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Many Tunisians lack adequate access to health care and water, rate government poorly

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 393 | Aida Elbeji and Imen Mezlini

Summary

Despite gains in building its democracy, Tunisia still struggles with poor economic conditions and high rates of unemployment and inequality (Diwan, 2019). The country, especially in the interior region, is also plagued by unreliable public services such as medical care and water supply – particular problems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tunisia's public health facilities face severe challenges, including substantial debt, too few beds to meet demand, inadequate equipment, and a shortfall of 14,000 qualified medical staff (News24, 2017).

In addition, water shortages have sparked warnings of a “thirst uprising” as residents in the interior suffer long water-supply cuts, reservoirs run dry, and farmers experience drastic losses (National, 2016). These challenges add to social tensions in a country still struggling with instability since its 2011 revolution.

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that inadequate access to health care and water is an issue for many Tunisians, and the government is rated poorly for its performance in providing these two essential services. The survey also shows significant rural-urban gaps in access to water and medical care.

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 in 2019/2021 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Tunisia, led by One to One for Research and Polling, interviewed 1,200 Tunisian adults between 24 February and 18 March 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Tunisia in 2013, 2015, and 2018.

Key findings

- Almost all Tunisians (96%) live in zones served by a piped water system, but only a slim majority (55%) live within easy walking distance of a health facility.

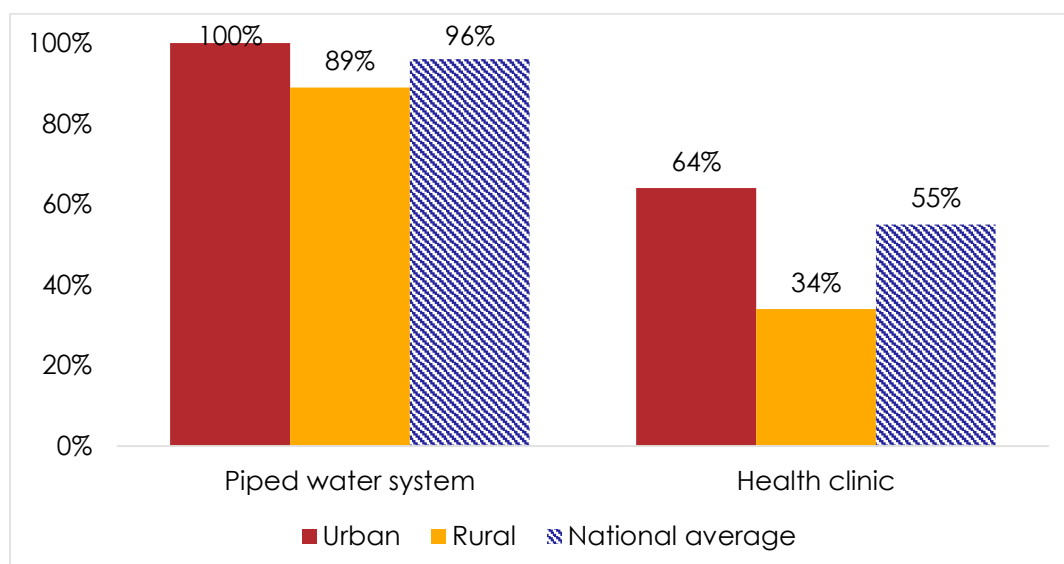
- About four in 10 Tunisians say they went without medical care (43%) or clean water (40%) at least once during the previous year, including about three in 10 (33% and 29%, respectively) who did so “several times,” “many times,” or “always.”
- More than half (53%) of Tunisians who had contact with public health facilities during the previous year say they found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to obtain needed health care.
 - One in six (17%) say they had to pay bribes to get care.
- A majority (58%) of Tunisians say the government treats them unfairly based on their economic status, including four in 10 (39%) who say this happens “often” or “always.”
- Only one-third (35%) of Tunisians say government is doing “fairly well” or “very well” in providing water and sanitation services. Fewer than three in 10 (27%) rate the government positively for its performance in improving basic health services.

Access to water and health services

Afrobarometer collects data on the presence of basic infrastructure in the enumeration areas that survey fieldworkers visit. Based on fieldworkers’ observations, an overwhelming majority (96%) of Tunisians live in zones served by a piped water system. However, only a slim majority (55%) live within easy walking distance of a health facility (Figure 1).

