



YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES AND THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ELITES

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INTRODUCTION

Youth¹ participation in electoral and political processes is important for the development of modern democratic societies for two reasons: first, it makes the decision-making process inclusive and second, it means the future generation is voicing its needs and opinions, which helps to ensure effective long-term policy implementation.

Citizens can engage in the political process by participating in elections and, by so doing, they play a meaningful role in the process of government formation. For an informed choice it is crucial to have an understanding of electoral processes, as well as the platforms and ideologies of political parties. This paper focuses on the level of awareness among young voters and the systems that ensure their inclusion in political processes.

An engaged youth benefits the electoral process in several ways. First, young people who are well-informed about the significance of elections, political parties and election procedures are better informed voters. Second, the inclusion and active participation of the youth in elections prompts political parties to reflect their needs and interests in their election programs.

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One way political parties engage with young voters is by creating youth organizations within the parties, which provides a forum for young people to become directly involved in the political process. It also helps develop new generations of political elites and brings new faces to the political arena. This report analyses the current situation and the existing challenges in this regard.

INFORMING YOUTH ABOUT ELECTORAL PROCESSES

It is important that voters are well informed about all electoral processes in order to make thoughtful and rational decisions. This means understanding political parties and the powers of the parliament, in addition to the election process.

Unfortunately, the Georgian electorate – particularly young voters – are not well informed about political processes, according to recent surveys. They are certainly familiar with some political leaders, but are less interested in the functioning of institutions, which could be due to the high level of personalization of Georgian

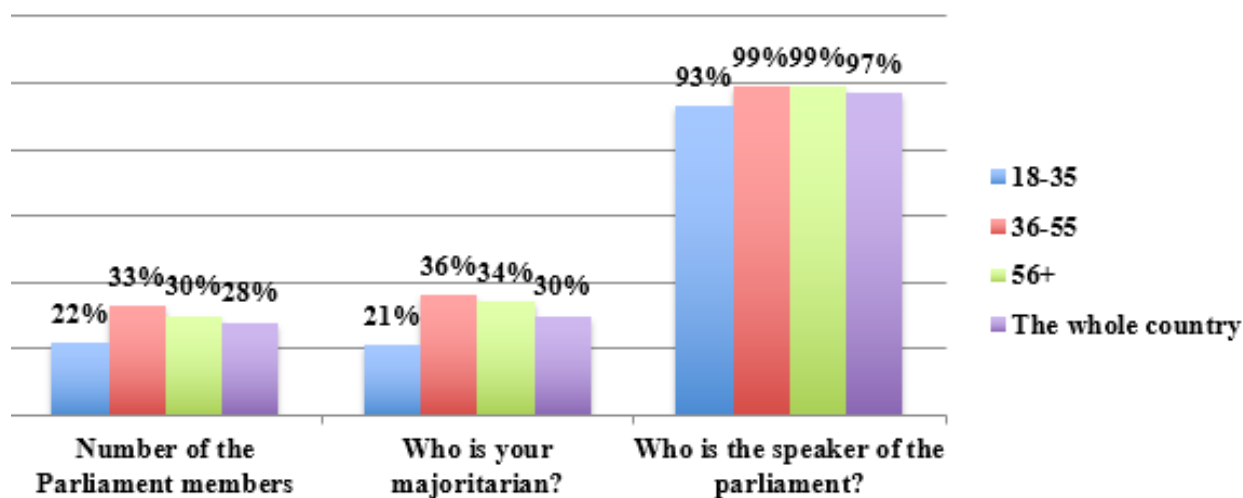
politics.

The majority of young people knew the name of the chairman of the parliament², according to Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) 2015 survey. Only 36% of respondents between the ages of 15-35 stated that they follow the activities of the legislative body, however, which is the lowest number compared to other age groups.³ Additionally, the 2014 National Youth Survey found that just 12% of young people aged 15-29 were aware of their civil rights.⁴

Another indication that the majority of the youth are not interested in the legislative process is the low number – approximately one-fifth of young respondents and one-third of the overall population – who could correctly identify their representatives in parliament, or the number of MPs in parliament.

Youth distrust and political nihilism could be one explanation. The results of a recent survey showed people see politics as a dirty business rather than a civic responsibility.⁵ The level of trust in public servants and law-makers is even lower: only 8% of young respondents think that members of the parliament properly fulfill their duties.⁶

CRRC: Respondents' Correct Answers to the Following Questions



It could be argued that raising youth's awareness and increasing their interest in the political processes is crucial. This is directly linked to how they will fulfill their civic duties individuals and engaged citizens. Moreover, youth participation and accessible political systems could reduce the degree of political nihilism in youth.

