15 years of reporting South African elections:

Same same but different

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1. Introduction

One of the core elements of a functioning democracy is the media and its role during the elections.The media plays a crucial role in disseminating information from the political parties to electorates. Free and fair elections involve a range of things including a participatory process where the electorate engages candidates on various issues that affect their communities. Media also gives candidates and political parties a platform to debate policy positions on different areas such as economy and health, thus helping citizens to make informed choices. For all this to happen, the media needs to conduct itself in a professional manner.[1] The fairness of many elections is judged on how the media conducted itself during the elections period.

Media Monitoring Africa has analysed South African media's coverage of all local and national elections since our first democratic elections in 1994. This report aims to compare the results of those analyses to observe any trends in coverage over time. This report specifically looks at the national elections that took place in 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014. Each of these elections took place in different contexts with different parties and different political candidates campaigning for leadership positions of the country.

 For the purpose of this analysis, we ask the following questions:

- Was the media providing fair and balanced election coverage that challenged parties to address issues that affect society?
- Did the media challenge the traditional gender stereotypes that often play out in politics?
- Whose voices did we most often hear in elections coverage and what did this say about power dynamics in the country?

Bearing in mind that media is an important instrument of information dissemination, analysing these issues helps us understand the role that the media have played in setting the elections agenda.

Background

The media and democracy cannot be separated [2]; hence, the role of the media in a democratic society is to give voice to both electorate and candidates. However, upholding this role has been difficult given the environment the media finds itself in during the elections period. In the South African context, during the elections period, news items tend to focus more on political personalities than issues. This represent a very serious challenge and it is often difficult for the media to set the agenda. Instead, politician set the agenda and the media merely report on what is available.

Another critical issue is that the majority of South African voters do not have a direct relationship with political parties. In other words, the majority of South African voters do not subscribe to a political party's membership.For instance, during the 2014 elections, the ANC received over 11 million votes,[3] while its membership was just over 1 million.[4] This type of political setting requires that the media play a proactive role in conveying messages between parties and supporters and making sure that parties not only address their manifestos but also respond to citizens' concerns.

1 See The electoral knowledge network: Media and Election https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/me/onePage
2 See What is the media's role in a democratic society? https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-medias-role-in-a-democratic-society
3 See 2014 National and Provincial Elections: http://www.elections.org.za/content/elections/results/2014-national-and-provincial-elections--national-results
4 Audits reveal ANC membership numbers soar, Niren Tolsi: https://mg.co.za/article/2012-12-17-anc-membership-numbers-soar

The media's role also includes identifying and selecting issues of public relevance, and challenging the parties to address them as election issues.

The goal of this comparative analysis is to highlight and reflect on some of the negative and positive practices by the media during election periods so that gaps and challenges can be addressed for any future elections. The specific years were chosen to ensure methodological consistency where themes of gender, fairness and political party coverage were all monitored by MMA during each period.

2. Methodology

2.1 Scope of the monitoring

The first step in answering some of the questions in this analysis was to create a methodology that would allow us to unpack some of the trends across these media election coverage reports.Rather than collecting new data, we examined previous MMA reports that analysed the media coverage of four South African elections: 1999,[5] 2004,[6] 2009[7] and 2014.[8] Within those reports, four areas were identified for comparison and analysis, and our research therefore sought to answer the following questions:

1. Topics: Which five topics dominated and which topics were marginalised over the four elections periods.
2. Gender: What is the gender breakdown of voices sourced in the media analysed?
3. Fairness: Was the coverage of the elections fair or biased over the periods analysed?
4. Political party coverage: How did coverage of political parties differ across election periods?

2.2 Sample and sampling methods

The entire sample selected for analysis came from the four previous elections, in 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014. We chose these reports specifically because of their availability as well as a similar approach used to analyse the elections coverage.

The exclusion of the 1994 report

The first democratic election in South Africa took place in 1994. These elections not only brought about massive political change in the nation, but also provided an opportunity for all spheres of society to be democratised, including the media which was expected to play its role in safeguarding the transparency of the democratic process.

5 Ibid
6 MMP, 2004. 2004 The Media Monitoring Project. What is the name of the report?
7 Govenden, P., Duncan. C., & Radu, W. (2009).National and Provincial Elections 2009: A Win or a Place, Citizens come Last .Johannesburg: Media Monitoring Africa. Accessible from www.mediamonitoringafrica.org
8 By Radu, W. Bird, W. Reporting elections:A good story to tell? Elections 2014/ Interim Report May 2014

Although the 1994 media election coverage findings cannot be questioned, its methodology and focus areas of monitoring was slight different compared to the follow-up elections that took place in 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014. For example, the 1994 report states that one of the immediate objectives of monitoring the elections was to analyse news coverage of all aspect of the political environment before and during the elections period.[9] This means that other social issues in the media such as gender and race were not given the deliberate attention they would have deserved.

2.3 Content analysis

Once all the data was collected, it was entered into an excel spreadsheet so that various aspects of the monitoring data for each election and on different subject could be selected for analysis.

The table below shows the elections years that were monitored, duration of monitoring, number of articles, number of media monitored for each election as well as the type of monitoring undertaken.

Table 1: Monitoring methodology

Year of election	1999	2004	2009	2014
Period of monitoring	Two month	One month	Two month	Three month
Number of elections items monitored	14 100	6 080	17 797	7 581
Number of media	35	42	56	51
Monitoring type	manual	manual	manual	manual and online

24 Limitations of methodology

While the reports were chosen because of their consistency on issues monitored, there were noticeable differences in the naming and wording of certain topics for different elections. For example, "Elections logistics", "IEC", "IEC/Logistics" refers to the activities by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), meaning that every story that was IEC centered will be allocated to these topics. These variations emanated from the differences in the circumstances facing the country as well as the evolving media landscape and the languages used by the news reports. For example, in 1999, "political violence" was used as a topic, while in 2009 the same topics were labelled as "political violence and intimidation". Nevertheless, all efforts were made to ensure that topic terminology was aligned and this report reflects those adjustments.

