

Geography of the conservative-liberal cleavage and selected factors influencing the distribution of conservative and liberal voters in Slovakia

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Abstract: *The main aim of the paper is to identify the success rate in time and space of political parties with a more conservative electorate and those with a more liberal voters in Slovakia based on the results of parliamentary elections in the last twenty years and to conduct a subsequent correlation analysis of selected socioeconomic parameters (urbanisation rate, registered unemployment rate, the share of persons over 65 years of age, the share of persons with religious faith and share of university-educated persons) and the spatial distribution of conservative or liberal voters. We identify the success rate of parties with a more conservative or more liberal electorate at the level of the Slovak Republic as a whole, as well as in its regions and districts, in the parliamentary elections from 2002 onward, while also evaluating the issue through the spatially disaggregated results of the referendum on the family (2015). Based on statistical analysis, liberal voters in Slovakia are more notably concentrated in urban areas, particularly in districts with a lower level of unemployment, a higher share of people with a university education and non-religious residents. On the other hand, conservative voters are more evenly distributed throughout the country, and in their case, the highest statistical association identified among the monitored socioeconomic indicators related to the share of the population professing a certain religion. The highest summary statistical dependence among the examined variables in terms of the conservative-liberal conflict line was identified for indicators of the degree of urbanisation, the share of persons without religious confession and the share of university-educated people. It seems, given the current social situation opening up the liberal or secular ideas, that in the future the conflict of conservative and liberal values represented by specific parties and a significant number of voters in political struggle will become more significant, and not only in post-socialist countries. All the more important will be such studies, e.g. also in the context of setting up appropriate political marketing and effective election campaigns of political parties.*

Keywords: *conservatism, liberalism, parliamentary elections, referendum on the family, correlation analysis, regions and districts of Slovakia*

Introduction

After the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic in 1993, many Slovak authors have analysed the territorial differences of election results and electoral behaviour in Slovakia, including Vlčková and Brunn (1994), Vlčková (1995), Krivý et al. (1996), Mariot (1999), Madleňák (2006, 2012), Plešivčák (2011a, 2011b, 2014, 2017), Mikuš (2014), Mikuš et al. (2016), Mikuš and Gurňák (2016, 2019) or Krivý and Majo (2018).

The discussion on value-ideological issues that concern our society is a subject that never loses its topicality. Still today, we often come across the typical division of society into its conservative and liberal elements. Since some political parties frequently use these two political ideologies to mobilise their voters, it is interesting and socially necessary to look closer at the success of parties with a more conservative electorate or of those with a more liberal electorate in Slovakia over the last twenty years and to think about what forms the conservative-liberal socio-political conflict in our circumstances. Andrew Heywood (2017) is a renowned author who deals systematically with the issue of political ideologies, their definition and classification, including conservatism and liberalism. He clearly presents various currents of opinion and also clarifies the influence of individual political ideologies on society, its formation and its current state. The level of knowledge in the field of political ideologies has in recent times been heavily influenced by other authors, such as Geffert (2007), Sargent (2008) and Ball et al. (2014). More details on ideologies of conservatism and liberalism in Central Europe are provided by Buček et al. (2017). The topic of conflict lines, or so-called cleavages, is closely related to the issue of political ideologies. A major work in this area is that of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Madleňák (2012) focused his attention on conflict lines and their spatial connections in Slovakia, including the conservative-liberal conflict line. Other authors who deal with this issue in the Central European context include, e.g. Hloušek and Kopeček (2004), Leška (2013) and the already mentioned Buček et al (2017).

Knowledge of the spatial mosaic concerning the public support for conservative and liberal values is important for the political parties, especially in terms of conducting an effective election campaign aimed at maximizing their own election results on one hand and minimizing the material, financial and human resources spent on the campaign on the other (efficient management of the parties' finances). It can be assumed that the importance of this cleavage for the election results may be influenced by the aging phenomenon in the future. More importantly, knowing the spatial distribution of conservative and liberal voters can, to a certain extent, lead to a more precise setting of certain types of public policies (considering the disparities in preferences and needs of people living in different parts of the country), which can, in turn, reduce tensions between various social groups. Based on the above-outlined thoughts, the main aim of this paper is to identify the measure of success of parties with a more conservative electorate and those with a more liberal electorate in Slovakia in time and space based on the results of parliamentary elections held since 2002 and subsequent analysis of selected socioeconomic indicators associated with the spatial distribution of conservative or liberal voters at the sub-state level (at the level of regions and districts). The issue is also evaluated in the context of the results of the referendum on the family held in 2015.

Theoretical foundation

The fundamental reason for the inclination to a certain ideology is either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the socio-political situation and the related economic situation that voters find themselves in (Geffert 2007). The concept of ideology is still a relatively vague and is interpreted in various ways. The problem with discussions on the definition of the term *ideology* is that there is no fixed or agreed definition, but only a set of "competing" definitions. According to David McLellan (1995), ideology is the most elusive concept in all the social sciences. No clear definition exists, because according to Heywood (2017), an ideology is only more or less coherent, which substantiates the fact that ideologies are not hermetically sealed systems and are rather variables of ideas that often intersect at many points. Despite the fact that this concept is not clearly defined, in developed countries, there is general agreement on the essence of this phenomenon, where ideology is understood as a more or less articulated

set of ideas that form the basis of organised political activity, whether such activity aims to maintain the existing political system or to overthrow it.

In terms of political geography, Heywood (2017) classifies *liberalism, conservatism, socialism, nationalism, fascism, anarchism, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, ecologism, feminism, religious fundamentalism* and *religious nationalism* among the most influential political ideologies. Each of these political ideologies, according to Geffert (2007), offers its vision and assessment of reality. The fact that ideologies are not exactly separated by “*boundaries*”, but are constantly evolving and intersect each other in various ways, is related to hybridisation or a specific combination of already existing ideologies (Buček et al. 2017). This has resulted in the emergence of hybrid ideological forms, such as *liberal conservatism, socialist feminism* or *conservative nationalism* (Heywood 2017). In the literature, we can also come across the separation of ideologies into “*classical*” and “*new*” forms. “*New*” ideologies do not have such a strong historical basis as the “*classical*” or main ideologies – *liberalism, socialism, and conservatism* (Buček et al. 2017). The mentioned authors state that it is impossible to expect established ideologies to be fundamentally replaced because the policies based on them are based more on partial values and identities or a critical position towards the main ideologies and do not rely heavily on political parties, but rather on movements and civil society. Heywood (2017) includes *feminism, ecologism, multiculturalism, ethnic nationalism, and various forms of religious fundamentalism* among the “*new*” ideologies.

