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Electoral Clientelism: A Key Barrier for Fair and Competitive Elections in Georgia

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Executive Summary

How are elections won in Georgia? Is it charismatic political leaders or policy debates that play a decisive role? This policy brief investigates the phenomenon of electoral clientelism in Georgia, which is a form of transactional politics. In other words, the exchange of tangible personal benefits provided by political parties for political support usually facilitated by electoral brokers. Although clientelism and the activities of brokers represent an open secret in Georgian elections, analysis of clientelism in Georgia has been rather lacking. This brief argues that electoral clientelism plays a crucial role in winning elections in Georgia, which makes it an important challenge for the development of Georgian democracy, and one that requires urgent attention in the context of the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections.

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Introduction

The 2024 parliamentary election in Georgia marks an important milestone for the development of democracy in the country for three main reasons. It will be the first time that all members of parliament are elected using a proportional system (albeit with a 5% electoral threshold) apart from the 2004 elections following the Rose Revolution. Eliminating the single-member plurality, first-past-the-post, constituencies (known in Georgia as the “majoritarian” system) is likely to contribute to less personalization of linkages between voters and parties. Additionally, for the first time, voting will happen using electronic technology, which is expected to increase trust in the vote. Finally, it will be the first election since the European Union granted Georgia candidate status. Therefore, the vote and pre-election developments will be watched closely by all international partners of Georgia. If Tbilisi aims to advance to accession negotiations swiftly, it needs to meet the necessary conditions and give the European Commission solid ground to believe in the future of Georgian democracy.

In this context, every barrier to free, fair, and competitive elections becomes perilous. Electoral clientelism is among these perils. Political parties with sufficient administrative and financial resources to cultivate clientelistic networks prior to elections or over time between elections have an unfair advantage. They establish a type of linkage with voters that is based on providing private goods in exchange for their votes. This violates one of the key conditions for democratic elections: a level playing field among the competitors. Furthermore, clientelism usually works well in underdeveloped societies, where voters find that the marginal utility of small material gifts is high and outweighs the importance of values related to democracy. This creates a condition in which ruling parties have an incentive to keep voters poor to maintain the system of clientelism. However, this creates a trap for the political leadership as the increasing dissatisfaction of voters will eventually result in threat to the government’s security of tenure. Consequently, clientelism is a dangerous phenomenon even for ruling parties who benefit from it the most. Therefore, the issue of clientelism needs to be addressed immediately and comprehensively by those who wish to advance the cause of Georgian democracy.

This policy brief focuses on three aspects of clientelism. Firstly, the policy brief assesses under what conditions clientelism works in Georgia. This is followed by a description of the structure of clientelist networks and their operation. These analyses allow us to understand the underlying mechanisms and contextual factors that incentivize political parties to engage in clientelist practices. Finally, the brief investigates the consequences of clientelism for democratic elections in Georgia and long-term stability in party politics. Consequently, the brief shows that clientelism is a problem for Georgian political parties and competition between them, which is a foundation for stable

democracy. Based on the analysis, the concluding section of the policy brief presents a set of recommendations on how to eliminate clientelism and what Georgian political parties should pursue as a healthy alternative to clientelist strategies of competition.

Under What Conditions Does Clientelism Work in Georgia?

