

# Behind the Ballot: How the Georgian Dream Secures Electoral Wins

**D**espite the widespread mass protests against adopting the “Russian law” in Georgia and consistent opinion polls over the past two decades showing that 80 percent of the population favors EU membership, many foreign observers are puzzled. They question how a parliament elected by these same people can vote to pass a law that jeopardizes the country’s European integration.

This article describes how the ruling Georgian Dream party secures electoral victories without substantial reliance on party programs or ideological orientations. The party merely sets some blurry red lines, such as avoiding overtly pro-Russian or anti-Orthodox stances; however, within these frameworks, it acts without any political or moral compass. These red lines can also be scrapped and changed, depending on political expedience. For instance, not being overly anti-European and anti-American seemed to be one such red line; however, in the last few months, the Georgian Dream’s

anti-Western statements and policies have skyrocketed.

This analysis will outline the electoral machinery established by the Georgian Dream, which uses administrative resources, economic benefits distribution, threats, result manipulation, and other tactics to secure a comfortable majority in parliament. In Georgian elections, ideological preferences and geopolitical orientation compete strongly with more practical and material considerations.

## Georgian MPs: Personal Loyalty over Ideology and Geopolitics

One major reason for the discrepancy between the parliament’s actions and the majority’s will is that the Georgian Dream party never explicitly opposed the EU during their electoral campaigns. Instead, they consistently presented themselves to both the electorate and the international commu-



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nity as pursuing European integration. Many voters, whether motivated by conviction, pressure, or self-interest, believed they were not jeopardizing the country's European future. The ruling party and its leaders probably were never genuinely pro-European but were pragmatic enough to avoid alienating a significant portion of society.

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Another factor is the personal loyalty of elected representatives to Bidzina Ivanishvili, the billionaire and de facto ruler of the country. This loyalty encompasses government members, heads of law enforcement bodies, and MPs. Over the years, the party has become highly monolithic, consistently purging hesitant elements, such as the 2012 coalition partners (the Republicans, the Free Democrats) and Georgian Dream members from civil society. Today's Georgian Dream parliamentarians lack any ideological preference, serving as loyal followers of Ivanishvili, willing to shift from social democracy to the far right to ensure his continued power.

Over half of the Georgian Dream deputies are official [millionaires](#) who view their membership in parliament as a means to protect their business interests. This lack of principles within the majority parliamentary faction is illustrated by the events of March 2023. Eighty-six GD deputies voted in favor of the so-called "foreign agents' law" in the first hearing. After unprecedented protests, Ivanishvili decided to withdraw the law and the same number of deputies who initially supported it then voted against it just days later. The absolute majority of these MPs voted in favor of the same law one year later.

## Influence and Control over Election Administration

Allegations of vote-counting manipulation by the Georgian Dream have raised concerns about the legitimacy of election outcomes in Georgia. The ruling party has strategically placed loyal officials in key positions within the Central Election Commission (CEC) and district election commissions. These election commission members receive training and directives that align with GD's interests, influencing how they manage the vote-counting process.

Recent developments illustrate that the CEC's neutrality is highly questionable. The Georgian parliament abolished the position of deputy to the president, which was usually appointed based on the opposition's suggestion. This decision followed a disinformation campaign involving the current CEC Chairman, a GD loyalist, who falsely claimed that the political opposition was planning an attack to replace him with his deputy, an opposition representative.

Additionally, the Chairman of the CEC can now be elected by a simple majority of parliament rather than the previously required qualified majority. President Salome Zourabichvili [attempted](#) to veto this change, warning that "there is a risk that the elections will be organized by a biased, single-party administration controlled by the ruling party, leading to a lack of confidence in the electoral process, both within society and the international community."

Moreover, in May, the Georgian Dream proposed another set of amendments to the Election Code. These amendments intend to change the current decision-making system which requires the support of two-thirds of CEC members for certain Commission decisions. Instead, the ruling party proposes that if the Commission fails to make a

decision with this rule, it can be re-voted in the same meeting and adopted with a simple majority of the Commission members. According to Georgian [NGOs](#), these changes “rule out opposition involvement in the decision-making process and further intensify the doubt about the unconscionable influence of the ruling party in the election administration.”

The district and precinct election commissions employ numerous techniques to influence election results. One common tactic involves manipulating voter lists by [inflating](#) them with fictitious or deceased individuals. Conversely, opposition supporters are often removed from voter lists, particularly in areas with a strong opposition presence.

In addition to manipulating voter lists, ballot boxes are also tampered with. While direct ballot stuffing is rare, introducing pre-filled ballots into the ballot boxes during the voting process is more common, a tactic known as [chain-voting](#) or, more colloquially - “Armenian carousel.”

Georgian elections usually have a relatively high number of [invalid ballots](#), ranging from three to five percent of the total, often attributed to the meticulous scrutiny of electoral commission members. Studies indicate that most invalidated ballots favor the opposition. [Destroying ballots](#) that support opposition candidates, often under the pretext of procedural errors, is also common.

