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The politicisation of youth issues in party programmes: symbolic rhetoric or policy priority? The case of Georgia as a transitional democracy

Abstract

This article analyses how Georgian political parties have addressed youth issues in their election programmes since 2008 and how their perspectives on these issues have evolved over successive election cycles. In particular, it examines whether this focus reflects a genuine party policy or is merely an electoral strategy. Using the 2024 parliamentary elections as the central case study and analysing comparative data from the 2008–2024 electoral periods, the study draws on rational choice theory (Shepsle & Bonchek, 2010) and the concept of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1985) as part of a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis. The results show that the parties focus on youth issues only during elections and do not make them long-term priorities. Consequently, the stated commitments to youth policy go beyond their actual implementation. The analysis also places these patterns within the broader ideological context of the parties and shows that the politicisation of youth issues is shaped not only by the electoral calendar but

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also by the parties' underlying ideological orientation. The Georgian case follows a more general pattern that can also be observed in other transition democracies. By providing valuable new data, this study will contribute to the literature on party programmes and youth policy in the post-Soviet context.

Keywords: Georgia, election programmes, youth policy, politicisation, transitional democracies

Introduction

Election programmes play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of party democracy and in political science analyses of party competition (Eder et al., 2017). In transitional democracies, however, research findings show that their dual function, communicating party priorities to voters and presenting formal political commitments, often breaks down, as parties tend to use their election manifestos strategically rather than programmatically (Edelman, 1985; Fink-Hafner, 2024). Youth policy is a clear example of this tension. Although young people make up a significant proportion of the electorate, their concerns are rarely translated into long-term political priorities (Norris, 2011; Kitanova, 2020). The case of Georgia illustrates this dynamic perfectly, and that is precisely what this article sets out to examine.

An election programme is a strategic document setting out a party's priorities, policy proposals and commitments to the electorate. Young people represent a significant and dynamic section of the electorate: if their concerns are addressed in election programmes, this can mobilise this group and lead to higher voter turnout and greater political engagement (Dalton, 2015; Small & Memmo, 2004). Furthermore, youth-oriented policies have long-term implications for social development, and by addressing issues such as education, employment and health, political parties demonstrate their commitment to future generations (Norris, 2002; Montanye, 2001; Small & Memmo, 2004). International studies also show that the challenges faced by young people, particularly with regard to political participation and activism, have had a significant influence on democratisation processes (Kitanova, 2020). However, the inclusion of youth issues in election programmes does not always lead to their actual politicisation, i.e., their transformation into substantive political priorities on the party's list of priorities. This distinction forms the central analytical focus of the present study.

Although there is extensive research in the international literature on youth participation and party politics (Petyuh et al., 2023; Rosocha, 2022; Walker & Stephenson, 2012; Tereshchenko, 2010), there have so far been few systematic analyses in Georgia of the content of party programmes from the perspective of youth issues. The unfinished process of democratic consolidation since independence in 1991, the high instability of the party system (Tavits, 2008) and the low level of political trust among young people (FES, 2023) together create a context in which parties may have strategic incentives to use youth issues in a rather symbolic manner rather than developing them programmatically. Georgia's democratic consolidation remains an

ongoing process, with external assessments repeatedly highlighting institutional deficits as a key structural challenge (USAID, 2020). The state has officially recognised youth policy as a priority area through specific policy frameworks (Government of Georgia, 2014). The analysis of party manifestos, particularly how youth issues are presented and what role they play in electoral strategy, remains a little-researched area, and it is precisely this gap that forms the impetus for the present study.

The theoretical framework of this article is based on rational choice theory (Shepsle & Bonchek, 2010), which conceptualises political parties as strategic actors operating within institutional frameworks and making calculated decisions to maximise voter support. This framework is complemented by the concept of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1985), which distinguishes between political rhetoric for mobilisation purposes and substantive political commitments. Together, these two frameworks form the analytical basis for examining whether youth issues in Georgian party manifestos represent genuine political priorities or serve primarily as instruments of electoral communication. The theory of rational choice therefore predicts that political parties do not view youth issues as a long-term commitment, but rather as a strategic resource to be deployed when it is politically advantageous to do so under the prevailing electoral conditions.

This article addresses two interrelated research questions: 1) How did Georgian political parties address youth issues in their election programmes? And 2) How have political parties' perceptions of youth issues evolved across parliamentary electoral periods? In this respect, the Georgian case goes beyond a local analysis and contributes to broader debates in political science on the role of party manifestos in the politicisation of youth issues in transitional democracies. In particular, using Georgia as a case study, the study provides new empirical insights into the post-Soviet context. The study thus shows that, up until 2024, parties with greater voter support would pay significantly less attention to youth issues than smaller opposition parties, which runs counter to the trend observed in 2020. The analysis also situates these findings within the parties' broader ideological positioning.

Youth issues in party programmes: theoretical and comparative perspectives

The role of political parties in shaping youth policy is attracting increasing academic attention, particularly in the context of transition democracies, where the relationship between election campaigns and policy-based engagement remains a matter of debate (Petyuh et al., 2023; Rosocha, 2022; Elerian et al., 2026). Election manifestos are widely recognised not merely as technical documents, but as the primary means by which parties communicate their political vision and canvass for votes (Fink-Hafner, 2024; Kakhishvili, 2020). Beyond their electoral function, election manifestos also represent programmatic commitments that link election promises to subsequent policy, thereby strengthening democratic accountability (Thomson, 2020).

The examination of youth issues in party manifestos draws on two interrelated strands of the literature. The first concerns the strategic logic underpinning the

behaviour of political parties during election campaigns. Holler and Skott (2005) argue that strategic decisions made by political parties during election campaigns can have a significant impact on election results, even if voters' preferences remain unchanged. Empirical studies from post-communist countries confirm that parties strategically prioritise issues such as youth employment and education in their election manifestos, as these have a measurable impact on voter mobilisation (Titterton & Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2024). This finding is consistent with Edelman's (1985) concept of symbolic politics, which distinguishes between political rhetoric for mobilisation purposes and substantive policy commitments.

The second approach examines the link between youth issues and democratic legitimacy and argues that taking young people's concerns into account strengthens a party's democratic credibility (Norris, 2011). However, research consistently shows that highlighting youth issues in election programmes does not necessarily lead to substantial political engagement. Baglioni, Colloca and Theiss (2015) use comparative data from Italy and Poland to show that structural difficulties such as unemployment significantly limit young people's political participation and that institutional actors play a crucial role in bridging this gap, a pattern that is further confirmed by comparative social research across Eastern Europe (Ferragina et al., 2015). These findings are relevant to the Georgian context, where low political trust among young people (FES, 2023) goes hand in hand with the formal, yet largely superficial, recognition of youth as a voter group by political parties, a group that is simultaneously portrayed as a social risk and a political resource (Zawadzki, 2012).

