



# Measurement of the production cross-section of a single top quark in association with a Z boson in proton–proton collisions at 13 TeV with the ATLAS detector

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## ABSTRACT

The production of a top quark in association with a Z boson is investigated. The proton–proton collision data collected by the ATLAS experiment at the LHC in 2015 and 2016 at a centre-of-mass energy of  $\sqrt{s} = 13\text{ TeV}$  are used, corresponding to an integrated luminosity of  $36.1\text{ fb}^{-1}$ . Events containing three identified leptons (electrons and/or muons) and two jets, one of which is identified as a  $b$ -quark jet are selected. The major backgrounds are diboson,  $t\bar{t}$  and  $Z + \text{jets}$  production. A neural network is used to improve the background rejection and extract the signal. The resulting significance is  $4.2\sigma$  in the data and the expected significance is  $5.4\sigma$ . The measured cross-section for  $tZq$  production is  $600 \pm 170(\text{stat.}) \pm 140(\text{syst.})\text{ fb}$ .

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## 1. Introduction

At hadron colliders, the top quark is typically produced in  $t\bar{t}$  pairs through the strong interaction or as a single top or antitop quark through the electroweak interaction. The top quark was first observed via  $t\bar{t}$  production at the Tevatron [1,2]. This was followed by the observation of single top-quark production [3–5] in the  $t$ - and  $s$ -channels, also at the Tevatron. The associated  $tW$  production was first observed in 8 TeV proton–proton collisions at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) [6,7]. These single-top-quark channels allow a direct determination of the dominant  $tWb$  vertex and of the magnitude of the CKM matrix element  $|V_{tb}|$  [8] using their measured cross-sections.

With increasing energy and integrated luminosity, the ability to study rare Standard Model (SM) phenomena becomes possible. In the case of single top-quark production, examples include  $pp \rightarrow tZq$  [9] and  $pp \rightarrow tH$  [10]. The  $pp \rightarrow tZq$  process involves  $WWZ$  and  $tZ$  couplings and has not been observed so far [11]. Fig. 1 shows typical lowest-order Feynman diagrams for the process. This channel probes two SM couplings in a single process, whereas the similar final state  $t\bar{t}Z$  only probes the  $tZ$  coupling. The  $t\bar{t}Z$  process has been measured by the ATLAS [12,13] and CMS [14] collaborations. In addition, the production of  $pp \rightarrow tZq$  is a SM background to the  $tH$  final state [10].

This Letter presents evidence of the production of a single top quark in association with a Z boson in the  $t$ -channel process  $pp \rightarrow$

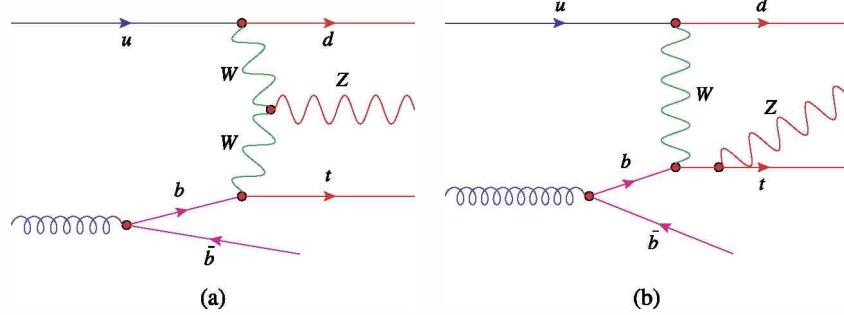
$tZq$ , where the Z boson decays into electrons or muons and the W boson from the top quark decays leptonically.

## 2. ATLAS detector

The ATLAS experiment [15] at the LHC is a multi-purpose particle detector with a forward–backward symmetric cylindrical geometry and a near  $4\pi$  coverage in solid angle.<sup>1</sup> It consists of an inner detector (ID) surrounded by a thin superconducting solenoid providing a 2 T axial magnetic field, electromagnetic and hadron calorimeters, and a muon spectrometer. The inner detector covers the pseudorapidity range  $|\eta| < 2.5$ . It consists of silicon pixel, silicon micro-strip and transition radiation tracking detectors. The innermost pixel layer, the insertable B-layer, was added between Run 1 and Run 2 of the LHC, at a radius of 33 mm around a new, thinner, beam pipe [16]. Lead/liquid-argon (LAr) sampling calorimeters provide electromagnetic (EM) energy measurements with high granularity. A hadron (steel/scintillator-tile) calorimeter covers the central pseudorapidity range ( $|\eta| < 1.7$ ). The end-cap and forward regions are instrumented with LAr calorimeters for both the EM and hadronic energy measurements up to  $|\eta| = 4.9$ .

<sup>1</sup> ATLAS uses a right-handed coordinate system with its origin at the nominal interaction point (IP) in the centre of the detector and the z-axis along the beam pipe. The x-axis points from the IP to the centre of the LHC ring, and the y-axis points upwards. Cylindrical coordinates  $(r, \phi)$  are used in the transverse plane,  $\phi$  being the azimuthal angle around the z-axis. The pseudorapidity is defined in terms of the polar angle  $\theta$  as  $\eta = -\ln \tan(\theta/2)$ . Distances in the  $\eta$ – $\phi$  plane are measured in units of  $\Delta R \equiv \sqrt{(\Delta\eta)^2 + (\Delta\phi)^2}$ .

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**Fig. 1.** Example Feynman diagrams of the lowest-order amplitudes for the  $tZq$  process. In the four-flavour scheme, the  $b$ -quark originates from gluon splitting. The largest contributing amplitude to the cross-section where the  $Z$  boson is coupled to the  $W$  boson is shown in (a) while (b) shows one of the four diagrams with radiation off a fermion.

The muon spectrometer surrounds the calorimeters and is based on three large air-core toroidal superconducting magnets with eight coils each. The field integral of the toroids ranges between 2.0 and 6.0 T m across most of the detector. The muon spectrometer includes a system of precision tracking chambers and fast detectors for triggering. A two-level trigger system is used to select events. The first-level trigger is implemented in hardware and uses a subset of the detector information to reduce the accepted rate to at most 100 kHz. This is followed by a software-based trigger level that reduces the accepted event rate to 1 kHz on average.

### 3. Data and simulation samples

The  $pp$  collision data sample used in this measurement was collected with the ATLAS detector at the LHC during the 2015 and 2016 data-taking periods, corresponding to integrated luminosities of  $3.3 \text{ fb}^{-1}$  and  $32.8 \text{ fb}^{-1}$ , respectively, for a total of  $36.1 \text{ fb}^{-1}$ , after requiring that the detector is fully operational. Events are considered if they were accepted by at least one of the single-muon or single-electron triggers [17,18]. The electron triggers select a cluster in the calorimeter matched to a track. Electrons must then satisfy identification criteria based on a multivariate technique using a likelihood discriminant. In 2015, electrons had to satisfy a ‘medium’ identification requirement and have a transverse energy of  $E_T > 24 \text{ GeV}$ . In 2016, electrons had to satisfy a ‘tight’ identification together with an isolation criterion and have  $E_T > 26 \text{ GeV}$ . To avoid efficiency loss due to isolation at high  $E_T$ , an additional trigger was used, selecting ‘medium’ electrons with  $E_T > 60 \text{ GeV}$ . Muons are triggered on by matching tracks reconstructed in the muon spectrometer and in the inner detector. In 2015, muons had to satisfy a ‘loose’ isolation requirement and have a transverse momentum of  $p_T > 20 \text{ GeV}$ . In 2016, the isolation criteria were tightened and the threshold increased to  $p_T = 26 \text{ GeV}$ . In both years, another muon trigger without any isolation requirement was used, selecting muons with  $p_T > 50 \text{ GeV}$ .

In order to evaluate the effects of the detector resolution and acceptance on signal and background and to estimate the SM background, a full GEANT4-based detector simulation was used [19, 20]. Event generators were used to estimate the expected signal and background contributions and their uncertainties. The top-quark mass in the event generators described below was set to  $172.5 \text{ GeV}$ . Multiple inelastic  $pp$  collisions (referred to as pile-up) are simulated with PYTHIA 8.186 [21], and are overlaid on each Monte Carlo (MC) event. Weights are assigned to the simulated events such that the distribution of the number of pile-up interactions in the simulation matches the corresponding distribution in the data. All simulation samples are processed through the same reconstruction algorithms as the data.

Monte Carlo  $tZq$  signal samples were generated at leading order (LO) in QCD using MG5\_aMC@NLO 2.2.1 [22] in the four-flavour

scheme, treating the  $b$ -quark as massive, with the CTEQ6L1 [23] LO parton distribution functions (PDFs). The  $Z$  boson was simulated to be on-shell and off-shell  $Z/\gamma^*$  contributions and their interference are not taken into account. Following the discussion in Ref. [24], the renormalisation and factorisation scales ( $\mu_r$  and  $\mu_f$ ) used in MG5\_aMC@NLO are set to  $\mu_r = \mu_f = 4\sqrt{m_b^2 + p_{T,b}^2}$ , where the  $b$ -quark is the external one produced from gluon splitting in the event. This choice is motivated by the total scale dependence being dominated by this external  $b$ -quark, shown in Fig. 1. The parton shower and the hadronisation of signal events were simulated with PYTHIA 6 [25] using the Perugia2012 set of tuned parameters [26]. The  $tZq$  total cross-section, calculated at next-to-leading order (NLO) using MG5\_aMC@NLO 2.3.3 with the NNPDF3.0\_nlo\_as\_0118 [27] PDF, is  $800 \text{ fb}$ , with an uncertainty of  $+6.1\%/-7.4\%$ . The uncertainty is computed by varying the renormalisation and factorisation scales by a factor of two and by a factor of 0.5.

A comparison of the event kinematics before parton showering between the LO MG5\_aMC@NLO 2.2.1 sample and a sample generated using NLO MG5\_aMC@NLO 2.3.3 showed agreement within 10%, justifying the use of a LO sample for the detector simulation.

Monte Carlo simulated events are used to estimate the SM background that can produce three leptons and at least two jets in the final state. In  $t\bar{t}$  production, if both  $W$  bosons decay into leptons (referred to as ‘prompt’) and either a  $b$ - or  $c$ -hadron decays into a lepton (referred to as ‘non-prompt’) that is isolated, the final state can mimic the  $tZq$  final state. The nominal  $t\bar{t}$  simulated sample was generated at NLO with the PowHEG-Box [28–30] event generator using the CT10 PDFs [31]. The cut-off parameter,  $h_{\text{damp}}$ , for the first emission of gluons was set to the top-quark mass. The events were then processed using PYTHIA 6 to perform the fragmentation and hadronisation, and to generate the underlying event.

Events from the associated production of a  $t\bar{t}$  pair and a boson ( $W/Z/H$ ) provide additional modes for the production of leptons in the final state. For  $t\bar{t} + W$  the MC simulated events were generated using MG5\_aMC@NLO 2.2.2 [22], while the  $t\bar{t} + H$  and  $t\bar{t} + Z$  MC simulated events were generated using MG5\_aMC@NLO 2.2.3. The generated events were then processed with PYTHIA 8 [21] to perform the fragmentation and hadronisation, and to generate the underlying event, using the NNPDF2.3LO PDF set and the A14 tune [32].

Processes that include the production of  $WW$ ,  $WZ$  and  $ZZ$  events were simulated using SHERPA 2.1.1 at LO with up to three additional partons and the CT10 PDF set. In the trilepton topology, the diboson background consists mainly of  $WZ$  events, while the contribution to the background from  $WW$  final states, corresponding to the case where a jet is misidentified as a lepton, is negligible. The  $ZZ$  background gives a small contribution of 9% of all diboson events. The gluon-induced diboson production,

which amounts to about 10% of the quark-induced diboson production, is therefore negligible in the  $tZq$  signal region, and is not included in the diboson samples. In order to estimate the systematic uncertainty, additional diboson samples were simulated using the POWHEG-Box generator in combination with PYTHIA 8 and the CTEQ6L1 PDF sets.

Of the aforementioned single-top-quark production channels, only the  $tW$  channel contributes to the trilepton final state. This sample was produced using the NLO Powheg-Box event generator with the CT10 PDF set. The events were then processed with PYTHIA 6 to perform the fragmentation and hadronisation, and produce the underlying event. A sample of  $tWZ$  events was produced using the MG5\_aMC@NLO 2.2.3 generator and showered with PYTHIA 8, using the NNPDF3.0\_NLO PDF set and the A14 tune.

#### 4. Object reconstruction

The reconstruction of the basic physics objects used in this analysis is described in the following. The primary vertex is chosen as the proton–proton vertex candidate with the highest sum of the squared transverse momenta of all associated tracks with  $p_T > 400 \text{ MeV}$ .

Electron candidates are reconstructed from energy deposits in the electromagnetic calorimeter that match a reconstructed track [33–36]. The clusters are required to be within  $|\eta| < 2.47$  excluding the transition region between the barrel and end-cap calorimeters at  $1.37 < |\eta| < 1.52$ . Electron candidates must also satisfy a transverse energy requirement of  $E_T > 15 \text{ GeV}$ . A likelihood-based discriminant is constructed from a set of variables that enhance the electron selection, while rejecting photon conversions and hadrons misidentified as electrons [34]. An  $|\eta|$ - and  $p_T$ -dependent selection on the likelihood discriminant is applied, such that it has an 80% efficiency when used to identify electrons from the  $Z$ -boson decay. This working point corresponds to an approximate rejection factor against jets of 700 at a  $p_T$  of  $40 \text{ GeV}$ . Electrons are further required to be isolated using criteria based on ID tracks and topological clusters in the calorimeter, with an isolation efficiency of 90(99)% for  $p_T = 25(60) \text{ GeV}$ . Correction factors are applied to simulated electrons to take into account the small differences in reconstruction, identification and isolation efficiencies between data and MC simulation.

Muon candidates are required to have  $|\eta| < 2.5$  and  $p_T > 15 \text{ GeV}$ , and are reconstructed by combining a reconstructed track from the inner detector with one from the muon spectrometer [37]. To reject misidentified muon candidates, primarily from pion and kaon decays, several quality requirements are imposed on the muon candidate. An isolation requirement based on ID tracks and topological clusters in the calorimeter is imposed, and results in an isolation efficiency of 90(99)% for  $p_T = 25(60) \text{ GeV}$ . The overall efficiency obtained for muons from  $W$ -boson decays in simulated  $pp \rightarrow t\bar{t}$  events is 96% and the rejection factor for non-prompt muons with  $p_T > 20 \text{ GeV}$  is approximately 600. As for electrons, correction factors are applied to muons to account for the small differences between data and simulation.

Jets are reconstructed from topological clusters using the anti- $k_t$  algorithm [38,39] with the radius parameter set to  $R = 0.4$ . They are reconstructed for  $p_T > 30 \text{ GeV}$  in the region with  $|\eta| < 4.5$ . To account for inhomogeneities and the non-compensating response of the calorimeter, the reconstructed jet energies are corrected using  $p_T$ - and  $\eta$ -dependent factors that are derived in MC simulation and validated in data. Any remaining differences in the jet energy scale are corrected using *in situ* techniques, where a well-defined reference object is momentum-balanced with a jet [40]. To suppress pile-up, a discriminant called the jet-vertex-tagger (JVT) is constructed using a two-dimensional likelihood method [41]. For

jets with  $p_T < 60 \text{ GeV}$  and  $|\eta| < 2.4$  a JVT requirement corresponding to a 92% efficiency, while rejecting 98% of jets from pile-up and noise, is imposed.

To identify jets containing a  $b$ -hadron ( $b$ -tagging), a multivariate algorithm is employed [42]. This algorithm uses the impact parameter and reconstructed secondary vertex information of the tracks contained in the jet as input for a neural network. Due to its use of the inner detectors, the reconstruction of  $b$ -jets is done in the region with  $|\eta| < 2.5$ . Jets initiated by  $b$ -quarks are selected by setting the algorithm's output threshold such that a 77%  $b$ -jet selection efficiency is achieved in simulated  $t\bar{t}$  events. With this setting, the misidentification rate for jets initiated by light-flavour quarks or gluons is 1%, while it is 17% for jets initiated by  $c$ -quarks [43]. Correction factors are derived and applied to correct for the small differences in  $b$ -quark selection efficiency between data and MC simulation [42].

The missing transverse momentum, with magnitude  $E_T^{\text{miss}}$ , is calculated as the negative of the vector sum of the transverse momenta of all reconstructed objects,  $p_T^{\text{miss}}$ . In addition to the identified jets, electrons and muons, a track-based ‘soft’ term is included in the  $p_T^{\text{miss}}$  calculation, by considering tracks associated with the primary vertex in the event but not with an identified jet, electron, or muon [44,45].

To avoid cases where the detector response to a single physical object is reconstructed as two separate final-state objects, several steps are followed to remove such overlaps, following Ref. [46].

#### 5. Signal, control and validation regions

The reconstructed  $tZq$  final state consists of three charged leptons (electron and/or muon), a  $b$ -tagged jet, an additional jet and  $E_T^{\text{miss}}$ . Reconstructing the  $Z$  boson and the top quark is important in order to identify specific features that help to separate the signal from the background. For example, the  $Z$ -boson mass distributions can contribute to the reduction of top-quark backgrounds, as these do not include a  $Z$  boson in the final state, while the untagged-jet pseudorapidity distribution differs in shape between  $tZq$  signal events and diboson and  $t\bar{t}Z$  events, which constitute some of the largest backgrounds.

The signal region (SR) definition reflects the  $tZq$  final state by selecting only events that have exactly three charged leptons, one  $b$ -tagged jet and one additional jet, referred to as the untagged jet as no  $b$ -tagging requirement is applied. In order to better separate the  $tZq$  signal from background, additional requirements are imposed on the properties of the selected objects. The three leptons are sorted by their  $p_T$ , irrespective of flavour, and required to have transverse momenta of at least 28, 25 and  $15 \text{ GeV}$ , respectively. Both jets are required to have  $p_T > 30 \text{ GeV}$ .

