How natural disasters affect citizens' political attitudes?
Case of Georgia 2012 parliamentary election

■ **NINO MACHURISHVILI**

[Ilia State University, Georgia, Tbilisi]

Abstract

This paper is a part of research about evaluation natural disasters influence on citizens political attitudes reviewing Georgia 2012 parliamentary election case – election result in the eastern part of Georgia, taking into consideration 2012 summer flood, which preceded voting in four districts of Kakheti. Paper aim is to answer theoretically and empirically important question: How social welfare is related to the district-level election outcomes. Theoretical framework is a theory of retrospective voting. Research is based on a qualitative research methodology, basic methodological approach being the method of case study. In the frame of the research two alternative hypothesis are tested. Present paper will contribute to the academic debates around the issue of citizens retrospective voting.

Keywords

Election Results; Material Deprivation; Natural Disasters

1. Introduction

This paper contributes to better understanding of voters' political behavior. Existing materials study citizen's political attitudes in India and Pakistan, where floods and earthquakes preceded election, also, in democratic countries – in USA. Natural disaster preceded 2012 parliamentary election in the eastern part of Georgia, Kakheti region. Four districts – Gurjaani, Telavi, Lagodekhi and Kvareli were damaged by floods. Research subject is the evaluation of the natural disasters impact on October 2012 Georgia parliamentary election results.

Research aim is not to explain whether election caused or not the shift of the political regime or met the expectations of the society. Taking into consideration the fact, that in contemporary history of independent Georgia, since 1991, 2012 parliamentary election was the first case, when government was changed through the election and acting authority let to the oppositional political force come in power, it is important to analyze preconditions for this issue. Analyzing the election results taken from the Georgia election portal database,[1] research aim is to prove posi-

1 Georgia Election Portal (GEP). **http:// data.electionportal.ge/en/** Accessed on Feb. 06, 2017. GEP was created by Jumpstart

tive correlation between election results from the four districts of the eastern part of Georgia and floods.

As for the methodology, research aim is to answer theoretically and empirically important question: How social welfare is related to the district-level election outcomes. Methodological restriction of the research is that, does not evaluate thoroughly the factors, like population ethnicity, religion, education level; only focuses on damage and paid compensation linkage with the election results.

Basic methodological approach is a case study, although the paper is based on some quantitative data, methodologically it is a qualitative research. Research chronological boundary is pre – election period in Georgia, July 2012 – October 2012. In addition to the above methodological bases, for the data analysis the following techniques will be used: analysis of primary sources of Georgia election portal database, international organizations evaluation document analysis, content analysis of scientific literature about theoretical framework and concrete case.

This part of paper also presents main definitions and basic theoretical assumptions of the relationship between natural disaster, government response and election results focusing on the level of citizen's material deprivation.

Theoretical frame is the theory of retrospective voting, according to which: Negative income shocks increase citizen's willingness to participate in rebellion, which in turn creates incentives for politicians to democratize and provide public goods in order to avoid paying the costs of repression. This theory helps to explain acting government decisions while paying compensation and foreseeing benefits for a damaged region population. Retrospective voting theory presumes that people are more concerned with policy outcomes than policy instruments.

The responsibility hypothesis implies that the voters hold the government responsible for the state of the economy. Taking into consideration the abovementioned fact, research is based on main theoretical assumptions:

H_1. Compensation paid by the government after floods, during the pre – election period, influenced election results in the proper election districts.

Taking into consideration political situation in Georgia, it is possible to form and test alternative hypothesis:

H_2. Government less effective actions and promise of the oppositional political force leader to the electorate of a damaged region, that amount allocated by him for the consequences of a disaster would be more than double of allocation made by the government, influenced election results.

Level for the analysis is district-level society.

For the research purposes, *income should be considered as an index of an individual's ability to consume commodities; each unit of income represents a different bundle of commodities that a person is able to consume*.[2]

The paper is divided into three parts: theoretical and empirical parts and discussion of research results. In the theoretical part the content from academic sources will be reviewed and hypothesis will be formulated; the empirical part of the research will be dedicated to case study; the final part of the research is conclusion, where according to the processed data, hypothesis would be confirmed or rejected.

