The Role of Electoral Blocs in the Weak Institutionalisation of the Party System in Georgia (1990–2020)

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Abstract:

This article examines the role of formally registered electoral blocs in the weak institutionalisation of Georgia's party system between 1990 and 2020. The analysis is based on eight electoral cycles and one transitional period, drawing on nine regular parliamentary elections and one repeat parliamentary election. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the study examines how electoral blocs influenced electoral stability, parties' roots in society, and organisational autonomy. The findings show that bloc-level volatility accounted for more than half of overall electoral volatility, while repeated participation in ideologically heterogeneous blocs often coincided with the weakening of parties' independent electoral identities. The most successful blocs were typically organised around a dominant leader or constituent party, reinforcing political personalisation. Although electoral blocs may have reduced disproportionality under high electoral thresholds, they also encouraged short-term electoral cooperation at the expense of organisational continuity. The Ukrainian experience further suggests that prohibiting electoral blocs alone is unlikely to strengthen party system institutionalisation. Overall, the article argues that formally registered electoral blocs should be understood not merely as electoral arrangements but also as institutional mechanisms shaping longer-term party system development.

Keywords: *Electoral bloc, party system, institutionalisation, electoral system, legal threshold.*

Introduction

In Georgia, the 2020 parliamentary election was the last election in which political parties were permitted to form formal electoral blocs. Since the first multiparty legislative election following decades of Soviet rule in 1990, electoral blocs had been a recurring feature of the country's electoral landscape, allowing parties to compete under a common electoral label and electoral list. The formation of electoral blocs was prohibited by a constitutional amendment adopted in 2017; however, following another constitutional amendment, blocs were permitted again for the 2020 parliamentary elections. According to the explanatory note accompanying the draft law, electoral blocs were considered one of the main obstacles to the development of an institutionalised party system. Consequently, the initiators of the amendment argued that retaining the bloc mechanism was incompatible with the goal of strengthening party system institutionalisation (Parliament of Georgia, 2017).

The concept of party blocs has been used in comparative party system research in a broader sense than the formal electoral arrangements examined in this article. Building on the seminal study of European party system stabilisation by Bartolini and Mair (1990), Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021) conceptualise party blocs as parties that tend to cooperate with one another on the basis of a shared political identity. In this approach, both cooperation and identity are necessary components of a bloc: temporary electoral cooperation or participation in a common government does not constitute a bloc unless it reflects a more durable pattern of political alignment. Such blocs are typically embedded in ideological or historical patterns of competition and may themselves contribute to the development of collective identities among cooperating parties.

This article adopts a narrower, institutional definition of electoral blocs, focusing specifically on formally registered electoral subjects rather than broader patterns of party cooperation or ideological alignment. An electoral bloc is defined here as a formally registered joint electoral subject through which two or more political parties contest an election under a single, legally recognised label, primarily in order to pool resources and secure parliamentary representation. This definition captures the specific legal and organisational mechanism that existed in Georgia between 1990 and 2020 and distinguishes electoral blocs from broader forms of pre-electoral cooperation, such as placing candidates on another party's list, coordinating constituency nominations, campaigning jointly, or forming political alliances without formally registering a separate electoral subject. While such forms of cooperation may represent broader political alliances, they fall outside the scope of this study.

Broader forms of pre-electoral cooperation, including electoral coalitions and alliances, have often been described as particularly characteristic of transitional democracies. Golder (2005) documented 186 pre-electoral coalitions formed in 19 Western European countries between 1946 and 2002, of which 22% subsequently entered government. The formation of such alliances increased notably in the late 1970s, coinciding with the first democratic elections in Portugal (1975) and Spain (1977) after decades of authoritarian rule (Golder, 2005, p. 646).

Similar to patterns observed during the third wave of democratisation, Georgia's first democratic elections in 1990, held after seven decades of Soviet rule, saw most political parties compete through electoral blocs. Among them, the Round Table – Free Georgia bloc, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, defeated the Communist Party establishment. Between 1990 and 2020, 57 electoral blocs were formally registered across Georgia's ten parliamentary elections. Since these alliances were typically short-lived and primarily created for electoral purposes, scholars have

argued that the possibility of forming blocs, combined with the use of single-member districts, created strong incentives for small parties to merge, disappear, or seek representation through broader electoral vehicles (Bader, 2008, p. 91).

Despite extensive research on pre-electoral coalitions and party alliances, less attention has been paid to how formally institutionalised electoral blocs affect the broader development of party systems, particularly in post-authoritarian and post-communist contexts. This article argues that electoral blocs contributed to the weakness of party system institutionalisation in Georgia by shaping patterns of party competition beyond their immediate electoral function. Rather than serving primarily as mechanisms of durable inter-party cooperation, many electoral blocs operated as short-term electoral vehicles that weakened organisational continuity and stable party identities.

Sartori defines a party system as "a system of interaction resulting from inter-party competition" (Sartori, 1976, p. 44). Huntington describes institutionalisation as the process through which organisations and procedures acquire value and stability (Huntington, 1968, p. 12). Assessing Georgia's characteristics according to these two paradigms reveals that the party system has yet to be fully established in the country (Narsia, 2020; p. 39), and it is difficult to even talk about its institutionalisation, which is extremely limited (Bader 2008, p. 86; Silagadze, 2017, p. 6).

This study seeks to identify how electoral blocs have contributed to the weakness of party system institutionalisation in Georgia. The first stage analyses party patterns, quantitative characteristics of electoral blocs, and levels of party institutionalisation. The second stage examines the mechanisms through which electoral blocs may influence different dimensions of institutionalisation, including electoral stability, the development of stable party identities and

voter-party linkages, and the role of leadership within political organisations. The final stage examines Ukraine as a comparative case, where the prohibition of electoral blocs provides an opportunity to assess the consequences of removing this institutional mechanism.

