

MAKING PUBLIC POLLING MATTER IN GEORGIA

A REPORT ON PRE-ELECTION POLLING IN THE 2012 GEORGIA PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

An international review

Conducted by

ESOMAR (World Association for Market, Social and Opinion Research)

and WAPOR (World Association for Public Opinion Research)

Sponsored by

The Open Society Georgia Foundation and the Open Society Think Tank Fund

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June 2013

We would like to thank the polling experts from Georgia, Europe and the U.S. for contributing to this report.
All conclusions – and any errors -- are ours, not theirs.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2012 Georgia held a Parliamentary election that was unique for the country: an intense campaign with an organized single opposition party. The results of published pre-election polls differed widely from each other and the final result, and were criticized for their accuracy, their methodology and the motives of those who conducted them.

In the spring of 2013, the Open Society Think Tank Fund and the Open Society Georgia Foundation in partnership with ESOMAR and WAPOR, international associations of survey researchers, invited a panel of international experts to evaluate the polls against international standards, and recommend ways to improve the quality of conducting, publishing and using polls in Georgia. The panel interviewed more than 40 people associated with Georgian elections and public opinion research. The panel explored claims of respondents' unwillingness to be interviewed and criticisms of poor survey conduct, and looked at news coverage about the polls, and the election campaign itself. The panel's key findings include the following:

- While respondent unwillingness and fear to participate and concerns about privacy are not unique to Georgia, they were frequently expressed in interviews with the expert panel. However, many of those engaged in the interviewing process believed that respondents generally answered truthfully, when they did answer.
- Adopting a code of standards will reassure respondents that their answers are confidential, and poll companies should review their methodologies because the interviewing context (such as timing of the poll, type of person doing the interviewing) can impact results.
- Differences in how and when in questionnaires respondents were asked their party preference, as well as how polling organizations handled undecided voters, resulted in poll differences.
- Media coverage was focused exclusively or narrowly on the voting percentages, with the polls seen as part of political public relations, instead of being used to help explain the public's choices.
- A prison scandal, emerging just two weeks before the elections, changed the campaign and there is strong evidence that it also changed voters' intentions in the direction of the opposition Georgian Dream. While there is only limited public polling information, private polls confirm the scandal's impact. It is impossible to judge the accuracy of surveys conducted in the summer of 2012, before the scandal emerged, against the election returns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In general, polling organizations in Georgia are serious and responsible, although there are some areas for improvement in the way election polls are conducted. The greater challenge is to ensure that polls regain their status, so that they can inform decision-makers about the hopes and desires of their electorate, and provide useful information to Georgians so they are well informed and represented in political debate in their country. Polling institutes should take steps as an industry to adopt international standards, particularly about information that should be disclosed in any public release. Disclosure of methods and transparency has raised the standing of opinion polls in many countries and also encourages polling institutes to use professional methods.

Those who use and report polls, including poll sponsors, media organizations, and political parties, should require this information before reporting polls. They should also improve their understanding of polls through training and avoid treating unscientific call-in polls as professional polls. This will instill public confidence in polls and increase participation.

Assistance will be needed from the international research community in drafting and promoting the adoption of a set of opinion poll standards that work for Georgia but which also meet international criteria. The donor community can provide training opportunities for polling experts and journalists, mandate quality and disclosure standards for polling projects it funds, and help to create an archive of polls for wider public use. These improvements are not difficult to implement and now is the right time to take action. The next elections will be good tests for the industry, for poll sponsors and users, and for journalists.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) and the Open Society Think Tank Fund requested that ESOMAR, the World Association for Market, Social and Opinion Research, appoint an international panel of public opinion research experts to review the pre-parliamentary election polls conducted in Georgia in 2012. Those polls differed greatly both from each other and – in most cases – from the final outcome of the October 1 vote. The panel was asked to examine the polls, evaluate them as compared to international standards, and recommend ways to improve the quality of conducting, publishing and using polls in Georgia, in order to bring such practice closer to international standards.

The members of the panel appointed by ESOMAR and by WAPOR (the World Association for Public Opinion Research) are:

- Dr. Kathleen A. Frankovic (USA), former Director of Surveys for CBS News and a past President of WAPOR, who chaired the panel
- Dr. Mirosława Grabowska (Poland), Director of CBOS (Center for Public Opinion Research) in Warsaw, and a Professor at Warsaw University
- Emmanuel Rivière (France), Director of the Opinion Polling Department at TNS-Sofres in Paris
- Dr. Michael Traugott (USA), Professor of Communication Studies and Political Science at the University of Michigan and a past President of WAPOR.

The panel's goal was not to critique specific polls or to decide which polling organizations were "best." Clearly, there were many factors during the parliamentary campaign that could influence polling, as voters were asked to render judgment on the state of the country and the then-incumbent administration, evaluate the claims of a newly-formed and well-funded opposition group, and respond in the closing weeks of the campaign to an almost unthinkable scandal.¹

Events during a political campaign, especially in the last few weeks of a campaign, can have a major impact on the voter's decision-making process, and there is strong evidence of that happening in Georgia in 2012. Since nearly all public polls were conducted before the scandal emerged, there is no way to assess those polls' accuracy compared to the final results. We can only judge them on their own, and compared with other polls, and assess their compliance with international standards for good polling conduct and disclosure.

Between April 22 and April 26, 2013, two of the panel experts, Dr. Frankovic and Prof. Grabowska met with more than 20 survey organizations, academics, journalists and other interested parties. Afterwards, Dr. Frankovic interviewed representatives from eleven additional organizations by phone and email exchange. All the sources were helpful; many were especially open about their techniques, the difficulties they faced in 2012, and their opinions about the polls. This report is based on those interviews as well as additional research conducted by panel members.

Our four key recommendations are aimed at several groups in Georgian political society:

1. Polling organizations should publicly adopt international standards and guidelines particularly about information that should be disclosed in any public release, in order to demonstrate their independence and their strength as an industry.
2. Academics should strengthen ties with research practitioners to improve the quality of both academic and private research.