A more comprehensive comparative analysis shows that the patterns observed in Georgia are not an isolated case, but reflect a general regional trend. Studies from post-communist Europe consistently show that political engagement among young people remains sporadic and fragmented, including in the case of political education initiatives in Poland (Pospieszna et al., 2023). Studies from the Czech Republic show that voter support for parties is often determined not by the depth of their programmes but by the general image of the party and its leadership, which creates incentives for political engagement that is more symbolic than substantive (Vlachová, 1997).

Specific research on youth policy and party manifestos in Georgia remains scarce, which in itself represents a significant gap in the literature. Zurabashvili (2022) analyses the position of young people within political parties and their access to party politics, and identifies the lack of a results-oriented youth policy as a key factor in low levels of political trust. Recent studies by the Georgian Institute of Politics confirm this picture: Kandelaki (2024) notes that during the 2020 election campaign, only 38% of young people in Georgia were familiar with the content of the parties' election manifestos, and that young people's involvement in the parties is largely of a formal nature and limited to technical tasks. The Georgian Institute of Politics (2020) also identifies the lack of youth-oriented components in the parties' election programmes as a structural weakness of the Georgian electoral process. The studies examined confirm that the politicisation of youth issues in the programmes of Georgian political parties remains superficial and occasional, thereby providing an empirical and theoretical basis for the research questions addressed in this study.

Methodology

This study is based on a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis. Mixed-methods research is widely regarded as an effective strategy for capturing both the breadth and depth of empirical phenomena (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 357). In this study, the quantitative results were incorporated into the thematic coding process, whilst the qualitative data facilitated the interpretation of statistical patterns within the context of party discourse. Quantitative analysis makes it possible to assess the frequency and extent to which youth issues appear in party manifestos, whilst qualitative analysis allows for an assessment of whether this presence reflects meaningful political engagement or primarily serves a rhetorical function. This study also adopts a case-study approach and regards Georgia not as an isolated case, but as a representative example of a more general pattern observable in the post-Soviet transitional democracies.

The empirical data consists of the election programmes of the political parties that took part in the 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections; these form the primary unit of analysis. The sample comprises six political parties and party alliances that submitted official election manifestos. Five of these exceeded the 5% threshold, whilst one party, although it did not reach the threshold, received around 5% of the vote and was, therefore, included in the analysis as a relevant political actor. The 2024 election programmes varied considerably in length and structure, ranging from a one-page document (United National Movement) to 35 pages (Coalition Strong Georgia), with an average length of approximately 16 pages across the five parties for which a page-based document was available. Only Gakharia for Georgia and Coalition Strong Georgia contained sections specifically devoted to youth policy, comprising two pages of a 31-page document and one page of a 35-page document respectively; the remaining programmes included youth-related content within broader thematic categories, mostly in the form of bullet points, without detailed information. Two parties, Georgian Dream and Girchi, did not publish official election programmes; their materials were taken from pre-election presentations and the parties' websites respectively, and coded using the same analytical framework as the other documents.

Data from previous parliamentary elections (2008, 2012, 2016, 2020) are used for comparative purposes to identify trends in the consideration of youth issues across election cycles. The election manifestos are sourced from primary sources: the official websites of the respective parties and the website of the Central Election Commission of Georgia, which ensures the reliability and authenticity of the material used. Secondary sources, including national and international reports on the challenges facing young people in Georgia (FES, 2023; Youth Agency, 2020), serve both as contextual background and as an independent benchmark against which the parties' policy responses are measured, a comparison that is central to addressing the first research question. Furthermore, comparative literature on youth policy in transition democracies is drawn upon to situate the findings within a broader regional context.

Key terms such as "youth", "students" and "future generation", as well as references to the 18–29 age group, were defined as the primary units of analysis. The thematic categories presented in the article were identified using an inductive, context-oriented

approach with MAXQDA, with the data filtered through a lens strictly focused on young people. This approach reflects both the internal structural components of the programmes and specific age groups, such as students or the future generation. If a topic related to more than one area, it was assigned to the most appropriate category; e.g., housing subsidies were classified under “Economy/Unemployment”. The parties analysed were selected through a purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy, based on their electoral threshold status (see: Methodology, Sample). Within each selected manifesto, a multi-stage coding procedure was then used to identify and extract all relevant passages. The thematic analysis was conducted according to the framework developed by Braun and Clarke, which encompasses the identification, coding and systematisation of themes within the empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). In addition, critical discourse analysis (Keller, 2013, p. 61) was employed as a supplementary level of interpretation, with a focus on processes of meaning-making and legitimisation in political texts. This method made it possible to assess whether the language used reflects a genuine programmatic commitment or primarily serves a mobilisation function.

The quantitative content analysis was carried out using MAXQDA, which served as the primary tool for both quantitative and qualitative analysis: it enabled the coding, segmentation, categorisation, and visualisation of text data, as well as the identification of relationships between thematic categories. Statistical calculations, including chi-square tests and correlation analyses, were carried out in R Studio to examine the relationship between the frequency of youth-related content and election cycles. All coding was carried out by a single researcher, and the data were organised and structured in Microsoft Excel prior to analysis.

The Georgian context: youth challenges and party responses

Young people constitute a demographically significant but increasingly vulnerable group within Georgian society (FES, 2023). Georgia’s democratisation following the collapse of the Soviet Union took place gradually, with political parties becoming key players in election campaigns and political representation (Kukava, 2022; Matsaberidze, 2019). Their establishment was not only an expression of political engagement, but also a necessary stage in institutional consolidation (Aldrich, 1995). The 2024 parliamentary elections were contested by five main parties and coalitions, whose electoral results and parliamentary composition are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Electoral results and youth representation in the 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections

Party/Coalition	Vote Share (%)	Seats	MPs aged 35 or under (n)	MPs aged 35 or under (% within party)	Political Orientation*
Georgian Dream	53.93	89	12	13.5	Centre-left (economic); right-wing (social-cultural)
Coalition for Change (Gvaramia, Melia, Girchi-More Freedom, Droa)	11.03	19	7	36.8	Centrism; right-centrism
United National Movement (UNM)	10.17	16	1	6.3	Right-centrism (Liberalism)
Coalition Strong Georgia (Lelo, For the People, Freedom Square)	8.81	14	3	21.4	Centre to centre-left (Liberalism, Pro-Europeanism)
Gakharia for Georgia	7.78	12	2	16.7	Centre to centre-left (Social democratic)
Total	91.72	150	25	16.7	

Source: Central Election Commission of Georgia (2024); Parliament of Georgia (2024);

*For the detailed analysis of parties’ political position, see Figure 1 below.

