Search for flavor-changing neutral currents in top-quark decays $t \to Zq$ in $pp$ collisions at $\sqrt{s}=8$ TeV

CMS Collaboration; Chatrchyan, S; Khachatryan, V; Sirunyan, A M; et al; Chiochia, V; Kilminster, B; Robmann, P

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The CMS Collaboration

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The heaviest known elementary particle, the top quark, decays to a bottom quark and a W boson, \( t \rightarrow Wb \), with a branching fraction of nearly 100% \([1]\). The corresponding decay to a Z boson and a light up-type quark (u or c), \( t \rightarrow Zq \), is highly suppressed by the GIM mechanism \([2]\). In the standard model (SM), this flavor-changing neutral current (FCNC) decay occurs only at the level of quantum loop corrections, and the predicted branching fraction \( B(t \rightarrow Zq) \) is \( O(10^{-14}) \) \([3]\). The detection of \( t \rightarrow Zq \) decays at a higher-than-expected rate would thus be clear evidence for physics beyond the SM. Some extensions of SM predict enhancements of the branching fraction that could be as large as \( O(10^{-4}) \) \([4, 5]\). These values, which cannot be excluded by indirect constraints from meson physics \([6]\), are within the reach of experiments at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC).

In a previous search with the Compact Muon Solenoid (CMS) experiment, we reported results from a search for this decay using 5.0 fb\(^{-1}\) of proton-proton collisions at a center-of-mass energy of 7 TeV, resulting in a 95% confidence level (CL) upper limit on \( B(t \rightarrow Zq) \) of 0.21% \([7]\). A limit of 0.73% \([8]\) on the branching fraction has also been reported by the ATLAS experiment from an analysis of 2.1 fb\(^{-1}\) of 7 TeV data. The analysis described in this letter uses a data sample corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 19.7 fb\(^{-1}\) of pp collisions at \( \sqrt{s} = 8 \) TeV. With the larger integrated luminosity, and the increased \( \ell \ell \) production cross section at the higher energy, the current analysis represents a significant improvement in the sensitivity of the search for FCNC processes.

The central feature of the CMS apparatus is a superconducting solenoid, which provides an axial magnetic field of 3.8 T. Within the field volume there are a silicon pixel and strip tracker, a lead tungstate crystal electromagnetic calorimeter, and a brass/scintillator hadron calorimeter. Charged-particle trajectories are measured by the tracker, covering \( 0 \leq \phi \leq 2\pi \) in azimuth and \(|\eta| < 2.5 \) in pseudorapidity, where \( \eta \) is defined as \(-\ln|\tan(\theta/2)|\) and \( \theta \) is the polar angle of the trajectory of the particle with respect to the counterclockwise proton beam direction. Muons are identified and measured in gas-ionization detectors embedded in the steel flux return yoke outside the solenoid. A more detailed description of the CMS detector can be found in Ref. \([9]\).

Monte Carlo (MC) samples of Drell–Yan events, SM \( \ell \ell \), \( W\ell \), \( Z\ell \), and diboson (WW, WZ, and ZZ) events are simulated using \textsc{MADGRAPH} \([10]\), while single-top-quark events are generated using \textsc{POWHEG} \([11–13]\). The signal sample \( pp \rightarrow \ell \ell q + Wb \rightarrow \ell^+\ell^-q + l^{\pm}v + \ell' b \) (\( \ell, \ell' = e, \mu, \tau \)) is generated with \textsc{MADGRAPH}. One of the top quarks of the pair is forced to decay as \( t \rightarrow Zq \), where \( q \) stands for a u or c quark with equal probability, while the other decays to Wb. The ratio between the dimension-4 vector and the axial-vector couplings of the \( t \rightarrow Zq \) FCNC model is assumed to be SM-like \([14]\). In all cases, hadronization and showering are simulated with \textsc{PYTHIA} 6 \([15]\), while \( \tau \) decays are simulated with \textsc{TAUOLA} \([16]\). The set of parton distribution functions (PDFs) used is CTEQ6L \([17]\). The CMS detector response for all MC samples is simulated using a \textsc{GEANT4}-based \([18]\) model, and the events are reconstructed and analyzed using the same software used to process collision data. The simulated events are weighted so that the trigger efficiencies, reconstruction efficiencies, and the distribution of reconstructed vertices observed in data are reproduced.

The search is performed by looking for \( \ell \ell \) events where one top quark decays into Zq and the other decays into Wb with both vector bosons decaying leptonically, which provide a very clear signature. The analysis follows closely the search performed at 7 TeV \([7]\). Several of the event selection requirements have been re-optimized before the complete dataset was collected, based on the expected signal and background yields at 8 TeV with \( B(t \rightarrow Zq) = 0.1\% \).

Events are required to pass at least one of the ee or \( \mu\mu \) high transverse momenta (\( p_T \)) dilepton triggers. Events with two opposite-sign, same-flavor, isolated leptons (e or \( \mu \)) having an
invariant mass between 78 GeV and 102 GeV, consistent with a Z-boson decay, and one extra charged lepton (e or µ) are selected. When there is more than one lepton pair forming a Z candidate, the pair with invariant mass closest to the nominal value is taken. All three leptons must satisfy the following kinematic requirements: \( p_T > 20 \text{ GeV} \) and \(|\eta| < 2.5\) for electrons and \(|\eta| < 2.4\) for muons. The lepton selection efficiencies (reconstruction, identification, and isolation) mean values and their dependence with \( p_T \) and \(|\eta|\) are consistent between the data and the simulation [19, 20].

Multiple simultaneous interactions per bunch crossing (pileup) were observed in data. Events are required to have at least one good primary vertex candidate. In events with more than one candidate, the vertex with highest \( \Sigma p_T^2 \) of its associated tracks is selected. The leptons and all charged particle tracks that are associated with jets are required to be consistent with originating from the primary vertex.

Since the leptons are expected to originate from the decays of W and Z bosons, they are required to be isolated as defined in Ref. [21]. Events with a fourth isolated lepton are rejected. Neutrinos from W-boson decays escape detection and produce a significant momentum imbalance in the detector in the plane transverse to the beams. The missing transverse momentum \((-\Sigma \vec{p}_T)\) and its magnitude \(E_T^\text{miss}\) are reconstructed using the CMS particle-flow technique [22], and we require the \(E_T\) to be larger than 30 GeV. The W-boson candidates are constructed from the momentum of the extra lepton and the missing transverse momentum (assumed to originate from an undetected neutrino), by constraining the resulting invariant mass to be equal to the W-boson mass [23].

The requirements described above, namely events with dilepton-triggers, a Z boson candidate, an extra lepton, no fourth lepton, and the requirement of \(E_T^\text{miss}\), will be referred to as the “basic event selection”. The observed number of events after the basic event selection is 1424, dominated by WZ and ZZ diboson production, in agreement with the MC expectation of 1455 ± 16 events, where the uncertainty quoted is only statistical.

Figure 1 shows the distributions for data and simulated events of the \(E_T^\text{miss}\) and transverse mass \((m_T)\) of the W-boson candidate after the basic event selection. The transverse mass is calculated using the transverse momentum of the extra lepton \(p_T^{\ell}\), the \(E_T^\text{miss}\), and the azimuthal angle difference \((\Delta \phi)\) between the two, as \(m_T = \sqrt{2p_T^{\ell}E_T^\text{miss}(1-\cos(\Delta \phi))}\).

To reduce the background from diboson events we require at least two jets, reconstructed also using a particle-flow technique [22], each with \( p_T > 30 \text{ GeV} \) and \(|\eta| < 2.4\). Exactly one of these jets should be identified (tagged) as a b-quark jet. These requirements further reduce the observed event yields from 1424 after the basic event selection to 29. The b-jet identification is performed using the combined secondary vertex b-tagging algorithm described in Ref. [24]. This tagging method has an identification efficiency of 62% for b jets with transverse momentum between 30 GeV and 100 GeV and a misidentification rate below 1.5%.

The invariant mass of the W boson and b-tagged jet, \(m_{Wb}\), is required to be within 35 GeV of the top-quark mass, which is set to 172.5 GeV in the simulation. A non-b jet is combined with the Z candidate to form a second top-quark candidate. By examining all possible pairings, the top-quark candidate which has the largest separation in azimuthal angle to the first top quark is selected, and the reconstructed top-quark mass, \(m_{Zj}\), is required to be within 25 GeV of the assumed value of 172.5 GeV. The mass requirements are the same as in the 7 TeV analysis [7]. Figure 2 shows the comparison of the \(m_{Zj}\) and \(m_{Wb}\) distributions in data and simulation, while Table I summarizes the signal efficiencies determined from simulated events.

