Whose Broadcaster?

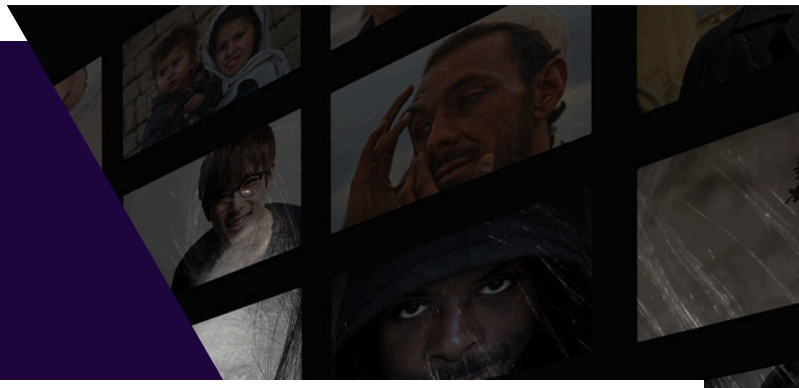
An Interim Audit of SABC Election Coverage

WRITTEN BY
Musa Rikhotso

EDITED BY
Lister Rikhotso

DESIGNED BY
Kgothatso Baatile Mohale

MOXII AFRICA



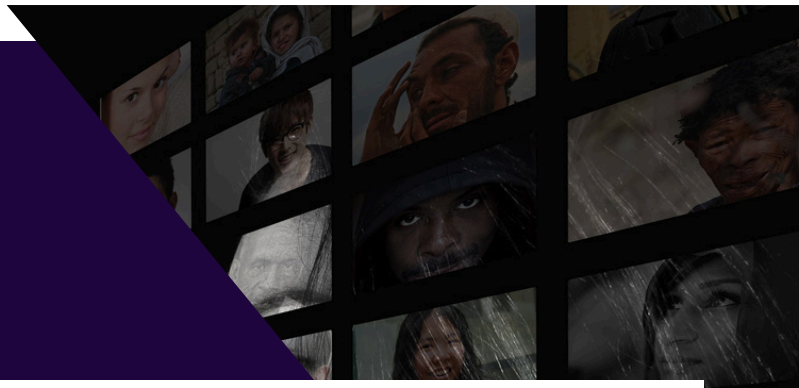
1. INTRODUCTION

This interim report presents the findings of the election coverage monitoring conducted on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) during the period, 4 August to 4 October, 2026 ahead of the 2026 Local Government Elections. The monitoring is being undertaken by Moxii Africa, formerly known as Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), an organisation dedicated to promoting media accountability, ethical journalism, freedom of expression, and democratic participation across Africa. Through its media monitoring initiatives, Moxii Africa seeks to assess the extent to which media institutions contribute to the provision of accurate, balanced, and diverse information, particularly during periods of significant democratic importance such as elections.

As South Africa's public broadcaster, SABC occupies a pivotal position within the country's democratic landscape. The broadcaster operates under a statutory obligation established by Section 6 of the Broadcasting Act (No. 4 of 1999) and the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) Electoral Code of Conduct. Under these provisions, the SABC is legally mandated to provide universal access, deliver fair and impartial news, reflect national and regional diversity across all official language groups, and offer comprehensive, public-centered coverage that enables informed voting choices.

To critically evaluate whether the SABC is upholding this public interest charter, this report interrogates four core analytical questions:

1. **Universal Access & Geographic Equity:** Is the SABC providing equitable coverage across all nine provinces, or is its reporting biased toward major economic centers at the expense of rural and non-metropolitan voters?
2. **Public-Centered Substantive Discourse:** Is election reporting empowering voters with information on governance, socio-economic challenges, and policy options, or is it defaulting to political "horse-race" coverage and campaign logistics?



3. **Inclusive Sourcing & Diversity:** Does the range of quoted voices foster broad democratic participation by representing women, ordinary members of the public, independent experts, and civil society, or does it privilege male political elites?
4. **Procedural vs. Substantive Neutrality:** Does achieving numerical party fairness ("0% bias") automatically mean the SABC is fulfilling its constitutional public broadcasting mandate, even if broader social perspectives remain excluded?

2. Methodology

The monitoring process involved the systematic identification, collection, and analysis of news and current affairs programs relating to electionst aired by SABC from the 4th of August 2026 when the election date was announced until the 4th of September 2026. All election-related news and current affairs stories were coded against a predetermined set of indicators designed to measure the quantity, quality, and diversity of election coverage.

The indicators included the volume of election-related news and current affairs stories, the geographic distribution of reports, the issues and topics covered, the nature and affiliation of sources featured in coverage, and the gender representation of individuals quoted or interviewed and the fairness in the story reporting. Each story was analysed using a standardised monitoring framework to ensure consistency and reliability throughout the process.

All information was captured using “Dexter”, Moxii Africa’s monitoring tool. The number of election stories captured during the period was 1437, of which 766 were from the SABC. These findings are evaluated below to determine the degree to which SABC's editorial choices serve the public interest.