An opposite-sign, same-flavour (OSSF) lepton pair is required in order to reconstruct the  $Z$  boson. In the  $\mu ee$  and  $e\mu\mu$  channels, the pair is uniquely identified. For the  $eee$  and  $\mu\mu\mu$  events, both possible combinations are considered and the pair that has the invariant mass closest to the  $Z$ -boson mass is chosen. The  $W$  boson is reconstructed from the remaining lepton and the missing transverse momentum, using as constraint the  $W$ -boson mass to evaluate the  $z$  component of the neutrino momentum.<sup>2</sup> The top quark is reconstructed from the reconstructed  $W$  boson and the  $b$ -tagged jet.

To suppress background sources that do not contain a  $Z$  boson, the invariant mass of the leptons is required to be between 81 and  $101 \text{ GeV}$ . Because a  $W$  boson is expected in the final state,

<sup>2</sup> In case of an imaginary solution, the  $p_T^{\text{miss}}$  value is varied until one real solution is found.

**Table 1**

Overview of the requirements applied for selecting events in the signal, validation and control regions.

Common Selections			
Exactly 3 leptons with $ \eta  < 2.5$ and $p_T > 15 \text{ GeV}$			
$p_T(\ell_1) > 28 \text{ GeV}$ , $p_T(\ell_2) > 25 \text{ GeV}$ , $p_T(\ell_3) > 15 \text{ GeV}$			
$p_T(\text{jet}) > 30 \text{ GeV}$			
$m_T(\ell_W, v) > 20 \text{ GeV}$			
SR	Diboson VR / CR	$t\bar{t}$ VR	$t\bar{t}$ CR
$\geq 1$ OSSF pair	$\geq 1$ OSSF pair	$\geq 1$ OSSF pair	$\geq 1$ OSDF pair
$ m_{\ell\ell} - m_Z  < 10 \text{ GeV}$	$ m_{\ell\ell} - m_Z  < 10 \text{ GeV}$	$ m_{\ell\ell} - m_Z  > 10 \text{ GeV}$	No OSSF pair
2 jets, $ \eta  < 4.5$	1 jet, $ \eta  < 4.5$	2 jets, $ \eta  < 4.5$	2 jets, $ \eta  < 4.5$
1 $b$ -jet, $ \eta  < 2.5$	–	1 $b$ -jet, $ \eta  < 2.5$	1 $b$ -jet, $ \eta  < 2.5$
–	VR/CR: $m_T(\ell_W, v) > 20/60 \text{ GeV}$	–	–

the reconstructed transverse mass<sup>3</sup> of the  $W$ -boson candidate is required to satisfy  $m_T(\ell, v) > 20 \text{ GeV}$ .

The selection criteria that define the SR are summarised in Table 1. In total, 141 events are selected using these criteria. The criteria are modified to define validation regions, which are used to check the modelling of the main background contributions. Two validation regions (VR) are defined as follows: the diboson VR uses the same event selection as the SR, except that only one jet is required in the event and no  $b$ -tagging requirement is applied. The  $t\bar{t}$  VR also uses the same selection as the SR, except that the invariant mass of the OSSF pair must be outside the  $Z$ -mass window ( $m_{\ell\ell} < 81 \text{ GeV}$  or  $m_{\ell\ell} > 101 \text{ GeV}$ ). In addition, two control regions (CR) are defined, from which the normalisations of the diboson and the  $t\bar{t}$  background sources are computed, as explained in Section 6. The diboson CR is defined in the same way as the diboson VR, except with a tighter requirement on  $m_T(\ell_W, v)$ . The  $t\bar{t}$  CR instead has the same selection as the SR but it requires an opposite-sign, different-flavour (OSDF) lepton pair and rejects events with an OSSF pair.

## 6. Background estimation

Different SM processes are considered as background sources for this analysis. These are either processes such as diboson or  $t\bar{t}V + t\bar{t}H$  production, in which three or more prompt leptons are produced, or processes with only two prompt leptons in the final state (such as  $Z + \text{jets}$  and  $t\bar{t}$  production) and one additional non-prompt or ‘fake’ lepton that meets the selection criteria. Such non-prompt or fake leptons can originate from decays of bottom or charm hadrons, a jet that is misidentified as an electron, leptons from kaon or pion decays, or electrons from photon conversions.

The dominant source of background originates from diboson production. This consists mainly of  $WZ$  events with a small fraction of  $ZZ$  events in which the fourth lepton is missed (roughly 9% of the total number of diboson events). Studies in the diboson VR indicated that the number of events predicted by the SHERPA MC samples is lower than the number observed. The kinematic distributions are otherwise well described. Hence, the total number of diboson events predicted by the SHERPA samples is scaled by a factor of 1.47, leading to an expected number of diboson events in the SR of 53. The scale factor is derived from the diboson CR, defined in Section 5, by computing the data-to-MC ratio for events that satisfy the condition  $m_T(W) > 60 \text{ GeV}$ . This selection is applied in order to reduce the  $Z + \text{jets}$  contamination and ensure a diboson-dominated region. The uncertainty in the scale factor is estimated

by varying the requirement for the  $m_T(W)$  selection. An additional uncertainty in the diboson estimate is assigned by evaluating the difference in the number of events in the signal region when using the default SHERPA samples and a set of PowHEG samples. This results in an estimated uncertainty of 30%, also taking into account the extrapolation of the scale factor from the CR to the SR.

The main sources of non-prompt or fake-lepton background for this analysis are  $t\bar{t}$  and  $Z + \text{jets}$  events. These two contributions are evaluated separately. This choice is motivated by MC generator-level studies showing that although very similar in origin, the source of the non-prompt or fake lepton is usually different for processes involving top quarks compared to  $Z + \text{jets}$  events. For  $t\bar{t}$  events, in most cases, it is the softer of the two leptons assigned to the reconstructed  $Z$  boson, while for  $Z + \text{jets}$  events it is the lepton not assigned to the  $Z$  boson.

In order to take into account a possible difference between data and MC simulation for  $t\bar{t}$  events, the number of events containing a non-prompt or fake lepton in the MC simulation is scaled by a data/MC factor that is derived in the  $t\bar{t}$  CR defined in Section 5. This  $t\bar{t}$  control region and the signal region have very similar non-prompt lepton compositions. Requiring a pair of opposite-sign, different-flavour leptons, and rejecting events with an OSSF pair, ensures that there is no contamination from  $Z + \text{jets}$  events and from the SR. Different electron–muon invariant mass windows around the  $Z$  mass, with widths ranging from 20 GeV to 60 GeV, were investigated and the average of the obtained factors is used for scaling the  $t\bar{t}$  background in the signal region. The total uncertainty in the scaling factor is calculated taking into account this variation and the statistical uncertainty of the sample. This leads to a data/MC scale factor of  $1.21 \pm 0.51$ . Deriving separate factors depending on the fake lepton’s flavour or on the lepton  $p_T$  was also investigated. All approaches are consistent with each other within the assigned uncertainties. The expected number of  $t\bar{t}$  events in the SR is  $18 \pm 9$ . According to the MC prediction, the  $tW$  contribution is found to be less than one event.

A data-driven technique called the fake-factor method is used to estimate the  $Z + \text{jets}$  background contribution. A region defined by selecting events with  $m_T(W) < 20 \text{ GeV}$  is used for deriving the fake factors. Since it is observed that the number of non-prompt or fake electrons and muons can be very different, the estimation is done separately for the electron and muon channel. Fake factors are defined as the ratio of data events that have three isolated leptons to events in which one of the leptons fails the isolation requirement. They are derived in bins of the  $p_T$  of the lepton not associated with the  $Z$  boson. According to MC simulation, this lepton is in over 95% of the cases the non-prompt or fake lepton. These factors are then applied to events passing the signal region selection (including a  $m_T(W) > 20 \text{ GeV}$  cut) that have one of the three leptons failing the isolation requirement. Contamination from other background sources, which is about 50% and mainly coming from  $t\bar{t}$ , is taken into account and subtracted before making the

<sup>3</sup> The transverse mass is calculated using the momentum of the lepton associated with the  $W$  boson,  $p_T^{\text{miss}}$  and the azimuthal angular difference between the two:

$$m_T(\ell, p_T^{\text{miss}}) = \sqrt{2p_T(\ell)E_T^{\text{miss}}[1 - \cos\Delta\phi(\ell, p_T^{\text{miss}})]}.$$

final  $Z + \text{jets}$  estimate. The expected number of  $Z + \text{jets}$  events in the SR is 37. Different sources of uncertainty are investigated, including consistency checks of the fake-factor method using MC  $Z + \text{jets}$  samples, the effect of changing the diboson scale factor and the statistical uncertainties in the estimated and observed number of events. All these amount to a total uncertainty of 40%.

The expected  $t\bar{t}V$ ,  $t\bar{t}H$  and  $tWZ$  contributions are evaluated from the MC samples normalised to their predicted NLO cross-sections [22]. The  $t\bar{t}V + t\bar{t}H$  contribution is approximately 10% of the total background estimate, while  $tWZ$  events amount to 3%. The expected number of  $t\bar{t}V + t\bar{t}H + tWZ$  events is  $20 \pm 3$ . The uncertainty in the predictions is taken to be 13% [22].

## 7. Multivariate analysis

A multivariate analysis is used to separate the signal from the large number of background events. The neural-network package NeuroBayes [47,48] is used, which combines a three-layer feed-forward neural network with a complex robust preprocessing. Several variables are combined into one discriminant, then mapped onto the interval  $[0, 1]$ , such that background-like events have an output value,  $O_{\text{NN}}$ , closer to 0 and signal-like events have an output closer to 1. All background processes are considered in the training except  $t\bar{t}$  production, due to the very small number of available MC events that meet the selection criteria. Only variables that provide separation power and are well modelled are taken into account in the final neural network (NN). For the NN training, the ten variables with the highest separation power are used. These variables are explained in the order of their importance in

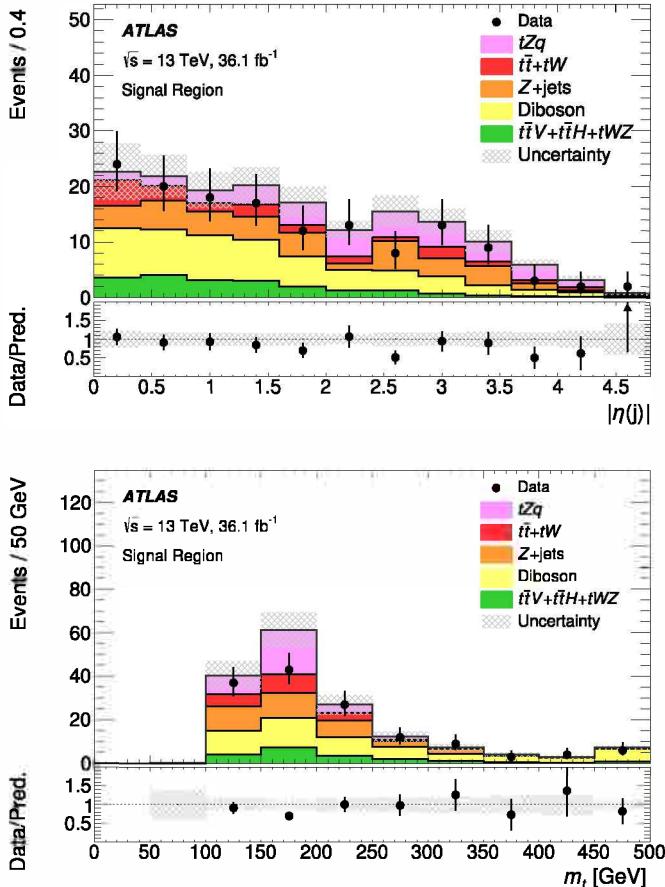
**Table 2**  
Variables used as input to the neural network, ordered by their separation power.

Variable	Definition
$ \eta(j) $	Absolute value of untagged jet $\eta$
$p_T(j)$	Untagged jet $p_T$
$m_t$	Reconstructed top-quark mass
$p_T(\ell^W)$	$p_T$ of the lepton from the $W$ -boson decay
$\Delta R(j, Z)$	$\Delta R$ between the untagged jet and the $Z$ boson
$m_T(\ell, E_T^{\text{miss}})$	Transverse mass of $W$ boson
$p_T(t)$	Reconstructed top-quark $p_T$
$p_T(b)$	Tagged jet $p_T$
$p_T(Z)$	$p_T$ of the reconstructed $Z$ boson
$ \eta(\ell^W) $	Absolute value of $\eta$ of the lepton coming from the $W$ -boson decay

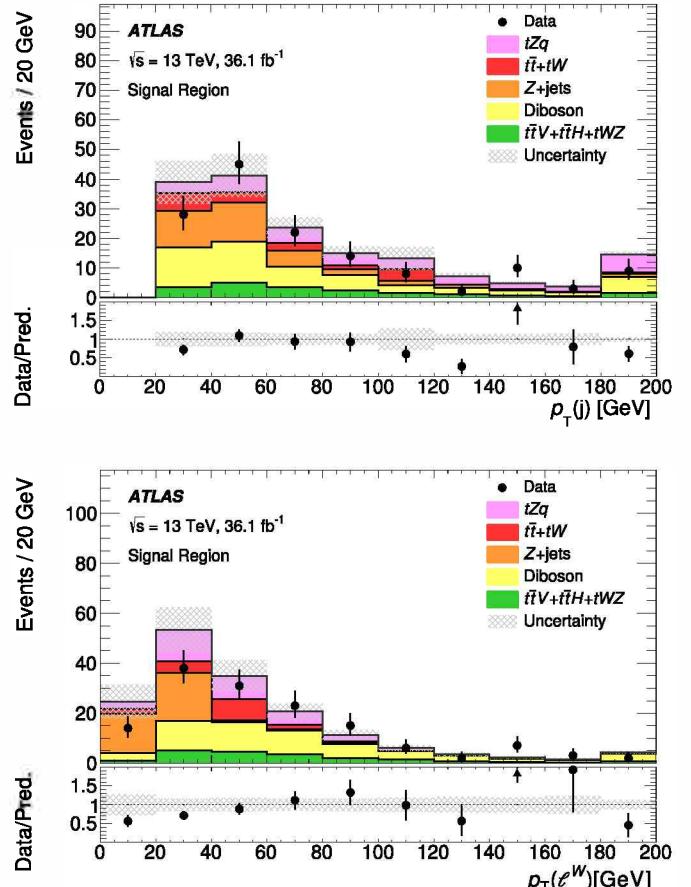
Table 2. They include simple variables, such as the  $p_T$  and  $\eta$  of jets and of the lepton not associated with the  $Z$  boson. Information about the reconstructed  $W$  boson,  $Z$  boson and top quark, such as their  $p_T$  as well as their masses, is also used. In addition, the  $\Delta R$  between the untagged jet and the  $Z$  boson is employed as an input.

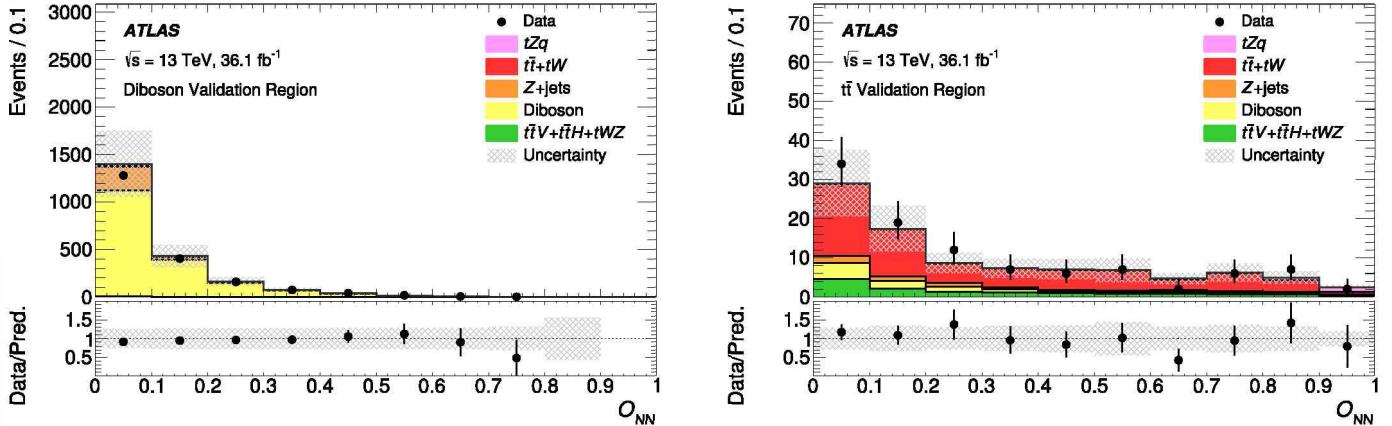
The modelling of the input variables is checked both in the validation regions defined in Table 1 and in the signal region. The distributions of some input variables in the signal region are shown in Fig. 2, normalised to the expected number of events, including the scale factors determined in Section 6. Good agreement between data and the prediction is observed.

The output of the NN is checked in the validation regions, shown in Fig. 3. Good agreement between the expected and ob-



**Fig. 2.** Comparison of the data and the signal + background model for the neural-network training variables with the highest separation power. Signal and backgrounds are normalised to the expected number of events. The  $Z + \text{jets}$  background is estimated using a data-driven technique. The uncertainty band includes the statistical uncertainty and the uncertainties in the backgrounds derived in Section 6. The rightmost bin includes overflow events.





**Fig. 3.** Neural-network output distribution of the events in the diboson (left) and  $t\bar{t}$  (right) validation regions. Signal and backgrounds are normalised to the expected number of events. The  $Z + \text{jets}$  background is estimated using a data-driven technique. The uncertainty band includes the statistical uncertainty and the uncertainties in the backgrounds derived in Section 6.

served numbers of events and in the shape of the NN output distribution are seen, demonstrating reliable background modelling. NeuroBayes includes extensive protection against overtraining and several further checks confirm that it functions well.

## 8. Systematic uncertainties

Systematic uncertainties in the normalisation of the individual backgrounds and in the signal acceptance, as well as uncertainties in the shape of the NN distributions, are taken into account when determining the  $tZq$  cross-section. For uncertainties where variations as a function of the NN distribution are consistent with being due to statistical fluctuations, only the normalisation difference is taken into account. The uncertainties are split into the following categories:

**Reconstruction efficiency and calibration uncertainties** Systematic uncertainties affecting the reconstruction and energy calibration of jets, electrons and muons are propagated through the analysis. The dominant sources of uncertainty for this measurement are the jet energy scale (JES) calibration, including the modelling of pile-up, and the  $b$ -jet tagging efficiencies.

