

# German Elections. Why did Die Linke do so badly?

Via [The Left Berlin](#)

In the recent German elections, die LINKE did not even attain the 5% of votes which would guarantee a parliamentary fraction. They were only saved by an abstruse rule which says that if 3 party candidates win their own constituency, you get a fraction anyway. Die Linke will be still represented in the next parliament, but with a much reduced number of 39 MPs.

There is no single reason why die Linke lost 2 million votes. In this article I will concentrate on three – the desire of a large part of the public to avoid a Chancellor Laschet, a Linke election campaign that almost exclusively concentrated on a “Red-Red-Green” (R2G) coalition, and the fight inside the party around Sahra Wagenknecht. I will address each of these in turn.

## **Stop Laschet**

Armin Laschet was the CDU’s chosen representative to succeed Angela Merkel, who combined neoliberal politics with an appearance of being “smarter, likely more compassionate and likeable, than her peers”. Laschet had little to recommend him apart from his claim to be Merkel’s natural heir. In other words, the same old politics, but without Merkel’s personal following.

Very quickly strong support emerged among the electorate for “anyone but Laschet”. This helped first the Greens under Annalena Baerbock, and later the SPD’s Olaf Scholz who made a tack to the left, producing election posters promising a minimum wage of €12, protecting the climate, stable pensions and affordable housing.

Theoretically, a vote for die Linke would have been the best way of preventing a Laschet Chancellorship. The German Chancellor is not necessarily the leader of the party which wins the most votes, but one who is supported by a majority of MPs. So, as long as left parties won enough MPs between them, Laschet would not get in, ever if the CDU/CSU got more votes than any other party.

And of the “left parties”, die Linke was the only one which categorically ruled out going into government with the CDU. The CDU did not just rule out a coalition with die Linke, they also called on the SPD and Greens to do the same. Meanwhile, the SPD and Greens have been more than happy to enter coalitions with Laschet’s party.

The SPD was already in a coalition with the CDU in the national government as well as in the regional parliaments of Mecklenberg-Vorpommern, Saarland and Sachsen-Anhalt. The Greens are in coalitions with the CDU in Baden-Württemberg, Hessen, Schleswig-Holstein and Lower Saxony. Both parties rule together with the CDU in Brandenburg and Saxony. That makes 9 regional parliaments out of 16, where either the Greens or the SPD are already in a coalition with the CDU.

But in the heads of many voters, only the SPD and Greens could stop Laschet as they were the only parties with their own candidate for Chancellor. Many Linke activists in the election campaign report talking to voters who said they feel closest to die Linke politically, but needed to vote SPD (or Green) this time to prevent Laschet.

### **Rot-Rot-Grün (R2G)**

Despite a radical manifesto, the Linke election campaign focussed almost exclusively on a future governmental coalition with the Greens and the SPD. Parliamentary leader Dietmar Bartsch campaigned for a “progressive alliance” with the Greens and SPD, as did the left of the party under the slogan

“rebellisch regieren” (rule rebelliously). In practise this meant not criticising potential coalition parties.

As election day came closer, this message was slightly refined. At the final election rally on 24th September in Berlin, speakers from all wings of the party made roughly the same appeal. The SPD and Greens were considering making a coalition with the FDP, but only Die Linke would guarantee that they would keep their promises.

At the rally, elder state minister Gregor Gysi explained his idea of responsible government. The SPD had campaigned in the election for a €12 minimum wage. The Linke was for €13. The SPD promise was insufficient, said Gysi, but would be a step in the right direction and would benefit millions of workers. Of course he's right – for some workers in the East it would mean a 25% wage rise – but that was no argument why people should vote Linke instead of SPD.

### **Compromise on NATO**

Then there was the question of NATO. The US defeat in Afghanistan in the middle of the election campaign should have been a godsend to the one party with anti-imperialist aspirations. The Afghanistan war was started under an SPD-Green government which willingly sent German troops.

