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Georgian Institute of Politics

EXPERT POLLS

Issue #12

Observers see government's image boosted amid COVID-19, split on date of parliamentary elections

The Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) conducted its 12th expert poll from May 20 to June 4. Fifty-two Georgian and international scholars and political observers answered questions about the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for political processes in Georgia. The results confirmed the trends in the last survey conducted in March 2020. Namely, that the government seems to have handled the crisis well and benefitted politically from it. Although the picture is more complex when one takes into account different aspects of crisis management. The performance of the Georgian opposition on the other hand has worsened between March and June, according to the surveyed experts.

About the respondents

The data provided below refers to a political assessment of recent developments. GIP's respondents were political observers, scholars and experts, who focus on political, social and economic developments in Georgia. It is important to note that the majority of respondents do not have a background in epidemiology or healthcare. Out of the 52 experts surveyed, 26 are foreigners and 26 are Georgians.

Government praised for epidemiological management but the moods are more moderate about its economic and social policies

In assessing the overall effectiveness of the government's crisis response, not much has changed in the opinion of the experts since March 2020. Figures 1 and 2 show the overall

assessment of measures taken by the Georgian government against COVID-19 as of March and June. The figures are almost identical. Nearly 80% of respondents assess the government's measures as "positive" in both surveys. There was no significant difference in assessments between Georgian and international groups of respondents. However, Georgians were slightly more critical overall, with 7 Georgian experts voting neutral and 2 voting that the response has been negative, compared to only 1 neutral and 0 negative votes among foreign experts.

Figure 1: What is your overall assessment of measures taken by the Georgian government against COVID-19 [March 2020]?

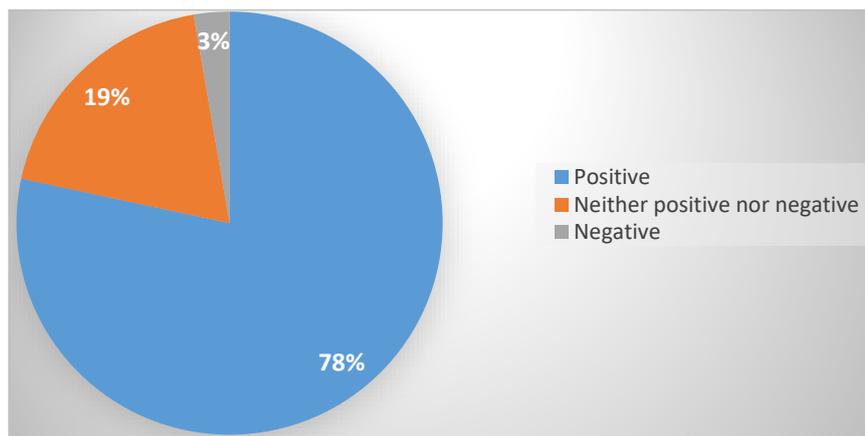
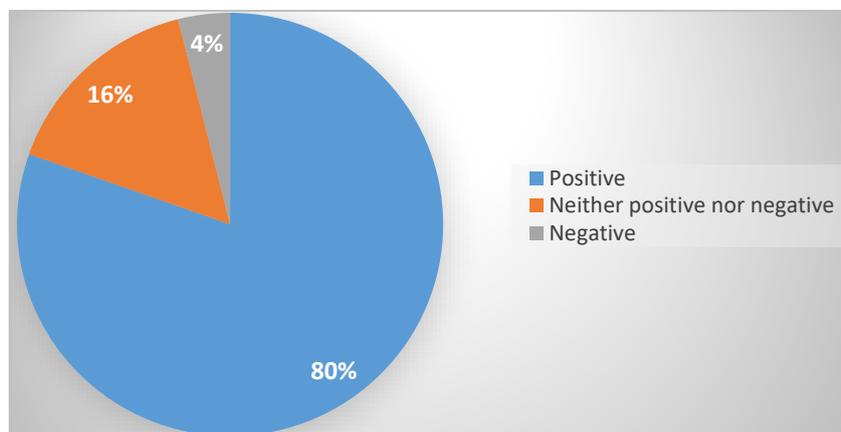
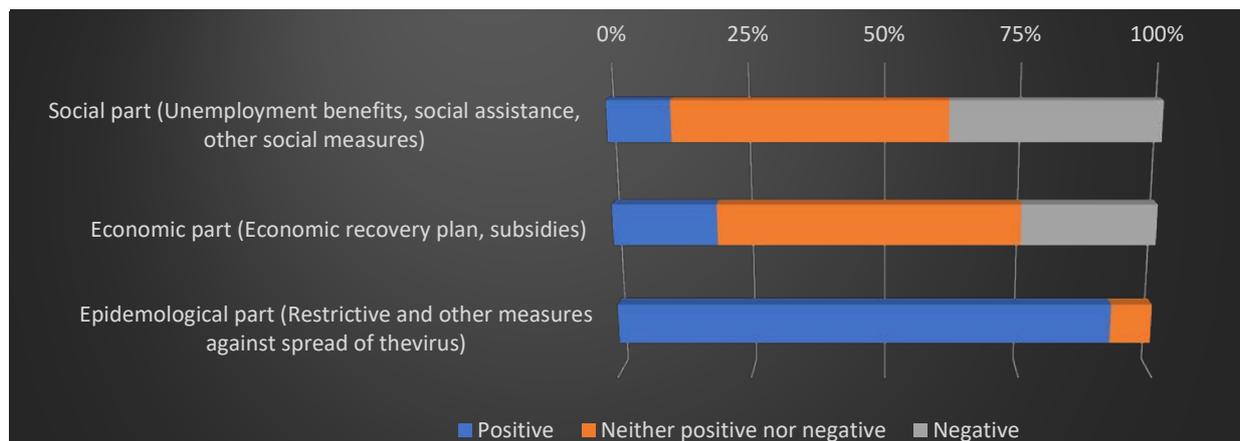


