



POLICY BULLETIN

# ARE GEORGIAN VOTERS POLARIZED?

Tbilisi, Georgia

October, 2020



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Dr. David Sichinava and Rati Shubladze for their feedback on earlier drafts of this brief. We also extend our thanks to Dr. Hans Gutbrod, Associate Professor at Ilia State University, who served as an external reviewer of the brief.

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## ABSTRACT

Talk about political polarization in Georgia is simple to find. One report went so far as to claim that Georgia was among Europe's most polarized countries.<sup>1</sup> Yet, few actually test these claims against data. This brief tests whether two key characteristics of political polarization among the general public are present. The first is division of society into two political groups. The second is that the two political groups have different policy preferences. The data provide little evidence of either. Indeed, the only thing that divides supporters of the Georgian Dream and United National Movement is the explicitly political, such as partisan victories and politicians themselves. This leads to the conclusion that while there is division in society, there is little political polarization.

## INTRODUCTION

Prior to the Covid 19 outbreak, the discourse on political polarization in Georgia was hard to miss. Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council at the time, commented on the issue in Batumi in 2019, telling Georgia, "Don't let yourself become divided."<sup>2</sup> The intensity of the conversation on polarization in Georgia picked up around the election of Salome Zourabichvili as President in late 2018. Before the pandemic, the discourse continued with many expecting a highly polarized electoral environment ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections. While there is much talk about polarization in Georgia, few have empirically examined the issue against a standard definition of it. This brief fills that gap.

Political polarization is generally considered to have two key components: issue partisanship and issue alignment.<sup>3</sup> Issue partisanship is the political division of society over issues into two groups: for and against. In the words of two prominent political scientists, it is "the correlation of issue attitudes with party identification."<sup>4</sup> For example, if supporters of one of the two main parties supported reducing the national debt, while the supporters of the other main party were for deficit spending to stimulate the economy, this would constitute issue partisanship. Issue alignment is "the correlation between pairs of issues."<sup>5</sup> More simply, party supporters share similar views on sets of issues. When issue partisanship and issue alignment coincide and grow, they lead to polarization.

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<sup>1</sup> GYLA and DRI, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Civil Georgia, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

While there is clearly a divisive political discourse in Georgia, does this translate into political polarization?

CRRC Georgia and NDI data suggest that Georgians are generally united on what matters to them in terms of issues – the economy. A large majority also share similar outlooks on the country’s foreign policy: it is pro-Western. There are some differences on serious issues such as banking regulations, although such differences are rare.

Georgians are so united that the vast majority even agree over what divides them: politicians. Notably, public opinion on what divides people coincides with what people actually have different attitudes about: politicians and specifically partisan events. This division hints at a factor which inhibits Georgia’s political stabilization: personalized politics based around specific leaders.

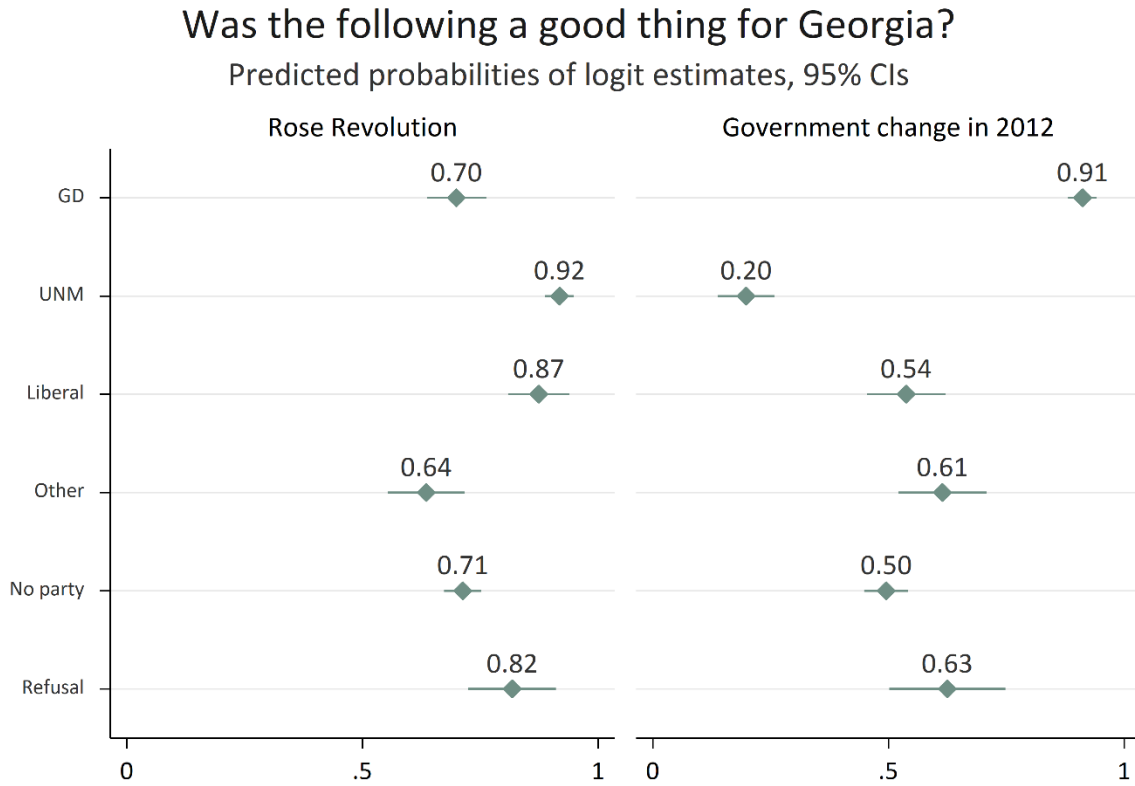
This ultimately leads to the conclusion that while there is personalized politics in Georgia, there is a lack of political polarization. This conclusion comes with two caveats. First, the data say nothing about whether elites are politically polarized. Second, personalities and politically symbolic moments do matter. As the data described below indicates though, it is unclear what these divisions are actually about. What is clear though, is that the divisions are not about either policy or ideology.

The data and analysis leading to the above conclusions is laid out in the text below. The next section of this brief presents data on division over partisans and political events, partisanship, and a wide variety of issues. The document finishes with conclusions and recommendations. A methods appendix is presented at the end of the document and replication code for the analysis is available at CRRC Georgia’s Github page.

