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Is Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht A New Alternative for Populist Voters?

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Received 16 August 2024 | Accepted 23 September 2024 |

Published online 27 November 2024

Abstract

In just five months, Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht (BSW) progressed from its foundation to winning six seats in the European Parliament. Research has indicated that the party has significant potential, particularly among voters of Germany's two populist parties: Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Die Linke. Since BSW is also classified as a populist party, this article explores the extent to which populist attitudes influence the vote choice preference for BSW. The analysis employs a three-dimensional populism scale, using data from a VAA-like website. The results reveal that voters intending to vote for BSW exhibit strong anti-elitist and people-centric views, but do not hold Manichean outlooks. This positions BSW voters ideologically between Die Linke and AfD voters in terms of populist ideation – albeit closer to the AfD, reflecting the party-level populism of BSW. Additionally, populist attitudes, particularly anti-elitism, are significant predictors of vote-switching from other parties to BSW.

Keywords

populist attitudes – BSW – voting advice applications

The European Elections of 2024 marked a breakthrough for the new German party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). Founded only five months prior to the elections, BSW won 6.2% of the votes for the European Parliament,

securing six seats. While this is a remarkable result for such a young party, BSW was even more successful in east Germany, where it won between 16.4% (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) and 12.6% (Saxony) of the votes in the six east German states. In September, the BSW won 15.8% of the votes in the Thuringia state elections and 11.8% in Saxony. Only nine months after its foundation, the party finds itself in a kingmaker position and could govern with the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in Saxony and Thuringia.

BSW's rapid rise has resulted in much attention from scholars and commentators. Three main explanations are offered regarding the party's appeal. Firstly, the party is highly personalized, with much of its electoral success attributed to the popularity of its leader and founder, Sahra Wagenknecht – something quite unusual in the German context.¹ Secondly, the party has been characterized as “left-authoritarian” or “left-conservative” in its ideology,² combining cultural conservatism with left-wing economic positions. As a result, BSW occupies a space in the party system that has so far been unrepresented.³ Another ideological peculiarity is its advocacy of highly polarizing foreign policy positions, including the rejection of arms deliveries to Ukraine, calls for immediate peace negotiations in the Ukraine-Russia war, Anti-Americanism, and the rejection of NATO.⁴ Thirdly, BSW has been labelled a populist party. Wagenknecht was the leading figure of the populist wing within her former party, Die Linke, and populist rhetoric plays a crucial role in framing political conflicts in BSW's first party manifesto.⁵

This raises the question of whether BSW offers an alternative vote option for voters believing in populist ideas. Research has highlighted a positive relationship between individual-level and party-level populism: voters holding

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- 1 Aiko Wagner, “Lechts oder links? Das Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht im Parteienwettbewerb” (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023), <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0261379421001323>.
 - 2 Cas Mudde, “Can Europe's New ‘Conservative Left’ Persuade Voters to Abandon the Far Right?,” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/16/conservative-left-europe-far-right-sahra-wagenknecht-germany>.
 - 3 Sarah Wagner, L. Constantin Wurthmann, and Jan Philipp Thomeczek, “Bridging Left and Right? How Sahra Wagenknecht Could Change the German Party Landscape,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 64, no. 3 (June 27, 2023): 621–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00481-3>.
 - 4 L. Constantin Wurthmann and Sarah Wagner, “On the Association of Attitudes Towards NATO and Weapon Deliveries for Ukraine with Vote Intentions in Germany,” *German Politics* 0, no. 0 (2024): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2024.2372562>.
 - 5 Jan Philipp Thomeczek, “Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): Left-Wing Authoritarian – and Populist? An Empirical Analysis,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 2024 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-024-00544-z>.

populist attitudes tend to vote more frequently for populist parties.⁶ So far, Germany had two established populist parties: the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the far-left Die Linke.⁷ However, the classification of the latter, which was Wagenknecht's former political home, is disputed, as it does not consistently use populist rhetoric.⁸

While populist attitudes are common among both Die Linke and AfD voters,⁹ these are also the two voter groups where BSW has a strong voting potential.¹⁰ Public expectations for BSW are high, as many observers hope it could halt the rise of the far-right AfD, which has gained significant support in recent polls, reaching up to 20%.¹¹ As it seems puzzling that BSW can appeal to far-left and far-right voters at the same time, populist attitudes could be the common denominator among (former) Die Linke and AfD voters switching to BSW.

In this article, I will first introduce the ideational concept of populism and its measurement at the individual level. This will be followed by a state-of-the-art summary of BSW's populism. I will then discuss the results of a detailed analysis of voter-level populism among potential BSW voters in contrast to other voters, as well as party-voter congruence regarding ideational populism. Lastly, I will contextualize my findings and discuss implications for future research.

