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**Article — Published Version**

## Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): Left-Wing Authoritarian—and Populist? An Empirical Analysis

Politische Vierteljahresschrift

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Springer Nature

*Suggested Citation:* Thomeczek, J. Philipp (2024) : Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): Left-Wing Authoritarian—and Populist? An Empirical Analysis, Politische Vierteljahresschrift, ISSN 1862-2860, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, Wiesbaden, Vol. 65, Iss. 3, pp. 535-552, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-024-00544-z>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/315570>

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# Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): Left-Wing Authoritarian—and Populist? An Empirical Analysis

J. Philipp Thomeczek 

Received: 24 January 2024 / Accepted: 24 April 2024 / Published online: 28 May 2024  
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**Abstract** Germany’s relatively stable party system faces a new left-authoritarian challenger: Sahra Wagenknecht’s Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) party. First polls indicate that for the BSW, election results above 10% are within reach. While Wagenknecht’s positions in economic and cultural terms have already been discussed, this article elaborates on another highly relevant feature of Wagenknecht, namely her populist communication. Exploring Wagenknecht’s and BSW’s populist appeal helps us to understand why the party is said to also have potential among seemingly different voter groups coming from the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and far left Die Linke, which share high levels of populist attitudes. To analyse the role that populist communication plays for Wagenknecht and the BSW, this article combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative analysis covers all speeches (10,000) and press releases (19,000) published by Die Linke members of Parliament (MPs; 2005–2023). The results show that Wagenknecht is the (former) Die Linke MP with the highest share of populist communication. Furthermore, she was also able to convince a group of populist MPs to join the BSW. The article closes with a qualitative analysis of BSW’s manifesto that reveals how populist framing plays a major role in this document, in which the political and economic elites are accused of working against the interest of “the majority”. Based on this analysis, the classification of the BSW as a populist party seems to be appropriate.

**Keywords** Populism · Germany · BSW · Mixed methods · New parties

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## Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW): links-konservativ – und populistisch? Eine empirische Einordnung

**Zusammenfassung** Die langjährige Stabilität des deutschen Parteiensystems wird aktuell durch eine neue links-konservative Partei herausgefordert: Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). Erste Umfragen deuten an, dass das BSW bundesweit bis zu 10 % der Stimmen gewinnen könnte. Die Einordnung als links-konservativ oder in Anlehnung an die englische Literatur links-autoritär wurde bereits medial intensiv diskutiert. Weniger Beachtung hat bislang die populistische Kommunikation von Wagenknecht gefunden. Die populistische Ansprache durch das BSW kann bei der Beantwortung der Frage behilflich sein, warum das BSW scheinbar gegensätzliche Gruppen wie Wähler:innen der Linken und der AfD gleichzeitig ansprechen kann, da populistische Einstellungen unter den Wähler:innen beider Parteien weit verbreitet sind. Der vorliegende Beitrag analysiert die Rolle der populistischen Kommunikation von Wagenknecht und dem BSW mithilfe qualitativer und quantitativer Methoden. Dazu wurden zunächst alle Reden (ca. 10.000) und alle Pressemitteilungen (ca. 19.000) aller Linken-Bundestagsabgeordneten der gesamten parlamentarischen Lebensdauer der Fraktion (2005–2023) untersucht. Die Ergebnisse dieser quantitativen Analyse zeigen, dass Wagenknecht unter den Linken-Abgeordneten mit Abstand am häufigsten populistische Kommunikationselemente einsetzte und sie ebenso in der Lage war, einige der populistischsten Abgeordneten zum BSW-Beitritt zu überreden. Der Artikel schließt mit einer qualitativen Auswertung der populistischen Rhetorik im BSW-Parteiprogramm. Es wird deutlich, dass hier insbesondere die Kritik an der Politik- und Wirtschaftselite eine wichtige Rolle spielt. Diese Elitenkritik wird mit einem starken Bevölkerungsbezug kombiniert, der beispielsweise in der Ansprache der „Mehrheit“ deutlich wird. Insgesamt erscheint damit die Klassifizierung als populistische Partei gerechtfertigt.

**Schlüsselwörter** Populismus · Deutschland · BSW · Mixed Methods · Neue Parteien

### 1 Introduction

After years of an increasingly difficult relationship with the Left Party (Die Linke), former co-faction leader Sahra Wagenknecht founded her own party in January 2024 under the name Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht—Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (BSW; Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht—Reason and Fairness; Mudde 2024). Wagenknecht was immediately joined by several Die Linke politicians, including nine current members of the Bundestag (MPs; Tagesschau.de 2023).<sup>1</sup> In the following months, the former Die Linke Bundestag MPs Neu and De Masi also became BSW members (Herrmann and Slavik 2024; Schack 2023).

<sup>1</sup> Besides Wagenknecht, those were Amira Mohamed Ali, Christian Leye, Ali Al-Dailami, Sevim Dagdelen, Klaus Ernst, Andrej Hunko, Zaklin Nastic, Jessica Tatti, Alexander Ulrich (all MPs in the current Bundestag legislative period), and Sabine Zimmermann (former MP).

