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POLICY BRIEF

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Decreasing level of trust in Georgian political parties: What does it mean for democracy and how to avoid negative consequences?

Levan Kakhishvili¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trust in political parties in Georgia has dropped from 21 percent in 2012 to 8 percent in 2017. Although the level of trust has never been particularly high, this trend should raise concern and inspire political parties to act. Political trust is mostly determined by societal beliefs and political institutions. This paper analyzes both of these dimensions to demonstrate the roots of the distrust. In terms of beliefs, the paper explores four aspects of trust as perceived by the Georgian public: competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability. The paper also considers the role of political institutions. In particular, it discusses the lack of transparency of political parties, which adds to voters' lack of awareness and knowledge – and leads to low levels of trust. The paper includes an analysis of a range of public opinion surveys conducted between 2015 and 2018, including CRRC's Caucasus Barometer and NDI public opinion polls, which provide insights on public perceptions and beliefs. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that the low level of political trust is perilous for Georgian democracy – specifically for political parties' ability to perform their representative functions. Political parties and other stakeholders interested in Georgia's democratic consolidation should be aware that the high share of distrustful voters has a direct impact on the level of citizens' participation in politics. Specifically it means their involvement in party politics will remain low. Therefore, this paper elaborates a number of recommendations for Georgian political parties, civil society organizations and think tanks in Georgia as well as donor organizations to take action to increase trust in political parties in Georgia.

¹Levan Kakhishvili is a policy analyst at Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) and a Doctoral Fellow at Bamberg Graduate School of Social Sciences (BAGSS) at the University of Bamberg in Germany..

Introduction: The problem of political trust and its implications for democratic consolidation in Georgia

The phenomenon of political trust is often overlooked when analyzing the process of democratization in Georgia. One reason for this could be that trust is a complex concept with multiple components. It is not very easy to contextualize its relevance within ongoing political processes. However, the degree to which the public trusts political institutions and actors, such as political parties, can have significant implications for the process of democratization and, eventually, for democratic consolidation. For example, from 2012 to 2017, trust towards Georgian political parties decreased from 21 percent to 8 percent, while distrust increased from 22 percent to 43 percent.² The majority of respondents, however, were indifferent (43 percent of respondents said their neither trust nor distrust political parties in 2017) or were unable to answer the question (the combined total of don't know and refuse to answer equaled 8 percent).³ Even though the level of trust was far from ideal in 2012, such a drastic drop should alarm Georgian political parties. The implications of a low level of trust, particularly for political parties, are two-fold: distrustful voters will not vote in elections and will not work and/or volunteer for a political party.⁴ Furthermore, high distrust towards political parties indicates that the linkage between parties and voters is weak; voters have a largely negative view of the performance of political parties; and finally, voters have limited knowledge of, and experience with, the workings of political parties.⁵ Putting this issue in a larger context translates into negative consequences for the democratic consolidation of Georgia. Due to the lack of trust, voters will abstain from participation in politics:⁶ participation, however, is the cornerstone for participatory democracy. As a result, there is an urgent need to act on this problem and design ways to increase public trust in political parties over time. This paper analyzes the phenomenon of public trust towards political parties in Georgia and provides recommendations on how to increase political trust.

² The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017). "Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

³ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017). "Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

⁴ Ceka, B. (2012). "The Perils of Political Competition: Explaining Participation and Trust in Political Parties in Eastern Europe". *Comparative Political Studies*. 46(12), 1610-1635. DOI: 10.1177/0010414012463908.

⁵ Berlin, D. and L.J. Lundqvist. (2012). "Do Leopards Ever Change Their Spots? The Development of Political Trust among Swedish Green party Sympathisers". *Environmental Politics*. 21(1), 131-152. DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2011.643372.

⁶ Ceka, B. (2012). "The Perils of Political Competition: Explaining Participation and Trust in Political Parties in Eastern Europe". *Comparative Political Studies*. 46(12), 1610-1635. DOI: 10.1177/0010414012463908.

What is trust and how can it be analyzed?

