JOURNAL OF ELECTIONS, PUBLIC OPINION AND PARTIES
2026, VOL. 36, NO. 3, 802–815
https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2025.2513293

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Much ado about nothing? Understanding Germany's Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) potential voters

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 European Elections not only saw increased vote shares for the radical right but also debuted the recently launched Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) with an impressive 6.2% vote share. Before the German federal election 2025, the parliamentary group held ten seats in German parliament and was led by former THE LEFT politician Sahra Wagenknecht. Wagenknecht's long-term anti-immigration stance suggests the emergence of a new left-authoritarian platform. This research delves into the demand for BSW and its left-authoritarian agenda within Germany. Leveraging individual-level data analysis, we investigate the structural factors influencing preferences for Wagenknecht's new party. Our findings show that those expressing scepticism towards immigration and weapon supplies to Ukraine are predicted to be more likely to support BSW. Most importantly, this study finds that one's perception of party leader Wagenknecht is the driving force behind BSW support. By examining the electoral potential of BSW under Wagenknecht's leadership, this study provides crucial insights into the evolving dynamics of German politics and the ramifications of this new entrant on the political spectrum.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 12 June 2024; Accepted 23 December 2024

1 A new left-Conservative party emerging?

The landscape of German politics witnessed a significant shift with the launch of Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), a new political entity spearheaded by Sahra Wagenknecht. The BSW already witnessed first successes, most recently at the European Parliament elections in 2024 where the party achieved 6.2% of the vote share only five months after its launch. The launch of this new

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2025.2513293.

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party comes in the wake of heightened speculation following Wagenknecht's departure from her previous party, THE LEFT, and her subsequent decision to form a distinct political platform. The emergence of BSW introduces a novel player in the political arena, promising to challenge established paradigms and reshape the German party system. Building upon the groundwork laid by Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek (2023) and Thomeczek (2025), which explored the potential ramifications of Wagenknecht's anticipated departure and the formation of a new party, this research note focuses on a post-launch analysis of BSW. As Wagenknecht's vision materialises into a tangible political force, it becomes imperative to delve deeper into the dynamics surrounding BSW's inception, its ideological positioning, and its electoral prospects. Drawing upon 2024 German Longitudinal Election Study data, this study examines factors driving support for BSW and delineate its impact on the broader political landscape. By analysing the preferences of various demographic segments, the ideological underpinnings of BSW's platform, and the implications of its emergence on Germany's political equilibrium, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics catalysed by the formation of BSW. The results show that while immigration is a factor driving BSW voters, the leadership personality outweighs these factors significantly. This is particularly relevant given that the BSW narrowly missed entering the German Bundestag in the 2025 federal election with 4.98 percent of the vote, and it was briefly uncertain whether Wagenknecht would withdraw from politics altogether.

2 The German party landscape in transition

For a long time, primarily one-dimensional models were used to structure and categorise Western party systems (Dalton 2013). The debate has shifted as alongside a horizontal socioeconomic left-right cleavage, a vertical cultural dimension has emerged (Norris and Inglehart 2019). This is described either as a conflict between integration vs. demarcation in a national protectionist context (Kriesi et al. 2006) or as a value conflict between green-alternative-libertarian (GAL) values on one hand and traditional-authoritarian-nationalist (TAN) values on the other (Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Marks 2024; Marks et al. 2006).

While socioeconomically left positions advocate for welfare measures and higher taxes for the wealthy, socioeconomically right positions, in contrast, advocate for less state intervention in the market economy and emphasise greater social responsibility (Debus 2022; Norris and Inglehart 2019). The sociocultural conflict dimension captures the societal-political opposition along conservative and progressive poles, covering issues such as LGBTQ rights, immigration, abortion and openness for alternative lifestyles (Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Marks 2024; Debus and Wurthmann 2024). This two-dimensional

