



Search for flavour-changing neutral current top-quark decays $t \rightarrow qZ$ in proton–proton collisions at $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV with the ATLAS detector

The ATLAS Collaboration

A search for flavour-changing neutral-current processes in top-quark decays is presented. Data collected with the ATLAS detector from proton–proton collisions at the Large Hadron Collider at a centre-of-mass energy of $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV, corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 36.1 fb^{-1} , are analysed. The search is performed using top-quark pair events, with one top quark decaying through the $t \rightarrow qZ$ ($q = u, c$) flavour-changing neutral-current channel, and the other through the dominant Standard Model mode $t \rightarrow bW$. Only Z boson decays into charged leptons and leptonic W boson decays are considered as signal. Consequently, the final-state topology is characterized by the presence of three isolated charged leptons (electrons or muons), at least two jets, one of the jets originating from a b -quark, and missing transverse momentum from the undetected neutrino. The data are consistent with Standard Model background contributions, and at 95% confidence level the search sets observed (expected) upper limits of 1.7×10^{-4} (2.4×10^{-4}) on the $t \rightarrow uZ$ branching ratio and 2.4×10^{-4} (3.2×10^{-4}) on the $t \rightarrow cZ$ branching ratio, constituting the most stringent limits to date.

1 Introduction

The top quark is the heaviest elementary particle known, with a mass $m_t = 173.3 \pm 0.8$ GeV [1]. In the Standard Model of particle physics (SM), it decays almost exclusively into bW while flavour-changing neutral current (FCNC) decays such as $t \rightarrow qZ$ are forbidden at tree level. FCNC decays occur at one-loop level but are strongly suppressed by the GIM mechanism [2] with a suppression factor of 14 orders of magnitude relative to the dominant decay mode [3]. However, several SM extensions predict higher branching ratios for top-quark FCNC decays. Examples of such extensions are the quark-singlet model (QS) [4], the two-Higgs-doublet model with (FC 2HDM) or without (2HDM) flavour conservation [5], the Minimal Supersymmetric Standard Model (MSSM) [6], the MSSM with R-parity violation (RPV SUSY) [7], models with warped extra dimensions (RS) [8], or extended mirror fermion models (EMF) [9]. Reference [10] gives a comprehensive review of the various extensions of the SM that have been proposed. Table 1 provides the maximum values for the branching ratios $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow qZ)$ predicted by these models and compares them to the value predicted by the SM.

Experimental limits on the FCNC branching ratio $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow qZ)$ were established by experiments at the Large Electron–Positron collider [11–15], HERA [16], the Tevatron [17, 18], and the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) [19–22]. Before the results reported here, the most stringent limits were $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow uZ) < 2.2 \times 10^{-4}$ and $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow cZ) < 4.9 \times 10^{-4}$ at 95% confidence level (CL), both set by the CMS Collaboration [22] using data collected at $\sqrt{s} = 8$ TeV. For the same centre-of-mass energy, the ATLAS Collaboration derived a limit of $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow qZ) < 7 \times 10^{-4}$ [20]. ATLAS results obtained at $\sqrt{s} = 7$ TeV are also available [19].

This analysis is a search for the FCNC decay $t \rightarrow qZ$ in top-quark–top-antiquark ($t\bar{t}$) events, in 36.1 fb^{-1} of data collected at $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV, where one top quark decays through the FCNC mode and the other through the dominant SM mode ($t \rightarrow bW$). Only Z boson decays into charged leptons and leptonic W boson decays are considered. The final-state topology is thus characterized by the presence of three isolated charged leptons,¹ at least two jets with exactly one being tagged as a jet containing b -hadrons, and missing transverse momentum from the undetected neutrino. The main sources of background events containing three prompt leptons are diboson, $t\bar{t}Z$, and tZ production. Events with two or fewer prompt leptons and additional non-prompt² leptons are also sources of background. Besides the signal region, control regions are defined to constrain the main backgrounds. Results are obtained using a binned likelihood fit to kinematic distributions in the signal and control regions.

The article is organized as follows. A brief description of the ATLAS detector is given in Section 2. The collected data samples and the simulations of signal and SM background processes are described in Section 3. Section 4 presents the object definitions, while the event analysis and kinematic reconstruction are explained in Section 5. Background evaluation and sources of systematic uncertainty are described in Sections 6 and 7. Results are presented in Section 8, and conclusions are drawn in Section 9.

¹ In this article, lepton is used to denote an electron or muon, including those coming from leptonic τ -lepton decays.

² Prompt leptons are leptons from the decay of W or Z bosons, either directly or through an intermediate $\tau \rightarrow \ell\nu\nu$ decay, or from the semileptonic decay of top quarks.

Table 1: Maximum allowed FCNC $t \rightarrow qZ$ ($q = u, c$) branching ratios predicted by several models [3–10].

Model:	SM	QS	2HDM	FC 2HDM	MSSM	RPV SUSY	RS	EMF
$\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow qZ)$:	10^{-14}	10^{-4}	10^{-6}	10^{-10}	10^{-7}	10^{-6}	10^{-5}	10^{-6}

2 ATLAS detector and data samples

The ATLAS experiment [23] is a multi-purpose particle physics detector consisting of several subdetector systems, which almost fully cover the solid angle³ around the interaction point. It is composed of an inner tracking system close to the interaction point and immersed in a 2 T axial magnetic field produced by a thin superconducting solenoid. A lead/liquid-argon (LAr) electromagnetic calorimeter, a steel/scintillator-tile hadronic calorimeter, copper/LAr hadronic endcap calorimeters, copper/LAr and tungsten/LAr forward calorimeters, and a muon spectrometer with three superconducting magnets, each one with eight toroid coils, complete the detector. A new innermost silicon pixel layer was added to the inner detector after Run 1 [24, 25]. The combination of all these systems provides charged-particle momentum measurements, together with efficient and precise lepton and photon identification in the pseudorapidity range $|\eta| < 2.5$. Energy deposits over the full coverage of the calorimeters, $|\eta| < 4.9$, are used to reconstruct jets and missing transverse momentum. A two-level trigger system is used to select interesting events [26]. The first level is implemented with custom hardware and uses a subset of detector information to reduce the event rate. It is followed by a software-based trigger level to reduce the event rate to approximately 1 kHz.

In this analysis, the combined 2015 and 2016 datasets from proton–proton (pp) collisions at $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 36.1 fb^{-1} are used. Analysed events are selected by either a single-electron or a single-muon trigger. Triggers with different transverse-momentum thresholds are used to increase the overall efficiency. The triggers using a low electron transverse momentum (p_{T}^e) or muon transverse momentum (p_{T}^μ) threshold ($p_{\text{T}}^e > 24$ GeV or $p_{\text{T}}^\mu > 20$ GeV for 2015 data and $p_{\text{T}}^{e,\mu} > 26$ GeV for 2016 data) also have isolation requirements. At high p_{T} the isolation requirements incur small efficiency losses which are recovered by higher-threshold triggers ($p_{\text{T}}^e > 60$ GeV, $p_{\text{T}}^e > 120$ GeV, or $p_{\text{T}}^\mu > 50$ GeV for 2015 data and $p_{\text{T}}^e > 60$ GeV, $p_{\text{T}}^e > 140$ GeV, or $p_{\text{T}}^\mu > 50$ GeV for 2016 data) without isolation requirements.

3 Signal and background simulation samples

In pp collisions at a centre-of-mass energy of $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV at the LHC, top quarks are produced according to the SM mainly in $t\bar{t}$ pairs with a predicted cross section of $\sigma_{t\bar{t}} = 0.83 \pm 0.05 \text{ nb}$ [27–32] for the top-quark mass value of 172.5 GeV used to simulate events as described in the following paragraphs; the uncertainty includes contributions from uncertainties in the factorization and renormalization scales, the

³ ATLAS uses a right-handed coordinate system with its origin at the nominal interaction point in the centre of the detector and the z -axis along the beam pipe. The x -axis points from the interaction point to the centre of the LHC ring, and the y -axis points upward. Cylindrical coordinates (r, ϕ) are used in the transverse plane, ϕ being the azimuthal angle around the beam pipe. The pseudorapidity is defined in terms of the polar angle θ as $\eta = -\ln \tan(\theta/2)$. The ΔR distance is defined as $\Delta R = \sqrt{(\Delta\eta)^2 + (\Delta\phi)^2}$.

parton distribution functions (PDF), the strong coupling α_S , and the top-quark mass. The cross section is calculated at next-to-next-to-leading order (NNLO) in QCD including resummation of next-to-next-to-leading logarithmic soft gluon terms with Top++ 2.0. The effects of PDF and α_S uncertainties are calculated using the PDF4LHC prescription [33] with the MSTW 2008 68% CL NNLO [34, 35], CT10 NNLO [36, 37] and NNPDF 2.3 5f FFN [38] PDF sets and are added in quadrature to those from the renormalization and factorization scale uncertainties.

The next-to-leading-order (NLO) simulation of signal events was performed with the event generator MG5_aMC@NLO [39] interfaced to Pythia8 [40] with the A14 [41] set of tuned parameters and the NNPDF2.3LO PDF set [38]. Dynamic factorization and renormalization scales were used. The factorization and renormalization scales were set equal to $\sqrt{m_t^2 + (p_{T,t}^2 + p_{T,\bar{t}}^2)/2}$ where $p_{T,t}$ ($p_{T,\bar{t}}$) is the transverse momentum of the top quark (top antiquark). For the matrix element, the PDF set NNPDF3.0NLO [42] was used. For the top-quark FCNC decay, the effects of new physics at an energy scale Λ were included by adding dimension-six effective terms to the SM Lagrangian. No differences between the kinematical distributions from the $bWuZ$ and $bWcZ$ processes are observed. Due to the different b -tagging mistag rates for u - and c -quarks, the signal efficiencies differ after applying requirements on the b -tagged jet multiplicity. Hence limits on $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow qZ)$ are set separately for $q = u, c$. Only decays of the W and Z bosons with charged leptons were generated at the matrix-element level ($Z \rightarrow e^+e^-, \mu^+\mu^-, \text{ or } \tau^+\tau^-$ and $W \rightarrow e\nu, \mu\nu, \text{ or } \tau\nu$).

Several SM processes have final-state topologies similar to the signal, with at least three prompt charged leptons, especially dibosons (WZ and ZZ), $t\bar{t}V$ (V is W or Z), $t\bar{t}WW$, $t\bar{t}H$, gluon–gluon fusion (ggF) H , vector-boson fusion (VBF) H , VH , tZ , WtZ , $ttt(t)$, and triboson (WWW , ZWW and ZZZ) production. The theoretical estimates for these backgrounds are further constrained by the simultaneous fit to the signal and control regions described below. Events with non-prompt leptons or events in which at least one jet is misidentified as an isolated charged lepton (labelled as non-prompt leptons throughout this article) can also fulfil the event selection requirements. These events, typically Z +jets (including γ emission), $t\bar{t}$, and single-top (Wt), are estimated with the semi-data-driven method explained in Section 6, which also uses simulated samples which for the Z +jets events include Z production in association with heavy-flavour quarks.

Table 2 summarizes information about the generators, parton shower, and PDFs used to simulate the different event samples considered in the analysis. The associated production of a $t\bar{t}$ pair with one vector boson was generated at NLO with MG5_aMC@NLO interfaced to Pythia8 with the A14 set of tuned parameters and the NNPDF2.3LO PDF set. The $t\bar{t}Z$ and $t\bar{t}W$ samples were normalized to the NLO QCD+electroweak cross-section calculation using a fixed scale $(m_t + m_V/2)$ [43]. In the case of the $t\bar{t}Z$ sample with the $Z \rightarrow \ell^+\ell^-$ decay mode, the Z/γ^* interference was included with the criterion $m_{\ell\ell} > 5$ GeV applied. The t -channel production of a single top quark in association with a Z boson (tZ) was generated using MG5_aMC@NLO using the four-flavour PDF scheme. Production of a single top quark in the Wt -channel together with a Z boson (WtZ) was generated with MG5_aMC@NLO with the parton shower simulated using Pythia8, the PDF set NNPDF2.3LO, and the A14 set of tuned parameters. The diagram removal technique [44] was employed to handle the overlap of WtZ with $t\bar{t}Z$ and $t\bar{t}$ production followed by a three-body top-quark decay ($t \rightarrow WZb$). The procedure also removes the interference between WtZ and these two processes. Diboson processes with four charged leptons (4ℓ), three charged leptons and one neutrino ($\ell\ell\ell\nu$), two charged leptons and two neutrinos ($\ell\ell\nu\nu$), and diboson processes having additional hadronic contributions ($\ell\ell\nu jj$, $\ell\ell\ell jj$, $gg\ell\ell\ell$, $\ell\ell\nu jj$) were simulated using the Sherpa 2.1.1 [45] generator. The matrix elements contain all diagrams with four electroweak vertices. They were calculated for up to one (4ℓ , $2\ell + 2\nu$) or no additional partons ($3\ell + 1\nu$) at NLO and up to three partons at LO using

Table 2: Generators, parton shower simulation, parton distribution functions, and tune parameters used to produce simulated samples for this analysis. The acronyms ME and PS stand for matrix element and parton shower, respectively.

Sample	Generator	Parton shower	ME PDF	PS PDF	Tune parameters
$t\bar{t} \rightarrow bWqZ$	MG5_aMC@NLO [39]	Pythia8 [40]	NNPDF3.0NLO [42]	NNPDF2.3LO [38]	A14 [41]
$t\bar{t}V, t\bar{t}H$	MG5_aMC@NLO	Pythia8	NNPDF3.0NLO	NNPDF2.3LO	A14
$t\bar{t}Z$ (alternative)	Sherpa 2.2.0 [45]	Sherpa 2.2.0	NNPDF3.0NNLO	NNPDF3.0NNLO	Sherpa default
WZ, ZZ	Sherpa 2.1.1	Sherpa 2.1.1	CT10 [36]	CT10	Sherpa default
WZ (alternative)	Powheg-Box v2 [49]	Pythia8	CT10nlo	CTEQ6L1 [54]	AZNLO [55]
tZ	MG5_aMC@NLO	Pythia6 [56]	NNPDF3.0NLO	CTEQ6L1	Perugia2012 [57]
tZ (rad. syst.)	MG5_aMC@NLO	Pythia6	NNPDF3.0NLO	CTEQ6L1	P2012RadHi/Lo [57]
WtZ	MG5_aMC@NLO	Pythia8	NNPDF3.0NLO	NNPDF2.3LO	A14
WtZ (alternative)	MG5_aMC@NLO	Herwig++ [58]	CT10	CTEQ6L1	UE-EE-5 [59]
$ggF H, VBF H$	Powheg-Box v2	Pythia8	CT10	CTEQ6L1	AZNLO
WH, ZH	Pythia8	Pythia8	NNPDF2.3LO	NNPDF2.3LO	A14
$3t, 4t, t\bar{t}WW$	MG5_aMC@NLO	Pythia8	NNPDF3.0NLO	NNPDF2.3LO	A14
Tribosons	Sherpa 2.1.1	Sherpa 2.1.1	CT10	CT10	Sherpa default
Z +jets	Powheg-Box v2, Photos++ [50]	Pythia8	CT10	CTEQ6L1	AZNLO
$t\bar{t} \rightarrow bWbW$	Powheg-Box v2	Pythia8	CT10	NNPDF2.3LO	A14
$t\bar{t} \rightarrow bWbW$ (rad. syst.)	Powheg-Box v2	Pythia8	CT10	NNPDF2.3LO	A14v3cUp/Do [41]
$t\bar{t} \rightarrow bWbW$ (PS syst.)	Powheg-Box v2	Herwig7 [60]	NNPDF3.0NLO	MMHT20141o68c1 [61]	H7-UE-MMHT [60]
$t\bar{t} \rightarrow bWbW$ (ME syst.)	MG5_aMC@NLO	Pythia8	NNPDF3.0NLO	NNPDF2.3LO	A14
Wt	Powheg-Box v1	Pythia6	CT10f4	CTEQ6L1	Perugia2012

the Comix [46] and OpenLoops [47] matrix element generators and were merged with the Sherpa parton shower using the ME+PS@NLO prescription [46–48]. The CT10 PDF set was used in conjunction with a dedicated parton shower tuning developed by the Sherpa authors. The Higgs boson samples ($t\bar{t}H$, Higgs boson production via gluon–gluon fusion and vector boson fusion, and in association with a vector boson) were normalized to the theoretical calculations in Ref. [43]. Events containing Z bosons + jets were simulated with Powheg-Box v2 [49] interfaced to the Pythia8 parton shower model, using Photos++ version 3.52 [50] for QED emissions from electroweak vertices and charged leptons. The generation of $t\bar{t}$ and single top quarks in the Wt -channel was done with Powheg-Box v2 and Powheg-Box v1, respectively. Due to the high lepton-multiplicity requirement of the event selection and to increase the sample size, the $t\bar{t}$ sample was produced by selecting only true dilepton events in the final state. The SM production of three or four top quarks and the associated production of a $t\bar{t}$ pair with two W bosons were generated at LO with MG5_aMC@NLO+Pythia8. The production of three massive vector bosons with subsequent leptonic decays of all three bosons was modelled at LO with the Sherpa 2.1.1 generator. Up to two additional partons are included in the matrix element at LO.

A set of minimum-bias interactions generated with Pythia 8.186 using the A2 set of tuned parameters [51] and the MSTW2008LO [34] PDF set were overlaid on the hard-scattering event to account for additional pp collisions in the same or nearby bunch crossings (pile-up). Simulated samples were re-weighted to match the pile-up conditions in data. For most samples, detailed simulation of the detector and trigger system was performed with standard ATLAS software using GEANT4 [52, 53]. Fast simulation based on ATLFastII [53] is alternatively used for a few samples dedicated to the evaluation of systematic uncertainties affecting background modelling. The same offline reconstruction methods used on data are also applied to the samples of simulated events. Simulated events are corrected so that the object identification, reconstruction, and trigger efficiencies; the energy scales; and the energy resolutions match those determined from data control samples.

4 Object reconstruction

The final states of interest for this search include electrons, muons, jets, b -tagged jets and missing transverse momentum.

Electron candidates are reconstructed [62] from energy deposits (clusters) in the electromagnetic calorimeter matched to reconstructed charged-particle tracks in the inner detector. The candidates are required to have a transverse energy $E_T > 15$ GeV and the pseudorapidity of the calorimeter energy cluster associated with the electron candidate must satisfy $|\eta_{\text{cluster}}| < 2.47$. Clusters in the transition region between the barrel and endcap calorimeters, $1.37 \leq |\eta_{\text{cluster}}| \leq 1.52$, have poorer energy resolution and are excluded. To reduce the background from non-prompt sources, electron candidates are also required to satisfy $|d_0|/\sigma(d_0) < 5$ and $|z_0 \sin(\theta)| < 0.5$ mm criteria, where d_0 is the transverse impact parameter, with uncertainty $\sigma(d_0)$, and z_0 is the longitudinal impact parameter with respect to the primary vertex (defined in Section 5). The sum of transverse energies of clusters in the calorimeter within a cone of $\Delta R = 0.2$ around the electron candidate, excluding the p_T of the electron candidate, is required to be less than 6% of the electron p_T . The scalar sum of particle transverse momenta around the electron candidate within a cone of $\min(10 \text{ GeV}/p_T, 0.2)$ must be less than 6% of the electron candidate's p_T .

Muon candidates are reconstructed from tracks in the inner detector and muon spectrometer, which are combined to improve the reconstruction precision and to increase the background rejection [63]. They are required to have $p_T > 15$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.5$. Muons are also required to satisfy $|d_0|/\sigma(d_0) < 3$ and $|z_0 \sin(\theta)| < 0.5$ mm criteria. Additionally, the scalar sum of particle transverse momenta around the muon candidate within a cone of $\min(10 \text{ GeV}/p_T, 0.3)$ must be less than 6% of the muon candidate's p_T .

Jets are reconstructed from topological clusters of calorimeter cells that are noise-suppressed and calibrated to the electromagnetic scale [64] using the anti- k_t algorithm [65] with a radius parameter $R = 0.4$ as implemented in FastJet [66]. Corrections that change the angles and the energy are applied to the jets, starting with a subtraction procedure that uses the jet area to estimate and remove the average energy contributed by pile-up interactions [67]. This is followed by a jet-energy-scale calibration that restores the jet energy to the mean response of a particle-level simulation by correcting variations due to jet flavour and detector geometry and data driven corrections that match the data to the simulation energy scale [68]. Jets in the analysis have $p_T > 25$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.5$.

To reduce the number of selected jets that originate from pile-up, an additional selection criterion based on a jet-vertex tagging technique is applied. Jet-vertex tagging is a likelihood discriminant combining information from several track-based variables [69] and is only applied to jets with $p_T < 60$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.4$.

Jets containing b -hadrons are identified (b -tagged) [70, 71] using an algorithm based on multivariate techniques. It combines information from the impact parameters of displaced tracks and from topological properties of secondary and tertiary decay vertices reconstructed within the jet. Using simulated $t\bar{t}$ events, the b -tagging efficiency for jets originating from a b -quark is determined to be 77% for the chosen working point, while the rejection factors for light-flavour jets and charm jets are 134 and 6, respectively.

The missing transverse momentum \vec{p}_T^{miss} is the negative vector sum of the p_T of all selected and calibrated objects in the event, including a term to account for soft particles in the event that are not associated with any of the selected objects [72, 73]. To reduce contamination from pile-up interactions, the soft term is calculated from inner detector tracks matched to the selected primary vertex. The magnitude of the missing transverse momentum is E_T^{miss} .

To avoid double counting of single final-state objects, such as an isolated electron being reconstructed as both an electron and a jet, the following procedures are applied in the order given. Electron candidates which share a track with a muon candidate are removed. If the distance in ΔR between a jet and an electron candidate is $\Delta R < 0.2$, then the jet is dropped. If, for the same electron, multiple jets are found with this requirement, only the closest one is dropped. If the distance in ΔR between a jet and an electron is $0.2 < \Delta R < 0.4$, then the electron is dropped. If the distance in ΔR between a jet and a muon candidate is $\Delta R < 0.4$ and if the jet has more than two associated tracks, the muon is dropped; otherwise the jet is removed.

5 Event selection and reconstruction

Events considered in this analysis meet the following criteria. At least one of the selected leptons must be matched, with $\Delta R < 0.15$, to the appropriate trigger object and have transverse momentum greater than 25 GeV or 27 GeV for the data collected in 2015 or 2016, respectively. The events must have at least one primary vertex. The primary vertex must have at least two associated tracks, each with $p_T > 400$ MeV. The primary vertex with the highest sum of p_T^2 over all associated tracks is chosen. Exactly three isolated charged leptons with $|\eta| < 2.5$ and $p_T > 15$ GeV are required. The Z boson candidate is reconstructed from the two leptons that have the same flavour, opposite charge, and a reconstructed mass within 15 GeV of the Z boson mass (m_Z). If more than one compatible lepton pair is found, the one with the reconstructed mass closest to m_Z is chosen as the Z boson candidate. According to the signal topology, the events are then required to have $E_T^{\text{miss}} > 20$ GeV and at least two jets. All jets must have $p_T > 25$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.5$, and exactly one of the jets must be b -tagged.