THE INCLUSION OF YOUTH IN POLITICAL PROCESSES

The prerequisite for enhanced political participation is a well informed youth.

Surveys have found that young people see voting as one of the best ways to influence political leaders. Other means of participating in the election process, like joining a political parties, working in non-governmental organizations or taking part in demonstrations, are less popular among the youth, as well as the wider Georgian population.⁷

Despite their positive attitude toward voting, fewer young people are voting compared to other age groups, according to surveys. The Central Election Commission does not publish the data on electoral participation by age groups; however different surveys show that young people are

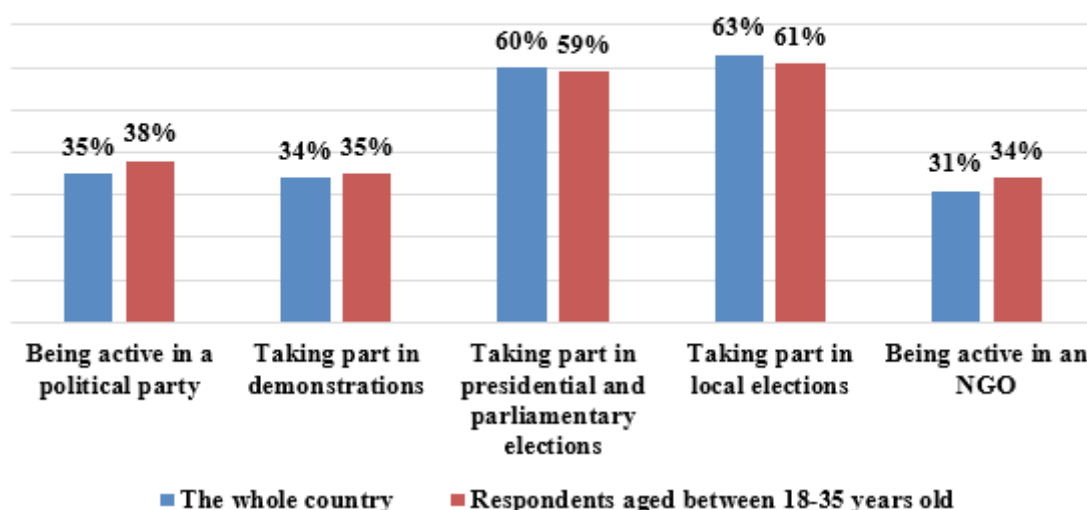
the most passive voters. For instance, according to a CRRC study, 63% of young respondents participated in the elections in 2012, while 75% of the total number of interviewees voted in elections, and the most active voters were people over age of 56 (83%).⁸

The situation is even worse in terms of youth participation in the decision-making process. Only 11% of respondents from the ages of 15 to 29 were involved in the decision-making process for an issue that was important for them, according to the 2014 National Youth Survey.⁹

This lack of engagement makes it more difficult for the government to effectively deal with problems, and it means the needs and the interests of young voters are not included on the political agenda.

Surveys have found that employment, health care, education and good governance are top priorities for the youth.¹⁰ Young people were concerned about three essential issues – employment, poverty and education – according to a CRRC study. For the wider population, however, priorities are different: employment, poverty, increased prices, territorial integrity and pension are all considered more important than education.

CRRC: Influence of Actions on Georgian Politics



Youth Participation in Electoral Processes and the Role of Political

While Georgia needs fundamental education reform in order to improve the quality of education, politicians rarely focus on this issue during their campaigns. Hypothetically, if the youth were more involved in political processes, concerns like quality education might be given more attention. A recent example is the impact of the student movement “Auditorium 115”.

A group of students from Tbilisi State University demanded reforms in the university management and its self-governance union, and asked for the removal of state security service agents from the university and changes in the rules for recruiting academic staff.¹¹