The study addresses three research questions: 1. What role does the instability of electoral blocs play in overall electoral volatility? 2. How does participation in heterogeneous electoral blocs affect the development of stable party identities and independent electoral support? 3. To what extent do leader-centred electoral blocs, organised around a dominant political figure or party, affect the institutionalisation of constituent parties? To answer these questions, the following hypotheses are proposed: H1: The instability of electoral blocs increases electoral volatility; H2: Electoral blocs that unite ideologically divergent parties weaken the clarity of party identities and reduce the ability of member parties to maintain independent electoral support; H3: Electoral blocs centred around dominant leaders tend to achieve greater short-term electoral success, but they provide weaker foundations for the institutionalisation of constituent parties.

The theoretical framework draws on Mainwaring (1999) and Mainwaring & Scully (1995), who identify four dimensions of party-system institutionalisation: electoral stability, parties' roots in society, party organisation, and party legitimacy. This study focuses on the first three, as there is insufficient evidence to evaluate the legitimacy dimension in the context of electoral alliances. According to the dimensions outlined by Mainwaring and Scully, in highly institutionalised systems, the pattern of party competition is stable, parties develop deep societal roots, and organisations are not subordinated to individual leaders. By contrast, institutionalisation is limited when parties function as personal instruments of leaders or small elites (Mainwaring, 1999, pp. 26–27).

Literature Review

Comparative Studies of Electoral Blocs

The academic literature on electoral blocs is relatively limited, focusing mainly on the rationales for their formation rather than their systemic consequences. Two main schools of thought explain the emergence of blocs: 1. Institutional incentives: Disproportional electoral systems increase the likelihood of pre-election coalitions, since the gap between votes and seats encourages small parties to unite (Shepsle, 1997; Strom, 1994); 2. Strategic signaling: Electoral blocs signal to voters the ability of member parties to form a governing coalition. They also allow opposition parties to project competitiveness against incumbents and demonstrate governing potential (Andersen, 1990; Hancock, 1998). In addition, blocs can signal exclusionary commitments by clarifying which parties will not cooperate (Martin & Stevenson, 2001; Müller, 2000; Müller & Strom, 2000).

A seminal comparative study by Golder (2005) analysed legislative elections in 22 industrialised democracies (1946–1998). She found that blocs are more likely to emerge under proportional electoral systems and in fragmented multiparty environments. Contrary to expectations, however, voter uncertainty about the next government was not a significant factor. According to Golder, 46% of blocs were formed under proportional systems compared to 27% under majoritarian ones. Vote shares of blocs were also consistently higher under proportional systems. These findings confirm that disproportionality and party-system fragmentation strongly shape the incentives for coalition-building (Golder, 2005, pp. 653–654).

More recently, Vallve, Meriläinen, and Tukiainen (2023) examined Finland and demonstrated that bloc formation can reduce member parties' electoral success. Specifically, voters punish parties that align with ideologically distant partners, whereas ideologically coherent blocs do not trigger such backlash.

Classification of Party Systems by Number of Parties

Party-system research commonly begins by counting parties, although scholars agree that not all parties are equally relevant. Sartori (1976) argued that relevance depends on whether parties influence coalition formation or the dynamics of competition, while other authors have proposed minimum seat-share thresholds (e.g., 2–3%) to distinguish relevant from marginal parties (Siaroff, 2019; Ware, 1996). To account for differences in party size, this study uses the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP), calculated from parliamentary seat shares following Laakso and Taagepera (1979).

Party-system types are identified from recurring party patterns rather than single elections. Sartori (1976) argued that a party pattern should persist for at least three elections to constitute a party system, whereas later authors proposed stricter criteria, including longer time spans or a greater number of consecutive elections (Bogaards, 2004; Greene, 2013; Siaroff, 2019).

Several typologies have been developed to classify party systems. Blondel (1968) distinguished between two-party, two-and-a-half-party, and multiparty systems with or without a dominant party. Sartori (1976) added ideological polarisation, distinguishing between moderate and polarised pluralism. The most recent classification, proposed by Siaroff (2019), is based on parliamentary seat shares and identifies five main types: one-party, two-party, two-and-a-half-

party, moderately multiparty, and strongly multiparty systems, with further distinctions according to the strength of the largest party. This study applies Siaroff's classification, as it is based on parliamentary representation and is consistent with the use of ENPP.

Study of the Institutionalisation of the Party System

The number of parties alone is not a sufficient criterion for analysing party systems. A key criticism of this approach is that it overlooks the degree of institutionalisation, which can group together countries with qualitatively different party system characteristics. Given the profound changes in contemporary democratic systems, Mainwaring (1998, p. 7) argued that analyses should examine not only the number of parties but also the extent of their institutionalisation.

Mainwaring further identified three boundaries beyond which the use of the term party system becomes questionable. First, when major parties in one election become insignificant in the next, speaking of a party system is meaningless. Second, under conditions of excessive personalisation, where non-party politicians dominate and parties exercise little control over access to office, the system loses coherence. Third, in one-party regimes, the concept of a party system is inapplicable; similar to Sartori (1976), Mainwaring argued that at least two parties must compete, otherwise we are dealing with a party state rather than a party system (Mainwaring, 1998, p. 7).

Huntington (1968) laid the foundation for studying institutionalisation, defining it as the process by which organisations and procedures acquire stability and value. He identified four key criteria: adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence. Adaptability reflects flexibility, including longevity, peaceful generational turnover, and the ability to survive functional changes. Complexity refers to diversified structures and multiple goals, strengthening loyalty and

resilience. Autonomy measures independence from other social groups or external actors, while coherence denotes internal unity and effective dispute-resolution, with fragmentation signaling weak institutionalisation (Huntington, 1968, pp. 12–22).

While Huntington focused on political organisations, Mainwaring and Scully (1995) shifted attention to the party system as a whole, identifying four dimensions of institutionalisation. The first is the stability of interparty competition: highly institutionalised systems show consistent patterns where major parties endure across elections, even if their vote shares fluctuate, while weakly institutionalised systems see parties frequently emerge and disappear. The second dimension concerns party roots in society, with strong and stable linkages to voters and organised interest groups. The third emphasises party independence from individual leaders, reflecting autonomy beyond serving as personal vehicles. Finally, legitimacy captures the broad acceptance of parties as essential to democratic politics, which strengthens overall system stability (Mainwaring, 1999, pp. 26–27).