As a (former) member of a relatively small party, one of the main puzzles around Wagenknecht is what the German electorate sees in her. She is one of the most popular politicians in Germany (Focus Online 2023), whereas her former party almost failed the 5% threshold at the last Bundestag elections. One possible explanation is that for many voters, Wagenknecht is a projection surface, as she never needed to make compromises in government. In this sense, the BSW includes aspects of a “purifier party” (Lucardie 2000). Public opinion data and first academic analyses show that Wagenknecht has strong potential among eastern Germans, Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Die Linke voters, and those who are dissatisfied with the way politics works in Germany. Regarding policy preferences, she appeals to voters with immigration-sceptical, economically left, and culturally conservative attitudes (Ehni 2023; Wagner et al. 2023; Petersen 2024). The BSW already polls around 7% nationwide (Handesblatt 2024). However, in eastern German states such as Thuringia, the party is polling at almost 20% and could become the third strongest party (Kathe 2024). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the party has not competed in any election yet, which also explains the high volatility of BSW’s support.

Why is Wagenknecht so much more popular than her former party? Her public statements and books indicate that she appeals to the “left-wing authoritarians” (Lefkofridi et al. 2014), namely voters who hold economically left positions but are culturally conservative. While Wagenknecht follows a clear left-wing economic agenda, emphasising issues such as social justice and redistribution (Wagenknecht 2023), she criticises Die Linke for being “too liberal” regarding immigration policies (Mudde 2024). This dissatisfaction was also the main motivation behind *Aufstehen* (“Get Up”), a short-lived social movement organised by Wagenknecht (Weisskircher 2018).

References to left-authoritarianism are also found in BSW’s first manifesto (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht 2024). The party heavily criticises the government’s climate and immigration policies as a burden for crisis-ridden Germans. The BSW also speaks of a spreading “political authoritarianism” that “dictates people how to live, heat, think and speak.” So far, such positions were associated with the far-right AfD, which is why commentators and academics see a high potential for the BSW among AfD voters (Wagner et al. 2023; Wagner 2023; Petersen 2024). Regarding economic and welfare issues, the BSW criticises the growing social injustice and the power of digital multinationals. The party describes the taxation system as unfair.

Besides cultural and economic issues, another important issue for potential BSW voters is foreign policy (Ehni 2023). The BSW demands peace negotiations to end the war between Ukraine and Russia and describes NATO and the United States as drivers of military conflicts. Sanctions against Russia are seen as harming Germany’s economy. Again, these are positions that have so far been associated with the AfD (Beltin et al. 2023).

A recent publication shows that Wagenknecht is evaluated more positively among left-authoritarian voters in Germany compared to voters not holding such attitudes (Wagner et al. 2023). From a strategic point of view, appealing to these voters could be promising, as no party in Germany combines cultural conservatism with an economic left-wing stance (Hillen and Steiner 2020; Steiner and Hillen 2019, 2021). According to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2019), there are

several parties with a similar left-authoritarian profile in Europe. Examples are the Social Democratic Party in Romania (PSD), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and far-left parties such as the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). Furthermore, a similar profile is found in the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland (Hillen and Steiner 2020, p. 344), which led the government for almost 20 years.

Besides this left-authoritarian profile, there is an additional quality of Wagenknecht that could explain her popularity: her populist appeal. Academic and journalistic commentators regularly attach the label “populist” to her (Qvortrup 2018; Sevillano 2023). Although it is not possible to claim a causal relationship based on descriptive polling data, her populist rhetoric could explain why the BSW appeals to far-left Die Linke and far-right AfD voters at the same time (Petersen 2024; Wagner 2023). Since populist attitudes are common among voters of both parties (Loew and Faas 2019), they may play a role in explaining vote switching from these parties to the BSW. Communication research has shown how populist framing can work as a successful strategy to win over voters (Hameleers et al. 2018; Hameleers and Schmuck 2017). Such a strategy is especially promising for political newcomers, as the electoral successes of Donald Trump (Lacatus 2019), the Five Star Movement in Italy (Mosca and Tronconi 2019), and the Syriza party in Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014) have shown. Since populist attitudes are widespread among voters (Akkerman et al. 2014), parties and politicians can reach large groups of society with populist rhetoric. Furthermore, since populist attitudes can compensate for the lack of programmatic congruence (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018), they can also help the BSW to appeal to voters outside the left-authoritarian quadrant.

So far, no academic analysis has put the populism of Wagenknecht and the BSW into perspective. The following article aims to tackle this research gap by analysing how Wagenknecht’s level of populist rhetoric stands out within the group of her former colleagues from Die Linke. For this purpose, quantitative and qualitative methods are combined. The quantitative analysis covers all speeches (around 10,000) and press releases (around 19,000) published by Die Linke MPs during the faction’s lifetime (2005–2023). The results show that during these 18 years, Wagenknecht used populist rhetoric most frequently among all Die Linke MPs and was also able to convince a group of “populist” Die Linke politicians to join her new party, BSW. The article closes with a qualitative analysis of BSW’s party manifesto, in which the party pits the political and economic elites against the interests of the “hard-working majority.”