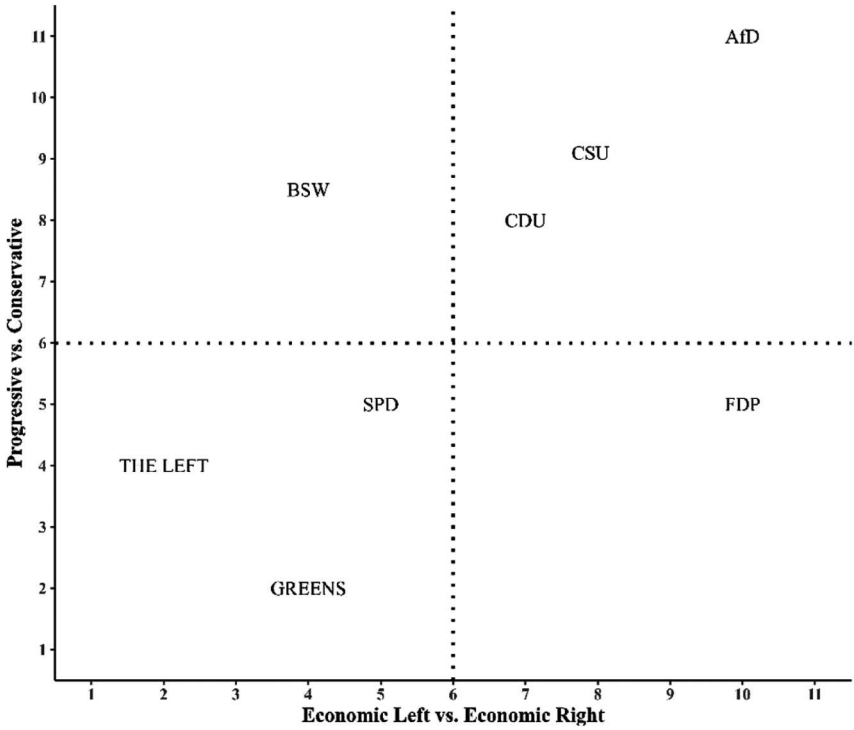

Figure 1. The German party system before the 2024 EP elections, Source: Author's own calculation and presentation, based on Thomeczek, Wurthmann, and Stecker (2024).

spatial model has been deemed adequate in describing the German party system (Jankowski et al. 2022; Norris and Inglehart 2019). The German party system can be mapped onto a four-field matrix (see Figure 1). It consists of a left-liberal quadrant, representing parties that are socioeconomically left-leaning and socioculturally liberal. There's also a right-liberal quadrant, encompassing parties that are socioeconomically right-leaning and socioculturally conservative. Additionally, there's a left-conservative quadrant, comprising parties that are socioeconomically left-leaning and socioculturally conservative. Finally, there's a right-conservative quadrant, representing parties that are socioeconomically right-leaning and socioculturally conservative (Debus 2022). While SPD, Greens, and The Left are to be located within the left-liberal spectrum, CDU, CSU, and AfD occupy the right-conservative spectrum, and the FDP represents the right-liberal spectrum. The left-conservative spectrum, however, has remained an unoccupied space for a long time (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Herold and Otteni 2025; Jankowski 2025; Jankowski et al. 2022; Steiner and Hillen 2025; Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023). Although there is an electoral demand for a political force to represent both, socioeconomically left-wing positions in combination with

traditionalist-conservative stances (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014; Steiner and Hillen 2021), no party in Germany has yet been successful in establishing itself in this spectrum. Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek (2023) therefore concluded that the prospects for a party positioned accordingly could be promising.

The manifesto of the newly launched BSW emphasises the need to address systemic inequalities and prioritise the well-being of ordinary citizens over the interests of the wealthy and powerful (BSW 2024). Key points include proposals for progressive taxation to redistribute wealth, measures to ensure affordable housing for all, and initiatives to strengthen workers' rights and protections. Additionally, the BSW aligns closer to the right-wing on sociocultural issues, such as immigration and gender diversity. The positions of the BSW include restrictions on immigration, criticism towards green politics, ending supply of weaponry to Ukraine, and a negotiated settlement to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The BSW advocates for economic interventionism and increased social welfare benefits, funded by the wealthy, while preserving medium-sized companies and family businesses. The BSW's blend of centre-left economic policies, neo-liberal ideas, and conservative stances on sociocultural matters means that newly launched BSW may fill in the left-conservative supply gap (Wagner and Wurthmann 2025). For this reason, the BSW is positioned within this political gap according to an expert survey conducted ahead of the 2024 European elections (see Figure 1).

