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## **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS AND REGIONAL PATTERNS OF ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR: 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN GEORGIA**

Analysis of election results is extremely important, as it helps to reveal power balance in domestic politics and identify trends in electoral behavior. Territorial analysis of election results is one of the key subjects of electoral geography, which in turn appears to be an important part of political geography. Georgia, like other post-Soviet states, cannot boast of any valuable study in that specific area of human geography. This fact is conditioned by the set of objective and subjective reasons. For the post-Soviet states electoral geography is a new discipline, and therefore, its development requires certain time. In addition, there have been very few cases of more or less free, fair and contested elections on the territory of the CIS. Actually, in most cases the election outcome was easily predictable. Naturally, scholars did not find it worthwhile to look at the issue from professional viewpoint.

Georgia's political crisis of fall 2007, more specifically, protest actions of November 2–7 against the authorities and its violent disbursement resulted in calling preterm presidential election on January 5. Emerged political environment created an expectation for vibrant and tensed competition and close race, which could have resulted in a diversified attitude and behavior throughout the country. Election results met those expectations and Georgia held one of the most competitive presidential races on the post-Soviet space.

This paper offers some analysis of the recent presidential election focusing on regional specificities of electoral behavior in Georgia. In particular, it makes particular focus on geographic (regional) aspects of the votes received by presidential candidates, as well as finding out extent of political pluralism within the Georgian electorate, and defining electoral regions of the country determined by electoral behavior of voters.

In 2008, Georgia had preterm presidential and parliamentary elections. The fact itself points at the extraordinary internal political situation. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003, political developments in Georgia had been proceeding dynamically, and after 2007 – even dramatically. During the above timeframe Georgian authorities made considerable steps forward, which included increased mobilization of budget revenues, attraction of foreign investments, simplification of tax system, increase in pension and wages, reduction of crime rate, promotion of tourism industry, better provision of utility services, successful police reform, eradication of petty corruption, introduction of national entry examinations in the universities in a corruption-free environment, etc. Despite the above, general social and economic conditions in the country did not improve, but even worsened, which was conditioned by objective and subjective reasons. Objective reasons included external factors, such as global raise in oil and gas prices entailing price increase in every area; economic embargo imposed by Russia on Georgian products sharply reduced level of income and deteriorated economic situation in Georgia.

The authorities failed to grasp a problematic nature of the emerged situation. Instead of implementing certain social reforms to smoothen social discontent, the ruling power did not give up the course of painful and, mostly, unpopular changes. The list of such measures includes mass layouts in the public sector and privatization of land and state-owned enterprises. Violation of property rights became a matter of particular discontent. Local authorities often legitimately, but sometimes unlawfully dismantled privately owned buildings and allowed privatization of “released” lands to new owners. Facts of forcible expulsion of the IDPs from former hotels and sanatoria caused public outrage. Unfortunately, the tone and language used by the government remained arrogant and inadequate.

Amendments to the constitution made in 2004 distorted balance of power in favor of the president. Ultimately, role of the judiciary was reduced to minimum.

Oppositional forces ceased the opportunity without delay. Scandalous televised statement of the former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili made on September 26 turned into a critical impulse that reactivated oppositional movement. Okruashvili accused the government of all kinds of wrongdoings, including the death of former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania. Soon after the above statement he was detained and his retraction statement followed shortly, however, the protest machine was set in motion and the authorities failed to stop it.

Another heavy-weight player – businessman and tycoon Arkadi Patarkatsishvili stepped into the political battlefield, employing his privately owned TV Company “Imedi” as a tool. He announced about his decision on joining his voice to the opposition’s demand on replacing existing government with the “government of people<sup>1</sup>.”

On November 2, the opposition forces launched a demonstration, which gathered tens of thousand of people in the center of the city. The coalition composed of ten opposition parties came up with four demands, including the key demand to hold parliamentary election within the constitutional timeframe, i.e. in spring of 2008<sup>2</sup>.

On November 3, when the unwillingness of the authorities to give in became obvious, the opposition coalition demanded resignation of the president Mikheil Saakashvili.