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9 Media Monitoring Project, Interim Report: Election news coverage of election, February and March 1994

Although this analysis was done using the actual reports that were produced for each election, some of the practical differences in how data was collected make for some difficult direct comparisons. For example, the 1999, 2004 and 2009 monitoring was all done manually, where trained personnel ("monitors") were required to read newspapers to examine content. However, in the 2014 report, monitoring of elections coverage was undertaken using Dexter, MMA's media monitoring tool, and MMA's monitors. Dexter scrapes news articles from all news websites into a database, and the data collected by Dexter is then used for analysis. Afterward, the data collected in 2014 was supplemented with manual monitoring to ensure same level of data validity as previous elections. The differences in data collection between the various years, while not unimportant, did not hinder our ability to generate conclusive findings on the media elections coverage.

3. Findings

3.1 Topics

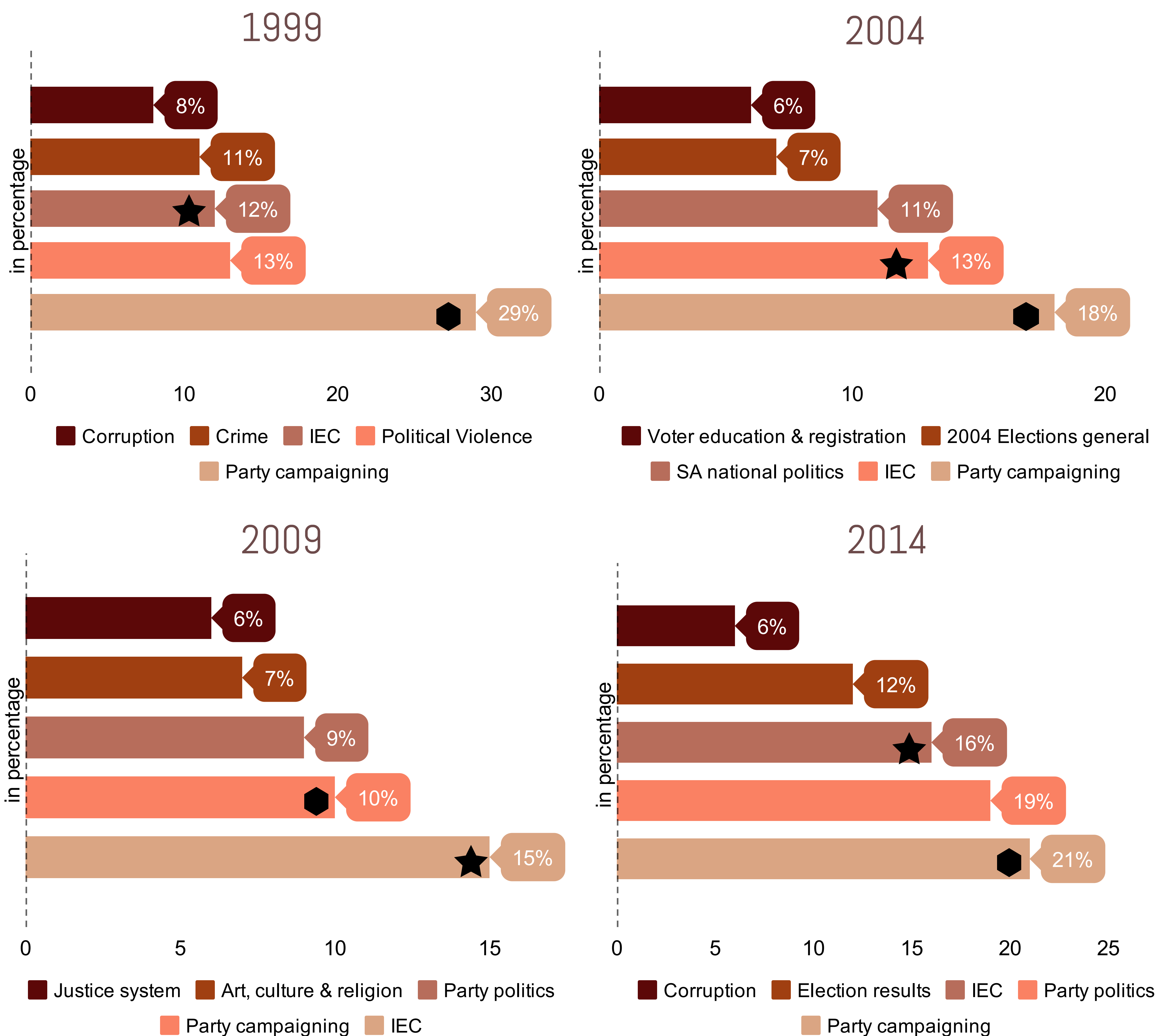Top five topics covered across the years

This section presents the key topics identified in the media elections coverage and highlights the levels of attention afforded to various subjects and issues. The media are at times unaware of the issues and types of stories that they prioritise, and this section help us understand whether the coverage caters to citizens' needs and the types of issues they raise. This is particularly important during an elections period.

In order to do this, an overall theme or topic was allocated to each story analysed. For example, stories that specifically focus on a political party candidate and their ideas about how to resolve a particular issue will be identified as a "Political party campaigning" story. In the same way, stories that centre on members of the IEC giving progress on the preparation towards the election would be categorised as "IEC logistics". The topic therefore refers to the central subject of the story.

