



“Missing Votes” and How to Find Them: Increasing Engagement of Georgian Emigrant Voters

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Executive Summary

The rising level of emigration from Georgia presents a significant challenge for electoral participation. Lower turnout rates among emigrants, attributed to bureaucratic and geographical barriers, contribute to the substantial number of "missing votes". With an estimated 18% of the eligible voters residing abroad, these votes could be pivotal in diversifying Georgia's political landscape and breaking the one-party dominance. Hence, engagement with the diaspora is gaining more and more prominence in the agenda of Georgian political parties, especially the opposition. This policy brief, following the work of Giesing and Schikora (2023), examines the voting pattern of Georgian emigrants in the last three national elections and argues that "missing votes" pose challenges to the representation and political pluralism of Georgian democracy. Addressing these challenges through policy reforms, increased engagement, and international collaboration can ensure a more inclusive electoral process, reflecting the true political preferences of all Georgian citizens, including those abroad.

Key Words: Elections, Emigrants, Democracy, Representation

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Introduction

With their increasing international mobility and the importance of their repatriated financial transfers to the economy of Georgia, the need to facilitate and support the wider engagement of emigrants into national elections becomes ever more urgent. Statistics suggest that the wave of emigration² from Georgia is continuing to rise (Arabuli 2023), and this is leading to increases in the share that remittances contribute to the country's overall GDP. Data shows that in 2022 the share of the money transferred by emigrants had increased to almost 16% of the country's GDP (Varadashvili 2023). What is even more interesting is that on the basis of the experience of Central and Eastern European countries (CEE), as Georgia advances on its European integration path, the issue of immigration and the position of citizens living outside their country of origin is going to become even more apparent. Since the 2004-2007 enlargement of the European Union, the migration rate from the CEE states varies from 5% (the Czech Republic), 12.5% (Poland), to almost 20% (Lithuania) of the population living abroad (Giesing and Schikora 2023, 2; Szulecki et al. 2022, 1).

Voting in the national elections is a fundamental right of every citizen and hence it should be the priority of the relevant stakeholders in Georgia to work on addressing challenges that are becoming more dire with every coming year. This policy brief, following the work of Giesing and Schikora (2023), examines why the inclusion of emigrant voters in the election process could be decisive for strengthening liberal democracy in Georgia and gives recommendations to relevant stakeholders on how to address the issue of the “missing votes”.

“Missing Votes” and Why They Matter?

As Georgia moves closer to European Union membership, the experience of CEE countries becomes especially relevant for the policymakers in Tbilisi. As in those states that joined the European Union in 2004, it has led to a dramatic increase in emigration to the Western, economically more well-off, EU members. According to Giesing and Schikora (2023) mass emigration from Poland after 2004 led to the increase in the share of votes for right-wing parties, as emigrant's left-leaning votes became “missing votes”. Similarly, Szulecki et al. (2023) have demonstrated that emigrant voters in CEE countries tend to support more liberal and economically right-leaning parties than the voters in their

² Except 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted travel

home countries. The case of Moldova also illustrates the role emigrants could play in national elections. In the 2020 presidential elections, pro-reform and pro-EU Maia Sandu's victory against pro-Russian incumbent Dodon was largely due to the diaspora's votes (Hernandez 2020).

To study whether those “missing votes” have an impact on election outcomes in emigrants' countries of origin, Giesing and Schikora (2023, 4) argue that there are at least three conditions that need to be in place. These conditions are: 1. emigrants need to be selected in terms of political preferences; 2. emigrants need to have lower turnout rates in elections in their origin country compared to a hypothetical scenario in which they did not emigrate; and 3. the number of emigrants needs to be sizeable compared to the home country population in order to have a substantial effect.

