BROADCASTING DEMOCRACY?

ANALYSING THE SABC'S ROLE IN THE 2024 ELECTIONS



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MEDIAMONITORING AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

The year 2024 marked 30 years since South Africa's first democratic election, which gave all citizens over 18 the right to vote. This anniversary coincided with the country's 7th National and Provincial Elections (NPE), considered the most significant since 1994.

Changes to the Electoral Act have introduced independent candidates into the political landscape, adding new voices and challenges. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), as with other media entities, had to quickly adjust its election coverage to include over **50 political parties and independent candidates,** all while representing the views of 27.7 million registered voters—the **highest number** in the country's democratic history.

This report, prepared by Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), examines whether the SABC met its obligation to provide fair and balanced election coverage as required by the entity's own **editorial guidelines.** It also looks at whether the broadcaster earned public trust by giving citizens a voice and addressing crucial issues like service delivery and human rights during this critical time.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF THE MEDIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

The 2024 South African National and Provincial Elections were unprecedented, following the adoption of the Electoral Amendment Act. This allowed independent candidates to stand for elections and introduced a third ballot for voters.

While online platforms improved access to information and voter engagement, they also brought challenges like hate speech and the spread of mis/disinformation, complicating the role of news media. Harassment of journalists and officials, including baseless accusations of election rigging against the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and its representatives, further strained the electoral environment.

The SABC faced these challenges within a difficult financial climate, sharing struggles with other media outlets. Limited resources made it harder to fulfil its mandate to cover political parties and independent candidates across all 12 official languages.

Despite these hurdles, the SABC made significant efforts to inform the public, provide comprehensive pre-election coverage, and deliver commendable reporting during and after the elections, supporting the transition to South Africa's 7th democratic administration.

METHODOLOGY

Between 29 February and 28 June, 2024, MMA's trained media monitors gathered and analysed a total of 5, 019 elections-related news items, gleaned across the SABC's varied news channels – including radio, television and its online news website, SABC Online.

This comprehensive monitoring focused on news coverage and dedicated programming related to the elections in all 12 languages of South Africa. The monitoring of sign language was limited to capturing whether all television broadcasts on elections had a sign language interpreter.

For radio, two bulletins were monitored daily for each of the radio stations (at 6 AM and 6 PM) as well as dedicated elections programmes such as town hall programmes.

For television, we monitored one prime-time news bulletin in the evening. Additionally, we monitored SABC 2's Morning Live and the SABC Delivery Gauge, a full-length news programme introduced specifically for the duration of the election period.

Our team of monitors verified, analysed and captured information or data from elections-related stories, using MMA's advanced in-house monitoring tool, **Dexter**[1], which allows our researchers to further analyse trends and provide meaningful insights provided from this well sorted and searchable database.

The Captured Data Included:

- Name of programme;
- Type of news story and its origin;
- Headline and summary;
- Main theme/ topic of the story;
- Identity of sources (including name, race, gender and affiliation of individuals or groups who were accessed either directly or indirectly in the stories);
- Identification of potential bias.

1. Dexter is a natural language processing platform that evaluates online news articles to improve transparency, equal representation and veracity of published news. Dexter is a collaboration between OCL and Media Monitoring Africa (MMA).

LIMITATIONS

As with many research endeavours, our monitoring process faced certain challenges. Although we analysed over 5, 000 election items produced by the SABC, factors such as load shedding and technical difficulties meant that some broadcasts may not have been captured.

Despite our best efforts to retrieve these recordings, we acknowledge that a few may have escaped our analysis.

Additionally, although all our monitors received uniform (or standardised) training and followed carefully developed protocols, the possibility of some human error and/or bias cannot be entirely eliminated.

We are confident, however, that the sample size, coupled with the five-month monitoring timeframe, provided sufficient data and content from which to draw fair and reasonable conclusions, despite some limitations.

