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FIRST EXIT POLL IN SERBIA: THE CASE OF VOŽDOVAC

Abstract

In this paper we will present the results and analysis of the first exit poll that has been done in Serbia, or more precisely, in Belgrade municipality of Voždovac. During election day of the 2020 Serbian parliamentary election, we collected data from 2969 respondents in 40 voting spots. We applied number of statistical and data collection procedures in order to improve precision of prediction. The collected data provided the evidence of a very accurate prediction. Beside the prediction of election results, we collected demographic data, as well as data of the timing of the making the decision to vote. Therefore, for the explorative purposes we present that data in the paper. We found significant differences among demographic categories regarding party/electoral list preferences. Additionally, we identify different patterns between SNS and Šapić voters, i.e. we found that SNS voters mostly decided to vote for this list a long time ago, while Šapić voters mostly decided to vote for this electoral list a few days before the elections. In conclusion, we discuss the possible reasons of such pattern.

Keywords: Exit poll, Voting, Pattern of voting

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INTRODUCTION

Exit polls are conducted on election day. In front of the polling stations, the pollsters use the questionnaires to ask the voters for whom they voted. (Tadić, 2010). These surveys are immediately sent to a central location where there are people who add them to the statistical database for continuous analysis. Technologies vary, and the transmission of query results is via a regular phone, a mobile phone - usually in the form of text messages or via the Internet. To have a successful data transfer, it has to be done accurately and fast. Projections about the results are usually made during the day. The analysts usually predict exit surveys using previously developed statistical models. They also have access to information obtained on election day, through actual field team reports, as well as information obtained prior to the election. (Scheuren, Alvei, 2008).

It is assumed that voters will circle the same on the ballot as at the polling station. After the closing of the polling stations, the estimates of the results based on the survey are published, and the main goal of the survey commissioners (non-governmental organizations or television stations) is to find out the estimates of the election results as soon as possible. Up until now - almost always - if the sampling is done properly, it shows that surveys give good result estimates. When simulating the sample randomness, interviewers try to examine different types of people or they overcome that by counting. Simulations are a good indicator of the direction in which one should investigate and theoretically justify what is claimed. Sometimes in practice those theoretical models can be a complex way of getting good results, which is why we have to rely on the information obtained by simulating those models. (Tadić, 2010).

This research is so popular thanks to television channels, where you can find out election results after the polls close, which gives political scientists an opportunity to comment, whereas live analysis on election night guarantees high ratings. The idea for this type of survey was first born in the United States, where it developed the most. The creation and development of the survey methodology was attributed to Warren Mitofski. (Kozłowski,

2012). The first election day survey was conducted in 1940 in Denver, and the first survey in the form in which we have it today, that is, on a large scale and most often at the request of the media, was conducted in 1967 for CBS (Levy, 1983). The first (although unsuccessful) exit polls were conducted by George Gallup, and then the mail survey (also unsuccessful) was conducted by the *Literari Digest*, during the 1936 election, which predicted that Alf Landon would defeat Franklin Roosevelt. The problems also arose in the 1948 election year, even though better methods were used. It was not until the 1960s that television networks paid more attention to them. (Scheuren, Alvey, 2008).

The exit poll is specific and yet the most accurate, because it does not include all people who have the right to vote, but only those people who actually vote – then, here we do not have the problem of identifying possible voters as is the case of pre-election polls. The questions in the exit poll refer to facts, not to intentions that may differ from the actual election decisions. This issue is of particular importance especially in the case of a change in political preferences a few days before the election (late swing). (Kozłowski, 2012) The exit poll is clearer and more receptive to respondents and it is assumed that fewer people will refuse it than some other types of pre-election polls (say pre-election polls by telephone).

The goal of the exit poll is not only to predict the election result. This type of research brings a lot of important information about the division of votes in different socio-demographic structures, changes in political preferences with regards to previous elections, motives for choosing a particular party or candidate, motives for choosing voting time, etc. This information allows for a detailed analysis of the results and it can be used until the next elections due to the fact that current policy research, mostly from the above, does not provide such detailed data with maximum accuracy. The most accurate data on the demographic composition of the electorate were derived from exit polls. The components of measurement error in research should be well calculated and researchers make significant effort to reduce or control them. (McDonald, 2007). In less consolidated democracies, exit polls indirectly perform the function of election legitimacy, i.e. whether there is a big difference between the results of the polls and the official election results. (Kozłowski, 2012).