## **WHAT GEORGIANS ARE DIVIDED ABOUT: POLITICIANS AND PARTISAN VICTORIES**

People are divided over partisan political events, politicians, and the institutions they run. Moreover, the public recognizes that this divides Georgians. The most obvious divisions are over whether transfers of power were a good thing. GD supporters are less likely to think that the Rose Revolution was a good thing and UNM supporters are more likely to think it was good. Conversely, UNM supporters are less likely to think that the government change in 2012 was a good thing and GD supporters more likely to think so.

FIGURE 1: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ROSE REVOLUTION AND 2012 ELECTORAL CHANGE OF POWER

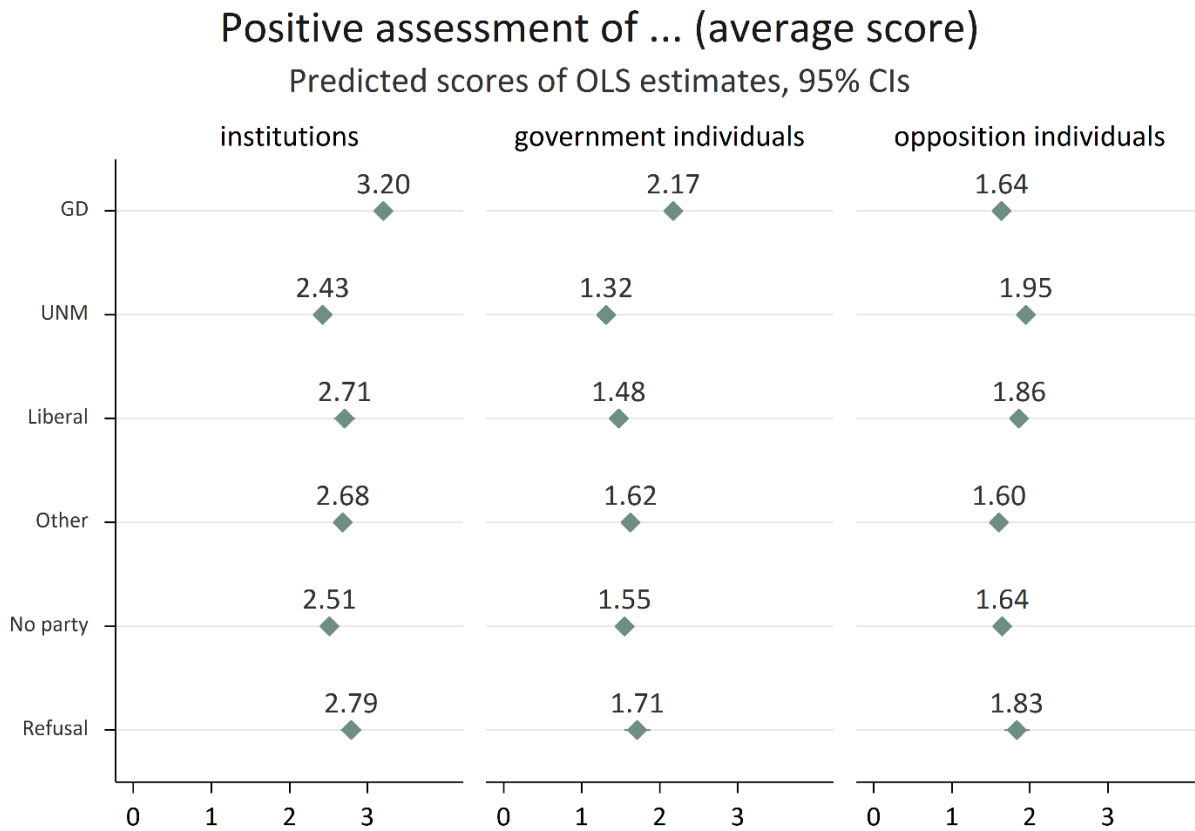


NDI/CRRC, April 2019

Previous analyses of the Caucasus Barometer survey suggest that trust in institutions varies based on who is in control of them.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, supporters of the main parties also have different attitudes towards institutions, with the UNM being less positive about performance and GD supporters more positive. The same holds when respondents were asked about GD associated public figures. Conversely, attitudes towards members of the opposition are more negative among GD supporters than among those that identify with the UNM (as well as the liberal parties).

<sup>6</sup> Vachradze, 2019.

FIGURE 2: ATTITUDES TOWARDS INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICIANS



