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Hoffmann, Philipp

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# Between Left-Authoritarians, Sympathy for Russia, and Political Discontent: The Correlates of Voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW)

Philipp Hoffmann 

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**Abstract** A new party has entered the German political landscape: The Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). After years of debate that her former party, The Left, had become “too liberal,” one of Germany’s most prominent politicians, Sahra Wagenknecht, founded her new party in January 2024. The BSW is described as blending socioeconomic leftist and sociocultural conservative positions, potentially attracting voters by positioning itself as a “left-authoritarian” party. Additionally, the BSW holds pro-Russia stances and anti-elitist sentiments. The party made a significant impact in 2024, achieving 6.2% in the European elections and securing third place in the state elections of Saxony and Thuringia. This raises the question: What underlying factors are drawing individuals to support the BSW? Using wave 26 of the German Longitudinal Election Study Panel, which includes the BSW, this article compares intended vote choice within Germany to actual votes cast in the 2024 European elections. Drawing on theories related to policy considerations and protest motivations in supporting new parties, three key findings emerge: First, left-authoritarian and pro-Russia attitudes are positively associated with support for the BSW. Second, populist attitudes and dissatisfaction with the federal government also drive individuals toward the BSW. Third, this might, however, be largely overshadowed by a strong impact of the favorability toward Sahra Wagenknecht.

**Keywords** BSW · Protest voting · German politics · Voting behavior · Left-authoritarian · New parties

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✉ Philipp Hoffmann

Chair of Political Sociology, University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany  
E-Mail: philipp.hoffmann@uni-bamberg.de

## Zwischen Linksautoritär:innen, Sympathie für Russland und politischer Unzufriedenheit: Die Korrelate der Stimmabgabe für das Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW)

**Zusammenfassung** Eine neue Partei ist in die politische Landschaft Deutschlands eingetreten: Das Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). Nach jahrelangen Debatten darüber, dass ihre vorherige Partei Die Linke „zu liberal“ geworden sei, gründete Sahra Wagenknecht, eine der prominentesten Politiker:innen Deutschlands, im Januar 2024 ihre neue Partei. Das BSW wird als eine Mischung aus sozio-ökonomisch linken und sozio-kulturell konservativen Positionen beschrieben, das möglicherweise Wähler:innen anzieht, indem es sich als „links-autoritäre“ Partei positioniert. Daneben vertritt das BSW pro-russische Positionen und eine anti-elitäre Haltung. Mit 6.2% bei den Europawahlen und dem dritten Platz bei den Landtagswahlen in Sachsen und Thüringen hat die Partei 2024 große Erfolge erzielt. Dies wirft die Frage auf: Welche Faktoren sind es, die Menschen dazu bewegen, das BSW zu unterstützen? Unter Verwendung von Welle 26 des German Longitudinal Election Study Panels, welcher das BSW beinhaltet, vergleicht dieser Artikel die beabsichtigte Wahlentscheidung innerhalb Deutschlands mit der tatsächlichen Stimmabgabe bei der Europawahl 2024. Ausgehend von Theorien, die sich auf thematische Erwägungen und Protestmotive bei der Unterstützung neuer Parteien beziehen, ergeben sich drei zentrale Erkenntnisse: Erstens sind linksautoritäre und russlandfreundliche Einstellungen positiv mit der Unterstützung für das BSW verbunden. Zweitens: Populistische Einstellungen und Unzufriedenheit mit der Bundesregierung treiben die Menschen ebenfalls zum BSW. Drittens wird dies jedoch möglicherweise weitgehend durch einen starken Einfluss der Sympathie für Sahra Wagenknecht überlagert.

**Schlüsselwörter** BSW · Protestwahl · Deutschland · Wahlverhalten · Linksautoritär · Neue Parteien

### 1 Introduction

The emergence of new political movements often raises questions about the factors driving electoral support. The Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), a political party named after its prominent founder, has recently garnered significant attention in Germany's dynamic political landscape (Herold and Otteni 2024; Steiner and Hillen 2024; Thomeczek 2024a). Following months of internal conflict and strained relations with her former party The Left, Sahra Wagenknecht, along with other key figures, departed in October 2023 (Steiner and Hillen 2024). Shortly thereafter, in January 2024, a new party was officially founded: Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht—Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht—Reason and Justice; Thomeczek 2024a). Despite being one of Germany's youngest political parties, the BSW has already achieved remarkable results. In its first run during the European elections in June 2024, the party secured 6.2% (Heckmann et al. 2025). Furthermore, in state elections in eastern Germany, the BSW achieved around 16% in Thuringia and 12% in Saxony, placing third in both regions (Jankowski 2024).

In this context, we know relatively little about why individuals support and vote for the BSW. One of the primary reasons Wagenknecht left her former party was dissatisfaction with its “too liberal” agenda, particularly regarding immigration (Thomeczek 2024b). While she aligns with her previous party’s left-leaning socioeconomic views—advocating for redistribution and social welfare—she diverges by taking a more restrictive stance on immigration, calling for reduced immigration and stricter asylum laws (Herold and Otteni 2024; Steiner and Hillen 2024; Thomeczek 2024a). This especially appeals to voters who can be described as “left-authoritarians,” meaning they hold left-wing socioeconomic views but lean right on sociocultural issues (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Lefkofridi et al. 2014). This positions the BSW uniquely within the German political landscape, as no major party currently occupies this policy space (Steiner and Hillen 2019). Hence, the BSW could represent a real alternative for these largely overlooked voters, potentially offering a significant electoral advantage.

Additionally, Wagenknecht and her fellow defectors differ to some degree from other German parties by encouraging greater cooperation and negotiations with Russia in the wake of the Ukraine war (Arzheimer 2023; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024). Although there is broad consensus among German parties to support Ukraine—even The Left party has adopted a slightly new stance, condemning the war, Putin, and Russia (Mader and Schoen 2023; Masch et al. 2023)—the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the newly founded BSW stand out as exceptions. Both parties oppose increased military aid to Ukraine and call for negotiations with Russia (BSW 2024a, b; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024).

While it is reasonable to assume that support for a non-established party stems from policy alignment, it could also be a signal of political discontent (Hernández 2018). This protest hypothesis is particularly relevant for new parties, which can serve as vehicles for dissatisfied voters, especially when they adopt anti-party and anti-establishment rhetoric, offering an alternative approach to politics (Bélanger 2017; Lago and Martínez 2011). Furthermore, research has shown that left-authoritarian voters often experience political dissatisfaction due to a lack of representation (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Steiner and Hillen 2019). Given that the BSW and Wagenknecht have expressed strong opposition to the federal government, even calling for “showing them the red card” (BSW 2024a) and signaling antiestablishment sentiments, the BSW is likely to attract individuals who are politically discontent.