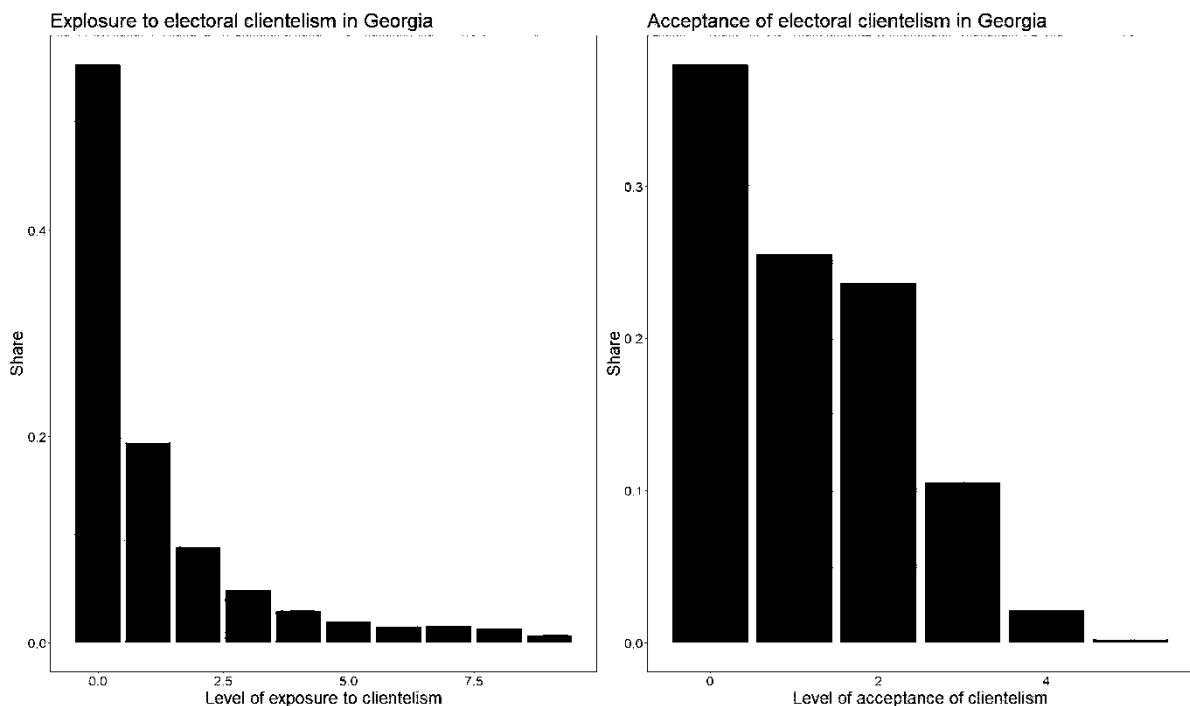
Clientelism is a well-documented phenomenon ubiquitous in new democracies and hybrid regimes and is even present in established democracies (see Kitschelt and Kselman 2013; Yıldırım and Kitschelt 2020). It can take various forms, but the simplest form is vote-buying. Furthermore, transactions between parties and voters can have either a positive or negative nature. Positive transactions may include provision of money, small gifts, and access to employment or social services such as healthcare and housing. These are conditional practices, and the targeted private benefits are conditional on the voter's political support. Negative transactions, on the other hand, include limiting or threatening to limit access to employment or social services, including acts or threats of violence and psychological pressure. There is a pattern in terms of how these forms of clientelism are used in Georgia and what kind of reactions they invoke among voters.

Electoral clientelism requires specific socio-economic and political conditions to work. Scholarly literature on the topic is diverse but this brief examines three sets of factors influencing clientelism. Firstly, socio-economic conditions are important – voters of lower social class are more likely to value the marginal utility of even small gifts (see Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes et al. 2013). Secondly, voters respond to different forms of clientelism differently with positive forms punished less compared to negative forms (see Gherghina and Saikkonen 2023; Mares and Visconti 2020). Finally, the literature predicts that the extent to which clientelist practices are repeated over and over again is important, as parties and voters can then build trust with each other that they each deliver on their promises (see Gherghina and Tap 2022; Yıldırım and Kitschelt 2020).

Data on clientelism in Georgia is limited. However, there is a publicly available, nationwide, representative survey on election-related processes, commissioned by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and implemented by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRG Georgia). The survey was conducted in 2021 and asked respondents about how elections are conducted in Georgia. The survey can be used to measure to what extent voters in Georgia are exposed to electoral clientelism and to what extent they tolerate it.

In terms of exposure to clientelism, the survey (see CRRC Georgia 2021) asks respondents nine questions, while in terms of acceptance of clientelism, the survey includes six questions. All these questions are about different forms of clientelism. The data shows, that almost 44 percent of Georgian voters have witnessed at least one form of clientelist practice and 62 percent of voters deem at least one form of clientelism to be acceptable political behavior (see the distribution in Figure 1). These figures are extremely high. For example, in Romania, where clientelism is believed to be widespread, only about a third of respondents report witnessing at least one form of clientelism, and about the same share of respondents tolerate it (Gherghina and Lutai 2024). Consequently, the scale of the problem in Georgia is rather large.