Applying energy–momentum conservation, the kinematic properties of the top quarks are reconstructed from the corresponding decay particles by minimizing

$$\chi^2 = \frac{\left(m_{j_a \ell_a \ell_b}^{\text{reco}} - m_{t_{\text{FCNC}}}\right)^2}{\sigma_{t_{\text{FCNC}}}^2} + \frac{\left(m_{j_b \ell_c \nu}^{\text{reco}} - m_{t_{\text{SM}}}\right)^2}{\sigma_{t_{\text{SM}}}^2} + \frac{\left(m_{\ell_c \nu}^{\text{reco}} - m_W\right)^2}{\sigma_W^2},$$

where $m_{j_a \ell_a \ell_b}^{\text{reco}}$, $m_{j_b \ell_c \nu}^{\text{reco}}$, and $m_{\ell_c \nu}^{\text{reco}}$ are the reconstructed masses of the qZ , bW , and $\ell\nu$ systems, respectively. For each jet combination, j_b corresponds to the b -tagged jet, while any jet can be assigned to j_a . Since the neutrino from the semileptonic decay of the top quark ($t \rightarrow bW \rightarrow b\ell\nu$) is undetected, its four-momentum must be estimated. This is done by assuming that the lepton not previously assigned to the Z boson and the b -tagged jet originate from the W boson and SM top-quark decay, respectively, and that \vec{p}_T^{miss} is the transverse momentum vector of the neutrino in the W boson decay. The longitudinal component of the neutrino momentum (p_z^ν) is then determined by the minimization of the χ^2 . The central values of the masses and the widths of the top quarks and the W boson are taken from simulated signal events. This is done by matching the particles in the simulated events to the reconstructed ones, setting the longitudinal momentum of the neutrino to the p_z of the simulated neutrino, and then performing Bukin fits⁴ [74] to the masses of the matched reconstructed top quarks and W boson. The obtained values are $m_{t_{\text{FCNC}}} = 169.6$ GeV, $\sigma_{t_{\text{FCNC}}} = 12.0$ GeV, $m_{t_{\text{SM}}} = 167.2$ GeV, $\sigma_{t_{\text{SM}}} = 24.0$ GeV, $m_W = 81.2$ GeV and $\sigma_W = 15.1$ GeV. The χ^2 minimization gives the most probable value for p_z^ν for a given combination.

⁴ These fits use a piecewise function with a Gaussian function in the centre and two asymmetric tails. Six parameters determine the overall normalization, the peak position, the width of the core, the asymmetry, the size of the lower tail, and the size of the higher tail. Of these, only the peak position and the width enter the χ^2 .

The combination with the minimum χ^2 is chosen, which fixes the assignment of reconstructed particles and the corresponding p_z^ν value. The jet from the top-quark FCNC decay is referred to as the light-quark (q) jet. The fractions of correct assignments between the reconstructed top quarks and the true simulated particles (evaluated as a match within a cone of size $\Delta R = 0.4$) are $\epsilon_{t\text{FCNC}} = 80\%$ and $\epsilon_{t\text{SM}} = 58\%$, where the difference comes from the fact that for the SM top-quark decay the match of the E_T^{miss} with the simulated neutrino is less efficient.

The final requirements defining the signal region (SR) are $|m_{j_a \ell_a \ell_b}^{\text{reco}} - 172.5 \text{ GeV}| < 40 \text{ GeV}$, $|m_{j_b \ell_c \nu}^{\text{reco}} - 172.5 \text{ GeV}| < 40 \text{ GeV}$, and $|m_{\ell_c \nu}^{\text{reco}} - 80.4 \text{ GeV}| < 30 \text{ GeV}$. Figure 1 shows the mass of the Z boson candidate as well as the E_T^{miss} and the masses of both top-quark candidates for the events fulfilling these requirements. The stacked histograms show backgrounds with three prompt leptons, normalized to the theory predictions, and the scaled background from non-prompt leptons, normalized as discussed in the next section.

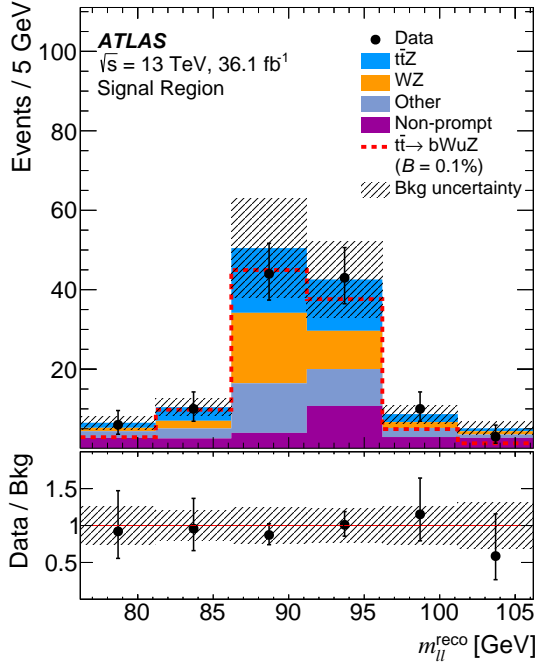
6 Background estimation and control regions

The main sources of background events containing three prompt leptons are: diboson production, $t\bar{t}Z$, and tZ processes. In addition, events where one or more of the reconstructed leptons are non-prompt, either mis-reconstructed or from heavy-flavour decays, are background sources. To assess how well the data agree with the simulated samples of the expected background, five control regions (CRs) are defined and included in the final fit. This allows rescaling of the background expectations to the best fit with observed data and reduces the background uncertainties. Systematic uncertainties in the signal yield are also reduced by the final fit (Section 8).

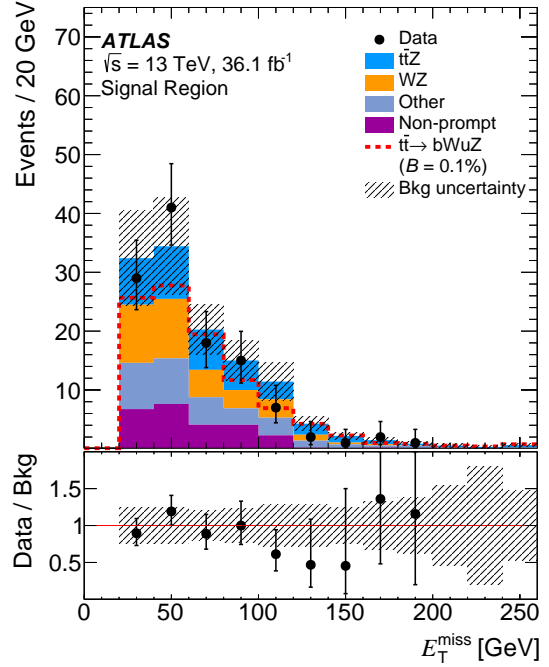
Backgrounds from events containing at least one non-prompt lepton are estimated by means of a semi-data-driven technique using dedicated selections. This technique uses the data to determine the normalization for simulated Z +jets and $t\bar{t}$ events with a non-prompt electron and non-prompt muon separately. In order to determine the non-prompt lepton scale factors (λ^e , λ^μ) for simulated Z +jets and $t\bar{t}$ events, four regions are defined each enriched with non-prompt electrons or muons from Z +jets events (“light” region) or $t\bar{t}$ events (“heavy” region). The selections used, which are given in Table 3, make the four regions orthogonal to the CRs and SR used in the final fit (Section 8). The non-prompt lepton scale factors for Z +jets and $t\bar{t}$ events are expected to be different due to differences in background sources and are determined by a simultaneous likelihood fit to the inclusive yields in the four regions, taking into account statistical and systematic uncertainties, leading to $\lambda_{Z+\text{jets}}^e = 2.2 \pm 0.8$, $\lambda_{Z+\text{jets}}^\mu = 1.9 \pm 0.9$, $\lambda_{t\bar{t}}^e = 1.1 \pm 0.3$, and $\lambda_{t\bar{t}}^\mu = 1.1 \pm 0.7$. These non-prompt lepton scale factors are applied to the Z +jets and $t\bar{t}$ samples in the CRs and SR used in the final fit (Section 8). Agreement between data and expectations in the CRs is significantly improved after applying the non-prompt lepton scale factors to the simulated samples.

The $t\bar{t}Z$ CR requires exactly three leptons, two of them with the same flavour, opposite charge, and a reconstructed $m_{\ell\ell}$ within 15 GeV of the Z boson mass. Furthermore, the events are required to have at least four jets with $p_T > 25 \text{ GeV}$ and $|\eta| < 2.5$, two of which must be b -tagged.

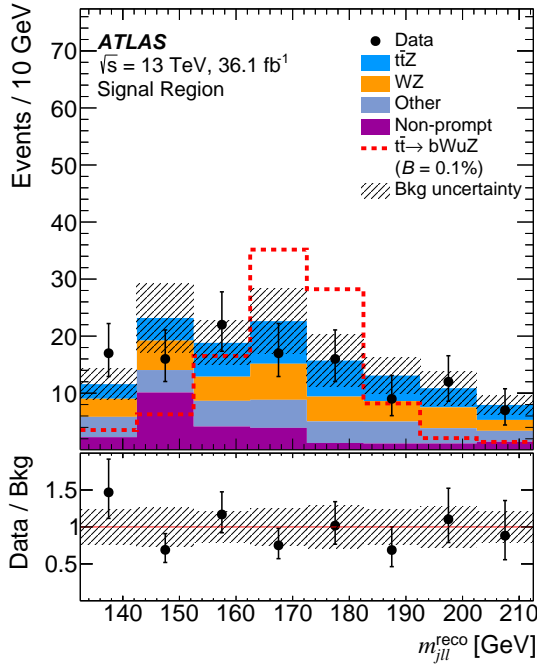
The WZ CR requires three leptons, two of them with the same flavour, opposite charge, and a reconstructed $m_{\ell\ell}$ within 15 GeV of the Z boson mass. Additional requirements are the presence of at least two jets with $p_T > 25 \text{ GeV}$ and $|\eta| < 2.5$, the leading jet having $p_T > 35 \text{ GeV}$, no b -tagged jets with $p_T > 25 \text{ GeV}$, $E_T^{\text{miss}} > 40 \text{ GeV}$, and a transverse mass $m_T^{\ell\nu} > 50 \text{ GeV}$, where $m_T^{\ell\nu}$ is calculated from the momentum of the non- Z lepton and the missing transverse momentum vector.



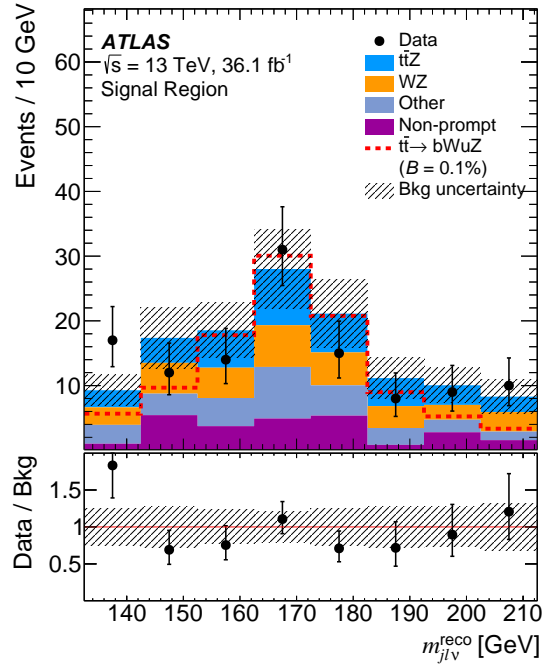
(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 1: Expected (filled histogram) and observed (points with error bars) distributions in the SR before the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis of (a) the mass of the Z boson candidate, (b) E_T^{miss} , (c) the mass of the top-quark candidate with FCNC decay, and (d) the mass of the top-quark candidate with SM decay. For comparison, distributions for the FCNC $t\bar{t} \rightarrow bWuZ$ signal (dashed line), normalized to $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow uZ) = 0.1\%$, are also shown. The dashed area represents the total uncertainty in the background prediction. The first (last) bin in all distributions includes the underflow (overflow). The “Other” category includes all remaining backgrounds described in Section 3.

The ZZ CR requires two pairs of leptons, each with the same flavour, opposite charge, and a reconstructed $m_{\ell\ell}$ within 15 GeV of the Z boson mass. At least one jet with $p_T > 25$ GeV and $|\eta| < 2.5$, no b -tagged jets with $p_T > 25$ GeV, and $E_T^{\text{miss}} > 20$ GeV are also required.

The CR for the non-prompt lepton backgrounds requires three leptons with two of them having the same flavour, opposite charge, and a reconstructed $m_{\ell\ell}$ outside 15 GeV of the Z boson mass, at least one jet with $p_T > 25$ GeV, and $E_T^{\text{miss}} > 20$ GeV. This CR is split into two regions, with either zero (CR0) or exactly one (CR1) b -tagged jet.

Table 4 summarizes the selection requirements described above. The expected and observed yields in these regions, before the background fit described in Section 8, are shown in Table 5.

Table 3: Selection criteria applied to derive the four scale factors of the non-prompt leptons background. OS indicates a pair of opposite-sign leptons, OSSF indicates a pair of opposite-sign, same-flavour leptons. Additionally, events with at least two jets, one of them b -tagged, and $20 \text{ GeV} < E_T^{\text{miss}} < 40 \text{ GeV}$ in the SR are rejected from the “light” regions.

“Light” region – e	“Light” region – μ	“Heavy” region – e	“Heavy” region – μ
eee or $e\mu\mu$, OSSF	$\mu\mu\mu$ or μee , OSSF	$e\mu\mu$, OS no OSSF	μee , OS no OSSF
$ m_{\ell\ell} - 91.2 \text{ GeV} < 15 \text{ GeV}$	$ m_{\ell\ell} - 91.2 \text{ GeV} < 15 \text{ GeV}$		
≥ 1 jet	≥ 1 jet	≥ 2 jet	≥ 2 jet
$E_T^{\text{miss}} < 40 \text{ GeV}$	$E_T^{\text{miss}} < 40 \text{ GeV}$		
$m_T \leq 50 \text{ GeV}$	$m_T \leq 50 \text{ GeV}$		

Table 4: The selection requirements applied for the background control and signal regions. OSSF refers to the presence of a pair of opposite-sign, same-flavour leptons.

Selection	$t\bar{t}Z$ CR	WZ CR	ZZ CR	Non-prompt lepton CR0 (CR1)	SR
No. leptons	3	3	4	3	3
OSSF	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
$ m_{\ell\ell}^{\text{reco}} - 91.2 \text{ GeV} $	$< 15 \text{ GeV}$	$< 15 \text{ GeV}$	$< 15 \text{ GeV}$	$> 15 \text{ GeV}$	$< 15 \text{ GeV}$
No. jets	≥ 4	≥ 2	≥ 1	≥ 2	≥ 2
No. b -tagged jets	2	0	0	0 (1)	1
E_T^{miss}	$> 20 \text{ GeV}$	$> 40 \text{ GeV}$	$> 20 \text{ GeV}$	$> 20 \text{ GeV}$	$> 20 \text{ GeV}$
$m_T^{\ell\nu}$	-	$> 50 \text{ GeV}$	-	-	-
$ m_{\ell\nu}^{\text{reco}} - 80.4 \text{ GeV} $	-	-	-	-	$< 30 \text{ GeV}$
$ m_{j\ell\nu}^{\text{reco}} - 172.5 \text{ GeV} $	-	-	-	-	$< 40 \text{ GeV}$
$ m_{j\ell\ell}^{\text{reco}} - 172.5 \text{ GeV} $	-	-	-	-	$< 40 \text{ GeV}$

Table 5: Event yields in the background CRs for all significant sources of events before the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis described in Section 8. The uncertainties shown include all of the systematic uncertainties described in Section 7. The entry labelled “other backgrounds” includes all remaining backgrounds described in Section 3 and in Table 2.

Sample	$t\bar{t}Z$ CR	WZ CR	ZZ CR	Non-prompt lepton CR0	Non-prompt lepton CR1
$t\bar{t}Z$	61 ± 9	16.3 ± 3.1	0 ± 0	6.1 ± 1.2	22.1 ± 3.2
WZ	9 ± 9	560 ± 240	0 ± 0	150 ± 70	20 ± 9
ZZ	0.07 ± 0.03	48 ± 11	92 ± 20	58 ± 16	9.0 ± 2.3
Non-prompt leptons	3 ± 6	28 ± 16	0 ± 0	150 ± 50	140 ± 70
Other backgrounds	13.4 ± 2.7	22 ± 5	1.0 ± 0.6	17 ± 6	32 ± 6
Total background	87 ± 15	670 ± 240	93 ± 20	380 ± 90	230 ± 70
Data	81	734	87	433	260
Data / Bkg	0.94 ± 0.19	1.1 ± 0.4	0.94 ± 0.23	1.13 ± 0.28	1.1 ± 0.4

7 Systematic uncertainties

The background fit to the CRs, described in Section 8, reduces the systematic uncertainty from some sources, due to the constraints introduced by the data. The effect on shape and normalization of each source of systematic uncertainty before the fit is studied by independently varying each parameter within its estimated uncertainty and propagating this through the full analysis chain.

The main uncertainties, in both the background and signal estimations, are from theoretical normalization uncertainties and uncertainties in the modelling of background processes in the simulation.

The theoretical normalization uncertainties are estimated to be 12% for $t\bar{t}Z$, 13% for $t\bar{t}W$ [39], and 30% for tZ production [75]. For dibosons, the uncertainties in the normalization of the cross section [76] and from the choice of values for the electroweak parameters [77] are added in quadrature, yielding a 12.5% uncertainty. An uncertainty of +10% and -28% is assigned to the WtZ background cross section following the methodology of Ref. [78]. For the remaining small backgrounds, a 50% uncertainty is assumed. The $t\bar{t}$ production cross-section uncertainties from the independent variation of the factorization and renormalization scales, the PDF choice, and α_S variations (see Refs. [32, 33] and references therein and Refs. [35, 37, 38]) give a 5% uncertainty in the signal normalization.

The uncertainties in the modelling of $t\bar{t}Z$ and WZ processes in the simulation are taken from alternative generators (Sherpa 2.2.0 and Powheg-Box v2 interfaced to the Pythia8, respectively) which yield 4% and 50% uncertainties in the SR, respectively. The WtZ parton-shower uncertainty is estimated as 6% in the SR by using a sample interfaced to Herwig++ [58]. The effect of QCD radiation on the tZ production process is estimated to be below 2% in the SR by using alternative MG5_aMC@NLO_Pythia6 [56] tZ samples with additional radiation. The uncertainty due to the choice of NLO generator for the $t\bar{t}$ event production is evaluated using the alternative sample generated with MG5_aMC@NLO interfaced to Pythia8. The uncertainty in the total non-prompt leptons background in the SR is 25%. To evaluate the uncertainty due to the choice of parton shower algorithm, $t\bar{t}$ samples generated using Powheg interfaced to Herwig7 [60] are used, yielding 2% uncertainty in the total non-prompt leptons background in the SR. To estimate the effect of QCD radiation on the $t\bar{t}$ samples, alternative samples generated with Powheg+Pythia8 are

considered where the factorization and renormalization scales are varied up and down by a factor of two and the A14 set of tuned parameters is changed to a version that varied the VAR3c [41] parameter, changing the amount of QCD radiation. This leads to a 10% uncertainty in the total non-prompt leptons background in the SR. Non-prompt lepton scale factor uncertainties are considered in the estimation of the backgrounds from events containing at least one non-prompt lepton.

For both the estimated signal and background event yields, experimental uncertainties resulting from detector effects are considered, including the lepton reconstruction, identification and trigger efficiencies, as well as lepton momentum scales and resolutions [62, 79, 80]. Uncertainties of the E_T^{miss} scale [72], pile-up effects, and jet-energy scale and resolution [81, 82] are also considered. The b -tagging uncertainty component, which includes the uncertainty of the b -, c -, mistagged- and τ -jet scale factors (the τ and charm uncertainties are highly correlated and evaluated as such) is evaluated by varying the η -, p_T - and flavour-dependent scale factors applied to each jet in the simulated samples. The relative impact of each type of systematic uncertainty on the total background and signal yields is summarized before and after the fit in Table 6 and Table 7, respectively.

The uncertainty related to the integrated luminosity for the dataset used in this analysis is 2.1%. It is derived following the methodology described in Ref. [83] and only affects background estimates from simulated samples.

Table 6: Summary of the relative impact of each type of uncertainty on the total background (B) yield in the background control regions and on the background and signal (S) yields in the signal region before the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis.

Pre-fit Source	$t\bar{t}Z$ CR	WZ CR	ZZ CR	Non-prompt lepton CR0	Non-prompt lepton CR1	SR	
	B [%]	B [%]	B [%]	B [%]	B [%]	B [%]	S [%]
Event modelling	29	40	13	24	40	30	5
Leptons	2.1	2.4	3.0	2.6	2.9	2.6	1.9
Jets	6	8	15	10	4	9	4
b -tagging	7	1.5	0.6	2.3	3.0	5	3.4
E_T^{miss}	0.4	4	2.6	3.0	0.8	5	1.4
Non-prompt leptons	1.1	1.3	—	12	15	6	—
Pile-up	5	1.3	5	3.5	1.8	4	2.3
Luminosity	2.0	2.0	2.1	1.3	0.8	1.7	2.1

8 Results

A simultaneous fit to the SR and all CRs defined in Table 4 is used to search for a signal from FCNC decays of the top quark. A maximum-likelihood fit is performed to kinematic distributions in the signal and control regions to test for the presence of signal events. Contamination of the CRs by the signal is negligible. The inclusion of the CRs in a combined fit with the SR constrains backgrounds and reduces systematic uncertainties. The kinematic distributions used in the fit are the χ^2 of the kinematical reconstruction for the SR, the leading lepton's p_T for the non-prompt leptons and $t\bar{t}Z$ CRs, the transverse mass for the WZ CR, and the reconstructed mass of the four leptons for the ZZ CR.

Table 7: Summary of the relative impact of each type of uncertainty on the total background (B) yield in the background control regions and on the background and signal (S) yields in the signal region after the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis.

Post-fit Source	$t\bar{t}Z$ CR	WZ CR	ZZ CR	Non-prompt lepton CR0	Non-prompt lepton CR1	SR	
	B [%]	B [%]	B [%]	B [%]	B [%]	B [%]	S [%]
Event modelling	22	10	11	9	23	18	5
Leptons	2.0	2.4	2.9	2.6	2.9	2.6	1.8
Jets	5	6	11	8	4	8	4
b -tagging	7	1.4	0.6	2.1	2.8	4	3.1
E_T^{miss}	0.3	3.3	2.5	2.8	0.7	4	1.4
Non-prompt leptons	1.1	1.1	—	8	12	5	—
Pile-up	5	1.2	5	3.3	1.7	3.5	2.2
Luminosity	2.0	2.0	2.1	1.3	0.8	1.6	2.1

The statistical analysis to extract the signal is based on a binned likelihood function $L(\mu, \theta)$ constructed as a product of Poisson probability terms over all bins in each considered distribution, and Gaussian constraint terms for θ , a set of nuisance parameters that parameterize effects of statistical and systematic uncertainties on the signal and background expectations. The parameter μ is a multiplicative factor for the number of signal events normalized to a branching ratio $\mathcal{B}_{\text{ref}}(t \rightarrow qZ) = 0.1\%$. The nuisance parameters are floated in the combined fit to adjust the expectations for signal and background according to the corresponding systematic uncertainties, and their fitted values are the adjustment that best fits the data.