Notes:

1. Political party Girchi stood as an independent party, received around 3% of the vote and thus failed to clear the 5% threshold; it is, therefore, not represented in parliament and not listed in this table, though it was included in the programme analysis (see: Methodology).
2. The age of one member of the Coalition for Change (G. Butikashvili, born around 1991) could not be verified with certainty and is based on an estimate.
3. The first 12 MPs from Gakharia for Georgia resigned their seats in protest against the election result, three of them aged 35 or younger; the data relates exclusively to the second list, which subsequently entered parliament with 12 MPs;
4. MPs aged 35 or younger are defined as those born in 1989 or later, calculated as of the 2024 parliamentary elections (October 26, 2024).
5. The total share of the vote (91.72%) takes into account only parties that cleared the 5% threshold; the remaining 8.28% was distributed amongst parties that did not enter parliament, including Girchi (3%).

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia took place on October 26, 2024. Of a total of 3,508,294 registered voters, 2,111,834 took part in the election, representing a turnout of 60.2% (Central Election Commission of Georgia, 2024). Table 1 shows the five parties and coalitions that cleared the 5% threshold and secured representation in parliament, together with details of their share of the vote and the proportion of MPs aged 35 or younger within each parliamentary group. Across all five parties, 25 out of 150 MPs (16.7%) were aged 35 or under at the time of the election (Parliament of Georgia, 2024). However, this overall figure masks significant differences between

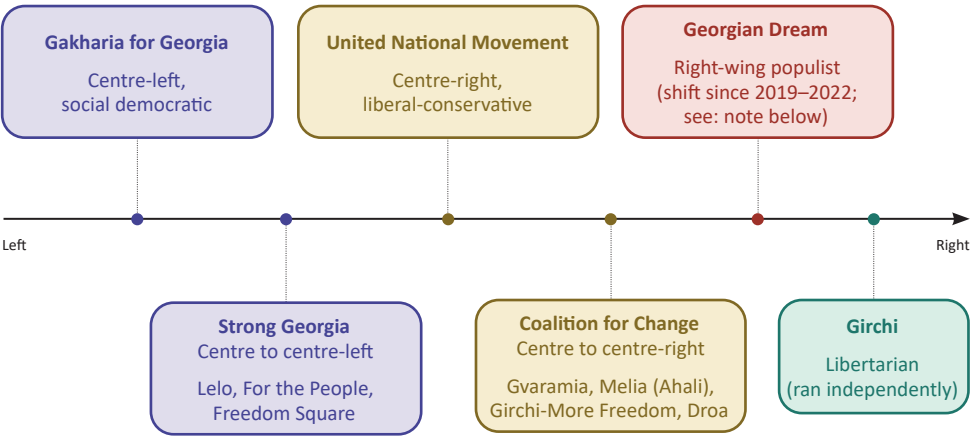
the parties. The Coalition for Change, which received 11.03% of the vote, had the highest proportion of young MPs (36.8%). The ruling Georgian Dream party, despite securing 53.93% of the vote and the largest share of seats, had a significantly lower proportion (13.5%). “Coalition Strong Georgia” (8.81%) had 21.4%, whilst Gakharia for Georgia (7.78%) stood at 16.7%. The United National Movement party had the lowest proportion of young MPs (6.3%).

These data further suggest that MPs aged 35 or under, whilst present across all five parliamentary groups, do not appear to reflect a substantial commitment to youth issues: parties with a higher proportion of young MPs do not necessarily give greater priority to youth policy in their election programmes (see: Figure 2).

It should be noted that the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections were contested by opposition groups amidst large-scale protests (Al Jazeera, 2024). Three of the five parliamentary groups – Coalition for Change, the United National Movement and Coalition Strong Georgia – refused to recognise the results as legitimate and, as a form of boycott, requested that the Central Election Commission declare their electoral lists invalid rather than take up their seats (OC Media, 2024). Gakharia for Georgia, however, decided not to withdraw its party list and consequently entered parliament in October 2025 with a second list of 12 MPs (DFWatch, 2025).

This contested aftermath reflects a broader pattern of polarisation in the Georgian party system, one that is closely tied to parties’ ideological and geopolitical positioning, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Political orientation of parties and coalitions in the 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia; positions are illustrative, based on the academic literature cited, not a strict economic policy scale



Sources: Wheatley (2019), Kakhishvili (2021), Imerlishvili (2022), Caliskan (2023), Caprile (2024), Tabatadze & Khuroshvili (2026), Matsaberidze (2026).

A defining feature of the Georgian party system is the lack of classical left-right ideological diversity; voter-party linkages are instead shaped by clientelism and personal

leadership authority, a legacy of late Soviet-era patrimonial structures (Kitschelt, 1995; Wheatley, 2019). Foreign policy, rather than socio-economic programmes, has consequently become the primary axis of competition, with parties defined chiefly by their stance towards Russia and the West (Kakhishvili, 2021; Imerlishvili, 2022). This explains the positioning shown in Figure 1: although Georgian Dream's economic framework has largely mirrored that of the UNM since 2012, when Georgian Dream replaced the UNM in government following parliamentary elections (Caprile, 2024), its post-2019 turn towards sovereigntist and Euro-sceptic rhetoric reflects a geopolitical rather than economic realignment, reframing EU integration around tradition and resistance to external pressure (Tabatadze & Khuroshvili, 2026). Matsaberidze (2026) interprets this shift as a deliberate strategy to draw a value-based boundary with Brussels while aligning Georgian Dream with populist-conservative currents within the EU itself. Caliskan (2023) similarly characterises the rivalry between GD and UNM as a polarised contest in which the winner takes all, and which tends to exacerbate the decline of democracy rather than being based on substantive ideological differences.

Beyond these two poles, the smaller parties and coalitions occupy more clearly defined ideological positions, though they remain secondary to the dominant geopolitical axis. Girchi retains a consistent right-libertarian orientation centred on deregulation and individual freedom (Girchi.com, 2024), while Coalition for Change and Coalition Strong Georgia present themselves as pro-European liberal and social-liberal blocs respectively, uniting parties with varied domestic priorities under a shared commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration (Caprile, 2024). Gakharia for Georgia positions itself as a centre to centre-left technocratic alternative to both major parties. Despite these internal distinctions, all opposition formations are ultimately unified less by a coherent domestic platform than by their shared rejection of Georgian Dream's foreign policy direction (Gvineria et al., 2024).

As the analysis shows, geopolitical positions are the decisive factor in the ideological orientation of Georgian political parties, whilst social and economic challenges are perceived as less decisive for their political positioning against this backdrop. In contrast, research findings confirm the existence of such challenges within various social groups, which was analysed in this study on the basis of the parties' policy priorities. According to data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the proportion of 18- to 29-year-olds in the total population has been falling steadily from 17.4% in 2008 to 12.9% in 2024, a trend closely linked to migration and population decline (Geostat, 2024b). At the same time, young people in Georgia remain a numerically significant voter group, and their mobilisation continues to be a strategic factor for parties during election campaigns (FES, 2016, p. 64). Understanding the socio-economic conditions under which young people live is, therefore, essential in order to assess whether party manifestos genuinely address their needs or merely mention them in passing.

