SO MUCH CHOICE, BUT NOT ENOUGH VOICE?

Analysing South Africa's media coverage of 2019 elections

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ELECTION COVERAGE 2019

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INTRODUCTION

2019 marked 25 years of democratic rule in South Africa and coincided with the sixth democratically held elections since the advent of democracy in 1994. During such a delicate period of elections on the national calendar, institutions such as the media – rightfully categorised as the fourth estate – play a crucial role in disseminating information to the electorate from the elite and vice versa, in order to facilitate informed decision-making when citizens exercise their vote at the election polls. As such, it is important then that the media demonstrates not only fairness and impartiality, but also highlight issues that affect South African citizens' lives and futures, including but not limited to poverty, unemployment and inequality as well as gender based violence to name a few.

Furthermore, covering what citizens need to know encourages informed choices and effective voting through reporting on parties and candidates, informing the public where they stand on key political issues. Since 1994, the past 25 years have illustrated the importance of elections as one of the founding pillars of democracy by empowering citizens to express their views on current affairs as well as their frustrations towards leaders and political parties who they may feel is failing them.

To hold the media accountable to these high level principles, 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. What follows is the final in a series of reports that unpacks the quality of media coverage in the 2019 elections period. While our previous reports focused specifically on media coverage in March and April 2019 with deep-dives into gender and land respectively, this report analyses all data captured over the whole three month period.

This report was also published in conjunction an 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

The data presented here was collected from 61 South African news media[1], including online, radio and television, from 1 March – 15 May 2019. For digital media, MMA's internal monitoring tool, *Dexter,* scrapes all media content from online news websites which are then stored in a searchable database. For radio, we monitored two bulletins a day for each station (one in the morning - 6am and one in the evening - 6pm). 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.

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 specialized online software, *Dexter*. This included: (1) name, type and origin of publication, (2) headline and summary, (3) main topics of the story, (4) the identities of all sources (including name, race, gender and affiliation) and (5) whether any type of bias is present. The results here are an analysis of the 10796 stories that form part of the dataset in this full 2.5 month period.

With any research, there will be some limitations to the method employed. Despite recording, monitoring and analyzing over 10 000 elections items, loadshedding and technical difficulties meant that not every broadcast was recorded on our system. In these cases, we approached the media houses directly and by and large received the recordings that we were missing. We note that there may still be a handful of items that did not make it into our analysis. 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.
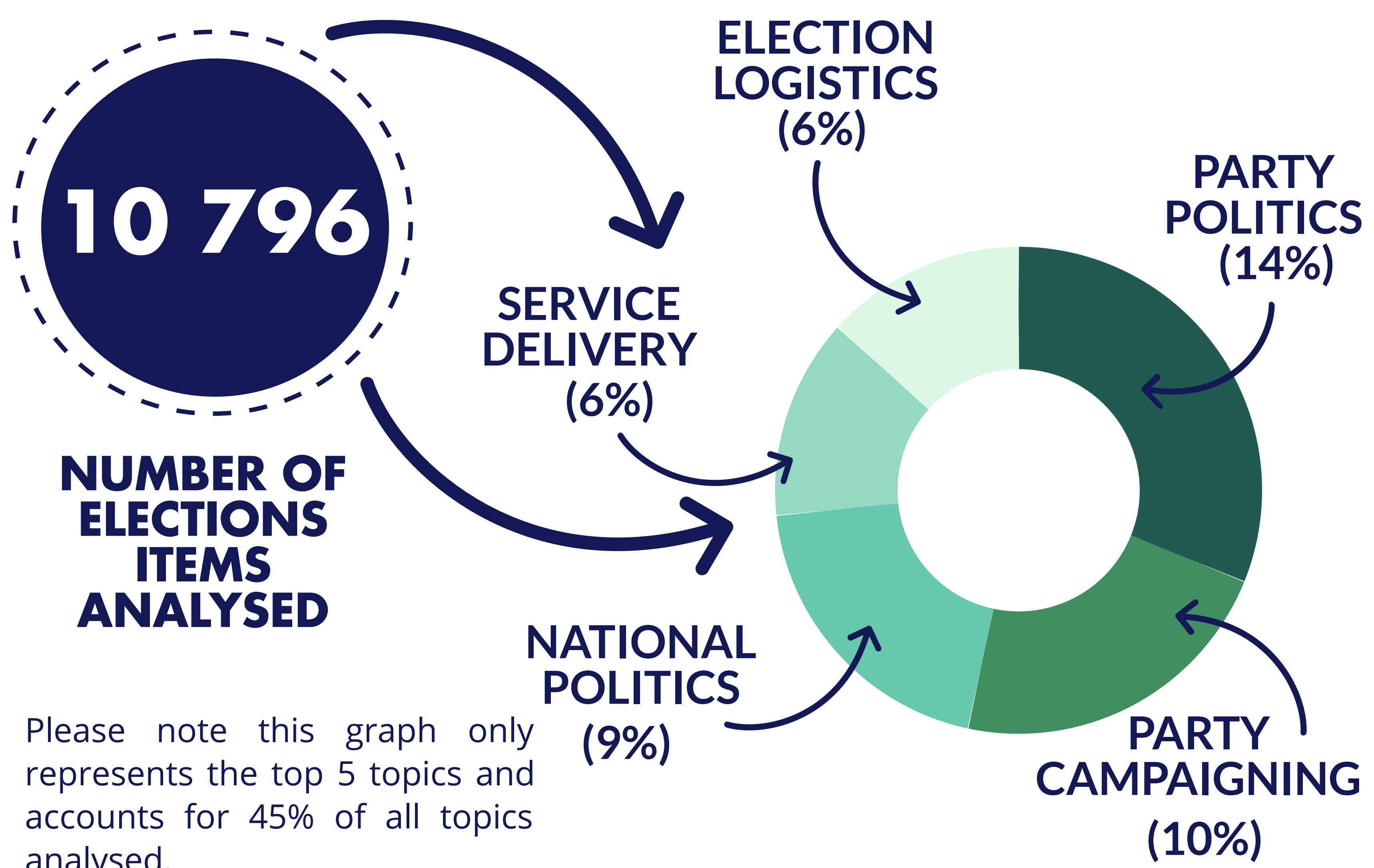
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WHAT WE FOUND

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1 ## WHAT WERE THE STORIES ABOUT?