FINDINGS

GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF ELECTIONS COVERAGE

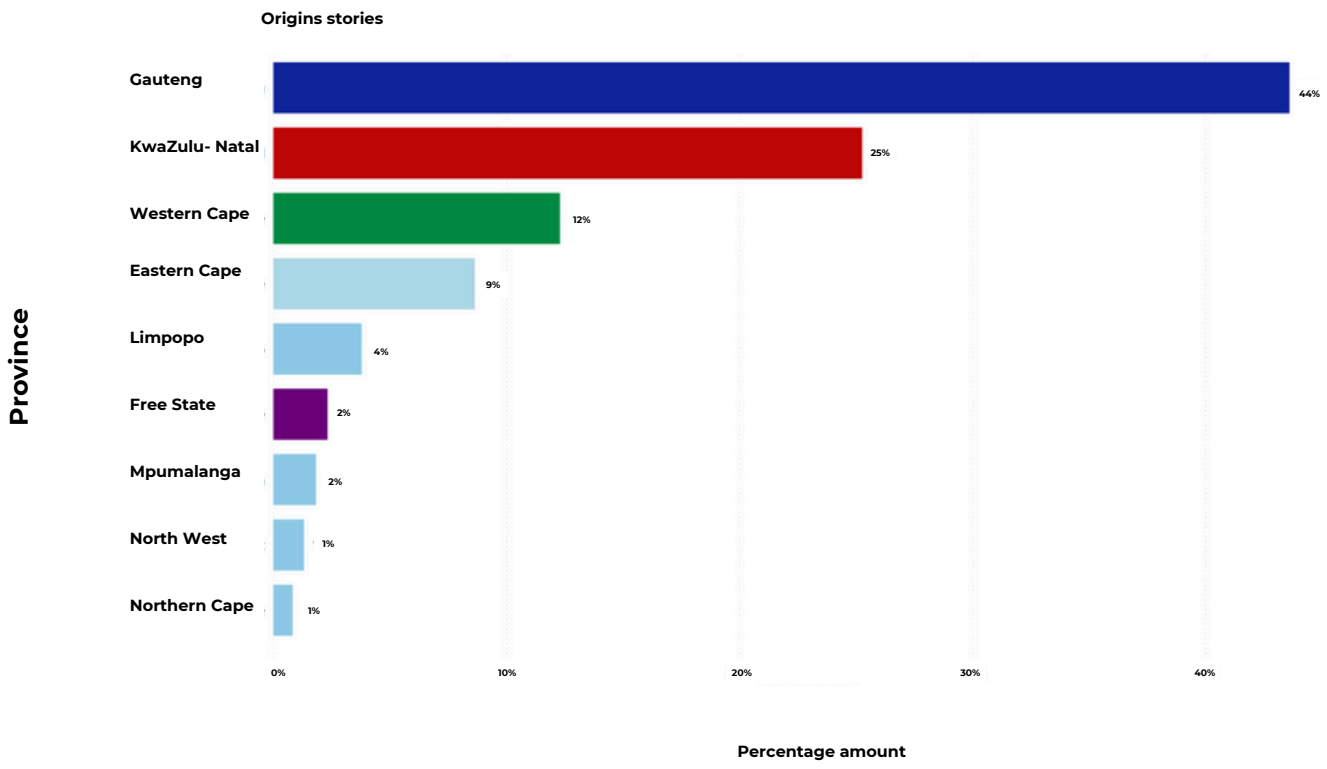


Figure 1: Geographical representation of SABC NPE24 coverage

In the 2024 National and Provincial Elections, Gauteng, South Africa's **economic hub**, dominated election-related news, receiving 44% of the coverage. This was followed by KwaZulu-Natal (25%) and the Western Cape (12%). The high concentration of coverage in these provinces reflects their politically contested nature and strategic importance.

The Western Cape has long been governed by the Democratic Alliance (DA), historically the primary opposition to the ANC but now part of the Government of National Unity (GNU) alongside the ANC and other parties. Numerous parties, both emerging and established, have sought to challenge the DA's dominance, making the province a consistent focal point for political and media interest.

KwaZulu-Natal has traditionally been a political flashpoint, with tensions heightened by the rise of the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP). Since its inception, the MKP has frequently made headlines for controversies ranging from internal disputes to legal battles with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Additionally, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) concentrated substantial resources in the province, seeking to expand its influence. The combination of the MKP's rise and the EFF's intensified efforts contributed significantly to KwaZulu-Natal's prominence in election coverage.

Gauteng's dominance in coverage can be attributed to its status as South Africa's economic powerhouse and its position as a key political battleground. With its dense population and significant number of voters, political parties invested heavily in the province, making it a central focus for campaign efforts and media attention alike.

However, the Free State presents an interesting exception, as it was over-represented in media coverage compared to the Eastern Cape. Despite casting just over 800,000 **votes**, the Free State received notable media attention, while the Eastern Cape, which recorded over 1.8 million votes, was largely overlooked. This disparity cannot be fully explained by urban bias, as both provinces have substantial rural populations. One potential explanation could be the relative poverty of the Eastern Cape, which may result in fewer resources and media presence in the region. Yet this rationale raises questions about equity in election coverage, particularly in ensuring that the voices of all voters, regardless of their economic status, are heard.

The disproportionate focus on certain provinces highlights their role as key battlegrounds in South Africa's political landscape, where shifts in power dynamics could signal broader changes for the nation. At the same time, the uneven attention given to others highlights ongoing challenges in equitable media representation, an issue that requires closer scrutiny in future elections.

