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POLITICAL ATTITUDES OF GEORGIAN SOCIAL-CONSERVATIVES

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POLITICAL ATTITUDES OF GEORGIAN SOCIAL-CONSERVATIVES

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ABOUT CRRC-GEORGIA

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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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The major goal of the report is to get a better understanding of the socio-demographic profile of socio-conservative people and their political attitudes. CRRC-Georgia, with financial support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), conducted a telephone survey of 1,278 adult (18+) Georgians in October 2023. The questionnaire was administered in the Georgian language, and data collection took place from October 4 to October 8. The findings can be generalized for the entire Georgian-speaking adult population of Georgia.

- Georgians are not particularly socially conservative. On the 0-1 index of social conservatism, the mean value is 0.51, and 50% of respondents are concentrated +/-0.15 from the mean.
- The more socially conservative someone is, the more likely they are to be a man, older, living outside of Tbilisi, less formally educated, and a supporter of the ruling party.
- Social conservatism is negatively associated with traditional political engagement. People who score higher on the social-conservatism index are less likely to have attended a rally, signed a petition, or contacted a government official during the last 12 months.
- However, people who are highly socially conservative are as politically active online as people who are not socially conservative.
- The more socially conservative a person is, the more likely they are to think that a democratic government is secondary to maintaining peace and stability in a country.
- Social conservatives are more likely to exhibit a neutral or negative general attitude towards the EU and less likely to express a positive attitude towards it. Moreover, the more socially conservative someone is, the more likely they are to exhibit skepticism towards Georgia's EU integration.
- Socially conservative people are more likely to support a new party promising closer ties with Russia, and they are less likely to support a party that prioritizes Georgia's integration into Western structures.
- Social conservatives are more likely to support a new party that promises to increase state funding for the church, or at least maintain the current amount of funding. On the contrary, they are less likely to support a new party that calls to cut funds allocated for religious groups.
- The more socially conservative a person is, the more likely they are to support a new party that pledges to increase social assistance. However, social conservative attitudes are not related to support for a new party that promises to increase defense spending or infrastructure projects.

INTRODUCTION

It is believed that Georgian political parties compete with personalities rather than ideologies or programmatic appeals.¹ However, the recent turn of Georgia's ruling party to conservatism has reignited discussions on its true intentions and the ideological composition of Georgian voters, especially the prevalence of socially conservative values.²

There are somewhat conflicting views regarding the prevalence of conservative values in the Georgian public. On the one hand, the widespread belief is that Georgian society is conservative at large.³ On the other hand, there are studies that suggest Georgian voters are more liberal on the socio-cultural spectrum rather than conservative.⁴ Seemingly, there is a gap in understanding social conservatism in Georgia, especially its political implications. Current research addresses this gap by constructing an index of social conservatism, measuring it in a representative sample of Georgians, and exploring the relationship between social conservative views and political attitudes

This research addresses the following questions: How conservative are the Georgian people? Which socio-demographic groups tend to be socially conservative in Georgia? What are the political attitudes of Georgian social-conservatives? To address the questions, data from a nationwide telephone survey conducted in October 2023 is used. Data suggests most Georgians fall somewhere in the middle of the social-conservatism index, suggesting the public is not overwhelmingly socially conservative. Moreover, people who tend to be highly socially conservative are men, older individuals, people living outside of Tbilisi, people with a secondary or a lower level of formal education, supporters of the ruling party or those unaffiliated with a political party, and people who attend religious services frequently. As for political attitudes, the more someone is socially conservative, the more they tend to favor maintaining peace and stability over democracy, the more they exhibit Eurosceptic attitudes⁵, and the less engaged they are with politics.

The report proceeds as follows. The paper first discusses methodological decisions regarding measuring socio-conservatism, data collection, and data analysis strategy. Next, the findings are presented in five subsections. The report ends with concluding remarks and a brief discussion of implications.

¹ Zviad Barkaia et al., *The Political Landscape of Georgia*, Second Edition (Tbilisi, 2020)

² Nino Samkharadze, "Georgian Dream's Populist Conservatism: Fight to Legitimise and Hold On to Power," *GIP* (blog), April 13, 2023

³ Emil Avdaliani, "The Rise of Socially Conservative Georgia," *CEPA*, July 10, 2024

⁴ Levan Kakhishvili et al., "GEORGIA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE DIVERSITY, CONVERGENCE AND EMPTY SPOTS" (FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG, October 2021), p. 11

⁵ The term Euroscepticism is employed to denote a general negative attitude towards the EU or opposition to Georgia's EU integration.

METHODOLOGY

The concept of social conservatism is often employed to distinguish the socio-cultural aspects of conservatism from economic conservatism, which is typically understood as a preference for a free market and limited government intervention in the economy.⁶ Broadly speaking, social conservatism is a set of ideological beliefs that defends traditional social structures as opposed to social change.⁷ Social conservatism usually focuses on maintaining traditional family structures, gender roles, sexual relations, national patriotism, and existing religious institutions.⁸ However, its specific variations vary across contexts. Therefore, measuring social-conservatism in Georgia requires taking into account the specificities of the Georgian context.

Throughout the following report, the prevalence of social-conservatism in the Georgian public is measured with the help of four propositions:

- 'There are other countries which are better than Georgia.'
- 'A husband is the head of the family, and his wife should be obedient to him.'
- 'The rights of LGBT people are already protected in Georgia, and nothing else needs to be done to better secure their rights.'
- 'The Soviet period was better than today because Georgians were properly respected.'

