

Beyond the Culture Wars: How Economic Grievances Shape Voting Behaviour in Polarised Democracies

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Introduction

Across Europe, contemporary political debate is saturated with cultural conflict. Parliamentary agendas, media cycles, and electoral campaigns increasingly revolve around questions of gender, sexuality, national identity, migration, minority rights, and the defence of “traditional values.” Because these issues are visible, emotionally charged, and symbolically potent, it is tempting to treat value-based divisions as the dominant axis of political competition and the principal driver of electoral polarisation. Yet visibility in public debate is not equivalent to causal primacy in voter alignment. Cultural issues may structure rhetoric and media framing while deeper economic trajectories, such as inequality, insecurity, and uneven development quietly shape the grievances that make electorates receptive to polarising appeals.

This paper develops and tests this distinction through an empirical question: are electorates genuinely divided primarily by values, or do economic grievances remain the decisive fault line beneath the culture-war surface? We address this puzzle through Slovakia, a post-socialist democracy where economic transformation and spatial inequality intersect with highly polarised political communication. By leveraging large-scale individual-level attitudinal data, we examine whether economic issues generate greater within-society disagreement than cultural “hot-button” issues, and whether economic polarisation is systematically structured by socio-demographic position.

Literature review

Much scholarship on contemporary polarisation foregrounds cultural and value conflicts, often mobilised by populist and extremist parties around issues such as gender equality, abortion, and LGBTQi+ rights (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rodrik, 2021). Yet a substantial body of work shows that economic determinants remain central for understanding electoral behaviour and the territorial patterning of discontent. The “geography of discontent” perspective emphasises that uneven development, labour-market insecurity, and long-run local decline generate political resentment and anti-establishment mobilisation (Autor et al., 2020; Rodrik, 2018, 2021; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014; Funke et al., 2016; Hacker & Pierson, 2020), shifting attention from individual deprivation to the economic trajectories of places.

Cross-national evidence supports this trajectory-based mechanism. Dijkstra, Poelman, and Rodríguez-Pose (2020) show—across more than 63,000 EU-28 electoral districts—that long-term economic and industrial decline is a strong and consistent predictor of anti-EU voting, with “places that have seen better times” exhibiting higher opposition even when standard socio-demographic controls are included. UK-based research similarly links political shocks such as Brexit to deep spatial economic imbalances and warns that dominant narratives can

obscure these underlying fundamentals (McCann, 2020; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021; Lenzi & Perucca, 2025). Complementing this, work on discontent highlights that economic grievances translate into political outcomes through mediating mechanisms such as trust, perceived geographic bias, and perceived institutional responsiveness (McKay, Jennings & Stoker, 2024).

Taken together, these literatures suggest a crucial implication for this paper: even when cultural controversies dominate political communication, economic grievances may still structure the underlying distribution of voter preferences. The analytical task is therefore not to dismiss cultural conflict, but to test whether economic issues remain more polarising—producing sharper and more systematically patterned disagreement—than the rhetorically dominant cultural questions.

Data and methods

Objective and research questions

The paper examines how economic concerns structure political attitudes and whether perceptions of economic issues vary systematically across socio-demographic groups. We address two guiding questions:

- RQ1: How do economic concerns structure voter preferences and (by implication) the potential foundations of electoral alignment?
- RQ2: Do perceptions of economic issues differ across age, gender, and education, and if so, how large and consistent are these differences?

Data

We use individual-level data from the Slovak Voting Advice Application (VAA) *Volebný kompas* (Mintal et al., 2024). The dataset contains responses to 39 policy statements (see Annex 1) spanning economic, cultural, and geopolitical domains, each measured on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), alongside demographics (age, gender, education). After cleaning (mainly removing duplicates with inconsistent responses, excluding missing/non-standard gender categories, and dropping cases with missing age or education) the analytical sample includes 103,263 respondents, representing roughly 13% of the Slovak electorate.

Methods

We begin with descriptive comparisons across age, gender, and education to identify where dispersion is largest and which issues generate pronounced divergence. However, conventional cross-tabulation is limited in this setting: a four-way table crossing gender $\times$ education $\times$ age $\times$ five response categories yields 480 cells, producing sparse counts in some combinations (notably older and less educated groups), and disaggregation by gender further exacerbates sparsity.