"this could mean that politicians were the agenda setters, and that politicking dominated the media during the election period"

Figure 1: Top 5 topics covered by media during 4 elections periods

1999

Topic	Percentage
Corruption	8%
Crime	11%
IEC	12%
Political Violence	13%
Party campaigning	29%

■ Corruption ■ Crime ■ IEC ■ Political Violence
■ Party campaigning

2004

Topic	Percentage
Voter education & registration	6%
2004 Elections general	7%
SA national politics	11%
IEC	13%
Party campaigning	18%

■ Voter education & registration ■ 2004 Elections general
■ SA national politics ■ IEC ■ Party campaigning

2009

Topic	Percentage
Justice system	6%
Art, culture & religion	7%
Party politics	9%
Party campaigning	10%
IEC	15%

■ Justice system ■ Art, culture & religion ■ Party politics
■ Party campaigning ■ IEC

2014

Topic	Percentage
Corruption	6%
Election results	12%
IEC	16%
Party politics	19%
Party campaigning	21%

■ Corruption ■ Election results ■ IEC ■ Party politics
■ Party campaigning

Please notice that the symbols ★ and ⬢ in the charts mean that the topics were covered by the media during all 4 of the elections.

The graph above shows a breakdown of the top five most common topics covered by the media across the 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 general elections. Notably, political party campaigning dominated the news coverage for majority of the elections analysed. For the purpose of this study, political campaigning stories are about political parties' plans and strategies to influence decision-making of the voters during elections periods. This can be done in different ways such as rallies and door to door campaigning by representatives of political parties. Party campaigning and party politics were also all consistently in the top five topics. Moreover, in many ways this could mean that politicians were the agenda setters, and that politicking dominated the media during the election period. IEC is also in the top five of all elections coverage meaning that the IEC is given enough voice to talk about the logistics of the challenges during the elections period.
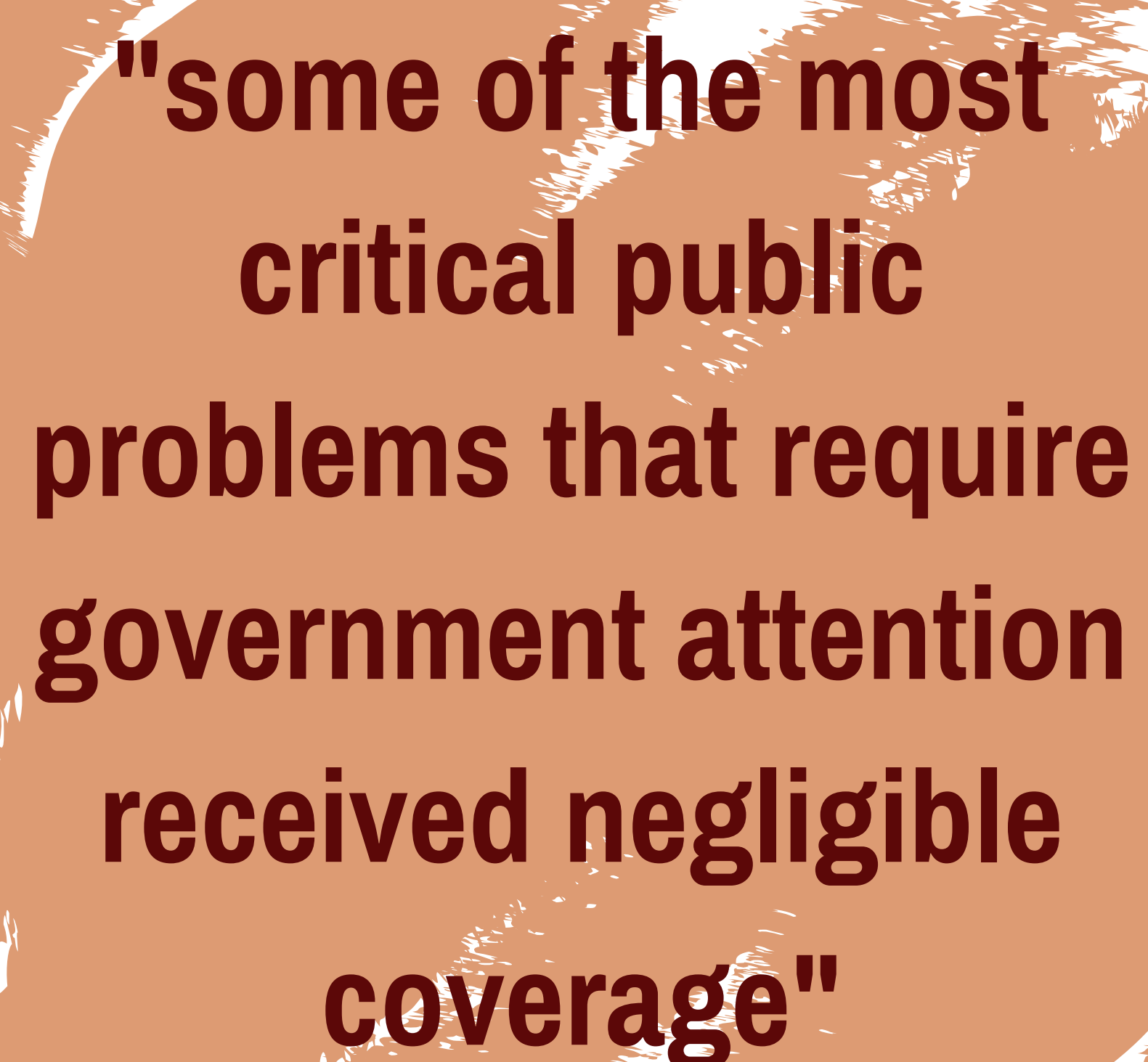
The 1999 elections monitoring report argued in its findings that the media was expected to cover the elections in a different way than in 1994 as this was the second democratic elections. Indeed, so many things had by that point been democratised, including the media and the experience from the coverage of the first election in 1994. The so-called "bread and butter" issues of society were expected to feature prominently across the media during the elections. However, the top five topics outlined above do not reflect the realities that South Africans faces; topics such as health, education and employment are nowhere to be seen among the top topics in the media.[10]