Both the SPD and the Greens refused to even enter coalition talks with die Linke unless the Linke rejected the opposition to NATO. Opposition to imperialist war has always been a cornerstone of the party's politics. And the failure of NATO politics was currently being played out in Kabul. If ever there was a chance of showing the difference between the Linke on one side, and the SPD and Greens on the other, this was it.

The Linke's actual response was to insist that NATO shouldn't be at a barrier to a coalition. Party leader Susanne Henning-Wellnow even said that she was “open” to the deployment of German troops. At the aforementioned rally, both Bartsch and

Gysi said “they say we want to abolish NATO – that’s not true”. None of the speakers from the Left of the party contradicted them.

Bartsch explained to MDR radio: “Die Linke won’t make it a condition that we leave NATO before we speak. No, we enter talks.” Even left wing party leader Janine Wissler gave an interview with WDR radio saying that die Linke wasn’t calling for an exit from NATO, and that “it’s not true that we don’t want a security alliance”. The sofortprogramme (emergency programme) issued by die Linke just before the election did not mention NATO once.

This unclarity on NATO and Afghanistan was not helped by one of the final votes in the Bundestag. This called for both support of deploying German troops in Afghanistan and for the evacuation of German citizens stuck in Kabul. In this context, the Linke call on its MPs to abstain was arguably the right decision. But it did not help promote die Linke as an explicitly anti-imperialist party.

This apparent flexibility towards principle around NATO had wider effects. As election analyst Horst Kahrs argued in neues deutschland, “mustn’t the nurse, who die Linke promised a higher wage, ask the question whether this issue could also be sacrificed to inner-party identity politics?”

## **Wagenknecht**

And then there was Sahra Wagenknecht. Wagenknecht is one of the most popular Linke representatives for the media. She’s an articulate speaker and a regular guest on chat shows. I have already written two lengthy articles on Wagenknecht (which you can read [here](#) and [here](#)), so I’ll try to be brief here.

At the beginning of the election campaign, Wagenknecht released a book called “Die Selbstgerechten” (the self-righteous) which attacked “skurille Minderheiten” (peculiar minorities) and dismissed movements like Fridays for Future as

being symptomatic of middle class lifestyle politics. Around the same time, Wagenknecht was announced as the leading candidate for the Linke in North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) after a very polarised vote.

The fact that die Linke did no better in NRW than elsewhere – the percentage of the vote exactly halved from 6.4% to 3.2% – did not cause Wagenknecht to reconsider her position. On election evening she appeared on television to say “in recent years, the Linke has increasingly moved from why it was actually formed, namely representing the interests of normal workers and pensioners.”

The main cost of Wagenknecht’s intervention was probably not in voters, but in activists and multipliers. More than any other parties, Die Linke, which has no large financial backers, needs committed members and supporters to lead an effective election campaign. Covid had already reduced the opportunities of waging an active campaign on the streets. But equally important was the fact that many good activists just refused to come out for Die LINKE.

Many people, in particular People of Colour, who would normally call their friends to vote for Die Linke said that they did not want to be associated with Wagenknecht’s racism. When Fridays For Future (FFF) Leipzig tweeted a criticism of Wagenknecht’s quote that die Linke was in danger of becoming the “party of the Fridays for Future milieu”, the Tweet got over 6,000 likes and over 400 retweets.

It is hardly surprizing that many FFF activists were reluctant to campaign for her party, even though the SPD and Greens had nothing concrete to offer them. When climate activists went on hunger strike, Scholz promised to speak to them “after the election” and Baerbock criticized them for using the wrong method of dialogue.

On purely anecdotal evidence, I have a number of friends who

are not party members but are heavily involved in political discussions. Normally, they are enthusiastic in their support for die Linke. This time round, I'm not sure that they even voted Linke (in fact, I know that some of them didn't). This phenomenon may be more pronounced in liberal Berlin, but it had an impact everywhere.

