

BETWEEN SECURITY ANXIETY AND LEADERSHIP DEMAND: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICS AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN ARMENIA AHEAD OF THE 2026 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Arthur V. Atanesyan <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8458-2447>

Dr. Sci. (Pol.), Professor, Head of Applied Sociology Department, Faculty of Sociology, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia. Email: atanesyan@ysu.am

Samson Mkhitaryan <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9033-7819>

PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Applied Sociology, Yerevan State University. Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences of Armenia. Email: mkhityansamson@ysu.am

Abstract: This article examines public perceptions of Armenia’s political situation, leadership, and electoral prospects based on six focus group discussions conducted in October–November 2025. The study explores how citizens evaluate recent developments in the country, perceive key challenges facing the Armenian state, assess political actors, and imagine the characteristics of an ideal political leader. The findings demonstrate that concerns about national security, statehood, and political leadership dominate public discourse. Although participants acknowledged certain positive developments, including digitalization, infrastructure improvements, and modernization of public services, these achievements were largely overshadowed by anxieties related to security, governance, national identity, and political legitimacy. Respondents expressed widespread distrust toward political elites and institutions while simultaneously demonstrating strong interest in electoral participation and leadership change. The image of the ideal leader was strongly associated with competence, patriotism, decisiveness, and the capacity to ensure national security. The study contributes to understanding political attitudes in contemporary Armenia and illustrates how collective perceptions of insecurity shape political evaluations and expectations.

Keywords: *Armenia, political leadership, public opinion, focus groups, elections, political trust, national identity, security perceptions.*

Introduction

The political transformation initiated by Armenia’s 2018 Velvet Revolution fundamentally altered the country’s political landscape. Initially accompanied by widespread public optimism and expectations of democratic consolidation, the



subsequent years brought a series of developments that significantly reshaped public attitudes. The 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the displacement of the Armenian population from the region, continuing security challenges, and ongoing political polarization have transformed public discourse and political expectations.

In such contexts, perceptions of political leadership become especially important. Citizens increasingly evaluate political actors not only through policy outcomes but also through symbolic representations of competence, security, patriotism, and national resilience. Public perceptions therefore provide an important lens through which broader political dynamics may be understood.

This article analyzes six focus group discussions conducted in Armenia during October–November 2025. The discussions explored participants' assessments of current developments in Armenia, perceptions of political actors, attitudes toward elections, and expectations regarding political leadership. Particular attention is paid to how participants connect evaluations of governance with broader concerns about security, statehood, and national identity.

The article addresses four research questions:

1. How do participants evaluate Armenia's current political and social situation?
2. What developments are perceived as positive and negative?
3. What characteristics define the ideal political leader?
4. How do citizens perceive existing political actors and the approaching parliamentary elections?

Literature Review

Political trust represents one of the central concepts in studies of democratic legitimacy. According to Easton (1965), political systems depend not only on institutional performance but also on diffuse support generated through citizens' beliefs about the legitimacy of political authority. Subsequent research has demonstrated that declining trust in institutions often coincides with increased personalization of politics and growing expectations toward individual leaders (Norris, 2011).

Leadership evaluations constitute a particularly important dimension of political behavior. Voters frequently rely on perceptions of competence, integrity, strength, and empathy when evaluating political candidates (Kinder, 1986). In contemporary politics, personalization processes increasingly shift attention from parties and programs toward individual leaders (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007).

Research on post-conflict societies suggests that security concerns often become dominant frameworks through which political developments are interpreted (Bar-Tal, 2013). Under conditions of perceived existential threat, citizens tend to prioritize leadership qualities associated with strength, protection, and national survival over procedural democratic considerations.

In Armenia, recent scholarship has highlighted the profound impact of war, geopolitical uncertainty, and identity-related debates on public discourse. Questions of sovereignty, security, historical memory, and national identity continue to shape political attitudes and electoral preferences.

Methodology

The study is based on six focus group discussions conducted between October and November 2025. Participants were recruited from Yerevan, Gyumri, Vanadzor, Tavush, and Syunik. Groups represented different age categories and included both men and women. Participants were selected from citizens who did not support the current government.

Each focus group consisted of approximately eight participants. Discussions explored perceptions of Armenia's current situation, assessments of political developments, evaluations of political actors, leadership preferences, and expectations regarding the 2026 parliamentary elections.

The discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring narratives, symbolic representations, evaluative categories, and explanatory frameworks were identified and compared across groups. Quotations presented below illustrate dominant themes rather than isolated opinions.

As with all qualitative research, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of the Armenian population. Instead, they provide insight into the meanings, narratives, and perceptions shared among participants.

