

Voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) from a Policy Space Perspective

NILS D. STEINER  and SVEN HILLEN 

Department of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz, Germany



ABSTRACT

This contribution studies voting for the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) through a three-dimensional policy space model (economic, transnational and morality dimension). What makes the new German party special is its unusual bundling of economically left-leaning with right-leaning positions on the transnational dimension, most prominently on immigration. We investigate how this policy mix is reflected among its voters. In a first study, we use cross-sectional survey data from March 2024 (GLES Tracking T57) to show that voting intentions for the BSW are associated with more left-wing economic positions and with more nationalist positions, but unrelated to positions on the morality dimension. In a second follow-up study, we use panel survey data (GLES Panel) to establish that positions on the economic and transnational dimensions shape switching to the BSW (in June 2024) in conjunction with individuals' prior party preferences. In line with the spatial perspective, nationalist positions predict switching to the BSW among previous supporters of left-leaning parties, whereas it is economically left-wing positions that predict switching to the BSW among previous supporters of right-leaning parties. Our results support a policy space-based explanation of the early success of the BSW, suggesting that new parties may succeed by offering new bundles of policy positions.

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Introduction

In January 2024 Sahra Wagenknecht, prominent German politician and former co-leader of the parliamentary group of the far-left party 'Die Linke' (The Left), together with allies, founded the 'Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht' (BSW). The decision to split from The Left can be seen as the culmination of long-term disagreements within the party over its positioning on socio-cultural issues (see Hough and Keith 2019), reflecting a broader

CONTACT Nils D. Steiner  steiner@politik.uni-mainz.de  Department of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, 55099 Mainz, Germany

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schism among Europe's radical left parties (Steiner et al. 2024). The new party had its first run in the European elections in June 2024, where it secured 6.2 per cent of the vote—more than double the share won by Wagenknecht's former party (The Left: 2.7 per cent). In the three subsequent state elections in September 2024, the BSW consistently garnered well over 10 per cent of the vote. As of this writing (February 2025), the BSW sits at around 4 per cent to 6 per cent in polls for national elections (Wahlrecht.de 2025). What explains the party's early success?

The empty space perspective from the literature on party emergence offers a plausible explanation for the good performance of the new party (Wuttke 2020). It holds that opportunities for the formation of new parties will open up if established parties leave ideological positions in the policy space empty (cf. Van De Wardt and Otjes 2022). What is special about the BSW from this perspective is not so much that it adopts entirely new issue positions, but rather that it offers a new, unusual package: Scholars and commentators widely perceive the BSW to be economically left-leaning while simultaneously adopting right-wing stances on 'socio-cultural' issues, most prominently restrictive positions on immigration (Herold and Otteni 2024; Thomeczek 2024b; Wagner 2023; Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025).

With this policy mix, the party appears to have filled the 'left-authoritarian supply gap' that has long characterised party systems in Western Europe (e.g. Hakhverdian and Schakel 2022; Hillen and Steiner 2020; Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014; Van der Brug and Joost van Spanje 2009). While some Western European parties have also moved toward the left-authoritarian quadrant—whether radical left parties shifting rightward on socio-cultural issues (Steiner et al. 2024) or radical right parties moving leftward on economic issues (Harteveld 2016)—the BSW's position stands out (see Jankowski 2024, 3). In Eastern Europe, explicitly left-authoritarian positions are more common, even among major parties, such as Poland's PiS, Hungary's FIDESZ, Bulgaria's Socialist Party or Slovakia's Smer. As the German party system has so far lacked electorally significant left-authoritarian parties (Häfner, Landwehr, and Stallbaum 2023; Steiner and Hillen 2021), the BSW's unique position may enable it to attract voters whose preference bundle did not match those of existing parties. This, in turn, could, explain its initial electoral successes.

In line with this empty policy space perspective, a number of studies—some of them carried out in parallel to the work presented here¹—have already indicated that both economically left-wing and socio-culturally right-wing positions go along with a higher likelihood of voting for the BSW (Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Herold and Otteni 2024; Jankowski 2024). However, these contributions have either not focussed on the policy space perspective, using single indicators only to

operationalise the dimensions, or not modelled how positions in the policy space affect switching to the BSW dependent on individuals' prior party preferences. Moreover, to the extent that the policy space has been considered, these works adopt a two-dimensional conception. We add to the available evidence in that we study voting for the BSW through a three-dimensional policy space model (economic, transnational and morality dimension), asking which specific positions attract voters to the BSW and how this depends on individuals' prior party preferences.

Drawing on the policy space model by Kitschelt and Rehm (2014; 2018), we argue that, to analyse voting decisions in favour of the BSW, it is informative to distinguish between two separate socio-cultural dimensions, which accompany a third economic dimension: The first socio-cultural dimension concerns issues of traditional morality, separating 'conservatives' from 'liberals', while the second revolves around group membership and ethnic diversity, contrasting 'nationalists' with 'cosmopolitans'.² According to this conception, the BSW may be better characterised as 'left-nationalist' than 'left-conservative' since it has been particularly outspoken about the strain from immigration. Thus, our guiding expectation is that the BSW's unusual bundling of economically left-wing with nationalist positions renders it attractive for voters who share these views. However, what specifically makes the BSW appealing should depend on voters' initially supported party: Whereas previous supporters of left-leaning parties should be attracted by the party's nationalist position, previous supporters of right-leaning parties should be attracted by the party's economically left-wing position.

To assess these theoretical expectations, our empirical analysis is structured into two interrelated studies. Using the first survey data published after the founding of the BSW in March 2024 as part of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) trackings (GLES Tracking T57), study I shows that voting intentions for the BSW are correlated with more left-wing economic positions and with more nationalist positions, while being unrelated to positions on morality issues. To add to these cross-sectional descriptive findings, we conducted study II to clarify whether and how positions in the policy space have a causal effect on switching to the BSW. Utilising panel data from the GLES (GLES Panel), we demonstrate that individuals' positions on the economic and transnational dimensions influence switching to the BSW (in June 2024) in combination with their prior party preferences. Consistent with the spatial perspective, nationalist positions drive switching to the BSW among former supporters of left-leaning parties, while economically left-wing positions account for switching among former supporters of right-leaning parties. The probability of switching is especially high (up to over 60 per cent) among previous voters of The Left with nationalist positions. We also uncover substantive probabilities of switching to the BSW (up to 25 per cent) among previous

AfD voters with left-wing economic positions. These spatial effects hold when accounting for other important motivations for supporting the BSW, such as individuals' populist attitudes (Thomeczek 2024a; 2024b), their stances on the Russo-Ukrainian War (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024) and even their personal ratings of Sahra Wagenknecht (Wagner, Wurthmann, and Thomeczek 2023).

