

# PARTISANSHIP AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN GEORGIA



CRRC Georgia

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CRRC-Georgia is a non-profit research organization which provides good data for public good. The organization's mission is to promote evidence-based discussions on pressing societal issues by producing reliable, up-to-date, and accessible data and analysis.

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## **DISCLAIMER**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every three out of ten Georgians can be categorized as somewhat affectively polarized. Polarized people tend to be older, ethnically Georgian, religious, and partisans. However, polarization does not seem to have hugely affected social relationships: Georgians overwhelmingly report that having contrasting party sympathies from their friends would not make them feel uncomfortable.

Supporters of the ruling Georgian Dream party are more polarized than opposition supporters and they also exhibit higher levels of negative party identification, i.e. the phenomenon when party support is built on strong dislike of other parties.

The issue of political polarization has become so exceedingly prevalent in discussions about Georgia's politics, that “polarization” has almost become a buzzword. On the one hand, it is often deemed as one of the main factors within Georgian democratic setbacks. On the other hand, it has been shown that at the societal level, political polarization does not result in diverging views on policy or ideology.

The study's main motivation was to examine partisanship and polarization at the societal level in Georgia. For that reason, a concept of affective polarization was employed, which does not necessarily focus on policy/ideological differences.

To examine partisanship and affective polarization, CRRC-Georgia conducted a nationally representative phone survey in Georgia (August-September, 2022). Overall, 1,523 interviews with adult (18+) Georgian citizens were conducted employing simple random sampling using the random-digit-dial method. The quantitative survey was complemented by a focus group discussion, which included six participants with various political affiliations and different regions of Georgia.

The study's findings lead to a wide range of conclusions:

- As for affective polarization, a third (31%) of the public can be categorized as somewhat polarized. More specifically, 31% of respondents said one of the two political camps rarely or never do what the country needs while claiming that the other political camp often or always does what the country needs.
- The study employed two different measures of affective polarization. Even though both measures suggest that Georgians are affectively polarized, affective polarization is more

prevalent when we rely on the measure which uses assessments of the parties (parties serving the country's needs) rather than horizontal personal relationships (social distance). The first measure has greater weight for the report's main argument.

- After constructing a polarization variable based on the first measure, we argue that more polarized people are more likely to be older, ethnic Georgians, people who attend religious services at least once a week, and partisans (GD supporters as well as opposition supporters).
- An examination of social distance between partisans suggests that 82% of GD supporters and 86% of non-affiliated voters report that they would feel completely comfortable or quite comfortable with a friend who is an opposition supporter. Eighty-one percent of opposition supporters and 86% of non-affiliated voters report that they would feel completely comfortable or quite comfortable with a friend who is a supporter of the ruling party. GD supporters are statistically more likely to say that they would feel uncomfortable with an oppositionally-minded friend in comparison to non-affiliated voters. At the same time, opposition supporters are more likely to report that they would feel uncomfortable with a GD supporter friend than non-affiliated voters.
- As for partisanship, 25% of the public ended up being supporters of the ruling Georgian Dream party (GD) and 10% were opposition supporters; a majority of voters did not name a particular political party that they would vote for or that they feel close to (62%). Supporters of the ruling party tend to be older, more religious, rural, and employed in the public sector. On the other hand, opposition supporters are more likely to be people with higher than secondary education, unemployed, or working in non-public sectors. Non-affiliated voters tend to be younger, live in Tbilisi, not employed in the public sector, and less religious.
- Twenty-nine percent of partisans exhibit negative partisanship, i.e. they support a particular party because other parties are unacceptable to them. On the other hand, 67% of partisans pointed out that they favor a particular political party because of what the party represents. Furthermore, GD supporters are more likely to exhibit negative partisanship than opposition supporters.

