



Research Article

# Gender differences in left-right ideology: European men are more right-wing, women are more centrist?

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, women appear to have become more left-wing or liberal-oriented compared to men (Dassonneville, 2020). In this paper, we examine whether this observation holds in the more recent survey data from Europe. We show that the exclusive focus on differences in average scores provides an incomplete picture of gender differences in ideology. Since both men and women tend to be centrist, the observed gender differences in averages may be due to differences in the relative popularity of the middle point of the scale. The analysis uses the ninth wave of the European Social Survey data (ESS 9.3), which covers 29 European countries. The results show that European women are, indeed, on average, positioned to the left compared to men. However, additional analyses revealed that these differences are partly due to men's preference for rightist ideological positions and partly to women's relatively more frequent positioning on the scale midpoint.

*Keywords:* left-right ideology, gender differences, public opinion, Europe

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## Introduction

A considerable research effort has been spent on the question of gender differences in ideology. Not only because it is an interesting and provocative question but also because it is a moving target. Those gender differences and similarities vary over time and space. Hence, new evidence is always a useful addition to the ongoing, perhaps never-ending, research endeavor. Examining the changes over time and differences across contexts is necessary in order to better understand – and explain – the factors behind the observed tendencies.

In this paper, we analyze the gender differences in left-right ideology in 29 European countries, available in the ESS 9 dataset (2018). We consider this study as an update to Dassonneville's (2020) analysis of trends in gender differences in left-right ideology over time. In her analysis based on data covering the period from the 1970s until 2018, and a number of European countries, she concluded that since the 1990s, women have become more left-wing compared to men in their subjective ideology.

This impressive analysis of changing trends over time shows that gender differences in ideology are not fixed but change over time and that theoretical accounts need to evolve accordingly. Moreover, this implies that continued research on the ideological gender gap and a comparative approach are needed.

Dassonneville's (2020) study focuses on trends in average scores on the left-right scale. However, while averages provide important information, it is actually minimal information. Gender differences may appear in other aspects of the distribution of left-right scores and could be overlooked if the attention remains focused on averages.

This paper contributes in three directions, as implied in the previous paragraphs. We present findings from more recent surveys, we include a larger number of European countries, and we present a more detailed analysis of gender differences – including the comparison of distributions. Our analysis starts with a very brief presentation of the previous research and relevant theoretical background. Next, we present the data and research method. We

continue with the results and finish with the discussion and the overall conclusions.

## Theoretical background

The 'traditional gender gap', meaning a more conservative or right-wing orientation of women, has been first described in the US – women tended disproportionately to support conservative candidates and policies (e.g., Manza & Brooks, 1998; Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986). Studies in Europe from the same period revealed similar gender differences, though with significant variation between countries (e.g., Baxter & Lansing, 1983). More recently, researchers in Europe and elsewhere have written about the 'modern gender gap', the situation "in which women offer disproportionate support to the left side of the political spectrum." (Giger, 2009, p. 475; Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014; Dassonneville, 2020).

Explanations of ideological gender differences that researchers observed in different periods are diverse. The literature often emphasizes sociological factors as influencing the observed ideological differentiation among the genders. In the US, the current gap originated from the Reagan era, when men moved to the conservative side, but women separated, and a significant proportion remained attached to liberal positions (Norrander & Wilcox, 2008). According to Norrander and Wilcox, "The increasing number of liberal women comes primarily from changing demographics. Well-educated and single women have always been more liberal than their less educated and married counterparts, and over time they have become more numerous in the population." (2008, p. 521).

A similar socio-structural explanation has been examined in the European context. According to Nathalie Giger, for instance, the formation of the new gender gap in voting behavior in Europe is an ongoing process: "Women tended to vote more for conservative parties in the 1970s, while in the new millennium, they have given higher support to left parties. The speed of this development differs cross-nationally, and not all countries reached the state of a modern gender gap (where women lean left)." (2009, p. 474). The author, however, did not reach a reliable conclusion regarding the explanation of the

new gender gap. She concluded that at the macro level, the "increased female labor force participation explains the emergence of a modern gender gap" (Giger, 2009, p. 486). Yet, at the individual level, it appeared that structural factors were not successful in explaining the modern gender gap.

The literature also suggests that modernization, and especially post-modernization, has contributed to women's leftward political and ideological transition (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2000, 2003). Summarizing the extant research, Dassonneville suggests that the increased labor market participation combined with commonly encountered pay disparity, increased education, and secularization are factors quoted in the literature as affecting the women's leftward ideological transition (Dassonneville, 2020; Giger, 2009; Inglehart & Norris 2000; Iversen & Rosenbluth 2006).

Some authors argue that even more fundamental forces may be at play in the recently observed women's leftward political transition. According to Sidanius and his coworkers, psychological and evolutionary forces are relevant. In their own words, "The invariance hypothesis from social dominance theory maintains that, everything else being equal, males will have higher levels of group dominance orientation than women." (Sidanius et al. 1995, p. 381). In the political vocabulary, this means that women's 'natural' political position is on the left relative to men. The liberation of women that has spread globally (incompletely, though) simply allowed these, so to say, natural tendencies to manifest.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, there are also more mundane factors that seem to be contributing to the observed gender differences. According to Burden (2008), for instance, methodology matters – in particular, how the relevant questions are asked. In the context of the USA, if a respondent is asked: "Generally

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<sup>1</sup> Egalitarian societies in fact may allow the expression of gender differences in some cases. According to Lipka (2010, p. 619), for instance, "United Nations indices of gender equality and economic development were associated with larger sex differences in agreeableness, but not with sex differences in other traits", which led the author to the conclusion that "culture plays a negligible to small role in moderating sex differences in personality."

speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat..." the usual gender gap is observed. However, if the question asks, "Generally speaking, do you usually *feel* that you are a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" the gender gap is reduced. The word 'feel' reduces the gap, leading Burden to conclude, somewhat contrary to the common stereotype, that "altering the party identification questions to mention feeling rather than thinking causes a shift among women in the Republican direction" (Burden, 2008, p. 69).