The Policy Space and the BSW

Our study builds on the premise that political competition in Germany, as in other Western European countries, can be usefully described with a spatial model in which key controversial issues align with overarching conflict dimensions (Jankowski et al. 2022; Hillen and Steiner 2020). According to this conception, parties and voters can be placed in the policy space according to their stances on the conflict dimensions and voters are assumed to prefer parties that hold similar positions in the policy space (Downs 1957).

But how many dimensions adequately capture political competition? Over the last decades, the rising salience of new issues has transformed politics in Western Europe. Controversial issues no longer align with a single, primarily economically imprinted dimension, dividing 'left' supporters of redistribution and state intervention in the economy and 'right' free market advocates. Instead, scholars now commonly add a second dimension that differentiates between 'liberal' attitudes, such as support for individual freedoms, socio-cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as international political integration, and 'conservative' attitudes that combine opposition to said diversity and political integration with support for traditional values (e.g. Hakhverdian and Schakel 2022; Hillen and Steiner 2020; Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014).

However, given the diverse content of these non-economic issues, some evidence suggests that they should not be condensed into one single 'socio-cultural' dimension (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2012; Heath et al. 1999; Wheatley and Mendez 2021). In their prominent model of the policy space, Kitschelt and Rehm (2014, 2018; see also Caughey, O'Grady, and Warshaw 2019) claim that socio-cultural issues are bundled into two separate dimensions, which accompany a third economic ('greed') policy dimension: The so-called 'grid' dimension revolves around issues of traditional morality and personal lifestyle such as gay rights and gender equality. The 'group' dimension concerns matters of ethnic diversity and national belonging. It integrates issues related to immigration and migrant integration, but also those related to the question of how much political power should be given to the supranational (e.g. EU) vs. national level.

For the present analysis, it seems informative to follow Kitschelt and Rehm (2014; 2018) and consider two rather than one socio-cultural policy

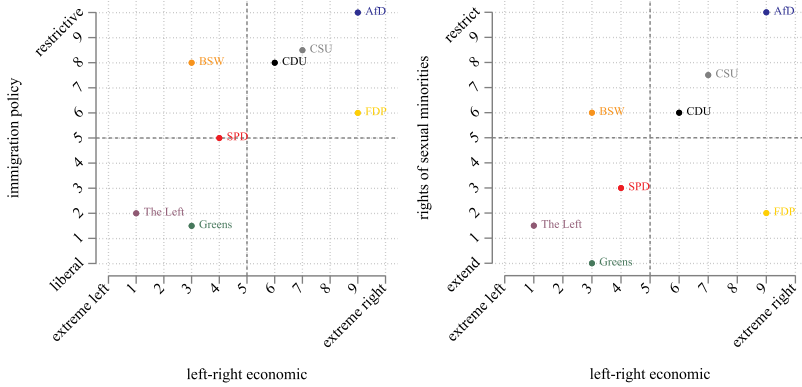


Figure 1. Experts' placement of German parties in the policy space.

Note: Median expert placement of parties in the expert survey GEPARTEE (Thomeczek, Wurthmann, and Stecker 2024).

dimension. We use the labels morality ('grid') and transnational ('group') to refer to these dimensions. While the BSW has been particularly outspoken about transnational issues, especially the strain from immigration and the necessity to restrict it (e.g. Frankfurter Rundschau 2024), morality issues are less prominent in the party's communication and its position towards these issues seems to be less pronounced (BSW 2024a; 2024b; 2025).³

Figure 1 adds some evidence for this conjecture. It uses data from a recent expert survey (Thomeczek, Wurthmann, and Stecker 2024) to map the German parties' positions on economic issues, immigration (transnational), and rights of sexual minorities (morality). The figure confirms the BSW's unique blend of economically left-leaning with culturally right-leaning positions. However, while experts firmly place the BSW towards the restrictive pole on immigration policy, they see the party as taking a less decisively conservative stand on the rights of sexual minorities. The BSW may thus cater more to 'left-nationalist' than to genuinely 'left-conservative' voters in the narrower sense.

Voting for the BSW from a Policy Space Perspective: Expectations and Previous Research

We study voting intentions for the BSW through the three-dimensional policy space model. Based on the party's left-nationalist profile, we expect left-leaning positions on the economic dimension as well as right-leaning positions on the transnational dimension to be associated with intentions to vote for the BSW. Given the BSW's less pronounced positioning on the morality dimension and its generally lower salience in Germany these days,⁴ we expect the morality dimension to be less relevant.

In study I, we examine data from the first GLES survey published after the founding of the BSW to provide initial evidence on how positions in the three-dimensional policy space are associated with voting for the BSW. In an early working paper, Herold and Otteni (2024) already presented findings from cross-sectional survey data speaking to a policy space perspective, however, without adopting a three-dimensional conception. They find that both socio-culturally right-wing positions and economically left-wing positions are associated with a higher reported likelihood of ever voting for the BSW. They also demonstrate that the BSW is the only one of the main German parties for which this pattern holds. Yet, with the socio-cultural dimension blending morality (gay marriage, gender self-determination) and transnational issues (national values) the study cannot discriminate effects of the two.

If (left-nationalist) voters are attracted to the BSW via policy positions, this raises the question of how specifically voters change their minds. We argue that which positions cause voters to switch to the BSW should depend on which party voters supported previously. Specifically, we expect nationalist positions on the transnational dimension to predict switching to the BSW among former supporters of left-wing parties (SPD, Greens, The Left) and left-wing positions on the economic dimension to predict switching to the BSW among former supporters of right-wing parties (CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD). Since these positions are not adequately represented by their respective former parties, the BSW provides a better-fitting alternative for these voters. By contrast, former supporters of left-wing (right-wing) parties should have less incentive to switch to the BSW based on their left-wing economic (nationalist socio-cultural) positions, as the BSW's economic (transnational) policies do not diverge significantly from those of left-wing (right-wing) parties. In study II, we thus draw on panel data to uncover how individuals' policy preferences in conjunction with their prior party support influence their intention to vote for the BSW.