Figure 2: What is your overall assessment of measures taken by the Georgian government against COVID-19 [June 2020]?



However, the picture becomes more differentiated when the experts assessed the specific aspects of the government’s anti-crisis policies (Figure 3). The overwhelmingly positive assessments of the experts are mostly confined to the epidemiological management of the COVID-19 crisis, but opinions are more skeptical when it comes to the government’s economic and social anti-crisis policies (Figure 3). The majority of both Georgian and international observers assess the government’s performance as “neither positive nor negative” followed by “negative” (Figure 3). Only a few experts provided a “positive” assessment of the government’s handling of the economic recovery and provision of social assistance (Figure 3).

Figure 3: How would you assess different aspects of government's anti-crisis plan during the COVID-19? [June 2020]?



Georgian opposition underperforms during COVID-19, Church still the worst performer

Still, the government scores well in comparison with other institutions and the opposition (Figures 4 and 5). In the two expert surveys conducted after the outbreak of the virus the healthcare system and the government occupied the top two spots in terms of performance amid the crisis. Their scores slightly worsened between March and June 2020, but still score far better than the rest of the actors (Figures 4 and 5). The Georgian opposition took the biggest leap backwards between March and June. In the June survey, the performance of opposition parties was assessed as the second-worst, beating only the Georgian Orthodox Church (Figure 5). The Orthodox Church still received the worst assessment by both Georgian and international groups of experts (Figure 5).

Figure 4: On a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best), please assess the performance of the following institutions during the COVID-19 crisis [March 2020]

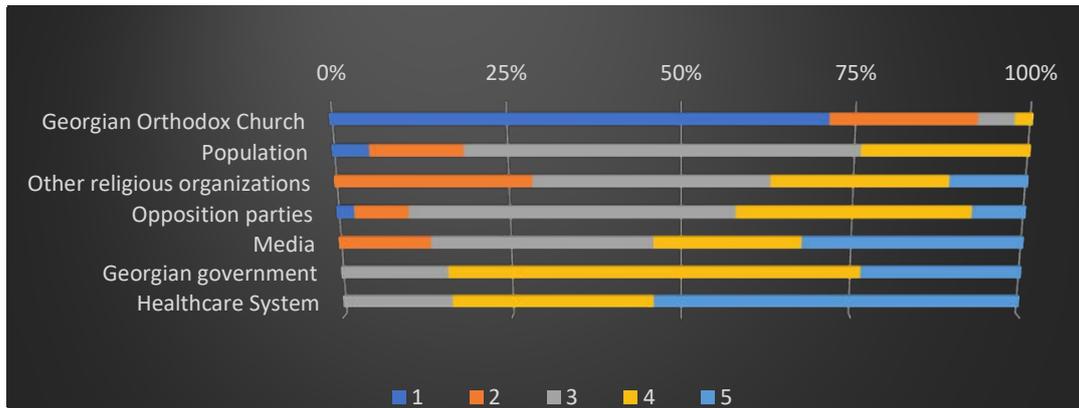
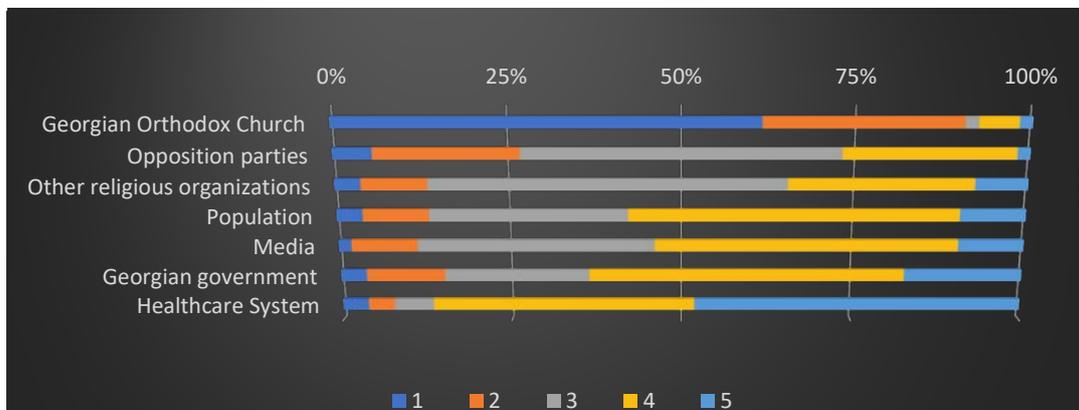