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- 6 Steven M. Van Hauwaert and Stijn Van Kessel, "Beyond Protest and Discontent: A Cross-National Analysis of the Effect of Populist Attitudes and Issue Positions on Populist Party Support," *European Journal of Political Research* 57, no. 1 (February 2018): 68–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12216>; Hugo Marcos-Marne, Homero Gil de Zúñiga, and Porismita Borah, "What Do We (Not) Know about Demand-Side Populism? A Systematic Literature Review on Populist Attitudes," *European Political Science* 22, no. 3 (September 1, 2023): 293–307, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-022-00397-3>.
- 7 Maurits J. Meijers and Andrej Zaslove, "Measuring Populism in Political Parties: Appraisal of a New Approach," *Comparative Political Studies* 54, no. 2 (July 5, 2020): 372–407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020938081>.
- 8 Matthijs Rooduijn et al., "The PopuList: A Database of Populist, Far-Left, and Far-Right Parties Using Expert-Informed Qualitative Comparative Classification (EiQCC)," *British Journal of Political Science*, September 20, 2023, 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123423000431>.
- 9 Nicole Loew and Thorsten Faas, "Between Thin- and Host-Ideologies: How Populist Attitudes Interact with Policy Preferences in Shaping Voting Behaviour," *Representation* 55, no. 4 (August 12, 2019): 493–511, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2019.1643772>.
- 10 Jan Philipp Thomeczek, "The Voting Potential of Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW)," *Political Studies Review* Online First (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299241264975>; Wagner, "Lechts oder rinks? Das Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht im Parteienwettbewerb"; Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek, "Bridging Left and Right?"
- 11 Mudde, "Can Europe's New 'Conservative Left' Persuade Voters to Abandon the Far Right?"

1 Populist Ideas at the Elite and Individual Level

Most empirical academic analyses of populism depart from Mudde's influential definition. He defines populism as a thin-centered ideology revolving around two core concepts: people-centrism and anti-elitism. People-centrism refers to the idea that "the people" are a homogeneous and morally "good" entity, while anti-elitism is defined as the rejection of "the elite" or "establishment" on the grounds that they are self-serving and corrupt.¹² This approach has been elaborated in recent years¹³ and is now described as the ideational definition of populism, united by the assumption that populism is a specific "set of ideas".¹⁴

Populism research was originally strongly rooted in elite-centered analyses. Typically, "early" ideational studies focused on parties¹⁵ or politicians.¹⁶ Recently, research began to investigate populism at the individual level.¹⁷ There is a strong congruence regarding ideational populism between the voters and party level: populist attitudes at the individual level are a strong predictor of voting for populist parties.¹⁸

Academics have recently shifted their focus to question on the conceptual relationship between the different subdimensions of populism around people-centrism and anti-elitism. The debate centers on the question of to what extent these subdimensions can be compensatory or are conditional

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- 12 Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 542–63.
- 13 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden, Marc Stears, and Lyman Tower Sargent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 493–512.
- 14 Kirk A. Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Introduction," in *The Ideational Approach to Populism. Concept, Theory, and Analysis*, ed. Kirk A. Hawkins et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 1–24.
- 15 Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave, "Populism as Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study of Political Parties' Discourse in Belgium," *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 3 (May 1, 2007): 319–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00690.x>;
- Matthijs Rooduijn and Teun Pauwels, "Measuring Populism: Comparing Two Methods of Content Analysis," *West European Politics* 34, no. 6 (November 1, 2011): 1272–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2011.616665>.
- 16 Kirk A. Hawkins, "Is Chávez Populist? Measuring Populist Discourse in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 8 (February 20, 2009): 1040–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009331721>.
- 17 Agnes Akkerman, Cas Mudde, and Andrej Zaslove, "How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters," *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 9 (August 1, 2014): 1324–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013512600>.
- 18 Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, "Beyond Protest and Discontent"; Marcos-Marne, Gil de Zúñiga, and Borah, "What Do We (Not) Know about Demand-Side Populism?"

elements of populist ideas.¹⁹ Compensatory measurements are widespread in empirical research and typically focus on average values. They are compensatory in the sense that a high value regarding one subdimension can compensate for a low value on another subdimension. For example, if a voter scores highly on the people-centrism dimension but lowly on the anti-elitism dimensions, he or she may still get a medium-level populism score on a compensatory scale. In contrast, conditional concepts require all elements to be present: if a person is strongly anti-elitist, but does not agree with people-centrism, he or she may not be called a populist based on a conditional logic since he or she does not agree with all elements.²⁰ Proponents of this perspective argue that only the combination of all subdimension equals populism. For example, people-centrism is also used frequently by mainstream catch-all parties,²¹ while anti-elitism is a defining element of anti-establishment parties of all kinds.²²

While the discussion of the consequences of such conceptual decisions was initially focused on the voter level,²³ recent studies have shown that these conceptual decisions also have significant consequences for analyzing populism at the elite level. Bernhard and Chueri find that the number of populist leaders decreases if a conditional logic is used, since the measurement is more discriminatory, classifying borderline cases more conservatively as non-populist.²⁴ Wuttke et al. suggest to take the minimal value of the different populism subdimensions to apply the conditional logic to populist attitudes.²⁵ Practically, this would mean that if someone has a high anti-elitism and a low people-centrism score, the populism score would be equal to the lowest subdimension score, i.e. people-centrism. The degree of populist attitude therefore corresponds to the subdimension with which he or she agrees the least.

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- 19 Alexander Wuttke, Christian Schimpf, and Harald Schoen, "When the Whole Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts: On the Conceptualization and Measurement of Populist Attitudes and Other Multidimensional Constructs," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (May 2020): 356–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000807>; Laurent Bernhard and Juliana Chueri, "It's Conditional: Improving the Measurement of Populism," *Populism* 1, no. aop (August 7, 2024): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-bja10067>.
- 20 Some suggest to distinguish "complete populism" from other forms such as "empty populism", e.g. Jagers and Walgrave, "Populism as Political Communication Style."
- 21 Luke March, "Left and Right Populism Compared: The British Case," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 2 (May 2017): 282–303, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117701753>; Rooduijn and Pauwels, "Measuring Populism."
- 22 A. Schedler, "Anti-Political-Establishment Parties," *Party Politics* 2, no. 3 (July 1, 1996): 291–312, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068896002003001>.
- 23 Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen, "When the Whole Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts."
- 24 Bernhard and Chueri, "It's Conditional."
- 25 Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen, "When the Whole Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts."

