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How Social Assistance Shapes Election Outcomes: The Case of Georgia

This policy brief investigates the relationship between social assistance programs and electoral outcomes in Georgia, focusing on the 2024 parliamentary elections. Our regression analysis establishes a statistically significant link between an increase in social assistance beneficiaries and the vote share obtained by the incumbent Georgian Dream party. The results raise critical questions about the potential use of social assistance programs as a strategic political tool. Specifically, a 1 percentage point increase in targeted social assistance beneficiaries as a share of the population lead to an, on average, 0.5 percentage point increase in the Georgian Dream's vote share, even after controlling for poverty-related factors. The findings recognize the dual impact of social assistance programs – alleviating poverty while shaping political behavior. They also underscore the need for ensuring that social assistance remains focused on addressing the needs of vulnerable populations without exerting undue political influence.

Introduction

The relationship between social assistance programs and electoral outcomes has gathered significant attention in both academic and policy circles, especially in the last decade. Social assistance programs, designed to support vulnerable populations, often carry political implications, particularly in developing democracies where incumbent governments may leverage these programs to secure voter loyalty. In Georgia, one of the largest components of social assistance is the targeted living allowance program, which, unlike other types of social assistance – such as those for individuals with special needs, internally displaced people, or elderly population – relies on assessing the beneficiaries' poverty levels through proxy means testing (PMT). This makes subsistence allowance benefits vulnerable to biased, favorable selection by those in power. Allegations exist that the government may have strategically used this program, including increasing the number of beneficiaries in the lead-up to elections to secure votes or threatening existing beneficiaries with the withdrawal of their assistance based on their disclosed political preferences (Shubladze (2024); Japaridze (2023); Social Justice Center (2024)).

This policy brief explores the impact of social assistance on electoral outcomes in Georgia, specifically assessing whether increases in the number of targeted subsistence allowance beneficiaries during the 2020-2024 period influenced the votes received by the incumbent party in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

This analysis is especially important given the recent developments in Georgia's political landscape. The 2024 parliamentary elections marked a critical juncture, with the Georgian Dream claiming to have secured 53.93 percent of the votes. Concerns over the fairness and transparency of the elections have been widespread. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

(ODIHR) reported systematic election irregularities, including pressure on voters, media bias, unequal campaign conditions, and election-day practices that compromised the ability of some voters – including public sector employees and recipients of social assistance – to cast their ballots without fear of retribution.

Our regression analysis documents a positive relationship between the number of living allowance beneficiaries and the votes garnered by the incumbent party across Georgian municipalities, raising further concerns about the integrity of the electoral process, and the allocation of state funds.

Political Implications of Social Assistance Programs: A Global Perspective

The link between social assistance and electoral outcomes has been widely studied. Social assistance programs often serve a dual purpose: they alleviate poverty and provide tangible support to vulnerable citizens while also shaping political behavior, particularly voting patterns. These programs can enhance incumbents' electoral support by fostering gratitude among recipients, signaling government competence in addressing social needs, or creating concerns among beneficiaries that their political preferences, if exposed, may influence the government's decisions when choosing the beneficiaries of social assistance.

Research by De La O (2013) provides a compelling case in the context of Mexico. Examining the Progres a/Oportunidades conditional cash transfer program, De La O find that the program led to an increase in both voter turnout and incumbent vote share.

Zucco (2013) contributes further evidence from Brazil, where the Bolsa Família conditional cash transfer program emerged as a cornerstone of electoral strategy. Zucco demonstrate that municipalities with higher proportions of cash



transfer beneficiaries tended to favor incumbent candidates in three different presidential elections, establishing a clear link between social assistance and voting behavior.

Adding to this body of work, Layton & Smith (2015) provide further insight into the nuanced ways in which targeted social assistance programs influence voter behavior in Latin America. The authors theorize that such programs simultaneously mobilize non-voters and convert opposition supporters, with variations based on country-level political and programmatic differences.

In addition, recent research from Indonesia further illustrates the impact of social assistance budgets on electoral outcomes. A study by Dharma, Syakhroza, and Martani (2022) examines 212 regencies and cities in Indonesia where incumbents participated in local elections. The findings reveal a direct positive effect of social assistance spending on incumbent votes. The author further claim that high political competition counteracts incumbents' advantages and mitigates the effectiveness of such spending.

The international literature thus provides valuable motivation for exploring the Georgian case, where social assistance may play a similar role in shaping voting behavior.

The Georgian Context

The deeply controversial October 26, 2024, parliamentary elections in Georgia mark a pivotal moment in the country's political history. According to the Central Election Committee of Georgia, the ruling party, the Georgian Dream, secured 53.93 percent of the votes, maintaining its dominant position in Georgian politics. However, the elections were accompanied by widespread allegations of electoral malpractice, casting a shadow over their legitimacy and raising concerns about the future of democratic governance in the country.