This policy brief applies this model to the Georgian emigrant voters and illustrates that these three conditions are present in this case, more specifically, as will be demonstrated, Georgian emigrants who vote abroad have very strong political preferences and these are different to the trends among the voters in Georgia itself. Furthermore, the turnout, due to some administrative, bureaucratic or geographical barriers, is considerably lower abroad than in their country of origin (CESKO 2016, 2018, 2020), leading to the substantial size of “missing votes”. These “missing votes” could play decisive roles in breaking the vicious circle of one-party dominance and create preconditions for a long-awaited multiparty coalition government in Georgia. And lastly, official statistics show that net immigration is considerably negative and continues to be on the rise (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024). Some estimates even suggest that the number of voters abroad could reach almost 18% of all those eligible to vote (Tsutskiridze 2024). This also explains why engaging with the diaspora and the issue of facilitating voting process abroad have started to gain more prominence in the agenda of Georgian political parties. This is especially the case with the opposition parties which are seeking to reach out to more voters and increase their potential electorate.

Subsequently, it can be argued that these emigrant “missing voters” significantly affect the distribution of political preferences in the election results. Facilitating and easing access for emigrants to exercise their fundamental right to vote is going to qualitatively improve representation and distribution of political forces in the governing institutions. Furthermore, in the context of a fully proportional electoral system, inclusion of as many emigration votes as possible is going to produce more adequate and balanced representations of the electorate's political preferences in the legislative body.

The Potential Impact of Georgian Emigrants' "Missing Votes"

To analyse the voting behavior of Georgian emigrants and the challenges that they are facing while exercising their fundamental right, this policy brief looks at the three most recent elections. These were the 2016 Parliamentary, 2018 Presidential, and 2020 Parliamentary elections. Furthermore, only the proportional results have been taken into consideration when comparing polling stations' results abroad, since majoritarian districts are not applicable in the elections held outside Georgia itself. This part of the paper applies the model of Giesing and Schikora (2023) to the case of Georgia and illustrates that the votes of Georgian emigrants are indeed "missing votes" that could potentially have a significant impact on election outcomes in the country.

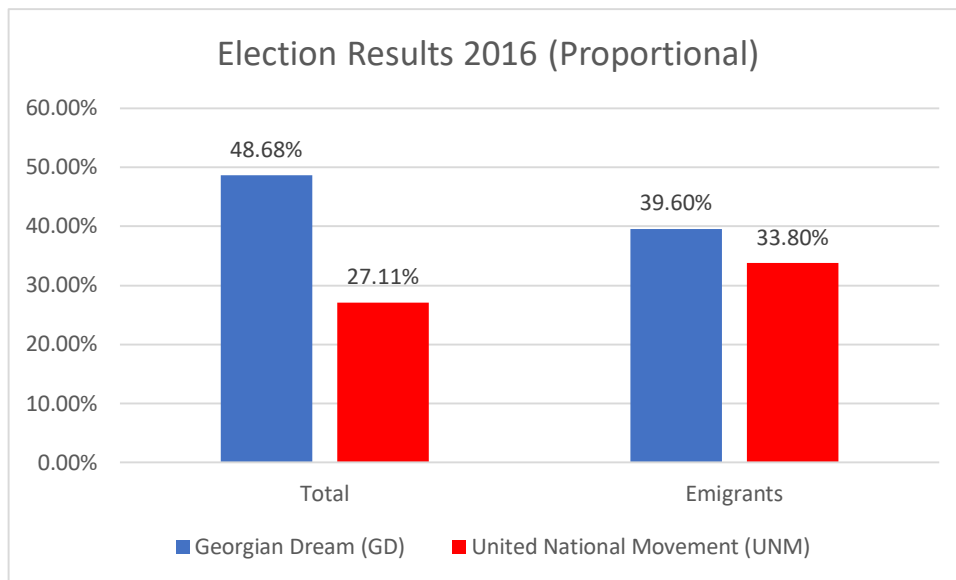
1. Emigrants' political preferences

Election results from the polling stations that were functioning abroad suggest that Georgian emigrants are more prone to vote for the opposition party. Except in 2016, but in both the 2018 presidential and 2020 parliamentary elections, opposition candidates and parties, respectively, got more votes than the ruling Georgian Dream. The graphs below were compiled based on the data of the Election Administration of Georgia and illustrate the trend among voters registered abroad.