The first studies on the BSW indicate that the party indeed draws support from left-authoritarian individuals, those who are politically dissatisfied, and those who have pro-Russia sentiments (Braband and Candeias 2024; Herold and Otteni 2024; Steiner and Hillen 2024; Wagner et al. 2023). However, current research has notable gaps: Some studies analyze the BSW and its potential supporters indirectly because they use a rather obscure question about voting intentions for a party that had not been set up at the point in time (Braband and Candeias 2024; Emmler and Seikel 2024; Wagner et al. 2023). Others do not include actual voting behavior (Herold and Otteni 2024; Steiner and Hillen 2024), or they lack representativeness (Thomeczek 2024b). Heckmann et al. (2025) and Jankowski (2024) have explored why voters are shifting from one party to the BSW. Although they effectively compare voters across the last federal election in 2021, October 2023, and June 2024, showing how left-

authoritarian attitudes coupled with anti-Ukraine support and dissatisfaction with democracy attract voters, especially from the AfD, The Left, and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), they overlook some important aspects. This mainly concerns the impact of Sahra Wagenknecht's leadership valence, as well as other political alienation factors, such as dissatisfaction with the federal government and distrust in political institutions. In addition, Heckmann et al. (2025) focus on vote choice in the 2024 European elections but do not address the unique conditions associated with it, while Jankowski (2024) again does not emphasize actual voting behavior.

This study addresses these gaps by comparing voting intentions in Germany with actual voting behavior in the 2024 European elections, the first nationwide election for the new party with special circumstances (such as a low threshold) that could particularly attract voters to the BSW (e.g., Schakel and Jeffery 2013; Schakel 2015). Thus, this paper uses more appropriate data to explore the factors driving support for the BSW by analyzing political attitudes and political discontent. Understanding these factors is crucial for comprehending the broader dynamics of electoral behavior and the shifting allegiances within Germany's political landscape. Therefore, this article seeks to answer the following research question: Which factors explain voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht?

Using wave 26 of the German Longitudinal Election Study Panel (GLES 2024), the correlates of voting for the BSW appear consistent across both elections. Left-authoritarian attitudes, a more pro-Russia stance, dissatisfaction with the federal government, and populist attitudes are all positively associated with choosing the BSW. In contrast, political distrust and dissatisfaction with democracy show no significant correlation with BSW support. Nevertheless, the strongest influence seems to be a higher favorability toward Wagenknecht.

## 2 The Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht as a New Party

Shortly after Sahra Wagenknecht and other figures departed from The Left, some commentators speculated that a new political party might resonate with voters who feel neglected by established parties. This new party could potentially carve out a distinct space in the German party system by adopting left-authoritarian positions (Thomeczek 2024b; Wagner et al. 2023). The literature offers insights into why such a party might thrive in an already crowded political landscape and attract support. In addition to factors related to new party formation (Harmel and Robertson 1985; Tavits 2008) and country- or election-specific conditions (Cox 1997; Rochon 1985), two interconnected factors may help explain the early success of the BSW. First, according to Downs's spatial proximity model (Downs 1957), parties adopt distinct positions on various policy dimensions, and voters are more likely to support the party closest to their preferences. Thus, new parties often benefit from addressing issues that are underrepresented or neglected by existing parties (van De Wardt and Otjes 2022; Wuttke 2020). Additionally, Cox (1997) posits that parties will enter the competition if their chances of success are high enough to justify the costs, which implies that when party-voter congruence is strong, a new party is more likely to emerge (Harmel and Robertson 1985; Rochon 1985; van De Wardt and Otjes 2022).

This is particularly relevant to the BSW. It is not that the party introduces entirely new issues or policies but rather that it appeals to a largely unrepresented voter base—the so-called left-authoritarians. These voters support greater state intervention in the economy, including redistribution and higher taxes on the wealthy, placing them on the left of the socioeconomic spectrum. At the same time, they hold authoritarian views, favoring stricter immigration controls, aligning them with more conservative or right-wing positions on sociocultural issues (e.g., Hillen and Steiner 2020; Lefkofridi et al. 2014; van Der Brug and van Spanje 2009). Although research shows that these attitudes are positively correlated (Malka et al. 2019), and a significant number of European voters hold such views (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Lefkofridi et al. 2014), this voter segment remains underrepresented (Hakhverdian and Schakel 2022; van Der Brug and van Spanje 2009). Steiner and Hillen (2019) found that in the 2013 German federal election, around 20% of respondents exhibited left-authoritarian attitudes, yet no party was effectively representing them.

Therefore, the BSW could enter an unoccupied political space. Yet, its positions on both the socioeconomic and the sociocultural dimensions are not new in Germany (Steiner and Hillen 2019). What sets the BSW apart is the unique and unusual combination. Indeed, an expert survey confirmed that the new party is best described as left-authoritarian (Thomeczek et al., 2024). Hence, the BSW could be characterized as what Lucardie (2000) calls a “purifier” party: a party that “[...] clings to an existing ideology, which it feels is diluted or betrayed by one (or more) of the established parties. Quite often, the founders of this type of new party were dissident members of an established party [...]” (Lucardie 2000, p. 176). As established parties fail to address certain voter concerns, the BSW could capitalize on these neglected issues. The combination of electoral potential and the logic of Downs’s (1957) spatial proximity model supports the viability of forming a new party (Rochon 1985; Tavits 2008). Voters who feel unrepresented by the existing parties may react positively to the emergence of the BSW (Harmel and Robertson 1985; Wuttke 2020). Van De Wardt and Otjes (2022) confirm that new parties gain support when there is significant party–voter incongruence and their platform aligns with voter preferences. Moreover, if mainstream parties overlook key voter concerns and the new party mobilizes an existing voter base, its chances of success increase (Lago and Martínez 2011; Tavits 2008).

In addition to the argument of electoral support based on policy considerations, some authors argue that the protest-voting hypothesis may also apply to a new party (Hernández 2018). Voting for a new party can be appealing as a form of political dissatisfaction (Bakker et al. 2021; Bélanger 2017), and in the case of the BSW, this discontent could intersect with the left-authoritarian policy space. Research shows that left-authoritarian voters tend to be less satisfied with democracy, have lower levels of political trust, and are less likely to vote (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Steiner and Hillen 2019). Because no existing party adequately represents their views, these individuals often experience cross-pressures, leading to greater political discontent. This voter–party incongruence further fuels dissatisfaction among left-authoritarians (Bakker et al. 2021). In such a scenario, voters may derive little benefit from supporting established parties but are more likely to back a party that combines both left-authoritarian positions and a critical stance toward the political establishment

(Wuttke 2020). Indeed, Bakker et al. (2021) confirm that voter–party incongruence is linked to political dissatisfaction and increased support for what they call “anti-establishment challenger parties.” Wuttke (2020) also concludes that it is discontent—rather than ignorance of attitudes—that primarily drives new party support. Additionally, some state that Wagenknecht and her new party could be described as populist, which is sometimes interpreted as signs of discontent. However, it remains unclear whether the BSW can be considered a populist party (Braband and Candeias 2024; Herold and Otteni 2024; Thomeczek 2024a). In sum, the BSW’s success may hinge on its ability to tap into both policy alignment and protest voting. The next section will outline specific expectations for how this may unfold.