A central concern in studying institutionalisation is electoral stability. Pedersen's (1979) development of the Electoral Volatility Index marked a turning point in this regard. The index measures the redistribution of party votes between elections, providing a tool for identifying whether party systems exhibit relative stability or significant fluctuations.

Research Methodology

Methods and Data

This study employs both statistical and qualitative analyses of electoral outcomes, complemented by the case study method. It examines eight electoral cycles and one transitional period based on the official results of nine regular parliamentary elections and one repeat

parliamentary election held in Georgia between 1990 and 2020. The separate analysis of the 2003–2004 transitional period reflects the exceptional restructuring of party competition following the Rose Revolution and the repeat proportional parliamentary election held in 2004. As a robustness check, all statistical analyses were replicated excluding the annulled proportional component of the 2003 parliamentary election. The results remained substantively unchanged, indicating that the inclusion of the 2003 election does not affect the overall findings or conclusions of the study.

The official results of the 1992–2004 elections report the share of votes obtained by electoral subjects in relation to the total number of participating voters, including invalid ballots. By contrast, the official results of the 1990 Supreme Council election and the 2008–2020 parliamentary elections are based on the proportion of valid votes received by each political party and electoral bloc. For the sake of comparability, this study analyses all elections according to the distribution of valid votes.

For the assessment of party system institutionalisation in Georgia and Ukraine, the study also draws on the University of Nottingham's database (whogoverns.eu), compiled by Casal Bértoa as part of his project on party systems and government monitoring (Bértoa, 2024).

Operationalisation of Variables

This study examines the role of electoral blocs in the weak institutionalisation of Georgia's party system through three dimensions: electoral stability, party roots in society, and party organisation. Electoral stability is examined quantitatively, whereas the latter two dimensions are assessed through qualitative comparative analysis of electoral blocs and party trajectories.

Electoral stability is measured using the Pedersen Index of electoral volatility, which captures changes in electoral support between two consecutive elections (Pedersen, 1979). The index (V) ranges from 0 (complete stability) to 100 (complete volatility). It is calculated as follows:

$$V = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^{n} | p_{i,t} - p_{i,t-1} |$$

where $p_{i,t}$ represents the percentage of votes received by party i at election t, and $p_{i,t-1}$ denotes its share at the previous election (Pedersen, 1979, p. 4). Applying the same principle, this study also calculates bloc-level volatility by comparing the vote share of formally registered electoral blocs with the electoral support of their constituent parties in the adjacent election. For blocs observed in the first election of an electoral cycle, their vote share is compared with the combined vote share subsequently obtained by their constituent parties, whether contesting independently or as members of another formally registered electoral bloc. Conversely, for blocs observed in the second election of a given electoral cycle, their vote share is compared with the combined vote share previously obtained by their constituent parties in the preceding election. The analysis is limited to formally registered electoral blocs and excludes informal pre-electoral cooperation, joint candidate arrangements, and alliances without formal registration. Coding decisions were based on the legal registration and organisational continuity of electoral subjects. Official party mergers were treated as organisational continuity, whereas party splits were coded as the emergence of new parties. Changes in party names alone were not treated as the creation of new political organisations. This approach enables the analysis to capture the extent to which electoral support associated with formally registered electoral blocs was maintained or redistributed across consecutive elections.

The party roots in society dimension is examined through the extent to which participation in ideologically heterogeneous electoral blocs affected the ability of constituent parties to maintain distinct political identities and independent electoral support over time. The analysis focuses on parties that repeatedly entered electoral blocs with ideologically incompatible partners and traces the evolution of their subsequent electoral trajectories.

The organisational dimension of party system institutionalisation is examined through the degree of personalisation in electoral blocs. Particular attention is paid to whether electoral blocs were organised around a dominant political leader or constituent party and whether this dominance was reflected in the bloc's official name. To complement the qualitative case studies, all electoral blocs are classified into three categories according to their naming convention: blocs listing all constituent parties, blocs with a neutral title, and blocs referring only to a dominant party and/or its leader. These categories are compared with regard to their electoral performance in order to assess the relationship between internal power asymmetry, personalisation, and party institutionalisation.

The Level of Party System Institutionalisation in Georgia

An analyses of party patterns demonstrates that Georgia has been unable to consolidate a stable party system over three decades of post-Soviet democratisation. According to the minimal criteria for the existence of a party system – the stability of party patterns across three consecutive elections (Sartori, 1976; Siaroff, 2019) – no period in Georgia’s electoral history meets this standard.

Table 1

Party Patterns and Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP) in Georgia (1990–2020)

Election	Types of Party Pattern[a]	ENPP
1990	Predominant moderately multi-party	2.13
1992	Highly multi-party	8.2
1995	Dominant moderately multi-party	3.33
1999	Predominant moderately multi-party	2.36
2003	Highly multi-party with a relative balance of the top three or more parties	6.03
2004	Two-subject	1.22
2008	Predominant moderately multi-party	1.55
2012	Two-subject	1.97
2016	Predominant moderately multi-party	1.61
2020	Predominant highly multi-party	2.37

Note. [a] Party patterns are defined based on Alan Siaroff's classification (2019). Categories are assigned on the basis of parliamentary seat shares, consistent with Siaroff's (2019) approach and with the ENPP figures reported in the same table. Data based on Narsia (2020).