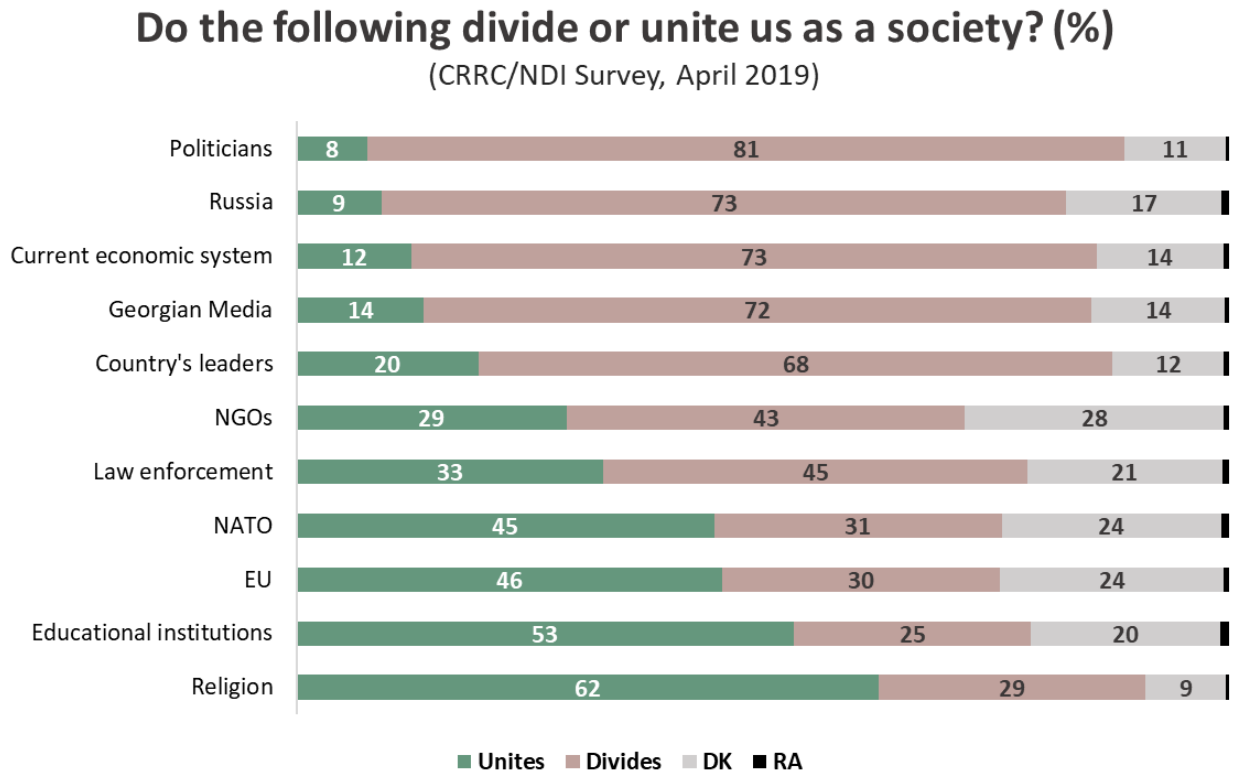
NDI/CRRC, April 2019

People also clearly recognize that personalities divide them. Of 11 actors and issues asked about on the April 2019, CRRC and NDI survey the vast majority of the public perceived politicians as a source of division.<sup>7</sup> More people even think that politicians divide the public than Russia.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbreath, 2019.



FIGURE 3: ATTITUDES TOWARDS WHAT DIVIDES GEORGIA



Politicians, politically controlled institutions, and explicitly partisan victories divide the public. But, is the public actually divided into two groups? And aside from party supporters thinking that their partisan victories were a good thing, do partisans actually support something different?

## GEORGIA LACKS PARTISANSHIP, A PRE-CONDITION FOR POLARIZATION

A key pre-condition for polarization is the division of society into two political groups. The data indicate this is anything but the case in Georgia. In the July 2019 CRRC and NDI survey, 9% of the public reported that the party closest to them was the UNM and 19% GD. Another 7% were supporters of liberal leaning parties like European Georgia and the Republican Party, while 9% were supporters of other parties of a variety of stripes such as the Patriot’s Alliance of Georgia and Industry Will Save Georgia. As is usually the case in the NDI survey, the most common party was no party, with 51% of the public with no party closest to them or not knowing which party they support.

FIGURE 4: PARTY IDENTIFICATION (%)

	2016- JUN	2016- NOV	2017- JUN	2017- DEC	2018- JUN	2018- DEC	2019- APR	2019- JUL
<b>Georgian Dream</b>	19	40	23	31	18	27	21	19
<b>United National Movement</b>	15	10	9	10	10	12	15	9
<b>Liberal parties</b>	11	5	7	5	5	6	7	7
<b>Other parties</b>	13	8	11	7	8	7	8	10
<b>No party</b>	37	28	45	35	54	40	43	51
<b>Refusal</b>	4	9	6	12	5	9	6	4

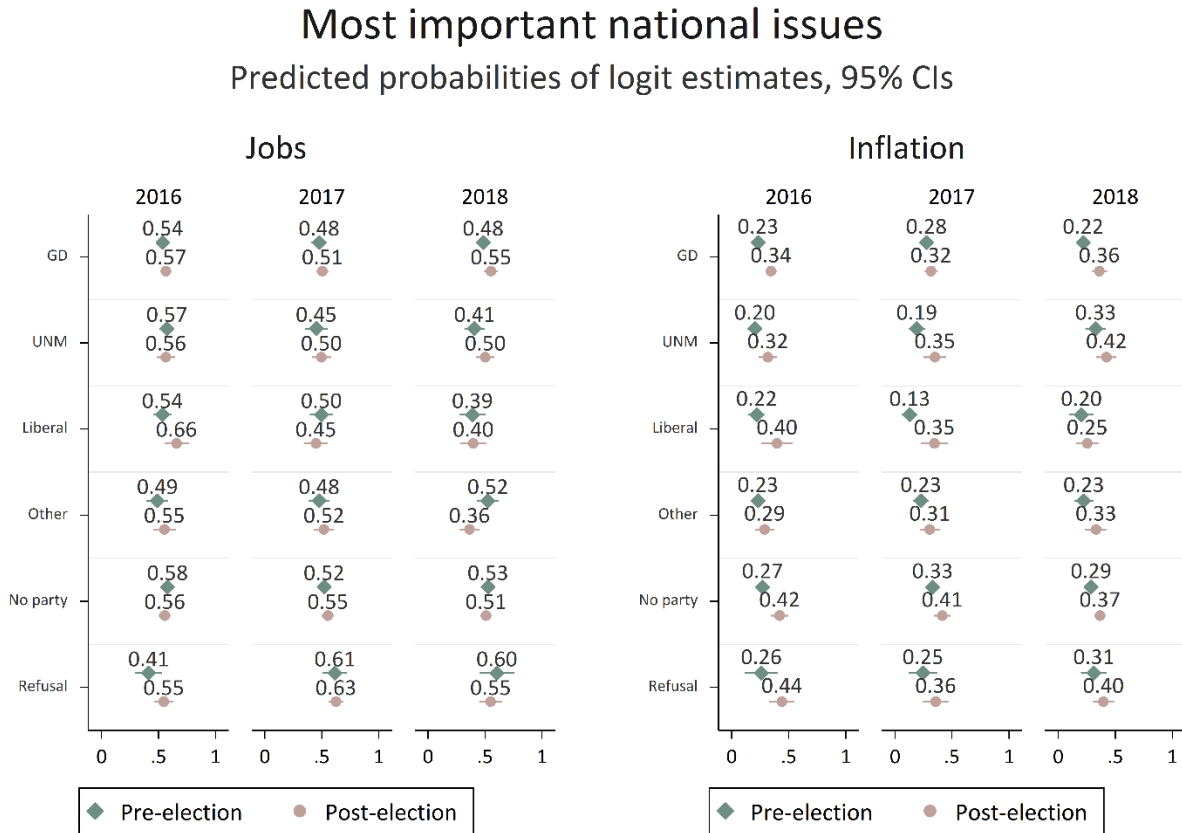
NDI/CRRC, 2016-2019

This pattern has stayed relatively constant for the last few years. With the exception of immediately following the 2016 parliamentary elections, the most common party that people have supported is “no party.” This shows that a pre-condition for political polarization – two organized political groups which society is divided between – does not exist in Georgia. Although the UNM and GD are political opponents, Georgian society is not split between them.