While the BSW is unique in the German party system through its combination of policy preferences, it is also special through its highly personalised and centralised structure (for review of personalisation see Lioy 2023). The party follows the logic of the personalised entrepreneurial issue party with the party leader being the charismatic figure at the top of the party (Harmel and Svåsand 1993). While the party is still in its infancy of development, the role of Wagenknecht within the BSW follows in line of a number of recent personal parties gaining fast "electoral success [that] can rapidly structure themselves on an institutional and organizational level" (Lioy 2023, pp. 829–830). The eponym and party leader of the BSW Sahra Wagenknecht is one of the most well-known politicians in Germany. She appeals to the frustrations of the voters and is perceived as competent among people in Eastern Germany and AfD supporters while simultaneously being a widely polarising figure (Focus 2023). Initial findings suggest that Wagenknecht herself and her party could primarily attract attention through populist rhetoric (Hoffmann 2025; Thomeczek 2024). However, is the support for BSW is guided by political attitudes, individual's ideological self-perception, or rather by evaluating Sahra Wagenknecht herself? Recent literature on personalisation shows that while social structure was historically crucial in shaping citizens' attitudes, recent changes have heightened the

importance of personality in political leadership (Blondel and Thiebault 2009). This has resulted in the centrality of leader perceptions in voting behaviour (Garzia 2019). While all populist parties entail strong link between leadership and mass, highly personalised leadership is mostly present in small parties (Blondel and Thiebault 2009). Therefore, Wagenknecht may significantly contribute to the vote intentions of individuals, dominating over the issue-based appeal.

3 Research design

This analysis utilises 2024 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) cross-sectional data, conducted between the in March (T57) and June/July (T58) 2024. The GLES employs a quota sampling methodology designed to reflect the demographic composition of the wider populace, facilitated through collaboration an online access panel. Weighting procedures are employed within the GLES framework to align the dataset with representative population characteristics, thereby enhancing the accuracy of subsequent analyses. A total of 2,254 individuals participated in the surveys used for this study. Due to further data cleaning processes, some respondents were excluded because they did not provide information on their current voting intentions or potential abstention from voting. Additionally, others were excluded for being unwilling or unable to respond to certain key variables. Consequently, 1,638 individuals remain for the analysis.

3.1 Dependent variable

The present analysis aims to elucidate voting intentions in favour of the newly established party, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), as of January 8th. Overall, 10.49 percent of the respondents express their intention to vote for the new party if there was a federal election next Sunday. Additionally, 26.12 percent intend to vote for the CDU/CSU, 14.57 percent for the SPD, 6.43 percent for the FDP, 10.84 percent for the GREENS, 3.64 percent for THE LEFT, 20.44 percent for the AfD, 3.95 percent for other parties, and 3.53 percent plan to abstain from voting. Given our specific interest in the positioning and differentiation of the BSW compared to other electorates and non-voters, the group of voters for other parties is chosen as the reference category in the subsequent multivariate models. This group is particularly suitable as it encompasses a diverse mix of voter groups.

3.2 Independent variables

As outlined, we initially consider three factors that could functionally contribute to mobilising potential voters for the new BSW party. Firstly, we examine

political attitudes and focus on the political leadership, as it is premature to assume a more long-term factor such as party identification at this stage (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960). Additionally, we incorporate ideological self-placement along the left-right continuum, as described by Dalton (2013) as a super-issue indicator.