Regardless of the methodological challenges, the overall weight of recent evidence is that recent decades witnessed the changing gender differences in ideology. This trend, or, in her words, realignment, is nicely outlined in Dassonneville's (2020) paper - as the shift in women's average position towards the left side of the spectrum compared to men.

Her analysis includes data from 36 OECD countries (mostly West European and North American) and covers the period from 1973 until 2018. Surveys from the 1970s and 1980s depict women as being, on average, somewhat more on the conservative or right-wing side. Since the 1990s, women have become more left-wing or liberal-oriented compared to men. The change affected women's position mostly, while men, on average, did not change their own ideological position much. However, significant cross-country variations have been observed.

It is worth noting that both genders, on average, occupy centrist positions. On a 1-10 scale, the estimated average for women at the end of the study period (2018) was 5.08, while in the 1970s, it was around 5.60. For men, the change was only approximately 0.10, from around 5.40 in the 1970s to 5.30 four decades later.

We would like particularly to draw attention to the magnitude of the main change. Among women, the change involves about 0.5 points on the 10-point scale. The difference between genders over most of the 2010s is around 0.1 points, while around 2018, it grew to about 0.2 points. So, the observed 'gender gap' is actually a tiny gap but statistically significant and certainly noteworthy given the diversity of the analyzed studies and countries covered.

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While this very sketchy overview of the literature lists a variety of explanations for the observed trend – political, social, and psycho-biological – this paper is concerned with a more descriptive task. Since the 'gender gap' in ideology has been changing over time and is not constant cross-culturally, the need for continued descriptive research, which would include a larger number of countries, is obvious. If the description of a phenomenon is insufficiently accurate, explanations are likely to be imperfect.

While in this study we simply expect the continuation of the observed tendencies – slightly higher average left-right scores among women, we argue that the issue of gender differences in ideology deserves a slightly more appropriate analytic approach than has commonly been the case. We are, in particular, concerned with the way gender differences are observed. Namely, the literature typically compares arithmetic means. However, as it is well known, phenomena may have different distributions while having the same averages. Likewise, averages can statistically differ, and yet the significance of those differences may be substantively inconsequential.

In this paper, we propose that, in addition to examining differences in averages, it may be fruitful to pay attention also to the potential gender differences in distributions of the left-right ideological dimension. This extension of the focus may provide some additional insight relevant to the understanding of the observed differences in the averages, which in turn may require fresh revision of the common theoretical accounts.

In particular, we believe that the observation that the left-right self-placement scale indicates prevalent "centrism" (Rodon, 2015; Knutsen, 1998) in most countries needs to be given due attention. Although the exact meaning of self-placements in the middle of the scale (not just this particular scale but more generally) is not clear, it may be relevant when formulating research conclusions. Rodon (2015), for instance, found that ideological 'centrism' often means a lack of political sophistication. Since the relative 'popularity' of the scale mid-point may affect the gender differences in averages, the differences in sophistication may be interpreted as ideological differences. Even if the centrist placements

do represent 'genuine' positioning, it is important to be aware of the contribution of ideological centrism to the overall gender differences.

According to the directional model of spatial voting, it is the *side* of the dimension relative to the neutral point that matters (e.g., Macdonald & Rabinowitz, 1993; Macdonald et al., 1995; Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989; Tiemann, 2022). From the directional angle, the middle of the left-right dimension is not so much 'centrist' but rather neutral, undecided, or "spatially indifferent" in Rodon's (2021) words.

## Method

We begin the analysis by comparing the basic distribution of responses to the left-right self-placement scale among men and women. The aim here is to check whether the gender differences in ideology observed by Dassonneville still hold. We expect that they do, as our data continue the timeline where the latest Dassonneville cases end.<sup>2</sup> Thus, our study has a confirmatory dimension concerning their descriptive conclusions about the ideological gender gap in the 2010s.

In the second and more innovative part of the analysis, we examine the gender differences in more detail – by comparing the distributions rather than simply comparing averages. We also examine country cases in more detail in order to have a better picture of the Europe-wide presence of the modern gender gap. Note also that we include some European countries that were not part of Dassonneville's analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> Most of their data series end in 2016 and 2017, while some end already in 2013 (Japan) and 2014 (Iceland and New Zealand). Only two cases have the latest data collected in 2018 - Hungary and Italy (see Dassonneville, 2020, Appendix, Table 1). In the ESS 9 dataset that we use, Hungarian data are collected entirely in 2019, while the Italian data collection started in December 2018, so there is basically no time overlap between our and Dassonneville's data).

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## Data and samples

The paper utilizes data from the European Social Survey (Round 9). The interviews were conducted in 29 European countries during 2018 and 2019, using the CAPI interview mode.<sup>3</sup> In each country, the ESS surveys are based on nationally representative random samples. The complete ESS 9 dataset (Edition 3.1, Production date: February 7, 2021) includes around 49,000 respondents (unweighted).<sup>4</sup> Some analyses in this paper are based on the entire ESS sample, and some analyses are limited to individual countries.

## Variables

The ESS study uses an 11-point scale left-right scale, which, according to Kroh (2007), is methodologically superior to alternative versions of the scale (e.g., 10-point, 7-point, etc.). Distribution of this variable by gender is given in the Results section (see Figure 4). In ESS9 data, gender is coded as a binary variable (female and male), where 51.45% of the gross sample is coded female (weighted by *pspwght*).

## Data weighting

In the analyses of the integral ESS 9 sample, unless otherwise noted, we use the weight *wcpsp*. This weight combines the ESS-provided *pspwght*, which corrects for sampling and demographic biases, and our own weight designed to equalize the sample sizes for all included countries. Namely, the relevant aggregate unit here is a political system, i.e., a country. Since the goal is not to generalize to an abstract 'European population', and the arbitrary differences in the sizes of the samples need to be eliminated, we have to ensure that countries have equal contributions towards the final results.