OSCE's ODIHR provided a comprehensive observation of the electoral process, noting both positive aspects and critical shortcomings. While the elections were generally well-administered, ODIHR's final report emphasized significant concerns related to the broader political environment. Key issues included the adoption of legislation that undermined fundamental freedoms, restrictions on civil society, and a pervasive atmosphere of voter intimidation. Specific election day practices, such as pressuring voters and leveraging administrative resources, were highlighted as undermining the integrity of the process. The report also mentions instances in 16 municipalities where public sector employees and economically vulnerable groups, particularly those reliant on social assistance, faced pressure to support the ruling party. Such fear of losing social benefits or facing retribution at work creates an atmosphere where voters struggle to form independent opinions and vote independently.

Further scrutiny from independent analysts has shed light on systematic irregularities that suggest the elections may not have reflected the genuine will of the Georgian electorate. Gutbrod (2024) suggests that tactics such as vote buying, mass intimidation, and direct manipulation of electoral outcomes were employed, leading to statistical anomalies. Specifically, the Georgian Dream's support increased disproportionately in precincts linked to reported violence and irregularities. Additionally, social assistance beneficiaries were identified as a target group for snowball mobilization, organized by individuals affiliated with the Georgian Dream – a method where participants are encouraged to mobilize or identify a certain number of additional people to expand voter outreach and engagement.

Social Assistance in Georgia

The Law of Georgia on Social Assistance outlines several types of social welfare programs aimed at addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. These include living allowance, reintegration assistance, foster care allowance, adult family



member care allowance, non-monetary social assistance and social package. Among these, the targeted social assistance program, commonly referred to as the “living allowance”, holds particular significance. This program is designed to provide financial support to families living in extreme poverty. Eligibility for the living allowance is determined through a proxy means test that evaluates the socioeconomic conditions of applicants, ensuring that the assistance reaches those most in need. For this policy brief, the focus will be on beneficiaries of the living allowance (hereafter social assistance beneficiaries), as their numbers and electoral behavior present a unique opportunity to analyze the intersection of social assistance and voting patterns in Georgia.

As of October 2020 (previous parliamentary elections’ date) 142,870 families in Georgia received social assistance, benefiting a total of 510,343 individuals. The total amount of social assistance transfers during this period amounted to 28,825,259 GEL. Over the next four years, leading up to the 2024 Parliamentary Elections, social assistance grew significantly. By October 2024, the number of families receiving assistance had increased by 25 percent to 178,107 families, while the number of individual beneficiaries rose by 34 percent, reaching 684,432. The most notable expansion occurred in the total amount of social assistance transfers, which surged by 143 percent to 69,936,512 GEL. This corresponds to a cumulative annual growth rate of 25 percent (Social Service Agency of Georgia, 2024).

In 2022, an important modification was introduced for social assistance beneficiaries aged 18 years to retirement age and without disabilities or serious health conditions, offering employment opportunities mainly, in the public sector with a salary of up to 300 GEL per month. These wages did not affect recipients existing social assistance benefits. Participants had the option to take suitable public sector jobs, formalize any informal employment, or, if formally employed in the private sector, provide necessary documentation. The modification covered also new beneficiaries

that were not already formally employed. Notably, families or individuals enrolled in the program were guaranteed eligibility for living allowance for four years, as their social assistance status would not be reassessed during this period.

As of October 2024, 50,962 families were enrolled in the program with guaranteed social assistance, accounting for 28.6 percent of all families receiving social assistance. The monthly spending of social assistance transferred to these families amounted to 22,766,706 GEL, representing 33 percent of the total social assistance transfers.

The significant increase in social assistance beneficiaries and the introduction of the 2022 program for employing social assistance recipients, guaranteeing them four years of social assistance transfers, highlight the growing scope and influence of targeted social welfare initiatives in Georgia. While these developments may have addressed pressing socioeconomic challenges, they also raise important questions about the potential political motivations. Specifically, the substantial increase in the number of beneficiaries and the guaranteed eligibility linked to employment programs could be interpreted as mechanisms to foster voter loyalty and mobilization in favor of the ruling party.

Methodology and Results

To examine the relationship between the increase in social assistance beneficiaries and electoral outcomes, particularly the votes garnered by the incumbent Georgian Dream party, we employ a regression analysis framework. This statistical method allows us to explore whether and to what extent the growth in social assistance recipients is associated with the changes in the vote share of the incumbent party. Since social assistance depends on the varying levels of poverty across municipalities, we incorporate control variables that isolate the effect of economic well-being, minimizing potential confounders.

The study utilizes data from two primary sources: information on social assistance recipients,



including families, individuals, and the total amount of transfers across municipalities, was retrieved from the Social Service Agency of Georgia. This dataset covers 64 municipalities (and self-governing cities) in Georgia. From 2022, data includes families and individuals guaranteed to retain their socially vulnerable status for four years under the State Program for Promoting Public Employment. Second, election data was sourced from the Central Election Commission of Georgia, covering both the 2024 and 2020 parliamentary elections. The 2024 data covers the results from both electronic and non-electronic voting. Key variables include the number of registered voters, total votes cast, and votes obtained by the Georgian Dream and opposition parties. This election data is also aggregated at the level of the 64 municipalities (and self-governing cities).