According to simulations, the dominant backgrounds arise from diboson and \(t\bar{t} + X\) production.
Table 1: Signal selection efficiency, in percent, for each dilepton channels with respect to events from all channels. The efficiency is calculated as the fraction of events with leptonically (e, µ, τ) decaying W and Z bosons passing the selection. Only statistical uncertainties are shown.

| Channel | Efficiencies [%] |
|---------|------------------|
| eee     | 0.49 ± 0.01      |
| eeµ     | 0.52 ± 0.01      |
| µµe     | 0.55 ± 0.01      |
| µµµ     | 0.55 ± 0.01      |
| All     | 2.12 ± 0.03      |

These processes can be categorized into three groups based on the number of b quarks present: (a) diboson and Drell–Yan events with nearly no b quarks; (b) events from top-quark FCNC decay with only one b quark; (c) t£, tbZ, t£W, and t£Z processes with at least two b quarks. Events passing the basic event selection, with two jets to be paired with W and Z bosons are divided into three samples: (a) events with no b-tagged jets; (b) events with exactly one b-tagged jet; and (c) the rest of the events. The numbers of events in those three samples can be related to the yields of the three groups based on the b-tagging efficiencies for b jets, c jets, or light jets, which are measured using data. The numbers of events in the three groups are then turned into an estimate of the corresponding yields via a linear 3 × 3 system of equations to be solved before the top-quark mass requirements. The corresponding acceptances of the mass requirements are obtained from MC. The overall contribution from WZ plus ZZ and Drell–Yan backgrounds is estimated to be 1.4 ± 0.1 (stat.) ± 0.3 (syst.) events. The expected yield from t£W, t£Z, tbZ, and t£ backgrounds is 1.7 ± 0.8 (stat.) ± 0.4 (syst.) events. The uncertainty of the b-tagging efficiency, measured in control data samples, and the uncertainty on the top-quark mass requirement, estimated with MC simulation, contribute to the systematic uncertainty. The estimated background yields are summarized in Table 2 and show a good agreement with those obtained from MC simulation. The background estimations from data are used for the final results.
Figure 2: Comparison between data and simulated events of the $m_{Zj}$ (left), $m_{Wb}$ (middle), and 2D scatter (right) distributions after the event selection prior to the top-quark mass requirements, which are shown as the dotted vertical lines (left, middle) and box (right). The data, corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 19.7 fb$^{-1}$, are represented by the points with error bars and the open histogram is the expected signal assuming $B(t \rightarrow Zq) = 0.1\%$. The stacked solid histograms represent the dominant backgrounds. The statistical uncertainties are not drawn. The last bin in each of the left two plots contains all the overflow events.

Table 2: Expected number of signal $t \rightarrow Zq$ events, background composition, and observed events corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 19.7 fb$^{-1}$ for all dilepton channels; background estimates included. The uncertainties in the background estimation include the statistical and systematic components shown separately, in that order.

| Process        | Estimation from data | MC prediction |
|----------------|----------------------|---------------|
| $t \rightarrow Zq$ ($B = 0.1\%$) | 6.4 ± 0.1 ± 1.3 | |
| WZ             | 0.9 ± 0.1 ± 0.3     |               |
| ZZ             | 1.4 ± 0.1 ± 0.3     | < 0.1         |
| Drell–Yan      | < 0.1               | < 0.1         |
| $t\bar{t}$     | 0.7^{+1.1}_{-0.4} ± 1.2 |               |
| $t\bar{t}Z$    | 1.7 ± 0.8 ± 0.4     | 1.1 ± 0.1 ± 0.8 |
| $t\bar{t}W$    | 0.1 ± 0.1 ± 0.1     |               |
| $tbZ$          | 0.3 ± 0.1 ± 0.2     |               |
| Total background | 3.1 ± 0.8 ± 0.8   | 3.2 ± 1.2 ± 1.5 |
| Observed events | 1                   | —             |

To calculate the expected upper limits, the systematic uncertainties from the dilepton trigger efficiency, lepton selection efficiency [19], pileup modeling [25], b-jet tagging efficiency [24], jet energy scale and missing transverse energy resolution [26] are included, with the b-jet tagging efficiency being the dominant one. Additionally, several sources of uncertainties in the signal yield are evaluated: the choice of PDFs, generator parameters, and uncertainty in the $t\bar{t}$ cross section. The major contributions come from the PDFs and the generator parameters of the signal MC simulation. The prescription given in Ref. [27] is used to determine the uncertainty from the CTEQ66 PDF error sets [28]. The uncertainty from the generator parametrization is evaluated using CMS fast simulation [29] samples with different top-quark mass assumptions ($\pm 2$ GeV), different parton-jet matching thresholds (30 GeV and 60 GeV), and different event renormalization and factorization scales (varied between 1/4 and 4 $\times$ from their nominal value). In addition, there is a 2.6% uncertainty on the luminosity measurement [30]. All these
sources, summarized in Table 3, are combined in quadrature to give a 20% relative uncertainty in the signal selection acceptance. The systematic uncertainties in the background estimation are listed with the total background prediction given in Table 2.

Table 3: Summary of the systematic uncertainties for the signal selection acceptance. An additional 2.6% uncertainty is due to the luminosity measurement.

| Source                        | Uncertainty % |
|-------------------------------|---------------|
| Renormalization/factorization scales | 12            |
| Parton distribution functions  | 7             |
| t̄t cross section              | 7             |
| Parton matching threshold      | 6             |
| Lepton selection              | 6             |
| Trigger efficiency             | 5             |
| b-tagging                     | 5             |
| Top-quark mass                 | 4             |
| Jet energy scale               | 4             |
| Missing transverse energy resolution | 3        |
| Pileup modeling                | 3             |
| Total                         | 20            |

After applying all the criteria and adding all four channels, 3.1 ± 1.1 events are expected from SM background processes and 1 event is observed in data. A 95% confidence level (CL) upper limit on the branching fraction of the t → Zq decay is determined using the modified frequentist approach (CLs method [31, 32]). A summary of the observed and predicted yields and limits are presented in Tables 2 and 4. The observed and expected 95% CL upper limits on the branching fraction B(t → Zq) are 0.06% and 0.10%, respectively.

These results are combined with the statistically-independent results of our previous search [7]. The systematic uncertainties on the signal efficiency estimation and the luminosity measurements are taken as fully correlated. Since the background estimations are based on independent samples, their systematic uncertainties are treated as uncorrelated, except for the uncertainties on the top mass selection requirement due to the choice of PDF, which are also taken as fully correlated. The combination with the 7 TeV b-tag analysis [7] gives a slightly lower expected limit and hence is chosen as the reference result. The observed upper limit on B(t → Zq) is 0.05%, with a median expectation of 0.09%, and with 1σ and 2σ ranges which are 0.06–0.13% and 0.05–0.18%, respectively. The derived limits and their uncertainties are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Upper limits at a 95% CL for B(t → Zq), as obtained using the 8 TeV data with an integrated luminosity of 19.7 fb⁻¹, and from the combination with previous CMS 7 TeV (5.0 fb⁻¹) data.

| B(t → Zq)                      | 8 TeV | 7 TeV + 8 TeV |
|-------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Expected upper limit          | <0.10%| <0.09%        |
| Observed upper limit          | <0.06%| <0.05%        |
| 1σ boundary                   | 0.06–0.13% | 0.06–0.13% |
| 2σ boundary                   | 0.05–0.20% | 0.05–0.18% |

In summary, a search for FCNC events in top-quark decays in t̄t events produced in proton-proton collisions at √s = 8 TeV is presented. A sample of events with three leptons (e or μ) in
the final state and compatible with leptonic decays of a Z and W boson is selected from data recorded with the CMS detector and corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 19.7 fb$^{-1}$. No excess of events above the background is observed. Combining this result with a previous search corresponding to an integrated luminosity of 5.0 fb$^{-1}$ at $\sqrt{s} = 7$ TeV, excludes a $t \rightarrow Zq$ branching fraction greater than 0.05% at a confidence level of 95%. This limit is about four times lower than the previous one and is approaching the enhanced FCNC branching fraction predicted by certain SM extensions to be as large as $O(10^{-4})$.