## PEOPLE ARE GENERALLY UNITED OVER WHAT THE ISSUES ARE AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM

Issue partisanship, if it existed, would be reflected in divisions over what people think the most important issues in the country are. Yet, the vast majority of the public as well as the supporters of different parties will say that the main issue in the country is some variant of the same thing: the economy. Moreover, the salience of economic issues has remained stable over time and across different party supporters. Election campaigns do not appear to change this.

FIGURE 5: MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES IN THE COUNTRY

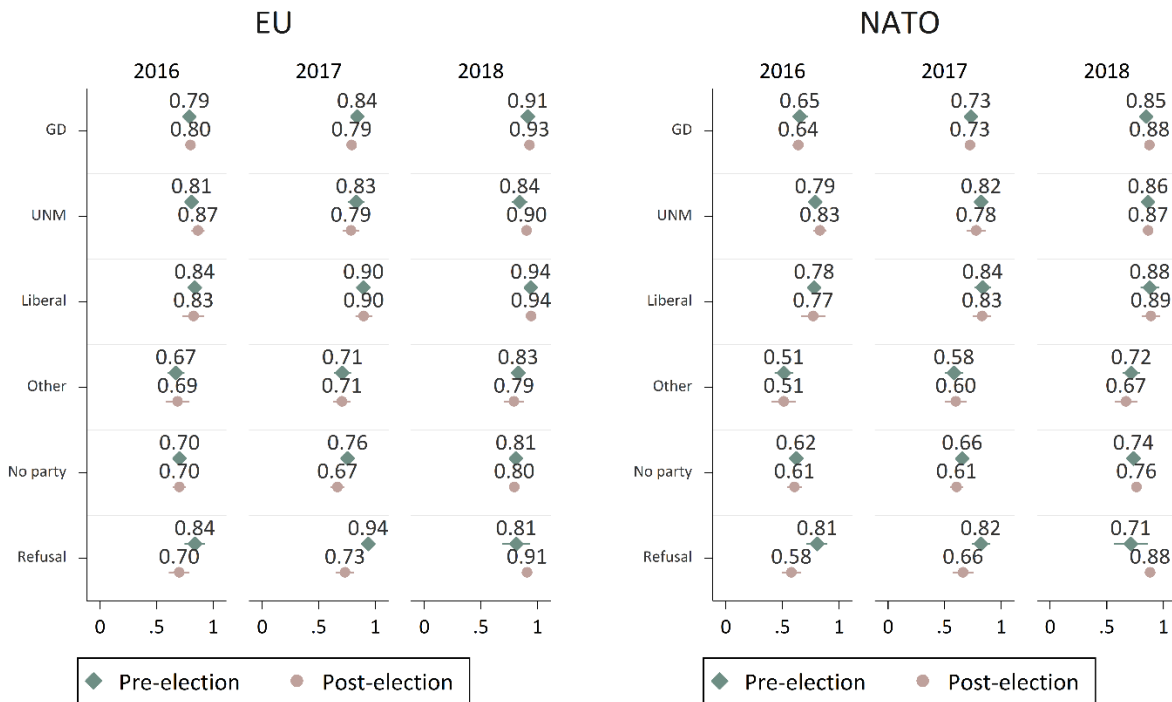


NDI/CRRC, 2016-2018

Similarly, if you ask about Georgia’s foreign policy goals of joining NATO and the EU, the vast majority of both GD and the UNM partisans support a pro-Western outlook. When forced to make a choice between joining the EU or having better relations with Russia, 65% of GD supporters think that Georgia should focus on strengthening relations with the EU compared with 75% of supporters of the UNM. While this difference is statistically a difference, two thirds of GD supporters still choose Euro-Atlantic integration.

FIGURE 6: ATTITUDES TOWARDS FOREIGN POLICY

### Approve government's stated goal to join Predicted probabilities of logit estimates, 95% CIs



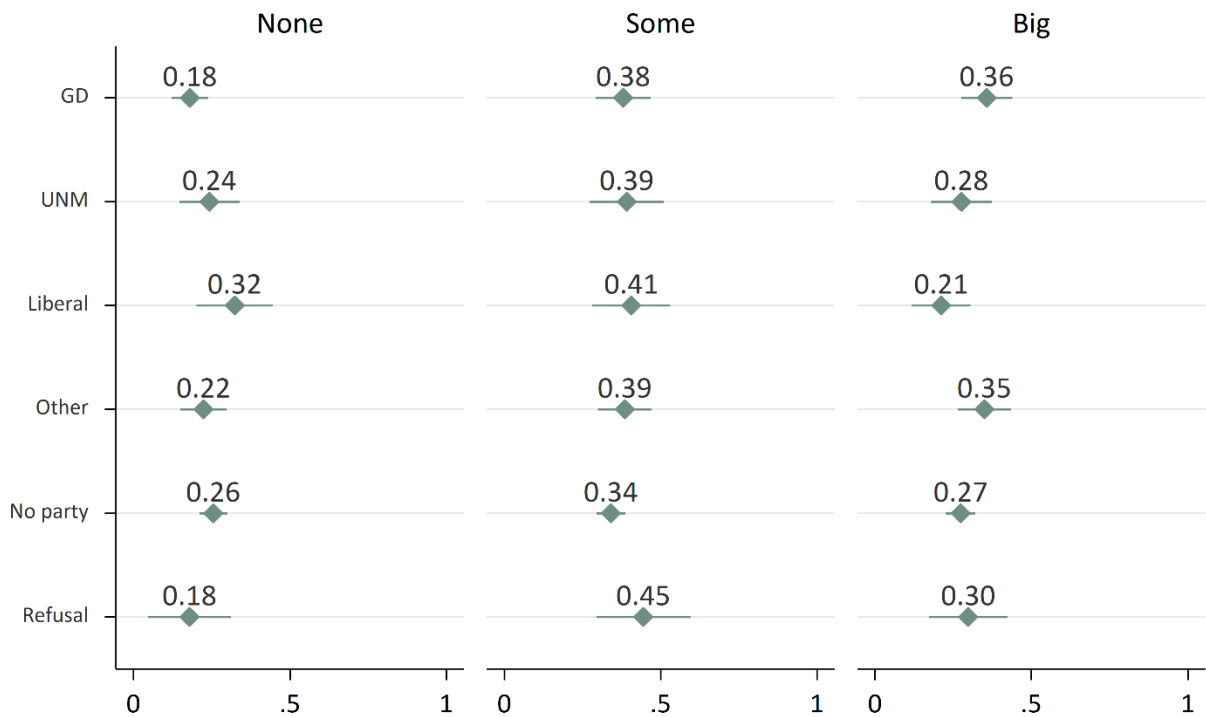
NDI/CRRC, 2016-2018

The data also show no differences between people’s preferred means or ideological preference for achieving a better economic situation in the country. GD and UNM supporters tend to think that either a little or a lot of government intervention is appropriate, as opposed to none, according to data from the July 2019 NDI/CRRC survey.

