

The Time to Gather Stones

**Overcoming Georgia's
Two-party Divide**

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The Time to Gather Stones - Overcoming Georgia's Two-party Divide

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The Time to Gather Stones

Overcoming Georgia's
Two-party divide

Executive

Summary

This research report explores the challenges faced by new political parties in Georgia and provides recommendations for their electoral success. The paper examines the attitudes of those citizens who are not aligned with any party and proposes strategies to mobilize these voters. Research methodology included: (i) examining the role of several key factors in the performance of existing parties that have been trying to alter the bipolar structure of Georgian party politics; (ii) conducting focus groups with undecided voters; and (iii) statistical analysis of nationally representative survey data. The findings emphasize the need for parties to develop clear ideological identities and agendas, to be transparent and accountable, and to communicate directly and continuously with voters. The paper also highlights the key role of intraparty democracy, which would allow greater engagement of the youth, the emergence of new leaders, the formation of durable, value-based partnerships and strategic alliances, and the adoption of policies addressing the needs of various social and interest groups. By implementing these recommendations, new political parties can facilitate broader participation and public consensus, reshape the existing party landscape, and move toward overcoming the existing two-party dichotomy in Georgia.



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Several new political parties and movements have emerged in Georgia since 2016. These groups sought to position themselves as a robust ‘third force’ in a bipolar political landscape, dominated by the Georgian Dream party and the United National Movement. Some believed that these newly-emerged parties had favorable exogenous and endogenous starting conditions for success and seemed to possess the necessary resources to capitalize on these factors. Endogenous factors included the high personal popularity of their leader/founder, a developed network of regional offices, sufficient financial resources, the availability of a parliamentary platform, and access to the media. The most important exogenous factor was the public demand for a third political center and the expectation of the majority of voters that the emergence of such a political force would end the largely bipolar party landscape, thus significantly reshaping the rules of the political game.

Polls suggest that the trust of Georgian voters in political parties has been declining each year since 2014. While in 2014 the share of respondents dissatisfied with political parties was 44%, in 2016, this figure rose to 73%¹. Surveys conducted in the following years showed an increase in the number of voters who disapprove of the performance of the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement and would like to see new political parties emerge in Georgia.

However, despite the growing discontent with the existing political parties and seemingly favorable structural factors, along with a high public demand for the emergence of new political parties, the political parties that emerged between 2016 and 2021 failed to achieve substantial electoral success. Furthermore, instead of building on the aforementioned starting conditions, they all showed a virtually identical negative dynamic, namely, after the initial ‘euphoric’ period, their popularity and approval ratings started to decrease steadily, eventually stabilizing at an electorally insignificant level.

The objective of this study is to investigate why these political parties, despite favorable starting conditions, failed to achieve substantial electoral success. In the first part of the study, we introduce a political party assessment tool based on a five-criteria model. We examine those political parties that were established between 2016 and 2021, had a stated claim that they would establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with in Georgian politics, but nevertheless did not manage to gain significant support in elections. To identify the reasons for the lack of success of these political parties, we conducted focus groups with undecided voters, during which respondents expressed their opinions about Georgian political parties and their leaders, talked about the main reasons for dissatisfaction with the parties, and indicated what kind of parties they would like to see

emerge. Based on the focus groups, we formulated hypotheses and tested these hypotheses on available secondary quantitative data.

Moreover, researchers tested another proposition often made by scholars of party identification, namely, that the failure of small parties to gain substantial electoral success is often due to their inability to form a party identity that would appeal to a part of the electorate, without regard for changes in the political agenda and personality of specific leaders². Our research confirmed this proposition. During the focus groups, the participants identified the inability to distinguish between the parties as one of the main problems. Small parties are often associated with big parties in their minds, and the identities of the parties are closely related to the personalities of their leaders.

In addition, we explored additional layers of the relationship between parties and voters. One of the main problems cited by research participants is the alienation of parties from society's daily problems. Politicians do not adequately address the social issues identified in the surveys and fail to suggest solutions. Regardless of the party, people are suspicious and often skeptical of politicians. According to study participants, politicians represent a political elite that has failed to address major issues of public concern. Poor communication about these issues is perceived as an inability to fix them. As a result, radical renewal of existing political elites and the arrival of new people into politics are seen as a solution to the perceived deadlock.

Quantitative data analysis has partially confirmed the findings, and insights from focus groups largely hold true in the general population as well. We found that while undecided voters tend to be more critical toward the ruling party, they do not consider any party to represent their interests. Consequently, they tend not to vote in elections. Surveys reveal that this group consists mostly of young people, residents of the capital, and employees in the private sector.

² Önnudóttir, Eva H., and Ólafur Þ. Harðarson. '12. Party identification and its evolution over time.' Research Handbook on Political Partisanship (2020): 167.

Why Does Georgian Democracy Need More Representative Parties Now?

Our research is based on the important assumption that the renewal of the party system is a vital need for the resilience and renewal of Georgian democracy. According to observers, the phenomena of technocratic populism are currently one of the main challenges to democracy in Georgia. Similarly to other countries, it creates a facade for the authoritarian and antidemocratic tendencies of the government. The key pillars of these kinds of system are not the difference of interests and ideas, but loyalty to the government and public demobilization. One way to look at the current situation is to consider the presence of a large number of undecided voters among Georgian voters as a form of demobilization that threatens the democratization process. The passivity of a significant part of voters arguably gives an advantage to the current ruling party, which has managed to maintain a substantial support base through clientelistic networks and has also been utilized polarizing strategies. Consequently, parties face the challenging task of mobilizing voters around their interests/ideas and engaging the public in substantial political and policy discussions. In the following section, we will provide a brief overview of the potential role of 'third' parties in this regard.

Over the past two centuries, political parties have played a key role in the development of democracy, and it can be said that the development of political parties is intertwined with the development of democracy. Elmer Schattschneider was among the first-generation researchers of political parties who concluded that political parties create democracy³. According to Schattschneider, political parties are the actors whose existence distinguishes democracy from dictatorship⁴.

Johnson argues that political parties provide a crucial link between citizens and the government⁵. According to him, the main purpose of political parties can be understood as fulfilling an intermediary role between citizens and government and taking into consideration the interests of citizens in decision making. Manin holds a similar view and believes that public debates and deliberations are necessary for legitimacy because decisions made by governments in democracies must be supported by the majority. The deliberation necessary for decision-making cannot take place without the existence of political parties⁶.

In line with Manin's argument, Joshua Cohen argues that an independent and publicly funded political party can ensure democratic deliberation because of two reasons: (a) parties, through their organizations, offer people with limited resources the opportunity to express their interests. To play this role, Cohen argues, political parties must be free and independent of private influences; and (b) because parties are required to address all political issues,

³ Elmer E. Schattschneider: *Party Government* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1942), 1.

⁴ Schattschneider, *Party Government*.

⁵ James Johnson, *Political parties and deliberative democracy?* *Handbook of Party Politics*, eds. Richard S Katz, and William J Crotty (London: Sage, 2006), 47-50.

⁶ Bernard Manin, 'On legitimacy and political deliberation', *Political Theory* 15, no. 3 (1987), 338-368.

they do not limit themselves to local or other narrow issues and engage in deliberations on all issues of importance to the country⁷.

It is critical for democracy that the interests of various groups of individuals are not overlooked and that all of them are considered to some extent in the decision-making process. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, after the rise of phenomena of mass parties in Europe, parties have represented the interests of different groups. Along with the development of party systems and political parties, parties have also developed distinct ideological identities. According to Hofmeister, many parties, especially in Europe, build their identity on a particular political and ideological basis. Since the nineteenth century, communist, socialist, social-democratic, Christian-democratic, liberal, and conservative parties have emerged in Europe⁸. Thus, parties provide a unique tool to align interests, ideas/ideologies, politics, and public policy.

However, Hofmeister notes that clear ideological positioning is not a guarantee of success. In support of this, he cites examples of religious parties in Indonesia and Malaysia that have not been successful in elections, even though the people of these countries are deeply religious. Hofmeister concludes that to succeed, a political party must combine its own ideological identity with competence, and voters must perceive the party and the candidate as competent actors, as is the case, for example, with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey.

⁷ Joshua Cohen, *Deliberation and democratic legitimacy: The Good Polity*, eds. Allan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 31.

⁸ Wilhelm Hofmeister: *Political parties shape democracy; their role, performance, and organisation from a global perspective* (Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd, 2022), 40-41.

Parties and Voters – in Georgia and in Theory

While there are several studies exploring parties and party systems in Georgia, most of them focus on the institutionalization of parties and the party system in Georgia. However, there are also a few studies that have specifically explored the links between parties and voters in Georgia.

One of the first comprehensive attempts to study Georgian parties and party politics was a book edited by Nodia and Scholtbach in 2006, in which the authors concluded that political parties in Georgia were institutionally underdeveloped and depended mainly on the personal qualities of a leader or a group of leaders⁹. In a more recent publication, Kobalia argued that since the country became independent, the institutional development of opposition parties in Georgia has been hampered by the absence of level playing field created by the ruling parties¹⁰.

Studies on the nature of linkages between voters and parties in Georgia can be categorized into three groups. A group of publications underlines the importance and prevalence of clientelism. Gherghina and Volintira argue that the most important characteristic of a party in Georgia that allows it to successfully mobilize voters is its ability to recruit local notables who, in turn, control a substantial number of voters through clientelistic networks¹¹.

Another group of authors attempts to relate public support for political parties to deeply embedded social and political cleavages. According to Whitley, support for political parties in Georgia is strongly related to a cultural cleavage formed around different ways of seeing the relationship between Georgia and the rest of the world. According to Sichinava, we are witnessing the rise of a classical center-periphery cleavage in Georgia, which is evident in an increased territorialization of the pattern of voting for the main opposition party, the United National Movement¹².

Yet another group of authors tries to understand how and to what extent support for parties in Georgia is related to ideological differences between parties and voters. Based on the analysis of voter application data, Kakhishvili and coauthors suggest that overall there is no close link between the ideological views of a voter and that of the party they support. However, the distance varies between parties, with supporters of the ruling party more closely aligned with their party of the choice and supporters of the United National Movement having a larger ideological distance from that party.

⁹ Ghia Nodia & Álvaro Pinto Scholtbach, Editors, *The Political Landscape of Georgia: Political Parties: Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects*, (Tbilisi: CIPDD, 2006), 247-255.

¹⁰ Irakli Kobalia, *Interest Aggregation and Policy-Making by Political Parties (Past Decade of the Georgian Party Politics)*, *The Political Landscape of Georgia*, Ghia Nodia, Editor (Tbilisi: EECMD, 2020), 110-111.

¹¹ Gherghina, Sergiu, and Clara Volintira. 'Political parties and clientelism in transition countries: evidence from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.' In *Political Parties and Electoral Clientelism*, pp. 87-103. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023.

¹² Sichinava, David. 'Cleavages, electoral geography, and the territorialization of political parties in the Republic of Georgia.' *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58, no. 6 (2017): 670-690.

The focus of the later study comes closest to the question of party-voters alignment, the topic we have explored in our current study. However, unlike previous studies, during focus group discussions we focused on a broader set of issues that create a party's image and explore various factors that can be relevant in the Georgian context.

There are several theories that attempt to explain why people vote for certain political parties. Some of the most prominent ones are:

- 1. Rational choice theory:** This theory posits that people vote for the candidate or the party that they believe will best serve their interests. Voters weigh the costs and benefits of each candidate's platform and choose the one that gives them the most favorable outcomes.
- 2. Retrospective voting:** This theory suggests that voters base their decisions on the recent record of the candidate or the party in office. If they are satisfied with the performance of the incumbent, they are more likely to vote for them again.
- 3. Party identification theory:** This theory argues that people tend to identify with a particular political party based on their social background, upbringing, and other factors. Once they have identified with a party, they are more likely to vote for its candidates in future elections.
- 4. Sociological framework:** This framework identifies various aspects of an individual's social location, such as social class, region, gender, and ethnicity, as sources of differential voting patterns.
- 5. Trust in institutions:** This theory suggests that voters who trust political parties as institutions are more likely to support candidates endorsed by party elites or those who have previously served in elected office. On the other hand, voters who distrust political parties are less likely to support the candidate backed by the party and may be more prone to indecision.

Our research reflects, to some extent, all of the theoretical statements above. However, our aim is not to determine which theoretical framework works best in the local context. A larger-scale quantitative study would be required to make such a determination. Instead, we focus on two theories derived from a rational choice approach that we believe best reflects the findings of the focus groups.

Anthony Downs was one of the first scholars to study the issue of voter-party preferences and put it in a systemic framework. In his work, 'An Economic Theory of Democracy', published in 1957, Downs argues that voters and candidates/political parties have certain political views, and these views exist between leftism and rightism in space. The sympathy will lean towards the party and the candidate that are closer to him in this value space. The approach proposed by Downs is known as spatial theory.

Although spatial theory sometimes provides a good explanation of voting behavior, it is not universal. There are cases where the limitations of spatial theory become obvious. Voters do not always make their choices based on ideological proximity. Downs' theory was later modified by Rabinowitz and Macdonald. According to the directional theory

developed by the aforementioned authors, left-wing voters choose among those left-wing candidates who are close to them, although center-right candidates may be closer to them in space and vice versa. In this case, voters divide candidates into ‘their’ and ‘other’ groups, considering candidates on their side of the center as ‘their’ candidates and candidates on the opposite side of the center as ‘other’ candidates, and making a choice among candidates who are on ‘their’ side, although candidates on the ‘other’ side may be closer to them.

Adams, Merrill, and Grofman introduced a so-called ‘discounting theory’, a new approach to spatial theory. According to this theory, voters do not expect all promises made by a candidate to be fulfilled. They expect some intermediate version between the promises and the status quo to be fulfilled. Consequently, voters make their choices according to these discounted versions of programs. Hence, the choice is based on expectations about what can be achieved rather than ideological proximity with candidates/parties in the left-right space.

Stokes proposed an approach to explain the logic of voting behavior that differs from spatial theory and is known as valence theory. According to the valence theory, there are issues on which there is a general consensus in society. These issues are referred to as valence issues, such as maintaining a low crime rate, promoting economic growth, increasing employment, etc. Voters choose the parties and candidates that they believe will best deal with existing problems. Therefore, according to Stokes, the ideological positioning of a party or a candidate does not matter; what matters is the competence of the parties and the voter’s perception of their competence.

Spatial and valence theories do not necessarily contradict each other. While one theory can explain the behavior of some voters, the other can explain the behavior of others. In this case, it seems worthwhile to observe which of these approaches is applicable to a larger number of voters. Stiers conducted research to see according to which of the approaches voters made their choice. Stiers asserts that voters are more likely to behave according to the spatial model when all political parties are unpopular, there are many parties in government, and the level of polarization is high, whereas valence issues are more relevant when parties differ ideologically, there are few parties in government, and the level of polarization is low.

Although Stiers’ conclusion is empirically supported, it would not be entirely justified to apply Stiers’ logic to Georgia’s case because the party system is not yet fully crystallized and the logic of the voter behavior has not been sufficiently studied. However, it can be argued that valence issues are rather important in Georgia because public is fairly consolidated in terms of defining most major important issues (economy, social conditions, foreign policy), and political parties will have to position themselves as a force that is able to work on these issues¹³.

¹³ The International Republican Institute, ‘Georgian Survey of Public Opinion, March 2023, accessed September 14, 2023, <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-public-opinion-survey-of-residents-of-georgia-march-2023/>

Niche Parties: Answer to the Demobilization Problem in Georgia?

The emergence and growth of 'niche parties' are one of the global counter-trends to the demobilization trend. A similar phenomenon has already been observed in the Georgian context as well.

Meyer and Miller provide the most straightforward definition of a niche party. They argue that niche parties focus on issues that are overlooked by mainstream parties¹⁴. Adams et al., on the other hand, offer a definition that differs from Meyer and Miller's. They consider non-centrist and radical ideological identification the most important sign of nicheness, citing communist, green, and radical nationalist parties as examples¹⁵. However, these definitions have certain limitations as they either do not fully cover niche parties or sometimes classify mainstream parties as niche parties. For instance, the German Green Party is not a niche party today but belongs to a group of mainstream parties. Wagner proposed a more accurate and comprehensive definition, according to which niche parties are younger than mainstream parties, have a relatively smaller support base that is organized around niche issues that are important to them, and their positions are somewhat more radical compared to those of mainstream parties¹⁶.

The United National Movement (UNM) from the pre-2003 Rose Revolution period was a closest example of a niche party in Georgia. It broke away from the Citizens' Union and focused on corruption as its main issue. According to Zurabashvili, the UNM managed to form its party identity from the very beginning, not based on ideology but on occupying a certain position-based niche. The UNM developed as an anticorruption party, which brought popularity to the UNM, as corruption was the most acute problem in pre-Rose Revolution Georgia and one of the main concerns of citizens¹⁷.

One of the possible models for the development of parties in Georgia that can resist the trend of political demobilization is the niche party model. Our recommendations, presented at the end of this report, are based inter alia on this model.

¹⁴ Thomas Meyer and Berhard Miller, 'The niche party concept and its measurement', *Party Politics* 21, no. 2 (2015), 259-271.

¹⁵ James Adams et al, 'Are niche parties fundamentally different from mainstream parties? The causes and electoral consequences of Western European parties' policy shifts', *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006), 513-529.

¹⁶ Markus Wagner, 'Defining and measuring niche parties', *Party Politics* 17, no. 6 (2011), 17-19.

¹⁷ Teona Zurabashvili, *Party Identity as the Basis for Splinter Party Electoral Success*, GIP Policy Memo, #45 (2021),

Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is a mixed-method approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative component involved conducting focus groups and analyzing the group results using thematic analysis techniques. On the other hand, the quantitative aspect involved developing an assessment and investigating the relationships between assessment dimensions and election data. Furthermore, secondary survey data were examined to test hypotheses derived from focus group results.

Research was carried out in three parts. First, we have conducted a multidimensional assessment of political parties' capabilities by assigning scores across several key factors. The aim of this exercise was to systematically evaluate how favorable conditions were for newly-emerged parties. The second part of the research was devoted to qualitative analysis of focus group discussions, which were conducted to answer the key research questions: What factors shape the political choices of non-aligned voters in Georgia? What factors determine the electoral failure of the small Georgian opposition parties? Participants were selected using the online questionnaire (see Appendix B). The third part consisted of analyzing nationally representative survey data with the aim of examining hypotheses derived from focus group data and exploring the profile of nonaligned voters in Georgia.