### 3 The Correlates of Voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht

Political attitudes and party competition typically revolve around two dimensions. The first focuses on economic issues, while the second deals with cultural topics. This two-dimensional political space structures political competition across Western Europe (Kriesi et al. 2012). On the economic dimension, issues such as redistribution, market regulation, and taxation are addressed, while the cultural dimension encompasses topics such as individual freedoms, cultural and ethnic diversity, and, particularly, immigration. It also integrates newer issues related to globalization and European integration (Herold and Otteni 2024; Hillen and Steiner 2020; Kriesi et al. 2012). According to the model of Downs (1957), voters calculate the ideological distance between themselves and the competing parties, supporting the party closest to them within this two-dimensional space. In most European countries, political parties cluster around either economically left and culturally liberal or economically right and culturally conservative positions. However, the left-conservative—or left-authoritarian—spot is often underrepresented, leaving voters with few viable options at the ballot box (Herold and Otteni 2024; Steiner and Hillen 2024; Lefkofridi et al. 2014). Despite this gap, a significant portion of the electorate holds socioeconomically left and socioculturally conservative views (Hakhverdian and Schakel 2022; Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Malka et al. 2019; van Der Brug and van Spanje 2009). Especially in Germany, no major party occupies this space, leaving a substantial number of voters without representation (Steiner and Hillen 2019, 2024; Wagner et al. 2023).

This dynamic might have shifted with the emergence of the BSW. On the economic dimension, the BSW frequently calls for increased state intervention, expanded welfare benefits, greater redistribution, and higher taxes on the wealthy, all in favor of supporting “the weak and hardworking” (BSW 2024a, b). In terms of the sociocultural dimension, the BSW takes a critical stance against so-called wokeism, the European Union (EU), and its deepening integration. They argue that political elites enforce a form of authoritarianism, dictating how people should live, eat, and speak (BSW 2024a, b). A key area where Wagenknecht and others diverge from The Left is immigration. They argue that Germany’s immigration policies are too liberal. Hence, the BSW favors tighter immigration controls, blames immigrants for exacerbating housing shortages and rising rents, and calls for increased border monitoring

(BSW 2024a, b). Again, those positions are not new or unique within the German political landscape, but the combination stands out. This distinctive platform appears to address the “left-authoritarian supply gap” in Germany’s party system. As such, these positions of the BSW could be regarded as positional issues because they resonate with the public (Stokes 1992). This unique combination could attract left-authoritarian voters who previously felt unrepresented, contributing to the party’s potential success (Herold and Otteni 2024; Steiner and Hillen 2024; Thomeczek 2024b).

Indeed, potential supporters of the BSW can be characterized by their socio-economically left and socioculturally conservative attitudes, which correlate with support for the BSW (Heckmann et al. 2025; Herold and Otteni 2024; Jankowski 2024; Steiner and Hillen 2024; Thomeczek 2024b). Drawing on Downs’ (1957) spatial proximity model and the idea that voters are motivated by policy preferences to support new parties (Hernández 2018; van De Wardt and Otjes 2022), I argue that the alignment in the left-authoritarian political space between the BSW and potential voters mobilizes them to cast their votes for the party.

H1a: The more left-leaning voters are on the socioeconomic dimension, the higher the probability of voting for the BSW.

H1b: The more conservative/right-leaning voters are on the sociocultural dimension, the higher the probability of voting for the BSW.

Besides the left-authoritarian profile of the BSW, Wagenknecht and her party make headlines for their pro-Russia positions and criticism of Ukraine, particularly regarding arms deliveries (Arzheimer 2023). Although the majority of Germans and nearly all political parties condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and called for solidarity with Ukraine, two notable exceptions stand out: first, the far-right AfD, which opposes weapons deliveries, increased defense spending, and the vilification of Russia (Arzheimer 2023; Hoffeller and Steiner 2024). Second, Wagenknecht and other prominent members of The Left—many of whom later joined the BSW—expressed concerns about the risk of escalating tensions with Russia, citing the dangers of arms shipments and strong support for Ukraine. They emphasize Germany’s long-standing tradition of non-intervention in armed conflicts, attempting to tap into the pacifist sentiments of the electorate (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024). In protest against The Left’s increasingly critical stance on Russia, Wagenknecht and others organized a peace demonstration opposing NATO, the German government’s pro-Ukraine position, and arms deliveries (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024). Wagenknecht has even been described as “[...] ‘the key figure of the current anti-war movement in Germany’” (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024, p. 6). The BSW has adopted similar foreign policy positions, framing the war in Ukraine as a “proxy war” between the United States and Russia. The party calls for an immediate halt to weapons deliveries and advocates for increased cooperation and negotiations with Russia, as well as a ceasefire to end the conflict (BSW 2024a). Additionally, the BSW demands an end to sanctions against Russia and the resumption of Russian oil, gas, and coal imports (BSW 2024b).

The BSW’s pro-Russia positions and the issue of weapons deliveries in general can be understood as positional issues (Stokes 1992). While a significant portion of the German electorate continues to support Ukraine and the federal government’s

stance, a segment of voters holds more critical views that align with the BSW's position (Mader and Schoen 2023; Masch et al. 2023). As Hoffeller and Steiner (2024) show, while attitudes toward Russia and Putin turned more negative in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion, by May 2023, 6.3% of German respondents still expressed a positive view of Putin, and 13.5% rated him neutrally. Thus, the issue seems to be highly controversial among the political elite and at the individual level. As a positional issue, foreign policy—particularly attitudes toward Russia and Ukraine—differentiates German parties by how closely they are linked to these views in the public's perception. In the case of the BSW, this connection, especially through Wagenknecht, may influence voting behavior (Stokes 1992; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024). Although foreign policy was once thought to play a minor role in electoral politics, this assumption has been increasingly challenged. Research has demonstrated that voters' decisions are influenced by their foreign policy attitudes (e.g., Aldrich et al. 1989; Schoen 2004). Wurthmann and Wagner (2024) show that the intention to vote for the BSW is positively associated with critical views on NATO and arms deliveries, a finding further supported by Thomeczek (2024b). In addition, anti-Ukraine stances drew voters toward the BSW (Heckmann et al. 2025). Given Wagenknecht's long-standing foreign policy positions, combined with the BSW's platform, it is plausible that these factors could significantly contribute to the party's electoral success.

H2: The more Russia-friendly/Ukraine-critical voters are, the more likely they are to vote for the BSW.

As previously discussed, support for a new party may not be solely driven by policy motivations; political dissatisfaction can also play a significant role (Hernández 2018; Wuttke 2020). New political parties might attract frustrated voters not by addressing previously overlooked issues but by channeling widespread discontent with established political parties. New parties often present themselves as untainted by the problems of the political establishment, which can resonate with disenchanted voters (Lago and Martínez 2011; Wuttke 2020). Moreover, new parties frequently criticize all traditional parties collectively, capitalizing on voter skepticism toward established parties that seem disconnected from public needs and interests (Bélanger 2017). When voters perceive problems in the functioning of democracy, its key institutions, and politics in general as being attributable to mainstream parties, those who are dissatisfied are more likely to shift their support to a new party rather than continue backing the established ones (Hernández 2018; Wuttke 2020). In this context, a new party serves as a vehicle for expressing distrust and signaling discontent to mainstream parties (Bélanger 2017). This dynamic has consistently been identified as a major factor driving support for non-mainstream and new parties (e.g., Bélanger 2017; Hernández 2018). Wuttke (2020) even suggests that political dissatisfaction influences support for a new party more strongly than attitudes or policy considerations.