The instability of party patterns can be attributed to several factors, some related to the dimensions of the electoral system and its frequent changes, and others to historical developments. In 1990, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, upon coming to power, banned the Communist

Party. Following his removal from office, his own party and bloc quickly became politically irrelevant. In 1992, Georgia entered a phase of extreme party fragmentation, which was significantly altered before the next elections by raising the electoral threshold to 5%. Between 1995 and 1999, the Union of Citizens of Georgia held a dominant or predominant position. By 2003, most political actors had adapted to the electoral system, and six political subjects managed to surpass one of the highest thresholds in the world – 7%. None of them, however, won even one-quarter of the electorate's support. Despite the formally multiparty outcome, serious allegations of electoral fraud emerged, triggering the Rose Revolution and the partial annulment of the 2003 results. These events disrupted the emerging party pattern in Georgia. The Union of Citizens of Georgia disintegrated, while the Revival Union of Georgia collapsed in 2004 following the removal of its leader Aslan Abashidze from power in the autonomous republic of Adjara. Meanwhile, the United Democrats decided to merge with President Saakashvili's United National Movement.

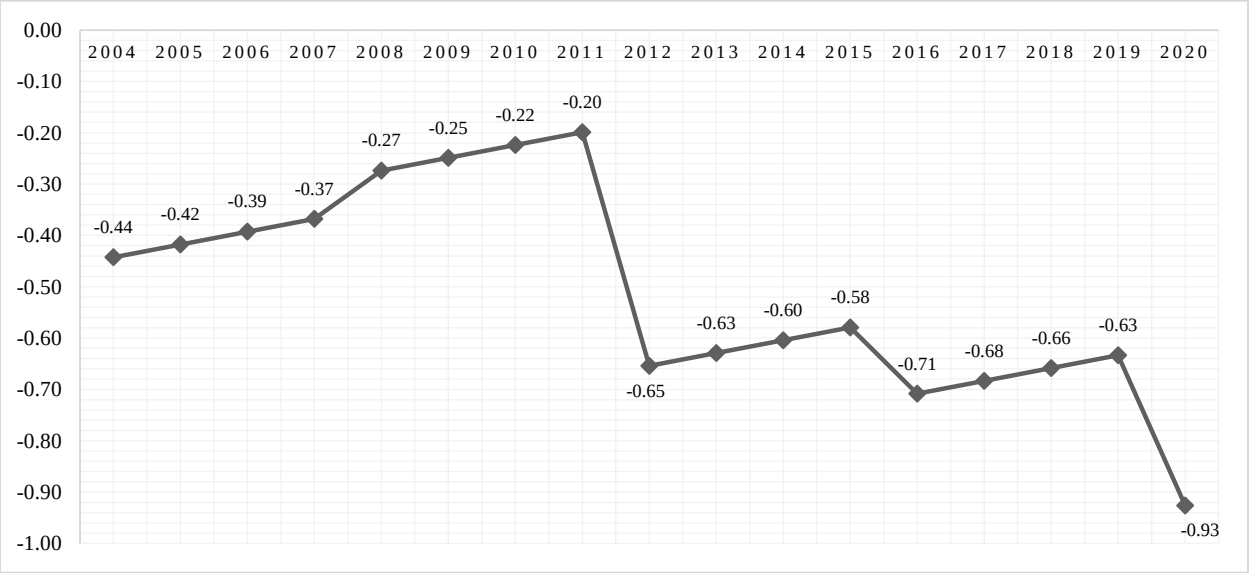
By 2012, the formation of a large opposition electoral bloc produced a two-subject parliament, with Georgian Dream taking power and subsequently winning parliamentary majorities in the next two elections. Although nine political subjects entered parliament in 2020, 84% of seats were captured by the ruling party and the former governing United National Movement.

Institutionalisation – understood as the process through which parties establish consistent patterns of mass mobilisation and internal organisation – has been measured in Georgia within the framework of the University of Nottingham project (Bértoa, 2024). Based on two indicators, the average age of parties and the index of electoral party dominance, the analyses reveals a declining trajectory of institutionalization. Figure 1 demonstrates that party institutionalisation in

Georgia remained consistently below the cross-system average throughout the 2004–2021 period, as indicated by the negative values of the index. Nevertheless, the trajectory exhibits substantial temporal variation. Between 2004 and 2011, party institutionalisation improved gradually, with the index increasing from -0.44 to -0.20, suggesting greater organisational continuity and electoral rootedness of established parties. This trend was reversed after 2012, when the index declined sharply to -0.65, coinciding with a major reconfiguration of the party system following the parliamentary alternation of power. Although the index recovered modestly between 2013 and 2016, it remained substantially below its pre-2012 level. A further deterioration occurred in 2017, followed by a period of relative stability until 2019. The lowest value was recorded in 2020 (-0.93), indicating the weakest level of party institutionalisation observed during the period under study. Overall, the evidence indicates that despite periods of modest improvement, Georgia's party system remained characterised by comparatively low organisational persistence and weak electoral rootedness of political parties.

Figure 1

Party Institutionalisation in Georgia (2004–2020)

