

THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER: IMPARTIAL? INDEPENDENT?

Analysing South Africa's
media coverage of 2019
elections

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On behalf of Media Monitoring Africa
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) has monitored every single democratic election in South Africa. The results from our monitoring are used to spotlight both the successes of media houses, but also the blindspots that journalists might miss in their everyday reporting. This report forms part of a series of reports unpacking the quality of media coverage in the 2019 elections period. An interim report focusing only on the SABC's coverage of the elections was published in April 2019.

This research was undertaken through funding generously provided by Open Society Foundation (OSF), Raith Foundation and Luminate. This work would also not have been possible without the efforts of our developers based at Open Data Durban and Assemble as well as the twelve dedicated monitors who persevered in monitoring over 10 000 stories.

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INTRODUCTION

Elections are a crucial and critical part of any society that deems itself democratic. Through these, the citizenry, via the act of voting, have the opportunity to express their views on current issues as well as their frustrations towards leaders who may be failing them. However, in order to vote efficiently and choose a party or leadership that will enable the fulfilment of the people's choice of government, voters need to be well-acquainted with where candidates and parties stand on public policy issues and to be in a position to make an informed choice. For the electorate to know this, media (among other sources of information) has a vital role to play of not only informing but also educating and entertaining voters - more so for the public broadcaster (SABC), which has a role to represent society in all its diversity.

During the election period, the public broadcaster's mandate is clearly to report accurately, fairly and equitably on what political parties stand for and to cover political rallies, speeches, and other such events organised by political parties. The large political landscape in terms of political parties in the country can be a challenge, more so with the inclusion of close to 20 new parties, not only to the SABC, but to other media as well.

Nevertheless, unlike other media, the SABC has a mandate to perform to the highest ethical standards in order to meet this challenge and to ensure that citizens' voices are heard and information they need to know is published.

For the last two previous general elections, the SABC has been notable in how it sought to isolate itself from the rest of the media in South Africa. While clearly it has the largest mandate and in many ways needs to differentiate itself from other media, SABC often ran elections content with little consultation or engagement with the broader industry. These elections and the SABC's media coverage is notable for its clear shift to deepen its public service mandate but also to engage and work more cooperatively and closely with other media.

This report was also published in conjunction an full elections report and interactive online elections presentation where all monitored data is available for viewing and use by any interested members of the public. Please look on our website www.mediamonitoringafrica.org for more details.

For any questions, please contact MMA directly on (011) 788 - 1278 or info@mma.org.za

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HOW WE CONDUCTED THE RESEARCH

For this report, we were not able to monitor all SABC services but monitored major news stations, including radio, television and SABC Online, across 10 of South Africa's official languages¹. For radio, we monitored two bulletins a day for each station (one in the morning - 6am, and one in the evening - 6pm) as well as selected elections town hall programmes. For television, we monitored one prime-time news bulletin in the evening. We also monitored SABC 2's Morning Live and SABC 3's Democracy Gauge, as a full-length news programme and an elections-specific programme respectively. Within each bulletin or programme, we identified all stories related to the 2019 National and Provincial Elections in South Africa between 1 March and 15 May 2019.

Information from each elections story was checked and recorded by specially trained monitors at Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) and the data was captured in MMA's dedicated online database, *Dexter*. The data included: (1) name, type and origin of publication, (2) headline and summary, (3) main theme or topic of the story, (4) identity of sources (including name, race, gender and affiliation of individuals or groups who were accessed either directly or indirectly in the stories) and (5) whether any type of bias was present.

The results below reflect the data from 3137 elections items across the monitoring period.

With any research, there will be some limitations to the method employed. Despite recording, monitoring and analyzing over 3 000 elections items, loadshedding and technical difficulties meant that not every broadcast was recorded on our system. While all efforts were undertaken to ensure that all missing recordings were retrieved through other means, we note that there may still be a handful of items that did not make it into our analysis. Nevertheless, sample size of almost 4000 elections items over 2.5 months provides enough of a sample size to draw reasonable conclusions. Secondly, all monitors received the same monitoring training and followed the same carefully developed monitoring protocols. Despite these attempts at uniformity and standardisation of results, the possibility of some human error and/or bias cannot be completely eliminated.

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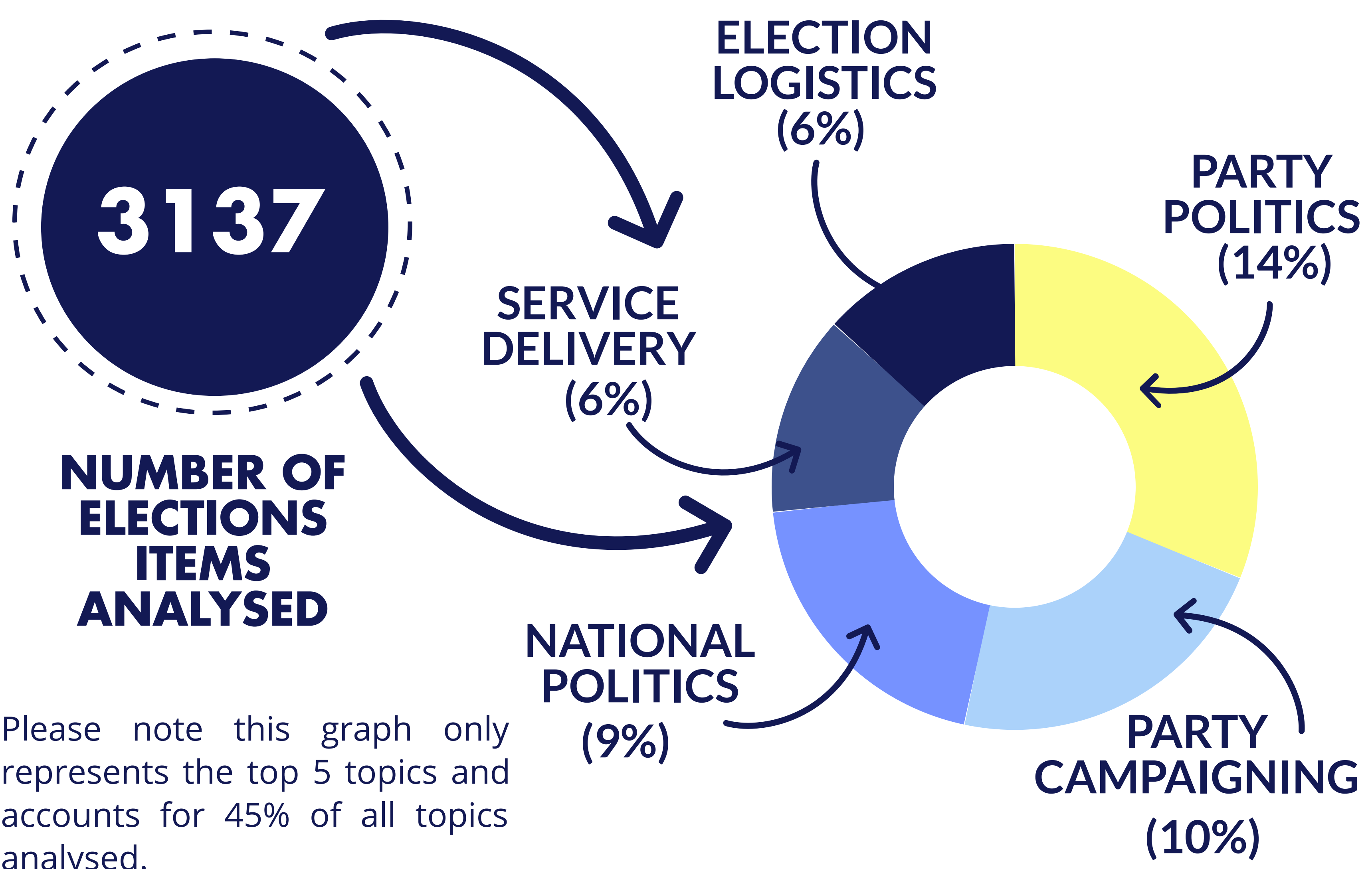
WHAT WE FOUND