The 2016 result for parliamentary elections³ (Figure 1) suggest that there is a contrast between emigrants votes and votes cast in Georgia itself.

³ Only proportional, since emigrants are not eligible to vote for the majoritarian representation

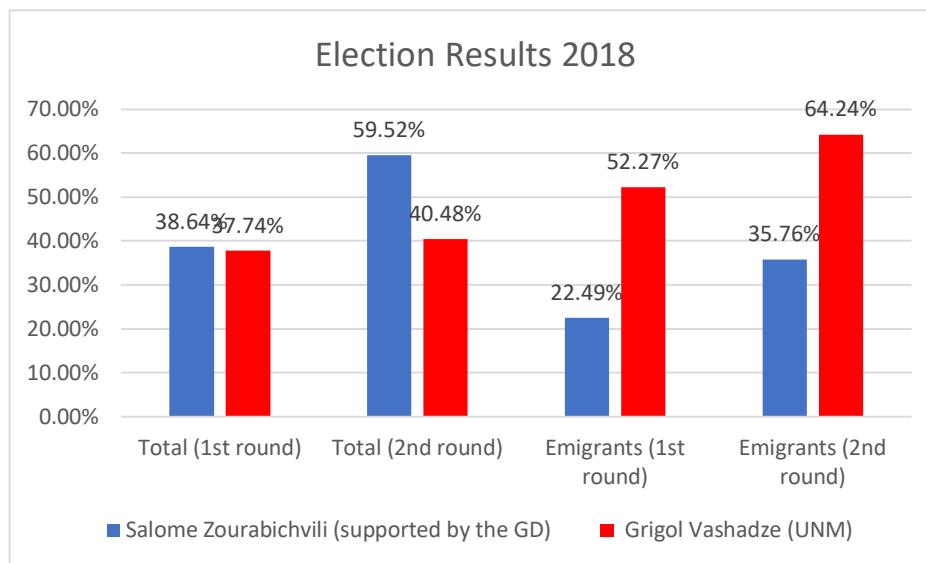
Figure 1: Election Results for 2016 Parliamentary Elections



Source: CESKO. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/>

During the 2018 presidential elections, this contrast was even more stark, with the opposition candidate ending up winning both rounds among the electorate registered abroad (Figure 2).

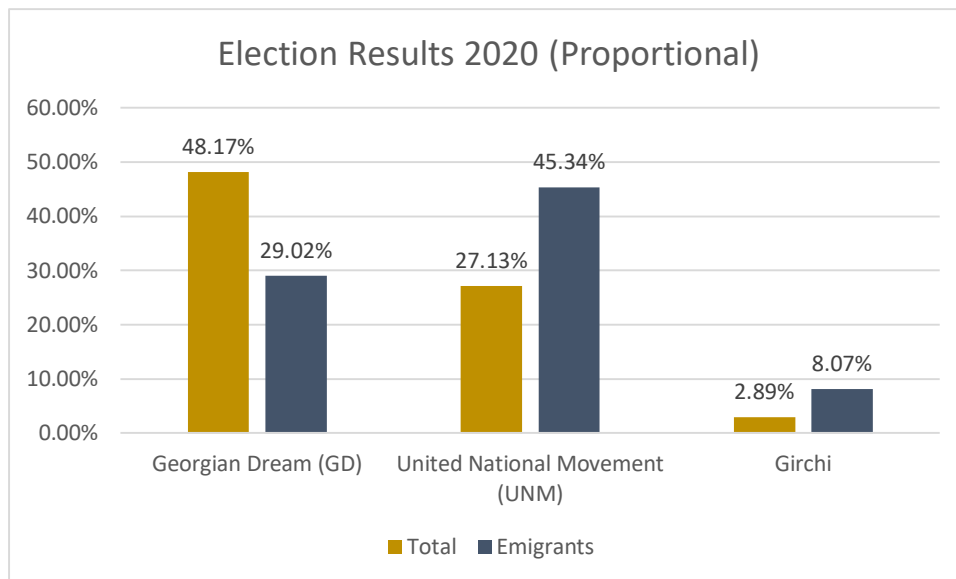
Figure 2: Election Results for 2018 Presidential Elections