The uncertainties due to lepton reconstruction, identification, isolation requirements and trigger efficiencies are estimated using tag-and-probe methods in  $Z \rightarrow \ell\ell$  events. Correction factors are derived to match the simulation to observed distributions in collision data and associated uncertainties are estimated. Uncertainties in the lepton momentum scale and resolution are also assessed using  $Z \rightarrow \ell\ell$  events [34,37,49].

Several components of the JES uncertainty are considered [40, 50]. Uncertainties derived from different dijet- $p_T$ -balance measurements as well as uncertainties associated with other in situ calibration techniques are considered. Furthermore, the presence of nearby jets and the modelling of pile-up affect the jet calibration. The uncertainty in the flavour composition covers effects due to the difference in quark-gluon composition between the jets used in the calibration and the jets used in this analysis. Also an uncertainty due to the different calorimeter responses to light-quark and gluon jets is taken into account. Finally, the JES uncertainty is estimated for  $b$ -jets by varying the modelling of  $b$ -quark fragmentation. The uncertainty in the jet energy resolution (JER) and the one associated with the JVT requirement are also considered [51]. The jet-related uncertainties with the highest impact on the final result are the JER and the flavour composition.

The impact of a possible miscalibration on the soft-track component of  $E_T^{\text{miss}}$  is derived from data-MC comparisons of the  $p_T$

balance between the hard and soft  $E_T^{\text{miss}}$  components [45]. The uncertainty associated with the leptons and jets is propagated from the corresponding uncertainties in the energy/momenta scales and resolutions, and it is classified together with the uncertainty associated with the corresponding objects.

Since the analysis makes use of  $b$ -tagging, the uncertainties in the  $b$ -tagging efficiency and the mistag rate are taken into account. These uncertainties were determined using  $\sqrt{s} = 8$  TeV data as described in Ref. [52] for  $b$ -jets and Ref. [53] for light jets, with additional uncertainties to account for the presence of the newly added inner layer of the pixel detector and the extrapolation to  $\sqrt{s} = 13$  TeV.

**Signal PDF and radiation** The systematic effects due to uncertainties in the parton distribution functions are taken into account for the signal. As it was generated at LO, the uncertainty is evaluated using the 30 eigenvectors of the NNPDF3.0\_lo\_as\_0118 [27] PDF set, in the four-flavour scheme. The events are reweighted according to each of the PDF uncertainty eigenvectors. As a cross-check, the PDF uncertainty is also evaluated following the updated PDF4LHC recommendation [54] by using the PDF4LHC15 NLO PDF set. This has a smaller effect; hence the uncertainty from the LO PDF set is used.

Variations of the amount of additional radiation are studied by changing the hard-scatter scales and the scales in the parton shower simultaneously in the  $tZq$  sample. A variation of the factorisation and renormalisation scale by a factor of two is combined with the Perugia2012 set of tuned parameters with lower radiation (P2012radLo) than the nominal set; while a variation of both scales by a factor of 0.5 is combined with the Perugia2012 set of tuned parameters with higher radiation (P2012radHi).

**Luminosity** The uncertainty in the combined 2015 + 2016 integrated luminosity is 2.1%. It is derived, following a methodology similar to that detailed in Ref. [55], from a calibration of the luminosity scale using  $x-y$  beam-separation scans performed in August 2015 and May 2016.

The effects of the above uncertainties on the number of signal events are summarised in Table 3. This does not include the impact of the background uncertainties.

**Background** The uncertainties in the normalisation of the various background processes use the uncertainty estimated in Section 6. For the  $t\bar{t}$  sample, the systematic effects due to uncertainties in the scale and the amount of radiation are included.

**Table 3**

Breakdown of the impact of the systematic uncertainties on the number of  $tZq$  signal events in order of decreasing effect. Details of the systematic uncertainties are provided in the text. MC statistics refers to the effect of the limited size of the MC samples used.

Source	Uncertainty [%]
$tZq$ radiation	$\pm 10.8$
Jets	$\pm 4.6$
$b$ -tagging	$\pm 2.9$
MC statistics	$\pm 2.8$
$tZq$ PDF	$\pm 2.2$
Luminosity	$\pm 2.1$
Leptons	$\pm 2.1$
$E_T^{\text{miss}}$	$\pm 0.3$

## 9. Results

Using the 141 selected events, a maximum-likelihood fit is performed to extract the  $tZq$  signal strength,  $\mu$ , defined as the ratio of the measured signal yield to the NLO Standard Model prediction. The statistical analysis of the data employs a binned likelihood function  $\mathcal{L}(\mu, \bar{\theta})$ , constructed as the product of Poisson probability terms, to estimate  $\mu$  [56]. The likelihood is maximised on the NN output distribution in the signal region. The background normalisations are allowed to vary within the uncertainties given in Section 6.

The impact of systematic uncertainties on the expected numbers of signal and background events is described by nuisance parameters,  $\bar{\theta}$ , which are each parameterised by a Gaussian or log-normal constraint for each bin of the NN output distribution. If the variation of the uncertainty in each bin is consistent with being due to statistical fluctuations, only the overall change in normalisation is included as a nuisance parameter. The uncertainties are set to be symmetric in the fit, using the average of the variations up and down. The expected numbers of signal and background events in each bin are functions of  $\bar{\theta}$ . The test statistic,  $q_\mu$ , is constructed according to the profile likelihood ratio:

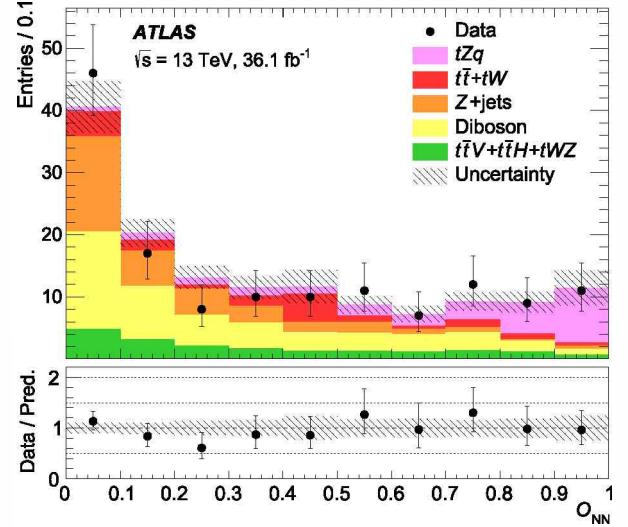
$$q_\mu = -2 \ln[\mathcal{L}(\mu, \hat{\bar{\theta}})/\mathcal{L}(\hat{\mu}, \hat{\bar{\theta}})],$$

where  $\hat{\mu}$  and  $\hat{\bar{\theta}}$  are the parameters that maximise the likelihood, and  $\hat{\bar{\theta}}$  are the nuisance parameter values that maximise the likelihood for a given  $\mu$ . This test statistic is used to determine a probability for accepting the background-only hypothesis for the observed data.

Fig. 4 shows the NN discriminant in the signal region with background normalisations, signal normalisation and nuisance parameters adjusted by the profile likelihood fit.

The results for the numbers of fitted signal and background events are summarised in Table 4. The table also shows the result of a fit to the Asimov dataset [56]. The total uncertainty in the number of fitted events includes the effect of correlations, which are large among the background sources, as the  $O_{\text{NN}}$  distributions have a similar shape. The strongest correlation is found to be between the diboson and the  $Z + \text{jets}$  contributions and it is about  $-0.5$  for both the Asimov dataset and the data.

After performing the binned maximum-likelihood fit and estimating the total uncertainty, the fitted value for  $\mu$  is  $0.75 \pm 0.21$  (stat.)  $\pm 0.17$  (syst.)  $\pm 0.05$  (th.). The quoted theory (th.) uncertainty in  $\mu$  includes the  $tZq$  NLO cross-section uncertainty given in Section 3. This is not taken into account when evaluating the cross-section. The statistical uncertainty in the cross-section is determined by performing a fit to the data, including only the statistical uncertainties. The total systematic uncertainty is determined by subtracting this value in quadrature from the total uncertainty. The cross-section for  $tZq$  production is measured



**Fig. 4.** Post-fit neural-network output distributions in the signal region. Signal and backgrounds are normalised to the expected number of events after the fit. The uncertainty band includes both the statistical and systematic uncertainties as obtained by the fit.

**Table 4**

Fitted yields in the signal region for the Asimov dataset and the data. The fitted numbers of events contain the statistical plus systematic uncertainties.

Channel	Number of events	
	Asimov dataset	Data
$tZq$	$35 \pm 9$	$26 \pm 8$
$t\bar{t} + tW$	$28 \pm 7$	$17 \pm 7$
$Z + \text{jets}$	$37 \pm 11$	$34 \pm 11$
Diboson	$53 \pm 13$	$48 \pm 12$
$t\bar{t}V + t\bar{t}H + tWZ$	$20 \pm 3$	$18 \pm 3$
Total	$163 \pm 12$	$143 \pm 11$

to be  $600 \pm 170$  (stat.)  $\pm 140$  (syst.) fb, assuming a top-quark mass of  $m_t = 172.5$  GeV.

The probability  $p_0$  of obtaining a result at least as signal-like as observed in the data if no signal were present is calculated using the test statistic  $q_{\mu=0}$  in the asymptotic approximation [56]. The observed  $p_0$  value is  $1.3 \times 10^{-5}$ . The resulting significance is  $4.2\sigma$  ( $5.4\sigma$ ), to be compared with the expected significance of  $5.4\sigma$ .

## 10. Conclusion

The cross-section for  $tZq$  production has been measured using  $36.1 \text{ fb}^{-1}$  of proton–proton collision data collected by the ATLAS experiment at the LHC in 2015 and 2016 at a centre-of-mass energy of  $\sqrt{s} = 13$  TeV. Evidence for the signal is obtained with a measured (expected) significance of  $4.2\sigma$  ( $5.4\sigma$ ). The measured cross-section is  $600 \pm 170$  (stat.)  $\pm 140$  (syst.) fb. This result is in agreement with the predicted SM  $tZq$  cross-section, calculated at NLO to be  $800$  fb with a scale uncertainty of  $^{+6.1\%}_{-7.4\%}$ .

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## The ATLAS Collaboration

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Alderweireldt<sup>108</sup>, M. Aleksa<sup>32</sup>, I.N. Aleksandrov<sup>68</sup>, C. Alexa<sup>28b</sup>, G. Alexander<sup>155</sup>, T. Alexopoulos<sup>10</sup>, M. Alhroob<sup>115</sup>, B. Ali<sup>130</sup>, M. Aliev<sup>76a,76b</sup>, G. Alimonti<sup>94a</sup>, J. Alison<sup>33</sup>, S.P. Alkire<sup>38</sup>, B.M.M. Allbrooke<sup>151</sup>, B.W. Allen<sup>118</sup>, P.P. Allport<sup>19</sup>, A. Aloisio<sup>106a,106b</sup>, A. Alonso<sup>39</sup>, F. Alonso<sup>74</sup>, C. Alpigiani<sup>140</sup>, A.A. Alshehri<sup>56</sup>, M.I. Alstaty<sup>88</sup>, B. Alvarez Gonzalez<sup>32</sup>, D. Álvarez Piqueras<sup>170</sup>, M.G. Alvaggi<sup>106a,106b</sup>, B.T. Amadio<sup>16</sup>, Y. Amaral Coutinho<sup>26a</sup>, C. Amelung<sup>25</sup>, D. Amidei<sup>92</sup>, S.P. Amor Dos Santos<sup>128a,128c</sup>, S. Amoroso<sup>32</sup>, G. Amundsen<sup>25</sup>, C. Anastopoulos<sup>141</sup>, L.S. Ancu<sup>52</sup>, N. Andari<sup>19</sup>, T. Andeen<sup>11</sup>, C.F. Anders<sup>60b</sup>, J.K. Anders<sup>77</sup>, K.J. Anderson<sup>33</sup>, A. Andreazza<sup>94a,94b</sup>, V. Andrei<sup>60a</sup>, S. Angelidakis<sup>37</sup>, I. Angelozzi<sup>109</sup>, A. Angerami<sup>38</sup>, A.V. Anisenkov<sup>111,c</sup>, N. Anjos<sup>13</sup>, A. Annovi<sup>126a,126b</sup>, C. Antel<sup>60a</sup>, M. Antonelli<sup>50</sup>, A. Antonov<sup>100,\*</sup>, D.J. Antrim<sup>166</sup>, F. Anulli<sup>134a</sup>, M. Aoki<sup>69</sup>, L. Aperio Bella<sup>32</sup>, G. Arabidze<sup>93</sup>, Y. Arai<sup>69</sup>, J.P. Araque<sup>128a</sup>, V. Araujo Ferraz<sup>26a</sup>, A.T.H. Arce<sup>48</sup>, R.E. Ardell<sup>80</sup>, F.A. Arduh<sup>74</sup>, J-F. Arguin<sup>97</sup>, S. Argyropoulos<sup>66</sup>, M. Arik<sup>20a</sup>, A.J. Armbruster<sup>32</sup>, L.J. Armitage<sup>79</sup>, O. Arnaez<sup>161</sup>, H. Arnold<sup>51</sup>, M. Arratia<sup>30</sup>, O. Arslan<sup>23</sup>, A. Artamonov<sup>99,\*</sup>, G. Artoni<sup>122</sup>, S. Artz<sup>86</sup>, S. Asai<sup>157</sup>, N. Asbah<sup>45</sup>, A. Ashkenazi<sup>155</sup>, L. Asquith<sup>151</sup>, K. Assamagan<sup>27</sup>, R. Astalos<sup>146a</sup>, M. Atkinson<sup>169</sup>, N.B. Atlay<sup>143</sup>, K. Augsten<sup>130</sup>, G. Avolio<sup>32</sup>, B. Axen<sup>16</sup>, M.K. Ayoub<sup>35a</sup>, G. Azuelos<sup>97,d</sup>, A.E. Baas<sup>60a</sup>, M.J. Baca<sup>19</sup>, H. Bachacou<sup>138</sup>, K. Bachas<sup>76a,76b</sup>, M. Backes<sup>122</sup>, P. Bagnaia<sup>134a,134b</sup>, M. Bahmani<sup>42</sup>, H. Bahrasemani<sup>144</sup>, J.T. Baines<sup>133</sup>, M. Bajic<sup>39</sup>, O.K. Baker<sup>179</sup>, P.J. Bakker<sup>109</sup>, E.M. Baldin<sup>111,c</sup>, P. Balek<sup>175</sup>, F. Balli<sup>138</sup>, W.K. Balunas<sup>124</sup>, E. Banas<sup>42</sup>, A. Bandyopadhyay<sup>23</sup>, Sw. Banerjee<sup>176,e</sup>, A.A.E. Bannoura<sup>178</sup>, L. Barak<sup>155</sup>, E.L. Barberio<sup>91</sup>, D. Barberis<sup>53a,53b</sup>, M. Barbero<sup>88</sup>, T. Barillari<sup>103</sup>, M-S Barisits<sup>32</sup>, J.T. Barkeloo<sup>118</sup>, T. Barklow<sup>145</sup>, N. Barlow<sup>30</sup>, S.L. Barnes<sup>36c</sup>, B.M. Barnett<sup>133</sup>, R.M. Barnett<sup>16</sup>, Z. Barnovska-Blenessy<sup>36a</sup>, A. Baroncelli<sup>136a</sup>, G. Barone<sup>25</sup>, A.J. Barr<sup>122</sup>, L. Barranco Navarro<sup>170</sup>, F. Barreiro<sup>85</sup>, J. Barreiro Guimarães da Costa<sup>35a</sup>, R. Bartoldus<sup>145</sup>, A.E. Barton<sup>75</sup>, P. Bartos<sup>146a</sup>, A. Basalaev<sup>125</sup>, A. Bassalat<sup>119,f</sup>, R.L. Bates<sup>56</sup>, S.J. Batista<sup>161</sup>, J.R. Batley<sup>30</sup>, M. Battaglia<sup>139</sup>, M. Bauce<sup>134a,134b</sup>, F. Bauer<sup>138</sup>, H.S. Bawa<sup>145,g</sup>, J.B. Beacham<sup>113</sup>, M.D. Beattie<sup>75</sup>, T. Beau<sup>83</sup>, P.H. Beauchemin<sup>165</sup>, P. Bechtle<sup>23</sup>, H.P. Beck<sup>18,h</sup>, H.C. Beck<sup>57</sup>, K. Becker<sup>122</sup>, M. Becker<sup>86</sup>, C. Becot<sup>112</sup>, A.J. Beddall<sup>20e</sup>, A. Beddall<sup>20b</sup>, V.A. Bednyakov<sup>68</sup>, M. Bedognetti<sup>109</sup>, C.P. Bee<sup>150</sup>, T.A. Beermann<sup>32</sup>, M. Begalli<sup>26a</sup>, M. Begel<sup>27</sup>, J.K. Behr<sup>45</sup>, A.S. Bell<sup>81</sup>, G. Bella<sup>155</sup>, L. Bellagamba<sup>22a</sup>, A. Bellerive<sup>31</sup>, M. Bellomo<sup>154</sup>, K. Belotskiy<sup>100</sup>, O. Beltramello<sup>32</sup>, N.L. Belyaev<sup>100</sup>, O. Benary<sup>155,\*</sup>, D. Benchekroun<sup>137a</sup>, M. Bender<sup>102</sup>, N. Benekos<sup>10</sup>, Y. Benhammou<sup>155</sup>, E. Benhar Noccioli<sup>179</sup>, J. Benitez<sup>66</sup>, D.P. Benjamin<sup>48</sup>, M. Benoit<sup>52</sup>, J.R. Bensinger<sup>25</sup>, S. Bentvelsen<sup>109</sup>, L. Beresford<sup>122</sup>, M. Beretta<sup>50</sup>, D. Berge<sup>109</sup>, E. Bergeaas Kuutmann<sup>168</sup>, N. Berger<sup>5</sup>, L.J. Bergsten<sup>25</sup>, J. Beringer<sup>16</sup>, S. Berlendis<sup>58</sup>, N.R. Bernard<sup>89</sup>, G. Bernardi<sup>83</sup>, C. Bernius<sup>145</sup>, F.U. Bernlochner<sup>23</sup>, T. Berry<sup>80</sup>, P. Berta<sup>86</sup>, C. Bertella<sup>35a</sup>, G. Bertoli<sup>148a,148b</sup>, I.A. Bertram<sup>75</sup>, C. Bertsche<sup>45</sup>, G.J. Besjes<sup>39</sup>, O. Bessidskaia Bylund<sup>148a,148b</sup>, M. Bessner<sup>45</sup>, N. Besson<sup>138</sup>, A. Bethani<sup>87</sup>, S. Bethke<sup>103</sup>, A. Betti<sup>23</sup>, A.J. Bevan<sup>79</sup>, J. Beyer<sup>103</sup>, R.M. Bianchi<sup>127</sup>, O. Biebel<sup>102</sup>, D. Biedermann<sup>17</sup>,

