# Bridging Left and Right? How Sahra Wagenknecht Could Change the German Party Landscape

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RESEARCH NOTE

# Bridging Left and Right? How Sahra Wagenknecht Could Change the German Party Landscape

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**Abstract** The prospect of a new party can significantly change political landscapes. In Germany, a potential new party is currently being widely discussed—Sahra Wagenknecht may splinter off from her party, The Left, to form a new radical party in Germany. Above all, Wagenknecht is known for her anti-immigration stance and could potentially bridge the gap between the right and left by forming a left-authoritarian party. What does the demand for such a left-authoritarian party look like in Germany? To explore this, we examined individual-level data to understand the structural factors that cause people to rate Wagenknecht higher than her current party, The Left. The results indicate that Wagenknecht is preferred over The Left by individuals who are more socioculturally right-wing, critical of migration, and dissatisfied with democracy. These findings provide valuable insights into the electoral potential of a potential left-authoritarian party led by Wagenknecht.

**Keywords** Party system transformation · German politics · Party formation · Left and right · Voting behaviour

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## Eine Brücke zwischen Links und Rechts? Wie Sahra Wagenknecht die deutsche Parteienlandschaft verändern könnte

**Zusammenfassung** Die Gründung einer neuen Partei kann politische Landschaften grundlegend verändern. In Deutschland wird derzeit die Gründungsmöglichkeit einer neuen Partei diskutiert – Sahra Wagenknecht könnte sich von ihrer Partei Die Linke abwenden, um eine neue radikale Partei zu gründen. Wagenknecht ist für ihre einwanderungskritische Haltung bekannt und könnte durch die Gründung einer linksautoritären Partei eine Brücke zwischen Rechts und Links bauen. Doch wie sieht die Nachfrage für eine solche linksautoritäre Partei in Deutschland aus, und wer käme als Wählergruppe für diese in Frage? In dieser Research Note gehen wir dieser Fragestellung auf Basis von Individualdaten nach. Dabei identifizieren wir strukturelle Faktoren, die dazu beitragen, dass Wagenknecht höhere Zustimmung genießt als ihre derzeitige Partei, Die Linke. Unsere Befunde deuten darauf hin, dass Wagenknecht von soziokulturell rechten, migrationskritischen und mit der Demokratie unzufriedenen Wählern gegenüber ihrer jetzigen Partei vorgezogen wird. Dies gibt uns wichtige Einblicke in das Wahlpotenzial einer möglichen linksautoritären Partei unter ihrer Führung.

**Schlüsselwörter** Wahlverhalten · Parteiensystemwandel · Links und Rechts · Parteigründung · Deutschland

## 1 Wagenknecht Without the Left—Off to New Shores?

Over the past few years, there have been notable instances of public dissent within the leadership of The Left (Die Linke) in Germany. These disagreements have frequently centred around Sahra Wagenknecht, a prominent figure within The Left party and former co-faction leader in the German Bundestag. Her contentious stance concerning immigration has caused a division between Wagenknecht and The Left. The divide within the party between those aligned with Wagenknecht's radical perspectives and those exhibiting a more moderate stance can even be found on the subnational level (Thomeczek 2023). As a result, the public has started to speculate whether former party leader Sahra Wagenknecht is forming a splinter party with a left-wing authoritarian[1] focus. Recent opinion polls suggest that up to 19% of voters would consider voting for a so-called Wagenknecht party, with 60% of the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland; AfD) voters expressing their support (Focus Online 2023a).

The Left is facing an electoral crisis, struggling to reach the 5% threshold at the last German federal election. Furthermore, there are significant structural diver-

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[1] The term left-authoritarian does not necessarily imply antidemocratic tendencies of parties within this spectrum. Rather, we follow the conceptualisation by the literature on these parties (see, e.g., Lefkofridi et al. 2014 and Federico et al. 2017) in which "left authoritarians" are understood as parties with left-wing economic positions while being "authoritarian, conservative and nationalist on cultural policy issues" (Hillen and Steiner 2020, p. 331).

gences between The Left and its voter base, leading to a growing sense of alienation, particularly on sociocultural matters. This has resulted in a noticeable shift of voters from The Left to the AfD, especially in eastern Germany (Olsen 2018), and contributes to the further decline in The Left's vote share.

While Wagenknecht's economically left-wing positions are mostly in line with her party, her culturally right-wing preferences place her in a unique, and unoccupied, space in German politics. Our analysis shows that Wagenknecht's appeal among voters is shaped by their own conservative tendencies on the sociocultural spectrum, along with general dissatisfaction with democracy. Wagenknecht's positioning thus has the potential to bridge the gap between The Left and the AfD.