Another important finding was that issues not seen in other years dominated the 1999 coverage. Critically, political violence was the second most covered topic occupying 13% of coverage, while crime and corruption were also in the top five, receiving a share of 11% and 8% of stories, respectively. One such major issue was the formation of the United for Democratic Movement (UDM) the elections of 1999, which led to political violence particularly in Richmond, Kwazulu Natal province where more than 120 people are believed to have been killed between 1997 and 1999.   [11]

The 2009 elections period was also another monitoring period where we observed a unique trend with stories on "Arts, Culture and Religion" and "Justice system" getting 7% and 6% of media coverage, respectively. Govenden, P., Duncan. C., & Radu, W. (2009) argued that this coverage was attributed to the legal challenges facing the African National Congress (ANC) candidate Jacob Zuma. Here, the Arts, Culture and Religion stories focused on the involvement of Rhema church in political issues as well as on different politicians attending church services to pray for the elections.[12]

Marginalised issues

Findings show that although there was outstanding reporting on topics such as party campaigning and IEC logistics, many topics directly affecting citizens were neglected. MMA in its 2009 report defined the citizen agenda story as one that adopts a citizen perspective that is clearly in the best interest of the voters, rather than passively reporting on the point of view of the political party without further analysis.[13]

"some of the most critical public problems that require government attention received negligible coverage"
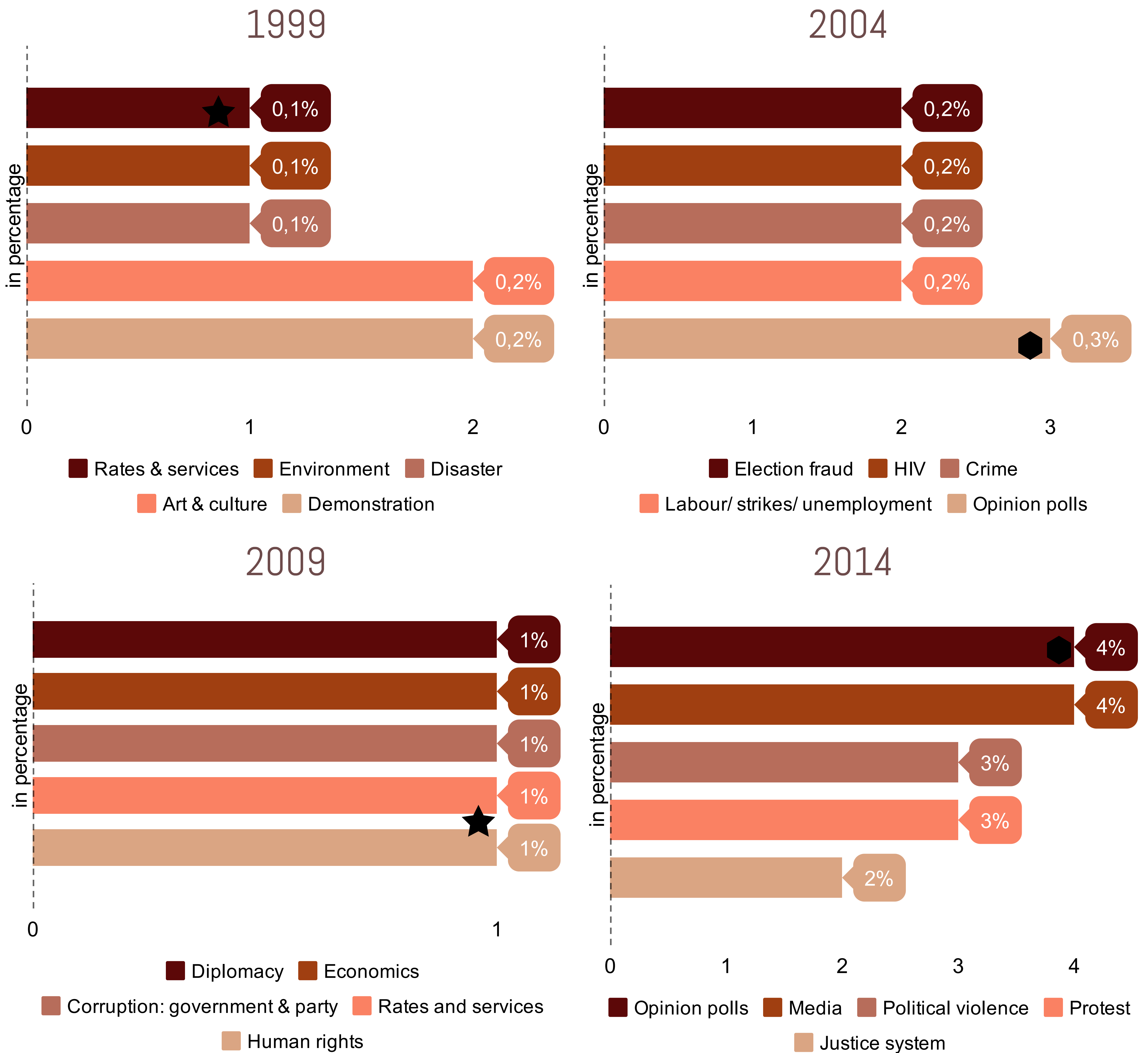
10 Coverage of the 1999 Elections. Accessible from www.mediamonitoringafrica.org
11 See A look back at the killing fields, https://mg.co.za/article/2008-10-02-a-look-back-at-the-killing-fields
12 Govenden, P., Duncan. C., & Radu, W. (2009).National and Provincial Elections 2009: A Win or a Place, Citizens come Last .Johannesburg: Media Monitoring Africa. Accessible from www.mediamonitoringafrica.org
13 Ibid