Source: CESKO. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/>

Similarly, most of the votes abroad went to the opposition in the 2020 Parliamentary elections (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Election Results for 2020 Parliamentary Elections

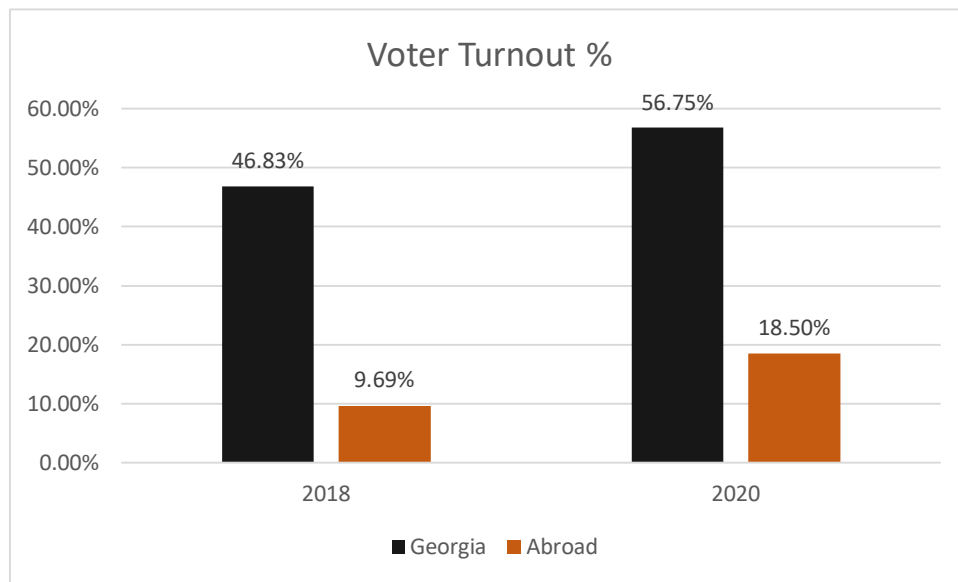


Source: CESKO. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/>

2. Turnout rates among emigrants are considerably lower compared to their country of origin

The second condition that needs to be in place, in order to be able to argue that external votes have the potential to impact the overall results of elections, is lower turnout rates in comparison to a scenario in which those voters have not emigrated. Statistical data from the Election Administration of Georgia demonstrate that election turnout among emigrants is considerably lower than the overall level of the turnout (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Voter Turnout for 2018 and 2020 Elections⁴