Our primary objective in this research note is to examine whether establishing a Wagenknecht party can potentially fill an electoral and representational gap for politically alienated economically left-wing and socioculturally right-wing voters. While previous studies have highlighted a deficiency in left-authoritarian representation, limited research exists regarding the politicians capable of bridging the ideological gap between left and right. Examining politicians and parties that might fill this supply gap is crucial for studying how voters react to other parties and for explaining the decline in support for the progressive centre-left parties. This research contributes to the expanding literature on the factors influencing support for radical left parties in Western European countries.

## 2 Transformative Change or Stopgap: Assessing the Potential of a Wagenknecht Party

In its simplest form, the political landscape can be understood through a left–right dimension. Traditionally, individuals favouring redistribution are positioned on the left side of the spectrum, while those adhering to free market ideals typically align themselves with the right side (Downs 1957). However, contemporary Western European democracies have witnessed a shift in focus from purely economic concerns to include other prominent issues such as immigration and environmental protection (Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019; Kriesi et al. 2008; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). The literature also discusses this as the GAL–TAN dimension, in which Green–Alternative–Libertarian (GAL) attitudes are to be found on one end of the scale, and traditional–authoritarian–nationalist (TAN) preferences are found on the other end (Jolly et al. 2022; Marks et al. 2006; Hooghe et al. 2002).[2] The GAL–TAN dimension serves as an indicator of party positioning on sociocultural issues.

In order to encompass the entire political space in Western societies, Lefkofridi et al. (2014) outline four basic ideological preferences: economic right/sociocultural liberal, economic right/sociocultural authoritarian, economic left/sociocultural liberal, and economic left/sociocultural authoritarian. As Van der Brug and Van Spanje (2009) and Thomassen (2012) show, there are significant voter groups in all four

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[2] Also, other research conceptualises policy spaces as two-dimensional, consisting of a socioeconomic and a sociocultural dimension (e.g., Jankowski et al. 2022). Although there are differences in details, the basic idea is the same.

quadrants of the two-dimensional political space in Western Europe. However, while numerous parties in Western Europe represent the political views of those in the right-liberal, right-authoritarian, and left-liberal quadrants, a notable gap exists in terms of party representation in the left-authoritarian quadrant (Lefkofridi et al. 2014).

The presence of individuals holding socioculturally authoritarian and socioeconomically left-wing attitudes (the "left-authoritarians") is no new phenomenon and was previously described as working-class authoritarianism (Lipset 1959). While later studies (Kriesi et al. 2008; Oesch and Rennwald 2018) refrain from using the term *working class* in association with left-authoritarianism, the general idea of who left-authoritarians are has not changed since then and has become more relevant with the salience of sociocultural issues. While voters with higher education tend to have more left-libertarian opinions, working-class voters are more likely to hold left-authoritarian views (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Steiner and Hillen 2019). Especially since the financial crisis of 2008, the conceptualisation of "cosmopolitan winners" and "communitarian losers" of globalisation (Kriesi et al. 2008) has become relevant. The "globalisation losers" are described as individuals who experience an objective or perceived decrease in their standard of living as a result of the impacts of globalisation. This group is most affected by austerity measures and feels neglected by social democratic parties because of a lack of socioeconomic protectionist stances. Consequently, these circumstances have contributed to an increasing dealignment between the "globalisation losers" and political parties.

This reaction to globalisation has translated to positions on the sociocultural dimension, for example through a greater degree of scepticism among the working class towards European integration (Evans and Mellon 2019). Therefore, we can also find that radical left parties gain electoral advantages by adopting Eurosceptic stances (Wagner 2022). Next to Euroscepticism, the working class's anti-immigration preferences became more salient following the refugee crisis in Europe. During this time, radical left parties such as the Irish Sinn Fein and Greek Syriza gained support from voters with anti-immigration preferences (Karyotis et al. 2014; O'Malley 2008). However, it is worth noting that most radical left parties tend to have more pro-migration stances (Hutter and Kriesi 2022).

According to Downs (1957) and in line with spatial proximity models, individuals vote for parties with the least distance between their own and the party's positions. However, this poses a problem for left-wing authoritarian voters because they lack representation in Western European party systems, such as that of Germany (Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Hillen and Steiner 2020). This means that although voters may want to vote for parties closest to them, left-authoritarians are forced to prioritise one dimension over the other, as there is only a limited number of parties that can be classified in the left-authoritarian quadrant in Europe (Norris 2019).[3]

Insufficient representation can lead to voter dissatisfaction, influencing various aspects of political behaviour (Silva and Wratil 2021), and can have a negative im-

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[3] In Germany, the combination of sociocultural nationalism, anti-immigration, and redistributive welfare policies are represented only by the right-wing extremist National Democratic Party of Germany (Norris 2019).

pact on voter turnout (Brockington 2009; Schäfer and Debus 2018). In the presence of a left-authoritarian supply gap, Hillen and Steiner (2020, p. 331) show that "left-authoritarians are less likely to vote and exhibit lower levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust". Beyond political trust, Hakhverdian and Schakel (2022) provide evidence that left-authoritarians are less likely to trust political parties, parliament, or the government, in line with general negative views towards democracy.