On November 7, the law enforcers disbanded the opposition meeting. Riot police used water cannons and tear gas to disperse people and clean the territory outside the parliament. Hundreds of riot policemen armed with shields, batons and riot guns were deployed in the center of the capital after patrol police failed to contain protesters. Same day the special unit of the police raided office of the TV “Imedi”. The representatives of the ruling party maintained that the given TV channel was a propaganda tool in anti-government movement and that A. Patarkatsishvili was sponsoring the *coup d'état*, supported by the Russian intelligence services. The authorities stated that through its news programs “Imedi” was facilitating tensions within the Georgian society<sup>3</sup>.

On November 8, President Saakashvili introduced emergency state on the whole territory of Georgia for two weeks period. Restrictions were imposed on information flow, public gatherings, demonstrations and strikes. As a result, all news programs were suspended on all private channels. Information was delivered only by the public broadcaster. Two TV companies – “Imedi” and “Kavkasia”, that were considered oppositional, suspended broadcasting at all<sup>4</sup>.

Shortly after introducing emergency state, President M. Saakashvili called preterm presidential election.

Heated Debates about fairness of this election, especially its vote counting

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=14700>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=14882&search>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=14783&search>

part, are still underway. Discussion and analysis of the above does not appear to be a purpose of the given paper. However, it could be firmly stated that the results of the election have revealed a number of important trends characteristic to political, social, economic and regional aspects of Georgia's society.

Despite unfavorable weather conditions (it snowed on the whole territory of Georgia on the day of election and temperature kept below zero), voters demonstrated impressive enthusiasm towards the presidential election. Election turnout was 57.3%, which might be considered as very high for Georgia.

Turnout is one of the key components of electorate's behavior, often determining the final outcome of election.

High turnout in the presidential election became one of the decisive factors defining the victory of the ruling party's candidate. Mikheil Saakashvili had a sweeping victory in those election districts where a turnout was over 70%. Voter turnout was from 85 to 90% in Javakheti region, something that raises suspicions, since during the winter season participation of local population in labor emigration is traditionally high.

Electoral behavior varied notably in the districts of Tbilisi. In the so-called prestigious districts voter turnout exceeded that of the less prestigious ones by 10%. We attribute the above trend to higher labor emigration from rather "poor" areas of the capital.

Voting is an important feature of the voters' behavior. Identification of territorial regularity of voting pattern and its analysis is a research subject for electoral geography.

According to Georgia's legislation, territory of the country is divided into 85 election district. The capital Tbilisi comprises 10 election district; territories of all other election districts coincide with the borders of administrative units or municipalities. In this case election was held in 78 election districts. Elections were not held in the significant parts of conflict regions – Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

According to the official data of the Central Election Commission (CEC), final results of the presidential election are as follows (also see figure 1):

- Mikheil Saakashvili: 1 060 042 votes (53.47%),
- Levan Gachechiladze: 509 234 votes (25.69%),
- Arkadi Patarkatsishvili: 140 826 votes (7.10%),
- Shalva Natelashvili: 128 589 votes (6.49%),
- David Gamkrelidze: 79 747 votes (4.02%),
- Giorgi Maisashvili: 15 249 votes (0.77%),

– Irina Sarishvili Chanturia: 3 242 votes (0.16%)<sup>5</sup>.

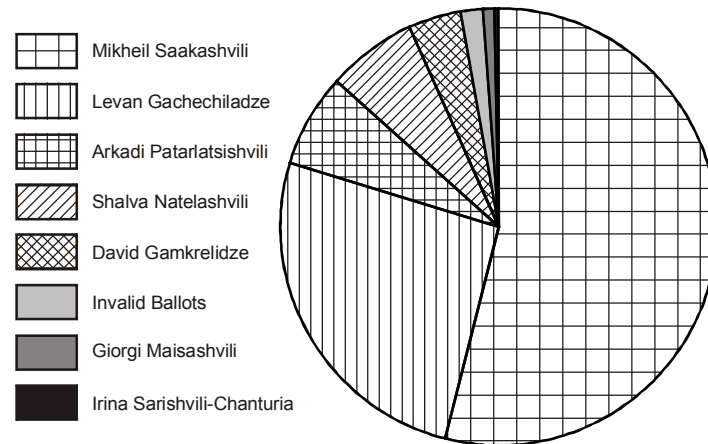


Fig. 1. Result of 2008 presidential elections  
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Main trends in the geography of election results by individual candidates are as follows<sup>6</sup>:

David Gamkrelidze (leader of the New Rights Party) was rather unsuccessful in the presidential election of 2008. The reason behind his failure was the fact that pro-opposition voters did not perceive him as a presidential candidate confronting the government radically enough. Even in Racha district, which is a stronghold of the New Rights Party, his advantage over Levan Gachechiladze was very insignificant, while lagging behind Mikheil Saakashvili considerably. Only in 4 election districts he managed to receive over 10% of votes, two of those being in Racha region.

