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THE MODERN GENDER GAP IN SERBIA (1990–2024): WOMEN’S IDEOLOGICAL SELF- PLACEMENT– NOT LEFT, BUT NOT RIGHT

Moderni rodni jaz u Srbiji (1990–2024): Ideološko samopozicioniranje žena– ni desno, ni levo

ABSTRACT: *Previous studies of ideological attitudes show gender differences in ideological self-positioning on the left-right scale, where it is concluded that women are more inclined to left-wing and progressive ideas– they more often identify themselves with the center-left compared to men. This phenomenon is called the modern gender gap. This paper examines whether this shift of women towards the center left, which was recorded in the countries of Western Europe, also exists in Serbia. The work uses the databases of public opinion research (1990-2024), owned by the Institute of Social Sciences, and international research conducted in Serbia. Examining the ideological positioning of men and women in Serbia over the past three decades can provide valuable insights into both the nature of the gender gap and the importance of self-centeredness in the post-socialist context. The results of the research in Serbia show that the predominant self-positioning of women in the position of the center left (only average values are considered) does not result primarily from their stronger connection with the left, but rather represents a combination of a lower tendency to position themselves on the right and a greater tendency towards the center. Additional analyses of gender differences showed that choosing the center on the scale left and right can be an expression of insecurity and the absence of clear attitudes, which opens up space for further examination of the motives of women to choose a centrist position on the scale.*

KEY WORDS: *left-right ideology, gender gap, public opinion, centrist self-placement, Serbia*

APSTRAKT: *Prethodna istraživanja ideoloških stavova ukazuju na rodne razlike u ideološkom samopozicioniranju na skali levo-desno, gde se zaključuje da su žene*

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sklonije levim i progresivnijim idejama, odnosno da se češće identifikuju sa levim centrom u odnosu na muškarce. Ovaj fenomen se naziva modernim rodni jazom. U ovom radu se ispituje da li ovaj obrt žena ka levom centru, koji je zabeležen u zemljama Zapadne Evrope, postoji i u Srbiji. U radu se koriste baze podataka istraživanja javnog mnjenja (1990-2024), koje poseduje Institut društvenih nauka i međunarodna istraživanja koja su rađena u Srbiji. Ispitivanje ideološkog pozicioniranje muškaraca i žena u Srbiji tokom protekle tri decenije može pružiti dragocene uvide kako u prirodu rodnog jaza, tako i u značaj samopozicioniranja u centar u postsocijalističkom kontekstu. Rezultati istraživanja u Srbiji pokazuju da preovlađujuće samopozicioniranje žena na poziciji levog centra (gledaju se samo prosečne vrednosti) ne proizlazi prvenstveno iz njihove snažnije povezanosti sa levicom, već predstavlja kombinaciju manje sklonosti da se pozicioniraju desno i veće sklonosti ka centru. Dodatne analize rodni razlika su pokazale da odabir centra na skali levo i desno može biti izraz nesigurnosti i odsustva jasnih stavova kod žena, što otvara prostor za dalje ispitivanje motiva odabira centrističke pozicije na skali.

KLJUČNE REČI: *ideologija levo-desno, rodni jaz, istraživanje javnog mnjenja, centristička pozicija, Srbija*

Introduction

Understanding how individuals place themselves on the ideological spectrum remains a cornerstone of research in political behavior and political psychology because it reveals how individuals understand and organize the political world, make decisions, and express political attitudes. The left-right scale serves as a cognitive tool that individuals use to make sense of the political landscape. It acts as a broad framework for interpreting political events and positions, simplifying the complexity of political life. Through the left-right scale, citizens interpret complex political realities and locate themselves within the broader political landscape. In the past decades, there has been an increasing amount of research examining whether gender plays a significant role in ideological self-positioning.

Previous research has shown that women were more conservative (right-wing) than men. That shift from right to left was most intense between 1980 and 2000. These gender differences vary over time and space. The first big change was in the mid-1990s, when there was a reversal and women began to position themselves more to the left than men, and that is the so-called “modern gender gap” (Giger, 2009; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Dassonneville, 2020). Although there was a significant shift among women toward the left between 1980 and 2000, the pace of change slowed considerably with the beginning of the new century (Dassonneville, 2020). Dassonneville concludes that the gender gap is real and exists, but modest in intensity, and is unlikely to grow significantly in the future, since the major changes have already occurred. The matter is further complicated by the fact that recent studies have shown that women are not dominantly positioned on the left pole of the ideological axis, but rather more often occupy a centrist position (Trogrlić and Todosijević, 2024).

The literature offers various explanations for the emergence of the gender gap in ideological orientation between men and women. Some authors point out that the appearance of the gender gap occurred due to the action of structural factors, such as greater education and economic participation of women (Giger, 2009). Another group of authors emphasizes the influence of value and cultural factors, especially in the context of postmodernization and secularization, which encouraged women to develop more progressive attitudes on issues such as gender equality, human rights, and social protection (Inglehart and Norris, 2000, 2003). The third school of thought interprets the gender gap as a consequence of psychological differences in preferences for solidarity and justice between women and men. Research shows that women adopt to a greater extent orientations based on caring for others, social justice, and collective well-being, which naturally brings them closer to left-wing political options (Sidanius et al. 1995 and Sidanius and Pratto, 2001). Finally, contextual factors such as institutional changes, party system dynamics, and the importance and visibility of certain topics (eg, feminism, protection of minority rights) further influence how the gender gap is shaped and changes over time (Knutsen 1995, 1998; Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986; Shapiro and Jacobs, 2000).