The test statistic is the profile likelihood ratio $q_\mu = -2 \ln(L(\mu, \hat{\theta}_\mu)/L(\hat{\mu}, \hat{\theta}))$, where $\hat{\mu}$ and $\hat{\theta}$ are the values of the parameters that maximize the likelihood function (with the constraints $0 \leq \hat{\mu} \leq \mu$), and $\hat{\theta}_\mu$ are the values of the nuisance parameters that maximize the likelihood function for a given value of μ . This test statistic is used to measure the probability that the observed data is compatible with the background-only hypothesis (i.e. for $\mu = 0$) and to make statistical inferences about μ .

The distributions used in the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis are presented in Figure 2. The same distributions after the fit are presented in Figure 3. Table 8 shows the expected number of background events, number of selected data events, and signal yields in the SR before and after the fit. The post-fit signal yield changes relative to the pre-fit one due to the fitted nuisance parameters. The yields in the CRs after the fit are shown in Table 9. Good agreement between data and the expectation from the background-only hypothesis is observed, and no evidence of a FCNC signal is found. The upper limits on $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow qZ)$ are computed with the CL_s method [84, 85] using the asymptotic properties of q_μ [86–88] and assuming that only one FCNC mode contributes. Figure 4 shows the observed CL_s for $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow uZ)$ and $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow cZ)$ together with the $\pm 1\sigma$ and $\pm 2\sigma$ bands for the expected values. The 95% confidence level (CL) limit on $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow uZ)$ is 1.7×10^{-4} , and on $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow cZ)$ it is 2.4×10^{-4} . The observed and expected limits are shown in Table 10. It can be seen that the observed limit is about 1σ more stringent than expected due to a smaller number of observed events in the first bin of the χ^2 distribution in the SR, which is the one with the largest sensitivity to the signal.

Using the effective field theory framework developed in the TopFCNC model [89, 90] and assuming a cut-off scale $\Lambda = 1$ TeV and that only one operator has a non-zero value, the upper limits on $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow uZ)$

and $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow cZ)$ are converted to 95% CL upper limits on the moduli of the operators contributing to the FCNC decay $t \rightarrow qZ$, which are presented in Table 11.

Table 8: Expected number of background events, number of selected data events, and number of signal events (arbitrarily normalized to a branching ratio of $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow qZ) = 0.1\%$) in the signal region before and after the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis. The uncertainties shown include all of the systematic uncertainties described in Section 7. The entry labelled “other backgrounds” includes all remaining backgrounds described in Section 3 and in Table 2. The uncertainties in the post-fit yields are calculated using the full correlation matrix from the fit.

Sample	Yields	
	Pre-fit	Post-fit
$t\bar{t}Z$	37 ± 5	37 ± 4
WZ	32 ± 19	32 ± 8
ZZ	6.2 ± 3.2	6.4 ± 3.0
Non-prompt leptons	26 ± 11	20 ± 7
Other backgrounds	23 ± 4	23 ± 4
Total background	124 ± 26	119 ± 10
Data	116	116
Data / Bkg	0.94 ± 0.21	0.97 ± 0.12
Signal $t \rightarrow uZ$ ($\mathcal{B} = 0.1\%$)	101 ± 8	103 ± 8
Signal $t \rightarrow cZ$ ($\mathcal{B} = 0.1\%$)	85 ± 7	87 ± 7

Table 9: Event yields in the background control regions for all significant sources of events after the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis. The uncertainties shown include all of the systematic uncertainties described in Section 7. The entry labelled “other backgrounds” includes all remaining backgrounds described in Section 3 and in Table 2. The uncertainties in the post-fit yields are calculated using the full correlation matrix from the fit.

Sample	$t\bar{t}Z$ CR	WZ CR	ZZ CR	Non-prompt lepton CR0	Non-prompt lepton CR1
$t\bar{t}Z$	61 ± 6	16.5 ± 3.1	0 ± 0	6.1 ± 1.2	21.9 ± 2.9
WZ	6 ± 4	610 ± 40	0 ± 0	166 ± 13	20 ± 5
ZZ	0.07 ± 0.02	49 ± 9	89 ± 12	59 ± 10	9.0 ± 2.2
Non-prompt leptons	2.0 ± 2.3	41 ± 15	0 ± 0	177 ± 32	174 ± 21
Other backgrounds	13.4 ± 2.6	23 ± 5	1.1 ± 0.6	19 ± 6	33 ± 7
Total background	82 ± 7	737 ± 35	90 ± 12	426 ± 30	258 ± 20
Data	81	734	87	433	260
Data / Bkg	0.99 ± 0.14	1.00 ± 0.06	0.97 ± 0.16	1.02 ± 0.09	1.01 ± 0.10

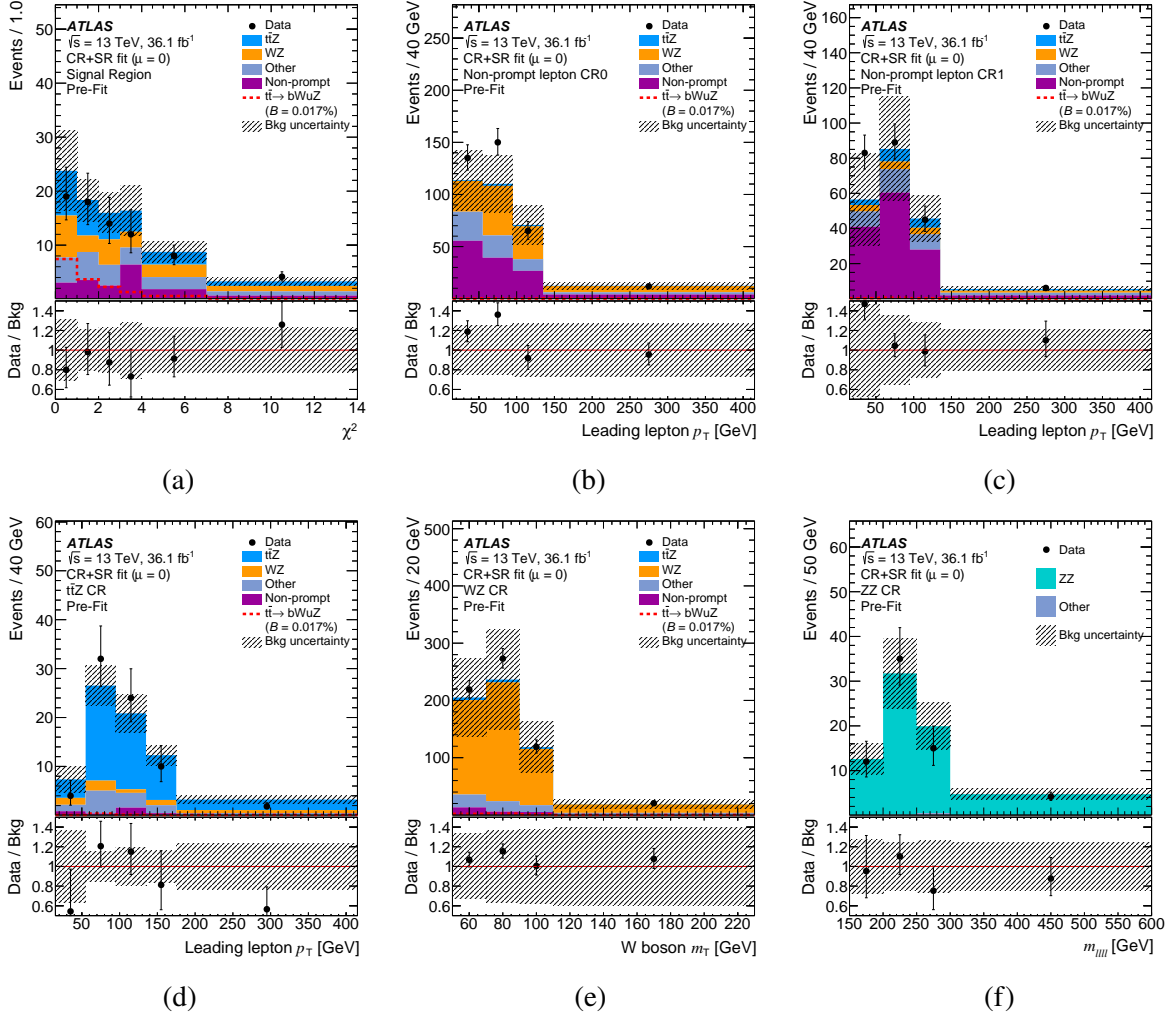


Figure 2: Expected (filled histogram) and observed (points with error bars) distributions before the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis of (a) the χ^2 of the kinematical reconstruction in the SR; (b) p_T of the leading lepton in the non-prompt lepton CR with b -tag veto; (c) p_T of the leading lepton in the non-prompt lepton CR with b -tag; (d) p_T of the leading lepton in the $i\bar{i}Z$ CR; (e) the transverse mass in the WZ CR and (f) the reconstructed mass of the four leptons in the ZZ CR. For comparison, distributions for the FCNC $i\bar{i} \rightarrow bWuZ$ signal (dashed line), normalized to the observed limit, are also shown. The “Other” category includes all remaining backgrounds described in Section 3. The dashed area represents the total uncertainty in the background prediction.

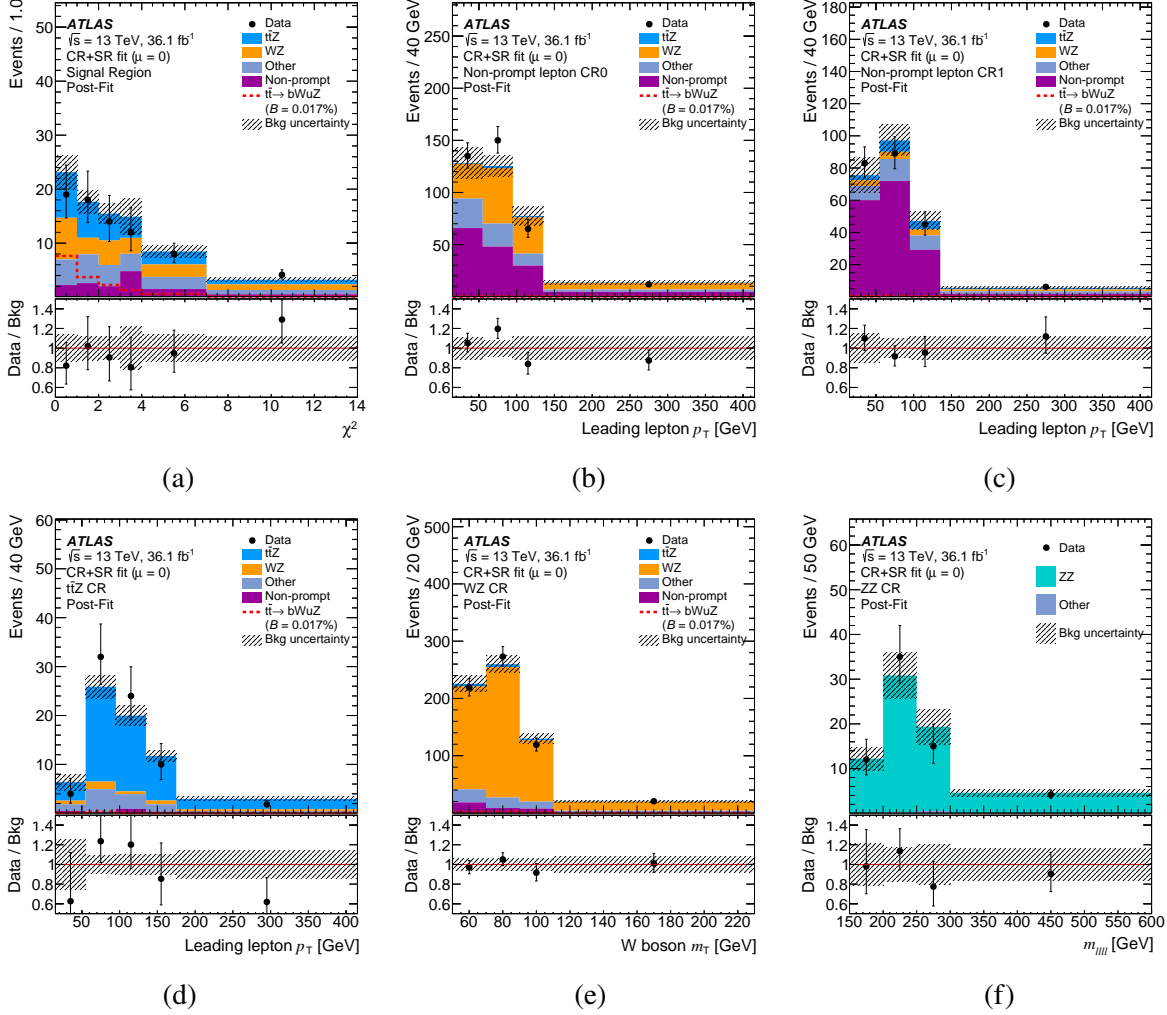


Figure 3: Expected (filled histogram) and observed (points with error bars) distributions after the combined fit under the background-only hypothesis of (a) the χ^2 of the kinematical reconstruction in the SR; (b) p_T of the leading lepton in the non-prompt lepton CR with b -tag veto; (c) p_T of the leading lepton in the non-prompt lepton CR with b -tag; (d) p_T of the leading lepton in the $i\bar{i}Z$ CR; (e) the transverse mass in the WZ CR and (f) the reconstructed mass of the four leptons in the ZZ CR. For comparison, distributions for the FCNC $t\bar{t} \rightarrow bWuZ$ signal (dashed line), normalized to the observed limit, are also shown. The “Other” category includes all remaining backgrounds described in Section 3. The dashed area represents the total uncertainty in the background prediction.

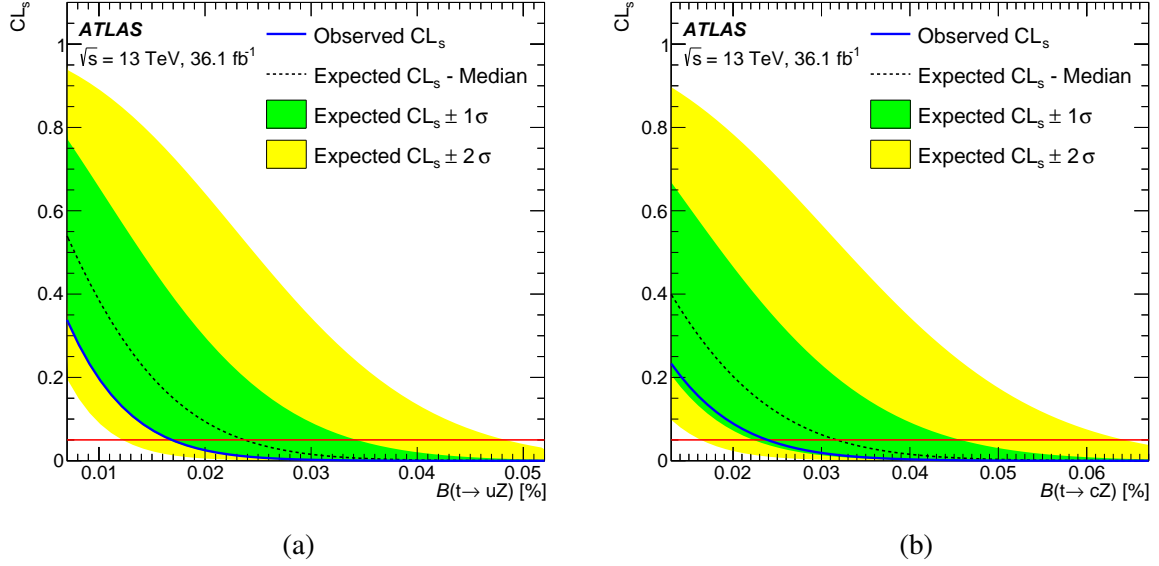


Figure 4: (a) CL_s vs $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow uZ)$ and (b) CL_s vs $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow cZ)$ taking into account systematic and statistical uncertainties. The observed CL_s values (solid line) are compared to the expected (median) CL_s values under the background-only hypothesis (dashed line). The surrounding shaded bands correspond to the 68% and 95% CL intervals around the expected CL_s values, denoted by $\pm 1\sigma$ and $\pm 2\sigma$, respectively. The solid line at $CL_s = 0.05$ denotes the threshold below which the hypothesis is excluded at 95% CL.

Table 10: Observed and expected 95% CL upper limits on the FCNC top-quark decay branching ratios. The expected central value is shown together with the $\pm 1\sigma$ bands, which includes the contribution from the statistical and systematic uncertainties.

	$\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow uZ)$	$\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow cZ)$
Observed	1.7×10^{-4}	2.4×10^{-4}
Expected -1σ	1.7×10^{-4}	2.2×10^{-4}
Expected	2.4×10^{-4}	3.2×10^{-4}
Expected $+1\sigma$	3.4×10^{-4}	4.6×10^{-4}

Table 11: Observed and expected 95% CL upper limits on the moduli of the operators contributing to the FCNC decays $t \rightarrow uZ$ and $t \rightarrow cZ$ within the TopFCNC model for a new-physics energy scale $\Lambda = 1$ TeV.

Operator	Observed	Expected
$ C_{uB}^{(31)} $	0.25	0.30
$ C_{uW}^{(31)} $	0.25	0.30
$ C_{uB}^{(32)} $	0.30	0.34
$ C_{uW}^{(32)} $	0.30	0.34

9 Conclusions

An analysis is performed to search for $t\bar{t}$ events with one top quark decaying through the FCNC $t \rightarrow qZ$ ($q = u, c$) channel and the other through the dominant Standard Model mode $t \rightarrow bW$, where only Z boson decays into charged leptons and leptonic W boson decays are considered as signal. The data were collected by the ATLAS experiment in pp collisions corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 36.1 fb^{-1} at the LHC at a centre-of-mass energy of $\sqrt{s} = 13 \text{ TeV}$. There is good agreement between the data and Standard Model expectations, and no evidence of a signal is found. The 95% CL limits on the $t \rightarrow qZ$ branching ratio are $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow uZ) < 1.7 \times 10^{-4}$ and $\mathcal{B}(t \rightarrow cZ) < 2.4 \times 10^{-4}$, improving previous ATLAS results by more than 60%. These limits constrain the values of effective field theory operators contributing to the $t \rightarrow uZ$ and $t \rightarrow cZ$ FCNC decays of the top quark.

