



# POLICY BRIEF

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## The Voice of Young Georgian Voters in Politics: Expectations, Demands, and Political Responses

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### Executive Summary

To increase political participation and confidence among Georgian youth, it is crucial for political parties to effectively communicate therewith, be sincere, and offer concrete action plans that address their needs, as borne out by interviews conducted with both young people and political parties. Prior to 2023, civic and political activity among young people was relatively low, but events of 2023 and 2024, particularly mass protests against the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" (the so-called "Foreign Agents Law"), highlighted the growing importance of accountability with respect to young people.

This policy brief analyzes the challenges and expectations that young people have of political parties and political parties' vision and strategy of attracting young voters and involving them in political life. The analysis is based on official documents, reports, statistics, public opinion polls, and data from nine interviews with political party leaders and focus groups with young people. The brief concludes with recommendations for Georgian political parties on how better to engage with and attract youth as a voting demographic, as well as suggestions for Georgian youth to enhance their political participation in democratic processes.

**Keywords:** Youth, demographic, political parties, elections, programs

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## Introduction

The participation of young people in democratic processes in Georgia has increased over the last two years, but their level of engagement with party politics and the political class remains low, consistent with previous years. Young people constitute approximately 18% of Georgia's population (Cheishvili and Gogoladze, 2020), yet only 18.8% participated in the last parliamentary elections (Polis180, 2021). Individuals aged 18 to 29 make up one-fifth of Georgian voters (Georgian Central Electoral Commission, 2020). If the majority of this demographic continues to abstain from elections, the youth vote may be effectively marginalized.

Despite an increased street-level presence of the youth, if the political class fails to earn their trust, there is a significant risk that young people will not participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections. In 2020, only 38% of young people were familiar with the electoral environment and the election programs of political parties prior to the elections (IRI Georgia, 2020). This weak familiarity was partly caused by political parties publishing their programs only a few weeks before the elections, failing to communicate them effectively, or not making the programs accessible to the public. A basic lack of interest in political involvement among young people also contributed to this situation. But the pre-election period of 2024 presents a different political landscape compared to previous parliamentary elections. Young people are now closely and critically observing the actions of political parties and are actively involved in civic processes.

Until 2023, Georgian youth were largely neglected by the political elite, but following the significant events of March 2023 (Samkharadze & Lebanidze, 2023) and 2024 (Boffey, 2024), when “Generation Z” exhibited strong resistance to the "Transparency of Foreign Influence" law, the Georgian political spectrum began engaging more actively with young people. Despite this increased communication, political parties often remain unaware of specific expectations among youth. Consequently, the strategies employed by politicians to attract and recruit young people are frequently misaligned with youth expectations.

With the 2024 parliamentary elections approaching, attracting young voters has become a top priority for politicians to ensure high voter turnout. Thus it is crucial to understand the needs of young people and develop political programs that address those needs. This policy brief aims to analyze what young Georgian voters expect from political parties and how political parties can ensure youth political participation in the 2024 elections. The analysis presented in this policy brief is based on existing literature and reports, youth manifestos, public opinion polls, statistical data, focus groups

with youth (particularly Generation Z), and interviews and consultations with leaders of nine political parties. Overall, this paper attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the perspectives of the youth and the readiness of political parties to meet their expectations.

## What are Young People's Views and Expectations of Political Parties?

The majority of young people in Georgia do not find anything in common with any political party and do not believe that any party is pursuing their interests. According to last year's public opinion poll results, 80% of youth aged 18 to 34 do not find any party close to them (NDI Georgia 2023). Moreover, 74% of young people either did not intend to vote for any existing political party or were undecided (NDI Georgia 2023). While the reintroduction of the "Foreign Agents' Law" in 2024 has made the youth more politically mobilized and their votes are likely to shift to the opposition flank, due to yet unformed political configurations and distrust of the political class in general, a large number of young people remain undecided, which is evinced by focus groups with students from different universities (FG with students).

