Paternalistic Attitudes and the Civic Passivity of Youth in Georgia

The University of Georgia (UG)
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Paternalistic Attitudes and the Civic Passivity of Youth in Georgia

This study builds on findings on paternalistic attitudes from the 2025 survey “Gen Z Civic Activism in Georgia”. It examines how paternalistic attitudes towards the state among young people aged 18–29 in Georgia relate to their civic agency and passivity.

Main topics

- What it means to be an active young person
- Experiences of socialisation in the family, formal education (school and university) and among peers
- Perceptions of the relationship between the state and citizens
- Experiences associated with civic passivity
- Possible incentives and enabling factors for civic engagement

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Research methodology

The qualitative study included six focus groups with young people aged 18–29.

Participant selection took account of
- **Settlement type (the capital, other cities and rural areas)**
- **Age group (18–23 and 24–29)**

Fieldwork period — 10–16 May 2026

Study limitations

- The findings are not statistically representative
- The data do not reflect ethnic minorities’ experiences
- Focus groups reveal perceptions and patterns

What Does Paternalism Mean?

Paternalism is an attitude in which a person or institution makes decisions for someone else on the grounds that they know what is best for that person.

Its main features include

- **Substituting one's judgement for another's** - making decisions on someone else's behalf.
- **Restricting autonomy** - reducing a person's freedom to choose and act independently.
- **A motive of care** - justifying intervention as serving the person's own wellbeing.
- **Weakening independence** - reducing a person's involvement in making their own decisions.

The relationship with youth civic passivity

Paternalistic attitudes may encourage young people to hand over decisions and responsibility to others, especially older people and authoritative institutions. This can hinder the development of an independent civic position and active participation in public life.

Sources

- Dworkin, G. (1972). Paternalism. The Monist, 56(1), 64–84.
- Clarke, S. (2002). A Definition of Paternalism. Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 5(1), 81–91.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2020). https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/paternalism

How Young People See the Role of Government

46%

"People are like children and the government should care for them as a parent cares for their children"