3.FINDINGS

3.1 Count of stories per day

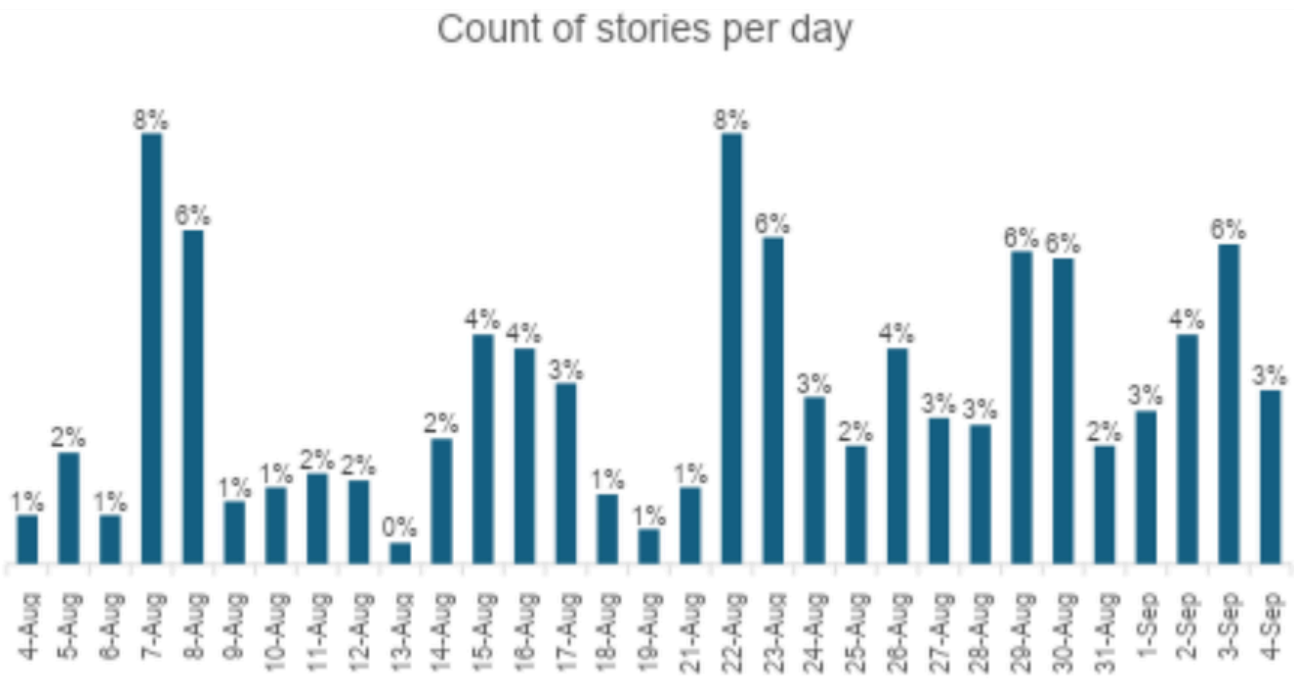


Figure 1: Daily Article Count of LGE26 coverage

This graph shows that the volume of election-related stories on SABC fluctuated throughout the monitoring period, with several notable spikes. The most significant peak occurred on 7 August, when coverage reached 8%, indicating that on 7 August, election coverage accounted for just 8% of all news and current affairs output, with non-electoral programming dominating the remaining 92% This surge was likely driven by major campaign activities, including party campaign launches, mayoral candidate announcements, and election rallies, which generated substantial media attention and multiple follow-up reports.

A second period of increased coverage was recorded between 18 and 25 August, when daily story percentage rose steadily, peaking at 8% on 22 August and 6% on 23 August. This increase may be attributed to intensified campaigning by political parties as they expanded voter outreach efforts and promoted their manifestos across different provinces. The rise in story volumes suggests a period of heightened political activity that provided SABC with a consistent stream of election-related content.

Another notable spike occurred on the 29 and 30 August at 6% both days. Given that the election is scheduled for 4 November, this increase is more likely linked to ongoing campaign activities, political rallies, manifesto-related events, coalition discussions, and responses to emerging political developments rather than the final stages of campaigning. Overall, the peaks in coverage appear to correspond with periods of intensified political activity, particularly campaign launches, candidate announcements, and large-scale public engagements by political parties.

