

Most Gambians value elections, but fewer trust the institution that manages them

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 491 | Sait Matty Jaw and Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

On 4 December 2021, Gambians will head to the polls in their first presidential election since the end of Yahya Jammeh's 22-year dictatorship. Incumbent Adama Barrow, who shockingly defeated Jammeh in 2016 with the backing of seven opposition parties (BBC, 2016), is seeking re-election at the head of his new National People's Party (Fatty, 2021; Muntagadura, 2021).

The election promises to be intensely competitive in the freer political and media landscape that Gambians have enjoyed under Barrow (Freedom House, 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2021). In addition to six television stations, Gambians have access to about 40 radio stations, including community radios, as well as several online media houses. The number of registered political parties has doubled since 2016, to 18 (Independent Electoral Commission, 2021). More than half (57%) of registered voters are women, and 58% are youth between the ages of 18 and 35 (Taylor, 2021).

The number of candidates interested in the presidency has also increased significantly: 23 aspirants submitted their nominations to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), although only six candidates were given the green light to contest (Jeune Afrique, 2021). Some of those turned away – for failing to secure 200 votes in some administrative areas or other technical reasons (Cham, 2021) – have filed a petition against the IEC at the High Court (Camara, 2021).

The presidential election will be followed by a National Assembly election in 2022 and local government elections in 2023.

The latest Afrobarometer survey findings show that Gambians overwhelmingly believe in the value of elections and see their most recent national election, the parliamentary election in 2017, as having been generally free and fair. Even so, popular trust in the IEC has declined.

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. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) 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.

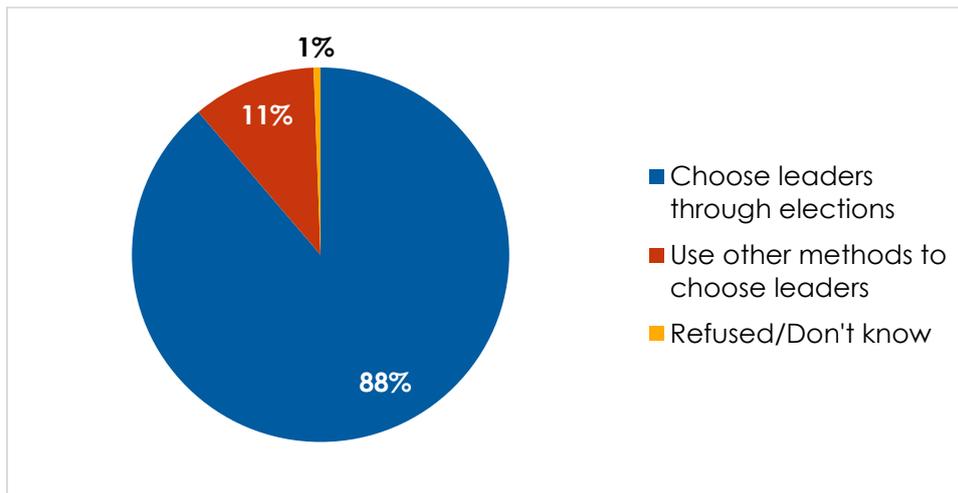
Key findings

- By overwhelming majorities, Gambians support elections as the best way to choose leaders (88%) and believe that elections work well in enabling voters to remove leaders who don't do what the people want (85%).
- A smaller majority (57%) say Gambia needs many political parties to ensure that voters have a real choice.
- In the last national election, in 2017, about two-thirds (64%) of Gambians who were of voting age at the time say they cast ballots. Three in 10 (30%) say they attended a campaign rally, and 11% report working for a candidate or party.
- Seven in 10 Gambians (71%) say the 2017 election was generally free and fair, and 78% believe that announced election results were accurate.
- Small minorities report a variety of flaws in the 2017 election, including that some people's votes were not accurately counted or fairly reflected in results (16%) and that police or soldiers, rather than election officials, assisted voters (15%).
- Despite fairly positive assessments of election quality, only about half (49%) of citizens say they trust the Independent Electoral Commission "somewhat" or "a lot," a significant decline compared to 2018 (64%).

Support for elections

Almost nine out of 10 Gambians (88%) endorse elections as the best method for choosing leaders (Figure 1). Support for elections is uniformly high across key socio-demographic groups.