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<sup>3</sup> In most countries, the data collection spanned across 2018 and 2019, and in several cases extended into 2020. In eight countries data collection started in 2019, while the earliest study begun in September 2018.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the dataset and the ESS project, see doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018.



The benefit of focusing on a single project is clear – ESS studies are characterized by methodological rigor and focus on securing high-quality data specifically designed for comparative research.

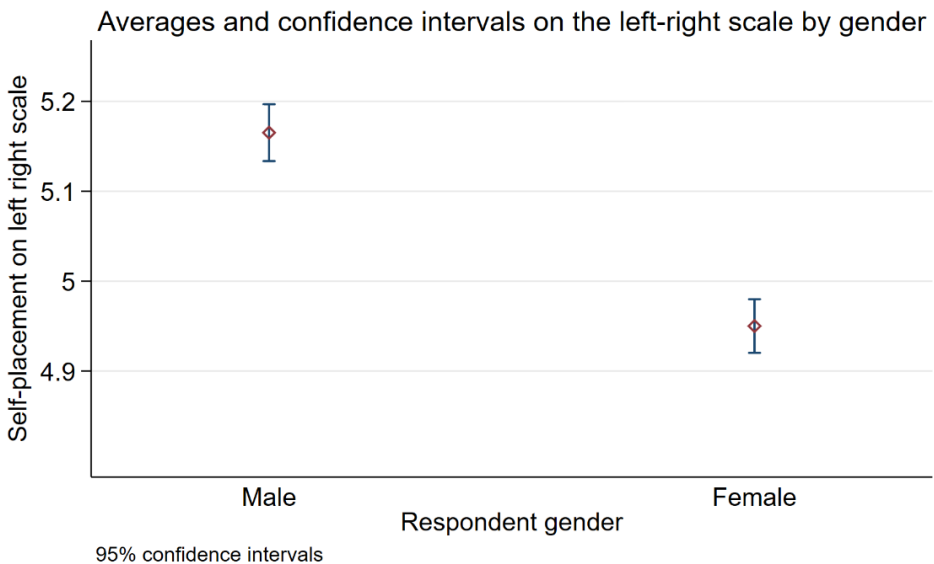
## Results

### Average left-right scores in Europe

Our first research question is: Are there any systematic differences between men and women in their average left-right self-positioning in different countries? According to the results presented in Figure 1, European women are indeed slightly more leftist compared to men (as represented by the ESS sample of countries). Male respondents, on average, place themselves in the position of 5.17, while the average women's position is 4.95.

**Figure 1**

*Averages and confidence intervals of male and female respondents on the left-right self-placement scale*



*Note.* Data source: ESS 9.3 data; weighted by *wcpsp*.

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Obviously, both genders are quite centrist ideologically, yet the difference is statistically significant. The size of the absolute difference between the means is  $5.165 - 4.950 = .215$ , which is similar to the findings presented by Dassonneville (2020) and Hatem (2021), for instance. The observed difference corresponds to Cohen's  $d$  of the magnitude .09, which is, as a 'rule of thumb,' considered a small effect, equivalent to the correlation of  $r = .05$ . Still, it is highly statistically significant due to the overall sample size. Thus, we can conclude that the modern gender gap in ideology continues to thrive in Europe - on average, European (meaning ESS 9) women posit themselves as slightly more left-wing compared to European men. The realignment observed by Dassonneville in the 2000s is continued, as testified by the ESS 9 data from 2018 and 2019.

### Gender differences in left-right ideology within European countries

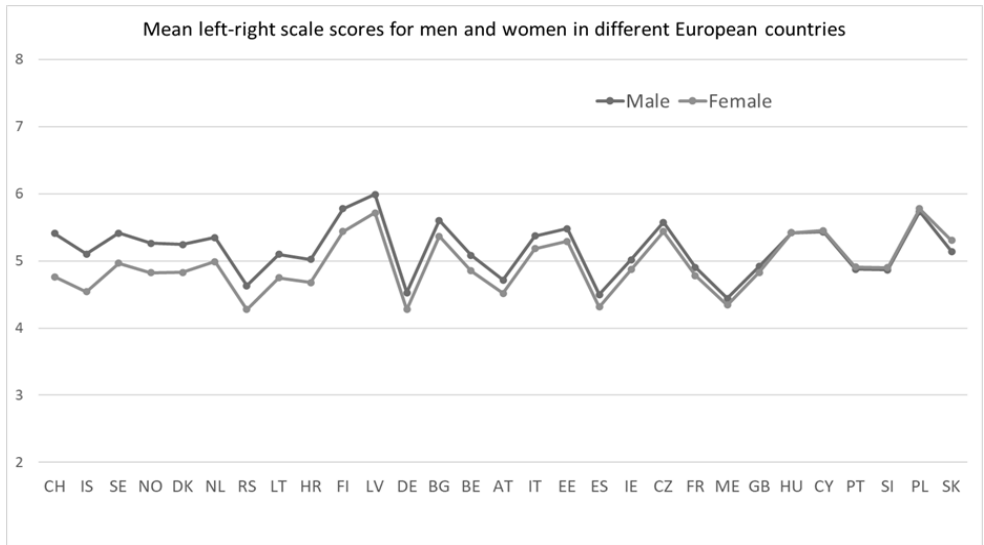
Dassonneville's data also showed notable differences between countries. Hence, the next question we address is: does this gender gap characterize all examined countries in 2018 and 2019? (Figure 2; see also Figure 3) plots the average scores separately for male and female respondents in each of the 29 countries in the ESS 9 sample (the exact numbers are presented in Table 1, in Supplementary materials). Countries on the horizontal axis are ordered according to the size of the gender gap (a larger gap is on the left).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Here, data are weighted with the original ESS weight *pspwght*, which is suitable for obtaining individual country estimates.