The employment situation is one of the most pressing challenges facing young people in Georgia. The unemployment rate amongst young people aged 18 to 29 fluctuated between 35 and 37% from 2008 to 2013, gradually fell to around 25% by 2019, and then rose sharply again to 37.5% in 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, before falling back to around 29% in 2022-2023 (Geostat, 2024a). These rates are consistently higher than the general unemployment rate, suggesting structural

barriers in the Georgian labour market that disproportionately affect young people. This trend has also been confirmed by studies in Poland, Ukraine, and Moldova (Męcina, 2014; Petyuh et al., 2023).

Access to high-quality education and healthcare represents a further dimension of the disadvantages faced by young people in Georgia. Although education is generally recognised as a priority, significant inequalities persist between urban and rural areas (FES, 2023, p. 5). In the healthcare sector, 61% of young people find access problematic, with cost cited as the main barrier (Youth Agency, 2020, p. 10). A similar divide is evident in sport: 82% consider it important, yet most do not participate regularly due to time and financial constraints (FES, 2021, p. 17). This shortfall is not limited to Georgia, it rather reflects a structural feature of transition democracies in the broader sense (Vesely et al., 2016; Tavits, 2008).

Young people's trust in politics and their civic engagement in Georgia are significantly shaped by these socio-economic conditions. Studies consistently show that young people have little trust in political institutions: 79% state that they do not trust political parties, and only 20% consider political engagement to be important (FES, 2023, pp. 9–10). Although many people follow political developments, they consciously distance themselves from formal participation, partly due to a sense of hopelessness regarding the direction in which the country is heading (FES, 2021, p. 35; Bastianon, 2018). Survey data attribute this low level of engagement to several factors: 41% cite a lack of interest in politics, 22% point to election campaigns that do not appeal to them, and 16% cite the lack of young politicians and youth parties (Rondeli Foundation, 2021, pp. 7–9). This disengagement has also been observed in other post-Soviet contexts, where young people mobilise in times of crisis but otherwise have little trust in parties and institutions (Nikolayenko, 2007).

A study carried out in Georgia confirms that 38% of young people consider the content of election programmes to be important in shaping their decision (FES, 2016, p. 64). This points to genuine potential for mobilisation, although the limited attention that parties pay to youth issues in practice forms the empirical basis for the first research question of this study: how, and to what extent, do Georgian political parties address youth issues in their election programmes? This question is analysed and discussed in detail in the following sections.

The scope and distribution of youth issues across party programmes

A quantitative analysis of the election platforms of Georgian political parties shows that youth issues have received only limited and inconsistent attention in party platforms across the election cycles examined. As shown in Table 2, the total number of youth-related code points across all parties rose significantly between 2008 and 2020, from 15 code points in 2008 to 127 code points in 2020, before falling sharply to 75 code points in 2024. This rise and fall is not consistent with a stable policy priority, but suggests that attention to youth issues tends to respond to specific political and socio-economic conditions rather than reflecting a long-term commitment to youth policy.

Table 2. Programmes of political parties, parliamentary elections of Georgia

	2008	%	2012	%	2016	%	2020	%	2024	%
Education	8	53.3	34	45.3	33	55.9	51	40.1	25	34.2
Economics/ Unemployment	1	6.6	18	24	7	11.8	19	15	17	22.7
Healthcare	0	0	5	6.6	3	5	4	3.1	3	4.0
Participation	0	0	4	5.3	1	1.7	10	7.9	6	8.0
Sports, Culture, Entertainment	3	20	5	6.6	6	10	17	13.3	7	9.3
Other	3	20	9	12	9	15.2	26	20.5	17	22.7
Total codes:	15	100%	75	100%	59	100%	127	100%	75	100%

The thematic categories were derived inductively from the coded material. The Education section includes references to the infrastructure of schools and higher education institutions, scholarships, vocational training, and curriculum reforms. The Economy/Unemployment section covers employment programmes, support for young people's entrepreneurship and housing-related financial assistance such as rent subsidies, as well as explicit references to unemployment. The Healthcare section is limited almost exclusively to access to medical services and youth-specific health programmes. The Participation section includes references to the representation of young people within political party structures and general social integration. The Sport and Culture section covers sports infrastructure, cultural programmes, and leisure activities for young people. The Other category covers topics such as emigration, compulsory military service, drug policy, demographic issues, and vulnerable groups that do not fit into the aforementioned categories.

Education consistently dominates youth-related content across all electoral cycles. In 2008, education accounted for 53.3% of all youth-related codes, and while this proportion fluctuated over subsequent cycles, it remained the single largest category throughout the period under review, accounting for 34.2% of codes in 2024 (see: Table 2). The sharpest increase was recorded between 2008 and 2012, when references to education rose by 325%, coinciding with a period of significant economic hardship and high youth unemployment in Georgia (see: Table 3). This suggests that education is treated by parties as a strategic rather than a structural priority, mobilised in response to socioeconomic pressures rather than developed as a coherent long-term policy agenda. By 2024, references to education had declined by 50.98% compared to 2020, despite the fact that education remains one of the most frequently cited concerns among young people in Georgia (FES, 2023). This discrepancy between the documented needs of young people and the programmatic attention devoted to education by parties is itself significant, suggesting that the inclusion of education in party programmes is more consistent with electoral logic than with a sustained response to youth needs.

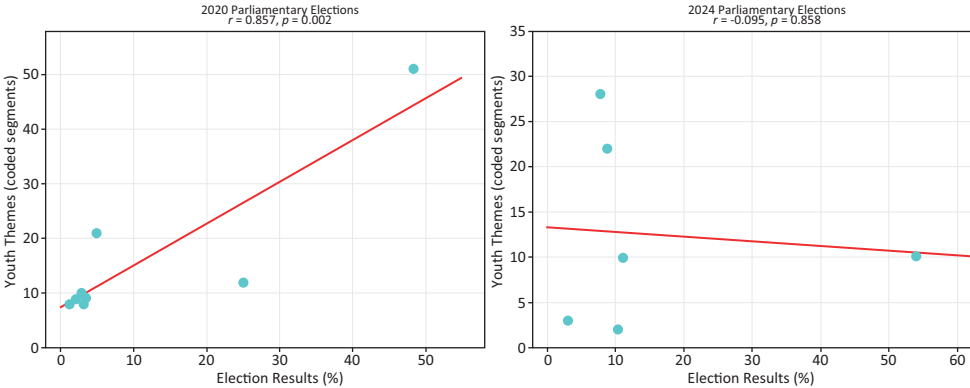
Table 3. Percentage growth rates for youth-related topics (2008–2024)

Year	Education %	Economics/ Unemployment %	Healthcare %	Participation %	Sports, Culture, Entertainment %	Other %
2012	325	1700.00	N/A	N/A	66.67	200
2016	-2.94	-61.11	-40	-75	20	0
2020	54.55	171.43	33.33	900	183.33	188.89
2024	-50.98	-10.5	-25	-40	-58.82	-38.46

Note: Values represent the percentage change in coded segments relative to the previous electoral cycle. Positive values indicate an increase, negative values a decrease, and N/A denotes categories with zero codes in the preceding cycle.