¹ On September 18, 2012, less than two weeks before the Parliamentary elections [a video was leaked](#) to television stations showing prison officials abusing prisoners at the Gldani 8 prison in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital. The clip showed multiple prisoners being beaten by severely by the guards; one is raped with a broom. The report was followed by demonstrations and the resignation and firing of many responsible for prison administration in Georgia.

3. Journalists should ask polling companies to provide the key poll information and improve their understanding of polls through training, and avoid the practice of treating scientific polls in the same way they treat unscientific call-in and write-in polls.
4. Donor organizations should provide technical and financial support to have a code of standards established, short-term studies for academics, media training for journalists, and an archive of publicly-released polls for pollsters, academics, journalists and the public. They should require local grant recipients to abide by international guidelines and disclosure standards.

Some recommendations will be easy to implement and relatively cost-free, while others may take more resources. This is, however the right time to take action: a presidential election will take place later this year, and some steps can be taken in the next few months, and developed further in the next few years. Clearly now is a good time to start.

II. THE BACKGROUND

Polling in Georgia does not have as long a history as in most Western democracies, but in previous elections, poll results were generally trusted and tracked with official election outcomes. A Greenberg Quinlan Rosner poll, conducted for the United National Movement, and released May 5, 2008, found UNM with a 32-point lead over the United Opposition; 16% said they were undecided. On Election Day, May 21, 2008, UNM scored a 41-point victory. A poll conducted for GQR and released the month before the January 2008 presidential election found a 30-point margin for Mikheil Saakashvili, with one in five respondents undecided. The final outcome of the January 5, 2008 election gave Saakashvili a 28-point victory. In addition, exit polls conducted October 1, 2012 for Rustavi 2, Imedi, and public broadcasting (by Edison Media Research and GfK, international firms using local interviewing companies) and the poll conducted for Maestro had results consistent with the Georgian Dream (GD) victory.

Historically, Georgians have been more than willing to criticize their government when being questioned in opinion polls. One source told us that he once had to tell then-President Edward Shevardnadze that he was “the most unpopular leader in the world.”

However, during the summer of 2012, several months before the October 1 Parliamentary election in Georgia, a series of opinion polls suggested very different likely outcomes for the Parliamentary elections, then still several months away:

- The National Democratic Institute (NDI) released one poll that found 42% of potential voters undecided in the election. Other organizations, like Forsa, reported results without taking undecided voters into account.
- While several polls conducted in the summer found a significant lead for the incumbent UNM, one poll found the opposition, GD, in a statistical tie with UNM, and another poll saw a six-point GD lead. In February, a report about one organization’s poll claimed it showed “Georgians love Mikhail Saakashvili,”² while in the days immediately before the election, GD held a 40-point lead in one poll. (See List of Published Polls at the end of this report).
- Methodological information about the polls was sometimes limited; in some cases, the exact question wording was released, but in others it was not. Even a knowledgeable observer would find it difficult to understand why undecided percentages varied from 42% to zero.

In addition, there were questions about the funding sources of various polls. New research organizations were created to conduct interviewing. Some appear to have done little if any work since. And while polls differed with

² <http://www.georgiatimes.info/en/interview/68876.html>

one another in how they reported their conclusions, the reasons for those differences were difficult to discover during the campaign.

More critically for the accuracy of polls, the campaign itself was atypical for Georgia. There was a highly competitive and well-funded opposition and opposition media. The campaign was rancorous, with charges of interference and dirty tricks emerging from both sides. We were told that a full week of the pre-election campaign was spent challenging poll results, and not discussing Georgia's future.

A major event, the reporting of a prison abuse scandal, occurred two weeks before the election, and the panel finds strong evidence that it made a major difference to the outcome. Consequently, surveys conducted before the scandal's emergence were severely out of date well before the election and cannot be judged against the election results.

Questions were raised about the willingness of respondents to state their preferences during the campaign. Poll results were routinely criticized: charges of "non-transparency" and even of "manufacturing" poll data were made. This happens sometimes, even in older democracies. For instance, in the U.S. in 2012, Republican consultants and pundits routinely accused the public polls of "undersampling" Republicans. One website provided what they said were "unskewed" polls, which changed the small Obama leads in most public polls to significant Romney leads, once the composition of the electorate was adjusted (or "unskewed") to reflect what they believed to be the "correct" number of Republicans. Of course, on election day the polls were vindicated as President Obama was re-elected.

The researchers we spoke with in Georgia and internationally are professional pollsters and social scientists. They take their role in Georgian political life very seriously, as indicated by their willingness to talk with us and concern about the impact of the 2012 controversies on their profession and the continued ability to conduct good research.

Many international projects have included Georgian companies and survey organizations. GORBI (Georgian Opinion Research Business International) participated in the World Values Surveys in 1996 and 2008, and is a member of Gallup International. It has conducted the Caucasus Barometer in multiple countries of the Caucasus. CRRC (Caucasus Research Resource Center) has conducted the Caucasus Barometer since 2004. The ISSC (International Social Survey Programme) has just voted CSS (Center for Social Sciences, Tbilisi State University) as one of its members, and international firms, from the U.S. to Ukraine, were involved in polling during the campaign.

III. THE POLLING DATA AND OTHER ISSUES

The panel found a number of issues affected the quality of 2012 pre-election poll conduct and reporting. Although the panel was impressed by the abilities of many opinion pollsters in Georgia, the context of the 2012 election made good polling difficult. As noted, there is evidence that polls conducted in campaigns before 2012 were reasonably successful in predicting the election outcomes.

The data available to researchers from which to draw a sample, while not perfect (the last census was conducted in 2002, and has been updated with birth and death records and some migration information since then), is better than in many places. A new census will be conducted next year.