**Figure 2**

*Average left-right scores by gender in Europe*

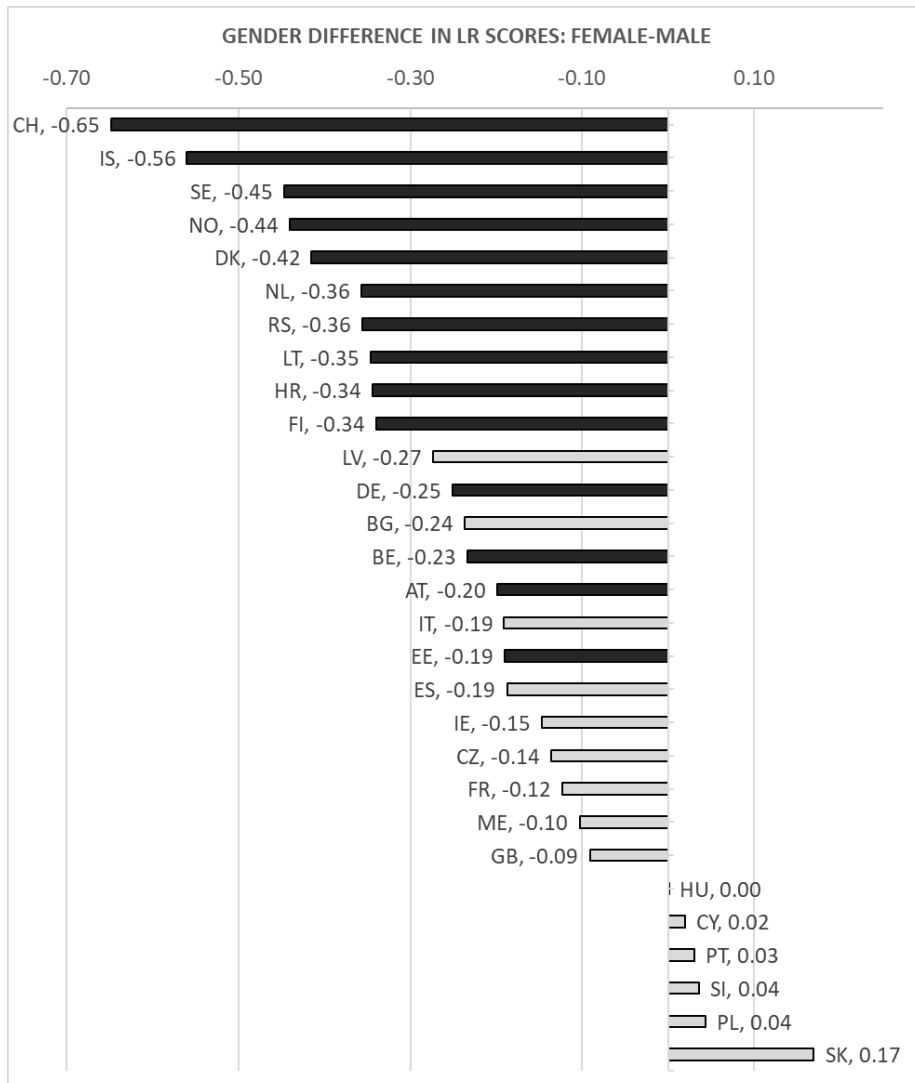


*Note.* Data source: ESS 9.3 data; weighted by *pspwght*.

By examining Figure 3, we can also see that on the single-country level, the magnitude of the gap previously observed on the aggregate sample (around .2 points) is typically below the magnitude that the difference needs to achieve to be statistically significant in a typically sized country sample. Thus, the largest difference is observed in the Swiss sample, and it is three times the size of the 'European-level' difference between the gender averages.

**Figure 3**

*Gender differences in left-right scores by country*



*Note.* Dark-colored bars represent statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ); Data source: ESS 9.3 data; weighted by *pspwght*.

The conclusion of this part of the analysis is that the 'modern gender gap' in ideology that seems to characterize Europeans is observed in about half of the included countries (the gap is statistically significant in 14 out of 29 cases). Yet, in not a single case, it appeared that men, on average, score more left-wing compared to women. It seems that if there is some ideological gender gap, it is as described under the label of the 'modern gender gap' – women are slightly more left-leaning. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that, within the ESS9 dataset, European countries without any gender gap in ideology, whether modern or ancient, are equally frequent.

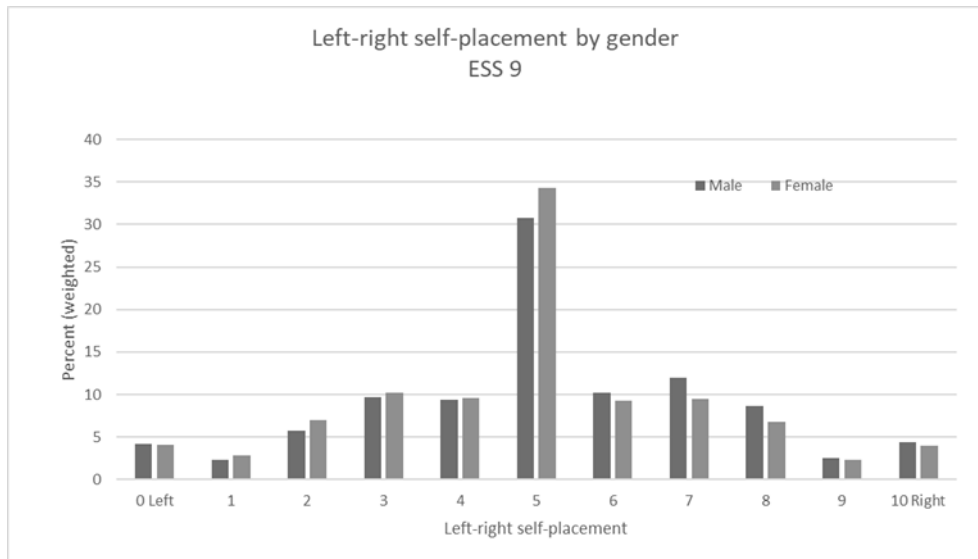
### Distribution of the left-right scale in comparative context

Thus far, we have focused on differences in averages. But what is happening behind the average scores? As indicated in probably every statistical introduction textbook, similar averages can mask large differences in distributions.