These issues are of particular importance in the case of Serbia, where the legacy of political upheavals, the instability of the party system, and value changes since the 1990s may have created distinctive patterns of ideological identification. An analysis of how men and women in Serbia have ideologically positioned themselves over the last three decades can provide valuable insights into both the nature of the gender gap and the significance of self-identification as a central issue in the post-socialist context. Previous research has clearly shown that national context specificities must be further examined, as global trends may obscure important differences (Dassonneville, 2020).

The paper aims not to examine Serbia as a theoretically or empirically unique case. Rather, it tends to provide a longitudinal test of whether the patterns documented in cross-national comparative research are also evident over time and how they have evolved over the last three decades in Serbia as a case study (1990-2024). By tracing these dynamics across multiple surveys, we add a crucial temporal dimension to cross-national findings.

Therefore, the present study investigates whether the gender-based ideological shift observed in Western democracies is also present in Serbia and how it has evolved over the past twenty-five years. We further explore whether women's apparent leftward tendency reflects a genuine ideological shift or is partly a result of a greater tendency for centrist self-placement, including the possibility that the midpoint on the scale serves as a refuge for uncertainty.

Theoretical background

Different socio-demographic variables shape citizens' political preferences and serve as the basis of strong cleavages in party systems (Lipset and Rokan, 1967). According to Knutsen the relationship between value orientations and

left-right self-placement remains closely linked to religious/secular values, is strongly correlated with economic left-right values, and has become increasingly associated with materialist/post-materialist value orientations. Religious, liberal economic, and materialist values are found to independently contribute to right-wing identification, whereas secular, economically leftist, and post-materialist values are associated with left-wing self-placement. These patterns were consistently observed across different national political cultures, although the strength of the associations varied (Knutsen, 1995: 72–77). In contrast to what holds class or religion, however, gender differences have never developed into a stable political cleavage (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). However, from previous research work, we know that by the late 1990s, a reversal of men's and women's ideological positions was visible in established democracies more generally (Inglehart and Norris, 2000, 2003; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2006; Norrander and Wilcox, 2008; Dassonneville, 2020). This difference in ideological self-placement along the left-right scale is commonly referred to as the *gender gap* in political preferences. The *traditional gender gap*, characterized by women's tendency to support more conservative or right-wing candidates and policies, has been documented in the United States (Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986). Similar patterns have also been observed in European studies, although the extent of these gender differences varies significantly across countries (Baxter and Lansing, 1983). But recent research shows that this *ideological gender gap* has reversed. Women are now placing themselves to the left of men and are more likely to vote for left-wing parties compared to men (Giger, 2009; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Dassonneville, 2020).

In the 1970s, women positioned themselves to the right of men on the left-right scale in survey data. By the mid-1980s, this difference began to narrow, and by the early 1990s, a clear distinction emerged between women's and men's ideological self-placement, with growing evidence that women were increasingly embracing left-wing views. However, this trend came to a halt in the late 1990s, and after the 2000s, the gender gap between men and women significantly decreased compared to, for example, 1995.³

Although increasing secularism and post-materialist values among mass publics, combined with stable economic preferences, might suggest a shift toward more leftist ideological positions, Knutsen (1998) observed a marked tendency for individuals to increasingly place themselves at the center of the left-right scale. But can we expect that women have increasingly positioned themselves in the political center over time? Knutsen's analysis across eight countries shows that, as the political center became more prominent, women were slightly more likely than men to place themselves there. However, the

3 The findings of the study conducted by Dassonneville, based on a case study of 36 countries, clearly show that: "the gap between men's and women's ideological positions has increased by 0.4 points (average score on a 1–10 left-right axis) over a period of four decades (from the 1970s to the 2010s). Given the length of the time period that is covered by the analyses (45 years), a half-point change on a 10-point scale can be qualified as rather small." (Dassonneville, 2020).

differences were relatively small. It is important to note that the rise in centrist self-placement was substantial for both men and women, and the gender gap becomes even smaller when the center-right category is taken into account (Knutsen, 1998: 312).

That has several implications for the claim that women are more inclined toward the center-left. If women are not clearly more positioned on the center-left, but predominantly place themselves in the center (with only a small difference compared to men), it means that the claim about a specific female inclination toward the center-left cannot be generalized. Research findings conducted by Knutsen reduce the political clarity of the *gender gap* along the left-right axis in several ways. First, if women are more inclined toward the center rather than openly left-wing positions, it means that the modern gender gap is less about a shift of women toward the left spectrum and more a reflection of their greater tendency toward moderation and value-based pragmatism. Second, this does not contradict earlier findings, which indicate that the gender gap is associated with structural variables that have fundamentally changed women's roles and positions in both society and family life (Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014: 314). In fact, it supports the conclusion that processes of modernization and post-modernization have played a significant role in shaping women's shift toward more left-leaning political and ideological orientations (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2000, 2003), though that shift is now more frequently expressed through moderate, centrist positions rather than radical left-wing ones. Third, the findings also suggest that the rise in centrist self-placement can be explained by changes in value orientations, as well as by shifts in the positions of political parties along the left-right spectrum. Based on this, the author concludes that the centrist tendency is genuine, citizens are indeed changing their ideological positions and values, rather than being confused or incapable of placing themselves politically (Knutsen, 1998: 311-312).

