

As Liberia's election approaches, what will citizens be looking for in their next government?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 151 | Thomas Isbell and David Jacobs

Summary

Later this year, after 12 years in office, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf will step down as president of Liberia and Africa's first female head of state, having completed her maximum of two terms. Sirleaf, who came to power after decades of underdevelopment, tyranny, and civil conflict in Liberia, will leave a legacy that has won international acclaim – including the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize – for progress in rebuilding infrastructure, strengthening health care and education, helping to bring warlord Charles Taylor to justice, and seeing the country through the 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic (Lane, 2016). In an interview with *Foreign Policy Magazine*, Sirleaf noted that her greatest achievement will be handing over power peacefully (McCormick, 2016).

Despite favourable international recognition for Sirleaf, public-opinion data show that Liberians' assessments of the country's economic condition and of Sirleaf's performance and trustworthiness became sharply more negative between 2012 and 2015. Unemployment, infrastructure, economic management, education, and agriculture top the list of problems that citizens said they want the government to address.

As the country approaches general elections in October, no clear favorite to succeed Sirleaf has yet emerged from a large field of candidates and parties (Dahir, 2017; AFP, 2017). But widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, coupled with an analysis of citizens' priorities, may provide some insight into what Liberians will be looking for in a post-Sirleaf government.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were completed between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys (2016/2017) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

This dispatch reports on the findings of the Round 6 survey in Liberia, which was conducted in May 2015. For the Round 6 survey, the national Afrobarometer team, led by Practical Sampling International, interviewed 1,200 adult Liberians. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Liberia in 2008 and 2012.

Key findings

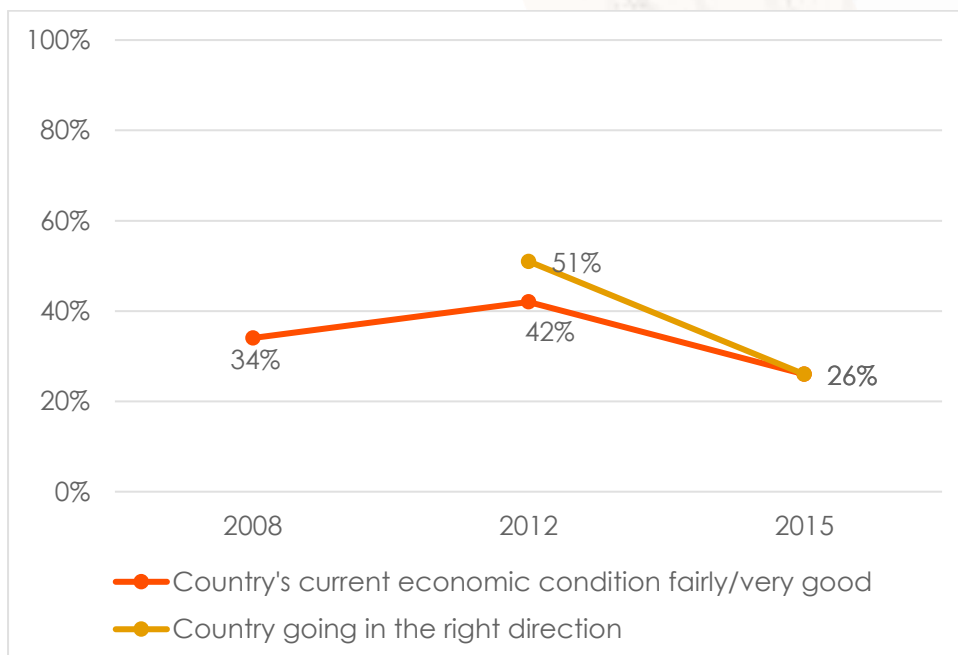
- Between 2012 and 2015, the proportion of Liberians who said their country is headed in the right direction dropped by half (from 51% to 26%), and fewer citizens saw their country's economic condition as "fairly" or "very" good (26%, down from 42%). Similar trends marked assessments of personal living conditions and optimism about improvements in the near future.

- Only one in three Liberians (33%) “approved” or “strongly approved” of the president’s job performance over the previous year – half the proportion who voiced approval in 2012. Assessments of members of Parliament and local government councillors showed similar declines.
- Popular trust in the president dropped by half, from 60% to 30% who said they trusted her “somewhat” or “a lot.” Meanwhile, perceptions of corruption doubled, from 31% in 2008 to 64% in 2015 who said that “most” or “all” officials in the office of the presidency are corrupt.
- Public approval of the government’s performance on managing the economy, improving living standards of the poor, and other key policy and service-delivery issues declined between 2008 and 2015.
- Unemployment, infrastructure, management of the economy, education, and agriculture are the most important problems that Liberians said they want their government to address. Among sectors needing additional government investment, respondents prioritized education and infrastructure.