Leader of the Labor Party Shalva Natelashvili as it was expected performed well in Eastern Georgia. He won election in his home place Dusheti municipality and marked good result in adjacent election districts. As for the western part of Georgia, Natelashvili was quite unsuccessful there. Despite higher expectations about him, he failed to meet them. Part of his traditional electorate, in particular socially vulnerable, had been enticed by

<sup>5</sup> The given article is referring to the official data posted on the web page of the Central Election Commission of Georgia: [www.cec.gov.ge](http://www.cec.gov.ge).

<sup>6</sup> The given article is not assessing election results with regard to Giorgi Maisashvili and Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia, since the votes cast for these two candidates had no effect on the general picture, both countrywide or on the level of any specific district.

Patarkatsishvili as the latter pledged to bring greater improvement in their social standing.

Election outcome for Arkadi Patarkatsishvili should be considered extraordinary, as he was a candidate who did not have a possibility to conduct full scale election campaign. He was out of Georgia during the campaign period. The authorities accused him of *coup d'état* attempt and launched vigorous propaganda against him, which included freezing his accounts in Georgian banks and suspending “Imedi” TV broadcasting. Despite the above he still managed to receive 7% of votes, thus getting a third place in the election race that came as a surprise to everyone. Here we deal with the phenomenon known in sociological science as a “Spiral of Silence”<sup>7</sup>. It refers to the situation, when the minority does not openly demonstrate its choice, especially if the choice is unpopular, to avoid moral condemnation and isolation from the majority side. Consequently, their preference is revealed in a “safe” environment, such as secret voting<sup>8</sup>.

Arkadi Patarkatsishvili received high number of votes in Kakheti, Svaneti, Guria and Lower Adjara, where his political organization had strong offices. Had he had similarly well-organized and effective electioneer in other regions of Georgia, he would probably come up with higher votes.

Candidate of the United Opposition Levan Gachechiladze, as it was expected, appeared to be a major challenger to Mikheil Saakashvili. He won two election districts – Tbilisi and Kazbegi. Notably, 40% of the ballots cast for him falls on Tbilisi’s account (in Tbilisi he won 8 out of 10 election districts). He also performed well in other big cities (Rustavi, Batumi and Kutaisi), where he slightly lagged behind the candidate of the ruling party. In addition, Levan Gachechiladze did outrun Mikheil Saakashvili in the administrative centers of seven municipalities. As for the rural areas, he received majority of the votes in Guria, Imereti, Kakheti and Ajara regions.

Mikheil Saakashvili crossed 50% threshold with a small margin. Nevertheless, the geography of his election results is quite impressive (see figure 2). Out of 78 election districts, he received majority votes in 68, in addition, he received over 50% of votes in 37 out of those 68 districts. The lowest and poorest result for him on a district level throughout the country was 27% of the votes.

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<sup>7</sup> Author of this theory is Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, German journalist. See Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984), *The Spiral of Silence*, University of Chicago, Chicago.

<sup>8</sup> Sociologists consider the case of Russia’s Liberal Democratic Party’s (chaired by Vladimer Zhirinovski) victory at Russia’s 1993 parliamentary election to be a classic example of “The Spiral of Silence” theory.

Particularly successful he was in the south and south-east Georgia, namely in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Shida Kartli (Rustavi city excluded), where he got support of over 75% of the electorate. The governmental candidate also enjoyed high support in Samegrelo, Upper Adjara and Lechkhumi.

IDPs from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region (South Ossetia) should be considered as loyal electorate for Mikheil Saakashvili. He had landslide victory almost in every precinct where the IDPs were registered. In addition, he enjoyed a great support among the residents of the conflict zones and adjacent areas (excluding Kazbegi municipality).

