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# Electoral Studies

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## Can hybrid regimes foster constituencies? Ethnic minorities in Georgian elections, 1992–2012



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### ABSTRACT

Do ethnic minorities in postcommunist regimes vote in systematic ways? This paper examines ethnic minority voting in Georgian elections from 1992 to 2012, examining the causes for ethnic minorities' high electoral turnout and ruling party support. Although some argue that electoral fraud is the explanatory cause, other interests, such as experience of poverty and party electoral strategy, help explain minority electoral behaviour. This paper uses statistical methods to examine electoral fraud, as well as OLS regression to investigate the role of socio-economic factors such as urban density or poverty on ethnic minority voting behaviour. The paper also draws from in-country field research to investigate the party strategies and programs in ethnic minority areas during the 2008 parliamentary election.

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Can electoral institutions provide inclusion for minority groups in hybrid regimes? Scholarly work on vulnerable ethnic minorities has often tied their political dissatisfaction with their exclusion from or outright oppression by the political system (Gurr, 1993). Literature on third wave democratic transitions recommended that states adopt electoral institutions that would construct paths toward inclusion for ethnic minorities and build ethnic majority tolerance for minority empowerment (Lijphart, 1991; Linz and Stepan, 1996). Complicating this picture for many regimes, however, has been the difficult and lengthy process of constructing meaningful electoral institutions. As Levitsky and Way (2002) have noted, governments optimistically branded as transitioning democracies have in reality been authoritarian regimes masked by minimally competitive electoral processes. In ethnically diverse regimes with persistent rivalries between minority and majority communities, meaningful elections and democratic consolidation might be even less likely (Zürcher, 2011). Can elections in hybrid contexts lead to any sort of political

accountability of the governing toward the governed? Georgia's electoral experiences indicate that while constituencies can emerge in hybrid regimes, they are vulnerable to party manipulation and state disregard. Nonetheless, there are important linkages between nascent constituency building and campaign narratives in Georgia, most evident in the 2008 and 2012 election cycles.

This paper examines electoral politics in the former Soviet republic of Georgia from 1992 to 2012, focusing on how it has framed the political inclusion and exclusion of the state's de facto territory's most populous minority groups. The Georgian electoral experience offers a particularly vibrant case for in-depth analysis, given its history of ethnic secessionism, its public engagement with democratic rhetoric via the Rose Revolution, and its notable failure to achieve democratic consolidation. Scholarship on elections in post-Soviet space largely offers divergent pictures of the processes of elections, with narratives noting the prevalence of fraud (Myagkov et al., 2009; Fish, 2005), institutional effects of electoral system structures (Moser, 2008), electoral politics that eschews party programs (Hale, 2006), or as frames to understand mass public opinion on big issues such as democratic or economic

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**Table 1**  
Georgia's ethnic makeup, 1989 and 2002 census.<sup>a</sup>

Ethnicity*	Population, 1989	% of Union Republic, 1989	Population, 2002	Percentage of National Population, 2002
Total	5,400,841		4,371,535	
<i>of this number</i>				
Georgian	3,787,393	70.1	366,1173	83.75
Azerbaijani	307,556	5.7	284,761	6.51
Armenian	437,211	8.1	248,929	5.69
Greek	100,324	1.86	15,166	0.35
Ossetian	164,055	3.04	38,028	0.87
Abkhazian	95,853	1.8	3527	.08
Russian	341,172	6.32	67,671	1.55
Ukrainian	52,443	0.97	7039	0.16
Kist			7110	0.16
Yazid (Kurd)	33,331	.062	18,329	0.42
Jew	24,795	0.46		
Other	56,708	1.05		

<sup>a</sup> The 2002 census excludes population counts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Sources: 1989 USSR All-Union Census 2002 Georgian census. Data files courtesy of the Georgian Statistical Office.

reform (McFaul, 1997) and regime changing 'revolutions' (McFaul, 2005).