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1 The CMS Collaboration

Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan, Armenia
S. Chatrchyan, V. Khachatryan, A.M. Sirunyan, A. Tumasyan

Institut für Hochenergiephysik der OeAW, Wien, Austria
W. Adam, T. Bergauer, M. Dragicicvic, J. Erö, C. Fabjan, M. Friedl, R. Frühwirth, V.M. Ghete, C. Hartl, N. Hörmann, J. Hrubec, M. Jeitler, W. Kiesenhofer, V. Knünz, M. Krammer, I. Krätschmer, D. Liko, I. Mikulec, D. Rabady, B. Rahbaran, H. Rohringer, R. Schöfbeck, J. Strauss, A. Taurok, W. Treberer-Treberspurg, W. Waltenberger, C.-E. Wulz

National Centre for Particle and High Energy Physics, Minsk, Belarus
V. Mossolov, N. Shumeiko, J. Suarez Gonzalez

Universiteit Antwerpen, Antwerpen, Belgium
S. Alderweireldt, M. Bansal, S. Bansal, T. Cornelis, E.A. De Wolf, X. Janssen, A. Knutsson, S. Luyckx, L. Micibello, S. Ochesanu, B. Roland, R. Rougny, H. Van Haevermaet, P. Van Mechelen, N. Van Remortel, A. Van Spilbeeck

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium
F. Blekman, S. Blyweert, J. D’Hondt, N. Heracleous, A. Kalogeropoulos, J. Keaveney, T.J. Kim, S. Lowette, M. Maes, A. Olibrechts, D. Strom, S. Tavernier, W. Van Doninck, P. Van Mulders, G.P. Van Onsem, I. Villella

Université Libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium
C. Caillol, B. Clerbaux, G. De Lentdecker, L. Favart, A.P.R. Gay, T. Hreus, A. Léonard, P.E. Marage, A. Mohammadi, L. Perniè, T. Reis, T. Seva, L. Thomas, C. Vander Velde, F. Vanlaer, J. Wang

Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
V. Adler, K. Beernaert, L. Benucci, A. Cimmino, S. Costantini, S. Dildick, G. Garcia, B. Klein, J. Lellouch, J. Mccartin, A.A. Ocampo Rios, D. Ryckbosch, M. Sigamani, N. Strobbe, F. Thyssen, M. Tytgat, S. Walsh, E. Yazgan, N. Zaganidis

Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
S. Basegmez, C. Beluffi, G. Bruno, R. Castello, A. Caudron, L. Cear, G.G. Da Silveira, C. Delaere, T. du Pree, D. Favart, L. Forthomme, A. Giammanco, J. Hollar, P. Jez, M. Komm, V. Lemaitre, J. Liao, O. Militaru, C. Nuttens, D. Pagano, A. Pin, K. Piotrzkowski, A. Popov, L. Quertenmont, M. Selvaggi, M. Vidal Marono, J.M. Vizan Garcia

Université de Mons, Mons, Belgium
N. Beliy, T. Caeberts, E. Daubie, G.H. Hammad

Centro Brasileiro de Pesquisas Fisicas, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
G.A. Alves, M. Correa Martins Junior, T. Martins, M.E. Pol, M.H.G. Souza

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
W.L. Aldá Júnior, W. Carvalho, J. Chinellato, A. Custódio, E.M. Da Costa, D. De Jesus Damiao, C. De Oliveira Martins, S. Fonseca De Souza, H. Malbouisson, M. Malek, D. Matos Figueiredo, L. Mundim, H. Nogima, W.L. Prado Da Silva, J. Santaolalla, A. Santoro, A. Sznajder, E.J. Tonelli Manganote, A. Vilela Pereira

Universidade Estadual Paulista a, Universidade Federal do ABC b, São Paulo, Brazil
C.A. Bernardes, F.A. Dias, T.R. Fernandez Perez Tomei, E.M. Gregores, C. Lagana, P.G. Mercadante, S.F. Novaes, Sandra S. Padula
The CMS Collaboration

Institute for Nuclear Research and Nuclear Energy, Sofia, Bulgaria
V. Genchev², P. Iaydjiev², A. Marinov, S. Piperov, M. Rodozov, G. Sultanov, M. Vutova

University of Sofia, Sofia, Bulgaria
A. Dimitrov, R. Hadjiiska, L. Litov, B. Pavlov, P. Petkov

Institute of High Energy Physics, Beijing, China
J.G. Bian, G.M. Chen, H.S. Chen, M. Chen, R. Du, C.H. Jiang, D. Liang, S. Liang, X. Meng, R. Plestina², J. Tao, X. Wang, Z. Wang

State Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Technology, Peking University, Beijing, China
C. Asawatangtrakuldee, Y. Ban, Y. Guo, Q. Li, W. Li, S. Liu, Y. Mao, S.J. Qian, D. Wang, L. Zhang, W. Zou

Universidad de Los Andes, Bogota, Colombia
C. Avila, C.A. Carrillo Montoya, L.F. Chaparro Sierra, C. Florez, J.P. Gomez, B. Gomez Moreno, J.C. Sanabria

Technical University of Split, Split, Croatia
N. Godinovic, D. Lelas, D. Polic, I. Puljak

University of Split, Split, Croatia
Z. Antunovic, M. Kovac

Institute Rudjer Boskovic, Zagreb, Croatia
V. Brigljevic, K. Kadija, J. Luetic, D. Mekterovic, S. Morovic, L. Tikvica

University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus
A. Attikis, G. Mavromanolakis, J. Mousa, C. Nicolaou, F. Ptochos, P.A. Razis

Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
M. Finger, M. Finger Jr.

Academy of Scientific Research and Technology of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Egyptian Network of High Energy Physics, Cairo, Egypt
A.A. Abdelalim⁹, Y. Assran¹⁰, S. Elgammal⁹, A. Ellithi Kamel¹¹, M.A. Mahmoud¹², A. Radi¹³,¹⁴

National Institute of Chemical Physics and Biophysics, Tallinn, Estonia
M. Kadastik, M. Müntil, M. Murumaa, M. Raidal, L. Rebane, A. Tiko

Department of Physics, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
P. Eerola, G. Fedi, M. Voutilainen

Helsinki Institute of Physics, Helsinki, Finland
J. Härkönen, V. Karimäki, R. Kinnunen, M.J. Kortelainen, T. Lampén, K. Lassila-Perini, S. Lehti, T. Lindén, P. Luukka, T. Mäenpää, T. Peltola, E. Tuominen, J. Tuominiemi, E. Tuovinen, L. Wendland

Lappeenranta University of Technology, Lappeenranta, Finland
T. Tuuva

DSM/IRFU, CEA/Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette, France
M. Besancon, F. Coudert, M. Dejardin, D. Denegri, B. Fabbro, J.L. Faure, F. Ferri, S. Ganjour, A. Givernaud, P. Gras, G. Hamel de Monchenault, P. Jarry, E. Locci, J. Malcles, A. Nayak, J. Rander, A. Rosowsky, M. Titov
The CMS Collaboration

M.Ö. Sahin, J. Salfeld-Nebgen, R. Schmidt, T. Schoerner-Sadenius, M. Schröder, M. Stein, A.D.R. Vargas Trevino, R. Walsh, C. Wissing

University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany
M. Aldayya Martin, V. Blobel, H. Enderle, J. Erfle, E. Garutti, M. Görner, M. Gosselink, J. Haller, K. Heine, R.S. Höing, H. Kirschenmann, R. Klanner, R. Kogler, J. Lange, I. Marchesini, J. Ott, T. Peiffer, N. Pietsch, D. Rathjens, C. Sander, H. Schettler, P. Schleper, E. Schlieckau, A. Schmidt, M. Seidel, J. Sibille, V. Sola, H. Stadie, G. Steinbrück, D. Troendle, E. Usai, L. Vanelderen

Institut für Experimentelle Kernphysik, Karlsruhe, Germany
C. Barth, C. Baus, J. Berger, C. Böser, E. Butz, T. Chwalek, W. De Boer, A. Descroix, A. Dierlamm, M. Feindt, M. Guthoff, F. Hartmann, T. Hauth, H. Held, K.H. Hoffmann, U. Husemann, I. Katkov, A. Kornmayer, E. Kuznetsova, P. Lobelle Pardo, D. Martschei, M.U. Mozer, Th. Müller, M. Niem, A. Nürnberg, O. Oberst, G. Quast, K. Rabbertz, F. Ratnikov, S. Röcker, F.-P. Schilling, G. Schott, H.J. Simonis, F.M. Stober, R. Ulrich, J. Wagner-Kuhr, S. Wayand, T. Weiler, R. Wolf, M. Zeise

Institute of Nuclear and Particle Physics (INPP), NCSR Demokritos, Aghia Paraskevi, Greece
G. Anagnostou, G. Daskalakis, T. Geralis, S. Kesisoglou, A. Kyriakis, D. Loukas, A. Markou, C. Markou, E. Ntomari, I. Topsis-giotis

University of Athens, Athens, Greece
L. Gouskos, A. Panagiotou, N. Saoulidou, E. Stiliaris

University of Ioánnina, Ioánnina, Greece
X. Aslanoglou, I. Evangelou, G. Flouris, C. Foudas, P. Kokkas, N. Manthos, I. Papadopoulos, E. Paradas

Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest, Hungary
G. Bencze, C. Hajdu, P. Hidas, D. Horváth, F. Sikler, V. Veszpremi, G. Vesztergombi, A.J. Zsigmond

Institute of Nuclear Research ATOMKI, Debrecen, Hungary
N. Beni, S. Czellar, J. Molnar, J. Palinkas, Z. Szillasi