ELECTION COVERAGE ACROSS SABC PLATFORMS

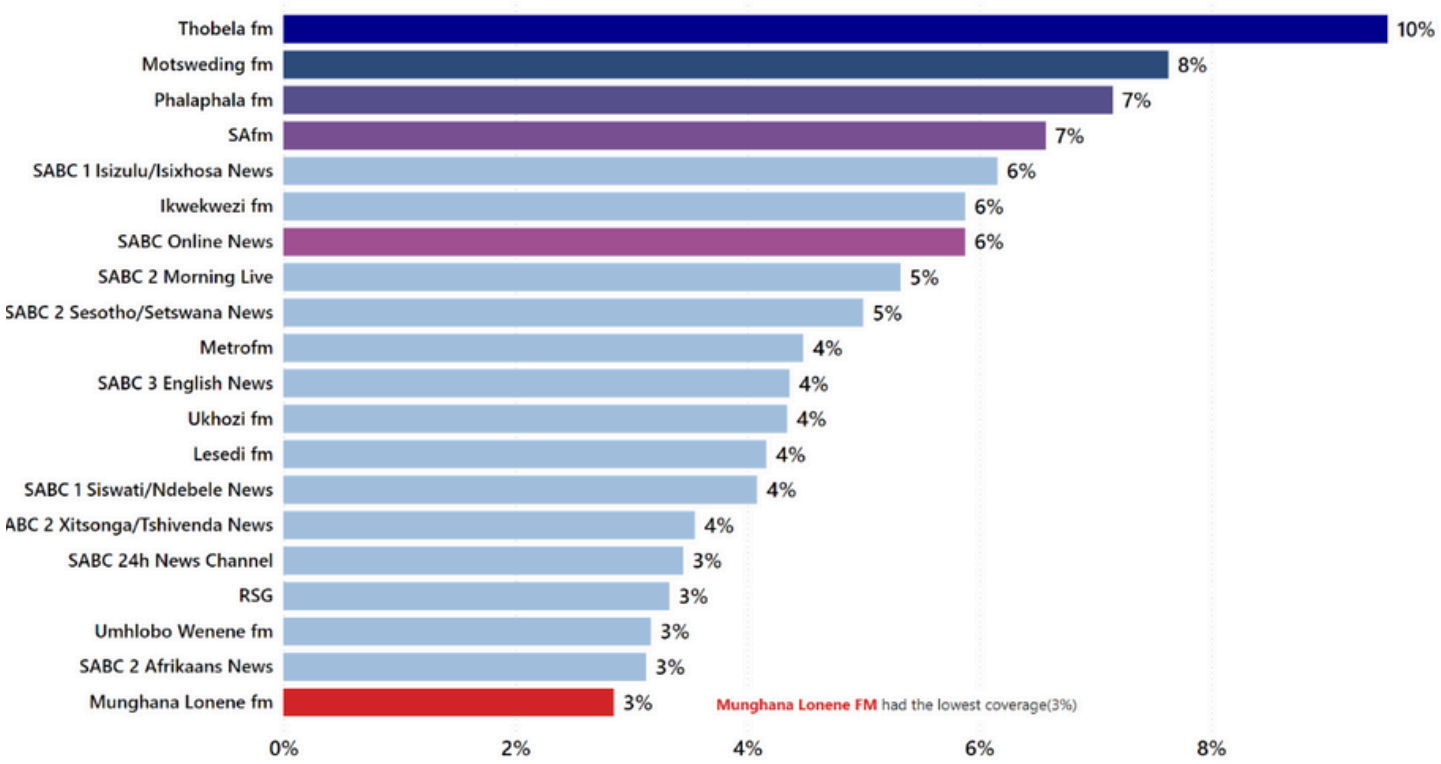


Figure 2: NPE24 coverage across monitored SABC platforms

Thobela FM, a Sesotho radio station, led SABC's election coverage with 10% of the total share, followed by Motsweding FM (8%), Phalaphala FM (7%), and SA FM (7%). **Motsweding FM** serves Setswana speakers, **Phalaphala FM** caters to TshiVenda audiences in Gauteng and Limpopo, while **SA FM** broadcasts nationally in English.

At the lower end, SABC 2 Afrikaans News and **Munghana Lonene FM**, a Xitsonga radio station covering Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, and North West, each accounted for 3% of the coverage. The SABC also leveraged its online platform, SABC Online News, which contributed 6% of the election-related content during the monitored period.

SABC TELEVISION ELECTION COVERAGE

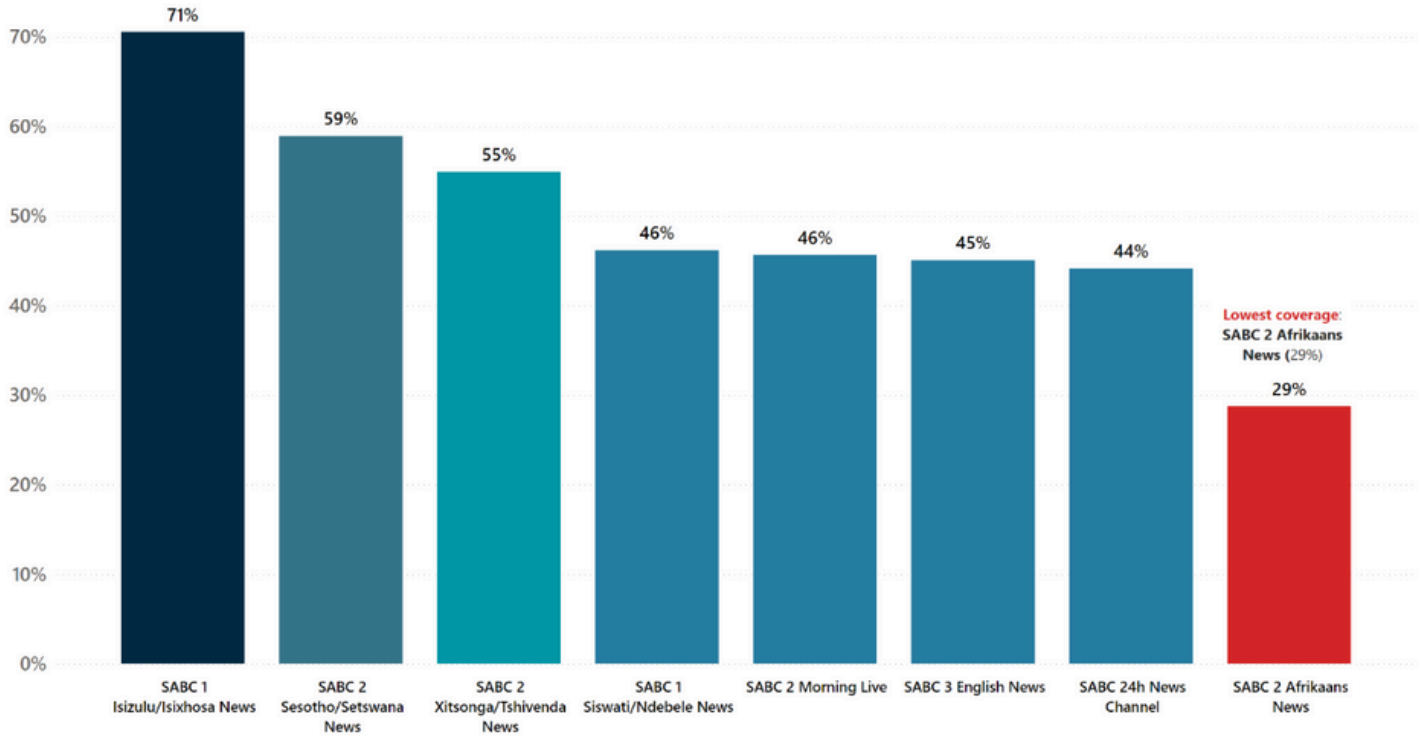


Figure 3: SABC television coverage of NPE24, comparing individual outlets' NPE coverage to their overall coverage.

