

Shades of Red and Blue—Regional Characteristics of Georgia’s 2012 Parliamentary Elections

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Abstract

The 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia marked one of the most important events in the recent history of a young democracy. The hotly contested and polarized election, which enjoyed strong interest among both international society and Georgian voters, revealed interesting voting behavior patterns. This article describes the regional division of party votes, the difference between the behavior of urban and rural areas, and the peculiarities of voting among ethnic minorities.

Elections Leading to the Peaceful Transition of Power

October 1, 2012, marked an important milestone in Georgia’s short history of democracy because it provided the basis for a peaceful power transition—a rare case not only in a country where civil wars and revolutions caused regime change, but for the entire post-Soviet geographic space.

The generally unexpected victory of the opposition coalition in both the proportional and single-member districts provoked intense interest both inside the country and abroad. According to the Central Elections Commission (CEC) of Georgia, there were 61,000 registered local observers followed by an army of international election observers, including the representatives of various organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), and electoral bodies of different countries (President of Georgia, 2012).

The main political event at the focus of this attention was the emergence of a strong political opposition led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire who made his fortune in Russia and until recent did not publicize his political interests. The fragmented opposition forces, which previously found it difficult to consolidate their efforts against the ruling party, gained enough support from the population to claim victory thanks largely to the personality of their leader. Another important factor which significantly impacted the election outcomes was the publication of videotapes depicting the physical and sexual abuse of prison inmates. The scandal caused a huge wave of anti-governmental protests and greatly contributed to the triumph of the opposition Georgian Dream coalition.

Despite the fact that the voting was polarized during the 2012 parliamentary elections and only two political groups managed to win seats in the legislature, from the geographic point of view, the results vary significantly, creating distinct spatial patterns of electoral behavior.

Proportional Voting—A Regional Division

The 2012 parliamentary elections employed a mixed electoral system in which 77 out of 150 MPs were elected by party list while the remaining 73 seats were filled by competitions in single-member districts. For the proportional voting, political parties needed to overcome a 5 percent threshold in order to win representation in the parliament. However, in contrast to the 2008 parliamentary elections when four groups entered the parliament, only the Georgian Dream Coalition and the United National Movement crossed the threshold to win seats through the proportional voting. Similarly, these two political groups were the only ones to win representation in the single-member districts.

The election results reveal several important regional factors which can be considered as steady through the last four years. In order to identify the current regional patterns of voting behavior, we employed geo-statistical techniques. The heat map (see Map 1 on p. 10) shows how the votes for the United National Movement are clustered spatially. The method also takes into consideration the distance between the spatial units (in our case, voting precincts). The “hot spots” indicate clustering of a high vote share, while “cold spots” show the accumulation of low scores for the ruling party. As noted above, the high level of voting polarization caused the spatial distribution of votes between the two main contestant political groups; consequently, the cold spots on the heat map could indicate higher scores for the Georgian Dream coalition.

Generally the election results for the proportional voting have distinct regional characteristics—Tbilisi and the surrounding areas emerged as one of the main strongholds for the winner Georgian Dream Coalition. The influence of the capital city is important not only in surrounding electoral districts, but also covers the mountainous areas of Eastern Georgia. The eastern part of Imereti region, a historical region of Zemo (Upper) Imereti, is another region characterized by higher support for the coalition. In Sachkhere, the native munic-

ipality of Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgian Dream won 93% of the votes; the coalition also did well in the neighboring municipalities of Chiatura (75%), Zestaponi (61%) and Kharagauli (51%). The south-western part of Georgia, more specifically the seaside areas of Guria and Adjara, also strongly supported the Georgian Dream coalition. The heat map also indicates a significant level of clustering for UNM's strongest support in Samegrelo and mountainous areas of Western Georgia. The southern regions of Georgia, more specifically, Upper Adjara, Samtkhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli form a large belt of the United National Movement's support. This territory has an important stratum of ethnic and religious minorities, which display distinctive voting behavior through almost the entire history of Georgian elections. Regions settled by Armenian and Azeri residents generally tend to vote for the incumbent government regardless of their political affiliation. As in the 2008 elections, in Kvemo Kartli and Samtkhe-Javakheti the victory of the ruling party was undoubted. Like the ethnic minorities, the municipalities of Upper Adjara, which are mainly inhabited by Sunni Muslim ethnic Georgians, maintained a high level of support for governmental candidates and political groups during all three recent national elections.