The four items were selected by the CRRC-Georgia team based on testing various questions in previous surveys and also taking advice from other researchers. The items were measured on a 4-point (agree-disagree) scale addressing important elements of social-conservatism: national patriotism, traditional family structure, sexual minorities in society, and sentiments toward the country's Soviet past. The latter component, i.e. conserving the Soviet past, has been publicly suggested by other experts as the central aspect of Georgian conservatism.⁹

Using the four items, we created a 0-1 index of social conservatism, with 0 indicating no social conservatism and 1 indicating high social conservatism. We checked the reliability of the index using Cronbach's Alpha.¹⁰ The value was 0.6, suggesting less than ideal internal consistency between the items, however, the four items are preserved for the following reasons: First, too few items often lead to low internal consistency, i.e., a lower Cronbach's Alpha. Therefore, less than-ideal internal consistency does not necessarily imply we have utilized inaccurate indicators for the index; and second, we have theoretical arguments to justify our selection of the above four items.

⁶ Jim A. C. Everett, "The 12 Item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (SECS)," *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 12 (December 11, 2013)

⁷ Karen Stenner, "Three Kinds of 'Conservatism,'" *Psychological Inquiry* 20, no. 2-3 (August 25, 2009): 142-59

⁸ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Regnery Pub., 1986).

⁹ Ghia Nodia, "რას ნიშნავს საქართველოში კონსერვატიზმი? (თუ რამეს ნიშნავს)," April 19, 2023

¹⁰ L. M. Collins, "Research Design and Methods," in *Encyclopedia of Gerontology (Second Edition)*, ed. James E. Birren (New York: Elsevier, 2007), 433-42

We believe national patriotism, views about traditional family structure, attitudes towards the LGBT community, and opinions of Georgia's Soviet past play a central role in defining social-conservatism in the country.

Considering the above methodological decisions, the research has certain limitations: a low number of overall index items and the omission of its religious component. We reviewed the convergent validity between the 4-item index and frequency of religious attendance but concluded not to add it to the index as the four items were attitudinal while the variable of frequency of religious attendance is behavioral. Future studies might consider measuring social conservatism differently. It would be particularly useful to include religious subdimensions into the measurement.

Data Collection

To examine social-conservatism, CRRC-Georgia conducted a survey. Overall, 1,278 Interviews were conducted with adult (18+) Georgians in October 2023. The questionnaire was administered in the Georgian language only. The survey was conducted using random sampling (random-digit-dialing) and therefore, findings can be generalized for the Georgian-speaking and Georgian adult population.

Survey results were weighted. Base weights were adjusted using 2014 National Census data for controlling respondents' gender, age, education, and residence. Population counts by groups (settlement type, gender, age, education,) were calibrated using an iterative proportional fitting (raking) algorithm.

More information about the sample composition can be found in Appendix 1.

Data analysis

We analyzed data using multivariate regression models. Unless otherwise specified, the models throughout the report include the following variables:

- Age
- Sex (men, women)
- Formal education level (secondary or lower, secondary technical, higher than secondary)
- Settlement type (Tbilisi, other urban areas, rural areas)
- Employment (working, not working)
- Frequency of religious attendance (at least once a week, at least once a month, only for special holidays, less often, never)
- Party identification (the ruling party, opposition parties, no party¹¹, refuse to answer)

The data and replication code used in this report are available upon request.

¹¹ No party contains observations when respondents explicitly said there is no party close to their views and observations when respondents did not know whether there is any party close to their views.

FINDINGS

Who is socially-conservative in Georgia?

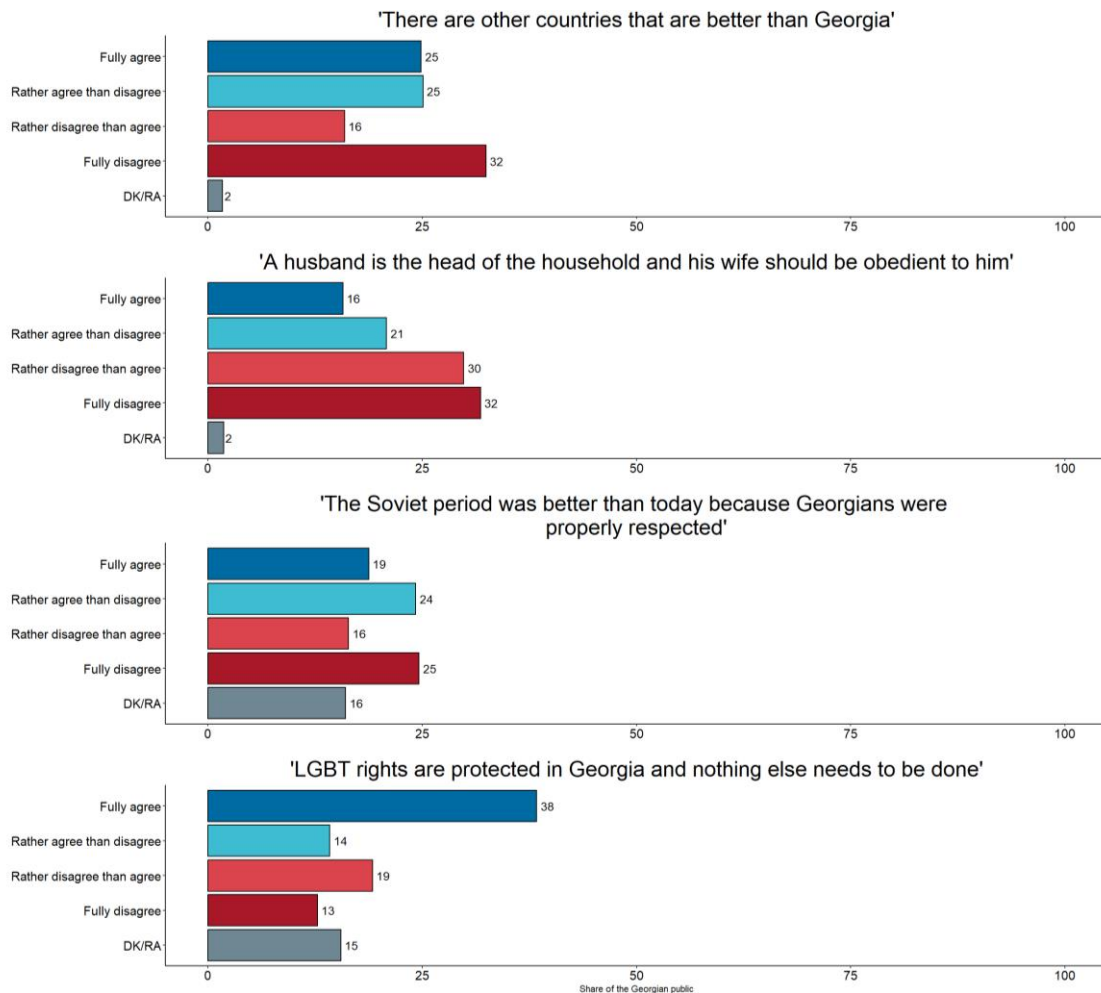
Figure 1 displays public agreement with the four items. Half of Georgians believe there are better countries than Georgia, while the other half disagrees.