The distribution of responses to the left-right self-placement scale by gender in the entire ESS sample (data from 29 countries) is shown in Figure 4. We can notice that the distribution is heavily centered – the single most popular answer on this 11-point scale is the mid-scale value of 5 –similarly among both genders. In fact, around 33% of the entire sample chose this response. The least popular responses are 1 and 9. Thus, the left-right centrism observed more than three decades ago (Knutsen, 1998) is still a notable feature of the European public.

Figure 4

*Distribution of left-right self-placement responses among men and women*



*Note.* Data source: ESS 9.3 data; weighted by *wcsp*.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that women are even more centrist compared to men (see the peak on the middle scale point at 5), while men are slightly more frequent in the moderate right (responses 7, 8, and 6). On the left from the scale midpoint, the distributions are virtually identical.

So, are the European women more leftist? Yes, if we focus on the differences in the average scores. If we look at the distribution of the responses, women appear to be less rightist and more centrist compared to men, at least using this "eyeballing method". Whether this is equivalent to being 'more leftist' is a matter of interpretation. However, the mid-scale responses on the left-right scale could mean ideologically 'neutral' or perhaps undecided responses (e.g., Knutsen, 1998). In any case, whatever the meaning of this may be, the point is that the conclusion "women are more leftist" may be misleading, as there are no relatively more women on the left side of the ideological dimension.

So, perhaps the more appropriate conclusion might be that women are not more left-wing but are more centrist and less rightist compared to European men. This distinction is theoretically important – especially if we take into account the directional model of voting, which states that it is the position relative to the scale center (neutral position) that matters, rather than the ideological closeness in absolute terms (e.g., Macdonald & Rabinowitz, 1993; Macdonald et al., 1995; Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989; Tiemann, 2022).

Hence, the modern gender gap, based on the difference in averages, might be politically inconsequential if it reflects differences in ideological centrism, especially if interpreted in a directional sense – as ideological indifference. From the directional perspective, those in the ideological scale center are not highly motivated to support any side in the electoral struggle. Thus, it may actually be the men on the moderate right that determine the relative power of the two political camps (left and right).

Note that Figure 4 shows just the so-called valid responses. In the aggregate sample, 11.29% of respondents answered 'Don't know' to the question about left-right self-placement. It is the most numerous category after the scale middle point. Scholz & Zuell (2016) showed that including an explicit option for respondents to express no opinion concerning their left-right positioning can improve the quality of the left-right scale. Our results show that there are gender differences in this domain: in the overall sample, female respondents are indeed more frequently represented in the DKN category compared to men. While in the overall sample, there are 51.4% of women, in the left-right DKN response category, 59.5% of cases are female (the difference is highly statistically significant ( $\chi^2(1, N = 42089) 134.26, p < .001$ ; weighted by the combined weight for equal country representation *wcpsp*).

The size of the difference is particularly large in Germany (74.7% of the DKN responses belong to female respondents), Denmark (69% of the DKN category is female), and in British and Dutch samples (in both cases around 68% of the category are female respondents). The smallest difference is observed in Latvia and Slovenia (53% and 54% of females in the DKN category, respectively). Only in the Norwegian sample male respondents are relatively more numerous

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among those who didn't know what to respond to the LR scale (nearly 60% of respondents in this category are of male gender). However, it should be kept in mind that in single-country analyses, the number of cases in the DKN category can be rather low, so not all observed differences are statistically significant. Still, given the rather uniform tendency, the overall picture is clear - European women are relatively more frequently choosing the DNK category when responding to the LR scale question.

While the analysis of the "Don't know" responses is not directly relevant to our point about certain gender differences in distributions of responses to the left-right scale, it is indirectly relevant. It is part of the responses to that scale and may be relevant for further research on the meaning of the midpoint responses and help answer the question of to what extent those responses also perhaps reflect uncertainty and lack of opinion.

### Country-level analysis

To what extent the described difference in ideological centrism is observable within individual countries? In order to examine to what extent women tend to be more frequently on the left wing or rather on the scale midpoint, we collapsed the left-right scale into three categories. The left-wing category is represented by merging answers on the left side from the midpoint (scores 0-4). The right-wing category is defined by collapsing responses to the right side of the midpoint (scores 6-10). This categorization would fit the directional conception of political preferences, as it emphasizes the side of the political divide compared to the middle or neutral position.

The relatively left-wing position of average women's score may reflect their relative concentration on the left compared to men, but also on the center of the scale if men are more present on the right side. If in most cases there is no difference between genders in their concentration on the scale midpoint, that would mean that the difference in averages is due to women being more present in the left wing.

