

UNDERSTANDING VOTER DECISION-MAKING IN THE URBAN CONTEXT OF TBILISI

Abstract

This article explores the perceptions of voters about the factors influencing electoral decision-making in Tbilisi. Based on in-depth interviews, it is argued that exposure to the media and personal qualities of the politicians are important to voters when it comes to political allegiance. It is argued that the 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia were primarily associated with the wish of voters for changes, their feelings of injustice in political and economic life, the personality of billionaire philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili and finally, widely publicized video clips of prisoner torture.

Keywords: *Voter decision-making, media exposure, post-Communist politics, Georgia*

1. Introduction

This article investigates the aspects of decision-making by voters in Tbilisi, Georgia and the influence of particular contextual effects on its formation. The study of electoral behaviour has been central to many disciplines across the social sciences, including political geography. A great deal of scientific literature is dedicated to the study of electoral geographies of the United States and to a lesser extent Western European democracies (Leib, Quinton, & Warf, 2011). Studies concerned with the geographic aspects of voting in the post-Soviet countries are scarce. They primarily investigate regional and historical agents dealing with elections in Ukraine (O'Loughlin, 2001; Roper & Fesnic, 2003; Clem & Craumer, 2008; Mykhnenko, 2009) and the electoral geographies of Russia (Perepechko, Kolossov, & ZumBrunnen, 2007). There is a significant body of literature dedicated to the role of societal cleavages. It is argued that the origins of the cleavages can be traced to the particularities of the democratic transition, types of the Communist rule (Whitefield, 2002), pre-Communist and "Leninist" cultural legacies (Evans & Whitefield, 2000; Kitschelt, 1995, p.455).

It is not clear whether the above mentioned factors provide enough context for explaining the reasons of voting behaviour. This is true especially in the case of Georgia,

where the study of elections has been largely neglected, as the country lacks stable party institutions (Nodia & Scholtbach, 2006; Bader, 2008) and local political regimes can be more described as hybrid rather democratic (Wheatley & Zürcher, 2008). However, since 2008, elections in Georgia have shown a high level of political contestation and voter polarization (Nilsson & Cornell, 2008; Schofield, Gallego, Jeon, & Muskhelishvili, 2012; Mueller, 2013). They also revealed a strong difference in the voting behaviour of "prestigious" and "working class" neighbourhoods of Tbilisi.

The first context which can contribute to the understanding of voting decision-making in Tbilisi is in the peculiarity of Tbilisi's urban development during the Soviet epoch. Like other union republics, Georgia underwent a very rapid process of urban growth alongside the rise of industrialization. Spatial development of the "socialist" city neighbourhoods was accompanied by a significant level of social segregation, especially in terms of housing allocation in places like Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary and the Soviet Union (Short, 1990; Topham, 1990; Szelenyi, 1996). In the case of Tbilisi, the central prestigious areas of the cities were allocated for the "white-collar" workers and intelligentsia (or so called "privilligentsia"), which formed a distinct social landscape. It can be argued that the social fabric had an influence on the formation of the "networks of discussion and persuasion" (Cox, 1969).

While the influence of media exposure, political mobilization and campaigning is still influential in established democracies (e. g in Norris, 2006), one cannot neglect the influence of political communications and the media in emerging (or transitional) democracies. As Voltmer (2006) notes, in transitional societies, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of mass media, especially considering the formation of institutions and party structures. As is well-documented in the case of Russia (e. g. in White, Oates, & McAllister, 2005), state-controlled media outlets are decisive in ensuring electoral victories of the governmental political groups. Consequently, this pattern could be an important factor in the electoral choices of the individuals in our context.

In light of the above discussion, this article seeks to understand the mechanism of voting decision-making among voters living in Tbilisi. The paper explores the role of voter exposure to the media as one of the influential determinants of electoral choice. It is

argued that there are few, if any ideological bases for political affiliation. There is more room for personality-based voting as well as different electoral manipulations. The article also looks through the possible influence of social background and family heritage in the context of the formation of "networks of discussion and persuasion".