Furthermore, as a consequence, left-authoritarians tend to disengage from politics (Federico et al. 2017) and exhibit more political apathy (Hussey 2012). Regarding Switzerland, Kurella and Rosset (2018) present evidence that when there is lack of left-authoritarian representation and cultural issues are highly salient, left-authoritarians are significantly more inclined to refrain from voting or to support a right-wing party based on cultural proximity. These findings are consistent with prior research on working-class voters in general, which has indicated that the vote shift of the working class from the mainstream left to the radical right is primarily driven by the growing importance of the sociocultural dimension (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Steiner and Hillen 2019).

The political landscape in Germany exemplifies a significant representation gap for left-authoritarians. Figure 1 illustrates that current German parties in parliament
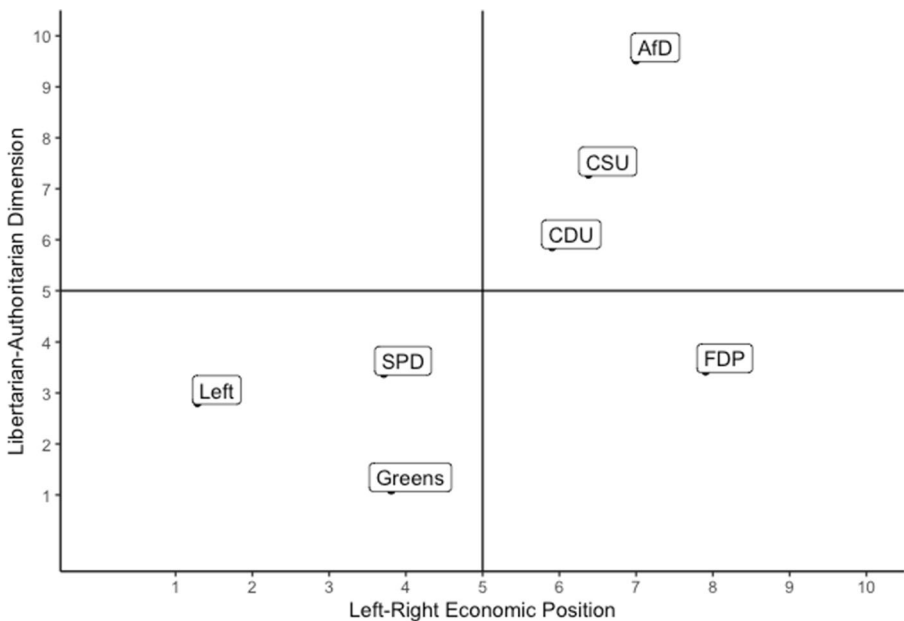


**Fig. 1** Germany's political landscape based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019. *AfD* Alternative for Germany, *CDU* Christian Democratic Union, *CSU* Christian Social Union, *FDP* Free Democratic Party, *SPD* Social Democratic Party. Source: Authors' own presentation, based on Chapel Hill Expert Survey data by Jolly et al. 2022

cater to left-liberal, right-liberal, and right-authoritarian preferences.[4] However, there is no party supply in the left-authoritarian quadrant, which leaves those individuals identifying with left-authoritarian preferences either voting for a left-liberal party, voting for a right-authoritarian party or abstaining. Because the support for the AfD is primarily driven by cultural factors, the party emerges as a viable alternative for left-authoritarian voters. Steiner and Hillen (2021) demonstrate that left-authoritarians are less inclined to vote for the AfD when they prioritise economic issues. In contrast, if they care more about immigration issues, the likelihood of left-authoritarians voting for the AfD increases from 15.7% to 24.7%. If left-authoritarians perceive the AfD to have left-leaning economic policies, this probability increases to 29.6%. Moreover, if they also prioritise immigration as their biggest concern, the likelihood of voting for the AfD increases even further, to 34.3%. Steiner and Hillen (2021) demonstrate similar patterns for The Left, indicating that if left-authoritarians prioritise immigration, their probability of voting for The Left is only about 19.2%. However, if the economy is a salient factor for voters, this probability increases to 34.6%.

A left-authoritarian party would effectively address this distinct representation gap. The Left can be characterised as a socioculturally liberal party, as shown by its positions on immigration and social policies, which fall between those of the Greens and those of the Social Democrats (Bräuninger et al. 2019). The majority of The Left's leadership emphasises their distinction from the right-authoritarian AfD party and rejects the notion of a political horseshoe. Prominent figures within The Left, such as Bernd Riexinger and Katja Kipping, have even suggested collaborating closely with the Refugees Welcome movement (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019).