### **So, why did die LINKE lose over 2 million votes?**

The post mortems are starting to flow in. Former party leader Klaus Ernst posted a tweet which he called a "warning shot" against "a left party that is barely anchored among workers, but walks behind every movement, wants to be greener than the Greens, for open borders for all, and argues that it should throw out Wagenknecht".

Meanwhile an article in Jacobin claimed that "A party, especially a socialist party, needs to be more than a collection of social movements. It must bundle the voices of a diverse working class in city, town and country, migrant and nonmigrant alike – but more than that, it must articulate them as a common interest. For years, Die Linke clearly hasn't aspired to this aim – with politics by and for the working class falling out of fashion. Sunday's defeat was the electoral outcome of this longstanding neglect of class formation."

Both arguments are based on an unwelcome but undeniable statistic. In the 2021 election, 6.6% of trade unionists voted for die LINKE. In 2009 this was 17.1%. This is particularly worrying in a year that has seen a slight upturn in industrial activity – in the railways, in the hospitals and in retail. Despite this, die LINKE has not been able to replace the SPD as the party that most trade unionists feel as "their own".

But how should we deal with this problem? The Jacobin article goes on to argue that die Linke:

"has to develop a political vision that connects with

significant sections of mainstream society, not just specific, highly politicized subcultures. Sadly, those within the party who have in recent years called for outreach to the working class in its full diversity, including the unemployed and older workers, have been shouted down and denigrated as reactionaries.”

“Those within the party” referred to here are people like Wagenknecht who have talked about “outreach to the working class” as a way of arguing that the party programme needs to be more racist.

As Horst Kahrs said when asked about Klaus Ernst’s tweet: “I find the aim of such statements to be utterly wrong. And they also do not correspond to the reality in the party. What are “movements”? If it is for example about the rent cap and Fridays for Future, then these are the social concerns which are an important integral part of left wing politics. I think that the problem is that older party members no longer understand how younger members view things.”

### **Social movements vs. working class needs**

I think that the fundamental problem is that Ernst, Alexander Brentler (who wrote the Jacobin article) and Wagenknecht all try to make an artificial distinction between social movements on the one hand and the needs of the working class on the other – as if saving the planet and fighting racism are middle class luxuries.

But the working class does not just consist of elderly white man. Many working class people are victims of racism or young people who will inherit a planet which has been ruined by man-made global warming. To suggest that supporting social movements which are fighting this is somehow against working class interests is just crazy talk.

Let’s look at 3 of the important social movements that emerged in the last 18 months.

In May 2020, in the middle of the Corona crisis and on the anniversary of George Floyd's murder, at least 15,000 people demonstrated in Berlin in support of Black Lives Matter. This demonstration was young, inexperienced, racially mixed and very working class. The train from the multi-racial working class Wedding district to the demo was full of young people who you don't normally see on demonstrations.

In Summer this year, at least 15,000 demonstrated for Palestine. This may not seem large compared to other countries, but it was the largest pro-Palestine demo in Germany in a generation, probably longer. Many of the demonstrators were not eligible to vote, but they could have been the core of an active election campaign. Then party leader Dietmar Bartsch joined representatives of other parties at a rally for Israel.

Two days before the elections, 620,000 demonstrated throughout Germany as part of the international climate strike. Although the Greens were nominally associated with this movement, their programme for a Green capitalism was clearly insufficient to address the urgent problems. If die Linke were more willing to criticise the Green programme, if Wagenknecht had just shut up, then maybe things would have been different.

### **A problem with deeper roots**

The Linke's inability to adequately relate to social movements did not start at the 2021 election campaign. In 2015, during the "refugee crisis", the party passed a conference vote clearly expressing its opposition to border controls. Wagenknecht was part of the very small minority who opposed the vote. Her response was to launch Aufstehen, nominally a German version of the Yellow Vests, but which focussed on restricting freedom of movement.

What this did in the short term was to give the impression that in the middle of a great national discussion about

refugees, die Linke was split down the middle – some of its members were for open borders, others argued that refugees dragged down the wages of “German” workers.