40%

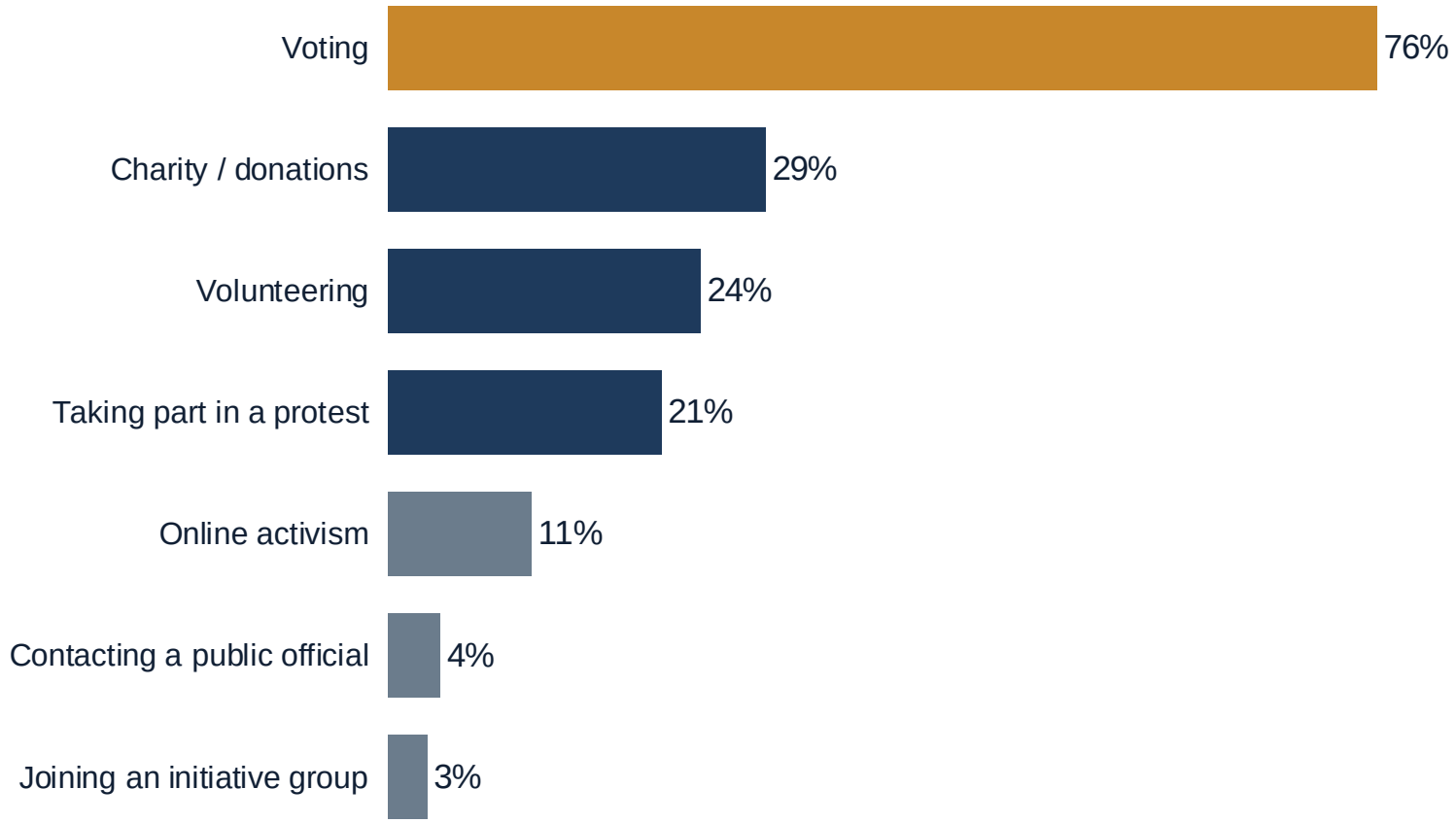
"The government is hired by the people. People should act like adults and keep the government in check"

11% — agree with neither statement

What do young people mean when they choose the first option?

Source - Gen Z Civic Activism in Georgia, 2026 study, N=1000

Youth Civic Participation Is Uneven



94–99%

are not members of formal organisations, parties or clubs.

Voting is common, but participation in organised civic life is low.

Activities in the past 12 months.
Source - Gen Z Civic Activism in Georgia, 2025 study, N=1000

How Do the Formation and Internalisation of Paternalistic Attitudes Relate to Youth Civic Passivity?

Formation

Family, school, university and peers — what young people hear and learn

Mechanisms

Experience, trust and a sense of efficacy - how attitudes become behaviour

Sustaining Agency

What strengthens young people’s belief that they can bring about change?

Perceptions of the Relationship Between the State and Citizens

A Hybrid Attitude

The data do not support dividing young people into “paternalists” and “non-paternalists”.

A hybrid attitude is more common. Broad social responsibilities for the state coexist with citizens’ political autonomy.

> “I’d agree more with the second statement too, but the first one is partly right … the state should look after all citizens … but people should have a say in the state’s decisions too.”
>
> *Focus group participant · Other cities, ages 24–29*

Three Ways of Seeing the Citizen’s Role

1

Participant

Citizens also help solve the problem

2

Spokesperson

Citizens identify the problem and raise it with institutions. The state solves it.

3

Waiting

Citizens wait for “someone” to act

What Young People Reject

Vignette — “A municipality announces a new youth policy, saying it is designed to protect young people, reduce tensions and maintain order. Local young people have not been consulted. When a small group asks for an open public discussion, officials respond that now is not the time and that responsible citizens should trust the institutions.”

Participants in all groups found this unacceptable.