University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary
J. Karancsi, P. Raics, Z.L. Trocsanyi, B. Ujvari

National Institute of Science Education and Research, Bhubaneswar, India
S.K. Swain

Panjab University, Chandigarh, India
S.B. Beri, V. Bhatnagar, N. Dhingra, R. Gupta, M. Kaur, M.Z. Mehta, M. Mittal, N. Nishu, A. Sharma, J.B. Singh

University of Delhi, Delhi, India
Ashok Kumar, Arun Kumar, S. Ahuja, A. Bhardwaj, B.C. Choudhary, A. Kumar, S. Malhotra, M. Naimuddin, K. Ranjan, P. Saxena, V. Sharma, R.K. Shivpuri

Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, Kolkata, India
S. Banerjee, S. Bhattacharya, K. Chatterjee, S. Dutta, B. Gomber, Sa. Jain, Sh. Jain, R. Khurana, A. Modak, S. Mukherjee, D. Roy, S. Sarkar, M. Sharan, A.P. Singh

Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Mumbai, India
A. Abdulsalam, D. Dutta, S. Kailas, V. Kumar, A.K. Mohanty, L.M. Pant, P. Shukla, A. Topkar
Tata Institute of Fundamental Research - EHEP, Mumbai, India
T. Aziz, R.M. Chatterjee, S. Ganguly, S. Ghosh, M. Guhathai, A. Gurtu, G. Kole, S. Kumar, M. Maity, G. Majumder, K. Mazumdar, G.B. Mohanty, B. Parida, K. Sudhakar, N. Wickramage

Tata Institute of Fundamental Research - HECR, Mumbai, India
S. Banerjee, S. Dugad

Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM), Tehran, Iran
H. Arfaei, H. Bakhshiansohi, H. Behnamian, S.M. Etesami, A. Fahim, A. Jafari, M. Khakzad, M. Mohammadi Najafabadi, M. Naseri, S. Paktinat Mehdiaabadi, B. Safarzadeh, M. Zeinali

University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland
M. Grunewald

INFN Sezione di Bari, Università di Bari, Politecnico di Bari, Bari, Italy
M. Abbrescia, L. Barbone, C. Calabria, S.S. Chhibra, A. Colaleo, D. Creanza, N. De Filippis, M. De Palma, L. Fiore, G. Iaselli, G. Maggi, M. Maggi, B. Marangelli, S. My, N. Nuzzo, N. Pacifico, A. Pompili, G. Pugliese, R. Radogna, G. Selvaggi, L. Silvestris, G. Singh, R. Venditti, P. Verwilligen, G. Zito

INFN Sezione di Bologna, Bologna, Italy
G. Abbiendi, A.C. Benvenuti, D. Bonacorsi, S. Braibant-Giacomelli, L. Brigliadori, R. Campanini, P. Capiluppi, A. Castro, F.R. Cavallo, G. Codispoti, M. Cuffiani, G.M. Dallavalle, F. Fabbrini, A. Fanfani, D. Fasanella, P. Giacomelli, C. Grandi, L. Guiducci, S. Marcellini, A. Meneghelli, A. Montanari, F.L. Navarreria, F. Odorici, A. Perrotta, F. Primavera, A.M. Rossi, T. Roselli, G.P. Sirola, N. Tosi, R. Travaglini

INFN Sezione di Catania, Università di Catania, Catania, Italy
S. Albergo, G. Cappello, M. Chiorboli, S. Costa, F. Giordano, R. Potenza, A. Tricomi, C. Tuve

INFN Sezione di Firenze, Università di Firenze, Firenze, Italy
G. Barbagli, V. Ciulli, C. Cividini, R. D’Alessandro, E. Focardi, E. Gallo, S. Gonzi, V. Gori, P. Lenzini, M. Meschini, S. Paoletti, S. Pugliese, T. Roselli, G. Squazzoni, A. Tropiano

INFN Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati, Italy
L. Benussi, S. Bianco, F. Fabbrini, D. Piccolo

INFN Sezione di Genova, Università di Genova, Genova, Italy
P. Fabbricatore, R. Ferretti, F. Ferro, M. Lo Vetere, R. Musenich, E. Robutti, S. Tosi

INFN Sezione di Milano-Bicocca, Università di Milano-Bicocca, Milano, Italy
A. Benaglia, M.E. Dinardo, S. Fioretti, S. Gennari, A. Ghezzi, P. Govoni, M.T. Lucchini, S. Malvezzi, R.A. Manzoni, A. Martelli, D. Menasce, L. Moroni, M. Paganoni, D. Pedrini, S. Ragazzi, N. Redaelli, T. Tabarelli de Fatis

INFN Sezione di Napoli, Università di Napoli ‘Federico II’, Università della Basilicata (Potenza), Napoli, Italy
S. Buontempo, N. Cavallo, F. Fabozzi, A.O.M. Iorio, L. Lista, S. Meola, M. Merola, P. Paolucci
INFN Sezione di Padova, Università di Padova, Università di Trento (Trento), Padova, Italy
P. Azzi\textsuperscript{a}, N. Bacchetta\textsuperscript{a}, D. Bisello\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Branca\textsuperscript{a,b}, R. Carlin\textsuperscript{a,b}, P. Checchia\textsuperscript{a}, T. Dorigo\textsuperscript{a}, F. Fanzago\textsuperscript{a}, M. Galanti\textsuperscript{a,b,2}, F. Gasparini\textsuperscript{a,b}, U. Gasparini\textsuperscript{a,b}, P. Giubilato\textsuperscript{a,b}, F. Gonella\textsuperscript{a}, A. Gozzelino\textsuperscript{a}, K. Kanishchev\textsuperscript{a,c}, S. Lacaprara\textsuperscript{a}, I. Lazzizzera\textsuperscript{a,c}, M. Margoni\textsuperscript{a,b}, A.T. Meneguzzo\textsuperscript{a,b}, F. Montecassiano\textsuperscript{a}, J. Pazzini\textsuperscript{a,b}, N. Pozzobon\textsuperscript{a,b}, P. Ronchese\textsuperscript{a,b}, F. Simonetto\textsuperscript{a,b}, E. Torassa\textsuperscript{a}, M. Tosi\textsuperscript{a,b}, S. Vanini\textsuperscript{a,b}, P. Zotto\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Zucchetta\textsuperscript{a,b}, G. Zumerle\textsuperscript{a,b}

INFN Sezione di Pavia, Università di Pavia, Pavia, Italy
M. Gabus\textsuperscript{a,b}, S.P. Ratti\textsuperscript{a,b}, C. Riccardi\textsuperscript{a,b}, P. Vitulo\textsuperscript{a,b}

INFN Sezione di Perugia, Università di Perugia, Perugia, Italy
M. Biasini\textsuperscript{a,b}, G.M. Bilei\textsuperscript{a}, L. Fanè\textsuperscript{a,b}, P. Lariccia\textsuperscript{a,b}, G. Mantovani\textsuperscript{a,b}, M. Menichelli\textsuperscript{a}, A. Nappi\textsuperscript{a,b}, F. Romeo\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Saha\textsuperscript{a}, A. Santocchia\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Spiezia\textsuperscript{a,b}

INFN Sezione di Pisa, Università di Pisa, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Pisa, Italy
K. Androssov\textsuperscript{a,29}, P. Azzurri\textsuperscript{a}, G. Bagliesi\textsuperscript{a}, J. Bernardini\textsuperscript{a}, T. Boccali\textsuperscript{a}, G. Broccolo\textsuperscript{a,c}, R. Castaldi\textsuperscript{a}, M.A. Ciocci\textsuperscript{a,29}, R. Dell’Orso\textsuperscript{a}, F. Fiori\textsuperscript{a,c}, L. Foà\textsuperscript{a,c}, A. Giassi\textsuperscript{a}, M.T. Grippo\textsuperscript{a,29}, A. Kraan\textsuperscript{a}, F. Ligabue\textsuperscript{a,c}, T. Lomtadze\textsuperscript{a}, L. Martin\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Messineo\textsuperscript{a,b}, C.S. Moon\textsuperscript{a,30}, F. Palla\textsuperscript{a}, A. Rizzi\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Savoy-Navarro\textsuperscript{a,31}, A.T. Serban\textsuperscript{a}, P. Spagnolo\textsuperscript{a}, P. Squillacioti\textsuperscript{a,29}, R. Tenchini\textsuperscript{a}, G. Tonelli\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Venturi\textsuperscript{a}, P.G. Verdini\textsuperscript{a}, C. Vernieri\textsuperscript{a,c}