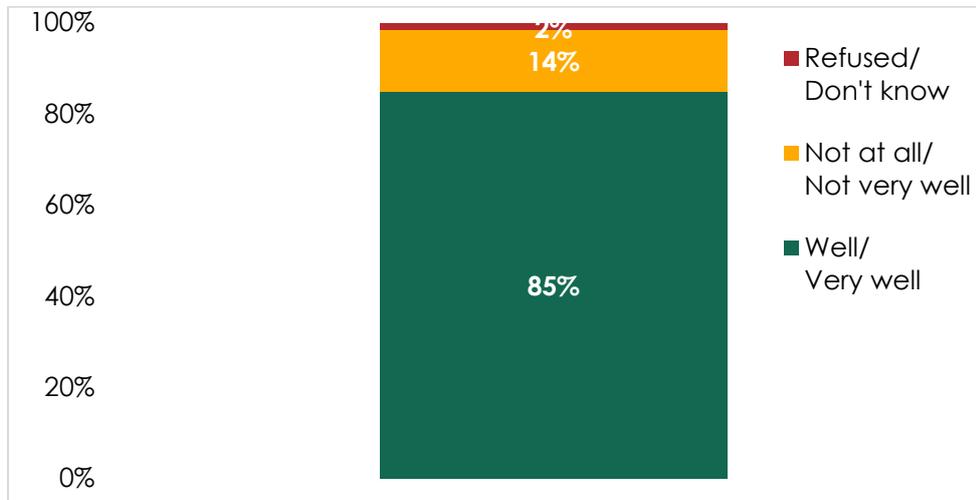
Figure 1: Support for elections as the best way to choose leaders | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

A similarly overwhelming majority (85%) think elections in the Gambia enable voters to remove leaders who do not fulfill the people's wishes, a belief supported by Barrow's victory over Jammeh in the 2016 election (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Elections as a tool for removing non-performing leaders | The Gambia | 2021

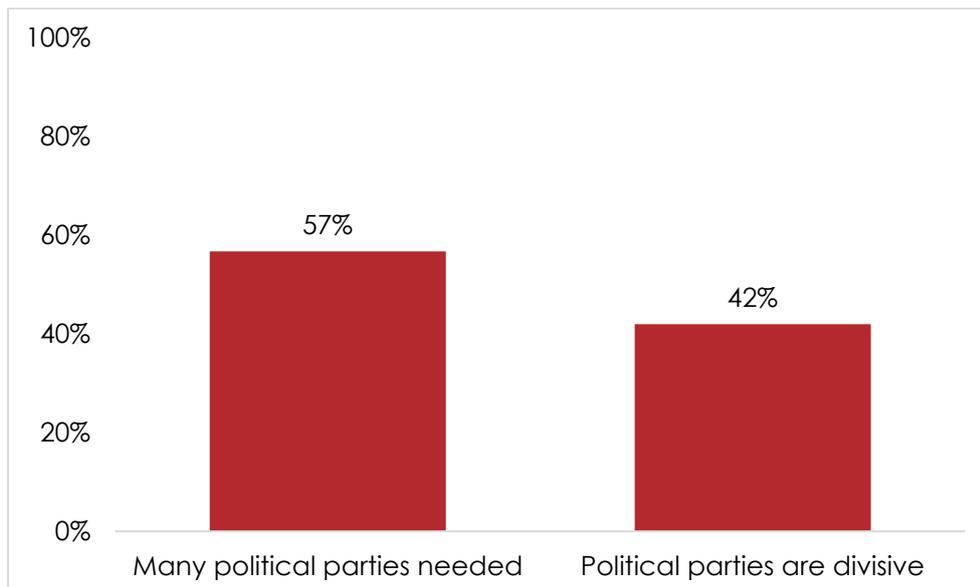


Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

Despite near-unanimous demand for elections, support for multiparty competition is weaker: 57% of Gambians say many political parties are needed to ensure they have real choices in who governs them. But more than four in 10 (42%) believe that political parties create division and confusion, and the country would be better off not having many of them (Figure 3).