2 BSW – A Populist Party for Populist Voters?

The label “populist” was attached to Sarah Wagenknecht by commentators and researchers long before she founded her new party, BSW.²⁶ Gründl found that she was the politician in all German-speaking countries who most frequently used populist rhetoric.²⁷ A recent analysis by Thomeczek shows that she was the most populist politician within Die Linke’s parliamentary group and succeeded in convincing many members of the “populist wing” to join her new party.²⁸ Furthermore, Thomeczek highlights the prevalence of populist rhetoric in BSW’s first party program. Examples of such rhetoric can also be found in the party’s manifesto for the European Elections 2024.²⁹ The party criticizes the political elite for serving the interests of “large agricultural corporations” at the EU-level at the expense of small farmers. BSW demands that “the super-rich” should be taxed more heavily and advocates for large-scale redistribution policies.

BSW was included in a recent expert-level party survey (GEPARTEE) that featured two items on anti-elitism and populism, conducted before the European Elections 2024.³⁰ The distribution of the median expert placements is shown in Figure 1. As indicated, the AfD is estimated by experts to be the most populist party, with median taking the maximum score (10) on both dimensions, people-centrism and anti-elitism. According to the figure, BSW is described as the second most populist party in Germany, scoring 8.5 on both dimensions. With such a high score, the party is classified as significantly more populist than Die Linke, which is identified as the least populist party in the top-right quadrant.

26 Matt Qvortrup, “Germany’s Radical Left Is Fueling Anti-Immigrant Sentiment,” CNN, September 7, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/07/opinions/sahra-wagenknecht-opinion-intl/index.html>.

27 “Populist Ideas on Social Media: A Dictionary-Based Measurement of Populist Communication,” *New Media & Society* 24, no. 6 (2022): 1481–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144820976970>.

28 “Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): Left-Wing Authoritarian – and Populist? An Empirical Analysis.”

29 Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, “Programm Für Die Europawahl 2024,” 2024, https://bsw-vg.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/BSW_Europawahlprogramm_2024.pdf.

30 Jan Philipp Thomeczek, Constantin Wurthmann, and Christian Stecker, “GEPARTEE – German Parties before the European Elections 2024” (Harvard Dataverse, May 24, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/7PBJS9>.

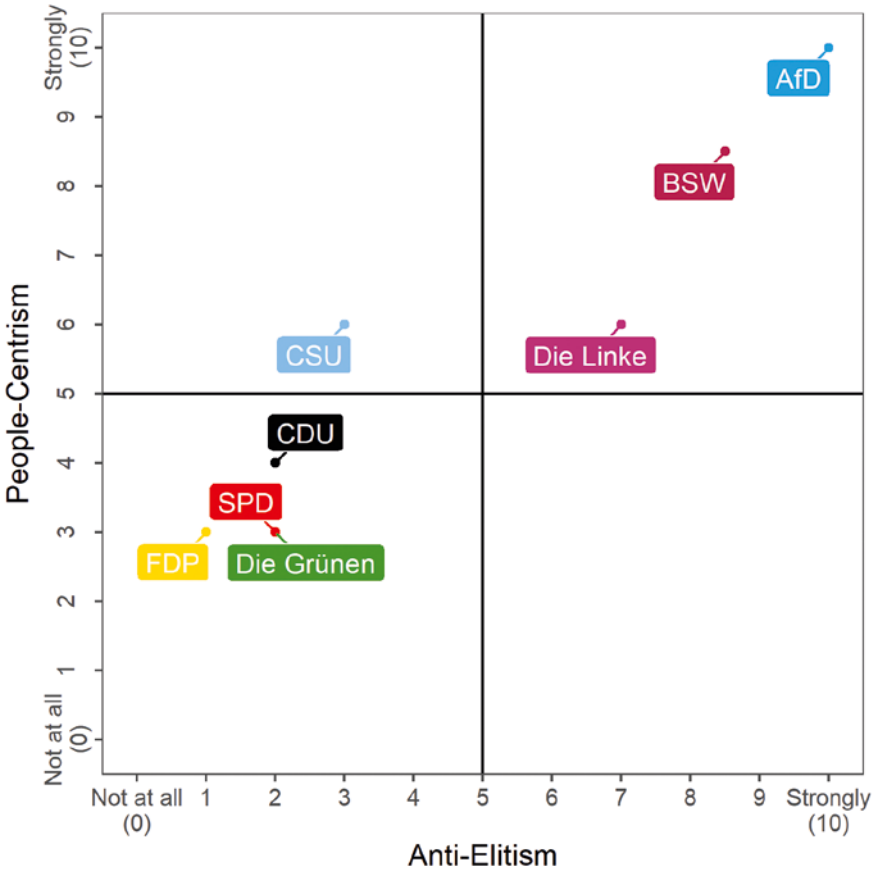


FIGURE 1 Anti-elitism and people-centrism of German parties. Data Source: GEPARTEE
 Note: Data Source: THOMECEK, WURTHMANN, AND STECKER.

