GERMAN POLITICS
2026, VOL. 35, NO. 3, 541–562
https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2025.2586054

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Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): Curse or Blessing for AfD in the State Elections?

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 state elections in eastern Germany became a focal point of debate, not only because of the AfD's strong performances. These elections witnessed the debut of the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) in German state politics. Research suggests that the left-conservative and populist stance of this new party could affect the AfD's voter base, potentially attracting significant support, particularly in eastern Germany. This study investigates the impact of the BSW on the AfD in the 2024 state elections in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg. It aims to determine whether and how the Sahra Wagenknecht-led alliance affects the AfD's electorate. By leveraging GLES survey data, which includes oversampling for the eastern German state elections, the study examines the direct competition between AfD and BSW. We assess whether the factors that previously motivated AfD voters are now also driving support for BSW – or whether BSW is attracting these voters for different reasons. Furthermore, the study uses the popular German voting advice application Wahl-O-Mat to analyse the programmatic alignment between BSW, AfD, and other parties. This analysis aims to provide a thorough understanding of the dynamics introduced by new political players and their influence on AfD's prospects in the eastern German state elections.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 26 March 2025; Accepted 3 November 2025

The Rise of the BSW in Eastern Germany: A New Challenger to the AfD?

Although Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) narrowly failed to surpass the five-percent threshold in the 2025 federal election, the party achieved remarkable success in eastern Germany. The BSW emerged as the third

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strongest force in the state elections in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia. These electoral gains were followed by coalition negotiations in various constellations. While a CDU-SPD-BSW alliance failed in Saxony, coalition governments were successfully formed in Thuringia and Brandenburg, where the BSW now governs alongside the Social Democratic Party. In all three states, the BSW – together with the radical right-wing AfD – holds enough parliamentary seats to block major legislative initiatives through a veto minority. In Thuringia, a joint government would even be mathematically feasible, although BSW has explicitly ruled out any cooperation with the AfD.

This institutional presence in eastern Germany is remarkable for such a newly founded party and may serve as a launching pad for a potential national comeback. Research indicates that the BSW has successfully attracted a subset of AfD voters – especially those who had temporarily defected from other parties (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2024). Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek (2023) argue that a party centred around Wagenknecht's[1] left-conservative positioning may uniquely challenge the AfD's dominance – unlike other competitors, who have largely failed to do so (Wagner and Lichteblau 2022).

Eastern Germany is particularly relevant in this context. The region continues to exhibit distinct cultural and policy-related value orientations and a structurally different party system (Dalton and Jou 2010; Mau 2019; Pickel and Pickel 2023). It also shows greater openness to the AfD (Heinze and Lewandowsky 2023), and both the AfD and the BSW benefit from the salience of issues such as opposition to military support for Ukraine and a more Russia-friendly stance – positions that resonate more strongly in the East (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Masch et al. 2023; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024, 2025). Bräuninger et al. (2020) demonstrate that party positioning can vary considerably across regions, particularly between eastern and western Germany – underscoring the importance of analysing party competition at the subnational level and taking a closer look at electoral behaviour in regional contexts.

We therefore focus on the recent state elections in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia to investigate the conditions under which BSW has emerged as a viable political actor. These Länder represent not only regional strongholds for the BSW but may also serve as the foundation for its future national resurgence. Voters dissatisfied with established parties tend to be more open to non-established alternatives – mainly when such alternatives reflect issue profiles aligned with region-specific attitudes. In eastern Germany, where socio-economic leftism, socio-cultural conservatism, and more Russia-friendly foreign policy views are more prevalent than in the West, the BSW appears particularly well-positioned to attract disaffected voters (Dalton and Jou 2010; Pickel and Pickel 2023; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024, 2025).

In this paper, we analyse the voting behaviour of BSW and AfD electorates to explore their similarities and differences across eastern Germany. We begin by examining general patterns of party preference, comparing clusters in western and eastern Germany, and finding a more polarised political climate in the East. We analyse party manifesto positions across the three eastern German states to assess this from the supply side. We then turn to the demand side, investigating how BSW and AfD voters perceive themselves and each other before comparing their voting behaviour to that of electorates supporting mainstream parties in the region.

Our findings reveal both overlap and distinctness between the electorates of the BSW and the AfD. Clear commonality is found on immigration and Ukraine policy, with both groups restricting immigration and ending arms deliveries to Ukraine. At the same time, BSW attracts voters who support the strong welfare state preferences widely shared in eastern Germany. While we do not find complete convergence between the two electorates, the BSW is the only competitor currently coming close to the AfD's voter profile.

Taken together with the persistently low levels of democratic satisfaction observed among both electorates (Jankowski 2024; Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023), these results suggest that the BSW could, over time, significantly disrupt the AfD's support base – particularly if questions of economic redistribution gain political salience. Although the AfD maintains a strong and growing foothold in eastern Germany, BSW represents a potential threat. It is, therefore, highly relevant to ask whether the BSW will prove to be a curse – or perhaps even a blessing – for the AfD. Our study shows that BSW is by no means a blessing. However, whether it becomes a curse remains an open question for future research.

Explaining Voting Behaviour in Relation to AfD and BSW

Traditional approaches for explaining voting behaviour, that provide a framework for political alignment, are only useful in a limited way to explain eastern German electoral behaviour. Due to the legacy of dictatorship in the East, the factors shaping the development of party systems diverge from those in the West (Dalton and Jou 2010; Pickel and Pickel 2023). Additionally, key explanatory variables such as long-term party identification have shown to be mostly irrelevant, especially due to being socialised in a country where only one party is legally allowed to compete for electoral support (Dalton 2018).