The multidimensional assessment of political parties' capabilities consisted of five elements: (i) leader/founder popularity; (ii) network of regional offices; (iii) financial resources; (iv) the availability of a parliamentary platform; and (v) access to media. The popularity of a leader/founder was evaluated based on the surveys conducted in recent years. The number of regional offices was determined using open sources such as political party websites and social media accounts. The financial resources of the political parties were determined through two methods: (a) annual budgetary funding for qualified subjects; and (b) information on private donations obtained from the Georgian website of Transparency International, which publishes annual data on private donations to political parties. The availability of a parliamentary platform was assessed based on the results of the 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections, as well as identifying the lawmakers who won parliamentary seats from each political party. The media coverage component was evaluated by analyzing the sample of Georgian TV channels during the respective preelection period (2016, 2020, 2021). Our primary objective was to explore whether higher scores on the multidimensional assessment, both the overall rating and individual components, translate into greater electoral success for political parties in Georgia. To investigate this, we compared the scores assigned to each party across factors like leader popularity and resources with their actual performance in recent parliamentary or local elections.

In the subsequent phase, we transformed the findings of the focus groups into hypotheses and assessed their generalizability to the entire population. To this end, we relied on secondary survey data and identified questions that would enable us to evaluate our hypotheses. Consequently, we were able to test most of our hypotheses. Regression analysis was used to examine the hypotheses and none of them were rejected. The available secondary data allowed us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the sociodemographic characteristics of undecided voters.

The Ascent and Decline of Political Movements in Georgia - Multidimensional Assessment

The Georgian political landscape, which has been dominated by two major parties - the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement - for a long time, witnessed the emergence of several new political parties and movements with favorable initial conditions and potential for electoral success between 2016 and 2021. These new actors, explicitly or implicitly, aimed to present themselves as a robust 'third force' in the political arena and possessed various objective and subjective factors that could facilitate their success. Subjective factors included the high ratings or personal popularity of party leaders/founders, the presence of regional branches, the availability of significant financial resources, the access to the parliamentary platform, the support of various media outlets, etc. The most important objective factor was the demand of the majority of voters for a third political center - a positive expectation that such a third force would offer an effective alternative to the existing reality and break the bipolar dynamic of Georgia's party politics. This demand was reflected in several public opinion surveys conducted during this period, which showed that a growing proportion of voters were dissatisfied with both 'main' parties and desired the emergence of alternative parties¹⁸.

According to public opinion polls conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) since 2014, there has been a significant decline in favorable attitudes towards political parties. In 2014, approximately 44% of people expressed dissatisfaction with the political parties, while in just two years this figure increased to 73%¹⁹.

Despite seemingly favorable starting conditions and increasing voter demand for new political players, the political parties and movements that emerged in Georgia between 2016 and 2021 were unable to achieve major electoral success. Furthermore, after an initial period of 'euphoria', their ratings, instead of rising, started to decline and eventually stabilized at an electorally insignificant level.

We created a multidimensional assessment tool to systematically evaluate how favorable the conditions were for the newly emerged political parties in Georgia between 2016 and 2021. The assessment aims to measure the capabilities of the political parties established in 2016, 2020, and 2021 in Georgia according to five key components that are essential to form a strong party.

Throughout this chapter, the ability of a political party to pass the 5% electoral threshold for parliament is considered a minimum criterion of success. Enough seats in parliament that allow a new party to coalign with other parties and form a coalition government in Georgia is considered a medium measure of success. The ultimate success criterion is becoming a robust third force, or an alternative to the existing two major political parties, that is

¹⁸ IRI, Public Opinion Survey, Residents of Georgia, September, 2022, P. 20.

¹⁹ IRI, Public Opinion Survey, Residents of Georgia, April 10-22, 2018.

capable of winning even in a two-party system. Each component of the assessment is scored on a 5-point scale.

The multidimensional assessment shows that the selected political parties had clearly favorable starting conditions for at least one of them to succeed and build a significant support and voter base. However, a simple comparison between the assessment scores and the actual election results indicates that the parties failed to challenge the bipolar system more or less similarly, despite differences in their scores.

For example, the political party European Georgia received the highest score of 24, indicating that it had the most favorable conditions to succeed in the elections. However, it performed similarly to parties with lower scores such as Lelo (16) and Strategy Aghmashenebeli (17). This suggests that the five criteria used for the multidimensional assessment are not sufficient to ensure electoral success. Although these criteria are essential for the formation of a political party, they do not guarantee that it will become a viable third force in Georgia. This indicates that there are other factors that influence the electoral performance of political parties in Georgia, which will be examined in more detail in the following sections.

In this regard, it is important to clarify for foreign readers of this paper: the assessment of 'success' in parliamentary elections in Western democracies and in weak democracies such as Georgia differs substantially. In Germany, for example, exceeding the electoral threshold means a relatively strong parliamentary representation and ensures substantial party funding from the state as well as support for associated political foundations. Those who have crossed the threshold can have some influence on the political processes. The weight and power of political parties that receive more than 15% of the vote are even greater. In Georgia, winner-takes-all logic leaves little space for opposition parties to thrive, and even the situation of coming in second in the electoral race can be seen as a failure, rather than a success. Furthermore, such a result can endanger the party's leadership, assets, and future prospects, as evidenced by the previous political history of the country.

The assessment of new political parties consists of five components:

1. Personal popularity of party leader/founder. Having a popular leader can facilitate the mobilization of mass support for a political party. Although a high approval rating for a leader does not necessarily translate into more supporters for the party, it improves visibility and, in conjunction with capitalizing on other relevant factors, creates an opportunity to increase the popularity of the party. The ratings of political leaders are derived from public opinion surveys conducted by the IRI at different times.
2. The presence of district and regional offices. Being locally representations in different cities and regions allows political parties to engage with voters regularly and increase their support through activities that respond to voters' needs. Among the selected political parties, only Lelo provides information on its district and regional representations on its website. For the other parties, the number of their offices in the country was obtained from open sources on the Internet.

3. Financial resources. Financial resources are essential for the effective functioning of political parties. They enable political parties to equip their central and regional offices with technical and human resources, conduct focus groups and surveys, hire consultants, plan and implement effective election campaigns, and carry out other activities necessary for political parties. This component is mainly based on the data provided by Transparency International Georgia. During the electoral periods, the main sources of funding for the selected political parties were private donations and public funding.
4. Parliamentary platform. Having MPs or a faction in parliament provides political parties with additional levers to advance their policies, as well as access to additional financial resources, which allow them to strengthen their party activists, among other things. Moreover, since parliamentary sessions and debates receive extensive media coverage, parliamentary platform is a useful tool for demonstrating their superiority over their opponents in debates, as well as for maintaining and increasing their visibility and ratings. In this component, scores of one or more were assigned to those political parties that had representatives during parliament in the election year.
5. Access to media. It is vital for political parties to keep voters informed about their leaders and activities. The media is the main channel of communication between voters and parties²⁰. Therefore, it is crucial for political parties to have media coverage of their activities. Access to the media means the possibility for political parties to communicate their views and positions to voters through live broadcasts. In the access to media component, the media archives of the selected political parties were examined.

Assessment

	1 points	2 points	3 points	4 points	5 points
Rating of favorability of a leader or founder	<20%	20-30%	30-40%	40-50%	>50%
A network of district and regional offices	<3	3-6	6-9	9-12	>12
Financial resources	<1M	1-2M	2-3M	3-4M	>4M
Parliamentary platform	1-2 MPs	2-5 MPs	6 MPs (a faction)	More than 1 parliamentary faction	The largest opposition party
Access to media	Mainly social media	Access mainly to 1 TV channel	Access to 1-3 TV channels	Access to more than 3 TV channels	Access to five television channels with the highest viewership

*Note: The media coverage component of the assessment does not take into account radio, print, and online media, as these media, according to various sociological surveys, are not the main source of information on political events for the Georgian population.

²⁰ NDI, Public Attitudes in Georgia, Results of July 2021 telephone survey.

²¹ "Caucasus Barometer 2021 Georgia." n.d. Caucasusbarometer.org. Accessed October 23, 2023. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2021ge/INFSOU1/>.

Capabilities of Third Parties – Assessment (2016-2021)

Political parties

Assessment components

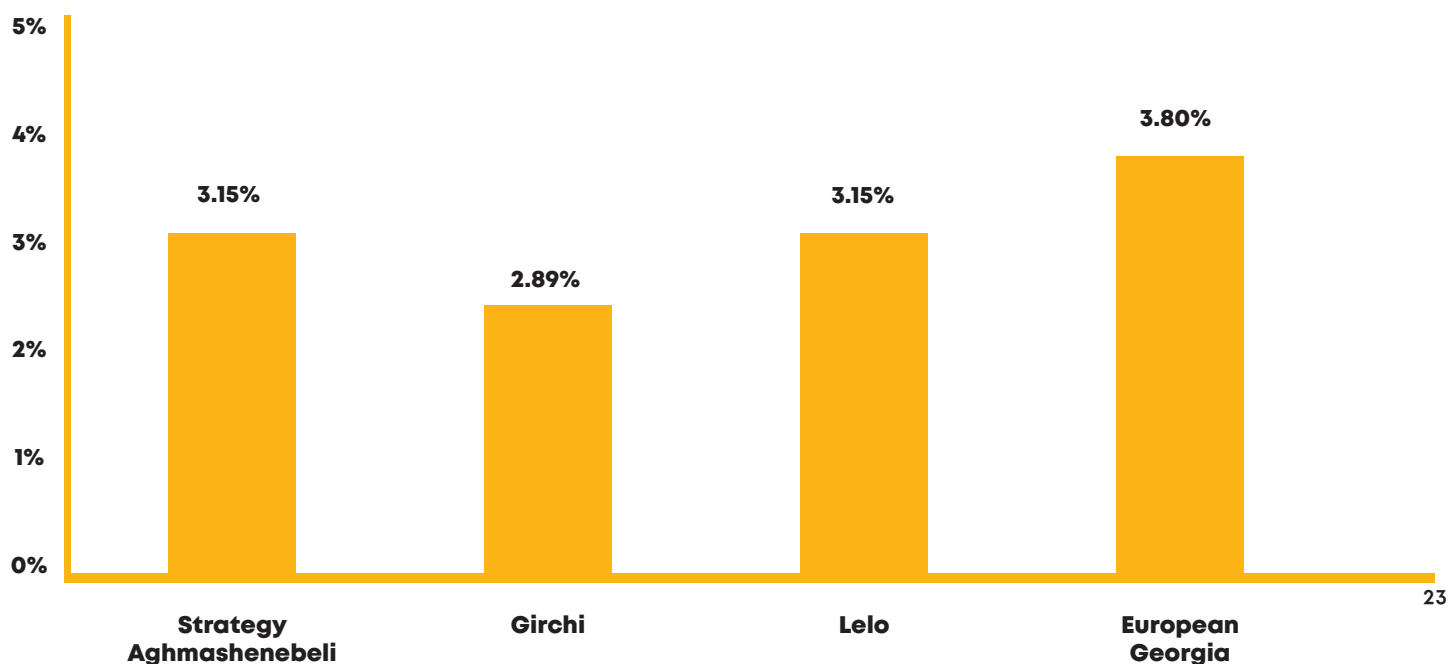
	Rating of favorability of a leader or founder	A network of regional offices	Financial resources	Parliamentary platform	Access to media	Total
New Political Center Girchi (2016)	1	5	1	2	5	14
The State for People and the New Georgia Election Block (2016)	5	5	3	1	5	19
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	4	5	4	0	4	17
European Georgia (2020)	5	5	5	5	4	24
Lelo for Georgia (2020)	2	5	2	0	4	16
For Georgia (2021)	5	5	2	3	4	19

*Note 1. In 2016, the New Political Center-Girchi was part of the State for People and the New Georgia electoral bloc, but this bloc disintegrated just days before the election day, as Girchi withdrew from the bloc and did not participate in the 2016 elections.

*Note 2. The assessment tool assesses the capabilities of the political parties and movements during the parliamentary elections in 2016 and 2020, since the parliamentary elections are the ultimate test to assess the success of the political parties. The only exception in this regard is the political party For Georgia founded by the former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, which has not yet participated in parliamentary elections and is analyzed in the the current research in context of the 2021 local government elections.

The assessment shows that the selected political parties had clearly favorable starting conditions to succeed and build a significant support and voter base, but they all failed to challenge the bipolar system in a more or less similar manner. In 2016, the electoral bloc consisting of the political parties of Paata Burchuladze and Giorgi Vashadze, which also included the New Rights, received only 3.45% support and did not reach the electoral threshold. The New Political Center - Girchi quit the race a few days before the election day, and in the following years, its once increasing rating declined and stabilized at an electorally insignificant level of 2-3%.

The results of the 2020 parliamentary elections could be seen as continuation of the above trends. If the 5% electoral threshold had not been removed exclusively for the 2020 elections, none of the political parties that participated in the parliamentary elections would have been able to pass the threshold and get elected to the parliament.



Regarding the political party For Georgia, founded by former PM Giorgi Gakharia, it received 7.8% of the votes in the 2021 local elections, which, while ahead of most opponents, fell short of voters' pre-election expectations. According to the IRI public opinion survey of June 2021, For Georgia party was the first choice for 9% of respondents and the second choice for 8%²⁴. Therefore, despite the potential to pass the threshold in the parliamentary elections, sociological surveys conducted after the elections showed a nearly threefold decrease in support for this party. According to the public opinion poll conducted by IRI in September 2022, the political party would be the first choice for only 3% of the respondents²⁵. However, the rating of the For Georgia party is not stable and, according to the latest surveys, the support of the party has a slight increase to 4% percent as the first choice²⁶. Another 4% would pick this party as a second choice, according both to 2022 and in 2023 surveys²⁷.

²³ Data of the Central Election Commission.

²⁴ IRI, Public Opinion Survey of Georgia, June 2021.

²⁵ IRI, Public Opinion Survey, Residents of Georgia, September 2022.

²⁶ IRI, Georgian Survey of Public Opinion, September - October 2023

²⁷ Ibid. IRI, Public Opinion Survey, Residents of Georgia, September 2022,

Evaluation of Political Party Scores

by Components of the Assessment

New Political Center - Girchi (2016)

Initial conditions according to the assessment: in 2016, the New Political Center-Girchi was a member of the electoral bloc headed by Paata Burchuladze's the State for People. Due to sharp ideological differences, Girchi was not seen as an organic part of the bloc throughout the election period²⁸. Two weeks before the election day, Girchi exited the bloc and was unable to participate in the elections. Despite this setback, Girchi had several factors that favored its success in 2016, such as a network of regional offices, a parliamentary platform, and access to the media.

a. Personal popularity of the leader/founder: Zurab Japaridze, the Girchi leader, had the lowest popularity rating among the party leaders covered by polls. According to the IRI public opinion survey, only 16% of the respondents had a positive opinion about him in 2016²⁹.

b. A network of regional offices: Girchi had more than 12 offices in the country in 2016. The political party had local representations in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Zugdidi, Martvili, Gori, Akhaltsikhe, Rustavi, Telavi and other municipalities.

c. Financial resources: Financial resources were not among relative strengths of Girchi. In 2016, the political party received donations in the amount of GEL 626,513²⁹.

d. Parliamentary platform: After splitting from the United National Movement, Girchi had four members of parliament who actively engaged in parliamentary debates.

e. Access to media: Girchi had access to mainstream TV channels in 2016. Party leaders appeared on political talk shows with high viewership. Girchi had ample opportunity to communicate its ideas and views through various media platforms.

Paata Burchuladze - The State for People (2016)

Starting conditions according to the assessment: In 2016, several political parties united around Paata Burchuladze, at the time one of the most popular public figures in Georgia. Burchuladze's State for People party, the New Political Center-Girchi, For New Georgia, and the New Rights formed a single electoral bloc that had favorable starting conditions to participate in the 2016 elections, but the project failed to deliver seats in the parliament. First, several members of the State for People left the political party due to internal conflicts, and then Girchi withdrew from the bloc shortly before the election day. In the end, the electoral bloc received 3.45% of the votes in the 2016 election.

²⁸ Friedrich Ebert Foundation, „Staying Power“, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/18697.pdf>.

²⁹ IRI, Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia: March-April 2016.

³⁰ „ახალი პოლიტიკური ცენტრი - გირჩი - პარტიების შემოწირულებები.“ n.d. www.transparency.ge. Accessed October 23, 2023.

https://www.transparency.ge/politicaldonations/ge/party/8?year=2016&fbclid=IwAR2pQbD8_tzPU-cPygQYsid9D2JBWO4W

JHDjHlv8c0IMP9dVZzL1Mbhnsg.

a. Personal popularity of the leader/founder: Before the 2016 elections, Paata Burchuladze was the most popular politician in Georgia. According to the IRI public opinion survey, he had a favorable rating of 75% in 2016. No other politician had such a high rating in the previous seven years.

b. A network of regional offices: In 2016, the State for People established its offices in all regions of Georgia. The network covered all major cities and municipalities throughout Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli, Shida Kartli, Samegrelo, Imereti, Guria, Samtskhe-Javakheti and other regions. This network expanded further after Girchi, New Georgia, and New Rights joined the unified electoral bloc. Despite Girchi's withdrawal from the bloc, the State for People still had more than 25 offices throughout the country.

c. Financial resources³⁴: In 2015, the State for People received GEL 4.4 million in private donations. After forming a bloc with New Georgia, Girchi and the New Rights, their total financial resources amounted to GEL 5.3 million, of which Girchi's share was GEL 600,000.^{35 36 37}

d. Parliamentary platform: while the State for People did not have any parliamentary mandates, its coalition with Girchi and New Georgia meant that the bloc was represented by five MPs. Girchi's later withdrawal left the bloc with one mandate.

e. Access to media: In 2016 opposition parties had access to all media with high viewership. Politicians from the State for People bloc appeared on Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, First Channel, and other mainstream TV channels³⁸.

European Georgia - Movement for Liberty (2020)

Initial conditions according to the assessment: The political party emerged from a split within the United National Movement in January 2017. The 2020 parliamentary elections were the first time that this party contested for the parliament and faced a serious electoral challenge. Compared to other newly formed parties, European Georgia had the best starting conditions in 2020, as it met all five criteria of the assessment.

a. Personal popularity of the leader/founder: The leader of European Georgia in 2020 was Davit Bakradze, one of the most popular figures in Georgian politics. According to the IRI public opinion survey, 53% of respondents had a favorable opinion about him in 2016.

³⁴ The financial information is based on the data provided by Transparency International Georgia.

