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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Chikhladze, M. (2025). Legitimacy Crisis: How Georgia's Elections Were Rigged. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 141, 2-7. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-00072369>

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Legitimacy Crisis: How Georgia's Elections Were Rigged

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000723691

Abstract

Georgia's October 2024 parliamentary elections have triggered a political crisis, with widespread allegations of electoral fraud undermining the legitimacy of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party's fourth consecutive victory. Opposition parties have rejected the results and boycotted parliament. Massive protests continue across the country. This analysis does not examine post-election developments but provides a comprehensive overview of the patterns and evidence indicating election manipulation. It delves into statistical anomalies and discrepancies between the official results and independent exit polls, which raise serious doubts about the election's integrity. Additionally, it details the systemic and multi-layered rigging tactics—including the exploitation of voters' personal data, voter coercion, and large-scale abuse of state resources—that distorted the outcome and failed to reflect the will of the electorate.

Introduction

Georgia's October 2024 parliamentary elections, which saw the ruling Georgian Dream party secure a fourth term, have sparked widespread domestic and international non-recognition due to credible allegations of systemic electoral fraud. With opposition parties boycotting parliament and protests erupting in Tbilisi and other main cities, the country faces a deepening legitimacy crisis. Observers report sophisticated manipulation tactics that altered the election outcome, undermining the will of a pro-European electorate. The European Parliament has responded by demanding a rerun of the elections under international supervision, EU sanctions against Georgia's prime minister and top officials, and a shift in government policies to align with the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. These developments mark a critical juncture for Georgia's democratic future.

Approximately 60% of Georgian voters participated in what was widely considered a defining election. The election offered voters a choice: either extend Georgian Dream's 12-year rule for another term or pave the way for a coalition government composed of opposition parties, potentially breaking the cycle of one-party dominance. The election was also seen as a referendum on Georgia's future direction—either aligning with Euro-Atlantic institutions or deeper entanglement with Russia. With an overwhelming majority of voters expressing strong support for a European future, the victory of the anti-Western Georgian Dream party left many puzzled.

According to the Central Election Commission's (CEC) official results, GD garnered an unprecedented 54% of the vote, while four opposition parties and electoral alliances—surpassing the 5% threshold required for parliamentary representation—managed to collectively secure around 38%. However, neither the opposition parties nor the president of Georgia accepted the election outcome, citing observer reports and exit polls

that showed the opposition performing significantly better than the official tally reflects. They argued that widespread and systemic election fraud significantly altered the results and thus the election failed to reflect the true will of the Georgian people. On October 28, thousands of citizens flooded the streets of Tbilisi to protest what they called a “stolen election.” Since then, periodic demonstrations have erupted in the capital. The president of Georgia filed a complaint with the Constitutional Court over the violation of voters' constitutional rights: the secrecy of the vote and universal suffrage, which was limited for Georgian voters abroad. Despite the legal limitation, the first session of the Parliament was convened on November 25, with GD sitting alone. Opposition parties have boycotted parliament and plan to renounce their mandates.

So far, credible evidence has emerged showing the election was rigged through a range of sophisticated tactics. While elections in Georgia have consistently faced criticism for falling short of being fully free and fair, the latest election appears to have introduced a new level of sophistication in electoral fraud that key civic and political actors failed to anticipate. This article aims to outline the key arguments and synthesize credible evidence suggesting that the election outcome was skewed.

Making Sense of the Election Results

Many argue that the official election results defy basic plausibility. According to the official count, Georgian Dream increased its vote share from 48.2% in 2020 to 53.9% in 2024, equating to 191,942 additional GD voters. Yet this uptick raises questions, especially considering the broader political context.

Given recent controversies surrounding the government's policies, such as the passage of the “Foreign Influence Transparency” law (often referred to as the Russian Law or Foreign Agents Law), which sparked

massive public protests—as well as the ruling party’s increasing authoritarian tendencies—one would expect a decline in support, not an increase. The ruling party’s anti-Western discourse and its alignment with Russia, which halted the EU integration and paused US assistance to Georgia, further amplifies the improbability of such a rise in votes.

General Outlook

International observation missions cast a shadow over the legitimacy of an election by withholding their ultimate judgment on electoral success: whether they were free and fair. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), in particular, did not include this crucial assessment in its preliminary report of Georgia’s recent election

In many competitive authoritarian contexts, electoral manipulation begins long before voting day. Regimes seeking to maintain the appearance of democracy often deploy coercion, bribery, and other forms of influence to shape the political landscape in their favor. This election was no exception. The ruling party’s extensive use of administrative resources and pervasive control over election administration at all levels drew widespread criticism from both local and international observers. These two critical issues tilted the playing field in favor of the ruling party. This was confirmed by other international missions like the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO), National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI).