Rural residents are less likely than their urban counterparts to have access to this infrastructure. The gap is especially large (30 percentage points) when it comes to the availability of health clinics.

Figure 1: Availability of piped water systems and health facilities | by rural-urban location | Tunisia | 2020



Survey enumerators were asked to record:

Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Piped water system that most houses can access?

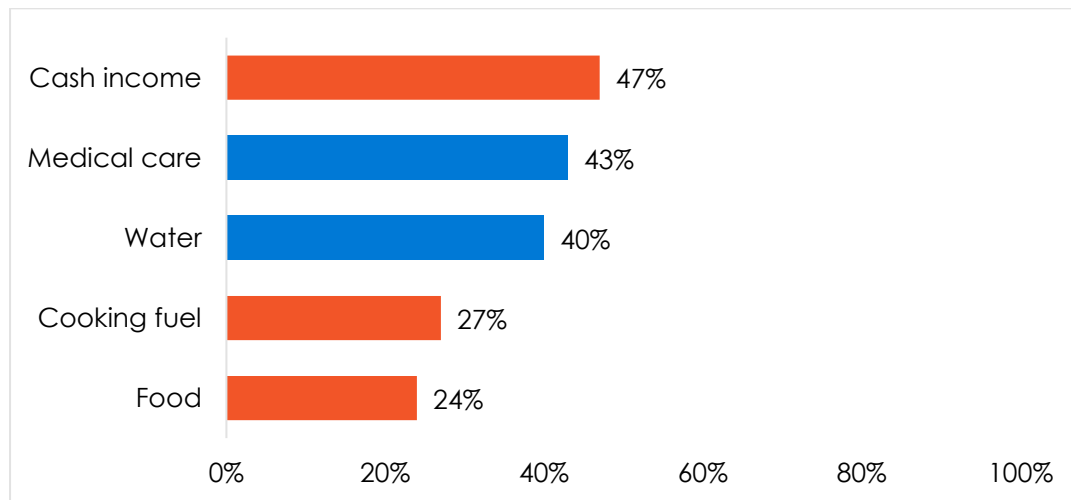
Are the following facilities present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area or in easy walking distance: Health clinic (private or public or both)?

(% “yes”)

To gauge citizens' access to basic necessities, Afrobarometer asks respondents how often, during the previous 12 months, they or their family went without enough food and clean water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income. About four in 10 Tunisians say they went without medical care (43%) and sufficient clean water (40%) at least once during the previous year, including about three in 10 (33% and 29%, respectively) who experienced this form of "lived poverty" "several times," "many times," or "always" (Figure 2).

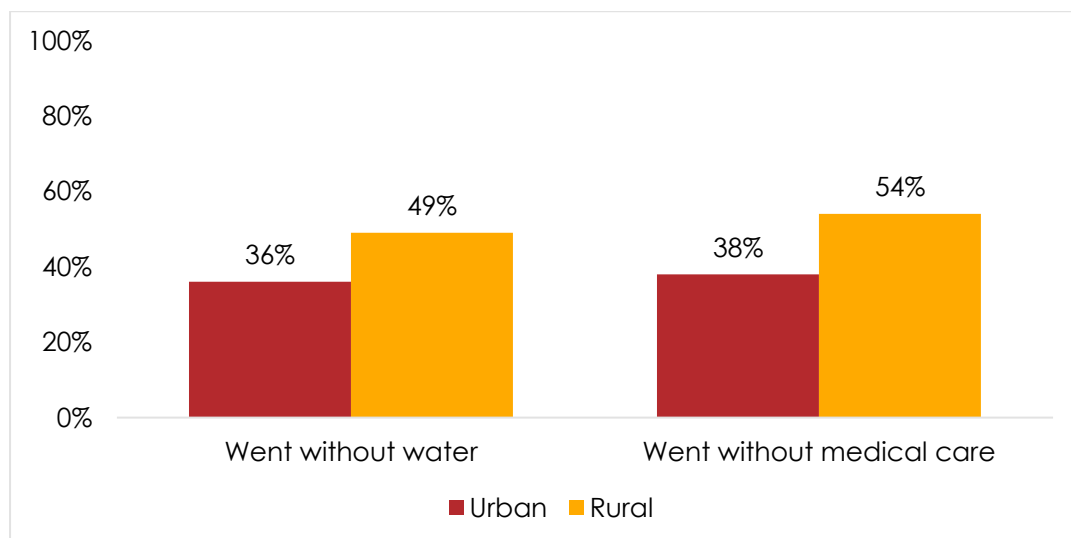
Rural residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to experience a lack of clean (49% vs. 36%) and medical care (54% vs. 38%) (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Went without basic necessities in the past year | Tunisia | 2020