By identifying the main subjects of stories, we can begin to unpack the types of issues that are prioritised on the media agenda over time. To do this, we identified the major theme in each news item from an extensive pre-existing list. For example, the story, "DA invites Ramaphosa to join them in Alexandra 'to account'" (*The Citizen,* 06-04-2019 [2]) was identified as a "Political Party Politics" item as it reports on the opposition party leader, Solly Msimang, calling on South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, to engage with angry Alexandra residents following violent protests in the township. On the other hand, the story "Wednesday is D-Day for parties to submit candidates lists" (*SABC Online,* 12 March 2019 [3]) unpacks how political parties need to present their party candidate lists and pay the registration fee to the Electoral Commission (IEC) in order to participate on 8 May 2019. This story was primarily around the requirements and activities surrounding the elections, and was therefore identified as "Elections logistics" item.

Figure 1. Top 5 topics across all elections coverage.

10 796

NUMBER OF ELECTIONS ITEMS ANALYSED

Please note this graph only represents the top 5 topics and accounts for 45% of all topics analysed.

ELECTION LOGISTICS (6%)

PARTY POLITICS (14%)

SERVICE DELIVERY (6%)

NATIONAL POLITICS (9%)

PARTY CAMPAIGNING (10%)

Our results here show the propensity of South African media to discuss and examine more politicised issues over those that citizens might see as important. In this case, internal party politics, political campaigning and national politics made up over one-third of all stories in the three-month analysis period. Interestingly, these top 3 topics accounted for 56% of stories analysed in 2014 elections coverage. Therefore, while these still make up the bulk of stories, there appears to be a far greater diversity and spread of issues reported than in other periods. This, in and of itself, is to be widely commended.

Importantly, too, we see that the coverage of some citizen-centred issues such as service delivery (6%) made it onto the media agenda. While this is by and large a positive development, the quality of these types of stories were often mixed and were usually steeped in political rhetoric rather than with the citizen-focused lens.

In line with this, a critical aspect of elections coverage is to provide the electorate with an understanding of what political parties will do once they are voted into power. This would mean identifying key issues that voters face and having political parties identify and unpack the solutions that they would implement to address them. In this case, we see how significant citizen issues such as refugees, social welfare, HIV/AIDS, poverty and people living with disabilities were relegated to the periphery of public discourse during these elections.

When we consider that South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world and where 30.4 million people are deemed to live below the poverty line , the fact that only a handful (<0.2%) of stories zeroed in on these types of subjects is abysmal. Much work is needed in newsrooms to ensure that we shift the conversation away from internal party politics and superficial electioneering to ensure that these types of subjects get the in-depth quality reporting that they deserve.

Figure 2. Critical issues that received <0.2% coverage
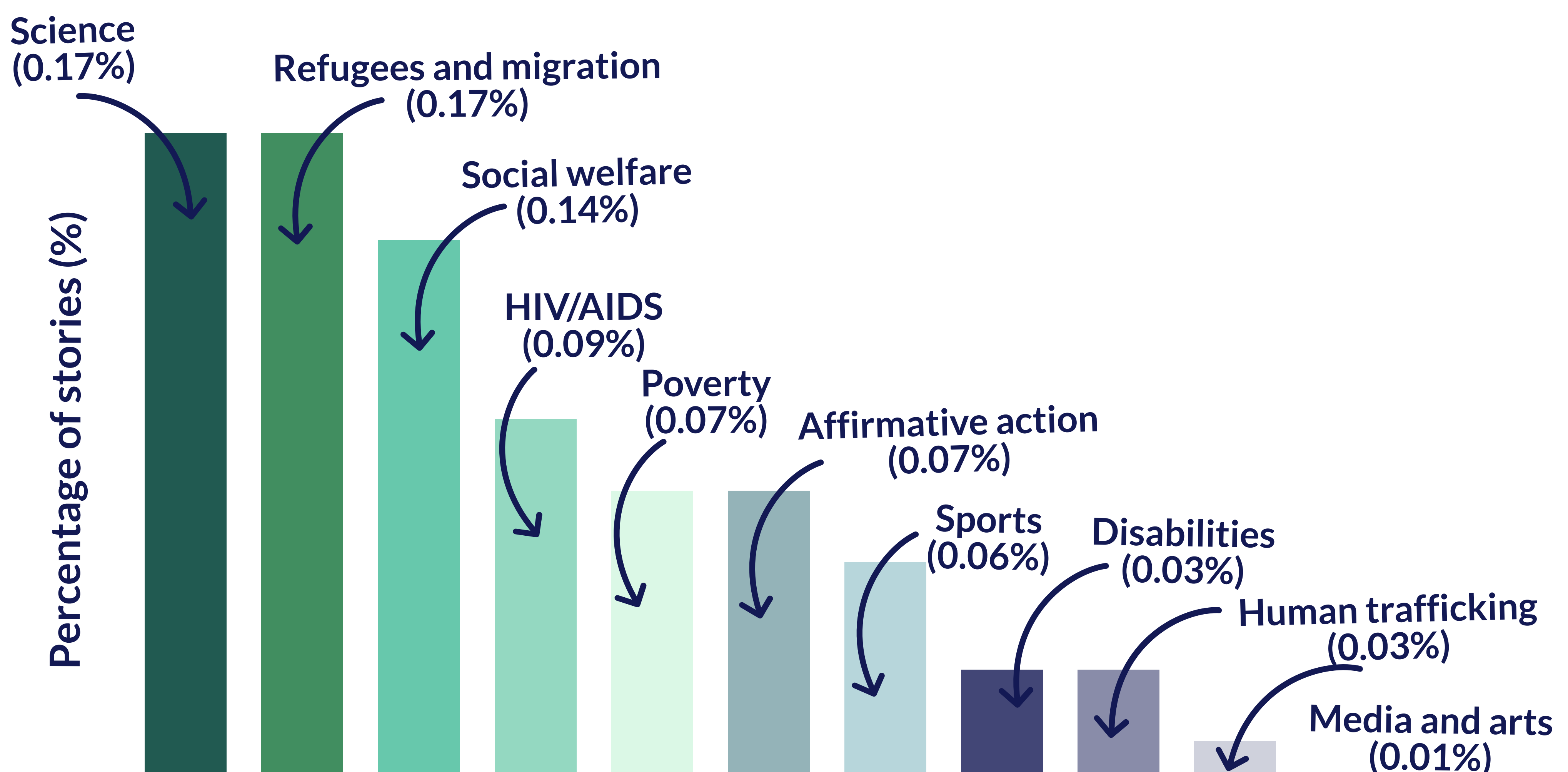
2 WHOSE VOICES DO WE HEAR?