The article is structured as follows. The next (second) section discusses the ideational approach of populism, which serves as a foundation for the analysis. The third section briefly summarises the history of Die Linke and Wagenknecht’s role within the party, followed by a quantitative analysis of the press releases and parliamentary speeches by Die Linke MPs. This analysis is complemented by a qualitative analysis of populist communication in the BSW’s manifesto. Finally, the article closes with a discussion of the results and their implications.

## 2 Populism: The Ideational Approach

The following analysis builds on the ideational approach, which recently became the dominant approach in the empirical research of populism (Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde 2017). This approach sees populism as a “unique set of ideas” (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2018, p. 3). Populist ideas work as a mental map through which one can understand the political reality (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). One of the advantages of this approach is that it works as an umbrella for different perspectives, such as the (thin) ideological (Mudde 2004) or the communicational perspective. The latter, defined as the discursive communication of populist ideas (de Vreese et al. 2018, p. 425), is the focus of this article.

Populist ideas have two main nodal points: “the people” and “the elite” (Canovan 1981, p. 294; Rooduijn 2019, p. 363–364). Populists use a simplistic narrative in which “the good ordinary people” are oppressed by the “evil elite,” which works against the people’s interests (Hawkins et al. 2018, p. 3). Therefore, there is an antagonistic relationship between these two entities (Stanley 2008, p. 96), which is built on two core concepts: people-centrism and anti-elitism. For populists, “the people” forms the central nodal point, as the name (derived from the Latin word *populus*) suggests. One of the distinct characteristics of populism’s appeal is that it addresses “the people” as a whole and dismisses internal divisions by highlighting their homogeneity (Mudde 2004). However, the concept of the people is intentionally vague. The populist far-right defines “the people” mostly in ethnic terms (“people as nations”). Populists from the left typically use socioeconomic criteria (as in “the common people”) and focus their rhetorical attacks on the economic elite (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, pp. 501–503).

## 3 Die Linke, Wagenknecht, and Their Populism

From a long-term perspective, Die Linke is the most successful and established far-left party in Germany. The party that was, until recently, the political home of Wagenknecht has an eventful past. Die Linke was founded in 2005 as the result of a merger between the East German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and a far-left split-off from the Social Democrats, the Labour and Social Justice—The Electoral Alternative party (WASG; Olsen 2007). While there is consensus among academics that the PDS was classified as a left-wing populist party (Hartleb 2004; March and Mudde 2005), the classification of Die Linke is debated among scholars. In two recently published datasets, Die Linke is classified as a borderline case (Meijers and Zaslove 2020; Rooduijn et al. 2023).

One of the main reasons for the difficulty around its classification is the considerable internal heterogeneity within the party. The split between the moderate and radical wings within Die Linke, which was already visible within the PDS (Koß and Hough 2006, p. 78), is well reflected at the level of subnational branches. In federal states where Die Linke is governing, the party uses much less populist communication than in states where the party is in opposition (Thomeczek 2023). Commentators have suggested that the party has become somewhat centrist in states

such as Thuringia, where Die Linke has been leading the government since 2014 (Schwesinger 2019). On the contrary, there are also organisations within Die Linke, such as the Communist Platform (KPF), which are monitored by German authorities (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat 2023, p. 158). There is little doubt that Wagenknecht was a crucial driver of Die Linke's internal split, where she led the radical populist wing (Jesse 2022, p. 203). On Facebook and Twitter (now known as X), no other German politician uses populist rhetoric more frequently than Wagenknecht (see Supplementary Material in Gründl 2022).

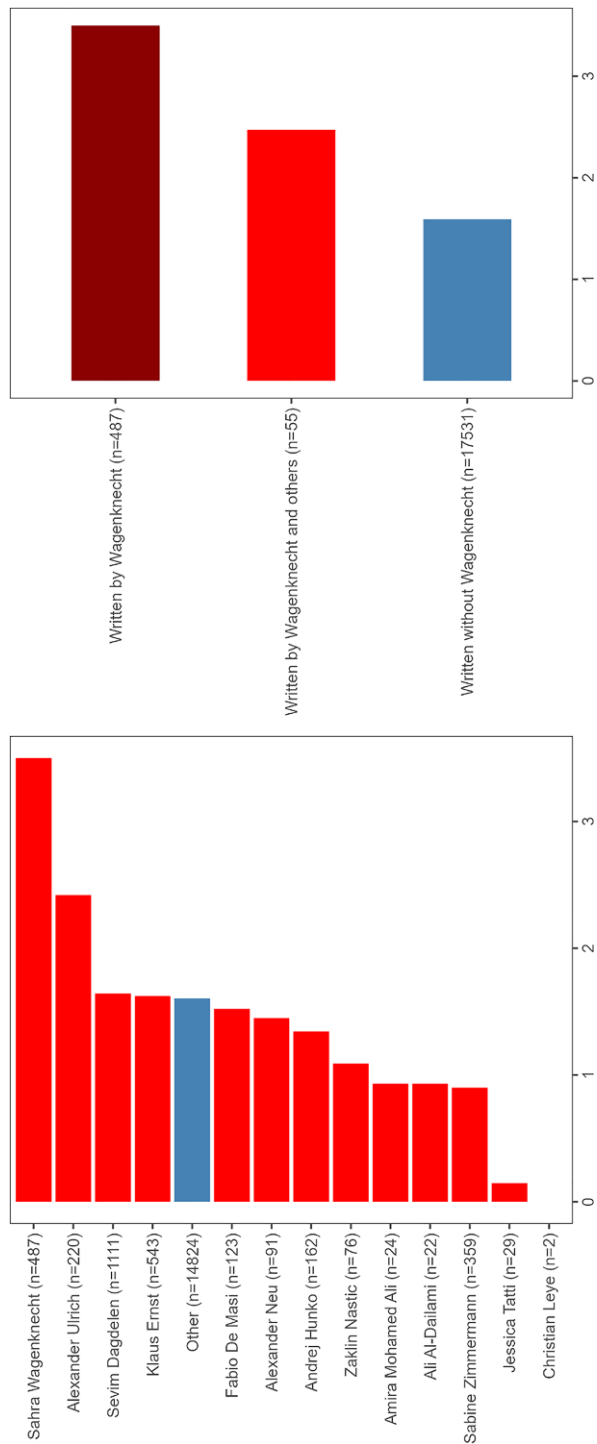
#### 4 Analysis: Populist Communication by Die Linke MPs, 2005–2023

