

DO ATTRIBUTES OF NEW POLITICAL PARTIES MATTER IN GEORGIA?

The results of a conjoint survey experiment

2024

DO ATTRIBUTES OF NEW POLITICAL PARTIES MATTER IN GEORGIA? THE RESULTS OF A CONJOINT SURVEY EXPERIMENT

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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

Georgia's electoral landscape has been polarized in the last decade, with the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement garnering close to three quarters of votes in national elections. At the same time, opinion polls show that a large share of the country's electorate is non-partisan: they do not identify with any political party, and have a nihilistic attitude towards politics in general. Political pundits and commentators have argued that the sheer amount of politically undecided voters is an opportunity for new political parties. That said, no such party has been particularly successful in any election within the last decade.

With the 2024 Parliamentary elections looming, CRRG Georgia examined how the Georgian public reacts to a combinations of policy positions and characteristics proposed by a hypothetical newly established political party. Ultimately, this study shows that such a party's policy positions, thematic priorities, and party leaders do matter for voters in Georgia, and their preferences shift as party characteristics are changing:

- Voters penalize a new political party if it pledges to increase the funding of religious groups. On the contrary, a party that proposes cuts in church funding might see a marginal yet statistically significant increase in the probability of being voted for.
- Voters tend to favor parties that do not vocally advocate for the advancement of LGBT rights.
- Voters prioritize the increase of education and social expenditures over spending more money on defense or infrastructural projects;
- While “new faces” are favored, a new party formed by only newcomers would be less popular compared to a political party that has new faces and already known public figures, whether they are widely known politicians or non-politician public figures;
- Voters are indifferent towards whether or not a new party prosecutes a previous political administration after being voted into office;
- Voters prefer general slogans that promise fairness and prosperity, over proposals that prioritize equity.

Analysis is based on an online conjoint nonprobability survey experiment in which 2,222 Georgian voters participated. The online opt-in survey was conducted in November and December 2023. This research was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) grant No. 2022-0621.

INTRODUCTION

Georgia's electoral politics are polarized, between the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party and the United National Movement (UNM). In 2012, 95% percent of votes went to these two parties in total, while as recently as in 2021 municipal elections, GD and UNM outflanked other political parties, receiving 77% of total votes in proportional voting (Election Administration of Georgia 2021).

That said, in everyday politics, a large segment of the electorate is non-partisan. A CRRC-NDI poll conducted in October 2023 suggests that almost half of the adult population (47%) claim there is no party in Georgia close to their views (NDI/CRRC 2023b). Similarly, another CRRC-NDI survey from 2023 demonstrates that less than a third of the electorate knows exactly which party they would vote for in parliamentary elections (NDI/CRRC 2023a).

More than two-thirds of Georgians (72%) say they are not satisfied with the existing political parties and want to see new ones in future elections (IRI 2023). Throughout the last decade, a number of new parties have attempted to address this electoral demand but none of them have been particularly successful (Kalandadze et al. 2024). Considering the upcoming parliamentary elections in October 2024, there is more to expect in the coming months.

With many Georgians wanting to see new parties, and with plausibly existing room for new faces in politics, this research asks: What characteristics and policy positions affect the favorability of a new political party in Georgia?

To address this puzzle, CRRC Georgia's team first put together a list of attributes of a hypothetical new political party that are potentially important for voters. The attributes consisted of characteristics (such as party leaders and slogans) as well as policy positions (such as position on budget priorities, LGBT rights, etc.). Next, we tested these in two focus group discussions with Georgian voters and narrowed down the list of attributes. To investigate the importance of these characteristics, we conducted an online conjoint survey experiment. A multi-level modeling of conjoint experiment results helped to examine what attributes of a hypothetical political party shift favorability among the Georgian voters.

The next section of this report discusses our methodological approach. The subsequent chapter presents the findings of our data analysis. The report concludes with a summary of findings, followed by references and appendices.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

The CRRC-Georgia team designed and conducted two focus group discussions and an online conjoint experiment to collect data. We employed focus groups to pilot test questions and gather preliminary insights from participants. In addition, focus group discussions provided context and allowed us to ask follow-up questions to validate and refine our research instrument. Focus groups were conducted in September 2023. 13 participants took part in the discussions.