INFN Sezione di Roma, Università di Roma, Roma, Italy
L. Barone\textsuperscript{a,b}, F. Cavallari\textsuperscript{a}, D. Del Re\textsuperscript{a,b}, M. Diemoz\textsuperscript{a}, M. Grassi\textsuperscript{a,b}, C. Jord\textsuperscript{a}, E. Longo\textsuperscript{a,b}, F. Margaroli\textsuperscript{a,b}, P. Meridiani\textsuperscript{a}, F. Micheli\textsuperscript{a,b}, S. Nourbakhsh\textsuperscript{a,b}, G. Organtini\textsuperscript{a,b}, R. Paramatti\textsuperscript{a}, S. Rahatlou\textsuperscript{a,b}, C. Rovelli\textsuperscript{a}, L. Soffi\textsuperscript{a,b}, P. Traczyk\textsuperscript{a,b}

INFN Sezione di Torino, Università di Torino, Università del Piemonte Orientale (Novara), Torino, Italy
N. Amapane\textsuperscript{a,b}, R. Arcidiacono\textsuperscript{a,c}, S. Argiro\textsuperscript{a,b}, M. Arneodo\textsuperscript{a,c}, R. Bellan\textsuperscript{a,b}, C. Biino\textsuperscript{a}, N. Cartiglia\textsuperscript{a}, S. Casasso\textsuperscript{a,b}, M. Costa\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Degano\textsuperscript{a,b}, N. Demaria\textsuperscript{a}, C. Mariotti\textsuperscript{a}, S. Maselli\textsuperscript{a}, E. Migliore\textsuperscript{a,b}, V. Monaco\textsuperscript{a,b}, M. Musich\textsuperscript{a}, M.M. Obertino\textsuperscript{a,c}, G. Orton\textsuperscript{a,b}, L. Pacher\textsuperscript{a,b}, N. Pastrone\textsuperscript{a}, M. Pelliccioni\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Potenza\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Romero\textsuperscript{a,b}, M. Ruspa\textsuperscript{a,c}, R. Sacchi\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Solano\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Staiano\textsuperscript{a}, U. Tamponi\textsuperscript{a}

INFN Sezione di Trieste, Università di Trieste, Trieste, Italy
S. Belforte\textsuperscript{a}, V. Candelise\textsuperscript{a,b}, M. Casarsa\textsuperscript{a}, F. Cossetti\textsuperscript{a,2}, G. Della Ricca\textsuperscript{a,b}, B. Gobbo\textsuperscript{a}, C. La Licata\textsuperscript{a,b}, M. Marone\textsuperscript{a,b}, D. Montanino\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Penzo\textsuperscript{a}, A. Schizzi\textsuperscript{a,b}, T. Umer\textsuperscript{a,b}, A. Zanetti\textsuperscript{a}

Kangwon National University, Chunchon, Korea
S. Chang, T.Y. Kim, S.K. Nam

Kyungrpook National University, Daegu, Korea
D.H. Kim, G.N. Kim, J.E. Kim, D.J. Kong, S. Lee, Y.D. Oh, H. Park, D.C. Son

Chonnam National University, Institute for Universe and Elementary Particles, Kwangju, Korea
J.Y. Kim, Zero J. Kim, S. Song

Korea University, Seoul, Korea
S. Choi, D. Gyun, B. Hong, M. Jo, H. Kim, Y. Kim, K.S. Lee, S.K. Park, Y. Roh

University of Seoul, Seoul, Korea
M. Choi, J.H. Kim, C. Park, I.C. Park, S. Park, G. Ryu
Sungkyunkwan University, Suwon, Korea
Y. Choi, Y.K. Choi, J. Goh, M.S. Kim, E. Kwon, B. Lee, J. Lee, S. Lee, H. Seo, I. Yu

Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania
A. Juodagalvis

Centro de Investigacion y de Estudios Avanzados del IPN, Mexico City, Mexico
H. Castilla-Valdez, E. De La Cruz-Burelo, I. Heredia-de La Cruz, R. Lopez-Fernandez, J. Martinez-Ortega, A. Sanchez-Hernandez, L.M. Villasenor-Cendejas

Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, Mexico
S. Carrillo Moreno, F. Vazquez Valencia

Benemerita Universidad Autonoma de Puebla, Puebla, Mexico
H.A. Salazar Ibarguen

Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, San Luis Potosí, Mexico
E. Casimiro Linares, A. Morelos Pineda

University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
D. Krofcheck

University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand
P.H. Butler, R. Doesburg, S. Reucroft, H. Silverwood

National Centre for Physics, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan
M. Ahmad, M.I. Asghar, J. Butt, H.R. Hoorani, S. Khalid, W.A. Khan, T. Khurshid, S. Qazi, M.A. Shah, M. Shoail

National Centre for Nuclear Research, Swierk, Poland
H. Bialkowska, M. Bluji, B. Boimska, T. Frueboes, M. Gorski, M. Kazana, K. Nawrocki, K. Romanowska-Rybinska, M. Szleper, G. Wrochna, P. Zalewski

Institute of Experimental Physics, Faculty of Physics, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland
G. Brona, K. Bunkowski, M. Cwiok, W. Dominik, K. Doroba, A. Kalinowski, M. Konecki, J. Krolikowski, M. Misiura, W. Wolszczak

Laboratório de Instrumentação e Física Experimental de Partículas, Lisboa, Portugal
P. Bargassa, C. Beirão Da Cruz E Silva, P. Faccioli, P.G. Ferreira Parracho, M. Gallinaro, F. Nguyen, J. Rodrigues Antunes, J. Seixas, J. Varela, P. Vischia

Joint Institute for Nuclear Research, Dubna, Russia
S. Afanasiev, P. Bunin, I. Golutvin, I. Gorbunov, A. Kamenev, V. Karjavin, V. Konoplyanikov, G. Kozlov, A. Lanev, A. Malakhov, V. Matveev, P. Moisenz, V. Palichik, V. Perelygin, S. Shmatov, N. Skatchkov, V. Smirnov, A. Zarubin

Petersburg Nuclear Physics Institute, Gatchina (St. Petersburg), Russia
V. Golovtsov, Y. Ivanov, V. Kim, P. Levchenko, V. Murzin, V. Oreshkin, I. Smirnov, V. Sulimov, L. Uvarov, S. Vavilov, A. Vorobyev, An. Vorobyev

Institute for Nuclear Research, Moscow, Russia
Yu. Andreev, A. Dermenev, S. Gninenko, N. Golubev, M. Kirsanov, N. Krasnikov, A. Pashenkov, D. Tlisov, A. Toropin

Institute for Theoretical and Experimental Physics, Moscow, Russia
V. Epshteyn, V. Gavrilov, N. Lychkovskaya, V. Popov, G. Safronov, S. Semenov, A. Spiridonov, V. Stolin, E. Vlasov, A. Zhokin
P.N. Lebedev Physical Institute, Moscow, Russia
V. Andreev, M. Azarkin, I. Dremin, M. Kirakosyan, A. Leonidov, G. Mesyats, S.V. Rusakov, A. Vinogradov

Skobeltsyn Institute of Nuclear Physics, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia
A. Belyaev, E. Boos, V. Bunichev, M. Dubinin, L. Dudko, A. Gribushin, V. Klyukhin, O. Kodolova, I. Lokhtin, A. Markina, S. Obraztsov, M.Perfilov, V. Savrin, A. Snigirev

State Research Center of Russian Federation, Institute for High Energy Physics, Protvino, Russia
I. Azhgirey, I. Bayshev, S. Bitioukov, V. Kachanov, A. Kalinin, D. Konstantinov, V. Krychkine, V. Petrov, R. Ryutin, A. Sobol, L. Tourtchanovitch, S. Troshin, N. Tyurin, A. Uzunian, A. Volkov

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Physics and Vinca Institute of Nuclear Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia
P. Adzic, M. Djordjevic, M. Ekmedzic, J. Milosevic

Centro de Investigaciones Energéticas Medioambientales y Tecnológicas (CIEMAT), Madrid, Spain
M. Aguilar-Benitez, J. Alcaraz Maestre, C. Batillana, E. Calvo, M. Cerrada, M. Chamizo Llatas, N. Colino, B. De La Cruz, A. Delgado Peris, D. Dominguez Vazquez, C. Fernandez Bedoya, J.P. Fernandez Ramos, A. Ferrando, J. Flix, M.C. Fouz, P. Garcia-Abia, O. Gonzalez Lopez, S. Goy Lopez, J.M. Hernandez, M.I. Josa, G. Merino, E. Navarro De Martino, J. Puerta Pelayo, A. Quintario Olmeda, I. Redondo, L. Romero, M.S. Soares, C. Willmott

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
C. Albajar, J.F. de Trocóniz

Universidad de Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain
H. Brun, J. Cuevas, J. Fernandez Menendez, S. Folgueras, I. Gonzalez Caballero, L. Lloret Iglesias