The academic literature on exit surveys focuses on two areas, methodology and the human factor. In general, the methodology of exit surveys also consists of two components: proper sampling techniques and logistical convenience included in conducting the exit survey. Exit surveys should be arranged in a random sample. However, the demographic structure, urban-rural structure, etc. should be considered here as well. Sometimes a more precise value will be obtained when it is mathematically calculated which respondent fills in the survey, and not randomly, though some criticize this method. Other times, the issue is with the types and techniques of voting, say via the internet or the mail as is the case in Oregon, therefore it is difficult to conduct an exit poll. In addition to the discussion on sampling, there are also practical ones related to the relationship between respondents and interviewers. Human interactions will produce certain biases in any scientific experiment, and the social context may be different as well as the likelihood of answering sensitive questions honestly. (Barreto, Guerra, Marks, Nuño, Woods, 2006).

The controversial part of exit polls is whether to publish the results before the polls close. The (un) intentional effect of the exit poll will be if the televisions would announce the winner of the election during the day and thus influence the (de) motivation of potential voters to go to the polls. This issue is mainly addressed to the United States, where there is no legal ban on publishing poll results before all polling stations close. (Cole, 2003). In November 2000, exit polls in Florida declared that Al Gore had won the presidential election. As a result, many television broadcasters declared Gore the winner of Florida, a key state to win the 2000 election. Just hours later, they were denied the right results and George W. Bush was the winner. As a result of the erroneous exit poll, the media and interviewers reviewed and re-analysed the methodology used in 2000 to better prepare for 2004. (Barreto, Guerra, Marks, Nuño, Woods, 2006). That is why it is best not to forecast and present data when there is no complete information or the race is very close, therefore the winner should not be announced during the night. (Scheuren, Alvey, 2008).

MAKING A DECISION WHEN TO VOTE

In many Western democracies, voters have begun to delay their voting decisions. More and more voters make their decision during the last weeks before the election, many of them even just in the last few days, if not on election day itself. (Schmitt-Beck, 2005). The first difficulty in understanding voters who decide late is to determine exactly how many voters decide late - in the last minute. Brox and Giammo define the late decision-making as the decision for whom to vote during the two weeks before the election, including election day. (Brox, Giammo, 2009). In every pre-election survey, a significant number of respondents state that they have not yet developed clear preferences for whom to vote. Even a few months before the election, there might be 20% or more undecided voters. For example, at the Italian elections, 15 days before the 2006 general elections, about 10% of respondents did not decide when they would vote if the elections were held the next day. In addition, the data show that the majority of undecided respondents make a decision only a few days before the voting, and even on election day itself. In all election polls we can find out the socio-demographic characteristics of undecided voters, but less is known about the decision itself and the processes that lead them to vote for one or the other candidate. (Arcuri, Castelli, Galdi, Zogmaister, Amadori, 2008.).

Schmitt-Beck argues that by comparing voters who made decisions at different stages of the election process, we can identify systematic differences in two dimensions: political involvement and cross-pressure. Researchers concluded that voter indecision is due to a lack of political voter participation; therefore it is difficult for them to make a voting decision, while cross-pressures hampered their ability to choose one party or candidate over another, even if they were motivated to make such a decision. He adds that voters who made a decision during the campaign can also be called floating / unsteady voters who were indifferent to politics and led a more or less apolitical life. In addition, they were not particularly interested in the elections and were not very interested in their results. For such voters, a low level of political interest, political knowledge and understanding is typical, and no will to obtain information through the mass media or other political sources. The

decisions that voters ultimately made to the researchers seemed accidental and could not be explained by the usual factors that determine elective behaviour. According to this author, electoral behaviour has an essentially dualistic nature. On one hand, there are voters who have a developed party identification, who are very careful and take care of all information and are therefore well informed, but usually use them to confirm their existing preferences. On the other hand, there are apolitical floating / unsteady voters who lack guidelines for political predispositions, and also political information that would allow them to make a meaningful election decision. (Schmitt-Beck, 2005).