The BSW's persistent criticism of the federal government and political elite may attract politically dissatisfied individuals. Wagenknecht and other BSW figures are vocal critics of the former traffic light coalition, which they blame for the recent economic downturn and for failing to represent the interests of the public, even suggesting that it deserves to be shown the "red card" (BSW 2024a, b). The BSW

argues that politics has become unfair and accuses the government of attempting to “reeducate” citizens on matters of lifestyle and thought. They also point to a growing distrust in key institutions, such as the media and the federal parliament, claiming that these institutions no longer reflect the majority’s views (BSW 2024a, b). In sum, the BSW appeals to politically dissatisfied voters. Braband and Candeias (2024) and Emmler and Seikel (2024) found that potential supporters of the BSW tend to have lower levels of political trust and greater dissatisfaction with democracy. This is positively correlated with support for the BSW (Herold and Otteni 2024; Jankowski 2024; Thomeczek 2024b).

The protest-voting hypothesis is supported by the link between left-authoritarian attitudes and political dissatisfaction. As previously discussed, left-authoritarians feel underrepresented by established parties (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Steiner and Hillen 2019), which can increase support for the BSW as it fills this gap for frustrated voters (Lefkofridi et al. 2014; van Der Brug and van Spanje 2009). Hakhverdian and Schakel (2022) demonstrate that this representational gap exacerbates overall political dissatisfaction, driving support for challenger and new parties (Bakker et al. 2021). Hillen and Steiner (2020) further illustrate that a left-authoritarian party, like Finland’s Finns Party (formerly known as True Finns), attracts discontented voters.

H3: The higher the political dissatisfaction, the more likely to vote for the BSW.

Another aspect that has been attributed to Wagenknecht and the BSW is populism (Braband and Candeias 2024; Herold and Otteni 2024; Thomeczek 2024a). Populism is defined here through the ideational approach, framing it as an ideology centered on the concept of “the people.” This ideology employs anti-elite rhetoric to create a sharp divide in society, portraying elites—such as politicians, banks, the media, and intellectuals—as corrupt or malevolent, while positioning populism as innovative and untainted by the establishment (Canovan 1981; Mudde 2004). Populism contrasts the alleged corruption of the elite with a focus on the citizens, often presenting itself as the true champion of the people. It emphasizes the “will of the people,” claiming that this will is neglected by traditional politicians but is central to populists’ agenda, who strive to ensure that the people’s voice is heard and prioritized (Akkerman et al. 2014; Canovan 1981; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). Thus, populism aims to place the goals and views of the populace back at the forefront of politics (Canovan 1981).

Another defining feature of populism is its one-dimensionality. Unlike ideologies such as liberalism and conservatism, which encompass a broad range of political concepts, populism focuses on a limited set of ideas and advocates for simple, often superficial solutions. This narrow programmatic scope is why populism is frequently described as a “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). Thus, populism is “[...] an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, p. 543). Hence, the ideational approach to populism is rooted in a Manichean worldview of good versus evil, emphasizing people-centrism and anti-elitism (Akkerman et al. 2014). It is posited that populism and, consequently, populist attitudes emerge when these three elements coincide (Akkerman et al. 2017; Hawkins et al. 2020).

Whether the BSW can be classified as a populist party is an open question. The party's manifesto opens with a statement asserting "[...] the will of the majority has been disregarded for years" and calling for a "[...] revival of democratic decision-making" (BSW 2024b, p. 1). This reflects a populist sentiment. In addition, Wagenknecht owns the label "populist" (Thomeczek 2024a). Her leadership style is notably people-oriented, consistently emphasizing the will of the people and aiming to "re-represent" those marginalized by the political elite (Braband and Candeias 2024; BSW 2024b). The BSW also characterizes the elite as corrupt and positions itself as a party independent of and opposed to the establishment (BSW 2024a). Thomeczek (2024a) investigated whether the individuals who defected to the BSW and its party manifesto exhibit populist traits. He concludes that "[...] the classification of the BSW as a populist party seems to be appropriate" (Thomeczek 2024a, p. 1).

Populist attitudes are prevalent among voters, allowing parties, including the BSW, to connect with large voter segments through populist rhetoric (Thomeczek 2024a). Research indicates that populist attitudes are associated with support for both right- and left-wing populist parties (e.g., Akkerman et al. 2017; Hawkins et al. 2020; Loew and Faas 2019). These attitudes can bridge gaps in programmatic alignment, helping the BSW attract voters beyond the left-authoritarian spectrum (Thomeczek 2024a). Loew and Faas (2019) and Marcos-Marne et al. (2020) suggest that populist attitudes, combined with specific policy offerings, may appeal to these voters. Additionally, if a new party aligns with populist sentiments and presents itself as a departure from the mainstream status quo, it can attract individuals with populist leanings (Marcos-Marne et al. 2020). For instance, the new parties Podemos and Ciudadanos were supported due to populist attitudes, despite Ciudadanos not being overtly labeled as populist (Marcos-Marne et al. 2020). Evidence also suggests that populist attitudes influence support for the BSW (Herold and Otteni 2024; Jankowski 2024).

H4: The stronger the voters' populist attitudes, the higher their probability to vote for the BSW.

## 4 Data Analysis

To address the research question and hypotheses, I utilized wave 26 of the GLES Panel (GLES 2024). This wave, conducted from June 12 to June 25, 2024, via computer-assisted web-based interviews (CAWI), surveyed 8469 respondents. Given that wave 26 followed the 2024 European elections, it encompasses questions about political involvement and attitudes related to both German and European politics. This provides a significant advantage for the study, extending existing literature by examining voting behavior in Germany and the actual casting of votes in the European elections. Although wave 26 is part of a panel design, it cannot be analyzed as panel data due to the BSW's non-existence in earlier waves. Another drawback is that as of this point, wave 26 is a pre-release, meaning that it does not include any information on the respondents' characteristics. Therefore, wave 26 is combined with wave 21 (GLES 2022), which includes relevant respondent characteristics.

Consequently, the final dataset consists of 4565 valid respondents without missing values, with weights adjusted for social and regional structural characteristics.

#### 4.1 Dependent Variables

Support for the BSW is reflected through voting behavior. I contrast the intended electoral choice in Germany with the actual votes cast in the 2024 European elections. The dependent variable is binary, indicating whether individuals voted or intend to vote for the BSW (= 1) or not (= 0). Hence, logistic regressions are employed. In Germany, 500 respondents indicated a potential vote for the BSW, representing about 11%, higher than the BSW's polling figure of about 7% in June (Statista 2024). For the European elections, 461 individuals reported voting for the BSW, equating to roughly 10%, which is greater than the BSW's actual result of 6.2% (Jankowski 2024). Comparing intended and actual voting behavior has both advantages and limitations. This approach extends the current literature by providing insights into both intended and actual voting patterns. First, some previous studies rely on a somewhat speculative question regarding voting intention for a party that had not yet been founded at the point in time (Braband and Candeias 2024; Emmeler and Seikel 2024; Wagner et al. 2023). Second, the 2024 European elections marked the first nationwide election in which the BSW participated. Beyond the significant media attention surrounding the party, the low threshold for gaining representation in the European Parliament in Germany may have particularly attracted voters to the BSW. Furthermore, the second-order nature of European elections, which often leads to votes driven by protest motivations or dissatisfaction with mainstream parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Schakel and Jeffery 2013; Schakel 2015), could make voters more inclined to support the BSW in this context. Therefore, potential factors associated with support for the BSW might emerge more prominently in the European elections than at the national level. Starting the analysis with the European Parliament elections and comparing these results to the national level offers valuable insights, especially for evaluating a new political party.