Country’s economic condition and overall direction

Between 2012 and 2015, popular evaluations of the country’s economic condition and overall direction grew sharply more negative. After increasing between 2008 and 2012, the share of Liberians describing the country’s economic condition as “fairly good” or “very good” dropped from 42% in 2012 to 26% in 2015. Even more dramatically, the proportion of respondents who saw the country as going “in the right direction” declined by half, from 51% in 2012 to 26% (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Country’s economic condition and overall direction | Liberia | 2008-2015

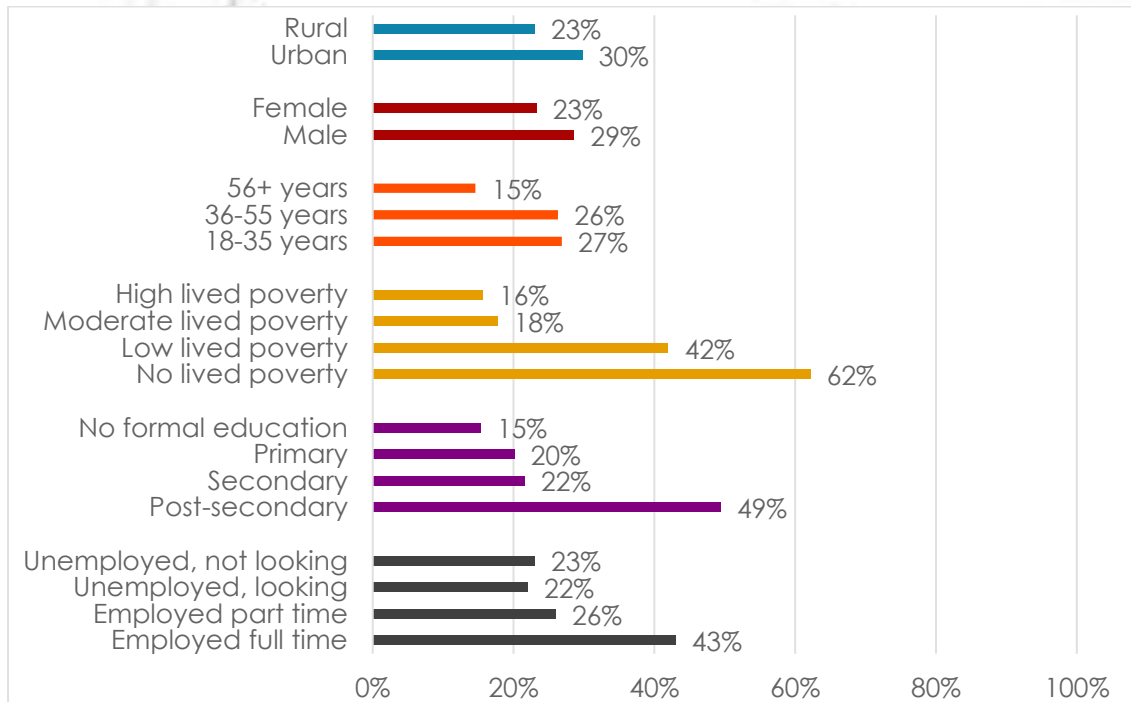


Respondents were asked:

- In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?
- Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Poor, less-educated, and unemployed Liberians were least likely to see the country as headed in the right direction (Figure 2). Differences were most striking between rich and poor: Among respondents with “high lived poverty,”¹ only 16% approved of the country’s overall direction, compared to 62% of those experiencing “no lived poverty.” Rural, female, and older respondents were also somewhat less likely to agree with the country’s direction than their urban, male, and younger counterparts.

Figure 2: Country going in the right direction | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2015