Many Georgian interviewers have extensive experience. Several of the firms who hire individual interviewers have been active for more than 10 years. The largest firms claim to have their own interviewers, who work only for them although they admit there may be some overlap; interviewing is, after all, not a guaranteed full-time job. There were several new organizations, like the Young Psychologists Association, who claimed to have trained

their own staff and sent them from Tbilisi to the regions to conduct interviews. These were for the most part, young interviewers.

Many, but not all, of the issues that may have helped create the controversy surrounding the 2012 pre-election polls had little to do with the actual conduct of the polls and more to do with problems in the way results were released and reported and used.

Our suggestions for improvement include rules for polling disclosure, additional training for all involved in reporting polls, as well as better training in survey techniques.

1. INTERVIEWING DIFFICULTIES

The context for interviewing in 2012 may have made good interviewing problematic. While pre-election polls were being conducted, the government elections commission was doing a house-to-house canvass to update the voting list; some municipalities were also collecting resident information. Some sources commented that these activities could have affected the willingness of respondents to participate and the accuracy of information received. Others noted that trust in the Electoral Commission was high, and grew during the campaign. In fact, a June NDI poll found that by 78% to 9%, those aware of the Voter List Verification Commission's work said they expected it would improve the voter list; and 86% of those who had been visited at home by the Commission rated their experience positively; just 3% were negative. Post-election surveys found satisfaction with the outcome.

However, that does not eliminate the belief among many we spoke with that there was unwillingness to participate by those opposed to the government. Overall response rates in Georgia, while high by international standards, clearly were not always random non-response³: we were told that while response rates were exceptionally high in rural areas, they were only 50% in Tbilisi, where support for GD was highest. This should not be a problem in good survey research, as weighting results to reflect national geographic and demographic distributions is standard procedure to correct any possible bias.

But some of those we spoke to were more direct in mentioning that distrust of the former government and a belief in government wiretaps and other monitoring hindered interviewing.⁴ Interviews may not always have been conducted in private, with only the interviewer and respondent present, as is also good polling practice. We heard stories (unconfirmed) of interference with the interviewing process by the police and by those who supported the opposition, leading to concerns about answering questions about voting intentions. Even one of our sources instructed a close female relative not to answer any question about how she would vote, should she be polled.

Higher response rates do not automatically mean better data. In many Western democracies, fewer than 50% of those selected to be part of a poll sample actually respond. In the U.S., the response rate in telephone surveys is barely 10%. But election polls in the U.S. and most other countries have been and continue to be quite accurate in recent years. Pollsters can see the demographic differences in response rates, and these differences can be corrected by the standard procedure of weighting the results to accurately represent the public.

We cannot know how Georgians viewed interviewers in 2012. The survey firms that actually conducted interviews (as opposed to those who funded and reported the research) told us that while interviewing was more difficult than before, for the most part respondents answered truthfully. One organization that had interviewers code at the end of each interview whether the respondent seemed concerned about the interview said that concern was no higher in Georgia last year than it is in similar countries. But another said that all of their

³ Just as a chef can judge a large vat of soup by testing just one spoonful, if the soup has been well stirred, so polls can achieve a 'representative sample' of an electorate. Just as the trick in checking the soup is to stir well rather than to drink lots, the essence of a scientific poll is to secure a representative sample (a random response).

⁴ After the election, it was reported that the government had, in fact, wiretapped 25,000 people.

interviewers reported after one survey near the end of the campaign that respondents were misrepresenting their vote (it should be noted that misrepresentation went in both directions, with respondents reportedly being told by both major parties not to report their vote intention).

Good interviewing, especially when done in-house and face-to-face during a contentious political campaign, requires the trust of respondents that their answers are confidential and will not be revealed or linked with their names and addresses, as required by international professional codes. As far as we could judge, survey companies adhered to good practice and followed this rule. But we do not know whether or not respondents believed their answers would be kept confidential. In some polls, interviewers were identified as working for non-Georgian companies, in the hope of avoiding any association with a political party.

There are many possibilities for unintended error. Standard good practice of validating interviewer work, by having supervisors re-interview (with fewer questions) a percentage of respondents could have been interpreted by some as “checking up” on whether respondents gave politically “correct” answers. And in this context, some respondents might have made assumptions about the goals of the interviewers. One 1990 experiment during the Nicaraguan Presidential election suggested that even unbiased interviewers were perceived by many respondents as representing the government. In this experiment, interviewers were randomly divided into three groups: one that carried the logo of the incumbent party, one that carried the logo of the opposition, and one that was neutral. Those holding neutral pens had the same results as those with government-affiliated logos.⁵

One way of dealing with this is to use a “secret ballot,” with respondents writing down their vote choice and placing that paper in a box, instead of verbally stating their choice to an interviewer. At least one firm did this. However, another firm experimented with this technique – asking half the sample verbally for their choice, and using the “secret ballot” technique for the other half sample. It found no difference in preference results.

But not all interviewers may have been perceived as government supporters. Younger urban interviewers, sent from Tbilisi to rural areas, could just as easily be seen as GD supporters. There is evidence this unintended interviewer effect has happened elsewhere. An exit poll conducted in Venezuela sent interviewers from Caracas to interview nationwide. Their estimate of the vote percentages in Caracas was nearly exact, but was much less accurate outside of Caracas.⁶ A similar pattern was found in the final Forsa pre-election poll results which predicted the vote in Tbilisi for GD precisely; it was off dramatically from the final results outside of the central city, significantly overestimating support for GD there.

In the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, an interviewer’s race, age and party preference impacted interviewing success as well as the answers that people gave. Interviewers must be made aware that their own preferences can impact the results they get.⁷

2. QUESTIONNAIRE AND OTHER DESIGN ISSUES

There are many legitimate ways to order a questionnaire, but that order can impact responses. Asking vote intention at the very beginning of the interview is likely to result in a higher undecided percentage than asking vote intention after several non-biasing items (general questions such as what the respondent perceives as the most important issues in the campaign, ratings of all the candidates, and likelihood of voting). Since polls used different question ordering, they were likely to have undecided percentages that differed – and perhaps differed dramatically. But since it was rarely clear exactly what questions were asked, and in what order, it was not possible for the panel to compare poll results directly and explain why polls might differ.