Figure 1. Degrees of exposure to and acceptance of clientelism in Georgia.



Source: Author's illustration based on CRRC Georgia (2021).

Clientelism is notoriously difficult to explain. This is true for Georgia too. The data exhibits some counterintuitive patterns. When exploring what factors influence exposure to clientelism, the regression analysis helps draw three conclusions (see Table 1 in the appendix for the detailed results). The first finding is that different sets of factors are statistically significantly associated with positive forms of vote-buying, such as the provision of gifts to voters, and negative forms of vote-buying, such as voter intimidation. The second finding shows this difference. Being from a rural area, as opposed

to living in the capital, increases the likelihood of being exposed to positive vote-buying by over 30 percent. A similar effect is observed for unemployed voters who are over 32 percent more likely to report that they have witnessed positive vote-buying. On the other hand, negative vote-buying is more likely to be reported by voters who live in Tbilisi compared to other urban areas, as are those who have completed higher education. The increase in likelihood is over 16 percent in each case. The third finding is that wealthier voters in Georgia tend to be more likely to report both forms of vote-buying. This finding is counterintuitive for positive vote-buying but not so much for negative vote-buying. With the latter, it seems that Georgian parties target voters who live in the capital, have a university degree and are wealthier. With positive vote-buying, parties seem to target rural and unemployed voters but also those who tend to be wealthier. Therefore, here the profile of voters is not as consistent as with the other form of clientelism.

On the other hand, previous exposure to clientelism decreases the degree of acceptance of clientelism among Georgian voters (see Table 2 in the appendix for the detailed results). The more incidences of clientelism voters witness, the more they tend to reject clientelism. For example, exposure to each form of positive vote-buying decreases the likelihood of tolerance towards clientelism by over 8 percent, while the same figure for exposure to negative vote-buying is almost 14 percent. Therefore, it can be concluded that Georgian voters react to pressure and threats more negatively. This finding runs counter to the idea of clientelism as a trust-building process between parties and voters in which repetition increases acceptance due to mutual trust.

From these results three conclusions can be drawn about clientelism in Georgia. Firstly, socio-economic conditions matter, as voters in Tbilisi with a university degree are more likely to experience intimidation from political parties, while unemployed voters in rural areas are more likely to receive gifts from parties. Secondly, voters' previous experience of clientelism makes them significantly less likely to tolerate such practices. Finally, voters' experience of negative vote-buying makes them less likely to tolerate clientelism compared to exposure to positive vote-buying.

How Does Clientelism Operate in Georgia?

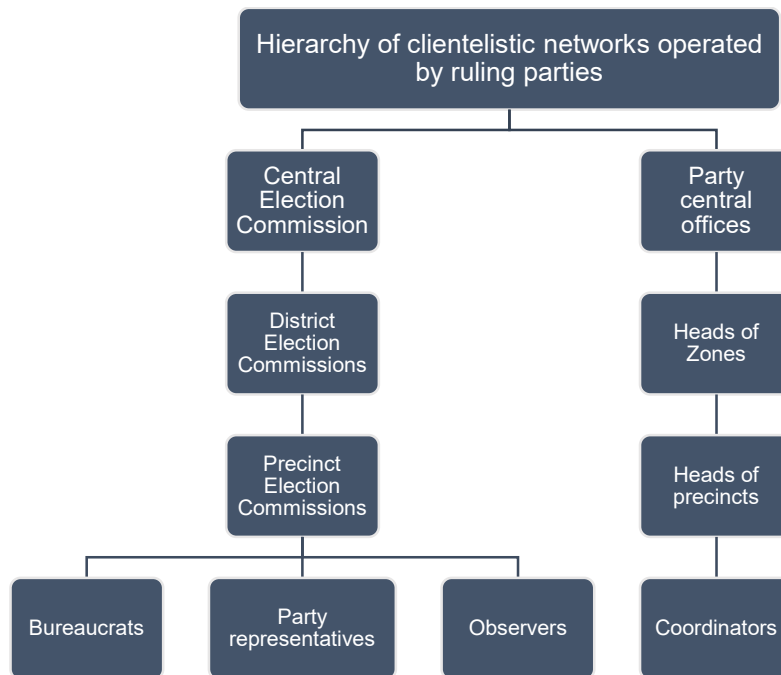
Clientelist transactions between parties and voters are usually facilitated by electoral brokers.² Brokers are important actors who have high social capital in their immediate environment and can interact with voters with ease. They collect information about voter preferences and needs and transfer it to the party. In return, they organize the distribution of targeted benefits to voters who promise political support. For this to work, however, on the scale shown with the quantitative data above, it is necessary to operate vast networks of brokers. This is exactly what Georgian parties strive to do.