To address this, we employ CART (Classification and Regression Trees) (Breiman et al., 1984). CART is well suited for uncovering non-linearities and interactions in an interpretable way, expressing findings as transparent “if–then” rules. For parsimony and comparability, responses are recoded into a binary outcome (Agree = Strongly Agree/Agree; Disagree = Strongly Disagree/Disagree). Neutral responses are excluded because they are substantively

heterogeneous and difficult to interpret as either support or opposition (neutral shares: 14.1% for S7, 16.2% for S8, 21.0% for S9). Trees are estimated with consistent specifications across statements: Gini impurity as the split criterion, maximum depth of five, pruning using the SE(0) rule, equal priors, and minimal node-size constraints.

This design allows us to identify the most salient demographic predictors and thresholds, while maintaining interpretability and robustness under uneven subgroup distributions.

Preliminary results

The preliminary results challenge the presumption that cultural controversies necessarily reflect the deepest divisions in voter preferences. Across the set of economic statements (including additional items such as S10 and S34 in broader descriptive comparisons, see Annex 1 for details), disagreement between “agree” and “disagree” camps is often substantial—typically ranging from 35% to 47%—with the sharpest cleavages emerging around price regulation and crisis compensation. By contrast, selected cultural statements produce more *skewed* distributions: for example, the statement on same-sex partnerships shows overwhelming agreement (~77%), while abortion restriction shows overwhelming disagreement (~90%). The implication is that cultural issues, though rhetorically salient, may exhibit lower within-society variance than economic questions that generate near-balanced contention.

CART models reveal that economic polarisation is not only pronounced but also systematically structured:

1. Gender as a key divider for household-price issues (S7): Gender is the primary split for food price regulation. Women exhibit markedly higher agreement with price regulation than men (illustratively: ~76.5% vs ~50.3% in the descriptive baseline). This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that these issues map onto gendered exposure to household budget constraints and care responsibilities. Here, gender functions less as an identity marker and more as a position in the household economy.
2. Education as the most consistent structural cleavage: Across statements, education repeatedly emerges as a second-order (and sometimes first-order) divider. A particularly robust pattern is the dichotomy between university-educated vs. all others, suggesting a discontinuity rather than a linear gradient. University-educated respondents deviate most strongly from the population mean on S7 and S8—differences reaching up to ~25 percentage points in descriptive comparisons. This points to education operating as a proxy for economic ideology and institutional trust, shaping selective support for different types of intervention.
3. Cohort effects anchored around the post-1989 generation (S8): Age often refines, rather than initiates, divisions, except for crisis-compensation preferences. The 25–34 cohort appears repeatedly as a decisive split point, especially for energy-cost compensation. This group, socialised in the post-transition era and facing weaker asset buffers, appears more supportive of expansive crisis protection. Older cohorts display greater scepticism toward universal compensation, plausibly reflecting different fiscal norms, life-cycle constraints, or experiences of prior crises.
4. Policy design matters: economic polarisation is multidimensional: The structure of disagreement differs across S7–S9, indicating that voters do not

respond to “state intervention” as a single axis. Regulation (price controls), fiscal compensation (energy subsidies), and targeted redistribution (mortgage support) activate different coalitions and moral economies of deservingness.

In sum, the preliminary evidence indicates that economic issues generate both higher variance and more layered demographic structuring than headline cultural issues, which often cluster into more lopsided majorities.

Discussion

These findings contribute to debates on polarisation, discontent, and representation in three ways.

First, they offer an empirical correction to “culture-war primacy” interpretations. Cultural issues may dominate discourse because they are symbolically potent and strategically mobilised, yet the Slovak evidence suggests that economic preferences may remain the more decisive axis of division, producing sharper and more systematically structured disagreement. The analytical implication is to distinguish between *discursive salience* (what dominates political talk) and *preference polarisation* (where voters actually diverge).

Second, the results align with and extend the geography of discontent literature by demonstrating micro-level structuring of economic attitudes in a transition context. Slovakia’s post-socialist trajectory makes it an analytically valuable case: legacies of transformation, uneven regional development, and recurrent crises intersect with contemporary party competition. The strong education cleavage echoes cross-national findings that human capital divides are central to political alignment, while the cohort patterns suggest that transition-era socialisation continues to shape expectations of state protection and perceived economic risk.

Third, the paper highlights the importance of policy design in the political economy of polarisation. “Pro-state” versus “anti-state” is too crude: voters differentiate between *how* the state intervenes, not merely whether it does. This supports a more nuanced view in which intervention is evaluated through multiple frames—market fairness, crisis deservingness, fiscal prudence, or institutional trust—frames that are themselves socially distributed.