Source: CESKO. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/>

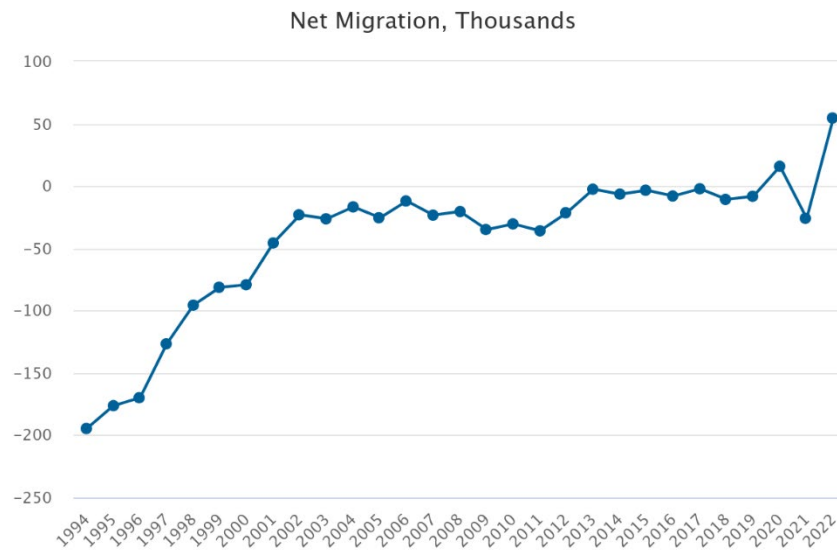
These stark differences between the turnout numbers for Georgia overall and voters registered abroad, suggests that the second condition of the model is also present in this case. Lower turnout could be attributed to several factors, such as distance to the nearest polling station, work commitments, not wanting to be registered in the embassy or the consulate, etc. These impediments, and how to address them, are discussed in the final part of this paper.

3. The number of emigrants is sizeable compared to the home country population

Statistics from the National Statistics Office of Georgia continuously demonstrate that net migration (the difference between the number of people leaving and those moving back to the country) remains negative. This reflects the dozens of thousands of Georgian citizens immigrating abroad annually. More specifically, as figure 1 illustrates, negative net migration has been consistently on the rise except in 2020 and 2022 (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024). These two exceptions are related to the global Covid-19 pandemic and the influx of Russian immigrants after the invasion of Ukraine.

⁴ This information is not available for 2016 parliamentary elections.

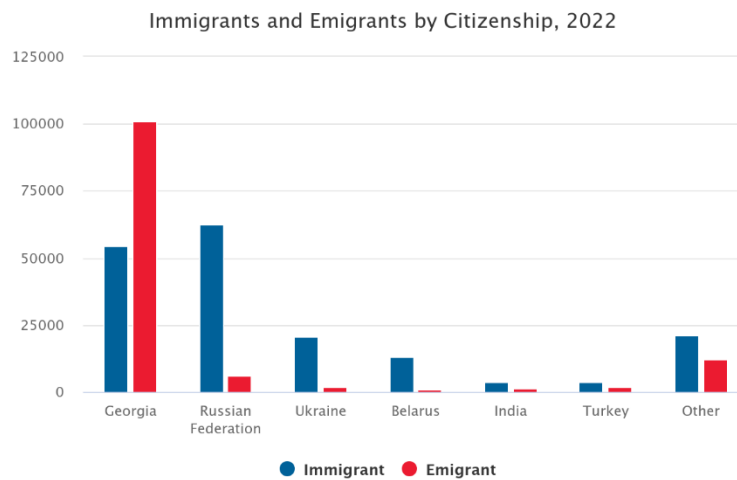
Figure 5: Net Migration, Thousands



Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia 2024, available at: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/322/migration>

The latest numbers that are available, as of writing this paper, are from the year 2022. This data suggests that in that year alone the number of Georgian citizens leaving the country was 100,80, while those moving back numbered 54.405 (figure 6) (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2024).

Figure 6: Immigrants and Emigrants by Citizenship, 2022



Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia 2024, available at: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/322/migration>

In other words, almost twice as many Georgian citizens left the country, as came back. Furthermore, the majority of those emigrants are in the 15-64 age group – the group that should be politically and socially most active. This age group is also the segment of society that contributes the most in terms of paying taxes, workforce, etc. Therefore, it should be of the utmost priority for all the relevant stakeholders in Georgia to work on guaranteeing their fundamental right to vote.

Challenges that Inhibit Emigrants from Voting

There are several challenges that inhibit Georgian emigrants from voting, and which lead to the effect of the “missing votes”. These barriers are related first of all to distance. In most cases, especially in large countries like the United States or Germany, registered voters wishing to cast their ballot need to travel far from their place of residence. As polling stations are only available in the consulates and embassies, this makes it either difficult or not worth the travel from other towns and cities, unless they are passionate enough about any political party or an issue.

