



Polling Wars in Georgia: Can it undermine public trust?

In democracies, opinion polls are a vital tool which offers politicians, parties, legislators and policy-makers a unique glance at the views and preferences of the public. In recent months, the Georgian public has been bombarded with the results of various opinion polls. In addition to polls conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which have long provided the Georgian public and political actors with such data, a number of TV stations and political parties have decided to launch, and publish, the results of their own public opinion surveys.

The diversity of results has caused some confusion as party ratings in different polls point in different directions, and it appears that this ideally objective sociological tool has been instrumentalized by various actors for political gains. With a majority of the population unconvinced by the results of nationwide polls, an increasing number of politicians from the ruling party, as well as the opposition, have cast doubts about the methodological soundness of some polls, and the political neutrality of some organizations which implement surveys. As a result of this controversy, polling, an important instrument within a functioning democracy, may continue to lose public trust.

At the request of the **Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)**, a selection of experts from **Georgia, Germany, and the United States** responded to the following three questions:

- **Given how public opinion polling tends to be politicized, how can Georgian voters make sense of recent public opinion polls which show differing pictures of the existing political race?**
- **To what extent can ongoing attempts from politicians to discredit polling organizations undermine the role that non-partisan polling plays in Georgia's democratic development?**
- **What can be done to tackle this problem? Could the involvement of national professional associations or universities in the polling process increase the credibility of polling in the public eye?**



Luis Navarro, *Eurasian Program Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute*

Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream (GD) has attacked methodologically sound polling since the party first emerged as the leading opposition electoral force in 2011. It seemed part of a larger effort, financed by undisclosed donors, to discredit pre-existing domestic and international civil society organizations engaged in election observation. Nine years later, this messaging by GD to denounce polling organizations and public accountability watchdogs they don't agree with as illegitimate or sponsored by Misha Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), has been institutionalized since taking power. Methodologically unsound polling by media organizations and other political parties has proliferated, as well as a complete lack of transparency regarding polling conducted by GD.

The dominance of media aligned with GD, and denunciations by successive GD leaders over nine years, has undermined the public understanding of polling and NGOs outside of a hyper partisan context. Vox populi surveys by media that only reflect the views of their specific program audiences or locations in which they are conducting them, typically using questions that

mirror their editorial perspective, further distort measurements of public opinion.

Bidzina Ivanishvili met with George Soros in December of 2012 and shortly thereafter, the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) sponsored a report, released in June, 2013, which provided conclusions and recommendations that NDI/CRRC and IRI adhere to, and should be an industry standard. Organizations should be transparent in their methodology and funding. Government and political parties that claim European aspirations should be more concerned with disinformation than dissent in order to further democracy and public policy.



Dr. Stefan Meister, *Head of office, Heinrich Boell Foundation, South Caucasus Office, Tbilisi*

Public opinion polls are an important tool for politicians, the media, analysts and civil society to assess the current mood and political positions of society. In many countries, polls, in the context of election campaigning, have become an instrument of manipulation of public opinion, rather than a tool to assess the democratic formation its citizens' will. Politicians and media outlets who use these important instruments for the manipulation of society are not interested in free and fair elections as their work discredits expertise and fuels disinformation. It is

important for polling organizations themselves to create, through transparency, trust in their work and to resist instrumentalization by others. Media education is crucial for dealing with social media and its role in manipulating public opinion as well as in assessing the quality of public opinion polls. Every citizen of Georgia should have the ability to check the sources of funding and the quality of the implementation of polls. The inflation proliferation of opinion polls in Georgia is a negative trend, because it both devalues them as an instrument of communication between society and political elites, and because further instrumentalization of polls will only lead to greater alienation from politics. Maybe there is a need for some agreed standards for the implementation of opinion polls, however, such frameworks are prone to manipulation. Therefore, it is up to the polling organizations to establish transparent rules, and it is up to society to check these standards constantly, and to invest in citizen's education so they are able to do so.



Dr. Nino Japaridze, Vice President, Edison Research

While there is no shortage of published opinion polls in Georgia, there is a large variance in their quality; in this regard, 2020 is similar to 2018. 2018 included polls with numbers that defied reality, and were clearly fabricated to promote an untrue narrative of public opinion. 2020 is no different: the Georgian public is bombarded with “imagined” realities. The evaluation of methodological soundness of pre-election polls by politicians is highly correlated with their own party ratings. Some politicians appear threatened by unbiased polls (Edison Research has conducted polls commissioned by Formula TV, as well as IRI and NDI) and resort to criticism rather than learning from the data. The best strategy to tackle political narratives designed to mislead the Georgian public is threefold: first, we must continue to conduct professional and independent public opinion polls. Second, we should strive to widely disseminate independent poll results and offer meaningful analysis. Third, people should just track the results of polls themselves over time and judge for themselves.

The creation of the Georgian Association of Public Opinion is underway. Hopefully, this association will become a place for fostering professionalization within the Georgian public

opinion research sector as well as a home for the creation of sound analytical insights. At Edison Research we are in the middle of our sixth Republic of Georgia pre-election poll, which will be released a couple of days before Georgia's 31 October Parliamentary Election. On Election Day, Edison's exit poll results will air on Formula News at 20:00 and 22:00; I hope many Georgians will watch.

Finally, Georgia has to learn to separate public opinion polling from private campaign strategy research and internal polling. They are and need to remain two separate things.



Dr. Iago Katchkatchishvili, *Professor of Sociology, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University*

Recently, public opinion polling in Georgia has become increasingly politicized in by a number of politically biased media outlets and research organizations. In this environment, what citizens should do is compare the results of different polls, critically assess them, and try to find some patterns and discrepancies. If one polls points in an entirely different direction than all other polls, citizens should disregard its results.

NDI and IRI ensure that the local organizations who implement polling procedures on the ground have appropriately transparent

information. However, polls produced by some media outlets say nothing about the local organizations which gather their primary sociological data.

Discrediting efforts aimed at public opinion polls undermine public trust toward such nationally representative surveys. Public distrust towards polling is deepening, but paradoxically, the public continues to provide a constant demand for opinion poll results. However, as the results of various polls are diametrically different, we see apathy towards polling grow.

In order to tackle this problem, a professional association should be created which would monitor the compliance of standards by different polling organizations in the country. Even though we do not have such as association in Georgia yet, with the help of USAID, US Ambassador Kelly Degnan, and Ilia State University, we will have one in the future.



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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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