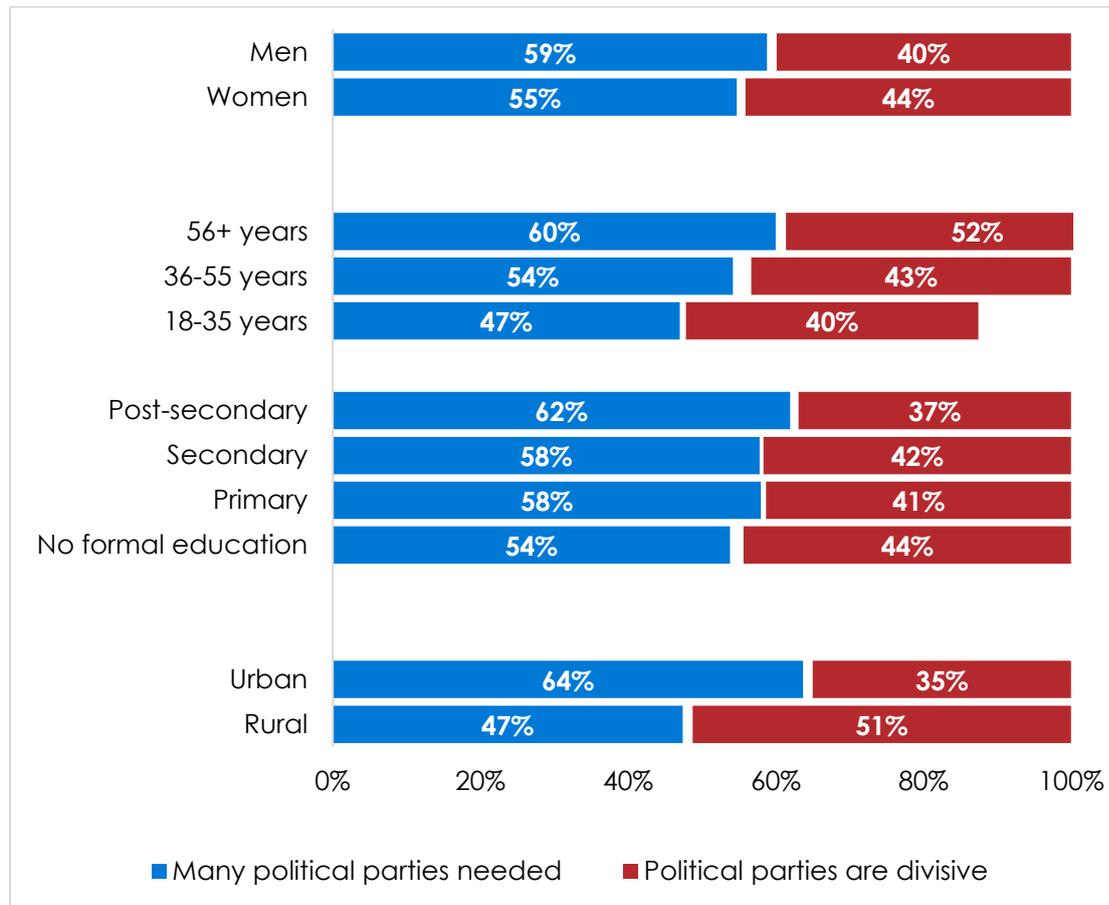
Support for multiparty competition is stronger in the cities (64%) than in rural areas (47%) and increases with respondents' education level and age (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Support for multiparty competition | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in the Gambia.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Gambians have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Figure 4: Support for multiparty competition | by socio-demographic group
 | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in the Gambia.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Gambians have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

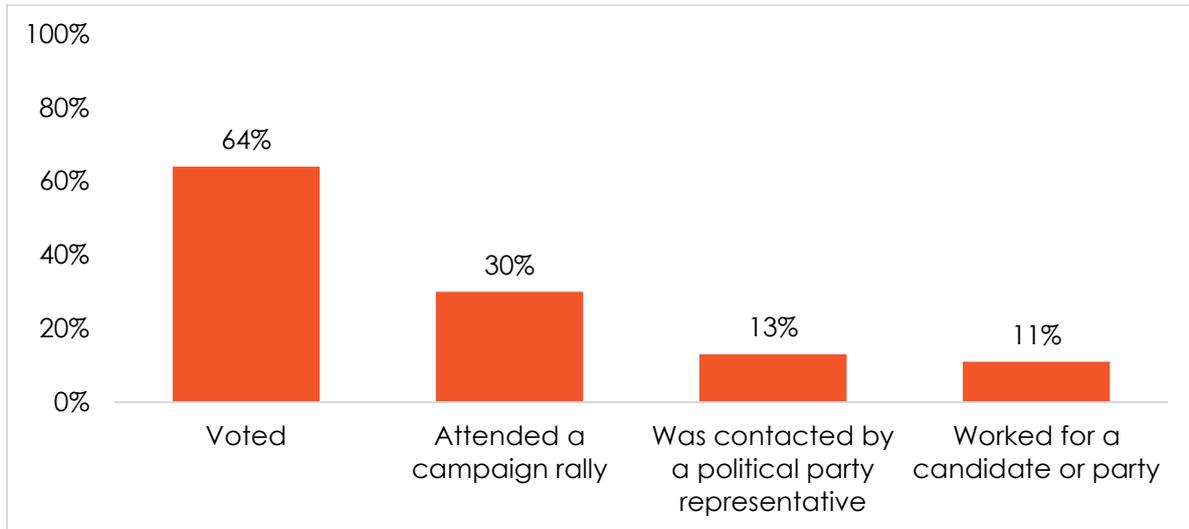
Participation in the 2017 election

While almost all Gambians support elections, far fewer participate in them. Excluding those who were too young to vote in 2017, about two-thirds (64%) of respondents say they voted in the most recent national election, while 35% say they did not (Figure 5).