However, aside from the longitudinal analyses conducted by Inglehart and Norris (2000, 2003), which cover the period up until the late 1990s, a few publications offer a view of the long-term trends in ideological differences between men and women. And even fewer contributions do so comparatively. As a result, we do not know if the modern ideological gender gap can be found in a growing group of countries, and whether that gap continues to grow stronger over time, stabilizes, or perhaps shrinks in size in the more recent period (Dossennvielle, 2020: 227). Ruth Dassonneville's (2020) comprehensive longitudinal analysis of 36 OECD countries demonstrates that women have gradually moved toward the left, reversing the traditional ideological gender gap. As we mentioned, Dassonneville's findings suggest that while women shifted significantly to the left during the 1980s and 1990s, this trend has slowed considerably in the 21st century. The analysis reveals a plateau in women's ideological self-placement since the early 2000s, as well as substantial variation across countries. Importantly, the observed realignment appears to be primarily driven by generational change; this change is particularly visible between the Silent generation and the Baby Boomers. Among younger generations (Generations X, Y, and Z), the gender gap

in ideology has remained relatively stable, with men showing a slight tendency to move to the right, contributing to a modest widening of the gap (Dossennvielle, 2020: 235).

On the other hand, there is research that proposes that in addition to examining only differences in averages, it may be productive to pay attention to what is happening besides average scores. This extension of the focus could deliver some additional insights relevant to the observed differences regarding gender gap (Trogrlić and Todosijević, 2024: 478). This shift in approach is necessary to address potential ambiguities arising from the predominance of centrism among respondents in most countries.⁴ The mid-scale responses on the left-right scale could mean ideologically “neutral” or it can be a replacement for undecided answers (Knutsen, 1998; Rodon, 2015). Therefore, in order to draw a general conclusion about whether women are genuinely more leftist than men, it is essential to take into account the underlying motivations behind respondents’ centrist self-placement. While Rodon’s 2015 study is based on a considerably larger dataset, covering 21 countries, his main conclusion aligns closely with that of Knutsen (1998). Both authors find that, where a sufficient level of political sophistication exists, centrist self-placement should not be interpreted as confusion or disengagement, but rather an authentic ideological position. Knutsen, who focused specifically on long-established Western democracies, similarly concluded that in such contexts, the center is not a default option for the politically indifferent, but a genuine expression of moderate ideological commitment. Rodon’s broader sample confirms this point, showing that in countries where party identification and political interest are higher, respondents are more likely to intentionally place themselves at the center of the left-right spectrum. However, Rodon confirms the findings of Knutsen’s research, that claim that the motives for centrist self-placement vary across countries and among individuals, because left-right orientation is contingent of individual and contextual factors, but the question remains, why does lack of political sophistication in some countries lead individuals to the center, whereas in others leads the to the “don’t know” option (Rodon, 2015: 191-192).

Although gender differences in left-right ideology have been documented in OECD countries, little is known about whether a similar ideological realignment has occurred in countries like Serbia, which underwent significant political, economic, and social transformations during the same period. Serbia’s specific context, like post-socialist transition, delayed democratization, and fluctuating levels of gender equality, has influenced both the pace and the direction of ideological change across genders. By focusing on longitudinal survey data from the early 1990s to the present, this study explores whether Serbia follows the same pattern identified by Dassonneville, or whether its trajectory diverges due to its unique socio-political development.

4 Based on ESS data from 29 countries Trogrlić and Todosijević conclude that: mid-scale value of 5 is the most popular answer between man and woman, around 33% of the entire sample chose this response (Trogrlić and Todosijević, 2024: 485).

Methods and Data

The empirical basis of this work is a unique series of public opinion research, the time frame of which includes more than three decades of modern Serbian history, from 1990 to 2024. It also represents the entire period since the re-introduction of multi-party system in Serbia. This longitudinal database, composed of fourteen different surveys of public opinion research, provides a rare opportunity to analyse social, political and value transformations through a period of deep socio-political changes.

Data were collected in almost all cases on nationally representative samples of the adult population of Serbia, which ensured high validity and reliability of the conclusions. The core of the research design consists of studies conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences (IDN) through its Centre for Political Research and Public Opinion (CPIJM). The centre is characterized by a rich tradition of systematic monitoring of public opinion in Serbia dating back to the sixties of the last century, which makes it the bearer of the longest research tradition of this kind in the region (Pantić, Pavlović and Todosijević, 2022). Early surveys (JMS/JJM series) were conducted through the Institute's own network of interviewers, laying the foundation for long-term comparative analysis.

This study also used data from international comparative projects such as the World Values Survey (WVS), the European Values Study (EVS), and the European Social Survey (ESS). The WVS 2006 and EVS 2008 studies were conducted in Serbia by specialized survey agencies for the needs and under the guidance of scientific institutions, and the Institute of Social Sciences study from 2012 is similar. As for the 2017 survey, it was conducted by IDN using the CASI methodology, and respondents were invited to participate in this survey via email. This is also the only survey in this database that does not have a fully nationally representative sample. The three most recent surveys of research were conducted within the international project European Social Survey, and in Serbia, the Institute for Sociological Research of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade and the Institute of Social Sciences were responsible for its implementation. The ESS, as one of the most demanding projects in the social sciences, applies strict quality control procedures, from perfectly randomized sampling to precise fieldwork, guaranteeing exceptional reliability and comparability of data,