Falsifying counted results can also occur, including tampering with results sheets. This involves altering the results recorded on official tally sheets before submission to higher authorities. This usually happens in those precincts where the precinct election commission members and NGO observers are either bought or expelled by the government. In such cases, the remaining members are often pressed into signing a protocol independent of the actual vote tally. Such precincts are known as [“green precincts”](#).

Experts and long-time observers of Georgian elections [claim](#) that commission manipulations, such as number changes and ballot box stuffing, affect between two and five percent of votes in Georgia. These figures are lower than in countries with entrenched dictatorial regimes like Russia or Belarus. However, in Georgia’s pluralist context, these are significant numbers likely to impact the results.

## Election Alchemy: Transforming State Resources into Votes

Many argue that the outcome of the elections is decided well before election day, mainly due to the long-tested practices of the GD electoral machine. These practices include using administrative resources, economic and social incentives, clientelism, and coercion and intimidation.

The use of “administrative resources” in elections is a common tactic in many imperfect democracies and hybrid political systems. Scholarly research defines administrative resources as using state positions, funds, and influence to benefit the ruling party. It is [argued](#) that the ruling party automatically secures around 25% of votes due to the support of public employees and their families. This practice makes a level playing field impossible, rendering opposition victories theoretical without significant political changes.

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liberal, reformist, and pro-Western governments (2003-2012) could not resist the temptation to control fundamental institutions vital for democracy. Consequently, reforms from 2003 to 2012 built a relatively solid and efficient state apparatus as compared to other post-Soviet neighbors. However, this efficient bureaucracy has become a formidable weapon for Ivanishvili and the GD, who view it primarily as an “administrative resource.”

This explains the significant increase in public sector employment. Currently, 302,000 people are considered public employees with their number [growing](#) by 4-5% annually since 2017. This growth has led to stronger politicization and clientelism, reducing the space for an independent civil service. Former senior civil servants have revealed extensive clientelism and politicization, affecting even kindergarten teachers and employees of state museums and public hospitals. Given this level of interference, it is improbable that the GD would allow complete independence to bodies dealing with crucial topics like the media, the judiciary, or the central electoral administration.

Public servants play a critical role in Georgian elections as they are heavily [mobilized](#) to support the GD’s campaign efforts. This includes campaigning during work hours, effectively turning them into unpaid campaign workers. Public employees are also asked to be active on social media, mainly Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, to actively “like” and “comment” on GD leadership posts and criticize opposing opinions. Government offices and resources, such as vehicles and communication tools, are used to support campaign activities.

Loyal public servants might receive promotions, bonuses, or other benefits as a reward for their political support. Public servants may also selectively enforce laws and regulations to disad-

vantage opposition parties and their supporters. They are often [required](#) to compile lists of potential voters and persuade them to support the ruling party. Public servants frequently serve as poll workers, influencing the voting process to ensure favorable outcomes for the GD.

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG, or SUS in Georgian) plays a key role in securing pro-GD votes on election day. Their involvement in the electoral process [raises](#) significant concerns about election integrity. The presence of operatives wearing blue jeans and black polo shirts at polling stations and their role in manipulating results through intimidation and tampering are well-noted.

Besides employees of various ministries, security services, city halls, and regional and local administrations, electoral clientelism particularly affects school and kindergarten teachers and primary and secondary school administrators. These professionals are [mobilized](#) extensively as voting often occurs in schools, and school staff are frequently involved in polling station commissions. Teachers in Georgia are relatively vulnerable, with around 70% [failing](#) their qualification exams, making their continued employment highly dependent on the goodwill of political authorities.

[Leaks](#) from the secret files of the Georgian intelligence services (SUS), organized by a former imprisoned high official, reveal that the SUS closely supervises the appointment of principals and teachers in schools and has extensive files on their political preferences. Recalcitrant principals or teachers face considerable physical and psychological pressure, as exemplified by the tragic [death](#) of school director Ia Kerdzaia in Zugdidi.

One favored technique for using administrative resources is to artificially inflate administrative roles by creating positions within government [NNLEs](#) (non-entrepreneurial, non-commercial

legal entities) to employ socially vulnerable individuals. This results in more civil servants dependent on the state budget and guaranteed votes for the ruling party during elections. An investigation in Zestafoni showed that these “fictional jobs” included unnecessary roles in local libraries, where tasks assigned were often redundant, suggesting the true intent was political rather than practical. Interviews with library staff and residents indicated that many services, such as book deliveries, were rarely performed, underscoring the program’s political motives.

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Other high-demand occupations include cemetery and municipal park employees, municipal waste management workers, and similar roles. In Keda, a small town in Adjara, for example, 150 people have been hired as cleaners, almost all of them claiming to be GD coordinators. The GD’s attempts to use electoral clientelism often reach absurd levels. For instance, at the Zugdidi Botanical Garden, where admission was free, six employees were [paid](#) as cashiers.

## Vote Buying and Commodification of the Ballot

The Georgian Dream often [provides](#) direct financial incentives to voters. These incentives can include cash payments, free food distributions, gift cards, or other monetary rewards in exchange for votes. Reports have surfaced of GD operatives discreetly distributing cash to voters in exchange for support, often near polling stations, where “coordinators” manage cash transactions with pre-agreed voter lists.