## INTRODUCTION

Political polarization is commonly singled out as an obstacle to Georgia’s democratic development. Probably most noticeably, in response to Georgia’s EU membership application in 2022, the European Commission concluded that one of the preconditions for granting the country a candidacy status is to “address the issue of political polarization.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the topic of political polarization has been increasingly present in the discussions about Georgia’s democratic development. On the one hand, some commentators argue that political polarization in Georgia is one of the main factors of democratic backsliding.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, other researchers have demonstrated that political polarization in Georgia does not directly manifest in diverging ideological and/or policy views in the electorate.<sup>3</sup> By employing the concept of affective polarization, which does not rely on policy or ideological differences, the report tries to reconcile the two seemingly inconsistent propositions and examine the share of the polarized people.

The concept of affective polarization is defined in the literature as the tendency during which the electorate increasingly distrusts an opposing party or a block of parties, regardless of their stance on policy issues.<sup>4</sup> In the Georgian context, this tendency can be seen in the inclination of supporters of the ruling party on the one hand, and supporters of the opposition on the other to increasingly distrust and dislike the other party.<sup>5</sup>

Considering this context, the report analyzes how Georgians feel about political parties, presents the level of affective polarization in the electorate, and examines which socio-demographic groups are more likely to end up politically polarized. The study describes to what extent political polarization (not necessarily conceptualized as policy/ideological polarization) trickles down to the societal level and which segments of the public tend to be more polarized.

The research included in this report was carried out by CRRC-Georgia with financial support from the National Endowment for Democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Gegeshidze and De Waal, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Gilbreath and Turmanidze, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Druckman and Levendusky, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> There are important differences between opposition parties but a focus group that preceded the survey confirmed that political polarization in Georgia can largely be considered as a polarization between the ruling party and UNM-led opposition as a whole. Samkharadze, 2022. Chkhetiani, 2022.

# METHODOLOGY

## Data collection

To measure how Georgians perceive parties and exhibit affective polarization, CRRC-Georgia conducted a nationally representative phone survey. Overall, 1,523 interviews with adult (18+) Georgian citizens were administered from Aug 29 to Sep 7, 2022. The survey was conducted in Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Russian languages. The quantitative survey was complemented by a focus group discussion, which included six participants with various political affiliations hailing from different regions of Georgia.

## Measuring affective polarization

Levels of affective polarization in a given country are usually measured using nationally representative surveys.<sup>6</sup> Different scholars employ distinct ways of operationalization, including how voters feel towards a party or a group of parties which they oppose (out-party) versus how they feel about their favorite party (in-party),<sup>7</sup> what traits do voters assign to out-party vs. in-party,<sup>8</sup> to what extent they trust out-party to do the right thing as compared to in-party,<sup>9</sup> and social distance between supporters of two political poles.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have demonstrated that all the aforementioned paths of operationalization go hand-in-hand (are highly correlated) except for measuring social distance.<sup>11</sup> More specifically, while other measures (like a feelings thermometer, trust and trait measures) might indicate a high level of affective polarization, this might not be reflected in social distance. For that reason, the following study tests two ways to measure affective polarization in Georgia:

- (1) **Parties serving the country's needs** - The survey asks respondents the following two questions:
  - a. “How often does the ruling party do what the country needs?”
  - b. “How often does the opposition do what the country needs?”

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<sup>6</sup> Iyengar et al. 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Lelkes and Westwood, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Levendusky, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Druckman and Levendusky, 2019.



These two questions are used to construct a polarization variable. The idea is that if respondents assess both political poles similarly, there is no polarization. However, the more contrasting respondents' assessments are, the greater polarization there is.

- (2) **Social distance** - Respondents were asked how comfortable they would they feel if their friend was a supporter of the ruling party and the opposition. The idea is that if affective polarization is present in Georgia, partisans should feel less comfortable with a friend who is an out-party supporter when compared to non-affiliated voters.