The previous discussion leads to the expectation that Wagenknecht's political language is strongly influenced by populist rhetoric. However, so far, the evidence for that is rather anecdotal. Furthermore, it is also an open question how populist she is compared to the other Die Linke MPs. The following section empirically tests this claim by analysing populist communication in the parliamentary speeches and press releases of Die Linke MPs published during the faction's lifetime (2005–2023). Because Wagenknecht already convinced several Die Linke MPs to join her new political project, including faction leader Mohamed Ali (Tagesschau.de 2023), the analysis will focus not only on Wagenknecht's rhetoric vis-à-vis Die Linke MPs but also on the other MPs who joined the BSW.

For this purpose, all parliamentary speeches and press releases have been scraped from the website of Die Linke's Bundestag faction (linksfraktion.de) using the R package "rvest." The dataset includes documents published from when the party first competed for the Bundestag elections (September 2005) until December 2023. Currently, this dataset includes all speeches and press releases published by the Die Linke parliamentary faction: After the ten BSW MPs, including Wagenknecht herself, left Die Linke, the share of Die Linke MPs dropped below 5%, the threshold for parliamentary factions. Consequently, Die Linke had to dissolve its faction on December 6, 2023 (Deutsche Welle 2023).

In total, more than 10,000 speeches and 19,000 press releases were analysed. Similar studies often only analyse one type of document (e.g., Breyer 2023; Thomeczek 2023; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Analysing two different sources facilitates generalisation. The two text types cover a broad range of political discourse at the MP level and also provide relevant information for potential voters. Although voters may only rarely read press releases or speeches directly, they are informed about their content through mass media and social media. One other source may be social media data. However, leaving aside the growing problem of data accessibility, such data are not available for the full 18-year period: 1) social media sites only became mass-communication channels in the 2010s, 2) not all MPs have accounts, and 3) even if they do have accounts, MPs often delete them when they leave politics.

For the analysis, the populism dictionary by Gründl (2022), which was developed based on an analysis of texts from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, was used, which consists of 238 terms. The dictionary is the currently most comprehensive dictionary project for the study of populism in German texts; it has been featured



**Fig. 1** Populist communication elements per 1000 tokens in press releases. *Red colour*: MP switched to BSW, *blue colour*: Die Linke MPs



in several recent publications (Breyer 2023; Thiele 2022; Thomeczek 2023) and addresses many of the shortcomings of previous populism dictionaries (Pauwels 2017; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). The greatest advancement is that it works based on multiword expressions. For example, instead of the word “party,” which could indicate anti-elitism but also neutral descriptions of political parties, “established party” and “party cartel” are included (see Supplementary Material in Gründl 2022 for the full list of terms). The dictionary results show high validity (e.g., Thomeczek 2023), something that was always a problem with previous populism dictionaries (Pauwels 2017). Furthermore, Breyer (2023, Supplementary Material A2) has shown that the correlation between manual coding and dictionary hits is high. Thiele (2022, p. 190) reports high reliability when comparing manual and dictionary coding (Krippendorff’s Alpha: 0.81). The following analysis was conducted with the R package “popdictR.” Short texts with less than 100 tokens have been removed as part of the data-cleaning process.