Three in 10 (30%) say they attended a campaign rally, and 11% report working for a candidate or party. About one in eight (13%) say they were contacted by a political party representative during the campaign.

As reported by survey respondents, voting rates were considerably higher in rural areas (80%) than in cities (52%). Young citizens (57%) and the most educated respondents (47%) are far less likely to report having voted than their older and less educated counterparts (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Participation in the 2017 election | The Gambia | 2021

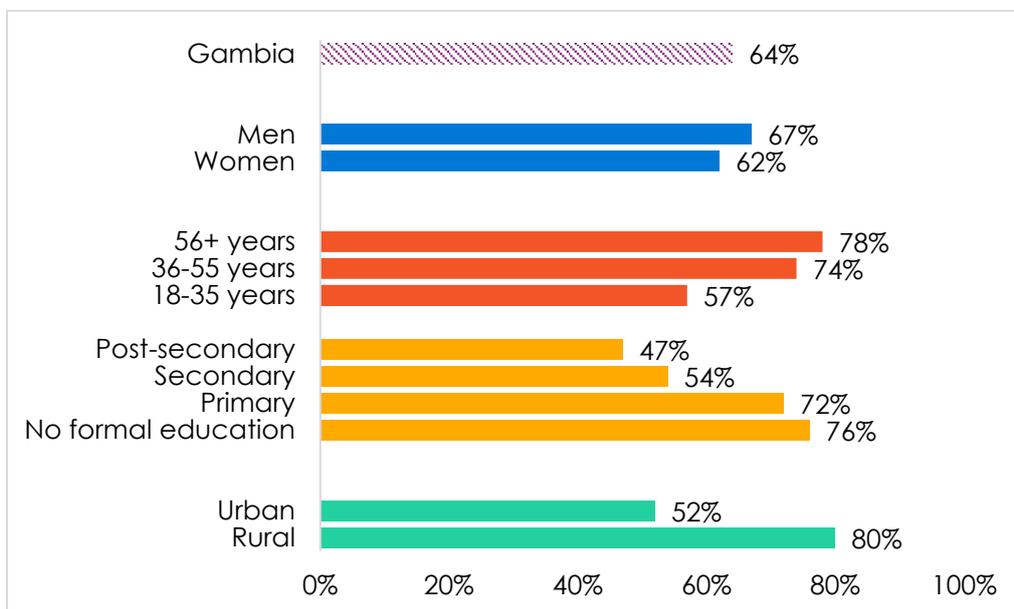


Respondents were asked:

People are not always able to vote in elections, for example, because they weren't registered, they were unable to go, or someone prevented them from voting. How about you? In the last national election, held in 2017, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2017 are excluded.)

Thinking about the last national election in 2017: Did you attend a campaign rally? Did you work for a candidate or party? Did any representative of a political party contact you during the campaign? (% "yes")

Figure 6: Voted in 2017 | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in 2017, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2017 are excluded.)

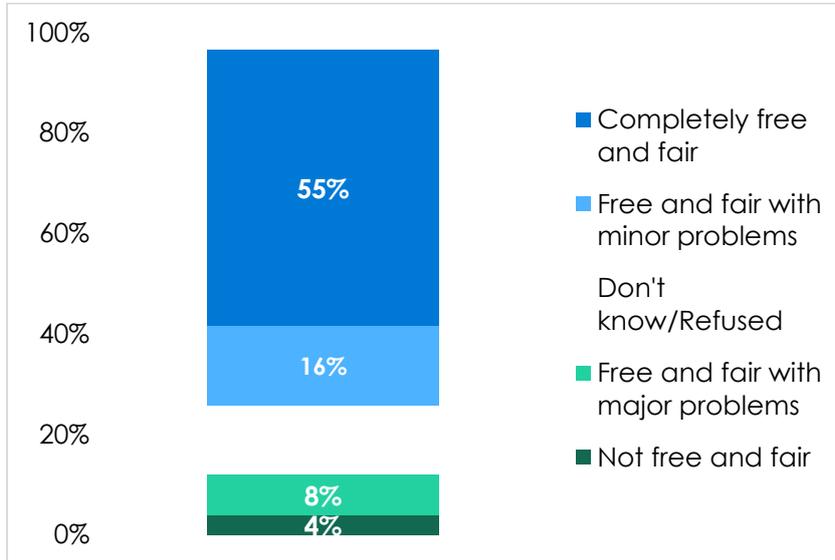
Election quality

While some elections are tainted by irregularities, fraud, and corruption, seven in 10 Gambians (71%) describe the 2017 parliamentary election as free and fair, including 55%

who say it was “completely free and fair.” Only about one in 10 say it was either “free and fair with major problems” (8%) or “not free and fair (4%)” (Figure 7).