³⁵ "მოდრობა სახელმწიფო ხალხისთვის (პაატა ბურჭულაძე) - პარტიების შემოწონილებები." n.d. Www.transparency.ge. Accessed October 23, 2023. <https://www.transparency.ge/politicaldonations/ge/party/12?year=2016&fbclid=IwAR17g3EbMcKNApuLtGEyVe7kBZl3hKJhDswptq20BXpkjGMZT45Ky8h7kWI>.

³⁶ "ახალი პოლიტიკური ცენტრი - გირჩი - პარტიების შემოწონილებები." n.d. Www.transparency.ge. Accessed October 23, 2023. <https://www.transparency.ge/politicaldonations/ge/party/8?year=2016&fbclid=IwAR0rsoGVkt9Bkz7oERY7z3OGkkK9E2D2DHWT4xRZ4IOVzI9MWBmgYvLM8GQ>.

³⁷ "სამოქალაქო პლატფორმა - ახალი საქართველო - პარტიების შემოწონილებები." n.d. Www.transparency.ge. Accessed October 23, 2023. https://www.transparency.ge/politicaldonations/ge/party/83?year=2016&fbclid=IwAR0WQM1UiqiaxMYq7pXpWu4yM8GM_NxESBD_LpyEa7Q5PIEVOjyKpWRKmcY.

³⁸ Nino Robakidze, "Political Polarization and Media: Threats to the Democratic Process in Georgia," Georgian Institute of Politics, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Policy-brief-19-Nino-Robakidze.pdf>.

b. A network of regional offices: European Georgia inherited a well-established network of regional offices from the United National Movement. The party had up to 50 offices across the country, including Tbilisi, Batumi, Zugdidi, Poti, Khobi, Martvili, Jvari, Chkhorotsku, Kobuleti, Keda, Khulo, Gori, Akhaltsikhe, Rustavi, etc.

c. Financial resources: In 2020, European Georgia received GEL 3.6 million in private donations and GEL 2.2 million in public funding. The total income of the political party was GEL 5.8 million³⁹.

d. Parliamentary platform: In 2017, 21 members of the United National Movement left the United National Movement to form European Georgia. After registering as a new party, European Georgia became the largest opposition party in the parliament with 21 seats and three parliamentary factions, granting it additional benefits in terms of parliamentary representation and state funding.

e. Access to media: The media landscape was much more polarized in 2020 than in 2016⁴⁰. Imedi TV, the channel with the highest viewership, stopped giving live broadcasts to opposition parties. As a result, the leaders of European Georgia did not have the opportunity to communicate their views and positions through the largest TV channel.

Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)

Initial conditions according to the assessment: Giorgi Vashadze founded a new political party, New Georgia, on 5 June 2015. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, he joined a bloc with Paata Burtchuladze, with the new block receiving 3.45% of the votes and failing to cross the 5% threshold to gain seats in the parliament. In 2020, New Georgia was renamed Strategy Aghmashenebeli. This time, Giorgi Vashadze formed a bloc with the Law and Justice political party, itself a new arrival on the political scene. Before the 2020 parliamentary elections, this political bloc also enjoyed favorable starting conditions, however the electoral bloc of Strategy Aghmashenebeli and Law and Justice.

a. Personal popularity of the leader/founder: According to a public opinion poll, up to 40% of the respondents had a positive attitude towards Giorgi Vashadze in June-July 2020. Vashadze was ranked seventh among Georgian politicians in terms of popularity, according to the same poll⁴¹.

b. A network of regional offices: The Strategy Aghmashenebeli electoral bloc had a well-established network of regional offices. The political party opened its offices in all major cities and municipalities, such as Tbilisi, Batumi, Mtskheta, Poti, Borjomi, Khashuri, Khobi, Samtredia, Vani, Tskaltubo, etc. Strategy Aghmashenebeli had opened more than 35 offices across the Georgia before 2020 elections.

³⁹ Transparency International – Georgia, 2020, Georgia's Political Finance in 2020: Revenues and Expenditures of Political Parties and Financial Oversight.

⁴⁰ Nino Robakidze, "Political Polarization and Media: Threats to the Democratic Process in Georgia," Georgian Institute of Politics, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Policy-brief-19-Nino-Robakidze.pdf>

⁴¹ IRI, Public Opinion Survey of Georgia: June-July 2020.

c. Financial resources: In 2020, Strategy Aghmashenebeli received GEL 3.4 million, of which GEL 2.6 million was private donations and GEL 765,000 were public funding.

d. Parliamentary platform: By 2020, the Strategy Aghmashenebeli had no seats in the parliament.

e. Access to media: As the media was highly polarized, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, like other opposition political parties, was unable to use Imedi TV airtime to communicate with voters. The main media support for this party was provided by so-called pro-opposition TV channels.

Lelo for Georgia (2020)

Initial conditions according to the assessment: The political party Lelo For Georgia was founded in 2019 by Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze, founders of one of the largest financial corporations in Georgia, TBC Bank. Khazaradze and Japaridze entered politics with great ambitions, and their political party initially positioned itself as the ‘third force’. Despite such ambitions and favorable financial resources, Lelo also failed to maintain the initial momentum and gain substantial success in subsequent elections.

a. Personal popularity of the leader/founder: According to IRI’s public opinion poll, the personal popularity of Lelos’ chairperson and leader, Mamuka Khazaradze, was 27% in 2020.

b. A network of regional offices: After its establishment, Lelo opened dozens of offices throughout the country. According to the official website of the political party, Lelo has more than 50 representations throughout the country to this day.

c. Financial resources: Among the selected political parties, Lelo was the party with the most finances. In 2020, the political party received GEL 8 million in donations. It should be noted that during the same period, the largest opposition party, the United National Movement, had received almost identical amount of funding.

d. Parliamentary platform: In 2020, Lelo, as a newly established party, had no representatives in the parliament.

e. Access to media: Like other opposition political parties, Lelo also faced substantial challenges. The largest TV channel, Imedi, did not provide Lelo with airtime, which significantly limited the party’s communication with voters.

For Georgia (2021)

Initial conditions according to the assessment: The political party For Georgia was founded by former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia in 2021, after leaving the Georgian Dream. The 2021 municipal elections were the first elections in which

⁴² IRI, Public Opinion Survey of Georgia: June-July 2020.

⁴³ “Donations to Political Parties,” Transparency International - Georgia, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.transparency.ge/politicaldonations/en/party/190?year=2020>.

this political party participated. For Georgia has not yet participated in parliamentary elections and has thus not yet faced the main electoral test.

a. Personal popularity of the leader/founder: The founder and leader of the party, Giorgi Gakharia, was the most popular Georgian politician in 2021. About 56% of the respondents had a favorable opinion of him⁴⁴.

b. A network of regional offices: The political party For Georgia quickly opened regional offices, the number of which exceeded 35. Party offices were opened in Tbilisi, Batumi, Mtskheta, Kutaisi, Zestaponi, Baghdati, Kazbegi, Dusheti, Kobuleti, Khulo, Keda, Shuakhevi, Zugdidi, Chkhorotsku, Tsalenjikha, and other municipalities.

c. Financial resources: In 2021, the political party received GEL 1.6 million in private donations⁴⁵.

d. Parliamentary platform: After Giorgi Gakharia left the Georgian Dream, six members of the parliament left the parliamentary group of the ruling party and formed For Georgia's parliamentary group⁴⁶.

e. Access to media: The political party had access to almost all TV channels, except Imedi TV, which, as in the case of other opposition parties, did not allow a former prime minister turned opposition politician Giorgi Gakharia on its air.

Association between the starting conditions and the election results of political parties

The capabilities assigned different scores to the six selected political parties, based on their starting conditions for the 2016 and 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local self-government elections. The political party European Georgia received the highest score of 24, indicating that it had the most favorable conditions to succeed in the elections. However, the actual election results did not match this expectation. On the other hand, Lelo for Georgia received a score of 16, reflecting its disadvantages compared to European Georgia, such as the lack of parliamentary representation and lower popularity of its leader/founder. Despite these differences, the electoral results of Lelo and European Georgia were relatively similar.

The multidimensional assessment scores and actual election results for the six political parties are compared in the table below. Overall, there is little relationship evident between the assessment scores and electoral outcomes.

⁴⁴ IRI, Public opinion survey residents of Georgia, June 2021.

⁴⁵ Source: Transparency International.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Ebert Foundation, „Staying Power“, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/18697.pdf>.

Comparison between assessment scores and the election results of political parties⁴⁷.

Table 1.

Comparison between assessment scores and corresponding election results.

Political party	Assessment score	The corresponding election result
Girchi (2016)	14	Did not participate
The State for people bloc (2016)	19	3.45%
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	17	3.15%
European Georgia (2020)	24	3.8%
Lelo For Georgia (2020)	16	3.15%
For Georgia (2021)	19	7.8%

The parties performed similarly in elections despite having significantly different scores in the five dimensions assessed. Favorable assessments across factors such as leader popularity and resources do not directly translate into greater electoral success for these political parties.

Although their assessment rankings vary considerably, their vote totals remain within a similar low range in elections.

⁴⁷ Data on the election results is taken from the webpage of the Central Election Commission.

Comparison between individual assessment criteria and election results:

The table below shows the relationship between the popularity of the party leader/founder and the election results.

Table 2

Comparison between the leader / founder of the popularity of the party and the corresponding election results.

Political party	Assessment score by popularity of the leader	The corresponding election result
Girchi (2016)	1	Did not participate
The State for people bloc (2016)	5	3.45%
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	4	3.15%
European Georgia (2020)	5	3.8%
Lelo For Georgia (2020)	2	3.15%
For Georgia (2021)	5	7.8%

When examining the six political parties, the popularity rating of the party leader also does not show a consistent connection with the final electoral outcomes. For example, Paata Burchuladze of the State for people had very high personal popularity ratings, yet his bloc only received 3.45% of the votes. Meanwhile, Mamuka Khazaradze had a lower personal favorability, but despite this factor, his Lelo for Georgia party performed similarly. Although leader popularity scores and election results may trend in the same direction in some cases, this relationship appears moderate based on the cases examined.

Additionally, a comparison between the number of regional offices and vote shares indicates that there is almost no relationship between this criterion and election outcome. Some parties like Lelo for Georgia and European Georgia had more than 50 regional offices, yet they did not receive substantially more votes than parties

Table 3

Comparison between the networks of regional offices of political parties and the corresponding election results

Political party	Number of regional offices	The corresponding election result
Girchi (2016)	>12	Did not participate
The State for people bloc (2016)	29	3.45%
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	36	3.15%
European Georgia (2020)	48	3.8%
Lelo For Georgia (2020)	54	3.15%
For Georgia (2021)	37	7.8%

The analysis indicates that the political parties were not successful in using their regional network of offices to attract more supporters. The number of regional offices did not have a significant impact on the election results.

The following table suggests that, in the case of third parties, having more financial resources does not necessarily translate into more votes. In fact, in the cases of Lelo and European Georgia, political parties with higher financial resources received less support from voters.

When examining the financial data, higher monetary resources do not appear to lead to better electoral outcomes for the six political parties reviewed. In fact, the parties with the most funding, like Lelo and European Georgia, performed similarly or worse than less-funded parties. For instance, Lelo raised GEL 8 million, yet received only 3.15% of the votes, while the For Georgia party with lesser funds secured a 7.8% support.

Table 4

Comparison between the financial resources of the selected political parties and the corresponding election results.

Political party	Political party Assessment score by financial resources	The corresponding election result
Girchi (2016)	1	Did not participate
The State for people bloc (2016)	3	3.45%
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	4	3.15%
European Georgia (2020)	5	3.8%
Lelo For Georgia (2020)	5	3.15%
For Georgia (2021)	2	7.8%

However, this inverse dynamic between finances and votes does not hold when looking more broadly at the main parties in the political landscape. The ruling Georgian Dream party raised GEL 29 million and won over 48% of the vote in 2020. Meanwhile, the top opposition party UNM raised less money and got around 27% of the votes. So, greater financial capacity seems strongly linked to electoral success among the largest, established parties over time. But for the selected parties examined in this study, increased monetary resources do not directly translate into better results. Lelo’s GEL 8 million in funding failed to produce more votes than For Georgia’s GEL 1.6 million budget. Although money is likely important for operational capacities, other factors beyond just financing seem to shape the fate of these emerging parties in elections. As discussed below, these parties may need to consider issues related party identity, policy platforms, leadership reliance, and other areas identified by focus groups.

Table 5

Comparison between the financial capacity of the main political parties in Georgia and their election results..

Political party	Financial resources	The corresponding election result
Georgian Dream (2020)	GEL 29000000	48.22%
United National Movement (2020)	GEL 8000000	27.18%
Lelo (2020)	GEL 8000000	3.15%
European Georgia (2020)	GEL 5800000	3.79%
Alliance of Patriots (2020)	GEL 4200000	3.14%
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	GEL 3400000	1.15%
Labor Party (2020)	GEL 1200000	1%
Elisashvili – Citizens (2020)	GEL 272000	1.33%
For Georgia (2021)	GEL 1600000	7.8%

The data shows a certain correlation between a party having parliamentary seats and attracting more votes, though additional factors clearly matter as well. For instance, European Georgia entered the 2020 race with 21 seats from the prior parliament, yet performed only slightly better than Lelo and Strategy Aghmashenebeli, which had none.

Table 6

Comparison between the parliamentary platforms and the corresponding election results of the selected political parties..

Political party	Assessment score	The corresponding election result
Girchi (2016)	2	Did not participate
The State for people bloc (2016)	1	3.45%
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	0	3.15%
European Georgia (2020)	5	3.8%
Lelo For Georgia (2020)	0	3.15%
For Georgia (2021)	3	7.8%

However, when looking more broadly, larger parties that have more dominant parliamentary blocs tend to achieve higher vote shares. The ruling Georgian dream held a majority in 2020 and secured more than 48% of the votes. Meanwhile, the largest opposition party, UNM, had fewer seats and got around 27% support. So, while parliamentary presence does not directly translate into electoral success, it can potentially play a reinforcing role for bigger parties.

Table 7

Comparison between the parliamentary mandates and the election results of the main political parties in Georgia.

Political party	Assessment score according to parliamentary mandates	The corresponding election result
Georgian Dream (2020)	5	48.22%
United National Movement (2020)	2	27.18%
Lelo (2020)	0	3.15%
European Georgia (2020)	4	3.79%
Alliance of Patriots (2020)	3	3.14%
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	0	1.15%
Labor Party (2020)	0	1%
Elisashvili – Citizens (2020)	0	1.33%
For Georgia (2021)	3	7.8%

For the third parties in this study, those with representation failed to take advantage of this factor to outperform newcomers. European Georgia barely surpassed Lelo and Strategy Aghmashenebeli despite its sizable parliamentary representation and three factions. It appears that parties seeking to challenge the status quo may require more than just seats in the parliament to grow electorally; they need to combine this with other factors like policy messaging, party identity, and leadership. Relying on the existing parliamentary mandates has proven insufficient to challenge the two-party dominance observed thus far.

The data indicate minimal differences in media access translating into votes across most of the studied parties. A comparison shows that parties with higher scores like State for people (5) performed similarly to those with less media access like European Georgia (4).

In fact, For Georgia in 2021 achieved the most electoral success out of the group while only receiving an assessment score of 4 for media. Therefore, greater media exposure, such as appearances on high-viewer outlets, does not directly correlate with a higher vote share based on this sample. As with factors such as leader ratings and resources, the connection between media access and vote totals appears unreliable.

Table 8

Comparison between the access to the media of the selected political parties and the corresponding election results.

Political party	Assessment score	The corresponding election result
Girchi (2016)	4	Did not participate
The State for people bloc (2016)	5	3.45%
Strategy Aghmashenebeli (2020)	4	3.15%
European Georgia (2020)	4	3.8%
Lelo For Georgia (2020)	4	3.15%
For Georgia (2021)	4	7.8%

Conclusion

A comparative look at the different assessment components reveals an inconsistent relationship with the outcomes of the election. The dimensions showing the strongest apparent connection to votes were the parliamentary presence and the popularity of the leader. For example, For Georgia performed best in the 2021 local elections, while scoring high on both these factors.

However, financial resources exhibited almost an inverse dynamic: the most well-funded parties like Lelo and European Georgia performed worse than less resourced ones like For Georgia. Therefore, the factors evaluated do not appear to uniformly point the electoral fortune in the same direction. Rather, they seem loosely associated, at best, depending on case specifics.

Data indicate that there are other crucial factors that political parties in Georgia must consider in addition to the rating of a leader/founder, the network of representative offices, financial resources, the parliamentary platform, and media access. Although the parties analyzed above seemed to have some necessary elements to become strong and successful political forces, they lacked something that hindered their development. Based on data from focus groups, these hindering factors include a party identity crisis, alienation from voters, a party structure centered on one leader, a lack of trustworthiness, and a lack of innovation. These factors will be examined in more detail in the following sections.

Factors Shaping the Support for New Political Parties in Georgia Insights from Focus Groups

This report presents the findings of five focus group discussions that were conducted as part of the research project on the ‘third force’ in Georgian politics. The focus groups involved 50 participants from Tbilisi, Telavi, Kutaisi, Zugdidi and Batumi. Participants were selected on the basis of their neutral or negative attitudes toward the existing political parties and expressed hope for the emergence of a new political party for the next parliamentary elections. Voters with such attitudes represent a major segment of Georgian voting public which could significantly influence the development of political parties seeking to evolve into a ‘third force’.

The aim of the focus group discussions was to explore and analyze the factors that shape the views of this group towards party politics. Data collected from the focus groups revealed: (i) the main sources of public dissatisfaction with the current political parties; (ii) the reasons for the failure of political parties that have attempted to position themselves as a ‘third force’ in Georgia in recent years; and (iii) the expectations and demands of Georgians for and from new political parties.

The analysis revealed that lack of political identity along with the mistrust towards existing leaders and political parties, resulting in the alienation of voters from the political elites are among the key factors that make political parties aspiring to be a ‘third force’ and their leaders relatively indistinguishable from each other and prevent them from becoming electorally successful parties.

National Problems and the Political Parties’ Responses to these problems, according to the Respondents:

The focus group discussions showed that the respondents regarded socio-economic issues as the most serious problems facing Georgia, with unemployment and outward migration seen as the most urgent and pressing. Education was also highlighted as a major problem by the focus group participants. Other problematic issues raised by respondents were nepotism and corruption, foreign policy, integration with the EU, and healthcare. Some respondents also mentioned territorial integrity, the influx of Russian citizens, the problems within the judiciary, and the maintenance of peace with neighboring countries.

Respondents expressed disappointment and frustration with the politicians’ inability or unwillingness to address the aforementioned issues. They felt that political parties either ignored these problems or talked about these issues without taking any concrete action to solve them. The participants were unable to name any political party whose agenda was based on the problems and needs of the citizens.

