

Angela Merkel as a potential catalyser of interest in politics among women

1. Introduction

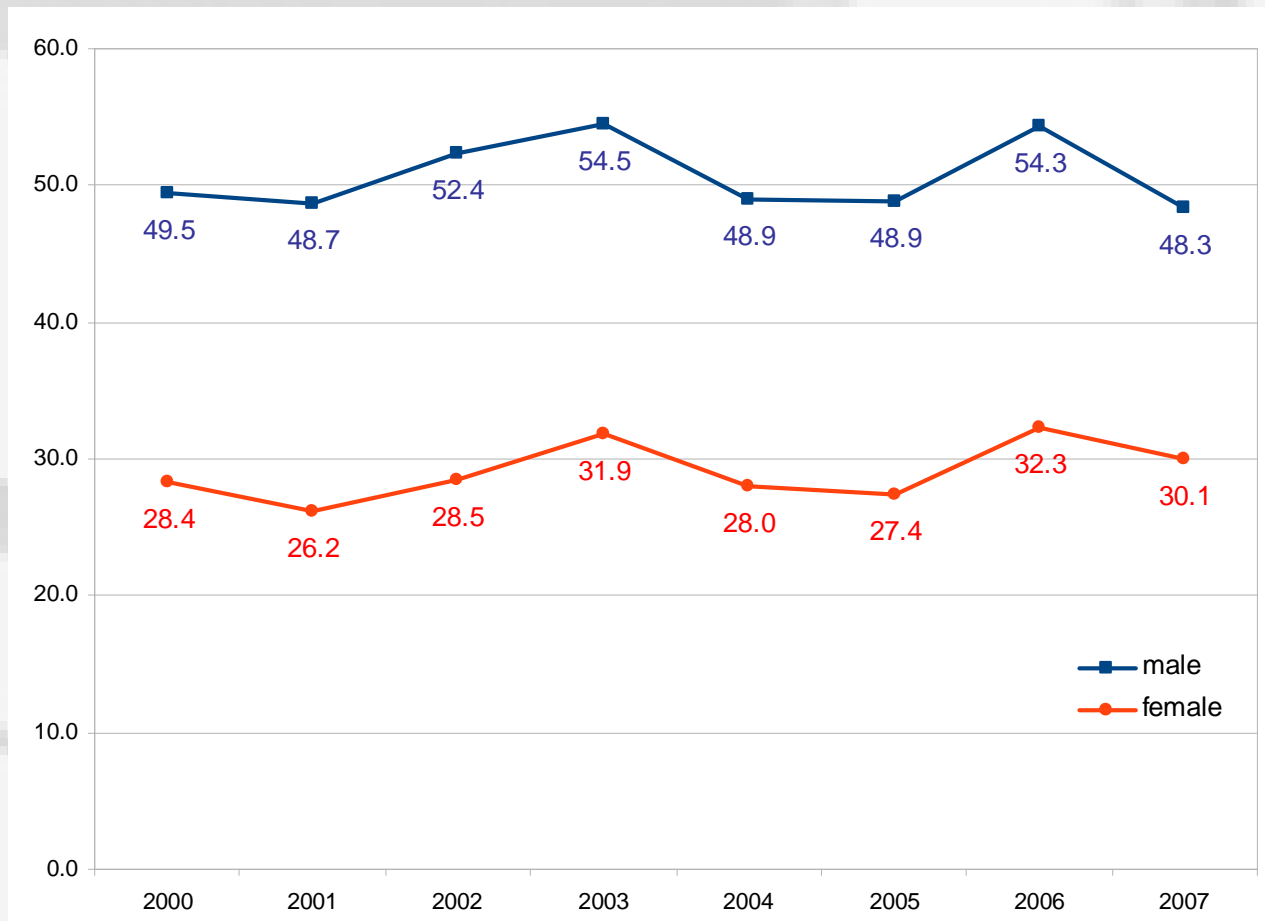
In November 2005, Angela Merkel became chancellor of Germany following the federal elections in September of the same year. From 2005 to 2009 Merkel led a grand coalition composed of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) + Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In November 2005, 31.8% of the *Bundestag* places were occupied by women. However, no woman had ever been the Head of State of the unified Germany and Angela Merkel had just become the first ever female Chancellor.



Photo kindly provided by Felix Heyder, www.felixheyder.de

Graph1: Percentage of people who feel interested and very interested in politics, per gender, throughout the years (2000-2007)



Women are significantly less interested in politics than men in all waves and there is no evidence of a particular increase in women's level of interest in politics since Merkel was elected. Both peaks seem to reflect the elections in 2002 and 2005 respectively.