Data from the GLES Panel have already been utilised by two recent studies. Jankowski (2024) examines the attitudes of BSW voters with a focus on their positions regarding two key political issues—welfare benefits vs. taxation and immigration. He finds that voters who switched from the parties they supported in the 2021 federal election to the BSW already held distinct attitudes compared to those who did not defect. Among former voters of economically right-wing parties, those who later switched to the BSW had always preferred more welfare benefits. Among former voters of all parties except the AfD, BSW voters had always been more critical of immigration. These findings align with the BSW's positioning in the policy space. However, lacking a multivariate model of vote switching, and finding differences on a range of attitudes, the study cannot determine which attitudes ultimately predict switching to the BSW and their relative importance.

Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner (2025) leverage panel data to analyse how voters' positions on immigration, Ukraine support, and welfare benefits influence their likelihood of switching to the BSW in the 2024 European election. They find that opposition to immigration and Ukraine support drives 2021 SPD, The Left and CDU/CSU voters to the BSW, while—perhaps surprisingly—positions on welfare benefits do not significantly impact switching behaviour. However, their study is not rooted in a theoretical argument about how positions in the policy space should affect switching to the BSW conditional on prior party preferences, measures positions on the two policy dimensions of interests through single items only and may thus overlook the broader significance of voter-party congruence across policy dimensions.

Thus, while illuminating in many ways, the existent studies do not provide a straightforward and encompassing test of the policy space argument presented here. In carrying out such a test, study II builds on the important insight by Jankowski (2024) and Heckmann and colleagues (2025) that voting for the BSW is best studied in conjunction with individuals' prior party preferences. Yet, in contrast to those two studies we focus on individuals' party preferences immediately before the BSW entered the German party landscape (rather than their vote choices in the 2021 election), to isolate how the additional option restructured party preferences.

Study I

Data and Methods

For study I, we use data from the Tracking T57 of the GLES (2024a). This online survey was fielded from 6 March to 15 March 2024. The sample is based on an online access panel by the company Respondi and includes only German citizens aged 18 and older, with quotas for age, gender, and education and a sample size of 1,145. For the analyses, we employ a weight which adjusts the sample to the German Microcensus.

Our main dependent variable is a binary indicator recording whether individuals reported a voting intention for the BSW (=1) or intended to vote for any other party (=0) in case a national election would be held next Sunday. 80 individuals, 7.0 per cent of all valid observations (or 10.1 per cent with the weight), reported an intention for the BSW. Our second outcome measure is respondents' rating of the BSW on a scale from -5 to +5 (mean: -1.4). Unsurprisingly, the two variables are closely associated with one another (see Table A1 in the appendix). We exploit the more fine-grained information contained in the ratings because of power concerns related to the limited absolute number of BSW voters in the sample.

We measure respondents' positions on the three policy dimensions through three items each (see Table 1), which we combine into single

Table 1. Measurement of policy dimensions in study I.

Dimension	Economic dimension		Transnational dimension		Morality dimension	
Items (with loading)	High-income earners should pay more tax than at present.	0.81	Some want to make it easier for foreigners to move here, others want to restrict the opportunities for foreigners to move here.*	0.87	Marriage should again only be possible between a man and a woman.	0.84
	The government should take measures to reduce income differences.	0.77	Immigrants should be obliged to adapt to German culture.	0.77	Abortions should be banned in Germany without exception.	0.78
	Some want fewer taxes and levies, even if this means fewer welfare state benefits, others want more welfare state benefits, even if this means more taxes and levies.*	0.55	Germany should provide financial support to EU member states that are experiencing severe economic and financial difficulties.	0.70	Now we would like to know what you think about government measures to promote equality for women in society. Some believe that the state's equality measures do not go far enough, others believe that they already go far too far. *	0.60
Eigenvalue	1.55		1.82		1.67	
Explained variance	0.51		0.61		0.57	

Note: Loadings from separate principal component factor analyses per dimension. The items have been rescaled such that higher values indicate more right-wing/nationalist/conservative positions. Items also used for measuring perceived party positions (see Figure 2) marked by an asterisk (*). Weight employed.

scores via principal component factor analyses. To avoid cross-loadings while also not enforcing a solution with orthogonal factors, we estimated these factor analyses separately per dimension. A factor analysis with all items recovers the same three dimensions (see Table A2). However, we note that respondents' positions on the general size of taxes and welfare benefits do not load as well with their positions on the other two economic items which are more closely related to redistribution and tax progressivity. For this reason, we will also report alternative results with disaggregated measures for the economic dimension below. Higher values on the factor scores indicate more right-wing/nationalist/conservative positions.

In the multivariate models, we ran binary logistic regressions for our first outcome variable (BSW voting intention) and OLS regressions for our second outcome variable (BSW rating). These include a standard set of socio-demographic control variables: Gender, age group, formal education, and residency in the Eastern (vs. Western) German states. Given the

limited sample and number of BSW voters and our primarily descriptive question of how positions in the policy space are *associated* with BSW support, we hesitate to include a longer list of control variables and leave questions of causality for later, when we turn to study II.

Descriptive Evidence: Perceived Party Positions and Voter Positions in the Policy Space

Before turning to the regression analysis, we show how German voters locate the BSW in the policy space, how BSW supporters are positioned in the policy space, and where they stand in relation to the voters of other parties.

To plot perceived party positions in Figure 2, we draw on questions which asked respondents to place the main German parties on three single items that form part of our three dimensions (see Table 1): positions on higher welfare benefits vs. lower taxes (x-axis in both panels), immigration (y-axis in left-hand panel), and gender equality (y-axis in right-hand panel). The left-hand panel confirms that—in line with the experts (see Figure 1)—respondents perceive the BSW to be restrictive on immigration, those who intend to vote for the party a bit more so than the average of all individuals. When it comes to the general level of welfare benefits vs. taxes,⁵ the BSW’s mean perceived position is only marginally left of centre, just barely situating it in the ‘left-nationalist’ corner of the respective two-dimensional policy space. Still, the BSW is, on average, perceived as more in favour of higher