Given that this study utilizes data from various public opinion surveys, which employed different methodologies, some key facts should be highlighted. The left-right scale is one of the basic and frequently used instruments in public opinion research, however, the lack of a standardized scale format represents a significant methodological challenge for comparative research. The two main issues concern the number of response categories and whether or not to include a midpoint on the scale itself. Different formats are encountered in practice: 7-point scales (e.g. in earlier research), 10-point (without a midpoint, used in the World Values Survey and Eurobarometer) and 11-point (with a central point, used in the European Social Survey), and even extremely detailed 101-point versions (e.g. Converse and Pierce, 1973). It is important to note that the 10-point scale, used in surveys from 1996 to 2008, was deliberately constructed

so that no position constituted an exact midpoint between left and right, forcing a leaning choice even from ambivalent respondents (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976). A concern with the midpoint is that less informed respondents use it to mask indecision. Still, empirical data do not support the claim that removing it (10-point scale) dramatically increases nonresponse rates. However, scales without an explicit centre can lead to errors when positioning entities perceived near the centre of the political spectrum, because respondents do not have an adequate expression for their attitude (Kroh, 2007). Research shows that the choice of format is not trivial and can affect the quality of the data. The 11-point scale consistently shows the highest validity, while the 101-point scale, despite its apparent precision, suffers from a strong method effect due to respondents' tendency to round answers to „round“ numbers, effectively reducing it to a coarser measure (Kroh, 2007).

When it comes to the data used in this study, left-right scales of different formats were used: the initial survey in 1990 used a 7-point scale, while subsequent surveys, from 1996 onwards to 2008, used a 10-point scale. More recent research, from 2012 until today, used an 11-point scale. There are several ways to address this methodological challenge and to compare responses obtained across scales with different numbers of categories and with different presence of a central point. In this case, rescaling was used to standardize scales to values from 0 to 10. In particular, the linear stretch method was applied, and the lowest values on the 7-point and 10-point scales were assigned the value 0, the highest value was set to the opposite endpoint, while the other values in the middle of the scale were given equally distributed numerical values in between. This is a commonly used scale homogenization method, although other approaches also exist (de Jonge et al. 2014). This method has been used in research for more than a century (Hull, 1922) and still remains a popular solution to overpass scale differences and enable comparison not only when it comes to left-right political ideology scale (e.g. Aybar et al. 2024; Veenhoven, 1993; Cohen et al), but also in research of other topics of interest, including left-right political ideology scale.

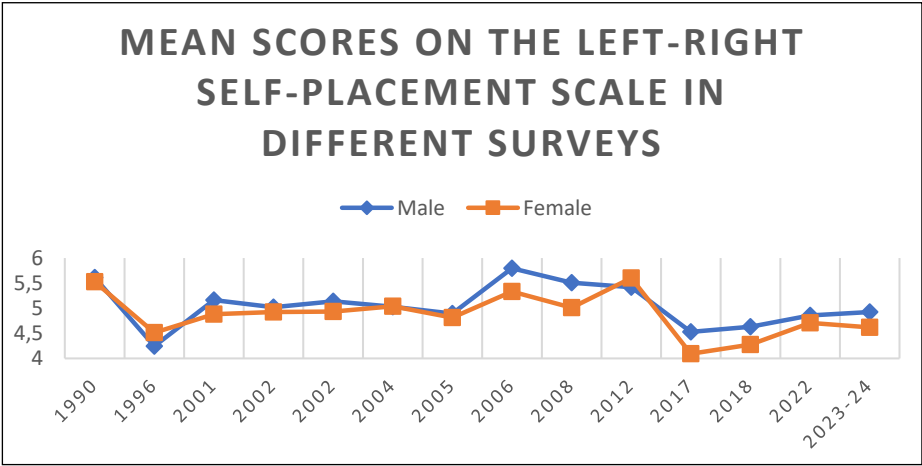
Results

The paper analyses how the political-ideological differences between women and men in Serbia have changed over time. This study analyses the long-term trend and development of the gender gap on the left-right scale in Serbia using data collected by surveys in the period from 1990 to 2024, and within the context of the country's social and political changes. The main goal of the research is the empirical mapping of changes in that gap over three decades. In particular, it is examined whether the tendency of women to more often identify with the left really reflects a greater ideological moderation, or perhaps it is a consequence of a greater tendency to opt for the center, which can be a way to express uncertainty or avoid a clear political commitment.

Charts 1 and 2 trace the evolution of men's and women's average ideological self-placement over time. Taken together, these descriptive patterns reveal a recurrent tendency-rather than a uniform, stable gap- whereby women score