1

WHAT WERE THE STORIES ABOUT?

This section of analysis unpacks the types of issues that media report on and it gives an idea of the types of stories that are prioritised in coverage over time. To do this, we identified an overarching theme or topic in each story. For instance, an item broadcast by SABC 3's English News (07-05-2019, 21h00) that reported on a service delivery protest that turned violent in Viljoenskroon (Free State) was categorised as "Demonstration and Protest". Likewise, a story that deals with the Electoral Commission's readiness to host elections and provides progress updates would be identified as "Elections logistics". An example of this type of story was published by SABC Online News, "IEC satisfied with voting abroad" (27-04-2019³), which unpacks how South Africans living abroad have cast their votes.

Figure 1. Top 5 topics across all elections coverage.

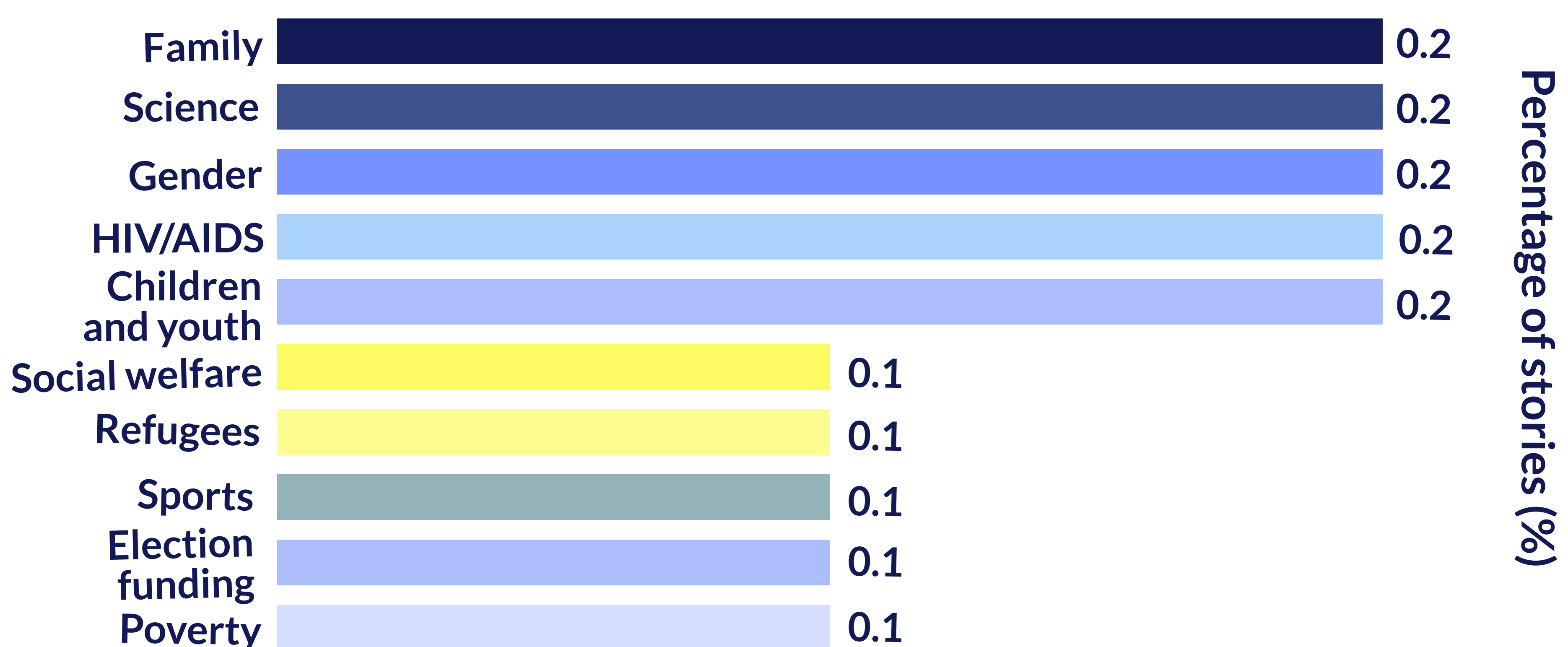


The results in Figure 1 show how, as expected, highly politicised issues took the spotlight in SABC’s 2019 elections coverage. Here, party campaigns, internal party politics and national politics were dominant themes and made up almost one third of all elections items in the three month period. Critically, this speaks to how the coverage of political events or shenanigans overshadowed the interrogation of politicians on their manifestos, ideas and solutions. This means that political parties and their politicians, while already using all measures to vie for the electorate’s attention, were then also in a position to steer the media agenda in the direction that they wanted. Nonetheless, the coverage afforded to these top three is significantly less than they were in 2014 (at 55%) suggesting a greater diversity and spread overall.

On a positive note, we do see how service delivery and community protests were steadily covered in the period and that these type of electorate issues are slowly making their way into the agenda. Importantly, though, many of these stories either became highly politicised (such as the protests in Alexandria, Johannesburg) or were only reported when the protests turned violent. Not only does this type of reporting undermine the genuine grievances of citizens, but it once again only frames them in relation to politics and/or electioneering. In this case, there is a clear need for a more thorough examination of the causes, consequences and lived realities of those most affected by the issues they are trying to raise.

In some ways, the inclusion of more citizen-centred issues speaks to the SABC’s mandate to reflect the views of all South Africans. However, other media monitored during this period equally reflected this upward trend and service delivery and community protests made up 6% and 5% of those elections items, respectively. Therefore while SABC is leading the charge when it comes to covering more and more electorate-focused stories, there seems to be a growing wave in the media community more broadly to report on these subjects too.