The term *conservatism* began being used at the start of the 19th century when conservative ideas emerged in response to the growing political, social, and economic changes associated with the French Revolution (Heywood 2017). The first classic manifestations of conservative principles were found by Edmund Burke (2016). Neilson (1958) defines conservatism as the disposition and tendency to preserve what is established, thus, the opposite of change. Rossiter (1968) explains this term as a position of opposition to disruptive changes in the political, social, economic, legal, religious, and cultural order. It is this position in regard to change that Conover and Feldman (1981) consider as the fundamental difference in the self-definition of conservatives and liberals – the acceptance of change characteristic for liberals vs. the typical resistance to change of conservatives. According to several authors (e.g. Mannheim 1986, Eckhardt 1991) conservatism as an ideology is characterised by a number of convictions, such as the desire for order and stability, a preference for gradual rather than revolutionary changes – if change must occur at all – the observing of existing social norms and support for either social or economic inequality.

Liberalism, which is characterised by strong political and economic features and has fundamentally marked the socio-political development and culture of the “*West*”, has been one of the most influential political ideologies for a long time (Buček et al. 2017). The development of the ideology of liberalism was tied to the disintegration of feudalism in Europe and with the rise of the market and capitalist society. Liberal ideas expanded in the 19th century and were related to the expanding industrialisation and market economy in Western countries (Heywood 2017). Heywood also states in his work that the central theme of liberalism is a commitment to and involvement of the individual and the desire to build a society in which people can satisfy their own interests and strive for each individual to have the maximum possible degree of freedom, which corresponds to equal freedom for all. According to Heywood (2017), individualism, freedom, reason, equality, tolerance and justice are among the basic values of liberalism. The development of liberalism has been subjected to various historical influences and according to several authors (e.g. Buček et al. 2017), we can distinguish between *classic liberalism, modern liberalism* and *neoliberalism*.

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) state that various serious social, economic, political, cultural, religious or civilizational problems typically divide society into two camps, i.e. they come from the fact that each society is divided into different segments or social groups that differ from one another in their interests. And it is this long-term and intense tension between individual social groups that Hloušek and Kopeček (2004) connect with the origin of lines of conflict. Established social conditions thus create opportunities for the emergence of party structures that represent the specific interests of some social groups (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Buček et al. (2017), however, point out that social divisions are not fully reflected in political divisions, and they do not support such a simplified understanding of the relationship between the political preferences of the population and the character of a country's party system.

The national revolutions in many Western European countries led to the *state vs. church* conflict, as emerging nation-states tried to separate the earthly and secular from the religious, while also seeking to limit church interference in the state (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). According to the authors of the "*cleavages*" concept, the conflict between the aspirations of the mobilising nation-state and the demands of churches contributed the most to this. This did not involve only economic matters, such as the financing of churches and church property, but also an important and fundamental issue at the time – control over social norms, in particular the question of education. National revolution thus created competition between the state and the church and, within the church, competition between Catholicism and Protestantism developed – and these two church currents were able to create networks of associations and institutions and to establish stable support among the working class. In the so-called Catholic countries in Europe, the first Christian parties began to form (Krno 2017). After the French Revolution, parties that supported the church were already emerging in the countries of Western Europe (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). According to Duverger (1954), the church played a significant role in obtaining voters, particularly for the old centre-right parties.

The Industrial Revolution, the process of industrialisation and the urbanisation of cities associated with it, increased the economic, cultural or political importance of cities, and this led to an increase in resistance among the rural population, thus creating a *city vs. the countryside* line of conflict (Madleňák 2012). The deepening of differences between the city and the country led to the emergence of agrarian parties in the countries of Western Europe (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), which, however, have no significant tradition on the Slovak political scene after 1989 (Plešivčák 2014). In this context, we can talk in Slovakia more about tradition vs. progress, which contributed to the emergence of conservative and liberal parties (Krno 2017). According to Plešivčák (2014), the rural population of Slovakia trusts more traditional state or church institutions than does the urban population. He also states that the values of egalitarianism, paternalism and authoritarianism are more promoted in the rural environment in Slovakia, and pro-reform and liberal ideas predominate in the urban environment.

Madleňák (2012) identifies 6 main areas of social division characteristic of the development of Slovak society since 1993 – the centre vs. periphery, *Mečiarism vs. anti-Mečiarism*¹, the socioeconomic line of conflict, the urban-rural line of conflict, the ethnic and nationalist line of conflict, and the conservative-liberal line of conflict.

¹ Vladimír Mečiar is a retired Slovak lawyer and politician. He was the three-time Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic in the 1990s (1990–1991, 1992–1994 and 1994–1998, until 1992 of Slovak Republic within the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, after the dissolution of the federation in 1993 of the independent Slovak Republic). Especially in the period before the parliamentary elections in 1998, a strong "anti-Mečiar" opposition was formed, which wanted to change Slovakia's foreign policy isolation and bring it to the European Union and NATO. This conflict line was decisive not only before the elections in 1998, but also in the period after (political conditions in Slovakia were decisively influenced by the degree of willingness to cooperate with his party HZDS).

Data and methodology

The main source of data was DATAcube database provided by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic. We also obtained data from the Census of Population, Homes and Dwellings (CPHD) 2001 or 2011 also provided by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and from statistics of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. In the next step, we focused on creating a comprehensive database of results of Slovak parliamentary elections (2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016 and 2020) regarding the results of parties with a more conservative and parties with a more liberal electorate in the period 2002–2020. We processed the results at the level of the Slovak Republic as a whole and for its regions and districts. In the database, we worked with all parties that received at least 1% of valid votes in the election in order to significantly minimise the number of lost votes. We drew data from the definitive election results to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, which are published by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

In the database, we also processed the results of the 2015 referendum on the family, namely participation in the referendum and the average answer “yes” to the three referendum questions – also at the level of the Slovak Republic as a whole and its regions and districts:

1. *Do you agree that no cohabitation of persons other than a union between one man and one woman should be called marriage?*
2. *Do you agree that couples or groups of people of the same sex should not be allowed to adopt and raise children?*
3. *Do you agree that schools should not require the participation of children in teaching about sexual behaviour or euthanasia if their parents or children themselves do not agree with the content of such teaching?*

We drew data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and visualised the results in map outputs and graphs. We then supplemented the database with socioeconomic indicators also at the level of the Slovak Republic and its regions and districts as follows:

- degree of urbanisation,
- rate of registered unemployment (economic factor),
- proportion of persons over age 65 (age factor),
- proportion of non-believers (religiosity factor),
- proportion of university graduates (education factor).

We obtained data for calculating the degree of urbanisation from the DATAcube public database for the specific month in which the individual parliamentary elections took place in the given year. We drew data on the registered unemployment rate from the official statistics of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, also for the month in which the individual parliamentary elections took place in the given year. Data for the indicators of the proportion of persons over 65 years of age, the proportion of persons without religious faith and the proportion of university-educated persons were obtained from census data (CPHD) for 2001 or 2011.