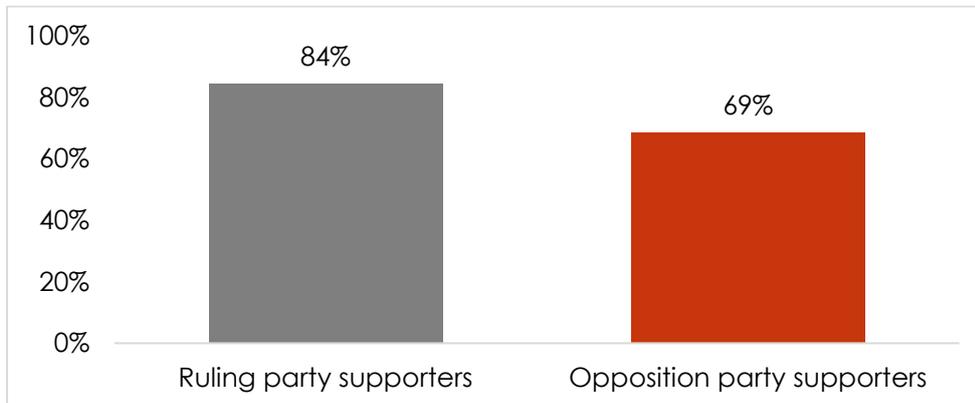
Even among respondents who say they “feel close to” the political opposition, more than two-thirds (69%) see the election as having been generally free and fair (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Freeness and fairness of 2017 election | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2017?

Figure 8: Freeness and fairness of 2017 election | by party affiliation | The Gambia | 2021

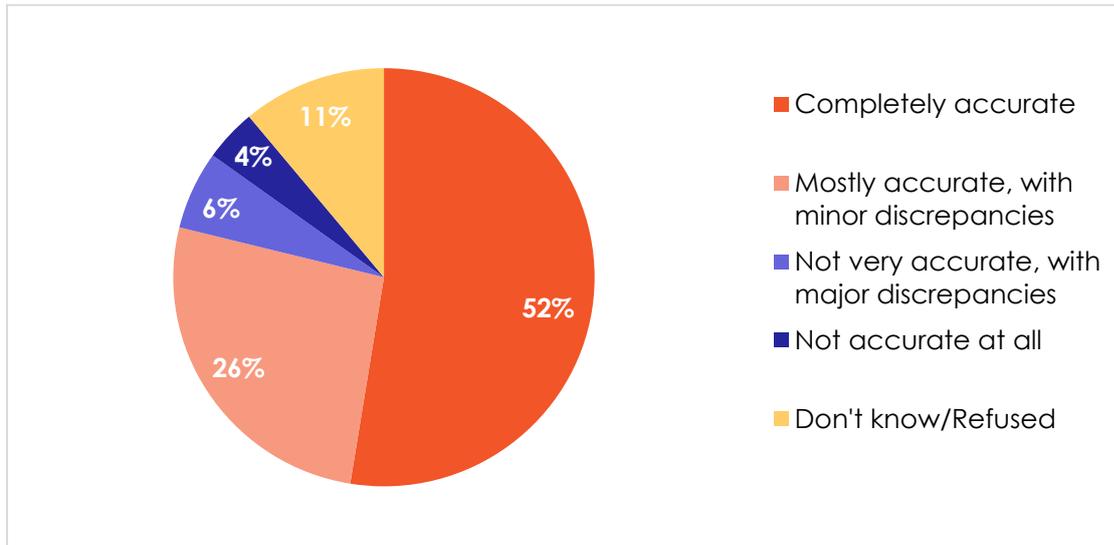


Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2017? (% who say “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems”)

One aspect of a fair election is that results announced by the Independent Electoral Commission correspond to the actual vote count and reflect the choice of the electorate. More than three-fourths (78%) of Gambians believe this was the case in the 2017 election, while only one in 10 respondents think announced results were “not very” or “not at all” accurate (Figure 9).

Even among opposition supporters, 77% accept the announced results as reflecting the votes as counted.