Figure 2. Critical issues that received <0.2% coverage



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WHOSE VOICES DO WE HEAR?

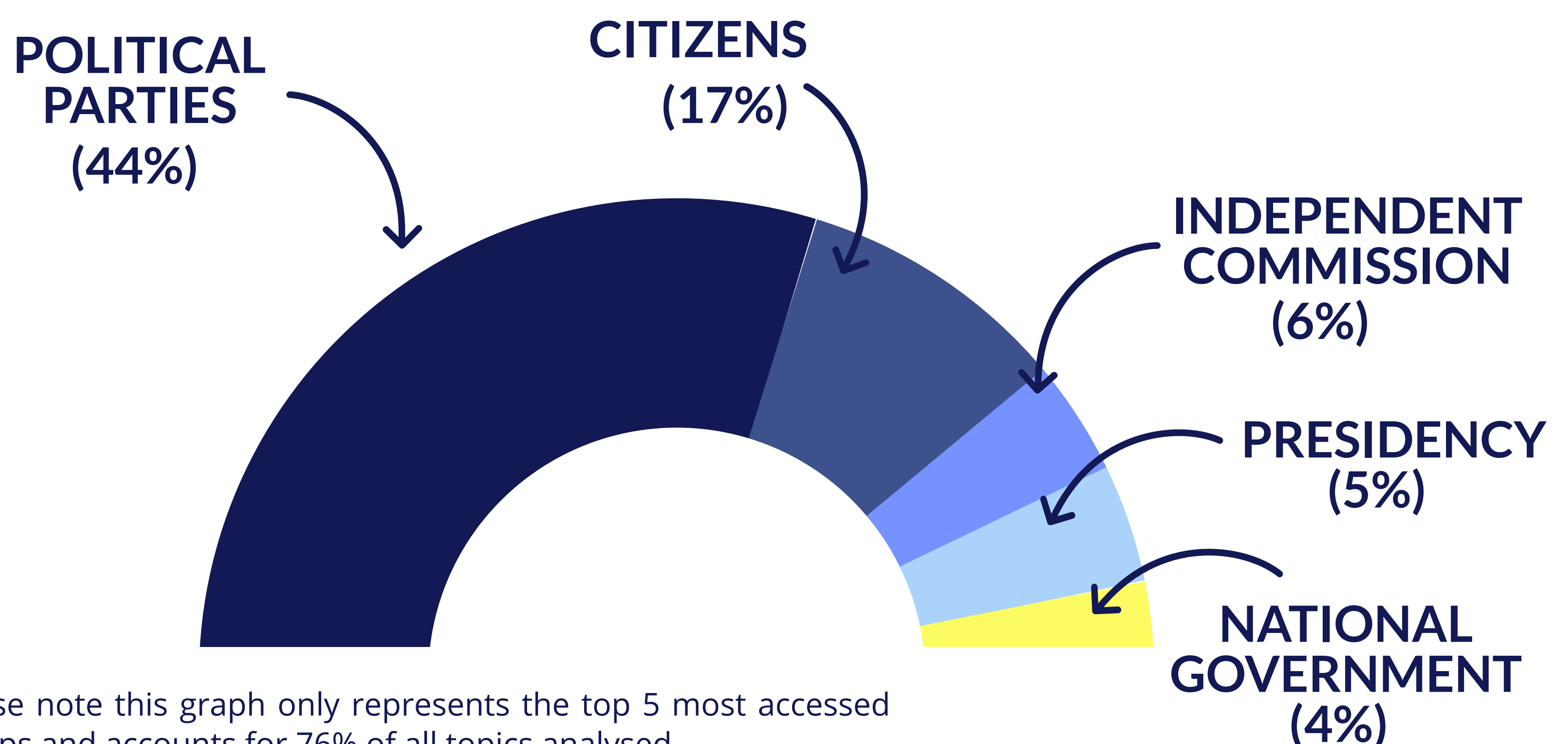
Analysing who gets to speak on which issues provides a window into whose voice is deemed important enough to contribute to public discourse. By unpacking the types of sources who are consistently sought after by the media, we begin to see who had the most opportunities to shape and frame elections issues. For our purposes, we define sources as any individual who is accessed or mentioned in a news story.

To start, there were 6 905 sources recorded in this monitoring period. This means that across all SABC channels and platforms, there were just over 2 (≈ 2.2) sources on average per elections item. Although this value may appear low relative to other global media, local source numbers in recent years have stagnated to 1.9 sources per story⁴. While there is still some work as numbers of sources are good indicators of quality journalism, this small upward trend indicates some level of improvement and is to be commended.

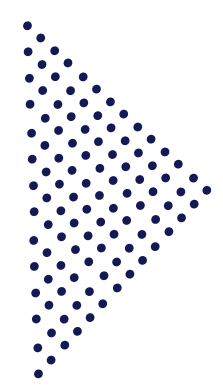
Which groups are accessed?

In a significant diversion from previous elections periods, citizen voices constituted almost a fifth of all sources accessed across SABC platforms. While this was in part due to the elections-specific programme, Democracy Gauge, it appears that deliberate efforts to access more of the electorate was evident across all stations. Interestingly, too, Independent Commissions identified here were made up primarily by the Electoral Commission speak to the electoral expertise and insight provided by the institution charged with independent elections. As expected and in line with all the other media monitored³, political parties were the most accessed at 44%. The clear effort to source citizens voices is positive but the dominance by political parties' views means there is less interrogation of what the parties are putting out in the public domain and the public, in turn, will be less exposed to views and perspectives other than what parties are seeking to put out.

Figure 3. The most frequently accessed groups in SABC elections coverage



Please note this graph only represents the top 5 most accessed groups and accounts for 76% of all topics analysed.



How did political parties fare?

Throughout an elections period, the media have the difficult task of providing free, fair and equitable coverage to all political parties. With the rise in number of political parties who threw their lot into the fray, the task becomes more arduous, more so for the SABC, a public broadcaster whose prerogative is to cater to the whole of South Africa in digital and broadcast channels. As such, the question we are interested in is whether the SABC afforded equitable coverage to the parties. It is clear that the SABC had set out and designed specific principles and guidelines to help determine party political coverage in the news. These included taking into account the individual parties' track records and existing parliamentary support, together with ensuring fair coverage. For example, if party X accuses party Y in a story and even if party Y has minimal public support, the need for fairness, especially during an elections period, necessitated that party Y would indeed still have the right of reply in the story. All of these elements were also considered based on their newsworthiness at the time and this series of decisions was informed by the SABC's editorial policies and mandate.

Over and above instituting a clear policy to help ensure fair adherence to equitable coverage, the SABC should also be commended for standing up and protecting their editorial independence. This was clearly evident when SABC refused to comply with the demands from the African Content Movement (ACM) that they cover their manifesto launch live. The SABC went to court to protect their independence and won⁵.