We subsequently identified in the already created database parties with a more conservative and parties with a more liberal electorate in the individual elections. In this article, we do not use the designation conservative or liberal parties, but we are assessing parties with a more conservative or more liberal electorate. This is because the electorate of these parties is not homogeneous. When identifying parties with a more conservative or liberal electorate, we relied on the election program of the given party, but when ranking we mainly took into account the voter base of the party and the reasons why the electorate voted for that party (based on available literature in the theoretical part of the paper). We did not take into consideration populist or “*catch-all parties*” and parties of the Hungarian minority, which have a nationalist

character. It is not possible to clearly classify the parties of the Hungarian minority along a conservative-liberal line, as they mobilise their electorate solely on the basis of the ethnic conflict line. Likewise, we did not consider parties that did not have a clear position on value-ideological and cultural issues.

Therefore, we will take the following parties into consideration as parties with a more conservative electorate: KDH, SNS, P-SNS, ĽSNS, SME RODINA, SIEŤ and VLASTĽ. In this case, we consider the KDH and SIEŤ as parties with a more conservative electorate, particularly in terms of the religious dimension, and the parties SNS, ĽSNS, SME RODINA and VLASTĽ in terms of the dominant antagonistic attitude towards liberal values.

We take the parties SDKÚ-DS, ANO, SF, SaS and the PS/SPOLU coalition into consideration as those with a more liberal electorate. We consider the SDKÚ or SDKÚ-DS to be a party representing a more liberal electorate, despite the name of the party declares its Christian orientation (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union). In this case, the party's programme on value-ideological issues was considerably pushed into the background after 2000 (due to a liberal and pro-reform economic programme); therefore, we will consider the party as one with a more liberal electorate for the analysis (based on its voter base). It is evident that in the first decade of the new millennium the party gained support in the metropolitan environment, thanks mainly to its economic, pro-reform and pro-integration programme (Slovakia's accession to the EU and NATO). Since the party's economic programme significantly suppressed its offer in the value-ideological arena, the party gained support, especially from more liberal-orientated voters. The suitability of assigning the SDKÚ-DS among parties with a more liberal electorate was also confirmed by the fact that the later-formed liberal SaS party took over a significant portion of the original electorate of the party SDKÚ-DS in the parliamentary elections in 2016. What would happen if we did not include such an important party as SDKÚ-DS among the parties with a more liberal electorate? If this party were included among the more conservative parties, Bratislava would become the "most conservative" part of Slovakia based on the election results (especially in the period of its boom in the years 2002–2010). If the party were not included in either the liberal or the conservative bloc (i.e. the party's results were not taken into account), the party with a more conservative electorate would still gain the upper hand in Bratislava (2002–2010), which is not in conformity with Bratislava as a long-term "liberal" centre of Slovakia. For these reasons, we were forced to understand the SDKÚ-DS as a party that was preferred by a sizeable portion of liberal voters in the elections (and to include it in the calculations in favour of a bloc of parties with a more liberal electorate). We consider the PS/SPOLU coalition in our work to be a coalition of parties with a more liberal electorate due to the dominant liberal orientation of the party PS, which was also the main party of this two-party coalition on the basis of pre-election polls.

We subsequently determined the summary election result of each ideological bloc of parties in individual parliamentary elections during the period under review. We determined the success of individual blocs of parties with a more conservative, or more liberal electorate, whether at the level of the Slovak Republic or its regions and districts, based on the percentage difference (percentage points) between the share of valid votes for the bloc of parties with a more conservative electorate and the share of valid votes for the bloc of parties with a more liberal electorate in the given elections and in the given territorial unit. We captured the difference found in percentage points at the district level in the maps, or at the level of regions and Slovakia as a whole in graphs. Based on these maps and graphs, we were able to identify and relevantly comment on the success rate of parties with the more conservative or more liberal electorate in the regions of Slovakia as well as look for associations between the distribution of conservative or liberal voters and the results of the 2015 referendum on the family.

For the analysis of selected socioeconomic parameters in connection with the electoral support of parties with a more conservative or more liberal electorate in the regions of Slovakia, we chose a correlation tool – *Pearson's correlation coefficient* (r)² – which expresses the linear statistical dependence of the examined variables. The identified dependencies indicate the existence of a relationship between two variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient is mathematically expressed by the equation:

$$r = \frac{\sum(x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum(x - \bar{x})^2 \sum(y - \bar{y})^2}}$$

x = independent variable, y = dependent variable

Two data sets were used to calculate the correlations of a given socioeconomic indicator. The first consisted of values of the given socioeconomic indicators in all 79 districts, and the second set was made up of the percentage share of electoral support for the bloc of parties with a more conservative or more liberal electorate in individual districts of Slovakia in the specific elections. Based on Pearson's correlation coefficient (Tab. 1), we determined the dependence between the examined socioeconomic indicators and the support of the bloc of parties with more conservative (orange colour), more liberal electorate (green colour) as well as their overall effect representing both sides of conservative-liberal conflict line (blue colour). We used the CORREL function in Microsoft Excel to make the calculation.

A correlation coefficient is a dimensionless number whose values move in the interval from $\langle -1; 1 \rangle$. During the analysis, we determined whether this is (Gregorová and Fillová 2004):

- a strong positive linear dependence; r is from the interval $\langle 0.7; 1 \rangle$,
- a strong negative linear dependence; r is from the interval $\langle -1; -0.7 \rangle$,
- a moderately strong positive linear dependence; r is from the interval $\langle 0.5; 0.7 \rangle$,
- a moderately strong negative linear dependence; r is from the interval $\langle -0.7; -0.5 \rangle$,
- a weak positive linear dependence; r is from the interval $\langle 0.3; 0.5 \rangle$,
- a weak negative linear dependence; r is from the interval $\langle -0.5; -0.3 \rangle$,
- the values are independent, if $r \in \langle -0.3; 0.3 \rangle$.

Since the data necessary to calculate the rate of urbanisation and the data on the registered unemployment rate are available from the above sources on a monthly basis, we analysed the mentioned two socioeconomic parameters with respect to all six parliamentary elections during the period under review. Data for the indicators of the share of persons over 65 years of age, the share of persons without religious confession and the share of university-educated persons were obtained from the CPHD 2001 or 2011; therefore, we analysed these parameters with respect to the parliamentary elections of 2002 or 2010 and 2012 (as the results of CPHD 2021 are not yet available). The output consists of graphs in which we captured the identified dependencies and subsequently commented on them and looked for connections.

² The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) applied in the statistical analysis expresses the mutual degree of correlation (linear dependence) between two variables (independent variable x and the dependent variable y). It expresses the strength (tightness) of the linear dependence between two variables, which in numerical expression ranges from +1 to -1. The value +1 expresses the maximum direct linear dependence and, conversely, the value -1 indicates the maximum indirect linear dependence between the considered variables. The closer this value is to zero, the smaller is the tightness of the dependence between the variables. Values close to zero say that there is no linear dependence between the investigated variables or this dependence is very weak.