Regarding political attitudes, we assess respondents' attitudes towards welfare state policies, immigration, gender equality, and climate policy. Concerning welfare state attitudes, respondents were asked to position themselves on a scale ranging from (1) *favouring lower taxes and fewer social welfare benefits* to (11) *advocating for higher social welfare benefits despite increased taxes*. We subsequently reverse-coded this indicator, such that lower taxes and fewer social welfare benefits, reflecting a more economically liberal stance and socioeconomically right-leaning attitudes (Norris and Inglehart 2019), corresponded to higher values. Conversely, the expansion of social welfare benefits,1 represented by lower values, reflects the socioeconomically left-leaning pole (Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023).

Attitudes towards immigration were assessed on a scale ranging from (1) *advocating for facilitated immigration for foreigners* to (11) *supporting restricted immigration for foreigners*. To capture climate policy attitudes, we employed a scale where (1) *prioritising climate change mitigation, even at the expense of economic growth*, contrasts with (11) *prioritising economic growth, even if it hinders efforts to combat climate change*.

The dimension of personalisation for the co-party leader, Sahra Wagenknecht, who has lent her name to the new party formation, is captured through a scale-based variable, where respondents' attitudes towards her were assessed, utilising a scale ranging from (1) *I do not think much of this person at all*, to (11) *I think a great deal of this person*.

Regarding respondents' ideological self-placement, they were asked to position themselves along a one-dimensional spectrum ranging from (1) *left* to (11) *right*.

3.3 Controls

As control variables, we further incorporate age, level of education, and the sex of the respondents as they have been shown to be relevant predictors of voting behaviour in Germany (Wurthmann 2022). Additionally, we include an indicator distinguishing between respondents residing in (0) Western Germany and (1) Eastern Germany. Furthermore, we control for self-reported occupational status, as Wagenknecht consistently asserts her commitment to representing the interests of self-identifying blue-collar individuals within the population (Wagenknecht 2022). Hence, we categorise respondents as (1) current or former blue-collar individuals, contrasting with those to whom this does not apply (0). Finally, attitudes towards weapons supply to Ukraine are highly

significant for the German public and BSW supporters (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Hoffmann 2025; Wurthmann and Wagner 2025). Therefore, we further control for stances on this issue, ranging from being against a weapons supply stop (1) to being in favour of a weapons supply stop (5). Finally, we control for the survey wave of data collection.

3.4 Methodological approach

To address the question of which factors influence voting intentions in favour of the newly founded BSW party, we employ multinominal regression analysis, using voters for other minor parties as the reference category due to their heterogeneous ideological profile. As it can be assumed that support for BSW is largely driven by attitudes towards Wagenknecht, we proceed in two steps. First, we calculate models that include all variables except for respondents' evaluations of the politician Sahra Wagenknecht (base model). Second, we incorporate these evaluations into the analysis (full model). Before delving into the multivariate findings, we present a series of descriptive findings to provide context for understanding the BSW and its potential voters.

4 Analysis

4.1 Descriptives

Despite recent findings that have expanded our perspective (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Herold and Otteni 2025; Hoffmann 2025; Jankowski 2025; Steiner and Hillen 2025), our understanding of BSW and its potential electorate remains incomplete. Consequently, to shed light on BSW's prospects and positions, this descriptive analysis includes comparisons to supporters of other parties, offering valuable insights on where party supporters stand after the new party has been launched.

In terms of immigration-specific attitudes, potential BSW voters tend to be comparatively restrictive, although less so than supporters of the far-right AfD. Nevertheless, they are more sceptical about immigration than supporters of the Christian Democrats. Less pronounced, but still sceptical about immigration, are the voters of the SPD and FDP. Only the supporters of the GREENS and THE LEFT are liberal on this issue. Regarding welfare state attitudes, BSW supporters are positioned relatively centrally, but with a slight tendency towards lower taxes and less welfare state intervention. Thus, they occupy a centrist position among party electorates – voters of the GREENS, SPD, and THE LEFT tend to support more welfare state policies, while those of the CDU/CSU, FDP, and AfD are more inclined to oppose them. Turning to climate policy attitudes, BSW supporters lean towards a rather centrist position with a tendency to favour market friendly policies.