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

Figure 3: Went without enough water and medical care | by rural-urban location | Tunisia | 2020

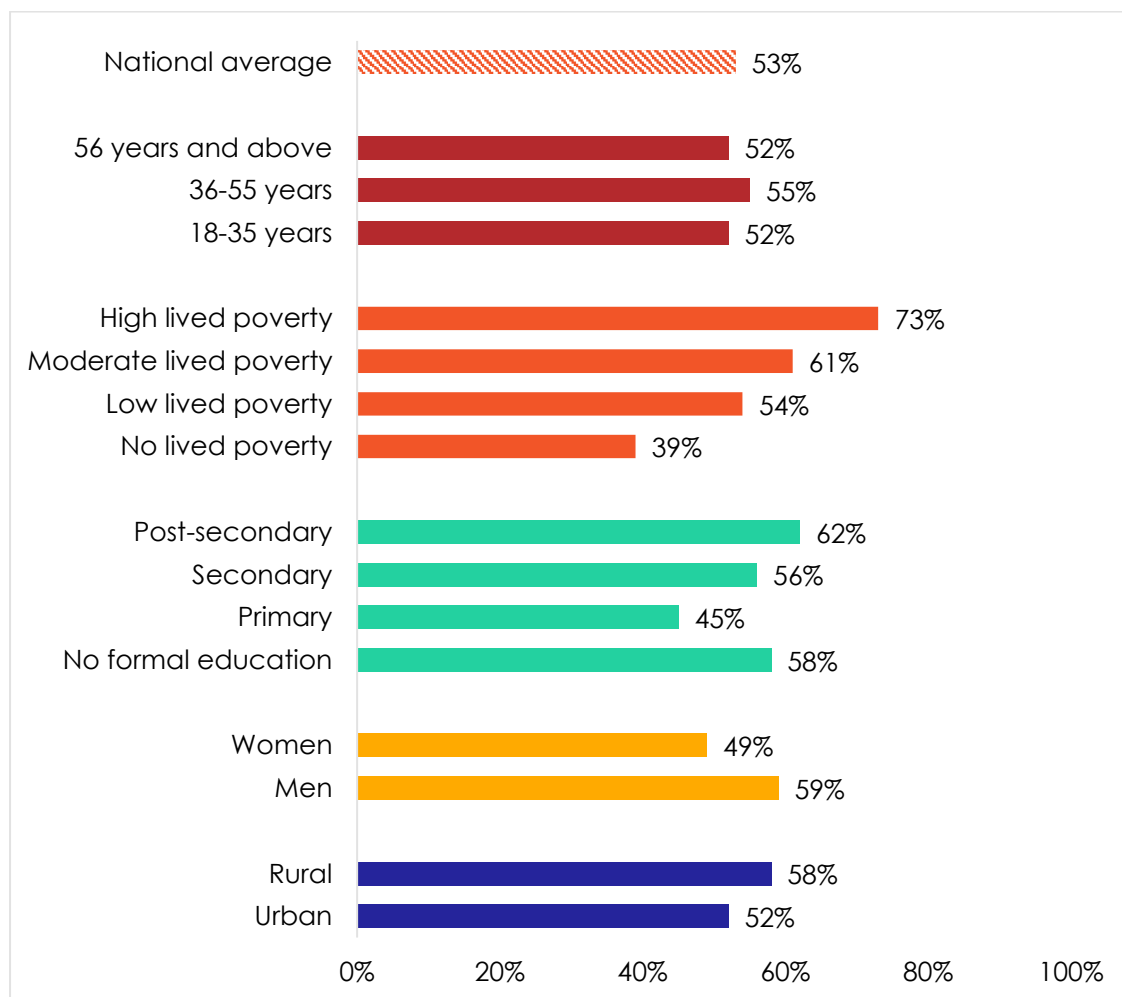


Respondents were asked: Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? (% who say "just once or twice," "several times," "many times," or "always")

Perhaps due to the poor condition of health facilities and the low number of health workers, more than half (53%) of Tunisians who had contact with public health facilities during the previous year say they found it “difficult” or “very difficult” to obtain the care they needed (Figure 4). The poorest citizens (those who experienced high lived poverty) are about twice as likely as those who are economically well off (experiencing no lived poverty) to find it difficult to get health care (73% vs. 39%). Men (59%) and rural residents (58%) are also more likely than women (49%) and urban residents (52%) to experience such difficulties.