Georgia for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) with the support of the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The purpose of the portal is to make voter's list and election data more accessible

2 Shlomo Yitzhaki, „Relative Deprivation and the Gini Coefficient," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 93 (1979): 321 – 322.

2. Explanation citizens' political behavior

Study on citizen's political behavior is an important issue in social sciences. Factors, influencing voters decisions, may be grouped in several directions: Similar to all other types of information, public opinion polls can influence public opinion. There exist two hypotheses to understand how polls affect public opinion: the bandwagon and the underdog effect. *The bandwagon effect claims that voters "jump on the bandwagon," which means that if a party is gaining in the polls, the party will gain additional support from the voters, and vice versa if the party is losing in the polls. The underdog effect suggests that if a party is losing in the polls, the party will gain some sympathy votes to offset this loss.*[3]

In addition to factors, such are political force's election programs, geographic and ethnic factors, natural disasters, which precede voting and government response influence citizen's electoral decisions as well. Those factors are taken into consideration by the oppositional political force while forming their pre – election program. Electorate may punish or trust the acting government, taking into consideration how effectively the government settle the results of natural disaster, also, if citizens face material deprivation, they may vote against acting government.

Natural disasters have been found to be determinants of both economic growth and violent conflict. Less is known about whether they affect how citizens vote in competitive elections. *By employing seismic data as an instrument, it is established that the relatively strong impact of geophysical disasters is causal.*[4]

Natural disasters may lead to the deterioration of economic conditions and challenge material deprivation for individuals. Economic conditions shape election outcomes in the world democracies. Good times keep parties in office, bad times cast them out. *The strong findings at the macro level are founded on the economic voter, who holds the government responsible for economic performance, rewarding or punishing it at the ballot box. Although voters do not look exclusively at economic issues, they generally weigh those more heavily than any others, regardless of the democracy they vote in. Hypothesis may be stated as follows: The citizen votes for the government if the economy is doing all right, otherwise, the vote is against.*[5]

Studies show, that the number of natural disasters is found to have a negative association with leader tenure in autocracies, but a positive one in democratic countries. Their explanation is that: *Democracies invest more in preventive measures, which limit the number of fatalities, since democratic leaders need to be supported by wider segments of the population.*[6]

As scientists mention, government change is more likely after hydrological and geophysical disasters, but not after biological or meteorological disasters. Geophysical disasters are ultimately caused by tectonic forces beyond the control of even the most ambitious government. Hence, a potential explanation for the pattern is that disasters with a stronger exogenous component may have a stronger effect on the likelihood for government change.

Important question is about the effect of natural disasters in countries with weak and strong governments. *One aspect of government strength that merits investigation is whether or not the government is formed by a coalition of parties.*

3 Jens O. Dahlgaard, Jonas H. Hansen, Kasper M. Hansen, Martin V. Larsen. „How are Voters Influenced by Opinion Polls? The Effect of Polls on Voting Behavior and Party Sympathy," *World Political Science,* 12 (2016): 283.

4 Pelle Ahlerup, *Natural Disasters and Government Turnover* (Centre of Globalization and Development, University of Gothenburg, Working Papers in Economics, 2013), 8.

5 Michael Lewis – Beck, Mary Stegmaier, "Economic Determinants of Electoral Outcomes", *Annual Review of Political Sciences,* 3 (2000): 183.