## Data analysis

The analysis below makes use of multivariate and univariate regression models. The multivariate models examine statistically significant relationships between the outcomes and the following variables:

- Age group (18-34, 35-54, 55+)
- Sex (male or female)
- Formal education level (secondary or lower, secondary technical, higher than secondary)
- Settlement type (Tbilisi, other urban areas, rural areas)
- Employment status (not working, working in the public sector, working in non-public sectors)
- Ethnicity (ethnic Georgian, ethnic minority)
- Frequency of religious attendance (at least once a week, at least once a month, only at special holidays, less often, never)
- Frequency of praying (at least once a day, several times a week, less often or never)

The inclusion of the two measures of religiosity needs further explanation.<sup>12</sup> A theoretical reason for the inclusion of these two independent variables is the expectation that the church and religiosity play an important role in forming political opinions of the public, and therefore, religiosity should be relevant for affective polarization as well. The Georgian public is believed to be one of the most religious across the region.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the church is not a passive actor in politics. Rather, it often plays an important role in political processes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Even though the frequency of praying and frequency of religious attendance (i.e. how often people attend religious services other than weddings and funerals) are associated with each other, they are not closely correlated and regression models do not suffer from multicollinearity. The assumption of little or no multicollinearity was checked by calculating the variance inflation factor (VIF) and none of the scores exceeded the value of 2.

<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> DRI, 2022.

## FINDINGS

In this section, we will discuss the findings of the survey. The first part of the section will cover partisanship and will show that slightly more than a third of the electorate can be considered partisan (35%). Furthermore, older people, people living in villages, people employed in the public sector, and more religious people tend to be more supportive of the ruling party than younger people, Tbilisi residents, people not employed in the public sector, and people who are less religious.

In the second part, we will discuss negative party affiliation. More specifically, three out of ten partisans (29%) exhibit negative party affiliation, i.e. they support a particular party because other parties are unacceptable and not because they favor what their favored party represents. Moreover, supporters of the ruling party are more likely to exhibit negative party affiliations than opposition supporters.

Finally, the third part will deal with affective polarization in Georgia. We will demonstrate that almost a third (31%) of the public can be categorized as somewhat polarized. As for group differences, older people, ethnic Georgians, more religious people, and GD supporters tend to be more polarized as opposed to younger people, ethnic minorities, less religious people, and opposition supporters or non-affiliated voters.

### Partisanship

Even though partisanship is one of the main preconditions of political polarization manifested at the societal level, it has been demonstrated by other surveys that, in Georgia, roughly half of the public is reluctant to name a particular party that they feel close to or would vote for in elections.<sup>15</sup>

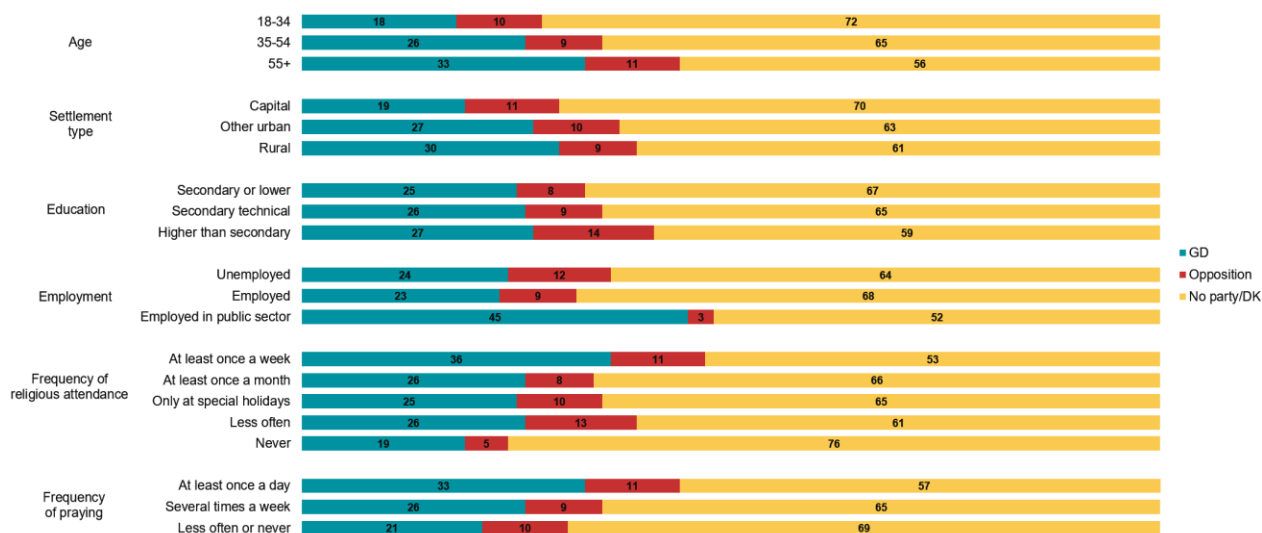
The survey asked two questions to measure partisanship: (1) “Which party is close to you?” and (2) “Which political party would you support if Parliamentary elections were on the upcoming weekend?” We combined the two questions in the following way: people who reported that they either feel close to the ruling party or would vote for GD were considered GD supporters, and the same goes for opposition supporters. After combining these two questions, 25% of the public ended up being a supporter of the ruling Georgian Dream party and 10% were opposition supporters; The