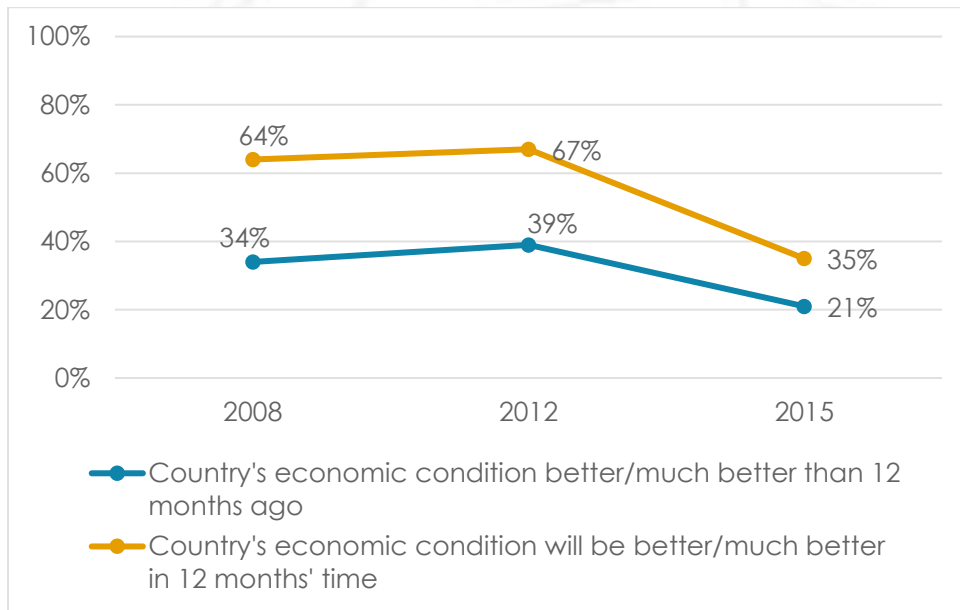
Respondents were asked: *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who said "right direction")*

Similarly, Liberians recorded an increasingly negative outlook with regard to the country’s economic progress and prospects for the future. Both indicators deteriorated by nearly half: The proportion of respondents who said that the economy was “better” or “much better” than 12 months earlier declined from 39% in 2012 to 21%, while the share of respondents who expected things to better in 12 months’ time decreased from 67% in 2012 to 35% (Figure 3).

Certain socio-demographic groups showed particularly low levels of optimism about Liberia’s immediate future (Figure 4): Rural residents (30%), respondents with high (20%) or moderate (31%) lived poverty, less educated and unemployed citizens were least likely to expect that economic conditions will be “better” or “much better” in 12 months’ time. Only among Liberians with low (52%) or no (72%) lived poverty, those who have a post-secondary education (50%), and those in full-time employment (57%) did at least half expect things to improve over the next year.

¹ Afrobarometer measures “lived poverty” by the frequency with which respondents or their families went without enough food, enough clean water, medicine or medical care, enough fuel for cooking, and cash during the previous year.

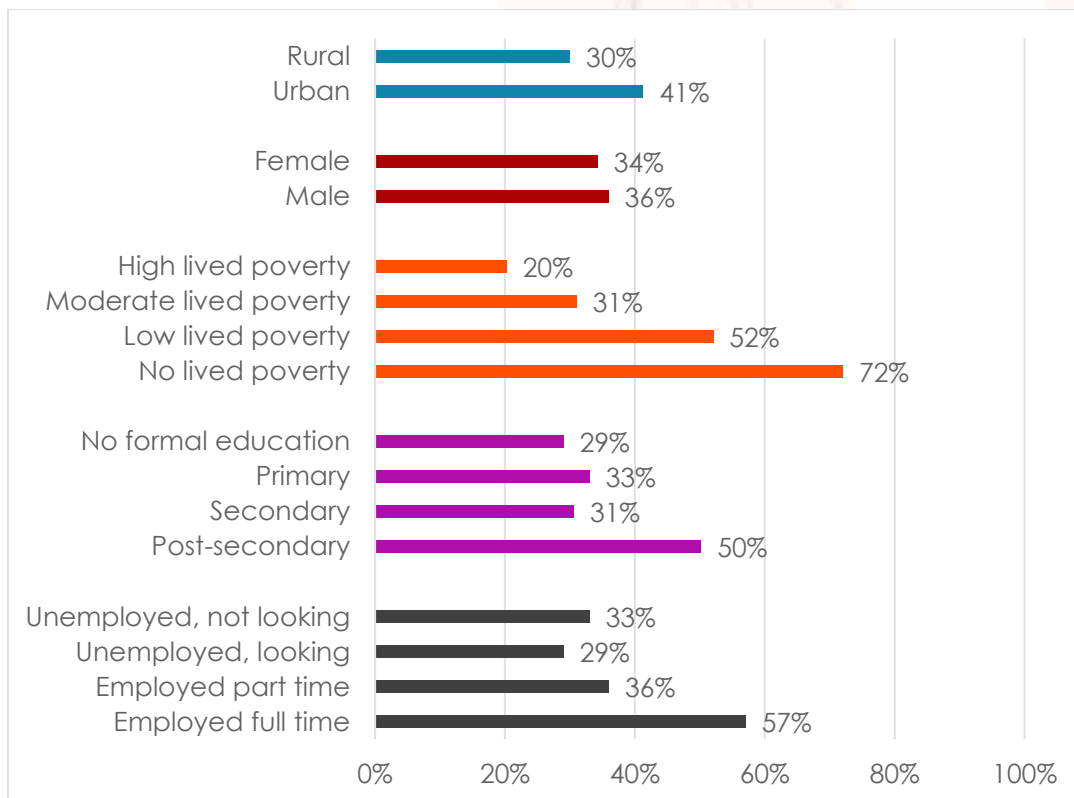
Figure 3: Country's past and future economic progress | Liberia | 2008-2015



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?