A good indicator in showing who gets to speak and on what issues, is by looking at the sources accessed by journalists and media practitioners in their news coverage. Sources accessed everywhere, across all sectors/sections of society, are an important feature of an in-depth, balanced and fair news story and ensures greater diversity of views and perspectives. It further provides the opportunity to empower people who have previously only been passive consumers of news rather than shapers of them.
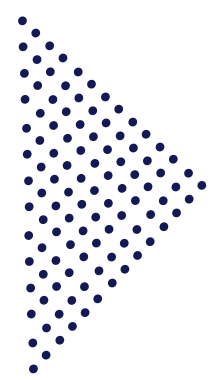
Which groups are accessed?

What is immediately clear from these results is that citizen voices are for the first time much higher (14%) than previously recorded [5], coming behind other key political voices. This rise in citizen voices and engagement with the media is commendable and indeed a step in the right direction towards diverse source representation. Notwithstanding, dominant voices in the media still largely remain those of "official" and/or "political" representatives, as seen by the excessive concentration on political parties (45%). Other sources accessed frequently include the Presidency (6%), national government (6%) and those representing the justice system (5%). Independent and insightful groups such as academics, media practitioners, researchers and labour formations, who would've lent a critical voice to issues that need unpacking in the country, were hardly accessed, the highest amongst them being the media at 3%.

Figure 3. The most frequently accessed groups in elections coverage
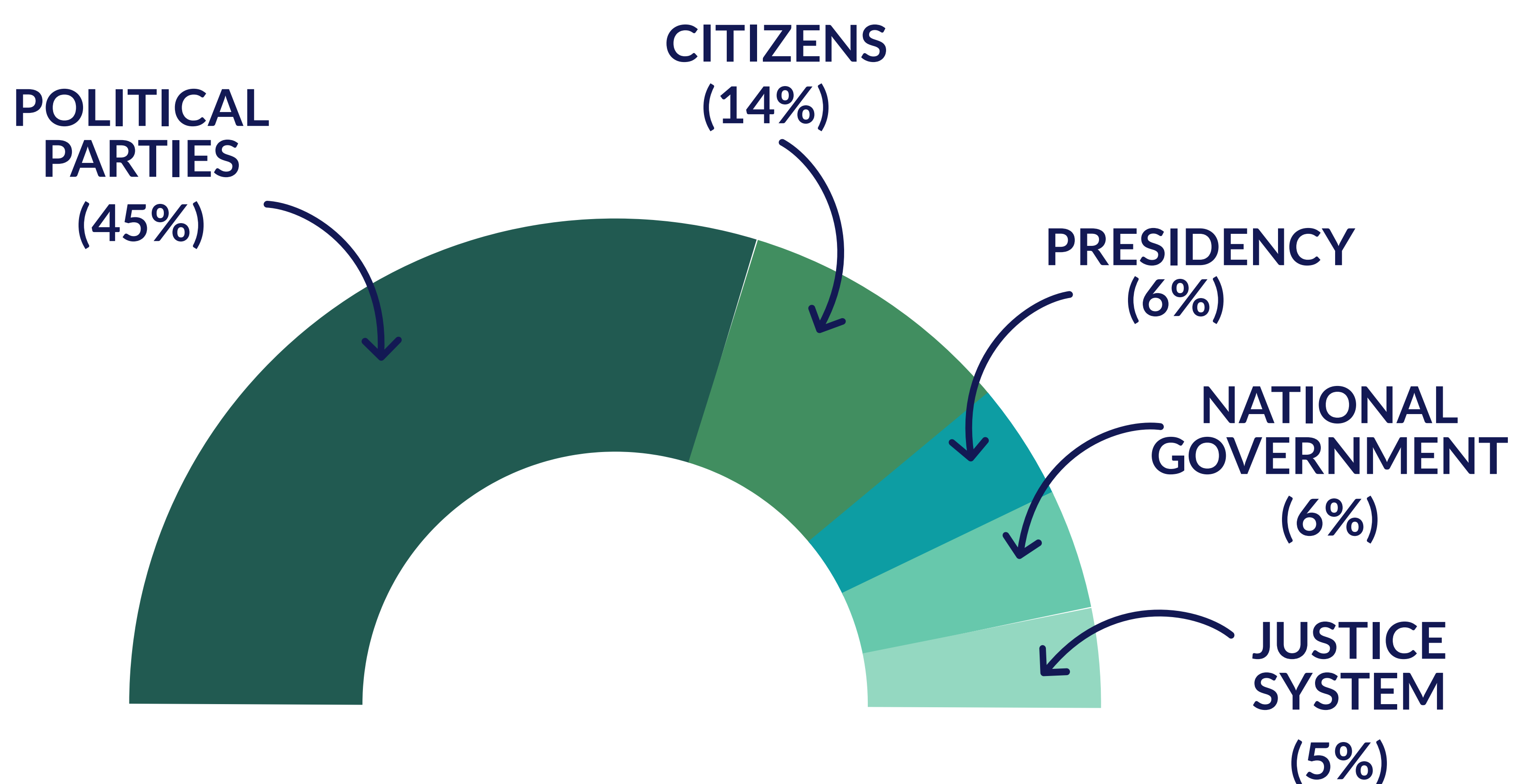
Please note this graph only represents the top 5 most accessed groups and accounts for 76% of group sources.
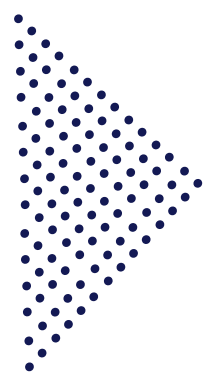
How did political parties fare?

During elections periods, we often hear politicians berating the media for not giving them "enough coverage". Newsrooms have the difficult duty of weighing up how much coverage should be given to different political parties, their campaigns and their events based on newsworthiness and overall importance. Broadcasters are also required to follow ICASA regulations which speak to equitable coverage. This task was made all the more difficult with an unprecedented 48 parties contesting on the 2019 ballot.

Despite these challenges, we see that the media did an extraordinary job in covering the top 5 South African political parties in a way that strongly matched the parties' performance at the polls. While previous research shows that the best performing party invariably receives the most coverage, at no time have we seen such a close correspondence with coverage of the other top performers. This is a truly significant finding where these parties appear to have received equitable coverage.