⁵ “Pens and Polls in Nicaragua: An Analysis of the 1990 Preelection Surveys.” *American Journal of Political Science* 36(2): 331–50 (1992) by Katherine Bischooping, Howard Schuman).

⁶ The same company conducted an accurate exit poll in Georgia in 2012 using all locally-based interviewers.

⁷ <http://abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/EvaluationofEdisonMitofskyElectionSystem.pdf>

Questionnaire design issues were not the only place where techniques varied. Question wordings were not exactly the same. Some polls asked respondents who said they were undecided about their vote intention a follow-up question about whether they had any preference, even if they had as not yet committed to a candidate (this is often described in international polling as the “lean” question – whether, as of now, the respondent “leaned” in favor of one candidate or party). The presence or absence of a “lean” question affects the size of the undecided percentage; it occasionally affects the balance between parties and candidates as well. Whether or not a pollster used a “lean” question was usually not revealed in poll reports.

Other differences that may have affected different results (and also not usually revealed) include which respondents form the basis for the public percentages for vote intention. For example, the 42% undecided percentage reported by NDI in August was based on a single question, asked early in the interview process. Forsa’s polls asked vote intention later in the questionnaire (we were told that at least one in five respondents still gave no preference), but the researchers re-percentage the question results and reported them based only on those with a preference. Both methods are acceptable and commonly used in pre-election polls, but the procedures needs to be disclosed, so the public can understand the differences.

In 2012, although the turnout was higher than usual (nearly 60%, up seven points from 2008), it still was nowhere near 100%. Obviously, many of those interviewed in national surveys do not actually vote. Consequently, reporting percentages based on all adults in pre-election polls can give a misleading picture of the voting public. But when poll results are presented as based on “likely voters,” there should be some explanation of how those likely voters were determined. For example, was it based on past participation in elections, in the respondent’s expressed intention to vote in the current election, in reported interest in the election? Or was it based on the expected distribution of voters based on their partisan attachment or reported party vote in previous elections?

The Greenberg Quinlan Rosner poll (shown in the list of election polls that follows this report) presented, in a public release, three different results based on which group was used for estimating the election result. This was very helpful; but in news reports, usually only one number was used, with no explanation of what it represented. One of those sets of percentages was based on allocating the undecided voters based on other factors. Although this approach was criticized in Georgia, it is a common practice in many other countries, where pollsters often allocate undecided voters, either by assuming they will vote in the same distribution as those with a choice (the assumption made by those polls that eliminated them from the calculation) or using answers to other questions about candidates and issues.

There are many examples of likely voter models in multiple countries. Modeling the electorate based on previous or expected election vote preference has worked in places like Great Britain; it has worked less well in the U.S. But whatever the model applied by a polling organization, it needs to be explicitly stated in any public release. We note that sometimes asking respondents about their intent to vote alone can result in an overestimate of turnout. In the summer of 2012, for example, an IRI poll found 91% of their respondents saying they were definitely or very likely to vote in the election.⁸

Finally, there may have been difference in weighting procedures or other methodological differences that may partially explain poll differences in 2012. We believe that all companies used probability selection at all levels although we cannot say for sure whether quotas (with interviewers selecting respondents to match a certain sample distribution) were used in some cases. There may also be differences in how a national sample is defined. It is very important to know whether a poll was conducted in both rural and urban areas, or just urban locations. In a country like Georgia, where there are substantial rural-urban differences in vote choice, this is especially important.

⁸ <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-poll-economic-and-healthcare-reforms-should-be-top-priorities-geor>

3. ISSUES WITH CAMPAIGN EVENTS AND POLL TIMING

There was one clear campaign event that the panel believes was the most important factor changing both people's voting intention and even their willingness to speak their minds: the prison scandal reported in mid-September, about two weeks before the election. We only have one polling source that publicly reported polls before and after – Forsa polls conducted by the Young Psychologists Association (and funded by the “Democracy Foundation,” an organization the panel was not able to find online).

When compared with the election results, the final Forsa poll clearly over-estimated the lead for Georgian Dream. In the first Forsa poll conducted August 17-30, prior to the release of the prison abuse tapes, GD led UNM 49% to 43% (based only on those with an opinion; this reported undecided percentage is a second major difference with other surveys conducted at approximately the same time). However, in the company's second poll conducted September 20-26, after the prison scandal reports and just days before the election, GD led UNM 65% to 25%, again based only on those with a preference.

Assuming that data collection methods, sampling and weighting were the same in both polls, the change due to the scandal was enormous. The Forsa polls overstated the final GD margin: the actual election outcome was 55% to 40%, a margin of 15 points in the party list vote, not 40 points, as in the Forsa poll. But the amount of change in vote intention in the two polls is clear: a 16-point gain for Georgian Dream post-scandal.

These were the only published polls that included pre- and post-scandal polls. However, the panel was told of several private polls, never released, that also showed sizable movement in the direction of GD after the prison tapes were released, confirming the impact of the scandal on vote intention. One firm showed a 22 point drop in UNM's lead over GD during a 10 day period that straddled the release of the prison tapes, with a 12 point drop for UNM's expected vote and a 10 point gain for GD.

In addition, turnout in Tbilisi (the most anti-UNM part of the country) was higher than expected, also increasing the GD share of the vote.

There are examples in other elections of how events can reshape election preferences, even within only a few days. In the 1980 U.S. presidential election between Democratic President Jimmy Carter and Republican challenger Ronald Reagan (with an independent challenge by John Anderson), polls showed an extremely close race up until the weekend before, when most organizations stopped interviewing. But election day 1980 marked the one-year anniversary of the taking of Americans hostages in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Iran. The focus of that anniversary (and perhaps the reminder of the failed attempt to rescue the hostages earlier that year) drew attention to other Carter deficiencies, particularly the poor economy, and its high unemployment and high inflation rates. Ronald Reagan scored a 10-point victory over Carter on Election Day.