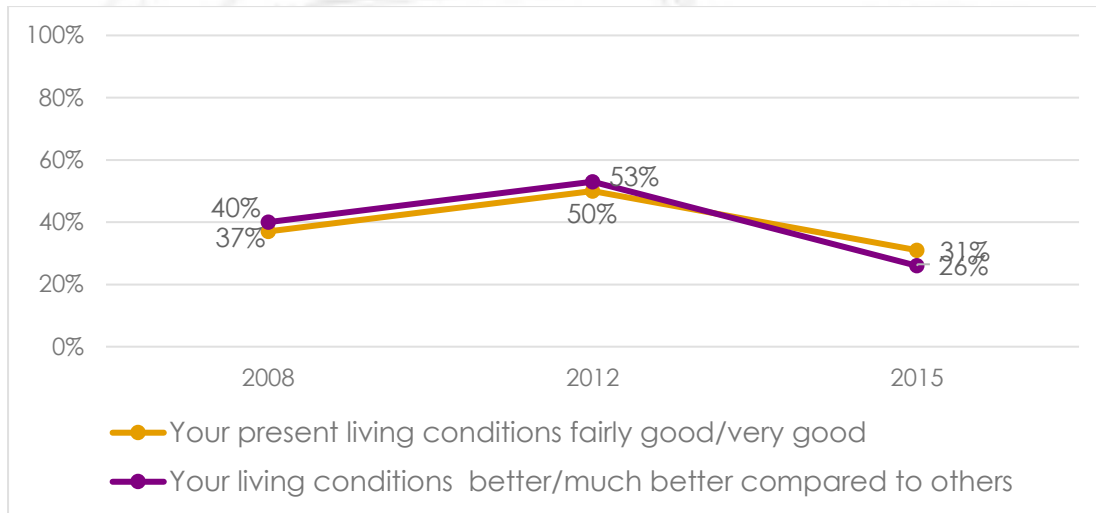
Figure 4: Country's economic condition better in 12 months' time | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2015



Respondents were asked: Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time? (% who said "better" or "much better")

Liberians' assessments of their personal living conditions darkened as well. Only about three in 10 (31%) said their living conditions were "fairly good" or "very good," down from half (50%) who felt this way in 2012. Likewise, far fewer thought their living conditions were "better" or "much better" than those of other Liberians, 26% vs. 53% in 2012 (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Personal living conditions | Liberia | 2008-2015



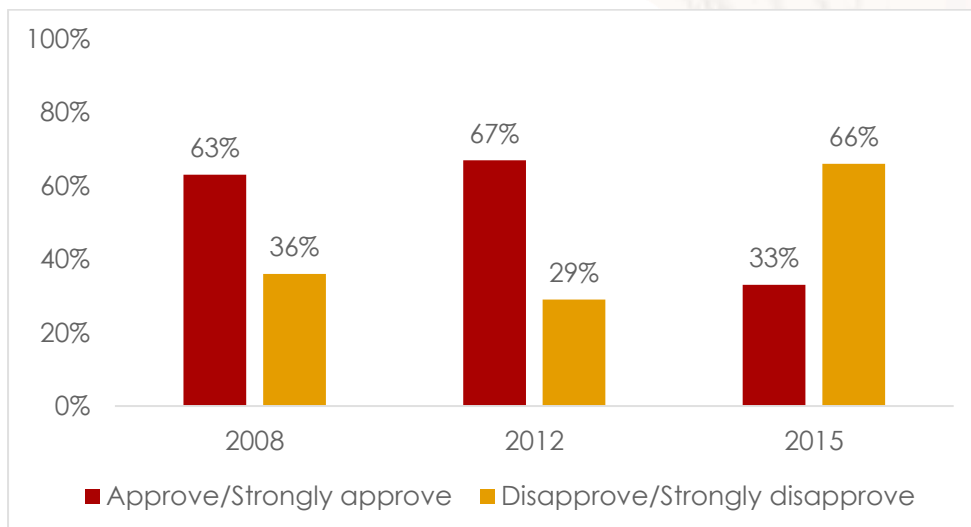
Respondents were asked:

- In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?
- In general, how do you rate your living conditions compared to those of other Liberians?

