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Public Opinion on Public Opinion: How Does the Population of Georgia See Public Opinion Polls?

Tinatin Zurabishvili, Tbilisi

Abstract

Although 6% of the population of Georgia reported not knowing anything about public opinion polls in 2015, polls—especially those focused on political issues—have become a visible part of the political landscape of the country. However, decision makers most often use the results with a specific agenda in mind. As CRRC’s 2015 Caucasus Barometer data suggest, attitudes towards poll results are ambivalent. However, there is a clear expectation that the government should consider the results of public opinion polls when making political decisions.

Following tense debates over the trustworthiness of the findings of public opinion polls in contemporary Georgia, CRRC’s 2015 *Caucasus Barometer* survey (CB) asked for the first time a series of questions concerning people’s attitudes towards poll results. In this article, we will first discuss the reported level of trust in the results of public opinion polls in Georgia and then analyze assessments of specific statements about public opinion polls, with the eventual goal of understanding whether the population perceives the results of public opinion polls as representing their own voice or, rather, as yet another tool in the hands of those in power.

Assessing Trust

With, on the one hand, a lack of knowledge of the population *en masse* concerning representative surveys in general and, on the other hand, often biased, contradictory and/or unprofessional reporting of poll results by the media¹, unsurprisingly, the population finds it difficult to assess their trust in public opinion poll results in Georgia. A large share, 41%, either report “don’t know” or choose middle positions (codes ‘5’ and ‘6’) on the 10-point scale that was used to assess people’s level of trust. When asked whether, in their opinion, “most of the people around them” trust or distrust poll results, the respective share increases to 57%, with an understandably high positive correlation between the answers to the two questions (Spearman’s correlation coefficient is .626).

The answers to the questions about people’s own trust in public opinion poll results and that of the “others” are rather similar, with a mean of 5.82 of a 10-point scale in the case of assessment of personal trust and a mean of 5.39 in the case of the assessment of “others” trust

(Table 1). Interestingly, people are more likely to report having trust in polls (26% choosing codes 8, 9 and 10, corresponding to high levels of trust according to the survey instructions) than they are to report “others” having such trust (12%), suggesting that they have heard more negative than positive attitudes towards poll results during the discussions that took place around them.

Table 1: Personal Vs. “Others” Trust in Poll Results in Georgia (% and Mean)

	To what extent would say you trust or distrust the results of public opinion polls conducted in our country?	And to what extent, in your opinion, do most of the people around you trust or distrust the results of public opinion polls conducted in our country?
Trust	27	13
Tend to trust	16	17
Tend to distrust	32	34
Distrust	17	12
Don’t know	8	24
Mean	5.82	5.39

Source: CRRC 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

Note: A 10-point scale was used to measure the level of trust, with code ‘1’ corresponding to the response “Do not trust at all” and code ‘10’ corresponding to the response “Completely trust.” For this paper, the responses were recoded into a 4-point scale, with original codes 1, 2 and 3 corresponding to “Distrust,” codes 4 and 5 corresponding to “Tend to distrust,” codes 6 and 7 corresponding to “Tend to trust,” and codes 8, 9 and 10 corresponding to “Trust.”

While answering the first of these questions, 6% reported, “I don’t know anything about polls”; they have been excluded from the analysis.

As the findings in Table 1 demonstrate, overall, the population does not report any convincing level of trust in

1 Making Public Opinion Matter in Georgia, <<https://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/documents/ESOMAR-WAPOR-guideline-on-reporting-pre-election-poll-results.pdf>>

the results of public opinion polls conducted in Georgia. Slightly more than one-quarter of those who answered this question (27%) report trust, with an additional 16% who, arguably, tend to trust but are nevertheless reluctant to report trust.

According to the theory of the “spiral of silence,” the answers to the question assessing the trust of “people around” an individual rather than respondents themselves represent a more accurate indicator of the attitudes that are prevalent in a given society. As this theory would suggest, the level of trust in public opinion poll results should be assessed as rather low in Georgia, with less than one-third of the population believed to trust polls at least slightly. This level of trust is comparable² to the reported level of trust in the local government, banks, or the Ombudsman and is, in fact, higher than that in the Parliament, executive and political parties. Statistically, of a number of social and political institutions that CB asked about, reported trust in poll results correlates most, although still rather moderately, with trust in NGOs, the media, the EU, the UN and the Ombudsman (Table 2).