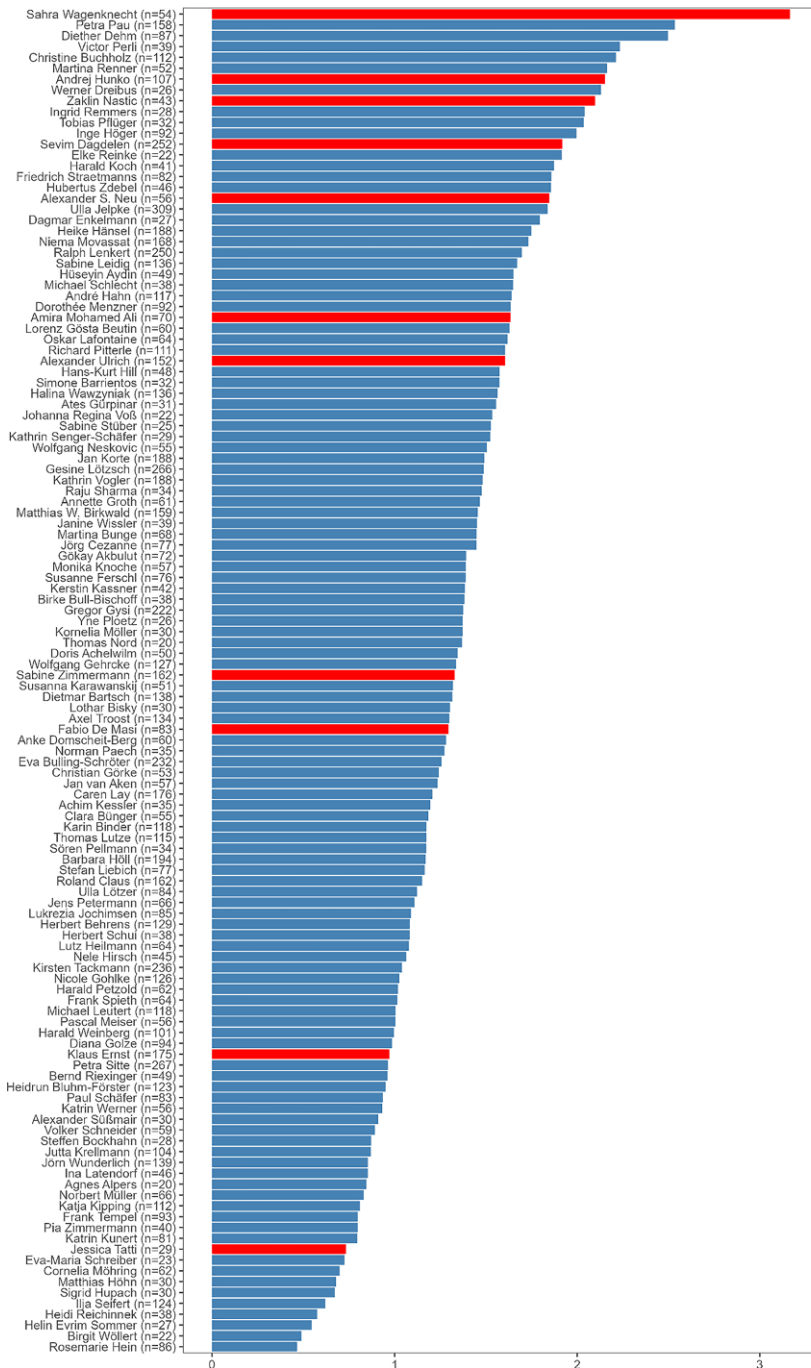
The following press release by Wagenknecht (2011) shows an application of the dictionary. The two hits are marked in boldface. In the text, Wagenknecht shows strong anti-capitalist stances and describes the behaviour of economic elites (*Wirtschaftseliten*) as “irresponsible and immoral.” These economic elites are pitted against “the majority of the people” (*Mehrheit der Menschen*), who “provide the goods and services our society needs with their daily work” but are “demotivated by feudal capitalism.”

Figure 1 summarises the use of populist communication in press releases. The left plot displays the average number of populist communication elements (i.e., dictionary hits) per 1000 tokens<sup>2</sup> for Wagenknecht and the Die Linke MPs who joined her individually. Their populist communication is compared to the aggregated results for the other Die Linke MPs (blue bar). The figures provide evidence that Wagenknecht has been the populist spearhead of Die Linke, with more than three populist communication elements per 1000 tokens in an average press release. There are also other BSW MPs, namely Ulrich, Dağdelen, and Ernst, who use populist rhetoric more frequently than those who did not join the BSW. It is also noteworthy that the “more populist” BSW members are generally more active (regarding the number of published press releases) than the MPs with lower populism scores. The score differences between BSW and non-BSW MPs are statistically significant at the 0.001 level.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that not all BSW MPs use populist rhetoric frequently in their press releases. Some BSW MPs, such as Mohamed Ali, Al-Dailami, and Zimmermann, use populist communication elements only rarely.

