

MEDIA MONITORING AFRICA

MONITORING ELECTIONS MEDIA COVERAGE

SEPTEMBER 2021 - OCTOBER 2021

Interim Report

Written by Lister Namumba and Azola Dayile

Edited by William Bird

#MMALGE21

1 INTRODUCTION

News media are essential for any democracy, but their role in an election period is even greater. One of the responsibilities of the media during an election period is to not only report on candidates fairly but to also unpack issues for the electorate to enable them to make informed decisions about who to vote for. Further, the media is expected to interrogate the elections manifestos, for instance, so that the electorate can understand what is promised to them.

The 2021 local government elections come at a time when the world is grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic which for South Africa meant the uncertainty, debates and court applications for the postponement of the elections.[1] With the voting date officially set for the 1st of November, 2021, political parties and candidates for the local government elections began the difficult task of convincing the electorate on why they should be given the vote. With many people suffering the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic which crippled the economy and destroyed lives and livelihoods, the electorate would need a lot of convincing on whom to vote for. While the media cannot convince the electorate, it can help the electorate by publishing and broadcasting well-researched content on elections issues and, giving fair representation of political parties and candidates.

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) is monitoring media's coverage of this year's 2021 local government elections just as MMA has done for every local and national election since 1994. The media monitoring exercise is to ascertain trends in coverage and check what issues are placed on the media's agenda. South Africa faces a number of issues among them high unemployment rate, racism and inequality, poor service delivery and Gender-Based Violence to name but a few. The monitoring exercise hopes to highlight whether these issues and more are in media coverage and to check how political parties and candidates are responding to these. Further, the monitoring hopes to expose instances of bias or breaches of codes of conduct.

Previous monitoring exercises have shown that the media still has a long way to go in terms of equitable representation of political parties and, race and gender. For instance, in media coverage of the 2016 local government elections, the top three political parties had a combined coverage share of 80%, leaving only a mere 20% to be shared among other political parties. This means that other and especially smaller political parties did not receive a fair representation in media coverage of the 2016 local government elections. Further, that monitoring revealed that women, both the electorate and candidates, were poorly represented in the media at 17.5% and 14.6% respectively. Citizens only spoke in this coverage at five percent with political parties taking the biggest voice share at 58.8%.[2]

This report presents interim findings of how the South African print and online media has performed so far in coverage of the 2021 local government elections from the 13th of September to the 13th of October, 2021.[3]

[1] https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/safricas-top-court-dismisses-bid-postpone-local-elections-2021-09-03/
[2] http://elections.mediamonitoringafrica.org/2016/southafrica/coverage/
[3] Broadcast media including the public broadcaster, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is also being monitored and findings will be analysed into reports at the end of the monitoring period.

2 METHODOLOGY

Media content on or related to the 2021 local government elections published between 13th of September, 2021 and 13th October, 2021 from 43 South African online[4] media were analysed for this interim report. An in-house monitoring tool called Dexter[5] was used to scrape the websites and collect the content which was stored in a database for analysis. Content analysed in this monitoring period was items that spoke about the 2021 local government elections or elections in general, linked issues such as crime, corruption, unemployment etc to elections and those that were about political parties and candidates. While MMA monitors media coverage of elections in other African countries, those items were excluded from this monitoring.