As the next step, we designed a conjoint experiment to collect data about voter priorities and preferences. When many factors affect an individual's behavior or decision, a conjoint analysis is a helpful research tool to observe and assess the impact of each factor, all else being equal. Data from focus groups were also used to inform the design of our conjoint experiment.

Conjoint analysis is a causal technique that is used in market research to establish what combination of qualities a product should have to yield the most profit (Eggers et al. 2018). In political science, it is used to examine which attributes of a policy, candidate, or political party would be most popular among voters (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020). In a conjoint analysis, respondents have to pick between two or more combinations of attributes or conjoint profiles. These could be, for instance, two or more versions of a product that have different shapes, colors and prices, or hypothetical political parties that offer different policy standings. These combinations are randomly assigned, meaning that when a respondent sees a conjoint profile, like a party description, it is a random sample from all the possible characteristics that were set by the researcher ahead of time.

In our experiment, in addition to socio-demographic and attitudinal questions, each respondent faced ten choice sets. Each choice set contained two profiles of hypothetical new parties and respondents were asked to choose between them. Each party profile had six attributes and each attribute had a different number of levels (Table 1). Attribute levels in each conjoint profile were randomly generated. We pre-registered this experiment on the Open Science Foundation's platform.¹

Voters arguably consider numerous factors when deciding to vote for a new party. However, we could not cover all possible factors due to existing technical and space constraints of the joint

¹ Date: November 14, 2023. Preregistration DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/Z759W>

design. Instead, based on prior experience and validated by focus group discussions, we selected divisive characteristics among the existing parties. We also included policies on which existing parties avoid expressing clear positions (such as financing religious groups or LGBT rights). We excluded policies where existing major parties have clear and similar positions to one another (such as foreign policy orientation). The attributes and their levels are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Attributes and levels of conjoint experiment

Attributes	Levels
Party leaders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Only new faces (2) Mainly new faces, but also with known politicians for the public (3) Mainly new faces, but with leaders known to the public, not necessarily politicians
Budget priorities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Increases social support (e.g., pensions, healthcare funding, public safety support) (2) Increases funding for infrastructure projects (e.g., roads, schools, public facilities) (3) Increases defense funding (e.g., buying new equipment, training, army funding) (4) Increases funding for education
Position regarding the Church	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Reduces funding for the church (2) Continues funding for the church as it is now (3) Increases funding for the church (4) No clear position on this issue
Position regarding LGBT issues	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Does not change anything because it believes that LGBT rights are already protected in Georgia (2) Supports improving the protection of LGBT rights (3) No clear position on the issue
Position regarding the previous government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Declares that it will prosecute members of the previous government (2) Declares political amnesty, as prosecuting members of the previous government is detrimental to the country
Slogan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) "Georgia should be a country of five million, not 50 millionaires" (2) "Georgia should be prosperous and a fair country."

The conjoint experiment was built in an online survey where participants were recruited through Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram). The questionnaire language was Georgian, and in total, 2,222 individuals participated in the survey between November 15 and December 10, 2023.

Georgia's internet users tend to be younger, more urban, and concentrated in Tbilisi (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2023), thus we decided to recruit participants by major population groups to compensate for potential coverage error. This was done by recruiting respondents in four audiences to reflect major socio-demographic groups and placing advertisements proportional to their share in Georgia's adult population. Specifically, the share of 18-40 (age) Tbilisi residents in Georgia's adult population is 13.1%. We allocated this percentage of our total advertising budget to that audience and so forth. A detailed list and a description of audience groups are presented in Appendix 2.

Therefore, the sample was a self-selected non-probability sample for each of the target audiences.

Online non-probability sampling may raise questions about the external validity of study findings. Even though the generalizability of surveys and conjoint experiments is a subject of scientific debate, there is evidence that causal mechanisms operate similarly in non-probability and probability samples (Coppock 2019). For instance, after conducting a conjoint experiment on convenience and representative samples, researchers found that the correlation of effect estimates coming from these two different samples was very high (0.95) (Kirkland and Coppock 2018).