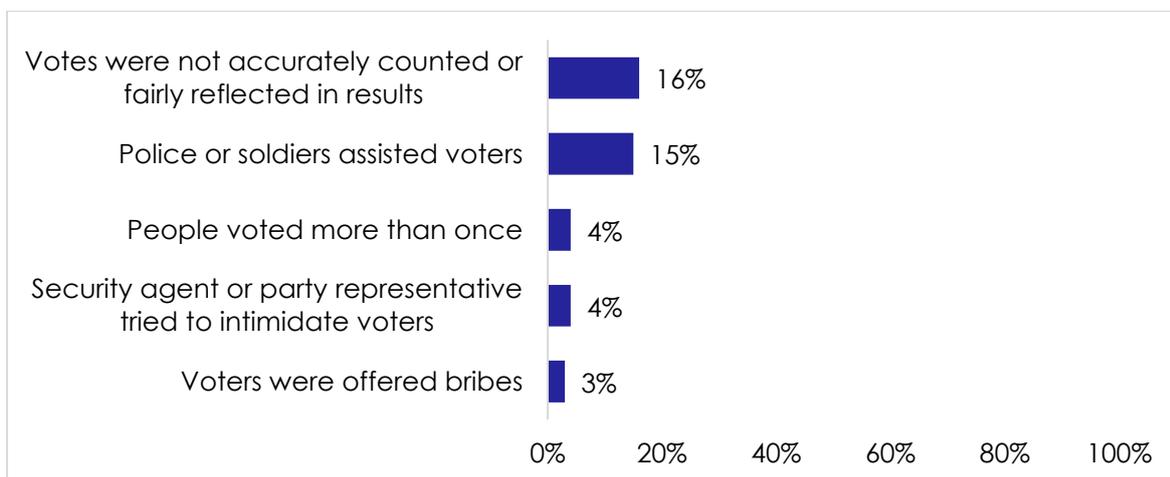
Figure 9: Accuracy of election results | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: With regard to the last national election in 2017, to what extent do you think the results announced by the Independent Electoral Commission accurately reflected the actual results as counted?

Fairly small minorities report a variety of flaws in the 2017 election, including that some people's votes were not accurately counted or fairly reflected in results (16%); that police or soldiers, rather than election officials, assisted voters (15%); that people voted more than once (4%); that security agents or political party representatives tried to intimidate voters (4%); and people were offered food, gifts, or money in exchange for their votes (3%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Electoral problems in 2017 election | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked:

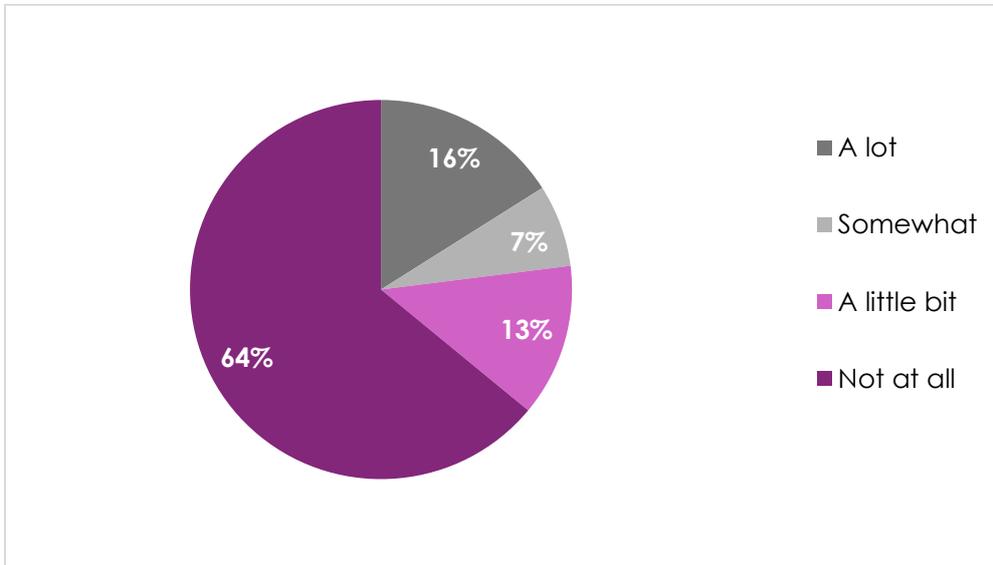
During the last national election in 2017, how often, if ever, did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food, a gift, or money, in return for your vote? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

In the last national election in 2017, how often did each of the following things happen: People's votes were not accurately counted or not fairly reflected in the results? People voted more than once? (% who say "a few times" or "often")

During the last national election in 2017, did you witness: Police or soldiers, rather than election officials, assisting some people to cast their ballot? Anyone from the security agency or a political party trying to intimidate voters? (% "yes")

About one in four respondents say they feared political intimidation or violence “a lot” (16%) or “somewhat” (7%) during the last national election, while more than three-fourths report fearing this “a little bit” (13%) or “not at all” (64%) (Figure 11).