3.2. Number of election-related stories

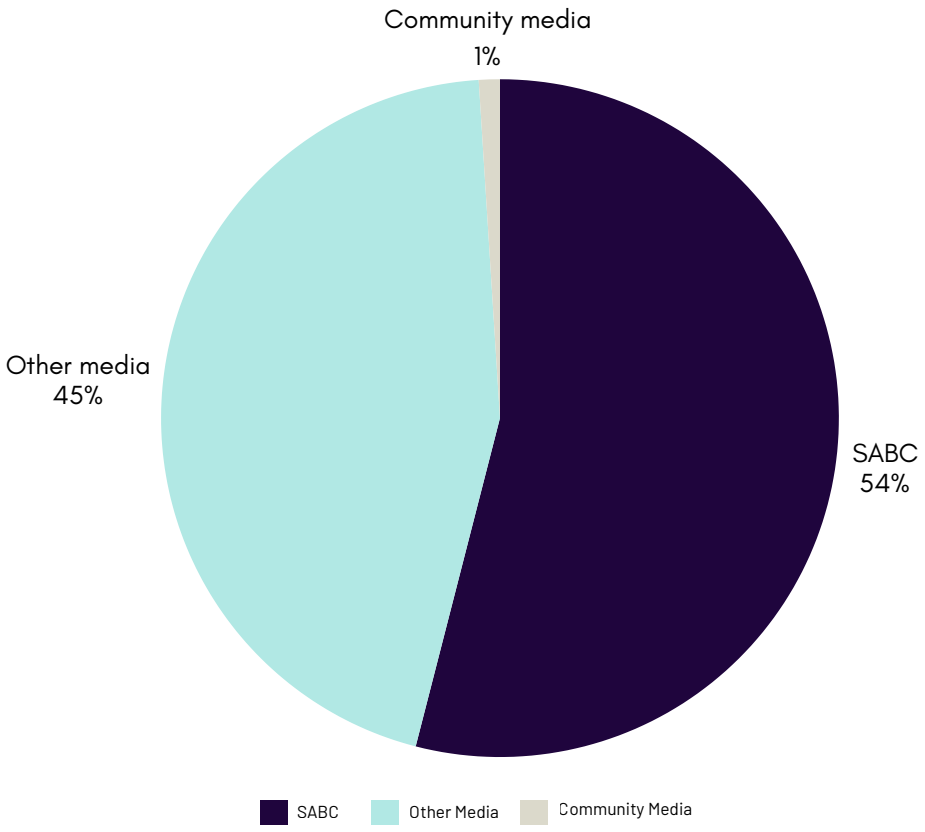


Figure 2: Number of election-related stories

The monitoring of election-related story volumes is an important indicator of the degree of prominence afforded to electoral issues within the media agenda. During election periods, the media serves as a primary source of information for voters, making it essential that adequate attention is devoted to electoral matters. Monitoring the distribution of election coverage across different media platforms provides insight into the extent to which audiences are exposed to information about electoral developments and processes.

The findings indicate that the SABC accounted for 54% of all monitored election-related stories, while other media outlets contributed 45% and community media represented only 1% during the monitoring period. These results demonstrate that SABC played a leading role in election reporting during the monitoring period, dedicating a substantial proportion of its news output to electoral issues. The near-equal contribution by other news media outlets also reflects significant engagement with election-related matters across the broader media landscape.

The dominance of SABC and other mainstream media in election coverage may be attributed to their greater resources, wider audience reach, and capacity to provide regular reporting on political developments. Election periods typically generate increased news activity as political parties, electoral management bodies, candidates, and other stakeholders intensify their public engagements and campaign activities. Consequently, these developments create a steady flow of newsworthy events that are more readily covered by larger media institutions.

In contrast, the limited contribution of community media, which accounted for only 1% of the monitored stories, suggests a comparatively minor role in election reporting during the period under review. This severe under-representation of community platforms underscores the public broadcaster's heightened responsibility to serve non-urban, grassroots audiences directly through its national and regional stations. Overall, the findings highlight the central role of SABC in shaping public access to election information.

3.3. Origin of the election stories

Core Interrogation: *Is the SABC fulfilling its obligation to represent the diversity of all regions and provinces, or does its reporting disenfranchise non-urban voters?*