Results

Summary support for parties with a more conservative and parties with a more liberal electorate in parliamentary elections, 2002–2020

Upon analysing the results of all six parliamentary elections that took place from 2002 to 2020, we can state that at the national level the total difference in the gain of votes of parties with a more conservative and liberal electorate is 2.67 *percentage points* (abbreviated *pp*). This tells of the only slight predominance of parties with a more conservative orientation within the Slovak Republic during the 6 elections.

We see (Fig. 1) that the only region where parties with a more liberal electorate prevailed during the six parliamentary elections we examined is the Bratislava Region (-15.92 *pp*). In the other 7 regions during the period under review, the bloc of parties with a more conservative electorate prevailed, even though we can see this only slightly in the Košice Region (0.57 *pp*). In contrast, the bloc with the more conservative electorate received the highest support during the six elections in the Žilina Region (12.44 *pp*) and the Prešov Region (10.18 *pp*).

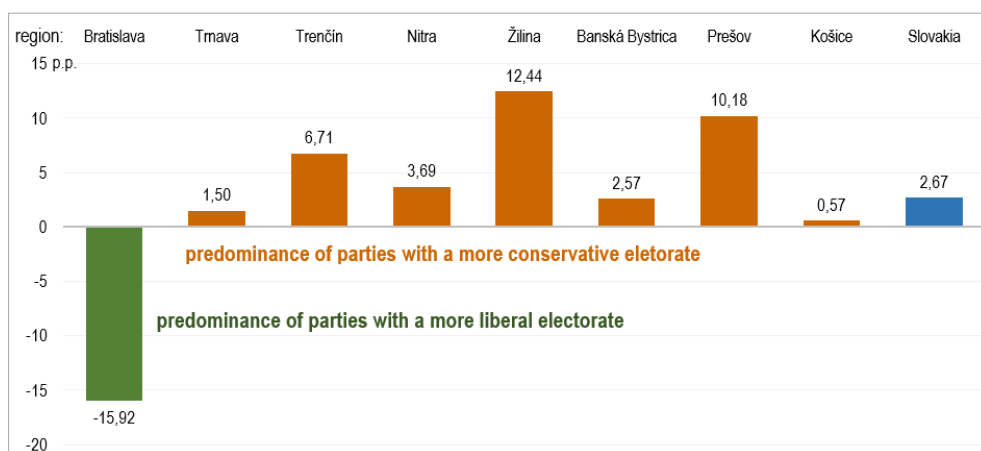


Fig. 1. Summary difference in the share of valid votes for parties with a more conservative and parties with a more liberal electorate in the regions of Slovakia in the parliamentary elections 2002–2020; Source: Authors' elaboration based on data by SOSR (2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020)

Based on summary results at the district level (Fig. 2) we can say that in the district Bratislava I (BA 1, -24.77 *pp*) the difference between the group of parties with a more conservative and liberal electorate was the most favourable for the liberal ones, which evidences the largest concentration of liberally orientated voters being in this part of Bratislava. Further (18-20 *pp*) follow the districts of Bratislava IV (BA 4), Bratislava V (BA 5), Bratislava II (BA 2) and Bratislava III (BA 3). Based on the analysis of the results of six parliamentary elections, we found in western Slovakia, aside from Bratislava, a predominance (2- 9 *pp*) of the bloc of parties with a more liberal electorate in the districts of Senec (SC), Pezinok (PK), Malacky (MA), Myjava (MY), Komárno (KN), Dunajská Streda (DS), Skalica (SI) and Šaľa (SA). In central Slovakia, the group of parties with a more liberal electorate slightly predominated (0,5-7 *pp*) in the districts of Banská Bystrica (BB), Zvolen (ZV) and slightly in Lučenec (LC), while in eastern Slovakia this occurred (7-13 *pp*) only in urban districts of Košice (KE 1 – KE 4).

The group of political entities with a more conservative electorate dominated (23-30 *pp*) the most in the north-west during the six parliamentary elections in the districts of Námestovo (NO), Tvrdošín (TS) and Bytča (BY). We can also see a predominance (11-19 *pp*) of political

entities with a more conservative electorate in other districts in northern Slovakia – Kysucké Nové Mesto (KM) Ružomberok (RK), Čadca (CA), Považská Bystrica (PB), Dolný Kubín (DK) and Púchov (PU) and in districts in eastern Slovakia (11-17 pp) – Levoča (LE), Sabinov (SB), Vranov nad Topľou (VT), Stará Ľubovňa (SL), Sobrance (SO), Bardejov (BJ), Kežmarok (KK), Humenné (HE), Gelnica (GL), Stropkov (SP) and Snina (SV).

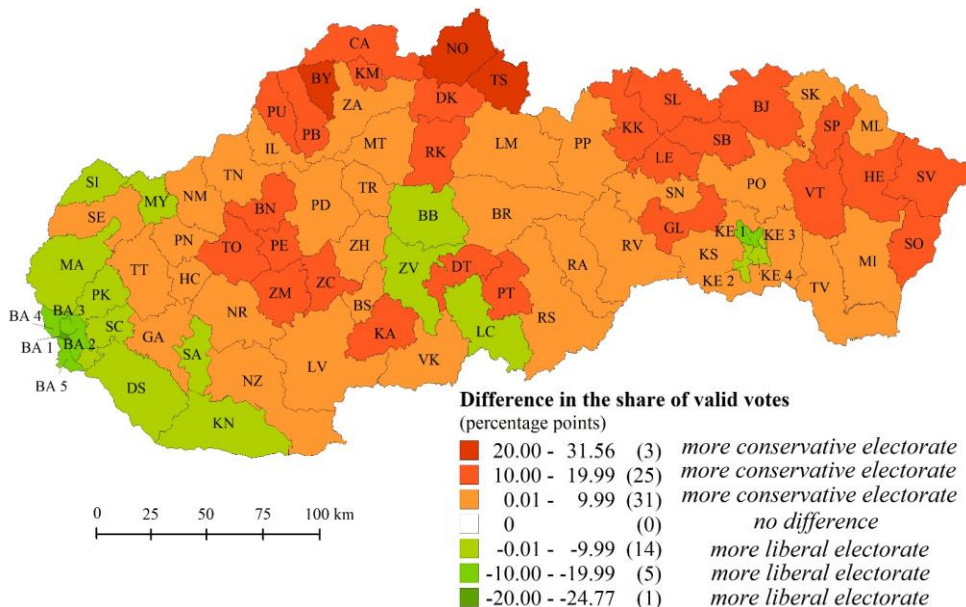


Fig. 2. Summary difference in the share of valid votes for parties with a more conservative and parties with a more liberal electorate in the districts of Slovakia in the parliamentary elections 2002–2020; Source: Authors' elaboration based on data by SOSR (2002, 2006, 2010 2012, 2016, 2020)

Assessment of participation in the 2015 referendum on the family and the average answer “yes” to the three referendum questions

With decision No. 320/2014 Coll., based on a petition of citizens, the President of the Slovak Republic announced a referendum, which subsequently took place on 7 February 2015. In this part of the article, we analyse participation of eligible citizens in the referendum and the average answer “yes” to the three referendum questions, and we look for their associations with the electoral support of the bloc of parties with a more conservative or a more liberal electorate during the six parliamentary elections at the national, regional and district levels.

