Liberal and Authoritarian Notions of Democracy among University Students in Slovakia: The Role of Family Socialisation and Cultural Capital

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Abstract: *This article examines understandings of democracy among university students in Slovakia and analyses the role of family socialisation, cultural capital and socio-economic background in shaping democratic orientations. The study is based on a representative survey of 1,017 university students conducted in 2020. Rather than measuring support for democracy as a political regime, it focuses on how students define its essential characteristics. Principal Component Analysis identified two latent dimensions: a Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND) and an Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND). A subsequent cluster analysis revealed three distinct democratic profiles: Liberal Democrats, Ambivalent Democrats and Sceptical/Reserved Democrats. The findings show that liberal democratic orientations are the most prevalent among students, but a substantial proportion simultaneously endorse both liberal and authoritarian/substantive principles. The analysis further indicates that democratic profiles are associated with differences in family educational background and cultural resources. The results support theories of political socialisation and cultural reproduction while highlighting the diversity and complexity of democratic understandings among young people. The study suggests that democracy is frequently interpreted not only through political rights and procedures but also through expectations regarding social protection, redistribution, authority and state responsibility.*

Keywords: ***democracy, political socialisation, university students, cultural capital, democratic values, Slovakia***

Introduction

The analysis of attitudes towards democracy has been an important topic in Slovak sociology since the political and economic transformation of post-socialist societies (Stena 1991; 1992; Roško 1993, 1995; Plávková 1993; Macháček 1994; Roško, Macháček, & Čambáliková 1997). During this period, scholarly attention focused on whether Slovak citizens' political orientations would facilitate the successful implementation of political and economic reforms. At the turn of the twenty-first century, growing attention was also devoted to young people's political attitudes and participation. Researchers examined processes of youth individualisation, particularly the retreat from the public sphere into private life and the perceived decline of political engagement among younger generations (Ondrejkovič 1997, 2002; Macháček 1998, 2001). More recently, interest in democracy and its functioning has intensified not only in Slovakia but across Europe. Contemporary social and political developments have renewed concerns about the resilience of democratic systems, including the growing electoral success of protest and anti-system political parties.

Previous research has produced mixed findings regarding citizens' understandings of democracy. While some studies suggest that support for democracy often coexists with approval of illiberal or non-democratic practices (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007), others identify more stable distinctions between liberal and authoritarian conceptions of democracy (Kirsch & Welzel 2019). Research conducted in Slovakia further points to the existence of heterogeneous democratic profiles and varying interpretations of democratic principles among citizens (Gyárfášová 2015; Baboš & Dolný 2021). Taken together, these findings suggest that support for democracy cannot be assumed to represent a single, coherent orientation and that citizens frequently attach different meanings and expectations to democracy.

In this article, we examine different understandings of democracy among university students in Slovakia. University students represent a distinctive subgroup of young people, characterised by comparatively high levels of political participation (Kovačeva 2002) and relatively low levels of support for far-right political movements (see, for example, Gallová Kriglerová et al. 2022; Gregor 2015). The decision to focus on university students is motivated not only by their comparatively high levels of political participation and educational attainment but also by the changing nature of the student population itself. The expansion and massification of higher education over the past two decades have increased the social heterogeneity of the student population. Universities have become accessible to students from increasingly diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, which may contribute to greater variation in democratic orientations and understandings of democracy. At the same time, the growing emphasis on professionally oriented study programmes has contributed to increasing diversity of university students.

University students are also a particularly interesting group from the perspective of political socialisation. They occupy a transitional position between family socialisation and independent adulthood. For many students, the process of gradual distancing from family environments and inherited political beliefs coincides with exposure to new institutional contexts, peer networks and intellectual influences associated with higher education. Universities may therefore serve as important spaces of political learning, directly through educational content and indirectly through broader academic cultures, professional identities and social interactions. The influence of these processes may differ across fields of study, although the present research design does not allow us to examine these mechanisms directly. For this reason, studying democratic understandings among university students offers an opportunity not only to map their democratic orientations but also to contribute to a broader discussion concerning the relative importance of family background and higher education in the formation of democratic attitudes.

Consequently, a closer examination of university students' democratic attitudes represents an important research question. By combining Principal Component Analysis and cluster analysis, this study moves beyond measuring support for democracy as a political regime and focuses instead on how students conceptualise democracy itself. This approach makes it possible to identify distinct interpretive patterns of democratic understanding and to estimate their prevalence within the student population.

The article pursues two main objectives. First, it seeks to identify and interpret the principal understandings of democracy among Slovak university students. Second, it analyses the extent to which these democratic orientations are associated with students' socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds, with particular attention paid to family socialisation, educational capital and cultural resources.

Previous research has shown that students often enter higher education with relatively stable values and political orientations already in place (Fischer 2017). Their political attitudes are therefore not formed exclusively within the university environment but are shaped by prior socialisation experiences. This highlights the importance of family socialisation as a key context in the formation of political orientations and behavioural predispositions. One important outcome of political socialisation is the development of beliefs about what constitutes democratic and undemocratic governance.