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“They don’t care about this issue at all. None of them has any interest in it. Once they reach power, they all become the same as those before them.”

“They talk [about problems], but they do nothing to solve them.”

“They only say things, but never do anything beyond that.”

“They do not take this issue [a pressing problem for a respondent] seriously. None of them has any interest in it.”

“Sadly, I have not heard of any political party that is working on solving urgent problems.”

Respondents also heavily criticize political parties for their inaction in problem-solving, and they believe parties fail to provide a definite agenda.

“I do not see [any activity] in any specific direction or any political party pushing for an initiative to create something for the youth...”

Participants express criticism regarding the decreasing credibility of political promises and the perceived lack of honesty among political parties. Participants express disappointment in the diminishing quality of promises made by parties, suggesting a decline in the parties' commitment to their pledges:

“They used to make more convincing promises; now they are too lazy even for that; they do not promise anything anymore.”

“None of them is honest; there is no party today that works on social programs.”

These perceptions were dominant in the five focus groups. Some respondents could name specific political parties that worked on the issues that mattered to them, but even then they evaluated their work as insufficient.

“Do [any political parties] work on problems or not? It seems to me that they either do not work or cannot work actively. Formally, yes, some political parties are working.”

“Such political parties do exist; I think we are less familiar with political parties and their programs than we should be...”

Another major insight is that respondents think there is a discrepancy between the stated positions and actions:

“It is hard to say whether they work actively or not. In words, they express this position. I may or may not like how someone puts it. Now, with the union of three political parties: Droa, Japaridze’s Girchi and Strategy Aghmashenebeli, their position is quite reasonable... Also, European Georgia, Lelo, and the United National Movement are making more or less correct emphases, but I do not see any action. It never goes beyond talking. The actions taken are really inadequate.”

In addition to being dissatisfied with actions and commitments of existing political parties, participants also highlight the importance of clear and simple communication:

“I remember that Lelo was doing this, but they had a very complex language of communication. I remember listening to them say something about lowering bank interest rates, and after listening to the first 10 minutes, I turned it off because I did not understand anything. The language of communication should be simple and understandable to the people of the regions. They should communicate their message to people.”

Communication between Political Parties and Voters

The focus group participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the way political parties communicate with citizens. They felt that Georgian politicians were indifferent towards their concerns and needs. According to the prevalent opinion in the focus groups, politicians rarely met with voters directly and only met them during the pre-election period, causing resentment amongst the focus group participants. Communication between political parties and citizens was discussed in two main problematic aspects: (i) the respondents argued that politicians did not engage with people and mostly limit their communication to talking from TV channels; and (ii) the agendas of the political parties focused on issues that were not relevant to ordinary citizens. These views were prevalent in all five focus group discussions.

Cynicism towards politicians’ public image prevailed among the participants:

“During the election campaign, politicians are eager to show their affection for the public; they smile and kiss for the cameras, only to wipe themselves with wet wipes afterward, a scene worthy of a movie. In reality, however, they don’t care about people...”

Participants criticize the lack of direct communication between politicians and voters, highlighting the disconnect between political parties and the populace. They emphasize the need for ongoing interaction beyond election periods.

“They talk among themselves; they do not communicate with us, the voters, who should be the main focus of the state, the political parties, and everyone else. They do not engage with us.”

“Political parties should interact directly with the population on a regular basis to identify their needs and their challenges, not as they do now: after the elections, they disappear from sight, and people feel that this person will vanish again after the next election, so it does not matter who they vote for or against.”

“Another common trait of all these politicians is that none of them meet people. For example, who among them has traveled to the regions and visited them? Except during the pre-election period.”

“Let them come out to the people, talk to us. Let them find out what our real problems are and take care of us.”

“For me, a leader is someone who does not spend much time on television screens, but is busy interacting with people, who listens more to the so-called ordinary people, understands them better, and pays more attention to social issues.”

“Politicians need to know their people. Not just go door-to-door before elections and take a subway ride. They have to know their people; they have to listen to them.”

“The political parties should represent our interests. Young people, elderly people, pensioners, people of different social statuses - we should feel supported by a specific political party.”

“Political parties should do what we are doing now - conduct focus groups to find out what our problems are, to learn how we perceive them.”

Focus groups revealed a negative attitude towards the agendas of political parties. Some respondents claimed that political parties tend to focus on ‘fabricated’ issues, ignoring basic needs of the citizens. Some respondents also suspected that they do this deliberately to serve their partisan interests. Some respondents claimed that political parties in Georgia suffer from a problem of alienation from voters. The focus group participants felt that political parties are not interested in the problems and needs of voters and, consequently, do not work to address them. At the same time, it is evident from the results of this research that the agenda that political parties offer to voters is not positively received by a significant part of voters, again evidencing, among other issues, the lack of sufficient communication between parties and voters.

Participants criticize political parties for manufacturing conflicts and lacking genuine solutions to real problems, attributing it to laziness or a lack of profitability for the parties.

“Political parties try to create artificial problems and stir up unnecessary conflicts, because they either do not want to or are too lazy to work on real problems or because it is not profitable for them.”

“They have no ideas; they only insult each other and waste their time gossiping. Why should anyone vote for any of them?”

“It is totally unclear what these political parties stand for and who they have on their lists.”

Moreover, respondents express concern about political parties neglecting education, aiming for an uninformed electorate, and emphasize the need for parties to focus on constructive communication rather than discrediting each other.

“Political parties ignore education because they do not need educated people; they just want a herd of sheep that they can lead wherever they want.”

“When they appear on television programs, instead of arguing, they should talk about what they want, what they will do and how. That is how they should show their advantage, not discrediting each other. We all have our own problems, and we have to watch and listen to them while burdened by these problems.”

“Political parties are plagued by internal divisions; they spend more time fighting among themselves than addressing global and local issues.”

Views on Reliability and Honesty of Political Parties and Party Leaders

The focus group discussions revealed that the respondents value the reliability and honesty of the political parties and leaders, but are dissatisfied with the existing ones and would welcome a new political force. Here, the focus group participants perceive major problems. Specifically, they seriously doubt the reliability and honesty of current political parties and their leaders. It seems from the discussions that most of the actors on the Georgian political arena have lost their credibility and a significant segment of the electorate no longer believes them.

Participants express a profound difficulty in trusting any political party, leading to a negative emotional state and uncertainty about supporting or making a difference through political engagement.

“I find it hard to trust anyone now. It is a very unpleasant feeling to realize that you have difficulty trusting someone. You are in a negative emotional state because there is no one you really want to support, make a difference, or do something for. But who? How? In what way?”

“They fool us so easily, but I hope they cannot deceive these young people.”

“There is not one political party that I would mark [on the ballot paper] and make sure I make the right choice.”

Respondents point out the complete discreditation of the opposition in the eyes of the majority and a broader loss of credibility in political parties over the past 30 years, attributing it to partisan interests hindering public service.

“I think the opposition is completely discredited in the eyes of most of the population.”

“My opinion about political parties is that they have lost their credibility over the past 30 years. I think their trust level has sunk below the sewer level... Each party has its own partisan interests that prevent them from serving the public interests.”

“I would not single out any of the political parties, as they are all too discredited in my eyes.”

“I have been and continue to be actively involved in politics; I go to protest rallies, but lately I have become so disillusioned with all parties that I don't want anything anymore.”

The participants also mentioned the reasons for their distrust, among which is the association of a party and its leaders with the former or current ruling party. This party and/or politicians are partly blamed for the ‘sins’ of the former associates. Another reason for the distrust is the lack of transparency in funding and the alleged dependence on ‘oligarchic’ money. Such suspicions have been raised not only against the two main political parties, but also against smaller parties. The source of distrust is also the often unclear logic behind the formation of alliances and coalitions by Georgian political parties. Skepticism about the reliability and honesty of political parties in general, which was identified during a general discussion about political parties, was also maintained in discussions about individual political parties.

Negative Association with Concrete Political Parties

During the focus groups, the respondents were given the names of existing political parties in Georgia and asked to name the first associations that came to mind when they heard these names. This part of the interview revealed that the focus group participants had questions about the reliability and honesty of Georgian political parties.

Georgian Dream:

The Georgian Dream has been widely criticized during focus groups for its perceived lack of credibility, integrity as well as its pro-Russian stance. Some of the common associations that the respondents had with this party were: ‘unreliable people’, ‘traitors’, ‘Russians’, ‘betrayers’, ‘100 factories’, ‘free money’, ‘a dream that never comes true’, ‘collaboration with Russia’, ‘Betrayal of Georgia’, ‘corruption’, ‘nepotism’, ‘oligarchy’⁴⁹.

United National Movement:

The United National Movement faced backlash throughout discussions for its alleged involvement in human rights violations, violence and populism. Some of the common associations that respondents had with this party were: ‘bloodthirsty’, ‘murderers’, ‘populism’, ‘destructive force’, ‘inability to improve and admit mistakes’, ‘violence’, ‘unprincipled’.

European Georgia:

European Georgia has been accused of being unreliable, untrustworthy, and associated with Giga Bokeria, whom respondents largely regarded as a controversial figure. Some of the common associations that the respondents had with this party were: ‘unreliable’, ‘Bokeria is associated with unreliability’, ‘do not trust this party’.

Strategy Aghmashenebeli:

Strategy Aghmashenebeli has been criticized for its populism, inconsistency, and opportunism. Some of the common associations that respondents had with this party were: ‘populism’, ‘nothing positive, negative – causes mistrust’, ‘inconsistent, now and then unites with different parties’, ‘always sides with someone in a favorable situation and tries to survive’, ‘seems to lack something: charisma or some kind of honesty’.

Lelo:

Lelo has been widely denounced during focus group discussions for its perceived ‘antagonism’, oligarchy, and self-interest. Some of the common associations that the respondents had with this party were: ‘antagonistic party’, ‘party of oligarchs’, ‘usurer’, ‘non-serious party created to defend Khazaradze’, ‘this party has been created to save its own skin’, ‘the creation and existence of this party serves the interests of a few individuals’, ‘unreliable and not serious’, ‘corruption and unreliability’, ‘I would not want it to be involved in any way in the governance of the country’.

⁴⁹ Participants referred to ‘100 factories’ and ‘free money’ as unfulfilled promises made by Georgian Dream prior to the 2012 elections.

For Georgia:

Focus group participants criticized For Georgia for its ‘pro-Russian orientation’, ‘lack of transparency’, and ‘opportunism’. Some of the common associations that respondents had with this party were: ‘steps towards Russification’, ‘a gray force that says nothing, does nothing and it is not clear what it was created for, so I do not trust it’, ‘when there is no transparency and clarity as to what motive drives the force, how can such a political party be trusted with the power?’, ‘a political party of people devoid of dignity, whose only goal is to gain short-term benefits from political life’, ‘He [party chairman Gakharia] is also a disgraced man, he has a Russian past. I have always been suspicious of this party’, ‘it is not oriented to national interests’, ‘mistrust’, ‘Let him first give us back lost eyes’⁵⁰, ‘question marks’, ‘ambiguous’, ‘vague’.

Girchi⁵¹:

When discussing Girchi, the term ‘pseudoopposition’ was often used to describe the party. Other common descriptors included ‘treason’, ‘unreliable people’, and ‘a party made up of comic characters that pretends to be in the opposition, but at every decisive moment collaborates with the government’. Some individuals viewed Girchi as far removed from politics and expressed anger towards this party. One person stated that ‘no issue suggested by a political party that promotes marijuana to attract young people can be important to me’. Others have referred to Girchi as a ‘booth of the Georgian dream’, ‘Bidzina’s slaves’ and ‘sellouts’.

Girchi – More Freedom:

This party was often associated with ‘corrupting young people’ through its ‘promotion of marijuana’. Some people viewed Girchi members or leaders as unprincipled and charlatans who easily exploit youth sentiments through tailored activities. They were also referred to as ‘the party of charlatans’ and ‘destroyer of the Georgian ethnicity’.

Droa:

It appears that Droa was not a well-known party for FG participants. Respondents were aware of the leader of Droa, however, they struggled to express their opinions about the party. When discussing the Droa political party, several opinions emerged. Some people associated the party with ‘Helen Khoshtaria’s Russian rubles’⁵². Others said they had no confidence in Droa. During the discussions, there was an agreement that ‘if one is fighting against Russia, one should not accept funds from the Russian state’.

⁵⁰ Focus Group participants referred events of June 20, 2019, when police used disproportional force against protestants gathered outside of parliament building. This event ended up with dozens of injured and 2 of protestants partially lost their eyesight. Giorgi Gakharia was then Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia

⁵¹ Note: The focus group participants could not often tell Girchi from Girchi – More Freedom and therefore, in the course of discussions there was a need to provide additional information to them.

⁵² Reference to political scandal in 2022 related to royalty transfers received by party’s leader, Elene Khoshtaria’s father from Russia.

Citizens:

Regarding the Citizens' political party, the term 'rogue Elisashvili' was used, suggesting a perception of unprincipled behavior. Other labels included 'turncoat', 'opportunist', and 'populist'. Some participants believed that members of this party are always strategically positioning themselves for personal gain and are prone to defection.

Subsequent discussions revealed that participants in the focus groups had a general lack of trust in the political parties considered. They expressed skepticism about the ability of these parties to represent their interests effectively.

“Let me note the similarity: what all [the political parties discussed] have in common is that they all lack reliability. The level of reliability of all listed parties is low.”

“All [political parties] are similar in that they care about their own interests and do not pay attention to people’s opinions. They only pursue their own interests and think about how to make money and get rich.”

“I think the opposition is oriented towards their personal interests and is corrupt.”

“Everyone is focused on their personal interests to gain power.”

“The similarity is that unfortunately they all pursue their personal goals, and the difference is that they try to fulfill their interests in different ways, but overall they have the same [goals].”

“There is only one similarity: fighting for their own interests.”

“What unites them is that none of them is a party for the people: neither the United National Movement, nor the Georgian Dream, or all the others. None of them are for the people or will not pursue and consider our interests.”

“I would only add one thing. Basically, there are about five political parties with the same leaders jumping back and forth, and there is such distrust of them that they cannot anymore express serious views to be voted for.”

“I will name one similarity. All of those listed, both opposition and pro-government, are similar in that they all take care of themselves and their families; their relatives win tenders; their children go to study abroad because they are the ones who have resources. This is the similarity: They are well-off today and care about their future and prospects, while nobody cares about us.”

The Problem of Party Identity

During focus group discussions, the issue of party identity was identified as an important concern for political parties. Most of the political parties discussed were found to lack a distinctive and unique identity, making it difficult for focus group participants to distinguish between them. The Georgian Dream and the United National Movement were exceptions in this regard. For other political parties, respondents frequently emphasized the former affiliation of their leaders or members with the Georgian Dream or the United National Movement. In the case of Girchi, most focus group participants agreed that it was a distinguished party targeting a certain segment and with a distinct ideology. However, participants think that the split of this party damaged its identity, resulting in focus group participants mostly failing to see the differences between Girchi and Girchi – More Freedom. Thus, Girchi and Girchi – More Freedom are seen as political parties with similar identities that differ from other parties in that they target a specific segment and work on specific topics.

The issue of ideology was also mentioned in passing during discussions about party identity. Some focus group participants had questioned the ideological character of political parties.

Participants stress the significance of a clear political ideology, highlighting Girchi as the only party with a distinct stance, even if it is not universally favored by wider public.

“In general, I see the problem in the political parties themselves; only one party (meaning Girchi) has a clear ideology. I like this party in some ways and dislike it in some other ways, but it adheres to its ideology and does not lie that it will do something for you.”

“A political party should define its own political ideology because it allows [people] to better understand the course of the party. People should know what to expect from a particular party.”

Respondents suggest that there is a lack of differentiation among political parties, noting a perceived bipolar system and minimal differences between them:

“How do the listed political parties differ from each other? That is what the parties themselves do not know...”

“I think there is actually a bipolar system: the Georgian Dream and its cronies are on the one side, and the UNM and its smaller subdivisions are on the other side.”

“In terms of grouping, we can group the United National Movement, the European Georgia, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, partially Lelo too, both Girchis and Droa, etc. The cardinal difference between them is minimal. Internal opposition is the only [difference].”

“With the exception of Girchi – More Freedom, almost all of them are similar in their meaningless populism. They make a fuss about any new topic that has already been discussed in society. How are they different? This again leads us to the notion of an idea; the only party that has some sort of idea is Girchi, no one else.”

Participants view most parties, except Girchi – More Freedom, as similar and standardized, lacking distinctiveness or meaningful ideas. The elite nature of these parties is emphasized, with perceived uniformity in their approach to politics.

“European Georgia is more of a subdivision of the United National Movement. The UNM and European Georgia have common values.”

“Strategy Aghmashenebli is obviously their [UNM’s] subdivision.”

“I think that all these parties, except Gichi, are more or less the same. Girchi has something unusual, foreign; it is outside of those stereotypes. The others, I think, are more or less similar. They have the same mentality. They all seem standardized, having come from the same mold.”

“The European Georgia is incomprehensible; maybe it is in some way better than the United National Movement, but they are still them.”

“It seems to me that there is one group, the elite, who sort of wants to do politics, but for whom? In other words, they are busy people, but is there a difference between them? None!”

“I think the only difference is the names, unfortunately.”

“[Giorgi] Vashadze is a representative of the United National Movement.”

Participants highlight perceived uniformity in political promises, noting similarities in pledges across parties, and expressing skepticism about the authenticity of these promises.

“Differences? Nothing special; they are political parties of the same type.”

“Their promises are similar, as if they copied each other. These promises are pensions, one-off assistance, etc.”

The United National Movement and the Georgian Dream are the two largest parties with the longest history of existence and experience in power. As such, according to participants, these parties do not face a problem of party identity. The names of these political parties evoke clear associations related to their past and present political activities, decisions, positions on various issues, and political events related to them. For UNM, these associations include the Rose Revolution, reforms, infrastructure development, the fight against corruption, and problems related to human rights. As for the Georgian Dream, it is associated with the defeat of the previous ruling party, initial attempts to undertake more socially oriented policy, and conciliatory/appeasement foreign policy towards Russia. Based on the focus group data, we can argue that the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement have managed to establish their identities in the eyes of citizens, and voters have formed opinions on what to expect from one party or the other in the event of winning elections.

This cannot be said of other political parties, with the exception of Girchi and Girchi - More Freedom, which, according to the views of the participants, have their own niches and identities. In the case of Droa, focus group participants associate it with UNM, although some respondents do not perceive Droa as a political party. As for the Citizens political party, focus group participants found it difficult to remember and describe this party until its leader was named.