Trust implies that a person or a group of persons depends or relies on another actor with a feeling of relative security.⁷ It exposes the trustor's vulnerability and inherently includes the risk that some endeavors may not succeed. Three aspects of trust are extremely important in order to understand trust as a political phenomenon. First, some people are more inclined to trust than others – this is a character trait. Second, certain beliefs lead to higher levels of trust, such as believing that the trustee has enough competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability so that the trustor chooses to rely on them (each of these qualities are discussed individually in the following sections below). And finally, certain types of institutional frameworks lead to higher levels of trust. Of the three aspects outlined above, the second two are the most important for Georgian political parties because while it is hard to change a predisposition to trust, beliefs can be nurtured and institutions can be built. Moreover, the fact that in 2012 the public had significantly higher trust levels and lower distrust levels, means that the predisposition to trust, although important, is less relevant for this discussion. Consequently, the roots for the problem should be found in beliefs and institutions.

Trusting beliefs: How do Georgians judge political parties?

The four beliefs that comprise one dimension of trust are competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability. It is worth considering them one by one to understand how the Georgian public sees political parties and why the lack of trust towards them exists. The data available is not perfect as publically available surveys have not been conducted for the purpose of evaluating how society's beliefs impact its trust in political parties. It is still possible, however, to find data across various databases, including CRRC's Caucasus Barometer and NDI public opinion polls (all surveys were conducted between 2015 and 2018), that can be closely related to these beliefs.

Competence

The trustor, in this case the Georgian public, should believe that the trustee, i.e. political parties, can resolve the issues that concern the voters the most. According to public opinion surveys, economic and social issues are the top priorities for Georgian society, followed by the issues related to territorial integrity.⁸ Table 1 below provides data about the perceived

⁷ McKnight, D.H. and N.L. Cherrany. (2001). "Trust and Distrust Definitions: One Bite at a Time". In: R. Falcone, M. Singh, and Y.-H. Tan (Eds.): *Trust in Cyber-societies*. Springer-Verlag: Berlin Heidelberg.

⁸ On the priorities of the Georgian public and how political parties respond to them in their party manifestos, see: Kakhishvili, L. (2017). "Is Democracy Possible without Stable Political Parties?" [online] Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/6401/>

competence of main Georgian political parties in six different policy areas that are important for the public.

Table 1: Perceived competence of Georgian political parties

#	Political party	Which political party do you trust most to manage the following issues? (%)					
		Economic development	Education	Healthcare	Restoring territorial integrity	Military and defense capabilities	Democratic development
1	Georgian Dream	24	28	37	16	26	27
2	United National Movement	11	12	10	6	13	10
3	Alliance of Patriots of Georgia	3	3	2	2	2	2
4	European Georgia	7	6	6	4	6	7
5	Other party	6	5	4	4	5	6
6	No party	22	17	14	40	16	17
7	DK/RA	27	28	26	28	33	31

Source: *The Caucasus Research Resource Centers*. (2017). "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017." Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

The data shows that in five out of the six policy areas, the most frequent answer is either "Don't know/Refuse to answer (DK/RA)" or "No party." The exception to the rule is healthcare – a field where the Georgian Dream has implemented reforms, including the introduction of universal healthcare. These changes seem to be appreciated by the public, hence the result of 37 percent of the population entrusting the management of healthcare to the Georgian Dream. However, if the shares of "DK/RA" and "No party" are combined (putting together the respondents who do not trust these issue to any party and those who cannot answer the question) the share would range from 40 percent in the case of healthcare to 68 percent in the case of restoring territorial integrity.