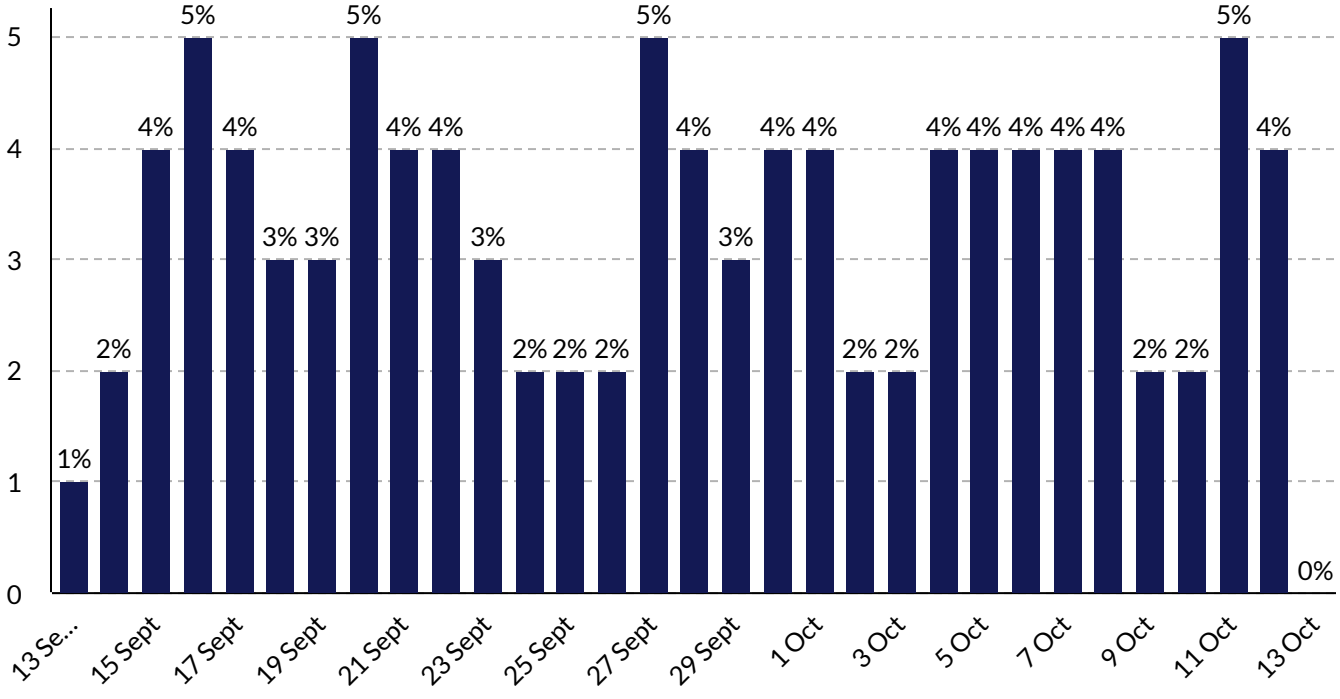
Dexter uses machine learning to extract important information and this was supplemented by human analysis to include aspects such as how many articles were published from the selected media monitored, the topics and the groups including political parties and people who spoke in this content. In addition, race and gender dynamics of these sources were monitored.
In this 31-day monitoring period, a total of 2, 410 items were collected and analysed. The report speaks to those items.



[4] Africa-Newsroom, All Africa, Cape Argus, Cape Times, City Press, Daily Dispatch, Daily Maverick, Daily News, Daily Sun, Die Laevelder, Engineering News, Eyewitness News, Fin24, Financial Mail, GroundUp, IOL Limpopo Mirror, M&G Middelburg Observer, Moneyweb, My Broadband, NewFrame, News24, Parliament RSA, PoliticsWeb, Pretoria News, SA News SABC Online News, Saturday Star, Sowetan The Citizen, The Daily Vox The Herald The Media Online, The Mercury The Post (SA), The Star, The Sunday Independent The Times The Witness Weekend Argus, Zoutnet eNCA Online
[5]Dexter is MMA's purpose built online monitoring tool. It harvests all content from selected online media websites and stores this ta in a database. In addition to hosting all this extracted information in a database, it utilises open source and bespoke developed tools to analyse the data retrieved. This includes entity extraction and machine learning. In practical terms, it allows us to automate core elements of media monitoring analysis, from understanding who speaks, what they say, what stories are about, where the stories are from and who the authors are. In addition to this, Dexter also captures a series of additional pieces of information allowing indepth and detailed analysis over time. Dexter is currently ingesting stories from over 100 credible news media websites and 25 dodgy news sites which are mostly South African based. Our data sources cover South African media, with growing footprints in Nigeria, Zambia, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Kenya. Our technical development partner on Dexter is Open Data Durban. Using Dexter, we are able to produce rapid analyses of media election coverage in South Africa, Lesotho and Zambia.

3 FINDINGS

Figure 1. Daily LGE Stories
(as % of total for the month)



It is expected that coverage of the local government elections will keep increasing as voting day draws closer. However, looking at the graph above, there seems to be peaks and troughs throughout the monitoring period. A closer look at the days with the most significant dips reveals that these were weekend days including Friday, the 24th of September which was a public holiday.

The days with the highest amount of media coverage all at five percent were the 16th of September, the 20th of September, the 27th of September and the 11th of September. The spike on the 16th of September is largely due to coverage given to the African National Congress (ANC) regarding the party being "thrown a lifeline"[1] by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) after the Commission had reopened the candidate registration. Subsequently the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) made applications for the Constitutional Court to rule against the reopening of councillor candidate submissions. Coverage of this issue continued to dominate media coverage a few days before and after the 16th of September. Another big story around the 16th was on the voter registration weekend to be held on the 18th and 19th of September where IEC was urging all eligible voters to go physically to centres and register to vote or use the opportunity to verify their details.[2]

[6] https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/elections/2613656/da-to-oppose-iec-reopening-of-candidate-registration-process-6-september-2021/
[7] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-09-16-last-opportunity-voters-urged-to-register-this-weekend-so-they-can-make-their-mark

Stories that could have contributed to the peak on the 20th of September included those on the ruling by the Constitutional Court that the reopening of candidates registration by the IEC was lawful.[8] Other stories were on the voter registration weekend where the IEC revealed that 91% of new voter registrations were by young people[9] and also that the IEC had reached over half of its target of new voter registrations. The death of Johannesburg Mayor, Jolidee Matongo[10] also made news on this day as more political parties, candidates and the general public paid tribute to him.