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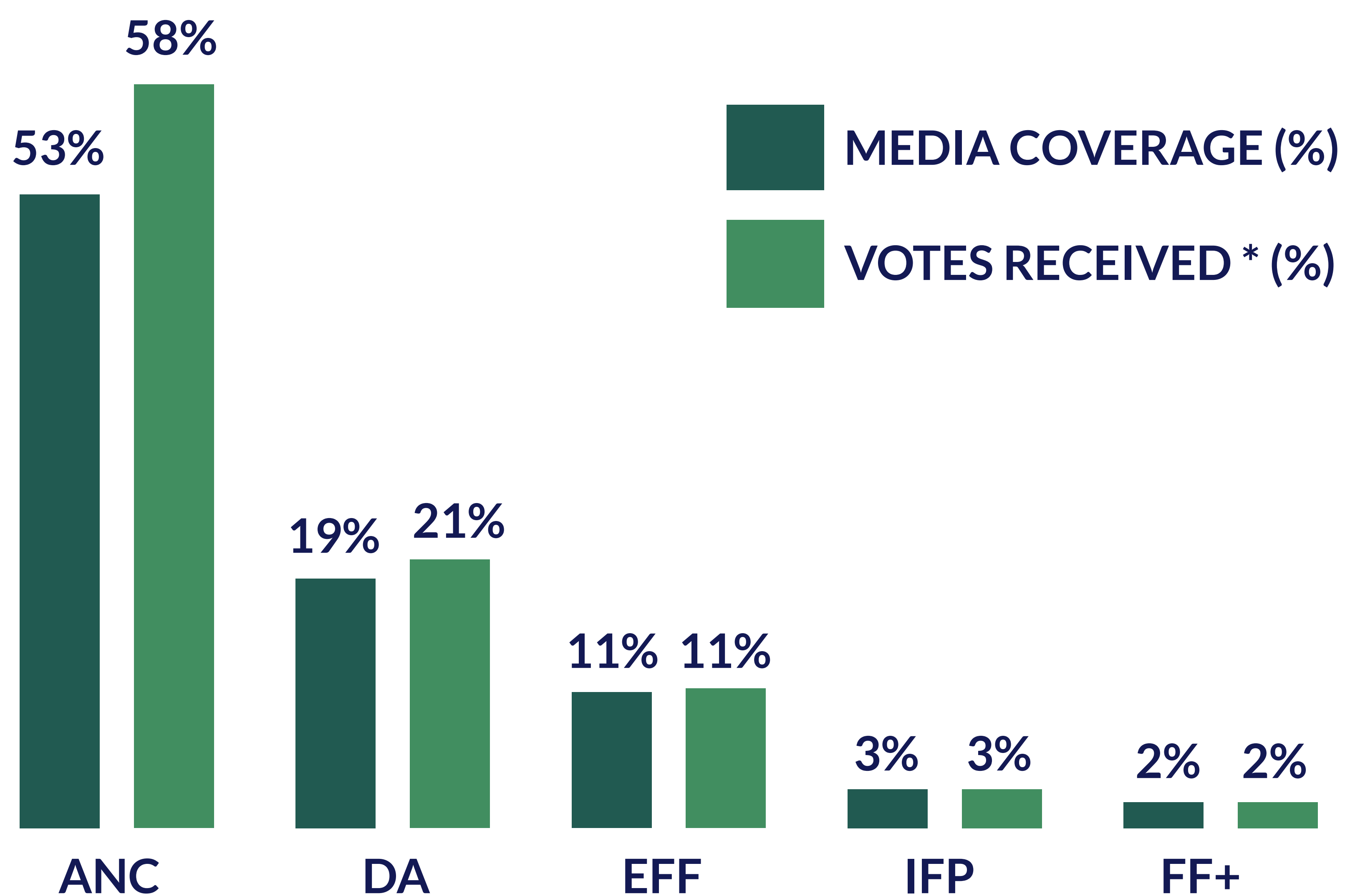

Within this, the ANC received the most coverage at 53%, followed by the official opposition, the Democratic Alliance (19%) and then the EFF (11%). This is to be expected, as the share of seats in the National Assembly is proportionate to the coverage the top three parties received, with ANC having 58% of the seats, DA with 21% and the EFF at 11%.

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

Interestingly, the Freedom Front Plus received double the level of coverage that they received in the lead up to 2014 elections. Their growth in media coverage coincides with their growth in the national assembly, moving from only four seats previously to 10 seats in 2019. A major contributing factor to this could be the ongoing debate around land expropriation without compensation and the apparent rise in global right-wing nationalism as well as debates about farm murders that saw them being in the news frequently over the period. Conversely, the IFP received similar media coverage to that in the 2014 elections, remaining steady at 3% despite growing their seats in the National Assembly from 10 seats in 2014 to 14 seats as of the 13th of May 2019[6].

