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Sahra Wagenknecht: the woman who will stop AfD or one more German reactionary?

Friday 1 March 2024, by [KLIKAUER Thomas](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2024).

For the past several weeks, one of Germany's most hotly discussed issues is whether Sahra Wagenknecht's new political party - the [Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance - Reason and Justice \(BSW\)](#) - is a left-authoritarian party or right-wing populist party. Some people have suggested that Sahra Wagenknecht's [BSW party](#) will primarily present direct competition for the [Neo-Nazi AfD](#) and to a much lesser extent the socialist-progressive [Die Linke](#) party. Beyond that, the new BSW party also changes Germany's traditional party system by, at least potentially, having a destabilizing and polarizing impact.

Visibly, in public polling, [Sahra Wagenknecht's BSW](#) is doing better than many people had expected. Potential voter support ranges between a realistic 12% and an overly optimistic 27%. Germany's much acclaimed [Polit-Barometer](#) gave the BSW just 13% in 2023 - before the party was created. On Groundhog Day, 2 February 2024, it showed BSW at 6% - a far cry from the imaginary 27%. A few days later, the even more important [Sonntagsfrage](#), saw BSW between 5% and 7.5%. Whether 5%, 6% or 7.5%, one thing seems to be certain, BSW is very likely to be represented in the next parliament because it is set to cross the [5% hurdle](#) that allows a political party to enter parliament.

Since people have observed a relatively high volatility and frequently changing support for different political parties in the current [party landscape](#), many of them are trying to understand how preferences for BSW can be classified. To ascertain this, one has to look at the "3 P's" of research on political parties: the person, the program, and popularity.

If mid-October 2023 had been the focus of analysts from the corporate media as regards BSW, political commentators might have suggested that Sahra Wagenknecht's BSW reflects what is written in the [communist manifesto](#): "A spectre is haunting Europe - the spectre of communism." That is how the spectre of [Sahra Wagenknecht](#) would have been seen. Today, everyone has realized that it is not a spectre at all. It is a reality. Sahra Wagenknecht actually planned and created a new party. And it has very little to do with communism.

It all started on 26 September 2023 when a German non-profit association called [BSW - Für Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit e.V.](#) was created. It was a precursor of what was to become BSW - the newest political party in Germany.

It is extremely rare, perhaps even incredible, that a political party gets founded and instantly becomes an important player in Germany's political landscape. Other recent candidates like the [Pirate Party](#) failed.

The Neo-Nazi AfD succeeded, but it took them a few years and a great deal of help from the [anti-democratic networks](#) operating in Europe, Russia and the USA. Today, they have a [22%](#) support base - despite weeks of mass [anti-AfD rallies](#) and the party's infamous [Wannsee 2.0 meeting](#) that planned

the mass [deportation](#) of [millions](#) of people from Germany.

Of course, Germany's parties are looking with great interest at the newly founded [BSW](#) because it represents both a competitor and a potential partner. The question is: What kind of political party is BSW in terms of personality, program, and populism?

P 1: Personality of Sahra Wagenknecht

How important the [personality](#) of Sahra Wagenknecht is in all this has been obvious from the start. **BSW** stands for [Alliance](#) or **Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht** - in other words it's a [one-woman show](#). She is the official party chairwoman - the all-defining figure of BSW. She is smart, an excellent speaker, quick-witted, a charismatic politician and - despite having been inside the dull machinery of politics for decades - a self-appointed [outsider defying the establishment](#).

The fact that her approval ratings were initially rather low was due to the fact that she had received very negative reviews in Germany's corporate media. On the other hand, she has an extremely strong fan base among the social media crowd.

Strangely, in November 2022, well over 50% of AfD voters rated Wagenknecht positively. Another survey taken in March 2023 saw 60% support for her from AfD voters. Even more interestingly, by mid-February 2024, [17% of all Germans](#) wanted Sahra Wagenknecht to be chancellor of Germany.

Also of interest is the fact that 50% of Die Linke voters could warm up to Wagenknecht despite the fact she split away from Die Linke. When supporters of other political parties are taken together with non-voters, Sahra Wagenknecht gets between 20% and 30% support.

All in all, Wagenknecht is rated positively - with the exception of those voting for Germany's environmentalist Green party. Only 15% of Green voters support Sahra Wagenknecht.

P 2: Program of BSW

In order to describe the program positions of [BSW](#), you must imagine a variation on [a political compass](#), with a) a cultural dimension (socio-political liberal, cultural identity, internationalism, and ecology); b) an economic dimension based on the welfare state, redistribution and state intervention in the economy; c) a progressive dimension (green, alternative, democratic, and liberal); and, d) a conservative dimension (traditionally authoritarian and nationalist).

When assessing BSW's program along these lines, BSW offers a contradictory picture. It is a nebulous mixture of conservative and progressive ideas. The same applies when it comes to culture vs. economy. No clear political policy picture emerges for BSW. Based on this, many political observers are inclined to describe BSW as a [left-authoritarian](#) party. It is a socio-economic progressive party mixed with socio-cultural conservatism.