The first part of this article reviews the concept of democracy and political socialisation and discusses relevant theoretical and empirical findings. The second part presents the data and analytical procedures used to identify patterns of democratic understanding among university students. To this end, Principal Component Analysis and cluster analysis were employed to identify latent democratic profiles. At the same time, multinomial logistic regression

was used to examine the socio-economic and socio-cultural factors associated with cluster membership. The third section presents and interprets empirical findings, followed by a discussion of their theoretical implications and the study's main conclusions.

Democratic understandings as an object of empirical inquiry

There is no universally accepted definition of what democracy means. Political theory has traditionally defined democracy through institutional and procedural characteristics such as free elections, political competition, civil liberties and the rule of law. In this perspective, democracy is primarily understood as a set of procedures regulating the relationship between citizens and political power (Dahl 1971; Held 2006). Recent scholarship has emphasised the need to distinguish between citizens' meanings of democracy and their understandings of democracy. While meanings of democracy refer to broader intuitive associations and socially embedded interpretations, understandings of democracy involve more explicitly articulated conceptions of democratic governance (Osterberg-Kaufmann, Stark, and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2020).

At the same time, a growing body of research suggests that ordinary citizens do not necessarily conceptualise democracy through the same analytical categories employed by political scientists. According to David Beetham, democracy should not be understood solely as a set of institutional procedures but also in terms of the extent to which citizens are able to exercise their rights and participate effectively in public life. Similarly, T. H. Marshall's (1950) concept of social citizenship highlights the importance of social rights and material conditions as prerequisites for meaningful participation in a democratic society.

From this perspective, expectations regarding social protection, economic equality and redistribution need not be interpreted as external to democracy but may constitute an integral part of how democracy is understood and evaluated. More critical traditions of democratic thought have gone even further, arguing that political equality cannot be fully separated from social and economic inequalities. Authors such as Macpherson (1977) and Nancy Fraser (2003) have questioned the tendency of liberal democratic theory to focus primarily on formal political procedures while treating socio-economic inequalities as secondary concerns.

Consequently, citizens may associate democracy with social justice, economic equality, public order, effective governance or the protection of collective interests. As a result, democracy represents not merely an institutional arrangement but also a broader normative ideal onto which individuals project their expectations concerning the functioning of society and the state.

For this reason, recent scholarship has increasingly distinguished between support for democracy and understandings of democracy. Whereas studies

of democratic support typically examine whether citizens prefer democracy to alternative political regimes, research on democratic understandings focuses on the meanings people attach to democracy and on the characteristics they consider essential for a democratic political system. In this perspective, citizens may support democracy while simultaneously holding very different views regarding what democracy ought to provide (Schedler & Sarsfield 2007; Kirsch & Welzel 2019).

Particularly influential is the distinction proposed by Kirsch and Welzel (2019) between a Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND) and an Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND). The liberal notion emphasises individual rights, political participation and civic freedoms, whereas the authoritarian notion values obedience, authority and strong leadership. Empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that citizens do not always perceive these principles as mutually exclusive. Instead, democratic attitudes often combine elements derived from different normative traditions and reflect broader expectations regarding social protection, redistribution, political order and state authority.

Consequently, examining democratic understandings requires an exploratory rather than purely deductive approach. Rather than assuming that citizens interpret democracy according to theoretically predefined models, it is necessary to investigate how democratic principles are actually structured within people's belief systems. Such an approach is particularly relevant when studying younger generations, whose political attitudes are shaped by specific experiences of political socialisation, educational trajectories and socio-economic conditions.

The present study therefore does not seek merely to assess the level of support for democracy among university students. Instead, it examines how students conceptualise democracy, which democratic principles they consider essential, and whether distinct patterns of democratic understanding can be identified within the student population. By focusing on these interpretative patterns, the study contributes to a growing literature that views democracy not only as a political regime but also as a socially constructed and culturally embedded set of meanings.

An additional challenge concerns the fact that democratic understandings are not formed solely through normative reflection on democratic principles. The meaning of democracy is also shaped by historical experience, political socialisation and contemporary political discourse. In post-communist societies, including Slovakia, the concept of democracy remains strongly connected to the regime transformation after 1989. For some citizens, especially older generations, evaluations of democracy may be influenced less by abstract democratic principles than by their assessments of the social, economic and political consequences of the post-communist transition. Consequently, scepticism towards democracy may not necessarily indicate opposition to democratic institutions as such, but rather dissatisfaction with the outcomes associated with the democratic transformation.

Furthermore, democracy is a highly contested concept in contemporary political communication. In public discourse, political actors frequently invoke democracy not only as a descriptive category but also as a normative label through which political opponents are evaluated and delegitimised. As a result, support for or criticism of democracy may reflect broader political identities and symbolic associations rather than carefully articulated conceptions of democratic governance. This may be particularly relevant for younger generations, whose understandings of democracy are often formed in an environment where political actors regularly frame certain policies, parties or ideological positions as either 'democratic' or 'undemocratic'.