SABC 1's isiZulu/isiXhosa News emerged as the leader in election coverage across SABC's four TV channels, dedicating 71% of its total output to the 2024 National and Provincial Elections. This achievement reflects the hard work and dedication of the isiZulu/isiXhosa news team, whose focus and commitment ensured comprehensive election reporting.

Following this, SABC 2's Sesotho/Setswana News devoted 59% of its coverage to the elections, while its Xitsonga/TshiVenda News contributed 55%. In contrast, SABC 2's Afrikaans News produced the least election-related content, with only 29% of its total output.

The results highlight the effectiveness of well-executed plans by individual news teams, underscoring the importance of editorial strategy and dedication in delivering election-focused programming across South Africa's diverse linguistic communities.

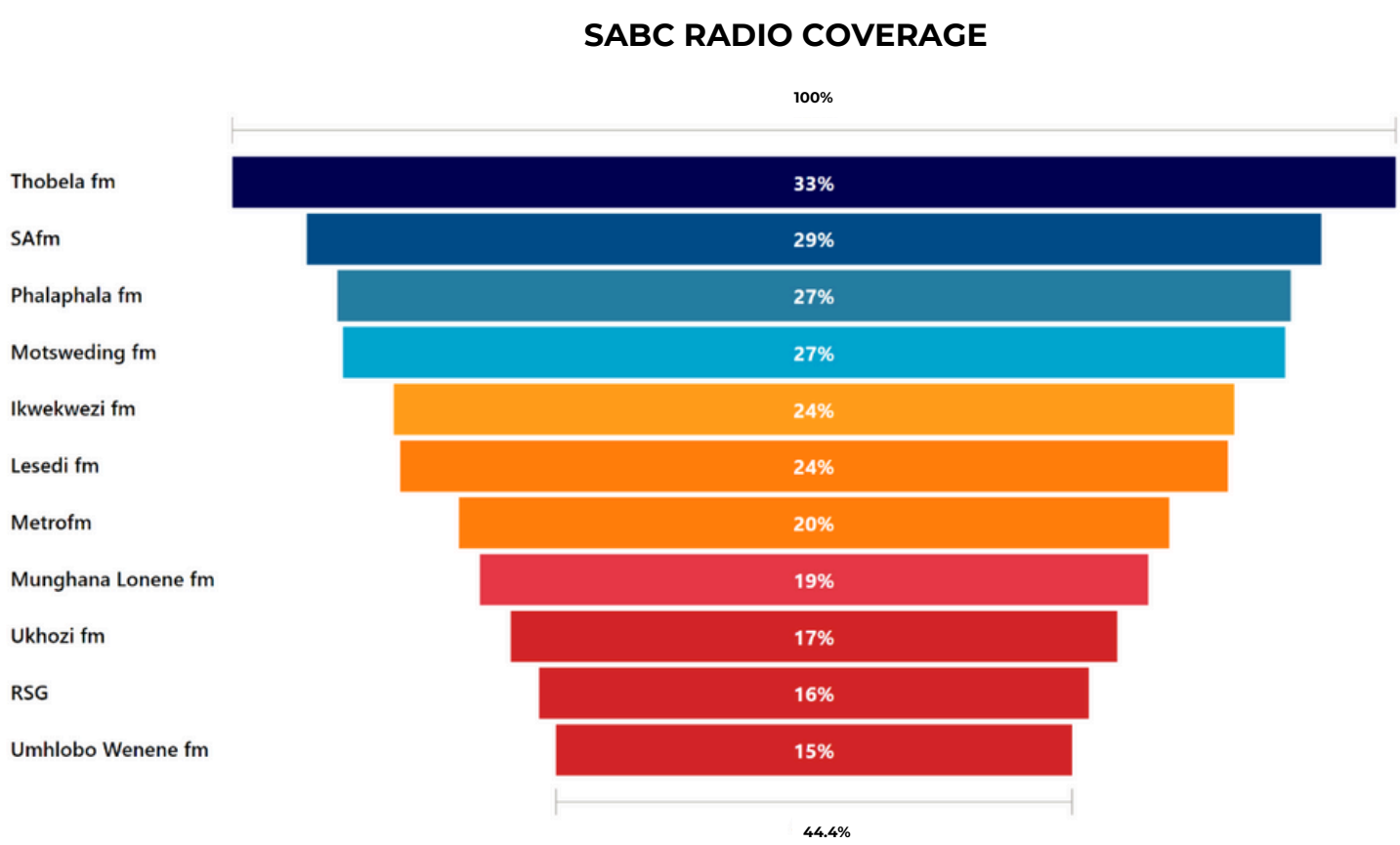


Figure 4: SABC radio coverage of NPE24, comparing individual outlets' NPE coverage to their overall coverage.

Among SABC's monitored radio stations, Thobela FM led election coverage, dedicating 33% of its total news output to the 2024 National and Provincial Elections during the monitored period from February to June 2024. This reflects a deliberate and well-executed coverage plan, ensuring timely and comprehensive election reporting for its listeners.

SA FM, South Africa's oldest English-broadcasting station, followed with 29% of its news output focused on elections. Despite SA FM's politically inclined programming, Thobela FM's performance highlights the effectiveness of its election coverage strategy.

Interestingly, Ukhozi FM, RSG and Umhlobo Wenene FM—the most listened-to stations reaching audiences respectively in isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans—produced significantly less election content, with only 17%, 16%, and 15% respectively of their output dedicated to the elections. This suggests that, despite their large audiences, these stations focused on a broader range of topics, potentially reflecting a decision to balance coverage across diverse issues rather than intensifying election reporting.