That same dynamic could have been at work in Georgia: the scandal focused attention on the other perceived failures of the incumbent party, including the perceived harshness of the government's approach to modernization, but especially to the continued poor economy.

While it may be difficult in a country where face to face interviewing is the only possible mode for interviewing, public polling does need to be conducted closer to election day in order to find any last-minute changes. We don't know exactly when most Georgian voters decided for sure how (of even if) they would vote, though it is clear that much decision-making took place in the last two weeks of the campaign. This would be very useful information had it been included in last-minute pre-election polls.

Most of the 2012 controversy involved polls conducted in the summer, before the scandal, and their accuracy suffered from their inability to measure any change. But the summer is also a difficult time to measure voter intentions accurately. People may be on vacation and hard to find, and not focused on the campaign. Since we know there were last- minute shifts, we should not be surprised if polls taken during the summer, weeks before the election, are wrong.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLLING ORGANIZATIONS

The panel believes that agreement on a set of guideline for poll disclosure is critical to improve opinion polling in Georgia. Whether this is done through a formal organization or through accepting a set of guidelines developed by a professional organization is less important but polling organizations must recognize that they constitute an industry and have common goals, even if they are competitors. Attacks on one organization reflect on all of them.

Usually an association of polling or research companies can reach agreement on what constitutes proper disclosure of poll methods and questions, and impose sanctions should an organization not comply with any set of rules about what needs to be released. The *ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Market and Social Research Practice*, adopted by over 60 market research associations worldwide, requires that researchers should be prepared to make available the technical information necessary to assess the validity of published findings and that they should require the client to consult with them about the form and content of the publication of the findings.

There is no association of polling individuals or companies in Georgia. ESOMAR has only four members in Georgia, and there are no WAPOR members, although one researcher attended a WAPOR regional conference last year in Gdansk. We believe that researchers in Georgia don't think of themselves as being part of an industry that needs to promote itself and the value of opinion polls. But they must.

We were pleased to discover that practitioners are willing to think about a loose “partnership” or “coalition” (not an association), and to consider signing a code of ethics and disclosure. It was suggested that the easiest way of implementing an agreement would be to use a set of international guidelines, which could be modified to reflect Georgian needs and issues.

Consequently, we distributed to the groups and individuals we interviewed the ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide to Opinion Polls⁹ which includes reporting standards for opinion polls. These can be modified to reflect Georgian realities.¹⁰

We are hopeful this can be implemented having learned of the efforts of G-PAC (The East-West Management Institute - Policy, Advocacy, and Civil Society Development in Georgia), an NGO, to encourage think tanks in Georgia to develop and publicly sign a code of ethics for the think tank industry.¹¹

The panel feels that a similar process could take place within the polling community. A public statement that polling organizations henceforth will always include certain methodological information when releasing a poll would hold polling organizations accountable to stand by that public promise. Organizations that refuse to sign such an agreement would isolate themselves, and lose public esteem, if the code is accepted as good practice. We note that any disclosure agreement would apply only to research that is made public, not to purely private research.

The organizations which sponsor polls, including NGOs, think tanks and academic funders, would have to agree to follow the guidelines as well, especially if they are the actual organizations which release poll results.

This requires leadership from polling organizations, and some funding to support these efforts. Several organizations said they had reached out to other groups after the election, but that has still to show results. Perhaps an outside organization can take support this effort, which would require soliciting suggestions from

⁹ http://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/codes-and-guidelines/WAPOR-ESOMAR_Guidelines.pdf

¹⁰ The ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide's list of questions to ask and disclosure items include such things as the names of the organizations that conducted and paid for the poll, the number of interviews, how respondents were chosen, when the interviewing was conducted and how they were conducted, and the questions asked.

¹¹ <http://www.ewmi-gpac.org/web/resources/quality-and-etical-standards-for-georgian-policy-research-organizations/>

polling organizations, reviewing what can be implemented from existing international codes, and encouraging signing such an agreement. It is important to start the collaborative effort as this will ensure that Georgian society becomes aware that there are rules for good polling practice, and can hold organizations for following those guidelines.

One of our sources said “Once the data are given to the sponsoring organization, they belong to the organization.” So a disclosure agreement would have to cover those who sponsor the polls as well as the organizations conducting the polls. No matter who makes the polling data public, it is vital that the public be told the details of the poll.

Several of our sources pointed out there is little solidarity and that people rank personal interest over group interest. In order for polling to rebrand successfully after the 2012 attacks, it needs to be clear that polling organizations are professional, and more interested in “getting it right” than being associated with one party or the other. “Getting it right” will improve business, too.

4. ISSUES WITH POLL REPORTING BY SPONSORS

We have noted that in general, the organizations conducting the polls were professional and responsible. But it is not clear if the way polls were presented to the public helped to encourage public understanding of the status of the campaign.

NDI (National Democratic Institute) and IRI (International Republican Institute), NGOs based in the U.S. (and whose Boards of Directors have members from the Democratic and Republican parties respectively) include among their goals one of party building. Each organization has been sponsoring polls in Georgia for several years, using those polls to inform the parties about their standing in the country, as well as about public opinion on important issues. However, their usual practice (which continued throughout 2012) was to release privately to each party its own standing – information the party would leak to the media if it found the results politically helpful, or to attack the NDI or IRI if it did not. Issue questions were released publicly later. Clearly, non-disclosure of what most people considered the most important 2012 poll result (the parties’ standing) fueled conspiracy theories about those two U.S.-based organizations.

These two organizations are the dominant public opinion sources for Georgia. Even their critics applaud the fact that they conduct polls – without their work, one source said, there would be NO publicly accessible information about public opinion.