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<sup>15</sup> CRRC-Georgia, 2021.

majority of voters, as also demonstrated in other surveys,<sup>16</sup> do not name a particular political party that they would vote for or they feel close to (62%), however only 3% of the respondents refused to answer the question.

Figure 1 - Partisanship by socio-demographic variables (%)



Multinomial regression analysis was conducted to better examine socio-demographic predictors of partisanship. Sex and ethnicity are statistically unrelated to partisanship. However, age, settlement type, education, employment, and religiosity (operationalized as attendance of religious services and frequency of praying) are associated with people’s party preferences.

<p><b>Supporters of the ruling party are more likely to be:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older people,</li> <li>• People living in villages,</li> <li>• Employed in the public sector,</li> <li>• More religious people</li> </ul>	<p><b>Supporters of the opposition are more likely to be:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People with higher than secondary education,</li> <li>• Unemployed,</li> <li>• People working in non-public</li> </ul>
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As for non-affiliated respondents, such people are more likely to be younger, live in Tbilisi, are not employed in the public sector, and are less religious.

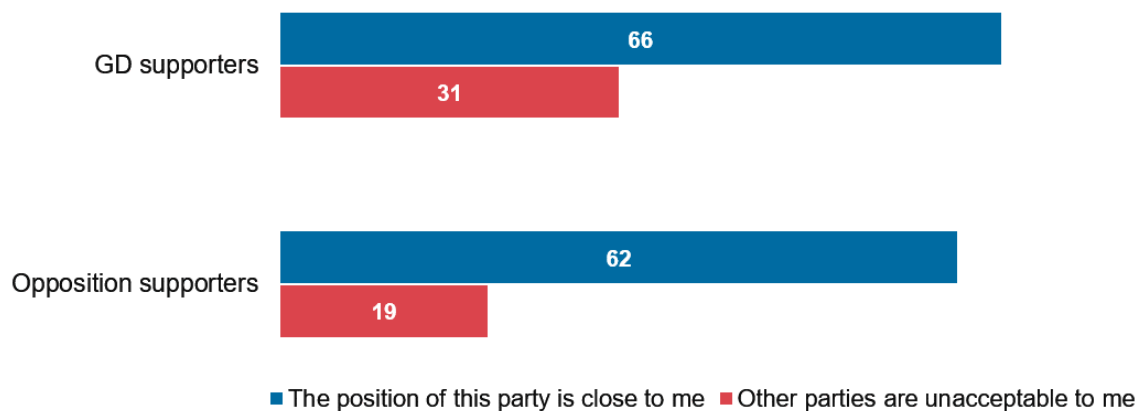
<sup>16</sup> CRRC-Georgia, 2022.

## Negative party affiliation

Partisanship or party affiliation does not necessarily imply that voters are bound to their favorite party because of its positions, ideology, and/or leaders. In a highly polarized political landscape, it might be the case a large segment of the electorate is motivated to align with one of the two political camps due to a strong negative alignment with the other side of the political spectrum. This phenomenon is defined in the literature as negative partisanship or negative party affiliation.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, partisans, i.e. people who are willing to name a political party close to them or to disclose which party they would vote for, comprise 34% of the electorate. The survey asked party-affiliated voters whether they would lean towards that particular party because of what it represents or whether other parties were unacceptable. 29% of partisans (which is 10% of the whole electorate) reported that they support a particular party because other parties are unacceptable to them. On the other hand, 67% of partisans, (23% of the electorate), pointed out that their party preference is due to the feeling of closeness to what the party represents.