Figure 5 shows the gender differences (men's percentage minus females' percentage) in their relative presence on the left-wing, right-wing, and

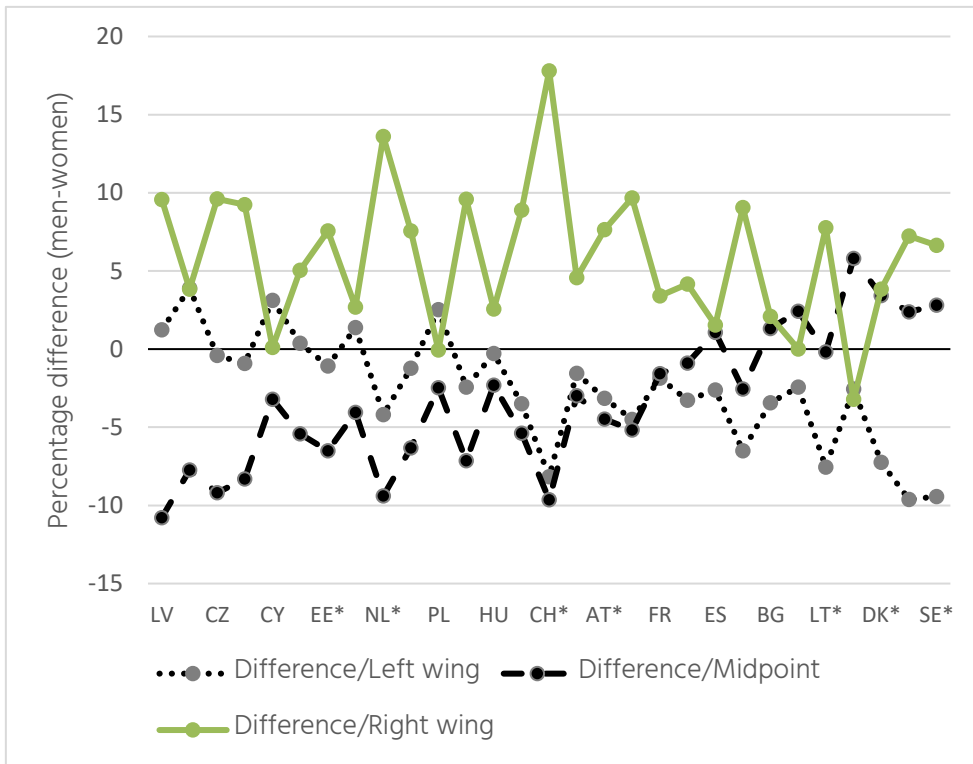


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scale midpoint across different ESS 9 countries. Positive values on the vertical axis mean that males are more frequent in that position. For instance, looking at the first country case (LV-Latvia), we can read from the graph that men are more frequently on the right wing (nearly ten percentage points difference), there is little difference in their relative frequency on the left-wing side, while women are more concentrated on the scale midpoint (nearly 11 percentage points difference; minus sign denotes that women are relatively more present in that category). The detailed table on which the graph is based is included in the Supplementary materials (see Table 2a and Table 2b).

Figure 5

*Gender differences in the relative frequency on the left-wing, right-wing, and midpoint of the left-right scale*



*Note.* Points represent the difference in percentage points between men and women on the left wing (scores 0-4), right wing (scores 6-10), and the midpoint of the left-right scale per country. The asterisk denotes countries where significant difference in averages between genders is observed (see Table 1); Data source: ESS 9.3 data; weighted by ESS weight *pspwght*.

By examining this graph, we can make several observations. First, women are more frequent on the scale midpoint – in 20 cases, the difference is larger than 1% point. The largest differences are in Latvia, Switzerland, and the Netherlands - nearly ten percentage point difference. In Latvia, nearly 33% of

men chose the middle point, while nearly 44% of women chose the same position. On the other side, men are relatively more frequent in the scale midpoint in 7 cases, but the difference is larger than three percentage points in just 2 cases (Slovakia – 5.8 percentage points, and Denmark – 3.4 percentage points). Among women, the difference is larger than three percentage points in 15 cases.

Men are relatively more frequently positioned on the right-wing side (scores 6-11) of the ideological scale in 25 cases (the difference of at least 1 percent points). This difference is the largest in Switzerland – nearly 18 percentage points, the Netherlands – 13.6 percentage points, Latvia, Czech Republic, Belgium, etc. In only a single case, women are more frequent on the right wing (Slovakia, the difference being 3.33 percentage points).

Men are relatively more frequent on the left side of the scale in 5 cases (the difference larger than one percentage point, the largest being 3.9). Women, on the other side, in 20 cases are more concentrated on the left wing. Women seem particularly leftist (compared to men) in north-western countries – Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, and Lithuania, Norway, and also Switzerland.<sup>6</sup>

On the horizontal axis, the country abbreviations are marked with an asterisk if, in that particular case, we observed statistically significant gender differences in the mean scores on the left-right scale. We can observe now that in some cases, this difference is mainly due to women indeed being more frequently on the left wing (while men are on the right wing). The best examples are Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden. In other cases, both women's relative prevalence on the left wing and on the midpoint contributed to the differences in averages. Here, the examples are Switzerland, Finland, Norway, and Serbia. However, there are also cases where the females' left-leaning is mainly due to

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<sup>6</sup> Table 2b (In Supplementary materials) shows the results of the Pearson Chi-square tests of the association between gender and the three-category left-wing, right-wing, and centrist placements. This test is non-directional - it just shows whether the frequency distribution statistically differs between genders, not if it is due to men or women being more leftist or rightist. However, by examining the frequency distributions, we can obtain a rather clear image of the associations.

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them being relatively more concentrated in the middle of the scale. The representative cases are Belgium, Estonia, Croatia, and Germany.

## Discussion

In this paper, we set out to investigate if the effects of "ideological realignment" (Dassonneville, 2020; Norrander & Wilcox, 2008), i.e., the tendency for women to hold somewhat more left-wing or liberal ideological positions and electoral preferences (Giger, 2009) compared to men, are still observable in the more recent data from Europe. For this purpose, we examined differences between average scores of men and women on the left-right self-placement scale, both analyzing the aggregate 'European' ESS sample as well as 29 individual country samples.

We also wanted to provide a 'higher resolution' picture of the gender differences (or similarities) than is possible by simply focusing on differences in the averages. Therefore, we compared distributions of the left-right scale among the two genders.

While the literature, based on comparing the averages, suggested that women are more liberal or left-wing oriented compared to men, we thought that this conclusion was premature because the data is not analyzed sufficiently in-depth. In particular, we wondered if the proportion of respondents (of both genders) located at the center of the scale might be relevant. Virtually all studies show that the left-right scale distribution is heavily centered (e.g., Knutsen, 1998; Dassonneville, 2020). Thus, small differences in the distribution of men and women in the center and wings of the scale might be relevant.