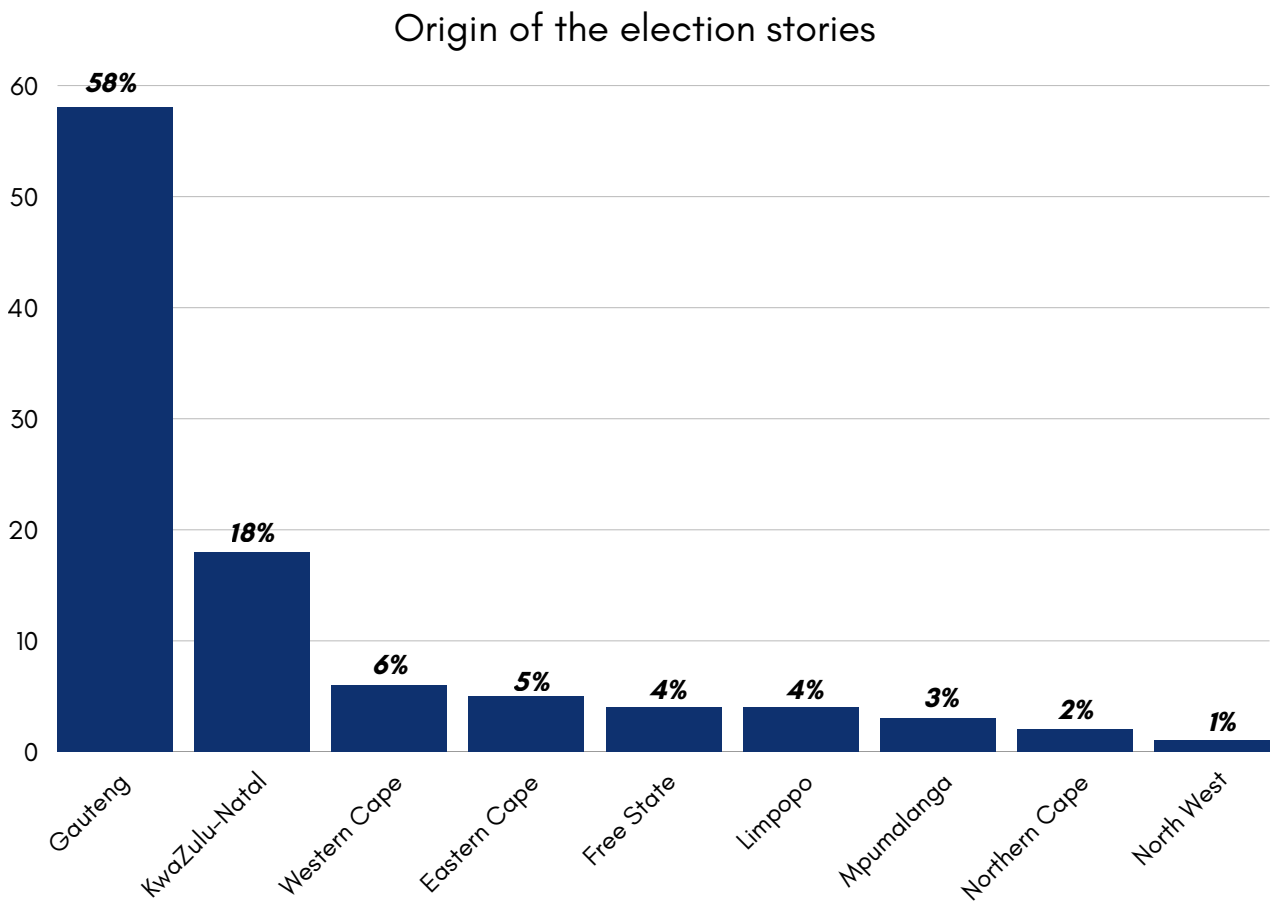


Figure 3: Origin of the election stories

Monitoring the geographic origin of election-related stories is essential for assessing whether election coverage reflects the experiences and concerns of the public across all provinces. Equitable geographic representation is a critical component of democratic media coverage, as it ensures that voters from different regions are afforded visibility and that local electoral issues receive appropriate attention.

The findings reveal that Gauteng accounted for 58% of election stories, followed by KwaZulu-Natal with 18%. The Western Cape contributed 6%, while the Eastern Cape accounted for 5% of stories. Free State and Limpopo each represented 4% of the coverage, Mpumalanga accounted for 3%, Northern Cape contributed 2%, and Northwest represented only 1%.

The heavy concentration of coverage in Gauteng can largely be attributed to the province being a key political battleground.

This overwhelming concentration of coverage in Gauteng (58%), while eight other provinces collectively share just 42%, reveals a significant geographic imbalance. By allowing news production to be dictated by the location of political party headquarters and regional hubs, the SABC risks marginalising rural and township voters. Under its public mandate, the broadcaster is required to reflect the broad national landscape. Prioritising urban political hubs over grassroots, provincial issues deprives voters outside Gauteng of equal airtime, leaving critical local governance and regional service delivery challenges out of the national media spotlight.

3.4: Top 10 topics

Core Interrogation: *Is SABC's electoral coverage providing substantive, issue-based reporting that enables citizens to vote meaningfully, or is it reducing democratic choices to procedural campaign management?*