> If you don’t even ask the people you’re doing it for what they want and how they want it done, that’s … absurd.
>
> *Tbilisi, ages 18–23*

> If you’re doing it for me but my opinion doesn’t matter, then you’re not doing it for me.
>
> *Focus group participant*

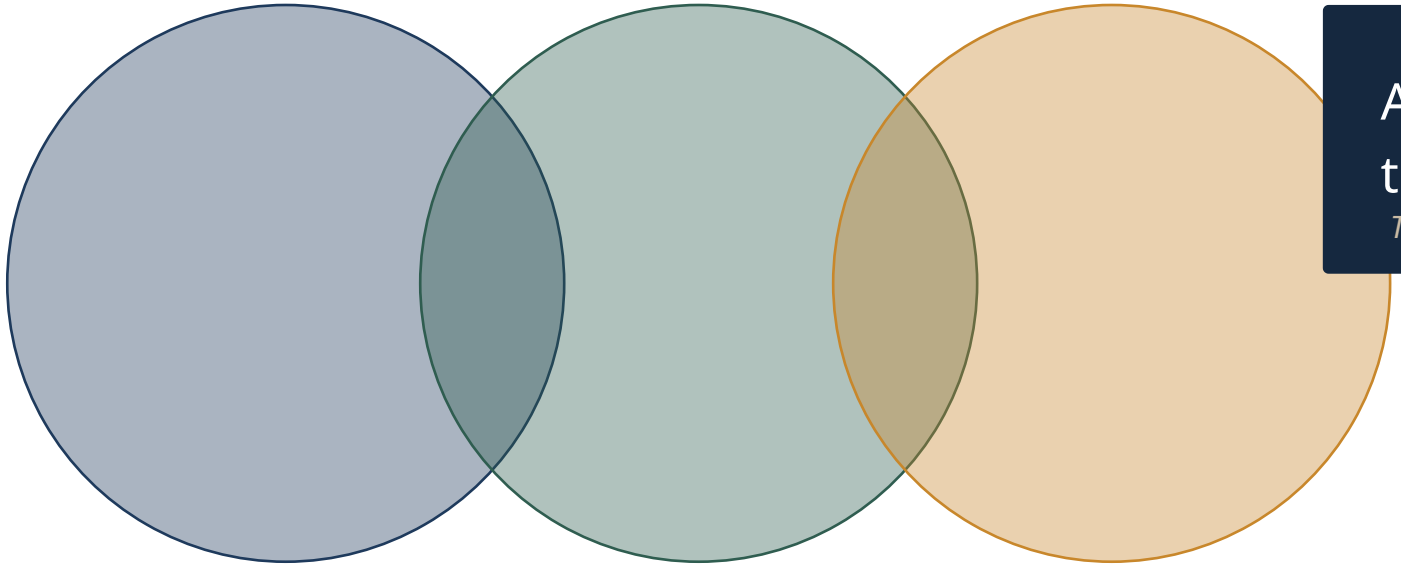
Care - expecting the state to fulfil its social responsibilities

≠

Procedural paternalism - excluding citizens from decisions

What It Means to Be an Active Young Person

What Does “Active Young Person” Mean?



> An active person can be apolitical too.
> *Tbilisi, ages 24–29*

Three meanings emerged.
Individual activity - managing one’s own life well.
Social activity - participating in programmes, volunteering and events**.**
Civic and political activity - taking a position on public problems and trying to influence them**.**

Some participants do not see civic activity as a defining feature of an “active young person”.

Low civic participation does not indicate general apathy.

Experiences Associated with Civic Passivity

Agency — Two Cycles

The Cycle of Futility

Action without results → **A weak sense of efficacy** → **Less willingness to participate**

The Cycle of Efficacy

Action → **Visible results** → **Greater willingness to participate**

"There was no point in being there" … "once, twice, three times"

60% agree that "the government does not take the views of people like them into account"

Source — Gen Z Civic Activism in Georgia, 2026 study, N=1000

Others Often Bear the Costs of Participation Too

> Some hold back because their mum or dad works somewhere where, if they find out, the parent will be dismissed and the family will lose a source of income.