Bearing these internal shifts in mind, the research reveals that amongst the top five parties, the SABC did a tremendous job in covering of the respective parties as the party coverage closely matched the votes received. The leading party, both in share of media coverage and share of votes, is the ANC, who received a share of 53% of media coverage and 57% share of votes. The DA with 21% of national votes and EFF with 11% were even more closely aligned with 19% and 11% of media coverage, respectively. This particularly close correspondence between votes received and media coverage were largely shared across other local newsrooms³.

This is also true for the smaller parties such as the UDM and NFP, whose share of media coverage is proportional to the votes the parties received, all below the 1% mark. It is only on a few occasions, involving the ATM and GOOD Party, where media coverage received by the parties from the SABC surpassed the share of votes they received, but on a very marginal scale. Even so, this is still commendable work done by the public broadcaster.

Figure 4. Media coverage (%) vs votes received for top 5 parties

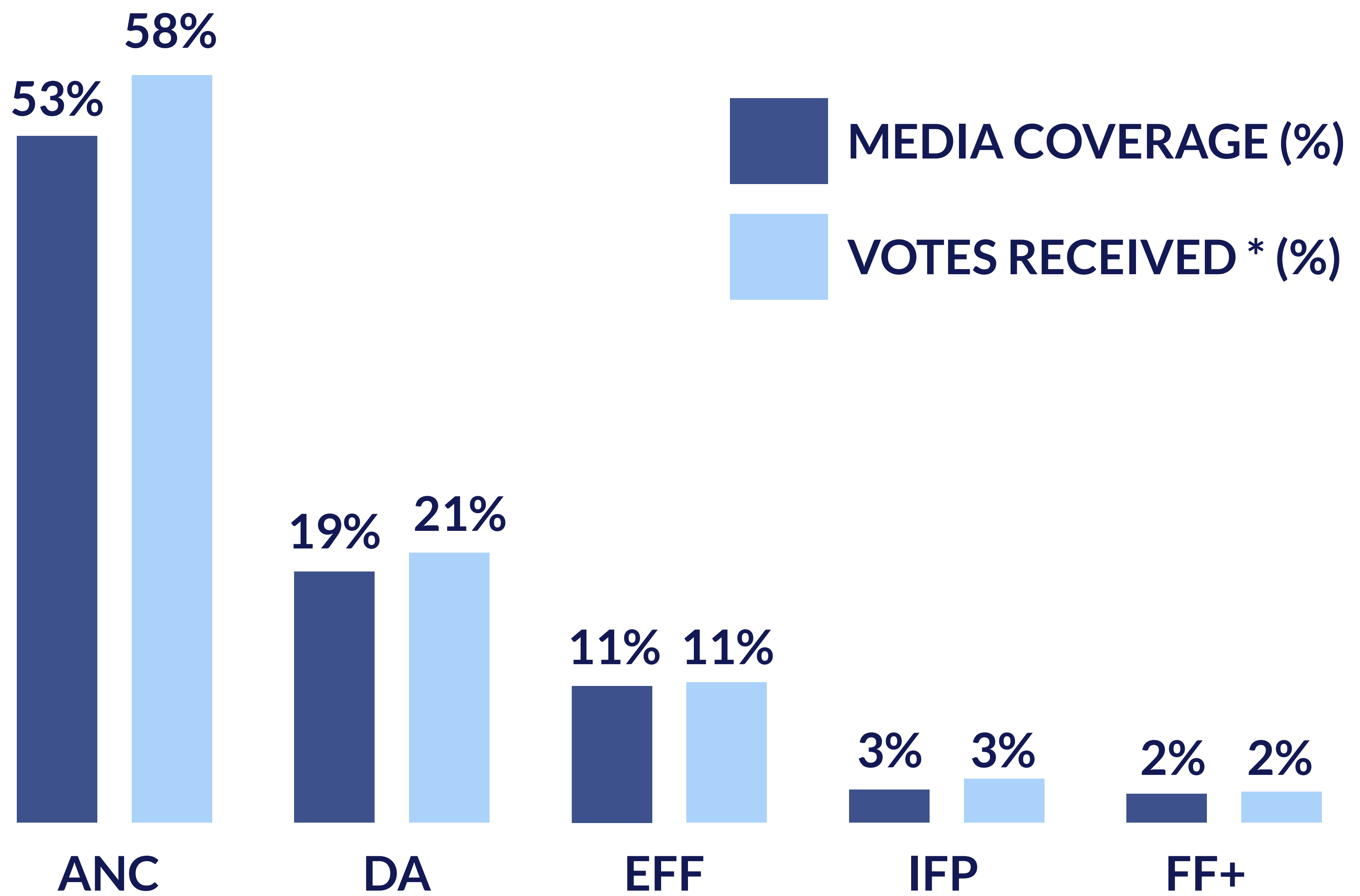
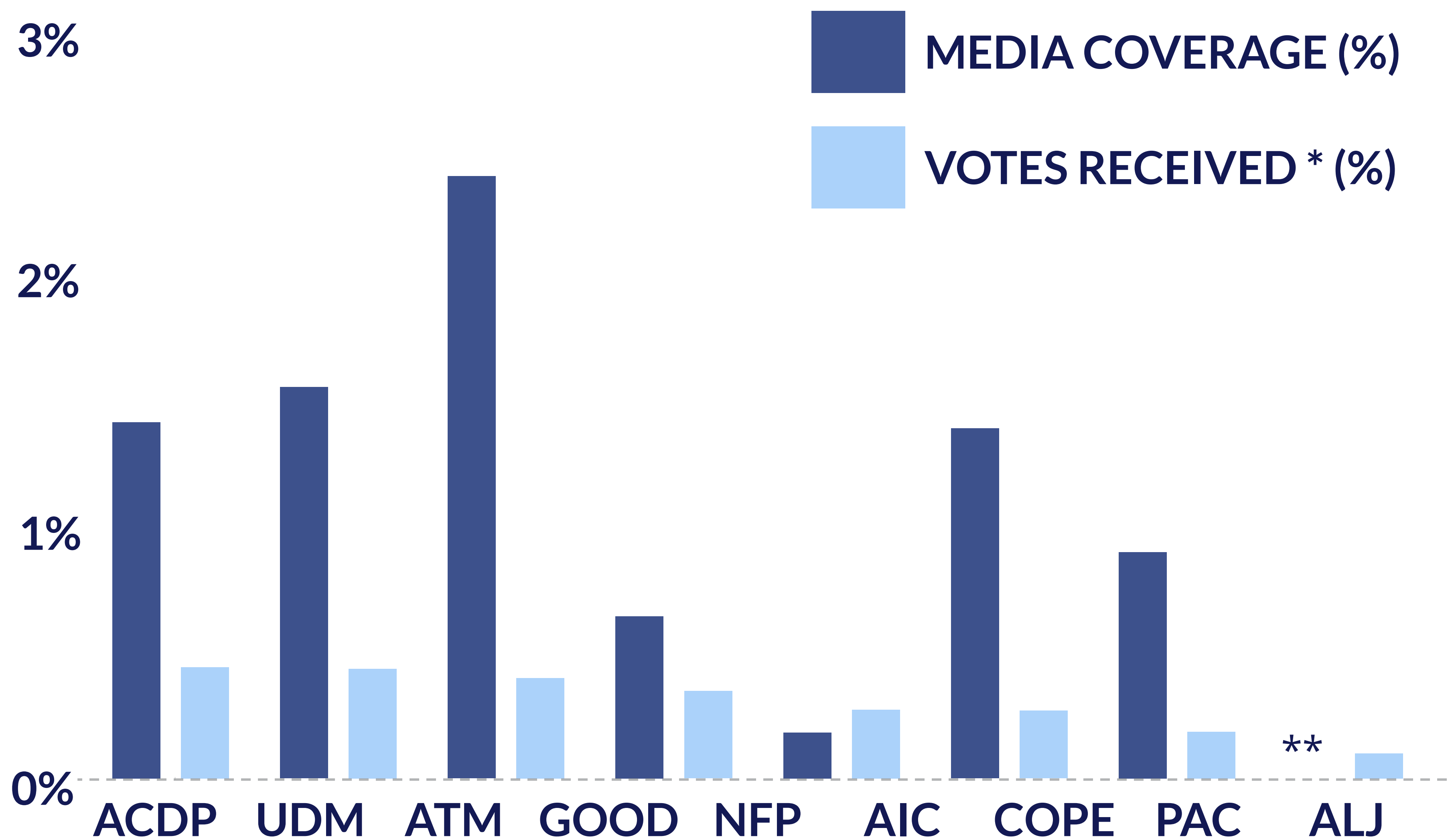
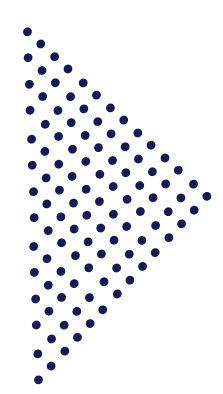