37% of Georgians agree with the statement, 'A husband is the head of a household, and a wife should be obedient to him.' However, up to two-thirds of Georgians (62%) disagree with the statement.

As for sentiments towards the country's Soviet past, 43% of the public thinks the Soviet period was better because Georgians were properly respected. While a similar share of the public (i.e., 46%) disagrees with the same statement. 16% of Georgians do not answer decisively to the question.

In response to the last item, 'the rights of LGBT people are protected in Georgia and nothing else needs to be done', slightly more than half of Georgians agree with the statement (52%), while a third of the public disagrees (32%). 15% of Georgians do not know or refuse to answer the question.

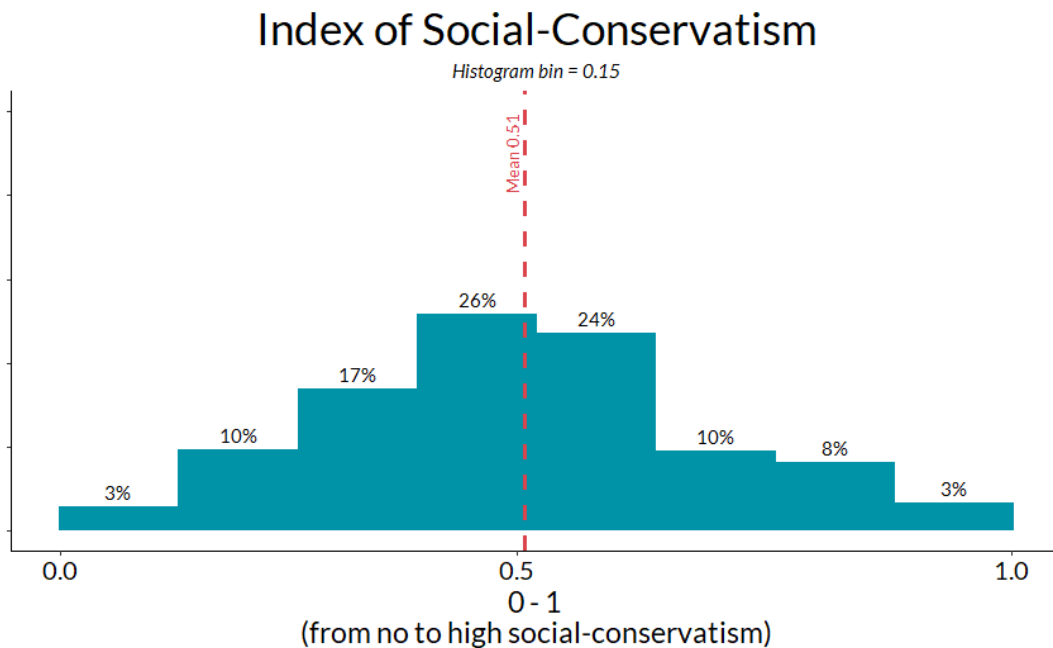
Figure 1. Four items of social-conservatism



To create an index, we reverse-coded the first item (“There are other countries that are better than Georgia”) and calculated the mean values of the four items for each respondent. This resulted in a mean value for each respondent ranging from 1 (the least socially conservative) to 4 (highly socially conservative). To make interpretation easier, we rescaled the values to a 0-1 scale, where higher scores indicate higher social conservatism for each respondent.

The distribution of Georgians on the social conservatism scale is displayed in Figure 2. According to the index, the distribution follows a normal distribution curve, with a mean value of 0.51, and approximately two-thirds of respondents are concentrated around the mean.

