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DEMOCRACY UNDER STRAIN

**Political, Societal and Cultural Divides
exposed by East Germany's 2024 Elections**



Main theses

1. The 2024 elections in East Germany have exposed significant societal divides, with high voter support for the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the national-conservative left, anti-establishment Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). These trends indicate not only dissatisfaction with established democratic parties but also a shift in political culture towards radicalization, characterized by populism and far-right content. This fragmentation poses a threat to democratic stability in East Germany, where forming governments without including the AfD is becoming increasingly challenging and impossible without the BSW, thus leading to unpredictable coalitions like in Thuringia or minority governments like in Saxony.
2. The political landscape in East Germany is increasingly mirroring certain aspects of contemporary American political culture, including heightened polarization, personality-focused campaigns, and an escalation in divisive rhetoric. This trend is further amplified by the AfD's adept use of social media for emotional mobilization. The ongoing influence of these dynamics regarding state and federal politics risks deepening societal fractures and further weakening public trust in traditional democratic institutions.
3. The established parties' ongoing and potential future alignment with the AfD's positions may deepen the legitimacy crisis of democracy, exacerbate political polarization, and ultimately empower the AfD's anti-democratic forces. In the forthcoming election campaign, we can expect that the majority of the parties, except the Greens and certain factions in the Left, will promise, with a different level of intensity, a robust stance on migration policies. The extent to which this will stop the arrival of refugees remains highly doubtful. In any case, it fosters an expectation that migration issues will be "solved" through radical proposals that were originally discussed by the AfD.

The Setting for the Super Election Year in East Germany

2024 has been a global super-election year, with more people being called upon to vote than ever before. In Germany, too, 2024 has been a year of numerous elections. This started in February with the partial re-run of the Bundestag elections in Berlin and was followed by the European elections and nine local elections around June 2024 (six of them in Eastern Germany). Finally, there were the three state elections in Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg in September. This global wave of elections took place against the backdrop of the strengthening of populist and extremist political parties. In Germany, the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) had been polling at 14 to 15% from the beginning of 2023 until May of that year before slowly but steadily increasing its voter support from June. The peaks were measured by Statista at 23% on October 13th 2023 and 22% on January 4th 2024. There was a great deal of concern, and the issue was at the forefront of the national debate.¹ However, a trend reversal set in. At the next Statista measurement point on February 1st 2024, the AfD had lost three percentage points of support, a trend that lasted for about half a year until voter approval leveled off between 16 and 17%. Two main reasons for this decline date back to January 2024. These were the revelation of a secret meeting on "remigration"

¹ Marcel Fürstenau, *Is Germany's far-right AfD a threat to democracy?* Deutsche Welle, 02.01.2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-germanys-far-right-afd-a-threat-to-democracy/a-67843885>

and the founding of the *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (BSW), a party that has made the AfD's three key issues – migration, “peace” with Russia, and sharp anti-establishment rhetoric – its brand as well.

The first reason, the revelation of a secret meeting on January 10th 2024 by the research collective CORRECTIV, at which radicalized conservative and far right-wing politicians and activists discussed mass deportations from Germany, led to an unprecedented mobilization of protest. It was the largest wave of protest concentrated in a short period of time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. Within weeks, the protests spread throughout the country, bringing people onto the streets not only in large cities but also in rural areas. Between the second week of January and the beginning of March, in a wave of protests against right-wing extremism and for democracy and human rights, 1,340 events with a total of over 3.6 million participants took place. It has been argued that the wave of protests could well lead to a consolidation of the AfD's electoral base.² It has also been pointed out that it was mainly the supporters of the Greens, and to a lesser extent of the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Left Party (*Die Linke*), who became mobilized. This kind of action was rather rare among supporters of the Christian Democrats (CDU). Still, the protests were a strong signal against the shift to the right, marking the beginning of the decline in the AfD's approval ratings.

The second reason, the founding of the BSW, has had a major impact on the German party landscape as a whole. It was the assessment of many commentators and experts that the BSW would offer a non-extremist “alternative” to the established parties.³ This is especially true since Sahra Wagenknecht herself stated: “I hope that we can convince many voters who voted for the AfD out of protest that our answers and concepts are more serious.”⁴ Yet, the European and local elections held at the same time in June 2024 showed that the BSW did not primarily take voters away from the AfD (+160,000) but was, above all, able to attract voters from the SPD (+580,000) and the Left Party (+470,000).