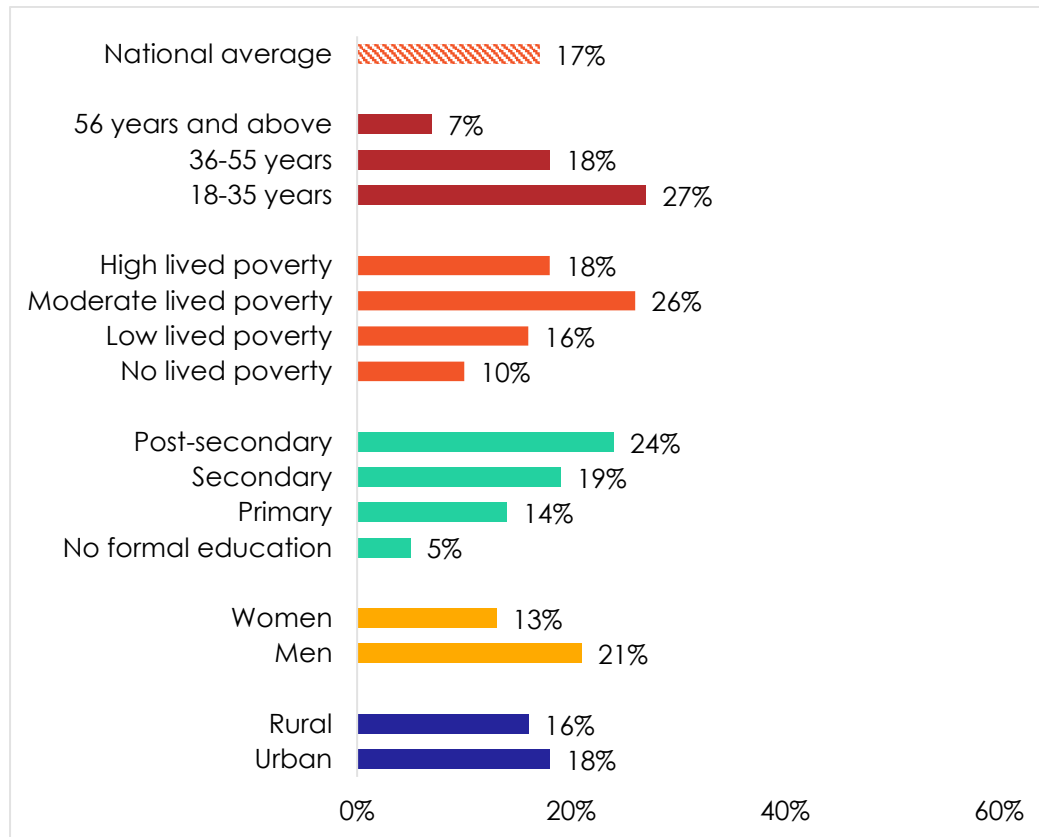
One in six citizens (17%) who had contact with public health facilities say they had to pay bribe to obtain care (Figure 5). Young adults and the highly educated are most likely to report having to pay bribes for health services. Reported bribe-paying to obtain health care is four times as common among respondents aged 18-35 years (27%) as among those aged 56 years and above (7%), and five times as frequent among citizens with post-secondary education (24%) as among those with no formal education (5%). Men (21%) are also more likely than women (13%) to report having to pay bribes.

Figure 4: Difficulty in obtaining medical care | by socio-demographic group
 | Tunisia | 2020



Respondents who said they had contact with a public clinic or a hospital during the previous year were asked: How easy or difficult was it to obtain the medical care you needed? (% who say “difficult” or “very difficult”) (Note: Figure excludes those who had no contact with a public clinic or hospital.)