Findings

Positive Developments: Limited Achievements in a Broader Context of Concern

Although discussions were predominantly critical, participants identified several positive developments that had occurred in recent years. The most frequently mentioned achievement was digitalization and modernization of public administration. Participants appreciated the transition to electronic systems and centralized databases.

One participant explained:

“The fact that everything is moving to electronic platforms and personal data are entered into electronic systems is already a form of development because it makes everything easier.” (Anna, Yerevan, 18–29)

Similarly, participants referred to improvements in taxation, formalization of employment, and reduced bureaucratic obstacles. These developments were generally viewed as practical improvements affecting everyday life.

Infrastructure improvements represented another commonly acknowledged achievement. Participants from Syunik and Tavush particularly emphasized school renovation projects and road construction. As one participant noted:

“Almost all schools are being renovated, roads are under reconstruction, and the city has made significant progress during the last two years.” (Satenik, Syunik, 18–29)

Educational opportunities were also viewed positively. Younger participants emphasized increased accessibility of higher education, online learning opportunities, and technological modernization. However, positive evaluations were frequently accompanied by qualifications. Many respondents argued that such developments reflected broader technological progress rather than exceptional governmental performance. According to one participant:

“Digitalization is not the result of some special policy. Time itself required these changes.” (Nairi, Yerevan, 18–29)

Thus, even when participants acknowledged improvements, they often questioned their political significance.

Security as the Central Political Concern

The most striking finding across all focus groups was the centrality of security concerns. Discussions repeatedly returned to questions of national defense, territorial integrity, geopolitical vulnerability, and state survival.

Participants often interpreted all other political developments through the lens of security.

One respondent stated:

“I observe only regression, both externally and internally. Neither Armenia’s borders are properly protected nor is there internal security.” (Eva, Yerevan, 18–29)

Another participant identified security as the country’s primary challenge:

“The first issue is undoubtedly security.” (Eva, Yerevan, 18–29)

Security concerns extended beyond military issues. Participants frequently connected national security to social cohesion, demographic decline, education, and governance. For many respondents, the security crisis represented not merely a policy problem but a broader challenge to Armenian statehood itself.

Several participants described Armenia as existing in an “existential struggle,” while others referred to “free fall,” “degradation,” and “uncertainty.” Such language suggests that security concerns function as a master narrative shaping interpretations of political reality.

Distrust Toward Political Institutions and Elites

Another dominant theme involved widespread distrust toward political institutions and political elites. Participants frequently argued that democratic institutions had weakened and that power had become increasingly concentrated.

One respondent stated:

“The separation of powers no longer exists. Legislative, executive, and judicial powers are concentrated and effectively subordinated to one person.” (Nairi, Yerevan, 18–29)

Others criticized what they perceived as selective application of democratic principles and limitations on freedom of expression. Distrust extended beyond current authorities. Many participants expressed skepticism toward virtually all political elites.

As one participant explained:

“The same mafia continues. Faces change, but they are all connected.” (Samson, Yerevan, 18–29)

This perception is significant because it suggests that dissatisfaction is directed not only toward specific political actors but toward the political class as a whole. Political competition is therefore often interpreted as competition among interconnected elite groups rather than between genuinely distinct alternatives.

National Identity and the Armenian Apostolic Church

Questions of national identity occupied a prominent place in the discussions. Participants frequently expressed concern about cultural change, weakening national values, and perceived threats to Armenian identity.

The Armenian Apostolic Church emerged as an especially important institution within these discussions. Participants consistently described the Church as a central component of Armenian history, identity, and statehood. One respondent remarked:

“For centuries the Church served as a foundation of our statehood.”
(Armen, Yerevan, 18–29)

At the same time, participants expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as the Church’s insufficient public engagement during recent crises. This apparent contradiction reveals the unique position of the Church in Armenian public consciousness. Respondents simultaneously regarded it as sacred and beyond ordinary political criticism while expecting it to play a more active moral and national role.

A participant from Syunik summarized this expectation:

“Faith and the Church have the ability to unite the Armenian nation around a common purpose.” (Andranik, Syunik, 18–29)

Thus, the Church functions not only as a religious institution but also as a symbolic guardian of national identity.

External Actors and Geopolitical Narratives

Participants frequently discussed the influence of external actors on Armenia’s political situation. Many respondents perceived Armenia as highly dependent on stronger international actors. Russia, the United States, Turkey, Azerbaijan, France, and international organizations were all mentioned as significant influences.

A recurring theme was disappointment with international organizations. Participants frequently described organizations such as the United Nations and European institutions as ineffective, biased, or unable to protect Armenian interests. Several respondents also expressed disappointment with Russia’s role during recent conflicts. At the same time, many viewed Armenia as lacking sufficient autonomy to pursue an independent geopolitical course.