Figure 5: On a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best), please assess the performance of the following institutions during the COVID-19 crisis [June 2020]



Considering the poor performance of the opposition, it seems to be no surprise that observers view the Georgian government as the main political beneficiary of the crisis (figure 6). 85% of those surveyed said that the government/Georgian Dream received the most political benefit from the crisis (Figure 6). Interestingly, none of the experts mentioned the opposition (Figure 6). Similarly, when asked about the political impact of COVID-19 on the upcoming parliamentary elections, 69% of respondents said that COVID-19 increased Georgian Dream’s chances to win elections, while only 31% said that COVID-19 has not so far significantly affected the chances of political parties to win elections (Figure 7).

Figure 6: In your opinion who has received the most political benefit from the Covid-19?

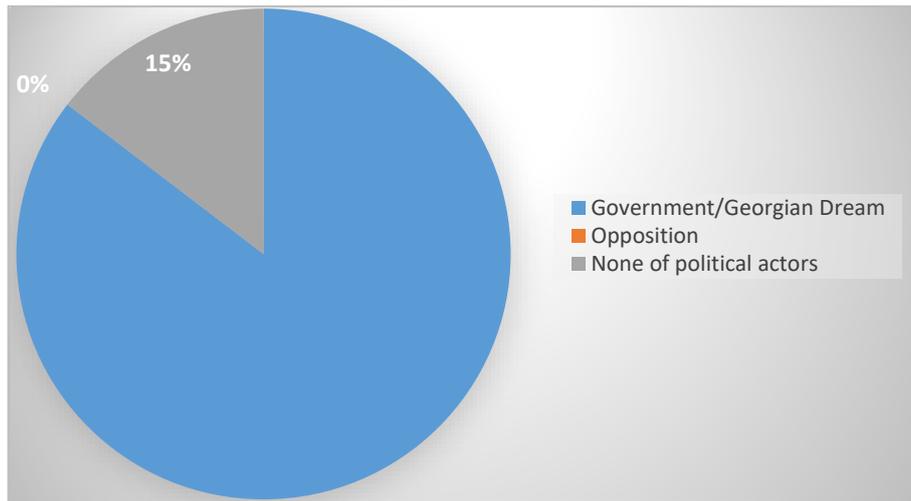
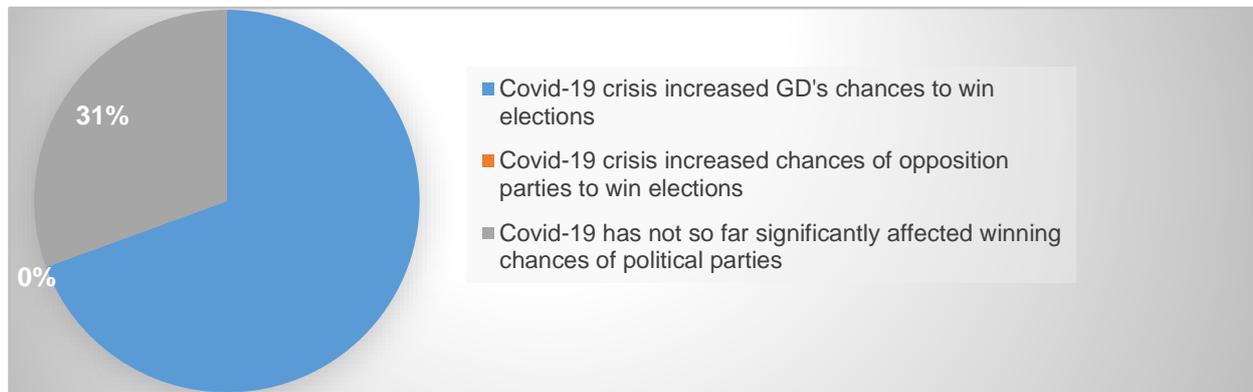


Figure 7: In your opinion, how will the COVID-19 crisis affect the chances of political parties in the upcoming elections (as of now)?