- R. Bielski 87, K. Bierwagen 86, N.V. Biesuz 126a, 126b, M. Biglietti 136a, T.R.V. Billoud 97, H. Bilokon 50, M. Bindi 57, A. Bingul 20b, C. Bini 134a, 134b, S. Biondi 22a, 22b, T. Bisanz 57, C. Bittrich 47, D.M. Bjergaard 48, J.E. Black 145, K.M. Black 24, R.E. Blair 6, T. Blazek 146a, I. Bloch 45, C. Blocker 25, A. Blue 56, U. Blumenschein 79, S. Blunier 34a, G.J. Bobbink 109, V.S. Bobrovnikov 111c, S.S. Bocchetta 84, A. Bocci 48, C. Bock 102, M. Boehler 51, D. Boerner 178, D. Bogavac 102, A.G. Bogdanchikov 111, C. Bohm 148a, V. Boisvert 80, P. Bokan 168, i, T. Bold 41a, A.S. Boldyrev 101, A.E. Bolz 60b, M. Bomben 83, M. Bona 79, M. Boonekamp 138, A. Borisov 132, G. Borissov 75, J. Bortfeldt 32, D. Bortoletto 122, V. Bortolotto 62a, D. Boscherini 22a, M. Bosman 13, J.D. Bossio Sola 29, J. Boudreau 127, E.V. Bouhova-Thacker 75, D. Boumediene 37, C. Bourdarios 119, S.K. Boutle 56, A. Boveia 113, J. Boyd 32, I.R. Boyko 68, A.J. Bozson 80, J. Bracinik 19, A. Brandt 8, G. Brandt 57, O. Brandt 60a, F. Braren 45, U. Bratzler 158, B. Brau 89, J.E. Brau 118, W.D. Breaden Madden 56, K. Brendlinger 45, A.J. Brennan 91, L. Brenner 109, R. Brenner 168, S. Bressler 175, D.L. Briglin 19, T.M. Bristow 49, D. Britton 56, D. Britzger 45, F.M. Brochu 30, I. Brock 23, R. Brock 93, G. Brooijmans 38, T. Brooks 80, W.K. Brooks 34b, J. Brosamer 16, E. Brost 110, J.H. Broughton 19, P.A. Bruckman de Renstrom 42, D. Bruncko 146b, A. Bruni 22a, G. Bruni 22a, L.S. Bruni 109, S. Bruno 135a, 135b, BH Brunt 30, M. Bruschi 22a, N. Bruscino 127, P. Bryant 33, L. Bryngemark 45, T. Buanes 15, Q. Buat 144, P. Buchholz 143, A.G. Buckley 56, I.A. Budagov 68, F. Buehrer 51, M.K. Bugge 121, O. Bulekov 100, D. Bullock 8, T.J. Burch 110, S. Burdin 77, C.D. Burgard 109, A.M. Burger 5, B. Burghgrave 110, K. Burka 42, S. Burke 133, I. Burmeister 46, J.T.P. Burr 122, D. Büscher 51, V. Büscher 86, P. Bussey 56, J.M. Butler 24, C.M. Buttar 56, J.M. Butterworth 81, P. Butti 32, W. Buttlinger 27, A. Buzatu 153, A.R. Buzykaev 111c, S. Cabrera Urbán 170, D. Caforio 130, H. Cai 169, V.M. Cairo 40a, 40b, O. Cakir 4a, N. Calace 52, P. Calafiura 16, A. Calandri 88, G. Calderini 83, P. Calfayan 64, G. Callea 40a, 40b, L.P. Caloba 26a, S. Calvente Lopez 85, D. Calvet 37, S. Calvet 37, T.P. Calvet 88, R. Camacho Toro 33, S. Camarda 32, P. Camarri 135a, 135b, D. Cameron 121, R. Caminal Armadans 169, C. Camincher 58, S. Campana 32, M. Campanelli 81, A. Camplani 94a, 94b, A. Campoverde 143, V. Canale 106a, 106b, M. Cano Bret 36c, J. Cantero 116, T. Cao 155, M.D.M. Capeans Garrido 32, I. Caprini 28b, M. Caprini 28b, M. Capua 40a, 40b, R.M. Carbone 38, R. Cardarelli 135a, F. Cardillo 51, I. Carli 131, T. Carli 32, G. Carlino 106a, B.T. Carlson 127, L. Carminati 94a, 94b, R.M.D. Carney 148a, 148b, S. Caron 108, E. Carquin 34b, S. Carrá 94a, 94b, G.D. Carrillo-Montoya 32, D. Casadei 19, M.P. Casado 13j, A.F. Casha 161, M. Casolino 13, D.W. Casper 166, R. Castelijn 109, V. Castillo Gimenez 170, N.F. Castro 128a, k, A. Catinaccio 32, J.R. Catmore 121, A. Cattai 32, J. Caudron 23, V. Cavaliere 169, E. Cavallaro 13, D. Cavalli 94a, M. Cavalli-Sforza 13, V. Cavasinni 126a, 126b, E. Celebi 20d, F. Ceradini 136a, 136b, L. Cerdá Alberich 170, A.S. Cerqueira 26b, A. Cerri 151, L. Cerrito 135a, 135b, F. Cerutti 16, A. Cervelli 22a, 22b, S.A. Cetin 20d, A. Chafaq 137a, D. Chakraborty 110, S.K. Chan 59, W.S. Chan 109, Y.L. Chan 62a, P. Chang 169, J.D. Chapman 30, D.G. Charlton 19, C.C. Chau 31, C.A. Chavez Barajas 151, S. Che 113, S. Cheatham 167a, 167c, A. Chegwidden 93, S. Chekanov 6, S.V. Chekulaev 163a, G.A. Chelkov 68, l, M.A. Chelstowska 32, C. Chen 36a, C. Chen 67, H. Chen 27, J. Chen 36a, S. Chen 35b, S. Chen 157, X. Chen 35c, m, Y. Chen 70, H.C. Cheng 92, H.J. Cheng 35a, 35d, A. Cheplakov 68, E. Cheremushkina 132, R. Cherkaoui El Moursli 137e, E. Cheu 7, K. Cheung 63, L. Chevalier 138, V. Chiarella 50, G. Chiarella 126a, 126b, G. Chiodini 76a, A.S. Chisholm 32, A. Chitan 28b, Y.H. Chiu 172, M.V. Chizhov 68, K. Choi 64, A.R. Chomont 37, S. Chouridou 156, Y.S. Chow 62a, V. Christodoulou 81, M.C. Chu 62a, J. Chudoba 129, A.J. Chuinard 90, J.J. Chwastowski 42, L. Chytka 117, A.K. Ciftci 4a, D. Cinca 46, V. Cindro 78, I.A. Cioara 23, A. Ciocio 16, F. Cirotto 106a, 106b, Z.H. Citron 175, M. Citterio 94a, M. Ciubancan 28b, A. Clark 52, B.L. Clark 59, M.R. Clark 38, P.J. Clark 49, R.N. Clarke 16, C. Clement 148a, 148b, Y. Coadou 88, M. Cobal 167a, 167c, A. Coccaro 52, J. Cochran 67, L. Colasurdo 108, B. Cole 38, A.P. Colijn 109, J. Collot 58, T. Colombo 166, P. Conde Muñoz 128a, 128b, E. Coniavitis 51, S.H. Connell 147b, I.A. Connelly 87, S. Constantinescu 28b, G. Conti 32, F. Conventi 106a, n, M. Cooke 16, A.M. Cooper-Sarkar 122, F. Cormier 171, K.J.R. Cormier 161, M. Corradi 134a, 134b, F. Corriveau 90, o, A. Cortes-Gonzalez 32, G. Costa 94a, M.J. Costa 170, D. Costanzo 141, G. Cottin 30, G. Cowan 80, B.E. Cox 87, K. Cranmer 112, S.J. Crawley 56, R.A. Creager 124, G. Cree 31, S. Crépé-Renaudin 58, F. Crescioli 83, W.A. Cribbs 148a, 148b, M. Cristinziani 23, V. Croft 112, G. Crosetti 40a, 40b, A. Cueto 85, T. Cuhadar Donszelmann 141, A.R. Cukierman 145, J. Cummings 179, M. Curatolo 50, J. Cúth 86, S. Czekiera 42, P. Czodrowski 32, G. D'amen 22a, 22b, S. D'Auria 56, L. D'eramo 83, M. D'Onofrio 77, M.J. Da Cunha Sargedas De Sousa 128a, 128b, C. Da Via 87, W. Dabrowski 41a, T. Dado 146a, T. Dai 92, O. Dale 15, F. Dallaire 97, C. Dallapiccola 89, M. Dam 39, J.R. Dandoy 124, M.F. Daneri 29, N.P. Dang 176,

- A.C. Daniells <sup>19</sup>, N.S. Dann <sup>87</sup>, M. Danninger <sup>171</sup>, M. Dano Hoffmann <sup>138</sup>, V. Dao <sup>150</sup>, G. Darbo <sup>53a</sup>, S. Darmora <sup>8</sup>, J. Dassoulas <sup>3</sup>, A. Dattagupta <sup>118</sup>, T. Daubney <sup>45</sup>, W. Davey <sup>23</sup>, C. David <sup>45</sup>, T. Davidek <sup>131</sup>, D.R. Davis <sup>48</sup>, P. Davison <sup>81</sup>, E. Dawe <sup>91</sup>, I. Dawson <sup>141</sup>, K. De <sup>8</sup>, R. de Asmundis <sup>106a</sup>, A. De Benedetti <sup>115</sup>, S. De Castro <sup>22a,22b</sup>, S. De Cecco <sup>83</sup>, N. De Groot <sup>108</sup>, P. de Jong <sup>109</sup>, H. De la Torre <sup>93</sup>, F. De Lorenzi <sup>67</sup>, A. De Maria <sup>57</sup>, D. De Pedis <sup>134a</sup>, A. De Salvo <sup>134a</sup>, U. De Sanctis <sup>135a,135b</sup>, A. De Santo <sup>151</sup>, K. De Vasconcelos Corga <sup>88</sup>, J.B. De Vivie De Regie <sup>119</sup>, R. Debbe <sup>27</sup>, C. Debenedetti <sup>139</sup>, D.V. Dedovich <sup>68</sup>, N. Dehghanian <sup>3</sup>, I. Deigaard <sup>109</sup>, M. Del Gaudio <sup>40a,40b</sup>, J. Del Peso <sup>85</sup>, D. Delgove <sup>119</sup>, F. Deliot <sup>138</sup>, C.M. Delitzsch <sup>7</sup>, A. Dell'Acqua <sup>32</sup>, L. Dell'Asta <sup>24</sup>, M. Dell'Orso <sup>126a,126b</sup>, M. Della Pietra <sup>106a,106b</sup>, D. della Volpe <sup>52</sup>, M. Delmastro <sup>5</sup>, C. Delporte <sup>119</sup>, P.A. Delsart <sup>58</sup>, D.A. DeMarco <sup>161</sup>, S. Demers <sup>179</sup>, M. Demichev <sup>68</sup>, A. Demilly <sup>83</sup>, S.P. Denisov <sup>132</sup>, D. Denysiuk <sup>138</sup>, D. Derendarz <sup>42</sup>, J.E. Derkaoui <sup>137d</sup>, F. Derue <sup>83</sup>, P. Dervan <sup>77</sup>, K. Desch <sup>23</sup>, C. Deterre <sup>45</sup>, K. Dette <sup>161</sup>, M.R. Devesa <sup>29</sup>, P.O. Deviveiros <sup>32</sup>, A. Dewhurst <sup>133</sup>, S. Dhaliwal <sup>25</sup>, F.A. Di Bello <sup>52</sup>, A. Di Ciaccio <sup>135a,135b</sup>, L. Di Ciaccio <sup>5</sup>, W.K. Di Clemente <sup>124</sup>, C. Di Donato <sup>106a,106b</sup>, A. Di Girolamo <sup>32</sup>, B. Di Girolamo <sup>32</sup>, B. Di Micco <sup>136a,136b</sup>, R. Di Nardo <sup>32</sup>, K.F. Di Petrillo <sup>59</sup>, A. Di Simone <sup>51</sup>, R. Di Sipio <sup>161</sup>, D. Di Valentino <sup>31</sup>, C. Diaconu <sup>88</sup>, M. Diamond <sup>161</sup>, F.A. Dias <sup>39</sup>, M.A. Diaz <sup>34a</sup>, E.B. Diehl <sup>92</sup>, J. Dietrich <sup>17</sup>, S. Díez Cornell <sup>45</sup>, A. Dimitrijevska <sup>14</sup>, J. Dingfelder <sup>23</sup>, P. Dita <sup>28b</sup>, S. Dita <sup>28b</sup>, F. Dittus <sup>32</sup>, F. Djama <sup>88</sup>, T. Djobava <sup>54b</sup>, J.I. Djuvslund <sup>60a</sup>, M.A.B. do Vale <sup>26c</sup>, D. Dobos <sup>32</sup>, M. Dobre <sup>28b</sup>, D. Dodsworth <sup>25</sup>, C. Doglioni <sup>84</sup>, J. Dolejsi <sup>131</sup>, Z. Dolezal <sup>131</sup>, M. Donadelli <sup>26d</sup>, S. Donati <sup>126a,126b</sup>, P. Dondero <sup>123a,123b</sup>, J. Donini <sup>37</sup>, J. Dopke <sup>133</sup>, A. Doria <sup>106a</sup>, M.T. Dova <sup>74</sup>, A.T. Doyle <sup>56</sup>, E. Drechsler <sup>57</sup>, M. Dris <sup>10</sup>, Y. Du <sup>36b</sup>, J. Duarte-Campderros <sup>155</sup>, F. Dubinin <sup>98</sup>, A. Dubreuil <sup>52</sup>, E. Duchovni <sup>175</sup>, G. Duckeck <sup>102</sup>, A. Ducourthial <sup>83</sup>, O.A. Ducu <sup>97,p</sup>, D. Duda <sup>109</sup>, A. Dudarev <sup>32</sup>, A.Chr. Dudder <sup>86</sup>, E.M. Duffield <sup>16</sup>, L. Duflot <sup>119</sup>, M. Dührssen <sup>32</sup>, C. Dulsen <sup>178</sup>, M. Dumancic <sup>175</sup>, A.E. Dumitriu <sup>28b</sup>, A.K. Duncan <sup>56</sup>, M. Dunford <sup>60a</sup>, A. Duperrin <sup>88</sup>, H. Duran Yildiz <sup>4a</sup>, M. Düren <sup>55</sup>, A. Durglishvili <sup>54b</sup>, D. Duschinger <sup>47</sup>, B. Dutta <sup>45</sup>, D. Duvnjak <sup>1</sup>, M. Dyndal <sup>45</sup>, B.S. Dziedzic <sup>42</sup>, C. Eckardt <sup>45</sup>, K.M. Ecker <sup>103</sup>, R.C. Edgar <sup>92</sup>, T. Eifert <sup>32</sup>, G. Eigen <sup>15</sup>, K. Einsweiler <sup>16</sup>, T. Ekelof <sup>168</sup>, M. El Kacimi <sup>137c</sup>, R. El Kosseifi <sup>88</sup>, V. Ellajosyula <sup>88</sup>, M. Ellert <sup>168</sup>, S. Elles <sup>5</sup>, F. Ellinghaus <sup>178</sup>, A.A. Elliot <sup>172</sup>, N. Ellis <sup>32</sup>, J. Elmsheuser <sup>27</sup>, M. Elsing <sup>32</sup>, D. Emeliyanov <sup>133</sup>, Y. Enari <sup>157</sup>, J.S. Ennis <sup>173</sup>, M.B. Epland <sup>48</sup>, J. Erdmann <sup>46</sup>, A. Ereditato <sup>18</sup>, M. Ernst <sup>27</sup>, S. Errede <sup>169</sup>, M. Escalier <sup>119</sup>, C. Escobar <sup>170</sup>, B. Esposito <sup>50</sup>, O. Estrada Pastor <sup>170</sup>, A.I. Etienne <sup>138</sup>, E. Etzion <sup>155</sup>, H. Evans <sup>64</sup>, A. Ezhilov <sup>125</sup>, M. Ezzi <sup>137e</sup>, F. Fabbri <sup>22a,22b</sup>, L. Fabbri <sup>22a,22b</sup>, V. Fabiani <sup>108</sup>, G. Facini <sup>81</sup>, R.M. Fakhrutdinov <sup>132</sup>, S. Falciano <sup>134a</sup>, R.J. Falla <sup>81</sup>, J. Faltova <sup>32</sup>, Y. Fang <sup>35a</sup>, M. Fanti <sup>94a,94b</sup>, A. Farbin <sup>8</sup>, A. Farilla <sup>136a</sup>, C. Farina <sup>127</sup>, E.M. Farina <sup>123a,123b</sup>, T. Farooque <sup>93</sup>, S. Farrell <sup>16</sup>, S.M. Farrington <sup>173</sup>, P. Farthouat <sup>32</sup>, F. Fassi <sup>137e</sup>, P. Fassnacht <sup>32</sup>, D. Fassouliotis <sup>9</sup>, M. Faucci Giannelli <sup>49</sup>, A. Favareto <sup>53a,53b</sup>, W.J. Fawcett <sup>122</sup>, L. Fayard <sup>119</sup>, O.L. Fedin <sup>125,q</sup>, W. Fedorko <sup>171</sup>, S. Feigl <sup>121</sup>, L. Feligioni <sup>88</sup>, C. Feng <sup>36b</sup>, E.J. Feng <sup>32</sup>, M.J. Fenton <sup>56</sup>, A.B. Fenyuk <sup>132</sup>, L. Feremenga <sup>8</sup>, P. Fernandez Martinez <sup>170</sup>, J. Ferrando <sup>45</sup>, A. Ferrari <sup>168</sup>, P. Ferrari <sup>109</sup>, R. Ferrari <sup>123a</sup>, D.E. Ferreira de Lima <sup>60b</sup>, A. Ferrer <sup>170</sup>, D. Ferrere <sup>52</sup>, C. Ferretti <sup>92</sup>, F. Fiedler <sup>86</sup>, A. Filipčič <sup>78</sup>, M. Filipuzzi <sup>45</sup>, F. Filthaut <sup>108</sup>, M. Fincke-Keeler <sup>172</sup>, K.D. Finelli <sup>24</sup>, M.C.N. Fiolhais <sup>128a,128c,r</sup>, L. Fiorini <sup>170</sup>, A. Fischer <sup>2</sup>, C. Fischer <sup>13</sup>, J. Fischer <sup>178</sup>, W.C. Fisher <sup>93</sup>, N. Flaschel <sup>45</sup>, I. Fleck <sup>143</sup>, P. Fleischmann <sup>92</sup>, R.R.M. Fletcher <sup>124</sup>, T. Flick <sup>178</sup>, B.M. Flierl <sup>102</sup>, L.R. Flores Castillo <sup>62a</sup>, M.J. Flowerdew <sup>103</sup>, G.T. Forcolin <sup>87</sup>, A. Formica <sup>138</sup>, F.A. Förster <sup>13</sup>, A. Forti <sup>87</sup>, A.G. Foster <sup>19</sup>, D. Fournier <sup>119</sup>, H. Fox <sup>75</sup>, S. Fracchia <sup>141</sup>, P. Francavilla <sup>126a,126b</sup>, M. Franchini <sup>22a,22b</sup>, S. Franchino <sup>60a</sup>, D. Francis <sup>32</sup>, L. Franconi <sup>121</sup>, M. Franklin <sup>59</sup>, M. Frate <sup>166</sup>, M. Fraternali <sup>123a,123b</sup>, D. Freeborn <sup>81</sup>, S.M. Fressard-Batraneanu <sup>32</sup>, B. Freund <sup>97</sup>, D. Froidevaux <sup>32</sup>, J.A. Frost <sup>122</sup>, C. Fukunaga <sup>158</sup>, T. Fusayasu <sup>104</sup>, J. Fuster <sup>170</sup>, O. Gabizon <sup>154</sup>, A. Gabrielli <sup>22a,22b</sup>, A. Gabrielli <sup>16</sup>, G.P. Gach <sup>41a</sup>, S. Gadatsch <sup>32</sup>, S. Gadomski <sup>80</sup>, G. Gagliardi <sup>53a,53b</sup>, L.G. Gagnon <sup>97</sup>, C. Galea <sup>108</sup>, B. Gallardo <sup>128a,128c</sup>, E.J. Gallas <sup>122</sup>, B.J. Gallop <sup>133</sup>, P. Gallus <sup>130</sup>, G. Galster <sup>39</sup>, K.K. Gan <sup>113</sup>, S. Ganguly <sup>37</sup>, Y. Gao <sup>77</sup>, Y.S. Gao <sup>145,g</sup>, F.M. Garay Walls <sup>34a</sup>, C. García <sup>170</sup>, J.E. García Navarro <sup>170</sup>, J.A. García Pascual <sup>35a</sup>, M. Garcia-Sciveres <sup>16</sup>, R.W. Gardner <sup>33</sup>, N. Garelli <sup>145</sup>, V. Garonne <sup>121</sup>, A. Gascon Bravo <sup>45</sup>, K. Gasnikova <sup>45</sup>, C. Gatti <sup>50</sup>, A. Gaudiello <sup>53a,53b</sup>, G. Gaudio <sup>123a</sup>, I.L. Gavrilenko <sup>98</sup>, C. Gay <sup>171</sup>, G. Gaycken <sup>23</sup>, E.N. Gazis <sup>10</sup>, C.N.P. Gee <sup>133</sup>, J. Geisen <sup>57</sup>, M. Geisen <sup>86</sup>, M.P. Geisler <sup>60a</sup>, K. Gellerstedt <sup>148a,148b</sup>, C. Gemme <sup>53a</sup>, M.H. Genest <sup>58</sup>, C. Geng <sup>92</sup>, S. Gentile <sup>134a,134b</sup>, C. Gentsos <sup>156</sup>, S. George <sup>80</sup>, D. Gerbaudo <sup>13</sup>, G. Geßner <sup>46</sup>, S. Ghasemi <sup>143</sup>, M. Ghneimat <sup>23</sup>, B. Giacobbe <sup>22a</sup>, S. Giagu <sup>134a,134b</sup>, N. Giangiacomi <sup>22a,22b</sup>, P. Giannetti <sup>126a,126b</sup>, S.M. Gibson <sup>80</sup>, M. Gignac <sup>171</sup>, M. Gilchriese <sup>16</sup>, D. Gillberg <sup>31</sup>, G. Gilles <sup>178</sup>,

