



POLICY BRIEF

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Georgia's Switch to a Proportional Electoral System: How Should Political Parties Prepare for the Possibility of Coalition Governments?

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Executive Summary

Georgia's transition to a fully proportional electoral system creates a new set of dilemmas for Georgian political parties. In order to avoid the risk of instability, Georgian parties will have to engage in qualitatively different electoral campaigns, coalition negotiations, and show unity while maintaining their own policy profile. This policy brief urges Georgian political parties to start preparations immediately. Based on the analysis of the 2020 electoral campaign materials of the Georgian Dream and United National Movement parties uploaded onto their official YouTube channels, it can be seen that one in four campaign appeals were negative and more than half of those contained character attacks. Parties will need to refrain from such virulent attacks in order to maintain the prospect of future collaborations. Drawing on empirical data and cutting-edge research on coalition governments, this policy brief elaborates a package of recommendations as an early warning for Georgian political parties and other stakeholders.

Keywords: proportional elections; party politics; coalition politics; electoral campaigns; negative campaigning

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Introduction

In October 2024 Georgia will hold its next parliamentary election. This election will be special in the history of the country because Georgian voters will elect their 150 representatives through a proportional vote. Electoral reform has been a persistent challenge in the process of democratization for Georgia. Differences of opinions have snowballed into protracted political crises, for which the best illustration is the protests that started in June 2019 and led to a full-blown crisis defined by the Georgian Dream's (GD) failure to fulfill its promise of electoral reform and the opposition's boycott of the 2020 parliament (see Kakhishvili 2021). This particular crisis was especially troubling considering that the political parties were unable to achieve a consensus, and when the European Union brokered an agreement this did not prove to be useful. The inability or unwillingness of Georgian parties to achieve a compromise-based consensus, when it is necessary for the stability and advancement of the country, has received an increasing amount of attention from analysts in recent years (see Samkharadze 2022; Lebanidze 2021; Minesashvili 2021; Kakhishvili 2018).

However, the implications of this challenge will be exacerbated following the electoral reform. Proportional voting leads to the inevitable possibility of coalitions in multi-party systems. In Georgia, although the largest two political parties – Georgian Dream (GD) and United National Movement (UNM) – represent the main powerhouses of Georgian politics, smaller parties have still managed to gather about 25 percent of the votes, which amounts to 24 mandates out of 120 proportionally allocated seats in the parliament (Civil Georgia 2020). Considering that it is only natural for dissatisfaction with the ruling party among voters to mount as their terms in office are continually renewed, the need for a parliamentary coalition to form a government may arise even if the GD remains as the largest party. The possibility of coalitions requires the political parties to adjust their competition and campaign strategies to retain room for political maneuverability when it comes to finding coalition partners.

This policy brief builds on the premise that Georgian parties need to prepare themselves for the possibility of coalition government. Even though the elections are not coming up for a little over two years, the political parties should urgently start preparations for a different style of electoral campaigning so that they do not find themselves trapped in their own rhetoric. The following section gives an overview of the reasons political parties should run qualitatively different electoral campaigns when they expect a possibility of coalition governments. This is followed by analysis of the 2020 electoral campaign to show how the current practice differs from what it ought to be. The concluding section elaborates final remarks and provides recommendations for the various stakeholders.

Why does the possibility of a coalition government matter for Georgian parties now?

The tendency that proportional electoral systems favor multi-party systems emerged as conventional wisdom in the 1950s. This, in its turn, leads to a high likelihood of coalition governments. Because of coalition governments, opponents of proportional electoral systems including those in Georgia (see c'inc'aze 2020), often engage in fear-mongering about the potential for political instability, especially against the background of foreign threats. However, there is a mechanism that avoids such instabilities. Research on 420 cabinets in 23 countries across Europe between 1945 and 2015 has demonstrated that the risk of early cabinet termination in coalition governments is significantly lower if participating parties sign a coalition agreement prior to the formation of a government (Krauss 2018). Furthermore, the longer and more comprehensive or detailed the coalition agreement is, the lower the risk of premature government termination becomes (Krauss 2018). These findings suggest that should there be a need for coalition formation in Georgia, parties should engage in a negotiation process to draft a coalition agreement allocating portfolios to participating parties. The resulting coalition agreement can constrain cabinet ministers and ensure that participating parties do not lose their agency over policy-making and that tight mechanisms are in place for monitoring and control (Moury 2010). This, however, creates new dilemmas for Georgian political parties which require urgent attention before the elections take place.