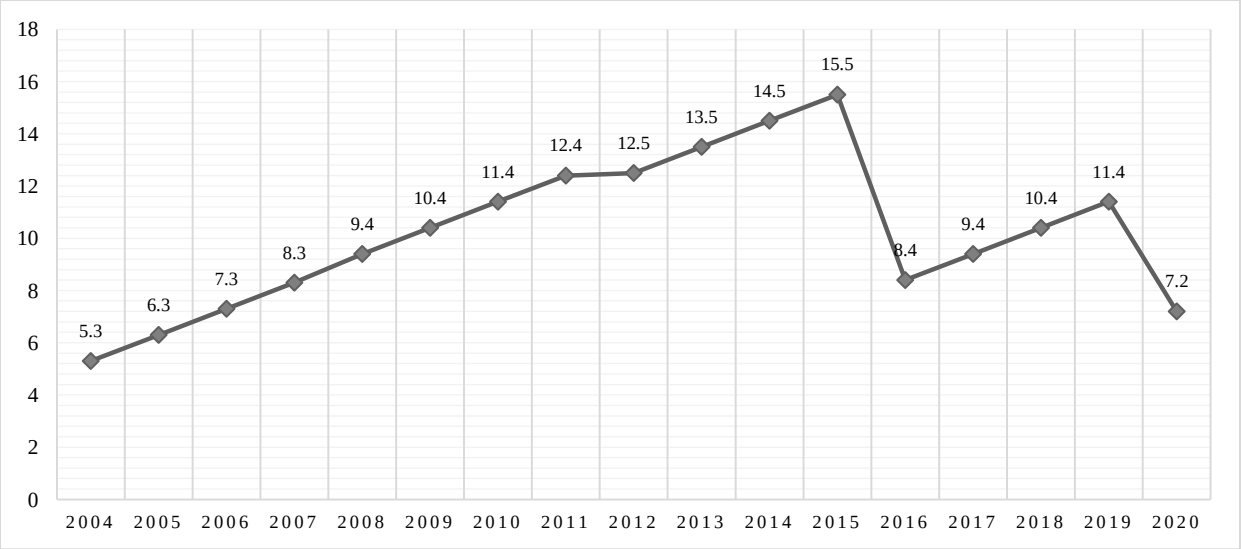


Note. Following Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021), party institutionalisation is measured using a composite index based on two complementary dimensions: organisational persistence (Average Party Age) and electoral rootedness (Established Party Dominance). The index is calculated as the arithmetic mean of the standardised (z-score) values of these two indicators. Data from Bértoa (2024), available at https://whogoverns.eu/

In recent years, the average age of parties winning at least 3% of the vote has also declined (see Figure 2). New political organisations are predominantly formed by leaders who split from existing parties. Notable examples include European Georgia and For Georgia, founded by leaders who left the United National Movement and Georgian Dream, respectively. The continuous emergence of new parties remains a defining feature of Georgian politics.

Figure 2

The Average Age of the Parties Obtaining at Least 3% of the Votes (2004–2020)



Note. Data from Bértoa (2024), available at https://whogoverns.eu/

Formation of Electoral Blocs in Georgia (1990–2020)

Between 1990 and 2020, a total of 57 electoral blocs were formed for parliamentary elections in Georgia. The 1990 Supreme Council election – the first free and democratic elections in Georgia after seven decades of Soviet rule – stand out for having the highest number of electoral blocs. While 30 parties registered with the electoral administration, only six ran independently. Elections held in 1999–2003 were also marked by a particularly high frequency of bloc formation, primarily driven by the need to overcome the increased electoral threshold, which at that time reached a record 7% (see Table 2).

Table 2

Number of Parties Contesting Elections Independently and through Electoral Blocs in Georgia (1990–2020)

Election	N of Parties Participating in	N of Parties Participating in the Election	Total

	the Election through a Bloc	as Independent Electoral Subject	
1990	24	6	30
1992	15	32	47
1995	19	45	64
1999	39	20	59
2003	27	12	39
2004	10	11	21
2008	14	9	23
2012	8	14	22
2016	14	19	33
2020	7	48	55

Electoral blocs won parliamentary majorities in Georgia on three occasions. In two of these cases, bloc victories resulted in a change of government. Electoral blocs were typically formed by opposition parties, while ruling parties created blocs only when their electoral support had significantly declined. This was the case in 2003, when the ruling Union of Citizens of Georgia established the bloc For a New Georgia.

Table 3

Participation of Electoral Blocs and Recorded Results in the 1990–2020 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia

Election	N of Registered Electoral Subjects	N of Electoral Blocs	Share of Electoral Blocs	N of Blocs Entering Parliament	Vote Share of Blocs	Seat Share of Blocs
1990	11	5	45.45%	3	63.78%	65.04%

1992	36	4	11.11%	4	44.02%	31.11%
1995	53	8	15.09%	2	17.35%	2.71%
1999	33	13	39.39%	2	45.88%	32.74%
2003[a]	21	9	42.86%	5	66.88%	63.51%
2004	16	5	31.25%	1	13.50%	10.00%
2008	12	3	25.00%	1	19.10%	11.33%
2012	16	2	12.50%	1	57.01%	56.67%
2016	25	6	24.00%	3	39.97%	22.67%
2020	50	2	4.00%	2	30.33%	26.67%

Note. [a] The results of the proportional component of the 2 November 2003 parliamentary election were annulled following the Rose Revolution. Nevertheless, the election is retained in the analysis because its majoritarian results remained valid and it captures the final configuration of party competition before the post-revolutionary restructuring of Georgia's party system.

Dimensions of Party System Institutionalisation: Key Findings and Analyses

Bloc-Level and General Electoral Volatility

The instability of electoral support represents one of the main challenges to the consolidation of Georgia's party system. The Pedersen Volatility Index reached its highest levels during the 1990–1995 electoral cycles (see Table 4). The bloc Round Table – Free Georgia lost 45% of its electoral support in the 1992 parliamentary election compared to the 1990 Supreme Council election. Similarly, the blocs Peace, October 11, and Ertoba, which ranked first, second, and fourth respectively in 1992, lost nearly two-thirds of their electoral support in the subsequent election.

Table 4

Level of Bloc Volatility and Pedersen's Index in Georgia (1990–2020)

Electoral Cycle/ Transitional Period	Bloc Volatility Index	Pedersen Index of Electoral Volatility	The Share of Bloc Volatility in Electoral Volatility
1990–1992	43.19	78.45	55.05%
1992–1995	21.97	60.81	36.13%
1995–1999	17.41	44.51	39.10%
1999–2003	40.02	44.14	90.67%
2003–2004	36.97	52.53	70.38%
2004–2008	5.58	21.41	26.07%
2008–2012	16.85	30.57	55.13%
2012–2016	14.21	16.19	87.74%
2016–2020	3.32	13.15	25.23%
Mean	22.17	40.20	54%

To assess the role of electoral blocs in shaping overall electoral volatility, the analysis calculates a bloc volatility index based on changes in the electoral support of formally registered blocs across consecutive elections. The index captures the extent to which electoral support accumulated under registered bloc labels was maintained, redistributed, or dispersed after subsequent elections.