FDP and CDU/CSU supporters position themselves somewhat more business friendly, while AfD supporters exhibit a notably stronger stance. Supporters of SPD, THE LEFT, and GREENS, in contrast, lean towards combating climate change rather than prioritising economic interests. BSW supporters are also centrally positioned on the left-right dimension – slightly left-leaning. Also situated on the left spectrum are SPD, GREENS and THE LEFT supporters. In contrast, FDP and CDU/CSU supporters lean somewhat towards the centre, while AfD lean slightly more to the right. BSW founding member Sahra Wagenknecht is highly popular among BSW supporters and somewhat less popular, but still positively rated, among THE LEFT and AfD supporters. A rather negative view is held by CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP and GREENS supporters (see Online Appendix Figures A1-A5 and Tables A1–A5 for more details). Overall, BSW supporters generally hold moderate, centrist views, though they lean slightly to the right, while identifying themselves as somewhat centre-left on the left-right political spectrum.

4.2 Factors predicting BSW vote intentions

Upon examining the findings of the multinomial regression analysis in Figure 2, it becomes evident that two anticipated factors significantly and positively influence voting intention in favour of the BSW: an anti-immigration stance ($p < 0.1$) and the view that no further weapons should be supplied to Ukraine ($p < 0.01$). These results corroborate previous findings (e.g. Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Herold and Otteni 2025; Hoffmann 2025; Jankowski 2025; Steiner and Hillen 2025; Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023; Wurthmann

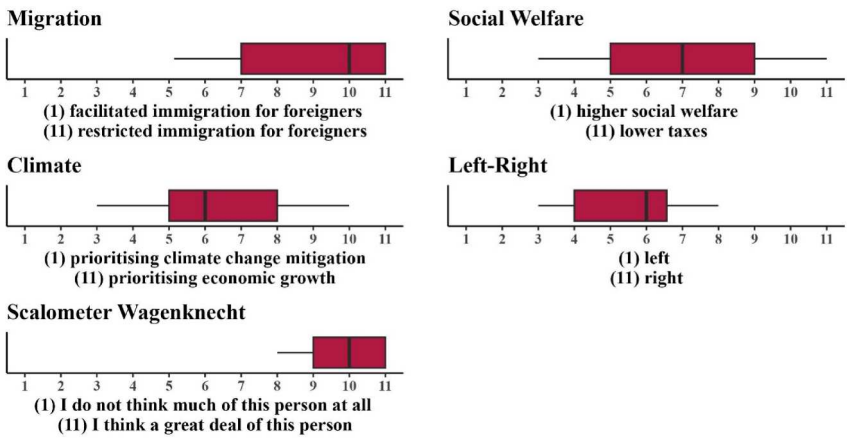

Figure 2. BSW voters' attitudes distribution, Source: Author's own calculation and presentation, based on GLES (2024a, 2024b). Note: N = 163. For more details about the distribution, see Boxplot Figures A1-A5 and Tables A1-A5 in the Online Appendix.

and Wagner 2025). Attitudes towards the welfare state and economy, climate policy, and self-positioning on a left-right scale remain insignificant in the base model. The findings are intriguing for two reasons. On the one hand, opposition to further arms deliveries and immigration leads to a higher likelihood of voting for the AfD – with the opposing positions leading to support for the GREENS, who act as BSW's and AfD's antithesis in this context. On the other hand, the factors above of ideological self-positioning and welfare politics are essential for explaining support for the already established parties CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, GREENS, LEFT, and AfD (see Online Appendix Table A6). This might mirror BSW's relatively new and unelaborated policy profile.

However, when the attitudes towards Wagenknecht are factored into the analysis, it is apparent that this factor can sustainably and positively influence voting intention in favour of the BSW ($p < 0.001$). At the same time, the significance of attitudes towards immigration policy and arms deliveries diminishes (see Figure 2). Interestingly, there is also a significant, albeit considerably weaker, correlation between a positive evaluation of Wagenknecht and voting for the CDU/CSU ($p < 0.05$), the LEFT ($p < 0.001$), and the AfD ($p < 0.001$).

