

# Majority of Gambians say their country is heading in the wrong direction

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 471 | Sait Matty Jaw and Demba Kandeh**

## Summary

In December 2021, Gambians will head to the polls for their first presidential election since the removal of longtime leader Yahya Jammeh in 2017. Amidst a proliferation of political parties and an increasingly liberal media environment, the election is expected to be keenly contested (Jaw & Jeng, 2021).

The election will also be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted development challenges confronting the country. The Gambia ranks poorly on many development indicators. The 2019 United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index, for instance, ranks the country 172th out of 189 countries (UNDP, 2020). The 2018 Gambia Labour Force Survey estimates that 41.5% of youth (aged 18-35) are unemployed and that 69.4% of all unemployed Gambians live in rural areas (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

COVID-19 has negatively impacted economic growth, "taking the country off the sustained growth path it has been on since 2017, with GDP growth recording a negative figure for the first time in nine years," according to Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs Mambury Njie (2020). While the government's 2021 budget was touted as promoting recovery from the pandemic, prominent human-rights activist Madi Jobarteh (2021) says it represents a continuation of the past and fails to address the real problems of ordinary Gambians.

Ahead of the election, what do Gambians say about the direction of their country, their personal well-being, and issues they want their government to address?

Findings from a recent Afrobarometer survey show that Gambians think their country is heading in the wrong direction and want their government to prioritize the economy and public service delivery. The survey also shows that lived poverty and personal living conditions have worsened since 2018, as have popular assessments of the government's performance on economic management, infrastructure, and basic services.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Center for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CePrass), interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Gambians in January and February 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. A previous Afrobarometer survey was conducted in the Gambia in 2018.

## Key findings

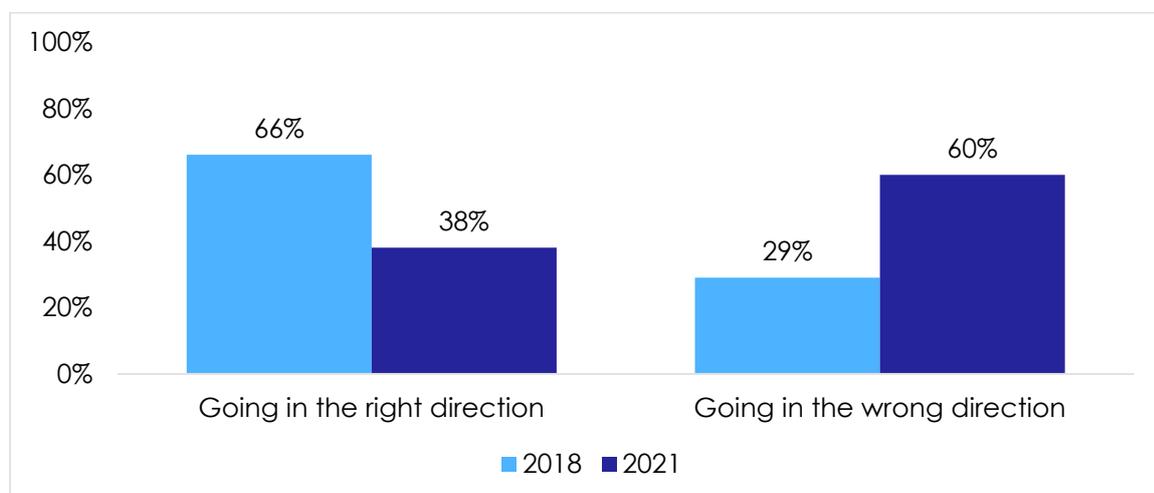
- Six in 10 Gambians (60%) say the country is heading in “the wrong direction,” double the proportion recorded in 2018 (29%).
- Only a quarter (25%) of Gambians describe the country's economic condition as “fairly good” or “very good,” less than half the approval rate in 2018 (58%).
- The proportion who describe their personal living conditions as “fairly good” or “very good” has also decreased drastically, from 66% in 2018 to 35%.
- The proportion of Gambians who say they went without basic necessities such as enough food, enough water, and medical care during the previous year increased significantly compared to 2018.
- Health (39%), management of the economy (38%), water supply (27%), and education (26%) are the most important problems that citizens want the government to address.
  - The share of respondents who cite management of the economy as a priority problem has more than doubled since 2018.
- Citizens' ratings of the government's performance on the economy, infrastructure, and basic services have declined sharply over the past three years.
- Approval ratings for the performance of key government leaders have also declined since 2018.