Brox and Giammo say there are two possible explanations for late voter decisions, on one hand, it is possible that voters who are late in deciding will give up voting because they do not have enough information about candidates or parties. These are, for example, contextual factors (economy factors, war and peace, keeping the exchange rate in relation to the dynamics of change, etc.), lack of party identification, knowledge of candidates, etc. One other reason for late decision-making could be that people who have little or no interest in politics wait to learn more about candidates or parties until election day forces them to make a final decision. Another possibility is that late voters prolong their decision because they feel they do not know enough about the candidates, but unlike the former, these late voters probably paid attention to the campaign, they know the candidates and their party affiliation, topics and personal qualities and are still delaying the decision until the last moment. These late-deciding voters follow the entire campaign, gathering as much information as possible before election day. They therefore believe that there are two groups of voters: those who are not interested in the campaign, who for some reason decide to participate at the last minute and therefore have to decide who to vote for just before election day, and those voters who are interested in the campaign and who will try to gather as much information as possible before electing a preferred presidential candidate or party. They also add that these two groups of voters differ in terms of socio-demographic structure, and attitudes, as well as the factors that influence their decision. (Brox, Giammo, 2009).

There are significant disagreements regarding demographics, attitudes, and behavioural characteristics among late voters. Demographically speaking, Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous are of the view that voters who decide later are usually younger than voters who decide earlier in the campaign. They also argue that higher social status (race and education) is occasionally correlated with late decision-making, however, opposed by Chafee, Choe, Whitney and Goldman, who say voters with above-average income and education levels chose earlier than others. Regarding the political attitudes, there is more agreement on the characteristics of late-deciding voters. Voters who make late decisions have weaker party identification of parties, see fewer differences between parties, have less interest in politics, and care little about election outcome. (Brox, Giammo, 2009).

Opponents of the claim that late-deciding voters have become more numerous and that their decisions are increasingly determining election results are Irwin and Holsteyn. They are of the opinion that it is a myth or a misunderstanding, and that all voices are equally important. The basis of the myth is probably the belief of politicians and the media and they are engaged in public opinion polls. Throughout the election campaign, the results of such assumptions are election polls. They say that the pre-election polls are only a picture of the current situation, not a prediction of the results, so if late deciding voters give their votes differently from those who knew for a long time when they will vote, surprises can occur and it seems that they can determine the outcome. The authors argue that much time and years have passed and that a factually unsubstantiated pessimistic view still prevails: a last-minute decision is often a wave of decisions by voters who care little and know little. (Irwin & Holsteyn, 2018).

ABOUT THE EXIT POLL IN MUNICIPALITY OF VOŽDOVAC

An exit poll in Voždovac has been done during the election day. In this municipality there is a total 90 polling stations with 161 256 registered voters. Among these polling stations, we randomly chose 40 of them with a total number of 73 379 voters. For each

selected polling station we had two interviewers, and additionally, we had one coordinator per five polling stations. Interviewers were carefully selected, and they passed a one day training. Regardless of many negative expectations, we did not have any problems during election day, i.e. interviewers regularly collected data with almost no problem at all. Sampling procedure has been set as systematic random sampling, since this is the procedure which guarantees counting based on dynamics of the timing of voting. The instrument for the research was rather simple. Beside their voting behaviour, we asked about basic demographics, as well as the main question for this paper, and this is ‘when did you decide for whom would you vote. In Graph 1 we present our sample consisting of 2969 observations.

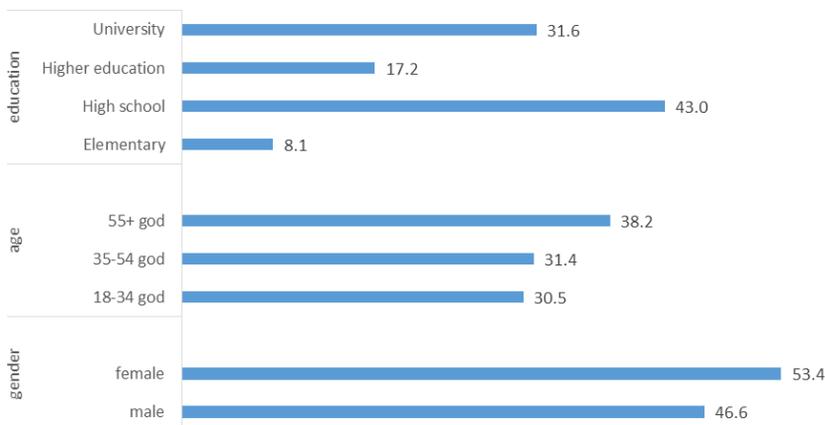
Therefore, the exit poll was organized in front of forty polling stations on a representative sample in the municipality of Voždovac. Two pollsters were in front of the polling station and one of them distributed the questionnaires, while the other had a transparent backpack on his back so as to ensure the data anonymity when inserting the questionnaires. The pollsters were in front of the polling stations before they were open, at the prescribed distance of 50 meters. At the very beginning, they had problems with some polling board members until their tasks were clarified, and the Republic Election Commission confirmed the possibility of their presence. After resolving the misunderstanding and explaining the purpose of the exit poll, the pollsters started working.