Lelo, in terms of the associations it evokes, was not directly linked to either the United National Movement or the Georgian Dream. However, when discussing similarities and differences among political parties, the respondents noted that Lelo was similar to other parties, and practically no differences could be seen between Lelo and the others. As for associations, there was a lot of skepticism about the previous business activity of the founders and the trustworthiness of the party leaders. The Georgian Dream and UNM were not mentioned in relation to Lelo because the founders of this political party were not openly affiliated with these two major parties. The main difference that distinguished Lelo from Droa and Citizens, according to participants, is that Lelo has greater visibility and it is perceived to be a more full-fledged political party by its own.

Regarding other political parties, focus group participants frequently associated them with the UNM or the Georgian Dream.



“I cannot perceive it as an independent party; for me, all of these parties are related either to the Georgian Dream or the United National Movement.”

Identity-related associations:

European Georgia: ‘Small United National Movement’, ‘small branch of the UNM’, ‘relict of the UNM’, ‘UNM offshoots’, ‘pretending to criticize the UNM but remaining identical at heart’, ‘former representatives of the UNM’, ‘miserable subdivision of the UNM’, ‘relatively smarter representatives of the UNM’, ‘runaway from the UNM, who want to rid themselves of responsibility’.

Strategy Aghmashenebeli: ‘Don’t even bother to write; they are all the same’, ‘defected from the UNM’, ‘remnants of UNM’, ‘did not offer anything different from UNM’.

For Georgia: There were three main opinions on the political party of Giorgi Gakharia. According to some respondents, it was created by the Georgian Dream as a fake opposition party, some respondents see it as a special political project of the UNM, while for a third segment of respondents, the party remains as a rather strange and incomprehensible political phenomenon.

‘Georgian Dream’, ‘project of the Georgian Dream’, ‘Bidzina’s project’, ‘some say that it is a Georgian Dream project, others say that it is a UNM project’, ‘incomprehensible’, ‘A breakaway group from the Georgian Dream’, ‘question marks’, ‘for me it raises lots of questions’, ‘I have no opinion about this party’, ‘vague’, ‘Gakharia left the Georgian Dream’, ‘they follow the Georgian Dream’.

Girchi: ‘Girchi is a sect, not a political party’, ‘marijuana’, ‘has its niche’, ‘has its followers’, ‘progressives’, ‘working with youth’, ‘talking about pressing issues’.

Girchi – More Freedom: ‘It is not a classical political party’, ‘anti-armed forces’, ‘legalization of marijuana’, ‘niche-oriented’, ‘the only party that has a target audience’, ‘neoliberalism’, ‘one can really feel that freedom is their principle’.

Droa: A large segment of the respondents found it difficult to recall this political party until its leader was named.

‘Helen Khoshtaria’, ‘Freedom to Misha!’ ‘Is not perceived as a political party’, ‘the party is not visible behind her [Helen Khoshtaria]’, ‘watchdog, when something happens, she protests against it from her, mostly correct, position’, ‘it is not a political party’, ‘more like a civil movement’, ‘the party’s activity is not known’, ‘defender of liberal values’.

Citizens: Much like Droa, some focus group participants found it difficult to recall this political party until its leader was named.

‘If you had not written Aleko Elisashvili’s name next to the political party, I would not have even guessed what party it was’, ‘an ally of the Georgian Dream’, ‘I do not know it’, ‘it is not associated with anything’, ‘its activities are unknown’, ‘for me, Citizens is a parliamentary Girchi (allegedly linked to the Georgian Dream)’.

Based on the results of focus group discussions, we argue that small political parties face a significant identity crisis. Voters who are unhappy with the existing parties and would like to see a new political party emerge in the near future hardly notice any fundamental differences between the existing small parties. For them, all small political parties are similar. The difference is only noticeable when it comes to Girchi and Girchi-More Freedom. However, the latter parties have little chance of electoral growth as their target audience is small and their campaigns deal with highly unpopular topics.



“The fact that Girchi is youth-oriented is good; it focuses on a certain target group and works well, but members of another generation cannot understand Girchi.”

Deficit of Innovations in Georgian political parties

During the focus group discussions, it was observed that the Georgian political parties and the political class in general lack renewal. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of innovation in Georgian politics.

“You know what? People got very tired of the same party, the same politics, the same arguments and bickering; we need another, new party.”

“[We need] new faces, not the same people under the name of another party.”

“I also believe that there should be a new force, a third force, and, let me add, a force led by a very young person.”

“As long as these politicians remain, nothing good will happen in Georgia; These are inconsistent people who change direction again and again.”

“No, until the old ones leave, nothing will improve in this politics.”

“Until the slaves of Shevardnadze’s time party are replaced, nothing good will happen.”

“It is absolutely unclear what these political parties want or who they have on their lists.”

“For our political parties, a young person is an egg thrower or a poster-sticker.”

“The political parties do not give young people a chance to prove themselves; they keep them in offices and instructed by someone older. If they speak out, they are called rebels.”

“Renewal is underway... First, they move from UNM to the Georgian dream and then they move from Georgian Dream to UNM.”

“Absolutely the same people on different platforms, in different logos and T-shirts, and it’s very annoying; it’s called clan rule. They lavishly distribute everything among themselves, and we, the people, have to watch that.”

“No one is decent; they must be replaced; new brains must come in. With them, with Bidzina and Merabishvili in the game again, what can happen?”

Focus group discussions suggest that there is a demand for a new political party in Georgian politics. There is also a need that the new political party be comprised of new politicians rather than those who have long experience of party life. Perceptions of the focus group participants indicate that there is a great dissatisfaction with the pace of rotation of political leaders in the existing parties in Georgia.

One of the main reasons for voters' dissatisfaction with parties is the dominance of so-called 'old faces'. Apparently, some citizens demand such a fundamental renewal in which new-generation politicians will take leading positions and appear before the voters in a capacity of party leaders and decision-makers.

Attitudes Toward the Role of the Leader in a Political Party

The focus group discussions revealed that most voters perceive some political parties as 'one-man' parties. The focus group participants do not approve of political parties that have one clear leader and are built mainly around that leader. They hardly perceive such parties as a genuine political organization and alternative. One of the prevailing suggestions across all five focus groups is for a political party to have several distinct leaders and not concentrate all attention on one or two individuals. From the focus-group data, it can be concluded that the obstacle to increasing the number of supporters for political parties such as Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Citizens, Droa, and Girchi – More Freedom is the excessive focus on one leader.

“There should not be one leader, there should be a group... there should be many leaders, not just one... If it appears that a party entering the [political] arena is again united around one person, it will not get my vote.”

“We have a very bad example of leaders, of turning personalities into leaders. So [leadership must be divided] into groups according to different professions and according to different ages.”

“I have an opinion about Khoshtaria individually, but not so much about the political party.”

“I have no idea, since there are only three people in the [Citizens' political] party.”

“I do not think a party should have one leader; we all know very well and have seen what happens when there is only one leader; this leader can disappear one day and the group cannot continue its existence because this leader is the only person who manages the group and gives it tasks.

“One person cannot be knowledgeable on everything, and when an issue has to be resolved, it has to be presented to the youth and to the older generation in different ways, and when there are many leaders, they will be able to formulate a more sensible opinion.”

“I do not trust a political party that depends on the financial resources of a single person. We can unite around an idea, but uniting around money is wrong.”

“We need political parties built on healthy values and oriented towards the development of society, not one-man or two-men political parties that bribe their way into parliament.”

“We do not need a political party just because someone who was too ambitious and could not unite ideologically with others went off and formed his own party, and there are only seven of them.”

“If a political party is ambitious, it needs several leaders.”

“There should not be a one-man political party!”

“There should be an alternative in a political party. Not just one man.”

“All politicians should work as a team.”

“They should control each other.”

“I am trying to remember who else is in the [Strategy Aghmashenebeli] party except Vashadze and I cannot remember anyone.”

“[Droa is a] one-man political party. It has no scale and is geared towards one person.”

Focus groups and analysis of the results suggest that a political party centered around a single leader is not considered a serious alternative to the existing political spectrum. Instead, such a party is viewed as a tool for the leader’s personal career goals. The participants argued that to strengthen its electoral position, a political party in Georgia should encourage voters to associate it with multiple politicians, rather than just one leader.

Visions of a New Party

Focus group participants have expressed their desire for new political parties to emerge. The mission of new parties should be to improve the approaches and policies that participants find lacking or unsatisfactory in the existing parties. In addition to general demands such as ‘pursuing national interests’, ‘consisting of principled people’, ‘pro-Western’, and ‘supporting democratic ideas’, the focus group respondents have also presented more specific demands related to renewing the political field, solving pressing social problems, active communication with citizens, and the formation of a distinctive party identity.

Discussions underline the importance of political parties having a clear idea, defining their identity and combining pro-Western and national values.

“The most important thing is to have the Idea.”

“[Political parties] should define their identity in a dignified way, at a high level.”

“It should be pro-Western and national. These two concepts should be smoothly combined.”

“Firstly, politicians must know what democracy is, and they must know their people.”

Moreover, discussions reveal the need for political parties to have a clear structure, a defined ideology, and strategic planning, including addressing economic issues and presenting a clean and competent image.

“People need to know what to expect from this or that political party.”

“It should definitely have a structure and an ideology.”

“Political parties should put smart people on their lists, strengthen the youth wings and start working on it four years earlier, and they will get better results in four years.”

“The first thing that needs to be done is to address the problems we have listed, everything that has been caused by or has been a consequence of the economic situation.”

“I will have trust in a party that comes from a relatively clean past, is not a relict of any of them but starts from a clean past, is competent, educated, and has its own values.”

“An ideal political party for me in the elections would be one that has strategies customized to my needs. Of course, everything, the status of the candidate, politics, foreign relations, correct accents, all that is, understandably, mandatory but first and foremost, [strategies] for internal development. If the country does not develop internally, then no matter where you want to integrate, all efforts will be in vain. Actually, it should have strategies tailored to the needs of my country.”

Respondents also call for political parties to address the demands of the people, avoid superficial promises, and actively engage with citizens of all age groups to build trust.

“There are three things they could do: work on the demands of the people, agree on who is a friend and who is an enemy of the country, and realize that we do not need neatly-combed, tie-wearing politicians. People can no longer tolerate these people in suits whose language, repeating formulaic texts, they do not understand.”

“We need a party that keeps its promises. Promises should be realistic and realizable, not like the promise to open 1,000 factories. They make promises and do not honor them. As people stop trusting these promises, that is why they can be easily bought.”

“Everyone has to work in the interest of the citizens, not that I will only talk to you because you are important to me. They have to convince people why they are doing what they are doing. They have to talk to all age groups: young people, middle-aged people, retired people.”

Respondents expect that political parties to engage with the public beyond elections. Moreover, in terms of issues undecided voters seem to prioritize socio-economic issues, barriers in Russian-Georgian politics, cultural development, and agriculture in their ideal political party's agenda:

“A political party should not limit itself to elections only. None of these parties, including the United National Movement and the Georgian Dream, is close to the people. When the elections are over, they evaporate.”



“It must first prove itself, show that it is radically different from all existing political parties and deserves to be voted for. It must show that it is different from others, that it is someone new, whose emergence will be tantamount to a breakthrough.”

“For me, the most important thing is probably the economic development; then probably building the right barriers in Russian-Georgian politics. Cultural development is also important, and the development of agriculture is important, too.”

Positive attitudes towards existing political parties:

Although the focus groups were dominated by negative attitudes towards the existing political parties, some respondents also expressed positive evaluations of each party. The United National Movement was praised for its past record of reforms, while the Georgian Dream was recognized for its social programs and was credited with ‘maintaining peace’. Strategy Aghmashenebeli and its leader Giorgi Vashadze were characterized as an innovator, a good manager, and received positive evaluations for the reform of the Public Service Hall. Girchi was commended for reasoned debates in the parliament, its focus on the youth, and being progressive. Girchi - More freedom was recognized for being bold and not making unrealistic promises. For Georgia was praised for its public relations strategy, and its leader Giorgi Gakharia was described as a ‘good manager’. Droa was assessed as having the right civic position, with its leader Helen Khoshtaria positively described as a ‘fighter’. The Citizens political party received the least positive assessment: One respondent said that it ‘started well’.

Conclusions

Despite some positive assessments, there is a significant level of dissatisfaction and disappointment among voters who are unhappy with the existing political parties in Georgia. These voters express a desire for the emergence of new political parties in the near future. The reasons for this dissatisfaction include a lack of communication between political parties and citizens as well as the perception that none of the parties adequately represents their interests. Additionally, many voters find it difficult to discern any noticeable differences between the existing parties, suggesting that these parties lack distinct identities. Some of the respondents believe that political parties should have multiple clear-cut leaders and should not be centered around a single individual. This view extends to several Georgian political parties and can be regarded as a major problem for party-voter relations in Georgia.

Trust is another crucial factor. It appears that the political parties and leaders currently active in Georgia have exhausted their trust mandate and are unable to expand their voter base.

Taking into account these factors, the dominant opinion among the focus group respondents was that there should be a ‘new party with new faces’ rather than a ‘new party with old faces’.

Undecided Voters in Georgia: Statistical Profile

By Givi Silagadze

For most Georgians, there is no party close to them⁵³. Such voters are often viewed and referred to as ‘politically undecided’. Because this group represents such a large proportion of the electorate, it has the ability to significantly influence electoral outcomes. Accordingly, understanding the elements that contribute to political indecision among voters is critical.

The following section focuses on the analysis of data drawn from recent nationally representative surveys⁵⁴. By rigorously testing several hypotheses with the help of regression models, the aim is to examine the role of a number of factors behind political indecision in Georgian society. The hypotheses presented here are based on the results of focus groups conducted within the current research project.

The analysis leads to the following findings: Georgian voters critical of the ruling party are more likely to be politically uncertain than those who approve of Georgian Dream's actions. Furthermore, party identification apparently requires believing that at least one political party represents one's interests. Those who are unable to name such a party are more likely to be uncertain, whereas those who can do so are certain of their vote. Trust in political parties as institutions also predicts political uncertainty and voting intentions, with dissatisfied voters more likely to be undecided or abstain from voting. In general, undecided voters tend to be younger, residing in the capital, employed in private sector, and ethnic Georgians.

Do individuals critical of the activities of the ruling political party have a higher likelihood of being undecided compared to those who support it?

According to the source, around one third of Georgian voters (35%) believe that the ruling party acts consistently (9%) or frequently (26%) in the interest of the country. On the contrary, a majority (52%) think that the Georgian Dream rarely (33%) or never (19%) serves the needs of the nation. Approximately 12% report not knowing, while 2% refuse to answer.

“How often does the Georgian Dream party do what the country needs?”



Source: The CRRC/NED survey conducted in 2022 among 1,523 Georgian voters under the title ‘Political Polarization and the War in Ukraine’, indicates that 52% of respondents who expressed skepticism towards the ruling party are likely to support its opposition. The complete survey is available for reference at

https://caucasusbarometer.org/downloads/ned_georgia_says/wave_1/NED_2022_Sep_07.09.2022_anonymized.dta.

⁵³ “NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023.” n.d. Caucasusbarometer.org. Accessed October 23, 2023. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2023ge/PARTYSUPS/>.

⁵⁴ All the surveys used in this section were conducted by Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC). Some of them were commissioned by National Democratic Institute (NDI) office in Georgia.

Predicted probabilities of being politically undecided



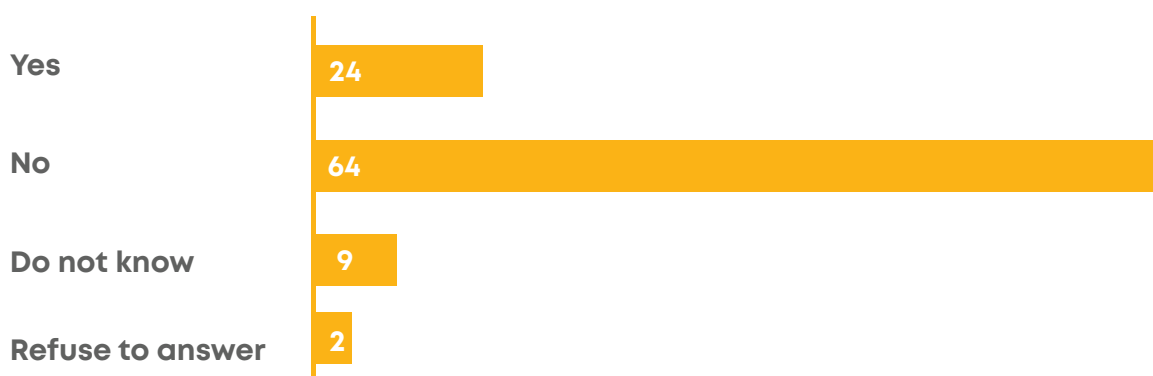
The results are derived from a logistic regression model, with the outcome variable being the decision to support a political party versus remaining undecided. Control variables included age, gender, education, type of settlement, employment status, ethnicity, and frequency of religious attendance. The independent variable was political orientation, classified as aligned with the ruling party, opposed to the ruling party, or undecided.

The study confirms the hypothesis that Georgians critical of the ruling party are more likely to be undecided in terms of party identification than those who are not critical of the Georgian Dream Party.

Do people who have confidence that a political party represents their interests tend to be more politically decisive?

Most voters believe that their interests are not articulated by political parties. According to data obtained from the NDI/CRRC survey, only 24% of Georgians are of the opinion that there is a political party in Georgia that more or less represents their interests, while approximately 64% of the general public believes that there is no political party that represents their interests. According to a CRRC/NDI survey conducted in 2023 among 1,032 Georgian voters, 9% were unsure and 2% refused to answer the respective question.

At least one party representing interests - %



The survey, 'Public Attitudes in Georgia', is available at <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2023ge/factsheet/>

Based on the qualitative portion of the research, which included focus groups, it is suggested that one of the primary reasons for political indecision is that Georgian political parties do not adequately demonstrate to voters that the political struggle is about representing their interests. Statistical analysis was used to test this hypothesis, with party identification as the dependent variable, views on at least one party representing one's interests as the independent variable, and sociodemographic factors as the control variables.

After adjusting for age, gender, education, type of settlement, and ethnicity through regression analysis, people who believe that no single party in Georgia upholds their interests differ significantly in party affiliation compared to those who think that at least one party represents their interests. Specifically, individuals who cannot specify a single political party representing their interests have a political determination probability 74 percentage points lower than those who can (for statistical analysis details, refer to Appendix 2).