It's important to note that while audience size may vary across stations, all audiences, regardless of language or reach, should receive sufficient information. Each station's approach reflects editorial decisions on how best to inform their respective listeners during the election period.

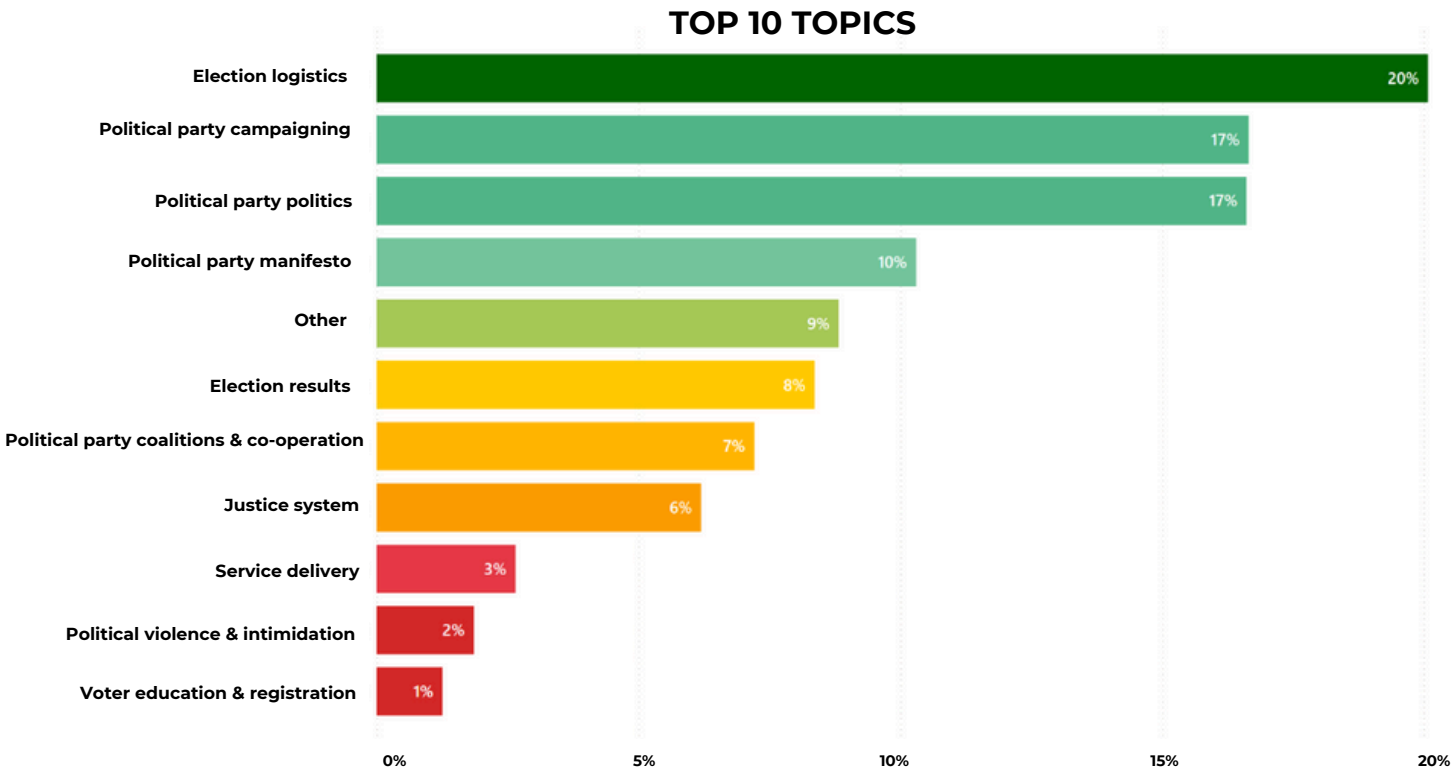


Figure 5: Top 10 topics in SABC NPE24 coverage, which is 91% of all election-coded topics)

The data reveals a striking gap in coverage: voter education and registration accounted for only 1% of SABC's airtime, despite the historic inclusion of independent candidates on the ballot. Given this significant electoral change, one would expect voter education to be a top priority.

In contrast, election logistics (20%), political party campaigning (17%), and inter and intra-party politics (17%) dominated the airwaves. Service delivery, the only other citizen-centric issue in the top 10, received just 3% of the coverage.

This trend of sidelining people-focused topics like voter education, crime, Gender-Based Violence, unemployment, and service delivery is a recurring issue not just for SABC, but across many media outlets. Addressing these issues is crucial for the media to effectively hold those in power accountable and fulfil its public mandate. To do so, the SABC must prioritise diverse, citizen-focused topics and make a concerted effort to report on the challenges affecting the electorate.

TOP 10 SOURCES BY AFFILIATION

One of the SABC's editorial core values is to ensure diversity of sources and to bridge the gap between political parties while representing various demographics, including gender, race, age, and class across all citizens. MMA defines a "source" as any individual who is directly or indirectly quoted, pictured or mentioned in a news story.

In our analysis of the election coverage, we asked: whose voices and perspectives did the SABC prioritise? Which groups of people were given the greatest opportunities to shape and frame election debates? Over the period from February to June, which sources were consistently given a platform?