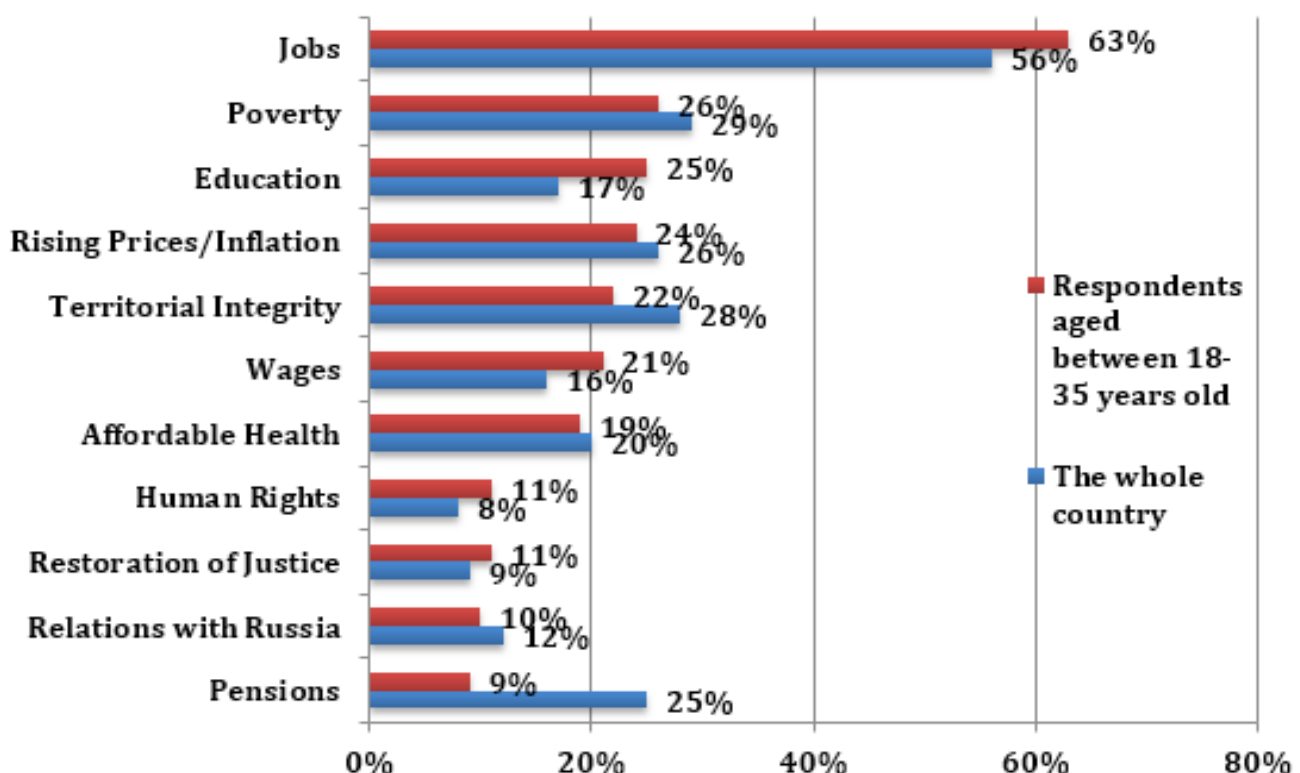
But the movement weakened due to its heterogeneous character and direct confrontation with the privileged members of self-governing body, who had access to administrative resources. Ultimately, the fundamental problems remained unsolved.

The ministry of education and the Georgian government failed to respond to the students’ demands. Instead of taking resolute steps, only minor, superficial changes were made – the rector of Tbilisi State University resigned and later the minister of education was replaced.

In recent years, due to youth activism, similar concerns have become part of the political agenda. Leading political figures should pay more attention to such developments, otherwise it will be hard to deal with similar challenges in future. Also, the government should initiate various instruments and encourage youth/civic participation.

The negative attitude in youth regarding political processes can be explained by the fact that their interests are rarely taken seriously. Moreover, they are more critical toward current political elite. On , it is also obvious that youth-related issues will not be included into political agenda without their active participation.

CRRC: Most Important National Issues



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICAL PARTIES

Youth engagement in political parties is another form of political activity. In democratic societies young people join the youth movements in political parties to learn more about political activities. In the process, they also gain experience and later replace older members of the party.

In Georgia, the situation is different. Competition in the Georgian political system is not based on ideology, and the youth wings of political parties do not recruit leaders and train them for political career.

A latest survey showed that a major source of motivation for young people to join political parties was the opportunity to access different educational resources (lectures, training, conferences) and enhance networking.¹² Often, because of ideological differences, young people leave parties as soon as it stops supporting the events they are interested in.¹³ Consequently, it appears that, in most cases, cooperation between the youth and political parties is very fragile and short-term (it likely the most intensive during election campaigns), as it is not based on common values.

As a result, career promotion within the parties is not a common practice and candidates often lack strong ties with political parties. Their candidates/delegates in parliament mostly come from local governments, businesses and public services.¹⁴ This political reality leads to mistrust in political elites. Besides, the past experience of nepotism in Georgian politics,¹⁵ might also make young people more reluctant to enter politics and drive change through youth organizations of political parties.