The turnout of eligible voters in the Slovak Republic in the 2015 referendum on the family was 21.47% (SOSR). At the regional level (Fig. 3), the highest turnout was in the Prešov Region (32.31%), the Žilina Region (29.87%) and the Trenčín Region (21.83%). The turnout in the Bratislava, Trnava and Nitra Regions was at about the same level (approximately 16%), and the Košice Region had a slightly higher voter turnout (19.08%). The lowest turnout was found in the Banská Bystrica Region (15.84%).

During the six parliamentary elections, the bloc of parties with a more conservative electorate received the highest support in the Žilina, Prešov and Trenčín Regions. This indicates that participation in the referendum, which was the highest in these same three regions of Slovakia, was related to the electoral support of conservatively orientated political entities.

At the district level (Fig. 4), the highest turnout (31-53%) occurred in the districts in the north and east of Slovakia. The highest turnout was in the districts of Námestovo, Tvrdošín,

Dolný Kubín, Čadca, Ružomberok, Kysucké Nové Mesto, Bytča and in most districts in the Prešov Region. Based on the support of parties with a more conservative electorate that we analysed, we can say that at the district level participation in the referendum was highest in the districts where we found the highest support for a group of political entities with a more conservative electorate. On the other hand, turnout in the referendum was lower in districts where we see only a milder predominance of a bloc of parties with a more conservative electorate or a predominance of more liberal-oriented political entities.

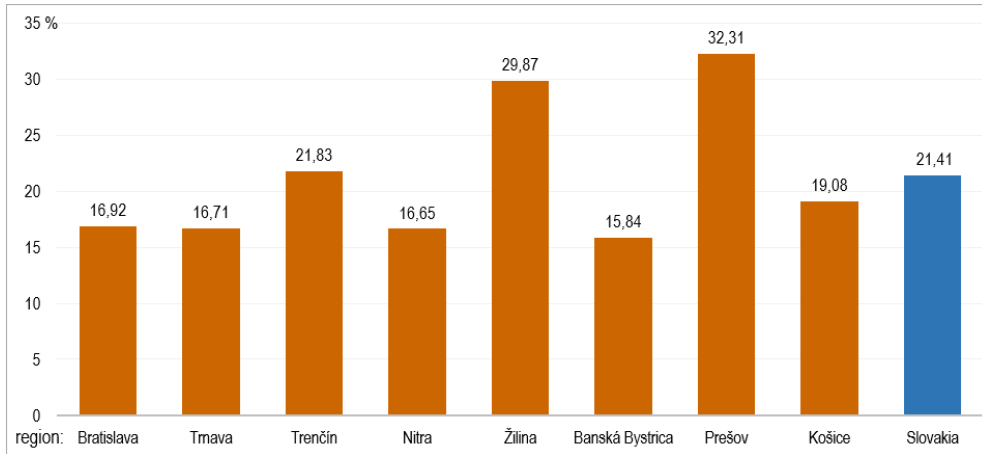


Fig. 3. Turnout in the referendum on the family in 2015 in the regions of Slovakia;
 Source: Authors' elaboration based on data by SOSR (2015)

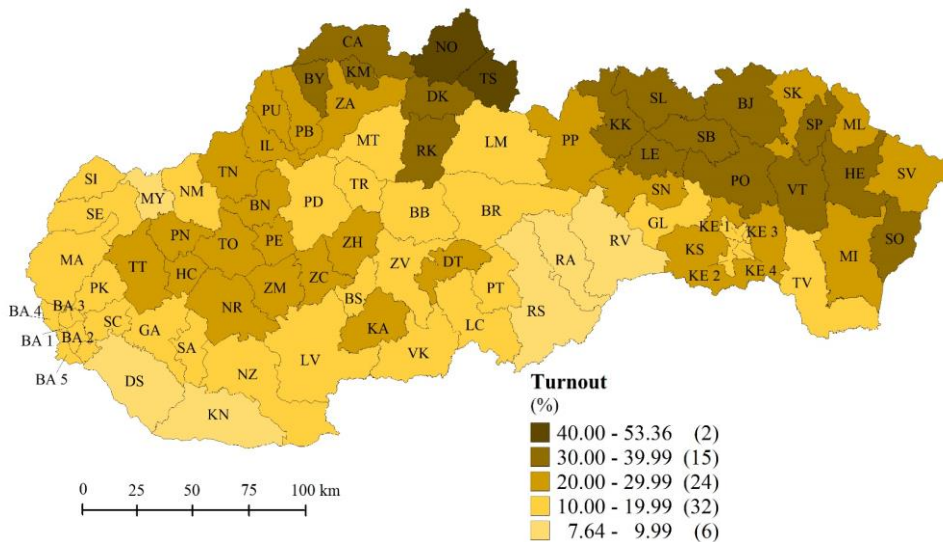


Fig. 4. Turnout in the referendum on the family in 2015 in the districts of Slovakia;
 Source: Authors' elaboration based on data by SOSR (2015)

When analysing the average share of the answer “yes” to the three referendum questions at the regional level (Fig. 5), we see that the highest average share of “yes” occurred in the Prešov (94.92%) and Žilina Regions (94.04%). The lowest average share of the answer “yes” was found in the Banská Bystrica (89.77%) and Bratislava Regions (90.05%). In the Prešov and Žilina Regions, where we recorded the highest support for the bloc of parties with a more conservative

electorate, participation in the referendum was the highest, as was the average share of the answer “yes” to the three referendum questions. In the Bratislava, Trnava and Nitra Regions, where turnout in the referendum was at approximately the same level (16%), we also see the average share of the answer “yes” at approximately the same level (90%), despite stronger support from parties with a more liberal electorate in Bratislava Region compared to other regions.

In the districts (Fig. 6) in north-western Slovakia (Námestovo, Tvrdošín, Dolný Kubín and Bytča) and in districts in eastern Slovakia (Stará Ľubovňa, Sabinov, Bardejov, Vranov nad Topľou, Stropkov, Humenné and others) we can observe a connection between turnout in the referendum and the support of parties with a more conservative electorate and an average share of the answer “yes” in three referendum questions, which is associated with the spatial distribution of more conservative voters within Slovakia.