Data analysis strategy

The conjoint data has a natural hierarchical structure. Respondents were comparing two profiles and picking one, overall, making ten choices. Each pair represented one case, nested within 2,222 participants. Given the structure, we modeled our data using hierarchical models to account for choice-level (leadership, budget priorities, positions, slogan) and respondent-level covariates (self-reported age, sex, education, party affiliation, etc.). In addition, hierarchical models allow us to incorporate respondent-level heterogeneity into the model estimates (Hox, Moerbeek, and Schoot 2017). In simpler terms, we acknowledge that respondents might not form their preferences in the same way.

In this analysis, we present Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) that are used to examine the extent to which a specific value of a conjoint profile feature increases or reduces respondents' support for the overall profile, averaging over all respondents and features. AMCE is an estimate of causal inference and it suggests how the probability of selection of a conjoint profile (party, candidate, policy, etc.) changes as a result of changing attribute level from one to another. Following Heiss' example and code in R (Heiss 2023), we calculated AMCEs with both frequentist and Bayesian approaches.²

Specific details about the model and data analysis are described in Appendix 3.

² In theory, both approaches should yield similar results. However, they are different in terms of their approach to probability. From the frequentist perspective, parameters are not random variables and are fixed quantities. In contrast, the Bayesian approach treats parameters as random variables. Bayesian statistics treats probability as a belief, incorporating prior information and updating with observed data to produce posterior distributions.

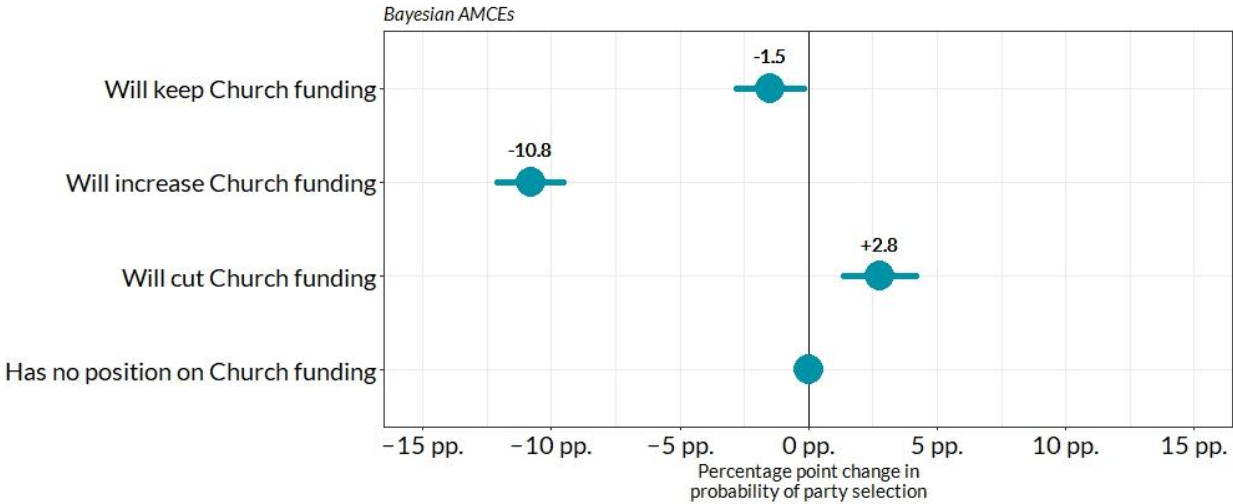
FINDINGS

Position on funding the church

The Georgian Orthodox Church is a powerful non-state institution that exerts substantial influence on Georgian politics (DRI 2021). In addition, the Georgian public is believed to be among the most religious across Eastern Europe (Pew Research Center 2018). Our focus group discussions affirmed that voters see it important for a new party in Georgia to take a stance on the Church, including about its funding. We offered respondents four positions regarding church funding, namely, that a new party promises to keep the current level of funding of the church, promises to further increase funding, cuts church funding, and finally, a new party does not take a position on church funding.

If a political party promises an increase of church funding, such as stance would reduce the probability of a party being selected by almost 11 percentage points (10.8%), compared to taking no stance towards church funding. Maintaining current spending levels would also cause marginal but statistically significant decrease in selection probability (1.5%). Notably, cutting church funding would improve the party’s probability of being picked (2.8 points), compared to taking no position towards church funding.