Based on the assumption that populist voters are congruent with populist parties regarding populism,³¹ one would expect that BSW voters also express a high level of populist attitudes. Results by Thomeczek point into this direction,³² as there is a high congruence between BSW’s potential voters and BSW’s anti-establishment messages, such as “Many people have lost trust in the state and do not feel represented by any political party anymore” or “Instead of investing in a competent state and good public services, politicians have served the wishes of influential lobbies and emptied the public offices”. Other

31 Marcos-Marne, Gil de Zúñiga, and Borah, “What Do We (Not) Know about Demand-Side Populism?”; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, “Beyond Protest and Discontent.”
 32 “The Voting Potential of Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW).”

studies have shown that BSW voters express low levels of trust towards established institutions such as NATO: rejecting NATO is a strong predictor of BSW's voting potential.³³ 46% of BSW voters have voted for the party at the European Elections because they were disappointed by the other parties.³⁴ Those with a high self-reported BSW voting potential express low levels of trust towards the public broadcast, the government, courts, the police and the army.³⁵

3 Data

The dataset for the following analysis originates from the website BSW-O-Mat (bswomat.de), a Voting Advice Application (VAA)-like website launched in January 2024, designed to explore the party positions of BSW. As the website was not designed for a particular election, it is best described as a Political Information Application (PIA), rather than a VAA. Users could also respond to various additional questions, such as sociodemographic variables, voting intention, and political attitudes, including populist attitudes. The full database includes around 50,000 entries. However, as VAA research has shown, such datasets suffer from self-selection biases, with certain groups, such as highly educated individuals and voters (compared to non-voters), being overrepresented.³⁶ Moreover, it is also likely that a website designed to explore BSW's positions attracts more voters interested in BSW's position. However, to that extent, I expect that the website has reached more voters with a higher voting potential for BSW across all groups and the whole political spectrum (i.e., the bias points in the same direction for all respondents).

33 Wurthmann and Wagner, "On the Association of Attitudes Towards NATO and Weapon Deliveries for Ukraine with Vote Intentions in Germany."

34 Infratest dimap, "WahlREPORT Europawahl 2024" (Berlin: Infratest dimap, 2024).

35 Helge Baumann and Daniel Seikel, "Wer wählt 'Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht'? Aktuelle Erkenntnisse über die BSW-Wahlbereitschaft aus der WSI-Erwerbspersonenbefragung," Research Report (WSI Report, 2024), <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/299270>.

36 Ioannis Andreadis, "Data Quality and Data Cleaning," in *Matching Voters With Parties and Candidates. Voting Advice Applications in a Comparative Perspective*, by Diego Garzia and Stefan Marschall (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2014), 79–92; Jan Kleinnijenhuis et al., "VAAs as Sources of Volatility and Fragmentation: Self-Selection Effects and Genuine Effects," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 75–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2016.1268143>; Joëlle Pianzola, "Selection Biases in Voting Advice Application Research," *Electoral Studies* 36 (December 2014): 272–80, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2014.04.012>.

The VAA literature recommends to use survey weights to tackle the self-selection bias.³⁷ Therefore, post-stratification weights were calculated based on respondents' information on gender, education, age, region (states grouped into eight regions), and recall of their vote in the Bundestag 2021 elections (including share of non-voters), using the latest Census data available at CensusHub (Eurostat) from 2011 and official regional election data.³⁸ As part of data cleaning, missing responses for the weighting variables and populist attitudes (see next section) were excluded. The dataset was further filtered for skippers and skimmers³⁹ and respondents who participated during the same eight week period after BSW's foundation (January 19 to March 19). For the analysis, a random sample ($n = 4,000$) was drawn from the weighted "full" dataset, where the selection probability was defined by the calculated weight. Finally, post-stratification weights were recalculated for this sample, which take values between 0.28 and 7.32. The data quality is therefore considered adequate.

In this article, I rely on the three-dimensional populism scale developed by Castanho Silva et al.,⁴⁰ which has been validated in multiple countries, including Germany. This scale includes the two core ideational dimensions discussed above: people-centrism and anti-elitism. As a third dimension, the scale includes items on "Manichean" black-and-white thinking, as proposed by Hawkins et al.⁴¹ Naturally, there are many different variants of proposed populism scales. In an empirical evaluation of seven established scales, Castanho Silva et al.⁴² conclude that this scale performs well regarding internal coherence and cross-national validity; however, there is room for improvement regarding conceptual breadth and external validity. The reason for the latter is, among other things, the Manichean outlook subdimension, which generally receives substantially less agreement than people-centrism and anti-elitism.⁴³

37 Dimiter Toshkov and Jeroen Romeijn, "How to Estimate the Policy Preferences of Party Supporters: Disaggregating Data from Voting Advice Applications versus Modeling Survey Responses," *Electoral Studies* 74 (December 2021): 102403, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102403>.

38 For more details, see Supplementary Material in Thomeczek, "The Voting Potential of Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW)."

39 Andreadis, "Data Quality and Data Cleaning."

40 "Public Opinion Surveys: A New Scale," in *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Theory, Method & Analysis*, by Kirk A. Hawkins et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), https://populism.byu.edu/App_Data/Publications/memo.pdf.

41 Hawkins and Kaltwasser, "Introduction."

42 "An Empirical Comparison of Seven Populist Attitudes Scales," *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 409–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919833176>.

43 Bruno Castanho Silva and Christopher Wratil, "Do Parties' Representation Failures Affect Populist Attitudes? Evidence from a Multinational Survey Experiment," *Political*

For this reason, I will discuss the three dimensions separately but will also focus on the compensatory aggregation, which takes the minimum of the three subdimensions, as suggested by Wuttke et al., and the mean value of all items.⁴⁴ All subdimensions were measured using three items each (five-point Likert scale), including one negatively formulated item per subdimension, which was reversed prior to analysis.