The panel sees great value in publicly-released opinion polls which inform politicians about the public’s needs and desires. While there is value in polls conducted for party campaign strategy, credible polls that are publicly released are even better able to keep the parties and the government accountable. They also allow respondents to situate themselves within the society – understanding what portion of the population agrees with them on social, political and election issues.

The NDI and IRI 2012 release strategy left the public out of the loop when it came to understanding where they stood in the political system. Piecemeal distribution of some, but not all data, clearly results in only a partially knowledgeable electorate, spoon-fed morsels of polling information without ever seeing a complete picture. But this process may be changing. Beginning in 2013, NDI now publicly releases all its poll results at the same time; it completed a survey just before panel members arrived in Georgia, and presented all the results at a press conference, a clear improvement in poll dissemination.

There is another possible problem with the way some 2012 polls were released. The Georgian companies that conduct fieldwork for NGOs have traditionally had little to do with the public release of their polls, but their insights into question wording, question order, and other issues can be extremely helpful and should be solicited by poll sponsors. There may be questions that have lost their value or are misunderstood by respondents.

Although having trend data (repeating the same questions with exactly the same wording and in the same order) is the best way to measure opinion change (and the IRI and NDI polls provide the best and most consistent source of opinion data for Georgia), sometimes trend questions need to be rewritten or even eliminated because they have lost their meaning. There are several techniques that can be used when transitioning from one question wording to another, such as asking the old and the new versions to randomly selected halves of a sample; they could prove useful here.

Polling organizations were not necessarily consistent or complete in the information that they provided along with the release of poll data. Typically, poll reports did include the dates of field work and the number of interviews, but other information, like question wording and order, the way likely voters were determined, and especially the funding for the poll were often left out.

There are international guidelines for proper disclosure. The *ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide to Opinion Polls* includes standards for what should be disclosed.¹²

Disclosure is a very useful protection against the kind of charges that were often made against the 2012 Georgia polls. For example, poll estimates of voting intention may differ because of the way organizations define “likely voters” or because of how those who at first say they are undecided are treated (for example, are they excluded from the percentages, are they asked follow-up questions that can elicit a preference, etc.)

Not describing these procedures in the original poll report opens up an organization to complaints that polling organizations are “manipulating” data. We heard such charges against competing polls during our meetings in Tbilisi. While organizations might criticize the methods used to allocate undecided voters, or object to the standards used in determining likely voters, proper disclosure could eliminate such charges.

Similarly, always revealing the name of the sponsoring organization, whether it is a political party or an NGO or an individual, opens the door to understanding whether there might be an agenda to the poll’s release, and allows journalists and citizens to treat the results appropriately. Certainly, just the name of a sponsor may not be enough information. In 2012, some sponsoring organizations appeared to be newly-formed groups which have since ceased visible activity. That might also eliminate (or at least mitigate) the use of polls by politicians as “graphics for propaganda” and “wild marketing techniques,” as one of our sources described it.

We also found some evidence of the need for additional training of pollsters and academics who use polls. In some cases, there was a lack of sophistication about how to use data, including at least one example of generalizing to the entire population from a study conducted among only a few segments of that population. We heard complaints that because a polling organization refused to release cross-tabulations for groups that comprised only a small percentage of the total number interviewed, this meant that the organization was hiding information. However, not releasing results based on too small sample sizes is standard practice for most polling organizations as there are too few respondents to provide reliable estimates. There needs to be more training in research methods at the universities which requires additional training for academic instructors and practitioners.

5. ISSUES WITH MEDIA REPORTING

We were able to examine only the English-language media given the international character of the panel members, who do not speak or read Georgian. In general, the reporting of polls in the media could be greatly improved. Part of the problem may be a lack of understanding of how polls should be conducted and how they should be used. That puts reporters at the mercy of politicians with a point to make, who may quote poll numbers without providing critical poll information.

Reporters need to distinguish between statistically sound polls and those that are call-in or write-in polls where people choose themselves to express an opinion. The latter should be treated as entertainment. If they are

¹² http://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/codes-and-guidelines/WAPOR-ESOMAR_Guidelines.pdf

reported in the same way as statistically based polls, they can confuse the public and cheapen news coverage. In addition, what reporting we saw suggested that journalists need training in how to understand and interpret polls which is not just a problem in Georgia. Journalists and others often go from discussing a specific poll to generalizing about all polls, leading to mischaracterization of polling information.

Journalists should demand disclosure of important poll information, but they need to know what to ask for. We were told that NDI is sponsoring training for journalists in understanding poll results; others told us of their own past efforts to educate journalists.

To improve poll reporting, there needs to be more understanding of what makes a good poll, and what sort of information one can get from poll reports. As one source put it, “Journalists understand that [a poll] is good material for a story, but on the second day they don’t remember it.” We were told that occasionally political talk shows may include actual polling analysis but that news stories on television and in newspapers do not. One company said that a poll they released was reported on a television station as being “about 50 pages long, with a margin of error of 2.7%,” as if the margin of error were determined by the length of the analytical document. One English-language newspaper reported a recent NDI poll under the headline “Hearsay,” which means “unverified” or “rumor,” not necessarily positive words about the data that had been collected. That same story included a graphic presentation that showed four bars, with percentages, but no indication of what it was supposed to represent.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACADEMICS AND JOURNALISTS WHO USE POLLS

We are pleased to see that there is significant interaction between practitioners and academics. Practitioners have told us that they lecture at universities; several organizations are based in – or are think tank offshoots – of universities. But there needs to be even more connections.

Universities can provide methodological research to improve questionnaires and improve surveys in general. The social science curriculum must have a quantitative component. Well-trained graduates can move on to work at survey research firms – or even to start their own. Increased collaboration between academic and private researchers will improve the quality of both academic and private research.

This will require funding for retraining of some academics. But there are international institutions that provide that training in short-term, several week-long summer programs. Training costs may not be exceptionally high, and the time investment is weeks instead of months or years. The University of Michigan’s Survey Research Institute, the University of Essex, GESIS in Germany, and ESOMAR itself all have summer programs. While these are no substitute for more formal and longer training, their costs are much less than full-time graduate programs.