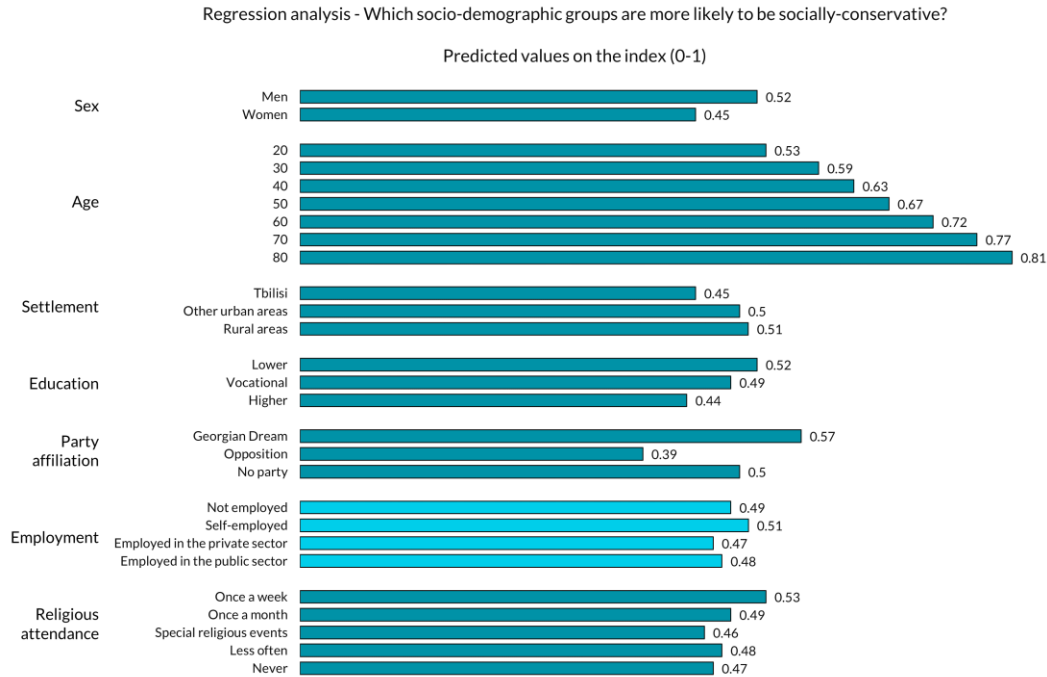
Figure 2. Social-conservatism index



Linear regression analysis was conducted to better understand which socio-demographic groups tend to be more socially conservative. Data suggests that men, older people, people living outside of Tbilisi, people with a lower level of formal education, supporters of the ruling party, and people who attend religious services frequently are more likely to be socially conservative (Figure 3).

More specifically, all else being equal, men score 7 points higher on the scale than women. People who are 80 years old have a predicted score on the index that is 28 points higher than those aged 20. Georgians residing in villages score 6 points higher on the index than Tbilisi residents. Individuals with a secondary or lower level of formal education score 8 points higher on the index than those with a higher level of education. Georgian Dream supporters are, on average, 18 points more conservative than opposition supporters. Finally, people who attend religious services once a week have a predicted score on the index that is 6 points higher than those who never attend religious services.

Figure 3. Which socio-demographic groups are more likely to be socially-conservative?



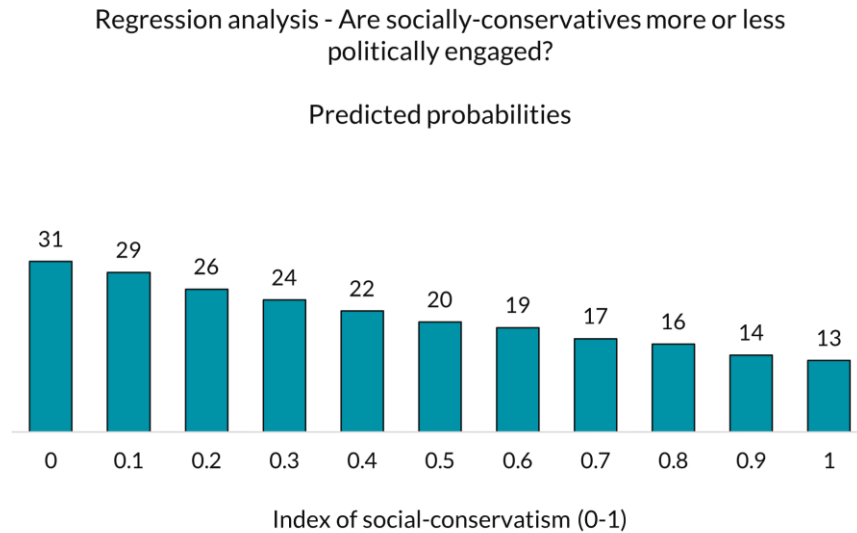
Political engagement of social-conservatives

In the following section, two types of political engagement are examined. First, traditional political engagement was considered as participating in a demonstration, signing a petition, or contacting a government representative within the last 12 months. We constructed a dichotomous variable with a value of 0 if a respondent has not participated in any of the three activities throughout the last 12 months, and a value of 1 if the respondent has taken part in at least one of the activities during the last year. Second, we operationalized online political engagement as a self-reported frequency of posting or writing about politics on social media.

Statistical analysis suggests that, all else being equal, people who tend to be more socially conservative are less likely to be politically engaged in a traditional sense (Figure 4). More specifically, people with a value of 0 on the social-conservatism index are 18 percentage points more likely to have participated in a demonstration, signed a petition, or contacted a government representative within the last 12 months than people whose score on the social-conservatism index is 1.

As for online political engagement, highly socially-conservative Georgians do not differ from people who are not socially-conservative at all.