The biggest obstacles for young people with regard to politicians are populism, insincerity, and lack of a consistent program or strategic plan. According to the youth focus group results, the basic criteria that political parties need to meet to attract young voters are strong ideological positioning and concrete solutions to specific problems. In conversation with Gen Z, it was revealed that the political party member competence is crucial to most of them. The competence of representatives of political parties should be demonstrated by having an objective view of our country's recent history — not be bound by the past, but an objective perception of modernity and not a focus on political revenge.

Gen Z believes that politicians should have the ability to initiate issue-based discussions themselves and not merely focus on hot-button issues among the populace, and they should have the ability to convince the public of the importance of certain issues that are not already popular.

As the study shows, to deserve the youth's attention, a political party should offer very concrete action plans and solutions to existing problems. Apart from this, the parties must have a strategy concerning national and regional security and economic stability.

The criteria that will motivate young people to go to the voting booths, and those that will make them want to participate in party political life, also differ from each other. As young people say, to

be motivated to go to the elections, political parties should first explain why the youth's voice is important. Second, parties should write detailed manifestos to clearly explain their promises and convince young people — election *slogans* are not enough for them. And third, parties should have direct communication with people, with personal meetings having a positive effect.

As for motivation to join any political party, the young people interviewed believe it important to convey ideas to people in simple language. They also believe that the parties should be able to ensure that the voice of youth is understood, with political programs created specifically therefor. This could be done by establishing youth councils and clubs to attract more young people as both voters and party members. One focus group participant recalled an American example in which young people are involved in decision-making at the local level under the wings of Republican and Democrat political parties' youth organizations.

It can be seen from this that young people in Georgia have a desire to contribute to decentralization and the decision-making process at the municipal level, but are rarely allowed to do so.

For political parties to understand what attracts young voters, they were also asked what the positive aspects of the political class in Georgia are today. In response, participants spoke positively about the ruling party's attempt to emphasize stability. Regarding the political opposition, they named a few aspects — an established Western perspective and corresponding narratives; strong support for Ukraine; close cooperation with academia, independent think tanks; and respect for the recommendations of international organizations.

## What are the Major Challenges of the Georgian Youth?

There is a huge gap between the youth demographics' needs and political parties' programs regarding youth-related issues. Among many problems, the fundamental challenges of youth are poor quality education, lack of opportunity, and socio-economic inequality (GIP and Polis180 2020). Young people argue that political parties do not address these problems adequately (FG with students, respondents 1,2,5).

Starting with educational challenges, according to the latest study on youth, approximately 31% of young people aged 14-29 are neither educated, trained, or employed (Shubitidze, Sichinava & Khoshtaria 2023). Young people are also concerned that the educational system does not respond to

international or even domestic requirements. Thus, they argue, the demands of the labor market are not in line with the quality of education provided by the Georgian system (FG with students, respondents 2,5,6). The study by the Youth Agency and focus group results revealed that there are not enough vocational or professional programs, and those that exist are not of a quality high enough to enable young people to advance in their career (FG with students; Youth Agency & FES). This is why, to improve their qualifications, young people try to participate in competitions to be enrolled in professional programs and free courses offered by international organizations and the NGO sector (FG with students 2024).

On the subject of the lack of opportunity and socioeconomic inequality, young people appear to mean unemployment. The reason for this is the mismatch of skills of young people with the market, and the absence of career services in universities (UNAG 2021). Young people also emphasize that both in the public and private sectors young people are used as free labor, especially in unpaid internship programs. Those who do have jobs complain of inadequate wages (GIP & Polis180; FG with students 2024).

Although young people are well aware of the causes of their problems, they do not have adequate spaces or formats with which to lobby for their needs at local and national levels (GIP & Polis180). They know that it is possible to participate in the political decision-making process from several platforms, be it local councils, youth centers, or youth wings of political parties, but they do not believe any of these formats effective (FG with students, respondents 3,4,7 2024). As for joining political parties and promoting their vision from political platforms, according to their observation, young people are rarely allowed to play a tangible role in the majority of political parties, and they argue that their role in the majority of cases is mostly symbolic, which is why most young people avoid involvement in party politics altogether (FG with students, respondents 1,3,4,5,6). If the political parties do not make efforts to include them and determine what is important to them only from their point of view, the political elite will not be able to gain the trust of the youth.