According to the established methodological code, they approached the voters after they left the polls. The majority of people wanted to cooperate after they got familiar with the survey purpose. Likewise, the pollsters noted the number of voters who refused to fill in the questionnaire. The citizens were genuinely interested, but the oldest and the youngest voters were the ones most interested. The pollsters did not have any problems or incidents at the polling stations. We had six mobile teams with two members each, which collected filled out questionnaires by car every two hours according to the established route and subsequently brought them to the office where six coordinators entered data into the program.

DATA, RESULTS AND ACCURACY OF POLLING: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

First in graph 1 we present demographics of the respondents. Since we had limited space and time to collect the data, we collected only the main characteristics from the respondents. It is to be seen that the sample is slightly skewed toward more educated, and female.

Graph 1. Exit poll demographics



As far as the accuracy of the exit poll is concerned, in graph 2 we present the results of the elections and the results of the exit poll. All in all, the average error of prediction is 0,56%, which could be treated as more than reasonable. If we speak about specific electoral lists, for four of them the election result was more or less then the confidence intervals predicted (Table 1). However, it can be seen that these are lists with small number of voters, as well as that the prediction is not 'too far' from the limits of the confidence interval.

Graph 2 Accuracy of prediction

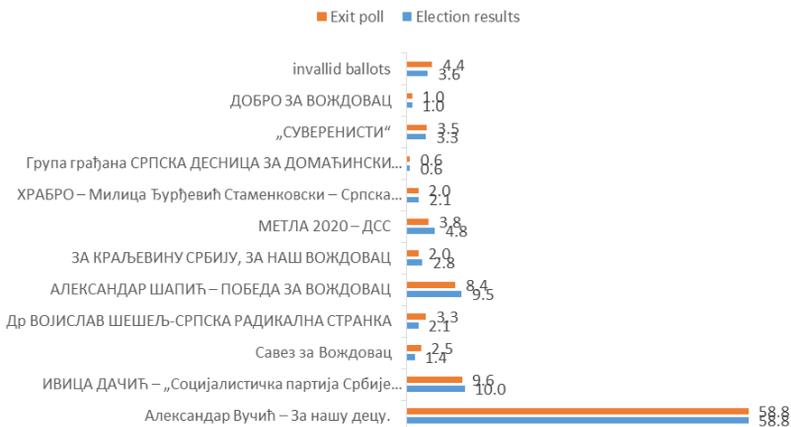


Table 1 The accuracy of prediction with 95% confidence intervals

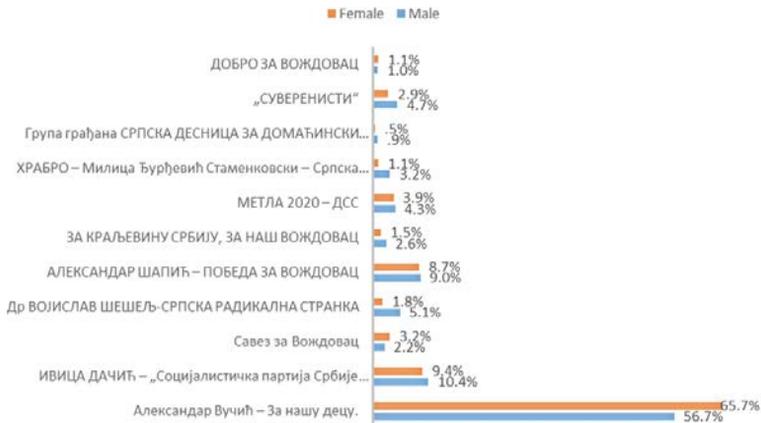
	Election results	Exit poll	Standard error 95% confidence	From	To
Александар Вучић – За нашу децу.	58,8	58,8	1,8	57,0	60,6
ИВИЦА ДАЧИЋ – „Социјалистичка партија Србије (СПС), Јединствена	10,0	9,6	1,1	8,5	10,6
Савез за Вождовац	1,4*	2,5	0,6	1,9	3,1
Др ВОЈИСЛАВ ШЕШЕЉ – СРПСКА РАДИКАЛНА СТРАНКА	2,1*	3,3	0,7	2,7	4,0
АЛЕКСАНДАР ШАПИЋ – ПОБЕДА ЗА ВОЈДОВАЦ	9,5*	8,4	1,0	7,4	9,4
ЗА КРАЉЕВИНУ СРБИЈУ, ЗА НАШ ВОЈДОВАЦ	2,8	2,0	0,5	1,5	2,6
МЕТЛА 2020 – ДСС	4,8*	3,8	0,7	3,1	4,5
ХРАБРО – Милица Ђурђевић Стаменковски – Српска странка Заветници	2,1	2,0	0,5	1,5	2,5
Група грађана СРПСКА ДЕСНИЦА ЗА ДОМАЋИНСКИ ВОЈДОВАЦ – Проф. др Не	0,6	0,6	0,3	0,3	0,9
„СУВЕРЕНИСТИ“	3,3	3,5	0,7	2,8	4,2
ДОБРО ЗА ВОЈДОВАЦ	1,0	1,0	0,4	0,6	1,3
invalid ballots	3,6	4,4	0,8	3,7	5,2

* Value is above or below 95% confidence intervals

VOTING FOR THE LISTS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

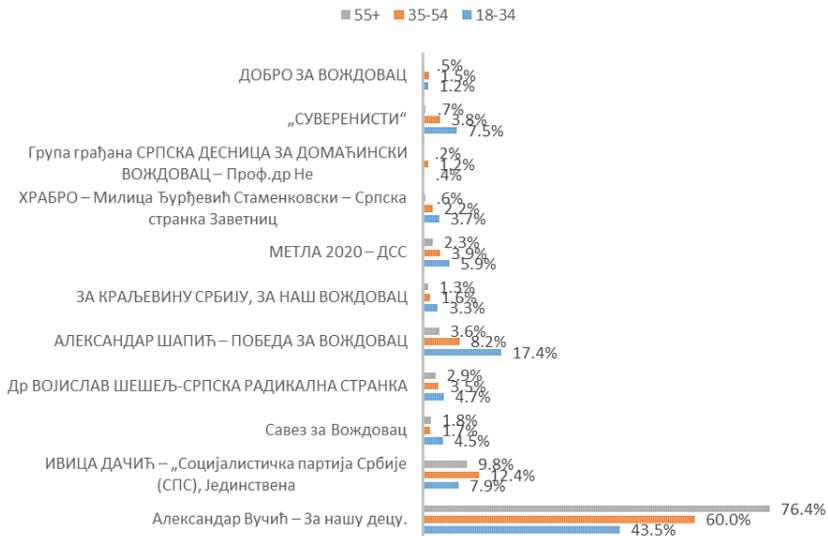
In Graph 3 we present the distribution of votes for male and female voters. It is to note some significant differences regarding gender distribution. The main difference is that women voted significantly more for the SNS electoral list than men. For the SRS electoral list, we observe the opposite pattern, as well as for the electoral lists HRABRO and Suverenisti. Other electoral lists are pretty much balanced in this regards.