In economically disadvantaged areas, food packages, clothing, and other essentials are often [distributed](#). These packages typically include potatoes, onions, flour, sugar, cooking oil, and party-branded promotional materials. In some communities, voters receive building materials such as cement and bricks, ostensibly for community development but tied to securing votes.

The Georgian Dream also uses state-funded social programs and benefits to buy votes. This includes one-time financial aid packages to targeted groups, such as pensioners and unemployed individuals, shortly before elections. Additionally, the government may temporarily increase pensions, unemployment benefits, or other social welfare payments during the election period. Moreover, GD authorities may threaten to withdraw social assistance from particular beneficiaries to influence their political choices. In 2018, before the second round of the Presidential Elections, the Georgian Dream went as far as to [write off](#) bad debts to several hundred thousand voters, which was widely interpreted as vote-buying.

Another tactic is offering employment opportunities or promises of jobs in the public sector to individuals who pledge their support to the party. Potential voters are often offered temporary employment for short-term government projects or public works, contingent on their voting behavior.

In every municipality, GD coordinators identify specific needs at the individual level, such as families with members suffering from illnesses or relatives imprisoned or fined. GD representatives offer public funding for medical treatment, [reduced prison sentences](#), or penalty removals in exchange for votes. This personalization of electoral issues and commodification of the ballot, combined with the GD’s extensive administrative and financial resources, gives the ruling party a significant advantage.

## Coercion and Intimidation

Public servants, or socially vulnerable persons, are often coerced into demonstrating support for GD. On election day, they are required to show a picture of their ballot marked for the ruling party or its candidate. This coercion can include threats of job loss, creating a climate of fear where expressing political dissent becomes risky. Public servants are frequently required to attend GD rallies and events during work hours, and their participation is closely monitored to ensure compliance.

The crucial role in coercion and intimidation beyond public employees is [assigned](#) to “thieves-in-law” (a term referring to a specific criminal fraternity within the former Soviet Union, particularly developed in Georgia) and petty criminals under their command. During the campaign and on election day, they threaten voters with physical harm if they do not support the Georgian Dream. This is especially effective in areas where criminal groups hold significant influence, primarily in certain urban areas. Additionally, threats to destroy property or businesses if individuals or communities do not comply with voting directives are frequent. Criminal networks are often mobilized to ensure voter turnout for the GD. This includes transporting voters to polling stations and managing logistics to ensure that GD supporters turn out in large numbers.

Criminals and “thieves-in-law” are also used to suppress opposition activities. This includes [disrupting](#) opposition campaign events through orchestrated violence or intimidation, harassing opposition candidates and their supporters, and deterring them from active campaigning through physical attacks or threats.

Two other specific groups often activated in voter intimidation are drug addicts benefiting from

state drug substitution programs and certain combat sports circles. Commonly called [metadonshiki](#), individuals fearing removal from drug substitution program lists are easily manipulated by authorities and are often asked to intimidate potential opposition voters on election day.

Martial arts athletes, such as wrestlers, are another group mobilized for intimidation. Municipal administrations or the Culture and Sports Ministry allocate substantial funds to finance training in sports clubs via various “youth and sports support programs.” In some cases, martial arts athletes [receive](#) promises of financial aid or direct cash payments to attack GD opponents or civil society members violently. Controlling various sports federations is a significant aspect of GD’s electoral strategies, and many athletes are elected to the Georgian parliament through the GD party list. Several others serve as mayors or heads of local administrations.

## Competitive but Unfair

International observers typically [describe](#) Georgian elections as largely competitive, with all political forces having access to the electoral process (unlike in Russia, for example), but not entirely fair as the conditions of competition clearly favor the ruling party.

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level. The GD's use of public servants to influence elections is a clear example of exploiting administrative resources for political gain. By coercing, mobilizing, and rewarding public employees, the ruling party ensures its dominance at the expense of fair and transparent electoral processes. Furthermore, the widespread practice of vote buying undermines the democratic process by distorting the free choice of voters and creating an uneven playing field. It fosters a culture of dependency and patronage, where voters expect material benefits in exchange for their support.

Unmasking the electoral practices that keep the Georgian Dream in power reveals that the Georgian parliament and other elective bodies do not necessarily reflect citizens' wishes and aspirations. The hidden manipulations within the ballot box make an opposition victory difficult under normal circumstances. With the adoption of the "Russian law" in May 2024, the GD and Ivanishvili have created extraordinary circumstances that could cause this well-oiled electoral machine to begin showing signs of fracturing since, for many voters, the elections have become a test for up-

holding a constitutional commitment to pursue European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

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Therefore, the October 2024 elections pose a significant challenge for Georgian society and the opposition parties. These elections are often dubbed a "referendum" over whether the country should go west or north. However, the success of the pro-European camp in the elections will depend not only on the mobilization of the pro-European electorate and successful campaign but also on the extent to which the institutionalized advantages that the Georgian Dream has created over the years will be undermined and dismantled ■