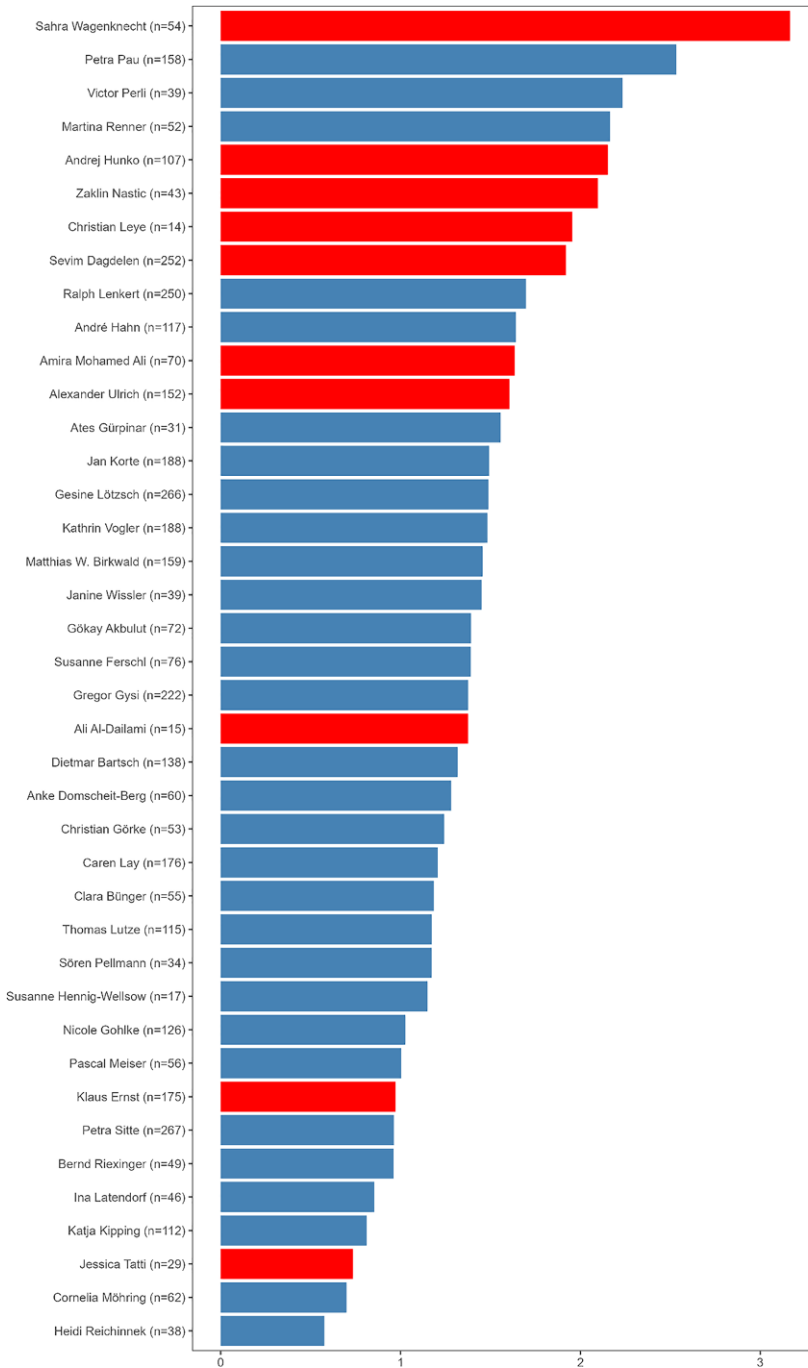
In addition to press releases written by individual MPs, there are also press releases authored by multiple MPs. The right plot shows the effect of Wagenknecht’s (co-)authorship on populist rhetoric in press releases. While her level of populism is outstanding, press releases she co-authored also include more populist commu-

<sup>2</sup> Tokenisation refers to the process of processing raw texts into smaller analytical units, such as stems or words (Welbers et al. 2017, p. 246). In the following analysis, one token typically represents one word (compound nouns such as “e-mail” are also counted as one token). 1000 tokens are roughly equivalent to 1.5 pages of text.

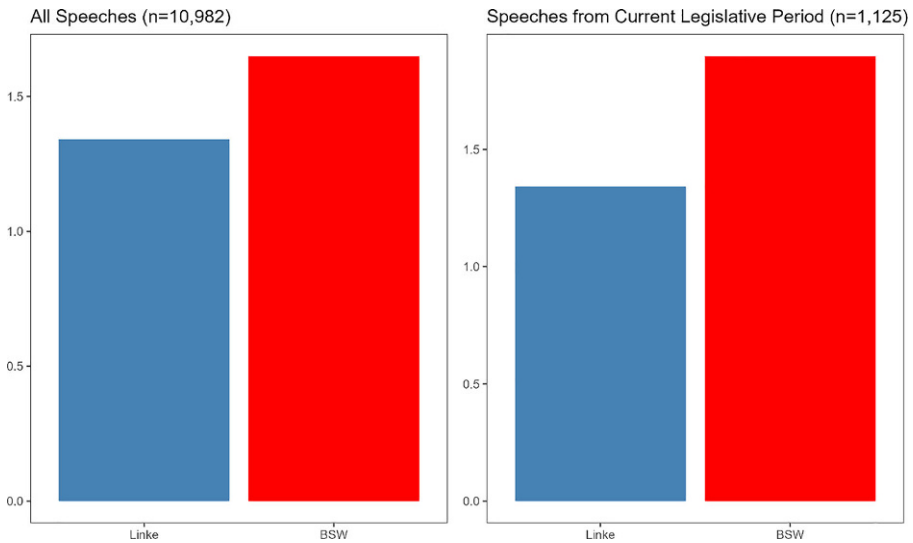
<sup>3</sup> Pairwise t-test with Bonferroni adjustment. All tests were performed with the R package “psych.”