However, we can observe distinct ideological and political profiles among eastern Germans in comparison to western Germans where the latter are more in favour of market liberalism, more in favour of immigration, and, recently, more in favour of weapons supply to Ukraine in the context of the 2022 Russian invasion (Pickel and Pickel 2023; Wurthmann and

Wagner 2024). Vice versa, eastern Germans are overall more supportive of restrictive immigration policies, an extension of welfare, and an end of weapon deliveries to Ukraine (Hansen and Olsen 2019; Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Mau 2019; Weisskircher 2022).

Ideological determinants and issue positions seem to be, for this reason, more relevant in explaining political behaviour in eastern Germany since especially the latter are less motivated in the long-term but rather as short-term determinants (Dalton 2018). These ideological determinants may reflect long-term developments of socialisation, leading eastern Germans to identify themselves as rather left-wing oriented compared to western Germans (Pickel and Pickel 2023; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024).

The left-right ideological spectrum serves as a broad heuristic for political decision-making in European party systems. The left-right divide primarily reflects socioeconomic policies (Gidron and Tichelbaecker 2025). Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, however, this divide has evolved to encompass sociocultural issues, including immigration, environmental policies, and civil liberties, leading to a more complex ideological structure (Steiner 2024). While European party competition is generally understood through a two-dimensional model comprising a sociocultural and a socioeconomic conflict dimension and serves as a framework for explaining party positions and voter behaviour (Gidron and Tichelbaecker 2025), a one-dimensional approach remains widely used, as it allows for a simplified representation of attitudinal differences. Dalton (2018) describes this as a super issue, encompassing all major aspects of ideological divergence.[2] This is especially true when such a heuristic is being used to calculate issue proximity. Left-right issue proximity captures the extent to which voters' ideological positions align with those of parties along this traditional axis.

In practice, left-right issue proximity is a powerful predictor of voting behaviour, as many voters rely on this overarching dimension to assess party positions (Downs 1957). It suggests that voters select the party or candidate whose policy positions are closest to their own in a spatial representation of ideological competition. Particularly in multiparty systems, where ideological differentiation is high, parties strategically position themselves to maximise proximity to key voter groups (Flavin and Law 2022). This logic has been extended through more advanced spatial models of voting behaviour, which measure both ideological and policy-related proximity between voters and political actors (Kurella and Rapp 2024). These models assume that rational voters will opt for the party that minimises their perceived ideological or policy-related distance, reinforcing the relevance of issue proximity in structuring electoral choices (Downs 1957; Flavin and Law 2022).

Regarding BSW and AfD, it becomes evident that, in a two-dimensional spatial model, these parties are differentiated less by sociocultural disparities

and more by socioeconomic differences in their party positions (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2024; Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023). While this does not render sociocultural differences irrelevant – since they are undeniably present – it highlights that both dimensions significantly influence party and voter positions and are strongly correlated. Both parties articulate economic positions that resonate with financially disillusioned or precariously positioned voters, while simultaneously offering distinct narratives on sociocultural topics such as immigration or national identity. As a result, BSW and AfD may be seen as competing for a similar voter base – especially among electorates that are economically dissatisfied and politically disenchanted, yet open to different framings of cultural issues. This overlap is particularly visible in Eastern Germany, where both parties attract significant support from voters critical of the political establishment and mainstream parties. Especially since BSW failed to enter the Bundestag in the 2025 federal election, eastern German states may now serve as strategic strongholds from which the party seeks to consolidate and expand its support. Thus, analysing their competition requires attention to both ideological dimensions and regional dynamics.

Fundamentally, we assume that an increasing perceived distance between voters and their assumed party position generally contributes to a lower likelihood of voting for that party. Additionally, we assume that the perceived relative distance to one of the two competing parties significantly increases the probability of voting for the other party. This is particularly relevant in the context of ongoing competition, in which BSW – at least in terms of their policy profile and communication – seeks to establish a clear spatial distinction (Steiner and Hillen 2024). This leads to the following two hypothesis:

H1 Spatial Distance Hypothesis:

H1a: The greater the perceived distance to both AfD and BSW, the lower the likelihood of voting for either party.

H1b: The greater the perceived distance to BSW, the higher the likelihood of voting for AfD, and vice versa.

While spatial models of party competition emphasise ideological distance, voters often base their electoral decisions on specific policy issues (Dalton 2018) rather than broad ideological categories. This phenomenon, commonly called issue voting, suggests that political preferences on key topics play a crucial role in shaping vote choices (Downes and Loveless 2018). Particularly in Germany's evolving party system, issue-based considerations have gained importance, influencing competition between established parties and newer challengers such as AfD (Abou-Chadi, Green-Pedersen, and Mortensen 2020) and BSW (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner

2025; Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023). As voters evaluate parties through the lens of policy alignment, issue voting provides an alternative explanation for electoral behaviour beyond traditional partisan loyalties or ideological proximity.

Among the issues that strongly shape party preferences, immigration policy has been particularly decisive for AfD voters (Heinze and Lewandowsky 2023). Public debates surrounding migration, asylum policies, and integration have significantly influenced AfD's electoral success, as voters with critical views on these topics perceive the party as the strongest representative of their positions (Lewandowsky and Wagner 2023). Given the salience of immigration in political discourse, issue voting in this domain has been a key factor in AfD's rise, particularly among voters who feel mainstream parties fail to address their concerns (Wurthmann et al. 2021). Similarly, BSW successfully mobilised anti-immigration voters within The Left (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025) and established a clear anti-immigration position within its first year. At both the party and electoral levels, BSW – alongside AfD – occupies one of the most anti-immigration positions within the German party system. In contrast to AfD, however, BSW does not employ xenophobic or racist narratives to justify its stance (Wurthmann and Wagner 2025).