FIGURE 7: IDEOLOGICAL VIEWS OVER GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN THE ECONOMY

### Government's desired involvement in business and economy

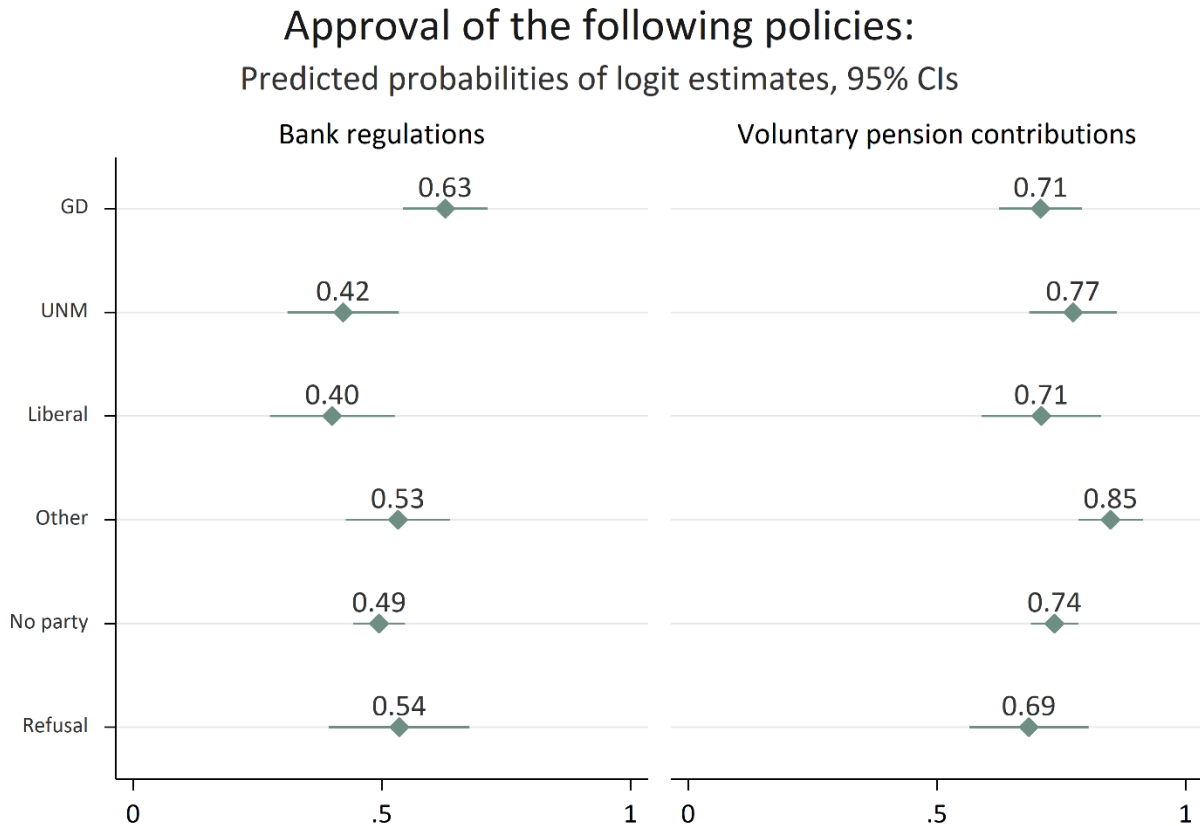
Predicted probabilities of multinomial logit estimates, 95% CIs



NDI/CRRC, July 2019

Supporters of GD and the UNM have different views on one of two recent, large-scale economic reforms. When it comes to support for the pension scheme, there are no significant differences between supporters of the main parties. When it comes to the new banking regulations introduced in January 2019, there is a significant difference. Supporters of the UNM are 22 percentage points less likely to support the new banking regulations than GD supporters, all else equal.