Figure 2 - Party support reason (%)



*NOTE: Non-affiliated voters were not asked this question.*

31% of GD supporters and 19% of opposition supporters report that they support their favored party because other parties are unacceptable. Religiosity, measured through frequency of praying, seems to be associated with reason for party support too; 28% of partisans who pray at least once

<sup>17</sup> Abramowitz and Webster, 2018.

a day, 25% of partisans that pray at least several times a week and 41% of partisans who pray less often or never say the same.

Age, sex, education, settlement, employment status, ethnicity, and frequency of religious attendance are not associated with negative party affiliation, while the party people support and how often they pray are relevant.

After controlling for other factors, GD supporters are more likely to exhibit negative party affiliation than opposition supporters. Moreover, people who rarely or never pray are statistically significantly more likely than people who pray at least several times a week to report that they support a particular party because other parties are unacceptable.

## Affective polarization

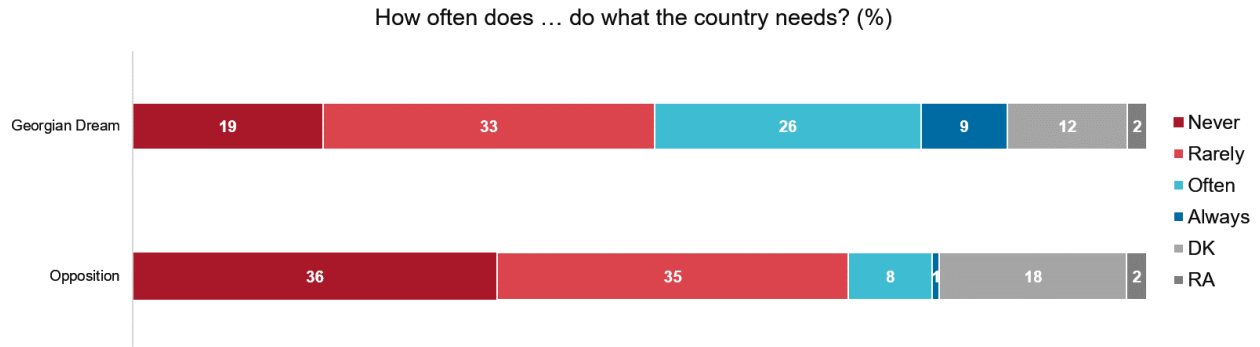
### Do parties do what the country needs?

Regardless of their stance on policy issues, the electorate might be affectively polarized. In this case, we examine how divergent are public assessments of the two political poles' activities: the ruling party and the opposition. Respondents were asked how often they thought the ruling party and opposition did what the country needed. 52% of the electorate thinks that GD rarely or never does what the country needs, while 35% reported that the ruling party often or always does what the country needs. As for the opposition, 71% of the public thinks that the opposition rarely or never does what the country needs, while only 9% of Georgians believe the opposition often or always does what the country needs.

There were also respondents who did not give definitive answers. 14% of the public does not know how to answer or refuses to answer the question "How often does Georgian Dream do what the country needs?", while 20% do not know how to answer or refuse to answer the question "How often does opposition do what the country needs?"

Further analysis suggests that almost a third (31%) of the public can be categorized as somewhat polarized. We defined somewhat polarized voters as people who reported that one of the two political camps rarely or never do what the country needs while reporting that the other political camp often or always does what the country needs. More specifically, 31% of the respondents can be considered somewhat polarized.