## What is the Political Parties' Approach towards the Georgian Youth?

In Georgian politics, traditionally, the involvement of young people in party politics was mainly auxiliary — distributing election program brochures, carrying flags, and appearing in crowds for pictures. This happened because the political leaders did not properly appreciate the role of the youth

in party politics, which is why most youth did not want to affiliate themselves with the parties. But since 2023, when so-called Gen Z emerged in society as a key player in mass protests, parties were obliged to rethink their strategies towards the young demographic and youth involvement in party politics.

Over the course of this study, interviews were conducted with the leaders of the nine opposition political parties.<sup>2</sup> Of those nine parties, the responses of Droa and Girchi-More Freedom were merged, based on their decision. The ruling party was also officially approached, but the research team did not receive a response. The graph below illustrates the youth-oriented action priorities of the political parties surveyed and their strategies for attracting young people to their parties.

Among action priorities, education for six parties and employment for five parties are the most important with regard to young people (Graph II). It can thus be said that the needs of young people and the priorities of these parties align with each other. In spite of this, information about these programs is not reaching the youth, and so this problem likely arises from the communication problem mentioned by focus group participants.

The parties' strategies and solutions are quite different. Concerning education, for example, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Labor Party, Droa & Girchi-More Freedom mainly find the need for educational reform (Vashadze, Kumsishvili, Khoshtaria 2024), while Lelo for Georgia focuses on the need for vocational education (Khazaradze 2024), and the Party for the People focuses on tuition fees and housing problems (Dolidze 2024). Four parties stressed the importance of paid internships (Lelo for Georgia, For Georgia, For the People, Strategy Aghmashenebeli) and two professional development in general (UNM, Citizens). Regarding the difference in priorities between the parties, one can highlight Lelo for Georgia's and Strategy Sghmashenebeli's sharp positions on youth migration, Lelo's efforts to encourage sports and cultural programs, the Labor Party's lobbying of the need to create youth infrastructure, and Citizens' active engagement in discussions regarding defense issues and the Defense Code in particular.

Five political parties are trying to recruit youth via youth wings and youth organizations; the United National Movement and Lelo for Georgia even have separate youth offices. Most of these parties use face-to-face communication and social networks to involve young people in party life. The strategy

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<sup>2</sup> United National Movement (UNM), Lelo for Georgia, Georgian Labour Party, For Georgia, For the People, Conservative Party of Georgia, Citizens, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Gorchi - More Freedom & Droa (interviewed together).

of both Aghmashenebeli and the United National Movement of involving young people in thematic discussions and debates is distinct from the other parties' strategies (Vashadze 2024).

The approach of Droa and Girchi-More Freedom is also interesting, in that they believe it important for the parties themselves to offer a vision and values to youth and not to deviate from party principles (Khoshtaria 2024). Almost all party leaders agree that you should talk to Gen Z in understandable, simple language and a friendly environment. Thus, none of the parties is apparently aware of young people's preference for detailed, measurable action plans and a demonstration of sincerity (FG with students 2024).

**Graph II:** Political parties' youth-oriented priorities, approaches to youth engagement in party politics, and strategies for attracting young voters

Parties	Youth-oriented thematic priorities	Approaches to involve young people in party activities	Strategies to attract young voters
<b>United National Movement (UNM)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Employment</li> <li>*Professional development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Face-to-face meetings</li> <li>*Debates</li> <li>*Youth organization</li> <li>*Youth office</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Fund for youth initiatives</li> <li>*Public discussions</li> </ul>
<b>Lelo for Georgia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Paid internships</li> <li>*Employment</li> <li>*Vocational education</li> <li>*Sport</li> <li>*Culture</li> <li>*Youth migration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Youth organization</li> <li>*Youth office</li> <li>*Political Academy</li> <li>*Engagement in creative work</li> <li>*Friendly environment and horizontal approach</li> <li>*Events</li> <li>*Youth in political council</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Communication in youth-friendly language</li> <li>*Short and visually effective messages</li> <li>*Explanatory social media posts</li> <li>*Engagement in party activities where there is no hierarchy</li> <li>*Party internships</li> </ul>