- D.M. Gingrich <sup>3,d</sup>, M.P. Giordani <sup>167a,167c</sup>, F.M. Giorgi <sup>22a</sup>, P.F. Giraud <sup>138</sup>, P. Giromini <sup>59</sup>,  
 G. Giugliarelli <sup>167a,167c</sup>, D. Giugni <sup>94a</sup>, F. Giuli <sup>122</sup>, C. Giuliani <sup>103</sup>, M. Giulini <sup>60b</sup>, B.K. Gjelsten <sup>121</sup>,  
 S. Gkaitatzis <sup>156</sup>, I. Gkialas <sup>9,s</sup>, E.L. Gkougkousis <sup>13</sup>, P. Gkountoumis <sup>10</sup>, L.K. Gladilin <sup>101</sup>, C. Glasman <sup>85</sup>,  
 J. Glatzer <sup>13</sup>, P.C.F. Glaysher <sup>45</sup>, A. Glazov <sup>45</sup>, M. Goblirsch-Kolb <sup>25</sup>, J. Godlewski <sup>42</sup>, S. Goldfarb <sup>91</sup>,  
 T. Golling <sup>52</sup>, D. Golubkov <sup>132</sup>, A. Gomes <sup>128a,128b,128d</sup>, R. Gonçalo <sup>128a</sup>, R. Goncalves Gama <sup>26a</sup>,  
 J. Goncalves Pinto Firmino Da Costa <sup>138</sup>, G. Gonella <sup>51</sup>, L. Gonella <sup>19</sup>, A. Gongadze <sup>68</sup>, J.L. Gonski <sup>59</sup>,  
 S. González de la Hoz <sup>170</sup>, S. Gonzalez-Sevilla <sup>52</sup>, L. Goossens <sup>32</sup>, P.A. Gorbounov <sup>99</sup>, H.A. Gordon <sup>27</sup>,  
 I. Gorelov <sup>107</sup>, B. Gorini <sup>32</sup>, E. Gorini <sup>76a,76b</sup>, A. Gorišek <sup>78</sup>, A.T. Goshaw <sup>48</sup>, C. Gössling <sup>46</sup>, M.I. Gostkin <sup>68</sup>,  
 C.A. Gottardo <sup>23</sup>, C.R. Goudet <sup>119</sup>, D. Goujdami <sup>137c</sup>, A.G. Goussiou <sup>140</sup>, N. Govender <sup>147b,t</sup>, E. Gozani <sup>154</sup>,  
 I. Grabowska-Bold <sup>41a</sup>, P.O.J. Gradin <sup>168</sup>, J. Gramling <sup>166</sup>, E. Gramstad <sup>121</sup>, S. Grancagnolo <sup>17</sup>,  
 V. Gratchev <sup>125</sup>, P.M. Gravila <sup>28f</sup>, C. Gray <sup>56</sup>, H.M. Gray <sup>16</sup>, Z.D. Greenwood <sup>82,u</sup>, C. Grefe <sup>23</sup>, K. Gregersen <sup>81</sup>,  
 I.M. Gregor <sup>45</sup>, P. Grenier <sup>145</sup>, K. Grevtsov <sup>5</sup>, J. Griffiths <sup>8</sup>, A.A. Grillo <sup>139</sup>, K. Grimm <sup>75</sup>, S. Grinstein <sup>13,v</sup>,  
 Ph. Gris <sup>37</sup>, J.-F. Grivaz <sup>119</sup>, S. Groh <sup>86</sup>, E. Gross <sup>175</sup>, J. Grosse-Knetter <sup>57</sup>, G.C. Grossi <sup>82</sup>, Z.J. Grout <sup>81</sup>,  
 A. Grummer <sup>107</sup>, L. Guan <sup>92</sup>, W. Guan <sup>176</sup>, J. Guenther <sup>32</sup>, F. Guescini <sup>163a</sup>, D. Guest <sup>166</sup>, O. Gueta <sup>155</sup>,  
 B. Gui <sup>113</sup>, E. Guido <sup>53a,53b</sup>, T. Guillemin <sup>5</sup>, S. Guindon <sup>32</sup>, U. Gul <sup>56</sup>, C. Gumpert <sup>32</sup>, J. Guo <sup>36c</sup>, W. Guo <sup>92</sup>,  
 Y. Guo <sup>36a,w</sup>, R. Gupta <sup>43</sup>, S. Gurbuz <sup>20a</sup>, G. Gustavino <sup>115</sup>, B.J. Gutelman <sup>154</sup>, P. Gutierrez <sup>115</sup>,  
 N.G. Gutierrez Ortiz <sup>81</sup>, C. Gutschow <sup>81</sup>, C. Guyot <sup>138</sup>, M.P. Guzik <sup>41a</sup>, C. Gwenlan <sup>122</sup>, C.B. Gwilliam <sup>77</sup>,  
 A. Haas <sup>112</sup>, C. Haber <sup>16</sup>, H.K. Hadavand <sup>8</sup>, N. Haddad <sup>137e</sup>, A. Hadef <sup>88</sup>, S. Hageböck <sup>23</sup>, M. Hagihara <sup>164</sup>,  
 H. Hakobyan <sup>180,\*</sup>, M. Haleem <sup>45</sup>, J. Haley <sup>116</sup>, G. Halladjian <sup>93</sup>, G.D. Hallewell <sup>88</sup>, K. Hamacher <sup>178</sup>,  
 P. Hamal <sup>117</sup>, K. Hamano <sup>172</sup>, A. Hamilton <sup>147a</sup>, G.N. Hamity <sup>141</sup>, P.G. Hamnett <sup>45</sup>, L. Han <sup>36a</sup>, S. Han <sup>35a,35d</sup>,  
 K. Hanagaki <sup>69,x</sup>, K. Hanawa <sup>157</sup>, M. Hance <sup>139</sup>, D.M. Handl <sup>102</sup>, B. Haney <sup>124</sup>, P. Hanke <sup>60a</sup>, J.B. Hansen <sup>39</sup>,  
 J.D. Hansen <sup>39</sup>, M.C. Hansen <sup>23</sup>, P.H. Hansen <sup>39</sup>, K. Hara <sup>164</sup>, A.S. Hard <sup>176</sup>, T. Harenberg <sup>178</sup>, F. Hariri <sup>119</sup>,  
 S. Harkusha <sup>95</sup>, P.F. Harrison <sup>173</sup>, N.M. Hartmann <sup>102</sup>, Y. Hasegawa <sup>142</sup>, A. Hasib <sup>49</sup>, S. Hassani <sup>138</sup>,  
 S. Haug <sup>18</sup>, R. Hauser <sup>93</sup>, L. Hauswald <sup>47</sup>, L.B. Havener <sup>38</sup>, M. Havranek <sup>130</sup>, C.M. Hawkes <sup>19</sup>,  
 R.J. Hawkings <sup>32</sup>, D. Hayakawa <sup>159</sup>, D. Hayden <sup>93</sup>, C.P. Hays <sup>122</sup>, J.M. Hays <sup>79</sup>, H.S. Hayward <sup>77</sup>,  
 S.J. Haywood <sup>133</sup>, S.J. Head <sup>19</sup>, T. Heck <sup>86</sup>, V. Hedberg <sup>84</sup>, L. Heelan <sup>8</sup>, S. Heer <sup>23</sup>, K.K. Heidegger <sup>51</sup>,  
 S. Heim <sup>45</sup>, T. Heim <sup>16</sup>, B. Heinemann <sup>45,y</sup>, J.J. Heinrich <sup>102</sup>, L. Heinrich <sup>112</sup>, C. Heinz <sup>55</sup>, J. Hejbal <sup>129</sup>,  
 L. Helary <sup>32</sup>, A. Held <sup>171</sup>, S. Hellman <sup>148a,148b</sup>, C. Helsens <sup>32</sup>, R.C.W. Henderson <sup>75</sup>, Y. Heng <sup>176</sup>,  
 S. Henkelmann <sup>171</sup>, A.M. Henriques Correia <sup>32</sup>, S. Henrot-Versille <sup>119</sup>, G.H. Herbert <sup>17</sup>, H. Herde <sup>25</sup>,  
 V. Herget <sup>177</sup>, Y. Hernández Jiménez <sup>147c</sup>, H. Herr <sup>86</sup>, G. Herten <sup>51</sup>, R. Hertenberger <sup>102</sup>, L. Hervas <sup>32</sup>,  
 T.C. Herwig <sup>124</sup>, G.G. Hesketh <sup>81</sup>, N.P. Hessey <sup>163a</sup>, J.W. Hetherly <sup>43</sup>, S. Higashino <sup>69</sup>, E. Higón-Rodríguez <sup>170</sup>,  
 K. Hildebrand <sup>33</sup>, E. Hill <sup>172</sup>, J.C. Hill <sup>30</sup>, K.H. Hiller <sup>45</sup>, S.J. Hillier <sup>19</sup>, M. Hils <sup>47</sup>, I. Hinchliffe <sup>16</sup>, M. Hirose <sup>51</sup>,  
 D. Hirschbuehl <sup>178</sup>, B. Hiti <sup>78</sup>, O. Hladík <sup>129</sup>, D.R. Hlaluku <sup>147c</sup>, X. Hoad <sup>49</sup>, J. Hobbs <sup>150</sup>, N. Hod <sup>163a</sup>,  
 M.C. Hodgkinson <sup>141</sup>, P. Hodgson <sup>141</sup>, A. Hoecker <sup>32</sup>, M.R. Hoeferkamp <sup>107</sup>, F. Hoenig <sup>102</sup>, D. Hohn <sup>23</sup>,  
 T.R. Holmes <sup>33</sup>, M. Homann <sup>46</sup>, S. Honda <sup>164</sup>, T. Honda <sup>69</sup>, T.M. Hong <sup>127</sup>, B.H. Hooberman <sup>169</sup>,  
 W.H. Hopkins <sup>118</sup>, Y. Horii <sup>105</sup>, A.J. Horton <sup>144</sup>, J.-Y. Hostachy <sup>58</sup>, A. Hostiuc <sup>140</sup>, S. Hou <sup>153</sup>,  
 A. Hoummada <sup>137a</sup>, J. Howarth <sup>87</sup>, J. Hoya <sup>74</sup>, M. Hrabovsky <sup>117</sup>, J. Hrdinka <sup>32</sup>, I. Hristova <sup>17</sup>, J. Hrivnac <sup>119</sup>,  
 T. Hrynevich <sup>5</sup>, A. Hrynevich <sup>96</sup>, P.J. Hsu <sup>63</sup>, S.-C. Hsu <sup>140</sup>, Q. Hu <sup>27</sup>, S. Hu <sup>36c</sup>, Y. Huang <sup>35a</sup>, Z. Hubacek <sup>130</sup>,  
 F. Hubaut <sup>88</sup>, F. Huegging <sup>23</sup>, T.B. Huffman <sup>122</sup>, E.W. Hughes <sup>38</sup>, M. Huhtinen <sup>32</sup>, R.F.H. Hunter <sup>31</sup>, P. Huo <sup>150</sup>,  
 N. Huseynov <sup>68,b</sup>, J. Huston <sup>93</sup>, J. Huth <sup>59</sup>, R. Hyneman <sup>92</sup>, G. Iacobucci <sup>52</sup>, G. Iakovidis <sup>27</sup>, I. Ibragimov <sup>143</sup>,  
 L. Iconomidou-Fayard <sup>119</sup>, Z. Idrissi <sup>137e</sup>, P. Iengo <sup>32</sup>, O. Igolkina <sup>109,z</sup>, T. Iizawa <sup>174</sup>, Y. Ikegami <sup>69</sup>,  
 M. Ikeno <sup>69</sup>, Y. Ilchenko <sup>11,aa</sup>, D. Iliadis <sup>156</sup>, N. Ilic <sup>145</sup>, F. Iltzsche <sup>47</sup>, G. Introzzi <sup>123a,123b</sup>, P. Ioannou <sup>9,\*</sup>,  
 M. Iodice <sup>136a</sup>, K. Iordanidou <sup>38</sup>, V. Ippolito <sup>59</sup>, M.F. Isacson <sup>168</sup>, N. Ishijima <sup>120</sup>, M. Ishino <sup>157</sup>,  
 M. Ishitsuka <sup>159</sup>, C. Issever <sup>122</sup>, S. Istiin <sup>20a</sup>, F. Ito <sup>164</sup>, J.M. Iturbe Ponce <sup>62a</sup>, R. Iuppa <sup>162a,162b</sup>, H. Iwasaki <sup>69</sup>,  
 J.M. Izen <sup>44</sup>, V. Izzo <sup>106a</sup>, S. Jabbar <sup>3</sup>, P. Jackson <sup>1</sup>, R.M. Jacobs <sup>23</sup>, V. Jain <sup>2</sup>, K.B. Jakobi <sup>86</sup>, K. Jakobs <sup>51</sup>,  
 S. Jakobsen <sup>65</sup>, T. Jakoubek <sup>129</sup>, D.O. Jamin <sup>116</sup>, D.K. Jana <sup>82</sup>, R. Jansky <sup>52</sup>, J. Janssen <sup>23</sup>, M. Janus <sup>57</sup>,  
 P.A. Janus <sup>41a</sup>, G. Jarlskog <sup>84</sup>, N. Javadov <sup>68,b</sup>, T. Javurek <sup>51</sup>, M. Javurkova <sup>51</sup>, F. Jeanneau <sup>138</sup>, L. Jeanty <sup>16</sup>,  
 J. Jejelava <sup>54a,ab</sup>, A. Jelinskas <sup>173</sup>, P. Jenni <sup>51,ac</sup>, C. Jeske <sup>173</sup>, S. Jézéquel <sup>5</sup>, H. Ji <sup>176</sup>, J. Jia <sup>150</sup>, H. Jiang <sup>67</sup>,  
 Y. Jiang <sup>36a</sup>, Z. Jiang <sup>145</sup>, S. Jiggins <sup>81</sup>, J. Jimenez Pena <sup>170</sup>, S. Jin <sup>35b</sup>, A. Jinaru <sup>28b</sup>, O. Jinnouchi <sup>159</sup>,  
 H. Jivan <sup>147c</sup>, P. Johansson <sup>141</sup>, K.A. Johns <sup>7</sup>, C.A. Johnson <sup>64</sup>, W.J. Johnson <sup>140</sup>, K. Jon-And <sup>148a,148b</sup>,  
 R.W.L. Jones <sup>75</sup>, S.D. Jones <sup>151</sup>, S. Jones <sup>7</sup>, T.J. Jones <sup>77</sup>, J. Jongmanns <sup>60a</sup>, P.M. Jorge <sup>128a,128b</sup>, J. Jovicevic <sup>163a</sup>,  
 X. Ju <sup>176</sup>, A. Juste Rozas <sup>13,v</sup>, M.K. Köhler <sup>175</sup>, A. Kaczmarska <sup>42</sup>, M. Kado <sup>119</sup>, H. Kagan <sup>113</sup>, M. Kagan <sup>145</sup>,