The peak on the 27th of September had stories such as the launches of election manifestos by political parties including the ANC, the Congress of the People (Cope) and the Good party. Political parties that launched their manifestos the week prior to the week of the 27th were still enjoying media coverage. However, much of the coverage on the 27th of September was on manifesto launches of the ANC, Cope and the Good party. Other coverage was on the ANC Treasury General, Paul Mashatile who was seen in a video posted online handing out money to church congregants in Limpopo.[11] The killing of Tshwane ANC councillor and candidate, Tshepo Motaung was also in the news on the 27th of September. Coverage of this incident revealed that Motaung's killing was "believed to be politically-motivated and linked to the party's recent councillor candidate-selection process".[12]

The last peak during this 31 day monitoring period was on the 11th of October and media coverage on this day was mostly on the arrest of a Mpumalanga member of the executive (MEC) who was charged with murder.[13] This story dominated media coverage on this day and the few days after with the president, Cyril Ramaphosa calling for the MEC to "step aside"[14] because of his case. The continued coverage of the replacing of the poster depicting Zulu kings in eThekwini municipality[15] with one by the city encouraging voters to go out and exercise their right could have also contributed to the spike on the 11th of October.

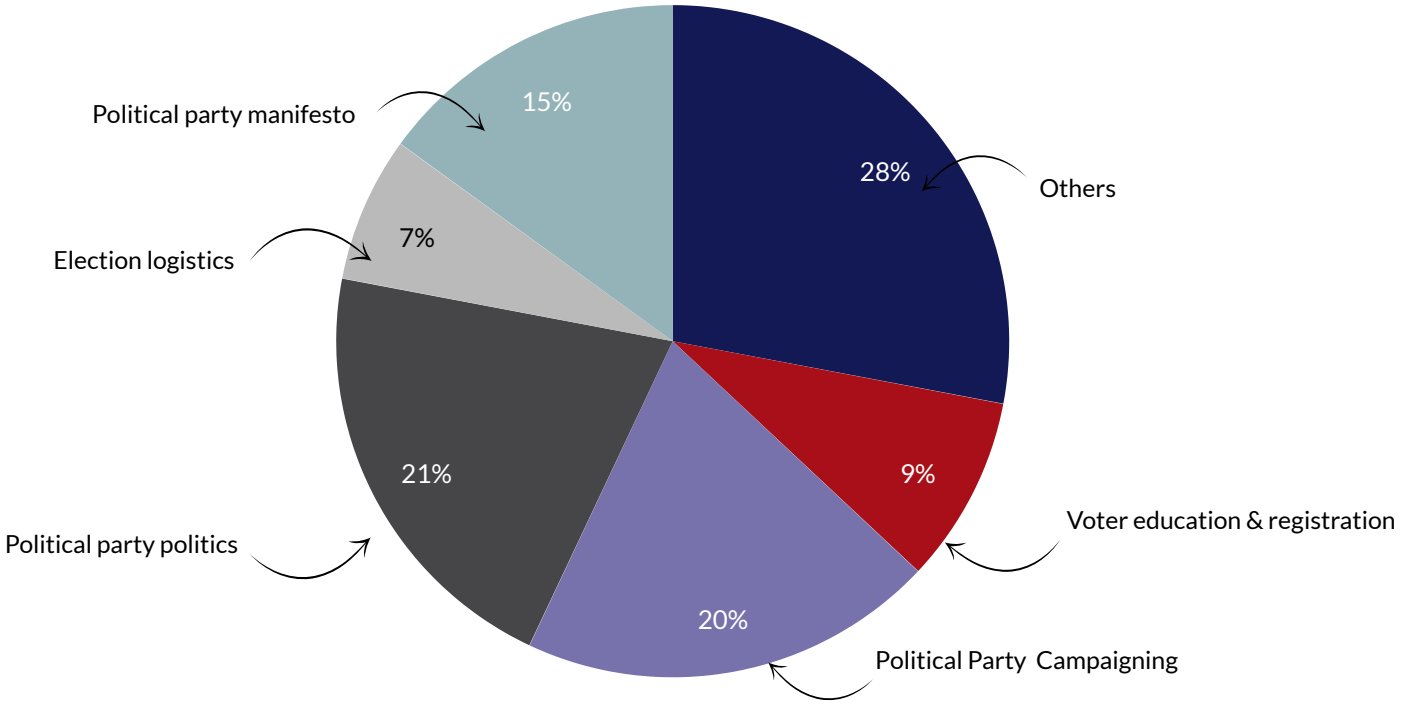
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[8] http://ewn.co.za/2021/09/20/concourt-rules-against-da-saying-the-iec-reopening-candidates-list-was-lawful
[9] http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-09-20-sy-mamabolo-young-south-africans-make-up-91-of-new-voter-registrations
[10] http://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/tributes-pour-in-following-city-of-johannesburg-mayor-jolidee-matongos-death
[11] https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/politics/2632620/mashatile-could-be-in-trouble-analysts/
[12] https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/politics/2632620/mashatile-could-be-in-trouble-analysts/
[13] https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2021-10-11-mpumalanga-mec-mandla-msibi-charged-with-murder-jailed-overnight/
[14] https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/ramaphosa-says-mpumalanga-mec-arrested-for-murder-will-need-to-step-aside/
[15] https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/politics/2021-10-11-stop-cheap-politicking-anc-tells-ifp-after-removal-of-zulu-kings-banner/

