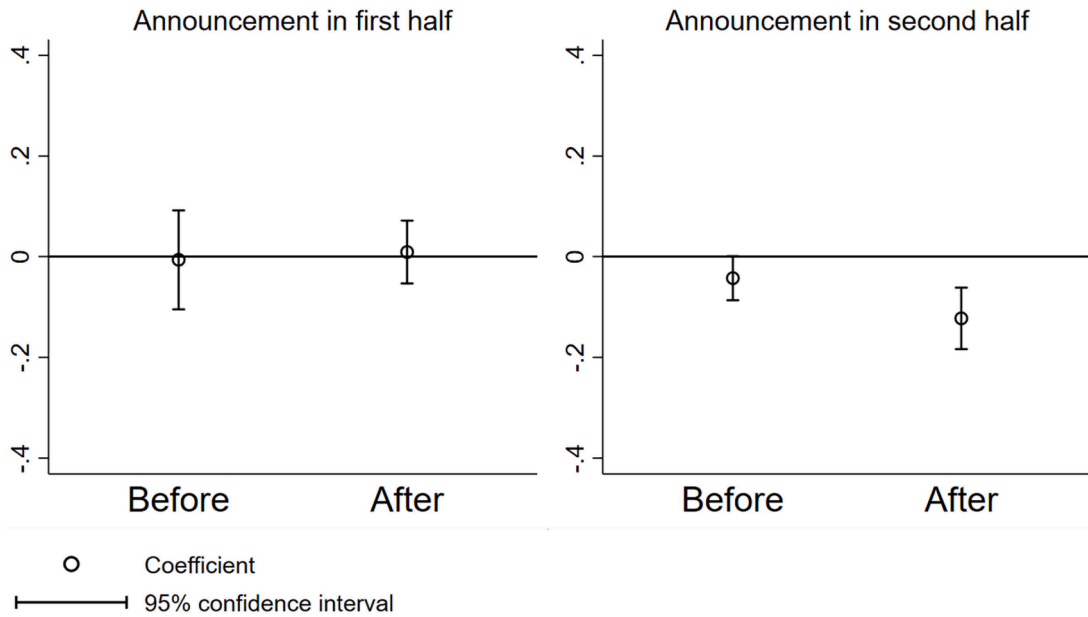


Fig. 4. Analyzing the point in time when politicians announce not to run again.
Notes: Politicians who announce their decision not to run early in the legislative term (first half of the legislative term) show no change in responsiveness when comparing the period before and after the announcement (left panel). This group comprises 43 individuals (10.1% of all legislators not running for reelection). Politicians who announce late in the legislative term (the second half of the legislative term) reduce responsiveness after their announcement (right panel). This group comprises 384 individuals (89.9% of all legislators *not* running for reelection).

Table 3
 Heterogeneity in reasons to withdraw: “Personal reasons” vs. “Political reasons.”.

Reason	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Personal reasons (Self-determined)			Political reasons (Constraints)			
	Age	Health	Generational change	Competition, defeat, dispute	Career	No reason	State to commit for rest of term
Dependent variable	Answered						
Before announcement	0.0258 (0.0547)	-0.0654 (0.0806)	-0.0717** (0.0348)	-0.0293 (0.0446)	-0.0610 (0.0640)	0.0078 (0.0369)	-0.0551 (0.0556)
After announcement	-0.0276 (0.0549)	-0.0305 (0.1005)	-0.0902*** (0.0347)	-0.1282** (0.0525)	-0.2643* (0.1418)	-0.0494 (0.0330)	-0.2550** (0.1051)
<i>(Before minus After announcement)</i>	<i>0.053</i>	<i>-0.035</i>	<i>0.019</i>	<i>0.099***</i>	<i>0.203**</i>	<i>0.057**</i>	<i>0.2***</i>
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
MP fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Term fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	102,141	101,313	103,952	102,388	102,340	103,666	102,773
Number of politicians	1151	1144	1146	1159	1144	1167	1148
With this withdrawal reason	27 (6.3 %)	14 (3.3 %)	36 (8.4 %)	37 (8.7 %)	20 (4.7 %)	54 (12.6 %)	28 (6.6 %)
R-squared	0.0102	0.0099	0.0125	0.0105	0.0128	0.0108	0.0136

Notes: OLS fixed effects estimation. The unit of observation is an individual politician-question pair. The comparison group consists of politicians with reelection incentives in all columns. Politicians without reelection incentives are kept in the sample categorized by their provided reasons for not running for reelection. Counts reported in the row “With this withdrawal reason” refer to MPs who publicly announced they would not seek reelection and cited the respective reason. Percentages are relative to the 427 non-running MPs. Controls include the variables *Day question*, *Direct mandate*, *Party in government*, *Tenure*, *Minister*, and *Number questions* as in column (2) of Table 2. Standard error estimates are clustered at the politician level.