The internal dissent within The Left has had various effects on both the party itself and its voters (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019). For instance, due to the ambiguity of The Left's stance on immigration, which is a significant issue on the cultural dimension, Steiner and Hillen (2021) found that left-authoritarians in Germany vote for the party because they misperceive the party's position on immigration. They also demonstrate that when voters become aware that the party's stance on immigration does not align with their own, it influences their voting choices.

In response, a significant voter migration from The Left to the AfD has been observed. Olsen (2018) illustrates that the increased prominence of the AfD in the German political landscape creates new competition for The Left. In the 2017 federal election, The Left lost around 430,000 voters to the AfD (Neu and Pokorny 2017). Many of these voters belong to the working class or are unemployed (Olsen 2018). This trend is particularly pronounced in eastern Germany, where The Left was a mainstream party (referred to as a *Volkspartei* by Arzheimer 2021) for many years until the establishment of the AfD. One possible reason for these defections from The Left could be the incongruence between the party's cultural positions and its voters' preferences.

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[4] This result is consistent throughout different conceptualisations of the sociocultural dimension (e.g., Jankowski et al. 2022) and generally shows a supply gap in one quadrant of the two-dimensional German political space.

This might be one of the reasons why The Left politician Wagenknecht established a movement named *Aufstehen* (Get Up) in 2018. *Aufstehen* was inspired by similar movements in France and the United Kingdom; it advocated in favour of more restrictive immigration policies and criticised liberal asylum policies. The movement aimed to prevent dissatisfied left-wing voters from defecting to the AfD. Although the movement was short-lived, it attracted over 100,000 supporters who registered for the campaign (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019).

Wagenknecht's profile is characterized by Eurosceptic and anti-immigration stances, while still maintaining strong pro-redistribution preferences. In her book *Die Selbstgerechten* [*The Self-righteous*], published in 2021, Wagenknecht argues that being left-liberal is a newly framed neoliberalism, and she positions herself contrary to her party's progressive cultural ideals. While Wagenknecht enjoys out-standing popularity in Germany (Focus Online 2023b), her party struggles with the 5% threshold. As she has ruled out a renewed candidacy for The Left (Tagesschau 2023), understanding her potential in German politics is more important than ever. She might be able to represent an underrepresented left-authoritarian quadrant in German politics. While The Left has experienced voter movement to the AfD and general disenfranchisement among its voters, Wagenknecht is uniquely positioned to provide a political home for those who no longer feel represented by The Left. This is particularly pronounced in eastern Germany, where The Left previously held most of its secure seats but lost them to the AfD. Our main focus in this research is to assess the potential appeal of Wagenknecht compared to The Left. Specifically, we are interested in examining those voters who view Wagenknecht more favourably than The Left.

## 3 Research Design

For this study, data were collected from a sample of individuals in Germany as part of the Values, Attitudes, and Participation Towards Environmental and Climate Issues (VAPECI) project at GESIS. The data were collected using the online access panel provided by Bilendi&respondi, which has 300,000 registered members in Germany. The survey was conducted in late November 2022 and recruited participants aged 18–83 (mean = 44.23) through quota sampling. The final, cleaned sample (without straightliners) consisted of 1272 respondents. The respondents resembled the German population well, only highly educated respondents were slightly over-represented (Online Appendix A1). In calculating the models, we included only respondents for whom there was no item nonresponse for the indicators relevant to the modelling, leaving us with 880 cases for the analysis.

### 3.1 Dependent Variable

Our central concern was to investigate which factors contribute to rating Wagenknecht positively and better than her party, The Left. For this purpose, we first calculated the difference between the rating of the person and the party. The assessment of Wagenknecht could be made on a scale from –5 (*I do not think much of*

*this person at all* to) +5 *(I think a great deal of this person).*[5] The same scale was used for the evaluation of her party. We then created a new dichotomous variable. It took the value (1) if two conditions were met: (a) Wagenknecht was rated positively (above 0), and (b) Wagenknecht was rated better than The Left. If at least one condition was not met, this variable took the value (0). In the following, we call this variable "potential Wagenknecht voters."

Analysing the potential for a Wagenknecht party provides us with conceptual challenges. So far, little is publicly known about what a potential Wagenknecht party would look like. The only certainty is that Wagenknecht would play a prominent role. For this reason, we focus our analysis on the evaluation of her person. We are aware that candidate evaluation and party evaluation are two different concepts[6]; however, we believe that by focusing on the evaluation of Wagenknecht in comparison to The Left, we can gain valuable insights into the discussion of the electoral potential of a Wagenknecht party. For example, a voter might be less likely to support her due to her current association with The Left; preferring her over The Left and positively assessing her gives us a good indication that this voter is going to be more likely to support her independent of The Left. A robustness test using only the Wagenknecht rating can be found in the Online Appendix (Fig. A3) and shows no substantial differences from the main results.