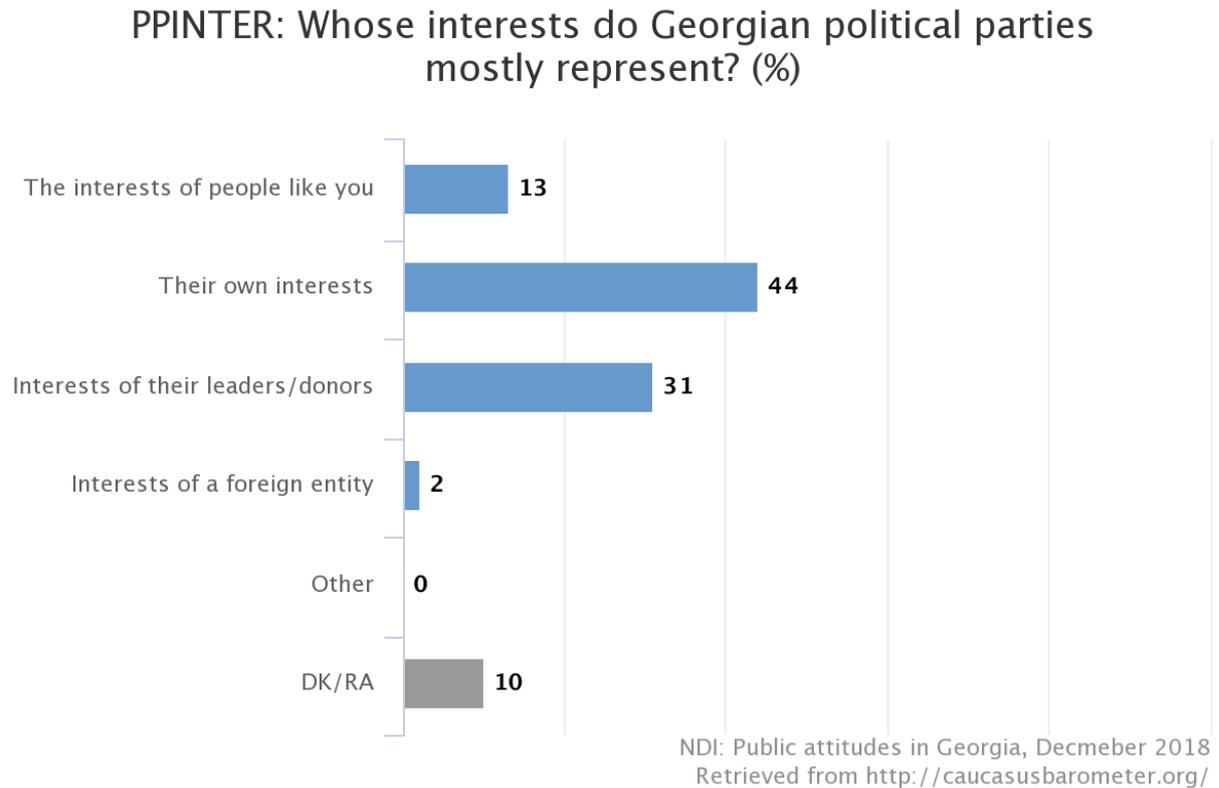
This data demonstrates that either Georgian voters do not believe that parties are competent in the indicated policy areas or voters simply cannot reasonably judge their competence. The latter might be a result of the lack of information about political parties, their finances, activities and goals. However, when it comes to the goals of political parties, another belief – benevolence – comes into play.

Benevolence

In order for political parties to enjoy higher levels of public trust, voters should believe that parties work toward goals that are important for society. Therefore, benevolence as a belief refers to what kind of judgment trustors make about trustees: either trustees serve the interests of the trustors or the interests of someone else. The December 2018 public opinion

poll, commissioned by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), provides data regarding this questions, shown in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Interests of Georgian political parties



As the data indicates, only 13 percent of the Georgian public believe that Georgian political parties are benevolent, i.e. serving the interests of the voters. This is an alarming figure for political parties in Georgia if they want to build up public trust. This figure becomes even more important considering that undecided respondents (those who answered DK/RA) represent only 10 percent of the population. The vast majority of society believes that political parties in Georgia represent either their own interests – 44 percent – or the interests of their leaders and/or donors – 31 percent. These two answers represent the opinions of three out of four voters. These numbers may point to two different problems: either political parties are genuinely unable to represent public interests or there is ineffective communication between parties and voters. Both of these problems suggest that the party-voter linkage in Georgia is weak.

Furthermore, perceptions on the benevolence of political parties are harmed by negative campaigning. Negative campaigning is defined as when candidates or parties focus more on the shortcomings of their competitors rather than what they themselves can offer to the public. According to the NDI June 2018 opinion poll, prior to the 2018 presidential elections, almost three out of four Georgians thought that candidates should spend “a little” or no time