For this reason, democratic understandings should not be treated as direct expressions of coherent political theory. Rather, they represent socially embedded interpretations of democracy that combine normative principles, historical experiences, political identities and everyday perceptions of how political systems operate. Examining these interpretations is therefore not a matter of assessing students' theoretical knowledge of democracy, but of understanding the meanings they attach to democracy as a political and social ideal.

Political socialisation in the family and the transmission of cultural capital

It is reasonable to assume that at least some of the predispositions underlying later political orientations originate in childhood and within the family environment. However, identifying the specific mechanisms through which family socialisation contributes to democratic understandings is far from straightforward. Some influences may be explicitly political, such as parental political discussions, partisan preferences, democratic norms or political prejudices transmitted across generations. Other influences are less overtly political but may nevertheless be equally consequential. Everyday family interactions, patterns of authority and obedience, styles of conflict resolution, levels of trust, and gender relations within the household may all contribute to broader dispositions that later shape individuals' understandings of politics, authority, equality and democracy.

Although the concept of socialisation is generally accepted among sociologists and research on it is quite continuous, the history of research on political socialisation is more complicated. According to Sapiro (2004: 5), the fundamental problem in the field of political socialisation is that its basic questions, theories and conclusions about how people become part of the fabric of their political communities and how they develop their political orientations and practices are framed by observations of an excessively limited range of political contexts. Niemi and Hepburn (1995) note that research on political socialisation began in the late 1950s and died a premature death in the 1970s. The field

atrophied because it was based on exaggerated premises and because of misinterpreted and misunderstood research findings (and lack of findings).

In a family environment, it is often unclear what is involved in the formation of political beliefs. Several studies have shown that the influence of the mother is more important than the influence of the father (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Harding, Morris & Hughes, 2015; Jeong, Kim, & Subramanian, 2018), although mothers generally pay less attention to politics. A possible explanation is that the formation of political beliefs may be influenced by ways of education, impressed values, and norms that are not directly political (e.g. trust, cooperation, authoritarianism, etc.). Some studies focused on indirect aspects, such as family climate or congruence among parents (Abendchön 2013). To prove the connection of these attributes to the results of political socialisation, however, turned out to be very problematic.[1]

Questions concerning the formation of political orientations remain central to contemporary research. As Sapiro (2004) notes, understanding how people acquire political skills, orientations and practices is as important today as it was several decades ago. At the same time, political socialisation takes place under changing social and political conditions. Contemporary democracies are characterised by declining partisanship, greater electoral volatility, changing patterns of political participation, and increasing reliance on digital sources of political information (Putnam 2002; Hooghe 2004). Younger generations are particularly important in this respect because they have been socialised entirely within these contemporary political environments and do not share the historical experiences that often inform older generations' evaluations of political developments.

Recent research on youth political participation further suggests that younger generations should not be viewed as politically homogeneous or universally disengaged. While some studies point to declining electoral participation and weakening attachment to traditional political organisations, others show that young people increasingly engage through alternative forms of political participation and civic action (Weiss 2020). These findings indicate that political socialisation in contemporary societies takes place under conditions that differ substantially from those experienced by previous generations, making it necessary to examine how political values and democratic understandings are formed among young people today.

One of the most influential explanations of political socialisation is based on social learning processes. According to this perspective, political orientations are acquired through interaction with significant others and the internalisation

1 The problem is also connected with the interdisciplinary character of the problem and the unclear division of the research and knowledge between sociology, psychology, pedagogy and political science in this area.

of values, norms and behavioural patterns. Parents function as important role models whose beliefs and practices are transmitted through imitation, identification and reinforcement mechanisms. Such processes are particularly relevant for the formation of political ideology, political trust, party identification and broader political orientations (Jennings et al. 2009). The outcomes of political socialisation are, however, far from predetermined. As noted by Preiser (2002, in Štefančík 2010), political socialisation may lead to political engagement, adaptation to dominant political norms, unreflective acceptance of inherited political views, political apathy or even rejection of the existing political system.

Although the concept of political socialisation is widely accepted, research in this field has undergone significant shifts. Earlier approaches often viewed political socialisation primarily as a mechanism reproducing political stability and transmitting support for existing political institutions. Subsequent research revealed that political attitudes are more flexible and context-dependent than originally assumed and that patterns of political behaviour differ across generations (Niemi & Hepburn 1995; Sapiro 2004). As a result, contemporary research focuses less on political stability and more on understanding how political orientations emerge, develop and change under different social circumstances.

Political socialisation is closely connected to the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. Numerous studies have demonstrated that social position, measured through education, occupation or income, tends to be reproduced across generations. Cultural resources inherited through the family environment play an important role in this process (Bourdieu 1984; Kraaykamp & Van Eijck 2010). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in embodied, objectified and institutionalised forms and contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities by shaping systems of perception, classification and evaluation.