Figure 3 – Parties doing what the country needs? (%)



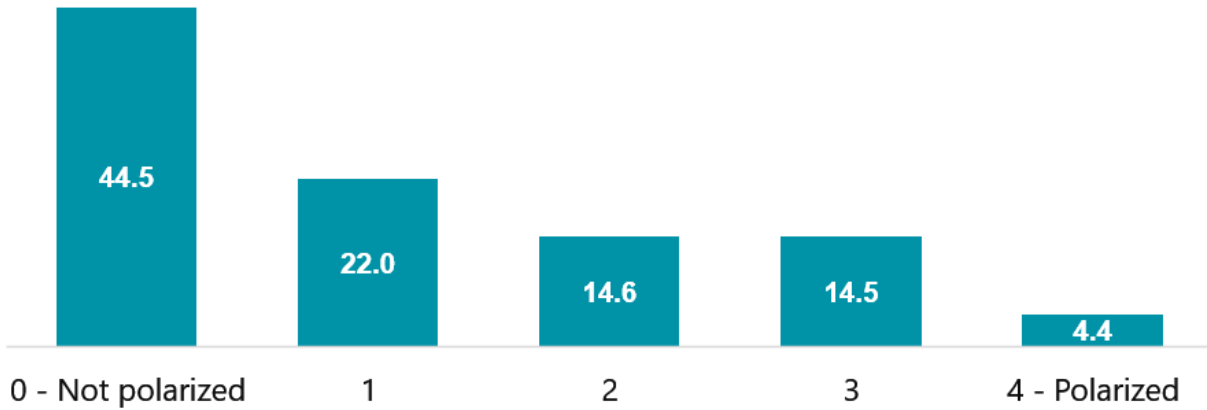
The two questions were combined and coded to construct a variable that measures affective polarization. The logic behind this effort is that people who respond similarly to those two questions should be considered less polarized, while people who assess one of the two positively and the other negatively should be considered polarized voters. The original two questions were measured on a 1-4 scale, ranging from a positive attitude towards a party to a negative attitude.

Given the fact that a sizeable portion of the public reported that they do not know, this response category was treated as a middle, neutral category. As a result, each variable was recoded on a 1-5 scale, ranging from positive assessments to negative, while 3 being the do not know category at the same time.<sup>18</sup> Then, for each respondent, an absolute distance between the two responses was calculated and the polarization variable was constructed.

The variable ranged from 0 to 4; 0 meaning that the respondent was not polarized at all because he/she reported identical responses to the two questions, and 4 meaning that the respondent is very polarized because he/she reported a very positive attitude towards one party and very negative attitude towards the other.

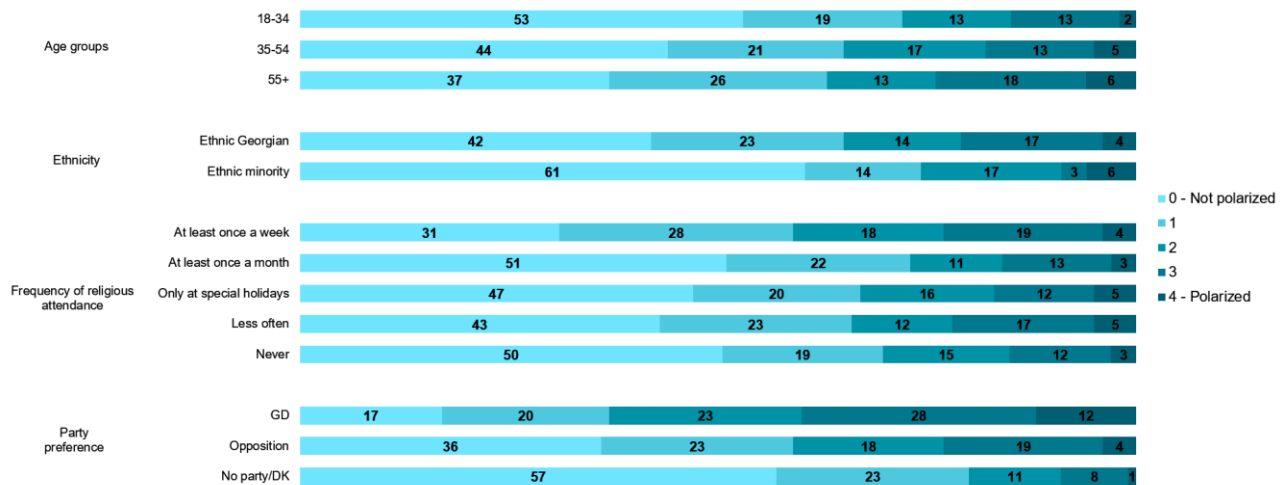
<sup>18</sup> The analysis was checked without DKs. As a result, the sample size decreased by 306 cases, but it yielded similar results.