Figure 5. Media coverage (%) vs votes received for remaining parties in National Assembly.



* Votes received: The values are rounded up and are based on final IEC national results.

** Al Jama-ah gained one seat in Parliament. However, it was only covered in a handful of stories in the media monitored and it therefore appears as zero in the graph.



What was the race breakdown of those accessed?

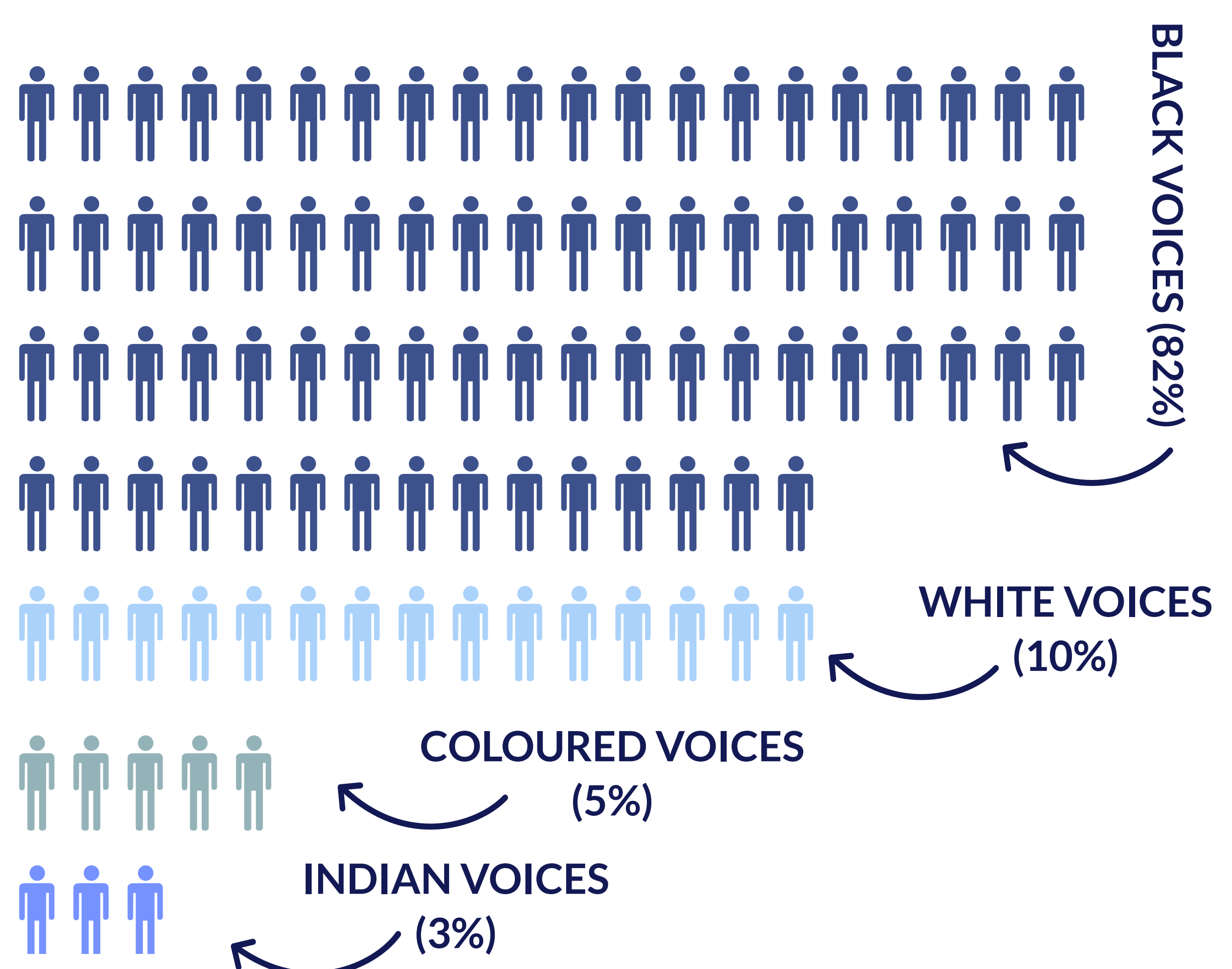
Coming from a long history of racial prejudice and polarisation, South Africa has recently been a hotbed of reverberating calls for transformation in all spheres and sectors of society, including the media. These calls further formed part of political party manifestos and rally speeches across the many political parties contesting the 2019 national and provincial elections. As such, the guiding question for our research was how does the racial diversity of sources compare to population demographic data? Does the media make it their prerogative to seek out voices from across the racial spectrum or do they tend to focus on one type of group over another?