- S.J. Kahn 88, T. Kaji 174, E. Kajomovitz 154, C.W. Kalderon 84, A. Kaluza 86, S. Kama 43,  
 A. Kamenshchikov 132, N. Kanaya 157, L. Kanjir 78, V.A. Kantserov 100, J. Kanzaki 69, B. Kaplan 112,  
 L.S. Kaplan 176, D. Kar 147c, K. Karakostas 10, N. Karastathis 10, M.J. Kareem 163b, E. Karentzos 10,  
 S.N. Karpov 68, Z.M. Karpova 68, K. Karthik 112, V. Kartvelishvili 75, A.N. Karyukhin 132, K. Kasahara 164,  
 L. Kashif 176, R.D. Kass 113, A. Kastanas 149, Y. Kataoka 157, C. Kato 157, A. Katre 52, J. Katzy 45, K. Kawade 70,  
 K. Kawagoe 73, T. Kawamoto 157, G. Kawamura 57, E.F. Kay 77, V.F. Kazanin 111,c, R. Keeler 172, R. Kehoe 43,  
 J.S. Keller 31, E. Kellermann 84, J.J. Kempster 80, J. Kendrick 19, H. Keoshkerian 161, O. Kepka 129,  
 B.P. Kerševan 78, S. Kersten 178, R.A. Keyes 90, M. Khader 169, F. Khalil-zada 12, A. Khanov 116,  
 A.G. Kharlamov 111,c, T. Kharlamova 111,c, A. Khodinov 160, T.J. Khoo 52, V. Khovanskiy 99,\*  
 E. Khramov 68, J. Khubua 54b,ad, S. Kido 70, C.R. Kilby 80, H.Y. Kim 8, S.H. Kim 164, Y.K. Kim 33, N. Kimura 156, O.M. Kind 17,  
 B.T. King 77, D. Kirchmeier 47, J. Kirk 133, A.E. Kiryunin 103, T. Kishimoto 157, D. Kisielewska 41a, V. Kitali 45,  
 O. Kivernyk 5, E. Kladiva 146b, T. Klapdor-Kleingrothaus 51, M.H. Klein 92, M. Klein 77, U. Klein 77,  
 K. Kleinknecht 86, P. Klimek 110, A. Klimentov 27, R. Klingenberg 46,\*  
 T. Klingl 23, T. Klioutchnikova 32, F.F. Klitzner 102, E.-E. Kluge 60a, P. Kluit 109, S. Kluth 103, E. Kneringer 65, E.B.F.G. Knoops 88, A. Knue 103,  
 A. Kobayashi 157, D. Kobayashi 73, T. Kobayashi 157, M. Kobel 47, M. Kocian 145, P. Kodys 131, T. Koffas 31,  
 E. Koffeman 109, N.M. Köhler 103, T. Koi 145, M. Kolb 60b, I. Koletsou 5, T. Kondo 69, N. Kondrashova 36c,  
 K. Köneke 51, A.C. König 108, T. Kono 69,ae, R. Konoplich 112,af, N. Konstantinidis 81, B. Konya 84,  
 R. Kopeliansky 64, S. Koperny 41a, A.K. Kopp 51, K. Korcyl 42, K. Kordas 156, A. Korn 81, A.A. Korol 111,c,  
 I. Korolkov 13, E.V. Korolkova 141, O. Kortner 103, S. Kortner 103, T. Kosek 131, V.V. Kostyukhin 23,  
 A. Kotwal 48, A. Koulouris 10, A. Kourkoumeli-Charalampidi 123a,123b, C. Kourkoumelis 9, E. Kourlitis 141,  
 V. Kouskoura 27, A.B. Kowalewska 42, R. Kowalewski 172, T.Z. Kowalski 41a, C. Kozakai 157, W. Kozanecki 138,  
 A.S. Kozhin 132, V.A. Kramarenko 101, G. Kramberger 78, D. Krasnoperovtsev 100, M.W. Krasny 83,  
 A. Krasznahorkay 32, D. Krauss 103, J.A. Kremer 41a, J. Kretzschmar 77, K. Kreutzfeldt 55, P. Krieger 161,  
 K. Krizka 16, K. Kroeninger 46, H. Kroha 103, J. Kroll 129, J. Kroll 124, J. Kroseberg 23, J. Krstic 14,  
 U. Kruchonak 68, H. Krüger 23, N. Krumnack 67, M.C. Kruse 48, T. Kubota 91, H. Kucuk 81, S. Kuday 4b,  
 J.T. Kuechler 178, S. Kuehn 32, A. Kugel 60a, F. Kuger 177, T. Kuhl 45, V. Kukhtin 68, R. Kukla 88,  
 Y. Kulchitsky 95, S. Kuleshov 34b, Y.P. Kulinich 169, M. Kuna 134a,134b, T. Kunigo 71, A. Kupco 129, T. Kupfer 46,  
 O. Kuprash 155, H. Kurashige 70, L.L. Kurchaninov 163a, Y.A. Kurochkin 95, M.G. Kurth 35a,35d,  
 E.S. Kuwertz 172, M. Kuze 159, J. Kvita 117, T. Kwan 172, D. Kyriazopoulos 141, A. La Rosa 103,  
 J.L. La Rosa Navarro 26d, L. La Rotonda 40a,40b, F. La Ruffa 40a,40b, C. Lacasta 170, F. Lacava 134a,134b,  
 J. Lacey 45, D.P.J. Lack 87, H. Lacker 17, D. Lacour 83, E. Ladygin 68, R. Lafaye 5, B. Laforge 83, T. Lagouri 179,  
 S. Lai 57, S. Lammers 64, W. Lampl 7, E. Lançon 27, U. Landgraf 51, M.P.J. Landon 79, M.C. Lanfermann 52,  
 V.S. Lang 45, J.C. Lange 13, R.J. Langenberg 32, A.J. Lankford 166, F. Lanni 27, K. Lantzsch 23, A. Lanza 123a,  
 A. Lapertosa 53a,53b, S. Laplace 83, J.F. Laporte 138, T. Lari 94a, F. Lasagni Manghi 22a,22b, M. Lassnig 32,  
 T.S. Lau 62a, P. Laurelli 50, W. Lavrijsen 16, A.T. Law 139, P. Laycock 77, T. Lazovich 59, M. Lazzaroni 94a,94b,  
 B. Le 91, O. Le Dortz 83, E. Le Guiriec 88, E.P. Le Quilleuc 138, M. LeBlanc 172, T. LeCompte 6,  
 F. Ledroit-Guillon 58, C.A. Lee 27, G.R. Lee 34a, S.C. Lee 153, L. Lee 59, B. Lefebvre 90, G. Lefebvre 83,  
 M. Lefebvre 172, F. Legger 102, C. Leggett 16, G. Lehmann Miotto 32, X. Lei 7, W.A. Leight 45, M.A.L. Leite 26d,  
 R. Leitner 131, D. Lelloouch 175, B. Lemmer 57, K.J.C. Leney 81, T. Lenz 23, B. Lenzi 32, R. Leone 7,  
 S. Leone 126a,126b, C. Leonidopoulos 49, G. Lerner 151, C. Leroy 97, R. Les 161, A.A.J. Lesage 138, C.G. Lester 30,  
 M. Levchenko 125, J. Levêque 5, D. Levin 92, L.J. Levinson 175, M. Levy 19, D. Lewis 79, B. Li 36a,w,  
 Changqiao Li 36a, H. Li 150, L. Li 36c, Q. Li 35a,35d, Q. Li 36a, S. Li 48, X. Li 36c, Y. Li 143, Z. Liang 35a,  
 B. Liberti 135a, A. Liblong 161, K. Lie 62c, J. Liebal 23, W. Liebig 15, A. Limosani 152, C.Y. Lin 30, K. Lin 93,  
 S.C. Lin 182, T.H. Lin 86, R.A. Linck 64, B.E. Lindquist 150, A.E. Lioni 52, E. Lipeles 124, A. Lipniacka 15,  
 M. Lisovyi 60b, T.M. Liss 169,ag, A. Lister 171, A.M. Litke 139, B. Liu 67, H. Liu 92, H. Liu 27, J.K.K. Liu 122,  
 J. Liu 36b, J.B. Liu 36a, K. Liu 88, L. Liu 169, M. Liu 36a, Y.L. Liu 36a, Y. Liu 36a, M. Livan 123a,123b, A. Lleres 58,  
 J. Llorente Merino 35a, S.L. Lloyd 79, C.Y. Lo 62b, F. Lo Sterzo 43, E.M. Lobodzinska 45, P. Loch 7,  
 F.K. Loebinger 87, A. Loesle 51, K.M. Loew 25, T. Lohse 17, K. Lohwasser 141, M. Lokajicek 129, B.A. Long 24,  
 J.D. Long 169, R.E. Long 75, L. Longo 76a,76b, K.A. Looper 113, J.A. Lopez 34b, I. Lopez Paz 13, A. Lopez Solis 83,  
 J. Lorenz 102, N. Lorenzo Martinez 5, M. Losada 21, P.J. Lösel 102, X. Lou 35a, A. Lounis 119, J. Love 6,  
 P.A. Love 75, H. Lu 62a, N. Lu 92, Y.J. Lu 63, H.J. Lubatti 140, C. Luci 134a,134b, A. Lucotte 58, C. Luedtke 51,  
 F. Luehring 64, W. Lukas 65, L. Luminari 134a, O. Lundberg 148a,148b, B. Lund-Jensen 149, M.S. Lutz 89,