Beyond immigration, foreign policy – precisely the issue of arms supplies to Ukraine – has become a crucial factor in voter alignment with both AfD and BSW. Both parties advocate for an immediate cessation of weapons deliveries. This stance distinguishes them from mainstream parties, which primarily support Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression. The opposition to arms deliveries resonates particularly with voters who are sceptical of Germany's involvement in the conflict, many of whom see economic and energy security concerns as more pressing domestic priorities (Masch et al. 2023; Wondreys 2023; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024). Recent research shows that AfD's anti-war positioning is part of a broader strategic effort to strengthen organisational structures beyond the electoral arena and to attract (former) left-wing supporters through so-called 'cross-front' strategies – efforts that have so far yielded only limited success in terms of broader mobilisation or alliance-building (Weisskircher 2025).

Welfare policy is a central pillar of BSW's electoral appeal. The party advocates for higher pensions, expanded social benefits, and greater state involvement in economic redistribution, positioning itself as a representative of the working class and economically marginalised groups (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2024; Steiner and Hillen 2024; Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023). This left-leaning economic agenda sets BSW apart from both the AfD and the mainstream parties, enabling it to mobilise voters dissatisfied with social inequality, neoliberal economic reforms, and the rising cost of living. While AfD has occasionally

adopted more left-leaning economic positions in eastern Germany – as demonstrated by Bräuninger et al. (2020), who show that the party's eastern manifestos contain more socioeconomically progressive content than their western counterparts – these positions remain secondary to its core focus on nativist and anti-immigration appeals. In contrast, issue voting centred on welfare and redistribution is likely to play a defining role in shaping BSW's electorate (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Wurthmann and Wagner 2025). These issue-driven dynamics illustrate how specific policy concerns – rather than broad ideological positioning alone – can drive voter preferences, particularly in the context of new challenger parties like AfD and BSW. With the exception of BSW in the 2024 EP elections (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025), AfD's voter base has been shown to be largely inaccessible to other parties (Lewandowsky and Wagner 2023). While its support has been notably stronger and deeply rooted in the East, mostly driven by the greater prominence of immigration and cultural identity issues (Mau 2019), this inaccessibility in western and eastern Germany remains largely the same. However, economic concerns play a more significant role in shaping voter preferences in western Germany, though their impact on electoral competition has declined over time (Wagner and Lichteblau 2022). We therefore argue that policy preferences on immigration, welfare and foreign policy have an effect on voting behaviour towards both AfD and BSW, creating a newly competitive environment for the radical right AfD.

H2 *Migration*: The stronger the rejection of immigration, the more likely an individual is to vote either for AfD or BSW.

H3 *Welfare*: The stronger the support for welfare and state intervention, the more likely an individual is to vote for BSW. In contrast, the relationship between these factors and voting for AfD is expected to be more ambiguous.

H4 *Foreign Policy*: The stronger the rejection of further weapon deliveries to Ukraine, the more likely an individual is to vote either for AfD or BSW.

Research Design

Case Selection Data

Our analysis focuses in particular on the eastern German states of Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia, where the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht has recently gained significant political traction. Although the party failed to enter the Bundestag in the 2025 federal election, it achieved notable success in eastern Germany and performed strongly in subsequent state elections, in some cases emerging as the third strongest political force. The BSW is now part of the governing coalitions in Brandenburg and Thuringia and entered formal cooperation

talks in Saxony. These developments underscore the party's growing political relevance in eastern Germany and provide a compelling rationale for examining political attitudes and electoral behaviour in these regions.

To this end, we rely on data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) for our analysis. The GLES data used in this paper are particularly well suited for capturing current developments in the population through cross-sectional surveys. However, certain limitations must be acknowledged as these data are collected via an online access panel. First, the data are not well suited to representing older segments of the population. Second, the selection of respondents does not follow a probability-based sampling approach, necessitating caution regarding the representativeness of the findings. Nonetheless, the GLES provides weighting variables that can adjust for sociodemographic deviations. We make use of GLES Tracking T59 (ZA10002) as it includes not only 1,131 respondents from across Germany but also an additional 791 respondents from the eastern German states of Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia. This allows for aggregated analyses at the state level, which will be applied in the following sections. The data were collected between 9 and 17 October 2024.

Operationalisation

Dependent Variables

A key aspect of our analysis is first to capture respondents' attitudes toward political parties in Germany across western and eastern Germany. Respondents were asked to evaluate all parties currently represented in the Bundestag at least as a parliamentary group on a scale ranging from (−5) 'do not support this party at all' to (+5) 'strongly support this party.' The parties under investigation include the SPD, CDU, CSU, GREENS, FDP, AfD, THE LEFT, and BSW.

The core focus of our analysis is voting behaviour in the state elections in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia. Respondents were first asked whether they participated in the election. Reported turnout was 92.6 per cent (N = 238) in Brandenburg, 93.3 per cent (N = 224) in Saxony, and 97.8 per cent (N = 266) in Thuringia. While these figures indicate a substantial overrepresentation of voters relative to actual turnout, they also ensure a sufficiently large number of cases to allow for a meaningful analysis of voting behaviour.

A list of the contesting parties was presented to respondents who reported participating in their respective state election. They were asked which party they voted for. Based on these responses, we created a new variable distinguishing between voting for (0) CDU, SPD, GREENS, FDP, THE LEFT, or other parties, (1) votes for AfD, and (2) votes for BSW.

The total number of respondents included in the analysis is further reduced, as we only consider those who provided meaningful responses to all our key indicators.