FIGURE 8: ATTITUDES TOWARDS ECONOMIC REGULATIONS



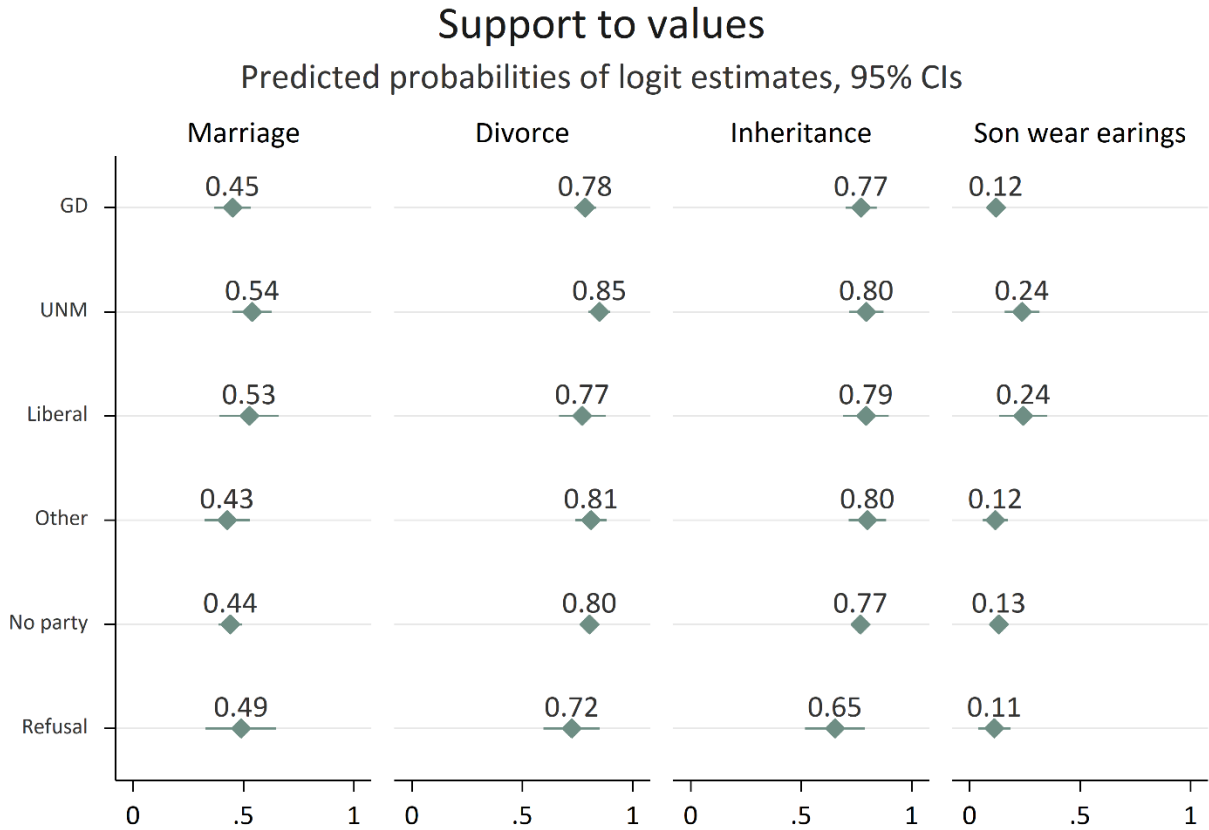
NDI/CRRC, July 2019

## MOST PEOPLE ARE SOCIALLY CONSERVATIVE, WITH FEW PARTISAN DIFFERENCES

As with economic and foreign policy, there are few differences between supporters of the main two parties on social values and policy. Most of the public holds conservative views.

GD and UNM supporters do not report that it is acceptable or unacceptable for their child to marry a person of a different religion, to divorce, or that the inheritance should go to the son at statistically distinguishable rates. GD and UNM supporters do differ in their attitudes towards whether or not it would be acceptable for their sons to wear earrings, however. While 12% of GD supporters would approve, 24% of UNM supporters would.

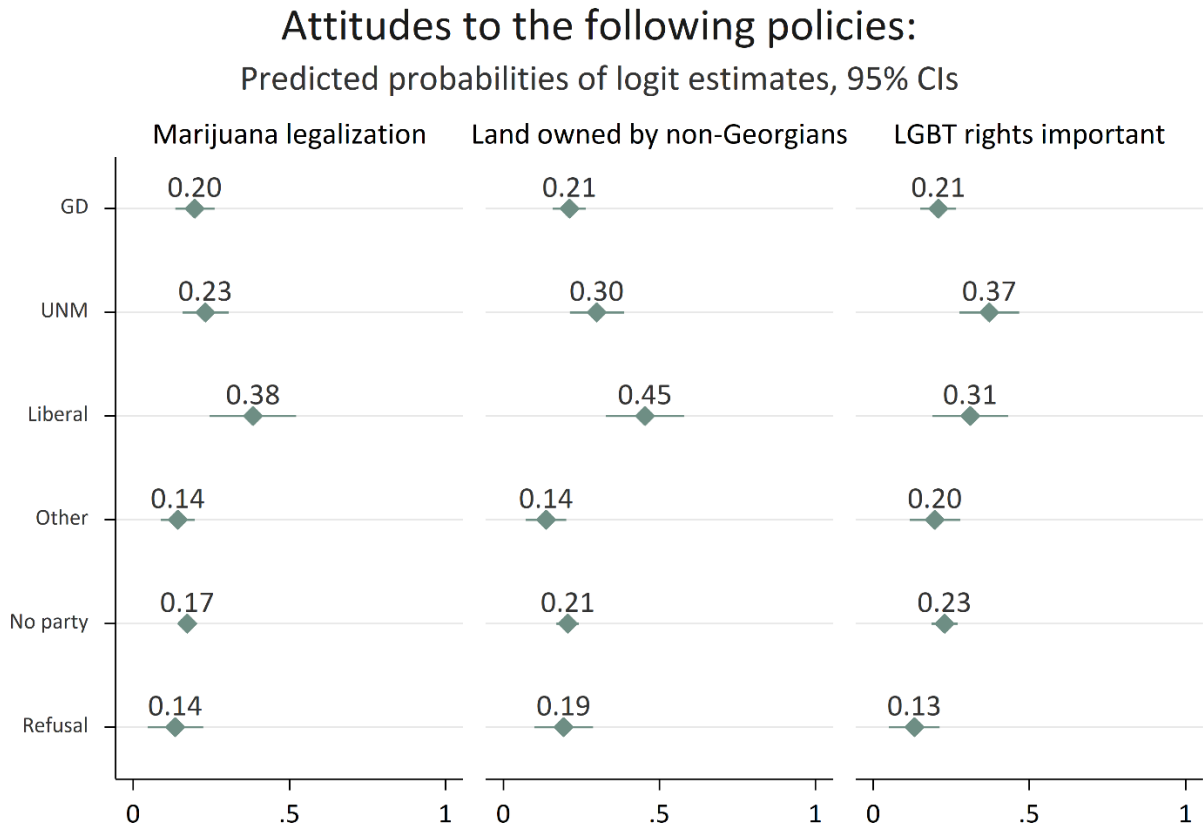
FIGURE 9: SOCIAL VALUES



NDI/CRRC, June 2018

Similarly, supporters of the two main parties generally hold similar views on the legalization of marijuana, whether it is important to protect LGBT rights, and whether foreigners should be allowed to own land. There is only one significant difference between supporters of the main two parties in terms of policy preferences, with UNM supporters being 16 points more likely than Georgian Dream supporters to report that protection of LGBT rights is important.

FIGURE 10: SOCIAL POLICY



NDI/CRRRC, June 2018

The data in this and the previous section show there are few statistically significant, let alone substantively large, differences in policy preferences or values between the major parties. It is hard to take these differences as evidence of political polarization. Rather, the above data suggest a lack of issue partisanship on most issues.



## CONCLUSIONS

In Donald Tusk's Batumi speech he noted, "Democracy is a constant debate and not a civil war." In Georgia, the debate is cantankerous. But, the society is not splitting in half (or into thirds either). Rather than polarized, Georgians on the whole are united around the vast majority of issues, and even on what divides the country: personalities rather than policies.