The results indicate that electoral bloc instability constituted a substantial share of overall electoral volatility throughout the period under study. On average, changes in bloc-level support accounted for 54% of total electoral volatility, although the contribution varied considerably across electoral cycles (see Table 4). The highest levels were observed in the 1999–2003 and 2012–2016 periods, when bloc volatility accounted for 90.7% and 87.7% of total electoral volatility, respectively. Similarly, bloc-level changes represented more than half of overall volatility in the 1990–1992 and 2008–2012 cycles (55.1% and 55.1%). Even in periods of comparatively lower volatility, such as 2004–2008 and 2016–2020, changes associated with electoral blocs remained a meaningful component of broader electoral instability.

These findings demonstrate that electoral volatility in Georgia has been closely associated with instability at the bloc level. Rather than functioning merely as temporary electoral arrangements, formally registered blocs represented important vehicles through which electoral support was aggregated and subsequently redistributed across elections. Consequently, instability among electoral blocs constituted a significant dimension of the broader volatility characterising Georgia's party system.

Heterogeneous Electoral Blocs and the Weakening of Party Identity

Another factor that appears to have hindered party development in Georgia was the repeated formation of ideologically and programmatically heterogeneous electoral blocs. While such alliances were often created to maximise electoral prospects, they frequently blurred party identities and reduced the visibility of individual parties within broader electoral coalitions. In many cases, participation in successive blocs with changing partners was associated with a gradual decline in parties' independent electoral support, making it increasingly difficult for them to establish stable and recognisable political brands.

The trajectory of the National Democratic Party (NDP) illustrates this pattern. A right-wing conservative party, the NDP first contested parliamentary elections independently in 1992, winning 9.21% of the vote, and remained one of the country's leading opposition parties in 1995 with 8.45%. Thereafter, however, it participated exclusively through electoral blocs for four consecutive parliamentary elections. In 1999, it formed the National Democratic Alliance – Third Way together with the Republican Party and the Party of Industrialists, despite significant ideological differences. Most notably, the NDP advocated a constitutional monarchy, whereas the Republicans supported a parliamentary republic. Although the bloc presented itself as an

alternative to both President Eduard Shevardnadze and Adjara's leader Aslan Abashidze, it obtained less than half of the vote share previously secured by the NDP alone, failed to pass the electoral threshold, and dissolved shortly after the election. The party subsequently joined the pro-government electoral bloc For a New Georgia in the 2003 parliamentary elections, alongside parties representing substantially different ideological positions, including the Socialist Party. The bloc was established by President Eduard Shevardnadze's party, the Union of Citizens of Georgia, and brought together political forces supporting the incumbent government. The NDP's participation represented a significant departure from its previous political trajectory, as the party had traditionally maintained a strongly oppositional stance toward Shevardnadze's administration. By joining For a New Georgia, the NDP became part of another heterogeneous electoral bloc that united parties with previously distinct positions within Georgia's political landscape. Following the Rose Revolution, the NDP entered another alliance with the former Burjanadze-Democrats in the 2004 repeat parliamentary elections, receiving only 2.71% of the vote. In 2008, it contested the elections as part of the Right-Wing Alliance – Topadze Industrialists, which secured just 0.93%. After seventeen years of participation in different electoral blocs, the NDP again ran independently in 2012 but received only 0.14% of valid votes. Although the decline in the party's support cannot be attributed solely to bloc participation, its repeated involvement in ideologically diverse and short-lived alliances coincided with the gradual erosion of its independent electoral profile.

Comparable developments can be observed in several other Georgian parties. The Traditionalists' Union entered a series of electoral alliances after initially competing independently, but gradually lost its distinct political profile and eventually disappeared from parliamentary politics. The Republican Party, despite maintaining a clearer ideological identity

than many of its partners, repeatedly shifted between substantially different electoral alliances – including cooperation with the National Democratic Party in 1999, participation in the opposition bloc led by Mikheil Saakashvili in 2003, and later membership in the Georgian Dream coalition. While the party remained politically relevant for a longer period than many of its counterparts, its electoral success increasingly depended on coalition participation rather than independent electoral strength. Similarly, Industry Will Save Georgia, despite initially establishing itself as an autonomous political force, increasingly relied on changing electoral alliances and was ultimately unable to preserve an independent parliamentary presence.

These cases suggest that electoral blocs often functioned as short-term electoral vehicles rather than durable mechanisms of party consolidation. Rather than fostering organisational cooperation or facilitating party institutionalisation, many heterogeneous alliances were followed by their rapid dissolution, frequent realignment of partners, and the further weakening of parties' independent electoral identities. This broader pattern is consistent with the quantitative evidence presented earlier, which demonstrates the high turnover of electoral blocs and the absence of stable inter-party cooperation throughout the period under examination.

The Role of Leadership in Electoral Blocs

In Georgia's electoral history, the success of several prominent electoral blocs appears to have been tied to the popularity of their leaders, producing imbalances among constituent parties. Examples include Zviad Gamsakhurdia's Round Table – Free Georgia (1990), Eduard Shevardnadze's Peace (1992) and For a New Georgia (2003), Aslan Abashidze's Revival of Georgia (1995), Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement (2003), and Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream (2012).

The decline of Round Table – Free Georgia following Zviad Gamsakhurdia's removal from power was particularly striking. While the bloc had secured 53.99% of the vote in 1990, its most successful successor, the Union of Georgian Traditionalists, received only 5.56% in 1992, while three other former member parties collectively obtained just 3.55%. By 1999, a reconstituted version of the bloc managed a mere 0.28%. Similarly, the Peace Bloc of 1992 rapidly disintegrated after Eduard Shevardnadze distanced himself from it and established the Union of Citizens of Georgia. In 2012, the decisive factor in the opposition coalition's electoral success was Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose Georgian Dream party has since come to dominate the political arena, while none of the coalition's other partners managed to pass the electoral threshold independently.