Nevertheless, certain limitations remain. Intended electoral choice does not always align with actual voting behavior. In addition, European elections are considered second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980), characterized by lower levels of turnout, greater opportunities for smaller and new political parties, and increased protest voting, often with national issues taking precedence. Hence, specific reasons to vote for the BSW could be over- or underrepresented.

#### 4.2 Explanatory Variables

In examining left-authoritarian attitudes, I focus on two commonly used aspects. First, the socioeconomic dimension assesses individuals' preferences regarding fewer (= 1) or higher (= 7) taxes and welfare benefits. Second, the sociocultural dimension measures attitudes toward immigration, with a scale from 1 (support-

ing more immigration) to 7 (supporting less immigration). Individuals who rate themselves higher in both dimensions are classified as left-authoritarians.<sup>1</sup>

A mean index captures pro-Russia stances with three views on the war in Ukraine. First, respondents are asked whether Germany should increase cooperation with Russia, using a scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Second, the same scale is used to assess opinions on whether Germany should resume importing Russian oil, coal, and gas. Finally, another variable measures whether Germany should exercise greater restraint in its support for Ukraine, with responses ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The index ranges from 1 (“no sympathy for Russia”) to 5 (“strong sympathy for Russia”), with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of 0.8.

Concerning political dissatisfaction, the first variable specifies respondents’ dissatisfaction with democracy in Germany. It ranges from 1 (“very satisfied”) to 5 (“very dissatisfied”). Additionally, dissatisfaction with the federal German government is assessed on a scale from +5 (“very satisfied”) to –5 (“very dissatisfied”). A mean index is created to capture trust in political institutions, with responses ranging from 1 (“completely trust”) to 5 (“completely distrust”). This index includes the federal parliament, the federal constitutional court, the federal government, and the federal armed forces, with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of 0.87. Last, populist attitudes are measured using a mean index, ranging from 1 (“no populist attitudes”) to 5 (“strong populist attitudes”). This index is based on responses to several statements rated from 1 (“do not agree at all”) to 5 (“fully agree”), with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of 0.85:

- Politicians talk too much and act too little.
- Ordinary citizens are united by a good and honest character.
- Ordinary citizens are pulling together.
- Ordinary citizens share the same values and interests.
- The differences between the people and the so-called elite are much greater than the differences within the people.
- The people, not the politicians, should make the most important political decisions.
- The politicians in parliament must follow the will of the people.
- The people should have the final word on important political issues using a referendum.

Most of these items are widely utilized in contemporary research to measure citizens’ populism, as they effectively capture the core dimensions of populist attitudes: anti-elitism, popular sovereignty, and the Manichean struggle between the two. Consequently, these items provide a more precise and comprehensive assessment of populist attitudes than traditional measures do, offering a deeper understanding of the ideational approach to populism (Schulz et al. 2018; Wuttke et al. 2020).

<sup>1</sup> An alternative approach would be to create a composite variable by averaging respondents’ scores on both dimensions (see, e.g., Hillen and Steiner 2020). Given that the BSW is a new party, it is more insightful to examine each dimension separately to better understand its distinct appeal.

### 4.3 Control Variables

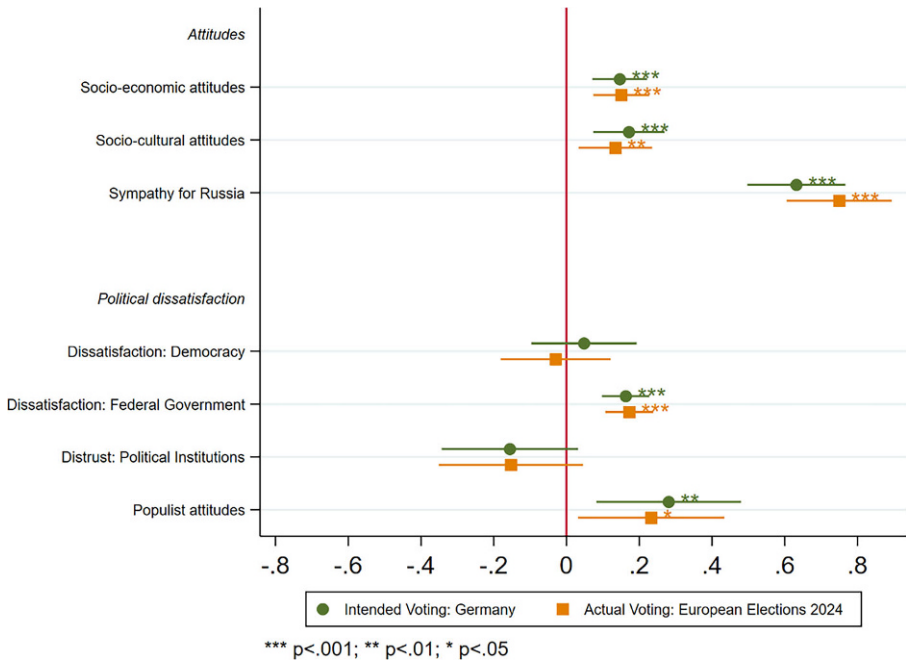
The following control variables are included: First, individuals' characteristics are captured based on their region of residence (0 = western Germany; 1 = eastern Germany), sex (0 = male; 1 = female), and age, grouped into four categories (with 18–29 years serving as the reference category). The BSW demonstrates significantly stronger support in eastern Germany, securing approximately 12% of votes compared to 5% in western Germany during the 2024 European elections. Additionally, women exhibit higher levels of support for the party in the elections in eastern Germany (Jankowski 2024). Regarding age, some observers note that the BSW's members predominantly come from older cohorts (Thomeczek 2024b). Socioeconomic background is represented solely by education level, categorized as low, middle, or high (reference group). The BSW appeals to individuals from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, as its advocacy for a robust welfare state and redistribution aligns with the interests of those in lower socioeconomic brackets (Hartmann et al. 2022). Unfortunately, data on income, labor force status, and class are unavailable.

Second, further attitudinal variables are included: general political interest, measured on a scale from 1 ("not at all interested") to 5 ("very interested"); the left–right self-placement, ranging from 1 (left) to 11 (right); and perceived fairness of one's share, with responses ranging from 1 ("much more than deserved") to 5 ("much less than deserved"). All of these aspects have been shown to influence voting behavior and the propensity to vote for a left-authoritarian party (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Lefkofridi et al. 2014). Last, respondents indicate whether they believe European integration has gone too far (7) or not far enough (1). Because Wagenknecht and her new party frequently attack the EU, they take a clear anti-EU position, which might resonate with voters (BSW 2024a, b).

## 5 Results

Figure 1 presents the findings for the associations of voting for the BSW, derived from the full models of Tables 2 and 3 of the supplementary material. Regarding left-authoritarian attitudes, the results align with the expectations. Support for the BSW is positively related to left-leaning views on the socioeconomic dimension in both types of elections. Similarly, individuals who favor restrictions on immigration are more likely to vote for the BSW, supporting hypotheses 1a and 1b. Additionally, I anticipated that pro-Russia sentiments would correlate with higher support for the BSW. The index of sympathy for Russia reveals that individuals who express greater empathy for Russia and less for Ukraine are more likely to choose the BSW. This is the case in both election types. Hypothesis 2 is thus supported.