Graph 3 Voting for electoral lists and gender distribution

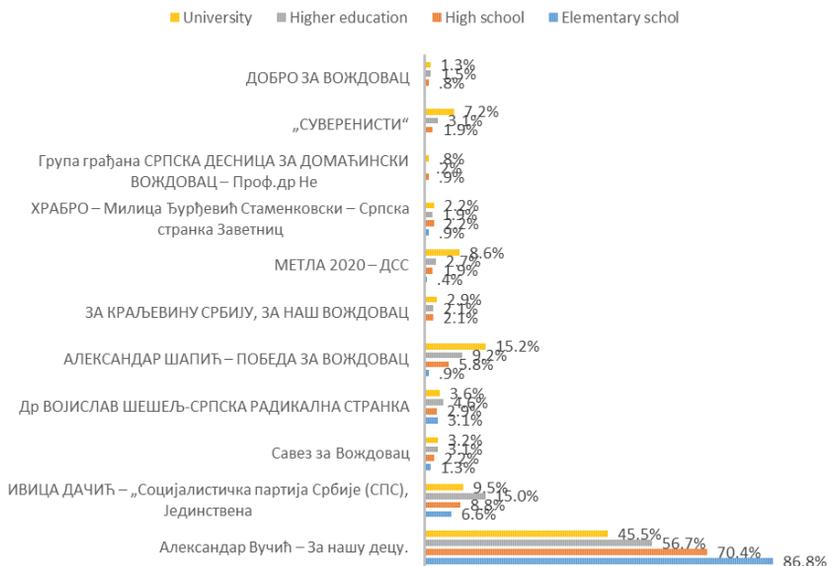


We observe in Graph 4 the age distribution and voting for the parties/ electoral lists. First, we identify clear linear relationship regarding voting for the SNS electoral list and age, i.e. the older the voters are, the more likely it is that they will vote for this electoral list. It can be seen that more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of voters of the SNS party are people older than 55 years, while ‘only’ 43,5% younger than 35 voted for this electoral list, respectively. It is to be concluded that older population too much extent more prefer ruling party. On the other hand, we can see completely the opposite linear pattern for the voters of the Šapić electoral list. Namely, the younger they are, the more likely it is they will vote for this electoral list. The same can be observed for the electoral list ‘Suverenisti’, while for other electoral lists, we have a pretty much balanced distribution.

Graph 4 Age distribution and voting for parties/lists



Graph 5 Education and voting for electoral lists/parties

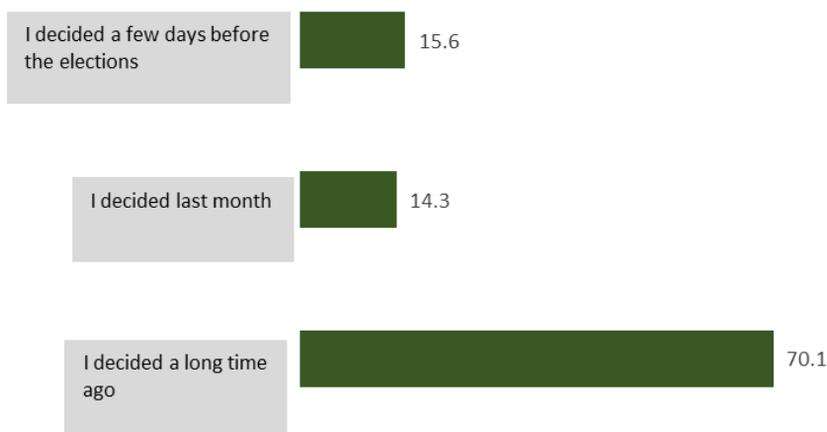


Finally, regarding demographics and voting, in Graph 5 we present percentage distribution of education for each party/ electoral list. Again, there is a clear linear relationship for the SNS voters, i.e. the less educated the voters are, the more likely it is they will vote for SNS. Again, for the electoral lists of Šapić and Suverenisti we observe a completely different linear pattern, meaning that the more educated voters are, the more likely it is they will vote for these two lists. Other parties have a mostly balanced distribution of education of their voters.