It is documented that clientelist networks are maintained by government as well as opposition parties in Georgia. Considering the necessary resources, however, smaller parties do not have the “luxury” of doing so, whereas the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party operates the largest network, which has unique characteristics because it controls state administrative bureaucratic resources. Therefore, this policy brief describes this largest and most comprehensive clientelist network.

The structure of the informal clientelist network managed by GD closely resembles the structure of the Central Election Commission (CEC) (see Figure 2), which was divided into 73 districts covering almost 3,800 precincts in 2020. Precinct Election Commissions (PEC) are the unit of interest as they are the ones conducting elections on the ground. Similarly, the GD informal party network has precinct level brokers who conduct electoral campaigns by going door-to-door in their own neighbourhoods. These people include Coordinators – people Georgian voters are most familiar with, and Precinct Heads, who manage the coordinators. Additionally, several precincts form a zone, and each zone has a Zone Head who manages the Precinct Heads. GD acknowledges that they maintained a network of about 2,000 coordinators during the 2020 parliamentary elections paying them a combined total of 600,000 GEL as compensation for their work (see Transparency International Georgia 2021). However, allegedly the number of coordinators is much higher: depending on the precinct, there can often be 5-6 and, in crucial areas for the GD, up to 20 coordinators in a precinct. Even using conservative assumptions, the cost of maintaining the network of coordinators must be 8 to 10 times higher than the official figure.

² This section of the policy brief is based on a fieldwork conducted by the author in 2021.

Figure 2. Structure of clientelistic networks operated by ruling parties.



Source: Author's own research.

The goal for the informal party network is to penetrate the formal bureaucracy of the CEC and have loyal people appointed at the level of PEC. These loyal people will be able to facilitate a form of voter fraud called so-called carousel voting – in which an empty ballot paper is taken outside the polling station, filled out, and given to a voter, forcing them to vote for a specific party. This is practiced usually by ruling parties as the opposition lacks the degree of penetration into the bureaucracy of the CEC necessary for the practice. For example, in 2021, Netgazeti reported a case of a member of a PEC in Kutaisi claiming she was pressured by GD representatives to allow a voter not on the list to get a ballot paper.

It must be noted, however, that Georgia is planning to introduce electronic voting technology, which has clear benefits for efficiency and the elimination of human error. According to the CEC, in the 2024 elections, 2,262 precincts including all precincts in Tbilisi will use electronic technologies while 768 precincts will conduct the vote using traditional procedures (see Central Election Commission of Georgia 2024). Considering that Georgia will use a voter-verified paper audit trail method, which leaves paper record that can be easily audited, there will still be a paper ballot, which could in theory be taken outside the polling station. It will probably be more difficult to do so without damaging the ballot and ensuring it remains readable for the voting machine. How this will affect carousel voting remains to be seen.

Although this description refers to ruling parties, opposition parties also operate clientelist networks. However, in these cases, the networks do not have influence over the CEC bureaucratic apparatus and are not nearly as extensive due to the lack of financial resources. Therefore, the goal of opposition parties is more reminiscent of US-style canvassing, albeit mediated through the informal social capital of electoral brokers. Consequently, the returns of clientelism are more limited for opposition parties but they still engage in the practice and even exhibit predatory behavior, sometimes poaching successful electoral brokers from other parties by offering higher compensation. However, brokers associated with opposition parties often experience psychological violence and suffer from discrimination at the hands of state bureaucracies (see Urchukhishvili 2023).

Furthermore, the administrative resources of the ruling party are not limited to the CEC bureaucracy. According to GeoStat, in 2022, 308,000 people were employed in publicly owned entities, while the number of people receiving an old age pension was 808,300 (see GeoStat 2023a; 2023b). These two groups combined exceed a million people and represent about 31.8 percent of the total number of voters in Georgia – almost every third voter (in 2020, there were a little over 3.5 million voters according to CEC (2020)). This makes it extremely difficult for opposition parties to compete with the GD.