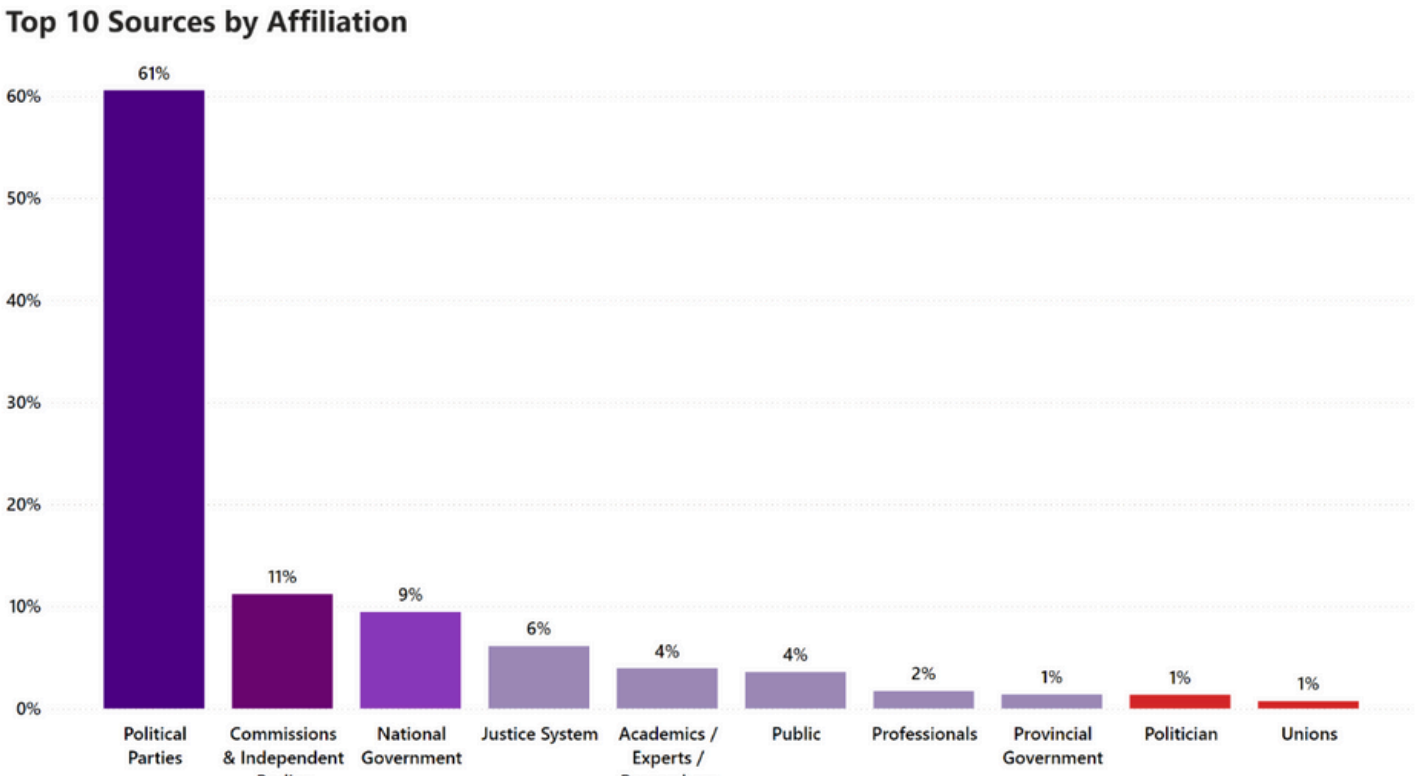


Figure 6: Top 10 sources by affiliation in SABC NPE24 coverage

As in past elections, political parties dominated coverage, accounting for 61% of the total voice share. This is unsurprising, as major parties like the ANC, DA, MKP, and EFF have well-organised communications teams that keep the media informed through press releases and scheduled visits.

Following, political parties, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and independent bodies received 11% of airtime. Given the high stakes of the 2024 elections, marked by fierce competition and ongoing legal disputes, the IEC's role became especially prominent in the news cycle.

However, the SABC fell short in providing equitable airtime for ordinary members of the public (Public on the graph) and experts, who received only 4% each. This imbalance indicates that the 2024 election agenda was largely shaped by political parties' interests, rather than prioritising the needs and concerns of the electorate, which is essential for a healthy democracy.

Clause 5.3.7 of the SABC editorial policy states that SABC staff should be committed to "promote and foster open dialogue and engagement with audiences and create opportunities for the public to discuss issues on local, social, political, economic and national concern." In light of this, the limited representation of the public and experts calls into question whether the SABC has fully embraced its mandate to ensure a more inclusive, citizen-focused electoral discourse.