Of the remaining parties who gained seats in Parliament, their representation by votes was highly divergent to their media coverage. Many of these smaller parties received far more media attention than what their votes would suggest they deserved. This is contrary to what was seen for top 5 parties in the previous section. While coverage remained comparatively negligible (<2.5% of all elections stories), a smaller party such as Good Party received more than five times the media coverage than votes at the polls. This could stem from the party's leader Patricia De Lille having a long-standing and well-established political profile and knowing how best to engage and communicate with media. Her increased voice may also stem from her contentious exit from the DA and her setting up her own party shortly thereafter.
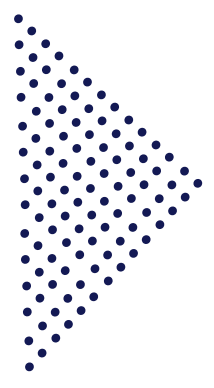
Figure 5. Media coverage (%) vs votes received for remaining parties in National Assembly
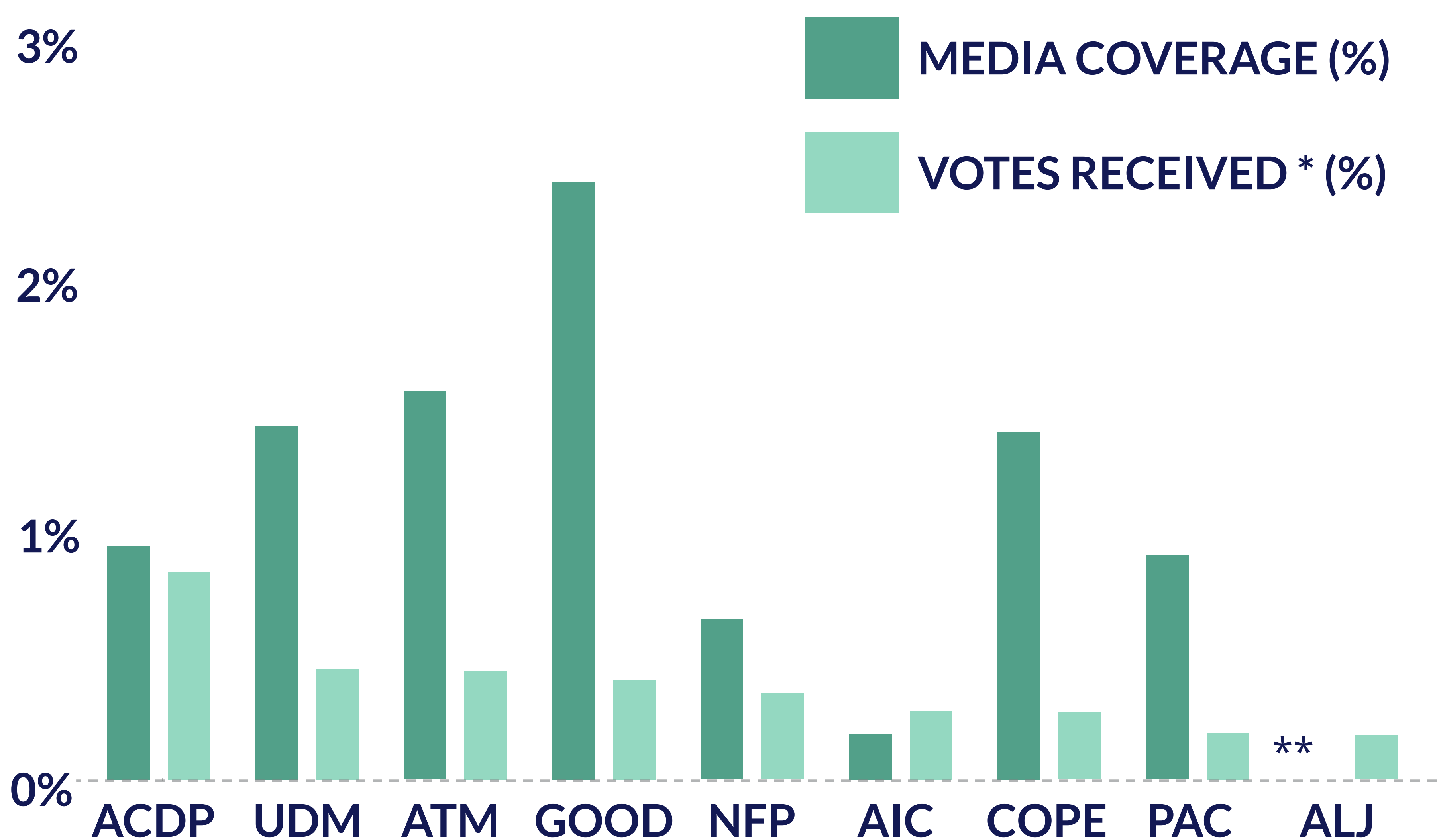
* Votes received: The values are rounded up and are based on final IEC national results.
** Al Jama-ah gained one seat in Parliament. However, it was only covered in a handful of stories in the media monitored and it therefore appears as zero in the graph.
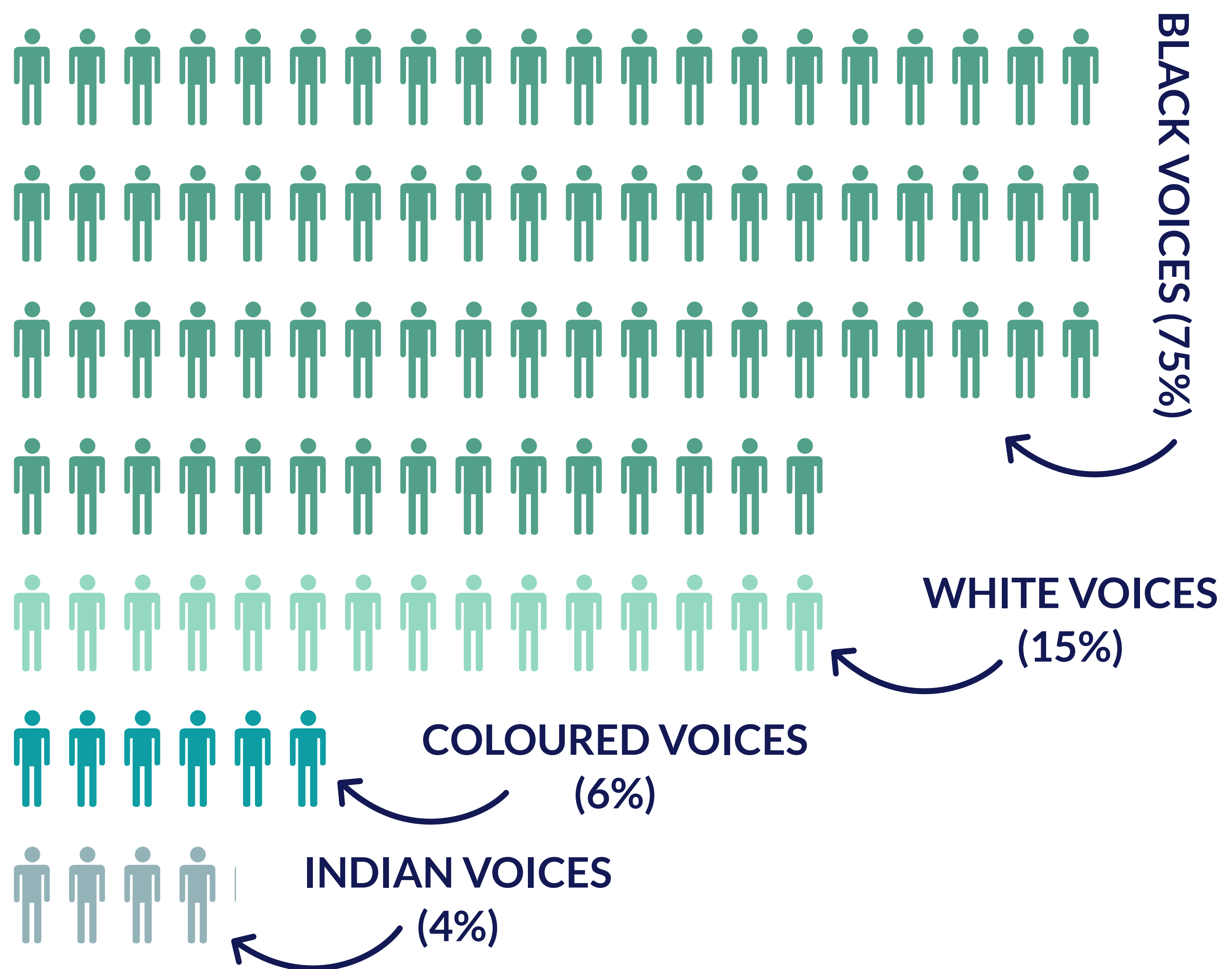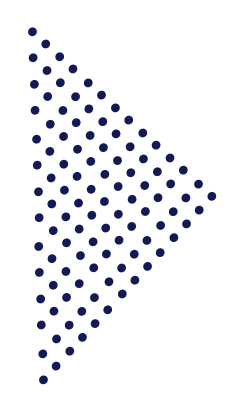
What was the race breakdown of those accessed?