Table 2: Correlation Between Reported Trust in Poll Results and Selected Institutions (Spearman’s Correlation Coefficients)

“To what extent would you trust or distrust the results of public opinion polls conducted in our country?” by “How much do you trust or distrust ...”	
NGOs	.239
EU	.205
Media	.203
UN	.200
Ombudsman	.186

Source: CRRC 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

These findings may help to suggest important areas for the future study of the nature of (dis)trust in public opinion polls and their results in Georgia. On the one hand, most of the people do not trust poll results, the main goal and role of which should be voicing the people’s views and attitudes. It is important to know which factors

2 Different scales were used during the survey to measure the level of trust in the results of public opinion polls, on the one hand, and major social and political institutions, on the other hand; hence, the results on the reported level of trust are not directly comparable but are instead indicative.

lead to distrust. On the other hand, the relatively high correlation of trust in poll results with trust in NGOs, the Ombudsman, the EU and the UN—i.e., the institutions that are not viewed as a part of the traditional system—may suggest that the population regards polls as something alien, and although people are more or less informed about them, people lack an understanding of both the nature of polls and how to assess their trustworthiness.

How Does the Population View Polls?

The following six statements about public opinion polls were assessed during the survey, using a 10-point scale³:

- [1] Public opinion polls help all of us get better knowledge about the society we live in.
- [2] Ordinary people trust public opinion poll results only when they like the results.
- [3] Public opinion polls can only work well in developed democratic countries, but not in countries like Georgia.
- [4] The government should consider the results of public opinion polls while making political decisions.
- [5] Politicians trust public opinion poll results only when these are favorable for them or for their party.
- [6] I think I understand quite well how public opinion polls are conducted.

Starting with the last of these statements, 14% of the population did not know how to answer this question, i.e., could not assess their own understanding of how public opinion polls are conducted. Approximately one-third chose middle positions on the scale (codes ‘5’ and ‘6’), while 16% “completely agreed” with the statement. Overall, although only slightly over one-third of the population claims to understand “quite well” how public opinion polls are conducted, the share of those who answered positively (codes ‘7’ through ‘10’) is twice as large than the share of those who answered negatively (codes ‘1’ through ‘4’), 37% to 18%. Of course, this is a person’s self-assessment, and specifically focused experiments or exercises would be needed to determine the extent to which this self-assessment corresponds to reality.

Assessments of statements [1] and [4] indicate whether people find survey results valuable. Although one would expect these two statements to measure rather similar aspects of attitudes towards polls, the answers to these two questions are surprisingly different. Compared to the share of those who claim that polls help us to better understand society, a considerably larger

3 Code ‘1’ on this scale corresponded to the response “Completely disagree” and code ‘10’ corresponded to the response “Completely agree.”

share agrees that the government should consider the results of public opinion polls when making political decisions—47% report “completely agreeing” (code 10) with this statement.

Table 3: (Dis)Agreement with Statements about Polls (% and Mean)

	Public opinion polls help all of us get better knowledge about the society we live in.	The government should consider the results of public opinion polls while making political decisions.
Agree	46	69
[In the middle]	30	18
Disagree	13	5
Don't know	12	8
Mean*	6.72	8.20

Source: CRRC 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

* To calculate means, the option “Don't know” was excluded.

Note: A 10-point scale was used to record answers to these questions, with code ‘1’ corresponding to the response “Completely disagree” and code ‘10’ corresponding to the response “Completely agree.” For this paper, the responses were recoded into a 3-point scale, with original codes 1 through 4 corresponding to “Disagree,” codes 5 and 6 to “[In the middle],” and codes 7 through 10 to “Agree.”

The share of those who disagree with the opinion that “Public opinion polls can only work well in developed democratic countries, but not in countries like Georgia” is nearly twice as large as the share of those who agree with it—41% and 22%, respectively—with one-quarter of the population choosing middle positions and another 13% answering “Don't know.”

People rather confidently agree that politicians in Georgia “trust public opinion poll results only when these are favorable for them or for their party,” with 42% reporting complete agreement with this statement. When speaking about ordinary people, however, considerably fewer people—slightly less than half of the population—agree that people trust the results of polls “only” when they like the results, although the distribution of answers to these two questions follows a similar pattern (Figure 1 on p. 5).

Overall, the data suggest little certainty in Georgian society regarding public opinion polls. The majority of the population does not report trust in poll results, which obviously means that people do not regard poll results as reflecting their voice; however, people also do not clearly state their distrust. Moreover, there is a clear demand for the government to consider the results of public opinion polls when making political decisions.

There are a number of important questions that still need to be answered to understand the role that public opinion polls play in contemporary Georgian society. Some of these questions are highlighted below:

- What are the factors that lead to distrust in the results of public opinion polls?
- Who influences what people think about the polls, and how?
- How much does the population actually need to know about the polls to be able to make independent and qualified judgments about their quality and the reliability of their findings?
- What role do the media play in (a) informing the population about polls and (b) influencing people's trust in their results?