Perceptions of the presidency

In parallel to economic assessments, popular perceptions of the president's job performance took a nosedive. While about two-thirds of Liberians said they "approve" or "strongly approve" of the president's performance in 2008 (63%) and 2012 (67%), the share of approving Liberians plummeted to just 33% in 2015 (Figure 6).

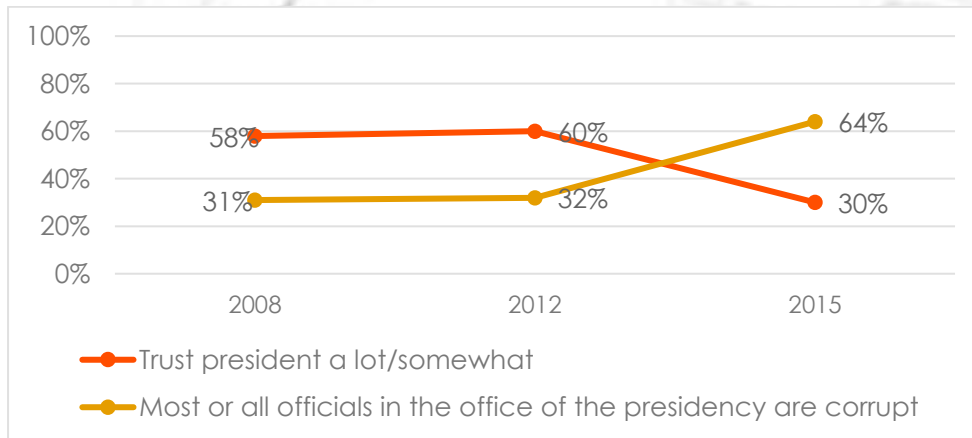
Figure 6: Performance of the president | Liberia | 2008-2015



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: President Sirleaf?

At the same time, trust in the president declined sharply, while perceptions of corruption in her office increased. Only three in 10 Liberians (30%) said they trust the president “somewhat” or “a lot” – half as many as in 2012 (60%) (Figure 7). Fully seven in 10 said they trust the president “just a little” (38%) or “not at all” (32%). Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents said “most” or “all” officials in the presidency are corrupt – twice the proportion in 2008 and 2012.

Figure 7: Trust and perceptions of corruption in the presidency | Liberia | 2008-2015

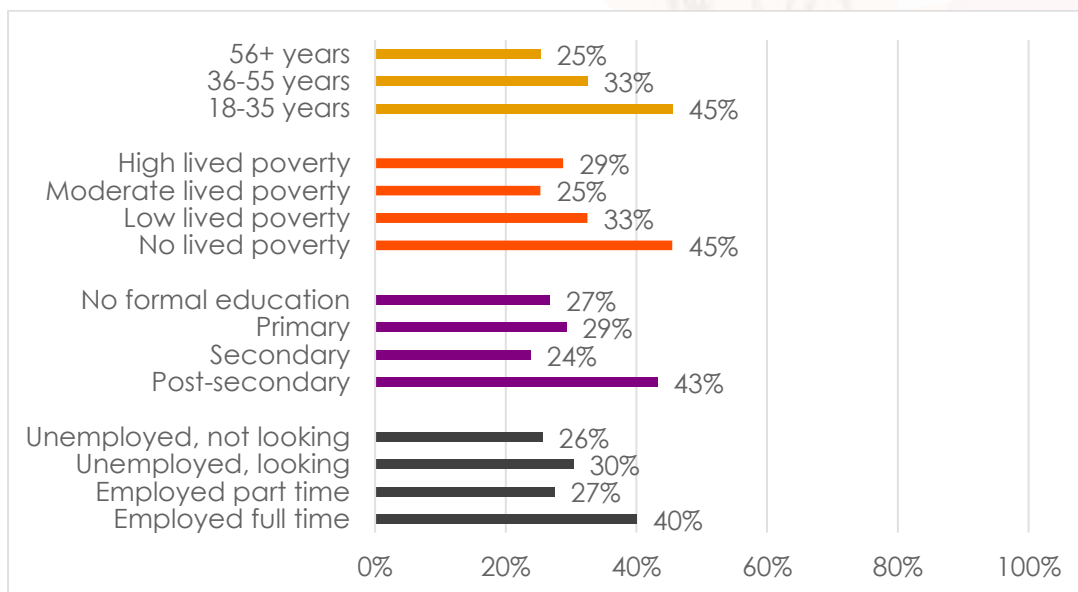


Respondents were asked:

- How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president?
- How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president and officials in her office?