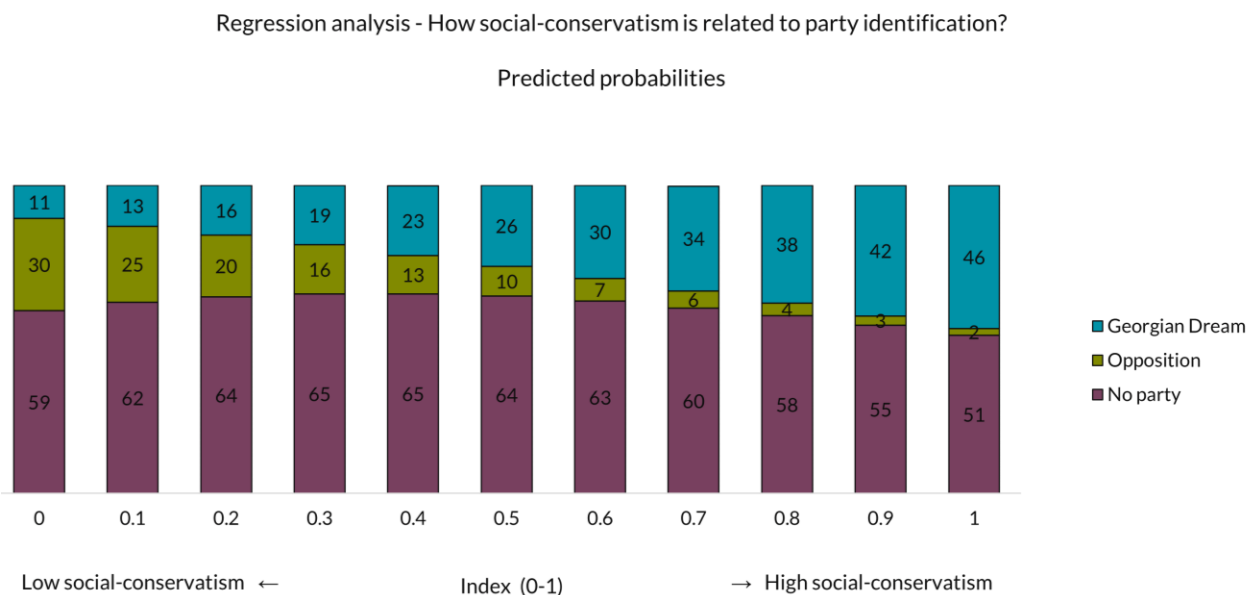
Figure 4. Social-conservatism and traditional political engagement



Another indicator of political engagement might be party identification. Analysis suggests that, after accounting for socio-demographic factors, socially conservative people are just as likely to be non-affiliated with any party as those who are not socially conservative (Figure 5).

However, social conservatism is linked to whether someone feels close to the ruling party or any of the opposition parties. The data indicates that the more socially conservative Georgians are, the more likely they are to support the ruling party and the less likely they are to feel close to any opposition parties.

Figure 5. Social-conservatism and party affiliation

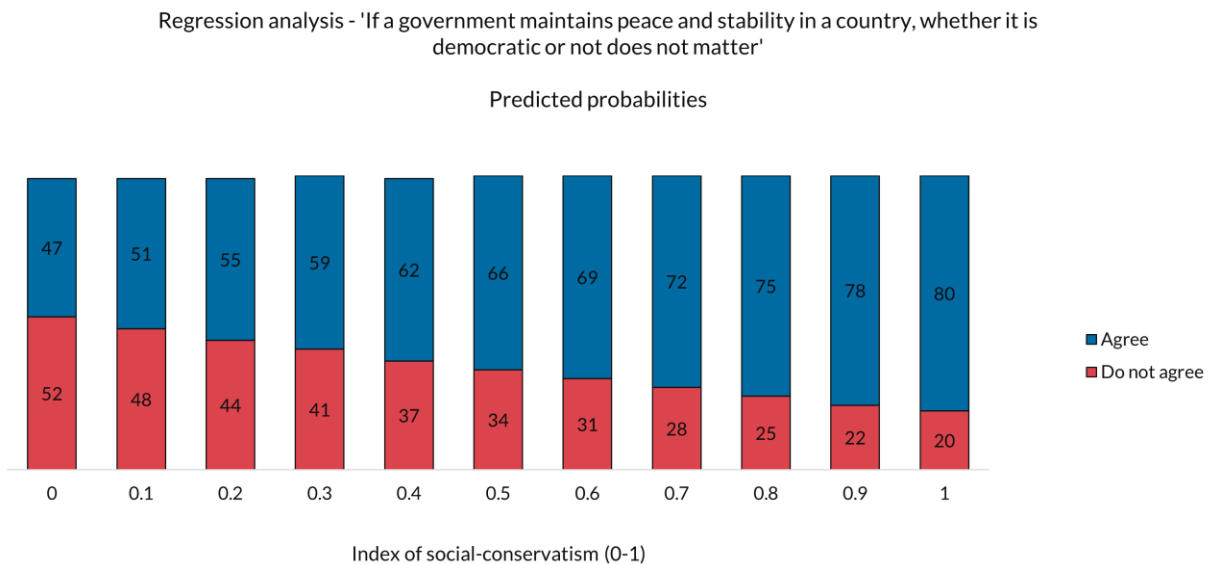


Democracy vs. peace and stability

Previous research has suggested that Georgians are overwhelmingly in favor of democratic governance.¹² However, when asked more nuanced questions, some people might prefer security, order, or stability over democratic government.¹³ Considering the Georgian context, we asked respondents the following question: ‘Do you agree or disagree with the proposition that if a government maintains peace and stability in a country, whether it is democratic or not does not matter.’ Analysis suggests the more socially conservative someone is, the more likely it is that they agree with the statement placing preference on stability and peace over a democratic government.

Figure 6 demonstrates that, all else being equal, people with a value of 1 (highly socially conservative) on the social-conservatism index are 33 percentage points more likely to agree with the statement than people whose score on the social-conservatism index is 0 (not socially conservative).