Instituto de Física de Cantabria (IFCA), CSIC-Universidad de Cantabria, Santander, Spain
J.A. Brochero Cifuentes, I.J. Cabrillo, A. Calderon, S.H. Chiang, J. Duarte Campderros, M. Fernandez, G. Gomez, J. Gonzalez Sanchez, A. Graziano, A. Lopez Virto, J. Marco, R. Marco, C. Martinez Rivero, F. Matorras, F.J. Munoz Sanchez, J. Piedra Gomez, T. Rodrigo, A.Y. Rodriguez-Marrero, A. Ruiz-Jimeno, L. Scodellaro, I. Vila, R. Vilar Cortabitarte

CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva, Switzerland
D. Abbaneo, E. Auffray, G. Auzinger, M. Bachtis, P. Baillon, A.H. Ball, D. Barney, J. Bendavid, L. Benhabib, J.F. Benitez, C. Bernet, G. Bianchi, P. Bloch, A. Bocci, A. Bonato, O. Bondu, C. Bottia, H. Breuker, T. Camporesi, G. Cerminara, T. Christiansen, J.A. Coarasa Perez, S. Colafranceschi, M. D’Alfonso, D. d’Enterria, A. Dabrowski, A. David, F. De Guio, A. De Roeck, S. De Visscher, S. Di Guida, M. Dobson, N. Dupont-Sagorin, A. Elliott-Peisert, J. Eugster, G. Franzoni, W. Funk, M. Giffels, D. Gigi, K. Gill, M. Girone, M. Giunta, F. Glege, R. Gomez-Reino Garrido, S. Gowdy, R. Guida, J. Hammer, M. Hansen, P. Harris, A. Hinzmann, V. Innocente, P. Janot, E. Karavakis, K. Kousouris, K. Krajczar, P. Lecoq, C. Lourenco, N. Magini, L. Malgeri, M. Mannelli, L. Masetti, F. Meijers, S. Mersi, E. Meschi, F. Moortgat, M. Mulders, P. Musella, L. Orsini, E. Palencia Cortezon, E. Perez, L. Perrozzi, A. Petrilli, G. Petracciani, A. Pfeiffer, M. Pierini, M. Pimiä, D. Piparo, M. Plagge, A. Racz, W. Reece, G. Rolandi, M. Rovere, H. Sakulin, F. Santanastasio, C. Schäfer, C. Schwik, S. Sekmen, A. Sharma,
P. Siegrist, P. Silva, M. Simon, P. Sphicas, J. Steggemann, B. Stieger, M. Stoye, A. Tsirou, G.I. Veres, J.R. Vlimant, H.K. Wöhri, W.D. Zeuner

Paul Scherrer Institut, Villigen, Switzerland
W. Bertl, K. Deiters, W. Erdmann, K. Gabathuler, R. Horisberger, Q. Ingram, H.C. Kaestli, S. König, D. Kotlinski, U. Langenegger, D. Renker, T. Rohe

Institute for Particle Physics, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland
F. Bachmair, L. Bäni, L. Bianchini, P. Bortignon, M.A. Buchmann, B. Casal, N. Chanon, A. Deisher, G. Dissertori, M. Dittmar, M. Donegà, M. Dünser, P. Eller, C. Grab, D. Hits, W. Lustomann, B. Mangano, A.C. Marini, P. Martinez Ruiz del Arbol, D. Meister, N. Mohr, C. Nägeli, P. Nef, F. Nessi-Tedaldi, F. Pandolfi, L. Pape, F. Pauss, M. Peruzzi, M. Quittnat, F.J. Ronga, M. Rossini, A. Starodumov, M. Takahashi, L. Tauscher, K. Theofilatos, D. Treille, R. Wallny, H.A. Weber

Universität Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland
C. Amsler, V. Chiochia, A. De Cosa, C. Favaro, M. Ivova Rikova, B. Kilminster, B. Millan Mejias, J. Ngadiuba, P. Robmann, H. Snoek, S. Taroni, M. Verzetti, Y. Yang

National Central University, Chung-Li, Taiwan
M. Cardaci, K.H. Chen, C. Ferro, C.M. Kuo, S.W. Li, W. Lin, Y.J. Lu, R. Volpe, S.S. Yu

National Taiwan University (NTU), Taipei, Taiwan
P. Bartalini, P. Chang, Y.H. Chang, Y.W. Chang, Y. Chao, K.F. Chen, P.H. Chen, C. Dietz, U. Grundler, W.-S. Hou, Y. Hsiung, K.Y. Kao, Y.J. Lei, Y.F. Liu, R.-S. Lu, D. Majumder, E. Petrakou, X. Shi, J.G. Shiu, Y.M. Tzeng, M. Wang, R. Wilken

Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand
B. Asavapibhop, N. Suwonjandee

Cukurova University, Adana, Turkey
A. Adiguzel, M.N. Bakirci, C. Cerici, C. Dozen, I. Dumanoglu, E. Eskut, S. Girgis, G. Gokbulut, E. Gurpinar, I. Hos, E.E. Kangal, A. Kayis Topaksu, G. Onengut, K. Ozdemir, S. Ozturk, A. Polatoz, K. Sogut, D. Sunar Cerici, B. Tali, H. Topakli, M. Vergili

Middle East Technical University, Physics Department, Ankara, Turkey
I.V. Akin, T. Aliev, B. Bilin, S. Bilmis, M. Deniz, H. Gamsizkan, A.M. Guler, G. Karapinar, K. Ocalan, A. Ozpineci, M. Serin, R. Sever, U.E. Surat, M. Yalvac, M. Zeyrek

Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey
E. Gülmez, B. Isildak, M. Kaya, O. Kaya, S. Ozkorucuklu, N. Sonmez

Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey
H. Bahtiyar, E. Barlas, K. Cankocak, Y.O. Günyaydın, F.I. Vardarlı, M. Yücel

National Scientific Center, Kharkov Institute of Physics and Technology, Kharkov, Ukraine
L. Levchuk, P. Sorokin

University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom
J.J. Brooke, E. Clement, D. Cussans, H. Flacher, R. Frazier, J. Goldstein, M. Grimes, G.P. Heath, H.F. Heath, J. Jacob, L. Kreczko, C. Lucas, Z. Meng, D.M. Newbold, S. Paramesvaran, A. Poll, S. Senkin, V.J. Smith, T. Williams

Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Didcot, United Kingdom
K.W. Bell, A. Belyaev, C. Brew, R.M. Brown, D.J.A. Cockerill, J.A. Coughlan, K. Harder,
S. Harper, J. Ilic, E. Olaiya, D. Petyt, C.H. Shepherd-Themistocleous, A. Thea, I.R. Tomalin, W.J. Womersley, S.D. Worm

**Imperial College, London, United Kingdom**
M. Baber, R. Bainbridge, O. Buchmuller, D. Burton, D. Colling, N. Cripps, M. Cutajar, P. Dauncey, G. Davies, M. Della Negra, W. Ferguson, J. Fulcher, D. Futyan, A. Gilbert, A. Guneratne Bryer, G. Hall, Z. Hatherell, J. Hays, G. Iles, M. Jarvis, G. Karapostoli, M. Kenzie, R. Lane, R. Lucas, L. Lyons, A.-M. Magnan, J. Marrouche, B. Mathias, R. Nandi, J. Nash, A. Nikitenko, J. Pela, M. Pesaresi, K. Petridis, M. Pioppi, D.M. Raymond, S. Rogerson, A. Rose, C. Seez, P. Sharp, A. Sparrow, A. Tapper, M. Vazquez Acosta, T. Virdee, S. Wakefield, N. Wardle

**Brunel University, Uxbridge, United Kingdom**
J.E. Cole, P.R. Hobson, A. Khan, P. Kyberd, D. Leggat, D. Leslie, W. Martin, I.D. Reid, P. Symonds, L. Teodorescu, M. Turner

**Baylor University, Waco, USA**
J. Dittmann, K. Hatakeyama, A. Kasi, H. Liu, T. Scarborough

**The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, USA**
O. Charaf, S.I. Cooper, C. Henderson, P. Rumerio

**Boston University, Boston, USA**
A. Avetisyan, T. Bose, C. Fantasia, A. Heister, P. Lawson, D. Lazić, J. Rohlf, D. Sperka, J. St. John, L. Sulak

**Brown University, Providence, USA**
J. Alimena, S. Bhattacharya, G. Christopher, D. Cutts, Z. Demiragli, A. Ferapontov, A. Garabedian, U. Heintz, S. Jabeen, G. Kukartsev, E. Laird, G. Landsberg, M. Luk, M. Narain, M. Segala, T. Sinthuprasith, T. Speer, J. Swanson

**University of California, Davis, Davis, USA**
R. Breedon, G. Breto, M. Calderon De La Barca Sanchez, S. Chauhan, M. Chertok, J. Conway, R. Conway, P.T. Cox, R. Erbacher, M. Gardner, W. Ko, A. Kopecky, R. Lander, T. Miceli, D. Pellett, J. Pilot, F. Ricci-Tam, B. Rutherford, M. Searle, S. Shalhout, J. Smith, M. Squires, M. Tripathi, S. Wilbur, R. Yohay