Increased collaboration is also possible. Private companies have many data sets which they are unlikely to analyze fully. These data sets, properly cleansed of information that could identify respondents, could be made available for academic use. That would provide data for both students and faculty, and help legitimize the survey research industry in the eyes of the academic community. If an archive of data sets is set up, their extremely useful information can be made available to all.

We were told that there are many connections between academics and the political parties but such connections can create problems for academics, as they can for polling firms. No matter how good or unbiased a researcher is, the perception will remain that their work is meant to advance a political point of view. This may be difficult in a small country, but it is important for professionalization.

As for journalists, NDI has begun training sessions for the media in understanding polls as other organizations have attempted to do this in the past. While these efforts are not panaceas that will cure all poll reporting ills,

they could help. There should be training in journalism schools in how to understand quantitative data, including polls.

This should include reading the ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide on Opinion Polls which includes a special section for journalists on opinion polls.

Several additional sources of information for journalists are the book *Precision Journalism*, by Philip Meyer;¹³ *20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask About Opinion Polls*;¹⁴ the Poynter NewsU course, available free on line,¹⁵ and resources for journalists provided by the American Association for Public Opinion Research.¹⁶

More than one of our sources told us they wished there were more polls. One added that the scarcity of publicly released polling information put too much emphasis on individual polls. More polls, especially if some were funded by news organizations themselves, might encourage better polling practice and better reporting in order to sort out differences and interesting stories.

News organizations provide a service to the public: as James Bryce wrote in the nineteenth century, they serve as narrators of events, opinion leaders, and weathervanes. That third function requires journalists to give an accurate representation of what the public thinks. Good polls and poll reporting allows them to do this.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONOR ORGANIZATIONS

We have already suggested several funding opportunities for the donor community:

- providing technical and financial help to have a code of standards accepted by polling organizations
- funding short-term studies for academics in survey research centers in Europe and the U.S.
- providing support to insure that journalists receive training in understanding and reporting polls, and funding short-term training sessions in survey research reporting for journalists.
- Funding an archive of publicly-release polls, including data sets that can be made available to academics, journalists and the public.

In our conversations, many of our sources criticized what they saw as the unsophisticated use of polls by some parties and politicians; political leaders were described as using polls only as propaganda, and not as tools for understanding what the public wanted or needed. This can also be a training opportunity for donor organizations.

There are also non-financial ways donor organizations can help. Most important, they can require those who receive funding for academic studies to adhere to the polling release guidelines in their academic publications. They should sign any set of polling disclosure guidelines. They can also ask recognized national and international survey research experts to review proposals they might support, and this peer-reviewed process should extend to final reports before they are published, to ensure that the projects – and the final analysis – meet international standards.

We are sure there are other funding opportunities for donor organizations to make a difference in the quality of polling.

¹³ Downloadable free at <http://www.unc.edu/~pmeyer/book/>

¹⁴ <http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/4>

¹⁵ <http://www.newsu.org/courses/understanding-and-interpreting-polls-2012>

¹⁶ http://www.aapor.org/For_Media/5611.htm

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Nothing will stop politicians and citizens from criticizing poll results they do not like. But professional standards and techniques that are publicly disclosed have helped to raise the standing of opinion polls in many countries. Disclosure of methods and transparency also encourage organizations to use good methods. While it will take the cooperation of all those involved in the gathering and the use of polling information, our conversations suggest that it is possible.

The 2012 election was difficult for Georgian pollsters. The campaign context was new for the country: two well-financed parties were competing in a highly competitive political environment. There were charges and counter-charges made about poll results, a politicized press, and the lack of understanding of exactly how polls were conducted made the situation worse. And the emergence of the prison scandal two weeks before the election changed minds, and made it impossible to rely on pre-scandal polling to estimate the election outcome.

Concerns about the accuracy of pre-election polling can affect opinion about opinion polling – and research in general. In fact, most survey research is not about who will win an election, but about public concerns, policy desires, and even consumer preferences. One reason that researchers in Western democracies are so much concerned about pre-election accuracy is that they know that all their work will be judged on how well they perform during an election. And the work done by academics, in think tanks, and at other research institutions to search for evidence-informed solutions to national problems will also be judged in part by the public's assessment of whether or not pre-election polls are accurate.

Polls are valuable to civil society. They measure the public's needs, desires, and opinions. Public polls provide information for decision makers in the political sphere, and tell the press and the public exactly how well or how poorly the government is doing. Georgian polling organizations can thrive even in a difficult environment by relying on professionalism, transparency, and adherence to international standards. And Georgian society should reward them for those efforts.

APPENDICES

A. Biographies of Contributors

The ESOMAR and WAPOR Expert Panel

Kathy Frankovic who chairs the expert panel, has more than three decades at CBS News as the point person for the CBS News Poll and the CBS News polling collaboration with The New York Times.

As Director of Surveys and a Producer at CBS News, she was responsible for the design, management and reporting of those polls, working with journalists and frequently appearing on television and radio as an analyst of poll results.

She retired from full-time work at CBS News in 2009, and is now an Election and Polling Consultant for CBS News, YouGov, Harvard University and other survey research organizations. She has served as President of both the WAPOR and the American Association for Public Opinion, and has won many national awards for her work conducting and explaining public opinion for the news media.

Michael Traugott is Professor of Communication Studies and Political Science and a Senior Research Scientist in the Center for Political Studies at the Institute for Social Research. His primary research interests include political communication, campaigns and elections and using polls as input for news.

Professor Miroslawa Grabowska is Professor at the University of Warsaw and Director of the Center for Public Opinion Research – CBOS, Poland.

Emmanuel Rivière is Director of opinion polling at TNS Sofres in France and was previously responsible for the government agency, Pôle Observatoire de l'Opinion in France.