The results regarding political dissatisfaction are less definitive. While a higher level of discontent with the federal government is associated with support for the BSW, dissatisfaction with democracy and political distrust do not show significant correlations in either election. The coefficients for political distrust even move in the opposite direction of what was expected. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is only partially

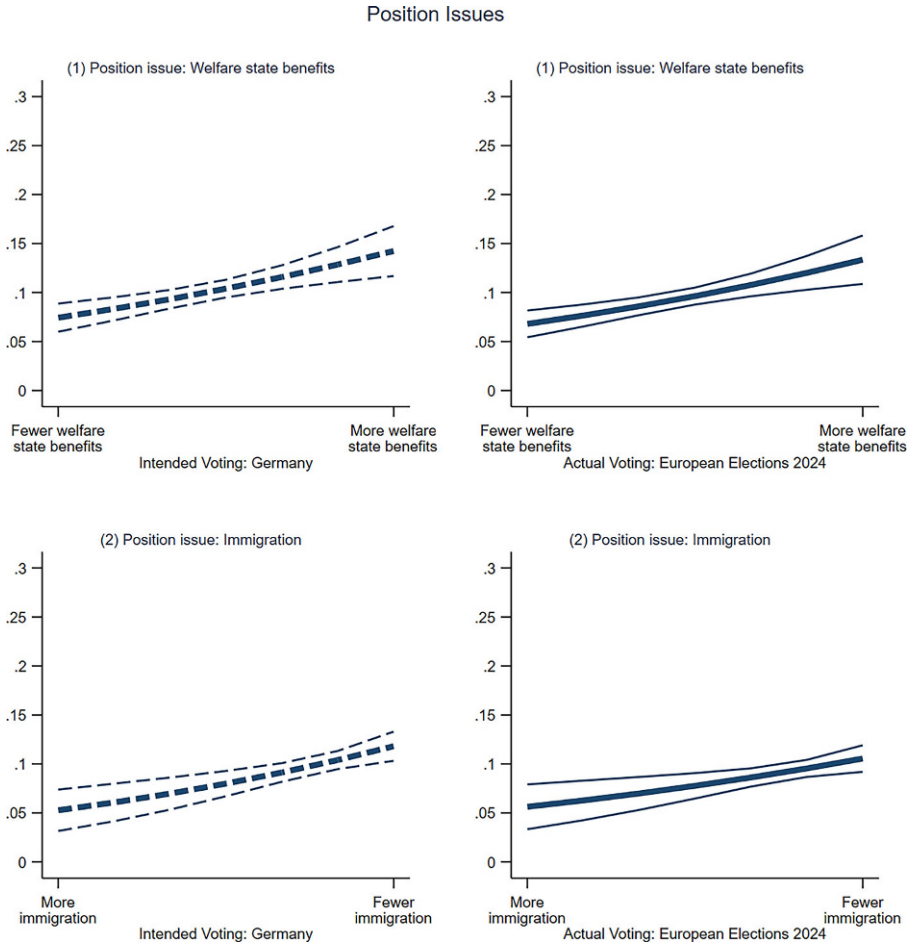


**Fig. 1** Correlates of voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht. Based on full models (Tables 2 and 3 of the supplementary material, with 95% confidence intervals). Data source: German Longitudinal Election Study Panel wave 26, version 1.0

supported by the association between dissatisfaction with the government and BSW support. In contrast, stronger populist attitudes are positively connected with voting for the BSW, thus supporting hypothesis 4.

In sum, the results reveal a general consistency across both election types, with minor exceptions. Since logistic regressions do not facilitate direct comparisons of effect sizes, the next step involves analyzing the predicted probabilities of the significant variables (Mood 2010). Figure 2 illustrates that more left-leaning socioeconomic positions and more right-leaning sociocultural attitudes are associated with a higher probability of voting for the BSW. Individuals who favor increased welfare state benefits have approximately a 13% likelihood of voting for the BSW in both election types. Similarly, those with restrictive views on immigration also exhibit a higher probability of supporting the BSW, though this effect is slightly weaker, around 11%.

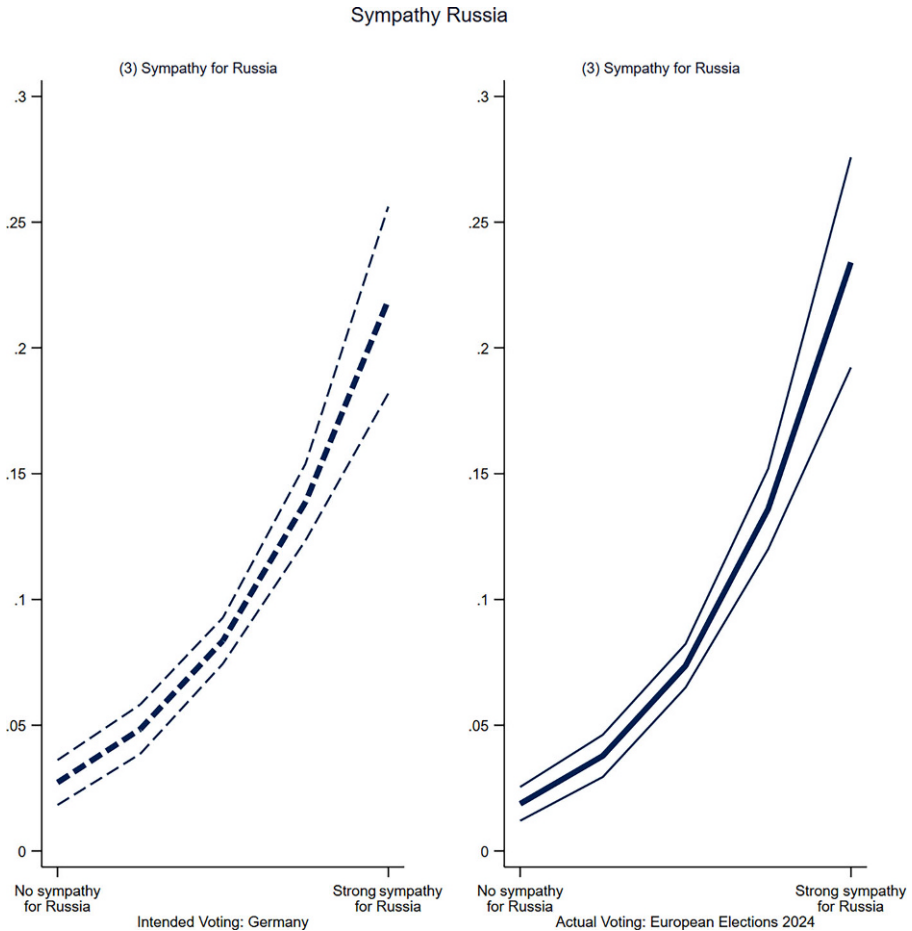
Regarding sympathy for Russia (Fig. 3), individuals who hold more positive views of Russia and negative views of Ukraine (e.g., by opposing weapons deliveries) exhibit a significantly higher probability of voting for the BSW. This effect is the strongest observed across both election types, with support for the BSW increasing by approximately 20 percentage points when moving from no sympathy to strong sympathy for Russia. Thus, the stronger the individuals' affinity for Russia, the greater their likelihood of supporting the BSW, highlighting this positional issue as the most critical factor influencing BSW voters.