The Economy and Unemployment category underwent significant fluctuations over the course of the election cycles: In response to the global financial crisis, it rose by 1,700% between 2008 and 2012 (from 1 to 18 coded segments), decreased by 61.11% in 2016, rose again by 171.43% in 2020, and decreased by 10.5% in 2024 (see: Table 3). These fluctuations are noteworthy because youth unemployment remained consistently high throughout the entire period, fluctuating between 25 and 37% (Geostat, 2024); the parties’ reduced focus on economic issues in 2016 and 2024, despite persistently high unemployment, indicates that such issues are shaped more by crisis situations and election cycles than by stable political commitments. Table 3 shows a similar pattern in the other categories: although the individual figures fluctuate considerably, they evolve in synchrony – they rose together in 2012 and 2020 and declined together in 2016 and 2024. This could suggest that the extent of youth-related content depends more on a general logic of voter mobilisation than on category-specific considerations, although a consistent response to general page restrictions across several election cycles cannot be ruled out. The consistent dominance of the Education category across all election cycles further supports this argument and suggests that education operates more as a routine rhetorical device than as a strategically prioritised policy area. This is consistent with Edelman’s (1985) observation that symbolic political promises gain intensity during election campaigns and recede into the background once the need to mobilise voters no longer exists.

Figure 2. Correlation between election results and youth-related content in party programmes (2020 and 2024 Parliamentary Elections)



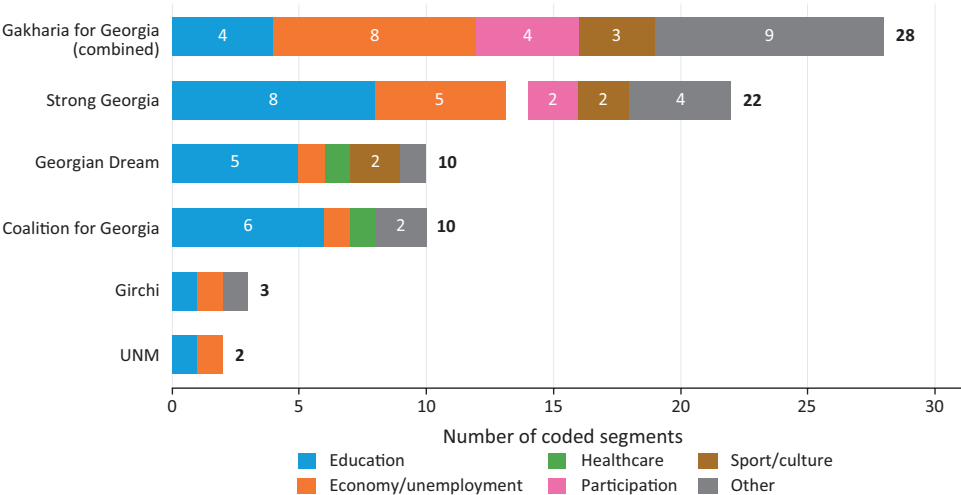
Source: Calculated by the author using R Studio.

The Pearson correlation analysis shown in Figure 2 reveals a clear difference between the election cycles. In 2020, a strong and statistically significant positive correlation was found between election results and youth-related content across the nine parties and coalitions that contested that election ($r = 0.857, p = 0.002$), suggesting that parties with higher voter support paid more attention to youth issues. By 2024, however, when only six parties and coalitions contested the election, this relationship had broken down: the correlation was close to zero and not statistically significant ($r = -0.095, p = 0.858$). For example, Georgian Dream secured 53.93% of the vote but produced only 10 segments coded as youth-related, whilst Gakharia for Georgia, with 7.78% of the vote, generated 28 segments. This shift may indicate a broader move away from using youth issues to mobilise voters among the largest parties, with opposition parties instead using the topic to reinforce their political identity; given the small number of parties involved, however, this remains a pattern observed in this dataset rather than a generalisable trend.

Healthcare, civic engagement, sport, and culture consistently play only a minor role in party manifestos, even though these areas are of great importance to young people in Georgia. Healthcare reached its highest proportion in 2012 at 6.6%, but by 2024 accounted for only 4.0% of youth-related sections in the manifestos, a 25% decline compared with 2020 (see: Tables 2 and 3). This discrepancy is significant: 61% of young people in Georgia describe access to healthcare as problematic (Youth Agency, 2020). Sport and entertainment followed a similarly erratic trend: whilst this category had accounted for 20% of the codes in 2008, this share fell to 6.6% in 2012, rose again in 2020, and then fell dramatically by 58.82% in 2024 (see: Table 3). Civil society and political participation recorded the most dramatic increase within an election cycle in the dataset, rising by 900% in 2020 (from 1 to 10 coded segments) (see: Table 3), which likely reflects the increased political mobilisation of young people during the political crisis of that period. By 2024, however, this figure had fallen again by 40%, reinforcing the pattern of a more episodic than sustained engagement with youth issues in party programmes. The Other category covers topics that cropped up

sporadically between 2008 and 2024, such as compulsory military service, emigration, drug policy and demographic issues. Emigration is repeatedly addressed not as an isolated problem, but in the context of economic precariousness: unemployment and emigration are often discussed in the same context, as, e.g., in the Coalition Strong Georgia programmes, which state: “Our young people face great difficulties in finding employment, which is why many of them leave the country” (Coalition Strong Georgia, 2024). In 2024, this category was also expanded to include environmental policy, measures against gambling and the protection of vulnerable young people.

Figure 3. Youth-related thematic coded segments by political party, 2024 election programmes

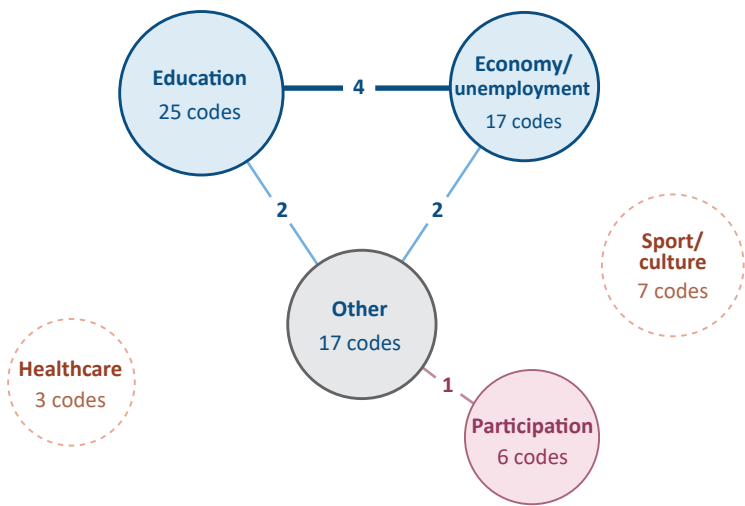


Note: Bars show the number of MAXQDA-coded segments per thematic category for each party’s 2024 election programme. Gakharia for Georgia combines its general election programme and the separate policy document issued by its youth organisation.