The family therefore transmits not only political orientations but also broader cultural dispositions through which individuals interpret social and political reality. Ownership of books, which is used in the present study as an indicator of objectified cultural capital, reflects more than the mere presence of educational resources within the household. It also signals placement within particular social and cultural milieus associated with specific values, tastes and forms of cultural participation. Several studies have shown that cultural participation and cultural preferences remain strongly associated with educational attainment, socio-economic status and broader social stratification processes (Bukodi 2007; Katz-Gerro 2011; Van Hek & Kraaykamp 2013).

From this perspective, democratic understandings can be viewed not only as political attitudes but also as products of broader processes of social and cultural reproduction. Individuals occupying different positions within the social structure are likely to develop different ways of perceiving, evaluating and interpreting political reality. Political conflicts and competing understandings of

democracy cannot therefore be reduced to differences in information or education alone. Rather, they are rooted in broader social experiences and positions that shape how citizens make sense of the political world and of democracy itself.

Methods, data collection and sample

Data were collected by the research agency FOCUS between 15 August and 15 September 2020 using the Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) method. The survey was conducted on a sample of 1,017 respondents, with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of ±3.06 percentage points. The target population consisted of students enrolled in higher education, including students entering their first year of study in September 2020. The final sample included students from 34 higher education institutions and 120 faculties, ensuring broad institutional and disciplinary coverage. The sample was constructed to be representative with respect to respondents' gender, year of study and field of study. The following fields were taken into account in the sampling design: social sciences; humanities and arts; economic sciences; law; technical sciences; natural sciences and mathematics; agriculture and forestry; teacher education; and health sciences. The questionnaire comprised a total of 182 questions covering a wide range of topics related to students' social background, values, attitudes and perceptions, including their understanding of democracy.

The identification of latent types of democratic understandings was based on items q16a–q16i (Table 1), which capture various normative conceptions of democracy. These items have also been employed in previous European research to distinguish between liberal and authoritarian (or substantive) understandings of democracy.[2]

The selected items reflect different traditions of democratic thought. Some correspond closely to liberal-procedural conceptions of democracy, emphasising free elections, civil rights and equality before the law. Others are associated with substantive understandings of democracy, emphasising social protection, redistribution and economic equality. Still others reflect order-oriented and authority-based expectations regarding political governance. Rather than assigning these dimensions a priori, the present study examines how respondents themselves structure these democratic principles and whether distinct patterns of democratic understanding can be identified empirically. Instead of assigning individual questionnaire items to predefined dimensions, the underlying

2 Before classifying respondents, several analytical steps were undertaken. First, the q16 items were cleaned by removing technical codes representing missing responses (77 and 99). Subsequently, all cases containing missing values on any of the q16a–q16i items were excluded from the analysis to ensure the reliability of the latent structure identification. Although all q16 items were measured on identical scales, they exhibited different variances. Therefore, all variables were standardised using z-scores before further analysis. This procedure ensured that no individual item exerted disproportionate influence on the subsequent analyses.

Table 1: Q16 Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as characteristic of democracy.

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD
q16a	Governments tax the rich and support the poor.	997	3.09	1.40
q16b	Religious authorities have the final say in interpreting laws.	972	2.19	1.29
q16c	People choose their representatives through free elections.	1012	4.33	1.18
q16d	People receive state support when they become unemployed.	1006	3.79	1.20
q16e	If the government is incompetent, the military takes over the governance of the country.	944	2.31	1.34
q16f	Civil rights protect people from state oppression.	1000	4.00	1.26
q16g	The state ensures equality of income.	995	3.07	1.35
q16h	People obey those who govern them.	970	2.71	1.34
q16i	Women have the same rights as men.	1015	4.22	1.22

Source: The author's own creation.

structure of respondents' democratic orientations was empirically examined using Principal Component Analysis (PCA).[3]

These dimensions are consistent with theoretical interpretations commonly found in the literature on democratic values and political orientations among young people. But they highlight the fact that basic features of the welfare state have been integrated into the notion of liberal democracy.

Principal Component Analysis identified two dominant latent dimensions of democratic understanding. The first dimension was associated primarily with free elections, civil rights, gender equality and, to a lesser extent, support for unemployment protection. Following the literature on democratic values and democratic citizenship, this dimension was interpreted as an Inclusive-Liberal Democracy (LND) dimension. As shown in Table 2, the strongest loadings were observed for free elections (q16c), equal rights for women and men (q16i), and civil rights protecting citizens from state oppression (q16f).

The second dimension combined support for authority, obedience, military intervention and religious influence in politics with support for redistribution, welfare provision and economic equality. In line with the conceptual framework proposed by Kirsch and Welzel (2019), this factor was labelled Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND). However, the empirical content of the factor appears broader than a purely authoritarian orientation, as it also incorporates substantive expectations regarding social protection and redistribution. For this reason, the factor may be interpreted more precisely as a substantive-authoritarian understanding of democracy.

3 Only two components exceeded the conventional eigenvalue threshold of 1 (2.717 and 2.017, respectively), while the third component reached an eigenvalue of 0.853. These two components jointly explained 52.53% of the total variance and therefore supported the retention of a two-factor solution.