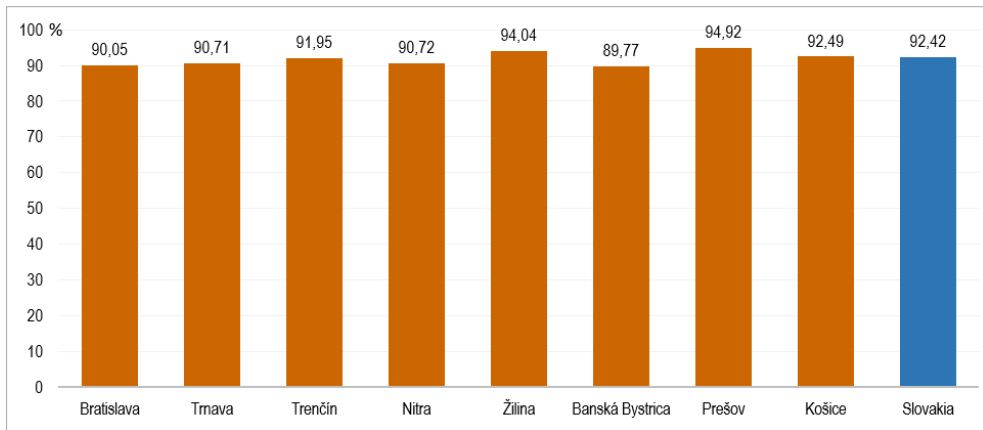


Fig. 5. The average share of the answer “YES” to the three referendum questions in the referendum on the family in 2015 in the regions of Slovakia;
 Source: Authors’ elaboration based on data by SOSR (2015)

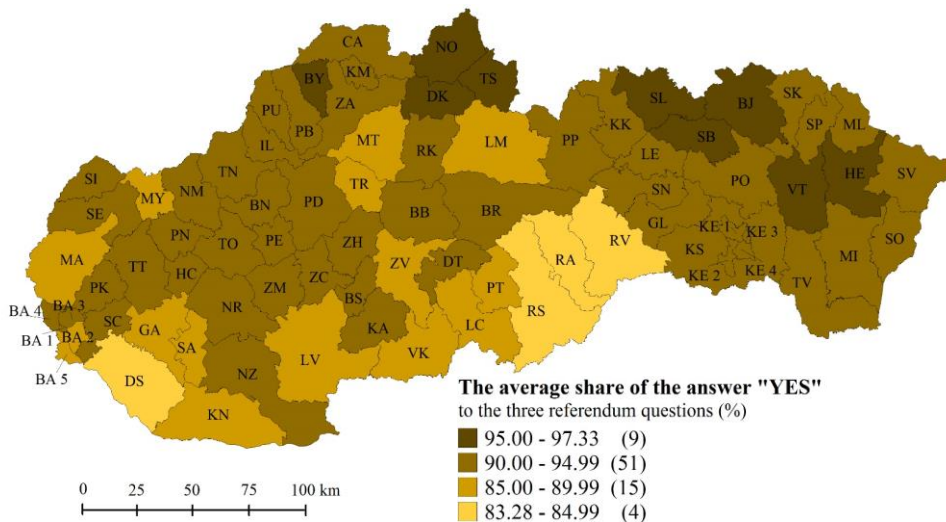


Fig. 6. The average share of the answer “YES” to the three referendum questions in the referendum on the family in 2015 in the districts of Slovakia;
 Source: Authors’ elaboration based on data by SOSR (2015)

Statistical association of the election results of parties with a more conservative and liberal electorate and selected socioeconomic indicators

In this part of the paper, we focus on an analysis of selected socioeconomic indicators in relation to the electoral support of parties with a more conservative and liberal electorate. We will look at five selected socioeconomic indicators – namely the rate of urbanisation, the rate of registered unemployment (economic factor), the share of people over age 65 (age factor), the share of non-believers (religiosity factor) and the share of university graduates (education factor). We analyse the rate of urbanisation and the rate of registered unemployment in the context of all 6 parliamentary elections. The share of people over 65, the share of persons with no religious belief and the share of university-educated people will be examined in connection with the parliamentary elections in 2002, 2010 and 2012, since we are using data from the Census of Population, Housing and Dwellings 2001 or 2011.

Degree of urbanisation

From the correlation analysis (Fig.7, Fig. 8, and Tab. 1) of the degree of urbanisation in the individual districts of Slovakia, we see a high positive dependence with the election results of more liberally oriented political entities in all 6 parliamentary elections. We can state that support for political parties with a more liberal electorate also strongly depended on the rate of urbanisation, since in all 6 parliamentary elections the Pearson's correlation coefficient in relation to the rate of urbanisation was 0.7 and higher. On the other hand, Pearson's correlation coefficient for the bloc of parties with a more conservative electorate is negative, but in the parliamentary elections 2002–2016, the statistical dependence towards the degree of urbanisation was not confirmed. Pearson's correlation coefficient reached the most significant value of -0.40 in the 2020 parliamentary elections, but even here, we can still speak of a weak negative dependence. These findings can perhaps be explained by the fact that while liberal voters are strongly tied to the urban environment, conservative voters also live in the urban environment as well as in rural areas.

Rate of registered unemployment

From the analysis of the resulting correlations of the registered unemployment rate for the bloc of parties with a more conservative electorate, we can say that no notable or positive dependence was demonstrated between the registered unemployment rate and support for political entities with a more conservative electorate, as Pearson's correlation coefficient in 2010, 2012 and 2016 was very close to 0. In 2002, 2006 and 2020 we can talk about a very weak positive (2020) and negative dependence (2002, 2006). In contrast, the negative dependence of the registered unemployment rate and the bloc of parties with a more liberal electorate gradually increases from 2002 (-0.39) to 2006 (-0.49) and 2010 (-0.65), which, according to Madleňák (2012), may indicate an increase in the importance of the socioeconomic conflict line during this period. The values of Pearson's correlation coefficient in the other parliamentary elections in 2012 (-0.63), 2016 (-0.64) and 2020 (-0.52) speak of a moderately strong negative statistical dependence between the registered unemployment rate and the support of the bloc of parties with a more liberal electorate. The negative dependence determined between the registered unemployment rate and the support of parties with a more liberal electorate also tells us about the spatial distribution of more liberal voters, who are more concentrated in parts of Slovakia with a low unemployment rate and a higher standard of living.