Figure 5: Paid bribe to obtain medical care | by socio-demographic group
 | Tunisia | 2020



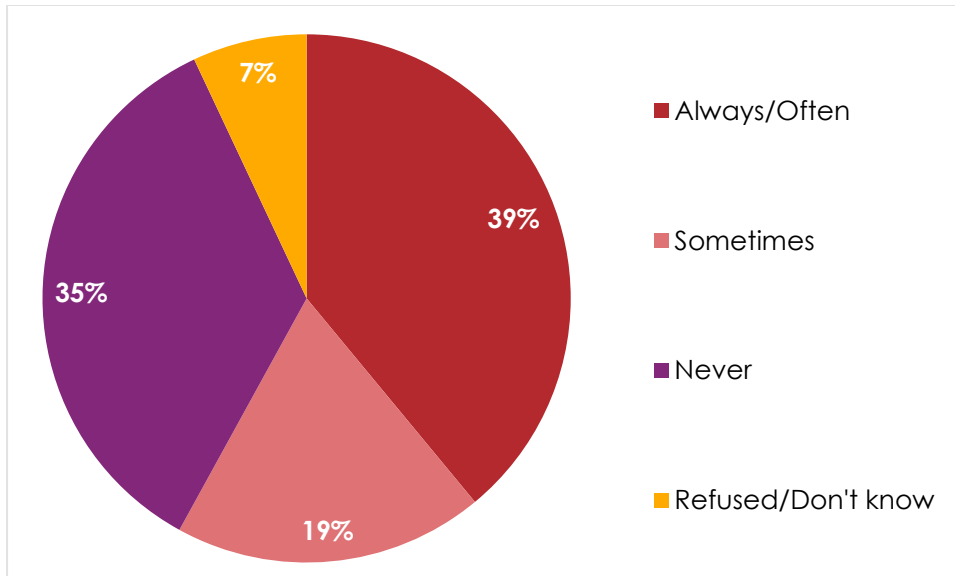
Respondents who said they had contact with a public clinic or a hospital during the previous year were asked: And how often, if ever, did you have to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a favour for a health worker or clinic or hospital staff in order to get the medical care you needed? (% who say “just once or twice,” “several times,” “many times,” or “always”) (Note: Figure excludes those who had no contact with a public clinic or hospital.)

Social inequality

Perceptions of social injustice and inequality – considered to be among the main reasons for the Tunisian revolution in 2011 – remain one of the country's major challenges, nine years after the uprising. Four in 10 Tunisians (39%) say they are “always” or “often” treated unfairly by the government based on their economic status (Figure 6). Two in 10 (19%) say they experience this “sometimes.”

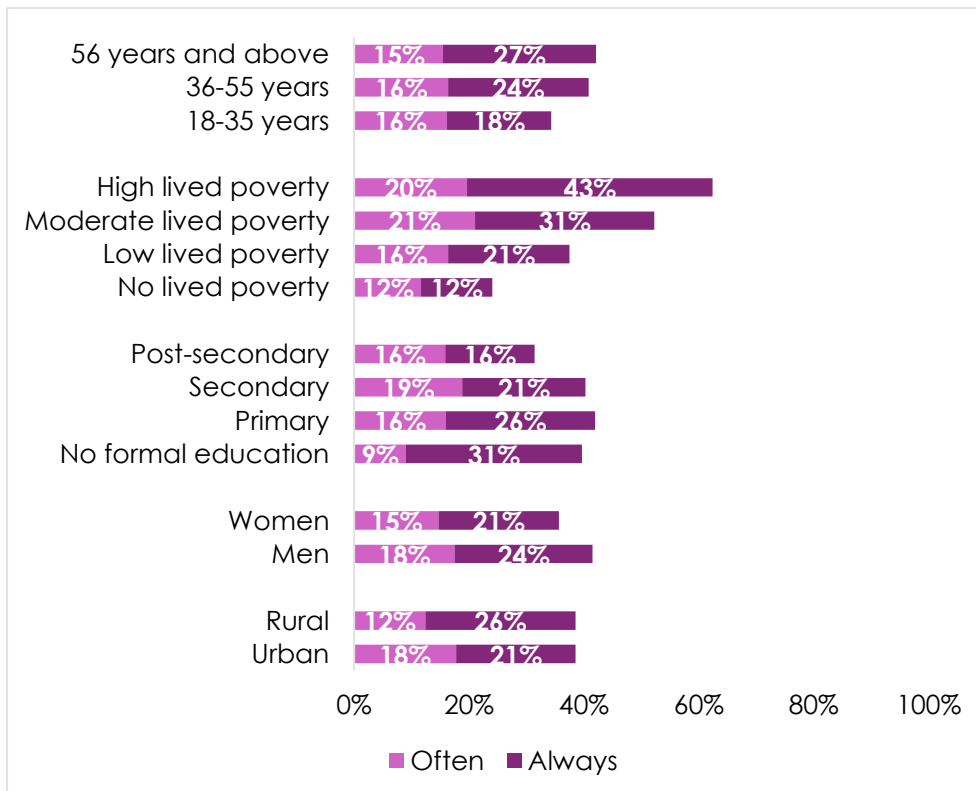
As might be expected, this experience increases with one's level of poverty (63% often/always among those with high lived poverty vs. 24% among those with no lived poverty), and highly educated citizens are least likely to complain about such unfair treatment (Figure 7). Men (42%) are somewhat more likely than women (36%) to say they are treated unfairly based on how rich or poor they are.