There are significant differences in the distribution of thematic categories across the individual parties in 2024. Figure 3 shows the number of segments of each party’s 2024 election manifesto coded using MAXQDA, broken down by thematic category. Coalition Strong Georgia covered the broadest spectrum of topics, with at least one coded segment in all six categories, followed by Georgian Dream and Gakharia for Georgia (five categories each, with the latter featured in two documents), Coalition for Change (four categories), Girchi (three categories) and the United National Movement, which covered the narrowest range of topics (two categories). In terms of total volume, Gakharia for Georgia had the highest number of coded segments (28), followed by Coalition Strong Georgia (22), whilst the United National Movement and Girchi generated significantly fewer (two and three respectively). In total, 75 coded segments were identified across all party manifestos, with Georgian Dream focusing its youth-related content primarily on education, whilst healthcare and civic participation were largely neglected. In contrast, Gakharia for Georgia demonstrates the

broadest engagement in the Other category (gambling, migration, minorities and vulnerable groups, drugs policy, environmental protection) and places greater emphasis on participation (youth engagement in social and political processes) than any other party. This diversity of thematic categories is largely attributable to electoral strategies and voter mobilisation, rather than to ideological differences. For instance, even ideologically opposed parties such as Girchi and Gakharia for Georgia devote completely different levels of attention to youth issues, without there being any clear ideological justification for this difference.

Figure 4. Co-occurrence matrix of thematic codes across party election programmes (2024 parliamentary elections)



Note: The line thickness reflects the number of coded segments in which two thematic categories occur together. Dotted outlines indicate categories for which no joint occurrences were recorded.

The co-occurrence network shown in Figure 4 reveals three analytically significant patterns that illustrate which topics tend to be discussed together and which are treated in isolation. Firstly, the strongest link is between education and unemployment, with four joint mentions recorded in the party manifestos. A typical example is the pledge that “the state’s social and economic policy should pay particular attention to young people, as well as to their education and employment” (Gakharia for Georgia, 2024), with both commitments being summarised in a single sentence rather than being treated as separate policy areas. This could suggest that, within this limited range of contexts, there is a tendency to view education more as a means of integration into the labour market than as a social or civic value in its own right, a pattern that has also been documented in other Central and Eastern European contexts (Theiss, 2006).

Secondly, the topic of healthcare does not appear in conjunction with any other thematic categories, an isolation that suggests healthcare is treated as a completely separate issue, which is reflected in the fact that it is mentioned in party manifestos in a largely symbolic manner, rather than forming part of a holistic political vision.

Thirdly, civil society and political participation appear together with another category on only one occasion: here, the promise to support the “integration of young people into the socio-cultural and economic life of the country” (Gakharia for Georgia, 2024) was framed both as participation and as a broader, undifferentiated commitment to vulnerable groups. The parties do not conceptually link youth participation to other key policy areas such as education or employment, but instead incorporate it into general formulations on social inclusion. Ultimately, this fragmentation, viewed through Hart’s (1992) analytical approach, points to a lack of coherent logic in how youth policy is conceptually linked across Georgian party programmes. Instead, it appears to be a collection of disjointed rhetorical gestures.

The symbolic function of youth policy in electoral competition

The quantitative patterns identified in the previous section, in particular the synchronous fluctuations in thematic categories across election cycles and the reversal of the correlation between electoral success and youth-related content between 2020 and 2024, raise a further question: What language do Georgian political parties actually use when addressing youth issues, and does this language reflect genuine political intentions or does it primarily serve rhetorical purposes? To investigate this, discourse analysis is used to examine how the parties employ language to shape the main themes identified through MAXQDA coding. Whilst the thematic analysis highlights which issues are addressed and how frequently this occurs, the discourse analysis examines the nature of these commitments in greater depth. Specifically, the study explored whether party promises reflect concrete commitments or merely serve as rhetorical gestures, and whether young people are viewed as active participants or as passive beneficiaries of politics.

Drawing on Edelman’s (1985) concept of symbolic politics, which distinguishes between rhetorical gestures and substantive political commitments, as well as Hart’s (1992) framework of youth participation, which distinguishes between symbolic and genuine forms of youth empowerment, the following discourse analysis examines whether Georgian party manifestos reflect genuine political intentions or primarily serve a rhetorical purpose. The central argument is that Georgian party manifestos largely fall into the category of symbolic measures: young people are frequently cited as a priority, yet the commitments made on their behalf rarely go beyond symbolic recognition.

This pattern is most evident in the education sector. All six parties addressed the issue of education in their 2024 election manifestos, but the depth and specificity of their commitments varied considerably. Georgian Dream highlighted the fourfold increase in education spending since 2012 and proposed further infrastructure investment, including the expansion of the International University of Kutaisi and a new campus for Tbilisi Technical University near Rustavi (Georgian Dream, 2024). However, unfulfilled promises from previous election cycles raise questions regarding the credibility of these new commitments. In contrast, the opposition parties presented a variety of initiatives: Coalition Strong Georgia proposed paid internships and regional IT schools, whilst the Coalition for Change introduced the Knowledge Piggy

Bank and funding for elite degree programmes in Global Studies. Meanwhile, the UNM focused on student accommodation and rent subsidies (UNM, 2024), Girchi proposed the abolition of standardised national exams (Girchi.com), and Gakharia for Georgia linked education to regional development through vocational training centres and modern halls of residence. Table 4 summarises the key education-related commitments and thematic priorities of each party.

Table 4. Party education policy commitments in the 2024 parliamentary elections

Political Party	Focus on education policy	Specific topics
Georgian Dream	Infrastructural and long-term reforms	Construction of universities and vocational schools, expansion of Kutaisi International University, and quality improvement through reforms.
Coalition Strong Georgia	Innovative skills and internships	Paid internships for graduates, IT schools in the regions, programming and robotics training, and student exchange programmes.
Coalition for Change	Financial accessibility and social equality	Knowledge Piggy Bank financing system, student housing, support for disadvantaged students, full financing for students enrolled at the best foreign universities.
UNM	Selective solution to social problems	Housing and rent subsidies for students in need.
Girchi	Systemic change and university autonomy	Cancellation of standardised national examinations, and establishment of admission rules for students by universities.
Gakharia for Georgia	Social and regional integration of education	Student housing at state universities, regional expansion of vocational schools, and reducing youth migration.