The PCA results suggest that students do not necessarily distinguish between democratic procedures, authority and welfare-state functions in the same manner as democratic theory does. While political theory often separates liberal, authoritarian and socio-economic dimensions of democracy, the empirical structure identified in this study indicates that these elements may coexist within broader interpretative frameworks through which students understand democracy.

As shown in Table 2, the first dimension was primarily associated with free elections, civil rights, gender equality and, to a lesser extent, social protection. Consistent with previous literature, this dimension was interpreted as a Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND). The second dimension was associated with religious authority, military intervention, obedience to rulers and, simultaneously, with redistributive and welfare-oriented expectations directed at the state. While labelled as an Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND) in accordance with previous research, the empirical content of this factor appears broader than a purely authoritarian orientation, combining elements of authority, social protection and redistributive expectations.

Table 2: Principal Component Analysis of Democratic Understandings

Item	Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND)	Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND)
q16a	0.250	0.366
q16b	-0.155	0.483
q16c	0.481	-0.160
q16d	0.426	0.207
q16e	-0.102	0.467
q16f	0.471	-0.015
q16g	0.208	0.383
q16h	-0.031	0.440
q16i	0.473	-0.082

Source: The author's own creation.

To identify the latent types, K-Means Clustering was applied. Factor scores derived from the PCA were subsequently used as input for a k-means cluster analysis (k = 3). The decision to retain three clusters was based on the theoretical assumption that at least three distinct value orientations could be expected (liberal, authoritarian and ambivalent); visual inspection of respondent distributions within the two-factor space. The decision to retain three clusters was therefore informed not only by statistical considerations but also by theoretical interpretability. The resulting solution distinguished between respondents predominantly endorsing liberal-democratic principles, respondents simultaneously supporting liberal and authoritarian/substantive understandings of democracy, and respondents exhibiting relatively weak endorsement of both

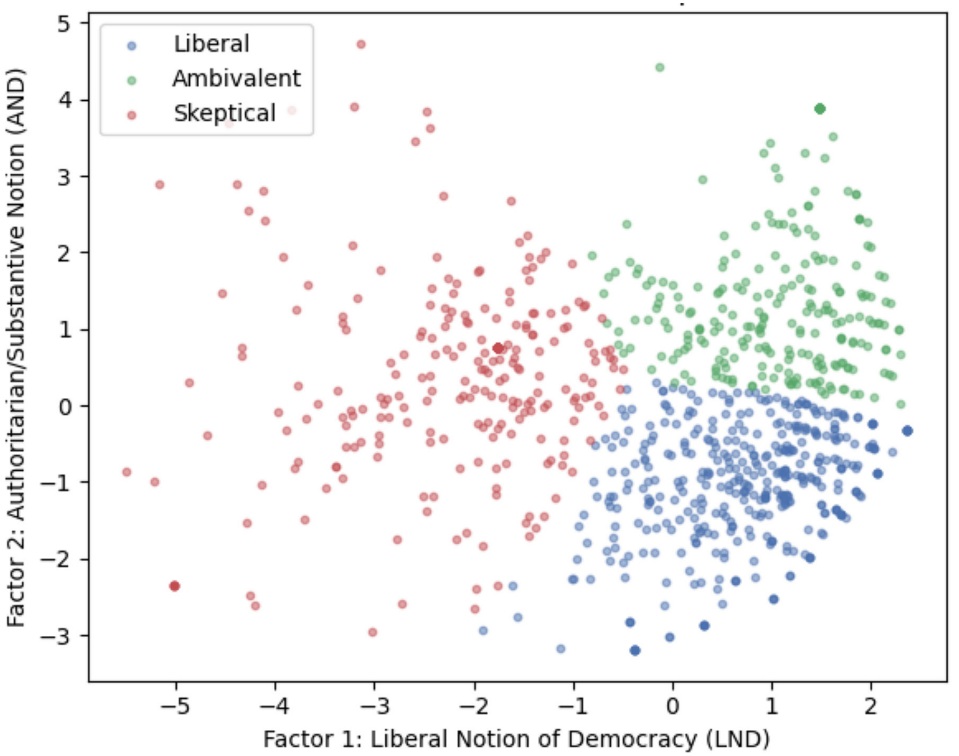
dimensions.[4] The clustering procedure identified three interpretable latent types of democrats (Figure 1):

Liberal Democrats – characterised by high scores on the liberal dimension and low scores on the authoritarian dimension.

Ambivalent Democrats – characterised by relatively high scores on both dimensions, reflecting a mixed or hybrid understanding of democracy.

Sceptical/Reserved Democrats – characterised by low scores on the liberal dimension and low or only moderately positive scores on the authoritarian dimension.

Figure 1: Cluster distribution in PCA space



Source: The author's own creation.

4 Alternative two- and four-cluster solutions were also examined. However, the three-cluster model offered the clearest substantive interpretation and was therefore selected for further analysis.