This seriously damaged the reputation of die Linke in the pro-refugee movement. In 2018, unteilbar (indivisible) organised a demonstration of 240,000 people in Berlin. Yet at the same time, many refugee activists were saying they could not vote Linke, and certainly not campaign for the party, because of Wagenknecht, who openly distanced herself from unteilbar.

The result was that two parties saw significant surges in their support. The AfD – a racist anti-migrant party, started to gain potential votes from CDU voters. And the Greens were perceived by many people to be the pro-refugee party – despite their clearly racist positions towards refugees in states like Baden-Württemberg where they were in office.

In the end, refugee politics seems to have played a remarkably small role in the recent elections. But this surge for the Greens – coupled with the Fridays for Future demonstrations – meant that they were suddenly discussed as possible government candidates. Die Linke, meanwhile, stagnated. In 2015, die Linke had 59,000 members, In 2019, despite the flurry of political activity, party membership had remained relatively constant at just over 60,000.

### **Rays of hope: Neukölln, Wedding and the housing referendum**

In the elections, some areas bucked the national trend. In Berlin-Neukölln, an area where die Linke has worked productively inside social movements, there was a minor fall in the vote in the general election, but a 2.7% increase in the local elections which were happening at the same time. This resulted in an increase in the number of Linke city councillors in Neukölln.

My district of Berlin-Wedding does not have the size and resources of Neukölln but we polled similar results,

particularly in the North of Wedding where I live. There are 7 constituencies in the district of Mitte. In the 2 constituencies in North Wedding, the Linke vote increased by 2.1% (for the candidate) and 2.3% (for the party) in one constituency, and 3.1% and 3.5% in the other.

In fact, while the party was haemorrhaging votes on a national level, the vote in the whole of Berlin also fell – but “only” from 20.3% to 14.3% This was because of the evening’s Good News story – the overwhelming victory of the Deutsche Wohnen Enteignen (DWE) referendum to expropriate the big landlords as a step towards achieving fairer rents in Berlin.

We have covered the referendum comprehensively on [theleftberlin.com](http://theleftberlin.com), so I won’t add much here, other than to say that it was a vibrant campaign which mobilised thousands of Berliners in a range of activities from demonstrations and door-to-door house visits to collecting signatures and cheerleading. This was not a passive campaign, but one of self-activity.

56.4% of Berlin voters – over a million people – voted for expropriation (if the million voters excluded from voting, largely because they’re not German citizens, were allowed to vote, this figure would have been much higher). And yet the fact remains that only a quarter of these people voted for die Linke, even though die Linke was the only major party which unambiguously supported the referendum.

The Greens gave grudging support, insisting that they would only expropriate as a last resort. Baerbock expressed her opposition. The SPD leader – Berlin’s new mayor Franziska Giffey – said that she opposed the referendum. This means that whatever the result of coalition talks, a majority of members of the new Berlin government will belong to parties that are at best lukewarm about implementing the referendum result.

So why the low result for die Linke? Of course activity in

social movements does not automatically transfer into election results, but there are two more fundamental reasons. Firstly, the Linke's reluctance to criticize the SPD and Greens on national level also took place on a local level. Linke politicians stayed quiet on their potential coalition partners' lack of support for one of the most important initiatives that the city has ever seen.

There was also the experience of the forerunners to die Linke, the PDS, who were part of an earlier Berlin government which privatised 70,000 apartments. People who remembered this were wary of once more supporting Die Linke in government. Similarly, die Linke has opposed the eviction of social projects in Berlin like Liebig 34, while being part of the government which carried them out.

Whatever happens, nearly 60% is a figure that is difficult to ignore, and Berliners will enter the new legislative period with a fight on their hands. The campaign Deutsche Wohnen & Co Enteignen will continue and it is exactly in places like Neukölln and Wedding that Linke activists who were active in the campaign have done the most to regain lost trust.