Saakashvili is much more popular among rural electorate. Interestingly, in some districts, such as Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tsalka, over 80% of rural population cast ballots in his favor, while he failed to get majority votes in the municipal centers of the same districts. In addition, he could not get majority votes in any of the big cities (Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi and Rustavi), and out of 10 election districts of the capital he lost election in 8. Out of rural districts he relatively poorly performed in Kakheti, Guria, Lower Adjara, Svaneti and Eastern highlands.

The 2008 presidential election once again revealed that the Georgian electorate attaches less importance to the programs of presidential candidates. When it comes to voting, Georgian society are rather guided by “like-dislike” or “trust-distrust” principal. However, in this election the voters looked more attentively to social and economic platforms and promises of the candidates. We believe that the latter approach contributed to the contested nature of the given election.

Conditionally we can divide 5 main presidential candidates into two groups. First group will comprise Mikheil Saakashvili, Arkadi Patarkatsishvili and Shalva Natelashvili, i.e. the candidates, whose election campaign was dominated by promises of social nature. The second group is made of Levan Gachechiladze and David Gamkrelidze, who attached priority to radical political changes and human rights issues. More specifically, they promised the electorate that if elected they would abolish presidential institution. Moreover, Levan Gachechiladze received the votes of those, who were unhappy with the situation in the human rights area and the judiciary in the country.

Political promises and ideas of Levan Gachechiladze and David Gamkrelidze found greater support primarily in the big cities and first of all in the capital, while the rural population gave priority to poverty reduction, unemployment and tax reduction issues.

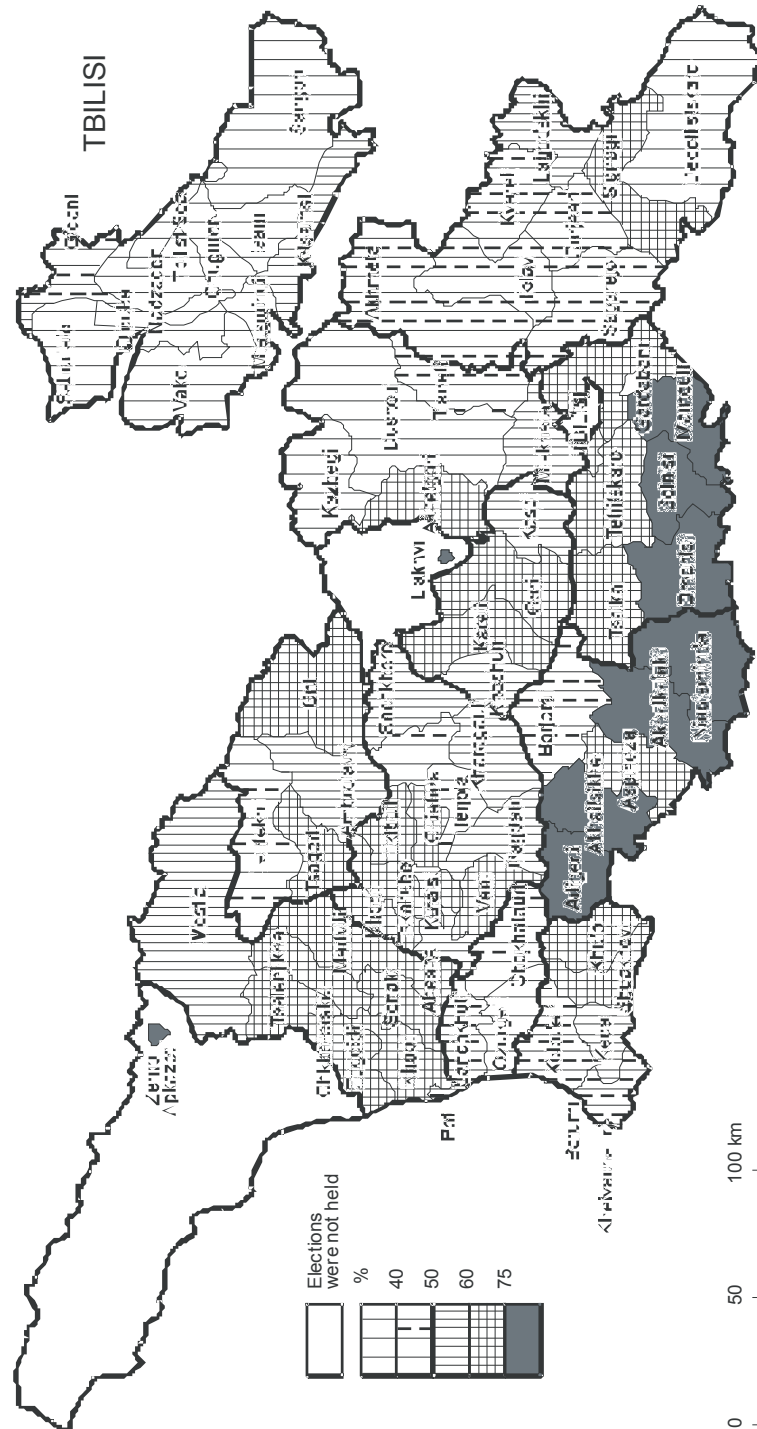
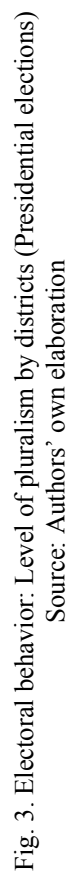