Similarly, while election day is a holiday in Georgia, this is not the case abroad, and emigrants living far from the location of the embassy, or the consulate cannot afford take leave of absence from their work.

Another source of reluctance for Georgians abroad to go and vote is connected with potential legal troubles among those who are living illegally in their country of residence.

There are several options on how to address challenges that are related to distance. If at least 50 Georgian citizens are registered in the embassy database as living in that specific country, a polling station can be requested in their town/city of residence. However, in places where there are a high number of Georgian emigrants, a single polling station in the consulate would not be capable of dealing with several thousands of voters. Hence, especially in the cities with large Georgian emigrant populations, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in coordination with its foreign partners and diaspora, needs to start working on the possibilities of opening polling stations outside the consulates.

Beyond the existing legal framework, issues related to distance could be overcome by allowing a wider range of options for casting votes for citizens living abroad. These options, as is the case in several European countries, could be allowing voting via regular post, or letting citizens living abroad

cast their votes at the embassies and consulates a couple of days earlier than the election day. These options address problems related to distance and work commitments.

Another important reform that could considerably boost emigrants' participation, is following the example of Estonia and allowing internet voting (Kakabadze 2021). Internet voting is going to remove another major impediment related to illegal emigrants who would not want to be registered in any overseas database. Allowing distant voting solves this by giving the possibility of casting their vote online, which allows them to participate in the elections and exercise their fundamental right without any potential legal implications.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Negative net migration continues to be on the rise in Georgia as more and more citizens, whether legally or illegally, leave the country. This massive departure of voters to go abroad, is likely to lead to the increase of so-called “missing votes” and this could impact the election results. Subsequently, the composition of parliament and the government end up not representing the actual preferences of citizens – the discrepancy of the turnout numbers between emigrants and Georgians living in Georgia is substantial.

Analysis of the last three elections shows that most of the voters living abroad that cast votes are opposition-leaning. This could be explained by the motivation and enthusiasm of those citizens who feel passionate about politics. Nonetheless, most of the emigrant votes are “missing votes” that could have impacted election outcomes. Active involvement by these voters in the elections is going to contribute to increased representation and political pluralism – one of the key challenges that Georgia's young democracy is facing today.

In order to facilitate participation in the voting by Georgian emigrants, and decrease the number of “missing votes”, this policy paper proposes following these short- and long-term recommendations:

To the government of Georgia and the CEC

- Start active information campaigns among Georgian citizens living abroad on how to formally request additional polling stations in their city of residence and on how to register as a voter;
- Work closely with emigrants and diaspora communities abroad to coordinate the diffusion of information and promote higher turnout;

- Work closely with the Georgian diaspora on possibilities of opening additional polling stations in cities with large immigrant population;
- Increase the period that is needed for registration as a voter without prior consular registration;
- Conduct studies to assess the readiness of the infrastructure and software for the introduction electronic voting;
- Study the possibility of mail voting for citizens living abroad;
- Introduce the possibility of voting over several days in Georgian consulates and embassies;
- Recruit temporary staff who would work in foreign representations during the pre-election and election period;

To political parties

- Increase campaigning and engagement with the Georgian diaspora in order to incentivise their participation in elections;
- Work together with relevant stakeholders on developing legal and technical frameworks that would allow emigrants to vote without a physical presence at the embassy or the consulate;
- Go beyond narrow party-interests and work together to address these challenges that emigrants are facing;

To the non-governmental sector and media

- Actively cooperate with the Georgian diaspora on information campaigns regarding voter procedures on voting abroad;
- Provide legal and bureaucratic assistance to emigrants in the process of registration as a voter abroad;
- Work closely with international partners to share their experience with distant voting;
- Conduct studies to examine existing legislations and procedures in other countries regarding emigrant voters;
- Work on policy recommendations for relevant stakeholders in Georgia.

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