### **What now?**

There is still an important place for Die Linke in the national political debate. This means taking clear positions against rent rises, for a national rent cap, and for an anti-imperialist politics which rejects NATO. We also need to take on more controversial policies like supporting open borders and opposing the headscarf ban.

In some places, this means a change of practise. Die Linke's participation in governments which gentrify Berlin and deport refugees in Thüringen damages its credibility.

At the same, there is little virtue in sitting in small rooms, only talking to people who agree with our full revolutionary programme. Young people are joining die Linke because they

want to change the world. Die Linke Newsletter reported that more than 600 people had joined the party in the three days after the election. This is a figure that we can build on, but only if die Linke remains active between elections.

This means not just supporting social movements with money and fine words, but being centrally involved in building these movements and recruiting the best activists. Where we have done this in the Deutsche Wohnen & Co campaign – in Neukölln, in Wedding and in the Right2TheCity group of non-Germans – we have strengthened both the campaigns and the local Linke.

During the election campaign, I heard of people joining the party in Wedding on a weekly basis – almost all were in their twenties and had been radicalised by Black Lives Matter, Fridays for Future and the like. In the new Berlin government, die Linke will be represented by radical left-wing migrant voices like Ferat Kocak and Elif Eralp who embody what left wing politics could and should be like.

On the day before the election, I was approached on a stall by a man who invited us to give out leaflets at his mosque. In a district with a lot of Muslims, we have had some disputes in the branch about the importance of actions at mosques. With the influx of new members, we already had one successful action during the election campaign, and intend to continue after the elections. This will help to anchor the party in the local community and win new multipliers.

### **The fights to come**

Socialists may know that the SPD and Greens are neoliberal parties who offer little hope of positive change, but in popular consciousness the election results show a shift to the Left. People have voted for these parties with expectations – particularly around social issues and the environment. If and when these expectations are not met, there is the potential for further struggles.

Some of these struggles are already on the agenda. In Berlin, SPD mayor Franziska Giffey will try to avoid implementing the demands of the referendum on expropriating big landlords. Legally, the referendum was only “advisory”, but a clear majority and a large and lively movement mean that if she does falter, she will meet serious resistance.

The immediate response of the Berlin Linke leadership to this threat is to demand that a coalition government contains Linke representatives who can hinder any attempts by Giffey and the Greens to backtrack. Yet history has shown that where die Linke and its predecessor parties joined a government which disappointed its voters, they ended up on the wrong side of the struggle and were punished for this by activists who felt betrayed. This must not happen again.

Meanwhile things could be hotting up on the industrial front. The Financial Times recently reported that “increasing numbers of German workers are demanding higher pay amid rising inflation, with some going on strike”. Inflation has reached a 29 year high of 4.1% and the Kurzarbeit scheme which protected some wages under Covid is currently being rolled back.

If die Linke actively supports these strikes – and if Linke members help lead the strikes – we can both overcome the deficit in trade union support and challenge the false dichotomy between trade union struggle on the one side and social movements on the other. Successes for the trade unions can strengthen the confidence of social movements to go onto the offensive (and vice versa).

A way forward was offered in a statement by some prominent party members “with migration background” published after the election:

“We need a consistent social voice, a voice which points out the local and international devastation of capitalism and develops alternatives. A voice which fights for progress and

reforms today, and acts together with the progressive movements of recent years. Fridays for Future, initiatives like Deutsche Wohnen & Co Enteignen and the many tenants initiatives, unteilbar and Seebrücke, Black Lives Matter, the Berlin hospital movement, social organisations and trade unions are our partners in the fight for a juster, more ecological world free of discrimination. We must continue along this path, we must win new active members, build the party and anchor ourselves in local districts and communities. This anchoring is only possible if people are clear what we stand for.”

It is in the nature of Die Linke that there will always be a tension between the people who want to change the world from below and those who just want to be a better version of the existing Social Democratic and Green parties. It may be that at some time we need to break away and create something new. For the meantime, let’s fight for a mass party that speaks for and builds the social movements.