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The ATLAS Collaboration

M. Aaboud^{34d}, G. Aad⁹⁹, B. Abbott¹²⁴, O. Abidinov^{13,*}, B. Abeloos¹²⁸, S.H. Abidi¹⁶⁵, O.S. AbouZeid¹⁴³, N.L. Abraham¹⁵³, H. Abramowicz¹⁵⁹, H. Abreu¹⁵⁸, Y. Abulaiti^{43a,43b}, B.S. Acharya^{64a,64b,o}, S. Adachi¹⁶¹, L. Adamczyk^{81a}, J. Adelman¹¹⁹, M. Adersberger¹¹², T. Adye¹⁴¹, A.A. Affolder¹⁴³, Y. Afik¹⁵⁸, C. Agheorghiesei^{27c}, J.A. Aguilar-Saavedra^{136f,136a}, F. Ahmadov^{77,ag}, G. Aielli^{71a,71b}, S. Akatsuka⁸³, H. Akerstedt^{43a,43b}, T.P.A. Åkesson⁹⁴, E. Akilli⁵², A.V. Akimov¹⁰⁸, G.L. Alberghi^{23b,23a}, J. Albert¹⁷⁴, P. Albicocco⁴⁹, M.J. Alconada Verzini⁸⁶, S. Alderweireldt¹¹⁷, M. Aleksa³⁵, I.N. Aleksandrov⁷⁷, C. Alexa^{27b}, G. Alexander¹⁵⁹, T. Alexopoulos¹⁰, M. Alhroob¹²⁴, B. Ali¹³⁸, G. Alimonti^{66a}, J. Alison³⁶, S.P. Alkire³⁸, C. Allaire¹²⁸, B.M.M. Allbrooke¹⁵³, B.W. Allen¹²⁷, P.P. Allport²¹, A. Aloisio^{67a,67b}, A. Alonso³⁹, F. Alonso⁸⁶, C. Alpigiani¹⁴⁵, A.A. Alshehri⁵⁵, M.I. Alstady⁹⁹, B. Alvarez Gonzalez³⁵, D. Álvarez Piqueras¹⁷², M.G. Alvigi^{67a,67b}, B.T. Amadio¹⁸, Y. Amaral Coutinho^{78b}, C. Amelung²⁶, D. Amidei¹⁰³, S.P. Amor Dos Santos^{136a,136c}, S. Amoroso³⁵, C. Anastopoulos¹⁴⁶, L.S. Ancu⁵², N. Andari²¹, T. Andeen¹¹, C.F. Anders^{59b}, J.K. Anders²⁰, K.J. Anderson³⁶, A. Andreazza^{66a,66b}, V. Andrei^{59a}, S. Angelidakis³⁷, I. Angelozzi¹¹⁸, A. Angerami³⁸, A.V. Anisenkov^{120b,120a}, A. Annovi^{69a}, C. Antel^{59a}, M. Antonelli⁴⁹, A. Antonov^{110,*}, D.J.A. Antrim¹⁶⁹, F. Anulli^{70a}, M. Aoki⁷⁹, L. Aperio Bella³⁵, G. Arabidze¹⁰⁴, Y. Arai⁷⁹, J.P. Araque^{136a}, V. Araujo Ferraz^{78b}, A.T.H. Arce⁴⁷, R.E. Ardell⁹¹, F.A. Arduh⁸⁶, J-F. Arguin¹⁰⁷, S. Argyropoulos⁷⁵, M. Arik^{12c}, A.J. Armbruster³⁵, L.J. Armitage⁹⁰, O. Arnaez¹⁶⁵, H. Arnold⁵⁰, M. Arratia³¹, O. Arslan²⁴, A. Artamonov^{109,*}, G. Artoni¹³¹, S. Artz⁹⁷, S. Asai¹⁶¹, N. Asbah⁴⁴, A. Ashkenazi¹⁵⁹, L. Asquith¹⁵³, K. Assamagan²⁹, R. Astalos^{28a}, R.J. Atkin^{32a}, M. Atkinson¹⁷¹, N.B. Atlay¹⁴⁸, K. Augsten¹³⁸, G. Avolio³⁵, B. Axen¹⁸, M.K. Ayoub^{15a}, G. Azuelos^{107,au}, A.E. Baas^{59a}, M.J. Baca²¹, H. Bachacou¹⁴², K. Bachas^{65a,65b}, M. Backes¹³¹, P. Bagnaia^{70a,70b}, M. Bahmani⁸², H. Bahrasemani¹⁴⁹, J.T. Baines¹⁴¹, M. Bajic³⁹, O.K. Baker¹⁸¹, P.J. Bakker¹¹⁸, D. Bakshi Gupta⁹³, E.M. Baldin^{120b,120a}, P. Balek¹⁷⁸, F. Balli¹⁴², W.K. Balunas¹³³, E. Banas⁸², A. Bandyopadhyay²⁴, S. Banerjee^{179,k}, A.A.E. Bannoura¹⁸⁰, L. Barak¹⁵⁹, E.L. Barberio¹⁰², D. Barberis^{53b,53a}, M. Barbero⁹⁹, T. Barillari¹¹³, M-S. Barisits⁷⁴, J. Barkeloo¹²⁷, T. Barklow¹⁵⁰, N. Barlow³¹, S.L. Barnes^{58c}, B.M. Barnett¹⁴¹, R.M. Barnett¹⁸, Z. Barnovska-Blenessy^{58a}, A. Baroncelli^{72a}, G. Barone²⁶, A.J. Barr¹³¹, L. Barranco Navarro¹⁷², F. Barreiro⁹⁶, J. Barreiro Guimarães da Costa^{15a}, R. Bartoldus¹⁵⁰, A.E. Barton⁸⁷, P. Bartos^{28a}, A. Basalae¹³⁴, A. Bassalat¹²⁸, R.L. Bates⁵⁵, S.J. Batista¹⁶⁵, J.R. Batley³¹, M. Battaglia¹⁴³, M. Bauc^{70a,70b}, F. Bauer¹⁴², K.T. Bauer¹⁶⁹, H.S. Bawa^{150,m}, J.B. Beacham¹²², M.D. Beattie⁸⁷, T. Beau¹³², P.H. Beauchemin¹⁶⁸, P. Bechtel²⁴, H.C. Beck⁵¹, H.P. Beck^{20,s}, K. Becker¹³¹, M. Becker⁹⁷, C. Becot¹²¹, A. Beddall^{12d}, A.J. Beddall^{12a}, V.A. Bednyakov⁷⁷, M. Bedognetti¹¹⁸, C.P. Bee¹⁵², T.A. Beermann³⁵, M. Begalli^{78b}, M. Begel²⁹, J.K. Behr⁴⁴, A.S. Bell⁹², G. Bella¹⁵⁹, L. Bellagamba^{23b}, A. Bellerive³³, M. Bellomo¹⁵⁸, K. Belotskiy¹¹⁰, O. Beltramello³⁵, N.L. Belyaev¹¹⁰, O. Benary^{159,*}, D. Benčekroun^{34a}, M. Bender¹¹², N. Benekos¹⁰, Y. Benhammou¹⁵⁹, E. Benhar Nocchioli¹⁸¹, J. Benitez⁷⁵, D.P. Benjamin⁴⁷, M. Benoit⁵², J.R. Bensinger²⁶, S. Bentvelsen¹¹⁸, L. Beresford¹³¹, M. Beretta⁴⁹, D. Berge⁴⁴, E. Bergeaas Kuutmann¹⁷⁰, N. Berger⁵, L.J. Bergsten²⁶, J. Beringer¹⁸, S. Berlendis⁵⁶, N.R. Bernard¹⁰⁰, G. Bernardi¹³², C. Bernius¹⁵⁰, F.U. Bernlochner²⁴, T. Berry⁹¹, P. Berta⁹⁷, C. Bertella^{15a}, G. Bertoli^{43a,43b}, I.A. Bertram⁸⁷, C. Bertsche⁴⁴, G.J. Besjes³⁹, O. Bessidskaia Bylund^{43a,43b}, M. Bessner⁴⁴, N. Besson¹⁴², A. Bethani⁹⁸, S. Bethke¹¹³, A. Betti²⁴, A.J. Bevan⁹⁰, J. Beyer¹¹³, R.M. Bianchi¹³⁵, O. Biebel¹¹², D. Biedermann¹⁹, R. Bielski⁹⁸, K. Bierwagen⁹⁷, N.V. Biesuz^{69a,69b}, M. Biglietti^{72a}, T.R.V. Billoud¹⁰⁷, H. Bilokon⁴⁹, M. Bindi⁵¹, A. Bingul^{12d}, C. Bini^{70a,70b}, S. Biondi^{23b,23a}, T. Bisanz⁵¹, C. Bittrich⁴⁶, D.M. Bjergaard⁴⁷, J.E. Black¹⁵⁰, K.M. Black²⁵, R.E. Blair⁶, T. Blazek^{28a}, I. Bloch⁴⁴, C. Blocker²⁶, A. Blue⁵⁵, U. Blumenschein⁹⁰, Dr. Blunier^{144a}, G.J. Bobbink¹¹⁸, V.S. Bobrovnikov^{120b,120a}, S.S. Bocchetta⁹⁴, A. Bocci⁴⁷, C. Bock¹¹², D. Boerner¹⁸⁰, D. Bogavac¹¹², A.G. Bogdanchikov^{120b,120a}, C. Böhm^{43a},

V. Boisvert⁹¹, P. Bokan^{170,51}, T. Bold^{81a}, A.S. Boldyrev¹¹¹, A.E. Bolz^{59b}, M. Bomben¹³², M. Bona⁹⁰, J.S. Bonilla¹²⁷, M. Boonekamp¹⁴², A. Borisov¹⁴⁰, G. Borissov⁸⁷, J. Bortfeldt³⁵, D. Bortoletto¹³¹, V. Bortolotto^{61a,61b,61c}, D. Boscherini^{23b}, M. Bosman¹⁴, J.D. Bossio Sola³⁰, J. Boudreau¹³⁵, E.V. Bouhova-Thacker⁸⁷, D. Boumediene³⁷, C. Bourdarios¹²⁸, S.K. Boutle⁵⁵, A. Boveia¹²², J. Boyd³⁵, I.R. Boyko⁷⁷, A.J. Bozson⁹¹, J. Bracinik²¹, A. Brandt⁸, G. Brandt¹⁸⁰, O. Brandt^{59a}, F. Braren⁴⁴, U. Bratzler¹⁶², B. Brau¹⁰⁰, J.E. Brau¹²⁷, W.D. Breaden Madden⁵⁵, K. Brendlinger⁴⁴, A.J. Brennan¹⁰², L. Brenner¹¹⁸, R. Brenner¹⁷⁰, S. Bressler¹⁷⁸, D.L. Briglin²¹, T.M. Bristow⁴⁸, D. Britton⁵⁵, D. Britzger^{59b}, I. Brock²⁴, R. Brock¹⁰⁴, G. Brooijmans³⁸, T. Brooks⁹¹, W.K. Brooks^{144b}, E. Brost¹¹⁹, J.H. Broughton²¹, P.A. Bruckman de Renstrom⁸², D. Bruncko^{28b}, A. Bruni^{23b}, G. Bruni^{23b}, L.S. Bruni¹¹⁸, S. Bruno^{71a,71b}, B.H. Brunt³¹, M. Bruschi^{23b}, N. Bruscolo¹³⁵, P. Bryant³⁶, L. Bryngemark⁴⁴, T. Buanes¹⁷, Q. Buat¹⁴⁹, P. Buchholz¹⁴⁸, A.G. Buckley⁵⁵, I.A. Budagov⁷⁷, F. Buehrer⁵⁰, M.K. Bugge¹³⁰, O. Bulekov¹¹⁰, D. Bullock⁸, T.J. Burch¹¹⁹, S. Burdin⁸⁸, C.D. Burgard¹¹⁸, A.M. Burger⁵, B. Burghgrave¹¹⁹, K. Burka⁸², S. Burke¹⁴¹, I. Burmeister⁴⁵, J.T.P. Burr¹³¹, D. Büscher⁵⁰, V. Büscher⁹⁷, E. Buschmann⁵¹, P. Bussey⁵⁵, J.M. Butler²⁵, C.M. Buttar⁵⁵, J.M. Butterworth⁹², P. Butti³⁵, W. Buttinger²⁹, A. Buzatu¹⁵⁵, A.R. Buzykaev^{120b,120a}, S. Cabrera Urbán¹⁷², D. Caforio¹³⁸, H. Cai¹⁷¹, V.M.M. Cairo², O. Cakir^{4a}, N. Calace⁵², P. Calafiura¹⁸, A. Calandri⁹⁹, G. Calderini¹³², P. Calfayan⁶³, G. Callea^{40b,40a}, L.P. Caloba^{78b}, S. Calvente Lopez⁹⁶, D. Calvet³⁷, S. Calvet³⁷, T.P. Calvet⁹⁹, R. Camacho Toro³⁶, S. Camarda³⁵, P. Camarri^{71a,71b}, D. Cameron¹³⁰, R. Caminal Armadans¹⁰⁰, C. Camincher⁵⁶, S. Campana³⁵, M. Campanelli⁹², A. Camplani^{66a,66b}, A. Campoverde¹⁴⁸, V. Canale^{67a,67b}, M. Cano Bret^{58c}, J. Cantero¹²⁵, T. Cao¹⁵⁹, M.D.M. Capeans Garrido³⁵, I. Caprini^{27b}, M. Caprini^{27b}, M. Capua^{40b,40a}, R.M. Carbone³⁸, R. Cardarelli^{71a}, F.C. Cardillo⁵⁰, I. Carli¹³⁹, T. Carli³⁵, G. Carlino^{67a}, B.T. Carlson¹³⁵, L. Carminati^{66a,66b}, R.M.D. Carney^{43a,43b}, S. Caron¹¹⁷, E. Carquin^{144b}, S. Carrá^{66a,66b}, G.D. Carrillo-Montoya³⁵, D. Casadei²¹, M.P. Casado^{14g}, A.F. Casha¹⁶⁵, M. Casolino¹⁴, D.W. Casper¹⁶⁹, R. Castelijin¹¹⁸, V. Castillo Gimenez¹⁷², N.F. Castro^{136a}, A. Catinaccio³⁵, J.R. Catmore¹³⁰, A. Cattai³⁵, J. Caudron²⁴, V. Cavaliere¹⁷¹, E. Cavallaro¹⁴, D. Cavalli^{66a}, M. Cavalli-Sforza¹⁴, V. Cavasinni^{69a,69b}, E. Celebi^{12b}, F. Ceradini^{72a,72b}, L. Cerda Alberich¹⁷², A.S. Cerqueira^{78a}, A. Cerri¹⁵³, L. Cerrito^{71a,71b}, F. Cerutti¹⁸, A. Cervelli^{23b,23a}, S.A. Cetin^{12b}, A. Chafaq^{34a}, D. Chakraborty¹¹⁹, S.K. Chan⁵⁷, W.S. Chan¹¹⁸, Y.L. Chan^{61a}, P. Chang¹⁷¹, J.D. Chapman³¹, D.G. Charlton²¹, C.C. Chau³³, C.A. Chavez Barajas¹⁵³, S. Che¹²², S. Cheatham^{64a,64c}, A. Chegwidan¹⁰⁴, S. Chekanov⁶, S.V. Chekulaev^{166a}, G.A. Chelkov^{77,at}, M.A. Chelstowska³⁵, C. Chen^{58a}, C.H. Chen⁷⁶, H. Chen²⁹, J. Chen^{58a}, J. Chen³⁸, S. Chen¹⁶¹, S.J. Chen^{15c}, X. Chen^{15b,as}, Y. Chen⁸⁰, H.C. Cheng¹⁰³, H.J. Cheng^{15d}, A. Cheplakov⁷⁷, E. Cheremushkina¹⁴⁰, R. Cherkaoui El Moursli^{34e}, E. Cheu⁷, K. Cheung⁶², L. Chevalier¹⁴², V. Chiarella⁴⁹, G. Chiarelli^{69a}, G. Chiodini^{65a}, A.S. Chisholm³⁵, A. Chitan^{27b}, Y.H. Chiu¹⁷⁴, M.V. Chizhov⁷⁷, K. Choi⁶³, A.R. Chomont³⁷, S. Chouridou¹⁶⁰, Y.S. Chow¹¹⁸, V. Christodoulou⁹², M.C. Chu^{61a}, J. Chudoba¹³⁷, A.J. Chuinard¹⁰¹, J.J. Chwastowski⁸², L. Chytka¹²⁶, A.K. Ciftci^{4a}, D. Cinca⁴⁵, V. Cindro⁸⁹, I.A. Cioară²⁴, A. Ciocio¹⁸, F. Ciotto^{67a,67b}, Z.H. Citron¹⁷⁸, M. Citterio^{66a}, M. Ciubancan^{27b}, A. Clark⁵², M.R. Clark³⁸, P.J. Clark⁴⁸, R.N. Clarke¹⁸, C. Clement^{43a,43b}, Y. Coadou⁹⁹, M. Coba^{64a,64c}, A. Coccaro⁵², J. Cochran⁷⁶, L. Colasurdo¹¹⁷, B. Cole³⁸, A.P. Colijn¹¹⁸, J. Collot⁵⁶, P. Conde Muiño^{136a,136b}, E. Coniavitis⁵⁰, S.H. Connell^{32b}, I.A. Connelly⁹⁸, S. Constantinescu^{27b}, G. Conti³⁵, F. Conventi^{67a,av}, A.M. Cooper-Sarkar¹³¹, F. Cormier¹⁷³, K.J.R. Cormier¹⁶⁵, M. Corradi^{70a,70b}, E.E. Corrigan⁹⁴, F. Corriveau^{101,ae}, A. Cortes-Gonzalez³⁵, M.J. Costa¹⁷², D. Costanzo¹⁴⁶, G. Cottin³¹, G. Cowan⁹¹, B.E. Cox⁹⁸, K. Cranmer¹²¹, S.J. Crawley⁵⁵, R.A. Creager¹³³, G. Cree³³, S. Crépe-Renaudin⁵⁶, F. Crescioli¹³², W.A. Cribbs^{43a,43b}, M. Cristinziani²⁴, V. Croft¹²¹, G. Crosetti^{40b,40a}, A. Cueto⁹⁶, T. Cuhadar Donszelmann¹⁴⁶, A.R. Cukierman¹⁵⁰, J. Cummings¹⁸¹, M. Curatolo⁴⁹, J. Cúth⁹⁷, S. Czekierda⁸², P. Czodrowski³⁵, M.J. Da Cunha Sargedas De Sousa^{136a,136b}, C. Da Via⁹⁸, W. Dabrowski^{81a}, T. Dado^{28a,y}, S. Dahbi^{34e}, T. Dai¹⁰³, O. Dale¹⁷, F. Dallaire¹⁰⁷, C. Dallapiccola¹⁰⁰, M. Dam³⁹, G. D'amen^{23b,23a}, J.R. Dandoy¹³³,

M.F. Daneri³⁰, N.P. Dang^{179,k}, N.D. Dann⁹⁸, M. Danninger¹⁷³, M. Dano Hoffmann¹⁴², V. Dao³⁵,
G. Darbo^{53b}, S. Darmora⁸, J. Dassoulas³, A. Dattagupta¹²⁷, T. Daubney⁴⁴, S. D'Auria⁵⁵, W. Davey²⁴,
C. David⁴⁴, T. Davidek¹³⁹, D.R. Davis⁴⁷, P. Davison⁹², E. Dawe¹⁰², I. Dawson¹⁴⁶, K. De⁸,
R. De Asmundis^{67a}, A. De Benedetti¹²⁴, S. De Castro^{23b,23a}, S. De Cecco¹³², N. De Groot¹¹⁷,
P. de Jong¹¹⁸, H. De la Torre¹⁰⁴, F. De Lorenzi⁷⁶, A. De Maria^{51,u}, D. De Pedis^{70a}, A. De Salvo^{70a},
U. De Sanctis^{71a,71b}, A. De Santo¹⁵³, K. De Vasconcelos Corga⁹⁹, J.B. De Vivie De Regie¹²⁸,
R. Debbe²⁹, C. Debenedetti¹⁴³, D.V. Dedovich⁷⁷, N. Dehghanian³, I. Deigaard¹¹⁸, M. Del Gaudio^{40b,40a},
J. Del Peso⁹⁶, D. Delgove¹²⁸, F. Deliot¹⁴², C.M. Delitzsch⁷, M. Della Pietra^{67a,67b}, D. Della Volpe⁵²,
A. Dell'Acqua³⁵, L. Dell'Asta²⁵, M. Delmastro⁵, C. Delporte¹²⁸, P.A. Delsart⁵⁶, D.A. DeMarco¹⁶⁵,
S. Demers¹⁸¹, M. Demichev⁷⁷, A. Demilly¹³², S.P. Denisov¹⁴⁰, D. Denysiuk¹⁴², L. D'Eramo¹³²,
D. Derendarz⁸², J.E. Derkaoui^{34d}, F. Derue¹³², P. Dervan⁸⁸, K. Desch²⁴, C. Deterre⁴⁴, K. Dette¹⁶⁵,
M.R. Devesa³⁰, P.O. Deviveiros³⁵, A. Dewhurst¹⁴¹, S. Dhaliwal²⁶, F.A. Di Bello⁵², A. Di Ciaccio^{71a,71b},
L. Di Ciaccio⁵, W.K. Di Clemente¹³³, C. Di Donato^{67a,67b}, A. Di Girolamo³⁵, B. Di Girolamo³⁵,
B. Di Micco^{72a,72b}, R. Di Nardo³⁵, K.F. Di Petrillo⁵⁷, A. Di Simone⁵⁰, R. Di Sipio¹⁶⁵, D. Di Valentino³³,
C. Diaconu⁹⁹, M. Diamond¹⁶⁵, F.A. Dias³⁹, M.A. Diaz^{144a}, J. Dickinson¹⁸, E.B. Diehl¹⁰³, J. Dietrich¹⁹,
S. Díez Cornell⁴⁴, A. Dimitrievska¹⁸, J. Dingfelder²⁴, P. Dita^{27b}, S. Dita^{27b}, F. Dittus³⁵, F. Djama⁹⁹,
T. Djobava^{157b}, J.I. Djuvsland^{59a}, M.A.B. Do Vale^{78c}, M. Dobre^{27b}, D. Dodsworth²⁶, C. Doglioni⁹⁴,
J. Dolejsi¹³⁹, Z. Dolezal¹³⁹, M. Donadelli^{78d}, S. Donati^{69a,69b}, J. Donini³⁷, M. D'Onofrio⁸⁸, J. Dopke¹⁴¹,
A. Doria^{67a}, M.T. Dova⁸⁶, A.T. Doyle⁵⁵, E. Drechsler⁵¹, E. Dreyer¹⁴⁹, M. Dris¹⁰, Y. Du^{58b},
J. Duarte-Campderros¹⁵⁹, F. Dubinin¹⁰⁸, A. Dubreuil⁵², E. Duchovni¹⁷⁸, G. Duckeck¹¹²,
A. Ducourthial¹³², O.A. Ducu^{107,x}, D. Duda¹¹⁸, A. Dudarev³⁵, A.C. Dudder⁹⁷, E.M. Duffield¹⁸,
L. Dufflot¹²⁸, M. Dührssen³⁵, C. Dülsen¹⁸⁰, M. Dumancic¹⁷⁸, A.E. Dumitriu^{27b,e}, A.K. Duncan⁵⁵,
M. Dunford^{59a}, A. Duperrin⁹⁹, H. Duran Yildiz^{4a}, M. Düren⁵⁴, A. Durglishvili^{157b}, D. Duschinger⁴⁶,
B. Dutta⁴⁴, D. Duvnjak¹, M. Dyndal⁴⁴, B.S. Dziedzic⁸², C. Eckardt⁴⁴, K.M. Ecker¹¹³, R.C. Edgar¹⁰³,
T. Eifert³⁵, G. Eigen¹⁷, K. Einsweiler¹⁸, T. Ekelof¹⁷⁰, M. El Kacimi^{34c}, R. El Kosseifi⁹⁹, V. Ellajosyula⁹⁹,
M. Ellert¹⁷⁰, S. Elles⁵, F. Ellinghaus¹⁸⁰, A.A. Elliot¹⁷⁴, N. Ellis³⁵, J. Elmsheuser²⁹, M. Elsing³⁵,
D. Emelianov¹⁴¹, Y. Enari¹⁶¹, J.S. Ennis¹⁷⁶, M.B. Epland⁴⁷, J. Erdmann⁴⁵, A. Ereditato²⁰, M. Ernst²⁹,
S. Errede¹⁷¹, M. Escalier¹²⁸, C. Escobar¹⁷², B. Esposito⁴⁹, O. Estrada Pastor¹⁷², A.I. Etienne¹⁴²,
E. Etzion¹⁵⁹, H. Evans⁶³, A. Ezhilov¹³⁴, M. Ezzi^{34e}, F. Fabbri^{23b,23a}, L. Fabbri^{23b,23a}, V. Fabiani¹¹⁷,
G. Facini⁹², R.M. Fakhruddinov¹⁴⁰, S. Falciano^{70a}, R.J. Falla⁹², J. Faltova¹³⁹, Y. Fang^{15a}, M. Fanti^{66a,66b},
A. Farbin⁸, A. Farilla^{72a}, E.M. Farina^{68a,68b}, T. Farooque¹⁰⁴, S. Farrell¹⁸, S.M. Farrington¹⁷⁶,
P. Farthouat³⁵, F. Fassi^{34e}, P. Fassnacht³⁵, D. Fassouliotis⁹, M. Faucci Giannelli⁴⁸, A. Favareto^{53b,53a},
W.J. Fawcett¹³¹, L. Fayard¹²⁸, O.L. Fedin^{134,q}, W. Fedorko¹⁷³, S. Feigl¹³⁰, L. Felgioni⁹⁹, C. Feng^{58b},
E.J. Feng³⁵, M. Feng⁴⁷, M.J. Fenton⁵⁵, A.B. Fenyuk¹⁴⁰, L. Feremenga⁸, P. Fernandez Martinez¹⁷²,
J. Ferrando⁴⁴, A. Ferrari¹⁷⁰, P. Ferrari¹¹⁸, R. Ferrari^{68a}, D.E. Ferreira de Lima^{59b}, A. Ferrer¹⁷²,
D. Ferrere⁵², C. Ferretti¹⁰³, F. Fiedler⁹⁷, M. Filipuzzi⁴⁴, A. Filipčič⁸⁹, F. Filthaut¹¹⁷, M. Fincke-Keeler¹⁷⁴,
K.D. Finelli²⁵, M.C.N. Fiolhais^{136a,136c,b}, L. Fiorini¹⁷², C. Fischer¹⁴, J. Fischer¹⁸⁰, W.C. Fisher¹⁰⁴,
N. Flaschel⁴⁴, I. Fleck¹⁴⁸, P. Fleischmann¹⁰³, R.R.M. Fletcher¹³³, T. Flick¹⁸⁰, B.M. Flierl¹¹²,
L.R. Flores Castillo^{61a}, N. Fomin¹⁷, G.T. Forcolin⁹⁸, A. Formica¹⁴², F.A. Förster¹⁴, A.C. Forti⁹⁸,
A.G. Foster²¹, D. Fournier¹²⁸, H. Fox⁸⁷, S. Fracchia¹⁴⁶, P. Francavilla^{69a,69b}, M. Franchini^{23b,23a},
S. Franchino^{59a}, D. Francis³⁵, L. Franconi¹³⁰, M. Franklin⁵⁷, M. Frate¹⁶⁹, M. Fraternali^{68a,68b},
D. Freeborn⁹², S.M. Fressard-Batraneanu³⁵, B. Freund¹⁰⁷, W.S. Freund^{78b}, D. Froidevaux³⁵,
J.A. Frost¹³¹, C. Fukunaga¹⁶², T. Fusayasu¹¹⁴, J. Fuster¹⁷², O. Gabizon¹⁵⁸, A. Gabrielli^{23b,23a},
A. Gabrielli¹⁸, G.P. Gach^{81a}, S. Gadatsch⁵², S. Gadomski⁵², G. Gagliardi^{53b,53a}, L.G. Gagnon¹⁰⁷,
C. Galea¹¹⁷, B. Galhardo^{136a,136c}, E.J. Gallas¹³¹, B.J. Gallop¹⁴¹, P. Gallus¹³⁸, G. Galster³⁹, K.K. Gan¹²²,
S. Ganguly¹⁷⁸, Y. Gao⁸⁸, Y.S. Gao^{150,m}, C. García¹⁷², J.E. García Navarro¹⁷², J.A. García Pascual^{15a},
M. Garcia-Sciveres¹⁸, R.W. Gardner³⁶, N. Garelli¹⁵⁰, V. Garonne¹³⁰, K. Gasnikova⁴⁴, C. Gatti⁴⁹,