1 TOPICS
What the stories are about

As items are monitored they are allocated a single core topic or subject. The topics on or relating to the 2021 local government elections that the media report on indicate what is given prominence by the media. The coverage of these topics is important to monitor and analyse because it gives a picture of what the media prioritises on its agenda. The figure below shows the top five topics on or relating to the local government that were reported on by the media during the 31-day monitoring period and as can be can seen, these top five topics had a combined coverage share of 72%.

Figure 2. What are the stories about?
(Top 5 which is 72% of all coverage and other topics grouped into "others")



The graph above shows that much of the coverage of the local government elections was on political party politics and political party campaigning at 21% and 20% respectively. In third place is the topic, political party manifesto at 15%. It is expected that much of the coverage during this period will be on political party politics which include both internal and external politics, campaigning and manifestos, however, that these three topics command a significant amount of coverage at the expense of other topics becomes problematic and exposes gaps in what is placed top on media's agenda. Further, a deeper analysis of the type of stories reporting political party manifestos reveals that much of the coverage on this and indeed on the other topics is event-based. This is a period when the electorate should be getting coverage that unpacks what is contained in election manifestos in order to aid the electorate in knowing what is promised.

It is important in a local government election that citizens drive the political and media agenda on issues affecting them that they want candidates to address and one of these issues is service delivery. Unfortunately, service delivery only received a coverage share of less than five percent in this monitoring period signalling that it is not a priority on the media agenda. Other issues affecting the electorate that should be high on the political and media agenda are health, crime, Gender-Based Violence, unemployment etc and these all received a coverage share of two percent and less.