In such an environment, political parties and their leaders play an essential role as they set the recruiting policies. The healthy inclusion of the youth is not only beneficial to political institutions, but also vital to the development of a political culture in the country.

CONCLUSION

For a country like Georgia, which is in the middle of a transition and has limited experience as a state, the role of youth participation in governance is key for country's further development.

First of all, it is necessary to encourage the youth's interest in political processes through education. In addition, both political elites and political systems should be open for their inclusion.

Based on this analysis, it is clear that political indifference prevails among young Georgians. They are averse to the ongoing political processes, which is expressed through their skeptical attitude toward the current political establishment. In addition, young people express little interest in activities of different political institutions. However, on a more positive note, they are actively involved in protests when it concerns the quality of education. However, as the case of students' protest discussed above demonstrated, civic activism was confronted by a time tested political method – a superficial resolution of a problem was suggested, instead of seeking the inclusive ways to deal with the problems.

Political parties do not demonstrate genuine and sufficient openness to youth. Even though all leading political organizations have youth wings, but their cooperation is usually short-term and lacks common ideological grounds.

In most cases, political parties treat youth as additional human resources to help during elections. As the research cited in this report shows, young people want to use their participation in political parties for to develop their careers. As a result, political parties fail to attract creative and active young people who will join their political teams in future. Additionally, the unpredictable/nontransparent recruiting policy of political parties can be considered as one of the main causes of alienation and distrust in the public.

As a result it is necessary to raise the level of education about the political process and foster

Youth Participation in Electoral Processes and the Role of Political

youth participation in politics. Educational institutions and civic organizations can play a significant role in ensuring this. In this process, the main responsibility of the political elites is to be open and ready for change. Otherwise frustration among the youth could grow. This can be avoided by providing youth and any other citizen with all necessary means to participate.

It is essential to change the attitude of political parties towards youth participation, which should not be limited to volunteering for pre-election campaigns. Without proper recruitment policies and a firm ideological platform, political parties will become more and more alienated from their voters and will fail to express their interests.

REFERENCES:

¹There are several age definitions for youth. Some sources used in this article use different age categorization while defining youth. Consequently, it was impossible to unify these different age classifications. That is why direct comparison of data may seem irrelevant. Even though there are some percentage inaccuracies due to age group differences, the analysis still shows general tendencies.

²Caucasus Research Resource Centre. (2015) “Survey on Public Policies in Georgia”. Built using Online Data Analysis website - <http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/> Seen on 10.09.2016

³53 % of respondents at the age of 36-55 and 65% of respondents older than 56 are aware of parliamentary activities.

⁴National Youth Survey in Georgia. UNICEF. 2014. Available at: http://unicef.ge/uploads/Final_Geo_Adolescents_and_Youth_in_Georgia. Seen on: 09.09.2016

⁵Caucasus Research Resource Centre. (2014) “Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia.” Built using Online Data Analysis website - <http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/> Seen on 12.09.2016

⁶Caucasus Research Resource Centre. (2015) “Survey on Public Policies in Georgia.” Built using Online Data Analysis website - <http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/> Seen on 10.09.2016

⁷Caucasus Research Resource Centre. (2014) “Volunteering and Civic Participation in Georgia.” Built using Online Data Analysis website - <http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/> Seen on 12.09.2016

⁸Caucasus Research Resource Centre. (2016) “NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia.” Built using Online Data Analysis website - <http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/> Seen on 08.09.2016

⁸National Youth Survey in Georgia. UNICEF. 2014. Available at: http://unicef.ge/uploads/Final_Geo_Adolescents_and_Youth_in_Georgia. Seen on: 09.09.2016

⁹ibid. 9

¹⁰Giorgi Diasamidze. “Manifesto #115 – TSU Students’ Union Protests Ended”. Netgazeti.Ge. 16.03.2016. Available at: <http://netgazeti.ge/news/102262/> Seen on 11.09.2016

¹¹David Jijelava. “Youth development in Georgian political parties: Looking for ways to utilise party resources”. Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, Georgia. p. 41 Available at: <http://nimd.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Intra-party-democracy-and-local-governance-English.pdf>

¹²In this survey youth is as persons between the ages of 18-25.

¹³Ibid.53

¹⁴Transparency International Georgia. “Survey: Nepotism in Public Sector.” Available at: <http://www.transparency.ge/en/node/5143/results>

¹⁵ibid. 50

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