This paper analyses 60 in-depth interviews collected in two areas of Tbilisi. Respondents were recruited in the central and prestigious Vake district and in the peripheral, working-class Gldani neighbourhood. First, I will review the research literature which conceptualizes and investigates the peculiarities of voting in post-Communist societies. Later, the aspects of political communications and media influence will be discussed. In the data analysis part, I will summarize key results of the in-depth interviews and finally, discuss main findings and their relation to the literature.

2. Literature review

There is a significant body of literature investigating the peculiarities of electoral behaviour in post-Communist societies. As it was shown (e.g. in Shabad & Slomczynski (1999) and Evans (2006)), the "tabula rasa" hypothesis regarding the lack of long-term ideological preferences (Kitschelt, 1995) seems to be either outdated or not sound in the case of this region. There are numerous other debates suggesting different explanations to voter allegiance and the mechanisms of electoral decision-making in these societies.

All institutions in post-Communist countries are complex outcomes of Communist-era systems and of particularities of the transition (Ishiyama, 1997; Shvetsova, 1999). On the one hand, current electoral systems mainly depend on the compromises and institutional changes brokered by the elites during the demise of Communism (Andrews & Bairett Jr, 2013) and electoral systems have enormous influence on electoral outcomes (Birch, 2001). On the other hand, voter preferences and their allegiance can be linked to the particularities of the Communist regime and its transition to democracy (Evans & Whitefield, 2000). Past legacies, especially voter socialization and exposure to the Soviet past can influence one's political preferences in a systematic manner (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2013).

Societal cleavages have long been an important tool for explaining the emergence of party systems in Western democracies (Karvonen & Kuhnle, 2003), despite criticism (Deegan - Krause, 2007; Johnston & Pattie, 2003). It appears that cleavages are important for post-Communist societies as well (Kitschelt, 1995; Evans & Whitefield, 2000; Evans, 2006). Disregarding the more advanced democracies of the region, divisions along societal borders and their translation into electoral policies can be observed in Ukraine (Birch, 1995; Clem & Craumer, 2008; O'Loughlin, 2001), Russia (Perepechko et al., 2007) and at some point – in Georgia (Sichinava, 2015).

Cleavages in the post-Communist polities are based on local factors (Whitefield & Evans, 1999) - in contrast to Western European countries, where the emergence of the divisions can be explained by the four societal¹ revolutions (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Evans and Whitefield show that the age, education, religion, ethnicity and employment type define ideological perspective (Whitefield & Evans, 1999).

Ultimately, these approaches show that Communist and pre-Communist legacies, together with socio-demographic factors, are prone to influence the long-term political affiliation of the voters. However, in many cases voter allegiance seems fluid depending on the particular context. Even in Western democracies, even before the start of "the end of history", politics in Western democracies had become based on short-term factors such as the public image of the candidate and his/her attitudes towards particular issues (Dalton, Flanagan, Beck, & Alt, 1984). Societal cleavages suffered the most, as "traditional" cleavages were gradually suppressed by issue-based voting and "new" cleavages, such as divisions along materialist and post-materialist values and the role of the state regarding foreign policy (Deegan - Krause, 2007).

Politics in post-Communist Europe also follows the described pattern. Tavits (2005) argues that in post-Communist societies electoral preferences are defined by the economic programmes of the parties and how they communicate with the voters.

¹ These are center-periphery, church-state, urban-rural and employer-employee dichotomies (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967)

Consequently, political communications play an important role in defining the political attitudes of the voters.

Political communications and the influence of the media have been important to electoral politics. An immense amount of information and consumption of television opens the floor to the candidate-centred politics (Habermas, 2004). Exposure to mass media has proved effective in electoral campaigns not only - for example - in Britain (Norris, 2006), but also in new democracies (Veltmer, 2006).

If we look at the specific examples, the case of Russia is particularly interesting in regard to the effects of media on political engineering. Currently, Russia lacks rigorous democratic institutions while the media strongly influences people's electoral choices. In 1999 and 2000, the previously unknown Vladimir Putin and the ruling Unity party were able to garner comfortable majority in the State Duma, thanks to wide support from the state-run TV channels (White, Oates, & McAllister, 2005). The same sources argue that the supporters of the Unity party were more likely to have been watching the news programmes of ORT TV². In a country which can be characterized as having "genuinely pluralistic unfree media" (De Smaele, 2004, p. 41), not only do parties use television as a tool for influencing voters, media outlets themselves lead to the emergence of "broadcast parties and candidates" (Oates, 2006, p. 196).