4 Analysis

Figure 2 displays the agreement with the nine populism items among BSW voters. The Manichean outlook items show very little agreement among BSW voters. Only the item “You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics” slightly falls above the 50% threshold (with around 1/5 of the respondents being neutral); with the two other items, a large majority of BSW voters disagrees. In contrast, a majority of voters agrees with the anti-elitism and people-centrism items. The largest agreement (>75%) is reached for the items “Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people”, “The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country’s politics” and “The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves”.

To analyze the level of populist attitudes held by BSW voters in contrast to voters of the other German parties and to account for the varying degree to which these items contribute to the measurement of populism, the three latent dimensions of the populism scale were estimated with the lavaan package for R⁴⁵ using the default option for ordinary scales (Empirical Bayes Modal). The estimated model shows a high model fit (CFI: 0.983; RMSEA: 0.05). Figure 3 shows the aggregated latent factor scores by vote choice for the next Bundestag election for the three populism subdimensions. Higher average values indicate that voters of the respective parties score, on average, more highly on the given latent populism subdimension.

Looking at the first two plots of Figure 3, which summarize the results for people-centrism and anti-elitism, AfD voters show, on average, the highest scores on both dimensions, followed by non-voters regarding anti-elitism

Science Research and Methods 11, no. 2 (2023): 347–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2021.63>, Footnote 10.

44 Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen, “When the Whole Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts.”

45 Yves Rosseel, “Lavaan: An R Package for Structural Equation Modeling,” *Journal of Statistical Software* 48 (May 24, 2012): 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v048.i02>.

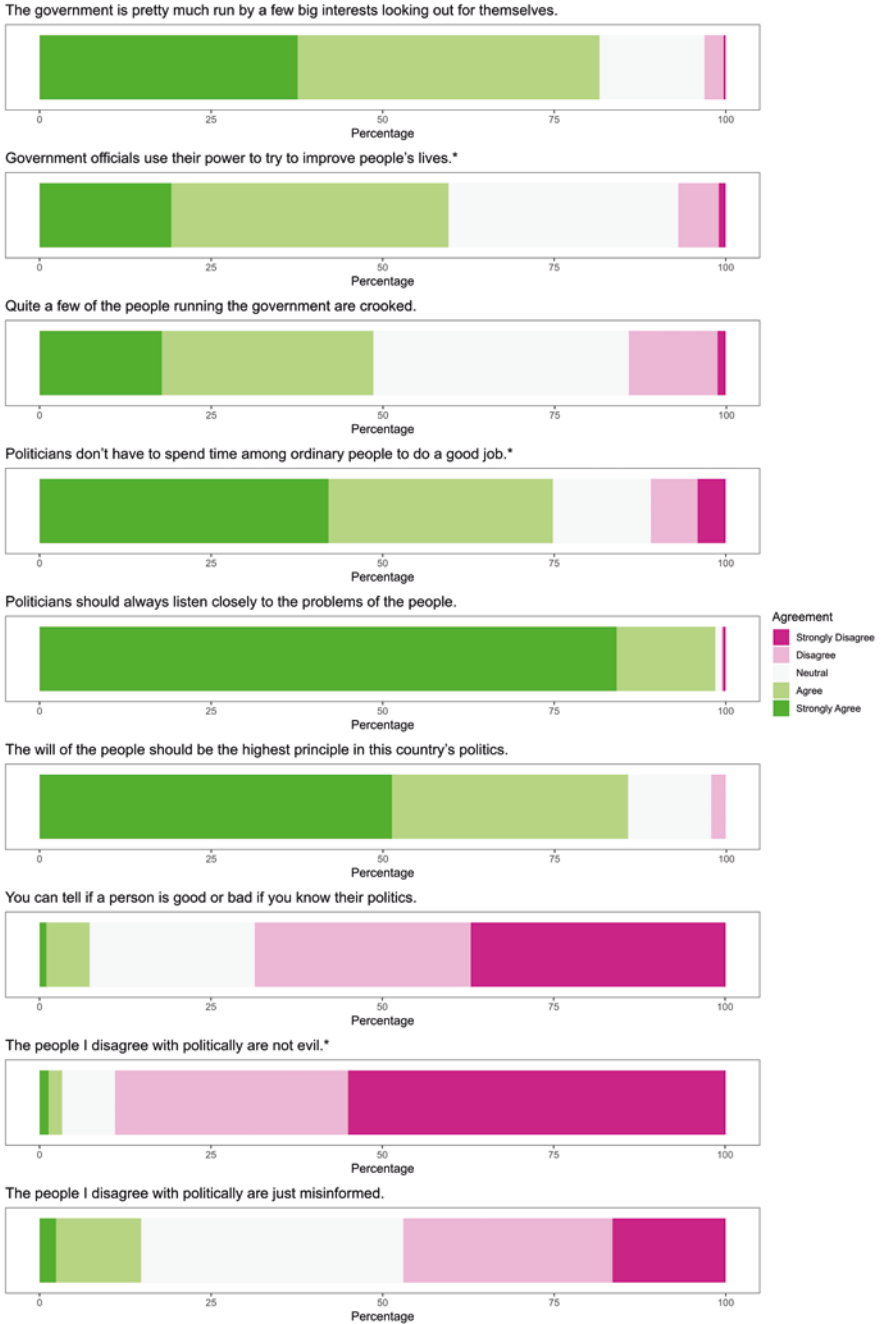


FIGURE 2 Agreement with populism items among BSW voters (weighted distribution). Items marked with an asterisk (*) were reversed prior to analysis