On the other hand, Wagenknecht's statements against so-called "well-off big city academics" who, in her mind, enforce a "left-liberal hyper-morality" is straight-forward [right-wing populism](#). Unsurprisingly, an analysis of her book "[die Selbstgerechten](#)" or "the Self-Righteous" comes to a similar conclusion. Her politics might boil down to the formula: For redistribution of wealth; resentful towards migration, global warming, and minorities.

From this, it's fair to say that the party is trying to compete for voters who are positioned at the left-authoritarian end of the spectrum - albeit more authoritarian than left, like the old Socialist Unity Party, or SED, which governed East Germany for 40 years - and the first 20 years of Sahra's life before the fall of the wall in 1989.

Most political parties in Germany have a clearly identifiable policy position and political profile, unlike the hazy picture offered by BSW. The closest probable voters for [BSW](#) are those conservative types who tend to vote for the AfD because they like their anti-Green and closed-border policies. BSW has a clear position on the border and therefore has drawn in more conservatives than progressives. Almost 25% of BSW support comes from that political area. There is a large pool (43%) of AfD supporters who could potentially vote for BSW. This moves a large swathe of right-wing populists to the authoritarian left because they view Sahra as a leader with a strong personality, a real fighter.

It appears at the moment that 23% of all Germans can image voting for BSW. 22% of BSW's pool of potential voters might come from Germany's conservatives (CDU). BSW might gain 18% from the neoliberal FDP, and just as much (18%) might be shaved away from the social-democratic SPD.

Most interestingly, only about 9% of Green voters would consider voting for BSW. In other words, those people Sahra Wagenknecht defames as "well-off big city academics with a left-liberal hyper-morality" are those who are least likely to vote for BSW. It seems like the party with the most people holding a doctorate (PhD) - the Greens - remains staunchly resistant to [left-wing populism](#).

In the end, [BSW's](#) greatest gains can come from the AfD. The biggest similarities in terms of basic political ideology are with the AfD, and the most substantial pool of BSW voters are migrating from the AfD. In short, BSW can be regarded as a [left-wing-populist](#) competitor for Germany's right-wing populists.

P 3: Popularity - the Left-Wing Populism of BSW

Because of the rather skilful fabrication of anti-establishment resentment by Sahra, BSW is seen as a populist party. [Populism](#) cannot be understood as a communication style; it is an ideology. The ideology of populism is characterized above all by stoking antagonism between "the people" and the so-called elite. [Populists appeal](#) to the unchallengeable sovereignty of "the people", which they [frame](#) as being threatened by the ever-illusiv e elites. These elites are painted as being "mostly corrupt" and therefore diseased and rotten and, like cancer, must be surgically removed or destroyed so they cannot infect the rest of the body politic.

Populist attitudes can, in fact, be measured by how much you agree with statements like: "What is called compromise in politics is in reality only a betrayal of principles" and "The political differences between elites and the people are greater than the differences within the people."

The German word for "the people" is "das Volk." When blowing the [neo-fascist dog-whistle](#), in the [understanding](#) of [the SS](#) and the [Einsatzgruppen](#), this means Hitler's [white supremacy](#) and Aryan *Volksgemeinschaft*.

In Germany, it is clear that the Neo-Nazi AfD is by far the party that adheres to this classical populist agenda - all other parties are behind in this area by a large margin. It is no coincidence that populist attitudes and populist parties (BSW & [AfD](#)) intermingle with each other.

Populism is what makes [the AfD](#) and BSW grow. Just as progressive voters on socio-economic issues are more likely to vote for the SPD or the FDP, people with strong populist attitudes are more likely to vote for [the AfD](#) - and now for BSW.

What All This Means

The results of an analysis using **p**erson, **p**rogram, and **p**opularity, show that BSW primarily represents a populist competitor for the voters of [the AfD](#).

All three, the person (Sahra Wagenknecht), the program and popularity (through populism and social media cult status of Sahra) are what is most attractive to AfD voters. Meanwhile, BSW will also be a noticeable - albeit somewhat less strong - electoral competitor for Die Linke. However, this competition with Die Linke might vanish if Sahra Wagenknecht's BSW pushes Die Linke below the critical 5% barrier, which would mean that Die Linke would be excluded from the Bundestag (parliament). There is a small likelihood that this might happen. For all other democratic parties - and this excludes the AfD - BSW should not represent substantial competition in the sense of an electoral threat.

Given that BSW will mainly steal votes from the [Neo-Nazi AfD](#), the Sahra Wagenknecht alliance could contribute to a substantial [weakening of the Neo-Nazi AfD](#), which is in itself not a bad thing.

Perhaps a conclusion we may come to in the not-so-distant future - if the AfD does succumb to her tactics - is that Sahra Wagenknecht may have strategically designed her populist rhetoric for the benefit of BSW by calculating that it might well weaken the [Neo-Nazi AfD](#) by undermining their fundamental rhetoric.

Many people who occupy the political centre and left-of-centre will regard fighting [Neo-Nazis](#) by [any means necessary](#) a worthwhile goal of the currently re-emerging [militant democracy](#), and then might eventually be ready and willing to welcome a useful BSW back into the fascist-free family of tolerant democracy.

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