Figure 6. Social-conservatism and democracy vs. stability dilemma



¹² Rati Shubladze and Tamar Khoshtaria, “The Gap Between Support for Democracy and Liberal Values in Georgi,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 118 (2020): 8–12

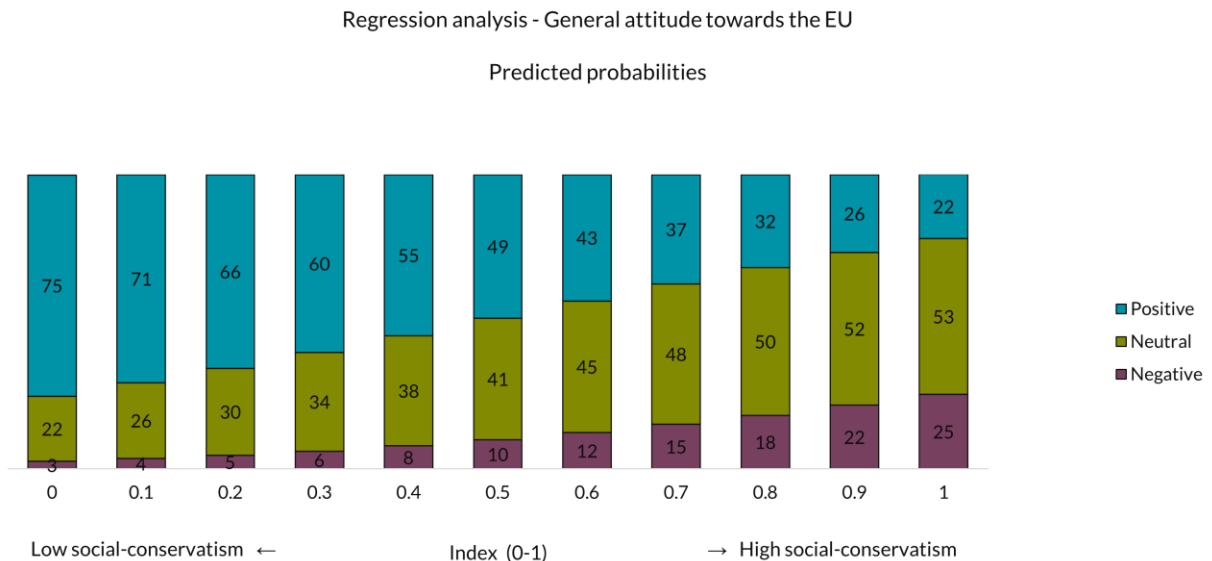
¹³ Gonzalo Herranz de Rafael and Juan S. Fernández-Prados, “The Security Versus Freedom Dilemma. An Empirical Study of the Spanish Case,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 7 (February 8, 2022)

Social-conservatism and foreign policy

Social conservatism seems to be related to attitudes towards the EU. After controlling for socio-demographic factors, as social conservatism increases, skeptical attitudes towards the EU increase as well.

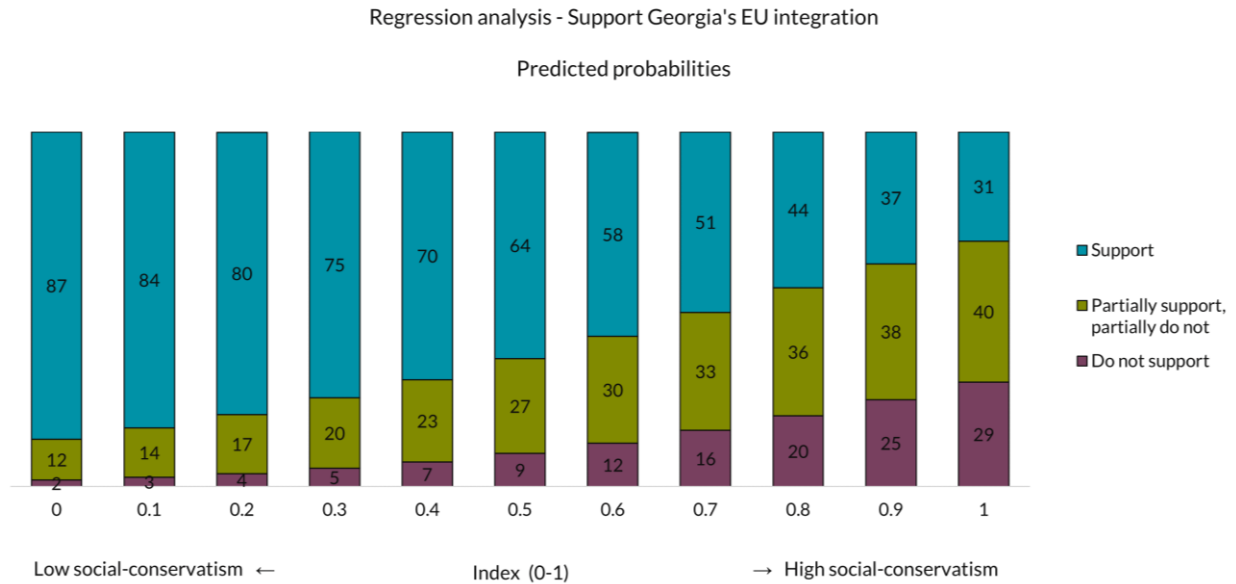
The survey asked about general attitudes towards the EU. The more socially conservative someone is, the more likely they are to have a neutral or negative general attitude towards the EU and the less likely they are to have a positive attitude (Figure 7). However, it must be noted that even for the most socially conservative people, the predicted probability of feeling negatively towards the EU does not exceed a quarter of the public, suggesting an overwhelmingly non-negative attitude towards the EU even among those most socially conservative.