Georgian and foreign observers disagree on election date

On a majority of issues, Georgian and foreign experts had similar views with only a few variations. The only topic on which the views significantly diverged from each other was the possible postponement of elections in case of a continued COVID-19 emergency. Whereas the majority of international observers support the idea of postponing the parliamentary elections until spring 2021 (Figure 10), Georgian experts still think the elections should take place as planned (Figure 9). When we add up votes by both Georgian and international group of experts, a slight majority (57%) supports conducting elections as originally planned.

Figure 8: Should a major impact of COVID-19 continue over the summer, would you support postponing the October elections to spring?

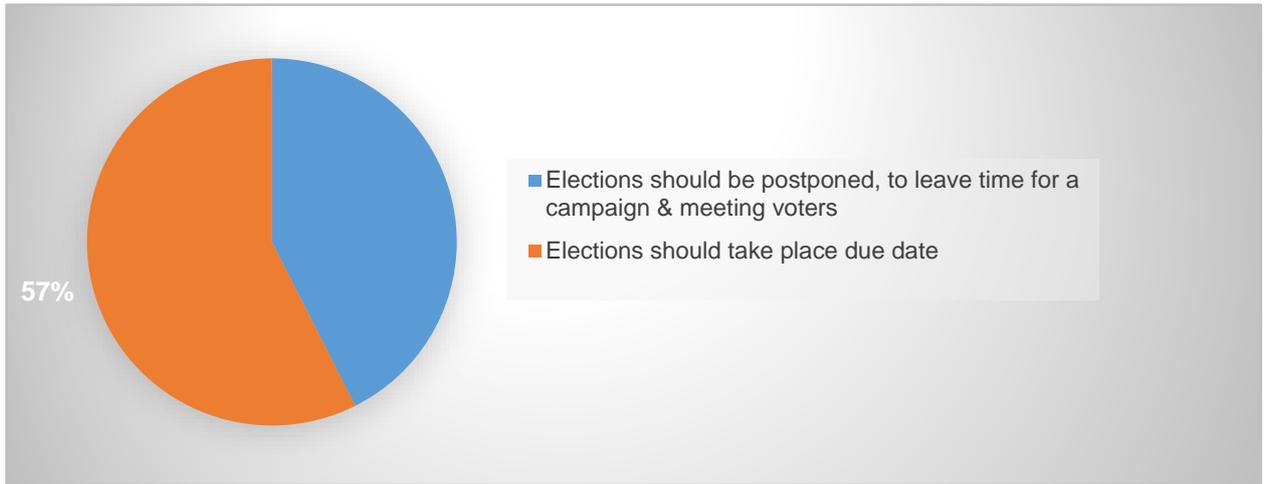


Figure 9: Should a major impact of COVID-19 continue over the summer, would you support postponing the October elections to spring? [Georgian experts only]