The use of administrative resources included both overt and subtle tactics aimed at pressuring public sector employees, especially in the education sector, to support the ruling party. Many feared losing social benefits and reported being intimidated into backing the ruling party. Likewise, supporters of the opposition were subject to direct harassment and threats. In parallel, several changes to the election framework further entrenched the ruling party’s control. These included the cancellation of the opposition-nominated deputy chairperson position, changes in the CEC decision-making rules, and the disbanding of the CEC’s advisory group. These changes allowed Georgian Dream to take control over election administration at practically all levels.

Local observation missions reported a range of irregularities on voting day too, including widespread voter tracking, breaches of ballot secrecy, and discrepancies in voter registration and inking procedures. Beyond procedural flaws, reports of violence aimed at voters, party representatives, and election monitors were widespread, contributing to an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.

The evidence collected by local observer groups and independent investigative journalists reveals a disturb-

ing pattern of manipulation, including the illegal processing of personal data, “carousel voting,” and the strategic exploitation of administrative power to sway the vote. These tactics—while difficult to qualify in their impact—point to a systemic effort to subvert the democratic process and maintain the status quo in favor of the ruling party.

Trends Signaling Manipulation

Several key trendlines emerged after the elections that suggest something unusual—anomalies that, while not definitive proof of electoral falsification, point to deviations from expected patterns that warrant deeper scrutiny.

Two independent exit polls, conducted by Edison Research and HarrisX, placed GD’s support in the 41–44% range—well below the 53.9% claimed by the CEC. Both polls, while funded by opposition groups, have strong credibility—Edison Research has a proven track record of accurately predicting results in past elections and HarrisX is well-recognized globally for its credible methodology.

HarrisX’s post-election analysis revealed a significant discrepancy, even after adjusting their data to account for the CEC’s figures and correcting for non-response bias. The analysis shows an 8% difference—equivalent to roughly 172,523 votes—between their results and the official count. Moreover, HarrisX identified 27 electoral districts with large statistical anomalies, such as the Marneuli district, where the exit poll showed 40% support for GD, while the CEC reported 80% (a practically impossible 40% variance). Such discrepancies raise serious questions about the reliability of the official results and suggest the possibility of manipulation or fraud.

Statistical analysis further corroborates these suspicions. Roman Udot, a former board member of the Movement Golos, a Russian election monitoring organization and one of the first targets of Moscow’s “Foreign Agents Law,” conducted a statistical review of the CEC data, revealing what he dubbed the “Russian Tale.” In a free and fair election, the distribution of support for the ruling party across polling stations forms a bell shape, following a normal distribution. However, Udot found that the support for GD across polling stations did not follow this pattern. Instead, it exhibited a “tail” on the high end—an abnormal concentration of pro-GD results—a phenomenon often associated with rigged elections in authoritarian regimes. This “Russian Tale” suggests an artificial inflation of support for the ruling party in certain areas.

Udot’s analysis also highlighted a concerning correlation between voter turnout and support for GD, particularly in rural areas. In a fair election, the proportion of votes for each party should remain consistent regardless of turnout levels. However, the analysis found that

in areas with unusually high turnout, GD's vote share disproportionately increased. This pattern suggests that in some precincts, inflated voter turnout may have been artificially manufactured, with additional votes being cast for the ruling party through ballot stuffing or other fraudulent means.

Further scrutiny of voter turnout data by the local watchdog, ISFED, added another layer of concern. ISFED's analysis of voter turnout according to gender revealed significant irregularities. In 62 precincts, male voter turnout ranged from 80–100%, while female turnout in these same precincts averaged only 57%. More troubling still, ISFED found cases where male voter turnout exceeded 100%, a statistical impossibility. Such discrepancies, coupled with the other irregularities, suggest a deliberate effort to skew the results.

Anomalies are evident and clearly point to manipulation; however, the question remains as to how these elections were manipulated? What specific tactics were employed to manipulate the vote? The following sections delve into key factors and tactics that likely contributed to these anomalies, shedding light on the possible methods of election fraud.

Exploitation of Administrative Resources and Voter Pressure

One method of manipulation is gaining control over election administration. In Georgia's most recent elections, the ruling party wielded unprecedented control over administrative resources, tilting the playing field in its favor. This manipulation of the state apparatus played a central role in shaping the election outcome.