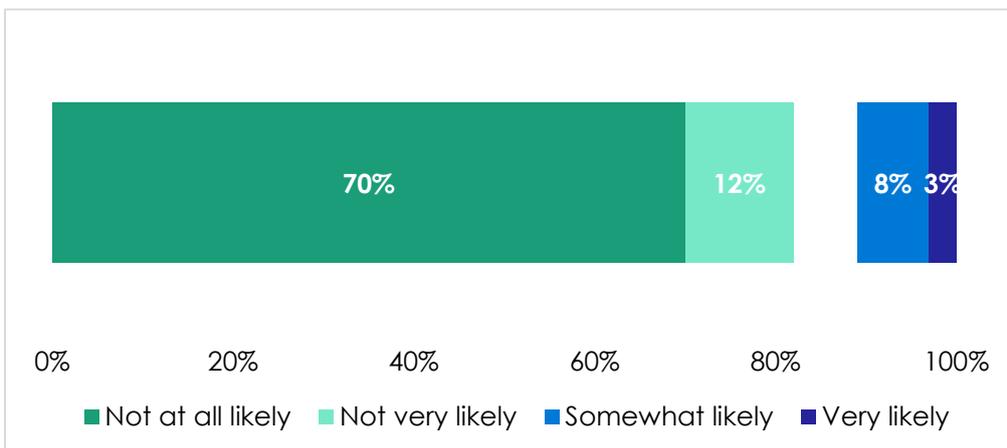
Figure 11: Fear of intimidation or violence | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: During the last national election campaign in 2017, how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

Most Gambians (82%) also trust that their ballots are secret. Only one in 10 (11%) consider it “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that powerful people can find out how they voted (Figure 12).

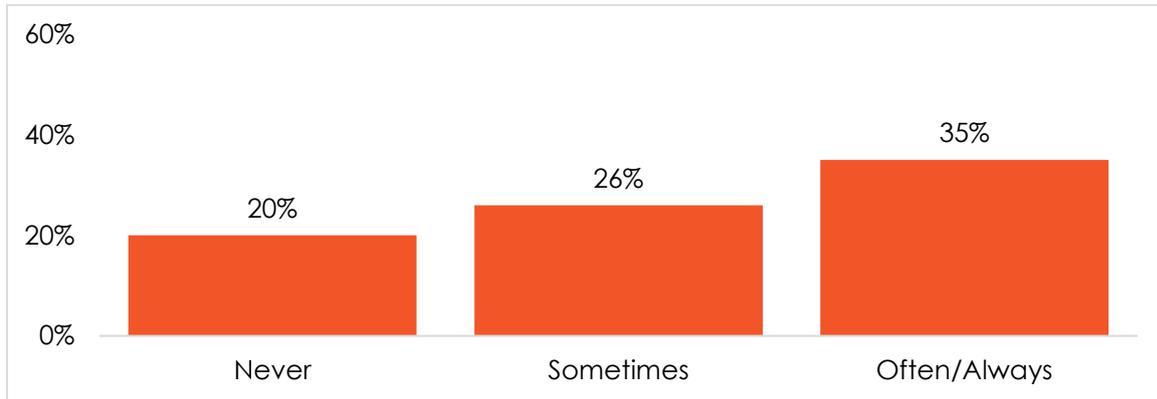
Figure 12: Views on ballot secrecy | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: How likely do you think it is that powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in this country?

But Gambians are less convinced of the fairness of election-related media coverage. Only about one-third (35%) say the media “often” or “always” provided fair coverage of all candidates in the 2017 election. One-fourth (26%) think media coverage was “sometimes” fair, and 20% say this was never the case (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Fair media coverage in the 2017 election | The Gambia | 2021



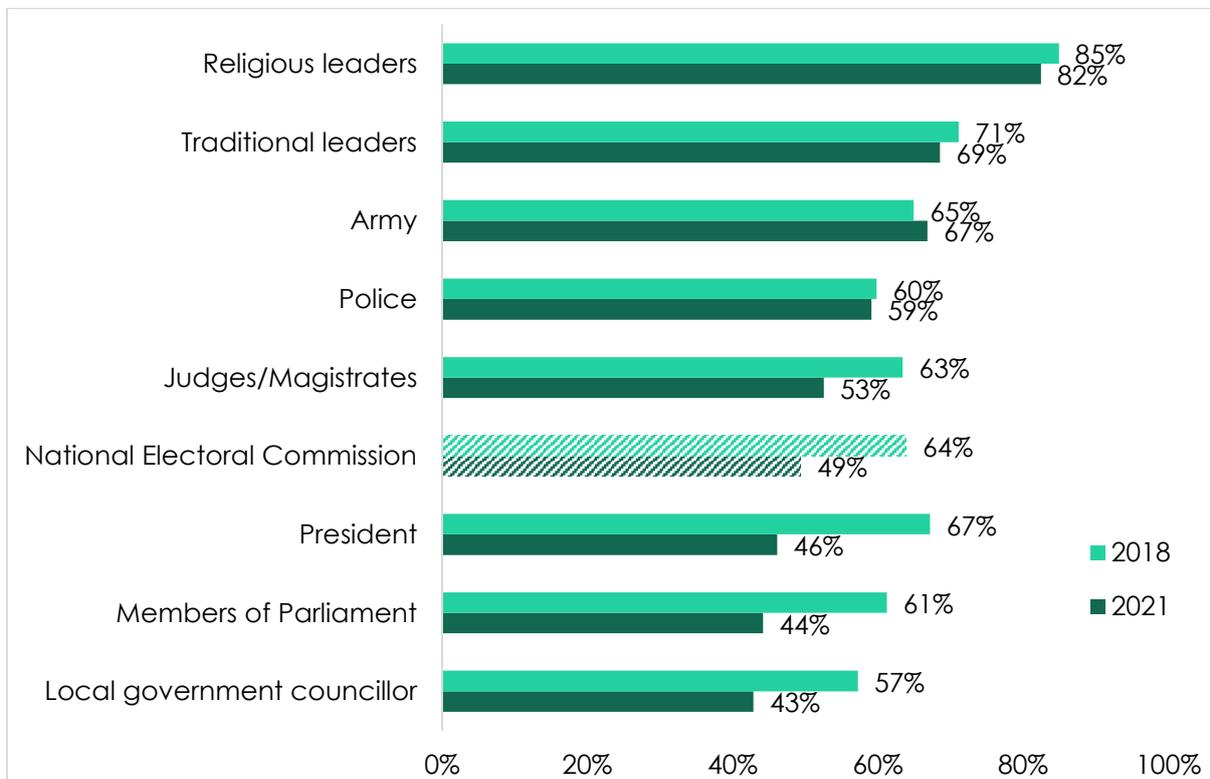
Respondents were asked: During the last national election campaign in 2017, how often did the media provide fair coverage of all candidates?