While trust in the president was low across all major demographic groups, it was above-average among younger Liberians (aged 18-35) (45%), among the wealthiest citizens (45%), among those with post-secondary education (43%), and among those with full-time employment (40%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Trust in the president | by socio-demographic group | Liberia | 2015

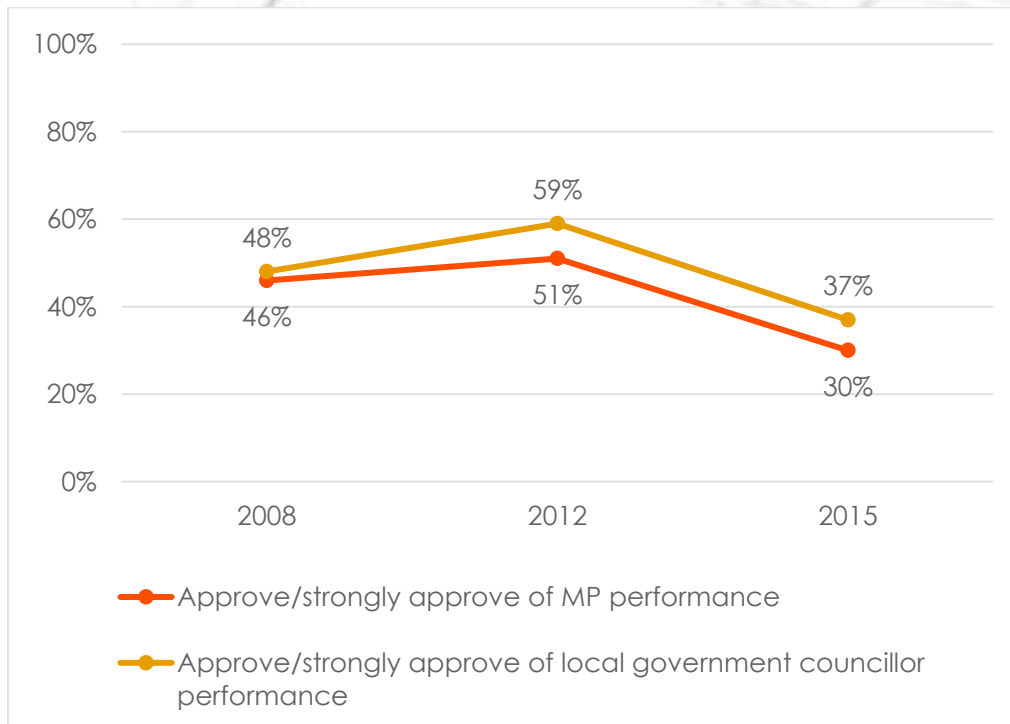


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president? (% who said “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Performance of national and local elected officials

But declining popular approval appeared not only directed at the president. While more than half of Liberians said in 2012 that they “approve” or “strongly approve” of how members of Parliament (MPs) (51%) and local government councillors (59%) had done their jobs in the previous 12 months, only 30% and 37%, respectively, said the same in 2015 (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Performance of national and local representatives | Liberia | 2008-2015



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: Your member of Parliament? Your local government councillor?

Government performance on policy and service delivery

Not surprisingly, given perceptions reported above, citizens' evaluations of the government's performance on key policy and service-delivery indicators also generally changed for the worse compared to the early years of the Sirleaf presidency.

On management of the economy, only 22% of respondents said the government was performing “fairly well” or “very well” – about half the proportions in 2008 (40%) and 2012 (41%) (Table 1). With regard to improving the living standards of the poor, approval dropped from about three in 10 in 2008 and 2012 to less than two in 10 (17%) in 2015.

Concerning the creation of jobs, public approval was steady but low (25% in 2015). On the issue of keeping prices down, popular assessments rebounded from a dip in 2012 to a still-feeble 19%.

Trends are similar when it comes to government service delivery. Between 2008 and 2015, approval of government performance dropped from 66% to 49% on addressing educational needs, from 60% to 52% on improving basic health services, and from 41% to 30% on providing water and sanitation services.

Table 1: Popular approval of government policy and service-delivery performance
| Liberia | 2008-2015

	2008	2012	2015	Change 2008-2015 (percentage points)
Managing the economy	40%	41%	22%	-18%
Improving living standards of the poor	29%	28%	17%	-12%
Creating jobs	24%	25%	25%	+1%
Keeping prices down	21%	8%	19%	-2%
Improving basic health services	60%	66%	52%	-8%
Addressing educational needs	66%	73%	49%	-17%
Providing water and sanitation services	41%	32%	30%	-9%

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:

- Managing the economy?
- Improving the living standards of the poor?
- Creating jobs?
- Keeping prices down?
- Improving basic health services?
- Addressing educational needs?
- Providing water and sanitation services?