A. Gaudiello^{53b,53a}, G. Gaudio^{68a}, I.L. Gavrilenko¹⁰⁸, C. Gay¹⁷³, G. Gaycken²⁴, E.N. Gazis¹⁰,
 C.N.P. Gee¹⁴¹, J. Geisen⁵¹, M. Geisen⁹⁷, M.P. Geisler^{59a}, K. Gellerstedt^{43a,43b}, C. Gemme^{53b},
 M.H. Genest⁵⁶, C. Geng¹⁰³, S. Gentile^{70a,70b}, C. Gentsos¹⁶⁰, S. George⁹¹, D. Gerbaudo¹⁴, G. Gessner⁴⁵,
 S. Ghasemi¹⁴⁸, M. Ghneimat²⁴, B. Giacobbe^{23b}, S. Giagu^{70a,70b}, N. Giangiacomi^{23b,23a}, P. Giannetti^{69a},
 S.M. Gibson⁹¹, M. Gignac¹⁷³, M. Gilchriese¹⁸, D. Gillberg³³, G. Gilles¹⁸⁰, D.M. Gingrich^{3,au},
 M.P. Giordani^{64a,64c}, F.M. Giorgi^{23b}, P.F. Giraud¹⁴², P. Giromini⁵⁷, G. Giugliarelli^{64a,64c}, D. Giugni^{66a},
 F. Giuli¹³¹, M. Giulini^{59b}, B.K. Gjelsten¹³⁰, S. Gkaitatzis¹⁶⁰, I. Gkialas^{9,j}, E.L. Gkougkousis¹⁴,
 P. Gkoutoumis¹⁰, L.K. Gladilin¹¹¹, C. Glasman⁹⁶, J. Glatzer¹⁴, P.C.F. Glaysher⁴⁴, A. Glazov⁴⁴,
 M. Goblirsch-Kolb²⁶, J. Godlewski⁸², S. Goldfarb¹⁰², T. Golling⁵², D. Golubkov¹⁴⁰,
 A. Gomes^{136a,136b,136d}, R. Goncalves Gama^{78b}, J. Goncalves Pinto Firmino Da Costa¹⁴², R. Gonçalo^{136a},
 G. Gonella⁵⁰, L. Gonella²¹, A. Gongadze⁷⁷, F. Gonnella²¹, J.L. Gonski⁵⁷, S. González de la Hoz¹⁷²,
 S. Gonzalez-Sevilla⁵², L. Goossens³⁵, P.A. Gorbounov¹⁰⁹, H.A. Gordon²⁹, B. Gorini³⁵, E. Gorini^{65a,65b},
 A. Gorišek⁸⁹, A.T. Goshaw⁴⁷, C. Gössling⁴⁵, M.I. Gostkin⁷⁷, C.A. Gottardo²⁴, C.R. Goudet¹²⁸,
 D. Goujdami^{34c}, A.G. Goussiou¹⁴⁵, N. Govender^{32b,c}, C. Goy⁵, E. Gozani¹⁵⁸, I. Grabowska-Bold^{81a},
 P.O.J. Gradin¹⁷⁰, E.C. Graham⁸⁸, J. Gramling¹⁶⁹, E. Gramstad¹³⁰, S. Grancagnolo¹⁹, V. Gratchev¹³⁴,
 P.M. Gravila^{27f}, C. Gray⁵⁵, H.M. Gray¹⁸, Z.D. Greenwood^{93,aj}, C. Greife²⁴, K. Gregersen⁹²,
 I.M. Gregor⁴⁴, P. Grenier¹⁵⁰, K. Grevtsov⁵, J. Griffiths⁸, A.A. Grillo¹⁴³, K. Grimm⁸⁷, S. Grinstein^{14,z},
 Ph. Gris³⁷, J.-F. Grivaz¹²⁸, S. Groh⁹⁷, E. Gross¹⁷⁸, J. Grosse-Knetter⁵¹, G.C. Grossi⁹³, Z.J. Grout⁹²,
 A. Grummer¹¹⁶, L. Guan¹⁰³, W. Guan¹⁷⁹, J. Guenther³⁵, A. Guerguichon¹²⁸, F. Guescini^{166a},
 D. Guest¹⁶⁹, O. Gueta¹⁵⁹, R. Gugel⁵⁰, B. Gui¹²², T. Guillemain⁵, S. Guindon³⁵, U. Gul⁵⁵, C. Gumpert³⁵,
 J. Guo^{58c}, W. Guo¹⁰³, Y. Guo^{58a,t}, R. Gupta⁴¹, S. Gurbuz^{12c}, G. Gustavino¹²⁴, B.J. Gutelman¹⁵⁸,
 P. Gutierrez¹²⁴, N.G. Gutierrez Ortiz⁹², C. Gutsche⁹², C. Guyot¹⁴², M.P. Guzik^{81a}, C. Gwenlan¹³¹,
 C.B. Gwilliam⁸⁸, A. Haas¹²¹, C. Haber¹⁸, H.K. Hadavand⁸, N. Haddad^{34e}, A. Hader⁹⁹, S. Hageböck²⁴,
 M. Hagihara¹⁶⁷, H. Hakobyan^{182,*}, M. Haleem¹⁷⁵, J. Haley¹²⁵, G. Halladjian¹⁰⁴, G.D. Hallowell⁹⁹,
 K. Hamacher¹⁸⁰, P. Hamal¹²⁶, K. Hamano¹⁷⁴, A. Hamilton^{32a}, G.N. Hamity¹⁴⁶, P.G. Hamnett⁴⁴,
 K. Han^{58a,ai}, L. Han^{58a}, S. Han^{15d}, K. Hanagaki^{79,w}, M. Hance¹⁴³, D.M. Handl¹¹², B. Haney¹³³,
 R. Hankache¹³², P. Hanke^{59a}, E. Hansen⁹⁴, J.B. Hansen³⁹, J.D. Hansen³⁹, M.C. Hansen²⁴,
 P.H. Hansen³⁹, K. Hara¹⁶⁷, A.S. Hard¹⁷⁹, T. Harenberg¹⁸⁰, F. Hariri¹²⁸, S. Harkusha¹⁰⁵, P.F. Harrison¹⁷⁶,
 N.M. Hartmann¹¹², Y. Hasegawa¹⁴⁷, A. Hasib⁴⁸, S. Hassani¹⁴², S. Haug²⁰, R. Hauser¹⁰⁴, L. Hauswald⁴⁶,
 L.B. Havener³⁸, M. Havranek¹³⁸, C.M. Hawkes²¹, R.J. Hawkings³⁵, D. Hayden¹⁰⁴, C.P. Hays¹³¹,
 J.M. Hays⁹⁰, H.S. Hayward⁸⁸, S.J. Haywood¹⁴¹, T. Heck⁹⁷, V. Hedberg⁹⁴, L. Heelan⁸, S. Heer²⁴,
 K.K. Heidegger⁵⁰, S. Heim⁴⁴, T. Heim¹⁸, B. Heinemann^{44,ap}, J.J. Heinrich¹¹², L. Heinrich¹²¹,
 C. Heinz⁵⁴, J. Hejbal¹³⁷, L. Helary³⁵, A. Held¹⁷³, S. Hellman^{43a,43b}, C. Helsens³⁵, R.C.W. Henderson⁸⁷,
 Y. Heng¹⁷⁹, S. Henkelmann¹⁷³, A.M. Henriques Correia³⁵, G.H. Herbert¹⁹, H. Herde²⁶, V. Herget¹⁷⁵,
 Y. Hernández Jiménez^{32c}, H. Herr⁹⁷, G. Herten⁵⁰, R. Hertenberger¹¹², L. Hervas³⁵, T.C. Herwig¹³³,
 G.G. Hesketh⁹², N.P. Hesse^{166a}, J.W. Hetherly⁴¹, S. Higashino⁷⁹, E. Higón-Rodríguez¹⁷²,
 K. Hildebrand³⁶, E. Hill¹⁷⁴, J.C. Hill³¹, K.H. Hiller⁴⁴, S.J. Hillier²¹, M. Hils⁴⁶, I. Hinchliffe¹⁸,
 M. Hirose⁵⁰, D. Hirschbuehl¹⁸⁰, B. Hiti⁸⁹, O. Hladik¹³⁷, D.R. Hlaluku^{32c}, X. Hoad⁴⁸, J. Hobbs¹⁵²,
 N. Hod^{166a}, M.C. Hodgkinson¹⁴⁶, P. Hodgson¹⁴⁶, A. Hoecker³⁵, M.R. Hoefkamp¹¹⁶, F. Hoenig¹¹²,
 D. Hohn²⁴, D. Hohov¹²⁸, T.R. Holmes³⁶, M. Holzbock¹¹², M. Homann⁴⁵, S. Honda¹⁶⁷, T. Honda⁷⁹,
 T.M. Hong¹³⁵, B.H. Hooberman¹⁷¹, W.H. Hopkins¹²⁷, Y. Horii¹¹⁵, A.J. Horton¹⁴⁹, J.-Y. Hostachy⁵⁶,
 A. Hostiuc¹⁴⁵, S. Hou¹⁵⁵, A. Hoummada^{34a}, J. Howarth⁹⁸, J. Hoya⁸⁶, M. Hrabovsky¹²⁶, J. Hrdinka³⁵,
 I. Hristova¹⁹, J. Hrivnac¹²⁸, A. Hrynevich¹⁰⁶, T. Hryn'ova⁵, P.J. Hsu⁶², S.-C. Hsu¹⁴⁵, Q. Hu²⁹, S. Hu^{58c},
 Y. Huang^{15a}, Z. Hubacek¹³⁸, F. Hubaut⁹⁹, F. Huegging²⁴, T.B. Huffman¹³¹, E.W. Hughes³⁸,
 M. Huhtinen³⁵, R.F.H. Hunter³³, P. Huo¹⁵², A.M. Hupe³³, N. Huseynov^{77,ag}, J. Huston¹⁰⁴, J. Huth⁵⁷,
 R. Hyneman¹⁰³, G. Iacobucci⁵², G. Iakovidis²⁹, I. Ibragimov¹⁴⁸, L. Iconomidou-Fayard¹²⁸, Z. Idrissi^{34e},
 P. Iengo³⁵, O. Igonkina^{118,ac}, T. Iizawa¹⁷⁷, Y. Ikegami⁷⁹, M. Ikeno⁷⁹, D. Iliadis¹⁶⁰, N. Ilic¹⁵⁰,

F. Iltzsche⁴⁶, G. Introzzi^{68a,68b}, P. Ioannou^{9,*}, M. Iodice^{72a}, K. Iordanidou³⁸, V. Ippolito⁵⁷, M.F. Isacson¹⁷⁰, N. Ishijima¹²⁹, M. Ishino¹⁶¹, M. Ishitsuka¹⁶³, C. Issever¹³¹, S. Istin^{12c,an}, F. Ito¹⁶⁷, J.M. Iturbe Ponce^{61a}, R. Iuppa^{73a,73b}, H. Iwasaki⁷⁹, J.M. Izen⁴², V. Izzo^{67a}, S. Jabbar³, P. Jackson¹, R.M. Jacobs²⁴, V. Jain², G. Jäkel¹⁸⁰, K.B. Jakobi⁹⁷, K. Jakobs⁵⁰, S. Jakobsen⁷⁴, T. Jakoubek¹³⁷, D.O. Jamin¹²⁵, D.K. Jana⁹³, R. Jansky⁵², J. Janssen²⁴, M. Janus⁵¹, P.A. Janus^{81a}, G. Jarlskog⁹⁴, N. Javadov^{77,ag}, T. Javůrek⁵⁰, M. Javurkova⁵⁰, F. Jeanneau¹⁴², L. Jeanty¹⁸, J. Jejelava^{157a,ah}, A. Jelinskas¹⁷⁶, P. Jenni^{50,d}, C. Jeske¹⁷⁶, S. Jézéquel⁵, H. Ji¹⁷⁹, J. Jia¹⁵², H. Jiang⁷⁶, Y. Jiang^{58a}, Z. Jiang^{150,r}, S. Jiggins⁹², J. Jimenez Pena¹⁷², S. Jin^{15c}, A. Jinaru^{27b}, O. Jinnouchi¹⁶³, H. Jivan^{32c}, P. Johansson¹⁴⁶, K.A. Johns⁷, C.A. Johnson⁶³, W.J. Johnson¹⁴⁵, K. Jon-And^{43a,43b}, R.W.L. Jones⁸⁷, S.D. Jones¹⁵³, S. Jones⁷, T.J. Jones⁸⁸, J. Jongmanns^{59a}, P.M. Jorge^{136a,136b}, J. Jovicevic^{166a}, X. Ju¹⁷⁹, A. Juste Rozas^{14,z}, A. Kaczmarska⁸², M. Kado¹²⁸, H. Kagan¹²², M. Kagan¹⁵⁰, S.J. Kahn⁹⁹, T. Kaji¹⁷⁷, E. Kajomovitz¹⁵⁸, C.W. Kalderon⁹⁴, A. Kaluza⁹⁷, S. Kama⁴¹, A. Kamenshchikov¹⁴⁰, L. Kanjir⁸⁹, Y. Kano¹⁶¹, V.A. Kantserov¹¹⁰, J. Kanzaki⁷⁹, B. Kaplan¹²¹, L.S. Kaplan¹⁷⁹, D. Kar^{32c}, K. Karakostas¹⁰, N. Karastathis¹⁰, M.J. Kareem^{166b}, E. Karentzos¹⁰, S.N. Karpov⁷⁷, Z.M. Karpova⁷⁷, V. Kartvelishvili⁸⁷, A.N. Karyukhin¹⁴⁰, K. Kasahara¹⁶⁷, L. Kashif¹⁷⁹, R.D. Kass¹²², A. Kastanas¹⁵¹, Y. Kataoka¹⁶¹, C. Kato¹⁶¹, A. Katre⁵², J. Katzy⁴⁴, K. Kawade⁸⁰, K. Kawagoe⁸⁵, T. Kawamoto¹⁶¹, G. Kawamura⁵¹, E.F. Kay⁸⁸, V.F. Kazanin^{120b,120a}, R. Keeler¹⁷⁴, R. Kehoe⁴¹, J.S. Keller³³, E. Kellermann⁹⁴, J.J. Kempster⁹¹, J. Kendrick²¹, H. Keoshkerian¹⁶⁵, O. Kepka¹³⁷, S. Kersten¹⁸⁰, B.P. Kerševan⁸⁹, R.A. Keyes¹⁰¹, M. Khader¹⁷¹, F. Khalil-Zada¹³, A. Khanov¹²⁵, A.G. Kharlamov^{120b,120a}, T. Kharlamova^{120b,120a}, A. Khodinov¹⁶⁴, T.J. Khoo⁵², V. Khovanskiy^{109,*}, E. Khramov⁷⁷, J. Khubua^{157b}, S. Kido⁸⁰, M. Kiehn⁵², C.R. Kilby⁹¹, H.Y. Kim⁸, S.H. Kim¹⁶⁷, Y.K. Kim³⁶, N. Kimura^{64a,64c}, O.M. Kind¹⁹, B.T. King⁸⁸, D. Kirchmeier⁴⁶, J. Kirk¹⁴¹, A.E. Kiryunin¹¹³, T. Kishimoto¹⁶¹, D. Kisielewska^{81a}, V. Kitali⁴⁴, O. Kivernyk⁵, E. Kladiva^{28b,*}, T. Klapdor-Kleingrothaus⁵⁰, M.H. Klein¹⁰³, M. Klein⁸⁸, U. Klein⁸⁸, K. Kleinknecht⁹⁷, P. Klimek¹¹⁹, A. Klimentov²⁹, R. Klingenberg^{45,*}, T. Klingl²⁴, T. Klioutchnikova³⁵, F.F. Klitzner¹¹², P. Kluit¹¹⁸, S. Kluth¹¹³, E. Kneringer⁷⁴, E.B.F.G. Knoops⁹⁹, A. Knue⁵⁰, A. Kobayashi¹⁶¹, D. Kobayashi⁸⁵, T. Kobayashi¹⁶¹, M. Kobel⁴⁶, M. Kocian¹⁵⁰, P. Kodys¹³⁹, T. Koffas³³, E. Koffeman¹¹⁸, N.M. Köhler¹¹³, T. Koi¹⁵⁰, M. Kolb^{59b}, I. Koletsou⁵, T. Kondo⁷⁹, N. Kondrashova^{58c}, K. Köneke⁵⁰, A.C. König¹¹⁷, T. Kono^{79,ao}, R. Konoplich^{121,ak}, N. Konstantinidis⁹², B. Konya⁹⁴, R. Kopeliansky⁶³, S. Koperny^{81a}, K. Korcyl⁸², K. Kordas¹⁶⁰, A. Korn⁹², I. Korolkov¹⁴, E.V. Korolkova¹⁴⁶, O. Kortner¹¹³, S. Kortner¹¹³, T. Kosek¹³⁹, V.V. Kostyukhin²⁴, A. Kotwal⁴⁷, A. Koulouris¹⁰, A. Kourkouveli-Charalampidi^{68a,68b}, C. Kourkouvelis⁹, E. Kourlitis¹⁴⁶, V. Kouskoura²⁹, A.B. Kowalewska⁸², R. Kowalewski¹⁷⁴, T.Z. Kowalski^{81a}, C. Kozakai¹⁶¹, W. Kozanecki¹⁴², A.S. Kozhin¹⁴⁰, V.A. Kramarenko¹¹¹, G. Kramberger⁸⁹, D. Krasnopevtsev¹¹⁰, M.W. Krasny¹³², A. Krasznahorkay³⁵, D. Krauss¹¹³, J.A. Kremer^{81a}, J. Kretzschmar⁸⁸, K. Kreutzfeldt⁵⁴, P. Krieger¹⁶⁵, K. Krizka¹⁸, K. Kroeninger⁴⁵, H. Kroha¹¹³, J. Kroll¹³⁷, J. Kroll¹³³, J. Kroseberg²⁴, J. Krstic¹⁶, U. Kruchonak⁷⁷, H. Krüger²⁴, N. Krumnack⁷⁶, M.C. Kruse⁴⁷, T. Kubota¹⁰², H. Kucuk⁹², S. Kудay^{4b}, J.T. Kuechler¹⁸⁰, S. Kuehn³⁵, A. Kugel^{59a}, F. Kuger¹⁷⁵, T. Kuhl⁴⁴, V. Kukhtin⁷⁷, R. Kukla⁹⁹, Y. Kulchitsky¹⁰⁵, S. Kuleshov^{144b}, Y.P. Kulinich¹⁷¹, M. Kuna⁵⁶, T. Kunigo⁸³, A. Kupco¹³⁷, T. Kupfer⁴⁵, O. Kuprash¹⁵⁹, H. Kurashige⁸⁰, L.L. Kurchaninov^{166a}, Y.A. Kurochkin¹⁰⁵, M.G. Kurth^{15d}, E.S. Kuwertz¹⁷⁴, M. Kuze¹⁶³, J. Kvita¹²⁶, T. Kwan¹⁷⁴, A. La Rosa¹¹³, J.L. La Rosa Navarro^{78d}, L. La Rotonda^{40b,40a}, F. La Ruffa^{40b,40a}, C. Lacasta¹⁷², F. Lacava^{70a,70b}, J. Lacey⁴⁴, D.P.J. Lack⁹⁸, H. Lacker¹⁹, D. Lacour¹³², E. Ladygin⁷⁷, R. Lafaye⁵, B. Laforge¹³², S. Lai⁵¹, S. Lammers⁶³, W. Lampl⁷, E. Lançon²⁹, U. Landgraf⁵⁰, M.P.J. Landon⁹⁰, M.C. Lanfermann⁵², V.S. Lang⁴⁴, J.C. Lange¹⁴, R.J. Langenberg³⁵, A.J. Lankford¹⁶⁹, F. Lanni²⁹, K. Lantzsche²⁴, A. Lanza^{68a}, A. Lapertosa^{53b,53a}, S. Laplace¹³², J.F. Laporte¹⁴², T. Lari^{66a}, F. Lasagni Manghi^{23b,23a}, M. Lassnig³⁵, T.S. Lau^{61a}, A. Laudrain¹²⁸, P. Laurelli⁴⁹, A.T. Law¹⁴³, P. Laycock⁸⁸, M. Lazzaroni^{66a,66b}, B. Le¹⁰², O. Le Dortz¹³², E. Le Guirriec⁹⁹, E.P. Le Quilleuc¹⁴², M. LeBlanc⁷, T. LeCompte⁶, F. Ledroit-Guillon⁵⁶, C.A. Lee²⁹,