6 Ahlerup, *Natural Disasters,* 2.

It is not clear a priori whether coalition governments are more likely to be voted out of office when a natural disaster strikes. The need for budget agreements that please parties with different agendas suggests that coalition governments may spend less on disaster prevention. Coalition governments could also be less decisive in their post – disaster actions due to internal disagreement. On the other hand, more parties in the government means that it is less clear who is responsible and who is to blame for lack of preparations or relief to affected individuals and regions. Government change is a less likely in democratic countries.[7]

It is considered, that political context affects the relationship between economic perceptions and vote intention. *Election results reflect the voter's experience with economic reforms: those who benefited from the reforms vote for the right wing pro – reform parties, whereas those who have become worse off, vote for the left wing parties.*[8]

Aside from the clarity of responsibility and the governing party target size, the effects of economic conditions also should be mediated by the clarity of available alternatives, share important assumptions regarding the relationships among economy, political context, and government support. *Specifically, voters are purposive agents who seek to assign credit and blame for economic performance to incumbents. Moreover, the political context is a constraint on individual voter's choices and thus seek to model the interactive relationship of economics and politics on support.*[9]

Studies give explanation of inequality, which emerges as a crucial determinant of political instability as it encourages the rich to contest power in democracies, often encourages social unrest in nondemocratic societies, therefore, democracy is more likely to be consolidated, if the level of inequality is limited, *whereas high inequality is likely to lead to political instability either in the form of frequent regime changes or repression of social unrest.*[10]

3. Political system description in Georgia

After Georgia declared independence in 1991, the following elections were held: 6 presidency, 8 parliamentary, 5 local, 7 Adjara High Council elections, also, one referendum and 2 plebiscites.[11]

During 1990 – 2012 Georgians participated in eight parliamentary elections (including the parliament, whose authority was terminated in November 2003), but only three of them followed by the change of government (1990, 2004 and 2012). As a rule, the ruling party holds the majority in parliament. Since 1990, parliamentary elections were peaceful, however, frequently were boycotted (1990, 1992, 1995, 2008); the system was not perfect, and the results were falsified.

According to the Constitution of Georgia, adopted on August 24, 1995, Article 49, First Part, the Parliament of Georgia shall consist of 77 members of the Parliament elected by a proportional system and 73 members of Parliament elected

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7 Ahlerup, *Natural Disasters,* 6 – 7.

8 Jan Fidrmuc, *Economics of Voting in Post-Communist Countries* (Electoral Studies in Press, 2000), 1.

9 Christopher J. Anderson, *Economic Voting and Political Context: a Comparative Perspective* (Electoral Studies in Press, 2000), 155 – 156.

10 Daron Acemoglu, James A Robinson, "A theory of Political Transitions," *The American Economic Review,* 91 (2001): 957

11 Georgia Central Election Commission webpage, accessed on March 20, 2015.
http://www.cesko.ge/files/TEA/archevnebisistoria/geohistory.pdf
http://cesko02-01.itdc.ge/ge/proaqtiuli-gamoqveyneba-251-ge

by a majority system for a term of four years on the basis of universal, equal and direct suffrage by secret ballot. 77 seats are allocated proportionally under the party – list contest among political parties and election blocs, which clear 5% threshold.[12]

Becoming a dominant political party in Georgia required access on distribution of patronage and administrative resources. Social landscape in Georgia is very specific. Society division is according to generations, education, language knowledge (Russian vs English), attitudes towards Soviet past and not by the classes or economic categories. Political parties fight for their identity, because electorate identifies them with the leader and not with the political course. United National Movement supporters were citizens with secondary education and living in provinces (especially in Samegrelo and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions).[13]

The years of partly free political regime, as defined by the Freedom House, did not allow free and transparent democratic elections to take place in Georgia, to understand electoral preferences ad behavior.

4. Overview of natural disasters chronology, its impact and government response

Severe storms swept through eastern and southern Georgia on July 19, 2012, damaging the homes and agricultural lands of over 25,000 households. While the affected regions are highly vulnerable to natural disasters, such as flash floods, droughts, hailstorm, strong winds and earthquakes – the severe storms and flooding of July 19th, proved significantly more damaging than usual storms.

The most affected municipalities in Kakheti were Telavi, Gurjaani, Kvareli and Lagodekhi municipalities. The storm affected 14 settlements in Telavi, 10 settlements in Gurjaani, 6 settlements in Kvareli and 5 settlements in Lagodekhi.