Figure 1. Party support based on the positions on Church funding

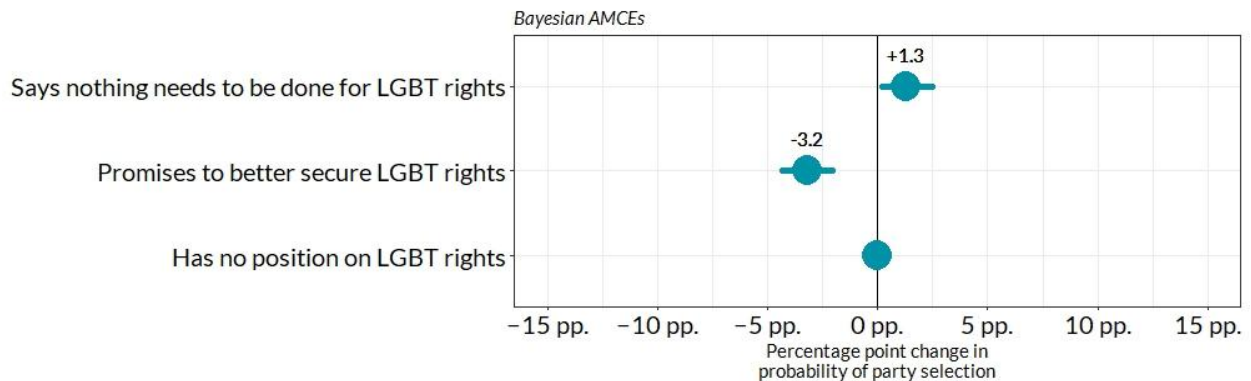


Position on LGBT rights

Despite Georgian political parties lacking clear and unequivocal positions on LGBT rights, LGBT issues are hotly debated in the Georgian society. More than a third of the public in Georgia (35%) thinks the protection of rights of sexual minorities is not important (NDI/CRRC 2022). In our experiment, we presented respondents with three different positions of a new party: the party claims that LGBT rights are already properly safeguarded and nothing more needs to be done; the party pledges to better secure LGBT rights; and the party has no position on LGBT rights.

Overall, the promise of protecting LGBT rights will negatively affect the party's electability. Compared to a hypothetical party that has no position on LGBT rights, the one that promises securing more rights for LGBT folks, would see a 3.2 percentage points decrease in the probability of supporting such a party. If a political party states that nothing needs to be done for the advancement of LGBT rights, that would yield a marginal yet statistically significant (1.3 percentage points) increase in the probability of support for such a party.

Figure 2. Party support based on the stances on LGBT rights.