By 2023, the government employed a record 320,500 civil servants, marking the highest level in the past decade. This vast public sector workforce, coupled with financial assistance directed to nearly 700,000 citizens—approximately 18.3% of the population in a country where 11% live below the absolute poverty line—provided an avenue for coercion and political influence.

In the run-up to the election, GD intensified its mobilization efforts. State workers and recipients of social assistance were coerced to support GD through explicit threats or veiled promises of rewards. This manipulation extended to local government officials, who were expected to exert similar pressure on their communities. The education sector—a key area for state control—also played a central role in these efforts. There have been multiple reports of teachers and other education staff being pressured to participate in campaign events and mobilize voters in support of the ruling party.

Meanwhile, a more insidious method of voter manipulation involved offering state benefits in exchange for votes. Under Georgian law, voter bribery is a criminal offense; however, there were widespread reports of

GD activists distributing goods, fuel vouchers, or even state services in return for electoral support. Particularly in rural and minority-populated regions—such as Ninotsminda, a district with a large Armenian population—GD's support appeared artificially inflated, with reports of near-90% backing in certain districts.

In addition, large sums from the state budget were spent on bonuses and allowances. In 2023, the government allocated GEL 413.6 million (approximately USD 146.4) for such bonuses, marking a decade-high expenditure. This figure does not include the additional resources spent by local governments or other state-run entities, suggesting a much larger total expenditure aimed at bolstering the party's electoral base.

The use of administrative resources—often manifesting as vote-buying—is not a new tactic in Georgia's elections. However, in 2023 and 2024, it reached a high point, likely playing a role in distorting the election results.

Allegations of Voter ID Confiscation and Multiple Voting

The 2024 elections have also been marred by extensive allegations of multiple voting and voter ID fraud, with reports pointing to organized efforts to exploit voter IDs and election procedures to manipulate the outcome. Central to these tactics is the illegal confiscation and the use of voter ID cards, a scheme that appears to have played a significant role in rigging the election results.

Reports indicate that both public and private sector employees, as well as ordinary citizens, including people with disabilities, were coerced or paid to hand over their ID cards in the weeks leading up to election day. The tactic was primarily aimed at ensuring control over who could vote and potentially allowing GD's loyal voters to vote multiple times under false pretenses.

Observers reported that some voters had ID numbers written on slips of paper, which they then placed inside their passports. Election registrars sympathetic to GD would register these additional ID numbers into the system, allowing GD loyal voters to vote multiple times. While the inking of voters' fingers is meant to prevent double voting, the evidence suggests that these measures were deliberately avoided. Election commission members engaged in the scheme would not properly ink voters or would not check the ink trace before allowing voters in the station.

As with many other elements of the election process, this fraud tactic was obscured by a lack of transparency. Some polling stations were deliberately arranged in ways that prevented observers from properly scrutinizing the registration process. Registrars' desks were often positioned against walls, effectively blocking any oversight. When observers attempted to get closer or request better

visibility of the registration process, they were routinely obstructed or even expelled from polling stations. This deliberate evasion of scrutiny indicates a concerted effort to conceal and discourage transparency.

Furthermore, the CEC made a controversial decision in August 2024 to assign key precinct roles a week before election day, in contrast to the traditional random assignment on voting day. This change allowed the ruling party to strategically place its allies in key positions, such as registrars, thereby facilitating the rigging of the vote.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of IDs that were illegally confiscated, and consequently, how many votes were fraudulently cast in favor of the ruling party through this scheme. However, the scale of the operation appears to be significant. An indirect indication of the extent of the rigging is the “My Vote” observation mission’s call for the annulment of results from 246 polling stations across 29 districts, affecting over 400,000 votes. This demand stemmed from recurring and, in many cases, systemic violations, including issues with voter registration, ballot marking, and voter tracking—all of which suggest active falsification.

Subsequently, opposition parties called on the CEC to make the voter database available on a neutral platform, allowing voters to check whether their vote was actually cast and at which polling station. Such transparency would partially help reveal the magnitude of the ID confiscation scheme.

However, confiscated IDs were not the only method used for carousel voting. There are reports suggesting that the ID numbers of citizens who had left the country but had not registered with consular offices abroad may also have been exploited. The publicly accessible database which has been demanded from the CEC could partially expose this practice, but the CEC has not fulfilled this request. Furthermore, given the low trust in the CEC’s integrity, releasing potentially cleaned data later will not achieve the desired transparency. Notably, the illegal processing of personal voter information extended beyond the use of confiscated IDs.