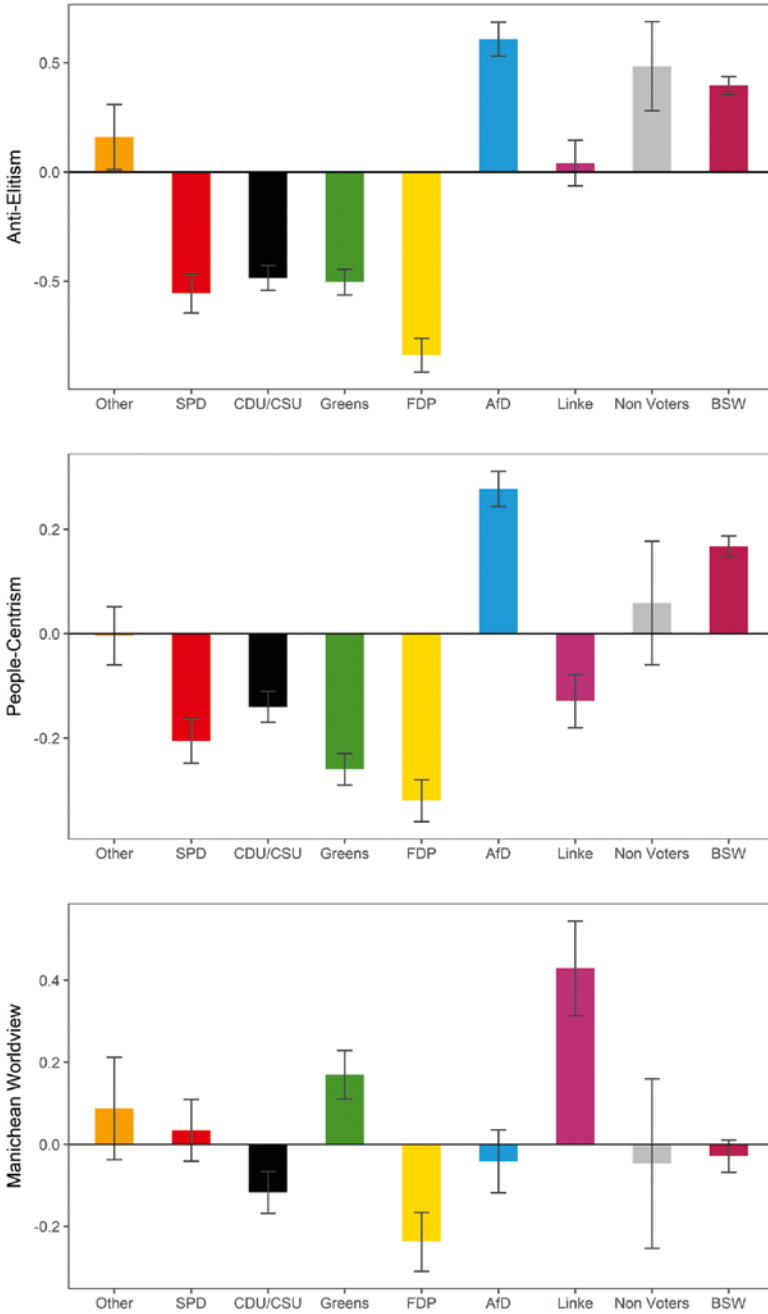


FIGURE 3 Weighted aggregated latent factor scores by vote intention for populist attitudes (95% confidence intervals)

and BSW voters on the people-centrism dimension. This is in accordance with results from previous studies, which have reported that there is a certain ideational overlap between voters of populist parties and non-voters.⁴⁶ Among the voter groups, AfD and BSW voters are the only two groups that express both high levels of anti-elitism and people-centrism. Non-voters are strongly anti-elitist, but score low (with a broad confidence interval) on the people-centrism dimension. Voters of the four mainstream parties SPD, CDU/CSU, Greens and FDP score low on both dimensions, whereas Die Linke voters are somewhat in between these parties and the populist parties, similar to voters of minor (other) parties.

The last plot in Figure 3 shows the distribution of the estimates for the Manichean worldview dimension. The pattern is more difficult to interpret, as it deviates from the pattern of the anti-elitism and people-centrism estimates. The highest scores are indicated for Die Linke and Green voters. This is somewhat surprising. When it comes to the Green voters, the relatively high scores could be related to strong preferences for ecological policies, where Green voters may have become intolerant towards other opinions. Regarding Die Linke, one should also keep in mind that the party has strongly declined electorally and only won 2.7% of the votes at the European elections 2024. Manichean thinking, therefore, of those that (still) vote for the party may be a result of a high frustration with the party's demise.

The low agreement with Manichean outlook items has consequences for the aggregation of subdimensions to a populism score, as shown in Table 1. If one chooses to use classic compensatory aggregation method and takes the average values of all three dimensions, AfD voters come out on top, followed by BSW voters and non-voters. When applying the conditional approach to all three subdimensions, the aggregated populism scores present some unexpected findings: voters of minor (other) parties have the lowest minimal value across all three dimensions and are therefore the most populist.

However, face-validity is higher when taking only the minimum value of people-centrism and anti-elitism for conditional aggregation. Using such a two-dimensional understanding of populism, AfD voters exhibit the highest populism scores, followed by BSW voters and non-voters. The results of the two-dimensional conditional aggregation and the three-dimensional compensatory aggregation are strongly correlated.

46 Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove, "How Populist Are the People?"; Cédric M Koch, Carlos Meléndez, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Mainstream Voters, Non-Voters and Populist Voters: What Sets Them Apart?," *Political Studies* 71, no. 3 (August 1, 2023): 893–913, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211049298>.