What the findings reveal to us is that the accessing of Black and White sources was roughly in line with the national demographics of both racial groups. Here, Black sources make up both 82% of sources and 81.5% of the South African population⁶, while White voices at 10% represent 8% of the population that they comprise⁶. In an unprecedented case, both Indian and Coloured voices were also accessed proportionally to their national population percentage.

In previous research, Indian voices generally received far greater representation while those of Coloured people were usually under-represented. The fact that the racial breakdown of sources is more closely aligned with population demographics is a key discovery and plays in stark contrast to the perpetually poor racial representation of sources in other media.

For example, analyses conducted in the same elections period showed once again the over-representation of White and Indian voices at the expense of Coloured voices³. The public broadcaster is to again be commended for seeking to close the gap between disproportionate media coverage and the national demographics of the diverse people of South Africa.

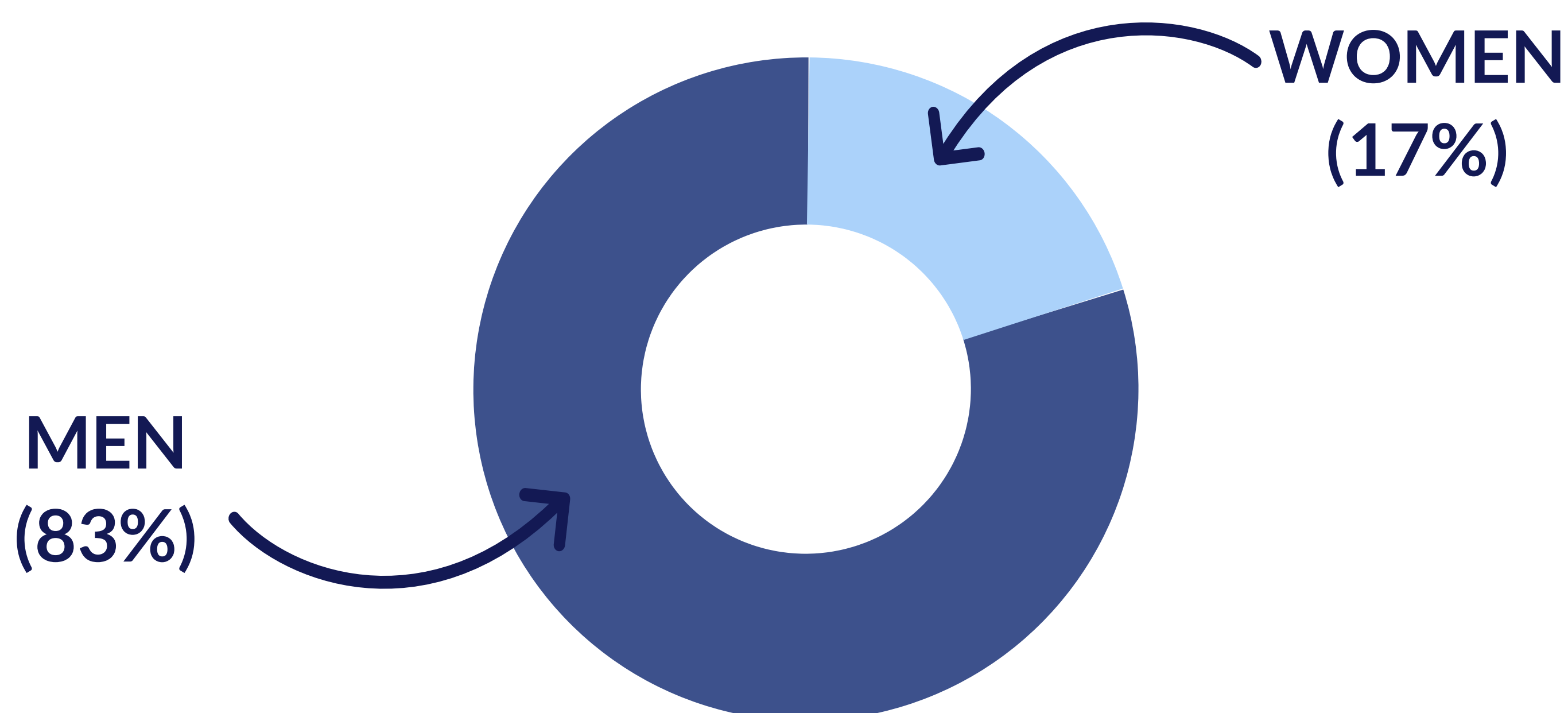
Figure 6. Breakdown of all sources by race



What was the gender breakdown of those accessed?

South Africa has a population of over 57 million citizens, 51% of whom are women⁷. One of the key roles of the public broadcaster is to represent the diversity of society. Despite this, as the findings reveal, women's voices remain marginalised and under-accessed, by receiving only 17% share of overall media coverage. The under-representation of women is not unusual and has been shown time and time again in elections coverage^{8,9,10}. What is important, however, is that the SABC fell below even the meagre representation of women by other media houses in this elections period. MMA's latest elections research shows that across all South African newsrooms analysed, women's voices made up only 20% of sources accessed³. This suggests a patriarchal bias in accessing voices and sourcing opinions from the electorate, privileging the voices of men over women. Furthermore, this speaks to the leadership make-up of the political parties involved, where the women representatives find very little representation. This is not only an SABC challenge or indeed a South African phenomenon but is the case in the majority of other countries across the globe¹¹. Given this reality, it is of utmost importance that the public broadcaster, the would-be leader of quality reporting and journalism, devises a different approach to gender sources, beyond the usual roles of child-rearing and victims of gender-based violence.