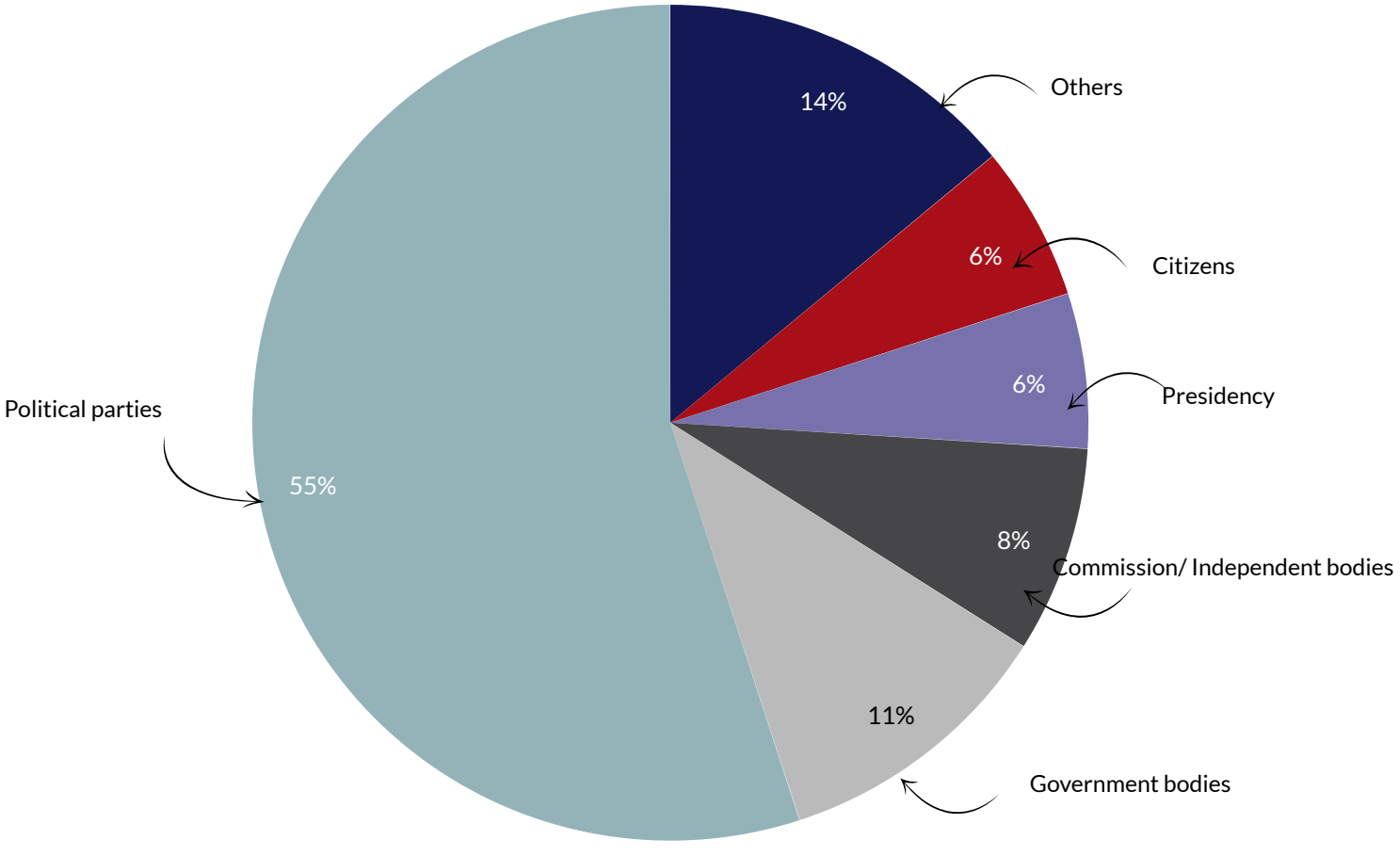


2 SOURCES (GROUPS) Whose voice do we hear?

Analysing whose voices we hear tells us something about those who have power in the media. Sources in media coverage of local government elections are monitored to determine who sets the agenda because it is known that the people who have the greatest voice tend to hold significant power in society. Of the 4, 342 sources recorded in monitored content, a combined 86% of those were from political parties (55%), government departments (11%), commissions and independent bodies (8%), the Presidency (6%) and citizens (6%).

Figure 3. Top Parties & Elections Related groups coverage

(Top 5 which is 86% of all coverage and other groups combined and labelled "others")



Findings presented above show that political parties are the most dominant voices in media coverage of the local government elections at 55%. What this reveals is that the media is reluctant to give other voices relevant to elections space in the media. This is evidenced by the huge gap between the top voice (political parties) and government departments or commissions and independent bodies which included the IEC.

As elections are not just about political parties and candidates, the voices of citizens need to be audible in this media coverage. Sadly, during this monitoring period, citizens only spoke in media coverage of the local government elections at six percent. This finding is not significantly different to findings from previous media monitoring exercises on elections. Citizens are seldom accessed in elections coverage and what this reveals is that the media prefers to access politicians more than the people who will be voting. Of course this is also understandable given that people may wish to hear what the political parties are offering.

The danger with low access of citizens is that issues facing the electorate will continue to be neglected by those who hold the power to address them. This danger is made worse by the neglecting of voices of experts who should provide expert views to issues facing citizens and how policy makers can address them. For instance, Gender-Based Violence which is greatly affecting South Africa is one of the issues that the politicians should be speaking on and providing policies on how, if voted into power, they will address the scourge. Here, experts in the field would be key in unpacking the politicians' proposed strategies for the electorate or indeed, give views on how the politicians can best address the scourge. Sadly, the voice of experts in media coverage of the 2021 local government elections during this monitoring period was at less than one percent.