There is a very clear distinction between 2003 and 2006 regarding the gender difference in support for the CDU. While between 2002 and 2003, men and women trailed exactly the same trend; between 2005 and 2006 both genders followed a significantly different tendency.

In 2005, the percentage of women close to the CDU was slightly smaller than that of men. In 2006, these values swapped and reached a statistically significant difference.

2. Puzzle

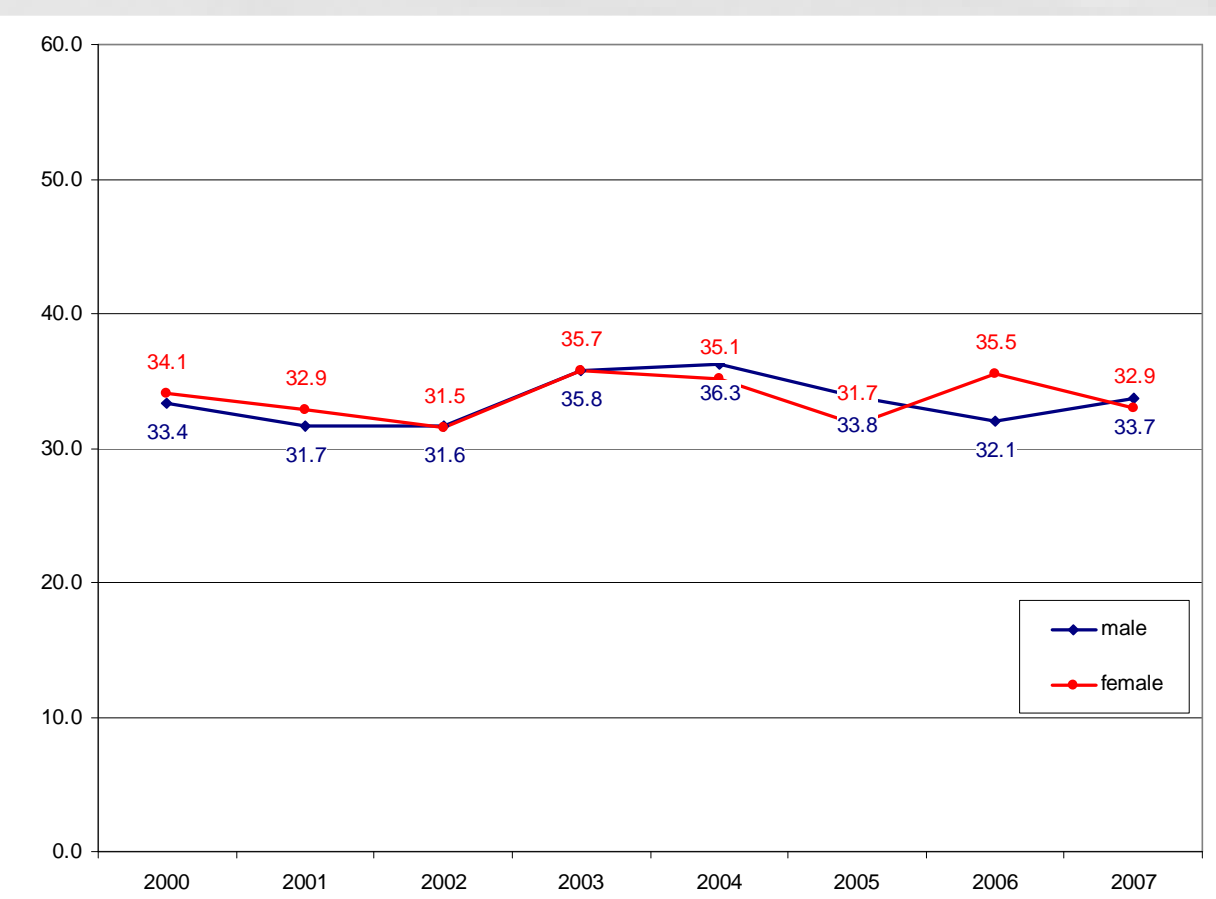
Some authors have argued that avoiding the political participation of a group brings that group to internalise the idea that they are not able to be politically active (Taylor, 1992 and Phillips, 1995). Accepting this premise, one might expect that a change to a more proportionate political environment would produce an impact on the traditionally under-represented groups' level of political involvement.

There is still a gender gap in some forms of political participation and in many forms of political attitudes.

Objective of the paper: Analyse whether or not the election of Angela Merkel as Chancellor had an impact on women's interest in politics.

Data: German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) from 2000 to 2007.