Predicted probabilities of being politically undecided

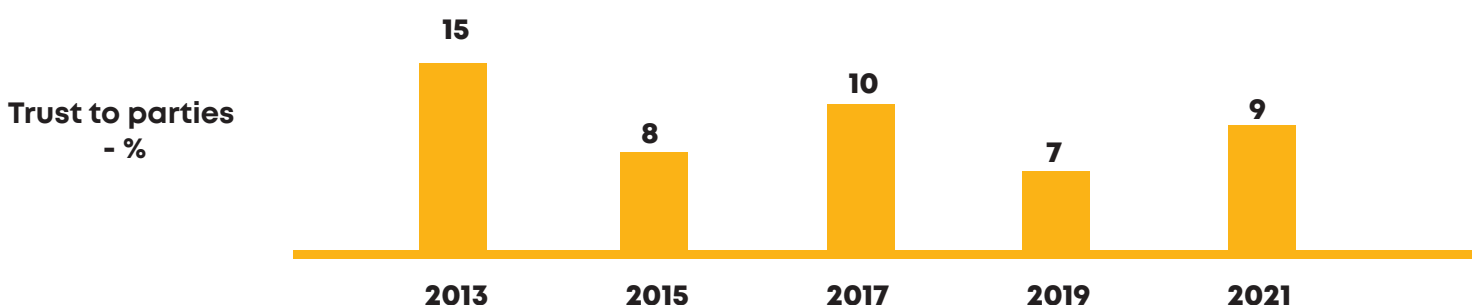


**Note: these entries are from a logistic regression model with party identification (no party vs. any party) as the outcome variable. Control variables include age, gender, education, type of settlement, and ethnicity. The study identifies the belief in at least single political party that represents the respondents' interests as the independent variable.*

The hypothesis stating that individuals who do not perceive a political party representing their preferences are more likely to remain politically undecided is confirmed.

Do people who trust parties as an institution tend to be less politically undecided?

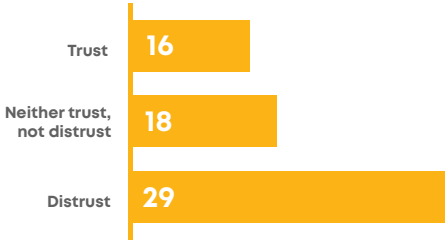
Trust in political parties as an institution is a crucial factor in maintaining a healthy political system. During the past decade, the percentage of Georgians who trust political parties has been consistently low. In 2015, only 15% of the electorate reported trust in political parties. The most recent Caucasus Barometer survey conducted in 2021 indicates that only 9% of Georgians exhibit trust in political parties.



**NOTE: Caucasus Barometer 2013-2021. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/TRUPPS/>*

Based on the recent data from the Caucasus Barometer, a statistical analysis was performed to examine the relationship between trust in political parties and party identification. According to logistic regression, with other factors constant, people who distrust political parties are more likely to be politically undecided than those who trust or have neither trust nor distrust in the parties. Individuals who express a lack of trust in political parties in Georgia are 13% more likely to be politically unaffiliated than those who trust political parties. Further information regarding the statistical model can be found in Appendix 3.

Predicted Probabilities of being politically undecided



The entries are part of a logistic regression model, with the outcome variable being the closest party (no party vs. any party), and with control variables of age, sex, education, settlement type, and ethnicity. The independent variable in this study is trust in political parties.

Additionally, a statistical analysis was performed to investigate whether overall trust in parties is linked to support for the ruling party or one of the opposition parties.

The findings of a logistic regression model indicate that, after controlling for demographic variables such as age, sex, education, settlement type, and ethnicity, Georgian citizens who generally lack trust in political parties are less likely to support the Georgian Dream party in comparison to those who either trust political parties or have a neutral stance. More information on this topic can be found in Appendix 4.

Predicted probabilities of supporting the ruling party



However, there is no significant association between trust in parties as an institution and supporting opposition parties. Specifically, there are no statistically significant differences between individuals who generally trust political parties and those who distrust them with regard to supporting the opposition (for additional information, see Appendix 5).

Predicted probabilities of supporting opposition



The entries are components of a logistic regression model. The outcome variable was the party closest to the individual (either the opposition parties or the ruling party). The control variables included age, gender, level of education, type of settlement, and ethnicity. The independent variable was individuals' trust in political parties.

Do people who trust in political parties as institutions have a higher likelihood of voting in elections?

Participation in national elections can serve as an indicator of political ambivalence, even beyond party preference. The Caucasus Barometer 2021 survey scrutinizes respondents' perspectives on various political issues, including whether they cast a ballot in the latest national elections.

Logistic regression analysis suggests that, all else being equal, people who trust parties in general tend to be more active in terms of election participation. Specifically, in 2021 municipal elections in Georgia, voters with confidence in parties are 16 percentage points more likely to report participation compared to those who distrust parties. For further information on the regression model, please refer to Appendix 6.

Predicted probabilities of voting in 2021



**NOTE: The entries represent components of a logistic regression model. The outcome variable was participation in the 2021 municipal elections, classified as either participated or did not participate. The control variables included age, gender, education, settlement type, and ethnicity. The independent variable was trust in political parties.*

In addition, a similar pattern emerged when investigating voting activity in the 2020 parliamentary elections. After accounting for sociodemographic factors, the analysis indicates that individuals who trust political parties have an 11 percent higher likelihood of participating in the 2020 elections compared to those who distrust them. Refer to Appendix 7 for more information.

Predicted probabilities of voting in 2020



**Note that the entries are part of a logistic regression model, and the reported outcome variable was participation in the 2020 Parliamentary Elections (participated vs. did not participate). The control variables included age, sex, education, type of settlement, and ethnicity, while the independent variable was trust in political parties.*

In summary, people who trust political parties as an institution are more likely to vote in elections than those who are skeptical of them.

Georgian voters who criticize the ruling party are more likely, both statistically and substantively, to be politically uncertain compared to those who support the actions of the Georgian Dream party. Opposition parties face challenges in exploiting the dissatisfaction of these voters with the ruling party for electoral gain.

The belief that political parties represent the interests of the people appears to be a significant factor in the identification of the parties. Individuals who are unable to identify a party that substantially and statistically represents their interests differ from those who believe that there exists a party that represents their interests. Individuals who do not perceive any political party as representing their interests are more prone to political indecision, whereas those who perceive the existence of such a party are more likely to have a clear voting preference.

Another significant predictor of voter indecisiveness appears to be the level of trust in political parties as an institution. Voters who distrust political parties as an institution are more likely to be undecided than those who do not.

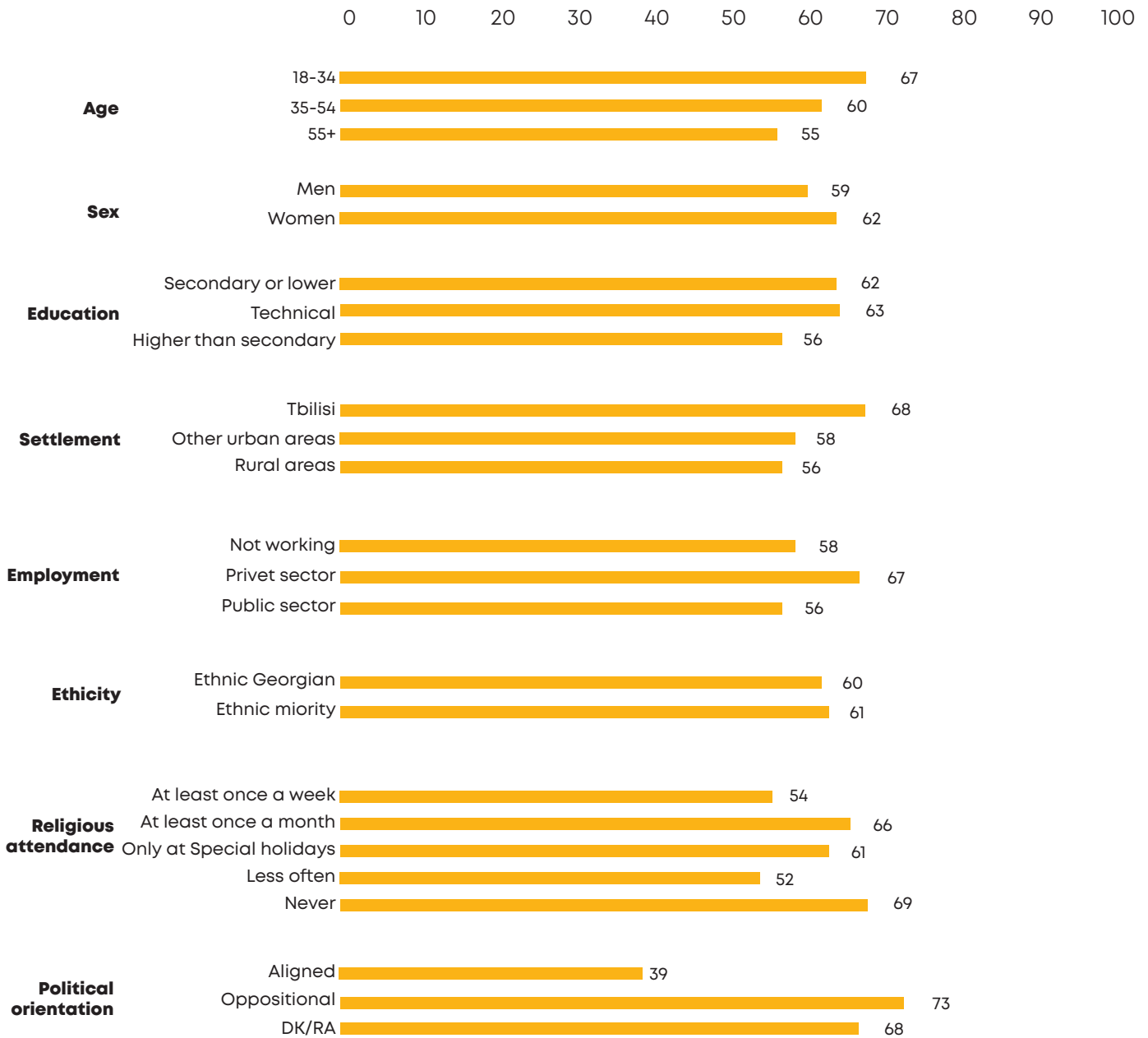
In addition, those who distrust political parties are less likely to have voted in the 2020 and 2021 elections.

Appendix 1

Data come from the NED/CRRRC survey conducted in August–September 2022.

Politically undecided - “No party is close to me”

predicted probabilities



To test the assumption of minimal multicollinearity, we utilized variance inflation factors. The associated scores do not exceed the value of 2, indicating that the assumptions are valid.

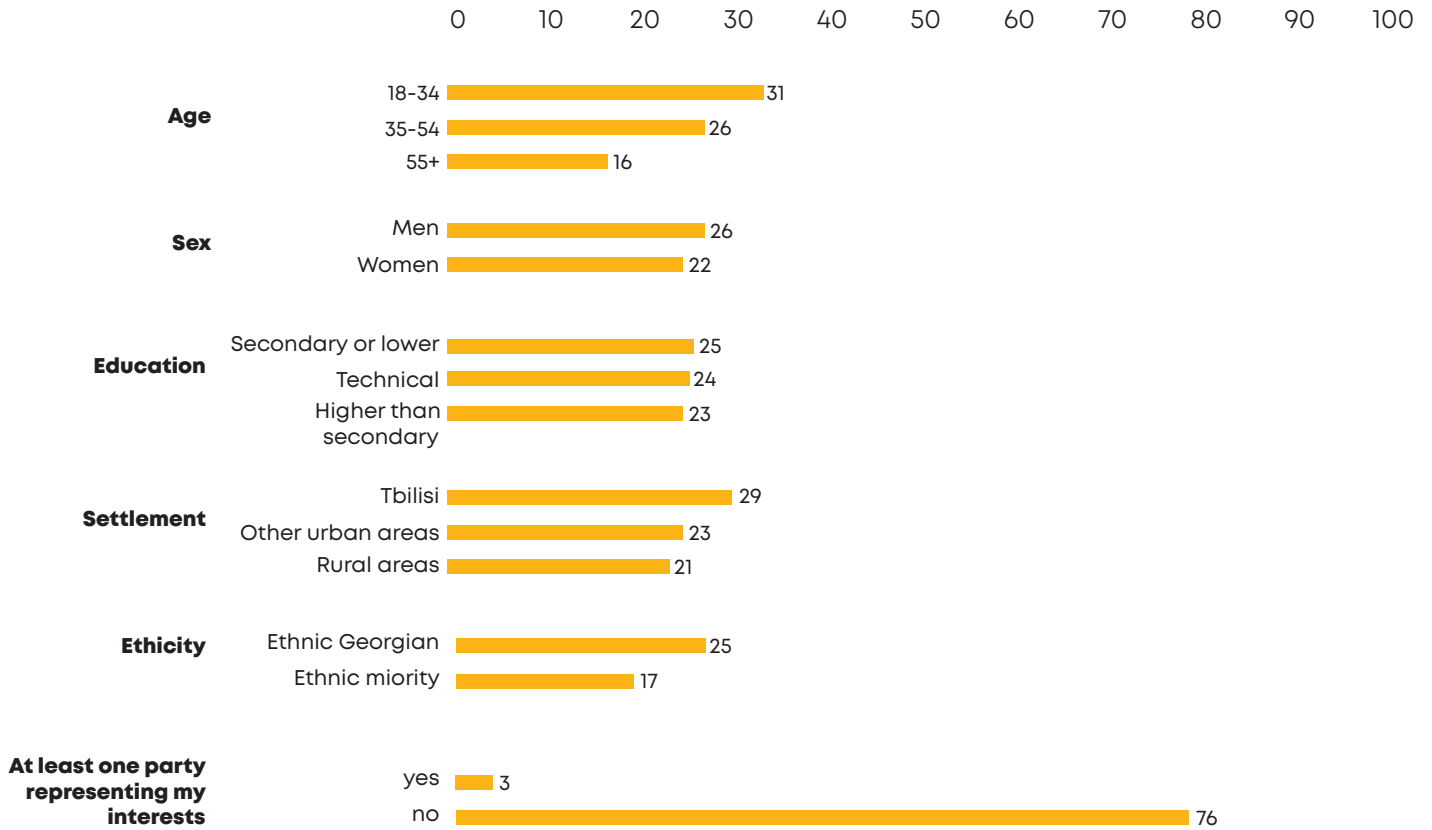
Based on the model, younger people exhibit a higher likelihood of being politically uncertain than their older counterparts. In addition, Tbilisi residents are more prone to indecisiveness than those who live in other urban or rural areas. Individuals employed in the private sector exhibit a greater degree of indecision compared to those who are unemployed or working in the public sector.

Appendix 2

Data come from the NDI/CRRC survey conducted in March 2023

Politically undecided - “No party is close to me”

predicted probabilities

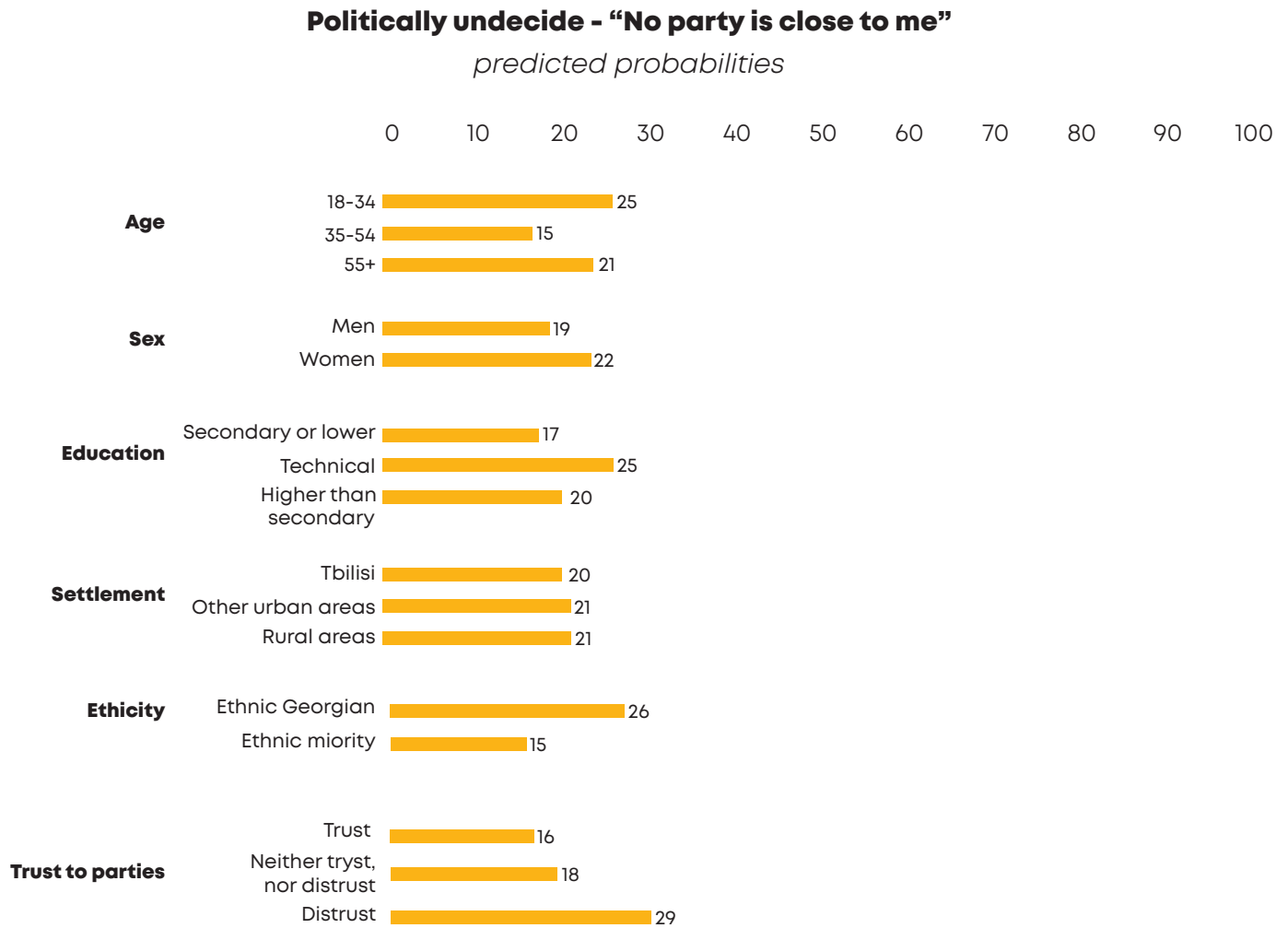


To test the assumption of minimal multicollinearity, we utilized variance inflation factors. The scores do not exceed 2, indicating that the assumptions are valid.