- P.M. Luzi <sup>83</sup>, D. Lynn <sup>27</sup>, R. Lysak <sup>129</sup>, E. Lytken <sup>84</sup>, F. Lyu <sup>35a</sup>, V. Lyubushkin <sup>68</sup>, H. Ma <sup>27</sup>, L.L. Ma <sup>36b</sup>, Y. Ma <sup>36b</sup>, G. Maccarrone <sup>50</sup>, A. Macchiolo <sup>103</sup>, C.M. Macdonald <sup>141</sup>, B. Maček <sup>78</sup>, J. Machado Miguens <sup>124,128b</sup>, D. Madaffari <sup>170</sup>, R. Madar <sup>37</sup>, W.F. Mader <sup>47</sup>, A. Madsen <sup>45</sup>, N. Madysa <sup>47</sup>, J. Maeda <sup>70</sup>, S. Maeland <sup>15</sup>, T. Maeno <sup>27</sup>, A.S. Maevskiy <sup>101</sup>, V. Magerl <sup>51</sup>, C. Maiani <sup>119</sup>, C. Maidantchik <sup>26a</sup>, T. Maier <sup>102</sup>, A. Maio <sup>128a,128b,128d</sup>, O. Majersky <sup>146a</sup>, S. Majewski <sup>118</sup>, Y. Makida <sup>69</sup>, N. Makovec <sup>119</sup>, B. Malaescu <sup>83</sup>, Pa. Malecki <sup>42</sup>, V.P. Maleev <sup>125</sup>, F. Malek <sup>58</sup>, U. Mallik <sup>66</sup>, D. Malon <sup>6</sup>, C. Malone <sup>30</sup>, S. Maltezos <sup>10</sup>, S. Malyukov <sup>32</sup>, J. Mamuzic <sup>170</sup>, G. Mancini <sup>50</sup>, I. Mandić <sup>78</sup>, J. Maneira <sup>128a,128b</sup>, L. Manhaes de Andrade Filho <sup>26b</sup>, J. Manjarres Ramos <sup>47</sup>, K.H. Mankinen <sup>84</sup>, A. Mann <sup>102</sup>, A. Manousos <sup>32</sup>, B. Mansoulie <sup>138</sup>, J.D. Mansour <sup>35a</sup>, R. Mantifel <sup>90</sup>, M. Mantoani <sup>57</sup>, S. Manzoni <sup>94a,94b</sup>, L. Mapelli <sup>32</sup>, G. Marceca <sup>29</sup>, L. March <sup>52</sup>, L. Marchese <sup>122</sup>, G. Marchiori <sup>83</sup>, M. Marcisovsky <sup>129</sup>, C.A. Marin Tobon <sup>32</sup>, M. Marjanovic <sup>37</sup>, D.E. Marley <sup>92</sup>, F. Marroquim <sup>26a</sup>, S.P. Marsden <sup>87</sup>, Z. Marshall <sup>16</sup>, M.U.F Martensson <sup>168</sup>, S. Marti-Garcia <sup>170</sup>, C.B. Martin <sup>113</sup>, T.A. Martin <sup>173</sup>, V.J. Martin <sup>49</sup>, B. Martin dit Latour <sup>15</sup>, M. Martinez <sup>13,v</sup>, V.I. Martinez Outschoorn <sup>169</sup>, S. Martin-Haugh <sup>133</sup>, V.S. Martoiu <sup>28b</sup>, A.C. Martyniuk <sup>81</sup>, A. Marzin <sup>32</sup>, L. Masetti <sup>86</sup>, T. Mashimo <sup>157</sup>, R. Mashinistov <sup>98</sup>, J. Masik <sup>87</sup>, A.L. Maslennikov <sup>111,c</sup>, L.H. Mason <sup>91</sup>, L. Massa <sup>135a,135b</sup>, P. Mastrandrea <sup>5</sup>, A. Mastroberardino <sup>40a,40b</sup>, T. Masubuchi <sup>157</sup>, P. Mättig <sup>178</sup>, J. Maurer <sup>28b</sup>, S.J. Maxfield <sup>77</sup>, D.A. Maximov <sup>111,c</sup>, R. Mazini <sup>153</sup>, I. Maznas <sup>156</sup>, S.M. Mazza <sup>94a,94b</sup>, N.C. Mc Fadden <sup>107</sup>, G. Mc Goldrick <sup>161</sup>, S.P. Mc Kee <sup>92</sup>, A. McCarn <sup>92</sup>, R.L. McCarthy <sup>150</sup>, T.G. McCarthy <sup>103</sup>, L.I. McClymont <sup>81</sup>, E.F. McDonald <sup>91</sup>, J.A. Mcfayden <sup>32</sup>, G. Mchedlidze <sup>57</sup>, S.J. McMahon <sup>133</sup>, P.C. McNamara <sup>91</sup>, C.J. McNicol <sup>173</sup>, R.A. McPherson <sup>172,0</sup>, S. Meehan <sup>140</sup>, T.J. Megy <sup>51</sup>, S. Mehlhase <sup>102</sup>, A. Mehta <sup>77</sup>, T. Meideck <sup>58</sup>, K. Meier <sup>60a</sup>, B. Meirose <sup>44</sup>, D. Melini <sup>170,ah</sup>, B.R. Mellado Garcia <sup>147c</sup>, J.D. Mellenthin <sup>57</sup>, M. Melo <sup>146a</sup>, F. Meloni <sup>18</sup>, A. Melzer <sup>23</sup>, S.B. Menary <sup>87</sup>, L. Meng <sup>77</sup>, X.T. Meng <sup>92</sup>, A. Mengarelli <sup>22a,22b</sup>, S. Menke <sup>103</sup>, E. Meoni <sup>40a,40b</sup>, S. Mergelmeyer <sup>17</sup>, C. Merlassino <sup>18</sup>, P. Mermod <sup>52</sup>, L. Merola <sup>106a,106b</sup>, C. Meroni <sup>94a</sup>, F.S. Merritt <sup>33</sup>, A. Messina <sup>134a,134b</sup>, J. Metcalfe <sup>6</sup>, A.S. Mete <sup>166</sup>, C. Meyer <sup>124</sup>, J-P. Meyer <sup>138</sup>, J. Meyer <sup>109</sup>, H. Meyer Zu Theenhausen <sup>60a</sup>, F. Miano <sup>151</sup>, R.P. Middleton <sup>133</sup>, S. Miglioranzi <sup>53a,53b</sup>, L. Mijović <sup>49</sup>, G. Mikenberg <sup>175</sup>, M. Mikestikova <sup>129</sup>, M. Mikuž <sup>78</sup>, M. Milesi <sup>91</sup>, A. Milic <sup>161</sup>, D.A. Millar <sup>79</sup>, D.W. Miller <sup>33</sup>, C. Mills <sup>49</sup>, A. Milov <sup>175</sup>, D.A. Milstead <sup>148a,148b</sup>, A.A. Minaenko <sup>132</sup>, Y. Minami <sup>157</sup>, I.A. Minashvili <sup>54b</sup>, A.I. Mincer <sup>112</sup>, B. Mindur <sup>41a</sup>, M. Mineev <sup>68</sup>, Y. Minegishi <sup>157</sup>, Y. Ming <sup>176</sup>, L.M. Mir <sup>13</sup>, A. Mirto <sup>76a,76b</sup>, K.P. Mistry <sup>124</sup>, T. Mitani <sup>174</sup>, J. Mitrevski <sup>102</sup>, V.A. Mitsou <sup>170</sup>, A. Miucci <sup>18</sup>, P.S. Miyagawa <sup>141</sup>, A. Mizukami <sup>69</sup>, J.U. Mjörnmark <sup>84</sup>, T. Mkrtchyan <sup>180</sup>, M. Mlynarikova <sup>131</sup>, T. Moa <sup>148a,148b</sup>, K. Mochizuki <sup>97</sup>, P. Mogg <sup>51</sup>, S. Mohapatra <sup>38</sup>, S. Molander <sup>148a,148b</sup>, R. Moles-Valls <sup>23</sup>, M.C. Mondragon <sup>93</sup>, K. Mönig <sup>45</sup>, J. Monk <sup>39</sup>, E. Monnier <sup>88</sup>, A. Montalbano <sup>150</sup>, J. Montejo Berlingen <sup>32</sup>, F. Monticelli <sup>74</sup>, S. Monzani <sup>94a,94b</sup>, R.W. Moore <sup>3</sup>, N. Morange <sup>119</sup>, D. Moreno <sup>21</sup>, M. Moreno Llácer <sup>32</sup>, P. Morettini <sup>53a</sup>, S. Morgenstern <sup>32</sup>, D. Mori <sup>144</sup>, T. Mori <sup>157</sup>, M. Morii <sup>59</sup>, M. Morinaga <sup>174</sup>, V. Morisbak <sup>121</sup>, A.K. Morley <sup>32</sup>, G. Mornacchi <sup>32</sup>, J.D. Morris <sup>79</sup>, L. Morvaj <sup>150</sup>, P. Moschovakos <sup>10</sup>, M. Mosidze <sup>54b</sup>, H.J. Moss <sup>141</sup>, J. Moss <sup>145,ai</sup>, K. Motohashi <sup>159</sup>, R. Mount <sup>145</sup>, E. Mountricha <sup>27</sup>, E.J.W. Moyse <sup>89</sup>, S. Muanza <sup>88</sup>, F. Mueller <sup>103</sup>, J. Mueller <sup>127</sup>, R.S.P. Mueller <sup>102</sup>, D. Muenstermann <sup>75</sup>, P. Mullen <sup>56</sup>, G.A. Mullier <sup>18</sup>, F.J. Munoz Sanchez <sup>87</sup>, W.J. Murray <sup>173,133</sup>, H. Musheghyan <sup>32</sup>, M. Muškinja <sup>78</sup>, A.G. Myagkov <sup>132,aj</sup>, M. Myska <sup>130</sup>, B.P. Nachman <sup>16</sup>, O. Nackenhorst <sup>52</sup>, K. Nagai <sup>122</sup>, R. Nagai <sup>69,ae</sup>, K. Nagano <sup>69</sup>, Y. Nagasaka <sup>61</sup>, K. Nagata <sup>164</sup>, M. Nagel <sup>51</sup>, E. Nagy <sup>88</sup>, A.M. Nairz <sup>32</sup>, Y. Nakahama <sup>105</sup>, K. Nakamura <sup>69</sup>, T. Nakamura <sup>157</sup>, I. Nakano <sup>114</sup>, R.F. Naranjo Garcia <sup>45</sup>, R. Narayan <sup>11</sup>, D.I. Narrias Villar <sup>60a</sup>, I. Naryshkin <sup>125</sup>, T. Naumann <sup>45</sup>, G. Navarro <sup>21</sup>, R. Nayyar <sup>7</sup>, H.A. Neal <sup>92</sup>, P.Yu. Nechaeva <sup>98</sup>, T.J. Neep <sup>138</sup>, A. Negri <sup>123a,123b</sup>, M. Negrini <sup>22a</sup>, S. Nektarijevic <sup>108</sup>, C. Nellist <sup>57</sup>, A. Nelson <sup>166</sup>, M.E. Nelson <sup>122</sup>, S. Nemecek <sup>129</sup>, P. Nemethy <sup>112</sup>, M. Nessi <sup>32,ak</sup>, M.S. Neubauer <sup>169</sup>, M. Neumann <sup>178</sup>, P.R. Newman <sup>19</sup>, T.Y. Ng <sup>62c</sup>, Y.S. Ng <sup>17</sup>, T. Nguyen Manh <sup>97</sup>, R.B. Nickerson <sup>122</sup>, R. Nicolaidou <sup>138</sup>, J. Nielsen <sup>139</sup>, N. Nikiforou <sup>11</sup>, V. Nikolaenko <sup>132,aj</sup>, I. Nikolic-Audit <sup>83</sup>, K. Nikolopoulos <sup>19</sup>, P. Nilsson <sup>27</sup>, Y. Ninomiya <sup>69</sup>, A. Nisati <sup>134a</sup>, N. Nishu <sup>36c</sup>, R. Nisius <sup>103</sup>, I. Nitsche <sup>46</sup>, T. Nitta <sup>174</sup>, T. Nobe <sup>157</sup>, Y. Noguchi <sup>71</sup>, M. Nomachi <sup>120</sup>, I. Nomidis <sup>31</sup>, M.A. Nomura <sup>27</sup>, T. Nooney <sup>79</sup>, M. Nordberg <sup>32</sup>, N. Norjoharuddeen <sup>122</sup>, O. Novgorodova <sup>47</sup>, M. Nozaki <sup>69</sup>, L. Nozka <sup>117</sup>, K. Ntekas <sup>166</sup>, E. Nurse <sup>81</sup>, F. Nuti <sup>91</sup>, K. O'connor <sup>25</sup>, D.C. O'Neil <sup>144</sup>, A.A. O'Rourke <sup>45</sup>, V. O'Shea <sup>56</sup>, F.G. Oakham <sup>31,d</sup>, H. Oberlack <sup>103</sup>, T. Obermann <sup>23</sup>, J. Ocariz <sup>83</sup>, A. Ochi <sup>70</sup>, I. Ochoa <sup>38</sup>, J.P. Ochoa-Ricoux <sup>34a</sup>, S. Oda <sup>73</sup>, S. Odaka <sup>69</sup>, A. Oh <sup>87</sup>, S.H. Oh <sup>48</sup>, C.C. Ohm <sup>149</sup>, H. Ohman <sup>168</sup>, H. Oide <sup>53a,53b</sup>, H. Okawa <sup>164</sup>, Y. Okumura <sup>157</sup>, T. Okuyama <sup>69</sup>, A. Olariu <sup>28b</sup>, L.F. Oleiro Seabra <sup>128a</sup>, S.A. Olivares Pino <sup>34a</sup>, D. Oliveira Damazio <sup>27</sup>,

- M.J.R. Olsson <sup>33</sup>, A. Olszewski <sup>42</sup>, J. Olszowska <sup>42</sup>, A. Onofre <sup>128a,128e</sup>, K. Onogi <sup>105</sup>, P.U.E. Onyisi <sup>11,aa</sup>, H. Oppen <sup>121</sup>, M.J. Oreglia <sup>33</sup>, Y. Oren <sup>155</sup>, D. Orestano <sup>136a,136b</sup>, N. Orlando <sup>62b</sup>, R.S. Orr <sup>161</sup>, B. Osculati <sup>53a,53b,\*</sup>, R. Ospanov <sup>36a</sup>, G. Otero y Garzon <sup>29</sup>, H. Otono <sup>73</sup>, M. Ouchrif <sup>137d</sup>, F. Ould-Saada <sup>121</sup>, A. Ouraou <sup>138</sup>, K.P. Oussoren <sup>109</sup>, Q. Ouyang <sup>35a</sup>, M. Owen <sup>56</sup>, R.E. Owen <sup>19</sup>, V.E. Ozcan <sup>20a</sup>, N. Ozturk <sup>8</sup>, K. Pachal <sup>144</sup>, A. Pacheco Pages <sup>13</sup>, L. Pacheco Rodriguez <sup>138</sup>, C. Padilla Aranda <sup>13</sup>, S. Pagan Griso <sup>16</sup>, M. Paganini <sup>179</sup>, F. Paige <sup>27</sup>, G. Palacino <sup>64</sup>, S. Palazzo <sup>40a,40b</sup>, S. Palestini <sup>32</sup>, M. Palka <sup>41b</sup>, D. Pallin <sup>37</sup>, E.St. Panagiotopoulou <sup>10</sup>, I. Panagoulias <sup>10</sup>, C.E. Pandini <sup>52</sup>, J.G. Panduro Vazquez <sup>80</sup>, P. Pani <sup>32</sup>, S. Panitkin <sup>27</sup>, D. Pantea <sup>28b</sup>, L. Paolozzi <sup>52</sup>, Th.D. Papadopoulos <sup>10</sup>, K. Papageorgiou <sup>9,s</sup>, A. Paramonov <sup>6</sup>, D. Paredes Hernandez <sup>179</sup>, A.J. Parker <sup>75</sup>, M.A. Parker <sup>30</sup>, K.A. Parker <sup>45</sup>, F. Parodi <sup>53a,53b</sup>, J.A. Parsons <sup>38</sup>, U. Parzefall <sup>51</sup>, V.R. Pascuzzi <sup>161</sup>, J.M. Pasner <sup>139</sup>, E. Pasqualucci <sup>134a</sup>, S. Passaggio <sup>53a</sup>, Fr. Pastore <sup>80</sup>, S. Pataraia <sup>86</sup>, J.R. Pater <sup>87</sup>, T. Pauly <sup>32</sup>, B. Pearson <sup>103</sup>, S. Pedraza Lopez <sup>170</sup>, R. Pedro <sup>128a,128b</sup>, S.V. Peleganchuk <sup>111,c</sup>, O. Penc <sup>129</sup>, C. Peng <sup>35a,35d</sup>, H. Peng <sup>36a</sup>, J. Penwell <sup>64</sup>, B.S. Peralva <sup>26b</sup>, M.M. Perego <sup>138</sup>, D.V. Perepelitsa <sup>27</sup>, F. Peri <sup>17</sup>, L. Perini <sup>94a,94b</sup>, H. Pernegger <sup>32</sup>, S. Perrella <sup>106a,106b</sup>, R. Peschke <sup>45</sup>, V.D. Peshekhonov <sup>68,\*</sup>, K. Peters <sup>45</sup>, R.F.Y. Peters <sup>87</sup>, B.A. Petersen <sup>32</sup>, T.C. Petersen <sup>39</sup>, E. Petit <sup>58</sup>, A. Petridis <sup>1</sup>, C. Petridou <sup>156</sup>, P. Petroff <sup>119</sup>, E. Petrolo <sup>134a</sup>, M. Petrov <sup>122</sup>, F. Petrucci <sup>136a,136b</sup>, N.E. Pettersson <sup>89</sup>, A. Peyaud <sup>138</sup>, R. Pezoa <sup>34b</sup>, F.H. Phillips <sup>93</sup>, P.W. Phillips <sup>133</sup>, G. Piacquadio <sup>150</sup>, E. Pianori <sup>173</sup>, A. Picazio <sup>89</sup>, M.A. Pickering <sup>122</sup>, R. Piegaia <sup>29</sup>, J.E. Pilcher <sup>33</sup>, A.D. Pilkington <sup>87</sup>, M. Pinamonti <sup>135a,135b</sup>, J.L. Pinfold <sup>3</sup>, H. Pirumov <sup>45</sup>, M. Pitt <sup>175</sup>, L. Plazak <sup>146a</sup>, M.-A. Pleier <sup>27</sup>, V. Pleskot <sup>86</sup>, E. Plotnikova <sup>68</sup>, D. Pluth <sup>67</sup>, P. Podberezko <sup>111</sup>, R. Poettgen <sup>84</sup>, R. Poggi <sup>123a,123b</sup>, L. Poggiali <sup>119</sup>, I. Pogrebnyak <sup>93</sup>, D. Pohl <sup>23</sup>, I. Pokharel <sup>57</sup>, G. Polesello <sup>123a</sup>, A. Poley <sup>45</sup>, A. Policicchio <sup>40a,40b</sup>, R. Polifka <sup>32</sup>, A. Polini <sup>22a</sup>, C.S. Pollard <sup>56</sup>, V. Polychronakos <sup>27</sup>, K. Pommès <sup>32</sup>, D. Ponomarenko <sup>100</sup>, L. Pontecorvo <sup>134a</sup>, G.A. Popeneciu <sup>28d</sup>, D.M. Portillo Quintero <sup>83</sup>, S. Pospisil <sup>130</sup>, K. Potamianos <sup>45</sup>, I.N. Potrap <sup>68</sup>, C.J. Potter <sup>30</sup>, H. Potti <sup>11</sup>, T. Poulsen <sup>84</sup>, J. Poveda <sup>32</sup>, M.E. Pozo Astigarraga <sup>32</sup>, P. Pralavorio <sup>88</sup>, A. Pranko <sup>16</sup>, S. Prell <sup>67</sup>, D. Price <sup>87</sup>, M. Primavera <sup>76a</sup>, S. Prince <sup>90</sup>, N. Proklova <sup>100</sup>, K. Prokofiev <sup>62c</sup>, F. Prokoshin <sup>34b</sup>, S. Protopopescu <sup>27</sup>, J. Proudfoot <sup>6</sup>, M. Przybycien <sup>41a</sup>, A. Puri <sup>169</sup>, P. Puzo <sup>119</sup>, J. Qian <sup>92</sup>, G. Qin <sup>56</sup>, Y. Qin <sup>87</sup>, A. Quadt <sup>57</sup>, M. Queitsch-Maitland <sup>45</sup>, D. Quilty <sup>56</sup>, S. Raddum <sup>121</sup>, V. Radeka <sup>27</sup>, V. Radescu <sup>122</sup>, S.K. Radhakrishnan <sup>150</sup>, P. Radloff <sup>118</sup>, P. Rados <sup>91</sup>, F. Ragusa <sup>94a,94b</sup>, G. Rahal <sup>181</sup>, J.A. Raine <sup>87</sup>, S. Rajagopalan <sup>27</sup>, C. Rangel-Smith <sup>168</sup>, T. Rashid <sup>119</sup>, S. Raspopov <sup>5</sup>, M.G. Ratti <sup>94a,94b</sup>, D.M. Rauch <sup>45</sup>, F. Rauscher <sup>102</sup>, S. Rave <sup>86</sup>, I. Ravinovich <sup>175</sup>, J.H. Rawling <sup>87</sup>, M. Raymond <sup>32</sup>, A.L. Read <sup>121</sup>, N.P. Readoff <sup>58</sup>, M. Reale <sup>76a,76b</sup>, D.M. Rebuzzi <sup>123a,123b</sup>, A. Redelbach <sup>177</sup>, G. Redlinger <sup>27</sup>, R. Reece <sup>139</sup>, R.G. Reed <sup>147c</sup>, K. Reeves <sup>44</sup>, L. Rehnisch <sup>17</sup>, J. Reichert <sup>124</sup>, A. Reiss <sup>86</sup>, C. Rembser <sup>32</sup>, H. Ren <sup>35a,35d</sup>, M. Rescigno <sup>134a</sup>, S. Resconi <sup>94a</sup>, E.D. Ressegue <sup>124</sup>, S. Rettie <sup>171</sup>, E. Reynolds <sup>19</sup>, O.L. Rezanova <sup>111,c</sup>, P. Reznicek <sup>131</sup>, R. Rezvani <sup>97</sup>, R. Richter <sup>103</sup>, S. Richter <sup>81</sup>, E. Richter-Was <sup>41b</sup>, O. Ricken <sup>23</sup>, M. Ridel <sup>83</sup>, P. Rieck <sup>103</sup>, C.J. Riegel <sup>178</sup>, J. Rieger <sup>57</sup>, O. Rifki <sup>115</sup>, M. Rijssenbeek <sup>150</sup>, A. Rimoldi <sup>123a,123b</sup>, M. Rimoldi <sup>18</sup>, L. Rinaldi <sup>22a</sup>, G. Ripellino <sup>149</sup>, B. Ristić <sup>32</sup>, E. Ritsch <sup>32</sup>, I. Riu <sup>13</sup>, F. Rizatdinova <sup>116</sup>, E. Rizvi <sup>79</sup>, C. Rizzi <sup>13</sup>, R.T. Roberts <sup>87</sup>, S.H. Robertson <sup>90,0</sup>, A. Robichaud-Veronneau <sup>90</sup>, D. Robinson <sup>30</sup>, J.E.M. Robinson <sup>45</sup>, A. Robson <sup>56</sup>, E. Rocco <sup>86</sup>, C. Roda <sup>126a,126b</sup>, Y. Rodina <sup>88,al</sup>, S. Rodriguez Bosca <sup>170</sup>, A. Rodriguez Perez <sup>13</sup>, D. Rodriguez Rodriguez <sup>170</sup>, S. Roe <sup>32</sup>, C.S. Rogan <sup>59</sup>, O. Røhne <sup>121</sup>, J. Roloff <sup>59</sup>, A. Romanikou <sup>100</sup>, M. Romano <sup>22a,22b</sup>, S.M. Romano Saez <sup>37</sup>, E. Romero Adam <sup>170</sup>, N. Rompotis <sup>77</sup>, M. Ronzani <sup>51</sup>, L. Roos <sup>83</sup>, S. Rosati <sup>134a</sup>, K. Rosbach <sup>51</sup>, P. Rose <sup>139</sup>, N.-A. Rosien <sup>57</sup>, E. Rossi <sup>106a,106b</sup>, L.P. Rossi <sup>53a</sup>, J.H.N. Rosten <sup>30</sup>, R. Rosten <sup>140</sup>, M. Rotaru <sup>28b</sup>, J. Rothberg <sup>140</sup>, D. Rousseau <sup>119</sup>, A. Rozanov <sup>88</sup>, Y. Rozen <sup>154</sup>, X. Ruan <sup>147c</sup>, F. Rubbo <sup>145</sup>, E.M. Ruettiger <sup>45</sup>, F. Rühr <sup>51</sup>, A. Ruiz-Martinez <sup>31</sup>, Z. Rurikova <sup>51</sup>, N.A. Rusakovich <sup>68</sup>, H.L. Russell <sup>90</sup>, J.P. Rutherford <sup>7</sup>, N. Ruthmann <sup>32</sup>, Y.F. Ryabov <sup>125</sup>, M. Rybar <sup>169</sup>, G. Rybkin <sup>119</sup>, S. Ryu <sup>6</sup>, A. Ryzhov <sup>132</sup>, G.F. Rzehorz <sup>57</sup>, A.F. Saavedra <sup>152</sup>, G. Sabato <sup>109</sup>, S. Sacerdoti <sup>29</sup>, H.F-W. Sadrozinski <sup>139</sup>, R. Sadykov <sup>68</sup>, F. Safai Tehrani <sup>134a</sup>, P. Saha <sup>110</sup>, M. Sahinsoy <sup>60a</sup>, M. Saimpert <sup>45</sup>, M. Saito <sup>157</sup>, T. Saito <sup>157</sup>, H. Sakamoto <sup>157</sup>, Y. Sakurai <sup>174</sup>, G. Salamanna <sup>136a,136b</sup>, J.E. Salazar Loyola <sup>34b</sup>, D. Salek <sup>109</sup>, P.H. Sales De Bruin <sup>168</sup>, D. Salihagic <sup>103</sup>, A. Salnikov <sup>145</sup>, J. Salt <sup>170</sup>, D. Salvatore <sup>40a,40b</sup>, F. Salvatore <sup>151</sup>, A. Salvucci <sup>62a,62b,62c</sup>, A. Salzburger <sup>32</sup>, D. Sammel <sup>51</sup>, D. Sampsonidis <sup>156</sup>, D. Sampsonidou <sup>156</sup>, J. Sánchez <sup>170</sup>, V. Sanchez Martinez <sup>170</sup>, A. Sanchez Pineda <sup>167a,167c</sup>, H. Sandaker <sup>121</sup>, R.L. Sandbach <sup>79</sup>, C.O. Sander <sup>45</sup>, M. Sandhoff <sup>178</sup>, C. Sandoval <sup>21</sup>, D.P.C. Sankey <sup>133</sup>, M. Sannino <sup>53a,53b</sup>, Y. Sano <sup>105</sup>, A. Sansoni <sup>50</sup>, C. Santoni <sup>37</sup>, H. Santos <sup>128a</sup>, I. Santoyo Castillo <sup>151</sup>, A. Sapronov <sup>68</sup>, J.G. Saraiva <sup>128a,128d</sup>, B. Sarrazin <sup>23</sup>, O. Sasaki <sup>69</sup>, K. Sato <sup>164</sup>, E. Sauvan <sup>5</sup>, G. Savage <sup>80</sup>, P. Savard <sup>161,d</sup>, N. Savic <sup>103</sup>, C. Sawyer <sup>133</sup>,