Figure 2: Marginalised issues from the media during the election period

1999

in percentage

- 0,1% ★
- 0,1%
- 0,1%
- 0,2%
- 0,2%

0   1   2

■ Rates & services ■ Environment ■ Disaster
■ Art & culture ■ Demonstration

2004

in percentage

- 0,2%
- 0,2%
- 0,2%
- 0,2%
- ⬢ 0,3%

0   1   2   3

■ Election fraud ■ HIV ■ Crime
■ Labour/ strikes/ unemployment ■ Opinion polls

2009

in percentage

- 1%
- 1%
- 1%
- 1%
- ★ 1%

0   1

■ Diplomacy ■ Economics
■ Corruption: government & party ■ Rates and services
■ Human rights

2014

in percentage

- ⬢ 4%
- 4%
- 3%
- 3%
- 2%

0   1   2   3   4

■ Opinion polls ■ Media ■ Political violence ■ Protest
■ Justice system

Please note that the symbols ★ and ⬢ in the charts mean that the issues were marginalised from the media during 2 elections.

The figure above shows the least covered topics across the four election periods. What is immediately apparent is that some of the most critical public problems that require government attention received negligible coverage, including economics, protests, the environment, unemployment, gender, children and crime. All of these issues have a direct impact on people's lives on a day-to-day basis and yet fall almost completely off the media's agenda.

All these important topics shown in the graph above account for less than 20% of the total topic coverage collectively across 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 monitoring periods. What is clear is that the coverage had very little to say on how parties could assist voters after they had been voted into power. Given the lack of diversity of issues covered by the media during elections period, this could also suggest that media were largely self-referential, and tended to mimick other media.[14]

South Africa saw an outbreak of xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals during the second half of 2008. However, the topic was not an election issue for the media, and this shows that there is clear lack of interest by the media to set the agenda about pressing societal issues during the elections. Previous media monitoring reports by MMA indicate that the media often fall short of setting the agenda on matters relevant to society: *"many media, instead of setting the agenda, merely reported on the events as they occurred in reactive vein, without engaging with the issues raised to requisite levels of analysis and discussion"*.[15]

3.2 Gender and elections

Across all of MMA's projects, including research on elections, we pay particular attention to the representation of gender in the media. One of the key ways to identify whether there is a balance of voices between men and women is to examine sources accessed in the coverage of the news to see if thesevoices reflect demographics in the population.
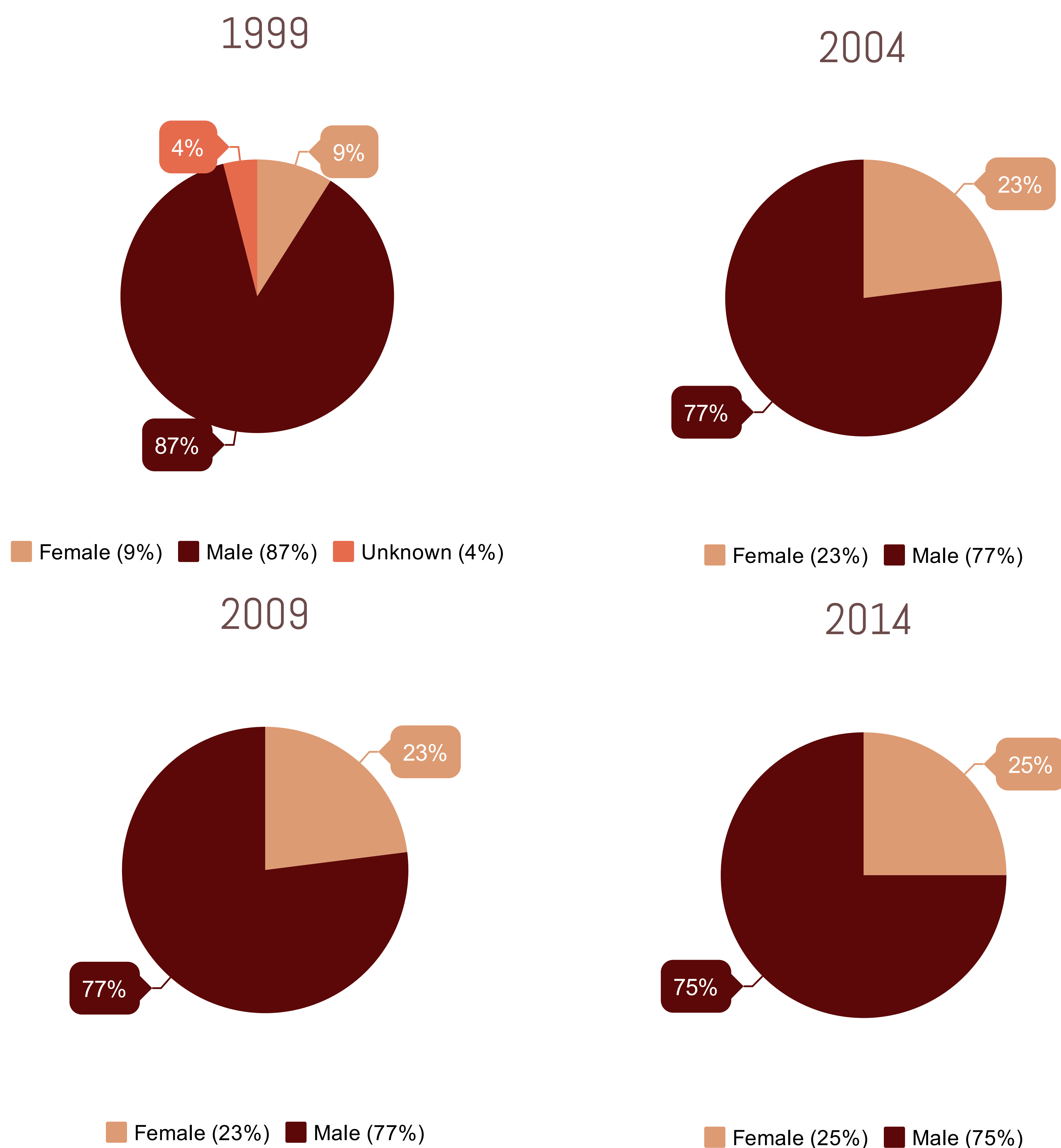
Gender discrimination is evident in the media, especially when it portrays the world in a way that suggests men outnumber women in all spheres of life.[16] However, sources of news, particularly during elections must reflect the views of both men and women in a balanced way and the media ought to cover the key priorities of both genders from a broad range of perspectives.