3. Methodology

The paper aims to achieve an understanding the mechanisms of the decision-making process among the voters in the urban context of Tbilisi. To do so, I employed in-depth interviews conducted among the residents of two localities of Tbilisi. The selection of the qualitative rather quantitative method is justified from the point of view of capturing varieties of narratives and ideas which cannot be achieved through opinion polls. As the literature suggests, qualitative approaches for investigating people's attitudes towards elections and the electoral processes "generate new insights – which the opinion poll surveys do not" (Wilson, 2012, p. 161). The limitation of such studies is the

² ORT – state-run federal TV channel in Russia

difficulty of generalizability. However, the approach generates rich data and contributes to the understanding of the processes.

The respondents were recruited from the Gldani and Vake neighbourhoods of Tbilisi. These neighbourhoods were selected in order to capture a wide variety of ideas from diverse respondents having a different social background. As the peculiarities of urban development of Tbilisi suggest, the social fabric of these two areas differ significantly. During the Soviet times, housing in the Vake neighbourhood was mainly allocated to the representatives of so called "privilligentsia" – members of intelligentsia, party officials, artisans and other privileged strata of Soviet Tbilisi, whilst Gldani generally was a "bedroom neighbourhood" for factory workers and lower-level executives (Salukvadze, Van Assche, Kristof, & Shavishvili, 2010). The current pattern of the social composition in these two areas to a large extent still reflects the Soviet legacy.

I conducted sixty in-depth interviews in both areas (30 in each neighbourhood) taking into account geographic and demographic peculiarities. The respondents were recruited randomly from the electoral precincts being either "typical" or "deviated" according to the results of the 2012 parliamentary elections of Georgia. The fieldwork was conducted between May and July 2013. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymized bearing in mind ethical considerations.

The respondents were asked about their personal perceptions of particular elections and the electoral process. They were asked about their viewpoints as to how other people decide which political groups or candidates to support. The respondents also spoke about their own strategies of electoral decision-making. The influence of personal networks on individual decision-making led us to ask questions about territorial concentration. The final discussion included narratives on family background and history of living in the place of current residence.

4. Data analysis

4.1 Setting the context: networks of discussion and persuasion

This section analyzes the particularities of social networks revealed through the interviews. As Ron Johnston mentions, "attitudes and behaviour patterns are...learned

through social interaction in places' (Johnston, 2009, p. 110) and "socialization of voters is a contextual process" (Ibid, p. 187), hence in many ways, voting decision-making is bound to a particular place and its spatial peculiarities (Agnew, 1987; Cox, 1969). If we follow the paradigm of political geography, from the theoretical point of view, the possible role of personal networks of influence cannot be denied.

The peculiarities of housing seemingly define the characteristics of these networks and may contribute to their territorial concentration. As the literature shows, the Soviet urban housing allocation system was characterized by a significant level of segregation both in terms of housing quality and geographic location (Gentile & Sjöberg, 2013). Until the early 1990s, the residential structure of all socialist cities was almost completely defined by the state, with occasional signs of private initiatives (Smith, 1996). This pattern was maintained in Tbilisi as well, which led to the emergence of distinct prestigious and less prestigious residential areas.

However, as the interviews clearly show, currently the population of the two areas are significantly influenced by population mobility. "*There are very few core families left who were the original residents of this apartment block from the beginning*" (female, Gldani); "*These days we get new neighbours very often...earlier we used to have very close relations with the original residents*" (male, Vake). It seems that formerly close-bonded neighbourhoods were set to deteriorate after the economic transitions of the late 20th century. Population mobility has made it so the only issues which bring the neighbourhood together are those that arise from communal concerns.

Communication between neighbours generally revolves around communal issues. Problems with lifts, water supply, and roofing are the most widely discussed topics that bring neighbours together to resolve common problems. It cannot be denied that there are some discussions about politics and current events, but they do not take place on regular basis. Moreover, almost all neighbours are aware of the possible political preferences of others.