Figure 6: Treated unfairly because of economic status | Tunisia | 2020



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are people like you treated unfairly by the government based on your economic status, that is, how rich or poor you are?

Figure 7: Treated unfairly because of economic status | by socio-demographic group | Tunisia | 2020

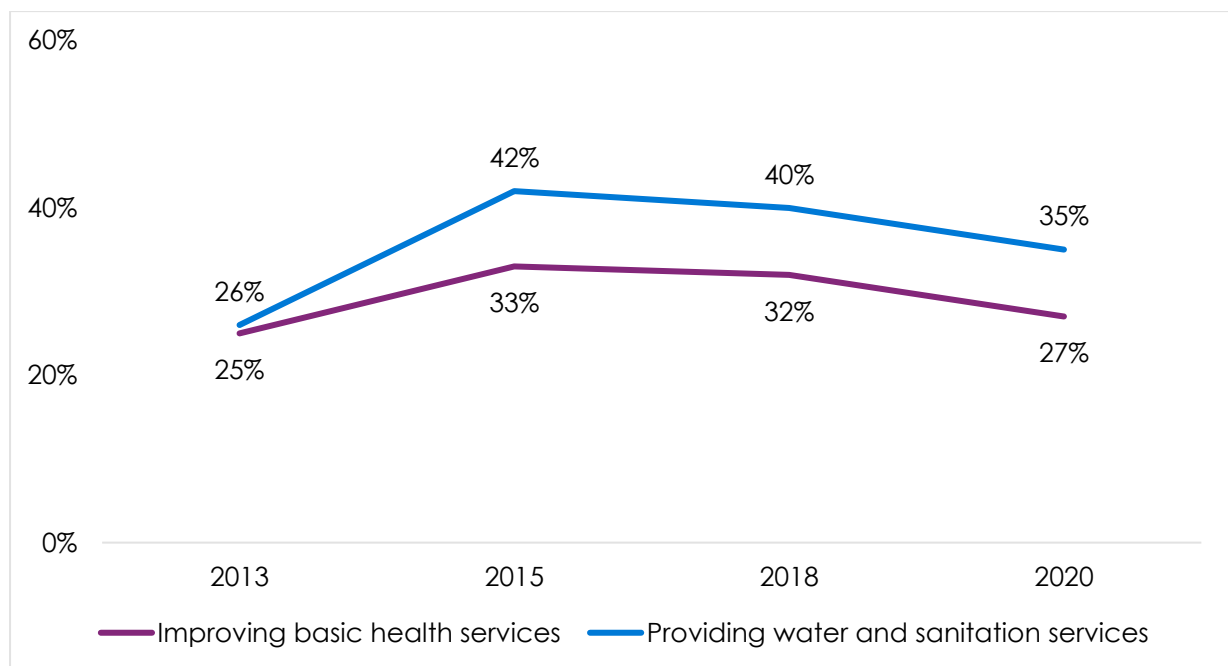


Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are people like you treated unfairly by the government based on your economic status, that is, how rich or poor you are?

Views on government performance in providing health care and water

Citizens' approval ratings for government performance in improving basic health services and providing water are generally low, and declining. Only about one-third (35%) of Tunisians say the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" in providing water and sanitation services, a 7-percentage-point decrease after climbing to 42% in 2015 (Figure 8). Even fewer citizens (27%) say the government is doing a good job in improving basic health services, a 6-percentage-point decrease since 2015.

Figure 8: Approval of government performance in improving basic health services and providing water | Tunisia | 2013-2020



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")

Conclusion

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey, conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, show that many Tunisians lack adequate access to health care and water, and most say the government is doing a poor job of providing these services. Poor and rural citizens are especially likely to have trouble getting health care services. These findings point to two priority areas for government action, especially given the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic for hygiene and health care.

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 for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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