Independent Variables

Our modelling approach follows two perspectives: a dimensional representation and an issue-based voting decision. While this simplified approach does not necessarily capture the full complexity of Western European party systems (Gidron and Tichelbaecker 2025), the left-right dimension remains a powerful explanatory super issue (Dalton 2018). Respondents were asked to place themselves and the political parties on a scale ranging from (1) left to (11) right. We calculate an absolute ideological distance measure using self-placements and party placements, such that a respondent at position 7 on the scale would have a distance of three points from AfD (position 10) and two points from BSW (position 5).

AfD and BSW have positioned themselves as sceptical of immigration and opposed to further arms deliveries to Ukraine. However, they diverge in their ideological stance on welfare state policies (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2024; Wurthmann and Wagner 2024). Pickel and Pickel (2023) further emphasise the high salience of these issues in eastern Germany, where greater scepticism toward immigration, stronger preferences for a strong welfare state, and a pronounced sense of loyalty towards Russia – shaped by socialisation under Soviet influence – play a crucial role.

For this reason, we incorporate respondents' immigration policy preferences using a scale ranging from (1) 'Opportunities for foreigners to immigrate should be made easier' to (11) 'Opportunities for foreigners to immigrate should be restricted.' Welfare state preferences are measured on a scale from (1) 'More welfare state benefits, even if this means higher taxes and contributions' to (11) 'Lower taxes and contributions, even if this means fewer welfare state benefits.' Regarding military support for Ukraine, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the statement 'Arms deliveries to Ukraine should be completely stopped' on a scale from (1) 'Strongly disagree' to (5) 'Strongly agree.'

Controls

First, we incorporate respondents' sex, age, and educational level, as these factors have shown to be particularly influential in explaining political attitudes and voting behaviour in Germany (Wurthmann et al. 2021). Respondents' sex is included as categorical variable differentiating into (1) male and (2) female.

Respondents' age was recorded as an open-text entry. The GLES groups respondents aged 65 and older into a single category. Educational attainment is measured based on respondents' highest school-leaving qualification. We distinguish between individuals with no formal education or a lower secondary school certificate (Hauptschule), categorising them as (1) low education. Respondents with an intermediate secondary school certificate (Realschule) are classified as (2) medium education. Individuals with an upper secondary

school qualification (Fachhochschulreife or Abitur) are categorised as (3) high education.

Furthermore, we control for differences between urban and rural areas, which are significant in many Western European party systems (Pickel and Pickel 2023). We differentiate between (1) large cities, (2) suburbs of large cities, (3) medium-sized or small towns, and (4) rural villages or more sparsely populated areas.

Additionally, we include respondents' place of residence at the federal state level as a control variable to account for region-specific contextual differences.

Analytical Strategy

Firstly, we examine how societal attitudes toward political parties differ between western and eastern Germany as has been done for earlier German federal elections (see Wagner and Lichteblau 2022). For this purpose, we rely on the analysis of party evaluation variables. We employ cluster analyses to classify respondents' attitudes in western and eastern Germany. This results in a sample of 659 respondents from western Germany and 636 respondents from eastern Germany.

Although respondents from western Germany are not included in the subsequent in-depth analysis, we consider this conservative approach to data reduction appropriate. By applying the same exclusion criteria to both regions, we ensure that only respondents who, for example, did not skip questions are included. This approach maintains consistency in response behaviour and ensures equal standards in survey completion across both regions.

In the second part of our analysis, we focus specifically on the extent to which political parties share substantive similarities on a *Länder* level. In particular, we examine the degree of programmatic overlap between BSW and other parties. To this end, we draw on data from the *Wahl-O-Mat*, a highly popular Voting Advice Application (VAA) in Germany, in which parties position themselves on 38 policy issues using a scale from (0) 'disagree', (1) 'neutral', to (2) 'agree'. VAA-generated data allow for standardised analysis of party positions and facilitate the measurement of their programmatic proximity (e.g. Garzia and Marschall 2016). Therefore, we calculate the proximity following the recommendation of Wagschal and König (2014). For further details, see section 1 in our online appendix.

In the third part of our analysis, we focus explicitly on voting behaviour in the eastern German state elections in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia. Accordingly, the number of respondents is further reduced to those who participated in these elections and provided substantive answers to our key indicators ($N = 521$). We present descriptive and bivariate findings before

turning to a multivariate analysis of voting behaviour. To this end, we employ multinomial regression models, using voters of all parties except AfD and BSW as reference categories. The primary objective of this analysis is to determine whether BSW constitutes a *curse* or a *blessing* for AfD – at least in eastern Germany.

Results

Patterns of Party Preferences and Political Alignments

Voting patterns in eastern and western Germany diverge significantly, contributing to distinct party landscapes (Dalton and Jou 2010). One possible explanation is the legacy and the long-term effects of socialisation under the socialist dictatorship of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), which continue to influence political attitudes today (Mau 2019). Voters in eastern Germany are more likely to have a favourable view of Russia, and this sentiment is reflected in their voting behaviour – such as supporting BSW, which opposes sending weapons to Ukraine (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024).

Die Linke's deep-rooted presence in East Germany is closely tied to its origins in the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, which governed the GDR as a one-party state (Hough and Keith 2019). Despite this historical left-wing dominance, AfD has increasingly established itself as a major electoral force in East Germany (Hansen and Olsen 2019; Weisskircher 2022). AfD's ability to attract disaffected voters is largely driven by strong dissatisfaction with democracy, anti-elitist sentiments, and pronounced xenophobia – attitudes that are particularly widespread in eastern German states (Pickel and Pickel 2023). Given these dynamics, we would expect that a cluster analysis of party evaluations might suggest that BSW and AfD belong to the same voter segment, particularly in East Germany, particularly due to shared geopolitical attitudes, such as scepticism toward the West and closer alignment with Russia – a sentiment historically stronger in the East.