While these two factors contributed to the temporary dip in the AfD's popularity at the level of Germany's national average, a closer look shows that they had different effects in Western and Eastern Germany. The AfD remained strong in the East, garnering around 30-35% of the vote in most eastern states (in all the elections mentioned above), while the BSW reached up to 15% there (e.g., in the state elections in Thuringia). On the one hand, this suggests that dissatisfaction with the established democratic parties is higher in the East than in the West. On the other hand, the stable support for the AfD, which in most federal states in Eastern Germany is classified as a right-wing extremist party by the German domestic intelligence service (Verfassungsschutz), seems no longer to be an expression of a protest vote, but rather a decision based on the party's radical content. This is already indicated by the different distribution of protests that developed in the wake of the CORRECTIV revelations. Only 20% of the protests took place in East Germany, where only 10% of the nation's mobilized population took part. The potential for mobilization in East Germany was thus significantly lower.

2 Dieter Rucht, Für Demokratie – gegen Rechtsextremismus. Profil und Dynamik der jüngsten Protestwelle, *ipb working papers*, Institut für Protest- und Bewegungsforschung, April 2024. <https://protestinstitut.eu/publikationen/fuer-demokratie-gegen-rechtsextremismus/>

3 Aiko Wagner, Lechts oder links? Das Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht im Parteienwettbewerb. FES impuls, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, December 2023. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/a-p-b/20846-20231215.pdf>

4 Marcus Giebel. Wagenknecht erklärt ihre Partei: Vier Kernpunkte – klare Abgrenzung zu AfD und Grünen, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 19.11.2023. <https://www.fr.de/politik/spd-wagenknecht-partei-bsw-afd-mohamed-ali-gruene-union-koalition-92682010.html>

Political Attitudes in East Germany

Among other reasons, such as a weaker civil society that has to operate in the context of a far-right hegemony, especially in rural areas, this lower mobilization capacity regarding protests against right-wing extremism illustrates different political attitudes in East and West Germany. After all, the approval of right-wing extremist attitudes is higher in the Eastern federal states than in Western Germany. A study based solely on a representative sample in Eastern Germany illustrates in detail what has already been shown in long-term studies such as the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study.⁵ High levels of agreement were found especially in the areas of xenophobia and chauvinism. For example, more than 40% of the East Germans surveyed either “completely” or “mostly agreed” with the statement that “foreigners only come here to abuse the welfare system.” In addition, above 35% believe that “Germany is losing its identity because of the large number of foreigners.” The same number thinks that “we should dare to have strong nationalist feelings again.” As expected, these attitudes are reflected among AfD voters, who are the most likely to agree with right-wing extremist statements. Two-thirds of them are openly xenophobic, half hold chauvinistic views, and over one-fifth support a dictatorship. At first glance, it is clear that the AfD has succeeded in capturing the voter potential of the far right. Overall, the study shows that many people in Eastern Germany no longer aspire to democratic participation and the protection of fundamental rights, but instead favor the perceived security of an authoritarian state.⁶

The “Americanization” of East German Political Culture

The AfD’s high approval ratings have also been related to specific dynamics in East German political culture, which could be described as “Americanization”. As the journalist Nils Markwardt has pointed out, this trend is most apparent in the increasing personalization and dual framing of election campaigns modeled after the American style, as seen in Thuringia, where the campaign led to a televised debate between the AfD’s leader Björn Höcke and his CDU counterpart Mario Voigt.⁷ In response to such binary polarization, bipartisan defensive coalitions have emerged in both the US and East Germany. For example, just as prominent Republicans endorsed Kamala Harris to block Donald Trump, Saxony’s CDU Minister President Michael Kretschmer called for the support of Brandenburg’s highly popular SPD candidate, Dietmar Woidke, to prevent the AfD from becoming the strongest party. The personalization of politics in both contexts also accelerates shifts in public opinion. In the US, the Democrats quickly caught up to Trump in the polls with Harris’s candidacy, while in Brandenburg, the SPD surged from around 20% to over 30%, following Woidke’s framing of the election as a referendum on his future. This strategy eventually proved decisive for Woidke’s very close win over the AfD in the elections, while it also drew criticism from members of the other democratic parties.

Furthermore, both the US and East Germany are experiencing a hardening of political discourse, partly due to their tradition of street-based activism. The structural weakness

5 Vereint im Ressentiment. Autoritäre Dynamiken und rechtsextreme Einstellungen. ed. Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess, Aylene Heller, Elmar Brähler, Gießen 2024.