Trust in the Independent Electoral Commission

Despite fairly positive assessments of the electoral process, Gambians' trust in the Independent Electoral Commission has declined: Only about half (49%) of citizens say they trust the institution "somewhat" or "a lot," a significant drop from 64% recorded in 2018 (Figure 14).

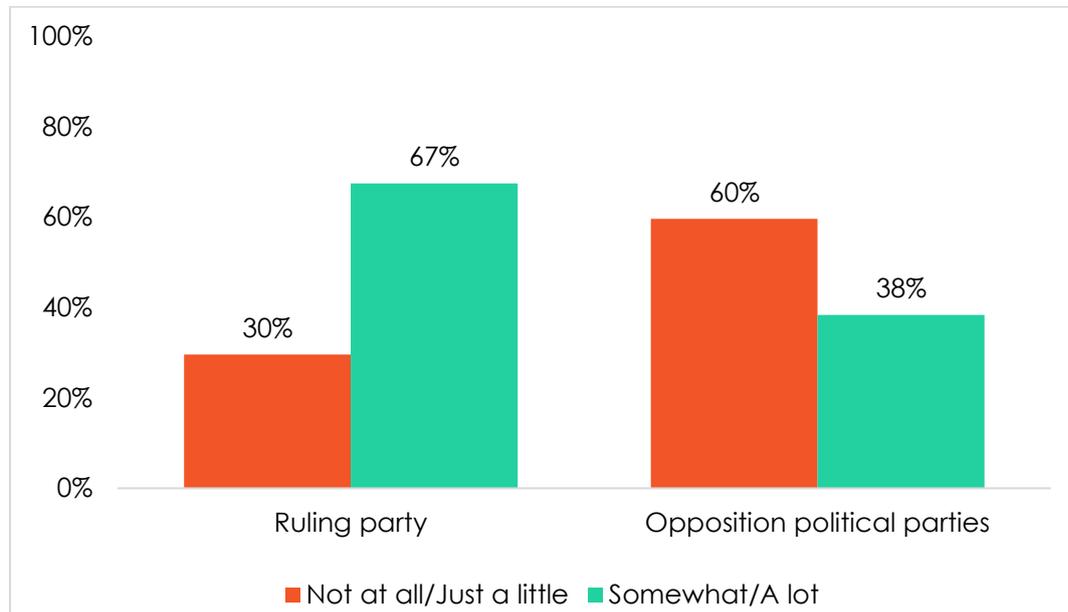
As might be expected, trust in the commission is far weaker among supporters of opposition political parties (38%) than among those close to the ruling party (67%) (Figure 15).

Figure 14: Popular trust in the Electoral Commission and other state institutions | The Gambia | 2018-2021



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

Figure 15: Popular trust in electoral commission | by party affiliation | The Gambia | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)?

Conclusion

New Afrobarometer survey findings show that most Gambians value elections as the best way to choose their leaders and are generally satisfied with the quality of their most recent election. This is significant because it suggests that Gambians desire to leave Jammeh's authoritarian legacy behind in favour of a new era of democracy.

One concerning trend is the decline in popular trust in the IEC. For the upcoming elections to meet citizens' expectations and build trust, the commission must be seen to be both independent and capable in its management.

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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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