The analysis indicates that younger individuals are more likely to be politically undecided than older individuals. Individuals who reside in Tbilisi are more likely to be undecided, and ethnic Georgians tend to be more politically indecisive than ethnic minorities.

Appendix 3

Data come from the Caucasus Barometer 2021.

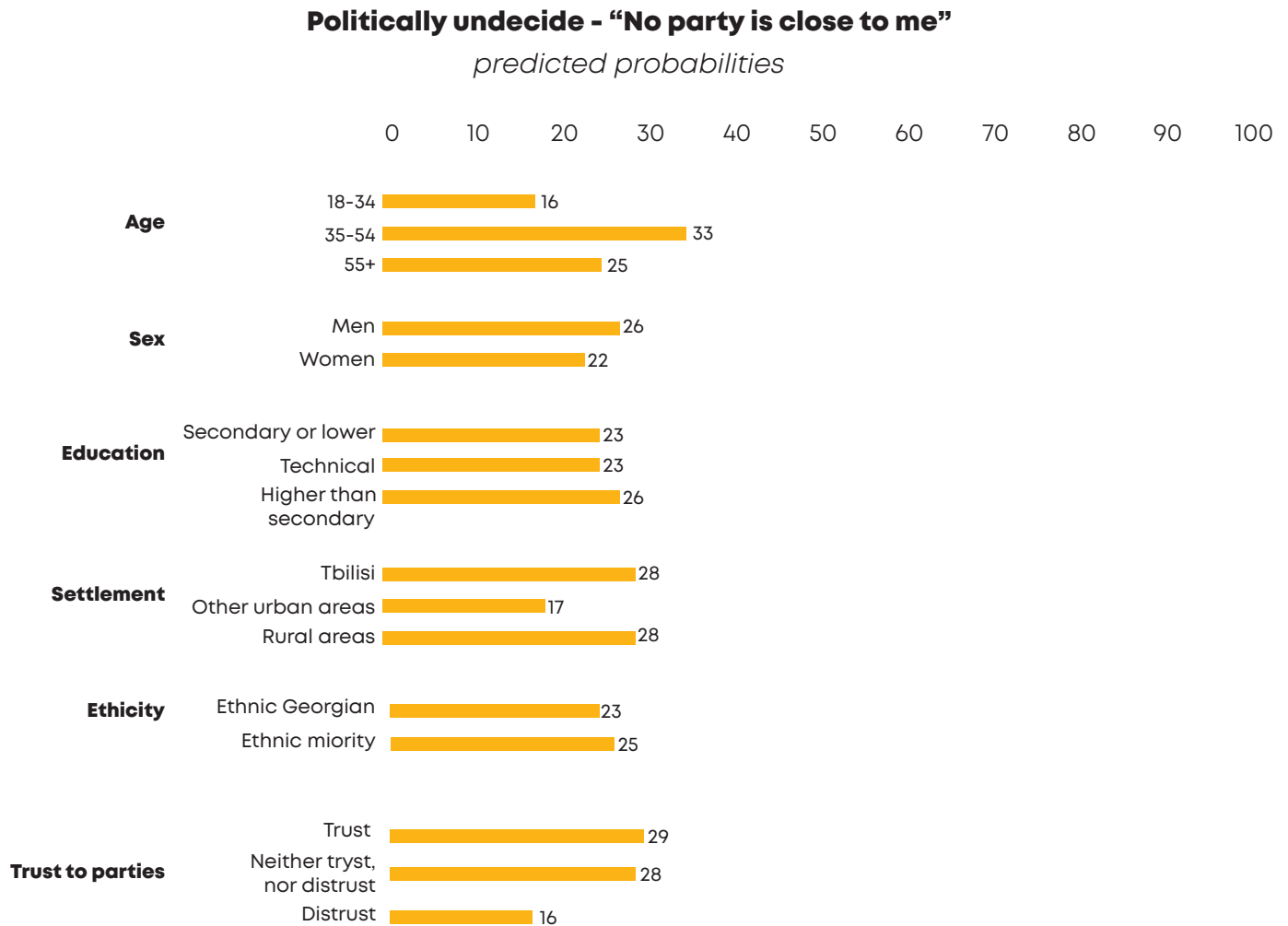


To verify the assumption of no or little multicollinearity, variance inflation factors were used. The scores do not exceed the value of 2, suggesting that the assumptions are valid.

The model suggests that younger people are more likely to be politically undecided than older people. Furthermore, ethnic Georgians are more likely to be undecided than ethnic minorities.

Appendix 4

Data come from the Caucasus Barometer 2021.

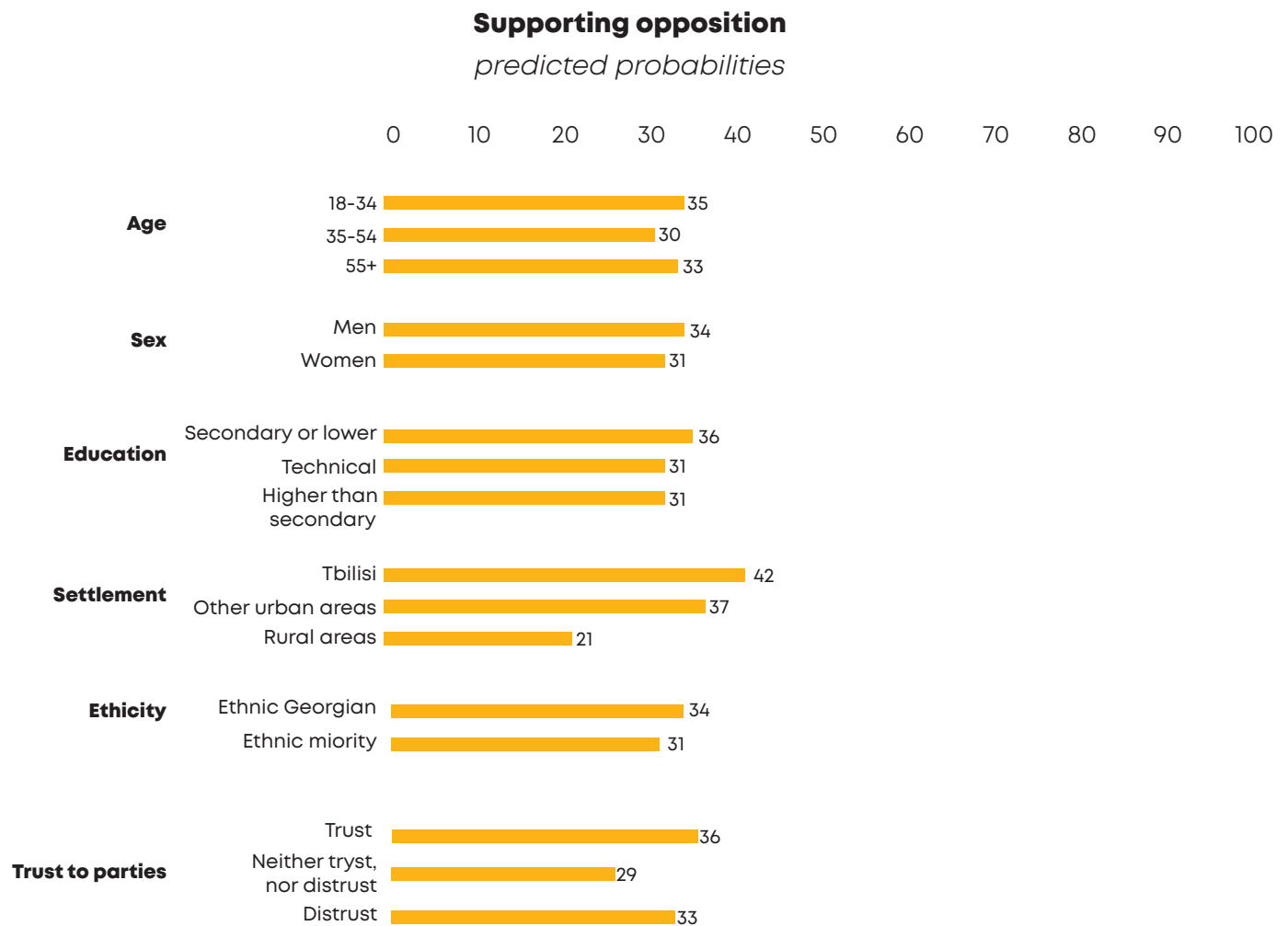


To verify the assumption of no or little multicollinearity, variance inflation factors were used. The scores do not exceed the value of 2, suggesting that the assumptions are valid.

The model suggests that older people are more supportive of the ruling party than younger people. Additionally, people living in other urban areas are more likely to support the Georgian Dream party than people living in Tbilisi or in villages.

Appendix 5

Data come from the Caucasus Barometer 2021.

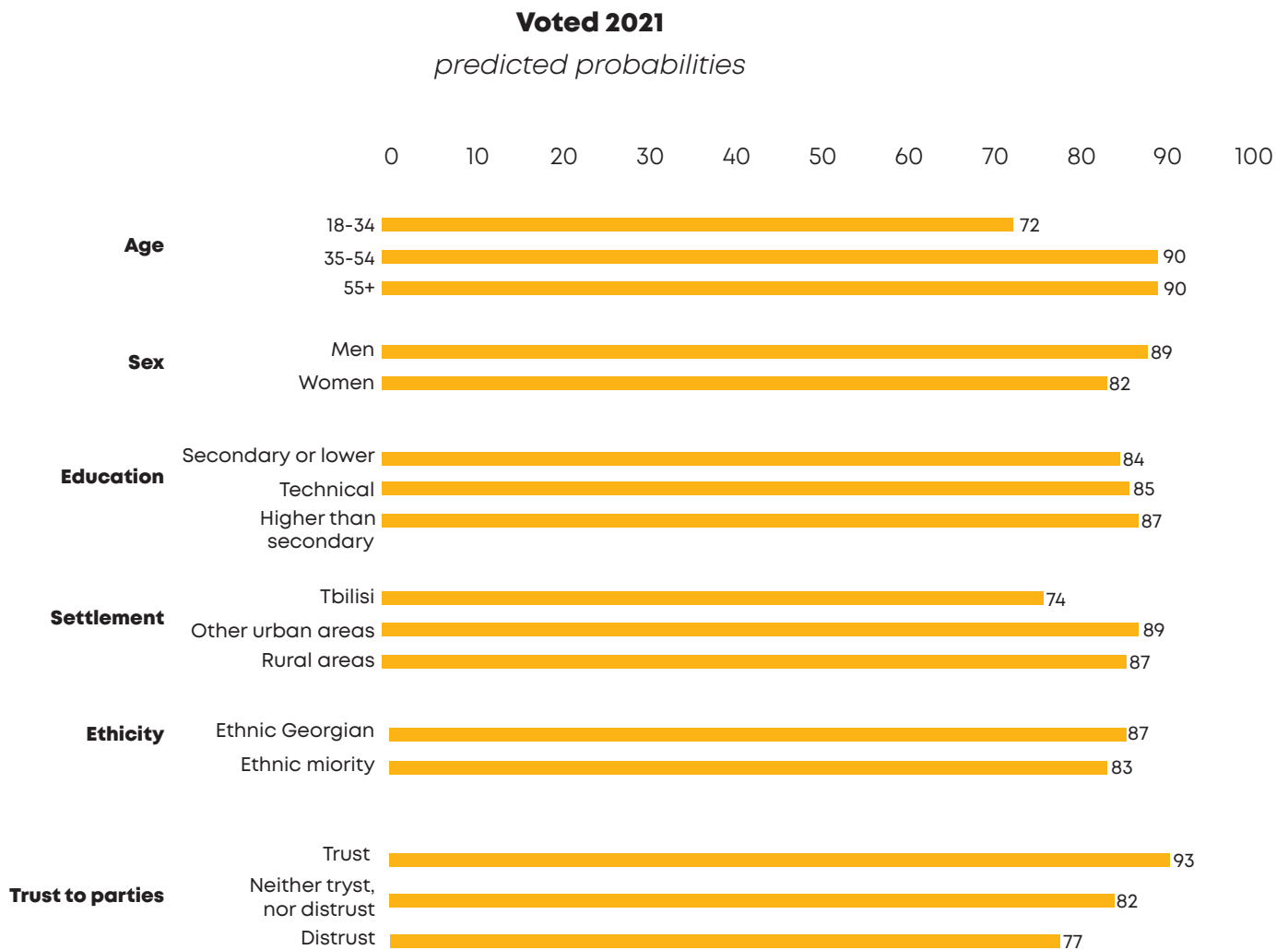


To verify the assumption of no or little multicollinearity, variance inflation factors were used. Scores do not exceed the value of 2, suggesting that the assumptions hold.

The model suggests that people living in urban areas are more likely to support the opposition than people living in rural areas.

Appendix 6

Data come from the Caucasus Barometer 2021.

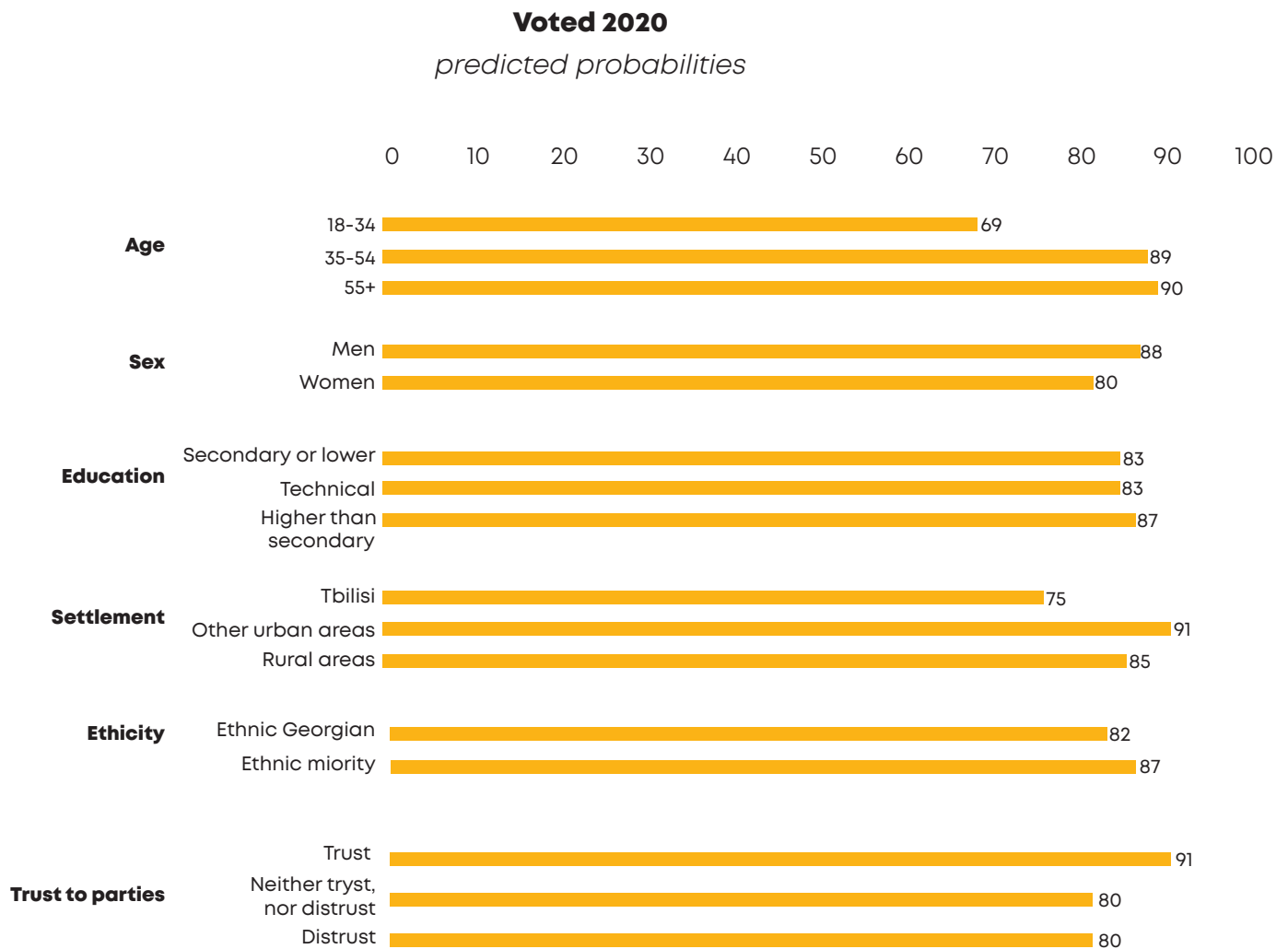


To verify the assumption of no or little multicollinearity, variance inflation factors were used. The scores do not exceed the value of 2, suggesting that the assumptions are valid.

The model suggests that older people are more likely to have voted in the 2021 municipal elections than younger people. Furthermore, men are more likely to report having participated in the 2021 elections than women. People living outside of the capital are more likely to say that they voted in the 2021 municipal elections than Tbilisi residents.

Appendix 7

Data come from the Caucasus Barometer 2021.



To verify the assumption of no or little multicollinearity, variance inflation factors were used. The scores do not exceed the value of 2, suggesting that the assumptions are valid.

The model suggests that older people are more likely to have voted in the 2020 parliamentary elections than younger people. Furthermore, men are more likely to report having participated in the 2020 elections than women. People living outside of the capital are more likely to say that they voted in the 2020 Parliamentary Elections than Tbilisi residents.

Recent public opinion polls reveal that a considerable proportion of Georgian voters express dissatisfaction with the existing political parties and aspire to witness the emergence of new parties in Georgian politics⁵⁵. To date, however, no political party has been able to pose a significant challenge to the dominance of Georgia's two main parties: the ruling Georgian Dream and the largest opposition party, the United National Movement. These two political parties have been garnering almost 80% of total votes in almost all nationwide elections throughout the last decade. The level of support for third parties varies, but none of them has garnered more than 10% of the support in any recent elections. In fact, their typical support levels range from 1% to 4% in opinion polls and various elections. As a result, political debates in Georgia revolve predominantly around a bipartisan agenda, which remains a challenge and potentially a threat for political pluralism. The dominance of the two parties is closely associated with polarization, which is another critical issue that has been widely acknowledged by experts and politicians in Georgia and highlighted internationally⁵⁶.

The current study was motivated by an interest in understanding the reasons behind the low electoral performance of political parties other than the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement. Consequently, the study aimed to explore the factors that determine the level of support for parties in Georgia, with a particular focus on parties that position themselves as the 'third way'.

