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Iakobidze, Tamar

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## Undecided Voters in 2016: Leaning Towards a Multi-Party System?

Tamar Iakobidze, Tbilisi

### Abstract

The Georgian political party system has been marked by radical polarization between the Georgian Dream (GD) and the United National Movement (UNM) since 2012. However, the Parliamentary Elections in 2016 have shown growing indecision among voters, which indicates dissatisfaction with both GD and UNM as well as the need for a third alternative. Examining the profile of undecided voters and their behavior during the 2016 October elections gives insight into the prospects of a multi-party system in Georgia. However, it seems that despite the considerable need expressed by society, a single and reliable third force is not visible to most voters.

### Increasing the Number of Undecided Voters

The 2012 October elections were historic because it was the first time since Georgia reclaimed its independence that political power transitioned via peaceful elections, rather than via revolution, war or demonstrations. One common feature of the October 2012 elections and the subsequent four years of the new administration has been the radical polarization of two political forces: UNM and the Georgian Dream Coalition. One indicator of this strong polarization built on antipathy is that according to the opinion polls of June 2016, 21% of the respondents would never vote for UNM, whereas 19% would never vote for GD. Although this polarization has extended to the recent October 2016 election campaign, an interesting change can be observed compared to previous years. According to the June 2016 opinion polls by NDI/CRRC, the number of voters who cannot identify themselves with any party has been increasing steadily since the previous parliamentary elections in 2012.

In March 2016, 61% of the Georgian population was undecided about how they would vote if parliamentary elections were to be held the next day.<sup>1</sup> Only approximately 34% were decided on their votes.

Although the number of decided voters gradually increased since August 2015, from 28% to 38%, the share of undecided voters has been more stable, at approximately 60% over the same period.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, half of the likely voters were still undecided in June 2016.<sup>3</sup>

By comparison, in August 2012, less than two months before the parliamentary elections, only approximately 25% were uncertain about their choice.<sup>4</sup> The percentage would be even smaller in September, after the infamous “prison videos” revealing the inhumane

treatment of prisoners during UNM’s rule, which largely escalated and polarized the public attitudes right before the 2012 elections.

Interestingly, in spite of the large number of undecided voters before the elections in 2016, those who were willing to vote still outnumbered the abstainers. However, although most of the population was willing to vote, the majority was undecided about their choice. Thus, it was obvious that the results of the October 2016 elections would be highly unpredictable because it would largely depend on the decisions of the undecided voters.<sup>5</sup>

What can a high share of undecided voters before elections say about Georgia’s political development? Can we suggest that there is a growing number of people who feel that they are not represented by any political force? Can this indicate the need for a more diverse multi-party system in Georgia? How can the actual results of the elections be explained, keeping in mind the voter indecision?

### Profile of the Undecided Voters

To better understand the challenges and future prospects of the political party system in Georgia, it is important to study the reasons for indecision among voters. The simplest way to do so is to explore the policy preferences and other attitudes of undecided voters compared to those of decided voters.

A comparison between decided and undecided voters shows that there are few radical differences between these groups that would enable the generalization of a distinct image of an undecided voter.

In general, the undecided voters are predominantly young (18–35), almost equally distributed by gender, and slightly more represented in rural and minority settlements.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the undecided voters are more

1 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_March%202016%20poll\\_Public%20Political\\_ENG\\_vf.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202016%20poll_Public%20Political_ENG_vf.pdf)>, p. 48.

2 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, p. 30.

3 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, p. 34.

4 <<https://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Aug-2012-Survey.pdf>>, p. 50.

5 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, p. 48.

6 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, p. 31–33.

critical in assessing the actions of the government over the past four years, claiming a lack of progress in key social areas. The undecided voters are also more sceptical about the improvement of their own economic conditions over the next year. Furthermore, the undecided voters are slightly more critical of the pro-Western foreign policy aspirations of Georgia. However, the June 2016 opinion poll does not reveal contrasting differences between decided and undecided voters in terms of the important factors that influence their decision to vote for a party. For both decided and undecided voters, the most important factors seem to be the same, namely trust in specific members of political parties, parties' past performance, and electoral platforms and promises. The preferences are slightly different. In the case of decided voters, more attention is paid to their trust of specific members of political parties, whereas undecided voters pay more attention to parties' past performance. Overall, decided voters were more likely to name important factors than undecided voters were.<sup>7</sup>

### *Policy Factors*

In terms of the most important policy issues while voting in parliamentary elections, the decided and undecided voters were very similar. The majority of both decided and undecided voters (41% and 42%, respectively) mostly care about a party's economic policy. The party's position on national security issues is a higher priority for decided voters, whereas healthcare matters more for undecided voters.<sup>8</sup>