**University of California, Los Angeles, USA**
V. Andreev, D. Cline, R. Cousins, S. Erhan, P. Everaerts, C. Farrell, M. Felcini, J. Hauser, M. Ignatenko, C. Jarvis, G. Rakness, P. Schlein, E. Takasugi, V. Valuev, M. Weber

**University of California, Riverside, Riverside, USA**
J. Babb, R. Clare, J. Ellison, J.W. Gary, G. Hanson, J. Heilman, P. Jandir, F. Lacroix, H. Liu, O.R. Long, A. Luthra, M. Malberti, H. Nguyen, A. Shrinivas, J. Sturdy, S. Sumowidagdo, S. Wimpenny

**University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, USA**
W. Andrews, J.G. Branson, G.B. Cerati, S. Cittolin, R.T. D’Agnolo, D. Evans, A. Holzner, R. Kelley, D. Kovalskyi, M. Lebourgeois, J. Letts, I. Macneill, S. Padhi, C. Palmer, M. Pieri, M. Saní, V. Sharma, S. Simon, E. Sudano, M. Tadel, Y. Tu, A. Vartak, S. Wasserbaech, F. Würtzwein, A. Yagil, J. Yoo

**University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, USA**
D. Barge, C. Campagnari, T. Danielson, K. Flowers, P. Geffert, C. George, F. Golf, J. Incandela,
C. Justus, R. Magaña Villalba, N. McColl, V. Pavlunin, J. Richman, R. Rossin, D. Stuart, W. To, C. West

California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, USA
A. Apresyan, A. Bornheim, J. Bunn, Y. Chen, E. Di Marco, J. Duarte, D. Kcir, A. Mott, H.B. Newman, C. Pena, C. Rogan, M. Spiropulu, V. Timciuc, R. Wilkinson, S. Xie, R.Y. Zhu

Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, USA
V. Azzolini, A. Calamba, R. Carroll, T. Ferguson, Y. Iiyama, D.W. Jang, M. Paulini, J. Russ, H. Vogel, I. Vorobiev

University of Colorado at Boulder, Boulder, USA
J.P. Cumalat, B.R. Drell, W.T. Ford, A. Gaz, E. Luiggi Lopez, U. Nauenberg, J.G. Smith, K. Stenson, K.A. Ulmer, S.R. Wagner

Cornell University, Ithaca, USA
J. Alexander, A. Chatterjee, N. Eggert, L.K. Gibbons, W. Hopkins, A. Khukhunaishvili, B. Kreis, N. Mirman, G. Nicolas Kaufman, J.R. Patterson, A. Ryd, E. Salvati, W. Sun, W.D. Teo, J. Thom, J. Thompson, J. Tucker, Y. Weng, L. Winstrom, P. Wittich

Fairfield University, Fairfield, USA
D. Winn

Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Batavia, USA
S. Abdullin, M. Albrow, J. Anderson, G. Apollinari, L.A.T. Bauerick, A. Beretvas, J. Berryhill, P.C. Bhat, K. Burkett, J.N. Butler, V. Chetluru, H.W.K. Cheung, F. Chlebana, S. Cihangir, V.D. Elvira, I. Fisk, J. Freeman, Y. Gao, E. Gottschalk, L. Gray, D. Green, O. Gutsche, D. Hare, R.M. Harris, J. Hirschauer, B. Hooberman, S. Jindariani, M. Johnson, U. Joshi, K. Kaadze, B. Klima, S. Kwan, J. Linacre, D. Lincoln, R. Lipton, J. Lykken, K. Maeshima, J.M. Marraffino, V.I. Martinez Outschoorn, S. Maruyama, D. Mason, P. McBride, K. Mishra, S. Mrenna, Y. Musienko, S. Nahn, C. Newman-Holmes, V. O'Dell, O. Prokofyev, N. Ratnikova, E. Sexton-Kennedy, S. Sharma, W.J. Spalding, L. Spiegel, L. Taylor, S. Tkaczynski, N.V. Tran, L. Uplegger, E.W. Vaandering, R. Vidal, J. Whitmore, W. Wu, F. Yang, J.C. Yun

University of Florida, Gainesville, USA
D. Acosta, P. Avery, D. Bourilkov, T. Cheng, S. Das, M. De Gruttola, G.P. Di Giovanni, D. Dobur, R.D. Field, M. Fisher, Y. Fu, I.K. Furic, J. Hugon, B. Kim, J. Konigsberg, A. Korytov, A. Kropivnitskaya, T. Kypreos, J.F. Low, K. Matchev, P. Milenovic, G. Mitselmakher, L. Muniz, A. Rinkevicius, L. Shchutska, N. Skhirtladze, M. Snowball, J. Yelton, M. Zakaria

Florida International University, Miami, USA
V. Gaulin, S. Hewamanage, S. Linn, P. Markowitz, G. Martinez, J.L. Rodriguez

Florida State University, Tallahassee, USA
T. Adams, A. Askew, J. Bochenek, J. Chen, B. Diamond, J. Haas, S. Hagopian, V. Hagopian, K.F. Johnson, H. Prosper, V. Veeraraghavan, M. Weinberg

Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, USA
M.M. Baarmand, B. Dorney, M. Hohlmann, H. Kalakhety, F. Yumiceva

University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Chicago, USA
M.R. Adams, L. Apanasevich, V.E. Bazterra, R.R. Betts, I. Bucinskaite, R. Cavanaugh, O. Evdokimov, L. Gauthier, C.E. Gerber, D.J. Hofman, S. Khalatyan, P. Kurt, D.H. Moon, C. O’Brien, C. Silkworth, P. Turner, N. Varelas
The University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA
U. Akgun, E.A. Albayrak, B. Bilki, W. Clarida, K. Dilsiz, F. Duru, J.-P. Merlo, H. Mermerkaya, A. Mestvirishvili, A. Moeller, J. Nachtman, H. Ogul, Y. Onel, F. Ozok, S. Sen, P. Tan, E. Tiras, J. Wetzel, T. Yetkin, K. Yi

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA
B.A. Barnett, B. Blumenfeld, S. Bolognesi, D. Fehling, A.V. Gritsan, P. Maksimovic, C. Martin, M. Swartz, A. Whitbeck

The University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA
P. Baringer, A. Bean, G. Benelli, R.P. Kenny III, M. Murray, D. Noonan, S. Sanders, J. Sekaric, R. Stringer, Q. Wang, J.S. Wood

Kansas State University, Manhattan, USA
A.F. Barfuss, I. Chakaberia, A. Ivanov, S. Khalil, M. Makouski, Y. Maravin, L.K. Saini, S. Shrestha, I. Svintradze

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Livermore, USA
J. Gronberg, D. Lange, F. Rebassoo, D. Wright

University of Maryland, College Park, USA
A. Baden, B. Calvert, S.C. Eno, J.A. Gomez, N.J. Hadley, R.G. Kellogg, T. Kolberg, Y. Lu, M. Marionneau, A.C. Mignerey, K. Pedro, A. Skuja, J. Temple, M.B. Tonjes, S.C. Tonwar

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA
A. Apyan, R. Barbieri, G. Bauer, W. Busza, I.A. Cali, M. Chan, L. Di Matteo, V. Dutta, G. Gomez Ceballos, M. Goncharov, D. Gulhan, M. Klute, Y.S. Lai, Y.-J. Lee, A. Levin, P.D. Luckey, T. Ma, C. Paus, D. Ralph, C. Roland, G. Roland, G.S.F. Stephens, F. Stöckli, K. Sumorok, D. Velicanu, J. Veverka, B. Wyslouch, M. Yang, A.S. Yoon, M. Zanetti, V. Zhukova

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA
B. Dahmes, A. De Benedetti, A. Gude, S.C. Kao, K. Klapoetke, Y. Kubota, J. Mans, N. Pastika, R. Rusack, A. Singovsky, N. Tambe, J. Turkewitz

University of Mississippi, Oxford, USA
J.G. Acosta, L.M. Cremaldi, R. Kroeger, S. Oliveros, L. Perera, R. Rahmat, D.A. Sanders, D. Summers

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, USA
E. Avdeeva, K. Bloom, S. Bose, D.R. Claes, A. Dominguez, R. Gonzalez Suarez, J. Keller, I. Kravchenko, J. Lazo-Flores, S. Malik, F. Meier, G.R. Snow

State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, USA
J. Dolen, A. Godshalk, I. Iashvili, S. Jain, A. Kharchilava, A. Kumar, S. Rappoccio, Z. Wan

Northeastern University, Boston, USA
G. Alverson, E. Barberis, D. Baumgartel, M. Chasos, J. Haley, A. Massironi, D. Nash, T. Orimoto, D. Trocino, D. Wood, J. Zhang