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14 Findlay, S.J., Bird, W. R. and Smith, T. (2017) "The more things change, the more they stay the same": The impacts of social media and digital technology on journalism quality in South African newsrooms , Johannesburg: Media Monitoring Africa

15 Govenden, P., Duncan. C., & Radu, W. (2009). National and Provincial Elections 2009: A Win or a Place, Citizens come Last .Johannesburg: Media Monitoring Africa. Accessible from www.mediamonitoringafrica.org

16 Gender, Media and Elections https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/me/introduction/me10/me10e

Figure 3: Gender of the sources in the election stories

1999

4% 9%

87%

Female (9%) ■ Male (87%) ■ Unknown (4%)

2004

23%

77%

Female (23%) ■ Male (77%)

2009

23%

77%

Female (23%) ■ Male (77%)

2014

25%

75%

Female (25%) ■ Male (75%)

As can be seen in the graph above, the media relied heavily on male sources and failed to access women during all the elections periods analysed. Women make up 52 percent of South Africa's population of 56 million, which means they are the majority of the population and ought to be given an equitable space in the media to talk about their issues.[17]

The worst election period was in 1999 when only 9% of sources were female compared to 87% of male sources. The figure above reveals that the media overlook women during the elections period, which is discouraging given the fact that women are a marginalised group in society and hearing their voices more often would inject the media a much-needed diversity into coverage.

17 By Radu, W. Bird, W. Reporting elections:A good story to tell? Elections 2014/ Interim Report May 2014

"In line with the global average, we see media give men a louder voice than women."

Another interesting finding was a steady increase of female sources accessed during the 2014 elections coverage. Women made up 25% of all sources in the media during the elections, which should be commended given the previous numbers. Despite this positive upward trend, there remains an obvious imbalance of female and male sources represented in the media two decade into democracy.

In line with the global average, we see media give men a louder voice than women. This result is no different during an election period and perpetuates gender stereotypes that suggest that men are more politically informed than women.
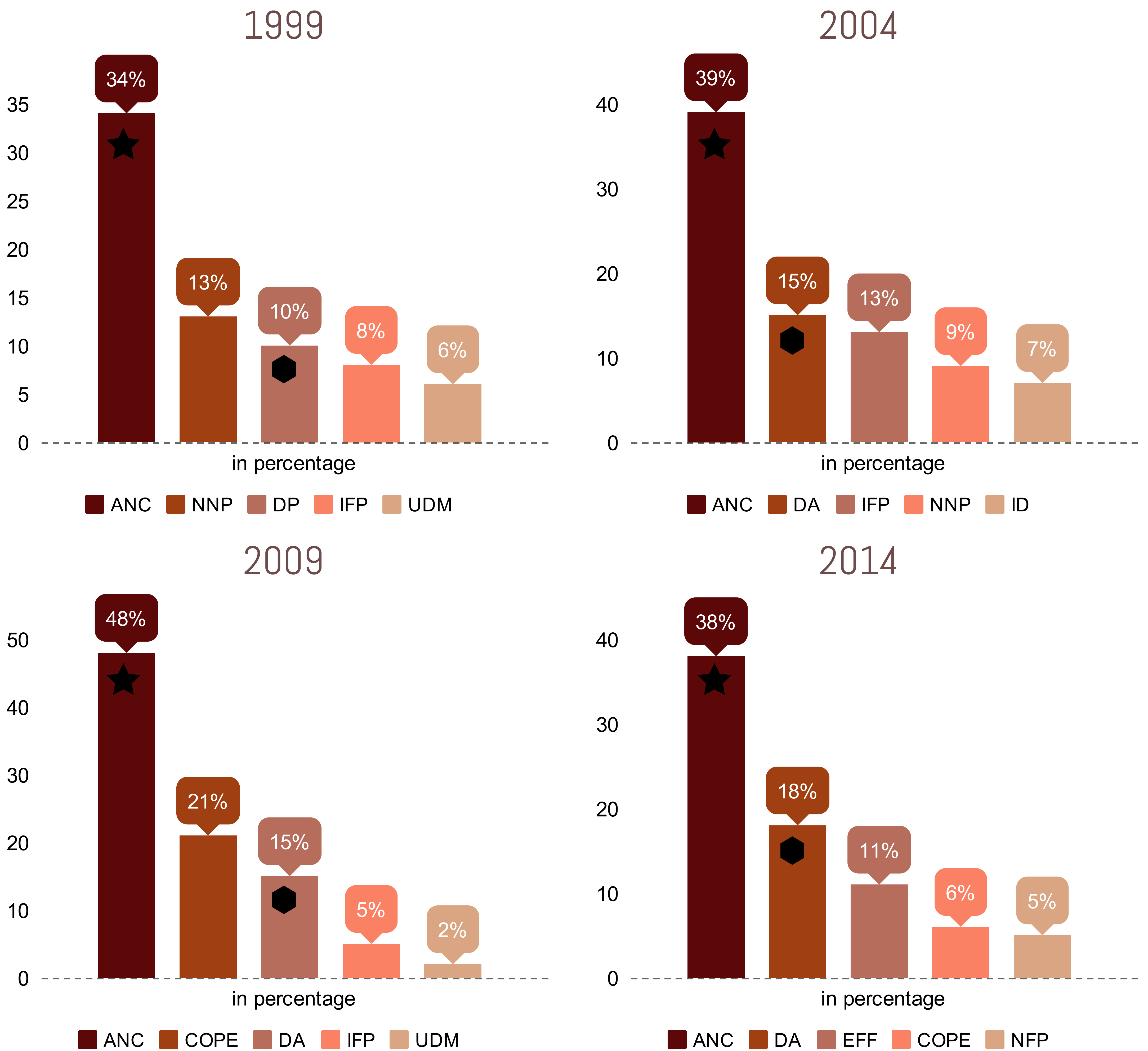
3.3 Top five political parties covered