### 3.2 Explanatory Factors

For our research, we tested six independent variables that researchers have found to affect radical left party success. Olsen (2018) shows evidence of the significance of eastern German voters in support for The Left. We expect this to affect a potential Wagenknecht party because both the radical right and the radical left find significantly more support in eastern Germany. For our operationalisation, we differentiated between eastern (1), and western (0) Germany. Because dissatisfaction with democracy is a major consequence of the left-authoritarian supply gap, as shown by Hillen and Steiner (2020) (see also Hakhverdian and Schakel 2022 and Steiner and Hillen 2019), we analysed whether those who are less satisfied with the democratic system in Germany are also more likely to have a positive perception of Wagenknecht in comparison to The Left. To determine the respondents' satisfaction with democracy as it exists in Germany, they were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with the current political system in Germany on a scale from (1) *not at all satisfied* to (5) *fully satisfied*. Furthermore, class is an important variable, as past literature has shown the support of the working class for right-wing sociocultural and left-wing economic positions (Steiner and Hillen 2019). To determine class, the respondents were asked to choose among six categories: (1) *lower class*, (2) *working class*, (3) *lower middle class*, (4) *middle class*, (5) *upper middle class,* and (6) *upper class*. Due to the small number of cases, categories (5) and (6) were combined.

Finally, one of our key expectations was that the political preferences of respondents would affect their perception of Wagenknecht. We tested this for the cultural

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[5] See Online Appendix Table A4 for exact wording of the survey questions.

[6] While strongly correlated, see Online Appendix Fig. A2.

and economic dimensions in general and for the position on immigration in particular. The first scale measures positions on the sociocultural dimension, which ranges from (1) *liberal* to (11) *conservative*. The second scale measures the individual's socioeconomic position, ranging from the belief that (1) *the government should be actively involved in the economy* to (11) *the government should not intervene in the market at all*. We included the respondents' self-positioning on these scales as a subjective component in our analyses. These indicators aim to cover the two-dimensional German political space (Bräuninger et al. 2019). Furthermore, because Wagenknecht has frequently opposed immigration to Germany, we tested whether those who more strongly agree with anti-immigration policies are more likely to support her. In order to map the extent of support for a restrictive immigration policy, respondents were asked to indicate how they feel about the following statement on a scale of (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*: *Immigrants should be obliged to adapt to German culture*.

### 3.3 Controls

We controlled for the age and sex of the respondents. Furthermore, the highest level of formal school-leaving qualification is included in the measures, with (1) representing the absence of a qualification and (5) denoting a university-entrance diploma. Moreover, it is helpful to control for antidemocratic attitudes to differentiate between antidemocratic and output-related democratic dissatisfaction (Lipset 1960; Pickel and Pickel 2023). For this reason, the respondents were asked to rate the importance of living in a democratically governed country on a scale from (1) *not important at all* to (11) *definitely important*.

### 3.4 Method

The results of our analysis are presented below. We ran logistic regressions due to the binary operationalisation of our dependent variable. In order to calculate the effects of corresponding influencing variables, we resorted to computing average marginal effects models. We calculated three models to gain more insights into how each predictor relates to our outcome variable. Our basic model includes only sociodemographic controls. Explanatory variables measuring individuals' satisfaction with democracy, the individually emphasised importance of being governed democratically, and the positions of the respondents on the sociocultural and socioeconomic dimensions are included in our attitudinal model. Finally, we added the respondents' attitudes towards migration to create our full model.