Tbilisi, ages 18–23

> I was so actively involved in all this that they tracked down my … family tree, and they started intimidating me through everyone connected to me, and I was forced to.

Other cities, ages 18–23

Fear can reduce participation even if anticipated penalties never materialise. People need only see them as a credible possibility.

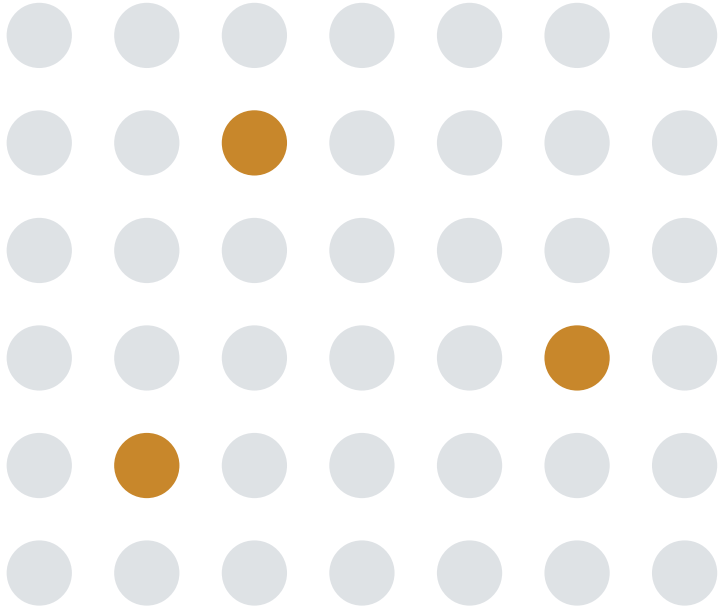
“What Difference Can I Make on My Own?”

What harm would it do if I didn’t go? I’m just one person.

When thousands think this way, the scale of collective action diminishes.

> “People are cheering me on [but] sitting at home” — and the “enthusiasm and drive” disappear.
>
> *Other cities, ages 18–23*

Citizens need more than a belief in their own ability to act. They also need to believe others will join them.



Verbal support ≠ action

Experiences of Socialisation in the Family, Formal Education (School and University) and Among Peers

Family and Formal Education (School and University) - Contrasting Influences

The expectation was that family and formal education transmit and reinforce paternalistic orientations. The data do not fully confirm this.

One Experience

The modern school system is a conveyor belt … no independent thinking whatsoever, no expressing your own opinion at all.

Focus group participant

A Different Experience in the Same System

I studied civic education … I learned what rights I had … school gave me a real sense of confidence.

Focus group participant

Information about democracy ≠ a sense of agency. Agency develops when young people have real opportunities to plan, speak up, see results and receive feedback.

Two Pathways to Passivity

Two Pathways to Passivity

Pathway 1 · Paternalistic attitudes — transferring responsibility

The state is the main actor in solving public problems → Citizens make demands but do not see themselves as initiators →

Pathway 2 · Blocked agency

Citizens recognise their responsibility and want to participate →

- Institutions do not respond
- Results seem unlikely
- Collective support is insufficient
- The costs are too high

→ **Civic passivity**

Who bears responsibility?

→ *Paternalism*

Do people believe their actions can make a difference?

→ *Civic efficacy*

What Needs to Change

1 Make participation lead to results

Consultations without results reduce engagement rather than increasing it.

2 Start where results are visible

Specific local issues offer the most accessible opportunities for agency, ahead of national politics.

3 Add practical experience to civic education

Plan → speak up → see results → receive feedback.

4 Account for the costs of participation

Young people often face significant risks. Safety is a precondition for participation, rather than its outcome.

The main aim is to show that participation can work and produce concrete results when expectations are realistic and goals achievable, rather than simply to argue that being active matters.