In the following, we undertake a cluster analysis, a statistical method for grouping observations into clusters based on their similarity across selected variables. It identifies patterns in data by minimising within-cluster differences and maximising between-cluster differences, helping to uncover underlying structures without predefined categories (Field, Miles, and Field 2012). Figure 1 makes use of the respondents' attitudes towards the German parties currently represented in the national parliament with group or faction status. Although the number of respondents is approximately similar in both regions, we observe significantly stronger cluster formation among respondents in western Germany than in eastern Germany. While four distinct clusters emerge in western Germany, only two can be identified in eastern Germany.

These findings of the cluster analysis in Figure 1 indicate a general ideological bloc logic in Western Germany, although a politically indifferent cluster is present. The first cluster displays general political ambivalence, with all parties scoring positively. The second cluster exhibits a strong preference for the Christian Democrats, rating all other parties negatively. In the third cluster, we find a distinct AfD cluster, rating all other parties negatively. Interestingly, while being rated negatively, the third cluster shows BSW in second rank order and approaching a neutral rating. The fourth cluster, with a Social Democratic and Green preference, expresses particularly strong aversion toward AfD. We find the same effect in the third cluster, distinct aversion toward the SPD and the Greens. A similar pattern emerges in eastern Germany, where an equally distinct AfD cluster exists. Here, only AfD receives a positive evaluation, while, similar to the third cluster in western Germany, BSW is the only party that comes close to a neutral rating. The second cluster in eastern Germany rates the CDU, SPD, and CSU slightly positively but considerably lower than AfD in Cluster 1. The rest of the parties are rated negatively. This cluster is primarily characterised by rejection of AfD rather than strong identification with any particular party (see Figure 1).

Any expectation that AfD and BSW would be perceived as belonging to the same cluster and receive positive evaluations from respondents, must

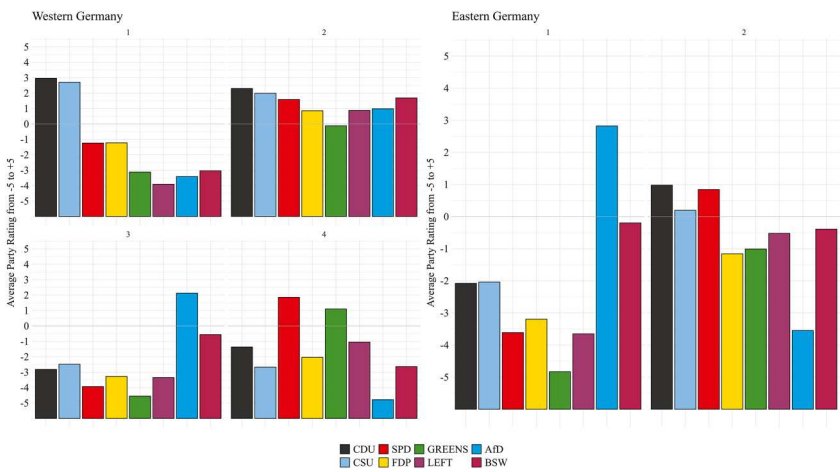

Figure 1. Party Evaluation Cluster in Western and Eastern Germany. Source: Own calculations based on data from GLES (2024). The total number of respondents included in this analysis is N = 659 in western Germany and N = 636 in eastern Germany. The respective cluster sizes in western Germany are N = 168 for Cluster 1, N = 162 for Cluster 2, N = 124 for Cluster 3, and N = 205 for Cluster 4. In eastern Germany, Cluster 1 consists of N = 293 respondents, while Cluster 2 includes N = 343 respondents.

Note: The y-axis represents the average rating on a scale from −5 to +5.

be rejected. Figure 1 indicates that AfD and BSW do not cluster together, neither in eastern nor western Germany. This result is somewhat unexpected, as BSW, like AfD, is significantly more popular in the East (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025). While AfD dominates the region's political landscape, BSW's support does not extend to the same segments of the electorate. Instead, AfD's profile remains distinct, reflecting its appeal to a different set of voters despite some thematic overlaps in policy preferences.

Yet, it is important to note that the figure above only shows the average ratings of the parties by cluster. Averages can mask extreme ratings, where some parties receive either very high or very low evaluations. Being just below the zero mark could imply that while many in this cluster rate BSW positively, a smaller group – especially those closely aligned with AfD – may rate it very poorly, potentially creating a misleading impression.[3] Following this logic, BSW could attract a portion of AfD electorate, as demonstrated in other studies (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2024). While this alone is insufficient for BSW to pose a significant threat to AfD, BSW stands out as the only party that could potentially become a *curse* rather than a *blessing*.

Supply Side: Understanding Party Proximity Based on Wahl-O-Mat Data

The contrast between eastern and western Germany, with eastern Germany displaying a distinct political landscape characterised by stronger polarisation, particularly in relation to AfD and mainstream parties, warrants a more detailed analysis of the potential for competition between AfD and BSW in the eastern German *Länder*. Following the methodological guidelines of Wagschal and König (2014), we thus calculate the programmatic proximity of major political parties[4] in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia. Based on the *Wahl-O-Mat* party positions, the overlap between BSW and other parties is more diverse than might initially be assumed. While Thomeczek (2024) identifies significant overlaps between BSW and AfD in the context of the European elections, these similarities are notably weaker at the state level.