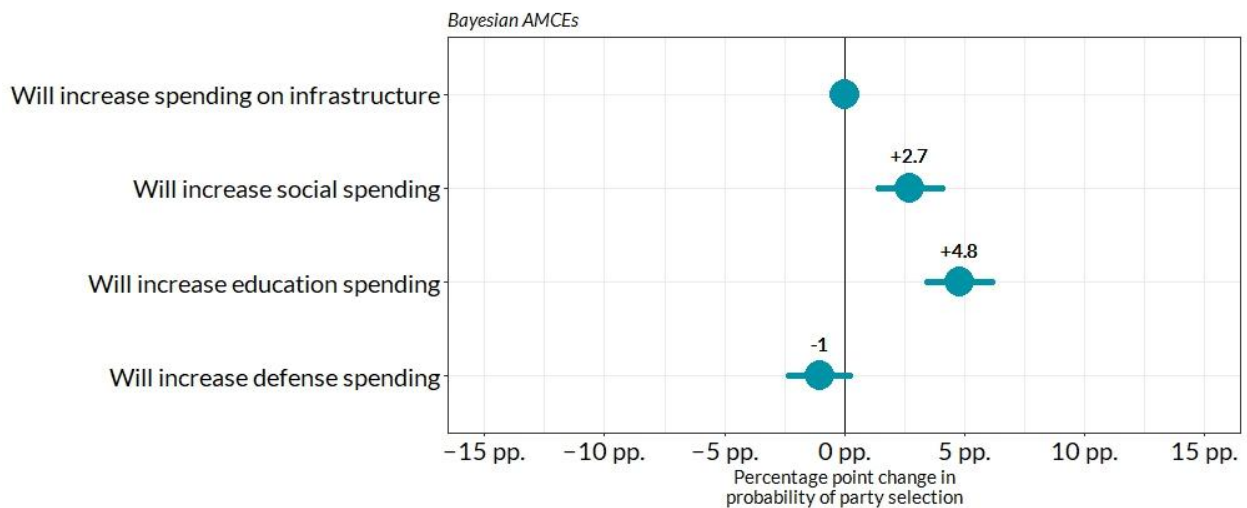


Budgetary priorities

Another general but essential characteristic of any new political party should be budgetary priorities, meaning what expenditures the party should prioritize if voted into government. In our experiment, we included four different budget priorities, such as more social spending, infrastructure expenditures, spending on education, and military expenditures.

Other things being equal, promising more spending on education increases a probability of choosing a new party by almost five percentage points (4.8%), compared to if a party suggests spending more on infrastructure. While prioritizing social spending also increases the probability of picking such a party, the effect is almost half of what is in the case of education (2.7 percentage points).

Figure 3. Party support based on the budgetary priorities



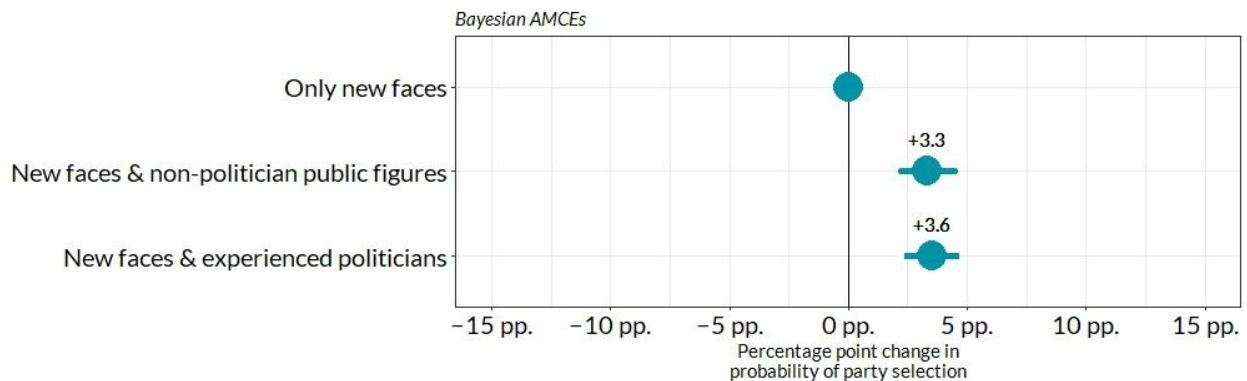
Notably, increased defense spending has no distinguishable effect on the probability of selecting of a party, compared to increased infrastructure spending. Thus, increasing defense spending is as popular, or perhaps, as unpopular, as increasing infrastructural spending.

Party leadership

Focus group participants agreed that a new party should showcase political newcomers and young politicians. However, participants differed when it came to the involvement of widely known figures. Some believed a new party with completely new faces had a better chance of success, while others thought that new politicians would be better off if they partnered with either experienced politicians or public figures.

Results of the conjoint experiment tend to agree with the latter. A newly-established political party, that only features new politicians would be less popular compared to a party that had both new politicians and public figures. If leaders of a new party consisted of newcomers as well as non-political public figures, that would increase the probability of picking such a party by 3.3 percentage points, compared to a party with only newcomers. An addition of experienced politicians does not statistically improve the electability scores compared to one with public figures, as such a party would have 3.6 points more of a probability of being picked over a party whose leaders are newcomers.