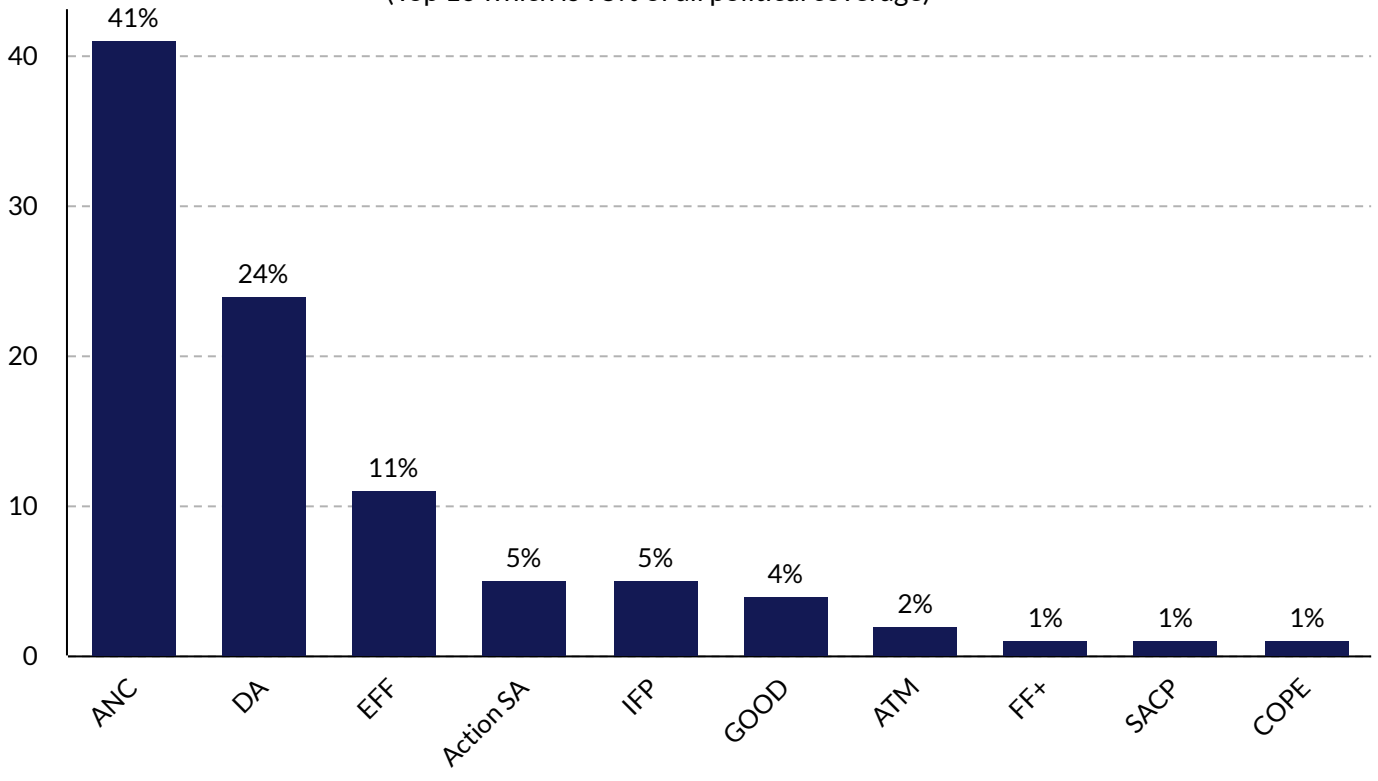
3 POLITICAL PARTY COVERAGE

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, there had been a lot of uncertainty around the local government elections, however since the pronouncement of the official election date by the IEC, political parties in South Africa have been out and about electioneering and launching their manifestos. Naturally, this has caught the attention of the media and as such, much reportage revolves around the party electioneering and the upcoming elections scheduled for 1 November.

Having monitored the media during this period, we have found that the top six political parties, namely the ANC, DA, EFF, IFP, ActionSA and GOOD Party, collectively took up 90% of all political party coverage during this period. The ANC scored the biggest share of the spoils with 41% total coverage, followed by the DA at 24% and the EFF at 11%. The coverage is broadly in line with the support that these parties enjoy and their representation in the National Assembly, with the ANC having 58% representation, the DA at 21% and the EFF at 11%.[16] With shrinking newsrooms due to budget constraints and the rise of digital and social media amongst other challenges facing the profession, covering all 325 political parties contesting the 2021 local government elections[17] in an equitable manner was a major challenge for many news outlets.

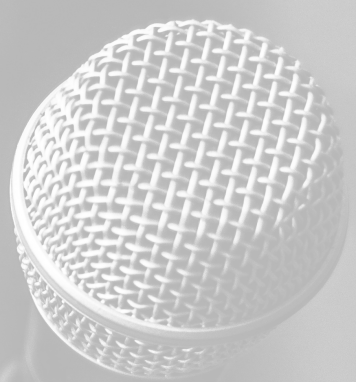
Figure 4. Political Party Coverage

(Top 10 which is 95% of all political coverage)



[16] https://www.parliament.gov.za/national-assembly
[17]https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/325-parties-contesting-2021-local-government-elections