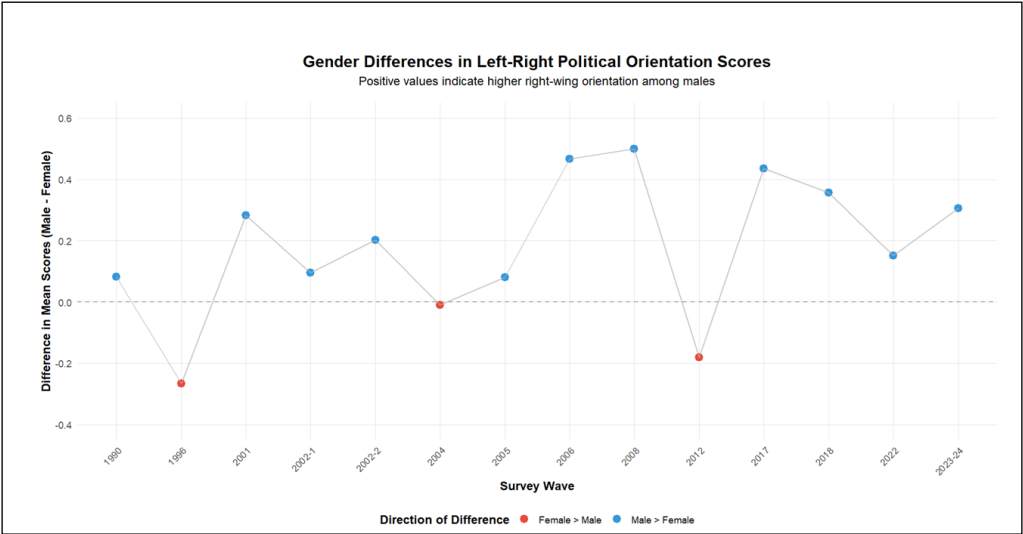
slightly lower on the left–right scale (i.e., are relatively more left-leaning) while also appearing more frequently at the centre. The magnitude of this tendency is modest, varies across surveys, and achieves conventional statistical significance in only a subset of them (notably 2018). The 2017 wave is treated as a sensitivity case due to comparability constraints (see Table 1 in the Appendix):

Chart 1. *Mean Scores on the Left-Right Self-Placement Scale in Different Surveys*



However, a longitudinal examination clearly shows that this gap was neither stable nor linear. In some surveys, the differences were statistically insignificant (e.g., WVS2001, JJM170, JJM174, JJM185, EVS2008), and in one wave (IDN2012), the difference was even in the opposite direction (women on average slightly to the right, although statistically insignificant).

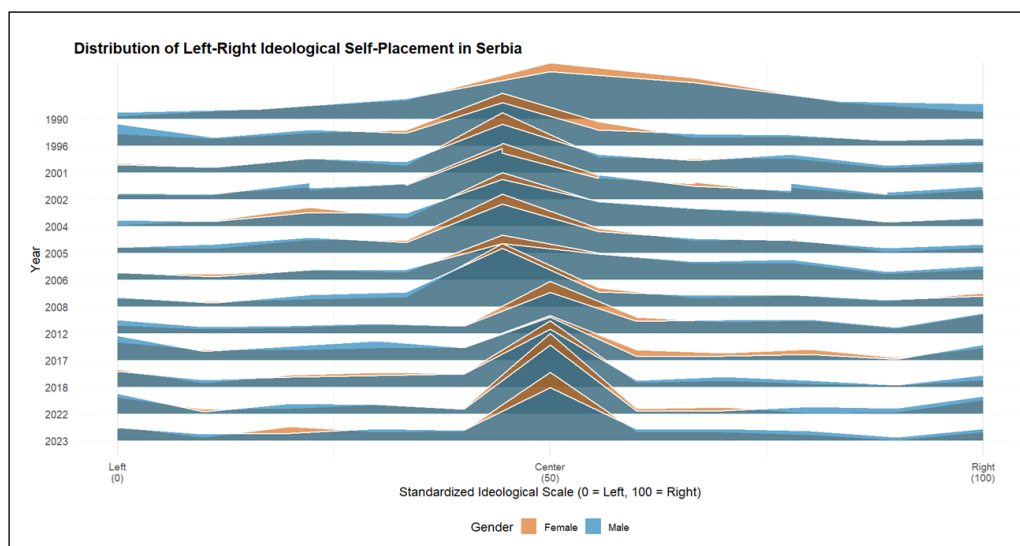
Chart 2. *Gender Differences in Left-Right Political Scores*



To get to the bottom of what lies behind the difference in average values, attention should be drawn to the general distribution of answers. As is common in public opinion surveys across Europe (e.g. Knutsen, 1998; Dassonneville, 2020), the data for Serbia consistently confirm that centrism is the dominant characteristic of the responses of both men and women throughout the observed period (Chart 3). The midpoint of the scale (together with the adjacent categories) was always the most popular response, indicating a general caution, moderation, or perhaps confusion among Serbian citizens regarding an abstract ideological continuum during the turbulent decades of transition.

However, a more detailed analysis of the distribution reveals key and consequential gender differences. As can be seen from the Chart 3, it can be seen that during almost all of the surveys, women were more inclined to choose the centre of the scale compared to men. This consistent tendency towards a greater centrist concentration of women represents an important indication that their average left position may not result exclusively from their greater inclination to the left side of the political spectrum, but also from this leaning towards the more neutral middle of the scale.

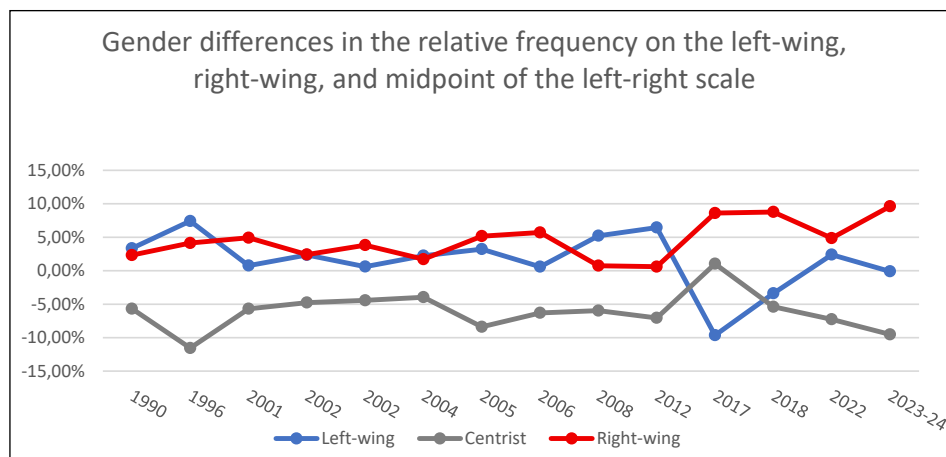
Chart 3. *Distribution on Left-Right Ideological Self-Placement in Serbia*