Figure 4. Party support based on the composition of the party leadership



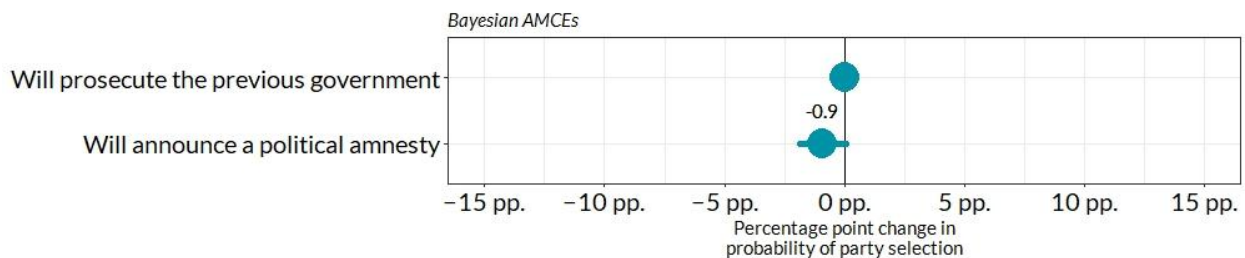
Notably, this is somewhat in line with other studies which have argued that if a new party was associated with experienced politicians, it was more likely to succeed electorally (Wieringa and Meijers 2022).

Position on prosecuting previous government.

Ruling parties in contemporary Georgia have been hostile towards preceding governing parties. Attitudes towards the previous government and, especially, whether or not a new party promises to prosecute the previous ruling party is an important factor. After the rose revolution in 2003, the previous ruling party, the Union of Citizens of Georgia, ceased to exist and several party officials were jailed (Civil Georgia 2008a). Since the Georgian Dream Party came to power in 2012, they too prosecuted a number of former UNM officials, including the president of Georgia, mayor of Tbilisi, and the ministers of defense and internal affairs.

Focus group participants shared two major, somewhat, opposing viewpoints on the issue: some argued that new parties in Georgia should not engage in punishing existing parties, instead attempting to break this cycle, and not prosecuting previous ruling parties and government officials. Others felt that a new party should aim at restoring justice, which would include prosecuting members of previous governments. These findings informed our decision of incorporating two positions in our experiment: one, where the party promises prosecution of the previous government, and the party will declare political amnesty.

Figure 5. Party support based on positions on prosecuting the previous government



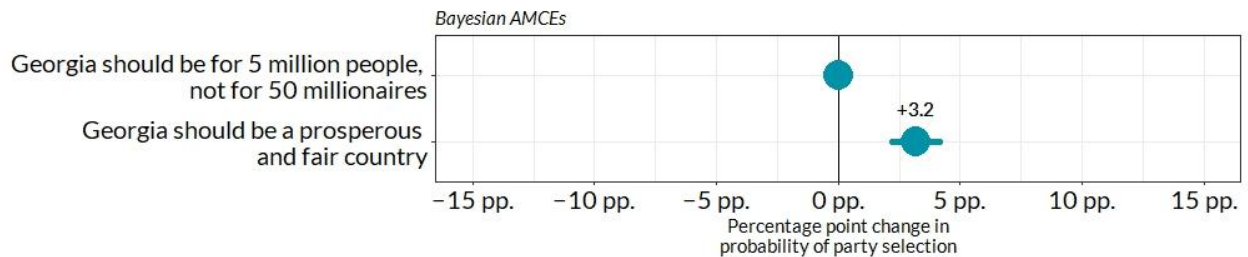
Contrary to trends in Georgian politics, prosecuting previous governments does not matter electorally. Data suggests that even though a promise to announce political amnesty might look somewhat unpopular, differences are not statistically significant.

Slogan

The final attribute of a new party in the conjoint analysis was a slogan. Party slogans should reveal their identity and ideological leanings, while also drawing public attention. Georgian contemporary political history has witnessed a wide variety of political slogans, including "Taking From the Rich, Giving to the Poor," "From Stability to Well-being," "Georgia Without Poverty," and others (Civil Georgia 2008b).

We decided to compare a general slogan emphasizing economic prosperity, such as "Georgia should be a fair and prosperous country," with a slogan that highlighted equity: "Georgia should be for 5 million people, not for 50 millionaires."