## 4 What Bridges Can Wagenknecht Build?

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The two-dimensional positioning of the German Bundestag parties reveals that there is a representation gap for socioeconomically left-wing and socioculturally right-
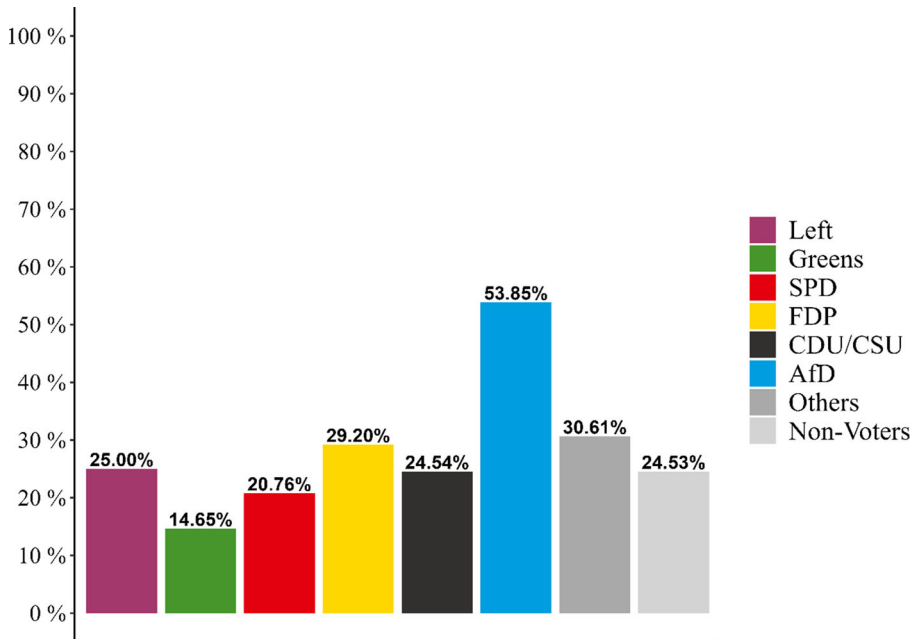
**Fig. 2** Who rates Wagenknecht positively and better than The Left? *N*= 880. *SPD* Social Democratic Party, *FDP* Free Democratic Party, *CDU* Christian Democratic Union, *CSU* Christian Social Union, *AfD* Alternative for Germany. Source: Authors' own presentation

wing individuals. Our assumption was that a potential Wagenknecht party could fill this gap. For this purpose, we considered it necessary to take a descriptive look at potential Wagenknecht voters.[7] Looking at Fig. 2, a relatively clear picture emerges. Among The Left's voters in the 2021 federal election, Wagenknecht was rated positively and higher than her party by only 25% of respondents. In contrast, this was the case for 54% of the AfD voters. Among Christian Democratic Union/ Christian Social Union and nonvoters, around 25% of the respondents preferred Wagenknecht over The Left and rated her positively. The support for Wagenknecht was lower for Social Democratic Party voters, with only 21% potential Wagenknecht voters. Among voters of the Free Democratic Party and other parties, potential Wagenknecht voters made up around 30% of respondents. Interestingly, only 15% of Greens' voters preferred Wagenknecht over her party and rated her positively. The correlation matrix between the propensity to vote for a party and the candidate evaluations (Online Appendix Fig. A3) leads to very similar conclusions.

These findings indicate that addressing a more nation state–oriented policy meets with approval, especially in the camp of the radical right. We need to examine the positive evaluation of Wagenknecht in more detail, as AfD voters do not necessarily

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[7] For a more detailed overview of the rating of Wagenknecht in each quadrant of the two-dimensional policy space, see Appendix A3.

**Fig. 3** Explanatory factors for potential Wagenknecht voters (*N* = 880 with 95% confidence intervals). For the tabulation of the average marginal effects, see Online Appendix Table A2. Source: Authors' own presentation
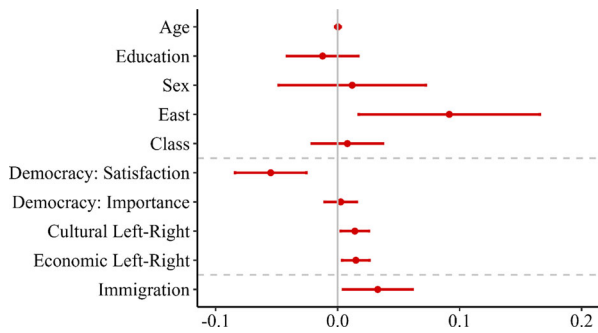


favour redistributive measures (Goerres et al. 2018; Wurthmann et al. 2021). The factors that influence this assessment will be explained in the following section.

## 4.2 Multivariates

Figure 3 shows that our initial expectation that Wagenknecht can garner support from both left- and right-authoritarians is only partially supported. Our analysis finds that those less satisfied with democracy rate Wagenknecht positively and higher than The Left. The average effect is 5.48 percentage points, by which the probability of rating Wagenknecht positively and better than her party increases if satisfaction with democracy decreases by one unit. Individuals from eastern Germany are also more likely to rate Wagenknecht positively and higher than The Left. In addition, we find that a sociocultural right-wing position positively correlates with our dependent variable. On average, one can observe an increase of 1.41 percentage points as the respondents position themselves closer towards the cultural right. However, we find that socioeconomic right-leaning, rather than left-leaning, respondents have a better rating of Wagenknecht compared to her party. Identifying socioeconomically more right-wing by one unit increases the average probability of a preference for Wagenknecht over her party by 1.49 percentage points. Furthermore, the significance of a restrictive attitude towards migration policy was consistently observed across the models, both when considered independently and in combination with positions on the sociocultural dimension (see Online Appendix Table A2 and Fig. A1 for the more detailed nested models). When an anti-immigration attitude is present, the probability of rating Wagenknecht positively and higher than The Left party increases by an average of 3.28 percentage points per scale point.