Our research reveals that there remain disproportionately high levels of representation of White and Indian voices in the media. Whilst making up a national population demographic of only 8% [7], White voices were accessed almost double than one would expect at 15% of overall media coverage. Similarly, Indian people make up 2.5% of the total population yet received 4% of the voices accessed. In contrast, we noted that Coloured voices found scant representation in terms of being accessed by the media during the period we monitored. A cause for concern is that these voices accessed, whether Black, White or Coloured, are mainly political elites and prominent people rather than ordinary citizens who very seldom have an opportunity to voice their opinions in the media.

Figure 6. Breakdown of all sources by race

BLACK VOICES (75%)

WHITE VOICES (15%)

COLOURED VOICES (6%)

INDIAN VOICES (4%)

What was the gender breakdown of those accessed?

In a country where one of the founding principles is non-sexism [8], it is of the utmost importance to have a fair and equal representation of men and women, including gender non-conforming people, in all spheres of South African life.

According to our findings, the share of voice remained largely unequal, with men on average being accessed four times more than women. This gender disparity is a consistent trend and has been repeatedly shown in research around the world. Such a disproportionate share of voice in the media is alarming, more so because women make 51% of the citizens in the country [9] and had two million more registered voters than men[10]. Critically, too, there were no people who openly identified as gender non-conforming that were accessed by any media houses. Both these reveal a society still deeply entrenched in patriarchy.

Figure 7. Breakdown of all sources by gender

WOMEN (20%)

MEN (80%)
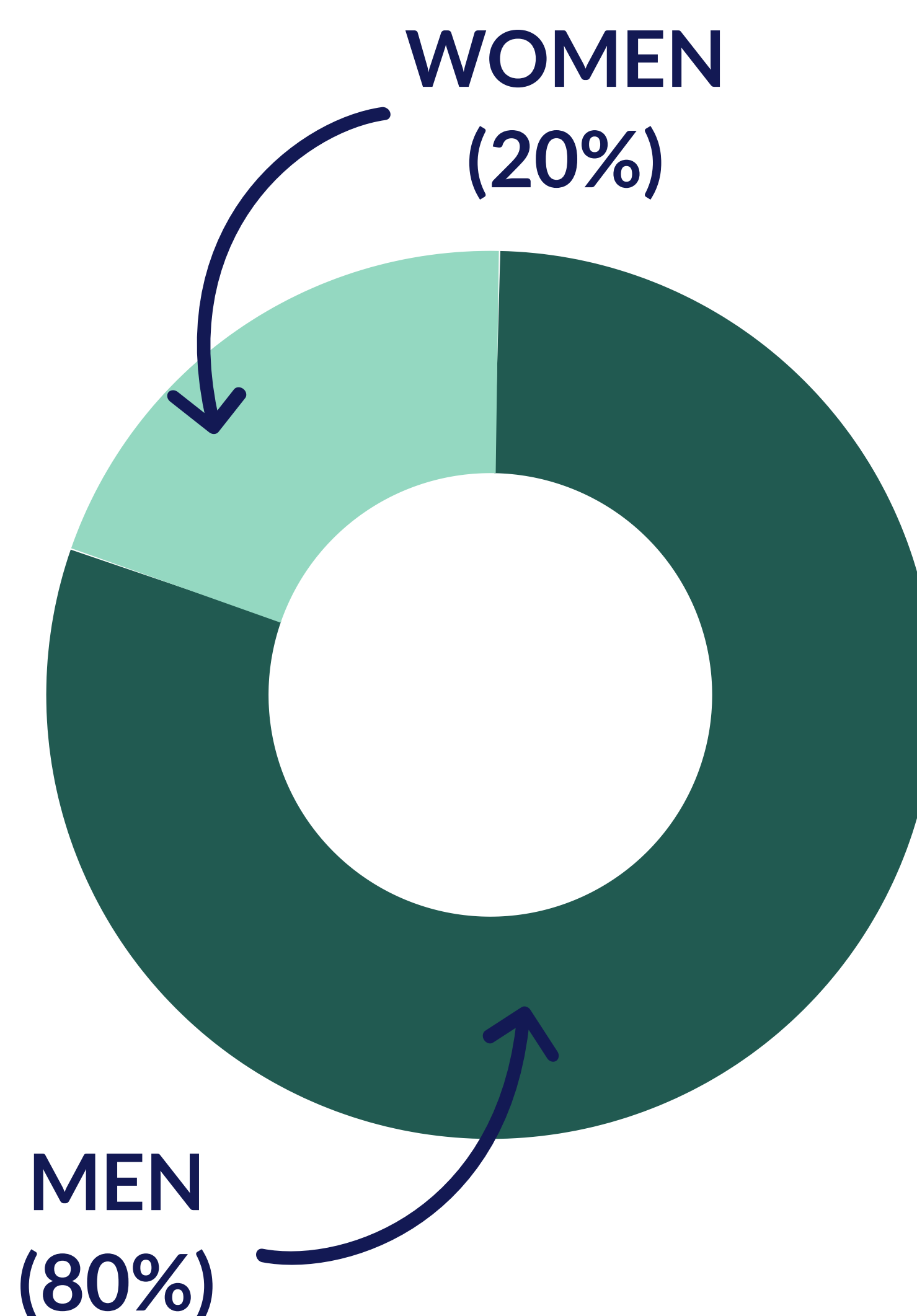
4 WHAT WAS THE REGIONAL DIVERSITY IN COVERAGE?

Media have the responsibility of reporting on issues, views and people from across the country. When it comes to regional diversity, our assumptions are that stories should cover a wide range of places in South Africa and that the media attention given to a particular location or province should be representative of that area's population.

The results here show how the two biggest urban hubs, namely Gauteng and Western Cape, garner far greater media coverage relative to their population sizes. Although it is not unusual that media coverage is concentrated in major metros, provinces such as Limpopo, North West and Mpumalanga continue to be heavily disregarded. While these 2019 findings point to some improvements in the geographical imbalance compared to previous elections[11] , more work is needed in the sector to ensure that underserviced provinces and smaller communities' voices and issues are not marginalised in perpetuity.