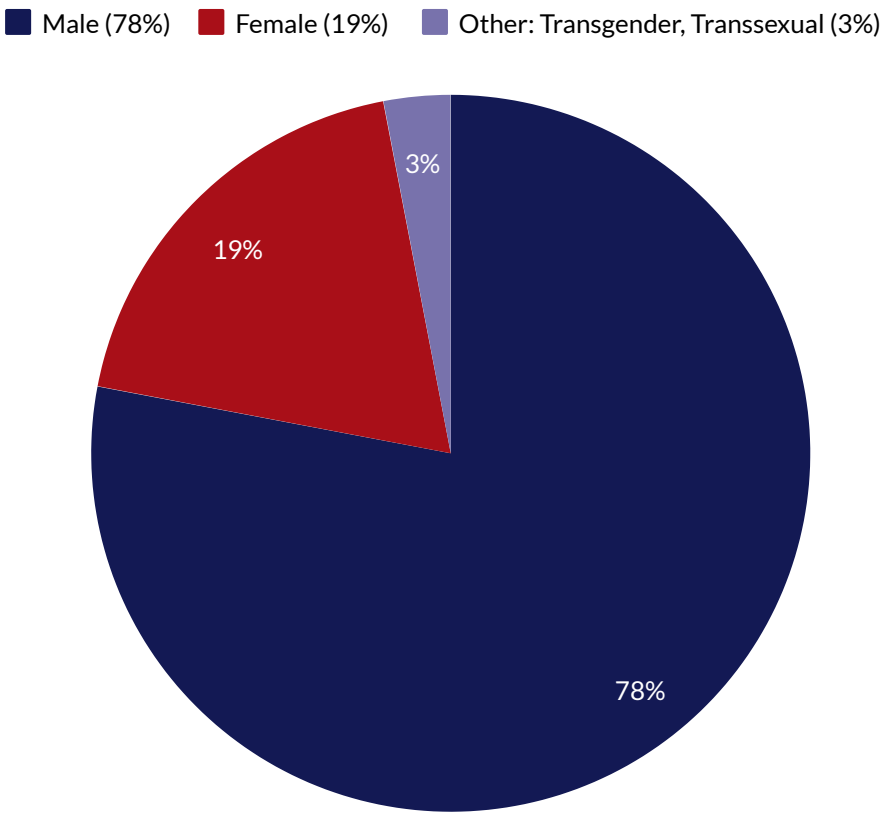
Despite these challenges, our research reveals that media coverage was concentrated mainly between the top three political parties, sharing a combined 90% of all total coverage. Interesting to note is the rapid rise of the ActionSA party led by former DA-affiliated Johannesburg Mayor and businessman Herman Mashaba who founded the party in August 2020. In just over a year of its existence, it has risen to prominence in the media, sometimes for reasons relating to xenophobia, and eclipsing established political parties such as COPE, PAC, UDM etc to score an overall five percent of all political party coverage, on par with the well-established IFP. Parties that usually enjoy considerable coverage such as the Freedom Front Plus were pushed further down the pecking order and as a result was counted together with the rest of the other parties to make up a combined 10% of total coverage for the period monitored.



4 SOURCES (GENDER)
Whose voices do we hear? Women and men

In a country whose founding is anchored on principles of non-racialism and non-sexism, it is of utmost importance to have a fair and equitable representation of males and females, including gender non-conforming people, in all spheres of South African public life, more so in the media.