**Fig. 2** Populist communication elements per 1000 tokens in parliamentary speeches. *Red colours:* BSW MPs, *blue colours:* Die Linke MPs



**Fig. 3** Populist communication elements per 1000 tokens in parliamentary speeches, Members of Parliament currently holding seats only. Red colours: BSW MPs, blue colours: Die Linke MPs



**Fig. 4** Populist communication per 1000 tokens in parliamentary speeches, aggregated by affiliation

nication elements than those published without her. A pairwise t-test shows that the difference regarding populist rhetoric between the texts written by Wagenknecht and those written without her is statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). The difference between the first and second group is significant at the 0.1 level.

Figure 2 shows how often, on average, Die Linke and BSW MPs have used populist communication per 1000 tokens in a speech.<sup>4</sup> The red bars indicate all MPs who have switched sides. Similar to the press release analysis, Wagenknecht herself comes out on top of the list again, with more than three populist terms per 1000 tokens. Other BSW politicians also score highly, such as Hunko, Nastić, and Dağdelen. Notably, some of them, such as Dağdelen, were also identified as using populist rhetoric frequently in their press releases. Others seem to focus their populist rhetoric predominantly on one text type, such as Ernst, who used populist rhetoric frequently in press releases but rarely in his speeches, and, vice versa, Nastić. Furthermore, there are also populist Die Linke MPs who have not joined the BSW. Some, such as Pau and Renner, were already MPs for the PDS and are unlikely to leave the party. It is also noteworthy that Dehm, a former Die Linke member with the third-highest populism score in Fig. 2, was a close ally of Wagenknecht and expressed his desire to join the BSW but accused her of keeping him out (Beer 2024).

To focus on the more recent developments that led to the party split, Fig. 3 shows the results only for the subset of MPs who currently hold a seat in the Bundestag. The results provide an even clearer picture. Among the ten MPs with the highest average use of populist communication, five have joined Wagenknecht, followed by Mohamed Ali (11th place) and Ulrich (12th). The aggregated results for the speeches

<sup>4</sup> Only MPs who held at least 20 speeches since 2005 are shown in the plot for displaying reasons.

grouped by affiliation (Die Linke MPs vs BSW MPs) can be found in Fig. 4. The average use of populist communication is higher among BSW members than among Die Linke MPs. The differences are more pronounced if only texts from the current legislative period are included in the analysis. Analysis of variance reveals that the differences between the two groups are statistically significant (all speeches,  $p < 0.001$ ; speeches from the current legislative period,  $p < 0.01$ ).

These results show that Wagenknecht herself can be considered the most populist MP of Die Linke's parliamentary group. Furthermore, she was also able to win over a substantial part of the populist wing from Die Linke. The next section will follow up on this claim and provide a qualitative analysis of populist rhetoric in BSW's manifesto.

## 5 Populism in the Manifesto of “Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht”

The first party manifesto of BSW was published in January 2024 (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht 2024). The document is around 1700 words long, which is relatively short for a German party manifesto but more than twice as long as the first AfD manifesto (Alternative für Deutschland 2013). Populist rhetoric plays a key role in the document. Regarding people-centrism, three main conceptualisations of “the people” can be distinguished in the text. First, there are politically neutral terms such as appeals to “citizens” (*Bürger*), “the majority,” or “humans” (*Menschen*). The latter is also frequently used by Die Linke (Olsen 2018, p. 80). Second, there are more specific references to the population's socioeconomic status. While this is, as discussed above, typical for left-wing populism, those references remain vague and do not refer to precarity or deprivation. Instead, the BSW appeals to the “taxpayers” and “employees,” and only once to “low earners” (*Geringverdiener*). Another term that the BSW uses to address the people in socioeconomic terms is “the hard-working” (*die Fleißigen*), although the meaning of this term is not limited to labour and could be related to any activity. Third, people-centrism is also constructed through the pronouns “us” and “our,” aiming to create a feeling of unity. These pronouns are used in expressions such as “our country” (used eight times) and “our society,” as well as in connection with the German economy, with terms such as “our economic strength” and “our medium-sized business” (*unser Mittelstand*). This is another indication that the BSW refrains from a classic far-left populist interpretation of people-centrism. It seems that for the BSW, domestic corporations are much closer to the people's interests than large multinationals are (see next section). Other important rhetorical constructs for people-centrism are *Gemeinwohl* and *Gemeinsinn*, best translated as public welfare. The party claims to stand for “public welfare-oriented politics” (*gemeinwohlorientierte Politik*) in which public welfare stands above “egoistic interests.” The BSW wants to focus on the “well-being of its citizens” (*Wohlergehen seiner Bürger*). All in all, the BSW uses the concept of people-centrism broadly rather than adopting a narrow left-wing interpretation. Interestingly, gender-inclusive spelling is not used in the document, a strong contrast to Die Linke's manifestos (Die Linke 2021).