<b>Georgian Labour Party</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Employment</li> <li>*Youth-oriented infrastructure</li> <li>*Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Youth engagement in intellectual forums</li> <li>*Friendly communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Adapting the program to the interests of young people</li> <li>*Spreading party messages on social platforms</li> </ul>
<b>For Georgia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Paid internships<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Communicating party vision and ideas regarding youth issues</li> <li>*Offering places on municipal election lists</li> <li>*Calls for recruiting new members via online application</li> <li>*Events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Spreading messages via social media</li> <li>*Showing youth that there are many young leaders in the party</li> </ul>
<b>For the People</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Students' dormitories</li> <li>*Employment,</li> <li>*Paid internships</li> <li>*Tuition fee in HEI</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Internships in the party and Tbilisi City Municipal Assembly</li> <li>*Offering training with the support of NGOs</li> <li>*Suggesting participation in decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Face-to-face communication</li> <li>*Putting youth problems on the political agenda</li> <li>*Social media communication</li> </ul>
<b>Conservative Party of Georgia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Education<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Creating a new youth wing, to replace the previous one</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Creating a new youth-oriented program</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy Aghmashenebeli</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Education on school and university levels</li> <li>*Financial stability</li> <li>*Internships</li> <li>*Youth Migration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Thematic discussions</li> <li>*Space for asking critical questions</li> <li>*Internships in the party</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Face-to-face communication</li> <li>*Field meetings</li> <li>*Communication with migrants</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> The youth-oriented program of the political party For Georgia is being created in cooperation with IRI

<sup>4</sup> The Conservative Party of Georgia is meanwhile developing the the program



<b>Citizens</b>	*Professional development *Defence Code <sup>5</sup>	*Field meetings	*Thematic meetings *Communication in social media
<b>Girchi - More Freedom &amp; Droa (interviewed together)</b>	*Educational reform *Workplaces *Russia and the EU *Values	*Meetings in a friendly environment *Engagement with youth in youth-friendly environments	*Youth-friendly communication language *Offering ready-made visions and not acting based on the views of the youth *Video messages on social media

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Young people are now more politically active in Georgia, and so their demands upon politicians are more clear and specific. Even though political parties are aware of the fundamental needs of young people in the areas of education and employment, the parties are still unable to respond to the needs of young people because their approaches are superficial. Before the active and massive involvement of youth in civic activism, political parties saw the role of youth in political party life as auxiliary, rather than as a primary component of success. Now parties have slowly realized that there is no alternative to involving young people in decision-making processes, and that their participation only in pre-election agitation has lost relevance. Thus, most political parties are trying to find a simple and friendly language to communicate with youth in order to understand them better. But the parties still lack sincerity and detailed, measurable action plans. Accordingly, if political parties take into account the visions and demands of young people and become more sincere regarding their values and plans, there is a good chance that turnout among still-undecided young voters will increase dramatically in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

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<sup>5</sup> The Citizens party is holding field works and developing the program

*Recommendations to political parties:*

- In cooperation with experts and international organizations working on election techniques and campaigns, study the **best practices for communicating with young voters including digital tools**, and apply them in practice.
- **Develop detailed election programs with action plans** by indicating realistic and tangible solutions to each fundamental problem for youth, and by distinguishing key people to be held accountable by youth to raise trust
- **Outline an ideological niche and basic values** to allow young voters to quickly and clearly identify your party's positions
- During the elaboration of election programs, **hold intensive consultations with various social segments of young people**, both in the center and on the periphery.

*Recommendations to Georgian youth:*

- **Transform their civil activism into political actions** by identifying the political parties closest to their views and values and getting involved in political party life
- Exercise their basic civic rights and responsibilities, and **participate in elections** by making their preferred political choices
- Take on the responsibility of becoming the guardians of democracy and **mass-register as election observers** to ensure fair and transparent elections
- **Put youth's needs on the political agenda** during the 2024 election by writing manifestos and joint statements, and advocating directly with the political parties.

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