To dwell deeper into the subject, survey responses were categorized into three broad groups: left, centre, and right. It should be noted that for those surveys that used a 10-point scale, both 5 and 6 were included in the centrist midpoint, as research has shown that respondents tend to use those categories as a virtual midpoint (Züll & Scholz, 2016). The analysis of the results (Chart 4) provides a significant and subtle contribution to the answer to our research question. The results show that the modern gender gap in Serbia during most of the observed period was mostly not based on women's greater commitment

to the left. Rather, the lower representation of women on the right, the greater representation of women in the centre, and the changing representation on the left are also noticeable.

Chart 4. *Gender Differences in the Relative Frequency on the Left-Wing, Right-Wing, and Midpoint of the Left-Right Scale*

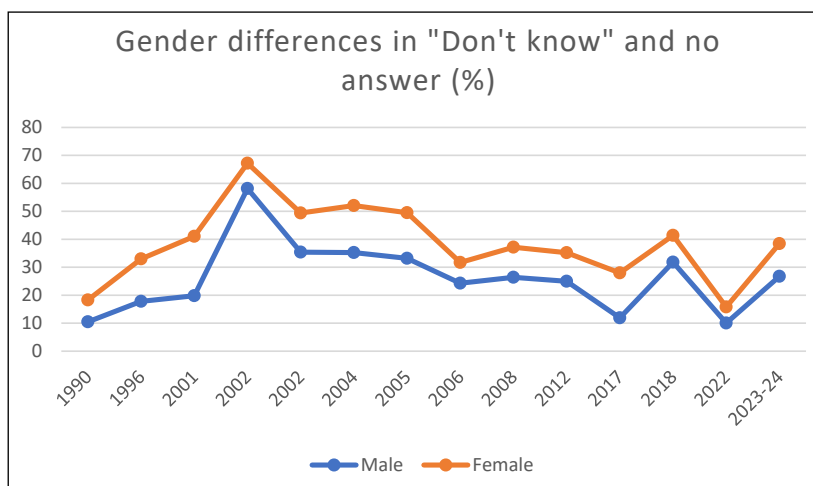


In almost all surveys, men are consistently and often statistically significantly more often represented on the right side of the spectrum than women. This is the most consistent finding, which suggests that one of the main drivers of the gap is precisely the lower tendency of women to accept right-wing ideological positions. At the same time, women were more represented in the centrist position in 12 of the 14 surveys. This indicates the possibility that the part of women who do not want to declare themselves for the right, turns towards the neutral middle of the scale. Unlike the previous two categories, representation on the left varies noticeably from wave to wave, with no clear and consistent gender pattern. In some years (e.g., JMS2017, where the difference is 9.7 pp in favour of women), women were significantly more represented on the left side, while in others (e.g., EVS2008, where the difference is 5.2 pp in favour of men), men had a slight advantage (See Table 2 in Annex). This suggests that the declarative preference for left-wing views among women may vary depending on political circumstances and current social issues, in contrast to their more stable and consistent tendency to avoid the right and choose the centre.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that women in Serbia appear to be more leftist compared to men. However, our data shows that it cannot be characterized with high certainty as a clear ideological position. Rather, we can conclude that this tendency is consistent with a combination of weaker alignment with the right and a stronger tendency towards centrism than with a pronounced left-wing affinity per se. Nonetheless, we treat this observed centrism with caution, as it may reflect either ideological moderation or response uncertainty; our data do not permit a definitive adjudication between these two interpretations.

An important, often neglected part of the story in left-right self-positioning research is the tendency to avoid direct answering. Chart 5 and accompanying data reveal a clear and consistent gender divide in this area. In all fourteen research surveys, women were significantly more likely than men to choose the option „I don't know“ or to refuse to answer the question about self-positioning on the left-right scale. This difference in some earlier surveys (e.g., 2002 and 2004) was big, reaching over 15-17 percentage points.

Chart 5. *Gender Differences in “Don't Know” and no Answer*



This strong connection between the female gender and a higher rate of non-response raises a critical question: is the choice of the midpoint of the scale for a part of the respondents, especially for women, actually a proxy for insecurity, absence of formed opinion, lack of political sophistication or lack of motivation to express themselves, rather than an authentic centrist conviction? In other words, part of what we measure as centre may actually be a hidden category of non-attitude.

It should be noted that when making these conclusions, it is necessary to take into account methodological limitations, that is, the fact that the collected data come from different research that are not completely methodologically harmonized. Some studies distinguish „Don't know“ from „Refusal to answer“, „No answer“ or „Haven't heard of left-right“, while others group these answers together, and in some cases, there is only a general category „Missing value“ without further explanation. Therefore, the generalization necessary to look at trends longitudinally undoubtedly somewhat overlooks the subtle but important differences between these response categories. Nevertheless, despite these methodological variations, it is indisputable that during the entire observed period, a significantly higher frequency of answers indicating non-attitude, lack of opinion or reluctance to declare was recorded precisely among female respondents.