Figure 4 – Polarization of the electorate (%)



Almost half of the electorate (45%) is not polarized at all, i.e. reported identical responses to the questions regarding GD and the opposition doing what the country needs. 22% is also less polarized, in other words, reported similar responses to the two questions. Every fifth (19%) Georgian seems to be quite polarized (response categories 3 and 4), i.e. their assessments of the ruling party and opposition doing what the country needs are diverging. The middle response category (2) cannot be unequivocally categorized, but as the above analysis suggests at least somewhat polarized voters comprise 31% of the electorate.

Figure 5 - Polarization by groups (%)



Ordinal logistic regression analysis suggests someone's polarization is not associated with their sex, education, settlement type employment status, and frequency of praying. On the other hand, age, ethnicity, frequency of religious attendance and party preference are related to respondent polarization.

Specifically, more polarized people tend to be:

- Older,
- Ethnic Georgians,
- People who attend religious services at least once a week and
- Partisans (GD supporters as well as opposition supporters)

Furthermore, supporters of the ruling party are more likely to be polarized than supporters of the opposition.

### Social distance among voters

Social distance is a specific measure of affective polarization. In contrast to other measures, it focuses on horizontal relations between voters (while other measures are often directed vertically, i.e. examine how voters feel towards a particular party or political elite). It has been demonstrated that affective polarization might not manifest itself as strongly in an increase in social distance as in other measures indicators of affective polarization, such as a feelings thermometer, trait ratings, or trust measures.<sup>19</sup>

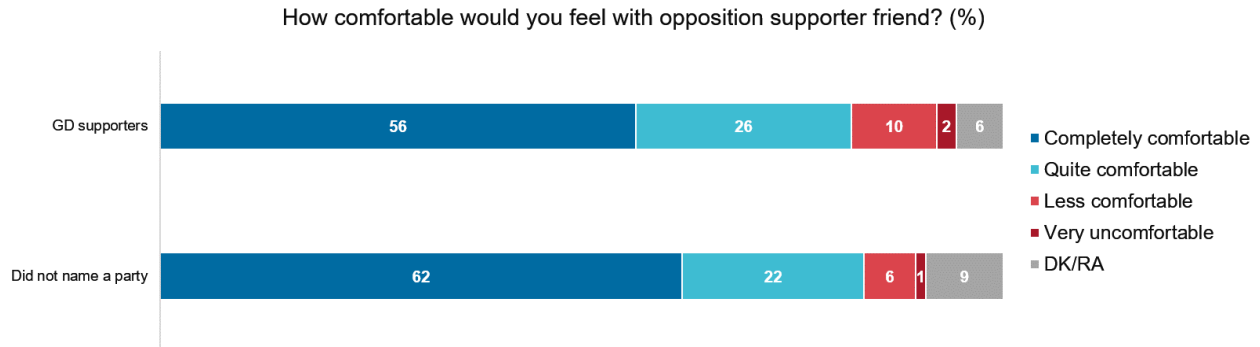
An overwhelming majority of supporters of the ruling party, as well as non-affiliated voters, report that they would feel quite comfortable or completely comfortable with a friend who is an opposition supporter. Only 12% of GD supporters said that they would feel less comfortable or very uncomfortable with an opposition supporter friend, while 7% of non-affiliated voters reported the same.

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<sup>19</sup> Druckman and Levendusky, 2019.