## Overall direction of the country

Six in 10 Gambians (60%) believe the country is heading in the wrong direction, while only a minority (38%) see it as moving in the right direction (Figure 1).

These perceptions are the opposite of those recorded in the 2018 survey, when two-thirds (66%) said the country was on the right track.

**Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | The Gambia | 2018-2021**



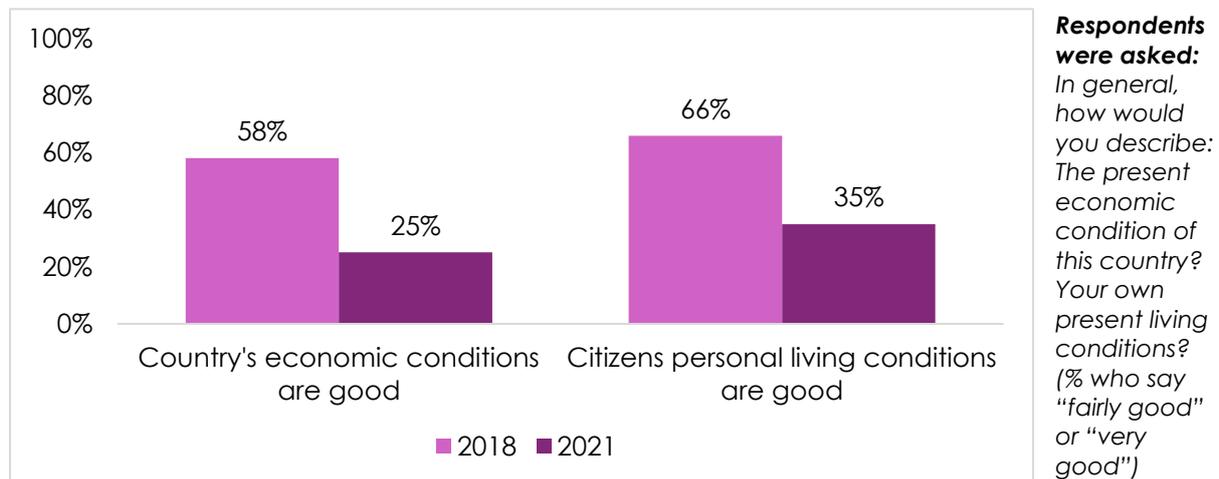
**Respondents were asked:** *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