During the elections period, the media has the responsibility to broadcast parties, candidates and manifestoes as widely as in-depth as possible. Regardless of the popularity and the support the parties command, the media ought to treat them equally and report impartially all the time.

The figure below shows the breakdown of the top five political parties in terms of coverage. MMA uses two methods to measure the party coverage in the media. The one is by capturing mentions only and the other by capturing voice, that is, where a party source speaks directly or indirectly in the story. By analyzing party coverage, we can see which parties' ideas and views are most commonly and least commonly put forward in the media.

"The power of the ruling party was visible in all elections coverage with the African National Congress (ANC) receiving the biggest share"

Figure 4: The political party's coverage across four elections periods

1999

- ANC: 34%
- NNP: 13%
- DP: 10%
- IFP: 8%
- UDM: 6%

Legend: ANC, NNP, DP, IFP, UDM

2004

- ANC: 39%
- DA: 15%
- IFP: 13%
- NNP: 9%
- ID: 7%

Legend: ANC, DA, IFP, NNP, ID

2009

- ANC: 48%
- COPE: 21%
- DA: 15%
- IFP: 5%
- UDM: 2%

Legend: ANC, COPE, DA, IFP, UDM

2014

- ANC: 38%
- DA: 18%
- EFF: 11%
- COPE: 6%
- NFP: 5%

Legend: ANC, DA, EFF, COPE, NFP

Please note that the symbols ★ and ⬡ in the charts mean that the political parties were in the top 5 of media coverage during the 4 elections and that the Democratic Party (DP) became in 2000 the Democratic Alliance (DA).

The power of the ruling party was visible in all elections coverage with the African National Congress (ANC) receiving the biggest share of coverage (>30%) across all the election years analysed. Although the share does not equate to its numbers in national parliament, it still dominated the media during the elections periods. Importantly, across the years analysed the top five political parties (regardless of which parties they were) received an overwhelming majority of coverage to the detriment of smaller parties.

For example, in 1999, the top five parties received 71% of coverage, among 16 parties contesting the elections. In 2004, the top five political parties shared 83% of the media coverage leaving the other parties to fight for 17% of the media attention. This situation deteriorated most drastically in 2009 where despite 26 political parties competing in the elections, the top five parties made up 91% of the media coverage. This meant that the remaining 21 other parties shared only 9% of the coverage. These results show how major political parties at the time commonly dominate coverage in any given elections period.

Critically, too, although the ANC was consistently well covered over the 15-year period, coverage of other parties fluctuated more widely. For example, the graph above indicates that the ANC received almost half of the elections media coverage in the 2009 general elections. During the same elections, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) saw a drastic shift from 13% of media coverage in 2004 to a mere 5% in 2009. Similarly, the New National Party (NNP) was the second most covered party in 1999 with 13%, however, the party disappeared after the 2004 election and was replaced by parties such as Democratic Party (DP) – which changed to Democratic Alliance (DA) – to dominate the media coverage in subsequent elections. A similar trend was also seen in the 2014 election coverage, when the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) received 11% of media coverage and as such were the third most covered party by the media. In this way, we can see how coverage of different parties shifts between elections periods.
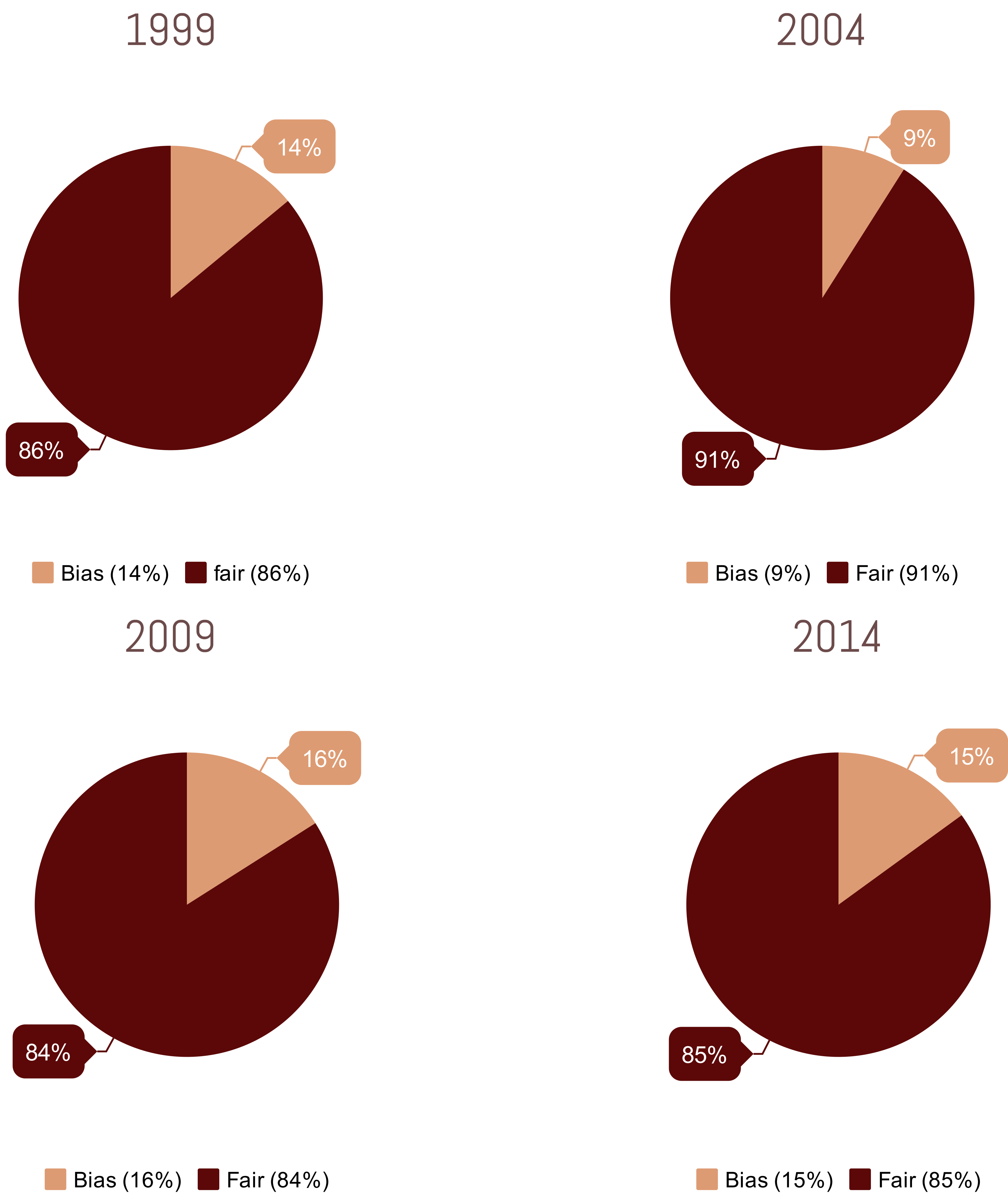
3.4 Fairness of the coverage