Literature suggests several interpretations of ideological centrism: genuine centrist location, lack of opinion, cognitive limitation, and irrelevance. The role of the ideological center has a particularly important role in the directional model of political preferences (e.g., Macdonald & Rabinowitz, 1993; Macdonald et al., 1995; Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989; Tiemann, 2022). In this view, what matters is the *side* of the political divide on which a person is, while the position in the center is seen as ideologically neutral or undecided rather than 'centrist'. Moreover, the evidence shows that political parties are usually

not located at the ideological center (despite the 'median voter theorem' and its implications). Hatem (2021, p. 84, Figure 3.1), for instance, on the basis of Chess<sup>7</sup> data, shows that European political parties are located more on moderate left and right than strictly in the center. Also in line with the directional perspective, Zur concludes that "Empirical evidence suggests that most parties in Western Europe do not take centrist policy positions, despite the centripetal force of the voter distribution." (2021, p. 1755).

A quarter of a century ago, Knutsen (1998) noticed increasing centrism among the European publics. He observed that "The centrist increase is not concentrated among those with little political involvement, but is somewhat larger among those with less education and women." (Knutsen, 1998, p. 292). Although it may appear that this implies that centrism reflects not ideology but a lack of opinion or interest, Knutsen wrote, somewhat contrary to the directional view, that "We are then inclined to conclude that the centrist tendency is genuine." (Knutsen, 1998, p. 314). Giger (2009) also finds that centrism is not just a superficial subjective ideology, but also has repercussions on voting behavior. Yet, more recently, Hatem concludes that "centrists are shown to be less sensitive to ideology than other voters when casting their ballots" (2021, p. ix).

Thus, although it is not entirely clear how to interpret ideological centrism, there is some support for both the genuine ideological position and the lack of opinion. However, one implication is certain: it is important to take ideological centrism into account when trying to understand the modern ideological gender gap.

The present results provide some support for the conclusion that women tend to lean more towards the left wing. Not in a single country did men appear more leftist, on average, than women. Overall, men appeared more right-wing-oriented in most European countries. This is evidenced not only by the

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<sup>7</sup> The Chapel Hill expert surveys estimate party positioning on ideology and various policy issues for national parties in a variety of European countries (<https://www.chesdata.eu/>).

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differences in the mean scores but also in their relatively higher concentration on the right-wing scale points compared to women.

However, the picture is more complex when it comes to the female gender. Their average position on the left compared to men reflects two underlying characteristics. One is that women are indeed relatively more frequent on the left wing compared to men, but not to the degree to completely account for the differences in the averages. The other one is that women, more often than men, tend to choose the scale midpoint.

This distinction is theoretically important because it may reflect different underlying processes. One may be the real (conscious) ideological shift of women in the leftward direction. And this is where almost all theories of the ideological gender gap claim to be relevant. However, being more left-wing because of the greater tendency to choose the scale midpoint may reflect ideological centrism, ideological neutrality (whatever that might be), but also a lack of opinion.

Explaining the tendency to choose a scale midpoint requires a somewhat broader explanatory model than when dealing with the modern gender gap. In addition to, for instance, examining the factors that may account for higher leftism among women (e.g., value orientations), researchers need to elaborate models that would account for higher centrism among women. Here, important factors might be political interest, competence, efficacy, issue salience, and so on.

Future research should investigate the obvious question stemming from the presented findings: what accounts for the observed ideological centrism of women? This means examining the association of ideological 'centrism' and political sophistication and interest on the one side and with political attitudes and policy preferences on the other. Of course, it remains important to continue descriptive research on gender differences and similarities in left-right ideology in order to be able to ask really relevant questions in explanatory studies.

Another topic that future research should focus on concerns cross-country differences. As in previous studies, this paper documented large differences between countries, both in the averages and in the distribution of

the left-right scale. Clearly, female leftism is more visible in north-western Europe and relatively rare in Southern and Eastern Europe, similar to Abendschön & Steinmetz (2014). Future research should study the regional differences and the role of contextual, macro-level factors (e.g., Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014).

Specifically, factors such as education, religiosity, and labor market participation, known to impact women's ideological positions, may not have the same effect across various countries. In the early 1990s, Inglehart and Norris (2000) showed that socio-structural and attitudinal factors have a unique contribution to voting preferences in advanced industrialized, postcommunist, and developing societies. While the economic progress of postcommunist countries has been relatively rapid, the pace of cultural and attitudinal shifts, which also play a significant role in voting preferences, has been considerably slower (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). And those broad cultural and attitudinal factors could vary significantly by country. Furthermore, it may simply be that the meaning of the left and right varies between countries too much to make the results based on the left-right scale generalizable (Zuelli & Scholz, 2019).

### *Conflict of Interest*

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

### *Data availability statement*

Data used in this paper are available upon a reasonable request.