**Fig. 2** Predicted probabilities for the influence of position issues on voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht. Based on full models (Tables 2 and 3 of the supplementary material, with 95% confidence intervals). Data source: German Longitudinal Election Study Panel wave 26, version 1.0

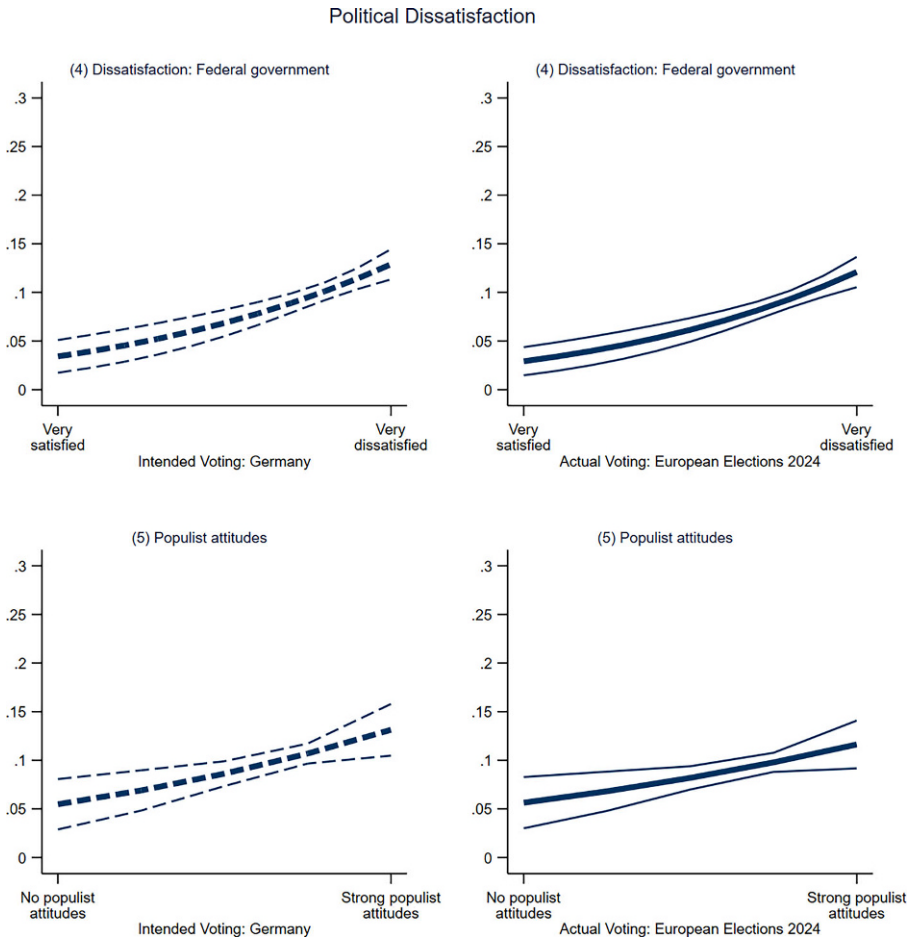
Finally, the analysis of populist attitudes and dissatisfaction with the federal government reveals consistent patterns (Fig. 4). Individuals who express dissatisfaction with the current government have roughly a 12% probability of voting for the BSW. Populist attitudes show a similar effect, with a slightly stronger influence in Germany compared to the European elections (around 13% in Germany versus 11% in the European elections). In both cases, there is a notable increase in voting probability from those very satisfied or having no populist attitudes to those very dissatisfied or having strong populist views.

In conclusion, several distinct features can characterize BSW followers: First, left-authoritarian attitudes are positively connected with support for the BSW. Second, being pro-Russia and Ukraine-critical is correlated positively with the BSW, seemingly having the strongest impact. Moreover, support for the BSW is notably



**Fig. 3** Predicted probabilities for sympathy toward Russia and voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht. Based on full models (Tables 1 and 2 of the supplementary material, with 95% confidence intervals). Data source: German Longitudinal Election Study Panel wave 26, version 1.0

higher among individuals dissatisfied with the current federal government, though discontent with democracy and political distrust do not seem to be significant factors. This pattern suggests a protest-voting dynamic, in which support for the BSW may serve as a means to express discontent with the existing government. This aligns with existing research indicating that both policy preferences and protest motivations shape support for new parties (Bakker et al. 2021; van De Wardt and Otjes 2022; van Spanje and Azrout 2020). In addition, there is a clear association between strong populist attitudes and voting for the BSW. While it remains uncertain whether the BSW can be classified as a populist party, the link between populist attitudes and support for the party is evident. This reinforces studies that connect populist attitudes with support for new parties (Marcos-Marne et al. 2020). Overall, the factors driving support for the BSW appear to overlap across different election contexts. Both policy preferences and protest sentiments, along with populist atti-



**Fig. 4** Predicted probabilities of political dissatisfaction and voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht. Based on full models (Tables 2 and 3 of the supplementary material, with 95% confidence intervals). Data source: German Longitudinal Election Study Panel wave 26, version 1.0

tudes, play a crucial role in shaping support for this relatively young party. By using more appropriate data and comparing vote intentions with actual voting behavior in different election contexts, this paper not only enhances the existing literature but also reaffirms previous insights into the factors driving individuals to support the BSW.

## 6 Discussion

Despite the insights provided, this article has several limitations. First, it is important to emphasize that the analysis focused on associations or correlations rather than causal relationships. Although the study relied on the GLES Panel, only wave 26

was used, resulting in cross-sectional data. This limitation hinders causal analysis, making it difficult to determine the causal mechanisms behind BSW support. Future research should employ longitudinal and panel data to better understand the dynamics of BSW support. Indeed, because Heckmann et al. (2025) and Jankowski (2024) use panel data, the findings here largely align with theirs, as they conclude that left-authoritarian attitudes, anti-Ukraine stances, and populist sentiments contribute to vote deflection toward the BSW. Second, the study faces limitations concerning socioeconomic background variables. The pre-release version of wave 26 lacks data on income, labor force status, and class, preventing a comprehensive examination of socioeconomic factors as control variables.

Moreover, regarding the insignificant effects observed, the simplest interpretation is that these factors are not related to the BSW. However, it may be useful to further explore whether the lack of a significant influence of political distrust toward institutions persists when excluding dissatisfaction with democracy and the federal government as well as populist attitudes, as these are correlated. Again, political distrust is not significant, further reinforcing the finding that political distrust, in general, is not associated with support for the BSW (see Table 7 in the supplementary material). Fourth, the sociocultural dimension is often divided into two subdimensions: “liberal” attitudes, which favor individual freedom and international political integration, and “conservative” attitudes, which encompass traditional values and resistance to diversity (Kriesi et al. 2012; Steiner and Hillen 2024).<sup>2</sup> Steiner and Hillen (2024) specifically investigated the “morality dimension” but did not find a link to BSW support. Unfortunately, the current analysis did not include additional variables for these dimensions due to data limitations. Furthermore, attitudes toward other international actors, such as the United States or China, were excluded because they likely reflect country stereotypes and are influenced by contextual factors (Mader and Schoen 2023). Additionally, this study did not address vote-switching dynamics. There is speculation that the BSW might attract voters from the AfD due to its critical stance on migration, or from left parties such as The Left, due to its socioeconomic profile (Thomeczek 2024b; Wagner et al. 2023). However, Heckmann et al. (2025) and Jankowski (2024) demonstrate that the BSW draws support mainly from former supporters of the AfD, the SPD, and The Left, although there are differences in the time of comparison.