6 Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess, Elmar Brähler, Autoritäre Dynamiken und die Unzufriedenheit mit der Demokratie: Die rechtsextreme Einstellung in den ostdeutschen Bundesländern. EfBI Policy Paper 2023/2, Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut, 27.06.2023, <https://efbi.de/details/efbi-policy-paper-2023-2-autoritaere-dynamiken-und-die-unzufriedenheit-mit-der-demokratie-2.html>

7 Nils Markwardt, Der Osten, unsere USA, *Die Zeit*. 22.09.2024, <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2024-09/brandenburg-wahlergebnisse-landtagswahl-ostdeutschland-usa/komplettansicht>

of political parties in the East, combined with the turbulent experience of reunification, means that political conflicts are often more direct and contentious. This helps explain why movements such as Pegida and demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions have been concentrated in East Germany. In its most extreme form, this results in increasing attacks on politicians and a radicalization of debates. It is notable that while many Western right-wing populist parties have adopted a more moderate, mainstream image, Trump's movement and the East German AfD have instead become more rhetorically extreme. At the same time, more and more voters of the AfD see it as a "centrist" party. This polarization can be related to the anti-democratic tendencies addressed above.

Another aspect that is not exclusively limited to East Germany, but seems to work particularly well there, is the AfD's extremely successful, highly emotionalized social media campaigns, which mirror that of Trump's campaigns in the US. The Potsdam Social Media Monitor, a study on the use of social media by political parties in Germany, has shown that the AfD has above 70% visibility on TikTok amongst first-time voters, while the runners-up are the CDU and BSW with a mere 8% each. The other parties are lagging even further behind.⁸ This, according to the authors of the study, is the result of a decade of political effort on social media. Like other far-right parties across Europe, the AfD has been leveraging social media platforms skillfully for many years, while other political actors and parties in Germany are only now starting to catch up. The AfD has been highly effective in exploiting the algorithmic structure of platforms like TikTok. Furthermore, their success, especially among young people, is closely tied to the network of right-wing influencers and multipliers who amplify the party's messages, videos and posts. According to the report's data, this clearly differentiates the AfD from other political parties. The AfD relies on simple, emotionally charged messages, combined with aggressive or catchy music. These elements are provocative, easy to grasp, and deliberately crafted to generate online engagement. In contrast, other established and more moderate parties focus on presenting factual information and addressing key societal issues – an approach that is less effective within the algorithm-driven landscape of social media.

East Germany's "fractions" and how they represent wider European contexts

Of course, the personalization of politics, the radicalization of discourse, and self-referential identity debates are not unique to East Germany and the US. They are, for instance, also present in other European countries. In the case of East Germany, they are an expression of deep-seated structural social disruptions. Steffen Mau, a renowned sociologist and expert on East Germany, uses the term "fractured society" for the German case, and suggests that this case can indeed be seen as representative of similar cleavages across Europe: "The balance of (German) unity is not only mixed; it is also thoroughly contradictory. To decipher this discrepancy, the concept of social fracture is helpful. In medicine, a fracture refers to the breaking of a bone. Many fractures are hidden beneath the skin and not externally visible, but some are exposed. Often, they heal; however, if displacements occur, one may have to live with functional limitations for life."⁹

Social fractures thus can be understood as disruptions in the social fabric that may result in structural misalignments. East Germany, in Mau's view, represents a society characterized

⁸ Potsdam Social Media Monitor, Sichtbarkeit der Parteien in den TikTok-Feeds von Erstwähler*innen, August 2024. <https://psmm.info/>

⁹ Steffen Mau, Lütten Klein: Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft. Berlin 2019.

by numerous fractures that arise from the unique features of its social structure and collective mindset. These fractures cannot be attributed solely to the collapse of the GDR nor exclusively to the challenges associated with reunification, but rather emerge from a combination of both factors. A society marked by such fractures becomes less resilient and adaptable, even if, on the surface, everything appears to be functioning normally.

Key aspects of such fractures that are observable in East Germany and are representative, to different extents and in different proportions and combinations, of other countries across Europe include: cultural disruptions during the transition from an ethnically homogeneous society to one characterized by immigration; widespread feelings of having been left behind; broad devaluation of life models; economic precariousness; and the pressures of increasing “flexibilization”.

Scenarios for state-level politics in East Germany

The developments just described are already having an impact on democracy in Eastern Germany: in Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia, parliamentary majorities against the AfD are not possible without the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht. The party leadership, especially the party’s namesake, is aware of this and has stressed the need for exploratory and coalition talks. Shortly after the election, Sahra Wagenknecht even called the two potential CDU prime ministers, Michael Kretschmer and Mario Voigt, to Berlin, making coalition talks dependent on a personal meeting with her. During the negotiations, the party leadership has exerted pressure due to the fact that the issues of the stationing of US missiles in Germany or the supply of weapons to Ukraine were not given enough prominence in the talks in Thuringia. We are now witnessing the formation of new governments with BSW in Thuringia (and most probably with the SPD in Brandenburg), a partner that sees itself as a challenger to the political establishment and is testing the limits of democratic culture in Eastern Germany.