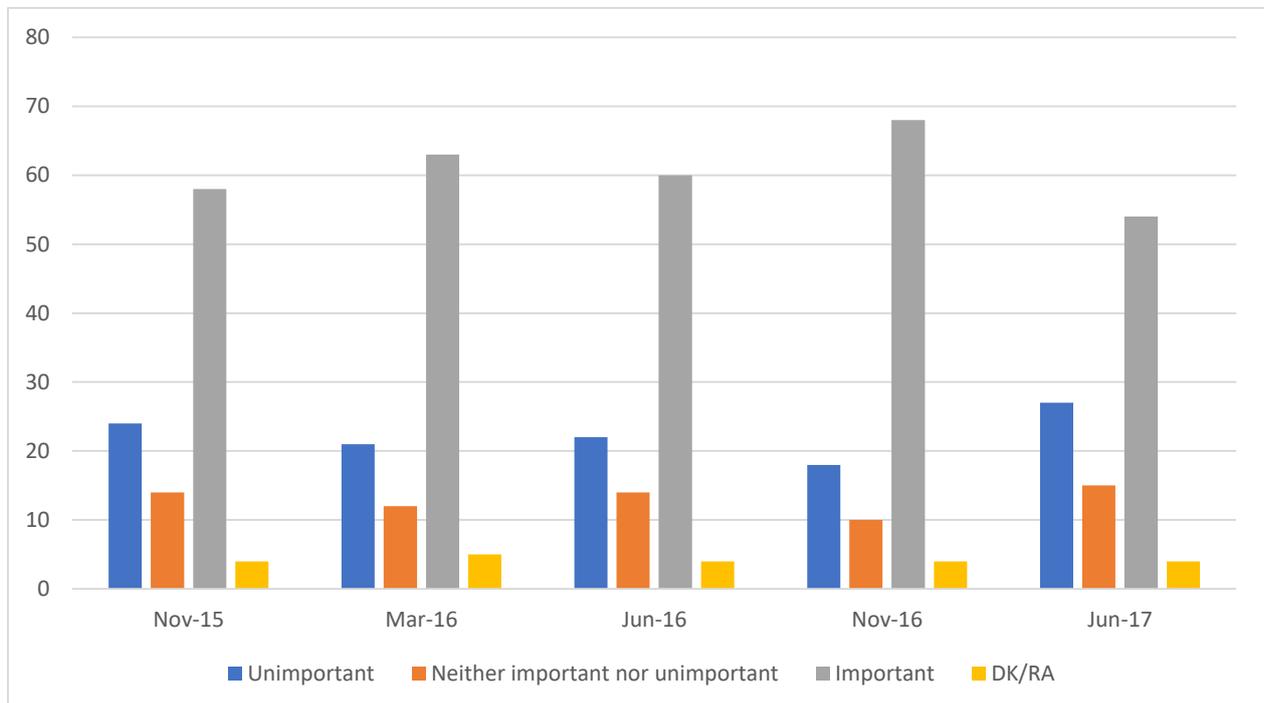
criticizing the competing parties.⁹ Research had demonstrated that negative campaigning reduces the level of trust in political parties.¹⁰

Integrity

When the trustee is believed to be truthful and fulfilling promises, in other words to be a person of integrity, the trustor can rely on them, which leads to a high level of trust. Although there is no data in public opinion surveys about how citizens judge the integrity of Georgian political parties, it is still possible to explore the importance of promises when voters make decisions on how to vote in the elections. Furthermore, there is data about the perceived level of corruption in political parties, which can also be used as a proxy indicator for integrity.

Chart 2 (below) provides data about the importance of pre-election platforms and promises for Georgian voters. The data clearly demonstrates that for over a half of the population, pre-election promises play a consistently important role when they decide for whom to vote.

Chart 2: Importance of pre-election platforms and promises for voters



Source: Author’s calculations based on five datasets.¹¹

⁹ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2018). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2018”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

¹⁰ Ceka, B. (2012). “The Perils of Political Competition: Explaining Participation and Trust in Political Parties in Eastern Europe”. *Comparative Political Studies*. 46(12), 1610-1635. DOI: 10.1177/0010414012463908.

¹¹ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2015). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2015”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016a). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016b). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, March 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016c). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

These figures indicate that integrity is important for Georgian voters but does not provide any insight into the level of perceived integrity of political parties, which would require different data. However, it can be argued that citizens' perception of the level of corruption in political parties may suggest the public's overall view on the integrity of political parties. Interestingly, according to the latest NDI public opinion of December 2018, those who believe that there is no corruption in political parties represent only 14 percent of the population, while almost half of the public – 46 percent – believes that “there is some corruption” in political parties.¹²

Of course, one cannot trust institutions if it is believed they are corrupt. The lack of information about the inner workings of political parties in Georgia also impacts the public's trust level, which can be concluded from the data discussed above.