In response to this disaster, the Georgian Government declared Kakheti a Level 2 emergency as the level of damage caused by the disaster required national government and its assets to aid in the response operations and implement emergency measures.

The economic impact, including physical damage and financial loss, was significantly high, amounting to 202.3 Million GEL (USD 123 Million).

Recovery plan was proposed to guide the development and prioritization of short, medium and long-term recovery actions that can help foster development and minimize the threat of long-term development setbacks due to natural disasters.

Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson allocate two groups of agents: the poor and the rich (the elite) and two types of political state – democratic or nondemocratic. *In a democracy, the median voter sets the tax rate, and because the poor are more numerous, the median voter is a poor agent. In a nondemocratic regime, taxes are set by the rich. When the political system is nondemocratic, the poor can attempt a revolution, and the elite decide whether to establish democracy. When the system is democratic, the rich can mount a coup. The level of income in this economy is stochastic, and the opportunity costs of coups and revolutions change with income.*[14]

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12 The Constitution of Georgia. Adopted on August 24, 1995. According to the amendments of February 23, 2005, N 1010. Article 49, Part 1.
13 Stephen Jones, Georgia: *A Political History Since Independence* (Centre of Social Sciences, 2013), 162.
14 Acemoglu, Robinson, *A theory,* 940.

The idea that natural disasters increase the risks of rebellious behavior has broad empirical support. *But the claim that an observed positive relationship between natural disasters and governance provides evidence for opportunity-cost mechanisms, requires that disasters primarily impact citizen behavior (and therefore politician's incentives) through the economic channel. Correlations between disasters and conflict (or democratization) by themselves provide little direct evidence on the mechanism.*[15]

Data of 2008 and 2012 Georgia parliamentary election results show, that for 2008 proportional election, on district level, the political party, which took the first place, was "National Movement". As mentioned, "National Movement" supporters were citizens living in Samegrelo and Samtskhe – Javakheti regions. Comparing 2008 and 2012 election results in Samegrelo – Zemo Svaneti, National Movement supporter number declined by 8 – 13% (on proportional and majoritarian level), but the winner majoritarian candidate was from "National Movement", in Samtskhe – Javakheti region declined by 15 – 18 %, but still the winner political force on both levels was "National Movement".

As for the four districts, affected by the natural disaster, in Telavi, "National Movement" supporter number declined by the 15 – 16%, in Gurjaani 20 – 20%, in Kvareli 12 – 18%, in Lagodekhi 9 – 7%, though except Telavi, the winner political force on both level was "National Movement". Finally, votes received by the National Movement in Kakheti was 47.02%, which is 1% less then votes received by the "Georgian Dream" coalition.

Received votes in Kakheti's three other districts were distributed as follows: in Akhmeta "National Movement" support declined by the 23 – 33%, in Dedophlistskaro 11 – 14%, in Sighnaghi 22 – 18%, but in Dedophlistskaro on the majoritarian level the winner candidate was from the National Movement.

As mentioned above, in Georgia electorate identifies political parties with a leader and not with a political course. Taking into consideration this fact, western part of Georgia, especially Imereti region, where oppositional party leader was born, supported "Georgian Dream" coalition. In Imereti region on proportional level "Georgian Dream" received 57.87% of votes and "National Movement" 37.47%. On majoritarian level from Imereti 12 districts only 8 of them (Baghdadi, Chiatura, Kharagauli, Kutaisi, Samtredia, Tkibuli, Zestaponi, Sachkhere) were won by the "Georgian Dream" coalition; in Sachkhere district, where Bidzina Ivanishvili – "Georgian Dream" coalition leader was born, the majoritarian candidate from his party received 92.66% of votes, only four districts (Khoni, Terjola, Tskaltubo, Vani) were won by a candidate from the "National Movement".