G.R. Lee^{144a}, L. Lee⁵⁷, S.C. Lee¹⁵⁵, B. Lefebvre¹⁰¹, G. Lefebvre¹³², M. Lefebvre¹⁷⁴, F. Legger¹¹², C. Leggett¹⁸, G. Lehmann Miotto³⁵, X. Lei⁷, W.A. Leight⁴⁴, M.A.L. Leite^{78d}, R. Leitner¹³⁹, D. Lellouch¹⁷⁸, B. Lemmer⁵¹, K.J.C. Leney⁹², T. Lenz²⁴, B. Lenzi³⁵, R. Leone⁷, S. Leone^{69a}, C. Leonidopoulos⁴⁸, G. Lerner¹⁵³, C. Leroy¹⁰⁷, R. Les¹⁶⁵, A.A.J. Lesage¹⁴², C.G. Lester³¹, M. Levchenko¹³⁴, J. Levêque⁵, D. Levin¹⁰³, L.J. Levinson¹⁷⁸, M. Levy²¹, D. Lewis⁹⁰, B. Li^{58a,t}, C-Q. Li^{58a}, H. Li^{58b}, L. Li^{58c}, Q. Li^{15d}, Q.Y. Li^{58a}, S. Li⁴⁷, X. Li^{58c}, Y. Li¹⁴⁸, Z. Liang^{15a}, B. Liberti^{71a}, A. Liblong¹⁶⁵, K. Lie^{61c}, A. Limosani¹⁵⁴, C.Y. Lin³¹, K. Lin¹⁰⁴, S.C. Lin¹⁵⁶, T.H. Lin⁹⁷, R.A. Linck⁶³, B.E. Lindquist¹⁵², A.L. Lioni⁵², E. Lipeles¹³³, A. Lipniacka¹⁷, M. Lisovyi^{59b}, T.M. Liss^{171,ar}, A. Lister¹⁷³, A.M. Litke¹⁴³, B. Liu⁷⁶, H.B. Liu²⁹, H. Liu¹⁰³, J.B. Liu^{58a}, J.K.K. Liu¹³¹, K. Liu¹³², L. Liu¹⁷¹, M. Liu^{58a}, Y.L. Liu^{58a}, Y.W. Liu^{58a}, M. Livan^{68a,68b}, A. Lleres⁵⁶, J. Llorente Merino^{15a}, S.L. Lloyd⁹⁰, C.Y. Lo^{61b}, F. Lo Sterzo⁴¹, E.M. Lobodzinska⁴⁴, P. Loch⁷, F.K. Loebinger⁹⁸, A. Loesle⁵⁰, K.M. Loew²⁶, T. Lohse¹⁹, K. Lohwasser¹⁴⁶, M. Lokajicek¹³⁷, B.A. Long²⁵, J.D. Long¹⁷¹, R.E. Long⁸⁷, L. Longo^{65a,65b}, K.A. Looper¹²², J.A. Lopez^{144b}, I. Lopez Paz¹⁴, A. Lopez Solis¹³², J. Lorenz¹¹², N. Lorenzo Martinez⁵, M. Losada²², P.J. Lösel¹¹², X. Lou^{15a}, A. Lounis¹²⁸, J. Love⁶, P.A. Love⁸⁷, H. Lu^{61a}, N. Lu¹⁰³, Y.J. Lu⁶², H.J. Lubatti¹⁴⁵, C. Luci^{70a,70b}, A. Lucotte⁵⁶, C. Luedtke⁵⁰, F. Luehring⁶³, W. Lukas⁷⁴, L. Luminari^{70a}, B. Lund-Jensen¹⁵¹, M.S. Lutz¹⁰⁰, P.M. Luzi¹³², D. Lynn²⁹, R. Lysak¹³⁷, E. Lytken⁹⁴, F. Lyu^{15a}, V. Lyubushkin⁷⁷, H. Ma²⁹, L.L. Ma^{58b}, Y. Ma^{58b}, G. Maccarrone⁴⁹, A. Macchiolo¹¹³, C.M. Macdonald¹⁴⁶, J. Machado Miguens^{133,136b}, D. Madaffari¹⁷², R. Madar³⁷, W.F. Mader⁴⁶, A. Madsen⁴⁴, N. Madysa⁴⁶, J. Maeda⁸⁰, S. Maeland¹⁷, T. Maeno²⁹, A.S. Maevskiy¹¹¹, V. Magerl⁵⁰, C. Maidantchik^{78b}, T. Maier¹¹², A. Maio^{136a,136b,136d}, O. Majersky^{28a}, S. Majewski¹²⁷, Y. Makida⁷⁹, N. Makovec¹²⁸, B. Malaescu¹³², Pa. Malecki⁸², V.P. Maleev¹³⁴, F. Malek⁵⁶, U. Mallik⁷⁵, D. Malon⁶, C. Malone³¹, S. Maltezos¹⁰, S. Malyukov³⁵, J. Mamuzic¹⁷², G. Mancini⁴⁹, I. Mandić⁸⁹, J. Maneira^{136a}, L. Manhaes de Andrade Filho^{78a}, J. Manjarres Ramos⁴⁶, K.H. Mankinen⁹⁴, A. Mann¹¹², A. Manousos³⁵, B. Mansoulie¹⁴², J.D. Mansour^{15a}, R. Mantifel¹⁰¹, M. Mantoani⁵¹, S. Manzoni^{66a,66b}, L. Mapelli³⁵, G. Marceca³⁰, L. March⁵², L. Marchese¹³¹, G. Marchiori¹³², M. Marcisovsky¹³⁷, C.A. Marin Tobon³⁵, M. Marjanovic³⁷, D.E. Marley¹⁰³, F. Marroquin^{78b}, S.P. Marsden⁹⁸, Z. Marshall¹⁸, M.U.F. Martensson¹⁷⁰, S. Marti-Garcia¹⁷², C.B. Martin¹²², T.A. Martin¹⁷⁶, V.J. Martin⁴⁸, B. Martin dit Latour¹⁷, M. Martinez^{14,z}, V.I. Martinez Outschoorn¹⁰⁰, S. Martin-Haugh¹⁴¹, V.S. Martoiu^{27b}, A.C. Martyniuk⁹², A. Marzin³⁵, L. Masetti⁹⁷, T. Mashimo¹⁶¹, R. Mashinistov¹⁰⁸, J. Masik⁹⁸, A.L. Maslennikov^{120b,120a}, L.H. Mason¹⁰², L. Massa^{71a,71b}, P. Mastrandrea⁵, A. Mastroberardino^{40b,40a}, T. Masubuchi¹⁶¹, P. Mättig¹⁸⁰, J. Maurer^{27b}, B. Maček⁸⁹, S.J. Maxfield⁸⁸, D.A. Maximov^{120b,120a}, R. Mazini¹⁵⁵, I. Maznas¹⁶⁰, S.M. Mazza^{66a,66b}, N.C. Mc Fadden¹¹⁶, G. Mc Goldrick¹⁶⁵, S.P. Mc Kee¹⁰³, A. McCarn¹⁰³, R.L. McCarthy¹⁵², T.G. McCarthy¹¹³, L.I. McClymont⁹², E.F. McDonald¹⁰², J.A. Mcfayden³⁵, G. Mchedlidze⁵¹, S.J. McMahon¹⁴¹, P.C. McNamara¹⁰², C.J. McNicol¹⁷⁶, R.A. McPherson^{174,ae}, Z.A. Meadows¹⁰⁰, S. Meehan¹⁴⁵, T.M. Megy⁵⁰, S. Mehlhase¹¹², A. Mehta⁸⁸, T. Meideck⁵⁶, B. Meirose⁴², D. Melini^{172,h}, B.R. Mellado Garcia^{32c}, J.D. Mellenthin⁵¹, M. Melo^{28a}, F. Meloni²⁰, A. Melzer²⁴, S.B. Menary⁹⁸, L. Meng⁸⁸, X.T. Meng¹⁰³, A. Mengarelli^{23b,23a}, S. Menke¹¹³, E. Meoni^{40b,40a}, S. Mergelmeyer¹⁹, C. Merlassino²⁰, P. Mermod⁵², L. Merola^{67a,67b}, C. Meroni^{66a}, F.S. Merritt³⁶, A. Messina^{70a,70b}, J. Metcalfe⁶, A.S. Mete¹⁶⁹, C. Meyer¹³³, J. Meyer¹¹⁸, J-P. Meyer¹⁴², H. Meyer Zu Theenhausen^{59a}, F. Miano¹⁵³, R.P. Middleton¹⁴¹, S. Miglioranzi^{53b,53a}, L. Mijović⁴⁸, G. Mikenberg¹⁷⁸, M. Mikesikova¹³⁷, M. Mikuž⁸⁹, M. Milesi¹⁰², A. Milic¹⁶⁵, D.A. Millar⁹⁰, D.W. Miller³⁶, A. Milov¹⁷⁸, D.A. Milstead^{43a,43b}, A.A. Minaenko¹⁴⁰, I.A. Minashvili^{157b}, A.I. Mincer¹²¹, B. Mindur^{81a}, M. Mineev⁷⁷, Y. Minegishi¹⁶¹, Y. Ming¹⁷⁹, L.M. Mir¹⁴, A. Mirto^{65a,65b}, K.P. Mistry¹³³, T. Mitani¹⁷⁷, J. Mitrevski¹¹², V.A. Mitsou¹⁷², A. Miucci²⁰, P.S. Miyagawa¹⁴⁶, A. Mizukami⁷⁹, J.U. Mjörnmark⁹⁴, T. Mkrtchyan¹⁸², M. Mlynarikova¹³⁹, T. Moa^{43a,43b}, K. Mochizuki¹⁰⁷, P. Mogg⁵⁰, S. Mohapatra³⁸, S. Molander^{43a,43b}, R. Moles-Valls²⁴, M.C. Mondragon¹⁰⁴, K. Mönig⁴⁴, J. Monk³⁹, E. Monnier⁹⁹, A. Montalbano¹⁵², J. Montejo Berlingen³⁵,

F. Monticelli⁸⁶, S. Monzani^{66a}, R.W. Moore³, N. Morange¹²⁸, D. Moreno²², M. Moreno Llácer³⁵, P. Morettini^{53b}, M. Morgenstern¹¹⁸, S. Morgenstern³⁵, D. Mori¹⁴⁹, T. Mori¹⁶¹, M. Morii⁵⁷, M. Morinaga¹⁷⁷, V. Morisbak¹³⁰, A.K. Morley³⁵, G. Mornacchi³⁵, J.D. Morris⁹⁰, L. Morvaj¹⁵², P. Moschovakos¹⁰, M. Mosidze^{157b}, H.J. Moss¹⁴⁶, J. Moss^{150,n}, K. Motohashi¹⁶³, R. Mount¹⁵⁰, E. Mountricha²⁹, E.J.W. Moyse¹⁰⁰, S. Muanza⁹⁹, F. Mueller¹¹³, J. Mueller¹³⁵, R.S.P. Mueller¹¹², D. Muenstermann⁸⁷, P. Mullen⁵⁵, G.A. Mullier²⁰, F.J. Munoz Sanchez⁹⁸, W.J. Murray^{176,141}, M. Muškinja⁸⁹, C. Mwewa^{32a}, A.G. Myagkov^{140,al}, J. Myers¹²⁷, M. Myska¹³⁸, B.P. Nachman¹⁸, O. Nackenhorst⁴⁵, K. Nagai¹³¹, R. Nagai^{79,ao}, K. Nagano⁷⁹, Y. Nagasaka⁶⁰, K. Nagata¹⁶⁷, M. Nagel⁵⁰, E. Nagy⁹⁹, A.M. Nairz³⁵, Y. Nakahama¹¹⁵, K. Nakamura⁷⁹, T. Nakamura¹⁶¹, I. Nakano¹²³, R.F. Naranjo Garcia⁴⁴, R. Narayan¹¹, D.I. Narrias Villar^{59a}, I. Naryshkin¹³⁴, T. Naumann⁴⁴, G. Navarro²², R. Nayyar⁷, H.A. Neal¹⁰³, P.Y. Nechaeva¹⁰⁸, T.J. Neep¹⁴², A. Negri^{68a,68b}, M. Negrini^{23b}, S. Nektarijevic¹¹⁷, C. Nellist⁵¹, A. Nelson¹⁶⁹, M.E. Nelson¹³¹, S. Nemecek¹³⁷, P. Nemethy¹²¹, M. Nessi^{35,f}, M.S. Neubauer¹⁷¹, M. Neumann¹⁸⁰, P.R. Newman²¹, T.Y. Ng^{61c}, Y.S. Ng¹⁹, T. Nguyen Manh¹⁰⁷, R.B. Nickerson¹³¹, R. Nicolaidou¹⁴², J. Nielsen¹⁴³, N. Nikiforou¹¹, V. Nikolaenko^{140,al}, I. Nikolic-Audit¹³², K. Nikolopoulos²¹, P. Nilsson²⁹, Y. Ninomiya⁷⁹, A. Nisati^{70a}, N. Nishu^{58c}, R. Nisius¹¹³, I. Nitsche⁴⁵, T. Nitta¹⁷⁷, T. Nobe¹⁶¹, Y. Noguchi⁸³, M. Nomachi¹²⁹, I. Nomidis³³, M.A. Nomura²⁹, T. Nooney⁹⁰, M. Nordberg³⁵, N. Norjoharuddeen¹³¹, O. Novgorodova⁴⁶, R. Novotny¹³⁸, M. Nozaki⁷⁹, L. Nozka¹²⁶, K. Ntekas¹⁶⁹, E. Nurse⁹², F. Nuti¹⁰², F.G. Oakham^{33,au}, H. Oberlack¹¹³, T. Obermann²⁴, J. Ocariz¹³², A. Ochi⁸⁰, I. Ochoa³⁸, J.P. Ochoa-Ricoux^{144a}, K. O'Connor²⁶, S. Oda⁸⁵, S. Odaka⁷⁹, A. Oh⁹⁸, S.H. Oh⁴⁷, C.C. Ohm¹⁵¹, H. Ohman¹⁷⁰, H. Oide^{53b,53a}, H. Okawa¹⁶⁷, Y. Okumura¹⁶¹, T. Okuyama⁷⁹, A. Olariu^{27b}, L.F. Oleiro Seabra^{136a}, S.A. Olivares Pino^{144a}, D. Oliveira Damazio²⁹, J.L. Oliver¹, M.J.R. Olsson³⁶, A. Olszewski⁸², J. Olszowska⁸², D.C. O'Neil¹⁴⁹, A. Onofre^{136a,136e}, K. Onogi¹¹⁵, P.U.E. Onyisi¹¹, H. Oppen¹³⁰, M.J. Oreglia³⁶, Y. Oren¹⁵⁹, D. Orestano^{72a,72b}, E.C. Orgill⁹⁸, N. Orlando^{61b}, A.A. O'Rourke⁴⁴, R.S. Orr¹⁶⁵, B. Osculati^{53b,53a,*}, V. O'Shea⁵⁵, R. Ospanov^{58a}, G. Otero y Garzon³⁰, H. Otono⁸⁵, M. Ouchrif^{34d}, F. Ould-Saada¹³⁰, A. Ouraou¹⁴², K.P. Oussoren¹¹⁸, Q. Ouyang^{15a}, M. Owen⁵⁵, R.E. Owen²¹, V.E. Ozcan^{12c}, N. Ozturk⁸, K. Pachal¹⁴⁹, A. Pacheco Pages¹⁴, L. Pacheco Rodriguez¹⁴², C. Padilla Aranda¹⁴, S. Pagan Griso¹⁸, M. Paganini¹⁸¹, F. Paige²⁹, G. Palacino⁶³, S. Palazzo^{40b,40a}, S. Palestini³⁵, M. Palka^{81b}, D. Pallin³⁷, E.St. Panagiotopoulou¹⁰, I. Panagoulas¹⁰, C.E. Pandini⁵², J.G. Panduro Vazquez⁹¹, P. Pani³⁵, S. Panitkin²⁹, D. Pantea^{27b}, L. Paolozzi⁵², T.D. Papadopoulou¹⁰, K. Papageorgiou^{9j}, A. Paramonov⁶, D. Paredes Hernandez^{61b}, A.J. Parker⁸⁷, K.A. Parker⁴⁴, M.A. Parker³¹, F. Parodi^{53b,53a}, J.A. Parsons³⁸, U. Parzefall⁵⁰, V.R. Pascuzzi¹⁶⁵, J.M.P. Pasner¹⁴³, E. Pasqualucci^{70a}, S. Passaggio^{53b}, F. Pastore⁹¹, S. Patariaia⁹⁷, J.R. Pater⁹⁸, T. Pauly³⁵, B. Pearson¹¹³, S. Pedraza Lopez¹⁷², R. Pedro^{136a,136b}, S.V. Peleganchuk^{120b,120a}, O. Penc¹³⁷, C. Peng^{15d}, H. Peng^{58a}, J. Penwell⁶³, B.S. Peralva^{78a}, M.M. Perego¹⁴², D.V. Perepelitsa²⁹, F. Peri¹⁹, L. Perini^{66a,66b}, H. Pernegger³⁵, S. Perrella^{67a,67b}, V.D. Peshekhonov^{77,*}, K. Peters⁴⁴, R.F.Y. Peters⁹⁸, B.A. Petersen³⁵, T.C. Petersen³⁹, E. Petit⁵⁶, A. Petridis¹, C. Petridou¹⁶⁰, P. Petroff¹²⁸, E. Petrolo^{70a}, M. Petrov¹³¹, F. Petrucci^{72a,72b}, N.E. Pettersson¹⁰⁰, A. Peyaud¹⁴², R. Pezoa^{144b}, T. Pham¹⁰², F.H. Phillips¹⁰⁴, P.W. Phillips¹⁴¹, G. Piacquadio¹⁵², E. Pianori¹⁷⁶, A. Picazio¹⁰⁰, M.A. Pickering¹³¹, R. Piegai³⁰, J.E. Pilcher³⁶, A.D. Pilkington⁹⁸, M. Pinamonti^{71a,71b}, J.L. Pinfeld³, M. Pitt¹⁷⁸, M-A. Pleier²⁹, V. Pleskot⁹⁷, E. Plotnikova⁷⁷, D. Pluth⁷⁶, P. Podberczko^{120b,120a}, R. Poettgen⁹⁴, R. Poggi^{68a,68b}, L. Poggioli¹²⁸, I. Pogrebnyak¹⁰⁴, D. Pohl²⁴, I. Pokharel⁵¹, G. Polesello^{68a}, A. Poley⁴⁴, A. Policicchio^{40b,40a}, R. Polifka³⁵, A. Polini^{23b}, C.S. Pollard⁴⁴, V. Polychronakos²⁹, K. Pommès³⁵, D. Ponomarenko¹¹⁰, L. Pontecorvo^{70a}, G.A. Popeneciu^{27d}, D.M. Portillo Quintero¹³², S. Pospisil¹³⁸, K. Potamianos⁴⁴, I.N. Potrap⁷⁷, C.J. Potter³¹, H. Potti¹¹, T. Poulsen⁹⁴, J. Poveda³⁵, M.E. Pozo Astigarraga³⁵, P. Pralavorio⁹⁹, S. Prell⁷⁶, D. Price⁹⁸, M. Primavera^{65a}, S. Prince¹⁰¹, N. Proklova¹¹⁰, K. Prokofiev^{61c}, F. Prokoshin^{144b}, S. Protopopescu²⁹, J. Proudfoot⁶, M. Przybycien^{81a},

A. Puri¹⁷¹, P. Puzo¹²⁸, J. Qian¹⁰³, Y. Qin⁹⁸, A. Quadt⁵¹, M. Queitsch-Maitland⁴⁴, V. Radeka²⁹,
 S.K. Radhakrishnan¹⁵², P. Rados¹⁰², F. Ragusa^{66a,66b}, G. Rahal⁹⁵, J.A. Raine⁹⁸, S. Rajagopalan²⁹,
 T. Rashid¹²⁸, S. Raspopov⁵, M.G. Ratti^{66a,66b}, D.M. Rauch⁴⁴, F. Rauscher¹¹², S. Rave⁹⁷, I. Ravinovich¹⁷⁸,
 J.H. Rawling⁹⁸, M. Raymond³⁵, A.L. Read¹³⁰, N.P. Readioff⁵⁶, M. Reale^{65a,65b}, D.M. Rebuzzi^{68a,68b},
 A. Redelbach¹⁷⁵, G. Redlinger²⁹, R. Reece¹⁴³, R.G. Reed^{32c}, K. Reeves⁴², L. Rehnisch¹⁹, J. Reichert¹³³,
 A. Reiss⁹⁷, C. Rembser³⁵, H. Ren^{15d}, M. Rescigno^{70a}, S. Resconi^{66a}, E.D. Resseguie¹³³, S. Rettie¹⁷³,
 E. Reynolds²¹, O.L. Rezanova^{120b,120a}, P. Reznicek¹³⁹, R. Richter¹¹³, S. Richter⁹², E. Richter-Was^{81b},
 O. Ricken²⁴, M. Ridel¹³², P. Rieck¹¹³, C.J. Riegel¹⁸⁰, O. Rifki¹²⁴, M. Rijssenbeek¹⁵², A. Rimoldi^{68a,68b},
 M. Rimoldi²⁰, L. Rinaldi^{23b}, G. Ripellino¹⁵¹, B. Ristic³⁵, E. Ritsch³⁵, I. Riu¹⁴, J.C. Rivera Vergara^{144a},
 F. Rizatdinova¹²⁵, E. Rizvi⁹⁰, C. Rizzi¹⁴, R.T. Roberts⁹⁸, S.H. Robertson^{101,ae},
 A. Robichaud-Veronneau¹⁰¹, D. Robinson³¹, J.E.M. Robinson⁴⁴, A. Robson⁵⁵, E. Rocco⁹⁷,
 C. Roda^{69a,69b}, Y. Rodina^{99,aa}, S. Rodriguez Bosca¹⁷², A. Rodriguez Perez¹⁴, D. Rodriguez Rodriguez¹⁷²,
 A.M. Rodríguez Vera^{166b}, S. Roe³⁵, C.S. Rogan⁵⁷, O. Røhne¹³⁰, R. Röhrig¹¹³, J. Roloff⁵⁷,
 A. Romaniouk¹¹⁰, M. Romano^{23b,23a}, S.M. Romano Saez³⁷, E. Romero Adam¹⁷², N. Rompotis⁸⁸,
 M. Ronzani⁵⁰, L. Roos¹³², S. Rosati^{70a}, K. Rosbach⁵⁰, P. Rose¹⁴³, N-A. Rosien⁵¹, E. Rossi^{67a,67b},
 L.P. Rossi^{53b}, J.H.N. Rosten³¹, R. Rosten¹⁴⁵, M. Rotaru^{27b}, J. Rothberg¹⁴⁵, D. Rousseau¹²⁸, D. Roy^{32c},
 A. Rozanov⁹⁹, Y. Rozen¹⁵⁸, X. Ruan^{32c}, F. Rubbo¹⁵⁰, F. Rühr⁵⁰, A. Ruiz-Martinez³³, Z. Rurikova⁵⁰,
 N.A. Rusakovich⁷⁷, H.L. Russell¹⁰¹, J.P. Rutherford⁷, N. Ruthmann³⁵, E.M. Rüttinger^{44,1},
 Y.F. Ryabov¹³⁴, M. Rybar¹⁷¹, G. Rybkin¹²⁸, S. Ryu⁶, A. Ryzhov¹⁴⁰, G.F. Rzehorz⁵¹, G. Sabato¹¹⁸,
 S. Sacerdoti³⁰, H.F.W. Sadrozinski¹⁴³, R. Sadykov⁷⁷, F. Safai Tehrani^{70a}, P. Saha¹¹⁹, M. Sahinsoy^{59a},
 M. Saimpert⁴⁴, M. Saito¹⁶¹, T. Saito¹⁶¹, H. Sakamoto¹⁶¹, G. Salamanna^{72a,72b}, J.E. Salazar Loyola^{144b},
 D. Salek¹¹⁸, P.H. Sales De Bruin¹⁷⁰, D. Salihagic¹¹³, A. Salnikov¹⁵⁰, J. Salt¹⁷², D. Salvatore^{40b,40a},
 F. Salvatore¹⁵³, A. Salvucci^{61a,61b,61c}, A. Salzburger³⁵, D. Sammel⁵⁰, D. Sampsonidis¹⁶⁰,
 D. Sampsonidou¹⁶⁰, J. Sánchez¹⁷², A. Sanchez Pineda^{64a,64c}, H. Sandaker¹³⁰, R.L. Sandbach⁹⁰,
 C.O. Sander⁴⁴, M. Sandhoff¹⁸⁰, C. Sandoval²², D.P.C. Sankey¹⁴¹, M. Sannino^{53b,53a}, Y. Sano¹¹⁵,
 A. Sansoni⁴⁹, C. Santoni³⁷, H. Santos^{136a}, I. Santoyo Castillo¹⁵³, A. Saponov⁷⁷, J.G. Saraiva^{136a,136d},
 O. Sasaki⁷⁹, K. Sato¹⁶⁷, E. Sauvan⁵, G. Savage⁹¹, P. Savard^{165,au}, N. Savic¹¹³, R. Sawada¹⁶¹,
 C. Sawyer¹⁴¹, L. Sawyer^{93,aj}, C. Sbarra^{23b}, A. Sbrizzi^{23b,23a}, T. Scanlon⁹², D.A. Scannicchio¹⁶⁹,
 J. Schaarschmidt¹⁴⁵, P. Schacht¹¹³, B.M. Schachtner¹¹², D. Schaefer³⁶, L. Schaefer¹³³, J. Schaeffer⁹⁷,
 S. Schaepe³⁵, U. Schäfer⁹⁷, A.C. Schaffer¹²⁸, D. Schaile¹¹², R.D. Schamberger¹⁵², V.A. Schegelsky¹³⁴,
 D. Scheirich¹³⁹, F. Schenck¹⁹, M. Schernau¹⁶⁹, C. Schiavi^{53b,53a}, S. Schier¹⁴³, L.K. Schildgen²⁴,
 C. Schillo⁵⁰, E.J. Schioppa³⁵, M. Schioppa^{40b,40a}, K.E. Schleicher⁵⁰, S. Schlenker³⁵,
 K.R. Schmidt-Sommerfeld¹¹³, K. Schmieden³⁵, C. Schmitt⁹⁷, S. Schmitt⁴⁴, S. Schmitz⁹⁷, U. Schnoor⁵⁰,
 L. Schoeffel¹⁴², A. Schoening^{59b}, B.D. Schoenrock¹⁰⁴, E. Schopf²⁴, M. Schott⁹⁷, J.F.P. Schouwenberg¹¹⁷,
 J. Schovancova³⁵, S. Schramm⁵², N. Schuh⁹⁷, A. Schulte⁹⁷, H-C. Schultz-Coulon^{59a}, M. Schumacher⁵⁰,
 B.A. Schumm¹⁴³, Ph. Schune¹⁴², A. Schwartzman¹⁵⁰, T.A. Schwarz¹⁰³, H. Schweiger⁹⁸,
 Ph. Schwemling¹⁴², R. Schwienhorst¹⁰⁴, A. Sciandra²⁴, G. Sciolla²⁶, M. Scornajenghi^{40b,40a}, F. Scuri^{69a},
 F. Scutti¹⁰², L.M. Scyboz¹¹³, J. Searcy¹⁰³, P. Seema²⁴, S.C. Seidel¹¹⁶, A. Seiden¹⁴³, J.M. Seixas^{78b},
 G. Sekhniaidze^{67a}, K. Sekhon¹⁰³, S.J. Sekula⁴¹, N. Semprini-Cesari^{23b,23a}, S. Senkin³⁷, C. Serfon¹³⁰,
 L. Serin¹²⁸, L. Serkin^{64a,64b}, M. Sessa^{72a,72b}, H. Severini¹²⁴, F. Sforza¹⁶⁸, A. Sfyrila⁵², E. Shabalina⁵¹,
 N.W. Shaikh^{43a,43b}, L.Y. Shan^{15a}, R. Shang¹⁷¹, J.T. Shank²⁵, M. Shapiro¹⁸, P.B. Shatalov¹⁰⁹,
 K. Shaw^{64a,64b}, S.M. Shaw⁹⁸, A. Shcherbakova^{43a,43b}, C.Y. Shehu¹⁵³, Y. Shen¹²⁴, N. Sherafati³³,
 A.D. Sherman²⁵, P. Sherwood⁹², L. Shi^{155,aq}, S. Shimizu⁸⁰, C.O. Shimmin¹⁸¹, M. Shimojima¹¹⁴,
 I.P.J. Shipsey¹³¹, S. Shirabe⁸⁵, M. Shiyakova⁷⁷, J. Shlomi¹⁷⁸, A. Shmeleva¹⁰⁸, D. Shoaleh Saadi¹⁰⁷,
 M.J. Shochet³⁶, S. Shojaii¹⁰², D.R. Shope¹²⁴, S. Shrestha¹²², E. Shulga¹¹⁰, M.A. Shupe⁷, P. Sicho¹³⁷,
 A.M. Sickles¹⁷¹, P.E. Sidebo¹⁵¹, E. Sideras Haddad^{32c}, O. Sidiropoulou¹⁷⁵, A. Sidoti^{23b,23a}, F. Siegert⁴⁶,
 Dj. Sijacki¹⁶, J. Silva^{136a,136d}, M. Silva Jr.¹⁷⁹, S.B. Silverstein^{43a}, V. Simak¹³⁸, L. Simic⁷⁷, S. Simion¹²⁸,