Politics are within very close networks, such as family and immediate friends and the respondents emphasize this fact: "*The truth is formed after debates with family*

members and friends...things said by a close friends has more weight than some commentary on the internet" (male, Vake).

As the respondents recall, voter decision-making still depends mainly on personal judgement, rather than on influences from others. The networks of discussion are mainly limited to the immediate family members and, to an even greater extent, close friends, whom the respondents considered their most trusted sources of information. As it is still considered as sensitive topic for discussion, the respondents tended to be cautious in speaking about politics.

4.2 Perceptions of voting and electoral decision-making

This section summarizes main narratives regarding the factors pertaining to electoral decision-making. The narratives expose the issues central to the political affiliation and voting intentions of a particular political group or individual. The respondents were also asked to describe the role of particular events which in their opinion had significant influence on the electoral decisions of the population.

The most influential factor revealed from the interviews is the media, especially television, which currently is the main source of information for most Georgians. The respondents underlined the role of the media and television in forming voters' opinions and subsequently, their voting intentions. The respondents mention the role of "biased" or "impartial" sources of information. They mention that journalists, who are also partial - can be paid off or "bribed" in turn for spreading news or opinion favouring particular individuals or political groups.

Yet the respondents' thoughts on the media are not totally negative. The narratives include the notion of media importance in general and indicate that media outlets "have to be improved" – *"[Media outlets] need to change, to improve... in order to bring [the truth] to the people"* (male, Gldani); *"[unlike the 1990s], people are more aware now...because of television."* (male, Gldani)

People unanimously agree that television can be an important factor for an individual to decide whom to vote for: *"Bidzina won the elections with the help of Maestro"* (female, Gldani) (Maestro is a TV station that harshly criticized former

President Mikheil Saakashvili and his United National Movement party). Respondents state that in many cases voters receive and accept information without sufficient analysis or discussion – *"The influence of mass media is so huge that the individual cannot think for himself... he just follows other ideas"* (male, Vake).

Economic difficulties can push people to accept "bribes" offered by particular political groups. Deepening socio-economic hardships can force people to choose candidates who offer social benefits and jobs. One female respondent from Gldani said: *"People now can be easily bribed with sugar or flour...they do not think about the future but rather about trying to support themselves.... For the pensioner it is ten Lari, addition to his/her state assistance."* Some respondents said that the 2012 parliamentary elections in particular bore a distinct "economic" character on top of the political issues.

Campaigning and party programmes and promises are very central to any democratic election. Normally, they follow the political ideology of a political party/candidate and try to attract voters of corresponding beliefs and maximize their own electoral outcome. Still, the respondents do not consider these to be important. As the interviewees pointed out, political campaign and pre-electoral promises from politicians seem not to strongly influence voters' decisions. It is good to have attractive promises and some people would take this into consideration, but the voters still do not know what they will get after the victory of a particular political group. One respondent recalled that *"I have never seen campaign promises ever fulfilled in Georgia."* (female, Vake)

Another important discussion topic that emerges as important for voting intentions is the personal characteristics of an individual politician or political leader. Mostly respondents agree that a charismatic, strong personality of politician can draw many supporters to him and ensure him a successful political career. Interviewees would especially underline the personality of one politician - *"For some people [like me], education and professionalism is important"* (female, Vake); *"[Ivanishvili] will not 'devour' us as he has already collected a fortune"* (male, Gldani). However, the assessment of personal values is quite controversial – starting from charisma and ability "to do things quickly" to personal fortune. When speaking about the particular personalities and their role on voters' decisions, the respondents in particular recall the

case of the 2012 parliamentary elections. Society needed someone who would dare to challenge the existing government. This sort of person would necessarily need an already established positive public image. Among other characteristics, the religiousness of a candidate - more precisely the alignment of a candidate's policies to those of the church - is an important factor for some respondents – *"First of all, I am Orthodox Christian and vote for those who are not against the Church"* (female, Gldani).

The interviews touched on various ideas which, according to the respondents, influence the minds of voters when it comes to voting intentions. They form inter-related clusters of ideas which can be summarized into broader categories. The influence of media, economic aspects, party programmes and the role characteristics of particular politicians are the general topics around which the narratives evolve.