Figure 8. Media coverage (%) vs Population (%) across different provinces
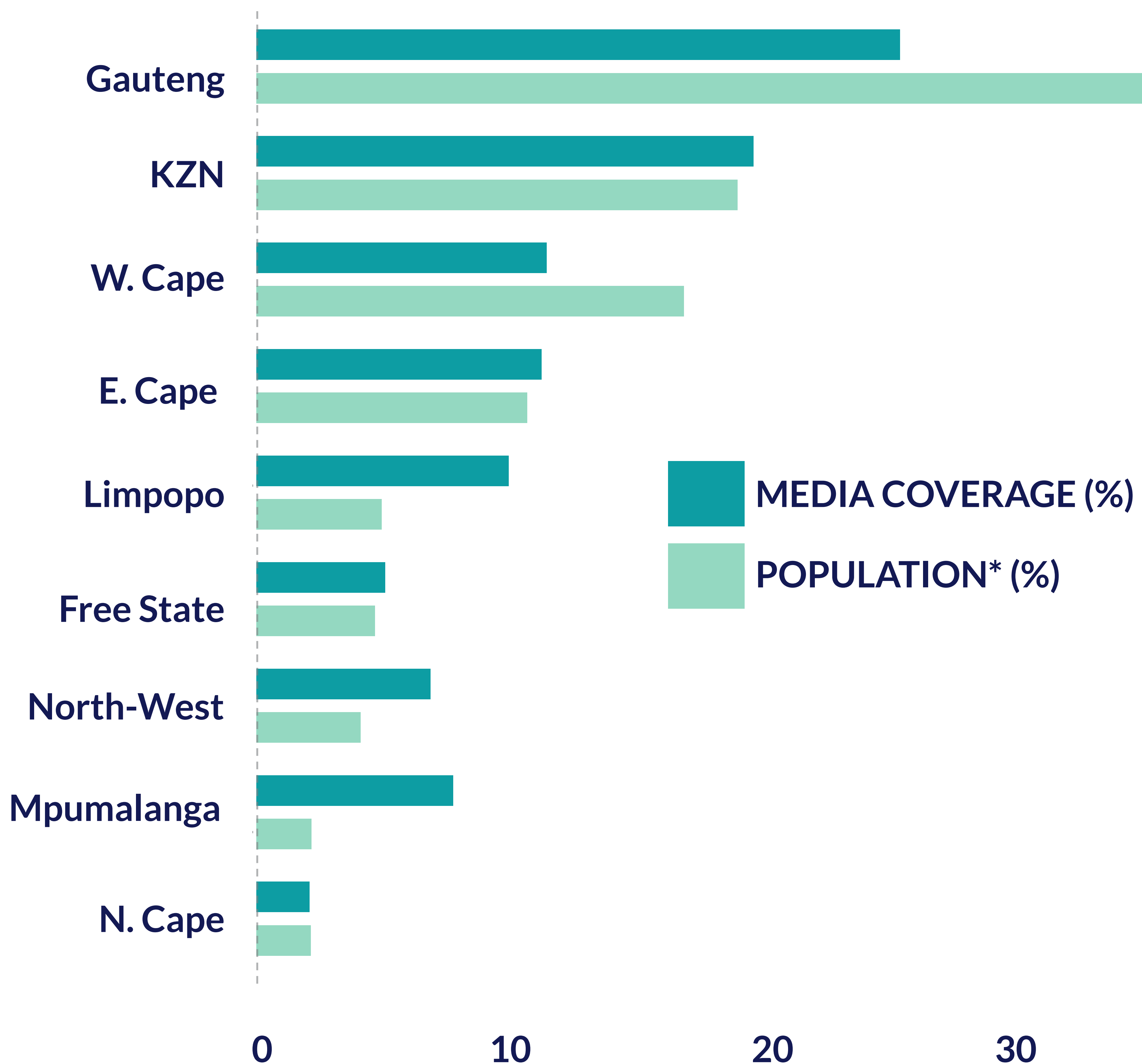
*Estimate of South African population living in that province according to StatsSA (2011)

5 HOW FAIR IS THE COVERAGE?

It is globally understood that balance and fairness is a key determinant of quality media coverage, especially in an elections period. In this case, stories that repeatedly favour one party or actively disfavour another have damaging effects on the quality of information voters receive and can ultimately impact how they vote. While one can never expect faultlessness across all stories, systemic bias can affect the freeness and fairness of elections. It is imperative that media bias is measured and analysed during an election period. MMA has spent the last 25 years working on refining and developing our assessment of fairness in media coverage.

In terms of our monitoring process, MMA's default position is one of fairness. i.e. the assumption is that all news stories are balanced and impartial until bias is clearly identifiable. We looked at bias specifically by asking the following questions:

- Does the item exaggerate/overstate a particular event or party?
- Does it generalise an issue or party by using vague language or by perpetuating stereotypes?
- Does it trivialise or dismiss a particular party
- Does the news bulletin or newspaper, when taken together, present a particular party in a favourable light?
- Were all necessary parties allowed the right of reply to allegations about them?

Bearing these questions in mind, the results here show the remarkable positive trends in media coverage in this elections period where less than 2% of all elections items showed any clear indication of bias. This is particularly significant given that in 2014, only 88% of all stories were deemed fair[11]. This drastic improvement is largely attributable to the dramatic increase in the fair and credible coverage from the SABC in this elections period.

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

FAIR
(98%)