## Country's economic condition and personal living conditions

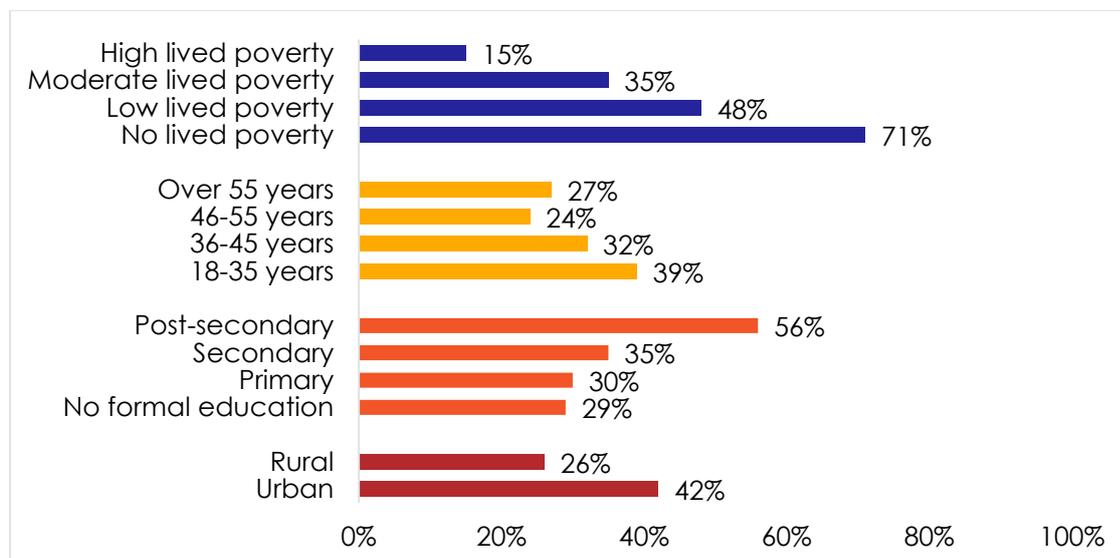
Popular assessments of the country's economic condition are on the decline. Only a quarter (25%) of Gambians describe the country's economic condition as "fairly good" or "very good," fewer than half as many as in 2018 (58%). Similarly, the proportion of Gambians who rate their personal living conditions as good has declined drastically, from 66% in 2018 to 35% (Figure 2).

As might be expected, poorer citizens are considerably less likely to give positive assessments of their living conditions, ranging from just 15% of those with high lived poverty to 71% of those with no lived poverty (Figure 3). Similarly, the most educated respondents are most likely to report good living conditions (56% of those with post-secondary qualifications). Urban residents (42%) and youth (39%) also report better living conditions than rural residents (26%) and older respondents (24%-32%).

**Figure 2: Country's economic condition and personal living conditions**  
| The Gambia | 2018-2021



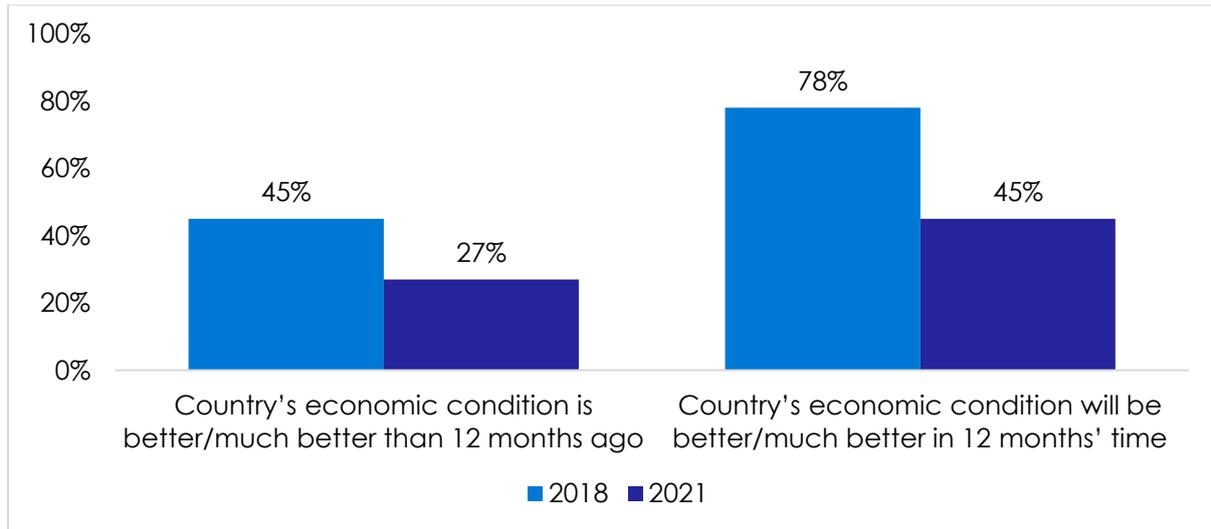
**Figure 3: Personal living conditions are good** | by socio-demographic group  
| The Gambia | 2021