The prospective outcomes of these development paths are cause for concern. (1) With failing coalition talks in Saxony, a minority government between the CDU and SPD is underway. Given that the two parties are ten votes short of a majority, it will be necessary to secure the support of multiple parties for various legislative projects (the Greens have seven, the Left has six, and the BSW has 15 MPs). Consequently, we can anticipate a period of government that will be more than just turbulent – a scenario that is unpopular in Germany because minority governments are perceived as unstable and prone to stagnation. (2) Even though a coalition agreement has been worked out in Thuringia (in Brandenburg the talks between the SPD and BSW have been constructive so far), there are serious disputes visible – not so much between the potential coalition partners as between the federal level and Thuringia’s BSW leadership. If these open fights between the different levels of the BSW party hierarchy continue to be carried out in public and affect the coalition itself, this could lead to the perception among voters that the state governments are incapable of solving problems (similar to the perception of the traffic light coalition at the central level). After all, there are substantive differences between the CDU and the BSW, as the Christian Democrats still have a resolution prohibiting cooperation with the Left Party, from which the BSW emerged. Thus, cooperation between the conservatives and a party formed out of the Left could reinforce a further self-delegitimization of the established parties (in this case, especially the CDU). Such a context could not only lead to early elections, but above all to a further strengthening of the AfD, which could then present itself as the only real “alternative”

and claim that the BSW, despite its self-presentation as a critic of the “establishment”, has not pushed for a change of course in politics. In sum, it is likely that we will witness a further destabilization of the political culture in Eastern Germany in the coming years, which could have a destructive effect on the Federal Republic as a whole.

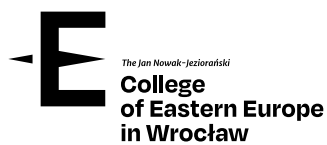
Possible implications for the Federal Level

The participation of the BSW in state governments will put pressure on the federal government’s Ukraine policy and other policies through the Federal Council (Bundesrat, the upper house of the German parliament). The two East German states in which the BSW is likely to be a part of the next government may be far from a majority in the Federal Council, but with the colorful coalitions in other states, they could tip the scales when it comes to particularly controversial legislative initiatives demanding concessions in German foreign policy. (2) The formation of a government after the upcoming snap federal elections is likely to be more complex than ever before, not only because of the political pressure that will come from the Bundesrat, but mainly because of the dynamics in public discourse and the perception that the political positions of the BSW are siphoning off votes from the established parties. (3) This development will be reflected in ways that have already been seen in the recent past, especially in the CDU and SPD, which have (stronger in the case of the CDU) adopted the anti-immigration rhetoric of the AfD and translated it into legislative proposals in order to secure votes. As a result of such discursive shifts, there is reason to fear a significant adjustment in Ukraine policy, especially regarding the SPD, which could see this as a way to secure votes against clear electoral migration to the BSW. (3) However, this convergence of political language and positions has so far failed to weaken the AfD’s support. On the contrary, the AfD remains more authentic as the original champion of anti-immigration positions and continues to benefit from its radicalization, since any discursive movement towards far-right narratives leads to a greater public focus on the AfD’s core issues – a pattern that has been repeatedly observed in cases in which European centrist parties tried to programmatically “adapt” to their radical competitors, most recently in the Netherlands.¹⁰ (4) In national polls, the AfD and the BSW are currently polling at around 25%, which – regardless of whether these parties make further gains – will also lead to problematic political constellations at the federal level. These developments make it more likely that three-party coalitions will be more common in the future – a scenario that, as the low popularity of the current traffic light coalition shows, plays into the hands of the AfD’s challengers to democracy. (5) The related political uncertainties and unstable coalitions are likely to further increase the influence of both the AfD and the BSW. In the medium term, these political dynamics might give way to a sort of “Easternization” and thus to the further “Americanization” of political culture also in West Germany. (6) Finally, in the medium term, coalitions of “all-democratic parties” (even from highly ‘incompatible’ parties like CDU and BSW) at the federal level could also fail to act as a bulwark against the AfD. This would even further undermine public confidence in the ability of traditional parties to provide stable and viable solutions. While it is extremely unlikely that the AfD will be part of the next federal government from 2025 onwards, the situation in 2029 may be much less clear if developments such as the “normalization” of “reactionary” positions concerning both society and the established parties, particularly the CDU, continue.

¹⁰ Pola Cebulak, Florian Lippert, Shocks to the System. Lessons from Geert Wilders’ Victory in the Dutch Elections. College of Eastern Europe (KEW), 15.02.2024, . <https://www.kew.org.pl/en/2024/02/15/shocks-to-the-system-lessons-from-geert-wilders-victory-in-the-dutch-elections/>

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December 2024

Edited by Adam Balcer
Proofreading: Niall Gray

ISBN 978-83-7893-361-8

DTP: Dolasu



Co-funded by
the European Union