(% who said "fairly well" or "very well")

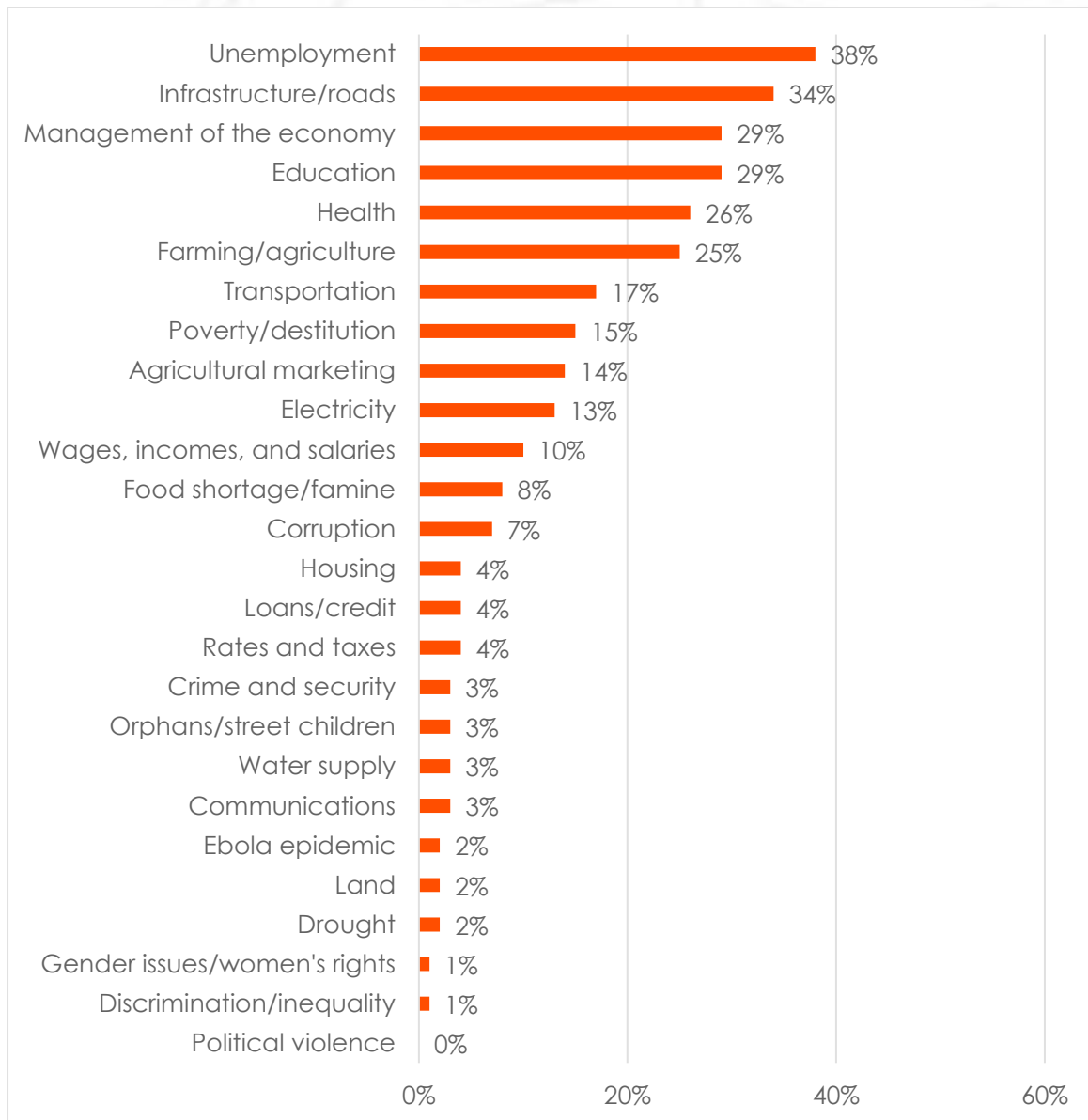
Most important problems and priorities

Negative assessments of government performance on economic issues are mirrored in what Liberians considered their country's most important problems. Unemployment tops the list: 38% of respondents cited it as one of the three most important problems the government should address. Infrastructure/roads (cited by 34%) and management of the economy (29%) are followed by education (29%) and health (26%) (Figure 10).