Personal Data Processing

The credible investigative media outlet *Studio Monitor* aired a journalistic investigation based on over 1,000 internal documents, spreadsheets, lists, and both text and voice messages leaked from the GD offices. It reveals that on the election day, the party orchestrated a covert network of call centers in rented offices near polling stations. In this network, individuals referred to as “captains” were tasked with voter mobilization. Each “captain” was responsible for a group of voters, whom they were pressured to coerce into voting for GD. Participants in the call center operations were compensated in cash.

The investigation also uncovered that GD-operated call centers were strategically located near polling stations to monitor voter turnout. A network of informants at the polling stations and the call centers exchanged information, allowing the “captains” to track the status of their supporters. Voter data, including personal identification numbers, was accessible to call center staff for each polling station. These call centers communicated via a secure online portal, enabling captains to identify which supporters had voted and apply further pressure to those who had not.

While voter mobilization itself may not be illegal, the unlawful processing of personal data, voter surveillance, and the use of undisclosed funds to finance this operation represent serious legal violations.

The “captains” relied on a vast amount of personal data—carefully aggregated and including tens of thousands of individuals. Earlier investigations by *Batumelebi* revealed that GD had access to detailed personal data about voters that was collected without their consent. This information was reportedly sourced from various government agencies and included sensitive data about individuals’ health, drug addiction, past electoral participation, voting intentions, and more. This happened particularly in targeted regions. Notably, this data is classified as sensitive under Georgian law, and its use is typically restricted to relevant state institutions.

Hans Gutbrod estimates that the main targets of this data collection included public sector employees, recipients of targeted social assistance, voters in ethnic minority-majority areas, incarcerated individuals, and those on probation. He estimates that altogether data was collected on up to 820,000 voters. As outlined earlier, GD used this data not only to influence voter behavior before election day through incentives or coercion, but also to track and pressure voters on the election day itself.

Breach of Ballot Secrecy

One of the most glaring violations of the core principles of free and fair elections was the breach of ballot secrecy. In precincts with electronic voting—which account for approximately 90% of ballots cast—the ballot itself revealed the vote on the reverse side of the paper. At these stations, ballots were required to be inserted into so-called “vote-counting devices” using an open sleeve, rather than the closed envelope that had been standard practice. Numerous photographs documented that the mark on the ballot was visible as the voter inserted it into the machine.

This systematically undermined the principle of vote secrecy. And the secrecy of the vote is a fundamental requirement for any free and fair election.

Aggravating the matter, the GYLA had raised concerns about this with the CEC several weeks before the

election, warning about the flimsy ballot design. Realizing the issue persisted on election day, the GYLA filed complaints with district election commissions, calling for the annulment of results in all precincts where electronic voting technology was used. The organization emphasized that the secrecy of the ballot is a core constitutional principle of democratic elections.

The Tetrtskaro City Court judge ruled in favor of the GYLA's complaint and annulled the results from around 30 precincts in Georgia's southern municipalities. However, the Court of Appeals rejected the alleged breach of vote secrecy and upheld the disputed results. As the final domestic authority on the matter, the Court of Appeals' decision provided no further legal recourse. The GYLA now plans to bring the case before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The Tetrtskaro City Court decision was a rare and significant move, demonstrating how other courts might have ruled if they had not been influenced and captured by the ruling party.

Limited Voting Abroad

There was unprecedented demand among Georgian emigrants to participate in the elections, but the government failed to meet this demand—likely because of the expectation of low support from the diaspora. This is logical, as many of these individuals and families left Georgia because of harsh social and economic conditions.

Georgia opened only 67 polling stations outside Georgia—a slight increase from 2020. More than 95,000 voters registered to cast ballots abroad, yet only around 35,000 managed to cast their vote. A poll conducted by the Georgian Association in the US in August found that 96% of respondents identified election accessibility as a major issue. The association shared its findings with both the government and opposition parties, but no action was taken. Election day footage shows long lines of voters who traveled from different cities to cast their ballots. Some were forced to leave after hours of waiting, unable to stay any longer.

Voting patterns within the diaspora offer insight into why the government may have sought to suppress turnout. In the 2020 elections, nearly two-thirds of expatriate voters supported pro-Western opposition parties, while GD received just 29% of the diaspora vote. This election saw a similar trend, with GD securing only around 14% of expatriate voters. Furthermore, the failure to ensure adequate access to voting for Georgians abroad violates the principle of universal suffrage. This is one of the complaints filed to the Constitutional Court, arguing that the rights of emigrants to vote were infringed.