4.3 What led to the "electoral coup"?

In the previous section, I summarized the main outcomes of respondents' perceptions regarding the reasons for making specific electoral decisions. As the analysis shows, none of them can be attached to the particular ideological pillars which define party affiliation in more advanced democracies. Apart from the general perceptions, the respondents spoke about their personal experiences of voting decision-making, as well as their perceptions of the most recent elections. In order to differentiate, the respondents were able to compare and describe the situations in the 2008, 2010 and 2012 elections, draw parallels and list the approaches they took.

There are several main directions in the narratives about the main reasons affecting people's decision-making in the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections. The respondents maintained that results of the elections in 2008, especially the presidential election, were falsified and did not reflect the genuine attitudes of voters. Additionally, the weakness of opposition political groups and candidates challenging the incumbent government was named as a reason for the opposition's failure: *"Gachechiladze [presidential candidate] was the wrong leader"* (male, Gldani); *"There was no contest [between the government and opposition] because of the qualities of candidates [from the opposition]"* (female, Vake). The weakness of the opposition, their

inability to challenge the government and to fully unite greatly affected the election outcomes.

When discussing the elections of 2008, the respondents also recall the role of political tensions which were fuelled by the opposition protests that were forcefully dispersed on 7 November 2007 and the violent closure of Imedi TV on that day. However, they also point to the indifference from of society caused by pressure from the state.

The local elections in 2010 were largely neglected by the opposition, and the ruling party, Saakashvili's United National Movement, easily achieved a convincing victory. The respondents had a hard time remembering the elections, which also points to low public interest. The informants indicated the greater frustration caused by the 2008 war with Russia, and the weakness of the opposition. Moreover, one can observe some positive attitudes towards Gigi Ugulava³ as a *"good mayor, who did a lot especially regarding communal services"* (male, Gldani). The proactive campaign on behalf of the government candidate greatly influenced frustrated voters, mobilizing them to vote for Ugulava.

The growing dissatisfaction with the existing system, as well as fear and the release of videos showing inmate abuse in Georgian prisons late in the campaign led to the *"electoral coup organized by the people"* (female, Gldani) in October, 2012. This important milestone in Georgia's recent history was one of the main topics of discussion during the interviews.

The main narrative as to how the voters decided as they did can be broken down thematically. One important reason pointed out was the intention and desire of people to achieve change. The turbulent political situation starting in 2007, economic hardship and widely perceived injustice and the August 2008 war with Russia were listed by the respondents as the reasons for the growing dissatisfaction with the ruling party: *"People en masse understood that something had to change in this country... [Saakashvili's government] did some things but more needed to be done"* (female, Gldani).

Injustice in economic and political life and the "lack of freedom" were other topics pointed out by the interviewees. The most popular phrase for describing this situation

³ UNM candidate running as incumbent for Tbilisi mayor in the 2010 local elections

was "we were fed up with feeling fear". Fear and the feeling of injustice grew during the last few years of the Saakashvili administration. "*People were stressed ... and fed up, as they were not able to speak about their economic problems*" (female, Gldani). Despite the fact that almost all respondents mentioned the many reforms carried out by then-time governing political party, the success achieved was less impressive because they felt the government was disregarding their personal freedoms.

Another important issue pointed out by the respondents was the personality of Bidzina Ivanishvili. As one of the respondents mentioned, in Georgia people have always been preoccupied with personalities, especially those with a strong and established nature. Ivanishvili was the one who could challenge incumbent government – "*Neither [then-opposition figure] Alasania, nor others were able to get rid of the government...*" (female, Vake), additionally, his wealth and experience in economic activities kindled popular hopes for an improved economy and more jobs. Even swing voters who would otherwise sympathize with the United National Movement, would affirmatively vote for Ivanishvili "*hoping that he would do more*" for the economy (female, Gldani). Ivanishvili's emergence in politics greatly influenced the path of political developments in the country - "*Such a person came along who was famous for his good deeds*" (female, Vake), "*there was no choice, either Misha [Saakashvili] or Bidzina*" (male, Vake). Ivanishvili's entry into the political battlefield was also linked to popular desire for change.