Competition and criticism versus the chance of future collaboration

Firstly, on the one hand parties will need to continue competing against and criticizing each other but at the same time they will need to ensure that they do not “burn bridges” and that there is still a chance of future collaboration even among the fiercest competitors. “Burning bridges” will lead to instability and political crises. Therefore, Georgian political parties will need to act as mature and responsible European parties do. Research shows that in Austria, for example, coalition parties criticize each other with little restraint but they do refrain from burning bridges with potential partners by avoiding “virulent attacks” (Haselmayer and Jenny 2018). Political parties often have incentives to pursue negative campaigns to turn voters away from competitors. However, in proportional systems with a high likelihood of coalition governments, this strategy can be perilous for political stability (Haselmayer 2019). Therefore, one way for political parties to prepare for the transition to proportional voting is to pursue positive electoral campaigns. Georgian parties need to start this course of action immediately because their track record is not very promising – as shown below in section on the 2020 electoral campaign in Georgia.

Electoral benefits versus policy motivations

The second dilemma Georgian parties will face is the tradeoff between electoral benefits and policy motivations (Eichorst 2014). Essentially, this means that being in government, even if it is a coalition government, comes with returns in electoral terms but, on the other hand, coalitions require policy compromises to which political parties may not want to commit: such compromises have the potential to undermine a given party's chances of gaining electoral support (Plescia, Ecker, and Mayer 2022). Until now, when such dilemmas have arisen in Georgia, Georgian parties have repeatedly chosen an uncompromising approach. Most recent illustration of this is the parliamentary boycott after the 2020 elections. This will need to change. It is easy to see political competition as a zero-sum game – an individual vote that parties target is indivisible and only one party can get it. However, coalition agreements and the process of crafting them are key in this context. Power can be shared and portfolios within a cabinet can be allocated to more than one party. Research shows that parties do not tend to suffer electorally if during coalition design they do not compromise on the key policy issues important for their electorate (Plescia, Ecker, and Mayer 2022). Moreover, if a party establishes strong attachments with its core voter base, supporters will accept policy compromises (Plescia, Ecker, and Mayer 2022). The caveat is that Georgian parties, especially challengers, need to maintain a close ideological linkage with supporters. A recent research report has found that the GD is ideologically closest not only to its own voters compared to other parties, but also to the median voter (Kakhishvili et al 2021). Therefore, challenger parties, such as UNM, needs to get closer to their voters, but these linkages should go beyond personalized politics and clientelist networks and should take the form of programmatic or ideological connections.

Showing unity to govern versus maintaining own policy profile

Proportional electoral systems cause what has been labeled as “institutional friction” (Jones and Baumgartner 2005: 33) because proportional systems lead to coalition governments which are constrained in their pursuit of policy changes. This happens because the participating parties employ a range of control mechanisms to monitor their partners. Consequently, the coalition partners have to coordinate their activities with each other, make compromises, and show unity in order to be able to survive and function successfully (Sagarzazu and Klüver 2017). Showing unity, however, comes with caveats as the dividing line between the different ideological and policy profiles of partner parties is blurred. Therefore, it is equally necessary to maintain a distinct ideological identity. Research has shown that Georgian parties do offer voters differentiated policy options in their pre-election manifestos (Kakhishvili 2020) and that in the 2020 elections four distinct camps of political parties could be identified (Kakhishvili et al 2021). Georgian parties will need to sharpen these profiles so that they are able to maintain their individuality and not blend in with the coalition. Furthermore, this will be useful to make the transition from personal charismatic and clientelist linkages with voters, to programmatic ones. Programmatic linkage requires an alignment of parties and voters in terms of their policy preferences, which currently remains a challenge for Georgian parties to solve.