Predictability

The final belief that increases levels of trust is the predictability of a trustee, which refers to the idea that the trustor can safely predict the actions, good or bad, of the trustee. Similarly to integrity, it is only possible to evaluate a proxy indicator as there is no data on how the Georgian public perceives the predictability of political parties. However, it is possible to discuss how important a party's past performance is for voters.

The data from five different NDI opinion polls conducted between 2015 and 2017¹³ demonstrate that the past performance of a political party is even more important to voters than pre-election promises. Between 65 to 74 percent of respondents prioritize the past performance of political parties over pre-election promises. This means that the public is willing to trust better performing political parties and political parties should take these beliefs into consideration when designing and implementing their strategies and action plans.

¹² The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2018). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2018”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

¹³ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2015). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2015”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016a). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016b). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, March 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016c). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

Institutional dimension of trust: Are parties sufficiently institutionalized to incite trust?

It is believed that strong institutions contribute to increasing political trust levels.¹⁴ The logic behind this idea is that institutions can provide guarantees, contracts, regulations, rules and procedures that ensure the fulfillment of promises or success in a risky endeavor. Consequently, for political parties, it is important to be perceived by the public as strong institutions. This can be achieved by developing more transparent decision-making practices, especially in such areas as elaborating policy platforms, nominating candidates or recruiting new members. Data shows, however, that parties are not perceived as strong institutions that would act as protective structures.

As part of the June 2017 NDI public opinion poll,¹⁵ respondents were asked about whose opinion matters most when deciding whether elections in Georgia were well organized. Respondents could pick up to three items from a list of ten. The most frequent choice was “my own opinion” – 46 percent of respondents say that their personal opinion matters the most in deciding about how well elections are run. The opinion of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and foreign observers tied for second with 23 percent each. The opinion of the political party, which the respondent supported, was picked by 16 percent of the population only. These figures indicate the preference for personal opinions as opposed to institutions, which suggests the weakness of political institutions.

Furthermore, to emphasize the personalization rather than the institutionalization of political parties, one can consider the question of the relative importance of a candidate vis-à-vis the party promoting the candidate for voters. According to data from the June 2017 survey, 50 percent of respondents attribute more importance to the mayoral candidate, compared to 38 percent who said the party promoting the candidate was more important.¹⁶ Consequently, if Georgian political parties aim at establishing themselves as institutions that last longer than any particular political leader, it is necessary to become more institutionalized, transparent, and better linked with supporters.

One final piece of data that suggests that the public does not view political parties as institutionally or programmatically very different from each other can be found in the June 2018 opinion poll, which asked respondents the following question: “Thinking generally, do you think which party is in government makes a big difference, some difference or no difference for the health of the economy?” Two out of five respondents reported that this makes no difference for the health of the economy. This figure can be interpreted in two ways (see Chart 3 below). A rather optimistic interpretation would be an assumption that 42 percent of Georgian voters believe each and every political party is sufficiently benevolent to act in the best interest of the nation. A much more pessimistic, and perhaps more realistic,

¹⁴ McKnight, D.H. and N.L. Cherrany. (2001). “Trust and Distrust Definitions: One Bite at a Time”. In: R. Falcone, M. Singh, and Y.-H. Tan (Eds.): *Trust in Cyber-societies*. Springer-Verlag: Berlin Heidelberg.