In all programmes, budgetary frameworks, timetables, and accountability mechanisms were rarely defined in specific terms. Education thus operates more as a symbolic gesture than as a vehicle for tangible change, with those involved identifying problems without offering credible solutions (Hart, 1992).

The picture is similar when it comes to the employment situation. In the run-up to the 2024 elections, Georgian Dream highlighted the fall in the unemployment rate from 26.7% in 2012 to 13.7% in 2024 and predicted a further drop to 4% by 2028. Opposition parties proposed various initiatives: Coalition Strong Georgia advocated paid internships as part of a “First Job” programme and tax exemptions, the UNM promised regional employment offices, Girchi advocated a deregulated labour market to promote self-employment (Girchi.com), and Gakharia for Georgia proposed subsidised salaries for university graduates. Despite these initiatives, the party programmes consistently failed to address the structural causes of youth unemployment, such as informal labour markets, regional inequalities and out-migration, suggesting that these commitments function more as rhetorical placeholders than as evolving

political strategies (Edelman, 1985). The absence of gender-specific strategies is also striking, given that young women in Georgia face disproportionately high barriers to entering the labour market (UN Women, 2022).

The gap between rhetoric and action is most evident when it comes to civic and political engagement. The Coalition Strong Georgia presented the creation of a new, youth-led political force as a central element of its vision. Similarly, Gakharia for Georgia regarded the involvement of young people as essential for democratic development and proposed the institutional strengthening of youth organisations. However, no party committed to legally binding mechanisms such as quotas on candidate lists or structured mentoring programmes. Hart's (1992) framework for youth participation is illuminating here: Georgian party programmes largely assign youth advisory roles without granting them decision-making authority. Gakharia for Georgia, e.g., views participation primarily from a financial rather than an institutional perspective: "strengthening their engagement in politics, whereby the state will establish appropriate mechanisms to fund young people's ideas and initiatives" (Gakharia for Georgia, 2024), whilst issues of representation and decision-making authority are not addressed. This is consistent with the findings of Krouwel and van Elfrinkhof (2014), who argue that young people are often used as symbolic figures in election campaigns but are excluded from the actual work of government. The fact that youth participation features in only two of the six programmes examined further underscores their marginal status in Georgian electoral politics. The Georgian Dream party's programme for 2024 is also revealing: youth-related issues are presented primarily in terms of past successes rather than future commitments, thereby positioning young people as beneficiaries of measures already implemented rather than as active participants in democratic life (Hart, 1992).

The areas of healthcare and sport receive significantly less attention in the party manifestos, and where they do feature, the subject is treated in similarly general terms. Georgian Dream cited the fivefold increase in access to medical services as one of its most important achievements, whilst Coalition Strong Georgia linked the issue of health with environmental policy and the Coalition for Change focused on paid specialist training for young doctors. In the area of sport and culture, Georgian Dream promised a financial investment of 2 billion GEL to expand sports infrastructure, by presenting the issue primarily as a matter of national well-being rather than as a policy specifically aimed at young people: "Sport is not just about top-level performance, but also about the health of the nation, the health of our fellow citizens and a healthy lifestyle" (Georgian Dream, 2024). The Coalition Strong Georgia emphasised broad access to sports facilities as a means of promoting social integration. As Bessant (2004) argues, cultural policy often serves more as a vehicle for the construction of national identity than for the empowerment of young people, particularly when it is detached from participatory frameworks (European Union, 2018). Comparative studies of sports policy in post-Soviet contexts also highlight the gap between state investment and the infrastructure available to young people (Rauch & Kropyvnytska, 2025; Smith & Green, 2005). The absence of monitoring mechanisms, accessibility targets and considerations of regional equity suggests that these commitments are based more on political rhetoric than on actionable policy measures.

Table 5. Ideological orientation of parties' and coalitions' youth policy in the 2024 parliamentary election programmes

Party / coalition	Coded segments (n)	Dominant discursive markers in youth-related segments	Inferred ideological orientation of youth policy	Officially declared political position
Girchi	3	Tax cuts and abolition of the unified national exams and of mandatory military service; all three segments reduce the role of the state in young people's lives.	Right-wing (Libertarianism)	Right-wing (Libertarianism)
United National Movement (UNM)	2*	Both coded segments concern housing support: subsidised rent and provision of student dormitories.	Centre to left*	Right-centrism (Liberalism)
Georgian Dream	10	State-funded infrastructure and statistic-led achievements (campus construction, funding multipliers); delivered in a top-down register with no reference to youth participation.	Centre (statist-paternalistic)	Centre-left (economic); right-wing (socio-cultural)
Coalition for Change	10	Funding guarantees framed around individual merit and competition (top-50 universities, dormitory ownership transferred to private use).	Centre to centre-right (Liberal-meritocratic)	Centre to centre-right (Liberalism, Pro-Europeanism)
Coalition Strong Georgia	22	Combines a participatory framing (youth leadership, integration into the public sector) with support for entrepreneurship and tax relief, alongside a critical, opposition-mobilising tone toward the ruling party.	Centre (Social-liberal)	Centre to centre-left (Liberalism, Pro-Europeanism)
Gakharia for Georgia	28	Intergenerational solidarity, integration of vulnerable groups, environmental sustainability, and regulatory prevention (gambling, drug policy); women's economic empowerment.	Centre to left (Social-democratic)	Centre to centre-left (Social democratic)

* The UNM's limited youth-related content ($n=2$) reflects the marginal treatment of youth issues in its 2024 programme; its centre-left positioning, therefore, cannot be generalised as the party's broader ideological orientation.

Note: The final column reflects an inductive orientation derived from youth-related segments coded in MAXQDA, rather than the parties' general ideology reported in the literature. For each 2024 programme, these segments were analysed collectively and classified based on their underlying values and policy instruments (e.g., state provision, market competition, redistribution, deregulation, or participation). Consequently, they were mapped onto a dedicated left-right scale focused specifically on youth policy.

An analysis of youth policy in the election programmes of Georgia's six main political parties for the 2024 elections shows that, in most cases, the ideological orientation of the youth-related content largely reflects the parties' officially stated positions (Table 5). Gakharia for Georgia and the Coalition Strong Georgia had the highest number of coded segments, which were predominantly focused on participatory and redistributive language, consistent with their centre-left and social-liberal profiles. The most notable exception is Georgian Dream, which, despite its centrist position, portrays youth policy almost exclusively as a top-down, state-led initiative and formulates its commitments as institutional objectives: "Our aim is to increase the number of students to 20,000" (Georgian Dream, 2024) – a formulation that positions young people as recipients of state benefits rather than as active participants. Girchi and United National Movement recorded the lowest number of contributions, which in itself could indicate an ideologically consistent downplaying of the state's role in youth issues, although given the small sample size, this should be regarded merely as an indication. Overall, these patterns suggest that, whilst the ideological orientation and discursive practice of Georgian parties largely coincide, the importance attached to youth issues depends more on strategic electoral positioning than on firm ideological commitments, a trend further reinforced by the fact that, in most programmes, youth-related pledges are presented without any financial basis or concrete implementation mechanisms.