There are also few differences in the perceptions of decided and undecided voters on the most important national issues. The majority of both decided and undecided voters agree that creating jobs is the most pressing issue. Slightly more undecided voters than decided ones think that the rising prices and inflation are the most important national issues.<sup>9</sup>

### *General Assessment of the Government*

The undecided voters were quite critical towards the government before the October 2016 elections and were less positive in assessing Georgia's development over the last four years in key areas, such as healthcare, freedom of

speech, education, rights of women, the court system, and minority rights.<sup>10</sup> However, the undecided voters are not necessarily more negative. Upon closer examination, more undecided voters than decided voters think that the conditions in Georgia have been the same since 2012 in the areas of healthcare, freedom of speech, corruption, jobs, and education. Only in a few areas, such as crime, poverty or inflation, were there more undecided voters who think that the situation has been worse. Similarly, although undecided voters were almost twice less likely to confirm that Georgia is developing in the right direction, most of them were not more negative; instead, they agreed that Georgia is not changing at all.<sup>11</sup>

The critical attitude of undecided voters is also evident in other questions. Thus, among undecided voters, more than half (55% vs. 39%) would not agree that, before the October 2016 elections, the government was making changes that mattered to them.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the undecided voters were less optimistic about their own economic conditions over the next year. Whereas 34% of the decided voters believed that their economic situation would improve, only 21% of the undecided voters thought the same. Additionally, 47% of the undecided voters thought that the situation would be the same, in contrast to 40% of the decided voters.<sup>13</sup>

### *Foreign Policy*

For foreign policy, it can be argued that decided voters are slightly more pro-Western and that undecided voters are slightly more pro-Russian and/or more critical towards the stated pro-Western goals. For example, more decided voters than undecided voters approved of the Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU and NATO.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, more decided voters (58%) than undecided voters (49%) agree that Georgia will benefit more from EU and NATO membership.<sup>15</sup> Although the majority of both decided and undecided voters believe that pro-Western policy should be combined with good relations with Russia, more decided voters think that Georgia's foreign policy should be pro-Western (17% vs. 11%).

For pro-Russian feelings, 29% of the decided voters and 30% of the undecided voters believe that Geor-

7 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, pp. 14–17.

8 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, p. 19.

9 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, p. 10.

10 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, pp. 14–15.

11 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, p. 23.

12 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, p. 33.

13 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, p. 41.

14 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, p. 46, p. 53.

15 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, p. 56.

gia would benefit more from abandoning the EU and NATO in favor of better relations with Russia.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, almost an equal share, one-fifth of both decided and undecided voters, believes that Georgia should be more pro-Russian with good relations with the EU and NATO. A small share of voters (both decided and undecided) also believes that Georgia should be pro-Russian.<sup>17</sup>

### The 2016 Parliamentary Election Results

Georgian Dream, the governing party, won the parliamentary elections with 48.68% of the votes, based on proportional voting. UNM was second, with 27.11% of the votes, and a third party, Alliance of Patriots, barely passed the 5% threshold to win parliamentary seats, with 5.01% of the votes. The second round was held in 50 majoritarian constituencies on October 30, and it resulted in GD winning 48 more majoritarian constituencies. There were only two constituencies where non-GD majorities won. One represented Industrialists, and the other was won by an independent candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, who was backed by GD. Therefore, GD has secured not only the most votes in the new parliament but also three quarters of the mandate, thus qualifying for a constitutional majority. In addition to GD, the new parliament will consist of UNM, Alliance of Patriots, a representative from the Industrialists, and one independent candidate.

### Understanding the 2016 Parliamentary Election Results—The Need for the Non-existent “Other”

An interesting way to analyze the election results in light of pre-election polls is to see the proportion of actual support nationwide. Because the turnout was only 51.63% (less than 60.8% in 2012 and less than 67% willing to vote according to a June 2016 opinion poll<sup>18</sup>), the nationwide support of Georgian Dream was 25.13%, that of UNM was 13.99%, and that of Alliance of Patriots was 2.58%. These results are not strikingly different from the June 2016 survey results, except for GD winning more than predicted.

Thus, did the surprisingly high share of undecided voters affect the parliamentary elections in 2016? And if so, how? It can be argued that yes, it has, but not in a very direct way.

According to the June 2016 survey among likely abstainers, the vast majority was undecided (74%).<sup>19</sup> It seems that, as expected, the majority of undecided voters did not participate in the elections at all. Naturally, by this fact alone, the undecided voters have indirectly affected the election results.