Age

In the case of assessing the age factor, the correlation analysis did not indicate either a direct or indirect dependence between the population of 65+ and electoral support for parties with a more conservative or more liberal electorate. The resulting correlations of the share of population 65+ for a group of parties with a more conservative and liberal electorate are influenced by the distribution of the population by age within Slovakia. Because of religion, tradition and education, the districts in the north and north-east of Slovakia are typically characterised by a high birth rate, which in the end means that these districts do not age rapidly and maintain

a relatively young population structure (Némethová and Šimánek 2013). Therefore, we can say that in these regions of Slovakia the more conservative-oriented parties are gaining support among young people who, because of their education and the local political climate, are much more likely to prefer conservative values. On the other hand, urbanised districts often have a higher proportion of the population 65+, which, according to Némethová and Šimánek (2013), is due to the low birth rate and the quality health care. In the metropolitan environment, in particular, older people often vote for more liberal parties. Both of these specifics undermine the traditional generalising view that young people vote for more liberal parties and older people vote more conservatively. Our research indicates that in this context, in many cases, this also depends on the local political climate and the traditional value-ideological orientation, which is “at home”, so to speak, in a given region or district.

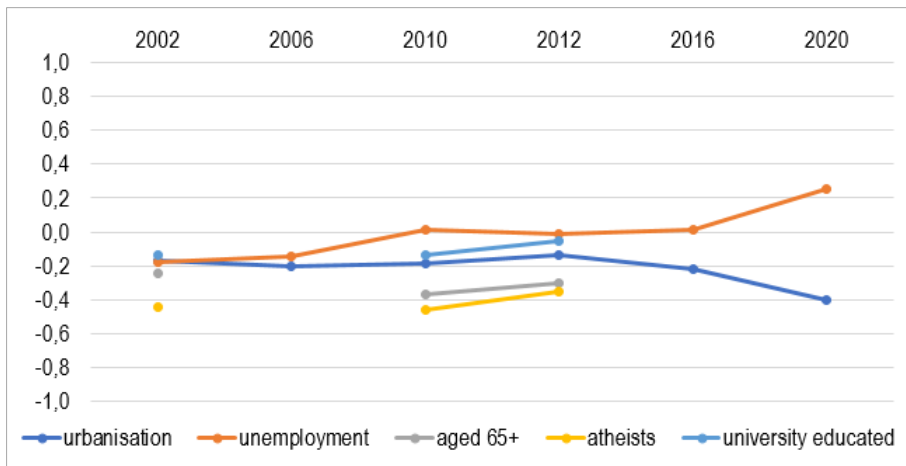


Fig. 7. Development of statistical dependence of selected socio-economic parameters in connection with the election result of parties with a more conservative electorate in Slovakia in the parliamentary elections 2002 – 2020; Source: Authors’ elaboration based on data by SOSR (2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020)

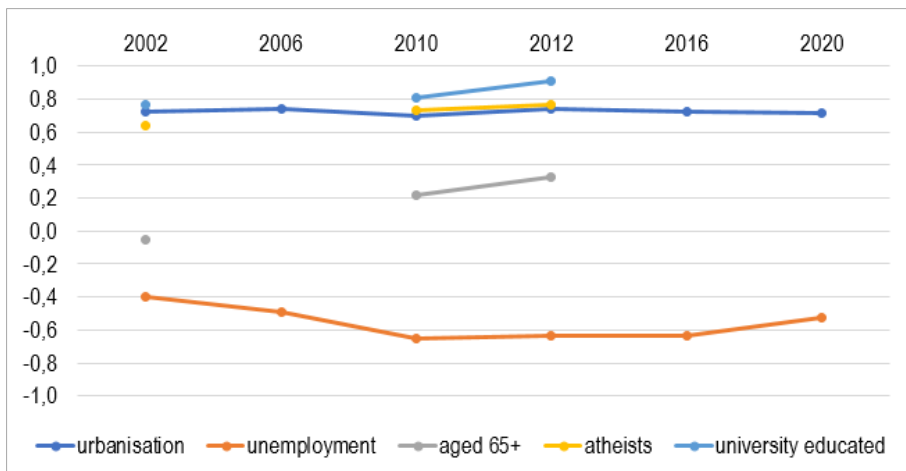


Fig. 8. Development of statistical dependence of selected socio-economic parameters in connection with the election result of parties with a more liberal electorate in Slovakia in the parliamentary elections 2002 – 2020; Source: Authors’ elaboration based on data by SOSR (2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020)

Tab. 1. Results of correlation analysis of selected socio-economic parameters in the context of conservative-liberal cleavage in Slovakia in the parliamentary elections 2002 – 2020

	parties with a more conserv. electorate						absolute values						average
	2002	2006	2010	2012	2016	2020	2002	2006	2010	2012	2016	2020	
urbanisation	-0.17	-0.21	-0.18	-0.13	-0.22	-0.40	0.17	0.21	0.18	0.13	0.22	0.40	0.22
unemployment	-0.18	-0.15	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.26	0.18	0.15	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.26	0.10
aged 65+	-0.25	-	-0.37	-0.30	-	-	0.25	-	0.37	0.30	-	-	0.31
atheists	-0.45	-	-0.46	-0.35	-	-	0.45	-	0.46	0.35	-	-	0.42
univ. educated	-0.14	-	-0.14	-0.06	-	-	0.14	-	0.14	0.06	-	-	0.11
	parties with a more liberal electorate						absolute values						average
	2002	2006	2010	2012	2016	2020	2002	2006	2010	2012	2016	2020	
urbanisation	0.73	0.74	0.70	0.74	0.72	0.71	0.73	0.74	0.70	0.74	0.72	0.71	0.73
unemployment	-0.39	-0.49	-0.65	-0.63	-0.64	-0.52	0.39	0.49	0.65	0.63	0.64	0.52	0.55
aged 65+	-0.05	-	0.22	0.33	-	-	0.05	-	0.22	0.33	-	-	0.20
atheists	0.64	-	0.73	0.76	-	-	0.64	-	0.73	0.76	-	-	0.71
univ. educated	0.77	-	0.81	0.91	-	-	0.77	-	0.81	0.91	-	-	0.83
	parties with a more conservative and more liberal electorate						absolute values						average
							2002	2006	2010	2012	2016	2020	
urbanisation	OVERALL						0.45	0.47	0.44	0.44	0.47	0.56	0.47
unemployment							0.29	0.32	0.33	0.32	0.32	0.39	0.33
aged 65+							0.15	-	0.29	0.32	-	-	0.25
atheists							0.54	-	0.60	0.56	-	-	0.57
univ. educated							0.45	-	0.48	0.48	-	-	0.47

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data by SOSR (2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020)

Religiosity

The analysis of the share of the population without religious confession in connection with the support of parties with a more conservative and parties with a more liberal electorate proved to be the most contrasting. In relation to the support of a more liberal-orientated bloc of parties, we can state a growing direct dependence between its support and the proportion of the population without religion. In 2002, the value Pearson's correlation coefficient was 0.64, enabling us to speak of a moderately strong statistical dependence. In the next elections, however, in 2010 and 2012, we can already see that there is a strong positive dependence (0.73 and 0.76, respectively) between the share of the population without religion and support for parties with a more liberal electorate. At the same time, we can also see an indirect dependence between the share of people without religion and the support for parties with a more conservative electorate. In 2002 and 2010, the values of Pearson's correlation coefficient were -0.45 or -0.46; and -0.35 in 2012. According to Madleňák (2012), the factor of the share of the population without religion reflects the division of society into more secular and liberal parts on the one hand and a more religiously and value-conservative part on the other hand. This also underlies the regional differences in support for the group of parties with a more conservative and the group of parties with a more liberal electorate.