TABLE 1 Weighted average populism scores by vote intention. Highest value per variable highlighted in bold

Vote intention	Anti-elitism (AE)	People-centrism (PC)	Manichean worldview (MW)	Compensatory: Average AE/PC/MW	Conditional: Minimum AE/PC/MW	Conditional: Minimum AE/PC
AfD	0.559	0.253	-0.085	0.242	-0.085	0.25
BSW	0.365	0.151	-0.043	0.158	-0.043	0.151
CDU/CSU	-0.577	-0.174	-0.156	-0.302	-0.577	-0.577
FDP	-0.838	-0.33	-0.234	-0.467	-0.838	-0.838
Greens	-0.577	-0.306	0.155	-0.243	-0.577	-0.577
Linke	-0.053	-0.149	0.343	0.047	-0.149	-0.149
Non voters	0.371	0.016	-0.063	0.108	-0.063	0.016
Other	0.053	-0.032	0.006	0.009	-0.032	-0.032
SPD	-0.597	-0.245	0.053	-0.263	-0.597	-0.597

To analyze party-voter congruence, the two-dimensional conditional aggregation method (using the minimum value of people-centrism and anti-elitism) was also applied to the party positions from Figure 1. The results in Figure 4 demonstrate a strong correlation between party and voter stances on populism. All observations are scattered closely around the dashed regression line, indicating that the more populist rhetoric a party employs, the more populist its electorate. This suggests that congruence regarding ideational populism could play a role in explaining BSW's voting potential.⁴⁷ However, it should also be noted that this is equally true for non-populist parties: voters of the Greens, SPD, CDU/CSU and FDP, who support populist ideas weakly, seem to (partially) vote for these parties precisely because they are non-populist.

As discussed above, BSW's voting potential is much higher in east compared to west Germany. Besides programmatic closeness (e.g., east Germans reject arms deliveries to Ukraine more strongly⁴⁸), the unequal distribution of populist attitudes may also play a role in explaining this. The state averages of the voter-level populism scores from Figure 4 (i.e., the two-dimensional

47 For a discussion of the role of the populism dimension next to cultural and economic factors, see also Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian-Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

48 Infratest dimap, "ARD-DeutschlandTREND Juli 2024," www.infratest-dimap.de, 2024, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/ard-deutschlandtrend/2024/juli/>.

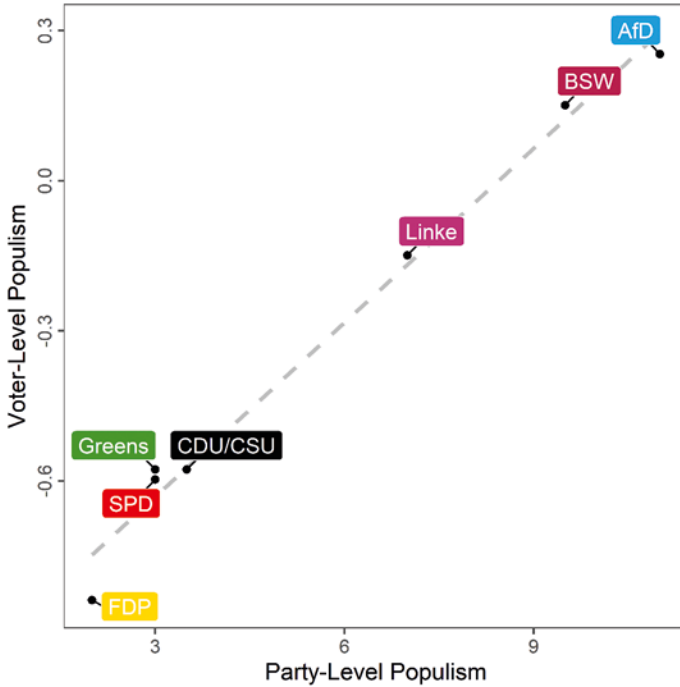


FIGURE 4 Relationship between party-level populism and voter-level populism

conditional aggregation) is displayed in Figure 5. The darker and more red-dish the colours, the higher the average values for populism. As can be clearly seen, populist attitudes are much more widespread in east Germany, providing populist parties such as the AfD and BSW with a solid base.

The previous results suggest that BSW could have successfully convinced populist voters to switch from these other parties to BSW. The highest BSW voting potential was reported for former AfD, Linke, and SPD voters, as well as non-voters.⁴⁹ To assess the extent to which populist attitudes predict switching from these parties (and non-voting) to BSW, four logistic regression models were calculated. These models use a binary variable to indicate whether a voter selected one of the four options in the Bundestag 2021 recall question and named BSW in the vote intention question as a dependent variable. The independent variables are the three estimated populism dimensions. The results are summarized in Table 2.

⁴⁹ Thomeczek, "The Voting Potential of Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW)."