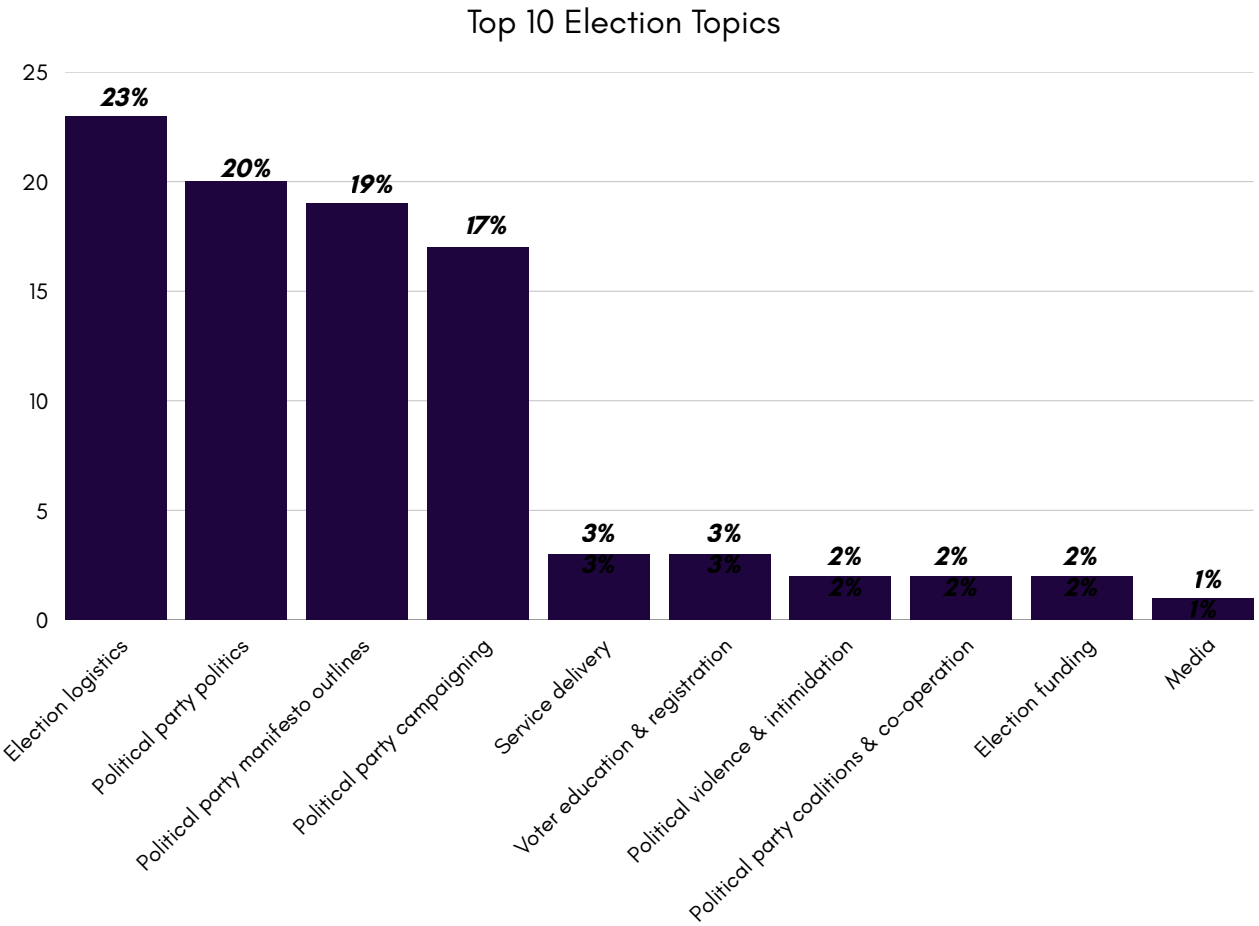


Figure 4: Top 10 topics

Monitoring the themes and issues covered during election periods is critical for determining whether the media is providing the public with meaningful information to support informed voting decisions. Effective election coverage should extend beyond campaign activities and political competition to include substantive discussions on governance, policy, service delivery, and matters of public interest.

The findings indicate that election logistics constituted the most prominent topic at 23%, followed by political party politics at 20%, political party manifestos at 19%, and political party campaigning at 17%. Service delivery and voter education each accounted for 3% of coverage, while political violence and intimidation, coalition politics, and election funding each represented 2%. Media-related issues accounted for only 1% of the election coverage.

Evaluating these results against the public service mandate reveals a structural deficiency: an overwhelming 79% of coverage focused strictly on political process, administrative logistics, and inter-party competition. Conversely, key policy discussions such as service delivery (3%), voter education (3%), and economic strategy received minimal coverage.

Most critically, the total omission of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) as an election topic represents a clear failure to address urgent public interest matters. During a period marked by national outrage over violent crimes against women, the SABC failed to use its election platform to interrogate political party proposals or hold candidates accountable on women's safety. By prioritising procedural campaign events over core socio-economic challenges, the public broadcaster risks offering an elite-driven narrative rather than an issue-focused public service.