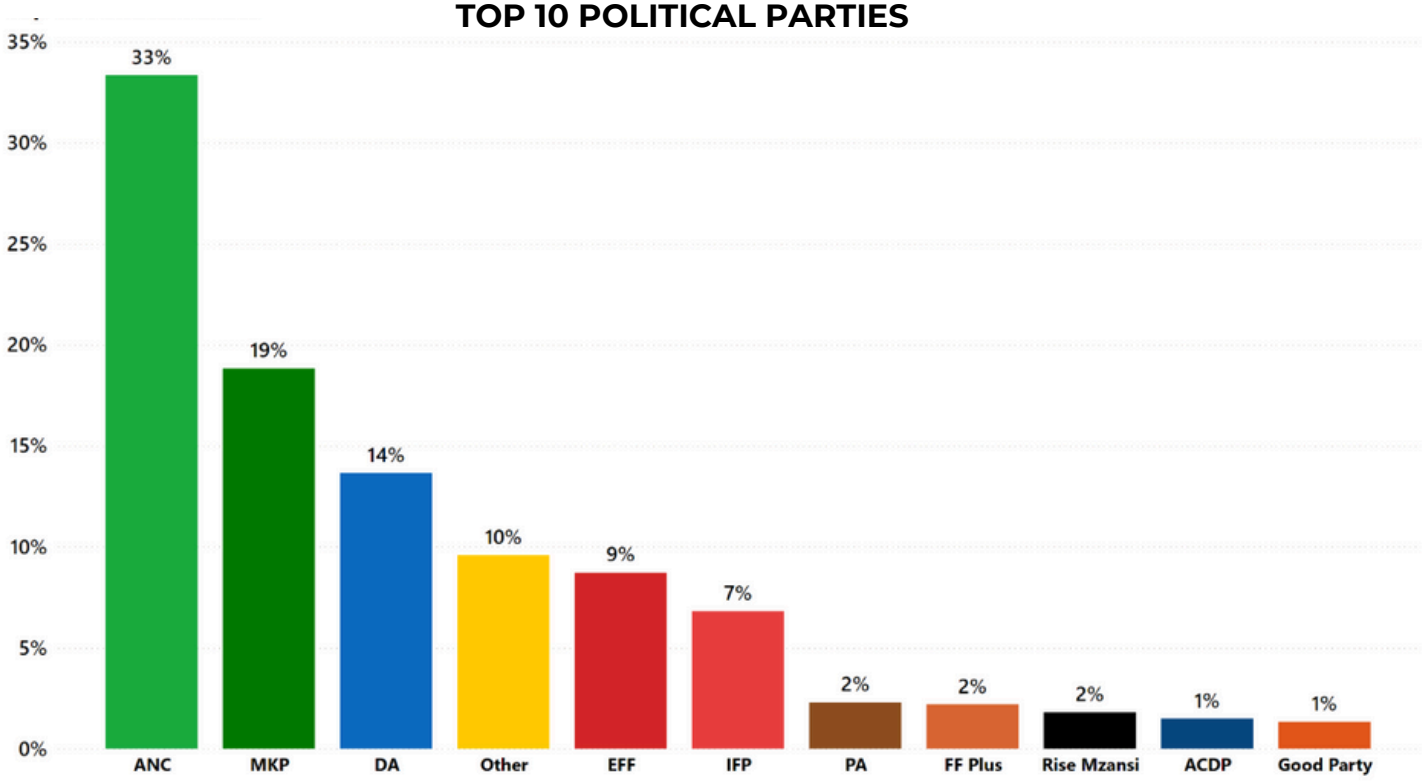


Figure 7: Top 10 political parties' representation in SABC NPE24 coverage

In our analysis of SABC's media coverage during the 2024 elections, we compared the airtime allocated to the top 10 political parties with the votes each party received. Our findings revealed a strong correlation between media coverage and electoral performance, but also highlighted significant disparities.

The top three political parties accounted for 66% of the total media coverage across SABC's TV and radio platforms. Notably, these same parties were the top three in terms of votes. The ANC, as the largest party and the ruling government at the time, received 33% of the coverage—more than double that of the Democratic Alliance (DA), which garnered 14%.

A notable trend in this election was the significant media attention given to new political parties. The Umkhonto we Sizwe Party (MKP), led by controversial figures such as Jacob Zuma, captured 19% of the coverage, placing it second. This is consistent with past trends where breakaway parties from the ANC, such as the Congress of the People (COPE) received a **significant amount of coverage** in the 2009 elections. Interestingly, while the EFF continued to receive substantial coverage over the years, it saw a slight decline compared to previous elections, which aligned closely with its reduced voice share of 9%. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) also drew increased media attention under new leadership, with 7% of coverage.

While it is noted that difficult financial and political conditions persist at the SABC, the public broadcaster needs to make notable efforts to provide equitable coverage to smaller political parties and independent candidates, ensuring a broader representation of voices. This will ensure there is diversity in the election discourse.

The overall representation of political parties emphasises the importance of continuing to balance media attention, ensuring fair representation of all parties, regardless of their size or political influence, while providing voters with comprehensive and diverse perspectives.