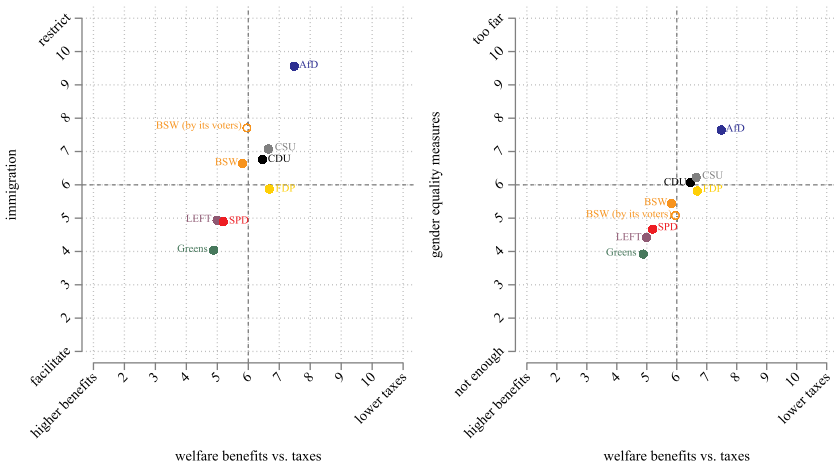


Figure 2. Mean perceived party positions.

Note: Mean perceived party positions among all individuals (filled circles) and, for the BSW’s position, among those with an intention to vote for the BSW (hollow circle).

welfare benefits than the CDU, CSU, FDP and AfD. The right-hand panel shows that only the AfD is perceived to be a clear opponent of gender equality measures. Individuals classify all other parties as relatively centrist or in favour of equality measures, including the BSW.

Figure 3 shows how voters are positioned in two different two-dimensional policy spaces using the factor scores derived from the factor analyses (see Table 1): The space on the left shows mean positions by current voting intention on the economic and transnational dimension and the space on the right mean positions on the economic and morality dimension. In addition to the dots which indicate the mean position of a party's voters, the numbers in each quadrant indicate the percentage share of BSW supporters among the individuals located in this quadrant.

The left-hand reveals that BSW supporters, on average, combine nationalist with economically left-leaning positions. Only AfD supporters take more nationalist positions, while economically, BSW supporters are close to SPD supporters. The percentage numbers indicate that the BSW receives its highest support in the left-nationalist quadrant (13.8 per cent) and its lowest in the opposite right-cosmopolitan quadrant (5.0 per cent). In the right-hand panel, we see that BSW supporters, on average, are not particularly conservative on morality issues. In fact, the mean BSW voter is positioned in the left-liberal quadrant. Accordingly, the share of BSW supporters is highest (14.5 per cent) in the left-liberal quadrant. These findings align with the perception of the BSW's position on gender equality (see Figure 2) and already suggest that the party draws support primarily from voters who are left-wing

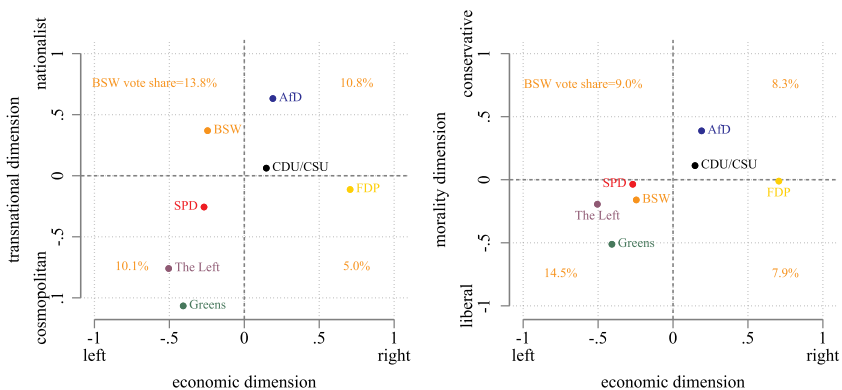


Figure 3. Mean positions in the policy space by vote choice.

Note: Mean positions on the policy dimensions (see Table 1) by current vote intention. Numbers in orange indicate the share of BSW supporters among those with an intention to vote in each quadrant. Weights employed.

on economic issues and nationalist (i.e. ‘left-nationalists’), but not particularly conservative on morality issues.

Results from Regression Analyses

In Table 2, we present results from multivariate analyses. Models 1 and 2 estimate logit regressions for whether or not individuals intend to vote for the BSW. Models 3 and 4 run OLS regressions for individuals’ rating of the BSW. For these regressions, we re-scaled all position measures to range from zero to one to ease interpretation. The main finding is that positions on the economic and the transnational dimension always exhibit statistically significant effects in the expected directions (with at least $p < 0.10$), while the morality dimension is significantly related (with $p < 0.10$) to the outcome measure in only one model. The more economically left-wing and the more nationalist individuals are, the higher is their probability of intending to vote for the BSW and the higher they rate the BSW.

Interestingly, Models 2 and 4 indicate that the effect of the economic positions is driven by individuals’ attitudes towards redistribution. If we combine only the first two items from Table 1, which both explicitly address income differences, into a factor score, we find that this ‘redistribution score’ significantly affects approval of the BSW, as opposed to individuals’ stances on the level of taxes vs. transfers. Thus, support for BSW seems more related to a preference for less economic inequality, but not to a preference for a bigger government per se.

Table 2. Regression results for BSW support.

	voting intention: BSW (binary logit)				rating: BSW (OLS)	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	(4)
	coef.	AME	coef.	AME	coef.	coef.
economic dimension	-1.28 ⁺ (0.69)	-0.11 ⁺ (0.060)			-1.42* (0.66)	
redistribution score			-1.20 ⁺ (0.64)	-0.10 ⁺ (0.057)		-1.49* (0.58)
taxes vs. transfers			0.072 (0.60)	0.0063 (0.052)		0.39 (0.59)
transnational dimension	1.69* (0.67)	0.15* (0.060)	1.50* (0.71)	0.13* (0.063)	2.20*** (0.66)	1.89** (0.69)
morality dimension	-0.78 (0.71)	-0.069 (0.063)	-0.73 (0.72)	-0.064 (0.063)	0.95 (0.60)	1.00 ⁺ (0.60)
socio-demographic controls	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
constant	-3.80*** (0.76)		-3.88*** (0.76)		-1.95** (0.63)	-2.09** (0.64)
observations		825		825	790	790
(McKelvey & Zavoina-)R ²		0.15		0.15	0.057	0.061

Note: Coefficients and average marginal effects (AME) with standard errors in parentheses. ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Weights employed. For the full regression table, see Table A4.