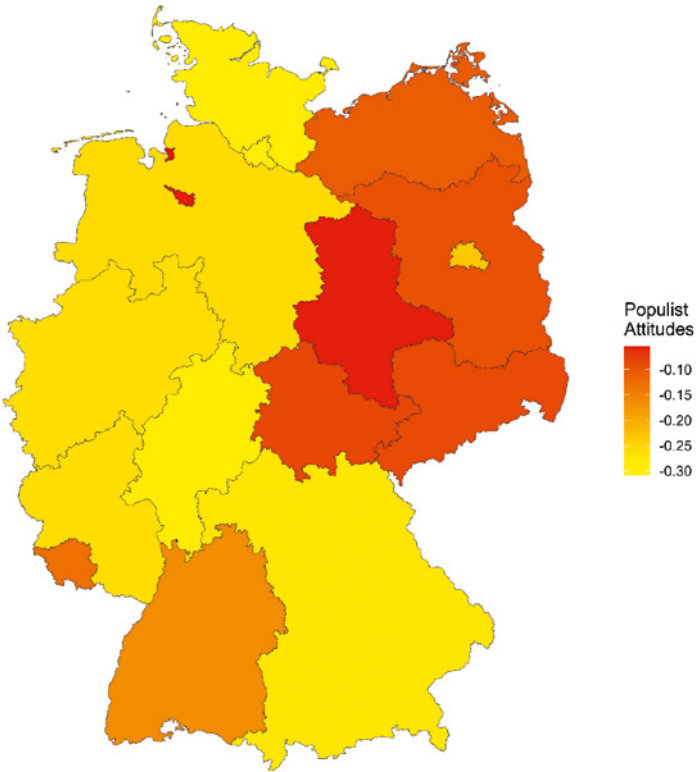


FIGURE 5 State average of populist attitudes (two-dimensional conditional aggregation)

High scores on the latent anti-elitism dimension strongly predict vote switching to BSW across all four models/groups. In contrast, high scores on the people-centrism dimension show only a statistically significant effect for switching from AfD and SPD to BSW, while having a negative effect on switching from non-voters. Holding a Manichean worldview is negatively associated with switching from non-voting to BSW. Therefore, regarding populist attitudes, it can be concluded that anti-elitism is the common denominator among former AfD, Linke, SPD voters, and non-voters who intend to vote for BSW in the next elections. While populist attitudes are common among AfD and (former) Die Linke voters,⁵⁰ these results also show that BSW convinced former SPD voters holding populist attitudes. While populist voters may not constitute a large

50 Loew and Faas, “Between Thin- and Host-Ideologies.”

TABLE 2 Results of weighted logistic regression. Standard error in parantheses

	Switch from AfD	Switch from Linke	Switch from Non-voting	Switch from SPD
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-4.627*** (0.187)	-2.633*** (0.068)	-3.701*** (0.113)	-2.188*** (0.054)
Anti-elitism	1.073*** (0.293)	0.814*** (0.136)	1.271*** (0.210)	0.323*** (0.115)
People-centrism	1.555** (0.663)	0.171 (0.290)	-0.801* (0.436)	0.570** (0.252)
Manichean outlook	-0.123 (0.229)	0.071 (0.114)	-0.404** (0.180)	-0.027 (0.100)
AIC	710.101	2139.016	998.623	2708.203
BIC	735.277	2164.192	1023.799	2733.379
Log likelihood	-351.050	-1065.508	-495.311	-1350.101
Deviance	665.832	2088.777	1037.734	2649.651
Num. obs.	4000	4000	4000	4000

***p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.1

proportion of SPD voters, as it is a non-populist party, it should be noted that the SPD won around 12 million votes in 2021. Therefore, even if the BSW can only appeal to a small subset of SPD voters, this could be equal to millions of votes in the next Bundestag elections.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

It took the new German party Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht (BSW) just five months from its foundation to win six seats in the European Parliament, and maybe only nine to enter the first state government. Given the central role of populism in the party's communication, this article has examined the extent to which (potential) BSW voters align with their party regarding populism. The results indicate that, based on a two-dimensional conceptualization of populist attitudes, BSW voters are slightly less populist than AfD voters but significantly more populist than Die Linke voters and non-voters. This is much in line with the degree of populism expressed by the German parties, where the

BSW can be labelled as the second-most populist party in Germany (after the AfD). As populist attitudes are more widespread in east than west Germany, the results of this study also offer an explanation why BSW's potential is much larger in the east German states, as demonstrated by the latest European and state elections.

Populist attitudes also help explain why former non-voters and voters from ideologically diverse parties such as the AfD, Linke, and SPD intend to vote for BSW. Here, anti-elitism serves as a common denominator, as high scores on the anti-elitism dimension strongly predict defection from these four options to BSW. Consequently, BSW offers a new voting option for anti-establishment voters dissatisfied with the current political elite. Therefore, it can be concluded that BSW voters put much hope in their new party, hoping that it may improve political representation for those who do not feel represented by the other parties anymore.

These results contribute to understanding the voting potential of the new populist party BSW and underscore the need for more detailed analyses. Since anti-elitism is a key factor in explaining vote-switching, future studies on BSW should include at least some items related to anti-elitism or anti-establishment sentiment, even if they are more interested in programmatic positions. Research should also dedicate more attention to institutional trust (e.g., trust in political institutions, the legal system or the European Union), which is closely connected to anti-elitist thinking.

The findings also address broader questions of research on populist parties, especially new parties. Apart from the electoral dynamics to understand the rise of this particular new party, the results highlight that populist attitudes play a key role in understanding the motivation to vote for a new populist party. Students of new populist parties should dedicate more attention to explaining vote switching. The results suggest that populist attitudes can even explain why voters from non-populist catch-all parties switch to newly founded populist alternatives. On a more conceptual level, the findings also show the difficulties with the Manichean subdimension of populist ideas. As reported by other studies, the agreement with the items measuring a Manichean worldview is generally much lower compared to the other two dimensions, even among voters of populist parties such as the BSW and AfD. This raises important conceptual questions, as the choice between a two- or three-dimensional conceptualization of populist attitudes can significantly impact the analysis of party-voter congruence.⁵¹

51 Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen, "When the Whole Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts"; Bernhard and Chueri, "It's Conditional."