Information on poverty levels in Georgian municipalities is not publicly available; therefore, we utilize control variables for employment and economic activity with the latter proxied by either the municipalities' tax revenues or the value added generated in the private sector. Information on employment and value added are gathered from National Statistics Office of Georgia, while data on tax revenues is retrieved from the Ministry of Finance.

The following table describes the results of the regression analysis.

Table 1. Regression analysis results

Change in vote shares for Georgian Dream from 2020 to 2024 parliamentary elections	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Constant	0.071	0.102	0.089	0.086
Change in number of social assistance beneficiaries as a share of population	0.491** (0.019)	0.472** (0.016)	0.509** (0.015)	0.528*** (0.009)
Employment rate 2023		-0.278*** (0.003)		
Change in employment, as a share of population			0.095 (0.829)	0.024 (0.954)
Tax revenues 2023, per capita			-0.00003 (0.164)	
Value added 2023, per capita				-0.004*** (0.006)
<i>Number of observations (number of municipalities and self-governing cities)</i>	64	64	64	64

Source: Author's calculations.
 Note: The values in parentheses indicate the p-value.
 *Significant at the 10 percent level; **Significant at the 5 percent level; ***Significant at the 1 percent level.

The first regression (column 1) investigates the relationship between the change in social assistance beneficiaries as a share of the population and the change in the Georgian Dream party's vote shares, displaying a significant relationship between the two. Specifically, the coefficient (0.49) is significant at the 5 percent level, suggesting that a 1 percentage point increase in social assistance beneficiaries as a share of the population, increases the vote share for the Georgian Dream by approximately 0.49 percentage points.

To control for the effect of poverty, we first use employment rates in 2023 (latest available data) as a proxy for poverty. Column 2 presents these results. In this specification, the coefficient for the change in social assistance beneficiaries remains significant at 5 percent level and its value (0.47) remains consistent with the previous specification. The model further suggests that poverty is also positively and significantly (at the 1 percent level) associated with incumbent votes – the higher the poverty (lower employment) in municipalities, the higher the Georgian Dream vote share.



In the next step (column 3), we model the relationship between the change in the Georgian Dream's vote share, change in employment as a share of the population, mobilized local tax revenues per capita, and the change in number of social assistance beneficiaries as a share of the population. Change in employment, calculated as the difference between 2019 and 2023 employment levels (as share of the population), is used as proxy for change in poverty. Tax revenues per capita for 2023 reflect economic activity across municipalities and self-governing cities, serving as a proxy for well-being. As seen in the table, change in employment is not statistically significant, however the amount of tax revenues mobilized across municipalities, is modestly significant. The coefficient for change in social assistance beneficiaries is once again statistically significant and consistent with the other specifications in terms of magnitude (at 0.51).

As a robustness test (column 4) we replace the previously used proxy for economic well-being (tax revenues), with the private sector value added per capita for 2023, which significantly (at the 1 percent level) correlates with an increase in the vote share for the incumbent party. Changes in employment remain insignificant. Importantly, the coefficient for change in social assistance beneficiaries remains positive (0.53) and statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

The discussed regression models were tested for a different dependent variable as well. In addition to observing the impact on change in vote shares, we also analyzed the impact on the number of votes cast for the Georgian Dream party between the 2020 and 2024 Parliamentary Elections. Changes in social assistance beneficiaries remain a significant explanatory variable in this specification as well.

The estimated impact of social assistance is consistent across all models, both in magnitude and significance, reinforcing the finding that increases in living allowance beneficiaries are strongly associated with higher vote shares for the Georgian Dream party, underscoring the critical

role of social assistance in shaping electoral outcomes.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates a strong and statistically significant relationship between the increase in social assistance beneficiaries and the vote share obtained by the incumbent Georgian Dream party in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Even after controlling for poverty and economic well-being, the results highlight the impact of social assistance in shaping electoral outcomes. The findings suggest that a 1 percentage point rise in social assistance beneficiaries as a share of the population translates into a 0.47–0.53 percentage point increase in the Georgian Dream's vote share. When contextualized within the overall election results, these estimates suggest that the expansion of the targeted social assistance program may have garnered the Georgian Dream an additional 45,500 to 50,000 votes, representing 2.2–2.5 percent of the total votes.

The results raise critical questions about the potential use of social assistance programs as a strategic political tool. The robustness of the relationship across multiple models suggests that the observed trends are not merely byproducts of economic conditions but reflect a deliberate link between social assistance expansion and electoral outcomes. The implications are significant for democratic governance in Georgia. The strategic use of social welfare programs risks undermining public trust in the electoral process and highlights the need for greater transparency and accountability in the implementation of social assistance policies. Recognizing the dual impact of these programs – alleviating poverty while potentially shaping political behavior – will be critical in fostering fairer electoral conditions and ensuring that social assistance remains focused on addressing the needs of vulnerable populations without undue political influence.



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