Here, I argue that Georgia's ethnic minority communities have voted in ways consistent with voting trends shared by the broader Georgian electorate, particularly among those with similar experiences of poverty. I find further that, while Georgia's elections have been troubled by fraudulence among districts dominated by ethnic minorities, we cannot conclude that ethnic minority electoral behaviour is solely explained by election day malfeasance (nor can we, as Georgian conventional wisdom might instruct us, reduce the political behaviour of ethnic minorities to being perpetrators of fraud). This point about fraudulence is important if we are to discern a real, rather than manufactured, constituency within the non-Georgian electorate. Third, political party mobilization and strategy have an effect on political behaviour broadly, both in terms of attracting votes and directing the campaign narrative. In most Georgian elections, both of these patterns rewarded the ruling party. In the 2012 parliamentary election that ousted the ruling United National Movement, however, the electoral trajectory of Georgia's ethnic minority populations showed considerable variation from previous trends. The story of ethnic minority inclusion in Georgian elections is a complex narrative of coercion, cooptation, and accountability that nudges open a door for the development of real constituencies in Georgian electoral politics.

### 1. Inconsistencies and interests: explanations of ethnic minority voting

This paper examines ethnic minority behaviour in Georgian national and municipal elections, specifically the electoral turnout and vote choice by ethnic minority communities, measured by district election results from 1992 to 2012, obtained from the Georgian Central Election Commission (CEC). Georgia's demographic characteristics provide a fruitful environment for systematic study of ethnic

**Table 2**  
Enclave districts and ethnic makeup, 1989 and 2002.

Ethnic Group/District	% of enclave/district population dominant minority, 1989	% of enclave/district population dominant minority, 2002
Azerbaijani		
Bolnisi	66	66
Gardabani	43	74
Dmanisi	64	67
Marneuli	76	83
Sagarejo	26	32
Armenian		
Tsalka	29	55
Akhalkalaki	91	94
Akhalsikhe	43	37
Ninotsminda	90	96

Sources: 1989 USSR All-Union Census 2002 Georgian census. Data files courtesy of the Georgian Statistical Office.

minority voting behaviour. The most populous ethnic minorities in Georgia currently, the Azerbaijanis and Armenians, are predominantly clustered in territorial enclaves in the southeast and south central part of the country. At 6.5 and 5.7 percent of the country's 2002 population, respectively, they outnumber the next largest minority, the Russians, who make up 1.6 percent of the population (See Table 1). Of the approximately 60 electoral and administrative districts in Georgia (they are congruent), nine are enclave districts, designated such when there is a dominant ethnic minority constituting over 30 percent of the territorial population.<sup>1</sup> By 2002, the date of the first census following Georgian independence, six of these districts, two in Samskhe-Javakheti and four in Kvemo Kartli, had become minority-majority districts, with over 50 percent of the population an ethnic minority. In most minority-majority districts, ethnic minorities comprise a substantial proportion of the population, generally over 65 percent (See Table 2).<sup>2</sup> The other most populous ethnic groups, namely Russians and Ukrainians, currently make up much smaller proportions of the population and are dispersed throughout the territory rather than concentrated into enclaves.

The Azerbaijani and Armenian minority populations carry significant political power in the Georgian context, both electorally and historically. Today, enclaves make up 11 percent of Georgia's electoral districts and comprise 10 percent of its registered voters. Such proportions provide these two ethnic minorities a reasonable opportunity to affect the outcomes in national elections, particularly when seating a legislature or affecting a presidential run-off. Socially, however, the two populations remain distant from ethnic Georgians. Few Armenians in Javakheti and Azerbaijanis in Kvemo Kartli speak Georgian (Wheatley, 2004, 2005). Until recently, only poor roads connected the Armenian-dominated cities in Javakheti with Tbilisi.

<sup>1</sup> The number of electoral districts in Georgia has altered over time, due in part to secessionist wars that alter its ability to run elections on its full UN recognized territory.

<sup>2</sup> Only one of the districts with ethnic minority concentration is outside of the stronghold regions typically related to the Armenian (Samskhe-Javakheti) and Azerbaijanian (Kvemo-Kartli) populations.

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