(% who say their living conditions are "fairly good" or "very good")

Only about one in four Gambians (27%) say economic conditions have improved during the past year, an 18-percentage-point decline from 2018. And while almost half (45%) believe things will get better during the coming year, that reflects a sharp drop in optimism compared to 2018 (78%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Economic condition – retrospective and prospective outlook | The Gambia | 2018-2021**



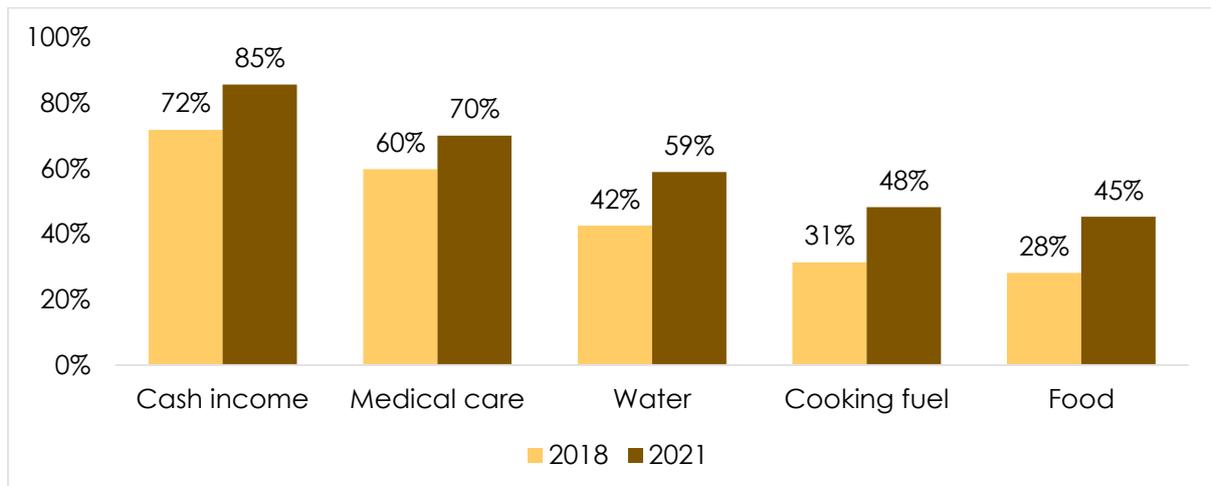
**Respondents were asked:**

Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?  
 Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

**Deprivation of basic necessities**

The number of Gambians reporting that they or their families went without basic necessities increased significantly compared to 2018 (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Going without basic necessities | The Gambia | 2018-2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat? Gone without enough clean water for home use? Gone without medicines or medical treatment? Gone without enough fuel to cook your food? Gone without a cash income? (% who say "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")