Figure 7. Breakdown of all sources by gender



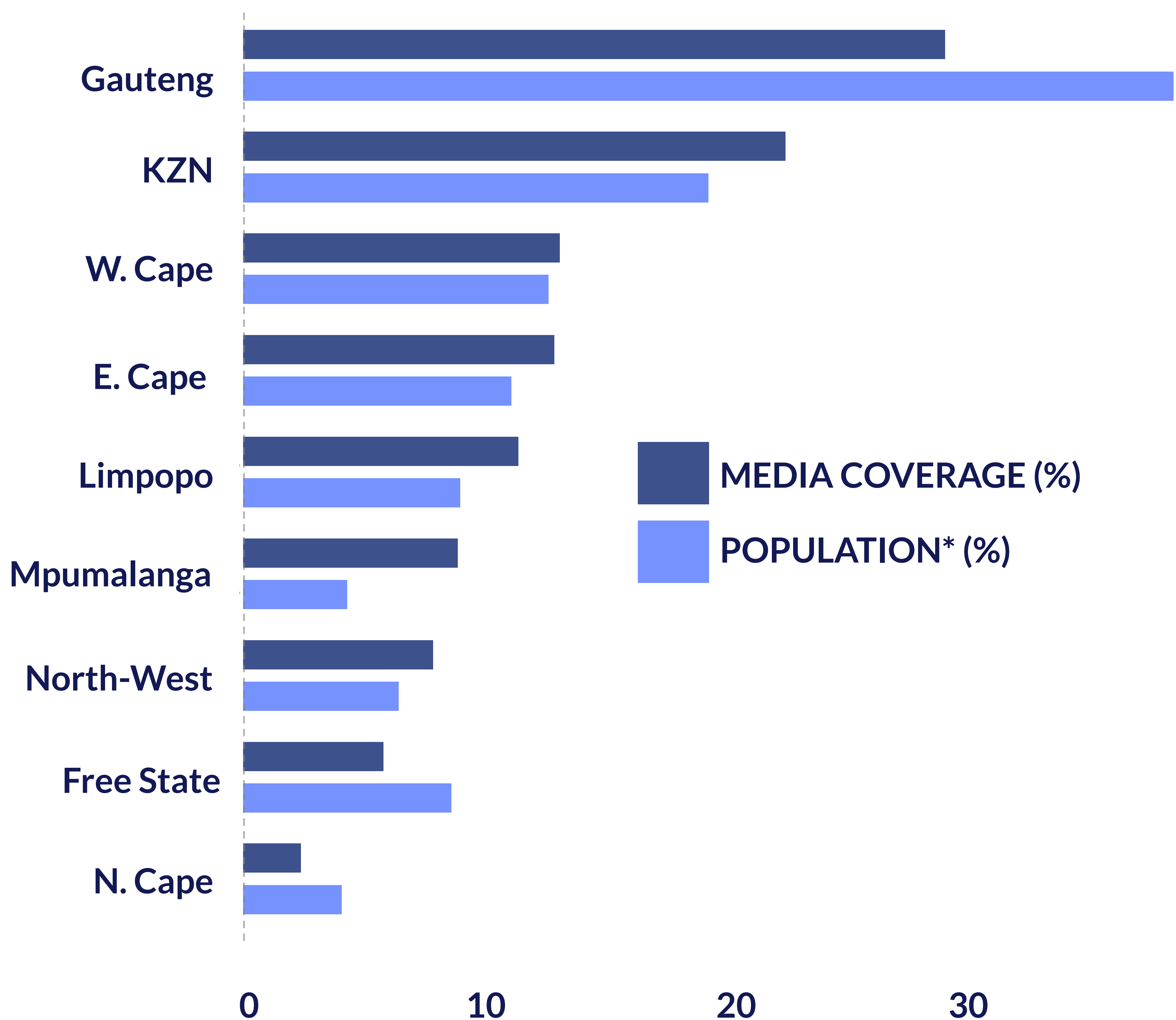
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WHAT WAS THE REGIONAL DIVERSITY IN COVERAGE?

One of the key tenets of the SABC's public broadcaster mandate is to reflect the diversity and interests of South Africa's people. One way of analysing this is to see whether the range and spread of communities, regions and provinces is suitably represented in media coverage by answering the following questions: Are stories limited to and concentrated in a small number of places in the country? And does the geographical diversity of coverage correspond to the number of people living there?

Our findings show that the SABC managed not only to report elections from across the length and breadth of the country, but they also largely succeeded in covering provinces broadly corresponding to population densities. Gauteng, as one of South Africa’s major urban hubs and business districts, was one notable exception and received more than their share of media attention. While it is not unusual for large metropolitan areas to receive more coverage¹², this elections period saw a far more equitable distribution of stories than previously. While there is always more to be done to cover historically underserved and marginalised areas, such as Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West, the results here show significant positive steps in rectifying these regional imbalances. Interestingly, the findings for the SABC closely follows trends in geographical diversity exhibited by other media houses where Gauteng largely remains over-represented but where coverage of other areas is improving from previous elections periods³.

Figure 8. Media coverage (%) vs Population (%)
across different provinces



*Estimate of South African population living in that province according to StatsSA (2011)

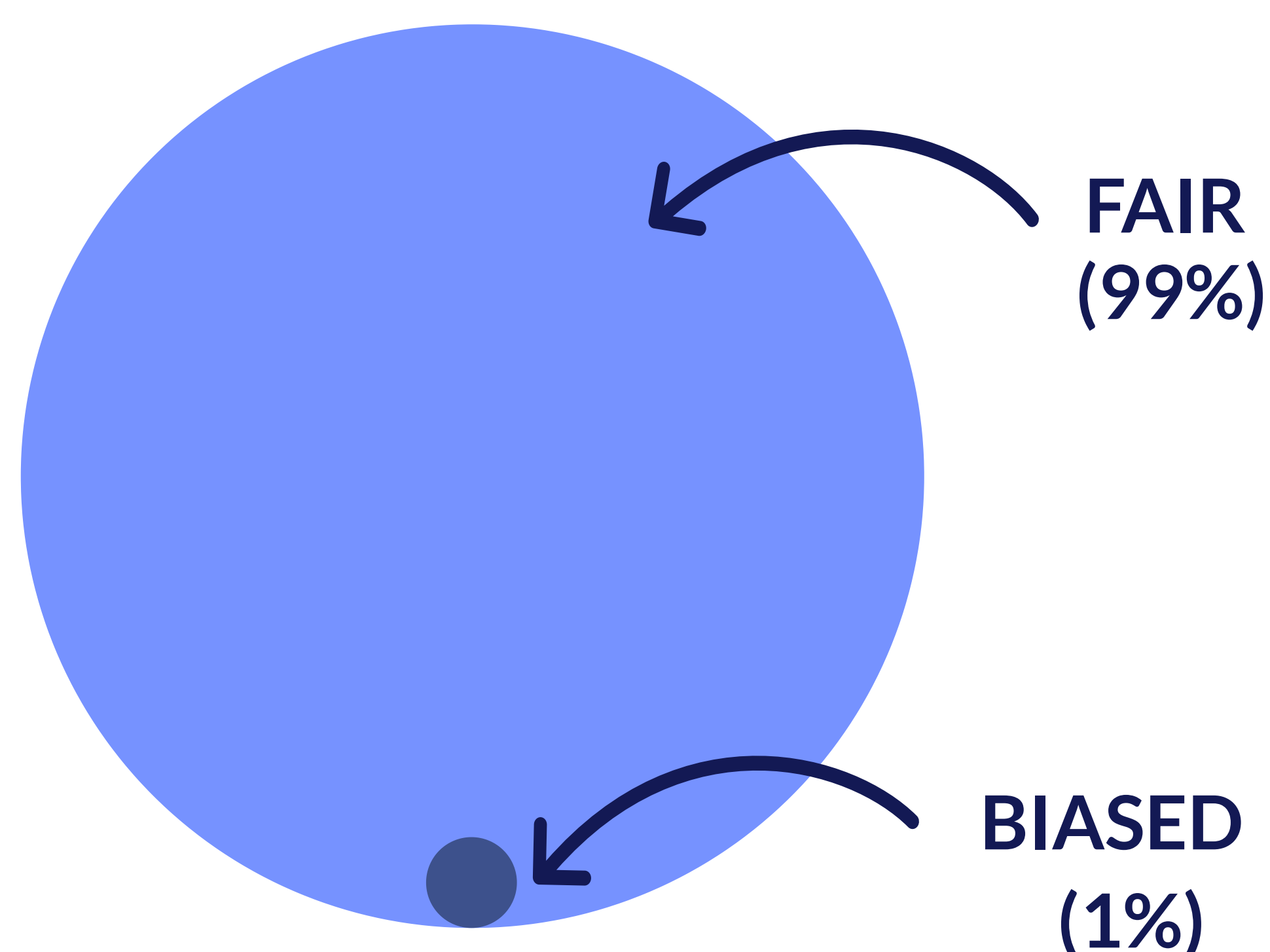
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HOW FAIR IS THE COVERAGE?