E. Simioni⁹⁷, B. Simmons⁹², M. Simon⁹⁷, P. Sinervo¹⁶⁵, N.B. Sinev¹²⁷, M. Sioli^{23b,23a}, G. Siragusa¹⁷⁵,
 I. Siral¹⁰³, S.Yu. Sivoklov¹¹¹, J. Sjölin^{43a,43b}, M.B. Skinner⁸⁷, P. Skubic¹²⁴, M. Slater²¹, T. Slavicek¹³⁸,
 M. Slawinska⁸², K. Sliwa¹⁶⁸, R. Slovak¹³⁹, V. Smakhtin¹⁷⁸, B.H. Smart⁵, J. Smiesko^{28a}, N. Smirnov¹¹⁰,
 S.Yu. Smirnov¹¹⁰, Y. Smirnov¹¹⁰, L.N. Smirnova¹¹¹, O. Smirnova⁹⁴, J.W. Smith⁵¹, M.N.K. Smith³⁸,
 R.W. Smith³⁸, M. Smizanska⁸⁷, K. Smolek¹³⁸, A.A. Snesarev¹⁰⁸, I.M. Snyder¹²⁷, S. Snyder²⁹,
 R. Sobie^{174,ae}, F. Socher⁴⁶, A.M. Soffa¹⁶⁹, A. Soffer¹⁵⁹, A. Søggaard⁴⁸, D.A. Soh¹⁵⁵, G. Sokhrannyi⁸⁹,
 C.A. Solans Sanchez³⁵, M. Solar¹³⁸, E.Yu. Soldatov¹¹⁰, U. Soldevila¹⁷², A.A. Solodkov¹⁴⁰,
 A. Soloshenko⁷⁷, O.V. Solovyanov¹⁴⁰, V. Solovyev¹³⁴, P. Sommer¹⁴⁶, H. Son¹⁶⁸, W. Song¹⁴¹,
 A. Sopczak¹³⁸, D. Sosa^{59b}, C.L. Sotiropoulou^{69a,69b}, S. Sottocornola^{68a,68b}, R. Soualah^{64a,64c,i},
 A.M. Soukharev^{120b,120a}, D. South⁴⁴, B.C. Sowden⁹¹, S. Spagnolo^{65a,65b}, M. Spalla^{69a,69b},
 M. Spangenberg¹⁷⁶, F. Spanò⁹¹, D. Sperlich¹⁹, F. Spettel¹¹³, T.M. Spieker^{59a}, R. Spighi^{23b}, G. Spigo³⁵,
 L.A. Spiller¹⁰², M. Spousta¹³⁹, R.D. St. Denis^{55,*}, A. Stabile^{66a,66b}, R. Stamen^{59a}, S. Stamm¹⁹,
 E. Stanecka⁸², R.W. Stanek⁶, C. Stanescu^{72a}, M.M. Stanitzki⁴⁴, B. Stapf¹¹⁸, S. Stapnes¹³⁰,
 E.A. Starchenko¹⁴⁰, G.H. Stark³⁶, J. Stark⁵⁶, S.H. Stark³⁹, P. Staroba¹³⁷, P. Starovoitov^{59a}, S. Stärz³⁵,
 R. Staszewski⁸², M. Stegler⁴⁴, P. Steinberg²⁹, B. Stelzer¹⁴⁹, H.J. Stelzer³⁵, O. Stelzer-Chilton^{166a},
 H. Stenzel⁵⁴, T.J. Stevenson⁹⁰, G.A. Stewart⁵⁵, M.C. Stockton¹²⁷, G. Stoicea^{27b}, P. Stolte⁵¹,
 S. Stonjek¹¹³, A. Straessner⁴⁶, M.E. Stramaglia²⁰, J. Strandberg¹⁵¹, S. Strandberg^{43a,43b}, M. Strauss¹²⁴,
 P. Strizeneč^{28b}, R. Ströhmer¹⁷⁵, D.M. Strom¹²⁷, R. Stroynowski⁴¹, A. Strubig⁴⁸, S.A. Stucci²⁹,
 B. Stugu¹⁷, N.A. Styles⁴⁴, D. Su¹⁵⁰, J. Su¹³⁵, S. Suchek^{59a}, Y. Sugaya¹²⁹, M. Suk¹³⁸, V.V. Sulin¹⁰⁸,
 D.M.S. Sultan⁵², S. Sultansoy^{4c}, T. Sumida⁸³, S. Sun¹⁰³, X. Sun³, K. Suruliz¹⁵³, C.J.E. Suster¹⁵⁴,
 M.R. Sutton¹⁵³, S. Suzuki⁷⁹, M. Svatos¹³⁷, M. Swiatlowski³⁶, S.P. Swift², A. Sydorenko⁹⁷, I. Sykora^{28a},
 T. Sykora¹³⁹, D. Ta⁵⁰, K. Tackmann^{44,ab}, J. Taenzer¹⁵⁹, A. Taffard¹⁶⁹, R. Tafirout^{166a}, E. Tahirovic⁹⁰,
 N. Taiblum¹⁵⁹, H. Takai²⁹, R. Takashima⁸⁴, E.H. Takasugi¹¹³, K. Takeda⁸⁰, T. Takeshita¹⁴⁷, Y. Takubo⁷⁹,
 M. Talby⁹⁹, A.A. Talyshev^{120b,120a}, J. Tanaka¹⁶¹, M. Tanaka¹⁶³, R. Tanaka¹²⁸, R. Tanioka⁸⁰,
 B.B. Tannenwald¹²², S. Tapia Araya^{144b}, S. Tapprogge⁹⁷, S. Tarem¹⁵⁸, G.F. Tartarelli^{66a}, P. Tas¹³⁹,
 M. Tasevsky¹³⁷, T. Tashiro⁸³, E. Tassi^{40b,40a}, A. Tavares Delgado^{136a,136b}, Y. Tayalati^{34e}, A.C. Taylor¹¹⁶,
 A.J. Taylor⁴⁸, G.N. Taylor¹⁰², P.T.E. Taylor¹⁰², W. Taylor^{166b}, P. Teixeira-Dias⁹¹, D. Temple¹⁴⁹,
 H. Ten Kate³⁵, P.K. Teng¹⁵⁵, J.J. Teoh¹²⁹, F. Tepel¹⁸⁰, S. Terada⁷⁹, K. Terashi¹⁶¹, J. Terron⁹⁶, S. Terzo¹⁴,
 M. Testa⁴⁹, R.J. Teuscher^{165,ae}, S.J. Thais¹⁸¹, T. Thevenaux-Pelzer⁴⁴, F. Thiele³⁹, J.P. Thomas²¹,
 J. Thomas-Wilsker⁹¹, A.S. Thompson⁵⁵, P.D. Thompson²¹, L.A. Thomsen¹⁸¹, E. Thomson¹³³, Y. Tian³⁸,
 R.E. Ticse Torres⁵¹, V.O. Tikhomirov^{108,am}, Yu.A. Tikhonov^{120b,120a}, S. Timoshenko¹¹⁰, P. Tipton¹⁸¹,
 S. Tisserant⁹⁹, K. Todome¹⁶³, S. Todorova-Nova⁵, S. Todt⁴⁶, J. Tojo⁸⁵, S. Tokár^{28a}, K. Tokushuku⁷⁹,
 E. Tolley¹²², L. Tomlinson⁹⁸, M. Tomoto¹¹⁵, L. Tompkins^{150,r}, K. Toms¹¹⁶, B. Tong⁵⁷, P. Tornambe⁵⁰,
 E. Torrence¹²⁷, H. Torres⁴⁶, E. Torró Pastor¹⁴⁵, J. Toth^{99,ad}, F. Touchard⁹⁹, D.R. Tovey¹⁴⁶, C.J. Treado¹²¹,
 T. Trefzger¹⁷⁵, F. Tresoldi¹⁵³, A. Tricoli²⁹, I.M. Trigger^{166a}, S. Trincaz-Duvoid¹³², M.F. Tripiana¹⁴,
 W. Trischuk¹⁶⁵, B. Trocme⁵⁶, A. Trofymov⁴⁴, C. Troncon^{66a}, M. Trovatelli¹⁷⁴, L. Truong^{32b},
 M. Trzebinski⁸², A. Trzupek⁸², K.W. Tsang^{61a}, J.C.-L. Tseng¹³¹, P.V. Tsiarshka¹⁰⁵, N. Tsirintanis⁹,
 S. Tsiskaridze¹⁴, V. Tsiskaridze⁵⁰, E.G. Tskhadadze^{157a}, I.I. Tsukerman¹⁰⁹, V. Tsulaia¹⁸, S. Tsuno⁷⁹,
 D. Tsybychev¹⁵², Y. Tu^{61b}, A. Tudorache^{27b}, V. Tudorache^{27b}, T.T. Tulbure^{27a}, A.N. Tuna⁵⁷,
 S. Turchikhin⁷⁷, D. Turgeman¹⁷⁸, I. Turk Cakir^{4b,v}, R. Turra^{66a}, P.M. Tuts³⁸, G. Uccielli^{23b,23a},
 I. Ueda⁷⁹, M. Ughetto^{43a,43b}, F. Ukegawa¹⁶⁷, G. Unal³⁵, A. Undrus²⁹, G. Unel¹⁶⁹, F.C. Ungaro¹⁰²,
 Y. Unno⁷⁹, K. Uno¹⁶¹, J. Urban^{28b}, P. Urquijo¹⁰², P. Urrejola⁹⁷, G. Usai⁸, J. Usui⁷⁹, L. Vacavant⁹⁹,
 V. Vacek¹³⁸, B. Vachon¹⁰¹, K.O.H. Vadla¹³⁰, A. Vaidya⁹², C. Valderanis¹¹², E. Valdes Santurio^{43a,43b},
 M. Valente⁵², S. Valentineti^{23b,23a}, A. Valero¹⁷², L. Valéry¹⁴, A. Vallier⁵, J.A. Valls Ferrer¹⁷²,
 W. Van Den Wollenberg¹¹⁸, H. Van der Graaf¹¹⁸, P. Van Gemmeren⁶, J. Van Nieuwkoop¹⁴⁹,
 I. Van Vulpen¹¹⁸, M.C. van Woerden¹¹⁸, M. Vanadia^{71a,71b}, W. Vandelli³⁵, A. Vaniachine¹⁶⁴,
 P. Vankov¹¹⁸, R. Vari^{70a}, E.W. Varnes⁷, C. Varni^{53b,53a}, T. Varol⁴¹, D. Varouchas¹²⁸, A. Vartapetian⁸,

K.E. Varvell¹⁵⁴, G.A. Vasquez^{144b}, J.G. Vasquez¹⁸¹, F. Vazeille³⁷, D. Vazquez Furelos¹⁴, T. Vazquez Schroeder¹⁰¹, J. Veatch⁵¹, V. Veeraraghavan⁷, L.M. Veloce¹⁶⁵, F. Veloso^{136a,136c}, S. Veneziano^{70a}, A. Ventura^{65a,65b}, M. Venturi¹⁷⁴, N. Venturi³⁵, V. Vercesi^{68a}, M. Verducci^{72a,72b}, W. Verkerke¹¹⁸, A.T. Vermeulen¹¹⁸, J.C. Vermeulen¹¹⁸, M.C. Vetterli^{149,au}, N. Viaux Maira^{144b}, O. Viazlo⁹⁴, I. Vichou^{171,*}, T. Vickey¹⁴⁶, O.E. Vickey Boeriu¹⁴⁶, G.H.A. Viehhauser¹³¹, S. Viel¹⁸, L. Vigani¹³¹, M. Villa^{23b,23a}, M. Villaplana Perez^{66a,66b}, E. Vilucchi⁴⁹, M.G. Vincter³³, V.B. Vinogradov⁷⁷, A. Vishwakarma⁴⁴, C. Vittori^{23b,23a}, I. Vivarelli¹⁵³, S. Vlachos¹⁰, M. Vogel¹⁸⁰, P. Vokac¹³⁸, G. Volpi¹⁴, S.E. von Buddenbrock^{32c}, E. Von Toerne²⁴, V. Vorobel¹³⁹, K. Vorobev¹¹⁰, M. Vos¹⁷², R. Voss³⁵, J.H. Vosseveld⁸⁸, N. Vranjes¹⁶, M. Vranjes Milosavljevic¹⁶, V. Vrba¹³⁸, M. Vreeswijk¹¹⁸, T. Šfiligoj⁸⁹, R. Vuillermet³⁵, I. Vukotic³⁶, T. Ženiš^{28a}, L. Živković¹⁶, P. Wagner²⁴, W. Wagner¹⁸⁰, J. Wagner-Kuhr¹¹², H. Wahlberg⁸⁶, S. Wahrmund⁴⁶, K. Wakamiya⁸⁰, J. Walder⁸⁷, R. Walker¹¹², W. Walkowiak¹⁴⁸, V. Wallangen^{43a,43b}, A.M. Wang⁵⁷, C. Wang^{58b,e}, F. Wang¹⁷⁹, H. Wang¹⁸, H. Wang³, J. Wang¹⁵⁴, J. Wang^{59b}, Q. Wang¹²⁴, R.-J. Wang¹³², R. Wang⁶, S.M. Wang¹⁵⁵, T. Wang³⁸, W. Wang^{155,p}, W.X. Wang^{58a,af}, Z. Wang^{58c}, C. Wanotayaroj⁴⁴, A. Warburton¹⁰¹, C.P. Ward³¹, D.R. Wardrope⁹², A. Washbrook⁴⁸, P.M. Watkins²¹, A.T. Watson²¹, M.F. Watson²¹, G. Watts¹⁴⁵, S. Watts⁹⁸, B.M. Waugh⁹², A.F. Webb¹¹, S. Webb⁹⁷, M.S. Weber²⁰, S.A. Weber³³, S.M. Weber^{59a}, J.S. Webster⁶, A.R. Weidberg¹³¹, B. Weinert⁶³, J. Weingarten⁵¹, M. Weirich⁹⁷, C. Weiser⁵⁰, P.S. Wells³⁵, T. Wenaus²⁹, T. Wengler³⁵, S. Wenig³⁵, N. Wermes²⁴, M.D. Werner⁷⁶, P. Werner³⁵, M. Wessels^{59a}, T.D. Weston²⁰, K. Whalen¹²⁷, N.L. Whallon¹⁴⁵, A.M. Wharton⁸⁷, A.S. White¹⁰³, A. White⁸, M.J. White¹, R. White^{144b}, D. Whiteson¹⁶⁹, B.W. Whitmore⁸⁷, F.J. Wickens¹⁴¹, W. Wiedenmann¹⁷⁹, M. Wielers¹⁴¹, C. Wiglesworth³⁹, L.A.M. Wiik-Fuchs⁵⁰, A. Wildauer¹¹³, F. Wilk⁹⁸, H.G. Wilkens³⁵, H.H. Williams¹³³, S. Williams³¹, C. Willis¹⁰⁴, S. Willocq¹⁰⁰, J.A. Wilson²¹, I. Wingerter-Seez⁵, E. Winkels¹⁵³, F. Winklmeier¹²⁷, O.J. Winston¹⁵³, B.T. Winter²⁴, M. Wittgen¹⁵⁰, M. Wobisch⁹³, A. Wolf⁹⁷, T.M.H. Wolf¹¹⁸, R. Wolff⁹⁹, M.W. Wolter⁸², H. Wolters^{136a,136c}, V.W.S. Wong¹⁷³, N.L. Woods¹⁴³, S.D. Worm²¹, B.K. Wosiek⁸², J. Wotschack³⁵, K.W. Woźniak⁸², M. Wu³⁶, S.L. Wu¹⁷⁹, X. Wu⁵², Y. Wu^{58a}, T.R. Wyatt⁹⁸, B.M. Wynne⁴⁸, S. Xella³⁹, Z. Xi¹⁰³, L. Xia^{15b}, D. Xu^{15a}, L. Xu²⁹, T. Xu¹⁴², W. Xu¹⁰³, B. Yabsley¹⁵⁴, S. Yacoub^{32a}, K. Yajima¹²⁹, D.P. Yallup⁹², D. Yamaguchi¹⁶³, Y. Yamaguchi¹⁶³, A. Yamamoto⁷⁹, T. Yamanaka¹⁶¹, F. Yamane⁸⁰, M. Yamatani¹⁶¹, T. Yamazaki¹⁶¹, Y. Yamazaki⁸⁰, Z. Yan²⁵, H.J. Yang^{58c,58d}, H.T. Yang¹⁸, S. Yang⁷⁵, Y. Yang¹⁵⁵, Z. Yang¹⁷, W.-M. Yao¹⁸, Y.C. Yap⁴⁴, Y. Yasu⁷⁹, E. Yatsenko⁵, K.H. Yau Wong²⁴, J. Ye⁴¹, S. Ye²⁹, I. Yeletsikh⁷⁷, E. Yigitbasi²⁵, E. Yildirim⁹⁷, K. Yorita¹⁷⁷, K. Yoshihara¹³³, C.J.S. Young³⁵, C. Young¹⁵⁰, J. Yu⁸, J. Yu⁷⁶, S.P.Y. Yuen²⁴, I. Yusuff^{31,a}, B. Zabinski⁸², G. Zacharis¹⁰, R. Zaidan¹⁴, A.M. Zaitsev^{140,al}, N. Zakharchuk⁴⁴, J. Zalieckas¹⁷, A. Zaman¹⁵², S. Zambito⁵⁷, D. Zanzi³⁵, C. Zeitnitz¹⁸⁰, G. Zemaityte¹³¹, J.C. Zeng¹⁷¹, Q. Zeng¹⁵⁰, O. Zenin¹⁴⁰, D. Zerwas¹²⁸, D.F. Zhang^{58b}, D. Zhang¹⁰³, F. Zhang¹⁷⁹, G. Zhang^{58a,af}, H. Zhang¹²⁸, J. Zhang⁶, L. Zhang⁵⁰, L. Zhang^{58a}, M. Zhang¹⁷¹, P. Zhang^{15c}, R. Zhang^{58a,e}, R. Zhang²⁴, X. Zhang^{58b}, Y. Zhang^{15d}, Z. Zhang¹²⁸, X. Zhao⁴¹, Y. Zhao^{58b,128,ai}, Z. Zhao^{58a}, A. Zhemchugov⁷⁷, B. Zhou¹⁰³, C. Zhou¹⁷⁹, L. Zhou⁴¹, M.S. Zhou^{15d}, M. Zhou¹⁵², N. Zhou^{58c}, Y. Zhou⁷, C.G. Zhu^{58b}, H. Zhu^{15a}, J. Zhu¹⁰³, Y. Zhu^{58a}, X. Zhuang^{15a}, K. Zhukov¹⁰⁸, A. Zibell¹⁷⁵, D. Zieminska⁶³, N.I. Zimine⁷⁷, S. Zimmermann⁵⁰, Z. Zinonos¹¹³, M. Zinser⁹⁷, M. Ziolkowski¹⁴⁸, G. Zobernig¹⁷⁹, A. Zoccoli^{23b,23a}, R. Zou³⁶, M. Zur Nedden¹⁹, L. Zwalinski³⁵.