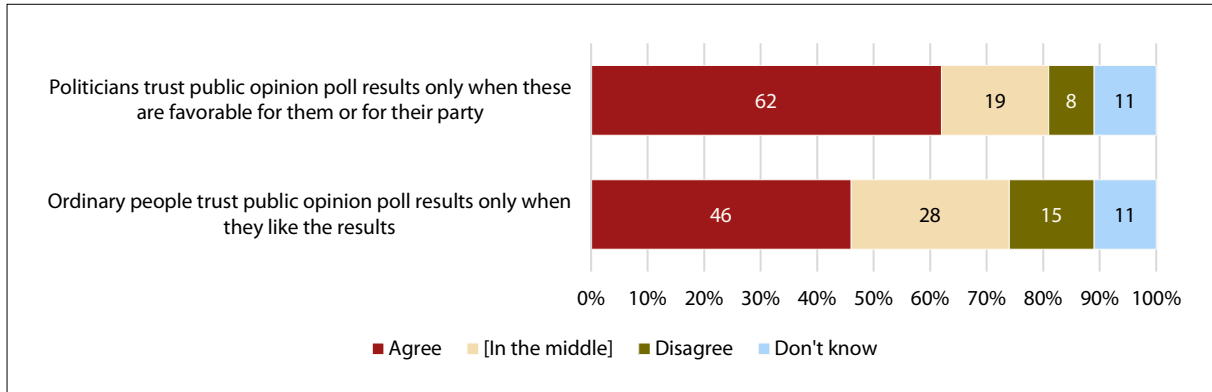
CRRC's 2015 Caucasus Barometer survey dataset is available at <http://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/downloads/>.

About the Author

Tinatin Zurabishvili holds a PhD in Sociology of Journalism from Moscow M. Lomonosov State University. From 1994 to 1999, Tinatin worked for the Levada Center in Moscow. After returning to Georgia in 1999, she taught various courses in sociology, particularly focusing on research methodology, for BA and MA programs in Telavi State University and Tbilisi State University Center for Social Sciences. From 2001 to 2003, she was a Civic Education Project Local Faculty Fellow; from 2010 to 2012, she was a professor at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA). In 2007, she joined the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) as Caucasus Barometer survey regional coordinator. Since 2012, she has worked as the CRRC-Georgia research director. Her research interests are focused on post-Soviet transformation, sociology of migration, media studies, and social research methodology.

Recommended Reading

- Making Public Opinion Matter in Georgia (2013). <https://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/documents/ESOMAR-WAPOR-guideline-on-reporting-pre-election-poll-results.pdf> (Accessed June 6, 2016).
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984). *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Figure 1: (Dis)Agreement with Statements about the Polls (%)

Source: CRRG 2015 Caucasus Barometer Survey

Note: A 10-point scale was used to record answers to these questions, with code '1' corresponding to the response "Completely disagree" and code '10' corresponding to the response "Completely agree." For this paper, the responses were recoded into a 3-point scale, with original codes 1 through 4 corresponding to "Disagree," codes 5 and 6 to "[In the middle]," and codes 7 through 10 to "Agree."

Evaluation of the Georgian Government's Performance Through the Lens of Public Trust

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Abstract

Using time-series survey data from the Caucasus Barometer (CB) conducted annually from 2008 to 2015 in Georgia, this article explores how the outcomes of (a) general political events and (b) policymaking can influence the formation of trust in key political and social institutions. If political actors or institutions realize high levels of performance in their policymaking and achieve results (measured in economic indicators), grateful citizens will repay them with a high level of political trust. However, in the event of unsatisfactory performance by political actors or institutions, a decrease in citizens' trust in institutions can be expected.

Introduction

The concept of political trust can be defined as the public's belief that political actors and public institutions would not perform any action that will deceive or harm society (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Political trust is particularly important in countries such as Georgia, where the presence of democratic institutions is relatively novel and the previous authorities left a legacy encouraging distrust. The lack of institutional memory and of experience in democratic governance could cause legitimacy problems for public institutions—i.e., in the capacity to maintain the confidence that those institutions are reliable, trustworthy and suitable for citizens (Słomczynski & Janicka, 2009).

Hence, it is important to understand the factors that shape political trust. For this purpose, this paper uses

institutional theories of political trust that claim that trust in institutions is rationally generated as a result of a citizen's evaluations of institutional performance and reactions to ongoing social events. When studying established democracies and developed countries, institutional theories typically emphasize the importance of economic performance. However, in post-Communist countries such as Georgia, where human rights and the rule of law have been violated for years, neglecting the rule of law and human rights are no less important. Therefore, while explaining changes political trust, we will be employing both economic indicators and political performance, suggesting that citizens' evaluation of public institutions are based on two different criteria: outcomes of political events that shape the politi-