*** $p < 0.01$.
 ** $p < 0.05$.
 * $p < 0.1$.

parliament. Coefficients before and after resignation announcements are comparatively small in absolute terms and statistically insignificant. As a final, non-exclusive category, we group politicians who, when announcing their resignation, explicitly commit to fulfilling their legislative and representational duties for the rest of the term. Politicians who resign for reasons of generational change make such a statement particularly often. As shown in column (7), a statement to commit to the legislative and representational duties is, if anything, associated with lower responsiveness, suggesting that such statements provide little informational value.²⁰

Finally, Figures D1 to D3 in Online Appendix D illustrate that politicians do *not* reduce their activity on the platform directly before the announcement. We interpret this as further indirect evidence for our hypotheses and against time constraints as an alternative driver (see also the Discussion below). If we assume that politicians have prior knowledge of their resignation that they keep secret, we would have expected to see at least some change in their behavior before the announcement.

5. Discussion

Consistent with the predictions of our theoretical model, the empirical analysis reveals that politicians generally decrease their responsiveness towards citizens following their announcement not to seek reelection. Crucially, the reasons behind a politician's resignation from parliament significantly influence their behavior towards citizens. Politicians who step down for personal reasons (self-selection) maintain their level of interaction with citizens post-announcement, showing no significant reduction compared to their activity before the announcement. Conversely, politicians who are compelled to forgo reelection due to political pressures exhibit a marked decrease in responsiveness towards citizens, answering significantly fewer questions from the public after making their announcement.

One might argue that declining responsiveness could also result from time constraints, for instance, if politicians learn they will not run again and begin preparing for a post-political career. While time constraints and other factors may generally matter for effort and responsiveness (e.g., Dal Bó and Rossi, 2011), the empirical results better align with the predictions of our theoretical model: If time constraints were the main driver, we would expect a reduction in responsiveness before the public announcement of the decision not to run. In contrast, our findings show that the decline typically occurs only after the announcement. This is particularly evident among politicians who withdraw due to internal party defeat or stated career plans: they remain responsive until they publicly announce their intention to leave. These patterns suggest that time constraints are not binding prior to the announcement and reinforce our interpretation that declining political motivation, triggered by reduced party support or renomination chances, is the key factor, as our model predicts.

We argue that interacting with citizens through an online platform, as analyzed in our case, offers several benefits for politicians: it allows them the flexibility to craft thoughtful responses at their convenience, enhancing the quality of their replies and reducing the risk of being caught off guard. Additionally, the ability to respond at a time that suits their demanding schedules, coupled with the support of staff to conduct research and draft answers, further underscores its convenience.²¹ Despite the relatively low costs of interaction, responses on the online platform *Abgeordnetenwatch* are visible and frequently used as metrics by both media and voters to assess a politician's performance.²² Given these factors, it seems plausible to us that politicians who choose to leave parliament of their own accord are likely to maintain their engagement on the platform, motivated by a desire to conclude their term on positive terms and signaling a degree of intrinsic motivation. In contrast, those who decide to leave due to political constraints may find their intrinsic motivation to remain actively engaged with citizens substantially diminished.

6. Conclusions

Our analysis provides new insights into politicians' behavior by leveraging data on politicians from the German Bundestag and contributes to the understanding of politician-voter interactions in political systems without constitutional term limits. Drawing on data from an online platform that documents direct interactions between citizens and their elected representatives, we show that the prospect of reelection is a pivotal determinant of politicians' engagement with voters. Consistent with our theoretical predictions, we observe a marked decrease in the efforts of politicians who do not seek reelection, especially as elections draw near. This decline in responsiveness is predominantly linked to a loss of standing within their political party and thus related to political constraints, which in turn affect motivation.

Importantly, our research highlights a highly nuanced impact of reelection incentives on political behavior towards citizens. Politicians retiring due to age or health reasons do not show a significant reduction in their responsiveness to voters, suggesting that their commitment to constituent service remains strong despite their impending departure from politics. In contrast, those who exit the political arena due to internal party dynamics exhibit a noticeable decrease in their responsiveness to constituents.

These findings also inform the broader literature on political representation (e.g., Kärnä and Öhberg, 2023; Portmann, 2014; Portmann et al., 2022) as they underscore the complex interplay between electoral incentives, intra-party competition, and individual motivations for political behavior toward voters in a political landscape free from term limits. They contribute to a better

²⁰ We apply the strategy above to absenteeism in roll-call votes as another measure for legislators' duties in Appendix B. For this variable, a similar but less clear-cut pattern emerges.

²¹ These advantages were highlighted to us personally by a member of parliament.

²² E.g., the largest German tabloid "Bild" ranked politicians based on data from *Abgeordnetenwatch* (<https://www.bild.de/regional/berlin/berlin-aktuell/ranking-welche-politiker-buergerfragen-beantworten-und-welche-nicht-84831568.bild.html>).

understanding of the relevance of incentives for behavior and the factors that influence politicians' responsiveness to their electorate, offering new perspectives for both political economy and practical governance. While our analysis focuses on responsiveness during a politician's final term, an important direction for future research would be to examine the subsequent career paths of those who do not seek reelection. Understanding whether politicians transition to other political roles or leave politics entirely could shed further light on how effort, responsiveness, party discipline, and long-term career considerations shape behavior in office. This would complement recent studies examining political careers and institutional constraints (e.g., [Geys and Sørenseelen, 2024](#)).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marco Frank: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Nicola Maaser:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **David Stadelmann:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.jce.2026.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2026.03.004).

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