Fig. 2. 2008 Presidential elections: Number of votes received by Mikheil Saakashvili in electoral districts  
Source: Authors' own elaboration





Source: Authors' own elaboration



Fig. 4. Electoral regions of Georgia (based on the 2008 Presidential elections)  
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Notably enough, that was not Levan Gachechiladze who took votes away from Saakashvili in a number of districts, but Arkadi Patarkatsishvili. Good illustration of the above is Kakheti, Guria and Lower Adjara. Interestingly, almost in every district where Patarkatsishvili received more than 9% of votes, Saakashvili failed to cross 50% threshold.

As it was already mentioned, the presidential election of 2008 was contested. Among other reasons this was conditioned by the fact that more than one candidate influenced an outcome of election in certain districts, unlike previous elections. We tried to identify the districts based on pluralism in choice. In doing so we looked at the number of candidates who managed to cross 10% virtual barrier. As a result we got a picture, which enables to conclude that political pluralism was rather characteristic the one-third of election districts in Georgia. In such districts three or four candidates received over 10% of votes.

It is important that the mountainous regions of Georgia demonstrated higher pluralism in the given presidential election, compared to the lowlands (see figure 3). From the above we can conclude, that the political life of Georgia's northern mountainous regions is decisively influenced by the local community. Electorate of the community votes for a candidate that is supported by the community leaders. Accordingly, community itself in is not pluralistic internally.

In the big cities we deal with political polarization, more specifically, with a bipolar situation. Majority of the votes here were divided between the two favorites of the presidential race. Political pluralism is still something unknown for the regions that are populated by ethnic minorities.

Voting pattern of each region is influenced by geographic, ethno-demographic, social-economic and personal factor or their unity.

1. Significant differences were observed in the electoral behavior of ethnic Georgians and ethnic minorities through the country's territory. Electoral behavior of ethnic minorities has remained unchanged almost for two decades already. First of all, the latter is characterized by the high turnout; moreover, traditionally they demonstrate great loyalty to acting government.

2. Significant differences were observed between the electoral behavior of urban population, especially of big cities, and rural population. Urban population proved to be more oppositionally disposed towards the authorities than the electorate of rural areas.

3. IDPs and the residents of conflict regions placed higher confidence in the authorities, compared to the rest of ethnic Georgians.

4. Mikheil Saakashvili enjoyed greater support in those municipalities, where social and economic infrastructure and employment level has been significantly improved during his presidency. This may explain the high number of ballots cast for him in Signaghi election district compared to the neighboring Dedoplistskaro or Gurjaani districts; analogous situation was observed in Imereti, where he proved to be popular in Tkibuli municipality, rather than Chiatura municipality with similar economic profile.

5. Significance of the economic factor is also confirmed by the fact that the opposition candidates proved to be more successful in the region, e.g. Kakheti, Guria, Lower Adjara and Borjomi municipalities, which have been affected by Russia's recent economic embargo.