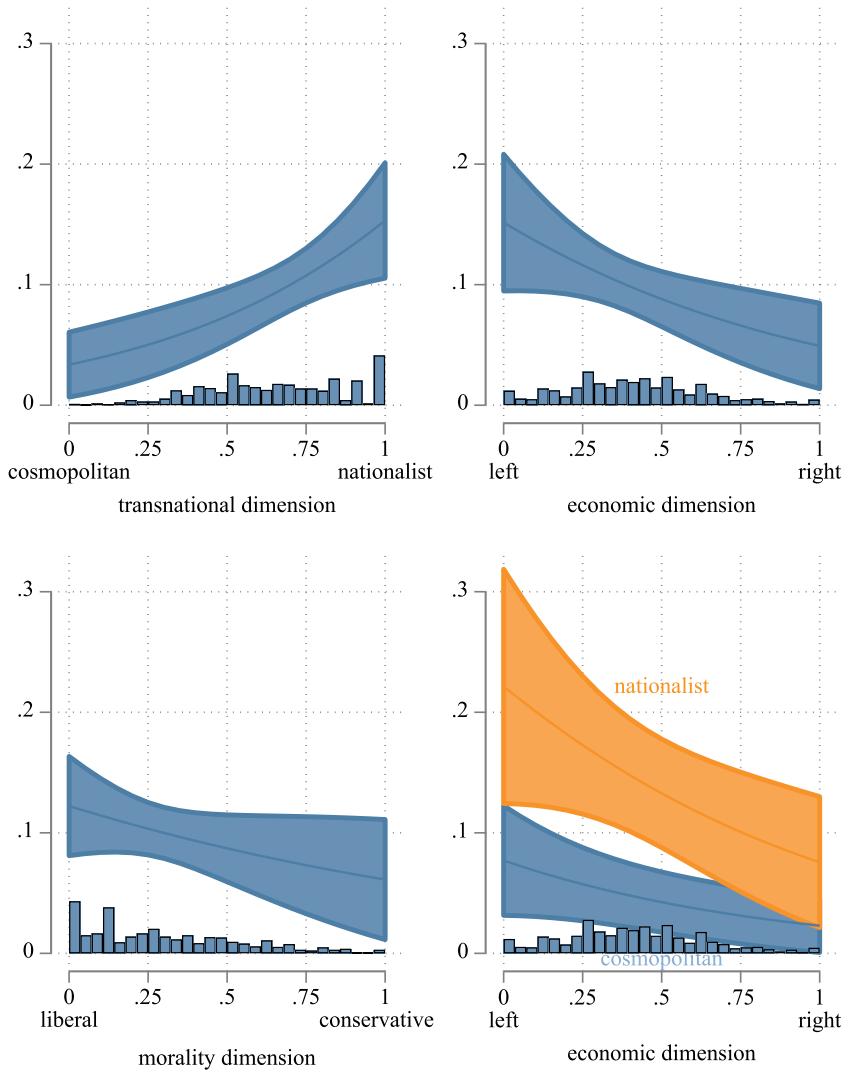


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of BSW vote intention across positions on policy dimensions.

Note: Predicted probabilities (with 90 per cent confidence intervals) based on model 1 in Table 2. Binned histograms show observed positions on the dimension. In the bottom-right panel, cosmopolitan and nationalist positions refer to the 5th and 95th percentile values respectively.

To demonstrate the magnitude of the effects, we plot predicted probabilities of BSW vote intentions based on Model 1 across observed positions on the three policy dimensions in Figure 4. The effects of individuals' positions on the transnational and the economic dimension are substantively relevant. The predicted probability of reporting an intention to vote for the BSW is about 12 percentage points higher for the most nationalist (15.3 per cent)

compared to the most cosmopolitan (3.4 per cent) individuals (top-left panel). Similarly, the probability is about 10 percentage points higher for someone who takes the most economically left-wing (15.2 per cent) rather than the most right-wing position (4.9 per cent) (top-right). While the curve is also downward sloping for positions on the morality dimension, the differences are substantively smaller and statistically insignificant (bottom-left). The bottom-right panel illustrates how the predicted probability of a BSW vote peaks with over 20 per cent among individuals who are both nationalist and economically left-wing.⁶

Study II

Data and Methods

To extend the correlational cross-sectional findings from study I, we use data from the GLES Panel in study II. The GLES Panel is a long-running online panel that allows to track intra-individual changes in political preferences among German eligible voters. To enhance the representativeness of the sample with respect to the German electorate, we used a weight that is based on the post-stratification weight for wave 14 that adjusts the sample to the German Microcensus and additionally adjusted the sample such that reported vote choices in the 2024 European election (including non-voting) match the official election result. Of key interest for study II are the waves 25, fielded in October 2023 (GLES 2024b), and 26 (GLES 2024c), fielded in June 2024. We use wave 26 to measure our outcome variable of interest, i.e. voting intentions for the BSW. As for study I, we use a binary indicator recording whether individuals reported a voting intention for the BSW (=1) or for any other party (=0) in case of a national election. Out of 6,679 valid observations, 834 individuals report an intention to vote for the BSW. This corresponds to 9.6 per cent in the weighted data.

From wave 25, we draw information on individuals' prior party preference, their policy positions and other potential motivations to switch to the BSW. Measuring policy positions about eight months before the outcome of interest strengthens the case for an exogenous role of policy positions in shaping voting behaviour. Prior party preferences are constructed from the variable on voting intentions for national elections in wave 25, but we also include, as a separate category, those who reported no intention to vote in this wave. In Figure B1 of the appendix, we show how voting intentions in October 2023 and in June 2024 are associated with each other. The figure indicates that the BSW performed especially well among former supporters of The Left: About 38 per cent of former Left voters intended to vote for the BSW in June 2024. It also attracted disproportional support from those who previously supported one of the other small parties (13 per

Table 3. Measurement of policy dimensions in study II.