The overlap indicator, derived from *Wahl-O-Mat* data, ranges from 0 to 1, representing the proportion of policy positions shared between two parties. In Brandenburg, BSW exhibits the highest degree of programmatic similarity with the Free Voters (0.62), followed by the SPD (0.59) and The Left (0.58), while the FDP (0.53) and, to a lesser extent, AfD (0.51) ranking lower. In Saxony, BSW's strongest overlaps are with the FDP (0.68), SPD (0.67), and The Greens (0.67), followed by The Left (0.61), with the CDU (0.58) and AfD (0.58) coming next. In Thuringia, the overlap between BSW and AfD is even lower (0.54). Instead, more substantial programmatic similarities

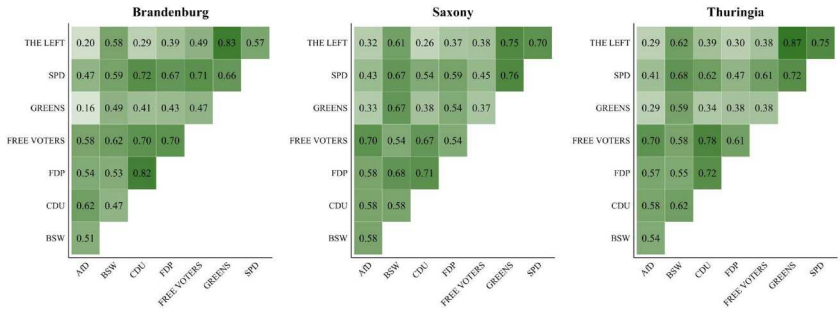

Figure 2. Party Proximity using Wahl-O-Mat Data. Source: Own calculations and representation based on *Wahl-O-Mat* data from the 2024 state elections in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia.

are observed with the SPD (0.68), CDU (0.62), The Left (0.62), The Greens (0.59), Free Voters (0.58), and FDP (0.55) (see Figure 2).

These findings suggest that while BSW shares some ideological common ground with AfD, its programmatic positioning at the state level is more heterogeneous, encompassing overlaps with both centre-right and centre-left parties. The *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW) thus challenges conventional categorisations within the ideological spectrum. The calculations of programmatic proximity to other parties suggest that BSW occupies a heterogeneous position that varies depending on the political context. While analyses of the European elections (Thomeczek 2024) identified a more significant programmatic overlap with AfD, this picture is significantly nuanced at the state level. Brandenburg's highest degrees of programmatic similarity exist with the Free Voters, SPD, and The Left. In contrast, in Saxony and Thuringia, noticeable overlaps are also observed with the FDP, CDU, and The Greens. Overlaps with AfD are consistently moderate and, in Thuringia, even the weakest among the analysed parties.

Demand Side: Voting for AfD and BSW in Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia

BSW and AfD voters differ notably in their attitudes, with AfD voters expressing stronger opposition to immigration and greater criticism of the welfare state (Online Appendix Figure A2). While both groups largely agree on halting arms deliveries to Ukraine, their ideological self-placement diverges, with AfD voters leaning centre-right and BSW voters identifying with the left. These differences underscore a potential misalignment between party positions and voter preferences.

In the next step, we examine how AfD and BSW voters perceive their spatial distance from their preferred party and from the opposing party and where

they place these parties ideologically. Both electorates perceive minimal ideological distance from the party they support, with a median distance of just one scale point. However, BSW voters perceive a more significant ideological gap of five scale points between themselves and AfD. In contrast, AfD voters perceive a smaller median distance of three scale points to BSW. While AfD voters place their party at a median of 8, indicating a moderate right-wing stance, BSW voters position AfD much further to the right, with a median value of 10, reflecting a perception of AfD as strongly far-right.

Despite these differences, there is consensus regarding the placement of BSW: both voter groups position BSW at a median value of 4, categorising it as a left-leaning party. However, the variance in this assessment is substantially higher among AfD voters than BSW voters, suggesting greater ideological disagreement within AfD electorate on BSW's precise positioning (see Figure 3).

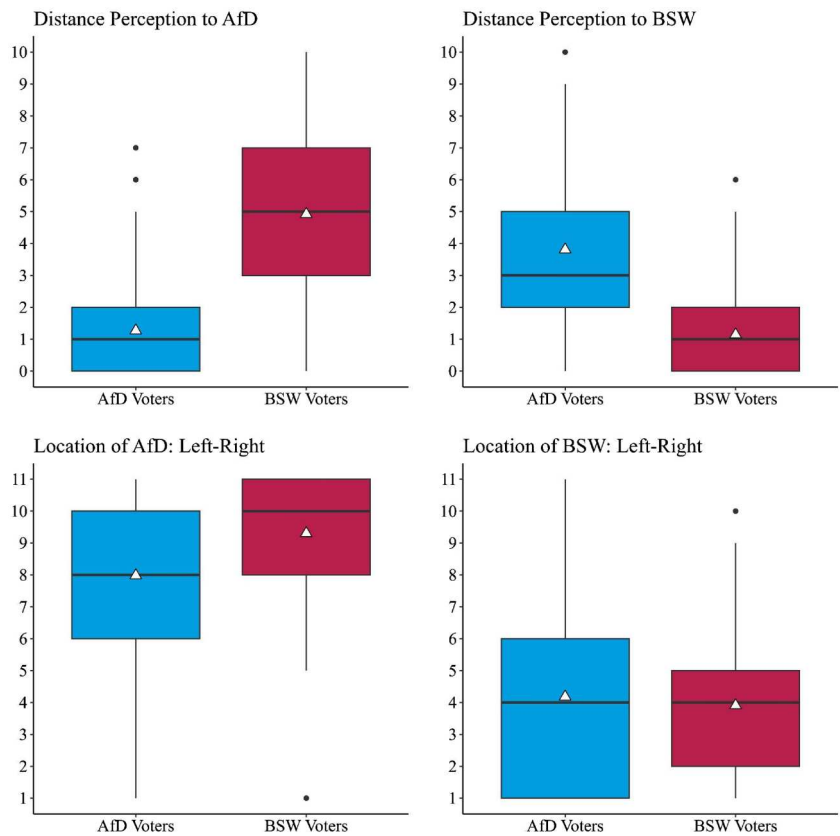

Figure 3. Self-Perception and Intergroup Perceptions of AfD and BSW Voters. Source: Own calculations and representation based on data from GLES (2024). Triangles represent the mean values.