These clusters represent distinct latent patterns through which university students interpret and evaluate democracy. Liberal democrats represent a relatively coherent type. Their profile is characterised by strong endorsement of liberal-democratic principles and comparatively low support for authoritarian features of democracy. For this group, democracy is primarily associated with free elections, civil rights and equality.

Ambivalent democrats constitute a more complex and theoretically intriguing group. They score highly on both the liberal and authoritarian dimensions of democracy. Although these orientations may appear contradictory from the perspective of democratic theory, the empirical evidence suggests that a substantial group of students does not perceive them as mutually exclusive. Rather, these respondents simultaneously endorse liberal-democratic principles while also supporting stronger state authority, social protection and other substantive expectations associated with democracy. Their understanding of democracy, therefore, appears to combine elements that are often treated as distinct or even competing in normative political theory. Ambivalent democrats appear to hold broader and more demanding expectations of both democratic governance and state intervention than the other identified groups.

Sceptical/Reserved democrats display low levels of support for the liberal dimension and only moderate support for the authoritarian dimension. In contrast to ambivalent democrats, they appear to express a weaker overall attachment to the normative characteristics of democracy. Rather than strongly endorsing either liberal-democratic or authoritarian/substantive expectations, this group may be interpreted as exhibiting a more reserved, less consolidated or less clearly articulated understanding of democracy. While the present data do not allow direct conclusions regarding political interest or political engagement, the pattern suggests comparatively lower normative expectations regarding the role and functioning of democratic institutions.

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, democratic understandings are assumed to be shaped not only by individual political preferences but also by broader processes of family socialisation and the transmission of cultural and socio-economic resources. If democratic understandings represent socially embedded interpretations of politics rather than merely abstract political beliefs, differences between democratic profiles should also be reflected in respondents' family backgrounds and cultural resources.

That's why we aimed to analyse the relationship between democratic types and social, economic and cultural factors. Following the identification of the three latent democratic types, cluster membership was used as the dependent variable in subsequent exploratory analyses. For each cluster, the distributions of selected socio-demographic, cultural and economic variables were examined separately. The following indicators were included:

Size of municipality (q29) – representing the respondents' urbanisation context;
Household cultural capital (q30) – measured through the number of books in the household;
Mother' s education (q36) – representing formal educational capital;
Father' s education (q35);
Household income (q52) – representing economic capital;
Additional supplementary indicators.

For each variable, frequency distributions were compared across clusters with particular attention to the magnitude of differences between groups and the consistency of observed patterns. In a final step, a multinomial logistic regression model was estimated to identify the factors associated with membership in the different democratic clusters. Cluster membership served as the dependent variable, while socio-demographic, cultural and economic characteristics were included as predictors. This approach enabled an assessment of the relative importance of individual factors in explaining variations in democratic understandings among university students.

Typology of democratic orientations

The empirical findings of this study closely align with theoretical expectations stemming from classical and contemporary research on political socialisation, cultural capital and democratic orientations. Prior scholarship has emphasised that young people's understanding of democracy is not only shaped by formal education but is profoundly rooted in the family environment, particularly in parents' educational and cultural resources. This study provides strong evidence for this claim.

Using PCA on items q16a–q16i followed by k-means clustering, we identified three latent types of democratic orientations among university students: 1) liberal democrats, 2) ambivalent democrats and 3) sceptical democrats. These clusters reflect the well-established distinction between liberal/procedural and authoritarian/substantive understandings of democracy, with an additional ambivalent type that combines elements of both. The proportion of each type in the analysed sample (N=912) was:

- Liberal Democrats: 45.5%
- Ambivalent Democrats: 26.9%
- Sceptical Democrats: 27.6%

These proportions are based on the cluster counts computed via Python. The nearly equal distribution between ambivalent and sceptical types suggests that approximately half of the student population does not fully internalise

liberal democratic norms, consistent with research on value heterogeneity in post-transition contexts.

To assess which socio-demographic, cultural and economic characteristics were associated with membership in the identified democratic profiles, a multinomial logistic regression model was estimated (Table 3). Social and Spatial Characteristics, such as the size of municipality (q29), showed only modest differences, with liberal democrats more common in medium-sized municipalities, but sceptical democrats being evenly distributed across settlement types. This suggests that urbanisation level alone does not strongly structure democratic orientations once family-level variables are taken into account.

Table 3: Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Democratic Profiles

Predictor	Ambivalent Democrats vs. Liberal Democrats (B)	p	Sceptical Democrats vs. Liberal Democrats (B)	p
Gender	-0.419	.078	-0.229	.360
Year of study	-0.034	.565	0.019	.749
Field of study	0.029	.337	0.028	.367
Municipality size	0.013	.834	-0.002	.973
Cultural capital	0.003	.933	**0.080**	**.047**
Father's education	-0.068	.149	-0.091	.059
Mother's education	-0.003	.956	**-0.105**	**.034**

Source: The author's own creation.