To sum up, the three dilemmas discussed here all arise from the need to form coalition governments, for which coalition agreements are an effective and well-tried instrument. However, to maintain integrity in the eye of the voter, Georgian parties need to avoid virulent

attacks against each other. In the example of the 2020 electoral campaign the next section analyzes the extent to which the two largest parties in Georgia employ such attacks.

How negative are electoral campaigns in Georgia?

To evaluate the extent to which electoral campaigns in Georgia are negative, it is necessary to establish a basic methodological framework starting from the definition of the term. There are a number of competing definitions of negative campaigning but this brief adopts the most established definition: any criticism of an opponent is an act of negative campaigning (Geer 2006). Essentially, this definition puts the key emphasis on individual campaign appeals and sets them apart in terms of their direction: if an appeal is directed at an opponent, it is negative, whereas if an appeal is directed at the own candidate or party, it is positive. Consequently, not all negativity is harmful for democracy: electoral competition is unimaginable without criticism. This is why there is an important difference to be made: negative campaigning can be of varied grades (Haselmayer 2019). This brief differentiates two types of negative appeals: issue attacks or criticism and character assassination attacks, which are directed at the opponent personally and not at their policy performance (see Walter 2014).

Measuring negative campaigning in the 2020 elections in Georgia

For empirical analysis, 57 videos were selected from the official YouTube channels of the GD and UNM, recorded and/or published during the two-month period of the official electoral campaign prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections. Of these videos, 47 were GD campaign material, while 10 videos were UNM material. This is a clear misbalance, but it is roughly in line with the campaign expenditures of the two parties. According to the Transparency International (2020) report, GD's campaign expenditure was about 3.26 times higher than that of the UNM, while advertising costs, which represented the largest category of costs for both parties, were 2.86 times higher for the GD than for the UNM.

The videos analyzed included campaign ads and speeches at party rallies. In total, the material amounted to over three hours of video footage. In each video, every sentence or quasi-sentence was coded as either a positive or a negative appeal (see Walter 2014 on coding procedures). The latter, however, was further differentiated into either an issue attack or character assassination attack. Overall, these procedures yielded a total of 1439 coded units, of which 1159 or 76 percent were positive and 24 percent were negative (see Table 1). From the negative appeals, 53 percent were character attacks while 47 percent were issue attacks.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the campaign materials analyzed

Party	Analyzed videos	Ads	Speeches	Total count of appeals	Count of positive appeals (%)	Count of negative appeals (%)
GD	47	36	11	1187	993 (84%)	194 (16%)
UNM	10	3	7	252	166 (66%)	86 (34%)