An overarching pattern emerges from the overall discourse analysis. Young people are frequently referred to in symbolic language: terms such as "youth support", "innovative education" and "future generation" appear in all programmes, yet are not matched by corresponding political mechanisms. The thematic coding confirms that regional inequalities, mental health, migration and political alienation receive only limited attention, suggesting a reluctance to address structural youth issues. Within a critical discourse framework, these manifestos function more as strategic communication tools than as vehicles for meaningful reform, reinforcing the notion that youth issues are treated as peripheral rather than central to policymaking (Edelman, 1985). This is not unique to Georgia. Research from the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Poland confirms that youth policy in transition democracies is generally only sporadically politicised and rarely implemented at the level of public policy (Veselý et al., 2016; Tavits, 2008). This finding is consistent with the general pattern identified in this study, according to which youth policy in democracies undergoing transition tends to follow electoral cycles and rarely constitutes a long-term political priority.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how Georgian political parties have addressed youth issues in their election manifestos and how their perceptions of these issues have evolved across parliamentary electoral periods. The results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses provide a clear and consistent answer to both research questions. Although youth issues are present in party manifestos, their inclusion is

sporadic, thematically narrow in scope, and rarely accompanied by concrete implementation mechanisms, budgetary frameworks or accountability structures.

The theoretical framework on which this study is based provides a good explanation for these findings. The theory of rational decision-making (Shepsle & Bonchek, 2010) explains the parties' selective and cyclical engagement with youth issues: they engage with youth-related issues when this is advantageous from an electoral tactics' perspective, and scale back this engagement when other priorities take precedence. Edelman's (1985) concept of symbolic politics explains the qualitative dimension: terms such as "future generation" and "youth support" serve as rhetorical acknowledgements without any substantive commitment, whilst youth unemployment is portrayed more as a driver of out-migration than as a political challenge in its own right; participation is discussed in financial rather than institutional terms; and sport is embedded in a national narrative that marginalises young people. Hart's (1992) "ladder of participation" similarly shows that Georgian political parties consistently assign young people advisory rather than decision-making roles. This is also evident in the age composition of the 11th Georgian Parliament, which shows no consistent correlation with the parties' focus on youth issues: the Coalition for Change had the highest proportion of young MPs despite modest coverage of youth policy, whilst Georgian Dream had the lowest proportion despite the most extensive coverage, indicating that the inclusion of youth issues is determined more by strategic considerations than by the age composition of parliamentary representatives. This logic also explains the general cyclical pattern observed between 2008 and 2024, including the shift between 2020 and 2024 from a tool used across the political spectrum to a strategy pursued primarily by opposition parties.

The comparative nature of the findings further supports this argument. The cyclical fluctuations in youth-related issues throughout the electoral cycles from 2008 to 2024, the dominance of education and employment at the expense of healthcare, participation and mental health, and the fragmented treatment of youth issues in party manifestos all confirm patterns that have also been documented in other post-communist contexts. Studies from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, and Ukraine confirm that youth policy in transition democracies is rarely institutionalised and is generally politicised only on an ad interim basis as part of broader electoral strategies, extending to specific policy domains such as healthcare access for vulnerable groups (Neugebauer et al., 2025). The Georgian case follows this trend and also provides systematic empirical evidence from a post-Soviet context, where such evidence has hitherto been limited. These findings support the arguments of Veselý et al. (2016) and Nalbandov (2014), who link this pattern to the structural tendency of parties in transitional democracies to prioritise short-term electoral gains over long-term policy development.

The discourse analysis reveals clear differences between the party programmes: Gakharia for Georgia stood out for its relatively comprehensive youth agenda, whilst Georgian Dream focused more on highlighting past successes. The Coalition for Change introduced innovative concepts such as the "Knowledge Piggy Bank", and Coalition Strong Georgia proposed specific measures such as paid internships as part of the "First Job" initiative. These differences suggest that, whilst a pattern of symbolic politicisation can be observed overall, some parties demonstrate greater programmatic ambitions than others, a nuance that future research could explore further through

a longitudinal study by examining whether election promises are translated into policy after the elections. These differences are generally consistent with the parties' core ideological positioning, which further underpins the politicisation thesis put forward in this study. However, this consistency is not absolute: at least one of the major parties approaches youth issues in a way that deviates from its stated ideological profile. This suggests that ideology alone cannot fully explain the politicisation of youth issues in Georgia, where party competition revolves primarily around geopolitical rather than socio-economic dividing lines (Kitschelt, 1995; Wheatley, 2019). As there is no clear left-right divide, strategic electoral calculations, therefore, remain a more decisive factor.

At the same time, these findings partly call into question certain assumptions in the existing literature. Tavits (2008), e.g., argues that the instability of the party system leads to weak political engagement across all policy areas; however, this study shows that this is not universally true: some parties, such as Gakharia for Georgia, pursue relatively comprehensive policy approaches. Thomson's (2020) thesis that election manifestos represent genuine political commitments is also not supported by the findings in Georgia, as implementation mechanisms are consistently absent from election manifestos. Whilst youth policy follows the expected pattern of episodic and symbolic engagement, the data also reveal significant differences between parties and thematic categories. Even Edelman's (1985) concept of symbolic politics, whilst accurately reflecting the prevailing pattern, does not fully explain cases in which parties introduce genuinely innovative policy concepts. Future research should, therefore, examine the conditions under which rhetorical innovation translates into substantive policy change, and those under which it remains purely symbolic.

The study has several limitations. As the official manifestos of Georgian Dream and Girchi were not available, alternative materials had to be used, which limits direct comparisons with the other four parties. Furthermore, the analysis focuses primarily on the 2024 election cycle, with earlier election cycles serving more as a comparative context than as the main subject of the analysis. A related limitation concerns sample size: only two coded segments were available from the United National Movement, which limits the possibility of generalising about its ideological positioning. Future research could extend this framework to a broader spectrum of parties and election cycles and supplement it with interviews with party representatives.

The broader conclusion of this study is that the politicisation of youth issues in Georgian party manifestos is not simply a reflection of the parties' indifference towards young people. Rather, it is the result of a rational calculation within a specific institutional and electoral context in which the votes of young people are not yet decisive, trust in the parties is low, and voters do not consistently reward policy depth. To counteract this, not only are changes in the parties' behaviour required, but also more comprehensive reforms are mandatory to strengthen young people's political participation, improve political education and create institutional mechanisms that hold the parties to account for their policy commitments.

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