Dimension	Economic dimension		Transnational dimension		Morality dimension	
Items (with loading)	The state should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.	0.75	Should it be easier or more difficult for foreigners to immigrate.	0.84	Same-sex partnerships should not be allowed to adopt children.	0.77
	The state should stay out of the economy.	0.64	Some people think that foreigners should completely assimilate to the German culture. Others think that foreigners should be able to live according to their own culture.	0.76	Every person should be able to determine his or her own gender and change it at the registry office.	0.82
	Some people prefer lower taxes, although this results in less social services. Others prefer more social services, although this results in raising taxes.	0.74	Should European unification be pushed further in order to establish a joint government soon or has European unification already gone too far.	0.73	Some think that state equality measures by no means go far enough, others think that they already go much too far today.	0.72
Eigenvalue		1.52		1.81		1.78
Explained variance		0.51		0.60		0.59

Note: Loadings from separate principal component factor analyses per dimension. The items have been rescaled such that higher values indicate more right-wing/nationalist/conservative positions. A factor analysis with all nine items leads to three similar dimensions (see Table B1). Weight employed.

cent) as well as former AfD voters (11 per cent) (cf. Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2024).

We measure positions on the three policy dimensions through three items each (see Table 3), which partly overlap with and are generally very similar to the set of items used for study I. We, again, combined the items for each dimension into single scores via principal component factor analyses, with higher values on the factor scores indicating more right-wing/nationalist/conservative positions.

We attempt to isolate the effect of positions on these policy dimensions by controlling for two potential other key motivations for switching to the BSW. The first are positions on the Russo-Ukrainian War (Wurthmann and Wagner 2024). We make use of four items that capture whether individuals are opposed to supporting Ukraine and in favour of more cooperation with Russia. These items load well on a single scale, and we use a factor score to combine them (see Table B2). The second are populist attitudes (Thomeczek 2024a; 2024b), which we operationalise through a factor score built from the eight items that are part of the populist attitude scale included in the GLES

Panel (see Table B3). All these attitudinal variables are scaled to range from zero to one to allow for an easy interpretation and comparison of effect sizes.⁷ In addition, our models include a similar set of socio-demographic control variables as in study I (gender, age groups, level of formal education, living in the Eastern part of Germany).

Results from Regression Analyses

In the first step, we aim to replicate the result from study I. We therefore start with a simple binary-logit model that regresses BSW voting intention on the three policy dimensions and the socio-demographic controls variables only. Figure 5 plots the average marginal effects from this model, showing how the probability of supporting the BSW changes with positions on the three policy dimensions. As in study I, we find that voting for the BSW is associated with more left-wing positions on the economic dimension and with more nationalist positions on the transnational dimension, but unrelated to positions on the morality dimension. Thus, study II confirms that the BSW fares best among left-nationalist voters.

To move from this descriptive result towards establishing how specific positions on the policy dimensions cause some voters to switch to the BSW, we ran a second model in which we also consider individuals' prior

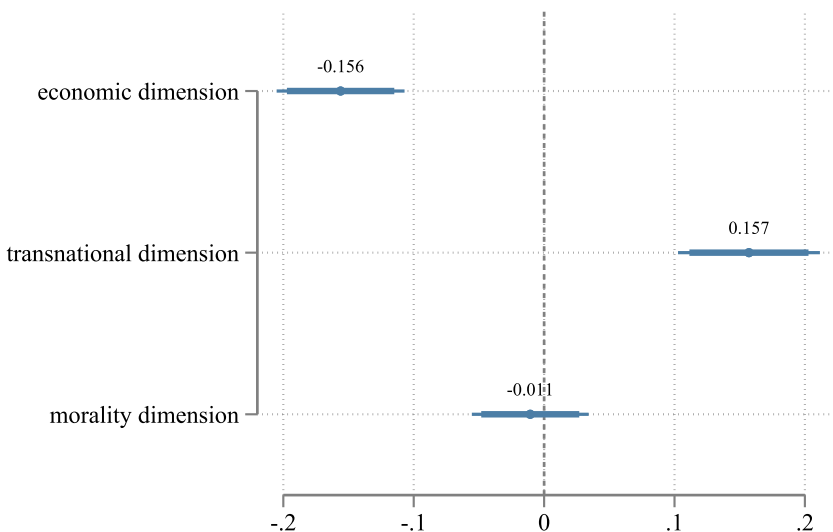


Figure 5. Marginal effects of policy positions on BSW voting intention. Marginal effects (with 90 per cent and 95 per cent confidence intervals) from logistic regressions where the outcome variable is the intention to vote for the BSW. Positions are scaled from 0 to 1. For the underlying regression table, see Table B4. Weight employed. $n = 5,893$. McKelvey/Zavoina- $R^2 = 0.146$.

voting intentions and interacted these with positions on the three dimensions. Thus, this model allows for the effects of positions to vary with prior party preferences. We also interacted the attitudinal control variables—attitudes towards the Russo-Ukrainian War and populist attitudes—with prior voting intentions to allow for prior party specific effects here as well.

Figure 6 displays marginal effects of the variables of interest conditional on prior vote intention. In line with the spatial logic outlined, we find that more right-wing positions on the transnational dimension predict switching to the BSW among previous supporters of The Left and the Greens. However, there is no such statistically significant effect among previous SPD supporters. For AfD supporters, positions on the transnational dimension even pull in the opposite direction, with more nationalist positions rendering switching to the BSW less likely. In light of the AfD holding a more extreme nationalist position than the BSW, this is not surprising.

Positions on the economic dimension do not significantly predict switching to the BSW among previous supporters of the left-leaning parties but do so for the right-leaning parties. Previous supporters of the FDP, the AfD and the CDU/CSU are more likely to switch to the BSW the more left-wing their positions on the economic dimension are. Positions on the morality dimension, in contrast, do not predict the probability of switching to the BSW for any prior party preference.

The marginal effects in the lower panels of Figure 6 reveal that being against assisting Ukraine increases the probability of switching to the BSW across the board, largely independent of one's prior party preferences (cf. Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025). Populist attitudes are overall a weaker predictor of switching to the BSW, though previous voters of The Left and the FDP with higher populist attitude scores are more likely to switch to the BSW than those who are less populist.

To further illustrate the effects of interests, we plot predicted probabilities of intending to vote for the BSW in Figure 7. In the top panel, the figure shows how the probability varies with positions on the transnational dimension among previous supporters of the left-leaning parties; in the bottom panel, it is shown how the probability varies with positions on the economic dimension among previous supporters of the right-leaning parties.