After comparing electoral success to several potential contributing factors, including the personal popularity of the party's leader, the extent of the regional network, available financial resources, parliamentary representation, and media coverage, it is evident that these elements have an unreliable or minimal association with vote outcomes.

This finding provided additional evidence for our initial assumption. The failure of small parties to gain substantial electoral success is related to their inability to form a distinct party identity that would appeal to a part of the electorate. During focus groups discussions, participants identified the inability to distinguish between parties as one of the main problems. Small parties are often associated with big parties, and the identities of the parties are strongly intertwined with the personalities of their leaders. In addition, the respondents named additional problems such as the low level of the credibility of political parties and the difficulties that the parties experience in effectively communicating with voters. Based on the findings of the focus group discussions, the researcher formulated hypotheses to test using secondary quantitative data.

An analysis of nationally representative survey data confirmed that undecided voters in Georgia are predominantly critical toward the ruling party and the

⁵⁵ Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia: September 2022', International Republican Institute, November 7, 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-georgia-september-2022/>.

⁵⁶ Thomas de Waal and Archil Gegeshidze, 'Divided Georgia: A Hostage to Polarization', Carnegie Europe, accessed October 3, 2023, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/12/08/divided-georgia-hostage-to-polarization-pub-85937>.

government. However, they do not perceive any party representing their interests, lack trust in Georgian political parties, and tend to abstain from voting in elections. This segment of society, which constitutes a significant percentage of the electorate, consists primarily of younger individuals, persons residing in the capital, and those employed in the private sector.

Therefore, we can conclude that Georgian voters evaluate politicians based on their previous performance and the presence of a clear agenda addressing social needs. A negative track record and the absence of such an agenda signal to voters the inability of politicians to address their pressing social issues. This observation in the Georgian context aligns with the valence theory of Stokes, which posits that voters tend to make choices not primarily based on relative distance from the positions on economic matters, but rather on their perception of competence, ability to govern, and integrity⁵⁷. The findings of our research also shed light on the problems within Georgia's party system, which a significant proportion of voters perceive as overtly closed, lacking effectiveness and integrity.

The existing gap between political parties and voters can also be partly attributed to the divergence between the views of voters and politicians. Evidently, there is an increasing demand for a particular kind of representation in Georgian politics. This form of representation entails a strong link between politicians and their constituents, and politics being conducted based on a clear understanding of interests of particular social groups⁵⁸. It seems that a different notion of representation, the one based on the understanding of national interests by politicians, is more popular among Georgian politicians.

The passiveness of a significant group of citizens who choose not to support any party or participate in elections is a major issue facing Georgian democracy. The existence of this group provides leverage for the current and potentially the future ruling parties. Therefore, any party that competes with the leading parties and aims to uphold liberal democracy in Georgia must focus on mobilizing these voters. This can be achieved by creating a political agenda that reflects the concerns and interests of this group, as well as by actively engaging with them at the grassroots level. Parties should also work toward building trust with these voters by addressing their grievances and concerns and providing them with a platform to voice their opinions.

⁵⁷ Stiers, Dieter. 'Spatial and Valence models of voting: The effects of the political context.' *Electoral Studies* 80 (2022): 102549.

⁵⁸ Andrew Heywood and Clayton Chin, 'Representation', chapter, in *Political Theory: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

Recommendations

Recommendations

Based on the findings of our research, we have developed certain recommendations for existing and/or new political parties that we believe will assist them on their road to greater electoral success.

The focus groups and our research and analysis have identified several major problems faced by Georgian political parties, including but not limited to an overarching identity crisis, fundamental shortcomings in communicating with voters, and the lack of reliability and credibility of these parties and their 'worn-out' leaders. Other flagged issues include the dependence of the existing parties on a single leader, contributing to the perception that they are run as wholly-owned private companies as opposed to publicly traded joint-stock companies with a multiplicity of stakeholders. The perceived unwillingness to allow a periodic democratic renewal of a party has also been named as an impediment to new parties' success.

Our research suggests that addressing these problems will significantly improve the standing of Georgian political parties in the eyes of voters and will help them rebrand into more reliable and effective political actors. Our recommendations are grouped into five main factors: (a) identity; (b) credibility; (c) communication; (d) leaders; and (e) openness to innovation.

Identity:

- **Clear ideological/political identity:** Focus groups have shown that a significant number of respondents do not know what to expect from the political parties that position themselves as the so-called 'third force'. In the eyes of respondents, none of such parties (except for Girchi and Gichi - More Freedom, which have distinct libertarian identities) has a clearly formulated ideology and a political agenda consistent with such ideology. Therefore, voters do not know what the party's stance and/or alliances will be when facing a practical dilemma or what the party's plan of action will be in a crisis situation. In order to form their own political identity, parties need to develop a clear ideological foundation defining 'who they are' and 'what they stand for' politically. Then they need to formulate a broad political agenda stemming from and based on such ideological foundation. Promoting a particular idea or vision that is not necessarily related to a concrete ideological framework can also greatly enhance party identity and help gain support among voters. Notably, the party identity needs to be resilient enough to withstand the challenges stemming from the natural or artificially induced polarization aimed at leaving no one 'in the middle'. Such polarization could be observed in the run-up to every Georgian election in the last decade.
- **Consistency and clear position on key issues:** According to focus groups, Georgian voters perceive Georgian political parties as unstable and inconsistent in terms of their rhetoric and actions. The respondents cited the parties' inability to agree on a coherent action plan and frequent changes of position on key issues (e.g., recognition of election results, entry into the parliament).

Moreover, according to focus groups, Georgian political parties do not have a clear position on issues of particular importance to the public. The lack of such predictability and stability are quoted as one of the reasons for distrust towards parties. To shape their political identities, parties should work on creating stable long-, medium- and short-term political agendas and routinely communicate respective messages to the voters. This will make it easier for voters to distinguish a particular party from its competitors based on ideology, issues and policies rather than personalities, and will lead to developing a stronger natural linkage with and allegiance towards a preferred party.

- **Connection with the two largest political parties:** Focus groups have shown that most of the new/small parties are perceived as subdivisions of either the Georgian Dream or the United National Movement. It has thus been difficult for these political parties to position themselves as independent political actors. To create their own distinct political identity, these parties must not only distance themselves from the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement, but most importantly find or create a political niche where such new political identity could be nurtured and developed into a resilient political organism, able to survive pre-electoral polarization. Easier said than done, though our analysis suggests that it has been a common mistake of third parties to assume that simply identifying as ‘neither GD nor UNM’ would amount to finding such a niche, which has proven not to be the case.
- **Greater focus on social and economic problems:** Analysis of the election campaigns of Georgian political parties showed that the parties focused on issues that, according to opinion polls, were not among the top five issues of which concern the public. Political parties should talk more about the problems that the Georgian public perceives as the most pressing, including unemployment, poverty, inflation, rising prices on consumer goods, and social security. Notably, these issues should be addressed in addition to and not at the expense of what the parties are currently stressing (e.g., EU integration and other foreign policy issues). Such broadening of the topics to encompass more ‘mundane’ concerns of voters can also be handled through diversifying speakers based on issues (while currently the same speakers often cover all issues on behalf of their parties, thus being unable to find linkage with a particular issue and detracting from their own credibility as no one can have expertise on every issue).
- **Issue ownership:** It is desirable that the parties identify and focus on a particular set of priority issues. These issues should become associated with concrete parties in the voters’ consciousness.
- **Targeting:** Party activities, messages, and campaigns should be targeted at specific social and interest groups. This means both campaigns aimed at one social group and campaigns aimed at crossing the interests of different social groups. Special attention should be paid to those social groups that do not always find representation of their own interests in the current political spectrum. Primarily these are young people, residents of Tbilisi, and middle-tier

employees of the private sector, though a more detailed breakdown should be made by parties to identify specific interest groups per location, age group, gender, occupation, etc. to better understand their needs.

Credibility:

- **Greater transparency and accountability:** The level of voter trust in political parties is low. Our analysis of the focus groups shows that one of the main reasons for the distrust is the lack of transparency and accountability of political parties. To gain citizens' trust, Georgian political parties must drastically increase the transparency of their activities (especially with regard to financing, both fundraising and spending, as well as activities in Parliament, coalition and alliance formation, candidate selection process and party list formation, etc.) and introduce accountability mechanisms and systems, with a particular emphasis on post-election reflection and renewals.
- **Fostering trust in political parties by promoting the inclusion of new leaders in party politics through a democratic selection process:** Voters who distrust political parties are less likely to support candidates backed by the party and may be more prone to indecision. Focus group discussions showed that voter distrust towards Georgian political parties is caused by the presence of the same 'faces' who, according to the respondents, are guided by old, 'corrupt' and ineffective standards. To increase trust, parties should facilitate the entry of 'fresh blood' into politics through a democratic and competitive selection process, who in turn will introduce higher democratic standards such as transparency, accountability, direct communication with voters and so on. It is important that such 'fresh blood' be not just 'new faces' – i.e., handpicked newcomers backed by the old guard – but real, self-made, ambitious politicians who have succeeded based on competitive selection/election criteria.

Communication:

- **More direct communication with voters:** Focus group respondents noted that Georgian political parties have a serious problem in terms of communication with voters. Participants of the focus groups complained that politicians communicate with people only through television screens. Instead, people would like to see politicians who communicate directly with voters by holding regular personal meetings throughout the country, by talking about topics and problems that are important to 'ordinary voters', and by doing so routinely, not only before the scheduled elections. Thus, more direct contacts and personal communication with voters should be the usual modus operandi for parties to gain and maintain trust...
- **Cooperation with civic movements:** Research has shown that in the perception of the Georgian public, most Georgian political parties pursue only their partisan interests as opposed to pursuing common causes with other stakeholders and interest groups. This perception negatively affects their electoral chances in the opinion of a significant percentage of voters. Instead of following a partisan agenda, Georgian political parties should make efforts to

achieve a wider public consensus. To gain the support of various social and interest groups, they should actively cooperate with civil society actors and civic movements, as well as reach out to professional unions and interest groups, whether in business, culture, medicine, education, or sports. This would contribute to the image as well as the voters' perception of voters that the parties are actively working on problems important to specific people, as opposed to their own self-interest.

Leaders:

- **Number of leaders:** A significant number of focus group respondents believe that Georgian political parties are united around the personality of a particular leader rather than a political ideology and respective political identity, which is perceived as a major weakness for the new parties. This was especially evident in the cases of Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Citizens, For Georgia, and Droa, often described as 'one man' parties, as a segment of respondents recognize these parties only because of their leaders. While the focus groups acknowledged the necessity of strong leadership within political parties, they expressed concern that many parties lack a distinct identity separate from the personality of their leader. As a result, focus group participants reported having little faith in the parties that are overly dependent on a single leader, as they do not believe such parties can sustain themselves over time if that leader steps down or assumes a more passive role. Focus group participants also indicated that the presence of multiple credible leaders is an important sign that a party can develop an enduring political identity along with a value system that extends beyond specific individuals. This was seen as crucial for fostering trust and confidence that a particular party can remain viable into the future, even with changes in leadership. Therefore, to overcome this challenge and strengthen parties, political actors should abandon dependence on one leader and unite the party around ideology, political identity, voter-tailored issues and agendas, with a broad selection of leaders as speakers on specific topics.

Innovation:

- **New approaches:** Politicians are recommended to offer voters new approaches, champion new ideas and offer mechanisms for gradual innovation. They should introduce policies tailored towards the needs of specific social and interest groups and develop solutions based on active work and engagement with these groups (i.e., target audiences). For example, holding youth forums aimed at addressing the needs of students, regional youth, education, youth healthcare, affordable housing; working with voters in the regions and offering them various solutions, development programs, vocational trainings, etc. Such an approach will help a party cultivate trust, respect and stately image, i.e., that of a party oriented towards the development of the country.

- **New political leaders:** A reason for public distrust in existing political parties is the presence of politicians who have been members of different political parties over the past few decades. A significant number of political

leaders are associated with current or previous governments, while some of them have held senior positions during the last two administrations. Consequently, in the eyes of many voters, they have exhausted their credibility mandates. To regain trust, parties need to undertake qualitative renewal and establish platforms allowing the entry and promotion of new political leaders within parties, preferably those who are not affiliated with either the current or previous governments.

Imagining a New Generation of Georgian Political Parties

Based on this analysis, we have imagined a new model for Georgian parties that can be taken as a whole or as individual constituent parts. Using this model or parts thereof can be useful in developing the existing parties or the creation of new parties. We argue that adopting such model will help existing small or new political parties mobilize undecided voters and break through boundaries of the existing, seemingly deadlocked and highly imperfect two-party system. Such party model is distinguished by a strong, positive political identity. It is distinguished from other parties, especially the two leading parties, by a clearly delineated circle of symbols, values, ideology and public policy priorities. The party has its own agenda, solid enough not to allow its opponents to hijack the agenda by artificial polarization attempt or libelous accusations, forcing a party into a defensive mode and detracting from its ability to communicate its own positive agenda. Although a party should have a clear ideological niche, there should be delicate balance between ideological positioning and public policy concerns.

Such a party allows new leaders to enter Georgian politics through democratic, competitive platforms. These leaders can be young entrants into politics as well as experienced professionals in other fields, public activists, or even existing political activists who were previously in the background. The party positions itself as an alternative to the existing political establishment. The preferred party leadership would consist of professional and political figures who have substantive achievements but may not have previously held highly prominent public roles. Distancing can also be achieved by presenting a new set of issues or re-interpretation of an existing agenda.

This agenda will be created through two-way communication with voters, for which both face-to-face and Internet communication will be actively used. The party's communication strategy will not be aimed only at unilaterally creating the party's image. Its aim will be to involve the public, at all geographic, regional, gender, age, ethnic, religious, social and other interest group levels, in the formation of the political agenda. By communicating with party representatives and being active on Internet platforms, members of the public are able to voice important priority issues for them, gain additional knowledge about them, and participate in discussions about them.

The party assumes the role of a bridge between the elites, professional experts,

civil society, and the state. With the help of experts and civil society, it will shape specific public policy proposals to meet the demands and needs of public groups and ensure that these proposals are represented on the national policy agenda. The party will focus on representing the interests of specific social groups and reconciling these interests. Special attention will be paid to social groups that are less represented by existing parties, namely young people, employees in the private sector, and residents of big cities.

The new party is introduced as an organization with a horizontal structure, where the principle of internal (intra-party) democracy is extensively represented. The leaders of the party at all levels will be elected by members or supporters, enabling the party to attract new leaders and gain active support from specific groups.

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Appendix A. Focus Groups Guide

Hello,

Thank you for attending today's meeting. We are researchers representing the non-governmental organization Chavchavadze Center. Our research aims to study the views of people interested in politics regarding existing political parties. We would also like to know what kind of a political party you would like to see in Georgian politics in the future. Our research does not serve the interests of any political party. The recommendations made as a result of the research will be equally available to all political parties.

To introduce you to the terms of participation - please note that participation in the focus group is completely voluntary, which means that you can leave the focus group at any time. Your identity is known only to the researchers and your real name will not appear in any report or publication. We are interested in the opinion of each of you. Therefore, it is important to consider that for us there are no right or wrong answers, and all opinions are equally valuable. Please allow each other to express your thoughts freely.

With your permission, we will record the discussion using a digital recorder. At any moment, at the request of one of the participants, it is possible to turn off the recorder and, if there is a permission, to turn it on again. The record will be accessible only to the researchers and will be destroyed 6 months after the end of the study.

Block I – Society

1. In your opinion, how has Georgian society changed in the last 3 years?
2. What do you think are the most important and relevant issues for Georgian society today? What is your attitude toward these issues? Can you name a political party that actively works on these issues?

Block II – Democracy

1. What is a state of democracy like today in Georgia and elsewhere? How should it be?
2. How has the situation in terms of democracy changed in our country during the last 3 years? Do you see political parties as responsible for this change? If so, how? If not, why not?

Block III – Political Parties

1. What do you think about political parties in general? Why do we need them? What would happen if there were no political parties in the country?
2. Now I will list the parties and please describe each party in 3 words:
 - Georgian Dream
 - United National Movement
 - European Georgia
 - Strategia Aghmashenebeli
 - For Georgia – Gakharia's Party
 - Girchi and Girchi - More Freedom
 - Droa
 - Alliance of Patriots
 - Anna Dolidze's Party
 - Party of Aleko Elisashvili
3. Now please tell us what distinguishes these parties from each other. List the main characteristics of these parties. Are they different from each other, or what do they have in common?
4. In the last few elections, political parties have spread negative messages and discredited each other. What do you think about it? Do you like this approach to politics? (Additional question: Which political party/parties do you think most actively use similar types of messages?)
5. Would you like a new political party that you would like to form an alliance with?

Block IV – Party Leaders

1. What is the role of leaders in a political party?
2. What personal and political characteristics should a politician have to be a party leader? (Additional question: Can you describe an example of a political party leader that you admire?)

3. Now I will list some Georgian party leaders, and please tell us what is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear this person's name:
 - Irakli Garibashvili
 - Levan Khabeishvili
 - Giorgi Vashadze
 - Mamuka Khazaradze
 - Zura Japaridze
 - Iago Khvichia - Vakhtang Megrelishvili
 - Elena Khoshtaria
 - Aleko Elisashvili
 - Anna Dolidze
 - Irma Inashvili
 - Eka Beselia
4. What are the qualities that 'new' political leaders must borrow from the 'old' ones?
5. What would you like to change in Georgian political parties, in terms of leadership style and personalities?
6. Are there any other features or characteristics that, in your opinion, are important for a political party in Georgia to attract votes?
7. Is there anything else worth mentioning about this topic?

Appendix B

Online Questionnaire for selecting participants of focus groups

- Name
- Surname
- Age
- City/Town/Municipality
- Education
- Occupation
- Telephone number
- Email

Questions:

1. On a 5-point scale, how would you evaluate your financial income?
5 points – High income;
4 Points – Higher than average income;
3 Points – Average income;
2 Points – Lower than average income;
1 Point – Low income;
0 point – Unemployed.
2. Have you ever been a party member or supporter?
 1. Yes;
 2. Yes, I am still party member/supporter;
 3. Yes, but I departed; 4. No.
3. Did you vote in the last two elections?
 1. Yes;
 2. No.
4. If you did not vote in the last two elections, what was the main reason of your abstention?
 1. I voted;
 2. Because of long distance to polling station;
 3. I am not interested in politics;
 4. I do not like existing political parties;
 5. Other reasons.
5. Do you believe that at least one political party in Georgia represents your interests?
 1. Yes;
 2. No.
6. Would you like to see new political party in the upcoming elections?
 1. Yes;
 2. No.