Northwestern University, Evanston, USA
A. Anastassov, K.A. Hahn, A. Kubik, L. Lusito, N. Mucia, N. Odell, B. Pollack, A. Pozdnyakov, M. Schmitt, S. Stoynev, K. Sung, M. Velasco, S. Won

University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, USA
D. Berry, A. Brinkerhoff, K.M. Chan, A. Drozdetskiy, M. Hildreth, C. Jessop, D.J. Karmgard,
J. Kolb, K. Lannon, W. Luo, S. Lynch, N. Marinelli, D.M. Morse, T. Pearson, M. Planer, R. Ruchti, J. Slaunwhite, N. Valls, M. Wayne, M. Wolf

The Ohio State University, Columbus, USA
L. Antonelli, B. Bylsma, L.S. Durkin, S. Flowers, C. Hill, R. Hughes, K. Kotov, T.Y. Ling, D. Puigh, M. Rodenburg, G. Smith, C. Vuosalo, B.L. Winer, H. Wolfe, H.W. Wulsin

Princeton University, Princeton, USA
E. Berry, P. Elmer, V. Halyo, P. Hebda, J. Hegeman, A. Hunt, P. Jindal, S.A. Koay, P. Lujan, D. Marlow, T. Medvedeva, M. Mooney, J. Olsen, P. Piroué, X. Quan, A. Raval, H. Saka, D. Stickland, C. Tully, J.S. Werner, S.C. Zenz, A. Zuranski

University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, USA
E. Brownson, A. Lopez, H. Mendez, J.E. Ramirez Vargas

Purdue University, West Lafayette, USA
E. Alagoz, D. Benedetti, G. Bolla, D. Bortoletto, M. De Mattia, A. Everett, Z. Hu, M. Jones, K. Jung, M. Kress, N. Leonardo, D. Lopes Pegna, V. Maroussov, P. Merkel, D.H. Miller, N. Neumeister, B.C. Radburn-Smith, I. Shipsey, D. Silvers, A. Svyatkovskiy, F. Wang, W. Xie, L. Xu, H.D. Yoo, J. Zablocki, Y. Zheng

Purdue University Calumet, Hammond, USA
N. Parashar

Rice University, Houston, USA
A. Adair, B. Akgun, K.M. Ecklund, F.J.M. Geurts, W. Li, B. Michlin, B.P. Padley, R. Redjimi, J. Roberts, J. Zabel

University of Rochester, Rochester, USA
B. Betchart, A. Bodek, R. Covarelli, P. de Barbaro, R. Demina, Y. Eshaq, T. Ferbel, A. Garcia-Bellido, P. Goldenzweig, J. Han, A. Harel, D.C. Miner, G. Petrillo, D. Vishnevskiy, M. Zielinski

The Rockefeller University, New York, USA
A. Bhatti, R. Ciesielski, L. Demortier, K. Goulianos, G. Lungu, S. Malik, C. Mesropian

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Piscataway, USA
S. Arora, A. Barker, J.P. Chou, C. Contreras-Campana, E. Contreras-Campana, D. Duggan, D. Ferencek, Y. Gershtein, R. Gray, E. Halkiadakis, D. Hidas, A. Lath, S. Panwalkar, M. Park, R. Patel, V. Rekovic, J. Robles, S. Salur, S. Schnetzer, C. Seitz, S. Somalwar, R. Stone, S. Thomas, P. Thomassen, M. Walker

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA
K. Rose, S. Spanier, Z.C. Yang, A. York

Texas A&M University, College Station, USA
O. Bouhali, R. Eusebi, W. Flanagan, J. Gilmore, T. Kamon, V. Khotilovich, V. Krutelyov, R. Montalvo, I. Osipenkov, Y. Pakhotin, A. Perloff, J. Roe, A. Safonov, T. Sakuma, I. Suarez, A. Tatarinov, D. Toback

Texas Tech University, Lubbock, USA
N. Akchurin, C. Cowden, J. Damgov, C. Dragoiu, P.R. Dudero, K. Kovitanggoon, S. Kunori, S.W. Lee, T. Libeiro, I. Volobouev

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, USA
E. Appelt, A.G. Delannoy, S. Greene, A. Gurrola, W. Johns, C. Maguire, Y. Mao, A. Melo, M. Sharma, P. Sheldon, B. Snook, S. Tuo, J. Velkovska
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA
M.W. Arenton, S. Boutle, B. Cox, B. Francis, J. Goodell, R. Hirosky, A. Ledovskoy, C. Lin, C. Neu, J. Wood

Wayne State University, Detroit, USA
S. Gollapinni, R. Harr, P.E. Karchin, C. Kottachchi Kankanamge Don, P. Lamichhane, A. Sakharov

University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA
D.A. Belknap, L. Borrello, D. Carlsmith, M. Cepeda, S. Dasu, S. Duric, E. Friis, M. Grothe, R. Hall-Wilton, M. Herndon, A. Hervé, P. Klabbers, J. Klukas, A. Lanaro, R. Loveless, A. Mohapatra, I. Ojalvo, T. Perry, G.A. Pierro, G. Polese, I. Ross, T. Sarangi, A. Savin, W.H. Smith
†: Deceased
1: Also at Vienna University of Technology, Vienna, Austria
2: Also at CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva, Switzerland
3: Also at Institut Pluridisciplinaire Hubert Curien, Université de Strasbourg, Université de Haute Alsace Mulhouse, CNRS/IN2P3, Strasbourg, France
4: Also at National Institute of Chemical Physics and Biophysics, Tallinn, Estonia
5: Also at Skobeltsyn Institute of Nuclear Physics, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia
6: Also at Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, Brazil
7: Also at California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, USA
8: Also at Laboratoire Leprince-Ringuet, Ecole Polytechnique, IN2P3-CNRS, Palaiseau, France
9: Also at Zewail City of Science and Technology, Zewail, Egypt
10: Also at Suez Canal University, Suez, Egypt
11: Also at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt
12: Also at Fayoum University, El-Fayoum, Egypt
13: Also at British University in Egypt, Cairo, Egypt
14: Now at Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt
15: Also at Université de Haute Alsace, Mulhouse, France
16: Also at Joint Institute for Nuclear Research, Dubna, Russia
17: Also at Brandenburg University of Technology, Cottbus, Germany
18: Also at The University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA
19: Also at Institute of Nuclear Research ATOMKI, Debrecen, Hungary
20: Also at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
21: Also at Tata Institute of Fundamental Research - EHEP, Mumbai, India
22: Also at Tata Institute of Fundamental Research - HECR, Mumbai, India
23: Now at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
24: Also at University of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India
25: Also at University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka
26: Also at Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran
27: Also at Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran
28: Also at Plasma Physics Research Center, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
29: Also at Università degli Studi di Siena, Siena, Italy
30: Also at Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) - IN2P3, Paris, France
31: Also at Purdue University, West Lafayette, USA
32: Also at Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolas de Hidalgo, Morelia, Mexico
33: Also at National Centre for Nuclear Research, Swierk, Poland
34: Also at Faculty of Physics, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia
35: Also at Facoltà Ingegneria, Università di Roma, Roma, Italy
36: Also at Scuola Normale e Sezione dell’INFN, Pisa, Italy
37: Also at University of Athens, Athens, Greece
38: Also at Paul Scherrer Institut, Villigen, Switzerland
39: Also at Institute for Theoretical and Experimental Physics, Moscow, Russia
40: Also at Albert Einstein Center for Fundamental Physics, Bern, Switzerland
41: Also at Gaziosmanpasa University, Tokat, Turkey
42: Also at Adiyaman University, Adiyaman, Turkey
43: Also at Cag University, Mersin, Turkey
44: Also at Mersin University, Mersin, Turkey
45: Also at Izmir Institute of Technology, Izmir, Turkey
46: Also at Ozyegin University, Istanbul, Turkey
47: Also at Kafkas University, Kars, Turkey
48: Also at Suleyman Demirel University, Isparta, Turkey
49: Also at Ege University, Izmir, Turkey
50: Also at Mimar Sinan University, Istanbul, Istanbul, Turkey
51: Also at Kahramanmaras Sütçü İmam University, Kahramanmaras, Turkey
52: Also at Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Didcot, United Kingdom
53: Also at School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom
54: Also at INFN Sezione di Perugia; Università di Perugia, Perugia, Italy
55: Also at Utah Valley University, Orem, USA
56: Also at Institute for Nuclear Research, Moscow, Russia
57: Also at University of Belgrade, Faculty of Physics and Vinca Institute of Nuclear Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia
58: Also at Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, USA
59: Also at Erzincan University, Erzincan, Turkey
60: Also at Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey
61: Also at Texas A&M University at Qatar, Doha, Qatar
62: Also at Kyungpook National University, Daegu, Korea