We concentrate here on the previous supporters of the Left and the AfD for whom we observe the highest shares of switchers to the BSW (see Figure B1). Among previous Left voters, the probability of switching to the BSW reaches over 60 per cent among the most nationalist voters, while the probability is less than 10 per cent among the most cosmopolitan. As the underlying histograms indicate, nationalist positions were also widespread among voters of The Left, resulting in incongruencies with their party. Our results indicate that the BSW could exploit this, attracting a majority of those Left supporters with nationalist positions. Thus, the disagreements over positions

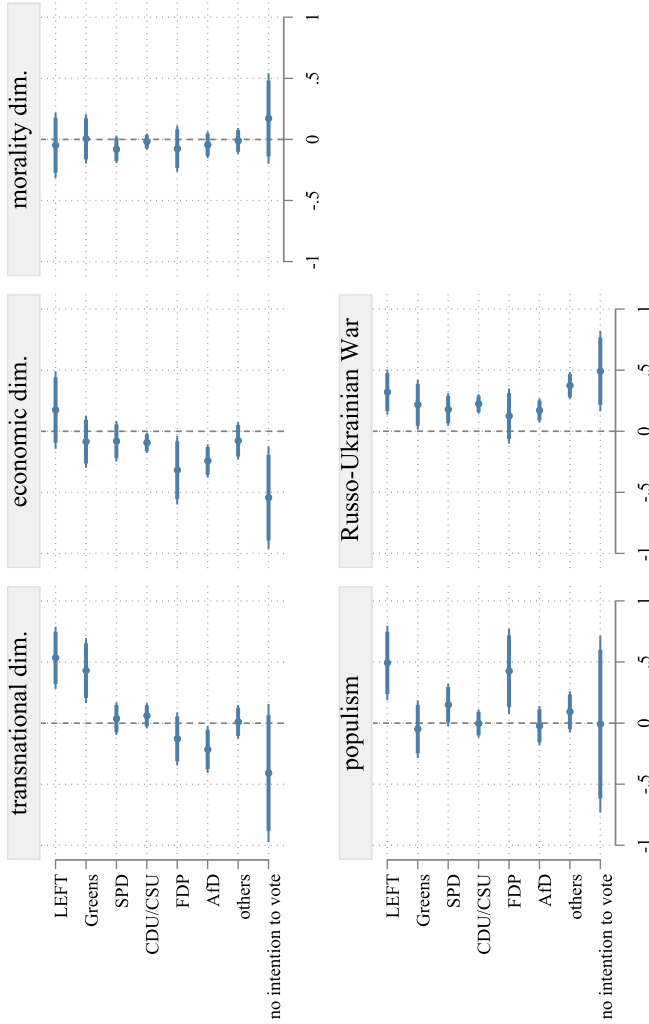


Figure 6. Marginal effects on BSW voting intention by previous voting intention.

Note: Marginal effects (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) from logistic regressions where the outcome variable is the intention to vote for the BSW. Positions are scaled from 0 to 1. For the underlying regression table, see Table B4. Weight employed. $n = 5,481$. McKelvey/Zavoina- $R^2 = 0.447$.

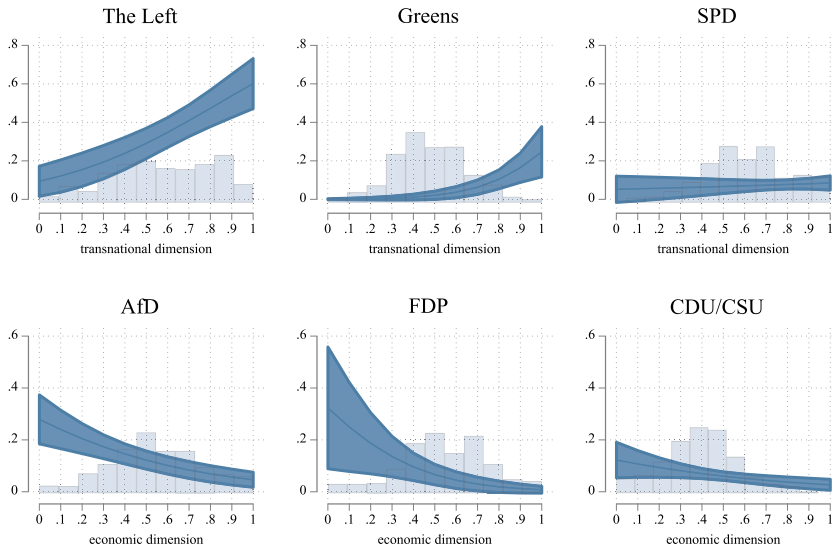


Figure 7. Predicted probabilities of vote switching to the BSW by previous voting intention and positions on the transnational/economic dimensions.

Note: Predicted probabilities (with 90 per cent confidence intervals) from logistic regression shown in Figure 6. Binned histograms of positions of voters of the respective party in t-1 shown without corresponding y-axis.

on transnational issues that eventually led Wagenknecht and her allies to split from the BSW are also key to understanding which former voters of The Left followed them. These results accord with comparative research which indicates that positions of European radical left parties on the transnational dimension are key to understanding the composition of their electorate (Steiner et al. 2024).

Among previous AfD voters, we observe a lot of variation in positions on the economic dimension. Here, the BSW was quite successful in winning over those with more left-wing positions, that is, AfD supporters who held economic policy positions that were incongruent with those of their party. Among previous AfD voters, the probability of switching to the BSW rises to 25 per cent among those with the most left-wing positions, while it is at 5 per cent only among those with the most right-wing positions.

In Appendix B, we list the results of robustness checks with alternative versions of Figure 6. First, our findings remain intact when adding the rating of Sahra Wagenknecht (as measured in wave 25 on a scale from -5 to +5; see Figure B3). Positive ratings of Wagenknecht raise the probability of switching to the BSW in a largely uniform way. Our results are also robust to conditioning on prior vote choice in wave 24 of May 2023 instead (see Figure B4, which responds to the concern that in the fall of 2023 it had already become increasingly clear that a Wagenknecht party would form),

to excluding switchers to other parties (resulting in a comparison between stayers and switchers to the BSW; see Figure B5) and to using reported vote choice for the BSW in the European Parliament (EP) election as an alternative outcome (see Figure B6; which results in a less clean definition of vote switching than our main model though). The only relevant difference is that the positive effect of more right-wing positions on the transnational dimension is no longer statistically significant among former Green supporters with EP vote choice.