Figure 7. Social-conservatism and general attitudes towards the EU



The picture is similar when it comes to support for Georgia's EU integration. People who score higher on the social-conservatism index are less likely to support Georgia's EU integration and more likely to say they do not support or only partially support it (Figure 8).

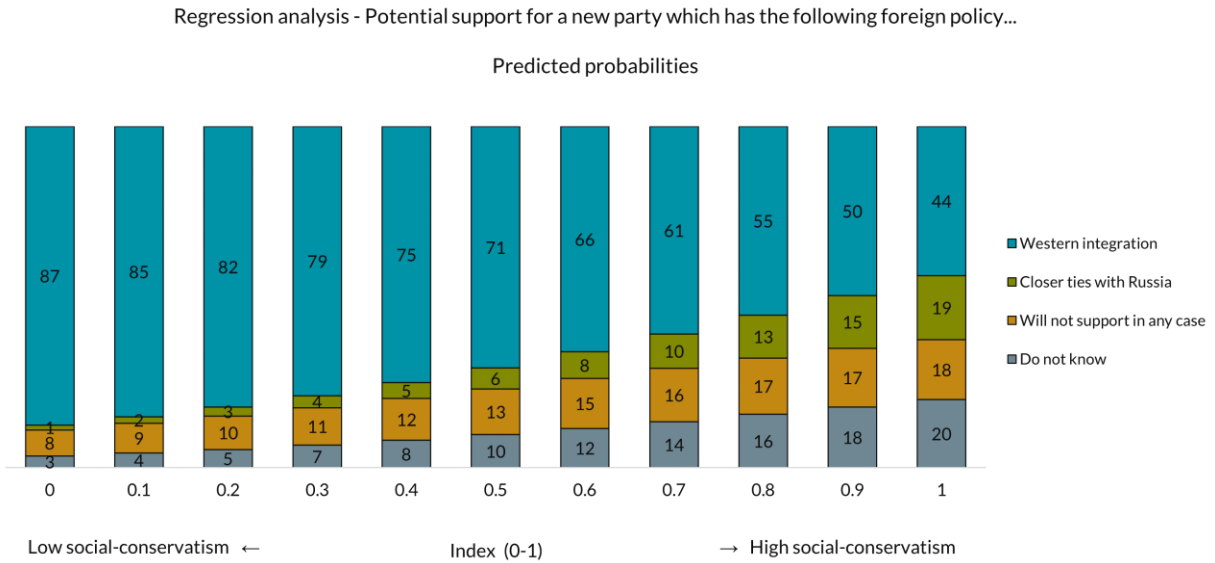
Figure 8. Social-conservatism and support towards Georgia's EU integration



Finally, in order to better examine the foreign policy preferences of respondents, the survey asked them to imagine that a new political party was being created. Respondents were then asked under which circumstances they would support this party, with several alternative foreign policy positions of the hypothetical new party presented.

Analysis suggests that, after controlling for other socio-demographic factors, socially conservative people are more likely to support a new party promising closer ties with Russia, and they are less likely to support a party that prioritizes Georgia's integration into Western structures (Figure 9). Even though social conservatism appears to be positively associated with pro-Russian views, it must be emphasized that the share of people supporting a hypothetical pro-Russian new party does not exceed 20%, even among the most socially conservative individuals. Moreover, it must be noted that the more socially conservative people are, the more likely they are to be unsure about supporting a new party.

Figure 9. Social-conservatism and foreign policy orientation

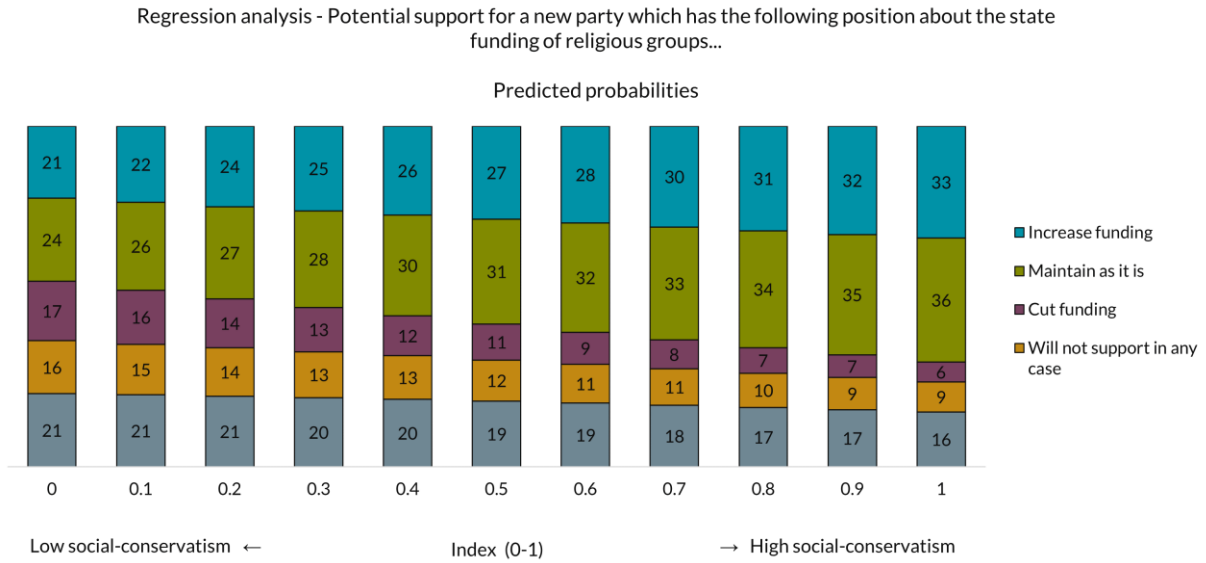


Social-conservatism and domestic policy preferences

Similar to examining foreign policy preferences, the survey asked respondents to imagine a new political party with several alternative policy positions presented. Ultimately, respondents were asked under which circumstances they would support this party.