Figure 6. Party support based on the slogans

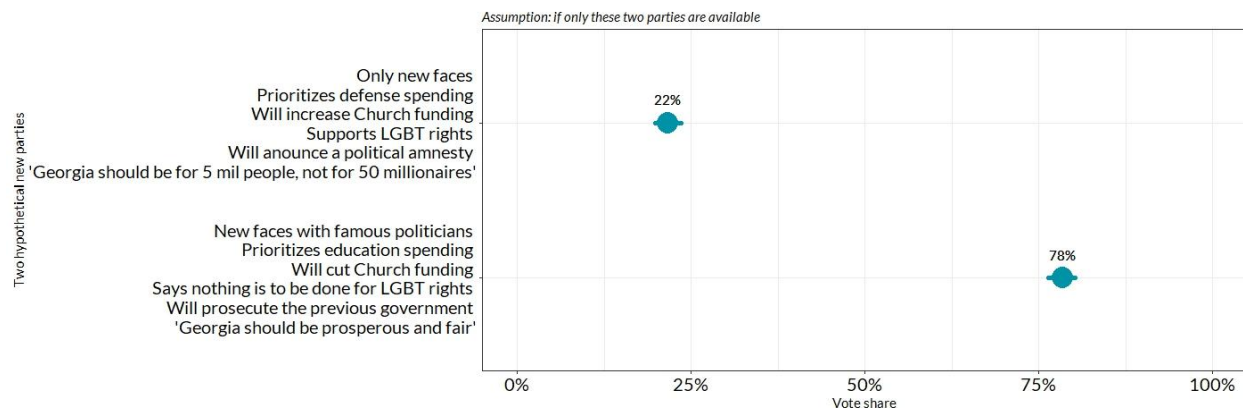


Overall, a slogan that emphasizes equitability, is less popular compared to more general slogan that highlights fairness and economic prosperity. Other things being equal, rallying under the slogan that Georgia should be a prosperous and a fair country would yield a 3.2 percentage point increase in the probability of selecting a slogan that emphasizes equality.

Predicted vote share

Conjoint analysis allows us to “assemble” a hypothetical political party and apply the fitted model to predict its vote share. We assembled two such political parties and predicted their respective vote share in hypothetical horse-race elections. We selected attributes so that Party A had the least favorable characteristics according to the above analysis. A hypothetical party B boasted characteristics that were most favored according to the model.

Figure 7. Predicted vote shares for two hypothetical new parties



The leadership of Party A consists of only new politicians. They prioritize higher defense spending and pledge to increase state funds for the church. The party promises to better secure LGBT rights and to announce a political amnesty once elected to office. Its slogan is "Georgia should be for 5 million people, not for 50 millionaires."

Party B's leaders are both new politicians and experienced politicians. They prioritize more education spending and wants to cut state funding for the church. Moreover, Party B says that LGBT rights are already properly protected in Georgia; nothing else needs to be done. The party also promises to prosecute officials of the previous ruling party. The party has the following slogan: "Georgia should be a prosperous and fair country."

Modeling a horse-race election, that is, a poll where only party A and party B participate, shows that the Party B would get 78% of votes, while Party A would receive the remaining 22%. If different characteristics had no effect on party favorability, we would receive 50% for both parties.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Sometimes it seems that in Georgia's polarized political landscape, the characteristics, priorities, and positions of political parties, including new political initiatives, do not matter to the electorate. The study suggests the contrary, demonstrating that people do care about new party leadership, budget priorities, positions on financing the Georgian Church, and LGBT rights.

Voters would strongly penalize a party that proposes an increase in church funding. They would slightly disapprove of a party that promises advancement of LGBT rights, compared to a party taking no explicit position on the issue. Increased spending, especially on education, and to a lesser extent social security, would position a new party more favorably compared to those that would spend more on defense or infrastructure.

Georgians prefer that a new political party features newcomers, but such a party would have greater chances if its leadership also included publicly known figures, politicians or not.

Retribution against former officials and ruling party members has been a standard move by new governments in Georgia. Our analysis shows that electorally, Georgians do not differentiate between a new party that would prosecute the previous government and a party that would declare political amnesty.

People tend to favor a party with a general slogan highlighting economic prosperity and fairness, compared to one that proposes equitability.