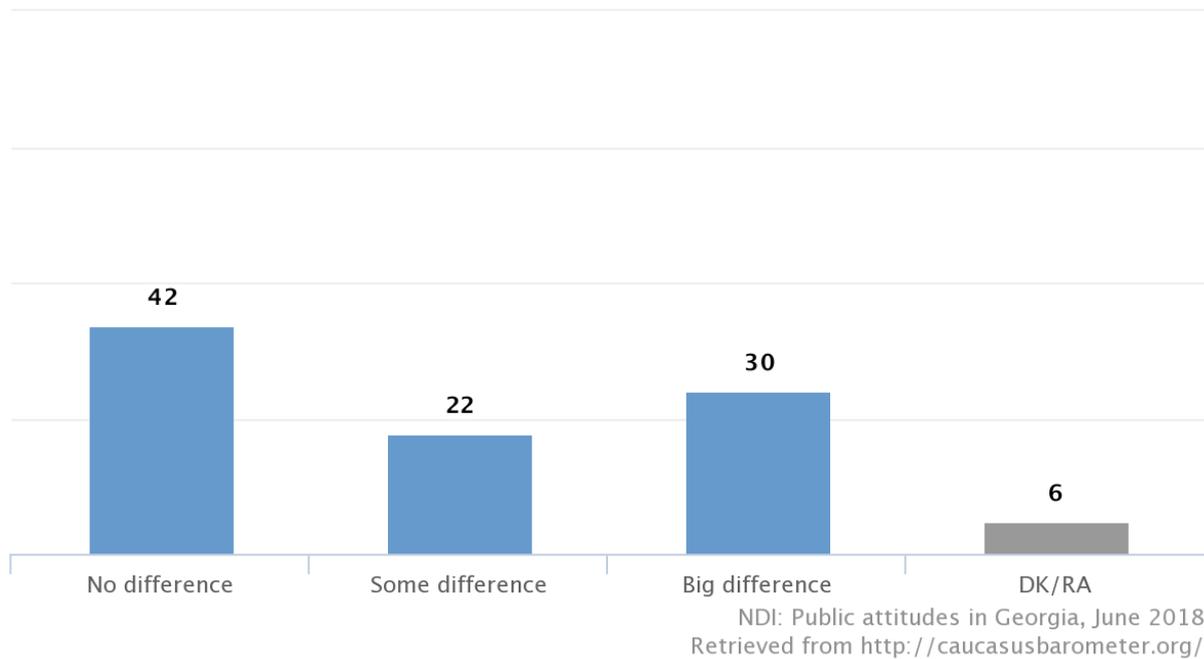
¹⁵ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

¹⁶ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

interpretation would be that the public does not view political parties as significantly different from each other in terms of their ideological programs, which leads to an unhealthy distance between parties and voters.

Chart 3: Does it make a difference which party is in government?

GPMDIFEC: Which party is in government makes difference for the health of the economy? (%)



The degree of closeness between a political party and its supporters, as research demonstrates, can be a much better indicator of why the level of political trust is low than, for example, an overall number of supporters.¹⁷ Consequently, when voters do not feel a strong link to any political party, it is more likely that the public has a lower level of trust in the political system.¹⁸ Therefore, Georgian political parties should prioritize establishing close linkages with their supporters as quality seems to be more important than the quantity of supporters when it comes to understanding trust as a political phenomenon.

¹⁷ Hooghe, M. and A. Kern. (2015). "Party Membership and Closeness and the Development of Trust in Political Institutions: An Analysis of the European Social Survey, 2002-2010". *Party Politics*. 21(6), 944-956. DOI: 10.1177/1354068813509519.

¹⁸ Hooghe, M. and A. Kern. (2015). "Party Membership and Closeness and the Development of Trust in Political Institutions: An Analysis of the European Social Survey, 2002-2010". *Party Politics*. 21(6), 944-956. DOI: 10.1177/1354068813509519.

Conclusion: How to increase trust in political parties?

This paper has demonstrated that the Georgian public does not trust political parties and this is rooted in two dimensions of trust. First, Georgian voters tend to believe that political parties do not have the necessary competence to manage various policy areas of concern for the public; that parties primarily represent the interests of their own or those of their leaders and/or donors; that the integrity and predictability of political parties are important in decision-making process when it comes to voting. And second, parties are not perceived to be sufficiently institutionalized to serve as guarantees they will implement their own promises and make a difference when an individual party comes to power. It has been already shown that all this data indicates that the linkage between parties and voters is weak and that the public does not understand the inner workings of political parties due to the lack of transparency. These conditions lead to the disillusionment of the public with politics in general and the lack of willingness to join and/or work for parties. This suggests a low level of political participation, which threatens the process of the consolidation of the young Georgian democracy.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for various actors, primarily, political parties, to take action in order to build political trust in Georgia. To this end, the recommendations elaborated below should be considered.