To sum up, this analysis shows four main points regarding how clientelism works in Georgia. First, the ruling party can penetrate the electoral administration and the bureaucratic apparatus that needs to remain neutral and unbiased in democratic and competitive elections. Second, parties can anticipate voter behaviour and can accordingly provide positive and/or negative incentives to them to reward or punish this behaviour. Third, Georgian parties compete to gain access to a better network of brokers with higher social capital. Finally, clientelism in Georgia provides opportunities for electoral fraud.

What are the Consequences of Clientelism for Party Politics in Georgia?

Electoral clientelism, especially vote-buying practices, undermines fair and competitive elections by violating the principle of a level playing field. Therefore, clientelist transactions between parties and voters should be urgently eliminated. Instead, political parties must rely on their offer of public goods to attract voters and win their political support. Clientelism has three main negative effects that Georgian parties need to consider: high costs, high uncertainty, and the double contingency problem

of clientelism. These effects are directly related to the operations of those parties that engage in clientelist practices and demonstrate that parties will benefit from eliminating such practices. This in its own turn, however, will contribute to healthier competition in the party system and therefore to the advancement of Georgian democracy.

The first negative effect of electoral clientelism on party politics is that clientelism is costly for political parties. It requires immense financial, organizational, and human resources. Clientelism turns political competition into a race of the rich. This gives ruling parties an unfair advantage as they control large administrative resources. As shown above, ruling parties can penetrate the bureaucratic apparatus and maintain a double hierarchy of clientelist networks that runs in parallel to official structures. They have sufficient capacity (as reported by GD) to manage thousands if not tens of thousands of electoral brokers. Under clientelist competition, however, even ruling parties are not immune. For example, in the 2012 parliamentary elections, a large number of the then ruling UNM party's electoral brokers defected from their patron party as it became extremely unpopular with the majority of voters to actively support the UNM. Furthermore, there was a challenger that had sufficient resources to parallel the UNM's capacity. Consequently, the UNM lost votes as a result of the loss of a significant part of its clientelist network. Therefore, offering public goods to win voters' support is significantly cheaper for political parties. Public goods are the result of policies that serve voter interests and solve problems that concern voters. Instead of employing slogan-like language in pre-election promises, political parties need to have comprehensive policy documents elaborated in advance, covering all domains of public policy and to use these documents as guidebooks for electoral campaigning. This will enable political debates to evolve beyond affectively polarized mudslinging to issue-based competition. To this end, it is critically important to maintain permanent engagement with voters, even during times when there are no elections approaching. Although maintaining offices across the whole of Georgia may be too costly for less wealthy parties, attracting enthusiastic activists through value-based ideological party-voter linkages can help smaller parties somewhat compensate for their lack of material resources.

The second negative effect of clientelism is related to uncertainty. Clientelism is usually used by political parties to increase certainty over the electoral outcome, but it is not very straightforward. Essentially, clientelism relies on the goodwill of voters to deliver on their promise of voting for a party that provided them with private benefits. However, it is virtually impossible to monitor voters' behaviour. Therefore, parties must mostly operate on the assumption that voters will behave as promised until the end of the voting day. This uncertainty of clientelist transaction leads parties to employ practices of electoral fraud and voter pressure. For example, the carousel vote system of

electoral fraud is intended to ensure that voters who promise their political support in exchange for personal benefits deliver on their promise. Consequently, clientelism incentivizes illicit behaviour that harms not only Georgian democracy but also trust between voters and parties. As shown in the survey data above, voters who experience such negative forms of clientelism are more likely to resent these practices. Therefore, attempts to monitor voting behaviour, without which parties can never be sure that voters do what they promise, increases voter dissatisfaction. Therefore, to avoid such negative reactions from voters and potential punishment from them, parties need to stop practicing clientelism.