BIASED
(2%)
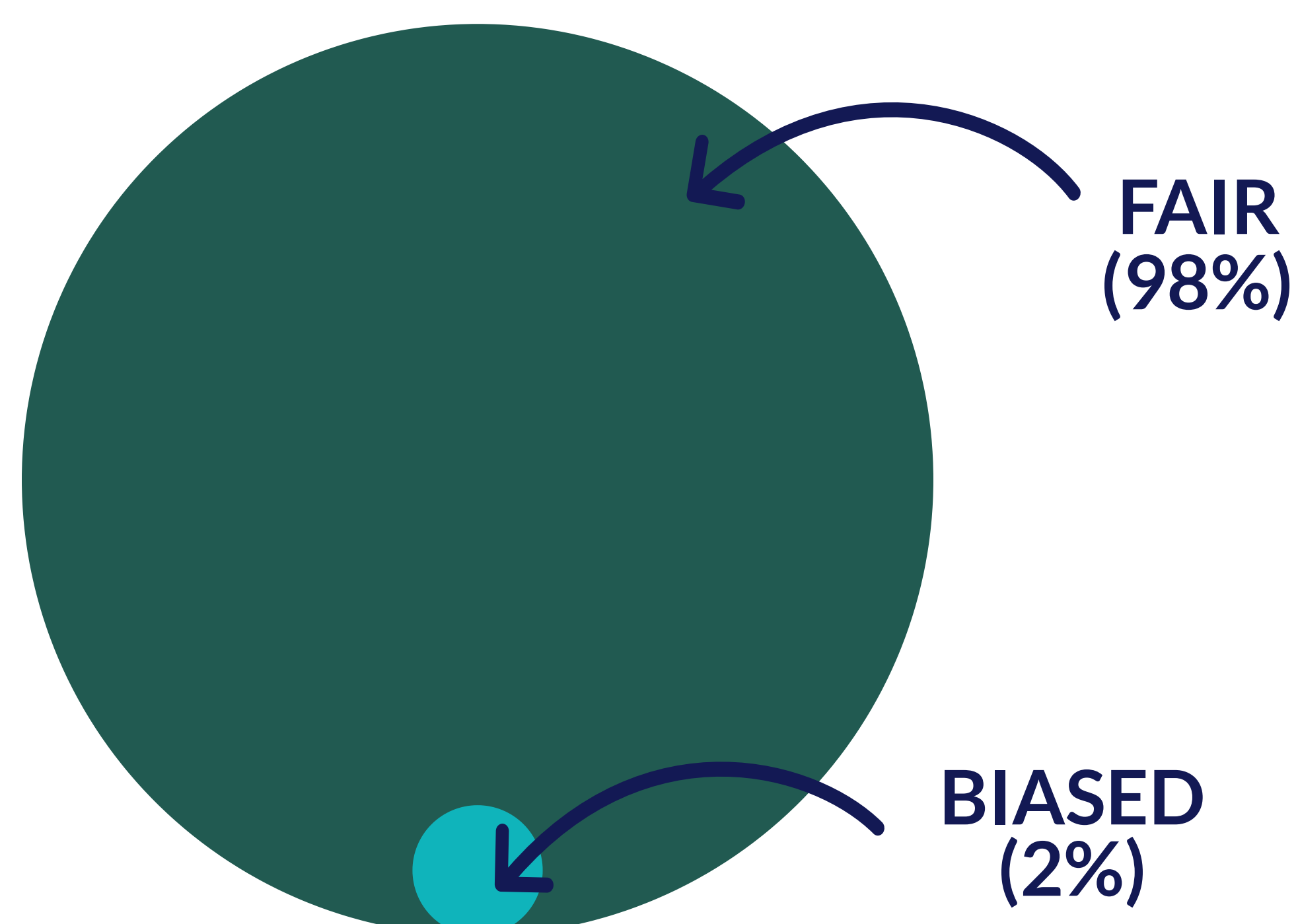
6 HOW DID MEDIA PERFORM OVERALL?

The elements described in previous sections are all indicators of quality media coverage. In order to gain a picture of the quality of coverage as a whole, we drew up an elections ratings score for each media house using these existing factors. This media rating 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 media and this ensures that media are evaluated on the same scale. The top 10 media are highlighted in the table below.

What is immediately clear is that special elections programming, such as the SABC's Democracy Gauge, were particularly high performers across all media analysed. While this stems primarily from the depth of information provided as well as the broad range of bread and butter issues discussed, the freeness with which the show was carried out also contributed to its high ranking. With the SABC being the biggest media player in South Africa by far, the strides taken to ensure quality elections programming is to be commended. These findings also show the value and impact that dedicated elections-centred programmes can have on the type and quality of information the electorate receive.

It is also important to draw attention to other notable publications, including GroundUp, Daily Maverick and The Daily Vox, who all published sterling elections pieces that were balanced, nuanced and diverse.

Table 2. Overall elections rating for top 10 media

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

While politics may shift, sometimes dramatically, and while parties may come and go, the role of the media in an elections period remains essential. News media isn't just critical but like the elections and voting process, it is vital to free, fair and credible elections.

One of South African media's greatest achievements in covering elections is that they report fairly. As the findings indicate, fair reporting is a trend across the board, both public and private media. The importance and significance of this finding should not be underestimated. Few emerging or indeed stable democracies around the world can demonstrate a similar trend. In the USA and UK, for example, there are clearly major media who have no regard for core ethics of reporting and have consistently biased media. The same is true for many of our neighbouring countries where fair coverage is nearly impossible due to state control. This finding is crucial to South Africa's election period and is a credit to our democracy.

The news is not all positive however. We see that the coverage, voice and focus given to women and to issues impacting women and girls, especially gender-based violence, remains profoundly marginalised. Women's voice account for a mere 20% overall despite making up 52% of our population. While media clearly can and must do more, political parties themselves need to shoulder much, if not most, of the blame in this regard.

The nature of news and of our politics is such that events and personalities tend to drive news coverage more than issues. It is thus hardly surprising to see how party campaigning and party politics dominate elections coverage. This does raise serious questions about how some of our more challenging and critical issues can be addressed if they have are almost never unpacked and dealt with. Land issues, crime, poverty, health, education, child abuse, climate change, gender-based violence and reproductive rights all offer tantalizing angles for political parties and potentially news. Yet as the result show none of these issues received even 1% coverage. It is essential we find ways to address this in our coming local government elections.

Another area in which our media have shown improvement is in the types of voices heard. While we expect the media voices to be dominated by politicians as they seek pursue votes, media have made a concerted effort these elections to ensure that more citizens voices are heard. Not only does this offer an opportunity to give voice to those whom the elections are really about but it also provides different perspectives, richness and texture to stories.

Overall, our media have like the rest of our democracy demonstrated their limitations. The IEC was challenged by the possibility of double voting and other anomalies but it didn't prevent the IEC from ensuring free fair and credible elections. A similar conclusion can be drawn on the media's performance. This year in addition to improvements noted above, we have seen a comprehensive effort by the industry to work together to help upskill the sector on elections reporting. South African National Editors Forum (SANEF), the Press Council together with other partners including MMA offered training across the country. In addition, media worked to build a comprehensive resource kit provided on SANEF's website. While not all may have learned or utilized these opportunities, the concerted effort demonstrates a clear commitment to ethical standards and reporting and is to be strongly supported and encouraged. The efforts also show that while far from perfect, building and protecting our democracy is the work and responsibility not just of the IEC and political parties, but also of our media to report, civil society to monitor and the voters to participate and engage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[6] Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) 2019. Political Party Representation in National Assembly. Accessed here: https://pmg.org.za/page/political-party-representation

[7] StatsSA, 2011. South African census.

[8] Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Accessed here: http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/constitution/SAConstitution-web-eng.pdf

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

[10] According to the Electoral Commission of South Africa, the total number of registered voters was 26 741 021 with women leading with a total of 14 708 219 compared to men's total of 12 032 802.

[11] Media Coverage of the 2014 National & Provincial Elections in South Africa. Presentation. Media Monitoring Africa. 2014. Accessible here: https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/elections.mediamonitoringafrica.org/2014/