Figure 6 - Feeling comfortable/uncomfortable with a friend who supports the opposition

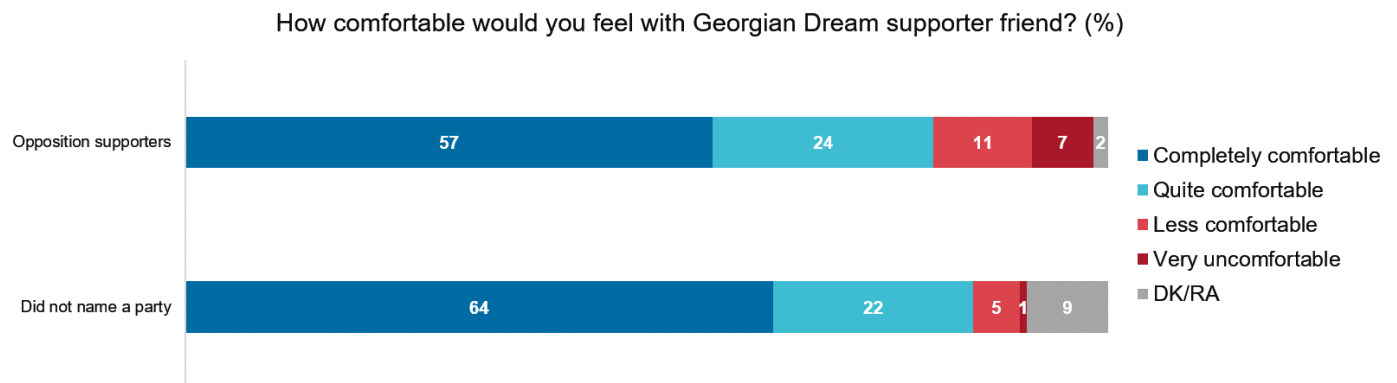


NOTE: Opposition supporters were not asked this question.

Regression analysis was conducted to statistically test whether GD supporters are different from non-affiliated voters in terms of feeling less comfortable with a friend who supports the opposition. The analysis suggests that, even though a majority of both groups tend to feel comfortable with an opposition supporter friend, GD supporters are statistically more likely to say that they would feel less comfortable or uncomfortable than respondents who did not name a party.

Similarly, an overwhelming majority of opposition supporters, as well as non-affiliated voters, report that they would feel quite comfortable or completely comfortable with a friend who is a supporter of GD. 18% of opposition supporters said that they would feel less comfortable or very uncomfortable with a GD supporter friend, while 6% of non-affiliated voters reported the same.

Figure 7- Feeling comfortable/uncomfortable with a friend who supports the ruling party



NOTE: Supporters of the ruling party were not asked this question.

Regression analysis was conducted to statistically test whether opposition supporters are different from non-affiliated voters in terms of feeling less comfortable with a friend who supports the ruling party. The analysis suggests that, even though a majority of both groups tend to feel comfortable with a GD supporter friend, opposition supporters are statistically more likely to say that they would feel less comfortable or uncomfortable than respondents who did not name a party.

## SUMMARY

Polarized people tend to be older, ethnically Georgian, religious, and partisans. Moreover, GD supporters seem exceptionally polarized as they are more likely to be polarized than not only non-affiliated voters but opposition supporters as well.

Measuring social distance among partisans suggested that friendship might be only slightly affected by partisanship. GD supporters are more likely to say that they would feel uncomfortable with an opposition-leaning friend in comparison to non-affiliated voters. At the same time, opposition supporters are more likely to report that they would feel uncomfortable with a GD supporter friend than non-affiliated voters. Regardless of these statistically significant differences, an overwhelming majority of the public says that they would feel quite or completely comfortable with a friend with either of the two political leanings.

Every third Georgian (35%) can be considered partisan. Three out of ten partisans (29%) say that they support a particular party because other parties are unacceptable, while two-thirds of partisans say they support a particular party because their positioning is close to them. 31% of GD supporters harbor negative party affiliation while the share of the respondents who say they support a particular opposition party because other parties are unacceptable is 19%.

As for party support, supporters of the ruling party tend to be older, living in villages, employed in the public sector, and religious people. People with higher than secondary education, unemployed, and people working in non-public sectors are more likely to support the opposition than people with lower levels of education or people employed in the public sector. The difference is substantial and most striking when it comes to people working in the public sector (12% of the public). 45% of public employees are GD supporters and only a 3% of them support for the opposition.

Generally, the public seems more critical of the opposition than the ruling party. Half of the public (52%) thinks that GD rarely or never does what the country needs. As for the opposition, more than two-thirds of the public (71%) think that the opposition rarely or never does what the country needs.

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