Finally, the third main negative effect of clientelism for political parties is that clientelist party-voter linkages are unstable in the long-term. Clientelism relies on brokers who facilitate transactional politics between parties and voters. Brokers are prone to defection given that they usually work for a party in exchange for personal benefits and not necessarily because they believe it is the right thing to do. Therefore, vast networks of brokers, without whom clientelism cannot work, can collapse if a new challenger makes a more appealing offer. Furthermore, brokers can act independently or out of self-interest, which can create further complications for political parties. For example, electoral brokers may not work as hard to mobilize voters if they anticipate a second round of elections because in this scenario they will be compensated twice instead of once. Therefore, the future of political parties will be significantly more stable if they attract votes based on their policy offers and form programmatic linkages with their supporters.

Overall, clientelism is associated with high risks for political parties. The costs of such practices are extremely high especially compared to programmatic strategies of competition, and new challengers with more resources can oust the incumbent. Furthermore, it is difficult to monitor the behaviour of voters and brokers and to ensure that they uphold their end of the transaction. Therefore, voters and brokers can defect and punish any political party engaged in clientelism. This means that parties should be wary of clientelism and work more intensively to establish programmatic linkages with voters.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This brief has analyzed electoral clientelism in Georgia and demonstrated that clientelism is rather widespread in Georgia. Parties use positive forms of clientelism, such as gifts and money, with less wealthy voters such as the rural and unemployed population, while they reserve negative forms of

clientelism, such as voter pressure and intimidation, for more educated voters from the capital. Furthermore, voters react to clientelism negatively, but they resent coercive practices even more than small gifts. Political parties, especially the ruling GD, operate vast clientelist networks, which in the case of the ruling party, penetrates the election administration and can facilitate electoral fraud. Brokers are crucial to the execution of transactional politics and exchange information and benefits between parties and voters. However, although this is potentially a high-reward practice, it is one connected to high risks. High financial costs, the difficulty of monitoring voting behavior, and the potential for broker defection are all among the key negative effects of clientelism on parties that engage in it. Therefore, this brief offers a set of recommendations to various stakeholders to eliminate electoral clientelism in Georgia.

To all political parties in Georgia

- **Cease clientelistic practices** – these practices are extremely costly, incentivize electoral fraud, risk defection, inspire resentment among voters, and create an uneven playing field among competing parties. A much cheaper and more stable alternative is the development of programmatic linkages with voters based on parties responding to voter preferences and offering a set of appealing policies.
- **Formalize all transactions** – transactions that happen between parties and electoral brokers are informal and go largely unreported. Parties need to formalize these transactions by signing contracts with coordinators and transferring compensation through the banking system rather than through cash payments.
- **Intensify efforts to create programmatic linkages with voters** – such linkages are more stable in the long-term and make voting behavior more predictable. It helps political parties form a permanent support base, which does not require electoral brokers or charismatic leaders for mobilization. This is achievable through two main mechanisms. Firstly, parties need to consistently prioritize offering solutions to policy problems that voters deem significant. Secondly, parties need to keep voters actively engaged not only during pre-election campaigns but also in the time between elections.
- **Shape your own ideological profile** – inconsistent ideological profiles, such as parties that make mutually exclusive promises such as rises in social welfare benefits alongside cuts to government spending, make it difficult for voters and other stakeholders to predict the actual policies a party will implement if it comes to power. Instead, parties need to make an

institutional choice about their ideological profile and create policy promises in line with this profile. This will help voters form a programmatic attachment with a party.

To think-tanks, media, and other civil society organizations in Georgia

- **Monitor and study electoral clientelism in Georgia** – apart from a few exceptions, there have been no studies conducted about clientelism in Georgia, which remains an open secret in Georgian elections. Understanding the phenomenon and identifying points of intervention to either transform these socio-political practices or eliminate them is a crucial foundation for success.
- **Educate lowest-level CEC bureaucrats about their rights** – often the lowest level bureaucrats from the election administration are the key to success and failure of any practice. These people who conduct elections on the ground often lack information about how they can react to illicit practices they witness, whether it be electoral fraud or pressure and the threat of violence.
- **Provide tailored legal assistance for coordinators** – party-employed coordinators often endure pressure and humiliation and lack instruments to protect their own rights. Considering that their work goes unrecognized, their rights may be violated not only by their opponents, but also by their own party which may refuse them their promised compensation. If parties do not refrain from relying on the work of coordinators, empowering these people as independent actors could hold the key to combating the practice of electoral clientelism.
- **Analyze and publicize pre-election party programmes** – focusing on pre-election party programmes would contribute to the exchange of information between parties and voters and also foster the proliferation of issue-based political debates. More public analysis of the various policies offered by parties could help voters identify their preferred policy options and help them decide which political party most deserves their vote on a programmatic basis.
- **Continue the practice of providing voters with voting advice applications (VAA)** – VAAs are an important tool for voters to learn about their own preferences and those of various political parties. Considering the previous success of such applications, the practice should continue, which can also provide a tool for monitoring changes in the policy offers of individual parties over time.