Another potential limitation relates to the dependent variables. In addition to the challenges associated with measuring intended and actual voting behavior, it may be more insightful to utilize a scalometer or propensities to vote (PTV). These methods are particularly advantageous when analyzing smaller or newer parties, as strategic voting considerations tend to have less impact on PTV measures (Thomeczek 2024b; van der Eijk et al. 2006). To address this, a robustness check was conducted using a rating scale for the BSW (ranging from -5, “do not like the party at all,” to +5, “like the party very much”) and ordinary least squares regressions (see Table 4 in the supplementary material). The results largely align with those from the voting analysis, but there are some differences regarding political dissatisfaction. Specifically,

<sup>2</sup> This differentiation is commonly described as the “old” versus “new” cultural dimensions (see, e.g., Kriesi et al. 2012).

stronger discontent with democracy is positively associated with a greater likelihood of liking the BSW, whereas dissatisfaction with the government is not. On the contrary, political distrust is negatively correlated with BSW support, suggesting that individuals with higher political mistrust are less likely to favor the party. This indicates some variation between the determinants of voting for the BSW and rating the party. However, it is important to recognize that supporters of a new party are often heterogeneous, and a more crystallized supporter base may only emerge over time (Hernández 2018; van De Wardt and Otjes 2022; van Spanje and Azrout 2020).

Nevertheless, one possible influential factor that has not been addressed is the influence of Sahra Wagenknecht, the omnipresent face of the BSW. Not only is the party named after her, but she is also one of its coleaders. The BSW's strong personalization around Wagenknecht gives her substantial influence over party issues and reflects a top-down approach (Braband and Candeias 2024). As one of Germany's prominent politicians, Wagenknecht's visibility is a key feature of the BSW's campaign. Despite not being the leading candidate in the European and eastern German elections, her image was central to the party's campaign agenda (Thomeczek 2024a). Given that voters often support candidates they are familiar with (Campbell et al. 1960), it is reasonable to assume that Wagenknecht's visibility and appeal significantly impact support for the BSW. As current studies on the BSW neglect the influence of Wagenknecht on support for her party (e.g., Heckmann et al. 2025; Jankowski 2024; Thomeczek 2024b), the leadership valence of Wagenknecht extends current research.

In this sense, Table 5 in the supplementary material includes the rating of Wagenknecht from -5 ("do not like her at all") to +5 ("like her very much") on the dependent variables of voting for and rating the BSW.<sup>3</sup> Several notable conclusions emerge: First, individuals who rate Wagenknecht more favorably are significantly more likely to vote for the BSW and to rate the party more positively. This association underscores her influence on BSW support, even though she was not an official candidate at the time (Campbell et al. 1960). Additionally, some variables previously linked to BSW support lose their significance when Wagenknecht's rating is considered. Specifically, the sociocultural dimension, dissatisfaction with the federal government, and populist attitudes become less relevant in predicting BSW support and ratings. This suggests that Wagenknecht may serve as a focal point for attitudes toward these issues, though it is uncertain whether she influences these attitudes or if the attitudes impact her rating. Since the causal mechanisms driving these effects remain unclear, Table 6 in the supplementary material includes respondents' ratings of Wagenknecht as the outcome variable. Except for dissatisfaction with the federal government, all explanatory variables are significantly associated with how respondents perceive Wagenknecht. Higher ratings are linked to left-authoritarian attitudes, sympathy for Russia, dissatisfaction with democracy, and populist attitudes. Conversely, stronger political distrust is negatively correlated with sympathy for Wagenknecht. This raises questions about the causal relationship between Wagenknecht's ratings and support for the BSW. Given the strong correlation be-

<sup>3</sup> A test for multicollinearity between rating BSW and Wagenknecht revealed no robust multicollinearity, although the correlation is strong (see Fig. 1 in the supplementary material).

tween the two (see Fig. 1 in the supplementary material), it is uncertain whether Wagenknecht's rating shapes these attitudes or whether these attitudes influence her rating. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and future panel studies are necessary to clarify the causal pathways between these variables.

Yet the lack of significant associations with sociocultural attitudes in Table 5 aligns with findings by Herold and Otteni (2024), who also found no correlation between sociocultural conservatism and BSW support in their full model. This might reflect a shift in priorities among BSW supporters, possibly due to economic challenges and inflation in Germany over the past 2 years, which may lead them to prioritize socioeconomic issues over sociocultural ones. Furthermore, with the AfD already catering to immigration-critical sentiments, such issues may weigh less for BSW supporters. It could also refute notions of left-authoritarian support for the BSW. Yet Wagenknecht's favorability emerges as the strongest predictor of BSW support (see Fig. 2 in the supplementary material). This indicates that her appeal might dominate other attitudes and political dissatisfaction among her supporters.

## 7 Conclusion

Amid ongoing struggles and internal disputes, Sahra Wagenknecht, a leading figure in German politics, left her previous party, The Left, to establish her new party, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht—Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit. Shortly thereafter, several famous members of The Left followed her, citing dissatisfaction with “too liberal” policies of their former party. The BSW has been vocal in criticizing the lack of negotiations with Russia, the arms supplies to Ukraine, and the open borders leading to high immigration rates. The BSW occupies a distinctive position in the German political landscape. While advocating for restrictive immigration policies, it also champions left-wing stances on issues such as redistribution, welfare, and taxation. This combination positions the BSW as a “left-authoritarian” party, a unique blend that has not been seen in Germany. Additionally, the BSW's anti-elitism stances resonate with politically dissatisfied citizens. The party garnered around 6% of the vote in the 2024 European elections and achieved third place in the 2024 state elections in Saxony and Thuringia. This has shifted attention to understanding the factors driving support for the BSW.

Therefore, this article examined possible determinants of support for the BSW, focusing on the interplay between policy considerations and protest motivations. I hypothesized that support for the BSW would be positively associated with left-authoritarian attitudes, political discontent, and favorable views toward Russia. Relying on wave 26 of the GLES Panel, this study contrasted intended voting behavior in Germany with actual voting outcomes in the 2024 European elections. Left-authoritarian and Russia-friendly attitudes, dissatisfaction with the government, and populist sentiments are positively correlated with BSW support. However, no significant association was found with dissatisfaction with democracy or with political distrust. Notably, Wagenknecht's influence seems to be a dominant factor, overshadowing other potential explanations, although the exact causal mechanism remains unhidden.

The combination of left-authoritarian positions, pro-Russia sentiments, and political dissatisfaction appears to resonate strongly with BSW supporters. Wagenknecht's prominent role as the face of the BSW likely reinforces this support. The party may be filling a representational gap for left-authoritarian voters, potentially mobilizing those who previously felt politically abandoned. However, if the BSW continues to grow in influence, electoral volatility and party fragmentation, for example, could become greater challenges. Hence, this study underscores the potential for future research to further explore the BSW, its voter base, and its wider political impact. Overall, the findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that new parties often benefit from a combination of policy preferences and protest motivations. Rather than introducing entirely new issues, the BSW succeeds by bundling existing issues and offering representation to previously overlooked voters. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how the BSW and its electorate evolve.

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