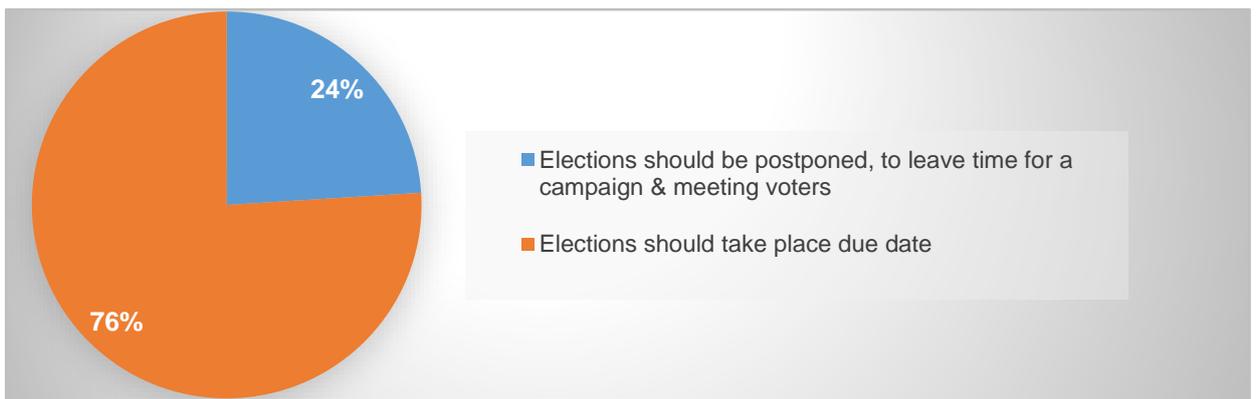
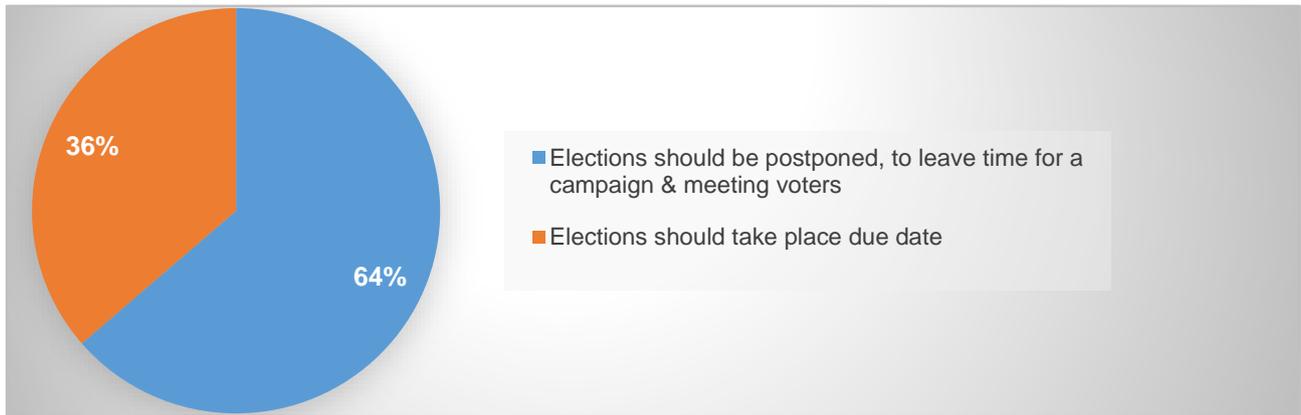


Figure 9: Should a major impact of COVID-19 continue over the summer, would you support postponing the October elections to spring? [International experts only]



Suggestions and recommendations

In the second part of the survey, GIP asked respondents a few open-end questions about how to conduct the upcoming parliamentary elections and the role of international community and civil society. The respondents proposed several ideas on how to conduct safe and democratic parliamentary elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the election day, the most mentioned suggestions included “postal voting”, “online voting”, “outdoor voting” and “extended voting”. Regarding the election campaigns, a majority of respondents underlined the importance of “smart digital campaigns,” including the active use of traditional and social media. When asked to consider the political challenges and opportunities of the upcoming election, some respondents mentioned importance of a “level playing field” by giving opposition parties more air time and more opportunities for smart digital campaigning.

Question 1: If the election date is not changed from October, how, in your opinion should the political parties best organize election campaigns under the COVID-19 restrictions? How should the safety of voters be ensured on election day?

Most frequently mentioned recommendations [Georgian and international experts]
- Postal Voting
- Online voting
- Outdoor voting
- Extended voting (more than one day)
- Digital election campaigns (by using traditional and social media)
- Outdoor/open air election campaigns

Respondents were also asked how the international community could assist Georgia in conducting free and safe elections during the pandemic. A majority of respondents underlined the significance of political support and democratic conditionality, including election monitoring, pressure on political actors to stick to political dialogue, and occasional pressure on the government to ensure a level playing field. Interestingly, Georgian experts were more demanding towards international community in terms of democratic conditionality and applying pressure on the Georgian government. Regarding the role of civil society and think tanks, many respondents mentioned the importance of education about safety and hygiene measures that should supplement their traditional tasks of monitoring and political analysis.

Finally, GIP asked respondents to underline important issues that were worth bringing attention to, but have been neglected during the COVID-19 crisis. The respondents listed numerous economic, social, and epidemiological issues, including: economic assistance to the agriculture sector, better communication with the population, independence of the judiciary, media freedom, the increased potential of vote buying, more attention towards persons with disabilities, domestic violence, women's rights, youth unemployment, ethnic and religious minorities, and better management of post-lockdown period, including better food safety and tackling the slackness of social distancing.



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Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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