3.5: Top 10 political parties

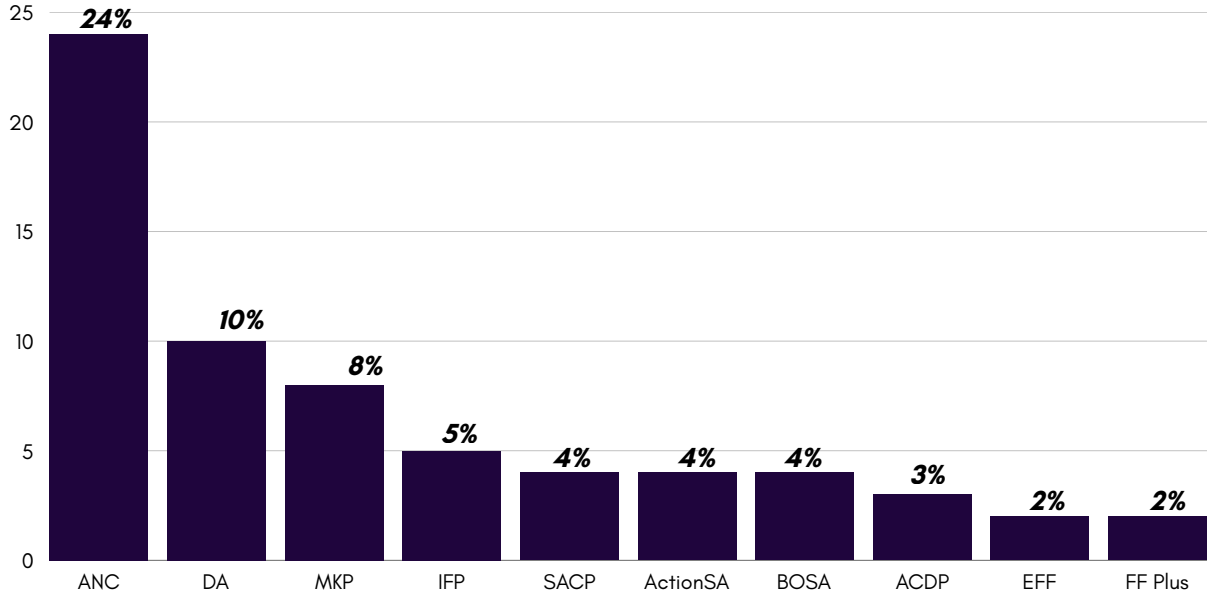


Figure 5: Top 10 political parties

The monitoring of sources is an important measure of editorial balance and diversity within election reporting. The range of voices included in media coverage directly influences the quality of public discourse and the extent to which audiences are exposed to differing viewpoints.

The analysis indicates that the African National Congress (ANC) accounted for 24% of all sources featured in election coverage. Democratic Alliance (DA) represented 10% of sources, followed by the Umkhonto we Sizwe Party (MKP) at 8% and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) at 5%. The South African Communist Party (SACP), ActionSA, and Build One South Africa (BOSA) each represented 4%. The African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) accounted for 3%, while Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Vryheidsfront Plus / Freedom Front Plus (VF+ / FF Plus) each represented 2%.

These results suggest that the news agenda was shaped largely by the activities and statements of the most prominent political actors. While this may reflect their political significance and newsworthiness, it can also result in a narrower range of viewpoints being presented to audiences. Over time, such patterns may reinforce existing power dynamics by giving greater visibility to already-established parties, while making it more difficult for smaller parties to gain recognition and influence public debate.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that media exposure was unevenly distributed, which may have implications for voter awareness, political pluralism, and the ability of publics to make informed comparisons across the full spectrum of political parties.