In summary, Wagenknecht scores particularly well against her party among those dissatisfied with the everyday outputs of democracy, those who tend to position themselves as more socioculturally right-leaning and more market oriented, and those who support a more restrictive migration policy, ceteris paribus. Interestingly, these factors usually predict AfD support (Goerres et al. 2018; Wurthmann et al. 2021; Hansen and Olsen 2022), which indicates that Wagenknecht is already quite popular among radical-right voters.

To further examine the validity of this potentially controversial claim, we conducted an additional analysis to assess its robustness. This analysis included the propensity to vote (PTV) in the full model. Respondents were asked to indicate on
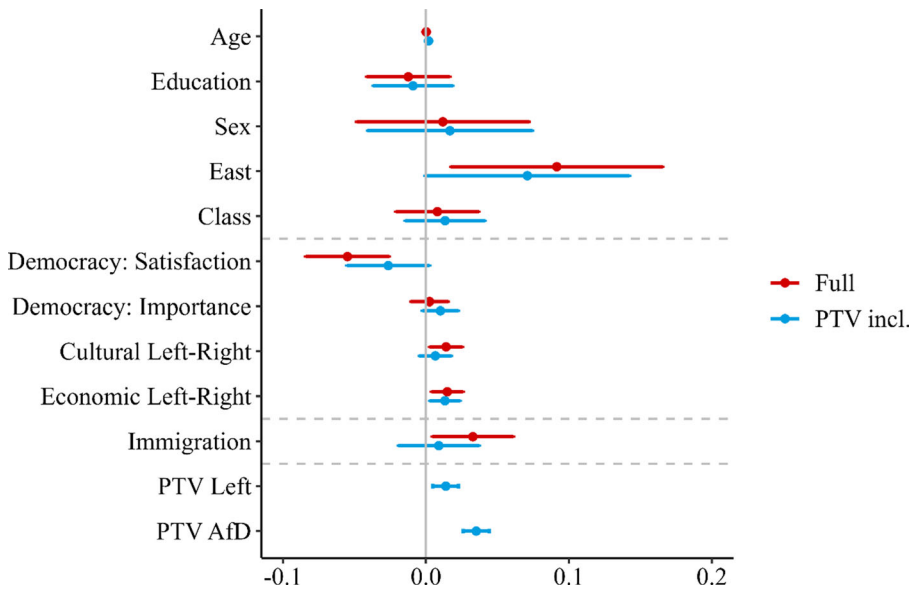
**Fig. 4** Robustness test including the propensity to vote as predictors ($N = 880$ with 95% confidence intervals). For the tabulation of the average marginal effects, see Online Appendix Table A2. *PTV* propensity to vote, *AfD* Alternative for Germany. Source: Authors' own presentation

a scale from (1) *not at all likely* to (11) *very likely* how likely they were to vote for a particular party. We included the PTV for The Left and the AfD in this model. Our findings support our previous assumption: As the probability of voting for The Left increases by one unit, the average probability of rating Wagenknecht higher than The Left increases by 1.39 percentage points, while the probability increases by an average of 3.51 percentage points as the probability of voting for the AfD increases by one unit (Fig. 4).

The cultural left–right position of individuals becomes statistically insignificant with the addition of the PTVs to the model—this is most likely due to its strong correlation with the AfD vote (Wurthmann et al. 2021). The same applies to anti-immigration attitudes and dissatisfaction with democracy, which are particularly widespread among AfD supporters (Reinl and Schäfer 2021; Schäfer and Reinl 2022) and are correspondingly absorbed by the inclusion of the AfD PTV. The economic left–right position remains unaffected (see Online Appendix Fig. A1 for the full detailed models).[8]

As there seems to be significant electoral potential among AfD supporters, one may ask how Wagenknecht is currently viewed by AfD sympathisers vis-à-vis the AfD's party leader, Alice Weidel. In Fig. 5, we see the distribution of sympathy towards the AfD, Wagenknecht, and Weidel by individuals with a high propensity to vote for the AfD ($\geq 9$). Interestingly, while we can see that the variation of sympathy