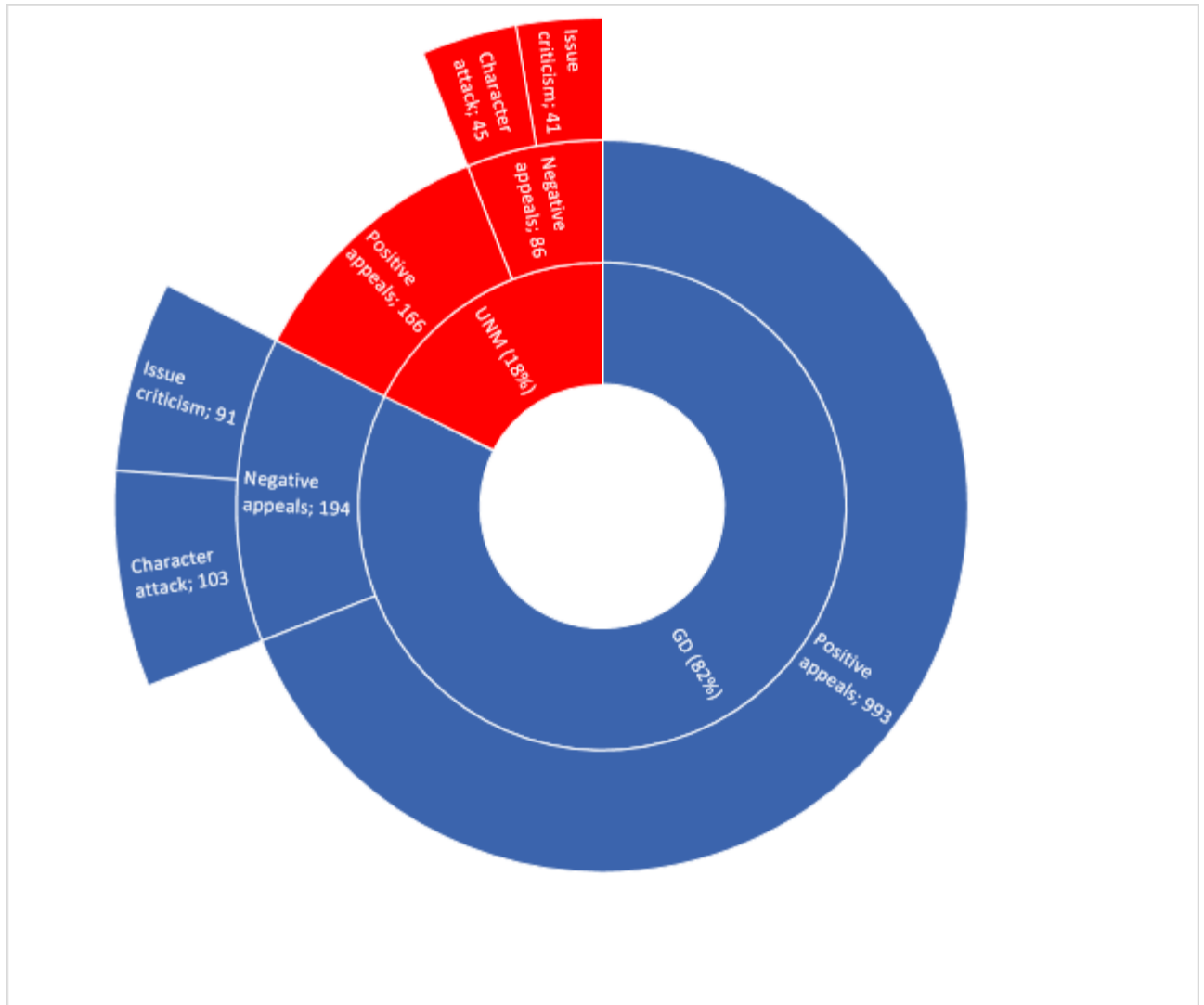
Source: Author's own analysis.

Patterns found in the data on negative campaigning

The data shows three important patterns. First, the challenger party – UNM – was more prone to use negative campaigning than the incumbent GD. This is in line with research findings in other countries as incumbents can more easily rely on emphasizing their performance during the past electoral cycle (see Haselmayer 2019). However, what the numbers do not capture is that the GD repeatedly compared the conditions in 2020 to those prior to 2012. This is indirect criticism of the opponent as the voter knows why the 2012 is used as a baseline. However, it is not a direct criticism and was not counted as negative campaigning.

The second pattern relates to the fact that both parties engaged in character assassination attacks more frequently than issue attacks. Throughout the data, the GD registered 103 counts of character assassination attacks and 91 issue attacks – all directed at the UNM. The respective numbers for the UNM are 45 and 41 – all directed at the GD (see Figure 1). This trend is most harmful for the chances of collaboration between the parties because the voter will question the integrity of any party that decides to enter a coalition government with an opponent whose character traits they have targeted with negative campaigns. On the other hand, it is understandable why Georgian parties are doing this – such attacks drive voters away from the opponent. Moreover, opinion polls have shown that prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections Georgian voters reported that the following three factors were the most important when deciding who to vote for: trust towards specific members of political parties – 36 percent; electoral platforms and promises – 25 percent; past performance of parties – 17 percent (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2019). These figures suggest that three out of four voters make their decisions based on these three factors. Conveniently, negative campaigning targets two of these three factors or 53 percent of voters: character attacks target voters' trust towards specific politicians, while issue attacks target opponent's past performance. It will present a dilemma in the future, however, as entering a coalition government with an opponent that a given party had actively tried to undermine is most likely to be seen as a lack of integrity in this party.