Household cultural capital (measured by number of books: q30) revealed more substantial variation: Liberal democrats show the highest cultural capital, while ambivalent democrats cluster around mid-levels. What is very interesting is that sceptical democrats display a polarised profile – some from highly book-rich households, others from book-poor households. This pattern confirms that cultural capital is important, but its effect is non-linear: without corresponding parental education, cultural capital alone does not guarantee a liberal democratic orientation. A significant indication is also the sceptical democrats' profile. The scepticism about democracy does not inevitably need to be a result of lack of knowledge, maybe a lack of confidence, but it is interesting that a lack of confidence is not reserved for low cultural capital surroundings.

Maternal education emerged as the only statistically significant predictor in the multinomial regression model. Although paternal education displayed a similar negative association with membership in the sceptical democratic profile, the difference between the two effects cannot be interpreted as statistically significant. Cluster comparisons and multinomial regression both demonstrated that higher maternal education significantly decreases the likelihood of belong-

ing to the sceptical type (p =.034). Father's education (q35) shows a similar but slightly weaker trend (p =.059). These results mirror long-standing findings in the political socialisation literature: parental education, particularly maternal, is a powerful predictor of democratic value internalisation.

Household income (q52) did differentiate the clusters descriptively, with liberal democrats coming from households with the highest income levels, and sceptical democrats from lower-income categories. After controlling for parental education in regression models, however, income loses its independent effect, suggesting that economic resources influence democratic orientations indirectly through educational and cultural conditions in the family.

Ambivalent democrats show a specific value profile. The absence of significant socio-demographic predictors in the regression model further indicates that this profile cannot be easily explained by differences in family background, economic resources or educational capital. Instead, it may reflect a broader understanding of democracy that integrates multiple and potentially competing normative expectations regarding political and social order. Future research should examine whether this democratic profile is associated with distinct levels of political interest, political efficacy or civic engagement, as the present data do not allow firm conclusions regarding these relationships.

The findings thus demonstrate that family educational capital is the dominant structuring mechanism behind the formation of democratic orientations among students. University-level factors (field of study, year of study) and even individual attributes (gender) do not significantly shape these orientations when parental background is taken into account. Democratic value formation thus appears to be tied not to contemporary educational experiences, but to long-term cultural and educational socialisation within the household.

Discussion and conclusions

This study examined understandings of democracy among Slovak university students, with particular attention to the role of family socialisation, cultural capital and socio-economic background. Building on previous research distinguishing between liberal and authoritarian notions of democracy, an exploratory approach was adopted to uncover the latent structure of democratic orientations among students. The analysis identified three distinct democratic profiles: liberal democrats, ambivalent democrats and sceptical/reserved democrats.

The findings suggest that democratic understandings are not distributed randomly among university students. Rather, they are associated with broader processes of family socialisation and the transmission of educational and cultural resources. This indicates that universities may encounter already established democratic predispositions rather than forming these orientations from scratch. Democratic education therefore remains important, but its effects

should be viewed in interaction with earlier socialisation processes taking place within the family environment.

The findings provide substantial support for the socialisation perspective developed in the literature on political learning and intergenerational transmission of values. Most notably, parental educational background, especially maternal education, emerged as the most consistent predictor of democratic orientations. Students whose mothers had attained higher levels of education were significantly less likely to belong to the sceptical democratic type and more likely to endorse liberal democratic principles. This finding corresponds with previous research emphasising the enduring role of the family environment in shaping political values and democratic attitudes, even under conditions of societal change and educational expansion.

The results also support the relevance of cultural capital. Liberal democrats tended to originate from households characterised by higher levels of cultural resources, measured through the number of books in the household. However, the relationship was not entirely linear. The presence of culturally rich households among sceptical democrats suggests that cultural capital alone does not automatically translate into support for liberal democratic values. Rather, cultural resources appear to operate in conjunction with family educational background and broader processes of political socialisation.

One of the most interesting findings concerns the group of ambivalent democrats. These respondents simultaneously endorsed liberal democratic principles and authoritarian/substantive expectations associated with democracy. From the perspective of democratic theory, such a combination may appear contradictory. However, the empirical evidence suggests that many students do not perceive liberal rights, social protection, state intervention, authority and order as mutually exclusive principles. Recent research has also demonstrated that support for democracy may coexist with support for illiberal majoritarian forms of governance. Citizens often define democracy through electoral legitimacy while simultaneously accepting the weakening of institutional constraints on executive power (Cordova and de Freitas 2026). In this sense, the ambivalent type should not necessarily be interpreted as politically inconsistent. Rather, it may reflect a broader and more demanding understanding of democracy that combines expectations of individual freedoms with expectations of a protective and interventionist state. Recent work suggests that citizens frequently evaluate democracy not only through procedures but also through distributive outcomes such as social protection, redistribution and economic well-being (Mortenson 2026).

One possible interpretation is that ambivalent democrats do not reject liberal-democratic principles. Rather, these principles may be perceived as self-evident and broadly accepted characteristics of democracy. At the same time,

they attach importance to additional substantive and authoritarian elements, resulting in high scores on both dimensions.