The second constitutive element of populist communication, anti-elitism, is equally prominently placed in BSW's manifesto. The main targets are the political and the economic elites. In contrast to BSW's broad conceptualisation of people-centrism, its anti-elitism resembles classic left-wing populist rhetoric (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, p. 503). Regarding the political elite, BSW claims that many people no longer feel represented by "any of the existing parties," which highlights that BSW has identified a representation gap. Often, criticism of the international economic elite is combined with left-wing stances suggesting that the BSW seeks stronger economic interventionism by the state. "Market-dominating big companies"; "infringing digital monopolists" such as Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple; and "overly superior financial companies such as Blackrock" are accused of undermining competition and democracy. Furthermore, high inflation rates are thought to be the product of "market failure", induced by "too much economic power." The large concentration of wealth and the "record dividends" of companies are criticised, "while the queues in front of food banks become longer and longer." For too long, "redistribution worked from the hard-working to the upper 10,000," which indicates that the BSW will focus on redistributive politics. This resembles Corbyn's famous slogan "for the many, not the few" (Maiguashca and Dean 2019) or the "99%–1%" rhetoric of populist social movements such as Occupy (Gerbaudo 2017). Large enterprises and "very rich private persons" should no longer be able to withdraw from the financing of the public welfare, which can be interpreted as demanding higher taxes on high incomes. The BSW seeks to "decentralise companies" to solve this problem. The German term *entflechten*, which sounds less radical than *zerschlagen*, is used to describe this process.<sup>5</sup> This is an interesting aspect, as it is related to a broader debate on the deradicalisation of Wagenknecht's economic policies (Vieweger 2023). In many cases, the political and economic elites are accused of being in cahoots. Politicians are said to have "fulfilled the wishes of influential lobbyists." In the past, politics was "influenced and bought by companies," and a "failure of cartel authorities" led to a dysfunctional market economy. This indicates that the party seeks to strengthen cartel authorities and antilobbyism laws. Finally, the BSW claims to stand against "attempts to extensively control the people by companies, secret services, and governments," suggesting that the party prioritises privacy laws and civic liberties.

To sum up, populist communication plays a central role in BSW's manifesto, as the party makes many references to populist ideas. While the BSW seems to interpret people-centrism broadly and not only in the sense of "the common people," the interpretation of "the elite" more closely resembles classic left-wing populist rhetoric and focuses on the international economic establishment.

<sup>5</sup> *Zerschlagen* literally translates as "smashing into pieces." Although this term sounds more radical, it is more frequently used in German political discourse than *entflechten* in discussions around ownership unbundling.

## 6 Conclusion and Discussion

There are strong indicators that the new party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht could establish itself in the German party system. First polls indicate that double-digit election results are within reach (Kathe 2024). So far, it seems that the BSW builds on three pillars (Wagner 2023): Wagenknecht's popularity, a left-authoritarian party programme, and populism. The third aspect was the focus of this article. The MP-level analysis has shown that within Die Linke, Wagenknecht was the most populist politician. Furthermore, Wagenknecht convinced a group of populist Die Linke MPs to join her new party. These trends have become even more evident in the current legislative period. A qualitative analysis of BSW's manifesto showed that populism plays an important role in framing political conflicts. The BSW tries to appeal to broad segments of German society with rhetorical constructs like "the hard-working" and creates a sense of community through terms like *Gemeinwohl*. It seems that Wagenknecht refrains from a narrow left-wing interpretation of "the people" and instead seeks to define the term more broadly. Regarding anti-elitism, the BSW shows a classic left-wing populist profile, which includes attacks on the economic and political elites. However, it also seems that German medium-sized businesses are seen as standing on the side of the German people, in contrast to the large multinational companies, which could be interpreted as favouring economic protectionism. All in all, looking at BSW's first manifesto, the classification as a populist party is justified.

While this study is descriptive, there are indicators that populism could play a key role in explaining voting for the BSW. Previous studies have shown that populist attitudes are predictive of voting for both the AfD and Die Linke (Loew and Faas 2019; Wagner 2023), the two voter groups where many see the largest BSW potential (Ehni 2023; Petersen 2024). Furthermore, holding populist attitudes could even compensate for lacking policy congruence (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018). Just as part of the AfD's success in the 2017 elections was due to eastern German voters switching from Die Linke to the AfD (Hansen and Olsen 2018), populist and/or left-authoritarian AfD and Die Linke voters could form a solid base for the BSW in eastern Germany, where its potential is large (Wagner et al. 2023; Ehni 2023). Given the strongly differing potential between eastern and western Germany, the BSW could further increase the regional differences within Germany. In the regional party systems of the 16 states, the BSW is more likely to play an important role in eastern Germany. With more parties in parliament, this could make government formation in states such as Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt even more difficult. However, it could also open new coalition options, depending on how willing the BSW is to compromise with other parties.

Participation of the BSW in elections, which will first occur in the European Elections 2024, will show how successful the party will be in transforming its undoubtedly great electoral potential into mandates. This analysis has shown that besides the aspect of personalisation and left-wing authoritarianism, researchers should also dedicate attention to BSW's populist communication, which could play a great role in shaping its electoral chances. To test whether there is a causal effect of BSW's populist rhetoric on its voting potential, future studies should combine

supply-side factors with demand-side explanations. Here, populist framing experiments have shown to be useful in other European contexts (Hameleers and Schmuck 2017; Hameleers et al. 2018).

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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