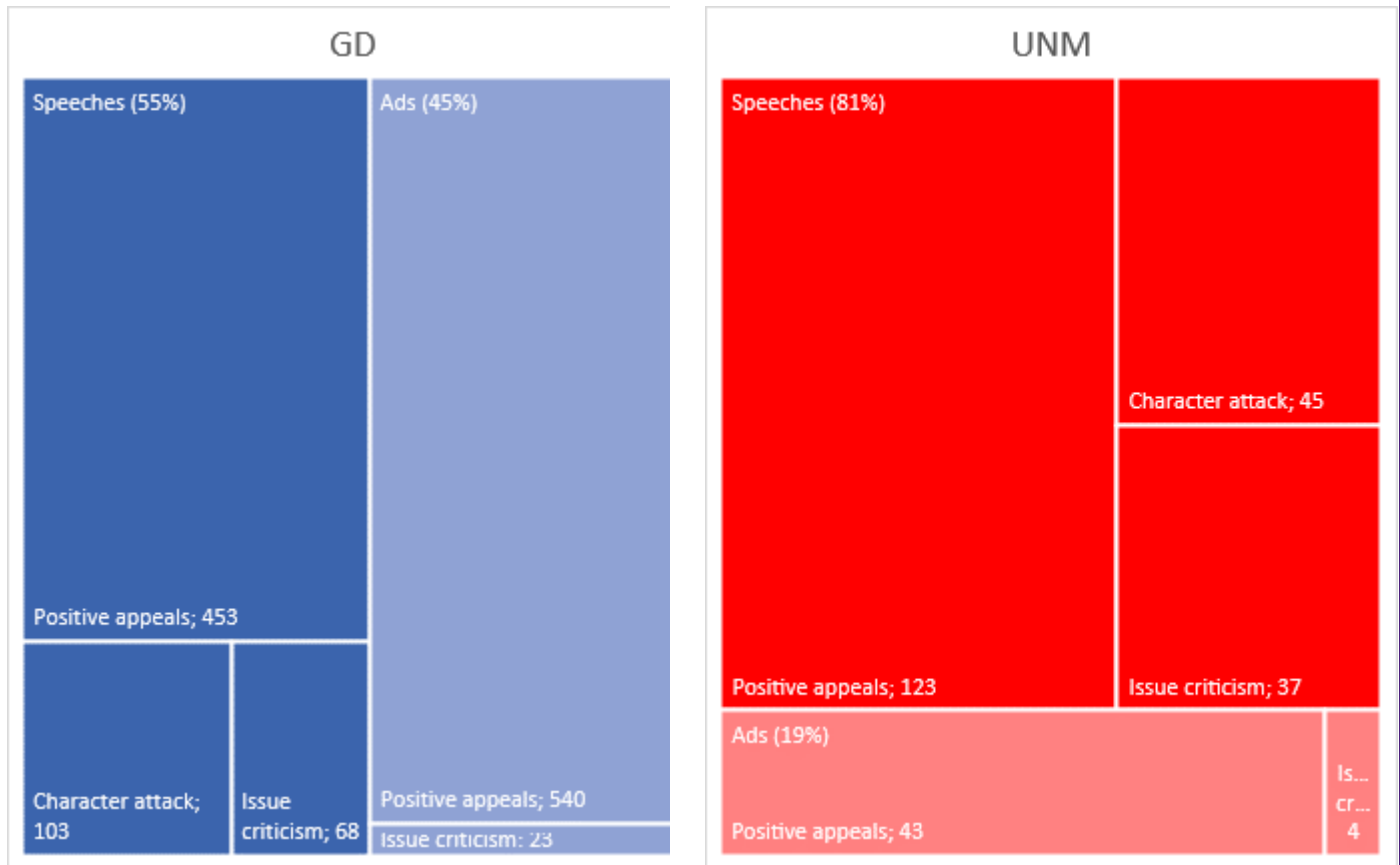
Figure 1. Structure of the GD and UNM appeals in the 2020 electoral campaign.