Discussion

This paper analyses how differences between men and women in left-right ideological self-placement emerged and changed in Serbia over the past three decades. To be more specific, it tends to determine whether the modern gender gap, that is, the tendency of women towards leftist or more liberal views compared to men, is noticeable in Serbia. The focus is not only on descriptive statistics, but also on identifying ideological consistency over time. The empirical basis of this work is a unique series of public opinion research, the time frame of which includes more than three decades of modern Serbian history, from 1990 to 2024. It also represents the entire period since the reintroduction of multi-party system in Serbia.

Recent decades have witnessed shifts in gender differences in ideology. The trend of changing women's ideological orientation more to the left was well observed and explained in detail by Dassonneville in her research, where she concludes, based on a sample of 36 countries, that since the 1990s, women more frequently position themselves on the left of center compared to men, while men did not change their own position much. Dassonneville included in her sample several countries that are not only from the territory of Western Europe; she also included countries of post-communist Europe that, according to the historical context, may have many similarities with Serbia. However, despite a very diverse sample, the conclusions that Dassonneville drew cannot be applied to Serbia, and in the next few pages, we will explain why.

The longitudinal analysis of data from Serbia from 1990 to 2024 points out a recurrent tendency of an ideological gender gap, but reveals it as a complex, dynamic, and ambiguous phenomenon that is far more subtle than a simple "left-wing woman". Women in Serbia tend to position themselves on average somewhat more leftis than men, but this gap is not constant over time (Chart 2). The results of our study provide clear evidence that the direction and intensity of the gender gap are strongly influenced by the socio-political context of the specific moment, echoing Knutsen's (1995) assertion that the strength of value associations with left-right identification varies across national contexts. This variability clearly indicates that the size and direction of the ideological gap between the sexes changed significantly depending on the prevailing socio-political circumstances. Following Knutsen's approach, if we want to determine if the choice of the center on the left-right scale truly reflects ideological positions, it is necessary to consider in more detail the 'authenticity' of the centrist position. In this context, it is essential to consider whether the centrist positioning of women in Serbia reflects a moderate ideological orientation or results from a lack of political sophistication, confusion, and passivity. If we accept that Serbia features a polarized society, an unstable party system, volatile political actors, a low level of political culture, and a low level of public awareness, these factors not only shape the ideological spectrum but also influence individual ideological orientations. This instability calls for great caution in drawing unified conclusions and emphasizes the importance of analysis that goes beyond simple comparisons

of arithmetic means (Trogrić and Todosijević, 2024). It is therefore necessary to analyze in more detail why women are dominantly positioned in the center.

The main driver of the observed differences is not so much a greater authentic commitment of women to left-wing positions, but a reduced tendency to position themselves on the right compared to men, combined with a pronounced tendency to respond in the centre.

A significant part of the female average “left-wing” positioning stems from their greater concentration in the centre. As we elaborated before, the mid-scale responses on the left-right scale could mean ideologically “neutral”, serve as a substitute for undecided answers (Knutsen, 1998; Rodon, 2015), or a tendency to avoid direct answering. This raises a critical question of the interpretation of the centre and whether moderation is an authentic ideological position for women in Serbia, or is it rather a space for avoiding a clear commitment, perhaps due to a lack of political knowledge, interest, or self-efficacy. This finding challenges the theoretical proposition that centrism is a genuine expression of moderate ideological commitment (Knutsen, 1998) in contexts like Serbia. Consistently higher rates of “I don’t know” and missing responses among women (Chart 5) indicate that part of their ideological profiling is marked by greater uncertainty, and the tendencies toward the centre and toward non-response may be related. This is consistent with some previous findings (e.g. Züll, C., & Scholz, E., 2016). The paper does not claim that choosing the centre necessarily reflects insecurity; rather, it presents this as one possible interpretation. Distinguishing centrism as an ideological stance from uncertainty requires better-adjusted measurements.

Our research on the gender gap in ideological self-positioning in Serbia confirms Rodon’s thesis that the motives for choosing the center on the left-right scale vary from country to country, because ideological orientation is conditioned by contextual factors. But Rodon also correctly notes that in many cases the center is used as a “proxy” for indecision or low political certainty, especially among less politically literate respondents. In politically unstable or democratically underdeveloped countries, centrist positioning of citizens is more often the result of confusion, lack of political sophistication, and weaker identification with party and ideological options than the result of a conscious and deliberate choice. Therefore, the answer to the central research question is subtle and multi-layered. We can conclude that women in Serbia appear to be leftist compared to men primarily because they consistently avoid the right and more often choose the centre, and not necessarily because they possess a solid and authentic left orientation. Whether this is a true commitment to the left or is it rather the result of a combination of a mild leftist orientation, a pronounced tendency towards centrism, and structurally greater insecurity, remains a question that requires further research. These findings indeed suggest that the interpretation of the centre as a space of non-attitude and indifference is particularly relevant for understanding the ideological profiling of women in Serbia, and that future research should be directed towards clarifying the causes and implications of this centrist uncertainty. This suggests that the value and cultural factors highlighted by Inglehart and Norris (2000, 2003) may manifest

differently in post-socialist Serbia, not as a clear shift to the left but as a retreat from the right and a search for a safe, moderate centre.