GENDER REPRESENTATION OF SOURCES

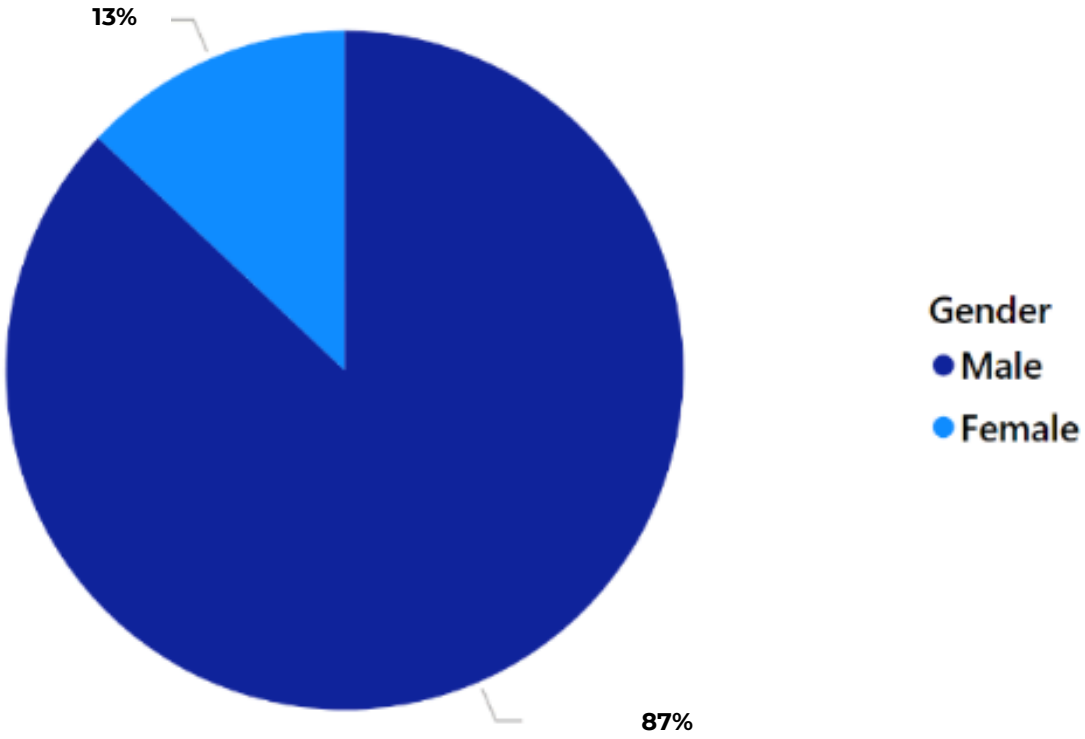


Figure 8: Gender representation of sources in SABC NPE24 coverage

MMA's monitoring of election coverage consistently highlights the underrepresentation of women in media. During the 2024 elections, the SABC relied predominantly on male voices, with men accounting for 87% of sources compared to just 13% for women. This represents a decrease from the **2019 National and Provincial Elections**—where women's voices stood at only 17%. This disparity highlights the persistence of gender stereotyping in political reporting.

This imbalance reflects a broader global trend. **Women's voices in news coverage worldwide** average between 23% and 25%, meaning the SABC's performance is less than consistent with international norms. This comparison should compel the SABC to improve its gender representation to achieve gender equity. Women remain largely excluded from critical political discourse, limiting diverse perspectives and perpetuating inequality.

The SABC and other media outlets must align their practices with these advancements, ensuring that women's voices are not the exception but the norm. By reflecting the country's commitment to gender equity more effectively, the media can foster a more inclusive and representative public discourse.

A cornerstone of election analysis for the media—especially the SABC—is the principle of fairness. This requires newsrooms to present political parties and their activities clearly, impartially, and with all critical facts, enabling voters to make informed decisions.

For the SABC, fairness is particularly vital for three reasons:

- **Mandated Integrity**: As the public broadcaster, the SABC must uphold editorial independence and fairness, especially during elections.
- **National Reach**: The SABC has the widest reach in South Africa, serving even the most marginalised communities through its extensive network of radio stations and television channels in all official languages.
- **Political Scrutiny**: The SABC operates in a politically contested space, historically subject to manipulation. For example, in 2021, ANC Elections Manager Fikile Mbalula accused the SABC of negatively influencing voter sentiment after the party's underperformance.

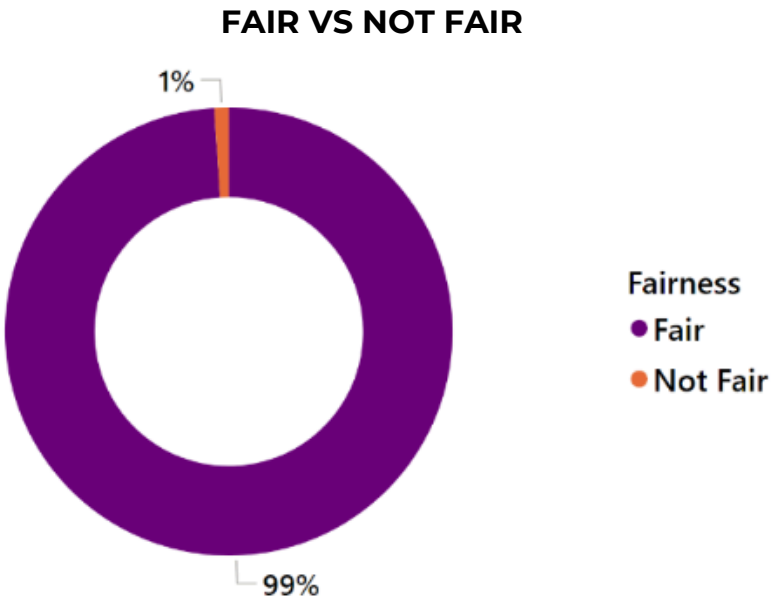


Figure 9: Bias and fairness in SABC NPE24 coverage

In this election cycle, 99% of SABC's election items were found to be fair and balanced, a marked improvement compared to 2016 when 10% showed bias. While minor lapses, such as omission of responses from certain parties and occasional language bias, were noted, they were infrequent and did not necessitate deeper investigation.

This consistency in impartial coverage underscores the SABC's commitment to its editorial policies and its mandate to foster an informed electorate. Such dedication not only supports South Africa's democracy but also strengthens public trust in the media.

CONCLUSION

The role of the public broadcaster in South Africa's democratic process cannot be overstated, particularly during the election cycle. The SABC's mandate to provide objective, accurate, fair, and impartial coverage is not only a constitutional obligation but a cornerstone of the electorate's ability to make informed decisions. This analysis indicates that the SABC largely upheld these principles, demonstrating a commendable commitment to editorial independence and impartiality throughout the 2024 National and Provincial Elections.

Radio emerged as SABC's leading platform for election-related coverage, a reflection of its unique reach and accessibility in even the most rural areas of the country. This underscores its critical role in fostering democracy, ensuring that citizens have access to vital information, and providing a platform for public expression.

However, there is room for improvement. Greater representation of ordinary citizens, women, and marginalised provinces, such as the Eastern Cape, would further enhance the SABC's commitment to inclusivity and balance. Addressing these gaps would not only reflect the diversity of South Africa's population but also reinforce the public broadcaster's role as a true public service entity.

Despite financial and political challenges, the SABC's unbiased and proportional coverage of the 2024 elections affirms its dedication to its public mandate. This performance reflects a broadcaster striving to uphold democratic values and support South Africa's evolving democracy.

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