To the international partners of Georgia

- **Promote the transfer of party-political know-how** – Georgian parties often lack institutionalization of various procedures, including those connected to designing and campaigning on a policy package before elections. There is a need for a transfer of knowledge to Georgian political parties on how to collect information about voter preferences, how be responsive to them, how to create a feasible policy offer, and how to connect with voters through such programmes. This is especially true for those parties which lack material resources compared to the ruling party.
- **Support election-related projects** – The more knowledge is created about election-related processes in Georgia, the easier it will be to generate ideas about solving the key challenges in Georgian elections. Therefore, it is crucial to support projects that aim to, for example, provide legal services to coordinators and those who experience pressure in pre-election contexts; create Voting Advice Applications to make party programmes more transparent and accessible for voters; conduct fundamental research about elections in Georgia; and promote participation of younger generations in elections.
- **Hold Georgian parties involved in clientelism accountable** – ensuring political parties' accountability and responsiveness to voter preferences is not an easy task. There are few opportunities for conditionality, while coercion and pressure can be counterproductive and lead to resentment. Therefore, finding a balance between effective measures that do not make the situation worse is crucial. One such measure could be persuasion of individual decision-makers within party structures who can impact party behaviour. In this scenario, it is possible to apply pressure on individual leaders to push them to eliminate clientelism practices.

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Appendix

Table 1. Regression analysis to explain the degree of exposure to electoral clientelism in Georgia.

	Variables	Aggregated	Positive vote- buying	Negative vote-buying
Main independent variables	Settlement type (urban)	0.905 (0.085)	1.026 (0.336)	0.836* (0.077)
	Settlement type (rural area)	1.038 (0.091)	1.305* (0.388)	0.899 (0.085)
	Higher Education	1.145+ (0.075)	1.089 (0.293)	1.169* (1.021)
	Unemployed	1.180* (0.080)	1.325* (0.347)	1.149+ (0.074)
	Wealth	1.119*** (0.017)	1.103*** (0.082)	1.122*** (0.016)
Control variables	Ethnic minorities	0.682* (0.173)	0.788 (1.051)	0.580** (0.175)
	Voted in the last legislative elections	1.350** (0.102)	1.104 (0.489)	1.399*** (0.094)
	Female	0.807** (0.076)	0.722** (0.360)	0.827** (0.071)
	Age	0.997 (0.002)	0.992* (0.009)	0.899 (0.002)
	Intercept	0.502*** (0.203)	0.201*** (0.988)	0.304*** (0.187)

Note: Results of negative binomial and poisson regression models. All models report incidence rate ratios (IRR) with robust standard errors in parentheses. Reference category for the settlement type variable is the capital.

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Table 2. Regression analysis to explain tolerance towards electoral clientelism in Georgia.

Hypotheses	Variables	
Main independent variables	Exposure to positive vote-buying	0.915* (0.035)
	Exposure to negative vote-buying	0.863*** (0.024)
Control variables	Preference for pre-election promises when voting	1.144** (0.041)
	Settlement type (urban)	1.061 (0.047)
	Settlement type (rural area)	1.018 (0.050)
	Higher education	1.033 (0.041)
	Unemployed	0.971 (0.043)
	Wealth	1.025** (0.008)
	Ethnic minorities	1.298*** (0.062)
	Voted in the last legislative elections	1.123* (0.055)
	Female	0.972 (0.041)
	Age	1.001 (0.001)
Intercept	0.901 (0.102)	

Note: Results of negative binomial regression. The model reports incidence rate ratios with robust standard errors in parentheses. Reference category for settlement type is the capital.

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.



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