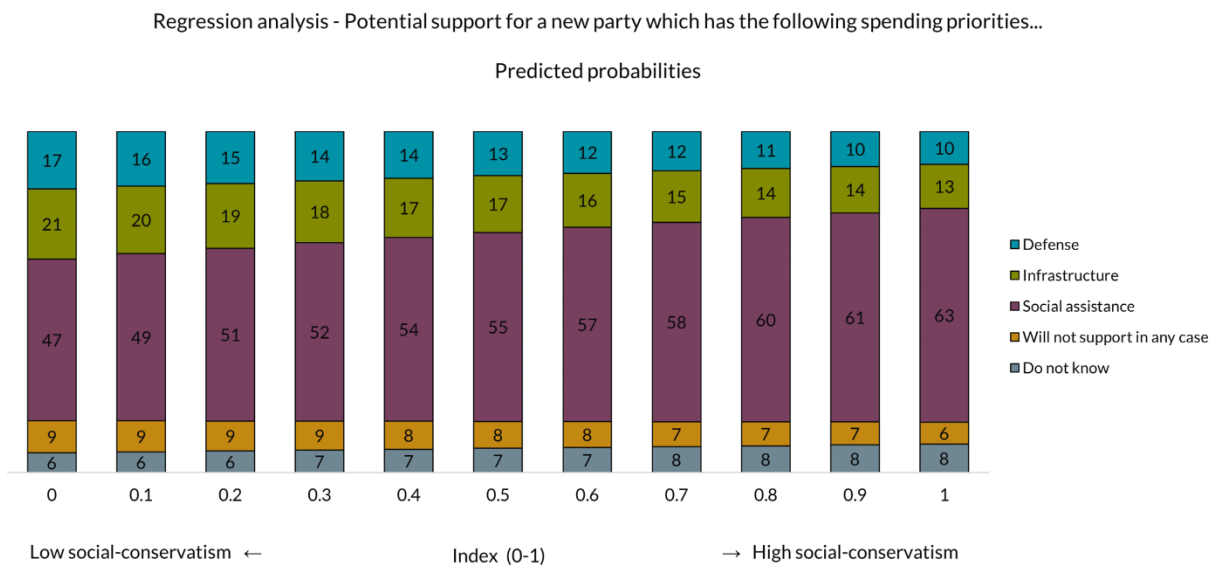
The first question asked respondents about funding for religious groups. The analysis suggests that all else being equal, the more conservative someone is, the more likely they are to support a new party that intends to maintain or increase state funding for religious groups, and the less likely they are to support cutting its funding (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Social-conservatism and policy of funding religious groups



Another question asked about the new party's spending priorities if elected to office. Figure 11 suggests people who score higher on the social-conservative index are as likely to favor defense and infrastructural spending as people who score lower. However, the more socially conservative people are, the more likely they are to prioritize a new party that promises to increase social assistance.

Figure 11. Social-conservatism and spending priorities



CONCLUSION

Georgians are not overwhelmingly socially conservative. For each of the four items used in this study, the public is roughly divided into two fairly equal groups: one group holds socially conservative positions, while the other demonstrates less socially conservative perspectives.

Men, older people, people living in villages or smaller urban areas, those with lower levels of education, supporters of the ruling party, and unaffiliated voters tend to be more socially conservative than women, younger people, Tbilisi residents, individuals with a bachelor's degree or a higher level of formal education, and supporters of opposition parties.

Highly socially conservative people tend to be less politically engaged. They are less likely to have attended a rally, signed a petition, or contacted a government official within the past year. However, those who are strongly socially conservative are just as politically active on social media as those who are not socially conservative.

The more socially conservative someone is, the more likely they are to believe that as long as the government maintains peace and stability, it makes no difference whether it is democratic or not.

Moreover, social conservatism is positively correlated with Eurosceptic attitudes, as measured by both general attitudes toward the EU and support for Georgia's EU integration.

Particularly socially conservative individuals tend to favor a party promising greater social assistance. However, social conservatism is not related to prioritizing defense or infrastructure spending. The more socially conservative someone is, the more likely they are to support a new party advocating for increased state funding for religious groups.

The report offers several noteworthy implications for understanding the modern political dynamics of Georgia. Highly socially conservative people are less engaged politically and tend to be disassociated from opposition parties. This, on the one hand, points to a gap in the campaigning strategies of opposition parties and, on the other hand, indicates that there might be fertile ground in the electorate for an increasingly conservative agenda of the ruling party. Moreover, a strong association between social-conservatism and Eurosceptic attitudes suggests that pro-EU actors should aim to incorporate conservative themes into their campaigns in order to appeal to the concerns of socially conservative segments of the electorate.

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APPENICES

Appendix 1

Table 1. Sample composition

Variable	Value	n	Proportion in the sample	Proportion after weights
Sex	Men	573	0.45	0.46
	Women	705	0.55	0.54
Age	18-34	291	0.23	0.31
	35-54	482	0.38	0.35
	55+	505	0.39	0.34
Settlement	Tbilisi	406	0.32	0.30
	Other urban areas	448	0.35	0.27
	Rural areas	424	0.33	0.43
Formal education	Lower	407	0.32	0.51
	Vocational	272	0.21	0.19
	Higher	599	0.47	0.30