¹Department of Physics, University of Adelaide, Adelaide; Australia.

²Physics Department, SUNY Albany, Albany NY; United States of America.

³Department of Physics, University of Alberta, Edmonton AB; Canada.

⁴(^a)Department of Physics, Ankara University, Ankara; (^b)Istanbul Aydin University, Istanbul; (^c)Division of Physics, TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara; Turkey.

⁵LAPP, Université Grenoble Alpes, Université Savoie Mont Blanc, CNRS/IN2P3, Annecy; France.

- ⁶High Energy Physics Division, Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne IL; United States of America.
- ⁷Department of Physics, University of Arizona, Tucson AZ; United States of America.
- ⁸Department of Physics, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington TX; United States of America.
- ⁹Physics Department, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens; Greece.
- ¹⁰Physics Department, National Technical University of Athens, Zografou; Greece.
- ¹¹Department of Physics, University of Texas at Austin, Austin TX; United States of America.
- ¹²(^a)Bahcesehir University, Faculty of Engineering and Natural Sciences, Istanbul;(^b)Istanbul Bilgi University, Faculty of Engineering and Natural Sciences, Istanbul;(^c)Department of Physics, Bogazici University, Istanbul;(^d)Department of Physics Engineering, Gaziantep University, Gaziantep; Turkey.
- ¹³Institute of Physics, Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, Baku; Azerbaijan.
- ¹⁴Institut de Física d'Altes Energies (IFAE), Barcelona Institute of Science and Technology, Barcelona; Spain.
- ¹⁵(^a)Institute of High Energy Physics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing;(^b)Physics Department, Tsinghua University, Beijing;(^c)Department of Physics, Nanjing University, Nanjing;(^d)University of Chinese Academy of Science (UCAS), Beijing; China.
- ¹⁶Institute of Physics, University of Belgrade, Belgrade; Serbia.
- ¹⁷Department for Physics and Technology, University of Bergen, Bergen; Norway.
- ¹⁸Physics Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and University of California, Berkeley CA; United States of America.
- ¹⁹Institut für Physik, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Berlin; Germany.
- ²⁰Albert Einstein Center for Fundamental Physics and Laboratory for High Energy Physics, University of Bern, Bern; Switzerland.
- ²¹School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Birmingham, Birmingham; United Kingdom.
- ²²Centro de Investigaciones, Universidad Antonio Nariño, Bogota; Colombia.
- ²³(^a)Dipartimento di Fisica e Astronomia, Università di Bologna, Bologna;(^b)INFN Sezione di Bologna; Italy.
- ²⁴Physikalisches Institut, Universität Bonn, Bonn; Germany.
- ²⁵Department of Physics, Boston University, Boston MA; United States of America.
- ²⁶Department of Physics, Brandeis University, Waltham MA; United States of America.
- ²⁷(^a)Transilvania University of Brasov, Brasov;(^b)Horia Hulubei National Institute of Physics and Nuclear Engineering, Bucharest;(^c)Department of Physics, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Iasi;(^d)National Institute for Research and Development of Isotopic and Molecular Technologies, Physics Department, Cluj-Napoca;(^e)University Politehnica Bucharest, Bucharest;(^f)West University in Timisoara, Timisoara; Romania.
- ²⁸(^a)Faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Informatics, Comenius University, Bratislava;(^b)Department of Subnuclear Physics, Institute of Experimental Physics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Kosice; Slovak Republic.
- ²⁹Physics Department, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Upton NY; United States of America.
- ³⁰Departamento de Física, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires; Argentina.
- ³¹Cavendish Laboratory, University of Cambridge, Cambridge; United Kingdom.
- ³²(^a)Department of Physics, University of Cape Town, Cape Town;(^b)Department of Mechanical Engineering Science, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg;(^c)School of Physics, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; South Africa.
- ³³Department of Physics, Carleton University, Ottawa ON; Canada.
- ³⁴(^a)Faculté des Sciences Ain Chock, Réseau Universitaire de Physique des Hautes Energies - Université Hassan II, Casablanca;(^b)Centre National de l'Energie des Sciences Techniques Nucleaires (CNESTEN), Rabat;(^c)Faculté des Sciences Semlalia, Université Cadi Ayyad, LPHEA-Marrakech;(^d)Faculté des

Sciences, Université Mohamed Premier and LPTPM, Oujda;^(e)Faculté des sciences, Université Mohammed V, Rabat; Morocco.

³⁵CERN, Geneva; Switzerland.

³⁶Enrico Fermi Institute, University of Chicago, Chicago IL; United States of America.

³⁷LPC, Université Clermont Auvergne, CNRS/IN2P3, Clermont-Ferrand; France.

³⁸Nevis Laboratory, Columbia University, Irvington NY; United States of America.

³⁹Niels Bohr Institute, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen; Denmark.

^{40(a)}Dipartimento di Fisica, Università della Calabria, Rende;^(b)INFN Gruppo Collegato di Cosenza, Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati; Italy.

⁴¹Physics Department, Southern Methodist University, Dallas TX; United States of America.

⁴²Physics Department, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson TX; United States of America.

^{43(a)}Department of Physics, Stockholm University;^(b)Oskar Klein Centre, Stockholm; Sweden.

⁴⁴Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY, Hamburg and Zeuthen; Germany.

⁴⁵Lehrstuhl für Experimentelle Physik IV, Technische Universität Dortmund, Dortmund; Germany.

⁴⁶Institut für Kern- und Teilchenphysik, Technische Universität Dresden, Dresden; Germany.

⁴⁷Department of Physics, Duke University, Durham NC; United States of America.

⁴⁸SUPA - School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh; United Kingdom.

⁴⁹INFN e Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati; Italy.

⁵⁰Physikalisches Institut, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Freiburg; Germany.

⁵¹II. Physikalisches Institut, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Göttingen; Germany.

⁵²Département de Physique Nucléaire et Corpusculaire, Université de Genève, Genève; Switzerland.

^{53(a)}Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Genova, Genova;^(b)INFN Sezione di Genova; Italy.

⁵⁴II. Physikalisches Institut, Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, Giessen; Germany.

⁵⁵SUPA - School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Glasgow, Glasgow; United Kingdom.

⁵⁶LPSC, Université Grenoble Alpes, CNRS/IN2P3, Grenoble INP, Grenoble; France.

⁵⁷Laboratory for Particle Physics and Cosmology, Harvard University, Cambridge MA; United States of America.

^{58(a)}Department of Modern Physics and State Key Laboratory of Particle Detection and Electronics, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei;^(b)Institute of Frontier and Interdisciplinary Science and Key Laboratory of Particle Physics and Particle Irradiation (MOE), Shandong University, Qingdao;^(c)School of Physics and Astronomy, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, KLPPAC-MoE, SKLPPC, Shanghai;^(d)Tsung-Dao Lee Institute, Shanghai; China.

^{59(a)}Kirchhoff-Institut für Physik, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg;^(b)Physikalisches Institut, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg; Germany.

⁶⁰Faculty of Applied Information Science, Hiroshima Institute of Technology, Hiroshima; Japan.

^{61(a)}Department of Physics, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong;^(b)Department of Physics, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong;^(c)Department of Physics and Institute for Advanced Study, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong; China.

⁶²Department of Physics, National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu; Taiwan.

⁶³Department of Physics, Indiana University, Bloomington IN; United States of America.

^{64(a)}INFN Gruppo Collegato di Udine, Sezione di Trieste, Udine;^(b)ICTP, Trieste;^(c)Dipartimento di Chimica, Fisica e Ambiente, Università di Udine, Udine; Italy.

^{65(a)}INFN Sezione di Lecce;^(b)Dipartimento di Matematica e Fisica, Università del Salento, Lecce; Italy.

^{66(a)}INFN Sezione di Milano;^(b)Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Milano, Milano; Italy.

^{67(a)}INFN Sezione di Napoli;^(b)Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Napoli, Napoli; Italy.

^{68(a)}INFN Sezione di Pavia;^(b)Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Pavia, Pavia; Italy.

- ^{69(a)}INFN Sezione di Pisa;^(b)Dipartimento di Fisica E. Fermi, Università di Pisa, Pisa; Italy.
- ^{70(a)}INFN Sezione di Roma;^(b)Dipartimento di Fisica, Sapienza Università di Roma, Roma; Italy.
- ^{71(a)}INFN Sezione di Roma Tor Vergata;^(b)Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Roma Tor Vergata, Roma; Italy.
- ^{72(a)}INFN Sezione di Roma Tre;^(b)Dipartimento di Matematica e Fisica, Università Roma Tre, Roma; Italy.
- ^{73(a)}INFN-TIFPA;^(b)Università degli Studi di Trento, Trento; Italy.
- ⁷⁴Institut für Astro- und Teilchenphysik, Leopold-Franzens-Universität, Innsbruck; Austria.
- ⁷⁵University of Iowa, Iowa City IA; United States of America.
- ⁷⁶Department of Physics and Astronomy, Iowa State University, Ames IA; United States of America.
- ⁷⁷Joint Institute for Nuclear Research, Dubna; Russia.
- ^{78(a)}Departamento de Engenharia Elétrica, Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora;^(b)Universidade Federal do Rio De Janeiro COPPE/EE/IF, Rio de Janeiro;^(c)Universidade Federal de São João del Rei (UFSJ), São João del Rei;^(d)Instituto de Física, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo; Brazil.
- ⁷⁹KEK, High Energy Accelerator Research Organization, Tsukuba; Japan.
- ⁸⁰Graduate School of Science, Kobe University, Kobe; Japan.
- ^{81(a)}AGH University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Physics and Applied Computer Science, Krakow;^(b)Marian Smoluchowski Institute of Physics, Jagiellonian University, Krakow; Poland.
- ⁸²Institute of Nuclear Physics Polish Academy of Sciences, Krakow; Poland.
- ⁸³Faculty of Science, Kyoto University, Kyoto; Japan.
- ⁸⁴Kyoto University of Education, Kyoto; Japan.
- ⁸⁵Research Center for Advanced Particle Physics and Department of Physics, Kyushu University, Fukuoka ; Japan.
- ⁸⁶Instituto de Física La Plata, Universidad Nacional de La Plata and CONICET, La Plata; Argentina.
- ⁸⁷Physics Department, Lancaster University, Lancaster; United Kingdom.
- ⁸⁸Oliver Lodge Laboratory, University of Liverpool, Liverpool; United Kingdom.
- ⁸⁹Department of Experimental Particle Physics, Jožef Stefan Institute and Department of Physics, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana; Slovenia.
- ⁹⁰School of Physics and Astronomy, Queen Mary University of London, London; United Kingdom.
- ⁹¹Department of Physics, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham; United Kingdom.
- ⁹²Department of Physics and Astronomy, University College London, London; United Kingdom.
- ⁹³Louisiana Tech University, Ruston LA; United States of America.
- ⁹⁴Fysiska institutionen, Lunds universitet, Lund; Sweden.
- ⁹⁵Centre de Calcul de l'Institut National de Physique Nucléaire et de Physique des Particules (IN2P3), Villeurbanne; France.
- ⁹⁶Departamento de Física Teórica C-15 and CIAFF, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid; Spain.
- ⁹⁷Institut für Physik, Universität Mainz, Mainz; Germany.
- ⁹⁸School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Manchester, Manchester; United Kingdom.
- ⁹⁹CPPM, Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS/IN2P3, Marseille; France.
- ¹⁰⁰Department of Physics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst MA; United States of America.
- ¹⁰¹Department of Physics, McGill University, Montreal QC; Canada.
- ¹⁰²School of Physics, University of Melbourne, Victoria; Australia.
- ¹⁰³Department of Physics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI; United States of America.
- ¹⁰⁴Department of Physics and Astronomy, Michigan State University, East Lansing MI; United States of America.
- ¹⁰⁵B.I. Stepanov Institute of Physics, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Minsk; Belarus.

- ¹⁰⁶Research Institute for Nuclear Problems of Byelorussian State University, Minsk; Belarus.
- ¹⁰⁷Group of Particle Physics, University of Montreal, Montreal QC; Canada.
- ¹⁰⁸P.N. Lebedev Physical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow; Russia.
- ¹⁰⁹Institute for Theoretical and Experimental Physics (ITEP), Moscow; Russia.
- ¹¹⁰National Research Nuclear University MEPhI, Moscow; Russia.
- ¹¹¹D.V. Skobeltsyn Institute of Nuclear Physics, M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow; Russia.
- ¹¹²Fakultät für Physik, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, München; Germany.
- ¹¹³Max-Planck-Institut für Physik (Werner-Heisenberg-Institut), München; Germany.
- ¹¹⁴Nagasaki Institute of Applied Science, Nagasaki; Japan.
- ¹¹⁵Graduate School of Science and Kobayashi-Maskawa Institute, Nagoya University, Nagoya; Japan.
- ¹¹⁶Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque NM; United States of America.
- ¹¹⁷Institute for Mathematics, Astrophysics and Particle Physics, Radboud University Nijmegen/Nikhef, Nijmegen; Netherlands.
- ¹¹⁸Nikhef National Institute for Subatomic Physics and University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam; Netherlands.
- ¹¹⁹Department of Physics, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb IL; United States of America.
- ¹²⁰^(a)Budker Institute of Nuclear Physics, SB RAS, Novosibirsk;^(b)Novosibirsk State University Novosibirsk; Russia.
- ¹²¹Department of Physics, New York University, New York NY; United States of America.
- ¹²²Ohio State University, Columbus OH; United States of America.
- ¹²³Faculty of Science, Okayama University, Okayama; Japan.
- ¹²⁴Homer L. Dodge Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Oklahoma, Norman OK; United States of America.
- ¹²⁵Department of Physics, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater OK; United States of America.
- ¹²⁶Palacký University, RCPTM, Joint Laboratory of Optics, Olomouc; Czech Republic.
- ¹²⁷Center for High Energy Physics, University of Oregon, Eugene OR; United States of America.
- ¹²⁸LAL, Université Paris-Sud, CNRS/IN2P3, Université Paris-Saclay, Orsay; France.
- ¹²⁹Graduate School of Science, Osaka University, Osaka; Japan.
- ¹³⁰Department of Physics, University of Oslo, Oslo; Norway.
- ¹³¹Department of Physics, Oxford University, Oxford; United Kingdom.
- ¹³²LPNHE, Sorbonne Université, Paris Diderot Sorbonne Paris Cité, CNRS/IN2P3, Paris; France.
- ¹³³Department of Physics, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia PA; United States of America.
- ¹³⁴Konstantinov Nuclear Physics Institute of National Research Centre "Kurchatov Institute", PNPI, St. Petersburg; Russia.
- ¹³⁵Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA; United States of America.
- ¹³⁶^(a)Laboratório de Instrumentação e Física Experimental de Partículas - LIP;^(b)Departamento de Física, Faculdade de Ciências, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa;^(c)Departamento de Física, Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra;^(d)Centro de Física Nuclear da Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa;^(e)Departamento de Física, Universidade do Minho, Braga;^(f)Departamento de Física Teórica y del Cosmos, Universidad de Granada, Granada (Spain);^(g)Dep Física and CEFITEC of Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Caparica; Portugal.
- ¹³⁷Institute of Physics, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague; Czech Republic.
- ¹³⁸Czech Technical University in Prague, Prague; Czech Republic.
- ¹³⁹Charles University, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Prague; Czech Republic.

- ¹⁴⁰State Research Center Institute for High Energy Physics, NRC KI, Protvino; Russia.
- ¹⁴¹Particle Physics Department, Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Didcot; United Kingdom.
- ¹⁴²IRFU, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette; France.
- ¹⁴³Santa Cruz Institute for Particle Physics, University of California Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz CA; United States of America.
- ¹⁴⁴(*a*)Departamento de Física, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago; (*b*)Departamento de Física, Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, Valparaíso; Chile.
- ¹⁴⁵Department of Physics, University of Washington, Seattle WA; United States of America.
- ¹⁴⁶Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Sheffield, Sheffield; United Kingdom.
- ¹⁴⁷Department of Physics, Shinshu University, Nagano; Japan.
- ¹⁴⁸Department Physik, Universität Siegen, Siegen; Germany.
- ¹⁴⁹Department of Physics, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC; Canada.
- ¹⁵⁰SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory, Stanford CA; United States of America.
- ¹⁵¹Physics Department, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm; Sweden.
- ¹⁵²Departments of Physics and Astronomy, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook NY; United States of America.
- ¹⁵³Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Sussex, Brighton; United Kingdom.
- ¹⁵⁴School of Physics, University of Sydney, Sydney; Australia.
- ¹⁵⁵Institute of Physics, Academia Sinica, Taipei; Taiwan.
- ¹⁵⁶Academia Sinica Grid Computing, Institute of Physics, Academia Sinica, Taipei; Taiwan.
- ¹⁵⁷(*a*)E. Andronikashvili Institute of Physics, Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi; (*b*)High Energy Physics Institute, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi; Georgia.
- ¹⁵⁸Department of Physics, Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa; Israel.
- ¹⁵⁹Raymond and Beverly Sackler School of Physics and Astronomy, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv; Israel.
- ¹⁶⁰Department of Physics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki; Greece.
- ¹⁶¹International Center for Elementary Particle Physics and Department of Physics, University of Tokyo, Tokyo; Japan.
- ¹⁶²Graduate School of Science and Technology, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Tokyo; Japan.
- ¹⁶³Department of Physics, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Tokyo; Japan.
- ¹⁶⁴Tomsk State University, Tomsk; Russia.
- ¹⁶⁵Department of Physics, University of Toronto, Toronto ON; Canada.
- ¹⁶⁶(*a*)TRIUMF, Vancouver BC; (*b*)Department of Physics and Astronomy, York University, Toronto ON; Canada.
- ¹⁶⁷Division of Physics and Tomonaga Center for the History of the Universe, Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba; Japan.
- ¹⁶⁸Department of Physics and Astronomy, Tufts University, Medford MA; United States of America.
- ¹⁶⁹Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of California Irvine, Irvine CA; United States of America.
- ¹⁷⁰Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Uppsala, Uppsala; Sweden.
- ¹⁷¹Department of Physics, University of Illinois, Urbana IL; United States of America.
- ¹⁷²Instituto de Física Corpuscular (IFIC), Centro Mixto Universidad de Valencia - CSIC, Valencia; Spain.
- ¹⁷³Department of Physics, University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC; Canada.
- ¹⁷⁴Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Victoria, Victoria BC; Canada.
- ¹⁷⁵Fakultät für Physik und Astronomie, Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Würzburg; Germany.
- ¹⁷⁶Department of Physics, University of Warwick, Coventry; United Kingdom.
- ¹⁷⁷Waseda University, Tokyo; Japan.
- ¹⁷⁸Department of Particle Physics, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot; Israel.

¹⁷⁹Department of Physics, University of Wisconsin, Madison WI; United States of America.

¹⁸⁰Fakultät für Mathematik und Naturwissenschaften, Fachgruppe Physik, Bergische Universität Wuppertal, Wuppertal; Germany.

¹⁸¹Department of Physics, Yale University, New Haven CT; United States of America.

¹⁸²Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan; Armenia.

^a Also at Department of Physics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur; Malaysia.

^b Also at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York, NY; United States of America.

^c Also at Centre for High Performance Computing, CSIR Campus, Rosebank, Cape Town; South Africa.

^d Also at CERN, Geneva; Switzerland.

^e Also at CPPM, Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS/IN2P3, Marseille; France.

^f Also at Département de Physique Nucléaire et Corpusculaire, Université de Genève, Genève; Switzerland.

^g Also at Departament de Física de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona; Spain.

^h Also at Departamento de Física Teórica y del Cosmos, Universidad de Granada, Granada (Spain); Spain.

ⁱ Also at Department of Applied Physics and Astronomy, University of Sharjah, Sharjah; United Arab Emirates.

^j Also at Department of Financial and Management Engineering, University of the Aegean, Chios; Greece.

^k Also at Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY; United States of America.

^l Also at Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Sheffield, Sheffield; United Kingdom.

^m Also at Department of Physics, California State University, Fresno CA; United States of America.

ⁿ Also at Department of Physics, California State University, Sacramento CA; United States of America.

^o Also at Department of Physics, King's College London, London; United Kingdom.

^p Also at Department of Physics, Nanjing University, Nanjing; China.

^q Also at Department of Physics, St. Petersburg State Polytechnical University, St. Petersburg; Russia.

^r Also at Department of Physics, Stanford University; United States of America.

^s Also at Department of Physics, University of Fribourg, Fribourg; Switzerland.

^t Also at Department of Physics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI; United States of America.

^u Also at Dipartimento di Fisica E. Fermi, Università di Pisa, Pisa; Italy.

^v Also at Giresun University, Faculty of Engineering, Giresun; Turkey.

^w Also at Graduate School of Science, Osaka University, Osaka; Japan.

^x Also at Horia Hulubei National Institute of Physics and Nuclear Engineering, Bucharest; Romania.

^y Also at II. Physikalisches Institut, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Göttingen; Germany.

^z Also at Institutio Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avancats, ICREA, Barcelona; Spain.

^{aa} Also at Institut de Física d'Altes Energies (IFAE), Barcelona Institute of Science and Technology, Barcelona; Spain.

^{ab} Also at Institut für Experimentalphysik, Universität Hamburg, Hamburg; Germany.

^{ac} Also at Institute for Mathematics, Astrophysics and Particle Physics, Radboud University Nijmegen/Nikhef, Nijmegen; Netherlands.

^{ad} Also at Institute for Particle and Nuclear Physics, Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest; Hungary.

^{ae} Also at Institute of Particle Physics (IPP); Canada.

^{af} Also at Institute of Physics, Academia Sinica, Taipei; Taiwan.

^{ag} Also at Institute of Physics, Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, Baku; Azerbaijan.

- ah* Also at Institute of Theoretical Physics, Ilia State University, Tbilisi; Georgia.
- ai* Also at LAL, Université Paris-Sud, CNRS/IN2P3, Université Paris-Saclay, Orsay; France.
- aj* Also at Louisiana Tech University, Ruston LA; United States of America.
- ak* Also at Manhattan College, New York NY; United States of America.
- al* Also at Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology State University, Dolgoprudny; Russia.
- am* Also at National Research Nuclear University MEPhI, Moscow; Russia.
- an* Also at Near East University, Nicosia, North Cyprus, Mersin; Turkey.
- ao* Also at O Chadai Academic Production, Ochanomizu University, Tokyo; Japan.
- ap* Also at Physikalisches Institut, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Freiburg; Germany.
- aq* Also at School of Physics, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou; China.
- ar* Also at The City College of New York, New York NY; United States of America.
- as* Also at The Collaborative Innovation Center of Quantum Matter (CICQM), Beijing; China.
- at* Also at Tomsk State University, Tomsk, and Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology State University, Dolgoprudny; Russia.
- au* Also at TRIUMF, Vancouver BC; Canada.
- av* Also at Università di Napoli Parthenope, Napoli; Italy.
- * Deceased