Assessing levels of fairness and balance in news is a fundamental aspect of any media elections analysis. Fairness speaks to newsrooms' responsibilities to provide audiences with information that presents political parties, their views and activities in a clear and impartial manner, which promotes informed decision-making when it comes to voters casting their ballots. This is made all the more important for the public broadcaster for three reasons. Firstly, the SABC's mandate is one of editorial independence and fairness. Secondly, the public broadcaster has widest reach across all public and private media platforms and often accesses even the most marginalised of society. And thirdly, because the SABC is a highly contested political space that has often been manipulated by those in power for their own gain. In 2016 Municipal Elections, for example, various nefarious forces were at play to control SABC news services and this resulted in systemic bias across some SABC platforms for the first time¹². For these reasons, we unpack the level of fairness of SABC's coverage in an elections period in more detail.

In an extremely positive turn of events, we see that almost all SABC elections items (99%) were balanced and fair in this monitoring period. This is in stark contrast to 2016 findings which saw 10% of coverage demonstrating some level of impartiality and bias. For this period, one the biggest issues was that of omission where some parties were not afforded the opportunity to respond to allegations against them. Different types of language bias also crept into the mix and were seen in a handful of stories. The numbers were however minimal and do not warrant deeper investigation. This sharp shift in unbiased elections coverage is a sign of hope for the public broadcaster.

Figure 9. Percentage of stories that were fair vs biased.



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HOW DID MEDIA PERFORM OVERALL?

In order to gain a picture of the quality of coverage as a whole, we calculated an elections ratings score for each SABC programme and channel. This score was based on each of the indicators analysed above and was developed after extensive consultations with media industry bodies, journalists and data scientists.

Each indicator is weighted differently, depending on its importance to quality ethical elections coverage and is informed by a human rights media agenda. The ratings score comprised of: (1) fairness, (2) gender representation, (3) spread of topics, (4) depth of information and (5) diversity of sources. Because there is no “perfect” score when it comes to media performance, the rating is comparative rather than an absolute total. i.e. the numbers provided indicate how each station measures up to other SABC programmes and this ensures that media are evaluated on the same scale¹³.

The top 10 programmes are shown in the table below. Democracy Gauge, as one of the few elections-specific shows across all South African media, was clearly the favourite in terms of quality reporting. This stemmed not only the number of sources and non-political voices accessed but also from the wide spread of often human rights-focused stories and better gender representation than other media. This shows the importance of dedicated elections programming that can offer richness and texture of information to audiences beyond simple news snippets and soundbytes. In an equally positive move, SABC 1 Siswati/Ndebele evening news alongside Thobela fm, Lesedi fm and Motsweding fm all showed exceptional levels of balance as well as depth of information. These stations should be applauded for their hard work, despite the ongoing financial and political crises that plagued the broadcaster as a whole. It is hugely encouraging to see that five of the top 10 elections rated media in this analysis were from the SABC. While there is always room for improvement in any sector, it is remarkable that the public broadcaster, despite ongoing financial crises, managed to write such a successful elections story for themselves.

Table 2. Overall elections rating for top 10 South African media. SABC media highlighted in bold

1	Democracy Gauge (SABC3)
2	GroundUp
3	Daily Maverick
4	SABC 1 Siswati/Ndebele News
5	Thobela fm
6	Die Son
7	The Daily Vox
8	Isolezwe
9	Lesedi fm
10	Motsweding fm

04

CONCLUSIONS

SABC's coverage of the 2019 general elections are to be strongly commended, not just because they were overwhelmingly fair, but because:

- There was a clear shift to offer more citizens voices,
- Political parties were equitably covered
- SABC stood up for their editorial independence
- Provincial coverage was in line with general population spread,
- To the best of our knowledge, no formal complaints about the SABC's failure to run party adverts or messages were lodged

Clearly these amazing achievements need to be balanced against the patriarchal bias that exists within all media, and against the generally low levels of interrogation of party manifestos and of critical issues around land, children, poverty alleviation, jobs, and gender based violence. Importantly, too, many of the large improvements noted in SABC reporting, in terms of regional and party diversity, were also seen in coverage by other media. However, these gaps in coverage as well as the similarity to other newsrooms cannot and should not detract from the achievements of the SABC in these elections.

These findings are all the more positive and extraordinary when one considers the huge pressure that they were placed under by the numerous political parties all seeking to sway the SABC. When we reflect that just three years ago, they were in danger of losing all credibility and their basic ability to report fairly was being questioned, and when we consider that for much of the lead up to the elections the SABC had no quorate Board and that the SABC was and remains in a profound financial crisis. Despite all the other challenges we face as a nation, we can take heart and be inspired by the incredible effort made by those at the SABC to deliver accurate fair and equitable coverage of the 2019 National and Provincial Elections.

REFERENCES

[1] Please see the table below for the full list of media analysed.

[2] Article accessed here: <http://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/iec-satisfied-with-voting-abroad>

[3] Findlay, S.J. and Dayile, A. 2019. "So much choice, but not enough voice? Analysing media coverage of 2019 Elections in South Africa" pp. 15

[4] Smith, T. and Bird, W. 2019. Infographic: Media trends for World Press Freedom Day.

[5] For more information, you can read here : <http://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/sabc-to-defend-urgent-application-by-acm-to-cover-its-manifesto-launch-live/> and <http://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/motsoenengs-acm-accuses-sabc-of-obstructing-freedom-of-expression/>

[6] StatsSA, 2011. South African census.

[7] Approximately 51% of the South African population is female (StatsSA, 2018).

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[13] For more information on the elections rating score and system, please contact MMA directly on (011) 788 - 1278 or info@mma.org.za