Furthermore, it seems that the last months of pre-election campaign led some of the undecided voters to make up their minds. Of the various possible developments from June to October that could have affected the feelings of the electorate, Saakashvili's factor could have played a serious role in triggering further polarization, and not necessarily in his favor. On the one hand, the UNM demonstration was organized three days before the elections, and Saakashvili's promise to win the elections and “cross the sea” to Georgia was taken by some UNM supporters as additional motivation to vote. On the other hand, the undecided voters could have felt discouraged by Saakashvili's continued influence over UNM and by the visible lack of rethinking on the party's side about its past deeds. In this light, some of the undecided voters could have been drawn towards GD to prevent UNM from succeeding, which was a similar impulse as that felt before the 2012 elections.

What is striking in both the pre-election polls and the actual results is that the support for the “other” party is quite high. According to the June 2016 nationwide poll, the share of those who thought that the “other party” (neither Georgian Dream nor UNM) was closer to them was higher (24%) than the declared support for either GD (19%) or UNM (15%). Furthermore, the share of those who could not identify themselves with any party was 40% in June 2016.<sup>20 21</sup> For the actual election results, 24.22% of the voters voted for a party other than Georgian Dream or UNM. Although such support would easily guarantee parliamentary seats for one party or at least a coalition, in reality, there are more than 20 parties that all differ in terms of their ideology and supporters. Therefore, one major insight of a high share of undecided voters is an increased need for a third force in society. However, it seems that the actual “supply” of political parties or their configuration does not meet this need because the majority of voters cannot see a reliable third alternative among more than 20 different parties.

The two most prominent pro-Western parties among “the other” were Free Democrats (4.63%) and the Repub-

16 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, p. 56.

17 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_June\\_2016%20poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VFF%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_June_2016%20poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VFF%20(1).pdf)>, p. 62.

18 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, p. 24.

19 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, p. 34.

20 <[https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English\\_3.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Public-Attitude-Findings-English_3.pdf)>, p. 36.

21 These percentages are representative of entire Georgian population, in contrast to the election results, which represents only 51.63% of the voters who participated in elections.

lican Party (1.55%). Their lack of support could be attributed to their past as part of the Georgian Dream Coalition, and it was difficult to perceive them as independent opposition forces. This is particularly true in the case of the Republican Party, which left the coalition only in late March 2016 but retained their political positions for a few more months, for which they were criticized. Because the electorate of these two parties is very similar, forming a coalition could help both of them.

A newly founded party by Paata Burchuladze, who is an opera singer and a prominent activist of children's charities, has gathered considerable support (3.45%) due to his personal popularity, despite accusations of being an UNM satellite. This party might have gathered support of some of the previously undecided voters, thus limiting chances of other parties.

One development, partially confirmed by election results, is that the pro-Russian parties used simple messages to target a broader audience (such as Alliance of Patriots with 5.01% or Burdjanadze—Democratic Movement with 3.53%), which is more effective in mobilizing nationwide electoral support. In contrast, pro-Western parties find themselves closed in small bubbles of like-minded people, mostly well-educated residents of the capital.

### **Future Prospects**

Thus, what are the future prospects for Georgia with the recent elections in mind? As it seems, GD has secured the constitutional majority, resulting in more uncertainties over political institutions because Georgia has witnessed an excess of power during UNM rule. This alone seems dangerous, considering the lack of institutional barriers for limiting the overuse of power. Further-

more, although it is perhaps unsurprising in the modern world, it is nevertheless striking that, after elections that resulted in a parliament in which only approximately 40% of the population is represented, a case could be made for a lack of legitimacy and a democratic deficit.

The 2016 parliamentary elections of Georgia have once more shown the role of television as the main medium with the voters. As a result, strong financial support and simple messages targeting a wide audience should not be underestimated.

Overall, the picture is more diverse in 2016 than it was in 2012 in terms of both the number of participating entities and the actual results. However, this diversity is not sufficiently reflected in the Parliament because only 3 of the 26 participating parties passed the 5% threshold. This suggests the need for lowering the threshold on the one hand and a better-targeted campaign of the “other” parties on the other hand, especially pro-Western ones.

As the 2016 parliamentary elections in Georgia have shown, there is an apparent need for more diversity and a third alternative that differs from UNM and GD. However, the only force that managed to use this window of opportunity (not counting the two previously mentioned above) was the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots. Therefore, it is possible that pro-Western policies will be challenged to a greater extent than before over the next 4 years.

While GD is rejoicing in its victory, it should ensure that the undecided voters do not become a reason for deeper frustration and crisis. Keeping in mind that the majority of voters are not represented in the parliament, the silent voice of the abstainers should be given more attention in the coming years.

#### *About the Author*

Tamar Iakobidze holds the degree of Master of Science (MSc) in Policy Studies from the University of Edinburgh.