B. List of interviewed organizations

Thanks to all those from these organizations who we contacted for this report:

- ACT Research
- Business Consulting Group (BCG)
- Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC)
- Center for Social Sciences, Tbilisi State University
- Council of Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics
- Delegation of the European Union to Georgia
- East-West Management Institute, G-PAC
- Edison Media Research
- EI-LAT
- Forsa
- Georgian Dream (GD)
- Georgian Opinion Research Business International (GORBI)
- GEOSTAT
- GESOMAR
- GfK
- Greenberg Quinlan Rosner
- Ilia State University
- Institute for Policy Studies (IPS)
- Institute for Polling and Marketing (IPM)
- Institute for Social Researches, Georgia (ISR)
- Institute of Social Studies and Analysis (ISSA)
- International Republican Institute (IRI)
- The Mellman Group
- National Democratic Institute (NDI)
- Office of Opinion Research, US Department of State
- Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF)
- Penn Schoen and Berland
- Policy and Management Consulting Group (PMCG)
- SONAR Market Metrics
- United National Movement (UNM)
- University of London/Oxford University Consultants
- Young Psychologists Association

C. Publicly-released preference polls from the 2012 pre-parliamentary election period

Note: All polls were national samples, with interviewing conducted face-to-face

Final election results: October 1, 2012 – United National Movement 40%, Georgian Dream 55%

ORGANIZATION & DATE	QUESTION	UNM%-GD%	UNDECIDED	NOTES
ISSA, November 11-22, 2011	If the Parliamentary elections are held tomorrow, which political party would you vote for firstly?	36%-32% (“Bidzina Ivanishvili’s Party”)	16%	N=3,000. For Penn Schoen and Berland, funded by “Georgian Development Research Institute”
NDI, February 22-March 5, 2012	Who would you vote for if Parliamentary elections were being held tomorrow?	VOTERS: 47%-10%	33%	N= 3,161. Conducted by CRRC; funded by Swedish International Development Agency
NDI, June 4-22, 2012	Who would you vote for if Parliamentary elections were being held tomorrow?	VOTERS: 36%-18%	38%	N= 6,299. Conducted by CRRC; funded by Swedish International Development Agency
Penn Schoen and Berland, July 3-15, 2012	NOT AVAILABLE	VOTERS: 41%-42%	9%	N=1,980. Conducted by Psychoproject. Funded by “European Platform for Democracy in Georgia”
NDI, July 31-August 12, 2012	Who would you vote for if Parliamentary elections were being held tomorrow?	VOTERS: 37%-12%	42%	N=2,038. Conducted by CRRC; funded by Swedish International Development Agency
Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, August 1-6, 2012	Although the next scheduled parliamentary elections are very far away, if the next parliamentary elections were held today, for which party would you vote, if the choices were the names on this card?	ALL: 46%-24% VOTERS: 47%-26% ALLOCATED: 55%-33%	20% 18% 2%	N=1,500. Conducted by ACT; Funded by United National Movement
Forsa, August 17-30, 2012	If Parliamentary elections were held next week, which party would you vote for?	VOTERS: 43%-49%	NOT INCLUDED	N=2,008. Conducted by Young Psychologists Association; funded by “Democracy Foundation”
Forsa, September 20-26, 2012	If Parliamentary elections were held next week, which party would you vote for?	VOTERS: 25%-65%	NOT INCLUDED	N=1,942. Conducted by YPA; funded by “Democracy Foundation”

D. Sponsoring Organizations

About Open Society Georgia Foundation

The Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) is a member of the Open Society Foundation's Network, which was set up in 1994. In over 20 years of independence, Georgia has made progress in building a democratic society that strives to take its place as part of the European family of nations. Through donor funding, partnership, training and helping to unlock the potential of talented Georgian young people, the OSGF plays a significant role in this process. The OSGF is committed to the development of a free and democratic society where government is accountable to its citizens and politics serves people. The OSGF has a strong record in developing civil institutions and independent media, protecting human rights, promoting civil values and a transparent election environment. It runs initiatives to increase access to education and healthcare and supports programs for social equality and integration.

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Fax: +995 32 2 29 10 52 E-mail: contact@osgf.ge or osgf@osgf.ge Web: www.osgf.ge

About the Think Tank Fund

The Think Tank Fund (ITF) is a program of the Open Society Foundations. It supports independent policy research centers that strengthen democratic processes by identifying political, economic and social problems, researching them in a non-partisan and policy relevant way and providing policy alternatives that enrich public debate. ITF also examines the various roles and functions that think tanks play in the political and policy arenas and serves as a knowledge hub and advocate for evidence-informed policy research. Our vision is to ensure that decision-makers and relevant stakeholders in the countries of operation use high quality, evidence-informed research to develop and implement policies that lead to and sustain more open and prosperous societies. For more details, go to: www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/think-tank-fund

About ESOMAR

ESOMAR is the World Association for Social, Opinion and Market Research. With 4900 individual and corporate members in over 100 countries, ESOMAR's mission is to promote the development and use of market, social and opinion research, as an important basis for effective management decisions in both the public and private sectors through contacts with governments, companies and academic bodies. Through its Code and guidelines, ESOMAR encourages self-regulation and the highest technical and professional standards. The ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Market and Social Research has been adopted by all ESOMAR members and adopted or endorsed by over 60 national and international market research associations worldwide. ESOMAR and WAPOR have published the Guide to Opinion Polls. For more details, go to www.esomar.org

About WAPOR

WAPOR is a professional society of more than 600 individuals from academic and business professions in over 50 countries. WAPOR's mission is to promote internationally, the right to conduct and publish scientific social and opinion research. WAPOR promotes the knowledge and application of scientific methods through events, publications and international exchange among researchers, journalists and political actors, as well as the representatives of the different scientific disciplines. WAPOR encourages high professional standards, promotes improved research techniques, and informs journalists about the appropriate forms of publishing and using poll results in elections. WAPOR cooperates with other international bodies such as ESOMAR, the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other UN agencies. For more details go to www.wapor.unl.edu



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