The correlation analysis in Table A1 shows that a greater ideological distance from the AfD is associated with lower migration scepticism, stronger support for welfare policies, and higher approval of arms deliveries. This suggests that individuals ideologically close to the AfD tend to hold more restrictive positions on migration and welfare, and are more critical of military support for Ukraine. In contrast, distance from the BSW reveals a less consistent pattern: it correlates with increased migration scepticism and support for arms deliveries, but shows no clear association with welfare attitudes. This distinguishes BSW-related attitudes from those linked to AfD. On a broader level, migration scepticism tends to go hand in hand with scepticism towards the welfare state and opposition to arms deliveries, pointing to a general pattern of policy preferences that may be best described as authoritarian-nationalist rather than conventionally conservative.

Multivariates

How can voting behaviour for AfD and BSW be explained in contrast to other parties? First, it is important to note that AfD voters account for 36.0 per cent (N = 188) of respondents in the remaining subsample of the three eastern German states – Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia. The proportion of BSW voters stands at 17.9 per cent (N = 89). While this allows for reliable analyses, it does not enable state-specific breakdowns. It is also evident that both voter groups are overrepresented in this sample.

The results of our multinomial regression models in Figure 4 show that in both cases – AfD and BSW – a greater ideological distance significantly reduces the probability of voting for the respective party ($p < 0.001$). This aligns with standard spatial voting models and is, therefore, unsurprising. Our Hypothesis H1a is thus confirmed.

Regarding Hypothesis H1b, which posits that greater ideological distance from BSW increases the probability of voting for AfD and vice versa, we find only partial support. A greater perceived distance from BSW significantly increases the likelihood of voting for AfD ($p < 0.001$). However, the reverse mechanism – where greater perceived distance from AfD increases the likelihood of voting for BSW – is not observed.

One explanation lies in the general perception of distance from BSW. As shown above, this distance is minimal among BSW voters (m = 1.15; 95 per cent CI: 0.86–1.43), somewhat greater among voters of other parties (m = 2.76; 95 per cent CI: 2.49–3.03), and significantly higher among AfD voters (m = 3.81; 95 per cent CI: 3.44–4.18). In contrast, there is a clear consensus between those who vote for AfD and those who do not. AfD voters, unsurprisingly, perceive a strong ideological closeness to their party (m = 1.27; 95 per cent CI: 1.05–1.49), while voters of other parties – including CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP, The Greens, and The Left – report a much greater distance from AfD (m = 5.32; 95 per cent CI: 5.00–5.64). BSW voters also

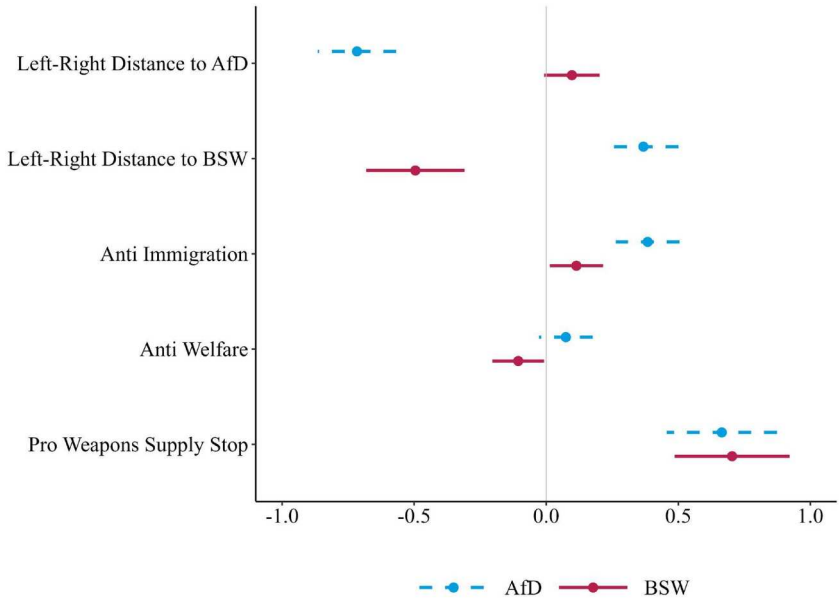

Figure 4. Multinomial Regression Models - Voting for AfD and BSW. Source: Own calculations and representation based on data from GLES (2024).

Note: The voting decision favouring CDU, SPD, FDP, Greens, The Left, and other parties serves as the reference category for the dependent variable. See Table A2 in the Online Appendix for the full detailed tables.

report a similarly high perceived distance from AfD (m = 4.92; 95 per cent CI: 4.31–5.53). Given that AfD is widely perceived as a far-right party, voters who perceive a substantial ideological distance from AfD have multiple alternative voting options beyond BSW.

An anti-immigration stance increases the probability of voting for both AfD ($p < 0.001$) and BSW ($p < 0.1$). Our Hypothesis H2 is therefore supported. In Hypothesis H3, we posited that AfD voters are more critical of the welfare state, whereas BSW voters support welfare policies. This assumption is based on the observation that BSW tends to represent socioeconomically left-wing positions, while AfD advocates a more economically liberal or libertarian approach. While our descriptive analysis does indicate a slight tendency toward economically liberal views among BSW voters, our multinomial models show that the probability of voting for BSW significantly decreases ($p < 0.1$) as welfare state scepticism increases. Conversely, support for welfare state measures increases the likelihood of voting for BSW. Among AfD voters, this effect is insignificant, confirming our Hypothesis H3 in sum.