Education

The spatial distribution of the last socioeconomic parameter examined – the share of university-educated persons – correlates significantly with the support of parties with a more liberal electorate. In all three parliamentary elections in which the share of university-educated voters was tested, we see a strong positive relationship between the proportion of university-educated people and the support of parties with a more liberal electorate. In 2002, the Pearson's correlation coefficient was 0.77; in 2010 it was 0.81, and in 2012 the coefficient reached a value of 0.91, which indicates a strong direct dependence of the examined variables. We can therefore say that higher education is a typical feature of liberal voters. No dependence was found in the three parliamentary elections from correlation analysis of the share of university graduates and the support of political groups with a more conservative electorate, since the correlation coefficient was close to 0. The reason no dependence was detected between the share of university-educated persons and support of political parties with a more conservative electorate is again the more equal distribution of conservative voters in comparison with more liberal voters, who are concentrated mainly in the urban environment.

In terms of the conservative-liberal conflict line as such, among the all variables under study we found the strongest absolute statistical dependence to be in relation to the share of persons without religious confession (absolute value of 0.57), the degree of urbanisation and the share of university-educated people (0.47 in both cases).

Discussion and conclusion

After the era of communism and its efforts to atheize society, Slovakia remained a religious country, and this conservative-liberal line was expressed in the first free elections in 1990 when the main rival of the revolutionary, liberal-secular VPN movement was the conservative KDH movement. The conservative-liberal line was then subsequently suppressed by the dominant conflict of Mečiarism vs. anti-Mečiarism and slipped into the background, which, according to Madleňák (2012), confirms the fact that KDH, as a typical representative of conservative values, formed a coalition of SDK with liberal political entities. Škutová (2013) talks about the union of extremes and the profiling of opposition political currents, despite the ideological plurality, in order to fight against a common adversary – Mečiarism. The fact that this line was not notably dominant is also demonstrated by the formation of a coalition after the 2002 or 2010 elections when the conservative KDH cooperated with the liberal parties ANO or SaS (Madleňák 2012). The cooperation of conservative and liberal parties was especially difficult after the 2010 elections, when internal conflicts occurred in the coalition between conservative and liberal demands, mainly between the conservative KDH and the liberal SaS, when disagreements occurred on questions of decriminalising marijuana and registered partnerships (Leška 2013). During 2012 – 2020, when Smer-SD was the strongest governing party, no liberal party was part of any governing coalition. That changed only after the 2020 elections when the SaS again became one of the governing parties. According to Leška (2013), the value orientations of citizens are intertwined in all lines of conflict and may add a certain specific meaning to them in a given spatio-temporal context, and this creates space for the cooperation of more conservative and liberal political groupings.

The results of our research confirm the statements that conservatism, in comparison with liberalism, is not strictly associated with any social class, because conservative values are widespread throughout society (Buček et al. 2017). The electorate voting for liberal parties is much more spatially concentrated. In only 20 out of a total of 79 districts in Slovakia were parties with a more liberal electorate able to achieve a better election result overall for all monitored elections than parties relying on a conservative voter, and nearly half of these districts are the city districts of Bratislava and Košice. However, parties with a more liberal electorate have a significant “upside” only in the city districts of Bratislava, where their election result was almost 20 or 25 percentage points (Bratislava I) higher compared to the result of more conservative parties. The difference in favour of more liberal parties in Košice at the district level is from 7 to 13

percentage points (less than in Bratislava, but more than in its surroundings). The remaining districts of the Bratislava Region, specifically Senec, Pezinok and Malacky, showed themselves to be areas with a predominance of support from more liberal parties, with a difference in their favour ranging from 5 to 10 percentage points. Geographically, but also in terms of values, the Skalica and Myjava districts are close to the district of Malacky. To the south-west, they are complemented by the districts of Dunajská Streda, Komárno and Šaľa with the predominant or a significant share of the population of Hungarian nationality. In the case of these five districts, the difference in favour of the more liberal parties is only around 2–3 percentage points. The last three districts with a slight predominance of support for political entities with a more liberal constituency are located in central Slovakia in the Banská Bystrica, Zvolen and Lučenec districts. In their case, the intensity of support for liberal parties increases with the degree of urbanisation of the given districts; however, even in the case of the Banská Bystrica district, it does not reach the level of any of the city districts of Bratislava or Košice.

A crucial element of conservatism is its connection with religion and Judeo-Christian morality (Nibset 1993). The Roman Catholic church is considered to be one of the pillars of conservatism; it is also associated with a conservative pessimistic understanding of the essence of man as an imperfect being. Emphasis is also placed on the family, the church, schools, the state and discipline, without which ethical behaviour in society and the responsible use of freedom would not be possible (Buček et al. 2017). Our research showed in relation to the election results of parties with a more conservative electorate the highest statistical correlation among the assessed socioeconomic parameters regarding the share of the population professing a certain religion (the highest negative correlation to the distribution of the population without religion). The results of the 2015 referendum on the family also confirmed these results. However, in the context of the socioeconomic characteristics examined, the election results reacted much more sensitively to the presence of liberal voters – positively especially in relation to the spatial distribution of higher education, urbanisation, and non-religious populations. In contrast, a negative association was seen in their case in relation to the unemployment rate. When evaluating the age factor, we can assume an influence of contextual factors, specifically e.g. local political climate.

It should be observed that conservative thinking historically has not been uniform in terms of history, because it has been adapted to existing traditions and national cultures. Conservatism has not been tied to any firm system of ideas, and the extent to which it has adapted to national traditions and cultures has influenced the prosperity of conservatism as an ideology (Heywood 2017). Its characteristics, expressions as well as explanatory factors are therefore different from country to country and from place to place. What's more, the evaluation of the conservative-liberal line of conflict will always have its systemic and methodological hazards, beginning with the inclusion of political parties in individual ideological blocs, since the motives of the electorate for choosing a given party may be different and may not always respect its predominant profile (the main line of conflict). An associated complication is the fact that the parties themselves, as well as their voters, may distinguish between the economic and cultural level of conservatism or liberalism. The electorate of all parties is more or less diverse, and the programme of some parties may unite conservatives and liberals on the one hand and divide them on the other.

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Acknowledgement: *This paper was prepared with the support provided by research grant VEGA No. 1/0278/20 – Relationship of legitimacy, governance and public finances at the local level in the geographical perspective of Slovakia.*

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