While farming/agriculture ranked sixth (25%) among respondents' most important problems, combining it with agricultural marketing (14%) and food shortage/famine (8%) boosts it into the No. 1 position (47%). Notably, only 2% of respondents cited Ebola as a top problem, and fewer than 0.5% cited political violence.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

Figure 10: Most important problem that government should address | Liberia | 2015

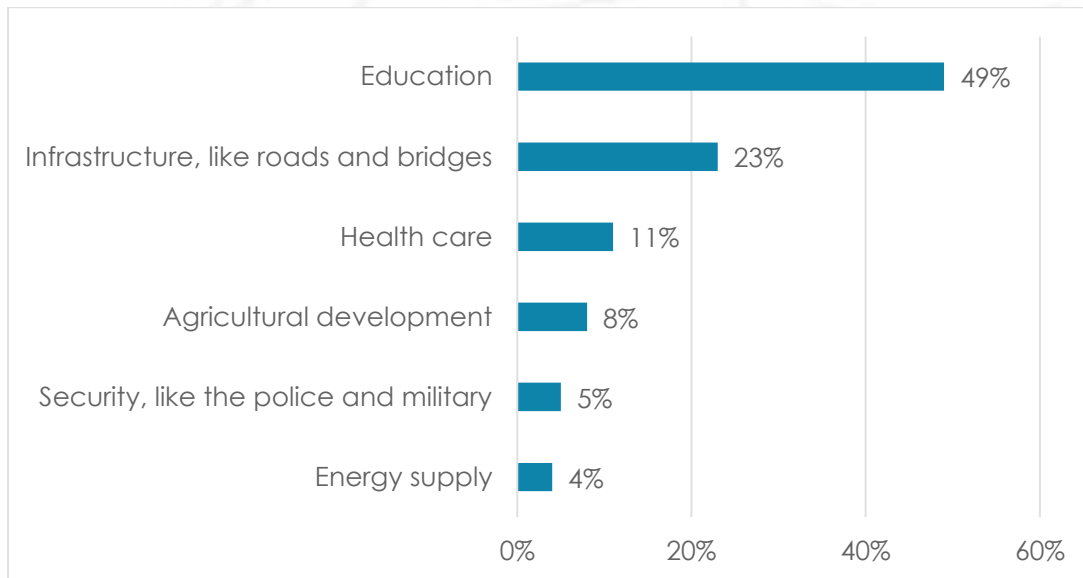


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?*
 (Note: Respondents were allowed up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who cited each issue as one of the top three problems.)

When citizens were asked which of six key sectors should be prioritized if additional government spending were possible,² by far the most frequent response was education (49%). A distant second was infrastructure, such as roads and bridges (23%), followed by health care (11%) (Figure 11).

² Unemployment was not listed as a response option on this question because it is not a service controlled by the government.

Figure 11: Top priority for additional government spending | Liberia | 2015



Respondents were asked: *If the government of this country could increase its spending, which of the following areas do you think should be the top priority for additional investment?*

Has Sirleaf's presidency strengthened women's role in politics?

As Africa's first female head of state, Sirleaf will also be judged by her impact on gender equity in politics. In 2012, 79% of Liberians "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" that women should have the same chance as men of being elected – sixth-highest among 34 surveyed countries in Africa, and well above the average of 69%. In 2015, that proportion dropped to 56% (Figure 12) -- seventh-lowest among 36 surveyed countries, significantly lower than the 36-country average of 66%.

Figure 12: Support for women as political leaders | Liberia | 2012-2015



Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
 Statement 1: *Men make better political leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women.*
 Statement 2: *Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.*

It may seem plausible that disenchantment with the country's direction and Sirleaf's performance might spill over to the broader question of whether women should have an equal chance of being elected to office. An analysis of this question is beyond the scope of this dispatch. But the data indicate that in 2015, respondents who disapproved of Sirleaf's performance were actually *more* likely to support gender equity in electoral politics (58%) than those who approved of her performance (53%) (Table 2).

Table 2: Support for women as political leaders | by evaluation of president's performance | Liberia | 2012-2015

Among those who ...	% who said women should have equal chance of being elected	
	2012	2015
Approved/Strongly approved of president's performance	82%	53%
Disapproved/Strongly disapproved of president's performance	75%	58%

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: President?
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women.
Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.

Conclusion

Despite international acclaim, Sirleaf will leave Liberia's presidency with a decidedly mixed track record in the eyes of ordinary citizens, who between 2012 and 2015 grew significantly more critical of their country's economic condition and overall direction as well as the president's performance and trustworthiness. Popular frustrations also appeared to shape Liberians' assessments of their MPs and local government councillors.

Previous Afrobarometer analysis suggests that Liberia approaches its October general election with a solid basis of popular support for democracy, regular and fair elections, and multiparty competition (Okuru & Armah-Attah, 2016). Nine out of 10 Liberians said they feel free to vote for the candidate of their choice and to join any political organization they wish. At the same time, half were dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in their country.

For presidential candidates vying for support in a wide-open field, citizens' dissatisfaction with the economy and their prioritization of job creation, infrastructure, education, and agriculture provide clues as to what it will take to earn popular approval.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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