3.6: Sources by affiliation

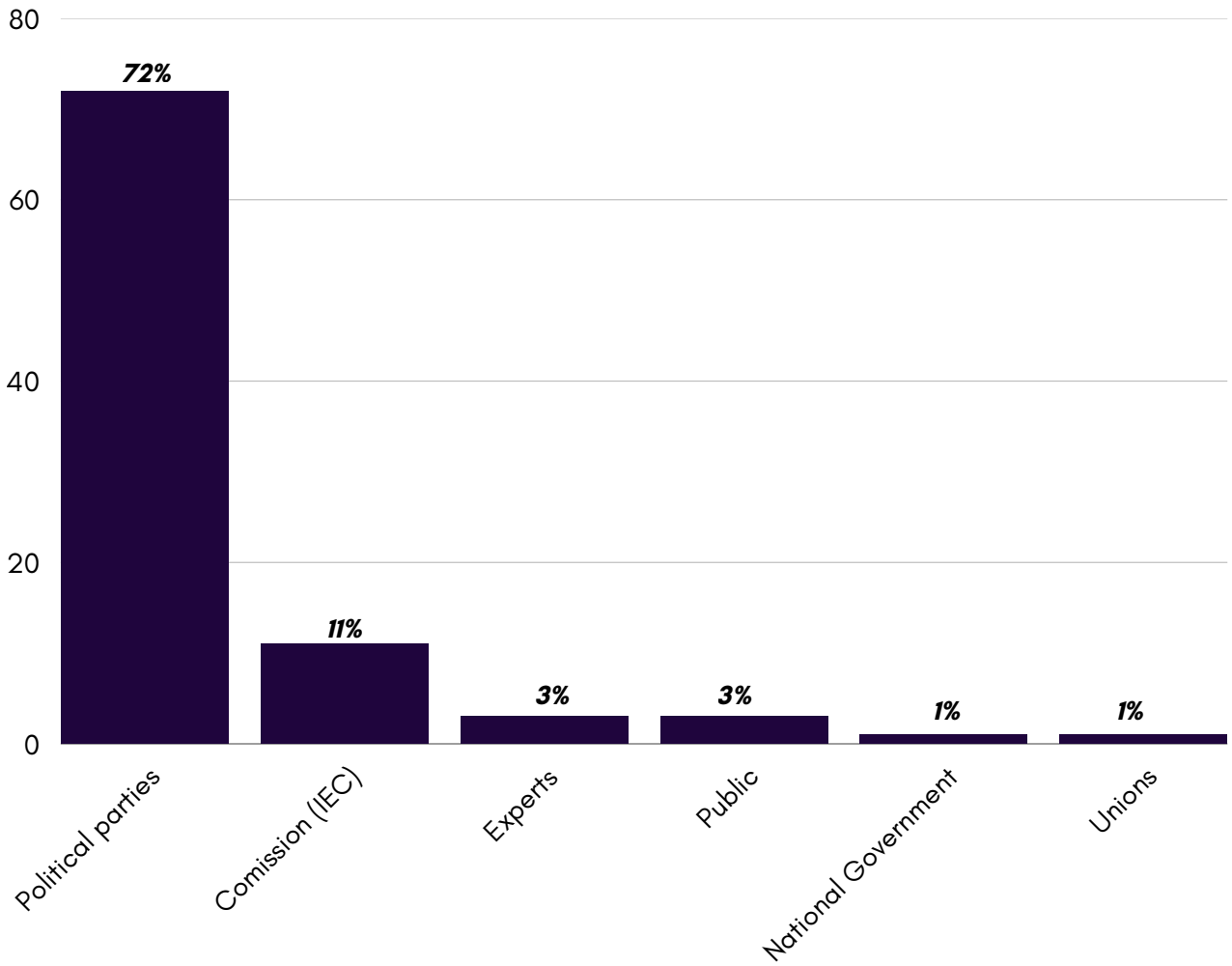


Figure 6: Sources by affiliation

Monitoring source affiliations is essential for evaluating the diversity of perspectives represented within election coverage. Elections affect a wide range of stakeholders, including political parties, voters, civil society organisations, labour groups, academics, and government institutions. A diverse sourcing pattern contributes to a more inclusive and representative public discourse.

The findings reveal that political party representatives accounted for 72% of all sources featured in election coverage. The IEC represented 11% of sources, while experts and the public each accounted for 3%. National government representatives and labour unions each constituted 1% of the sources.

The heavy reliance on political party representatives indicates that election coverage was largely driven by political actors themselves. While political parties are central participants within electoral contests, their overwhelming dominance may limit the diversity of viewpoints available to audiences. Of particular concern is the relatively low representation of the public, whose experiences and concerns are fundamental to democratic elections. Similarly, the limited inclusion of experts and civil society representatives may have constrained opportunities for independent scrutiny and informed analysis of electoral developments.

These findings suggest the need for a more deliberate effort to broaden the range of voices represented within election reporting so as to ensure greater inclusivity and diversity of perspectives.

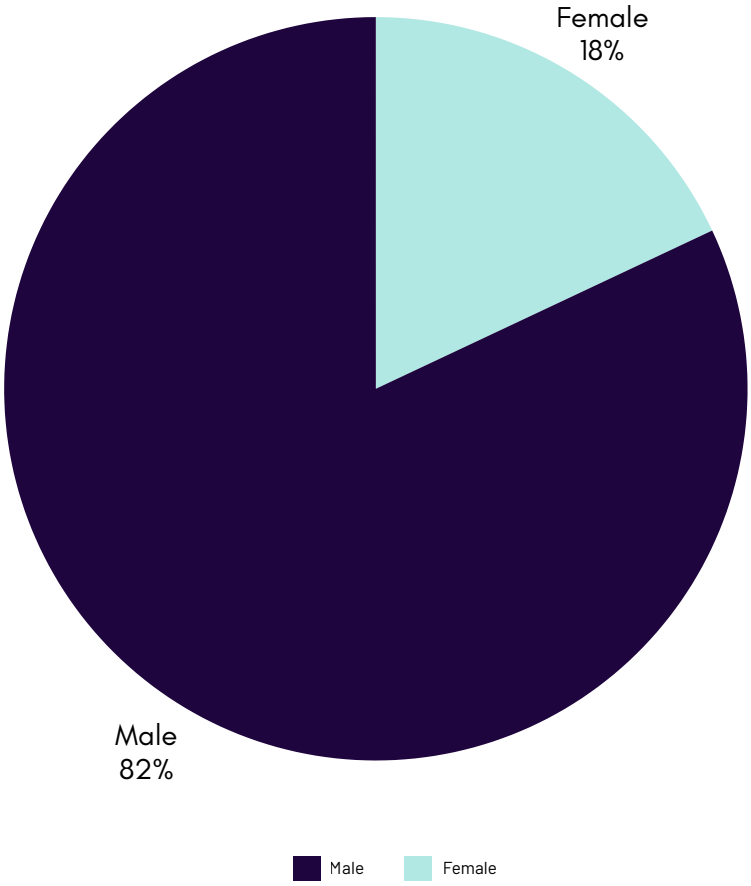


Figure 7: Sources by gender

Gender representation remains a critical indicator of inclusivity and equality within media coverage. Monitoring the gender composition of sources helps assess whether women and men are afforded equitable opportunities to participate in public discourse and contribute to discussions on political and electoral matters.

The findings indicate that male sources accounted for 82% of all sources featured in election coverage, while female sources represented only 18%. This reflects a significant gender imbalance in the voices presented to audiences during the election period. Previous monitoring activities have revealed that female sources make up a significantly lesser share of the total voice of sources in election coverage and, in coverage of other events and issues of national importance.

This severe disparity (82% male vs. 18% female) violates the principles of gender equity established in the Broadcasting Act. While political party leadership positions remain male-dominated, the public broadcaster cannot treat this as an excuse for uncritical newsroom practices. By failing to seek out female political candidates, community leaders, independent analysts, and voters, the SABC systematically marginalises women's perspectives. In a country where women bear the brunt of socio-economic inequality and gender-based violence, an 18% female voice share falls short of the SABC's mandate to serve all South Africans equally.