Upon examining attitudes toward Sahra Wagenknecht, we find that she is particularly well-regarded by individuals hold anti-immigration views ($p < 0.1$), oppose climate protection ($p < 0.001$) and weapon supplies to Ukraine ($p < 0.001$) (see Online Appendix Table A7). This observation helps explain

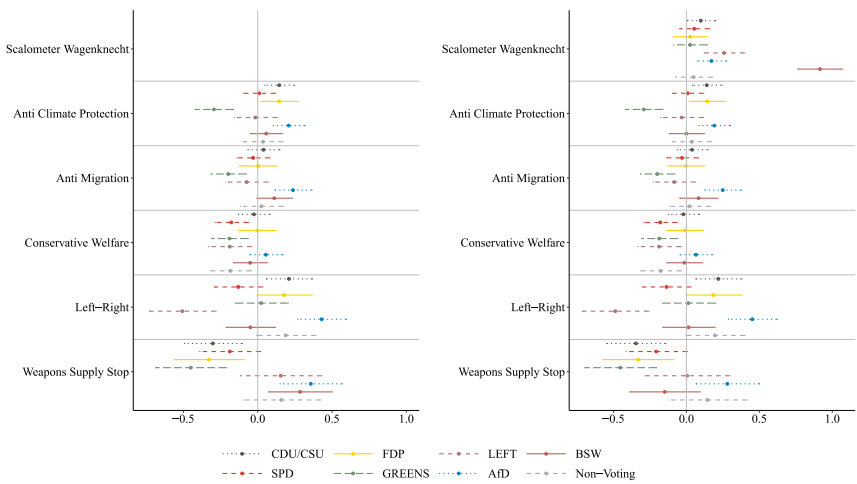

Figure 3. Predicting vote intention - base models (left panel) and full models (right panel), Source: Author's own calculation and presentation, based on GLES (2024a, 2024b). Log-Odds and 95% confidence intervals based on the multinomial regression coefficients are given. See Online Appendix Table A6 for full details. N = 1,638. Note: Voting for other parties serves as the reference category in our multinominal models.

the effects seen when Wagenknecht is included in the full model (see Figure 3). Moreover, given that BSW has found much of its success in Eastern German states during the European elections, there is a significant positive effect observed among those living in Eastern Germany and identifying as blue-collar workers (see Online Appendix Table A7). Interestingly, however, a more right-leaning ideological position leads to a more negative evaluation of Wagenknecht. Conversely, a more left-leaning self-assessment continues to result in a positive evaluation of Wagenknecht (see Online Appendix Table A7). Controlling for a non-linear relationship yields no significant findings supporting these results.

Testing for multicollinearity using the Condition Index revealed values between 1 and 2.29, confirming the robustness of our full model, as these are well below critical thresholds. Similarly, the VIF values for the linear model analysing the evaluation of Sahra Wagenknecht range from 1.04–1.59, indicating no evidence of multicollinearity.

Finally, we consider whether our model may be over-specified by including both ideological left-right self-positioning and issue positions. To address this, we re-ran our multinomial regression models using voters of other parties as the reference category, first excluding the issue positions (see Online Appendix Table A8) and then excluding the left-right self-positioning (see Online Appendix Table A9). In the BSW models, we see no substantial changes.[1]

5 Conclusion

The German party system is undergoing a period of change, which is evident not only through the increasing successes of the radical right-wing AfD and the struggling mainstream parties (Hansen and Olsen 2024). A systematic weakening of party allegiance (Dalton 2013) and the growing fragmentation in voter demands are fostering strategic processes of change. The emergence of the Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht – Reason and Justice (BSW) aims to address increasingly fragmented interests, including those of precarious workers, and claims to represent a broader societal group that no longer feels represented (Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023). This is evident in their economic, social, and immigration positions, as well as in societal transformations such as environmental positions and gender equality (Wagenknecht 2022).