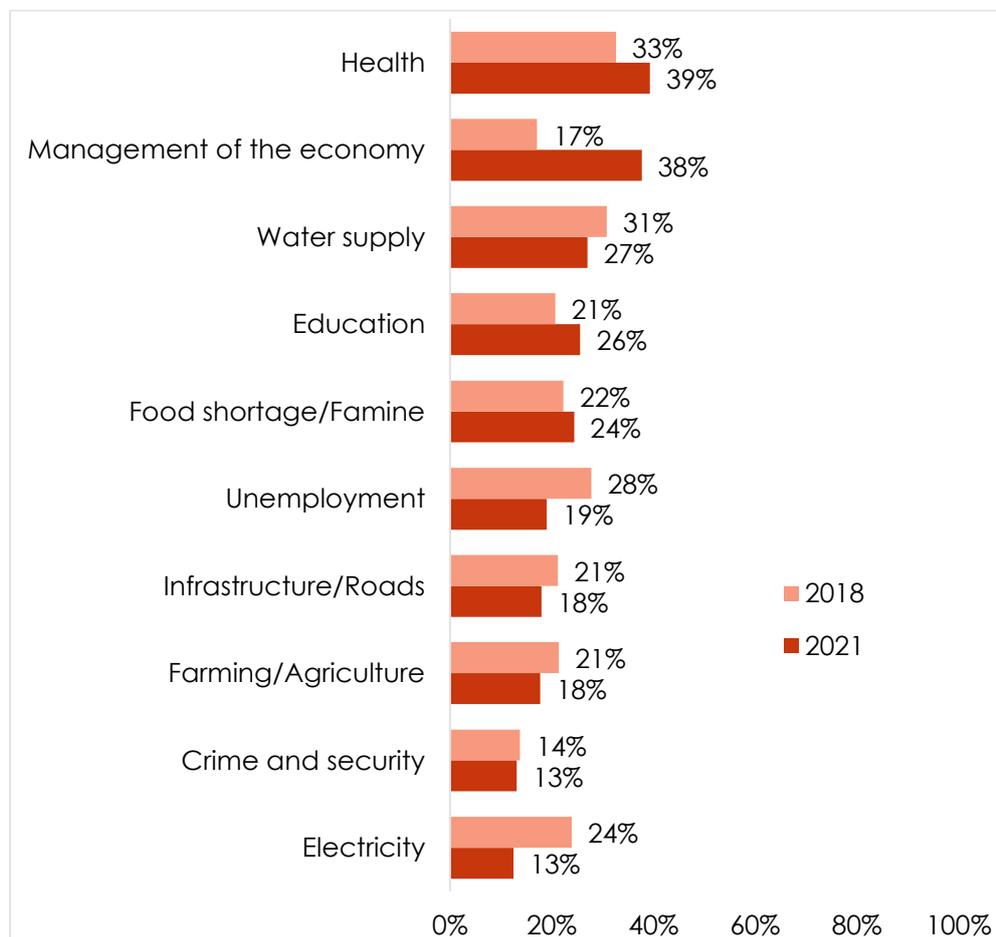
Large majorities say they went without a cash income (85%) and without needed medical care (70%) at least once during the previous year, up from 72% and 60%, respectively, in 2018. Six in 10 (59%) suffered shortages of clean water, and almost half (45%) say they went without enough food – increases of 17 percentage points on both indicators.

### Most important problems

When asked what they see as the country’s most important problems that the government should address, Gambians most frequently cite health (39%), management of the economy (38%), water supply (27%), and education (26%) (Figure 6).

Compared to 2018, management of the economy more than doubled in importance (from 17% to 38%), and health gained 6 percentage points, while unemployment and electricity dropped significantly as citizen priorities.

**Figure 6: Most important problems | The Gambia | 2018-2021**



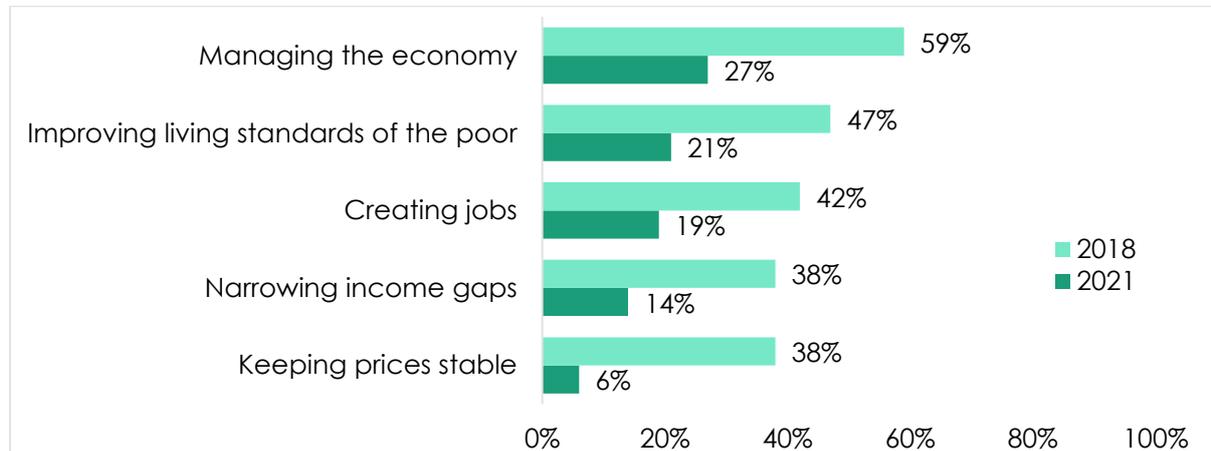
**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents were allowed up to three responses. Figure shows % who cite each issue among their top three concerns.)*