Unsurprisingly, opposition to further arms deliveries to Ukraine significantly positively affects ($p < 0.001$) the likelihood of voting for AfD and BSW. Our Hypothesis H4 is thus confirmed.

We assess the robustness of our analyses by examining multicollinearity. All calculated values fall within a non-critical range, remaining well below the threshold of 2.

Our findings suggest that BSW successfully capitalises on programmatic overlaps with the traditional AfD electorate. This applies not only to a core AfD issue, such as opposition to immigration but also to the more recent issue of arms deliveries to Ukraine, which has gained prominence following Russia's invasion. However, our results indicate that distinct profiles emerge concerning welfare state attitudes and broader ideological self-placement.

Therefore, highly radical or extreme AfD supporters are unlikely to be persuaded by BSW. However, respondents who place themselves ideologically in the centre to centre-right may perceive BSW as a viable alternative – provided that their specific policy preferences align with BSW's positions at the time of an election.

Curse or Blessing, or Both?

Given the political landscape of eastern Germany – characterised by strong anti-immigration sentiments and a pronounced scepticism towards Western support for Ukraine – one might expect the BSW to emerge as a direct competitor to the AfD. However, the reality is far more complex, revealing a nuanced interplay of ideological positioning, voter preferences, and regional dynamics. While both parties attract voters critical of immigration and arms deliveries to Ukraine, their electorates diverge significantly in their attitudes toward the welfare state and broader ideological self-placement. AfD voters remain firmly positioned within the far-right spectrum, whereas BSW voters, despite some commonalities with AfD supporters, align more closely with socioeconomic redistribution policies and exhibit greater ideological heterogeneity. The findings confirm that ideological proximity remains a key determinant of voter choice, aligning with standard spatial voting models. While greater ideological distance from BSW increases the likelihood of voting for AfD, the reverse effect is not observed, suggesting that AfD voters have a broader range of alternative options beyond BSW.

Our findings suggest that BSW's programmatic positioning varies significantly by state. This heterogeneity challenges traditional ideological classifications, positioning BSW as a hybrid formation that does not fit neatly into the conventional left-right spectrum. Unlike AfD, which maintains a consistent nationalist and anti-immigration stance, being the most right-wing party in rank ordering across the state manifestos, BSW adapts its positioning based on regional political contexts, reinforcing its potential as an alternative for disaffected voters beyond the radical right.

Moreover, shared policy positions on key issues – most notably opposition to immigration and arms deliveries to Ukraine – explain why BSW

can attract some former AfD voters. However, welfare state attitudes and broader ideological orientations differentiate the two electorates, limiting BSW's potential to appeal to highly radicalised AfD supporters. Instead, the party appears more capable of attracting voters positioned towards the ideological centre-right, provided their policy preferences align with BSW's stance at the time of an election.

Our study is not without limitations. One key challenge in electoral studies, particularly those relying on online access panel data, is the increasing difficulty of reaching politically disengaged or non-voting individuals. This can lead to biases whose full extent remains uncertain. Moreover, due to the absence of a measure for electoral availability (see Lewandowsky and Wagner 2023), we cannot assess the overall accessibility of voters – neither for the AfD nor the BSW. Additionally, the lack of panel data prevents us from making robust inferences about voter transitions, as our analysis is based on cross-sectional data. In turn, our ability to empirically assess the AfD's electoral vulnerability in greater detail is limited (e.g. Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2024). Finally, while our sample size is sufficiently large for an analysis of state elections, the constraints of our dataset have limited the complexity of the statistical modelling we could apply. A more extensive dataset would have allowed for more nuanced analytical approaches.

Nevertheless, our study highlights the distinct and overlapping factors that shape voting behaviour for AfD and BSW in eastern Germany. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of party competition in Germany's evolving political landscape, highlighting the overlaps and distinctions between AfD's and BSW's electorates. The eastern German states are of particular relevance in this context, as they not only represent strongholds for both parties but also serve as political laboratories where new electoral alliances and patterns of voter mobilisation are taking shape. While BSW failed to surpass the electoral threshold at the national level in the 2025 federal election, the party nonetheless achieved remarkably strong results in eastern Germany (see Wagner and Wurthmann 2025). Its electoral strength in the region and its participation in state governments in Brandenburg and Thuringia may serve as a springboard for a potential political comeback – possibly at the expense of AfD's vote share in these electorates. Future research should further explore the role of intra-regional variations and the long-term viability of BSW as an alternative for disaffected right-wing voters.

Notes

1. The party has announced that it will change its name, signalling an intention to move away from an explicit focus on Wagenknecht. The new name had not yet been disclosed at the time of publication.

2. Although a one-dimensional representation does not necessarily capture the full complexity of party competition, it still allows for a meaningful approximation of subjective perceptions of spatial distance between individuals and party positions. These subjective perceptions remain crucial in voter decision-making, as they influence how individuals evaluate ideological proximity and political choices (Gidron and Tichelbaecker 2025).
3. AfD voters in East Germany tend to evaluate BSW rather negatively, with a mean of –0.8 and a median of 0 on a –5 to +5 scale. While some express moderate approval (upper quartile = 2), a substantial share strongly rejects the party, as reflected in the lower quartile of –5. Nevertheless, BSW receives by far the most favourable evaluations on average and in terms of the median. (see Online Appendix Figure A1).
4. Defined here as all parties that hold at least parliamentary group status in the Bundestag or are part of a state government in Germany.

Disclosure Statement

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

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