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## Supplementary materials

**Table 1**

*Mean scores on the left-right self-placement scale in different European countries*

Country	Male	Female	Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
CH	5.41	4.76	0.65	6.20	0.001
IS	5.10	4.54	0.56	3.75	0.001
SE	5.41	4.96	0.45	3.75	0.001
NO	5.26	4.82	0.44	3.37	0.001
DK	5.24	4.83	0.41	3.51	0.001
NL	5.35	4.99	0.36	3.61	0.001
RS	4.63	4.27	0.36	2.50	0.013
LT	5.10	4.75	0.35	2.52	0.012
HR	5.02	4.68	0.34	2.68	0.007
FI	5.78	5.44	0.34	3.34	0.001
LV	5.99	5.72	0.27	1.57	0.117
DE	4.53	4.28	0.25	3.06	0.002
BG	5.60	5.36	0.24	1.79	0.074
BE	5.08	4.85	0.23	2.42	0.016
AT	4.72	4.52	0.20	2.43	0.015
IT	5.37	5.18	0.19	1.82	0.069
EE	5.48	5.29	0.19	2.12	0.034
ES	4.50	4.31	0.19	1.59	0.112
IE	5.02	4.87	0.15	1.77	0.078
CZ	5.57	5.44	0.14	1.52	0.129
FR	4.90	4.78	0.12	1.19	0.233

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ME	4.44	4.34	0.10	.50	0.620
GB	4.92	4.83	0.09	1.05	0.295
HU	5.42	5.42	-0.001	-.01	0.996
CY	5.43	5.45	-0.02	-.09	0.930
PT	4.88	4.91	-0.03	-.21	0.836
SI	4.87	4.90	-0.03	-.24	0.811
PL	5.74	5.78	-0.04	-.31	0.760
SK	5.14	5.31	-0.17	-1.08	0.280

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*Note.* Weighted by *pspwght*; data source: ESS 9.3 dataset.

**Table 2a***Distribution of left-wing, right-wing, and centrist placements on the left-right scale*

Country	Left-right self-placement - Males			Left-right self-placement – Females			Difference between M and F percentages (Male-Female)		
	Left wing	Middle point	Right wing	Left wing	Middle point	Right wing	Left wing	Middle point	Right wing
LV	14.7	32.9	52.4	13.4	43.7	42.9	1.2	-10.8	9.6
GB	34.5	35.3	30.2	30.6	43.0	26.4	3.9	-7.7	3.8
CZ	25.1	23.9	51.0	25.5	33.1	41.4	-0.4	-9.2	9.6
BE	31.9	30.7	37.4	32.8	39.0	28.2	-0.9	-8.3	9.2
CY	22.7	38.2	39.1	19.6	41.4	39.0	3.1	-3.2	0.1
IE	31.2	36.8	32.0	30.8	42.3	26.9	0.4	-5.4	5.0
EE	18.3	43.5	38.1	19.4	50.0	30.6	-1.1	-6.5	7.6
SI	33.8	38.0	28.2	32.4	42.1	25.6	1.4	-4.0	2.7
NL	29.5	23.6	46.9	33.7	33.0	33.3	-4.2	-9.4	13.6
HR	34.9	30.7	34.4	36.1	37.0	26.8	-1.2	-6.3	7.6
PL	25.1	29.7	45.3	22.6	32.1	45.3	2.5	-2.5	-0.1
DE	41.3	34.2	24.5	43.7	41.4	14.9	-2.4	-7.2	9.6
HU	28.3	27.7	44.0	28.6	30.0	41.5	-0.3	-2.3	2.6
RS	37.4	37.6	25.0	40.9	43.0	16.1	-3.5	-5.4	8.9
CH	27.4	26.8	45.8	35.5	36.4	28.1	-8.2	-9.7	17.8
ME	41.0	31.2	27.7	42.6	34.2	23.2	-1.6	-3.0	4.6
AT	37.0	33.5	29.5	40.2	38.0	21.9	-3.2	-4.5	7.7
FI	22.7	26.5	50.8	27.2	31.7	41.1	-4.5	-5.2	9.7
FR	34.0	33.7	32.3	35.9	35.3	28.9	-1.8	-1.6	3.4
IT	31.6	24.2	44.2	34.9	25.1	40.1	-3.3	-0.9	4.2
ES	47.5	25.6	27.0	50.1	24.5	25.4	-2.6	1.1	1.5
NO	36.8	19.6	43.6	43.3	22.2	34.5	-6.5	-2.6	9.1

BG	24.4	31.2	44.4	27.8	29.9	42.3	-3.4	1.3	2.1
PT	33.8	36.7	29.5	36.3	34.3	29.5	-2.4	2.4	0.0
LT	27.9	39.0	33.2	35.4	39.2	25.4	-7.6	-0.2	7.8
SK	29.2	35.8	35.1	31.8	30.0	38.3	-2.6	5.8	-3.2
DK	34.4	25.0	40.6	41.7	21.6	36.8	-7.2	3.4	3.8
IS	34.5	28.6	36.9	44.1	26.2	29.7	-9.6	2.4	7.2
SE	30.6	21.7	47.7	40.0	18.9	41.0	-9.4	2.8	6.6
Average	31.6	30.7	37.6	34.0	34.6	31.4	-2.6	-3.3	5.9

*Note.* Table entries are percentages of responses within each election study. For statistical significance see Table 2b. Weighted by *pspwght*. Data source: ESS 9.3 dataset.

**Table 2b**

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

Country	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>
LV	8.36	2	.015*	657
GB	12.51	2	.002**	2004
CZ	26.98	2	.000***	2157
BE	19.39	2	.000***	1684
CY	1.04	2	.594	541
IE	7.75	2	.021*	1919
EE	11.44	2	.003**	1728
SI	1.97	2	.373	1069
NL	31.90	2	.000***	1543
HR	12.41	2	.002**	1606
PL	1.41	2	.495	1231

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DE	34.41	2	.000***	2234
HU	1.23	2	.540	1400
RS	15.13	2	.001**	1294
CH	48.69	2	.000***	1420
ME	2.38	2	.304	779
AT	17.42	2	.000***	2280
FI	15.88	2	.000***	1677
FR	2.56	2	.278	1812
IT	3.79	2	.151	1983
ES	1.00	2	.605	1444
NO	11.51	2	.003**	1357
BG	2.04	2	.361	1343
PT	.74	2	.690	941
LT	11.71	2	.003**	1240
SK	3.69	2	.158	961
DK	8.40	2	.015*	1497
IS	8.34	2	.015*	808
SE	14.40	2	.001***	1480

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*Note.* Table entries correspond to frequency tables on which the results in Table 2a are based. Weighted by *pspwght*. Data source: ESS 9.3 dataset.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