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Annex

Table 1. Mean scores on the left-right self-placement scale in different waves

Mean scores on the left-right self-placement scale in different waves						
Year	code	Male	Female	Difference	t	p
1990	JMS117	5.6099	5.5282	0.0817	0.608	0.543
1996	WVS96	4.2446	4.5109	-0.2663	-1.601	0.110
2001	WVS2001	5.1625	4.8792	0.28332	1.621	0.105
2002	JJM170	5.0188	4.9235	0.09528	0.308	0.759
2002	JJM174	5.1374	4.9348	0.20259	1.511	0.131
2004	JJM184	5.0294	5.0394	-0.01	-0.075	0.940
2005	JJM185	4.8924	4.8119	0.08052	0.600	0.549
2006	WVS2006	5.79805	5.33117	0.46688	1.460	0.145
2008	EVS2008	5.50947	5.01052	0.49895	-0.994	0.321
2012	IDN2012	5.4203	5.6004	-0.1801	-1.059	0.290
2017	JMS2017	4.5266	4.0908	0.43583	-2.522	0.012
2018	ESS9	4.6304	4.2746	0.35585	2.511	0.012
2022	ESS10	4.8574	4.7067	0.15072	0.971	0.332
2023-24	ESS11	4.9225	4.6168	0.30571	1.944	0.052

Table 2. Distribution of left-right self-placement scale in different waves

Distribution of left-right self-placement scale in different waves										
		Male			Female			Difference		
YEAR	CODE	Left-wing	Centrist	Right-wing	Left-wing	Centrist	Right-wing	Left-wing	Centrist	Right-wing
1990	JMS117	24.29%	30.76%	44.95%	20.95%	36.43%	42.62%	3.34%	-5.67%	2.33%
1996	WVS96	38.68%	38.10%	23.21%	31.26%	49.66%	19.08%	7.42%	-11.55%	4.13%
2001	WVS2001	24.67%	43.23%	32.10%	23.91%	48.91%	27.17%	0.76%	-5.68%	4.92%
2002	JJM170	27.12%	46.61%	26.27%	24.77%	51.38%	23.85%	2.35%	-4.77%	2.42%
2002	JJM174	24.09%	46.14%	29.76%	23.48%	50.57%	25.95%	0.61%	-4.43%	3.82%
2004	JJM184	24.56%	46.55%	28.89%	22.31%	50.51%	27.18%	2.25%	-3.96%	1.71%
2005	JJM185	27.0%	45.9%	27.1%	23.8%	54.3%	22.0%	3.22%	-8.38%	5.16%
2006	WVS2006	20.3%	40.2%	39.5%	19.7%	46.5%	33.8%	0.59%	-6.30%	5.71%
2008	EVS2008	25.7%	47.5%	26.8%	20.4%	53.5%	26.1%	5.22%	-5.96%	0.74%
2012	IDN2012	29.8%	26.8%	43.4%	23.3%	33.8%	42.8%	6.45%	-7.05%	0.60%
2017	JMS2017	42.4%	29.1%	28.6%	52.0%	28.0%	20.0%	-9.65%	1.04%	8.61%
2018	ESS9	37.4%	37.6%	25.0%	40.8%	43.0%	16.2%	-3.38%	-5.38%	8.77%
2022	ESS10	30.8%	44.9%	24.3%	28.4%	52.2%	19.4%	2.40%	-7.26%	4.86%
2023-24	ESS11	33.0%	34.7%	32.3%	33.1%	44.2%	22.7%	-0.10%	-9.51%	9.61%

Table 3. *Results of Pearson Chi-square test of the association between gender and political self-placement (left-wing, right-wing, and centrist placements)*

Results of Pearson Chi-square test of the association between gender and political self-placement (left-wing, right-wing, and centrist placements)					
Year	Code	χ^2	df	p	N
1990	JMS117	4.646 ^a	2	0.098	1183
1996	WVS96	12.841 ^a	2	0.002	952
2001	WVS2001	3.141 ^a	2	0.208	826
2002	JJM170	.515 ^a	2	0.773	227
2002	JJM174	2.716 ^a	2	0.257	1163
2004	JJM184	1.769 ^a	2	0.413	1116
2005	JJM185	8.118 ^a	2	0.017	1135
2006	WVS2006	3.989 ^a	2	0.136	879
2008	EVS2008	4.891 ^a	2	0.087	1029
2012	IDN2012	8.767 ^a	2	0.012	1094
2017	JMS2017	14.215 ^a	2	0.001	1137
2018	ESS9	15.134 ^a	2	0.001	1294
2022	ESS10	7.562 ^a	2	0.023	1292
2023-24	ESS11	14.758 ^a	2	0.001	1049

Table 4. *List of all surveys they use in the paper*

Weights			
Year	Code	Weight	Constructed Using Information on..
1990	JMS117	Unweighted	
1996	WVS96	Unweighted	
2001	WVS2001	Unweighted	
2002	JJM170	Unweighted	
2002	JJM174	Unweighted	
2004	JJM184	Unweighted	
2005	JJM185	Unweighted	
2006	WVS2006	Unweighted	
2008	EVS2008	Weight	Age and Gender
2012	IDN2012	Unweighted	
2017	JMS2017	Combined Demographic Weight	Age, Gender, Urbanization
2018	ESS9	Post-stratification weight	Age Group, Gender, Education and Region
2022	ESS10	Post-stratification weight	Age Group, Gender, Education and Region
2023-24	ESS11	Post-stratification weight	Age Group, Gender, Education and Region