Even though politicians are not issues, reasonably they represent something. What that is though does not appear to have much to do with policy or ideology insofar as this analysis can demonstrate. In this regard, future research should look further into attempting to understand what, if anything, divides the public aside from politicians. A number of avenues may be fruitful. For instance, a general approach to political modernization may be an area of division: is it more important to slowly improve the situation or to deliver sweeping change? Another area that may be important is criminal justice policy. However, given the extremes of the UNM era, separating the policy from the politicians associated with them is likely to be difficult. Besides looking in this direction, a survey of political elites that parsed out the differences between parties in terms of policy preferences would be informative and potentially enable an understanding of where Georgia is headed if the current path of personalized politics continues.

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## METHODOLOGY ANNEX

To test claims of polarization empirically, this brief used CRRC and NDI data sets, looking at the data for symptoms of political polarization. These include division:

- About partisan victories, politicians, and party controlled institutions (proxying personalization of politics);
- Of society into political groups (a pre-requisite for issue partisanship) and;
- Over policy issues and values (measuring issue partisanship).

Aside from testing for the above generally, the analysis also tests for polarization before and after elections, when the surveys ask the same question before and after elections. This is based on the assumption that divisions would likely increase around elections, when parties actively appeal to voters with specific programs and promises. To this end, the analysis tests for changes in issue partisanship before and after 2016 parliamentary, 2017 local, and 2018 presidential elections. Some potentially divisive questions are available in a single survey wave, and hence, the analysis is limited to snapshots of political divisions. Overall, the brief looks at the following issues to explore issue partisanship:

- Attitudes towards the Rose Revolution;
- Attitudes towards the government change in 2012;
- Assessments of institutional performance;
- Approval of individuals in government;
- Approval of individuals in the opposition.
- Most important national issue;
- Approval of Georgia joining the EU;
- Approval of Georgia joining NATO;
- Level of support for government involvement in the economy;
- Approval of voluntary pension contributions scheme;
- Approval of 2019 banking regulations;
- Approval of divorce;
- Approval of a son wearing an ear ring;
- View on leaving inheritance to a son or daughter;
- Approval of a child marrying a person of another ethnicity;
- Approval of legalization of marijuana;
- Approval of foreign ownership of land;
- Support for the protection of LGBT rights;

The analysis makes use of logistic and multinomial logistic regression models to predict the probabilities of voter preferences among major parties or party groupings. Statistical models are built to link preferences with voters' self-reported party affiliations. The models also control for individual characteristics such as age group, gender, education, employment status, settlement type, being an

ethnic minority, and a proxy of the economic situation of a household (how many assets they own from a list of 10 asked about on each wave of the survey). When looking at the results of pre- and post-election waves, the wave variable is interacted with the voters' self-reported party affiliation and predicted probabilities for the outcome are computed for party identification for each wave.

When making a judgment about polarization on a particular voter preference, the brief looked at statistical significance between political groupings as well as at substantive differences. For example, the brief describes 5% differences as statistically significant differences between parties if they indeed are on a given issue. However, if 80% of Georgian Dream supporters are in favor of a given policy and 85% of United National Movement supporters are, we argue this cannot be seen as clear evidence of a meaningful form of political polarization.

Replication code for the analysis can be found at: [GITHUB LINK](#).

A description of variables in the models is available below:

Dependent variables**In general, do you think Rose revolution was a good thing or a bad thing for Georgia?**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2019, April	Good thing	0.74	0.01

**In general, do you think change of a government in 2012 was a good thing or a bad thing for Georgia?**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2019, April	Good thing	0.53	0.02

**Assessment of institutional performance (Index)**

Survey wave	Response	Mean	SE
2019, April	Positive	2.68	0.03

**Attitudes to ruling party politicians (Index)**

Survey wave	Response	Mean	SE
2019, April	Positive	1.55	0.03

**Attitudes to opposition politicians (Index)**

Survey wave	Response	Mean	SE
2019, April	Positive	1.61	0.02

**What are the most important national issues facing you and your family? (Up to three options)**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2016, June	Jobs	0.56	0.01
2016, November	Jobs	0.58	0.02
2017, June	Jobs	0.52	0.02
2017, December	Jobs	0.54	0.02
2018, June	Jobs	0.51	0.01
2018, December	Jobs	0.51	0.02
2019, July	Jobs	0.48	0.02

**What are the most important national issues facing you and your family? (Up to three options)**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2016, June	Inflation	0.26	0.02
2016, November	Inflation	0.38	0.02
2017, June	Inflation	0.28	0.02
2017, December	Inflation	0.35	0.02
2018, June	Inflation	0.28	0.02

2018, December	Inflation	0.37	0.02
2019, July	Inflation	0.34	0.02

#### Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU?

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2016, June	Approve	0.72	0.01
2016, November	Approve	0.73	0.02
2017, June	Approve	0.77	0.01
2017, December	Approve	0.72	0.01
2018, June	Approve	0.82	0.01
2018, December	Approve	0.83	0.01
2019, April	Approve	0.78	0.01
2019, July	Approve	0.78	0.01

#### Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join NATO?

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2016, June	Approve	0.64	0.02
2016, November	Approve	0.61	0.02
2017, June	Approve	0.66	0.02
2017, December	Approve	0.65	0.02
2018, June	Approve	0.75	0.02
2018, December	Approve	0.78	0.01
2019, April	Approve	0.74	0.02
2019, July	Approve	0.72	0.01

#### Government's desired involvement in business and economy

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2019, July	Big	0.28	0.02
	Some	0.35	0.02
	None	0.23	0.02
	Don't know	0.14	0.01

#### Do you approve or disapprove of January 2019 regulation on giving loans?

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2019, July	Approve	0.50	0.02

#### Which of the following two proposals on pension reform do you approve?

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2019, July	Voluntarily contributions to pension fund	0.71	0.02

**Son/daughter to marry a person of different religion: don't want vs it will not make any difference**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2018, June	No difference	0.44	0.02

**Prefer son/daughter to preserve the family even if s/he is not happy vs prefer son/daughter splitting from spouse if not happy.**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2018, June	Split if not happy	0.78	0.01

**Major part of inheritance should go to son vs. all should be split equally between son and daughter**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2018, June	Split equally	0.75	0.02

**Don't want my son to wear earrings vs it will not make any difference**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2018, June	No difference	0.14	0.01

**Do you believe Marijuana should or should not be legalized in Georgia?**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2018, June	Should be legalized	0.18	0.01