Dispute Resolution

A relatively lower number of complaints—1,170—were filed in this election, compared to 2,054 in 2020.

Whether this decline reflects improvements in the election process or a more sophisticated election rigging scheme is open to interpretation. Notably, the courts rejected all the complaints submitted by the independent observation organizations. In the few exceptional cases where courts initially upheld complaints, such as in Tetrtskaro and Gori, those rulings were later overturned by the Courts of Appeals. The Tetrtskaro court ruled to annul the district results for a breach of voter secrecy, while the Gori City Court ordered a recount of invalid ballots from 15 precincts. However, both rulings were overturned by higher courts, highlighting a lack of judicial independence and integrity.

Observer organizations reported that the complaints adjudication process failed to follow relevant international standards and did not provide a remedy to the mass and grave violations observed.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Thus far, Georgian society has largely converged around the conclusion that the 2024 elections were rigged and do not reflect the will of the voters. Opposition parties initially focused on immediate responses, declaring a boycott and mobilizing supporters to demand new elections. However, these protests were neither scalable nor well-organized enough to exert meaningful pressure on the government. Massive protests erupted later when GD's newly elected government declared the suspension of EU accession talks until 2028. The situation is constantly changing, with nonstop night protests across the week, though it remains to be seen if they can make any meaningful change.

Opposition parties struggled on two critical fronts. Both individually and collectively, they did not manage to establish themselves as a credible alternative to the ruling party. Their promise of a European future felt intangible compared to GD's campaign narrative, which invoked the fear of a war with Russia as a consequence of regime change. The opposition struggled to effectively counter or neutralize this narrative. Moreover, they neither anticipated potential election integrity risks nor managed voters' expectations of a potential victory. This dual failure has deepened public frustration and eroded the prospects for change. As a result, post-election protests have not reached the scale seen earlier, when the public rallied against the government's increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic moves.

This signals another looming challenge of erosion of faith in elections—a legitimate democratic mechanism for removing an underperforming government. This loss of trust could have serious consequences for future elections.

Meanwhile, the ruling party, undisturbed by the opposition boycott, approved the new government and

set the soonest possible date for the presidential election, aiming to swiftly elect a loyal president through delegates. This is happening while a constitutional appeal challenging the legality of the entire parliamentary convocation remains pending. Even if the Constitutional Court agrees to hear the appeal, there is widespread concern over the ruling party's political influence on the Court.

Defeating Georgia's authoritarian regime requires a long-term strategy. Opposition parties will have to address the growing disillusionment with elections by offering genuine, alternative policy solutions that resonate with voters, as mere anti-status quo rhetoric has

proven insufficient. They will also need to strengthen voter mobilization and communication efforts. These are the basic variables of political success.

The transitional period is crucial for Georgia's future. The country is at a crossroads, struggling to move away from competitive authoritarianism toward more entrenched authoritarianism, in which no democratic institutions remain independent of government control and the integrity of the political system deteriorates. If Georgia slides into a more consolidated authoritarian state, it risks becoming further isolated from the West and increasingly dependent on Russia, a scenario that would be extremely difficult to reverse.

About the Author

Mariam Chikbladze is an independent consultant specializing in democratic governance and resilience, with expertise in elections, political party strengthening, and democratic oversight practices. She has extensive experience managing oversight institutions' support portfolios within USAID's governance programs in Georgia and has contributed to UNDP's key legislative strengthening initiatives. Previously, she worked on elections and political party programs at the International Republican Institute (IRI), covering Georgia and Armenia. In collaboration with the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, she facilitated a political parties' pledge for election integrity during Georgia's 2020 parliamentary elections. Previously, she led the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy's (NIMD) grassroots political education program across four regions of Georgia.

Mariam holds a Master's in Public Policy Analysis from the Bush School of Public Service and Government at Texas A&M University, awarded through the Fulbright Graduate Student Program. She also completed the Edmund Muskie Professional Fellowship at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC. Mariam teaches democratic development courses and regularly writes on political processes in Georgia.

Acknowledgements

This contribution was originally published as a European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) Policy Alert on December 10, 2024: <https://epde.org/reports/legitimacy-crisis-how-georgias-elections-were-rigged/>

The editors of the Caucasus Analytical Digest are thankful to EPDE for the permission to reprint the contribution and to the author for small revisions.