Another important dimension of the 2012 parliamentary elections is the clear urban-rural divide in the voting behavior of Georgia's electorate (see Map 2 on p. 11). The United National Movement lost both the proportional elections and SMDs in all self-governing cities, including the ten districts of Tbilisi. Such an outcome in the urban areas reflects a steady pattern revealed during the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections, when the capital and large cities were the main basis for the opposition votes for both Levan Gachechiladze and the United Opposition. According to the results of the presidential elections, the opposition candidate managed to overwhelm Saakashvili in eight out of ten voting districts in Tbilisi. In the presidential elections, the United Opposition suffered a massive rout and was able to win only two single-member districts in the capital.

When looking at the individual voting districts, it is evident that the United National Movement did much better in the rural areas—in almost all districts, the difference between the vote share of the two settlement types was 10% or greater. Tbilisi by itself contributed the lion's share in the victory of the Georgian Dream coalition. Georgian Dream gathered 37% of its votes in Tbilisi, whilst only 20% of United National Movement's votes came from the capital. Rural areas were considerably more important for the governing political party—more than half of all its votes (55%) came from the voting precincts located in villages.

Parties Rather than Personalities— Peculiarities of Voting Behavior in the Single-Member Districts

Georgia's electoral system also maintains 73 single-member districts. Unlike some other countries, the district lines follow the administrative boundaries of the municipalities; consequently, their size varies greatly from 6,000 voters (Tsageri) to 140,000 voters (Kutaisi). During the parliamentary elections of 2008, the ruling United National Movement was able to win almost all majoritarian districts (72 out of 76) except Vake, Didube, Tsageri and Kazbeghi. It was expected that the unequal distribution of voters in the SMDs and the use of administrative resources also would contribute to the success of the UNM; however, the Georgian Dream Coalition, as with the proportional voting, was able to win more single-member districts than the incumbent party. According to the final results of the elections, the Coalition collected 41 seats while the UNM received 32 mandates from the majoritarian voting (currently the CEC annulled the results in several voting precincts and ordered by-elections) (see Map 3 on p. 12).

Voting patterns in the single-member districts were quite similar to the results of proportional voting. In general, the winner of the single-member district was the representative of the same political group which managed to receive the most votes in the municipality. In only five voting districts, more specifically, Dedoplistskaro, Tetrtskaro, Khashuri, Ambrolauri and Tkibuli, did the successful MP not represent the political party that collected the majority of votes on the proportional list.

In an absolute majority of all voting districts, the difference between votes cast for proportional and majoritarian candidates of the same party was 5% or lower.

The geography of the single-member district voting was similar to the proportional voting with few exceptions—Georgian Dream Coalition candidates managed to win in the districts of Tbilisi and the self-governing cities of Guria, lower Adjara, Upper Imereti and Shida Kartli, while the representatives of the United National Movement did well in Samegrelo, the mountainous areas of Western Georgia, Upper Adjara and in southern Georgia.

Generally, the voting patterns in the single-member districts were similar to the results of the party list voting and we can conclude that, due to the high level of voting polarization, preferences for the majoritarian candidate were mainly based on a voter's party affiliation—generally, the voters tended to pick the representative of the same political group as they voted for on the party list and vice versa.

Higher Participation than Usual

According to the official results announced by the CEC, turnout for the 2012 parliamentary elections was 61%, one of the highest points of the last two decades. Like the voting, the turnout also bore distinct spatial characteristics. In several voting districts of Tbilisi as well as in Sachkhere, Kharagauli and Ambrolauri, turnout was more than 70%, a clear indicator of the level of interest among the population and the mobilization of party supporters. The municipalities settled mainly by ethnic minorities, such as Tsalka, Marneuli, Bolnisi and Gardabani, had the lowest turnout in the country. From the regional point of view, Samegrelo, Kvemo Kartli and Javakheti had the lowest turnout rates while Upper Imereti, Guria and Tbilisi were among the leaders. In comparison to the previous elections, electoral turnout fell in the regions settled by ethnic minorities while it increased in the central areas of the capital. The areas of Kvemo Kartli and Samegrelo, as well as large cities had the lowest figures, as they did in previous elections.

The vote share for Saakashvili during the presidential elections correlated significantly with voting turn-

out, producing a positive indicator of 0.63 ($p < 0.05$); the correlation coefficient between the vote share for the United National Movement and voting turnout was similarly positive at 0.52 ($p < 0.05$) for the 2008 parliamentary elections. However, in the 2012 parliamentary elections, there was only a weak correlation between the vote share and turnout for both political parties. However it is worth mentioning that the coefficient was negative for the United National Movement, in contrast to the previous elections.

Conclusion

The 2012 parliamentary elections marked an important point in Georgia's recent history as it was the first time during the last twenty years that the country managed to change its government through the electoral process. The election results had clear spatial characteristics and revealed regional differences in party preferences. The electoral behavior of ethnic minorities and the rural-urban dichotomy were the most evident patterns during previous presidential and parliamentary elections and did not lose their significance in 2012.

About the Author

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