Figure 5. Gender of sources

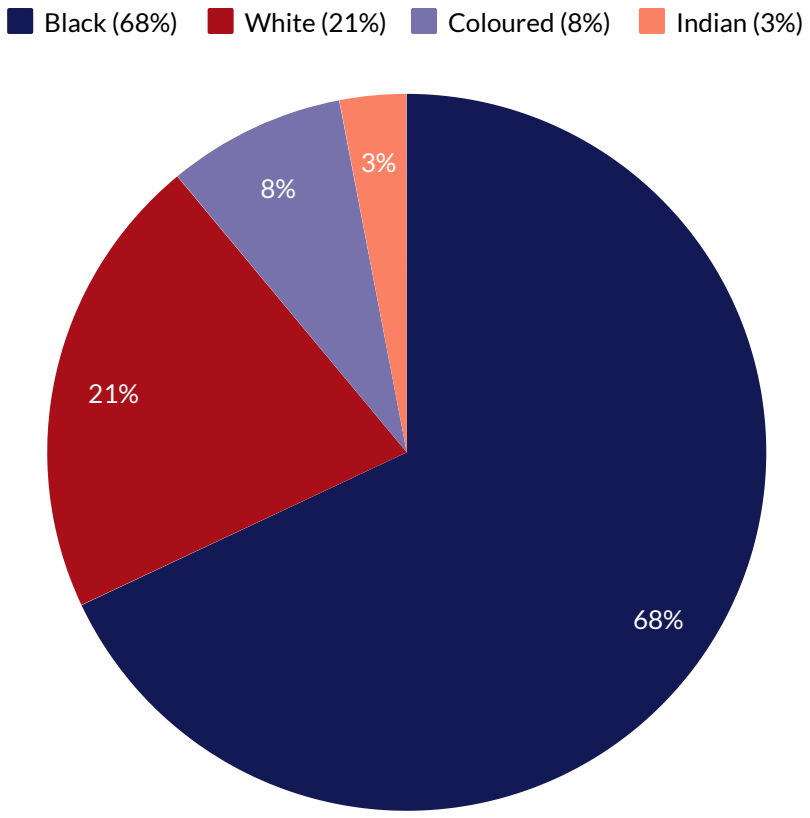


The monitoring reveals that the share of voice remained largely unequal, with men being accessed almost four times more at 78% than women who were accessed at a measly 19%. Interestingly, there was a little but significant rise in the voices of those who identify as transgender and/or transsexual with a three percent representation, a major jump from previous findings where their voices would be absent. The disproportion between male and female representation is a consistent trend and has been shown in research around the world repeatedly. Such a disproportionate share of voice in the media is alarming at least here in South Africa where women make 52% of the total population of the country and had two million more registered voters than men in the previous elections (2019 national elections). In previous elections, female sources were often boosted by conflict or controversies among key female leaders while in these elections, the main leaders seem to be men and much of the controversies are focused on men and, there is hardly any attention being given to key issues of gender equality.

5 SOURCES (RACE)
Whose voices do we hear?

On the question of representation according to the demographic of race, our monitoring reveals that there remain disproportionately high levels of representation of White population voices in the media. Whilst making up a national population demographic of only nine percent, White population voices were accessed more than double that figure, enjoying a 21% representational coverage in the media during this election period. This could be attributed to coverage around the Democratic Alliance, the second biggest political party in South Africa, having 21% share of the total seats in the National Assembly. This is also because the party is usually represented by mostly white party leaders during media engagements such as John Steenhuisen, Helen Zille and Dean McPherson as we witnessed recently with the controversial elections posters in Phoenix and the DA's ongoing campaign trail.

Figure 6. Race of sources



On the other hand, and unsurprisingly, Black voices enjoyed the most representational coverage with a total share of 68% of the spoils, much less than their actual population percentage of 81%. For the rest of the racial groupings, the South African Indian population (2.5%) received a total of three percent coverage while the often-neglected voices of the Coloured population (9%) were represented in media coverage at a total of eight percent. In contrast, we noted that Coloured voices found scant representation in terms of being accessed by the media during the period we monitored.

The coverage received during this period by the Coloured demographic is mainly around the rise of the Patriotic Alliance who won a by-election in Eldorado Park as well as the launch of their manifesto during the monitoring period. The results of our monitoring of the 2016 local government elections reveal a similar pattern to the findings from this monitoring period. Black voices were the most accessed then (82.2%) followed by White voices (9.1%) and then by the Coloured voice (7%) and lastly the Indian voice at 1.6%.[18]

4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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 is not just critical but like the elections and voting process, it is vital to free, fair and credible elections.

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 voices account for a mere 19% 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 been almost never unpacked and dealt with. These include gender-based violence, rising unemployment, rampant corruption and impunity, land issues, crime, health during the Covid-19 pandemic, education, child abuse, and climate change all offer tantalizing angles for political parties and potentially news. Yet as the results show, none of these issues received even one percent coverage. It is essential we find ways to address this in our coming local government elections.

[18] http://elections.mediamonitoringafrica.org/2016/southafrica/coverage/

To report better on issues that matter during and after an election period, we recommend the following to journalists and newsrooms;

- Seek out and cast a light on service delivery issues, especially in areas largely underrepresented in the media.

- Include experts representative of all demographic voices, with an added focus on Coloured and women voices.

- The media could also look at focus areas like Gender-Based Violence, femicide and human trafficking, corroborating these with official statistics from SAPS and other such sources to probe political parties and players on what they aim to do to eradicate these social ills.

- Bring in children into the elections conversation in an appropriate manner, and further representing their interests by doing stories on what parties have to say about Early Childhood Education and Development, children's rights and the quality of schooling in rural and township areas.

- The media could also probe the candidates on free speech, the safety of journalists and how they plan to ensure a safe and healthy environment for media practitioners, especially those whom are women.

For enquiries contact:

Lister Namumba; Programme Manager: Monitoring, Research And Analysis, **listerr@mma.org.za**

Azola Dayile; Programme Manager: Advocacy, Litigation And Lobbying, **azolad@mma.org.za**

011 788 1278