- L. Sawyer 82,<sup>u</sup>, J. Saxon 33, C. Sbarra 22a, A. Sbrizzi 22a,22b, T. Scanlon 81, D.A. Scannicchio 166,  
 J. Schaarschmidt 140, P. Schacht 103, B.M. Schachtner 102, D. Schaefer 33, L. Schaefer 124, R. Schaefer 45,  
 J. Schaeffer 86, S. Schaepe 32, S. Schaetzl 60b, U. Schäfer 86, A.C. Schaffer 119, D. Schaile 102,  
 R.D. Schamberger 150, V.A. Schegelsky 125, D. Scheirich 131, M. Schernau 166, C. Schiavi 53a,53b, S. Schier 139,  
 L.K. Schildgen 23, C. Schillo 51, M. Schioppa 40a,40b, S. Schlenker 32, K.R. Schmidt-Sommerfeld 103,  
 K. Schmieden 32, C. Schmitt 45, S. Schmitz 86, U. Schnoor 51, L. Schoeffel 138,  
 A. Schoening 60b, B.D. Schoenrock 93, E. Schopf 23, M. Schott 86, J.F.P. Schouwenberg 108, J. Schovancova 32,  
 S. Schramm 52, N. Schuh 86, A. Schulte 86, M.J. Schultens 23, H.-C. Schultz-Coulon 60a, H. Schulz 17,  
 M. Schumacher 51, B.A. Schumm 139, Ph. Schune 138, A. Schwartzman 145, T.A. Schwarz 92, H. Schweiger 87,  
 Ph. Schwemling 138, R. Schwienhorst 93, J. Schwindling 138, A. Sciandra 23, G. Sciolla 25,  
 M. Scornajenghi 40a,40b, F. Scuri 126a,126b, F. Scutti 91, J. Searcy 92, P. Seema 23, S.C. Seidel 107, A. Seiden 139,  
 J.M. Seixas 26a, G. Sekhniaidze 106a, K. Sekhon 92, S.J. Sekula 43, N. Semprini-Cesari 22a,22b, S. Senkin 37,  
 C. Serfon 121, L. Serin 119, L. Serkin 167a,167b, M. Sessa 136a,136b, R. Seuster 172, H. Severini 115, T. Sfiligoj 78,  
 F. Sforza 165, A. Sfyrla 52, E. Shabalina 57, N.W. Shaikh 148a,148b, L.Y. Shan 35a, R. Shang 169, J.T. Shank 24,  
 M. Shapiro 16, P.B. Shatalov 99, K. Shaw 167a,167b, S.M. Shaw 87, A. Shcherbakova 148a,148b, C.Y. Shehu 151,  
 Y. Shen 115, N. Sherafati 31, A.D. Sherman 24, P. Sherwood 81, L. Shi 153,am, S. Shimizu 70, C.O. Shimmin 179,  
 M. Shimojima 104, I.P.J. Shipsey 122, S. Shirabe 73, M. Shiyakova 68,an, J. Shlomi 175, A. Shmeleva 98,  
 D. Shoaleh Saadi 97, M.J. Shochet 33, S. Shojaii 94a,94b, D.R. Shope 115, S. Shrestha 113, E. Shulga 100,  
 M.A. Shupe 7, P. Sicho 129, A.M. Sickles 169, P.E. Sidebo 149, E. Sideras Haddad 147c, O. Sidiropoulou 177,  
 A. Sidoti 22a,22b, F. Siegert 47, Dj. Sijacki 14, J. Silva 128a,128d, S.B. Silverstein 148a, V. Simak 130, L. Simic 68,  
 S. Simion 119, E. Simioni 86, B. Simmons 81, M. Simon 86, P. Sinervo 161, N.B. Sinev 118, M. Sioli 22a,22b,  
 G. Siragusa 177, I. Siral 92, S.Yu. Sivoklokov 101, J. Sjölin 148a,148b, M.B. Skinner 75, P. Skubic 115, M. Slater 19,  
 T. Slavicek 130, M. Slawinska 42, K. Sliwa 165, R. Slovak 131, V. Smakhtin 175, B.H. Smart 5, J. Smiesko 146a,  
 N. Smirnov 100, S.Yu. Smirnov 100, Y. Smirnov 100, L.N. Smirnova 101,ao, O. Smirnova 84, J.W. Smith 57,  
 M.N.K. Smith 38, R.W. Smith 38, M. Smizanska 75, K. Smolek 130, A.A. Snesarev 98, I.M. Snyder 118,  
 S. Snyder 27, R. Sobie 172,0, F. Socher 47, A. Soffer 155, A. Søgaard 49, D.A. Soh 153, G. Sokhrannyi 78,  
 C.A. Solans Sanchez 32, M. Solar 130, E.Yu. Soldatov 100, U. Soldevila 170, A.A. Solodkov 132,  
 A. Soloshenko 68, O.V. Solovyev 132, V. Solovyev 125, P. Sommer 141, H. Son 165, A. Sopczak 130,  
 D. Sosa 60b, C.L. Sotiropoulou 126a,126b, S. Sottocornola 123a,123b, R. Soualah 167a,167c, A.M. Soukharev 111,c,  
 D. South 45, B.C. Sowden 80, S. Spagnolo 76a,76b, M. Spalla 126a,126b, M. Spangenberg 173, F. Spanò 80,  
 D. Sperlich 17, F. Spettel 103, T.M. Spieker 60a, R. Spighi 22a, G. Spigo 32, L.A. Spiller 91, M. Spousta 131,  
 R.D. St. Denis 56,\* , A. Stabile 94a, R. Stamen 60a, S. Stamm 17, E. Stanecka 42, R.W. Stanek 6, C. Stanescu 136a,  
 M.M. Stanitzki 45, B.S. Stapf 109, S. Stapnes 121, E.A. Starchenko 132, G.H. Stark 33, J. Stark 58, S.H. Stark 39,  
 P. Staroba 129, P. Starovoitov 60a, S. Stärz 32, R. Staszewski 42, M. Stegler 45, P. Steinberg 27, B. Stelzer 144,  
 H.J. Stelzer 32, O. Stelzer-Chilton 163a, H. Stenzel 55, T.J. Stevenson 79, G.A. Stewart 56, M.C. Stockton 118,  
 M. Stoebe 90, G. Stoica 28b, P. Stolte 57, S. Stonjek 103, A.R. Stradling 8, A. Straessner 47, M.E. Stramaglia 18,  
 J. Strandberg 149, S. Strandberg 148a,148b, M. Strauss 115, P. Strizenec 146b, R. Ströhmer 177, D.M. Strom 118,  
 R. Stroynowski 43, A. Strubig 49, S.A. Stucci 27, B. Stugu 15, N.A. Styles 45, D. Su 145, J. Su 127, S. Suchek 60a,  
 Y. Sugaya 120, M. Suk 130, V.V. Sulin 98, DMS Sultan 162a,162b, S. Sultansoy 4c, T. Sumida 71, S. Sun 59,  
 X. Sun 3, K. Suruliz 151, C.J.E. Suster 152, M.R. Sutton 151, S. Suzuki 69, M. Svatos 129, M. Swiatlowski 33,  
 S.P. Swift 2, I. Sykora 146a, T. Sykora 131, D. Ta 51, K. Tackmann 45, J. Taenzer 155, A. Taffard 166,  
 R. Tafirout 163a, E. Tahirovic 79, N. Taiblum 155, H. Takai 27, R. Takashima 72, E.H. Takasugi 103, K. Takeda 70,  
 T. Takeshita 142, Y. Takubo 69, M. Talby 88, A.A. Talyshев 111,c, J. Tanaka 157, M. Tanaka 159, R. Tanaka 119,  
 S. Tanaka 69, R. Tanioka 70, B.B. Tannenwald 113, S. Tapia Araya 34b, S. Tapprogge 86, S. Tarem 154,  
 G.F. Tartarelli 94a, P. Tas 131, M. Tasevsky 129, T. Tashiro 71, E. Tassi 40a,40b, A. Tavares Delgado 128a,128b,  
 Y. Tayalati 137e, A.C. Taylor 107, A.J. Taylor 49, G.N. Taylor 91, P.T.E. Taylor 91, W. Taylor 163b,  
 P. Teixeira-Dias 80, D. Temple 144, H. Ten Kate 32, P.K. Teng 153, J.J. Teoh 120, F. Tepel 178, S. Terada 69,  
 K. Terashi 157, J. Terron 85, S. Terzo 13, M. Testa 50, R.J. Teuscher 161,0, S.J. Thais 179, T. Theveneaux-Pelzer 88,  
 F. Thiele 39, J.P. Thomas 19, J. Thomas-Wilske 80, P.D. Thompson 19, A.S. Thompson 56, L.A. Thomsen 179,  
 E. Thomson 124, Y. Tian 38, M.J. Tibbetts 16, R.E. Ticse Torres 57, V.O. Tikhomirov 98,ap, Yu.A. Tikhonov 111,c,  
 S. Timoshenko 100, P. Tipton 179, S. Tisserant 88, K. Todome 159, S. Todorova-Nova 5, S. Todt 47, J. Tojo 73,  
 S. Tokár 146a, K. Tokushuku 69, E. Tolley 113, L. Tomlinson 87, M. Tomoto 105, L. Tompkins 145,aq, K. Toms 107,

- B. Tong <sup>59</sup>, P. Tornambe <sup>51</sup>, E. Torrence <sup>118</sup>, H. Torres <sup>47</sup>, E. Torró Pastor <sup>140</sup>, J. Toth <sup>88,ar</sup>, F. Touchard <sup>88</sup>, D.R. Tovey <sup>141</sup>, C.J. Treado <sup>112</sup>, T. Trefzger <sup>177</sup>, F. Tresoldi <sup>151</sup>, A. Tricoli <sup>27</sup>, I.M. Trigger <sup>163a</sup>, S. Trincaz-Duvold <sup>83</sup>, M.F. Tripiana <sup>13</sup>, W. Trischuk <sup>161</sup>, B. Trocmé <sup>58</sup>, A. Trofymov <sup>45</sup>, C. Troncon <sup>94a</sup>, M. Trottier-McDonald <sup>16</sup>, M. Trovatelli <sup>172</sup>, L. Truong <sup>147b</sup>, M. Trzebinski <sup>42</sup>, A. Trzupek <sup>42</sup>, K.W. Tsang <sup>62a</sup>, J.C.-L. Tseng <sup>122</sup>, P.V. Tsiareshka <sup>95</sup>, N. Tsirintanis <sup>9</sup>, S. Tsiskaridze <sup>13</sup>, V. Tsiskaridze <sup>51</sup>, E.G. Tskhadadze <sup>54a</sup>, I.I. Tsukerman <sup>99</sup>, V. Tsulaia <sup>16</sup>, S. Tsuno <sup>69</sup>, D. Tsybychev <sup>150</sup>, Y. Tu <sup>62b</sup>, A. Tudorache <sup>28b</sup>, V. Tudorache <sup>28b</sup>, T.T. Tulbure <sup>28a</sup>, A.N. Tuna <sup>59</sup>, S. Turchikhin <sup>68</sup>, D. Turgeman <sup>175</sup>, I. Turk Cakir <sup>4b,as</sup>, R. Turra <sup>94a</sup>, P.M. Tuts <sup>38</sup>, G. Ucchielli <sup>22a,22b</sup>, I. Ueda <sup>69</sup>, M. Ughetto <sup>148a,148b</sup>, F. Ukegawa <sup>164</sup>, G. Unal <sup>32</sup>, A. Undrus <sup>27</sup>, G. Unel <sup>166</sup>, F.C. Ungaro <sup>91</sup>, Y. Unno <sup>69</sup>, K. Uno <sup>157</sup>, C. Unverdorben <sup>102</sup>, J. Urban <sup>146b</sup>, P. Urquijo <sup>91</sup>, P. Urrejola <sup>86</sup>, G. Usai <sup>8</sup>, J. Usui <sup>69</sup>, L. Vacavant <sup>88</sup>, V. Vacek <sup>130</sup>, B. Vachon <sup>90</sup>, K.O.H. Vadla <sup>121</sup>, A. Vaidya <sup>81</sup>, C. Valderanis <sup>102</sup>, E. Valdes Santurio <sup>148a,148b</sup>, M. Valente <sup>52</sup>, S. Valentini <sup>22a,22b</sup>, A. Valero <sup>170</sup>, L. Valéry <sup>13</sup>, S. Valkar <sup>131</sup>, A. Vallier <sup>5</sup>, J.A. Valls Ferrer <sup>170</sup>, W. Van Den Wollenberg <sup>109</sup>, H. van der Graaf <sup>109</sup>, P. van Gemmeren <sup>6</sup>, J. Van Nieuwkoop <sup>144</sup>, I. van Vulpen <sup>109</sup>, M.C. van Woerden <sup>109</sup>, M. Vanadia <sup>135a,135b</sup>, W. Vandelli <sup>32</sup>, A. Vaniachine <sup>160</sup>, P. Vankov <sup>109</sup>, G. Vardanyan <sup>180</sup>, R. Vari <sup>134a</sup>, E.W. Varnes <sup>7</sup>, C. Varni <sup>53a,53b</sup>, T. Varol <sup>43</sup>, D. Varouchas <sup>119</sup>, A. Vartapetian <sup>8</sup>, K.E. Varvell <sup>152</sup>, J.G. Vasquez <sup>179</sup>, G.A. Vasquez <sup>34b</sup>, F. Vazeille <sup>37</sup>, D. Vazquez Furelos <sup>13</sup>, T. Vazquez Schroeder <sup>90</sup>, J. Veatch <sup>57</sup>, V. Veeraraghavan <sup>7</sup>, L.M. Veloce <sup>161</sup>, F. Veloso <sup>128a,128c</sup>, S. Veneziano <sup>134a</sup>, A. Ventura <sup>76a,76b</sup>, M. Venturi <sup>172</sup>, N. Venturi <sup>32</sup>, A. Venturini <sup>25</sup>, V. Vercesi <sup>123a</sup>, M. Verducci <sup>136a,136b</sup>, W. Verkerke <sup>109</sup>, A.T. Vermeulen <sup>109</sup>, J.C. Vermeulen <sup>109</sup>, M.C. Vetterli <sup>144,d</sup>, N. Viaux Maira <sup>34b</sup>, O. Viazlo <sup>84</sup>, I. Vichou <sup>169,\*</sup>, T. Vickey <sup>141</sup>, O.E. Vickey Boeriu <sup>141</sup>, G.H.A. Viehhauser <sup>122</sup>, S. Viel <sup>16</sup>, L. Vigani <sup>122</sup>, M. Villa <sup>22a,22b</sup>, M. Villaplana Perez <sup>94a,94b</sup>, E. Vilucchi <sup>50</sup>, M.G. Vinchter <sup>31</sup>, V.B. Vinogradov <sup>68</sup>, A. Vishwakarma <sup>45</sup>, C. Vittori <sup>22a,22b</sup>, I. Vivarelli <sup>151</sup>, S. Vlachos <sup>10</sup>, M. Vogel <sup>178</sup>, P. Vokac <sup>130</sup>, G. Volpi <sup>13</sup>, H. von der Schmitt <sup>103</sup>, E. von Toerne <sup>23</sup>, V. Vorobel <sup>131</sup>, K. Vorobev <sup>100</sup>, M. Vos <sup>170</sup>, R. 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