The study further contributes to the literature by highlighting the gap between theoretical concepts of democracy and citizens' everyday understandings of democracy. While political theory often distinguishes sharply between liberal, substantive and authoritarian conceptions of democratic governance, respondents may combine these elements in ways that are theoretically unexpected. The empirical structure identified in this study suggests that democratic attitudes are often organised less according to abstract theoretical categories and more according to broader normative expectations concerning how society and the state should function. The fact that empirical understandings of democracy do not always fit neatly into existing theoretical classifications should not necessarily be viewed as evidence of conceptual confusion among respondents. Rather, it may indicate that citizens combine political, social and economic expectations in ways that challenge conventional distinctions between procedural and substantive conceptions of democracy.

The findings should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations. First, the study relies on a battery of survey items that captures respondents' evaluations of democratic characteristics rather than their participation in democratic processes or their actual political behaviour. Consequently, the identified profiles represent patterns of democratic understanding rather than levels of democratic commitment. Respondents may endorse democratic principles in theory while behaving differently in political practice.

Second, the measurement of democracy itself presents substantial conceptual challenges. Democracy is a multidimensional and contested concept. Some survey items reflect procedural dimensions of democracy, such as free elections and civil rights, while others capture substantive expectations associated with welfare provision, redistribution and social equality. Still others refer to authority, obedience, religion or military intervention. As the analysis demonstrated, respondents do not necessarily differentiate between these dimensions in the same way political theorists do. Moreover, acceptance of liberal principles may be somehow trained and repeated as a phrase rather than a conscious internalisation of these principles. The same, nevertheless, could be said about authoritarian principles that can be learned from parents, social media or elsewhere. Although the existing literature often treats predispositions towards liberal or authoritarian understandings of democracy as relatively stable orientations, the present study focuses on young people whose political attitudes and values may still be evolving. Consequently, changes in these orientations over time cannot be excluded. Moreover, the data do not allow us to predict the extent to which these democratic understandings will translate into future political behaviour or exert a tangible impact on political processes. To conclude, the latent dimensions identified through PCA should not be understood as direct equivalents

of established theoretical models, but rather as empirically derived patterns of meaning attached to democracy by the respondents themselves.

Third, the exploratory nature of the analysis requires caution regarding the interpretation of the identified dimensions. Although the concepts of Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND) and Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND) are grounded in previous research, the empirical content of the authoritarian dimension in this study extends beyond conventional authoritarian attitudes and incorporates substantive expectations regarding redistribution and welfare provision. Future research could examine whether a more differentiated measurement strategy would reveal additional dimensions of democratic understanding.

Fourth, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow causal conclusions regarding political socialisation. While parental education and cultural capital are associated with particular democratic orientations, the precise mechanisms through which these influences operate remain beyond the scope of the present study. Longitudinal and mixed-method research would be necessary to explore how democratic understandings develop over time and how family influences interact with educational institutions, peer networks and media environments.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates that democratic orientations among Slovak university students are far from homogeneous. While almost half of the students can be classified as liberal democrats, a substantial proportion fall into either ambivalent or sceptical categories, indicating considerable variation in how democracy is understood and evaluated. This diversity is particularly noteworthy given the specific position of university students within the broader process of political socialisation. Although students are often treated as a relatively privileged and politically engaged segment of the younger generation, the expansion and massification of higher education have substantially increased the social heterogeneity of the student population. Contemporary university students originate from increasingly diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and therefore enter higher education with different socialisation experiences, values and expectations.

University students may also be viewed as a group situated at a transitional stage of political socialisation. On the one hand, many continue to be influenced by family environments and the value systems acquired during childhood. On the other hand, they are simultaneously exposed to new intellectual, social and institutional influences associated with higher education. Universities provide opportunities for encounters with alternative worldviews, professional identities and forms of civic engagement, which may reinforce, modify or challenge earlier political orientations. The extent and character of these influences may differ across fields of study and institutional environments, although such processes fall beyond the scope of the present analysis.

The findings also suggest that perceptions of democracy cannot be separated from evaluations of economic conditions (see also Grassi, Portos & Felicetti 2023). The economic dimension emerged as an important factor differentiating the identified clusters, indicating that respondents' understandings of democracy are shaped not only by political values and institutional preferences but also by their assessments of socio-economic realities. This is particularly noteworthy in the case of university students, many of whom have not yet achieved full economic independence and continue to rely, at least partially, on family resources. Nevertheless, economic security, redistribution and welfare provision appear to constitute important components of their democratic expectations, suggesting that evaluations of democracy are closely connected to perceptions of present and future socio-economic opportunities.

This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence showing that young people in Slovakia express particularly high levels of dissatisfaction with the economic situation. According to the NDI Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Central Europe survey, approximately 80% of Slovak young people reported dissatisfaction with the country's economic situation in 2024, compared to 63% in Poland (National Democratic Institute, 2025: 8), suggesting that economic evaluations may constitute an important context through which democratic performance is assessed.

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