The prominence of leaders is often reflected in bloc names themselves, where their first and/or last name appears explicitly. This practice typically characterised coalitions of unequal strength, reinforcing the identification of the bloc with its leader and underscoring the dominance of the leading party. Examples include Saakashvili – United National Movement, Burjanadze – Democrats, Jumber Patiashvili – Unity, Right Alliance – Topadze Industrialists, Bidzina Ivanishvili – Georgian Dream, Giorgi Targamadze – Christian-Democratic Union, Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, Irma Inashvili – Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, United Opposition, Nino Burjanadze – Democratic Movement, Paata Burchuladze – State for the People, Topadze – Industrialists, Our Homeland, and Giorgi Vashadze – Strategy Aghmashenebeli.

Between 1990 and 2020, 57 electoral blocs were registered in Georgia's ten parliamentary elections. Excluding one case because of incomplete information, the analysis covers 56 blocs. These were classified into three categories according to their naming conventions: blocs whose title listed the full or shortened names of all constituent parties, with no single dominant partner

(n = 12); blocs registered under a fully neutral name referencing neither a specific party nor a leader (n = 13); and blocs whose title referenced only one constituent party and/or its leader, or which were otherwise organised around a de facto dominant leader (n = 31). The differences across these three types are substantial: the egalitarian, all-parties-named blocs performed markedly worse, with a mean vote share of 2.26% and a seat-winning rate of 25%; neutrally named blocs performed better, with a mean vote share of 3.93% and a seat-winning rate of 46.15%; and blocs organised around a single dominant party or leader performed best of all, with a mean vote share of 10.30% and a seat-winning rate of 48.39%. This suggests that a bloc's underlying internal power structure – whether it was built around a dominant partner or organised as an egalitarian coalition of nominal equals – is closely associated with electoral performance, lending systematic support to the personalization argument beyond the illustrative examples discussed above. This comparison is based on group-level figures rather than a full multivariate test, and cannot rule out reverse causality: parties that were already electorally dominant may simply have been more likely to form blocs in which they were named as the sole or leading partner, rather than dominance being a consequence of the naming convention itself.

Unlike most cases, the electoral bloc Paata Burchuladze – State for the People followed a different trajectory. Rather than the junior partner, it was the bloc's major party that experienced subsequent electoral decline and stagnation. This outcome was primarily attributable to the withdrawal of the party's founder and the bloc's leader, Paata Burchuladze, from politics, which further weakened State for the People. In contrast, the bloc's junior partner, Civil Platform – New Georgia, subsequently rebranded as Giorgi Vashadze – Strategy Aghmashenebeli and won 3.15% of the vote in the following parliamentary election, thereby almost matching the level of electoral support previously achieved by the bloc.

The Ban on Electoral Blocs and Its Consequences: The Case of Ukraine

This section does not seek to provide a systematic comparison between Georgia and Ukraine. Rather, it uses the Ukrainian experience as an illustrative comparative perspective to examine how political parties adapted to the prohibition of electoral blocs. Ukraine is particularly relevant because, like Georgia, it introduced a legal ban on formally registered electoral blocs, allowing consideration of the possible consequences of removing this institutional mechanism despite broader differences in political institutions, party system development, and electoral rules.

Electoral blocs were a frequent feature of Ukrainian politics during the 1998–2007 parliamentary elections, which were conducted under proportional representation or mixed-member electoral systems. On average, 11.75 blocs were formed across the four elections held in this period, with the number of parties per bloc ranging from 2.33 to 3.1. In three instances, the combined vote share of electoral blocs exceeded that of parties running independently. In both the 2002 and 2007 elections, blocs secured the majority of proportional seats (see Table 5).

Table 5

Electoral Blocs in Ukraine (1998–2007)

Election	N of Parties Participating in the Election	N of Blocs	Average Number of Parties in Blocs	Votes Received by Blocs	Votes Received by Parties	Share of Seats Received by Blocs

1998	21	9	2.33	20.4 %	71.23 %	12.89 %
2002	22	11	3.82	51.32 %	42.51 %	56.44 %
2006	28	17	3	48.15 %	48.13 %	46.67 %
2007	10	10	3.1	49.84 %	45.81 %	55.11 %

Note. The 2006 and 2007 elections were conducted under a proportional representation electoral system, whereas the 1998 and 2002 elections – held under a mixed-member parallel system – are presented here with reference to their proportional component. The sum of votes cast for parties and electoral blocs shown in the table does not equal 100%, as the results are based on votes of participating voters. Voters had the option to vote "against all"; These votes, together with invalid ballots, are included in the total number of votes cast. Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Ukraine.

For the 2012 parliamentary elections, however, the formation of electoral blocs was prohibited. According to the Venice Commission and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the reform process was carried out without proper consultation with other political parties or civil society representatives. In their joint opinion, they stressed that unless a legitimate justification exists, political parties should be free to decide whether to contest elections independently or in coalition with others. They concluded that banning blocs restricted parties' freedom of association (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR 2011).