However, the findings do not suggest that new parties in Georgia should follow these guidelines or conclusions. These results are a reflection of respondents' preferences and viewpoints. However, parties, in addition to representation and interest aggregation, have other functions, such as political socialization of the electorate and actualization of certain issues.

An important caveat of this study is that it is based on an online self-selected survey, thus lacking the power to be generalized on the whole population of Georgia. That said, there is strong evidence that experimental effects across probability and nonprobability samples are fairly similar, meaning that we could carefully infer on how electorate would behave when confronted the choices described in this research.

Apparently, a new party that presents a blend of both new and publicly known figures, advocating for increased education spending, reduced state funding for religious institutions, and a belief that existing protections for LGBT rights are sufficient, would resonate more with the electorate, all else being equal, than a new party composed solely of new politicians, prioritizing increased defense spending, increased state funds for the church, and better protection of LGBT rights.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Targeted socio-demographic groups

Audience	Size of this demographic group in Georgia's population	% within the adult population	% of allocated budget	Allocated budget (USD) for advertisement
Audience 1: 18-40 y/o; Tbilisi residents	371,827	13.1	13.1	131
Audience 2: 41+ y/o; Tbilisi residents	570,520	20.1	20.1	201
Audience 3: 18-40 y/o; people living outside of Tbilisi,	747,018	26.3	26.3	263
Audience 4: 41+ y/o; people living outside of Tbilisi	1,146,200	40.4	40.4	404

Appendix 2 – summary of sample

Variable	Category	Number of respondents
Sex	Men	970
	Women	1,220
Age	18-34	216
	35-54	679
	55+	1,327
Education	Secondary or lower	189
	Vocational	342
	BA or higher	1,691

Appendix 3 – Model and data analysis strategy

The data had a respondent as a unit of observation. We transformed the data because the unit of analysis in our conjoint design was a party profile. Ultimately, the dataset contained 20 times as many observations as the number of respondents who took part in the survey because each respondent faced 10 choice sets, and each choice set was comprised of two party profiles.

Formal Bayesian model with {brms} (Bürkner 2018)

Multinomial probability of selection of choice_i in respondent_j

Choice_{ij} ~ Categorical({μ_{1,ij}, μ_{2,ij}})

Model for probability of each option

$$\{\mu_{1,ij}, \mu_{2,ij}\} = (\beta_0 + b_{0j}) + \beta_1 \text{Leaders}[2]_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{Leaders}[3]_{ij} + \beta_3 \text{Budget}[2]_{ij} + \beta_4 \text{Budget}[3]_{ij} + \beta_5 \text{Budget}[4]_{ij} + \beta_6 \text{Church}[2]_{ij} + \beta_7 \text{Church}[3]_{ij} + \beta_8 \text{Church}[4]_{ij} + \beta_9 \text{LGBT}[2]_{ij} + \beta_{10} \text{LGBT}[3]_{ij} + \beta_{11} \text{Amnesty}[2]_{ij} + \beta_{12} \text{Slogan}[2]_{ij}$$

$$b_{0j} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_0) \quad \text{Respondent-specific offsets from global probability}$$

Priors

$$\beta_0 \dots_{12} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 2) \quad \text{Prior for choice-level coefficients}$$

$$\sigma_0 \sim \text{Exponential}(1) \quad \text{Prior for between-respondent variability}$$

Where μ stands for the probability of selecting each of the options, i refers to individual party choices and j refers to respondents.

As for diagnostics, a Rhat measure was used (from the same brms package) to assess the convergence of Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) chains in the Bayesian model. Values did not differ from 1, suggesting multiple chains explored parameters' space similarly and they provided consistent estimates.

Furthermore, the findings are based on a full sample, and subgroups of the public might behave differently. We could not analyze subgroup preferences due to the demanding technical and computational requirements of a full hierarchical model with individual-specific differences across each of the party characteristics. However, there are some other caveats as well when it comes to subgroup preferences in the conjoint analysis; for instance, subgroup differences might be misleading because regression interactions are sensitive to the reference category used in the analysis.³

³ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/political-analysis/article/abs/measuring-subgroup-preferences-in-conjoint-experiments/4F2C21AC02753F1FFF2F5EA0F943C1B2>