Graph2: Percentage of people who feel close to the CDU, per gender, throughout the years 2000-2007



3. Analysis

Table 3: Differences in levels of interest in politics between 2005 and 2006, per gender and per political party to which one feels closest to (%)

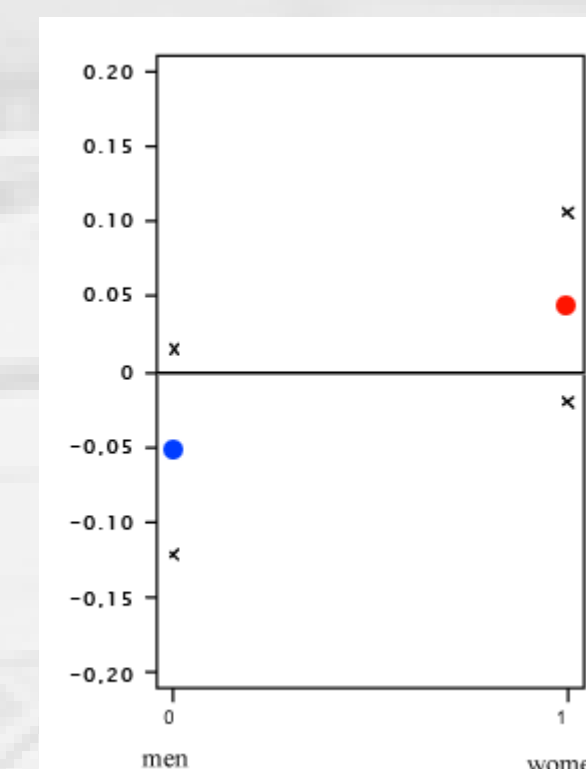
	Women	Men
Respondents who feel close to the CDU (not including values for CSU)		
Decreased	9.79	14.94
Did not change	64.95	63.14
Increased	25.26	21.93
Average (-3 to 3)	.17	.087
N	562	529
ttest between women and men = -2.1945; Pr(T < t) = 0.0142		
Respondents who feel close to the SPD		
Decreased	9.78	10.18
Did not change	68.63	65.11
Increased	21.59	24.71
Average (-3 to 3)	.135	.162
N	593	599
ttest between women and men = 0.7533; Pr(T < t) = 0.7743		
Respondents who do not feel close to any party*		
Decreased	13.12	15.52
Did not change	66.56	63.15
Increased	20.33	21.33
Average (-3 to 3)	.072	.052
N	1800	1411
ttest between women and men = -0.8329; Pr(T < t) = 0.2025		

* There was no significant differences in the results for the other parties (Greens and FDP).



The only significant gender gap can be observed among those who feel close to the CDU, with women having a higher mean. Between 2005 and 2006, 25% of the female CDU identifiers increased their interest in politics, while the same happened to 22% of their male fellows. Furthermore, a higher percentage of CDU men than women decreased their interest in politics (14.94% vs 9.79%). [GO TO TABLE 4 ↗]

Graph 3: Marginal effects of the interaction between being a sympathiser of the CDU and gender



Being a CDU female increases the positioning in the scale of difference in political interest between 2005 and 2006 by 0,043; while being a CDU male decreases it by 0.05

Note: Dots are regression coefficients and crosses are confidence intervals.

Table 4: Explaining the differences in levels of interest in politics between 2005 and 2006

	Model	
Gender (1=female)	-.209* (.095)	
Years of education	.026*** (.004)	
Age	.001 (.001)	
Interest in politics 2005 (reference category "not at all")	1=not much	-.486*** (.035)
	1=much	-.895*** (.037)
	1=very much	-1.300*** (.045)
CDU	-.047 (.034)	
Other parties	-.025 (.034)	
No party	-.288*** (.028)	
Gender*CDU	.093* (.045)	
Gender*other parties	.047 (.049)	
Gender*no party	.061 (.038)	
Constant	.552*** (.068)	
N (level 1)	6167	
N (level 2)	3315	

Note: Some non-significant variables were deleted due to lack of space. Standard errors in parentheses; * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001



Looking at the interaction between CDU and gender (which has a positive and significant coefficient), we observe that feeling close to the CDU is associated with an increase in the level of interest in politics, when the respondent is a woman (compared to the reference category: male SPD). This confirms the previous results. [GO TO GRAPH 3 ↗]

4. Conclusions

The results obtained on the increase in the level of interest in politics among female CDU sympathisers, leaves little doubt that a combination of Merkel's gender and party played a crucial role.

It is striking that even a self-declared non feminist woman, who does not attempt to appeal particularly to female citizens, and does not use her gender as a political tool, has any sort of impact on women, even if only women supporters of her party. This result underlines the evidence that when politicians share some physical characteristics with their constituents, the latter are more likely to feel politically involved. It also reveals, that the party affinity remains the most important connection between citizens and politicians.