To summarize 2012 election results for the rest regions of Georgia – Adjara, Guria, Shida Kartli and Tbilisi were won by the "Georgian Dream" coalition, while Kvemo Kartli, Racha – Lechkhumi, Samtskhe – Javakheti were won by the "National Movement".

According to the existing studies about 2012 Georgia parliamentary election, the regions with the highest and the lowest deprivation levels were likely to prefer the "Georgia Dream" Coalition, while those regions with medium deprivation level tended to vote for the United National Movement. On the other hand, *when the deprivation levels reach a certain threshold the voter's frustration might be the dominant cause of electoral outcomes*[16]

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15 Christine C. Fair, Patrick M. Kuhn, Neil Malhotra, Jacob N. Shapiro, How Natural Disasters Affect Political Attitudes and Behavior: Evidence from the 2010-11 Pakistani Floods, (Version July, 2013), 2.

16 Alexi Gugushvili, *Material Deprivation and the Outcomes of Elections* (Center for Social Sciences, Applied Social Science Program, Working Paper, 2012), 13.

Should be considered Georgian media assessment of pre – election period. As one of the credible on-line media source mentioned, *relief efforts in response to substantial damage inflicted by the hailstorm and flooding of 2012 July, turned at the time into one of the major campaign issues for political groups ahead of the October 1 parliamentary elections. Ivanishvili – led "Georgian Dream", that at the time was in opposition, vowed to compensate "fully" for the lost crops in case of victory in the elections. At the time, the previous government amended the 2012 state budget and allocated GEL 50 million for immediate relief efforts. After winning elections, Ivanishvili said in October that he would use his own money to provide promised compensations if state funds were not sufficient for this purpose.*[17]

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to evaluate natural disaster impact on citizen's political behavior. The final part of the research will be devoted to the discussion of the research results. Summarizing task structurally will be divided into two parts: The first part will summarize theoretical conclusions, the second part will generalize political processes.

Taking into consideration the research results, towards verified hypothesis, several theoretical conclusions can be made:

Theory of retrospective voting properly explains Georgia 2012 parliamentary pre – election period. Government during pre – election period allocated compensation and developed long – term rehabilitation plan for disaster – affected citizens to reduce negative income shock, to avoid citizens voting against the governing political party, in order to avoid price for repression.

This is evidenced by the analysis of "National Movement" votes from the regions, also, may be considered relevant for the explanation of the research hypothesis retrospective voting theory, because, citizens voted for and against the governing party taking into consideration economic conditions.

As for the conclusion of the empirical part, several considerations can be developed:

Taking into consideration election results, hypothesis, according to which compensation paid by the government after floods during pre – election period influenced election results in the appropriate election district, may be admitted verified; comparing the election results from the four affected districts with other parts of the country, in Kakhetian four districts, votes of "National Movement" supporters were decreased least of all.

The second hypothesis, according to which, government less effective actions and promise of the oppositional political force leader to the electorate of the affected region that the amount allocated by him for the consequences of disaster would be more than double of the allocation made by the government, influenced election results, could not be falsified or verified due to the lack of quantitative data, especially, considering the fact, that after winning the elections, the leader of the "Georgian Dream" partially changed his pre – election promise.

Summarizing the research results, one of the assumption about economic determinants of electoral outcomes should be considered, according to which, *the world over comes from the economic responsiveness of the electors, the individual voters. Citizen dissatisfaction with economic performance substantially increases the probability of a vote against the incumbent. Opinion about economic*

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17 Civil Georgia webpage, **http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25663&search=** accessed on March 20, 2015.

performance – satisfied versus dissatisfied – can alter dramatically from one elec-tion to the next, whereas party identification and other long-term forces change little. Thus, the fall of a government is more likely to come from a shift in economic evaluations than from a shift in party attachments.[18]

Finally, this study examined issue of the citizen's political behavior through the analysis of only material deprivation caused by the natural disaster that, hope-fully, will encourage scientific debates.

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18 Lewis – Beck, Stegmaier, *Economic Determinants,* 211.