3.8 Balance and Fairness in SABC's Election Reporting

Core Interrogation: *Does achieving 0% party-political bias satisfy the SABC's public charter if the coverage itself remains centered on urban hubs, male voices, and political elites?*

The monitoring findings indicate that SABC demonstrated a high level of balance and impartiality in its election coverage, recording 0% bias throughout the monitoring period. This suggests that the broadcaster adhered to the principles of fair and equitable reporting by providing election-related information without favouring or disadvantaging any political party, candidate, or electoral stakeholder.

The absence of detected bias is a significant achievement, particularly during an election period when media coverage is subject to heightened public scrutiny. SABC is commended for its commitment to editorial balance, which reflects strong oversight and adherence to ICASA's party-fairness standards.

However, a critical distinction must be drawn between procedural balance and substantive mandate compliance:

- Procedural Compliance: SABC successfully avoided partisan bias, giving political parties equitable airtime relative to their electoral standing without overt favor.
- Substantive Compliance : Neutrality among political parties does not compensate for structural imbalances in geographic coverage (58% Gauteng), source selection (82% male), or thematic priority (79% campaign logistics vs 3% service delivery).

True public service reporting requires more than dividing airtime neutrally among political candidates; it requires actively serving the information needs of the electorate.

The findings of this interim monitoring report demonstrate that while the SABC fulfilled its basic public service obligation to cover election developments impartially, significant structural gaps prevent it from fully satisfying its broader statutory charter.

Mandate Compliance Scorecard

Public Service Criterion	Statutory Benchmark	Observed Performance
Impartiality & Fairness	Equal treatment of political parties; no partisan bias (ICASA Regulations).	**0% detected bias**; fair allocation of airtime across contesting parties.
Geographic Diversity	Equitable representation of all provinces and non-metropolitan areas (Broadcasting Act Section 6).	**Gauteng dominated at 58%**; the remaining 8 provinces shared only 42%.
Substantive / Issue-Driven Content	Inform voters on key governance, social, and policy challenges.	**79% process/logistics**; Service delivery at 3%, Gender-Based Violence and social issues unaddressed.
Source & Public Inclusion	Facilitate broad public debate; reflect community voices.	**Politicians comprised 72%** of sources; ordinary members of the public accounted for just 3%.
Gender Equity	Balanced representation of men and women (Broadcasting Act Sec 2).	**82% male sources** versus **18% female sources**.

Strategic Recommendations for Editorial Reform

1. **Implement Geographic Sourcing Protocols:** Establish mandatory provincial coverage targets for newsrooms to ensure non-metropolitan and rural issues receive proportionate broadcast time.
2. **Transition to Issue-Based Reporting:** Shift editorial focus from campaign events to policy analysis, dedicating explicit coverage to service delivery, unemployment, healthcare, and Gender-Based Violence.

3. E**stablish a Gender Diversity Database:** Build and utilise an internal database of female experts, civic leaders, and political analysts to correct the current 82% male bias in sourcing.
4. **Elevate Public and Civil Society Voices:** Redesign election formats to prioritise voter panels, town halls, and community-led interviews over standard political party press conferences.

List of media monitored

TV	Radio Stations	Online
SABC 2 Xitsonga/Venda	Ukhozi	SABC News Online
SABC 1 IsiZulu/IsiXhosa,	Munghana lonene	
SABC 2 Afrikaans News	RSG	
SABC News Channel Full View	SA FM	
SABC 3 English News	Phalaphala	
SABC 1 Siswati/Ndebele	Motsweding	
SABC Lehae Afrikaans news	Umhlobo Wenene	
SABC 2 Morning live	Thobela	
SABC Lehae Siswati/Ndebele	Ikwekwezi	
SABC 2 Sesotho/ Setswana/Sepedi	Lesedi	
SABC Lehae Sesotho/Setswana/Sepedi	MetroFm	
SABC Lehae Xitsonga/Venda	RSG	
SABC Lehae IsiZulu/IsiXhosa		

About Moxii Africa's Election Work

Moxii Africa has monitored every democratic election in South Africa since 1994, bringing three decades of independent, evidence-based media monitoring to safeguard information integrity. For #LGE2026, Moxii Africa anchors the Partnership on Information Integrity in Elections (PIIE) —working in partnership key stakeholders and with the IEC to safeguard information integrity in elections. Other election work focuses on tracking media coverage, monitoring political party ad spending via PAdRe, and holding candidates accountable.

Stay ahead of the LGE26 narrative with Dexter, Moxii Africa's media monitoring platform that captures live and near-live election trends across print, broadcast, and digital news. Discover who gets heard, what drives headlines, and how media quality shapes public understanding in real time.

Explore live media tracking, accountability tools, and election insights at Moxii Africa's LGE2026 Hub or learn more about the coalition at PIIE.

Important Notice: For official election dates, voter registration details, candidate lists, and official results, please consult only the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC).
Report Online Harm: Seen something misleading online? Report disinformation, hate speech, or incitement through Real411, the official platform for reporting digital electoral harms.

CONTACT US

For any questions, comments, or clarifications, please contact Moxii Africa Formerly Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) from Media Monitoring Africa on (011) 788 1278 or
email: musar@mma.org.za