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[8] Based on the regression analysis, the variance inflation factor values calculated for all independent variables were observed to be less than 1.50, suggesting the absence of multicollinearity in our models.
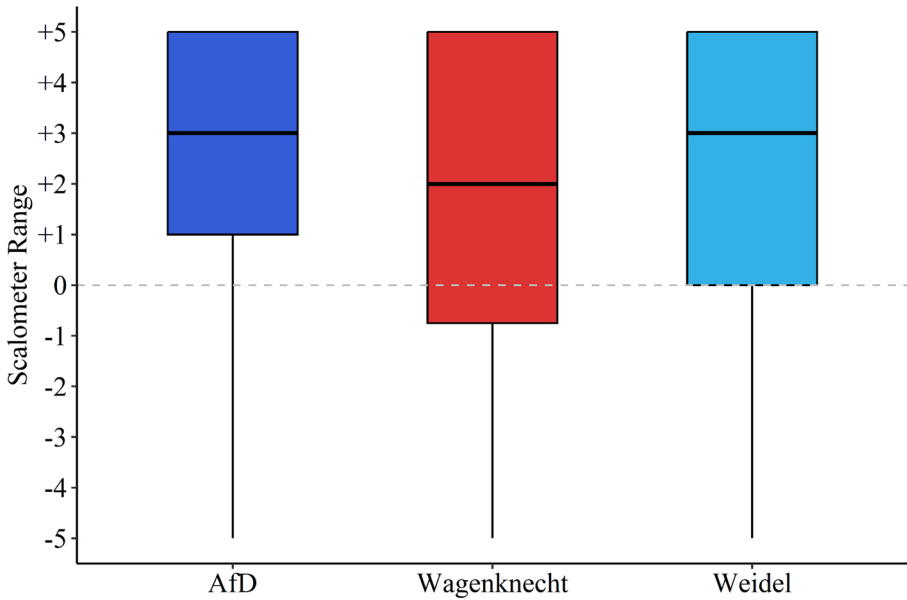
**Fig. 5** Boxplots of Alternative for Germany (AfD) supporters (scalometer on sympathy towards party/politician; *N* = 199). Source: Authors' own presentation

is more widely distributed for Wagenknecht than for Weidel and the AfD, the median score for Wagenknecht is positive. This shows that while Wagenknecht is possibly still perceived within the context of The Left, AfD voters are favourable towards her.

In summary, we can conclude that Wagenknecht has the potential to build a bridge to the right. She might not be able to convince core voters of The Left to vote for a new party. Instead, Wagenknecht could become a greater threat to the radical right AfD. Still, a component that clearly distinguishes her from the supporters of the AfD is her socioeconomic profile and her long-term membership in the "Communist Platform" (Kommunistische Plattform). However, there can be no doubts about Wagenknecht's ability to appeal to the far right. The December 2022 issue of the magazine *Compact*, classified by the *Verfassungsschutz* as right-wing extremist (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat 2022, p. 98), ran the headline "The best chancellor. A candidate for the left and the right" showing Wagenknecht's portrait (COMPACT 2022).

## 5 Conclusion: Bridging Left and Right

As a politician, Wagenknecht holds a prominent but also controversial role in German politics. Over time, she has distanced herself from the radical left-wing party, The Left, despite her previous commitment to communism. This is primarily due to the party's socioculturally liberal policies, which advocate more liberal immigration laws for Germany. Wagenknecht strongly opposes these policies, perceiving

immigration as an economic threat to low-skilled workers. Recently, she garnered nationwide attention by organising a peace rally regarding the Ukrainian war, finding support amongst the leadership of the AfD and well-known far-right figures. Again, we witness her bridging the gap between left and right. Further research is needed to explore how the historical ties between The Left party and the Soviet Union, along with the salience of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, will impact support for Wagenknecht's alliances with far-right activists.

The aim of this research note was to assess the potential of Wagenknecht should she establish a new party. To accomplish this, we employed an indicator to gauge who holds an overall positive and a more positive opinion of Wagenknecht compared to her party, The Left, in order to identify those who might be receptive to a potential new party. Our findings indicate that Wagenknecht could fill the electoral gap for left-wing authoritarian voters. The more culturally right-wing, critical towards immigration, and dissatisfied with democracy that respondents are, the more likely they are to prefer Wagenknecht over The Left. At the same time, socioeconomic right-wing positions are relevant for the preferential view of Wagenknecht. Overall, our analyses show that Wagenknecht is rated better than The Left by a significant proportion of the population — but she is particularly popular among AfD supporters and less popular among left-liberal voters.

In conclusion, we find that Wagenknecht has the ability to build bridges between left and right. However, we are yet to see whether current AfD voters will be willing to turn their backs on the AfD and vote for a Wagenknecht party instead. While our research suggests that Wagenknecht's cultural platform is most appealing to AfD voters, we can only speculate whether AfD voters would actually vote for a Wagenknecht party. Future research should delve deeper into this phenomenon to distinguish the influence of Wagenknecht as an individual versus her positions in shaping these findings. Most importantly, this research shows that Wagenknecht's position has real potential to shake up the German party system.

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