Politically, the findings imply that parties focusing exclusively on cultural mobilisation may misread the latent structure of discontent. Economic issues, particularly those touching household budgets and crisis protection, appear capable of reorganising coalitions across cultural lines. This also suggests a representational challenge: if parties amplify cultural conflict while economic divisions remain under-addressed, the result may be heightened dissatisfaction and distrust, especially among groups most exposed to economic shocks.

Conclusion

This paper argues and provides preliminary evidence that economic grievances remain central to political polarisation even in democracies where cultural conflict dominates public debate. Using large-scale individual-level data from the Slovak VAA *Volebný kompas* ($N \approx 103,263$), we show that economic issues such as price regulation, crisis compensation, and targeted redistribution generate substantial and structured disagreement, often exceeding the within-society variance observed on salient cultural questions. CART decision-tree models demonstrate that this economic polarisation is internally differentiated: education constitutes the most consistent cleavage (with a marked university/non-university discontinuity), gender

strongly shapes preferences for household-price interventions, and cohort differences (especially around the 25–34 group) matter for crisis-compensation attitudes. These patterns support a layered account of polarisation in which cultural conflict may provide the rhetoric of contestation while economic insecurity continues to underpin the distribution of preferences and the conditions of political receptivity.

Methodologically, the study also demonstrates the value of VAA data for regional science and political economy research, and the usefulness of CART for mapping complex demographic interactions in large but uneven samples. Substantively, the results encourage scholars and policymakers to move beyond culture-war narratives and re-engage with the economic foundations of discontent and representation, particularly in transition contexts where expectations, vulnerabilities, and institutional trust are shaped by long-run transformation.

Further work will extend the analysis by (i) systematically comparing economic versus cultural items across the full set of statements, (ii) linking attitudinal clusters to party positions and representation gaps, and (iii) exploring spatial heterogeneity to connect individual-level divides to regional trajectories central to the geography of discontent framework.

Annex 1: 39 statements included in Volebný kompas

Statement Number	Statement in Volebný kompas
1	Real estate tax should be increased to lower labor taxes
2	People who earn higher wages should have a higher income tax rate
3	The retirement age should rise as life expectancy rises
4	In the health care system, more emphasis should be placed on the personal responsibility of the individual
5	Banks and big corporations should be taxed more heavily
6	Health insurance companies should not generate profit
7	The state should play an active role in regulating food prices
8	During energy crises, the state must cover all extra household energy costs, so that they do not have to pay anything extra
9	The state should provide targeted help to people who are struggling to repay their mortgages
10	Reducing the gender pay gap in Slovakia requires state intervention
11	Same-sex partnerships should be legalised
12	The personal use of marijuana should be decriminalized
13	Abortion rights in Slovakia should be restricted
14	Slovakia should make it easier to bring in foreign workers

15	The State and the Church should remain separated
16	Banning the production of new cars with internal combustion engines after 2035 is the right step
17	Tackling climate change has a higher priority over achieving higher economic growth
18	Renewable sources of energy (e.g. solar or wind energy) should be supported even if this means higher energy costs
19	For a more homogenous regional development, poorer regions in Slovakia should be helped out at the expense of richer ones
20	The powers of the regions and localities should be strengthened at the expense of the central government
21	Teachers' salaries in the regions should be different according to the average salary in a given region
22	Liberalism (a set of views trying to assert the freedom and rights of the individual and the idea of progress) poses a threat to Slovakia
23	Slovakia needs a leader similar to Viktor Orban in Hungary
24	NGO funding should be subject to greater state control
25	Membership of the European Union is more beneficial than harmful to Slovakia
26	The European Union should punish Member States that violate the commonly agreed rules
27	The European Union should abandon the principle of unanimity of member states in making foreign policy decisions
28	Membership of NATO is more beneficial than harmful to Slovakia
29	Slovakia should stop providing military aid to Ukraine
30	Russia should bear financial consequences for unleashing war on Ukraine
31	Food self-sufficiency should be a priority for Slovakia
32	Russia is the aggressor in the war in Ukraine
33	It is unreasonable to demand that Slovakia spend 2% of its GDP on defense
34	Support mechanisms for refugees from the Ukraine should be more limited
35	Section 363 of the Code of Criminal Procedure should be significantly restricted (the section allows the Attorney General to overturn a legally binding decision)
36	Plagiarists should not hold public office
37	Investigations and prosecutions of former high-ranking officials launched after 2020 are important for societal renewal

38	The state should take more active efforts to improve the quality of life of Slovakia's Roma population
39	The government should increase support for cultural and educational activities in the Hungarian language

Source: Volebný kompas dataset (Mintal et al. 2024)