DECISION TO VOTE AND VOTING FOR THE PARTIES/LISTS

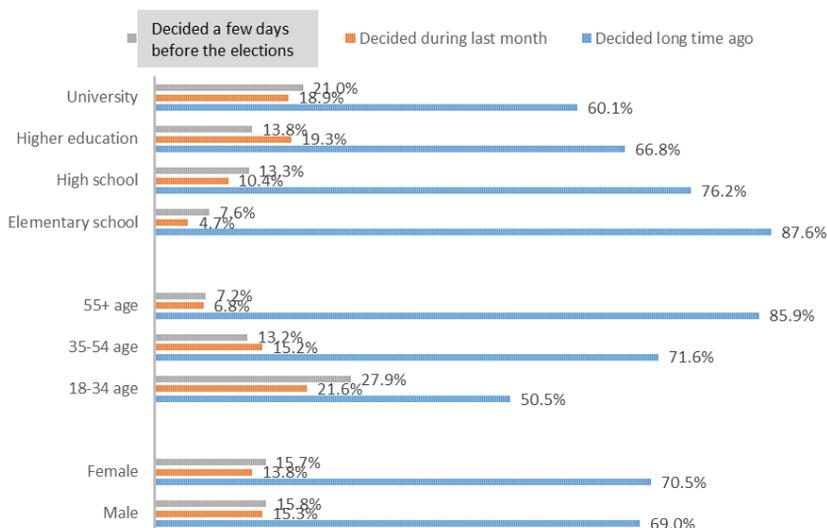
One of the most interesting findings of the exit poll research that has been done is the issue of decision making, or more precisely, the answer to the question when they decided to vote for a certain party/ electoral list. We provide the distribution of this variable in Graph 6. It can be seen that most of the voters decided for whom they would vote a long time ago, while around 15% of the voters decided that during the campaign, and almost the same number made a decision a few days before the elections, respectively.

Graph 6 When did you decide for whom to vote.

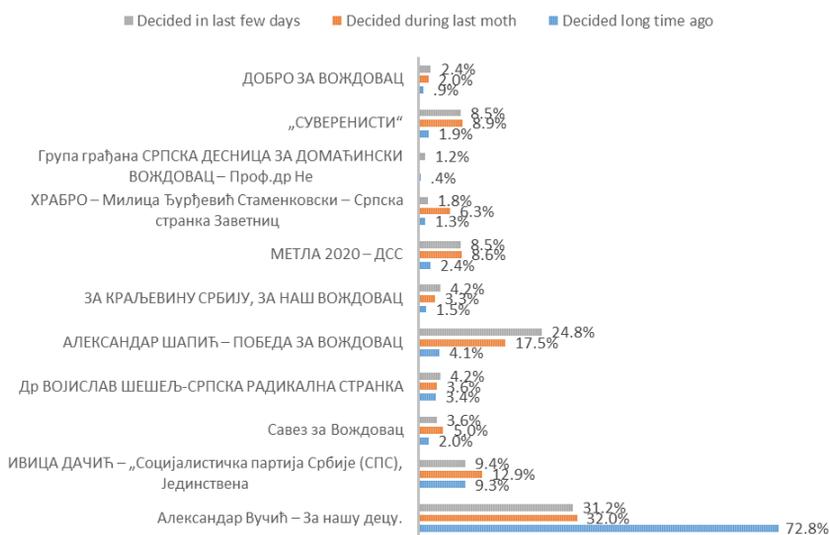


In graph 7 we observe demographics and decision to vote. First, we note that there is no significant difference between men and women in this regard ($X^2(2)=1.029$, $p=0.598$). For the other two variables the differences are significant according to Chi-square test. Although in each demographic category most of the voters decided a long time ago for whom to vote, we observe that the less educated the voters are, the more likely it is that they decided a long time ago. We observe the same linear pattern regarding age distribution, namely, the older they are, the more likely it is that they decided a long time ago.

Graph 7 Decision to vote and demographics



Graph 8 Decision to vote and party/list



One of the most interesting data based on our sample of voters is the relation between the decision to vote and voting for a specific party/ electoral list (Graph 8). We observe that most of the voters of the SNS electoral list decided to vote for that electoral list a long time ago, while for the Šapić electoral list, most of the voters decided to vote for that electoral list during the last month of the campaign, or just a few days before the elections, in particular. This finding deserves more attention in future research.

CONCLUSION

First, apart from usual argument that it is not possible due to cultural reasons to realize an exit poll in Serbia, it has been proved that this is not the case. We did not find any particular problem during the collection data process that proves the thesis false. Second, it is clear that relatively simple sampling procedures provide more than reasonably accurate predictions. Third, a lot of effort must be put in organizing the collection data process, since this is the greatest challenge of all. Fourth, we provide the evidence of very different distribution of votes across different demographics.

Fifth, and for the future research most relevant, we found that voting for certain lists is heavily correlated with the time when the decision was made for whom they will vote. It seems that the voters decided to vote for the ruling party a long time ago, while for the other lists their decision can be attributed to the effect of campaigning.

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