Conclusion

In this contribution, we have studied voting for the BSW from the perspective of a three-dimensional policy space model. Departing from the party's unusual bundling of economically left-leaning with nationalist-leaning policy positions, we conducted two studies to find out (1) how this policy mix is reflected in the positions of its voters and (2) how policy positions cause individuals to switch to the BSW contingent on their prior party preference.

In study I, based on cross-sectional survey data from March 2024, we found that the probability of intending to vote for the BSW increases with more left-wing positions on the economic dimension—especially on redistribution—and more nationalist positions on the transnational dimension. Conservative positions on morality are not significantly related to the overall likelihood of voting BSW. In this sense, BSW voters are best characterised as 'left-nationalists' rather than 'left-conservatives'. In our follow-up study II, based on panel data with voting intentions measured in June 2024 and policy positions measured in October 2023, we first replicated this finding: Economically left-leaning positions go along with a higher likelihood of BSW voting as do more nationalist positions, whereas positions on the morality dimension are orthogonal to BSW support.

But how do these patterns emerge? To better understand what drives individuals to switch to the BSW, study II then studied how policy positions affect switching to the BSW conditional on which parties individuals had supported before the BSW entered the German party landscape. We found that among prior supporters of left-leaning parties, especially of The Left but also of the Greens, more nationalist positions predict switching to the BSW, whereas economic positions are largely irrelevant. In contrast, among prior supporters of the right-leaning parties, AfD, Union and FDP, economically left-wing positions increase the likelihood of switching to the BSW. These findings are in line with a spatial logic: The BSW attracts voters from other parties through those dimensions on which it holds a decisively different position than the parties these voters previously supported. With its longitudinal design and by showing that the results hold up while

controlling for other motivations for switching to the BSW—populist attitudes, orientations towards the Russo-Ukrainian War and ratings of Sahra Wagenknecht, study II strongly suggests that policy positions are not only associated with vote choices for the BSW but affect those causally.

Our results thus replicate the finding from other studies that BSW support increases with economically left-wing and socio-culturally right-wing positions. But we also qualify this result in two ways: We show (1) that it is socio-cultural positions on the transnational rather than the morality dimension that are consequential and (2) that economically left-wing positions drive switching to the BSW among previous supporters of right-leaning parties whereas right-wing positions on the transnational dimension matter among previous supporters of left-leaning parties.

Our results have several implications. First and foremost, they support a policy space-based explanation of the early success of the BSW. They highlight how parties offering a new bundle of policy positions may exploit different kinds of positional incongruences between the ‘old’ parties and their voters. Similar evidence has been presented for the rise of Emmanuel Macron in France who, with his economically more right-leaning but socio-culturally progressive positioning, could attract economically right-leaning voters from the Socialists and socio-culturally progressive voters from the Republicans (Guntermann and Lachat 2023). Our study demonstrates a similar logic but does so for a rare case of a party that combines economically left-wing with nationalist stances.

Second, that the BSW fills a gap in the party system and attracts voters in this way can be read as indicating a long-term potential for the party (cf. Jankowski 2024). If our argument is correct, this potential seems better realised by emphasising its positions on both the economic and the transnational dimension, rather than hiding or blurring one of those. Whether the party realises this potential is bound to depend on many other factors, though, and remains an open question. At the time of this writing (shortly before the 2025 election), it is unclear whether the party will cross the 5 per cent electoral threshold and be part of the 21st German Bundestag.

Third, our results also speak to an important debate on whether AfD voters can be mobilised to vote for other parties through policy offerings. The BSW could attract a sizable chunk of AfD supporters—though not its most loyal long-term supporters (cf. Heckmann, Wurthmann, and Wagner 2025; Jankowski 2024)—by leveraging incongruencies between the AfD and some of its voters on a dimension that is secondary for the AfD, but seemingly not for all its voters.

Beyond studying how the BSW electorate evolves over time, future research may build upon the present work by studying distances to the BSW on the policy dimensions as perceived by individual voters. While we were interested in how people’s own positions relate to their support of the BSW, such research

could reveal whether switching to the BSW has indeed resulted in a lower *perceived* voter-party distance for left-nationalist voters.

Notes

1. A predecessor of this manuscript was published as a working paper in August 2024 (Steiner and Hillen 2024). It contained the results from study I as described below. We added study II during the peer-review process, as new data from the GLES Panel had become available.
2. These labels are regularly used in the literature to summarize positions on the policy issues within the respective dimensions (e.g., Hakhverdian and Schakel 2022).
3. To be sure, Sahra Wagenknecht previously attacked ‘self-righteous lifestyle leftists’ for leading a ‘culture war’ against all those who do not adhere to their ‘left-liberal’ conception of a progressive society (Wagenknecht 2021). However, there is little evidence from the party’s manifestos thus far that the BSW would aim to restrict gay rights and, especially, gender equality (BSW 2024a, 2024b, 2025).
4. On the later point, see the Politbarometer polling data on the most important issues in Germany (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2025).
5. Note that we lack a measure of perceived party positions focused more narrowly on redistribution.
6. The plot looks similar when including an interaction term between positions on the economic and transnational dimension (see Figure A1). Predicted values for the BSW rating based on model 3 in Table 2 also show a similar picture (see Figure A2).
7. Positions on the Russo-Ukrainian War exhibit a substantial correlation of 0.46 with positions on the transnational dimension (see Figure B2). Substantively, there is some overlap insofar as providing assistance is a question of international solidarity versus prioritizing alleged national interests. Thus, controlling for attitudes towards the Russo-Ukrainian War can be seen as a conservative estimation strategy.

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

Supplemental Data and Research Materials

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2025.2502100>.

About the Authors

Nils D. Steiner is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science, JGU Mainz, Germany. He studies political processes in advanced democracies from a comparative perspective, with a focus on the political attitudes and the political behaviour of citizens in Western Europe. His articles have appeared in journals such as *British Journal of Political Science*, *European Journal of Political Research*, and *Journal of European Public Policy*.

Sven Hillen was a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science, JGU Mainz, Germany, when this research was conducted. He is now a postdoctoral researcher in the Collaborative Research Centre 1472 Transformations of the Popular at the University of Siegen, Germany. His articles have appeared in journals such as *European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, and *Socio-Economic Review*.

Data availability statement

Reproduction materials for this article are available at Harvard Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EJDZYM>.

ORCID

NILS D. STEINER  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3433-4079>

SVEN HILLEN  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9417-3951>

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