Source: Author's own analysis.

The final pattern in the data relates to the fact that the type of campaign materials influences the likelihood of employment of character attacks. All character attacks observed in the sampled data are found in speeches. Ads include only policy attacks and tend to be significantly more positive than speeches (see Figure 2). The GD ads include only 12 percent of all negative appeals found in GD materials, which makes the GD ads 96 percent positive. Similarly, the UNM ads include only 5 percent of negative appeals and 91 percent of all appeals in the UNM ads are positive. This means that speeches are more problematic in Georgian election campaigns than political ads. Therefore, a clear area of improvement can be identified.

Figure 2. Structure of GD and UNM electoral appeals by campaign ads and speeches.



Source: Author's own analysis.

To sum up, it has to be emphasized that the campaign materials analyzed were created and distributed against a background in which 40 political parties signed a Code of Conduct for electoral competition aimed at ensuring they follow ethical norms and respect opponents and voters (Georgian Institute of Politics 2021). This means that in 2020 political parties should then have had increased awareness of ethical principles compared to prior campaigns. However, the Code of Conduct did not prevent the GD and UNM from employing character assassination attacks as an instrument of negative campaigning. Continuing such practice is likely to jeopardize future possibilities of fruitful coalition talks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Georgia's switch to a fully proportional electoral system from 2024 poses a challenge for the political parties as they are going to face dilemmas for which they have no experience. The Georgian parties will have to achieve a delicate balance between competition and criticism on the one hand, and the prospects of future collaboration on the other. They will find themselves on a seesaw between electoral benefits and policy motivations. Finally, once in a coalition government Georgian parties will have to walk a fine line between showing unity and maintaining their own ideological identity. To achieve this, one of the most powerful mechanisms for parties will be coalition agreements made prior the formation of coalition governments. However, data shows that the level of negativity of the electoral campaigns pursued by Georgian parties is high, which means that should they enter coalition talks, voters are likely to lose respect for their integrity. Therefore, a set of recommendations are given below that could help Georgian parties better prepare for the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2024.

For all political parties in Georgia

- **Submit to the ethical principles elaborated in the Code of Conduct** for the 2020 parliamentary elections and use these principles as a guideline during electoral campaigns. This will establish a respectful but competitive environment before elections.
- **Refrain from using character assassination attacks against opponents** because such practices threaten the possibility of collaboration and coalition governments. Avoiding character attacks would reduce the level of radical political rhetoric and increase the possibility of smooth coalition talks more likely. Entering a coalition with an opponent does not have to compromise integrity of any political party.
- **Intensify efforts to create a programmatic linkage with voters** – such a bond will be lasting and make voting behavior more predictable. In other words, political parties would be able to create permanent support bases, which would not be connected to individual political leaders. This could happen by repeatedly prioritizing policy problems and offering voters solutions.
- **Provide voters with positive appeals**, which offer solutions to problems that are important to them. Such practices will ensure that during the electoral campaign political agendas are positive. This will also help identify the salient issues that any given party would not want to compromise during potential coalition negotiations.
- **Cease clientelistic practices** such as creating an elaborate network of local coordinators to ensure voter mobilization and/or suppression. Such practices are

extremely costly and a cheaper and more stable alternative is a programmatic linkage based on a policy offer by the party responding to the preferences of the voter.

For think-tanks, media, and other civil society organizations

- **Monitor the implementation of the Code of Conduct by individual parties** to ensure that violations are uncovered and condemned.
- **Monitor the rhetoric of political parties and candidates** to identify the use of character assassination attacks and hold the respective political actors accountable for employing this as an instrument of electoral competition.
- **Analyze and publicize programmes political parties are advocating** in order to help voters identify their preferred policy and respective political party choices prior to the elections.

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