6. Electoral behavior on a district level might be seriously affected by a personal influence of a certain figure. Such person, as a rule, appears to be a senior government official or a successful businessman, someone who had contributed to the well-being of a district population and enjoys popularity as a result. For example, President's representative in Imereti region comes from Khoni district and presumably his personal authority and image conditioned high number of votes given to ruling party candidate Mikheil Saakashvili in that district.

Presidential election of January 5 proved that as a rule, population of one and the same historic region maintains similar electoral behavior. This enables us to conclude that historic-geographic regions represent stable psycho-cultural units. In general, based on the homogeneity of electoral behavior we can single out following 13 regions in Georgia (see figure 4):

- Tbilisi agglomeration<sup>9</sup> (Gardabani city excluded),
- Kakheti,
- Eastern Highlands,
- Shida Kartli,
- Eastern Imereti,
- Western Imereti and Racha,
- Svaneti,
- Samegrelo, Upper Abkhazia and Lechkhumi,

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<sup>9</sup> Tbilisi agglomeration, apart from the capital itself, includes such cities as Sagarejo, Mtskheta, Kaspi, Dusheti and Gardabani.

- Lower Adjara, Guria and Poti city,
- Upper Adjara,
- Tori,
- Southern Electoral Region (Samtskhe-Javakheti and Lower Kartli).

Pattern of electoral behavior also prompted us to single out three rather large regions on the country's territory. Unlike traditional geographic division of Georgia, here we deal with additional third region – Southern Electoral Region. The region comprises historic Samtskhe-Javakheti (Borjomi Municipality excluded) and Lower Kartli (Rustavi city excluded). In this region ruling party's candidate received highest number of votes.

It is important that within the above classification offered by us, borders of the Eastern Georgia region with similar electoral behavior coincides with the borders of a corresponding historic-geographic region. This argument has been clearly supported by the case of Mtskheta and Akhlagori election districts. Electoral behavior in those districts clearly differs from that of remaining three districts of Mtskheta-Mtianeti administrative region and is similar to the behavior of electorate of Inner Kartli. Accordingly, we combine all municipalities, which historically represent Inner Kartli, into one electoral region.

Tbilisi agglomeration turned out to be the most appositionally minded election region. Tbilisi itself revealed significant territorial specificities of the voters. "Rightist" candidates Levan Gachechiladze and David Gamkrelidze received majority of their votes in the capital's prestigious districts, while the "leftist" candidates Saakashvili and Shalva Natelashvili enjoyed higher support in less prestigious ones.

Eastern Highlands appear to be quite a specific electoral region: in the presidential election of 2008 it happened to be a most pluralistic one. First of all, none of the candidates managed to receive more than half of the votes there. Besides, all three election districts of the given region – Mtianeti, Dusheti and Kazbegi were won by different candidates – Mikheil Saakashvili, Shalva Natelashvili and Levan Gachechiladze respectively. Ruling party candidate could not win in 2/3 of the districts of this electoral region, even more, he received as low as 33.4% of the votes there. Stemming from the above, Eastern Highlands proved to be the most "appositionally" minded election district next to Tbilisi in 2008 presidential election.

With regard to Western Georgia and its regions, here we deal with rather different electoral behavior. Adjara was conditionally divided into

two parts. Lower Adjara has been united in one electoral region together with Guria and Poti city. Here Saakashvili received around 40% of votes.

Common electoral behavior has been observed in bordering regions: Samegrelo (Poti city excluded), Upper Abkhazia and Lechkhumi (Tsageri municipality). Here the ruling party candidate received overwhelming support.

Imereti has been divided into two parts conditionally: west and east. Western part of this region, which comprises Tkibuli, Tskaltubo, Khoni, Terjola, Baghdati, Samtredia and Vani municipalities, has been put together with Racha due to similar electoral behavior. Here Mikheil Saakashvili gained the majority votes. Separate electoral region is shaped in Eastern Imereti, including Chiatura, Zestaponi, Sachkhere municipalities and Kutaisi city. The electorate there rather voted for the opposition than the ruling party candidate.

In conclusion we may say that the general trends revealed in the recent presidential election indicate improved political culture of Georgian electorate, which is a positive sign since it brings Georgia closer to western standards. As for regional aspects of electoral behavior, analysis of election results disclosed interesting characteristics which merit further study by the experts, as well as political organizations and civil society actors.