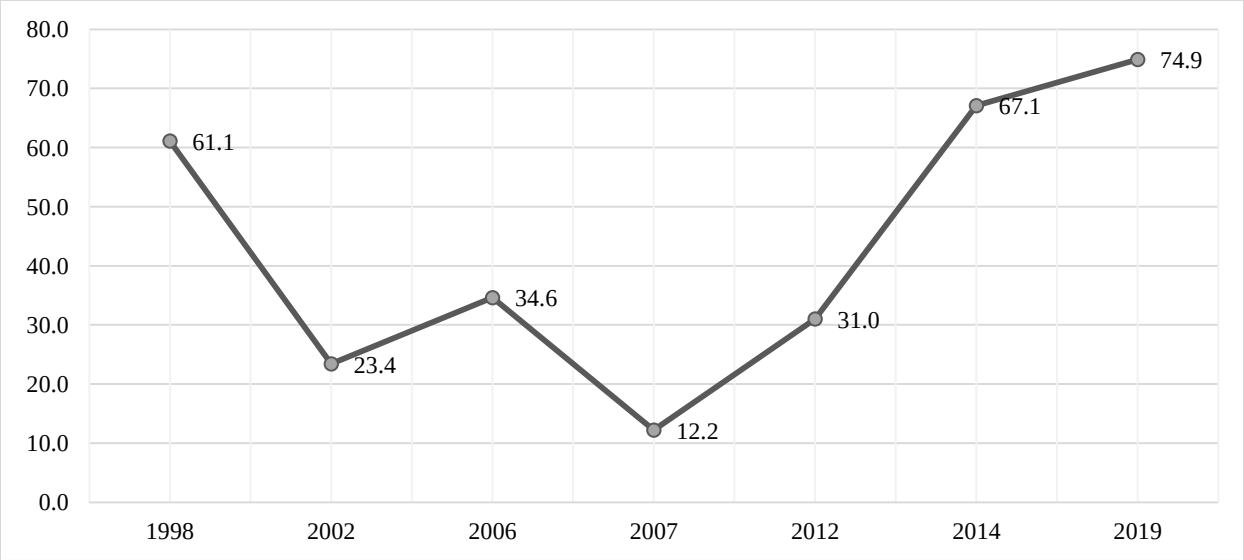
The issue resurfaced in 2013, when the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR reviewed a draft electoral law in Ukraine. They reiterated that, in the absence of a legitimate rationale for prohibiting blocs, and given the use of a 5% electoral threshold, lawmakers should consider allowing parties to form blocs to nominate candidates (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR, 2013).

Major opposition forces adapted to the ban by modifying their electoral strategies. The Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party, which had been the core of the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc since 2002, ran its 2012 campaign under the name United Opposition 'Batkivshchyna', incorporating representatives of allied parties into its electoral list. Among them was the Reforms and Order Party, a consistent member of the Tymoshenko Bloc in earlier elections, which now entered the 2012 contest under Batkivshchyna's banner. Another former ally, the Social Democratic Party, participated independently under the name Ukraine – Forward but failed to cross the 5% threshold. Ultimately, Batkivshchyna finished second, behind the ruling Party of Regions.

The prohibition of electoral blocs also heightened disproportionality as the number of contesting parties increased. While in the 2007 and 2012 elections combined, on average only about 7% of votes were cast for electoral subjects failing to pass the threshold, this figure rose to 22.36% in the 2014 snap election and 21.58% in 2019. The ban encouraged political forces to establish new parties as vehicles for cooperation, which – combined with broader political changes – fueled electoral volatility. As a result, in the 2019 election, the Pedersen Index of Electoral Volatility reached an unprecedented 75% (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Pedersen Index in Ukraine (1998–2019)



Note. 1998–2012 – Bértoa (2024), available at https://whogoverns.eu/; 2014–2019 – author's calculations.

Conclusion

This article examined the role of formally registered electoral blocs in the weak institutionalisation of Georgia's party system between 1990 and 2020. Drawing on evidence from ten parliamentary elections, it argues that electoral blocs were associated with weak party system institutionalisation through three interconnected mechanisms: electoral instability, the weakening of independent party identities, and the personalisation of political competition.

The findings suggest that electoral blocs rarely evolved into durable forms of inter-party cooperation. Instead, they primarily functioned as temporary electoral vehicles through which electoral support was aggregated and subsequently redistributed across elections. Instability at the bloc level accounted for a substantial share of overall electoral volatility, indicating that the frequent emergence, dissolution, and reconfiguration of electoral blocs contributed to unstable patterns of party competition.

The evidence further indicates that repeated participation in ideologically heterogeneous electoral blocs often coincided with the gradual erosion of parties' independent electoral profiles. Although the available evidence does not permit direct causal inferences regarding voter motivations, the trajectories of several parties suggest that successive participation in changing electoral alliances limited their ability to establish durable political identities and autonomous electoral support.

The analysis also demonstrates that electorally successful blocs were rarely partnerships of equals. Rather, they were typically organised around a dominant leader or constituent party, while smaller members remained electorally dependent on the alliance. The systematic comparison of bloc types further shows that blocs centred on a dominant party or leader consistently achieved stronger electoral results than more egalitarian alliances, suggesting that electoral blocs frequently reinforced patterns of political personalisation rather than contributing to the organisational consolidation of constituent parties.

Taken together, these findings indicate that formally registered electoral blocs constituted an important institutional factor associated with the weak institutionalisation of Georgia's party system. While blocs enabled smaller parties to pool resources and, particularly under high electoral thresholds, may have reduced disproportionality and broadened electoral competition, they simultaneously encouraged short-term electoral cooperation at the expense of organisational continuity and stable patterns of party competition.

The Ukrainian experience provides an illustrative comparative perspective on the consequences of prohibiting electoral blocs. It suggests that banning formal electoral alliances does not necessarily eliminate incentives for pre-electoral cooperation. Instead, political actors may adapt by establishing new political organisations or by incorporating coalition partners into

the electoral lists of larger parties. Although Ukraine differs substantially from Georgia in its political institutions, electoral system, and party system development, its experience suggests that the legal prohibition of electoral blocs alone is unlikely to strengthen party institutionalisation in the absence of broader processes of party organisational development and stable voter-party linkages.

More broadly, this article shifts attention from the literature's predominant focus on explaining why pre-electoral coalitions emerge to the longer-term institutional consequences of formally registered electoral blocs. By linking bloc formation to three dimensions of party system institutionalization – electoral stability, parties' roots in society, and organisational autonomy – it contributes to the literature by demonstrating that formally registered electoral blocs should be understood not merely as electoral arrangements but also as institutional mechanisms capable of shaping longer-term party system development. These findings are particularly relevant for evaluating Georgia's decision to prohibit electoral blocs from the 2024 parliamentary election onwards. They suggest that legal restrictions on electoral alliances alone are unlikely to strengthen party system institutionalisation without broader improvements in party organisation, stable voter-party linkages, and programmatic political competition.

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