### Government performance

Popular assessments of the government’s economic performance have worsened drastically since 2018 (Figure 7). Only about one-fourth (27%) of Gambians say the government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” on managing the economy, down by more than half compared to 2018 (59%).

Sharp declines also mark ratings of government performance on improving living standards of the poor (from 47% approval to 21%), creating jobs (from 42% to 19%), narrowing income gaps (from 38% to 14%), and keeping prices stable (from 38% to 6%).

**Figure 7: Government economic performance** | The Gambia | 2018-2021

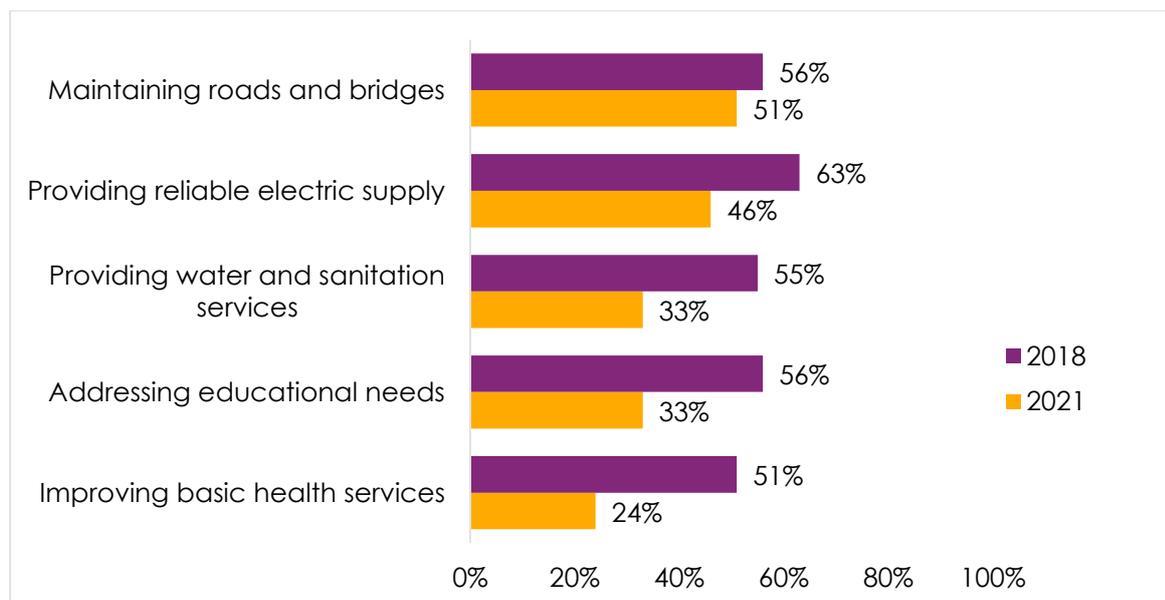


**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Though less extreme than on economic issues, increasingly negative reviews also characterize the government's performance on infrastructure and basic services (Figure 8).