Recommendations

For Georgian political parties:

- **Strengthen links with voters by elaborating ideologically consistent policy platforms, communicating promises clearly and understandably, and overall being predictable in ideological terms** – As public opinion data demonstrates, pre-election promises are one of the key factors that influence the electoral behavior of the Georgian voter. Although it may be tempting for political parties to be opportunistic and make popular and/or populist promises, parties should be methodical so that the public perceives each individual party as predictable, which leads to higher levels of trust and eventually to favorable electoral behavior.
- **Build their own portfolio as competent and benevolent actors caring for the public interests** – The Georgian public believes that political parties in Georgia serve their own interests and not those of society at large. Furthermore, citizens have a low opinion of the competency of political parties in the most important policy areas. For parties to gain the public's trust, it is necessary that they act in the best interest of the society as defined by their own policy platforms (see the previous recommendation). However, at the same time, it is vitally important that each individual party clearly communicates to the public about their work and how these efforts improve the lives of Georgian voters. This will help citizens better judge the past performance of parties, which is another key factor influencing voting behavior in Georgia.

- **Increase the transparency of their inner workings through institutionalization** – Almost half of all Georgian voters believe that there is some level of corruption in Georgian parties. This harms the perception of parties’ integrity as voters are unable to judge whether a particular political party is truthful and is willing to keep the promises they give. Research demonstrates that more informed citizens tend to trust more. Increasing the transparency and clearly communicating how political parties work, i.e. opening the metaphorical black box of parties, will help citizens develop more trusting beliefs. However, it is also necessary that parties have institutionalized procedures such as transparent nomination, recruitment and other decision-making processes.
- **Nurture democratic values in the society** – According to research, citizens develop higher levels of trust when they share the values of the potential trustee. Political parties as the key to successful democratic performance should have shared democratic values across the whole ideological spectrum. Furthermore, they should also nurture the same values in society so citizens see parties as closer to themselves. Existing research shows that democracy is not prioritized enough in Georgian party politics, which needs to change.
- **Minimize negative campaigning prior to elections** – Polls show that the Georgian public does not like it when candidates criticize other parties. Consequently, negative campaigning should be marginalized in the political mainstream. Political parties should focus on their own policy offerings instead of demeaning competitors. Such an approach would eventually lead to increased trust levels. This does not mean that due criticism should be avoided during the campaigning. It should not be the primary focus of any self-respecting political party or a candidate, however.

For civil society organizations and think tanks in Georgia:

- **Produce accountability reports for each political party in the parliament** – Evaluating the performance of each parliamentary political party as opposed to their own pre-election promises will be extremely useful for judging all four dimensions of trusting beliefs – competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability – for each individual party. Additionally this will also increase the transparency of party politics. Consequently, the findings of such research, effectively communicated to the public, can have significant impact on how the level of awareness of Georgian voters.
- **Contribute to increasing transparency in Georgian politics through regular informational campaigns and research on party politics** – Civil society organizations and think tanks have a significant amount of expertise on Georgian party politics. Therefore, expanding this expertise even further and effectively communicating it with the public will help citizens increase their knowledge, leading to more trusting beliefs. However, the challenge for civil society is that the public has comparably low level of trust in NGOs as well.

- **Incentivize constructive discussion and contribute to raising public awareness on issues related to negative campaigning** – Civil society organizations and think tanks have the potential to identify cases of negative campaigning and provide recommendations on how it is possible to focus on positive promises instead of political competitors disparaging each other. For this purpose, an analysis of party manifestos and the extent to which public statements of individual politicians relate to the policy offering outlined in their respective party programs should be conducted during each election cycle.

For donor organizations:

- **Support public opinion polls related to monitoring trust levels in political parties in Georgia** – Opinion polls evaluating four dimensions of trusting beliefs – competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability – will contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of political trust in Georgia.
- **Support projects aimed at studying political parties in Georgia, how they work and how they communicate with the public** – Political parties as key institutions in a representative democracy are severely understudied in Georgia. Incentivizing research on political parties will help civil society organizations, think tanks and universities deepen their understanding of the topic. However, all of these projects should have a strong communication component so that the findings reach Georgian voters and shape their understanding of party politics.



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Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: info@gip.ge

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