However, the crucial moment which drew the most swing voters towards the Georgian Dream Coalition was highly publicized prison abuse recordings. Almost all respondents mentioned that even though many people were aware that such abuses took place in prisons, actually seeing the footage sparked waves of protest and pushed neutral voters towards the opposition coalition. Nevertheless, the respondents said that they, as well as the majority of their neighbours, friends and relatives had already made up their minds before the release of the videos. When speaking about their own decisions, the respondents point out that it was totally personal and no one had influenced them, but many of them indicate that there were important discussions among close individuals prior to the voting process as well.

5. Discussion and conclusion

There are several factors contributing to electoral decision-making in the described context. Political campaigning and pre-electoral slogans do not play significant role in attracting voters to a particular platform. As Georgia largely remains a country where TV is the main source of information, the attitudes towards different political actors are influenced by voters' exposure towards media, especially television. The October 2012 election outcomes markedly displayed the role of socio-economic difficulties, the sense of injustice and the fear of persecution, which appear to have contributed to the formation of the protest vote. Finally, the personal values of the candidates also played an important role in voter decision-making.

When it comes to discussion of various topics, including politics, friends and family members are the main interlocutors. Discussion and persuasion inside these interpersonal networks are one of the import factors contributing to the formation of voting behaviour.

Despite the theoretical background drawn from the experience of new Eastern European democracies, the collected evidence in Tbilisi shows that during for at least the last five years, there has been limited basis for the mobilization of voters under the umbrella of ideologically motivated political parties. It cannot be denied that major political groups in the country claim to be following one or another ideological path, however, party preferences in the above-described context could be better connected to the love-or-hate attitude towards (particular) politicians and additionally, towards media outlets.

Here we come up to the "chicken or the egg" problem– is the lack of ideologically motivated political parties pushing the voters to concentrate on the personalities and mass media or does the present state of the society itself not allow such parties to exist? We could argue these circumstances are not mutually exclusive and can exist together.

On the one hand, it should be noted that the respondents tended to recall the images left from the previous parliamentary elections, where the role of ideological voting was totally neglected. Additionally, despite declared attachment to a particular ideology,

political groups in Georgia are more "catch-all" and populist, even amorphous unions (Nodia & Scholtbach, 2006), which makes it difficult for ideologically based parties to exist and for voters to concentrate on ideological considerations.

Theoretical evidence shows (e.g. Tavits, 2005) that communication of economic platforms can play an immense role in persuading voters to back particular political groups. Collected evidence points to the strength of this pattern in case of Tbilisi. Economic injustice, which was named as one of the reasons for popular disdain with the UNM government managed to draw more interest to the personality of B. Ivanishvili, as a successful entrepreneur and famed philanthropist.

However, for the 2012 parliamentary elections, political communications can be acknowledged as the main tool for influencing voters. As is the case in Russia, both the government and the opposition widely acknowledge the crucial role of media outlets, especially television. Must-carry rules mandating cable providers to offer all Georgian news broadcasters were approved under pressure from civil society organizations (Civil.ge, 2012) and opened up new forums for the opposition.

The interviews show that exposure to television significantly influenced voters. In the 2012 polls the then-opposition managed to communicate effectively with the voters and influence a big enough share of swing voters. Potential voters were already affected by the image of B. Ivanishvili, who can be described as a "broadcast candidate" (Oates, 2006) taking into consideration his successful image-making through the means of print and electronic media.

The opposition found another way of influencing undecided voters. The distribution of the recordings of prisoner abuse through television and other sources of electronic media was described by the voters as an important trigger for particular electoral action. The opposition not only successfully engineered the image of the coalition leader but, by distributing potentially disturbing materials, gained the support of many swing voters.

To summarize, the described context follows the already predefined path of post-Communist polities. As there is no stable basis for party identification, voters are exposed

to the political messages and significant media bias (Votmer, 2004). Close similarities to the Russian case do not necessarily mean the possibility of a "Russian scenario" in Georgia. Improved electoral systems and economic situation experienced through the multiple cycles of democratic transition can lead to higher valence party systems (Tavits, 2005), which can suppress the role of media bias and aid the switch to party identification on ideological bases.

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