Particularly noteworthy was the widespread perception that Turkey and Azerbaijan currently exert substantial influence over Armenia’s political environment. These perceptions reinforce the broader dominance of security concerns identified throughout the discussions.

Electoral Participation and Democratic Engagement

Despite expressing deep dissatisfaction with political institutions, most participants considered electoral participation an important civic responsibility. One respondent explained:

“I have always voted since I turned eighteen. In 2026 I will vote as well because otherwise anything can happen.” (Donara, Gyumri, 45+)

Participants frequently argued that abstention allows others to determine political outcomes and potentially facilitates electoral manipulation. At the same time, some respondents expressed doubts regarding the effectiveness of voting.

As one participant stated:

“If I had known what would happen, why would I have gone to vote?” (Ararat, Syunik, 18–29)

This combination of participation and skepticism reflects a paradox frequently observed in democratic systems experiencing declining institutional trust. Citizens continue participating while simultaneously questioning the responsiveness and legitimacy of political institutions.

Constructing the Ideal Political Leader

Perhaps the most coherent and consistent findings emerged in discussions regarding the ideal political leader. Participants overwhelmingly emphasized competence, patriotism, decisiveness, education, responsibility, and leadership capacity.

One participant summarized this preference by invoking iconic national figures:

“We need people like Monte and Nzhdeh¹.” (Masis, Syunik, 18–29)

The ideal leader was expected to possess practical administrative skills as well as symbolic qualities associated with national defense and collective resilience. Interestingly, respondents demonstrated substantial consensus regarding demographic characteristics. Most preferred a male leader over forty years old, family-oriented, and ideally possessing military experience.

Several participants also emphasized economic success as evidence of competence. Wealth itself was not viewed negatively, provided it was perceived as the result of achievement rather than corruption.

These findings suggest that leadership expectations are closely linked to contemporary perceptions of insecurity. Participants sought leaders capable of providing protection, stability, and strategic direction rather than merely administrative management.

Images of Political Actors

Participants evaluated political actors through highly symbolic and emotional language. Among all figures discussed, acting prime-minister Nikol Pashinyan² generated the strongest positive as well as negative reactions. Participants frequently described him as manipulative, dishonest, inconsistent, and weak. Nevertheless, some acknowledged his communication skills and political resilience.

Samvel Karapetyan³ received predominantly positive evaluations. Participants frequently described him as a successful businessman, philanthropist, patriot, and

¹ Armenian National heroes.

² Re-elected in June 2026 parliamentary elections as the major fraction leader.

³ Elected as major oppositional party leader.

benefactor. However, questions remained regarding his political experience and leadership capabilities.

Robert Kocharyan⁴ produced the most polarized evaluations. Some participants described him as strong, experienced, and capable, while others associated him with corruption, authoritarianism, and personal ambition.

A notable feature of these discussions was the extensive use of animal metaphors. Participants associated politicians with wolves, lions, foxes, snakes, jackals, and other animals. Such symbolic representations reveal the emotional and moral dimensions through which political actors are interpreted.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that political perceptions among government-critical citizens in Armenia are structured primarily around concerns about security, statehood, and leadership. Positive developments in administration and infrastructure are acknowledged but rarely regarded as politically decisive.

Instead, evaluations of political actors are filtered through broader narratives of national vulnerability and collective insecurity. Security concerns serve as the central interpretive framework through which governance, democracy, identity, and leadership are assessed.

The study also reveals a significant crisis of political trust. Participants expressed skepticism toward political institutions and elites while simultaneously maintaining strong expectations regarding leadership. This combination reflects a broader personalization of politics, whereby hope for political improvement becomes concentrated in individual leaders rather than institutions.

Finally, the findings demonstrate the continuing importance of national identity in Armenian political discourse. Discussions concerning the Church, education, cultural values, and external actors all reflected broader concerns about preserving Armenian statehood and identity under conditions of perceived uncertainty.

Participants acknowledged certain positive developments, particularly in digitalization and infrastructure. However, these achievements were largely overshadowed by concerns regarding security, governance, democratic institutions, and national identity.

The ideal political leader was imagined as competent, patriotic, decisive, and capable of ensuring national security. Existing political actors were evaluated through highly symbolic and emotional frameworks reflecting broader societal anxieties.

The findings suggest that contemporary Armenian political attitudes cannot be fully understood through conventional measures of policy satisfaction alone. Rather, they are deeply shaped by collective perceptions of vulnerability, uncertainty, and the future of Armenian statehood itself.

⁴ In June 2026 parliamentary elections has been elected as the second big oppositional party leader.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.