Given the left-conservative supply gap in Germany that no party has managed to address successfully (Norris and Inglehart 2019), despite evident demand from the voters' side (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Steiner and

[1]Figure A7 in the Online Appendix shows how left-right self-positioning influences vote intention based on predicted probabilities in our full model, with no impact on BSW vote intention.

Hillen 2021), BSW appears to have a promising starting point. The European Parliament elections 2024 showed that the BSW has a significant voter potential, especially in Eastern German states. Nevertheless, the initial finding by Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek (2023) suggesting that a Wagenknecht party could fill the existing political vacuum, excluded the role of Wagenknecht and her personalised leadership.

While it is evident that anti-immigration stances have a significant and positive influence on the support for a party led by Sahra Wagenknecht, this only holds true until the personalisation factor of Wagenknecht is included in the modelling. Wagenknecht has been known for her anti-immigration and anti-war positions for years (Wagner and Wurthmann 2025; Wurthmann and Wagner 2025). The effect of such is evident in the support for the party by those opposing further weapon supplied to Ukraine, an issue that Wagenknecht has successfully owned since the start of the Russian invasion in 2022 (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Hoffmann 2025). Her positions on immigration align, however, less with those of the far-right AfD but rather more with those of the Christian Democratic CDU/CSU. Wagenknecht seems to be a conservative proxy, a notion that resonates strongly with those inclined towards the centre-left. Consequently, she effectively embodies the anticipated attributes within the left-conservative spectrum on a personal level. One may argue that this finding derives from an information short-cut that voters have developed with Wagenknecht, meaning that voters attribute many position issues to her person and thus, any other factors are absorbed by her personalised leadership, enabled through the small, and highly top-down, structure of the BSW (Blondel and Thiebault 2009). While the personality factor itself may be a projection of multiple different facets, such as her charisma, positions and long-standing media presence (Garzia 2019), an important takeaway from this analysis is that Sahra Wagenknecht is a substantial driving force behind the BSW potential. Though this analysis is not able to causally separate the appeal of Wagenknecht's personality from the issues that she represents, we show that the personalised leadership is an essential factor for her electorate.

Simultaneously, we do not observe significant effects of ideological self-positioning on potential BSW voting intention. On one hand, it seems clear that Wagenknecht, who describes herself as needing a party that moves beyond the traditional left-right divide (Wagenknecht 2022), does not strongly appeal to voters with a fixed ideological stance. While BSW has been labelled a left-authoritarian party, the party does not seem to generate significant interest among those who identify as left-wing, at least not in a directly observable manner. So far, BSW has positioned itself rather centrally in their economic profile and Wagenknecht, argues that the German party landscape needs a party that moves beyond the traditional left-right divide

(Wagenknecht 2022). While she does not strongly appeal to voters with a fixed ideological stance, the BSW appears to be successful, particularly on issues where, as our analysis shows, the radical right AfD also resonates. Socio-economic issues, which are a key focus of a left-wing economic party (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023) are potentially less salient to the BSW electorate. Further research is necessary to explore whether these issues might hold greater relevance for certain segments of the electorate that have switched or might consider switching to this new party.

However, this analysis remains provisional and merely serves as an exploratory analysis on how BSW voters might be mobilised in the future. Based on the available cross-sectional data, it is not possible to identify long-term or clear causal mechanisms for vote intentions - panel data published to date, however, do not yet cover the 2025 federal election (see, e.g. Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2025; Steiner and Hillen 2025). Therefore, at this stage, we can only describe initial patterns that potentially pave the way for BSW to become an electorally successful party within the left-conservative spectrum in the long term. Future research should particularly focus on exploring the causal relationship between Wagenknecht's personalised appeal and her political positions to better understand whether support for the BSW is driven by an affinity for Wagenknecht herself or if her appeal is rooted in her policy positions. It will also need to be clarified whether the electoral prospects of the BSW have been much ado about nothing. However, at this moment, that question remains unresolved - even though BSW has not been succesful entering the German parliament after the 2025 federal election.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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