Half (51%) of respondents say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" on maintaining roads and bridges, down only 5 percentage points compared to 2018. But larger drops are visible when it comes to providing a reliable electricity supply (46% approval), water and sanitation services (33%), education (33%), and basic health services (24%).

**Figure 8: Government performance on providing infrastructure and basic services** | The Gambia | 2018-2021



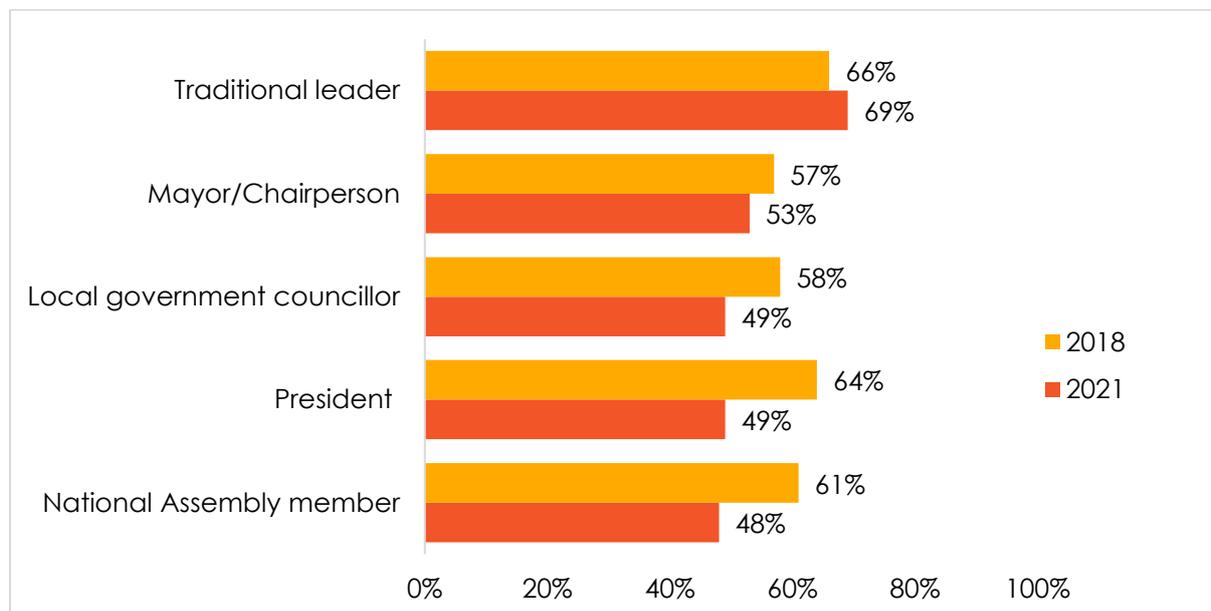
**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

## Job performance of leaders

Approval ratings for the performance of key government leaders have also declined since 2018. Only half of Gambians “approve” or “strongly approve” of the performance of the president (49%), National Assembly members (48%), and local government councillors (49%), reflecting declines of 15, 13, and 9 percentage points, respectively (Figure 9).

Approval of the performance of mayors/chairpersons declined by 4 points, to 53%, while traditional leaders gained 3 points, reaching 69% approval.

**Figure 9: Approval of leaders’ job performance | The Gambia | 2018-2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

## Conclusion

The Gambia is at a crossroads. The upcoming presidential and local elections are widely seen as a test of the country’s transition to democracy. Many Gambians credit President Adama Barrow’s government with holding the country together after Jammeh’s forced departure and with launching an economic recovery with an ambitious National Development Plan (Shaban, 2018). However, citizens’ negative ratings on key economic and performance indicators suggest that they do not see the government as delivering on its promises. These findings indicate that economic management and public-service delivery are likely to be high on citizens’ agenda during the upcoming campaign.

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