**Only the citizens of Georgia should own land in Georgia vs land should be owned by whoever will use it lawfully**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2018, June	Whoever uses lawfully	0.23	0.01

**How important or unimportant is the protection of rights of sexual minorities (LGBT)?**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2018, June	Important	0.24	0.02

**Key independent variable****Which party is closest to you? (First choice)**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2016, June	GD	0.19	0.01
	UNM	0.15	0.01
	Liberal parties	0.11	0.01
	Other parties	0.13	0.01
	No party	0.37	0.02
	Refusal	0.04	0.01

<b>2016, November</b>	GD	0.40	0.02
	UNM	0.10	0.01
	Liberal parties	0.05	0.01
	Other parties	0.08	0.01
	No party	0.28	0.02
	Refusal	0.09	0.01
<b>2017, June</b>	GD	0.23	0.01
	UNM	0.09	0.01
	Liberal parties	0.07	0.01
	Other parties	0.11	0.01
	No party	0.45	0.02
	Refusal	0.06	0.01
<b>2017, December</b>	GD	0.31	0.02
	UNM	0.10	0.01
	Liberal parties	0.05	0.01
	Other parties	0.07	0.01
	No party	0.35	0.02
	Refusal	0.12	0.01
<b>2018, June</b>	GD	0.18	0.01
	UNM	0.10	0.01
	Liberal parties	0.05	0.01
	Other parties	0.08	0.01
	No party	0.54	0.02
	Refusal	0.05	0.01
<b>2018, December</b>	GD	0.27	0.02
	UNM	0.12	0.01
	Liberal parties	0.06	0.01
	Other parties	0.07	0.01
	No party	0.40	0.02
	Refusal	0.09	0.01
<b>2019, April</b>	GD	0.21	0.01
	UNM	0.15	0.01
	Liberal parties	0.07	0.01
	Other parties	0.08	0.01
	No party	0.43	0.02
	Refusal	0.06	0.01
<b>2019, July</b>	GD	0.19	0.01
	UNM	0.09	0.01
	Liberal parties	0.07	0.01
	Other parties	0.10	0.01
	No party	0.51	0.02



Refusal	0.04	0.01
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**Other covariates**

**Respondent's gender**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
<b>2016, June</b>	Female	0.54	0.01
<b>2016, November</b>	Female	0.54	0.01
<b>2017, June</b>	Female	0.54	0.01
<b>2017, December</b>	Female	0.54	0.01
<b>2018, June</b>	Female	0.55	0.01
<b>2018, December</b>	Female	0.54	0.01
<b>2019, April</b>	Female	0.54	0.01
<b>2019, July</b>	Female	0.54	0.01

**Respondent's age groups**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
<b>2016, June</b>	18 to 37	0.38	0.01
	38 to 57	0.35	0.01
	58 and older	0.27	0.01
<b>2016, November</b>	18 to 37	0.37	0.01
	38 to 57	0.36	0.01
	58 and older	0.27	0.01
<b>2017, June</b>	18 to 37	0.40	0.01
	38 to 57	0.34	0.01
	58 and older	0.27	0.01
<b>2017, December</b>	18 to 37	0.39	0.01
	38 to 57	0.34	0.01
	58 and older	0.27	0.01
<b>2018, June</b>	18 to 37	0.38	0.01
	38 to 57	0.35	0.01
	58 and older	0.27	0.01
<b>2018, December</b>	18 to 37	0.37	0.01
	38 to 57	0.35	0.01
	58 and older	0.27	0.01
<b>2019, April</b>	18 to 37	0.37	0.01
	38 to 57	0.35	0.01
	58 and older	0.27	0.01
<b>2019, July</b>	18 to 37	0.38	0.02
	38 to 57	0.34	0.01
	58 and older	0.27	0.01

**Respondent's education**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2016, June	Tertiary	0.32	0.01
2016, November	Tertiary	0.32	0.01
2017, June	Tertiary	0.32	0.01
2017, December	Tertiary	0.31	0.01
2018, June	Tertiary	0.35	0.01
2018, December	Tertiary	0.31	0.01
2019, April	Tertiary	0.31	0.01
2019, July	Tertiary	0.33	0.01

**Respondent's employment status**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2016, June	Employed	0.36	0.02
2016, November	Employed	0.34	0.02
2017, June	Employed	0.38	0.01
2017, December	Employed	0.40	0.02
2018, June	Employed	0.40	0.01
2018, December	Employed	0.37	0.01
2019, April	Employed	0.41	0.02
2019, July	Employed	0.38	0.02

**Respondent's ethnicity**

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
2016, June	Georgian	0.89	0.00
2016, November	Georgian	0.89	0.00
2017, June	Georgian	0.93	0.01
2017, December	Georgian	0.91	0.01
2018, June	Georgian	0.91	0.01
2018, December	Georgian	0.91	0.01
2019, April	Georgian	0.89	0.01
2019, July	Georgian	0.90	0.01

**Household wealth index**

Survey wave	Response	Mean	SE
2016, June	Number of possessions	4.98	0.09
2016, November	Number of possessions	4.97	0.07
2017, June	Number of possessions	5.23	0.07
2017, December	Number of possessions	5.49	0.07

<b>2018, June</b>	Number of possessions	5.56	0.07
<b>2018, December</b>	Number of possessions	5.49	0.08
<b>2019, April</b>	Number of possessions	5.61	0.07
<b>2019, July</b>	Number of possessions	5.43	0.07

#### Settlement type

Survey wave	Response	Proportion	SE
<b>2016, June</b>	Capital	0.29	0.01
	Urban	0.30	0.01
	Rural	0.41	0.01
<b>2016, November</b>	Capital	0.28	0.01
	Urban	0.31	0.01
	Rural	0.41	0.01
<b>2017, June</b>	Capital	0.30	0.01
	Urban	0.30	0.01
	Rural	0.40	0.01
<b>2017, December</b>	Capital	0.31	0.01
	Urban	0.30	0.01
	Rural	0.39	0.01
<b>2018, June</b>	Capital	0.30	0.01
	Urban	0.31	0.01
	Rural	0.39	0.01
<b>2018, December</b>	Capital	0.30	0.01
	Urban	0.31	0.01
	Rural	0.40	0.01
<b>2019, April</b>	Capital	0.29	0.01
	Urban	0.31	0.01
	Rural	0.40	0.01
<b>2019, July</b>	Capital	0.29	0.01
	Urban	0.31	0.01
	Rural	0.40	0.01