One of the most critical elements of media coverage during an election period is that coverage is fair and not biased to any one group or party. We measure fairness according to a range of criteria out of an overall score of 100. Scores are given to a media title broadly and not to an individual item/story. We do this because, although there will almost certainly be biased stories over the election period and these will also likely occur in most media, this does not necessarily mean that the majority of coverage is unfair. Such coverage may occur when a party criticizes or accuses another and no right-of-reply is given in the story.[18]

While the story in and of itself does not reflect good journalistic principles of balanced voices, a poorly written individual piece does not constitute democracy-threatening bias. In our view, and of concern here is, democracy-threatening coverage which occurs when there is a consistent pattern and a clear effort to favour or disfavor a particular party over time. It is the trend of unbalanced and biased reporting that is of greater importance than individual instances of poor journalism. The analysis below, therefore, looks at media coverage as a whole over the period.[19]

18   By Radu, W. Bird, W. Reporting elections:A good story to tell? Elections 2014/ Interim Report May 2014
19   Ibid

1999

2004

Bias (14%) fair (86%)

Bias (9%) Fair (91%)

2009

2014

Bias (16%) Fair (84%)

Bias (15%) Fair (85%)

Balance in the media is crucial, particularly during an election period. The media has been doing a fair job when it comes to this issue. The graph above show that election coverage in 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 were largely fair with over 80% of the news items deemed as "fair". In the 1999 elections 86% of the stories monitored were fair, compared to 14% biased stories.

In the 2004 elections things got even better when fair stories during the elections period accounted for up to 91% from the media monitored in the elections year. In 2009, there was a slight drop with 84% of the stories recorded as fair and 16% as biased. In the 2014 elections, the numbers almost stayed the same with 85% stories recorded as fair and 15% as biased.

Given these findings, the media could continue to improve their coverage of elections and ensure they do so in an unbiased and objective manner. The statistics for biased stories in 2009 and 2014 are still too high given the importance of the election in a democratic system. These biases may stem from event-based coverage, meaning that a lot of political campaigns received coverage. Furthermore, the statements issued by politicians and their political parties are often reported instantly before opposing parties are given a right to reply.

4. Conclusion

This analysis highlights a number of challenges and successes of media elections coverage during the 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 elections. Across all elections, the media focused more on what political party's activities. The majority of topics were political in nature. Hence, we see political party campaigning with the exception of IEC topics, which also featured in all elections. The coverage across the elections years continued in the same pattern treating the elections as a period for political parties to air their views on various political and public issues.

Political parties drove the agenda; this period could have been used as a moment of reflection where communities would have had an opportunity to reflect on the performance of the parties and to raise issues that are important to them.

What became clear in this analysis was the lack of diversity across the media. The media, be its diversity of issues or sources, lagged behind in all important aspects of the election. Media diversity is critical in a society such as South Africa. The South African society is socially and economically fragmented, the needs of people in the peri-urban and rural areas are different, and it is the responsibility of the media to reconcile these divisions.

However, it should be noted that covering the elections has and will always be a difficult task for journalists given the challenging environment in which the media find themselves. Financial difficulties, political interferences and juniorisation of newsrooms are amongst the many challenges facing news organisations. Furthermore, many media organisations lack resources to access peri-urban and rural communities to broadcast or investigate issues during the elections period, which in turn contributes to the lack of diversity in the topic covered. The lack of coverage of citizen agenda topics such as health, economy, education, protest and environment cannot be excused, as these issues are central to the voters.

The findings of this study also indicate that gender representation in the media remains a persistent and entrenched problem in elections coverage, with male sources dominating all elections coverage monitored. How can we learn about issues that affect women if they are not accessed? This in turn may reinforce the stereotype that politics is male domain, while women remain uninformed about the issues and the needs of their communities.

Findings also indicate that the elections were fair, as there was no coverage devoted to any substantial degree to one political party. In conclusion, despite its challenges, the media did not hinder the free and fair nature of the elections across the monitored years.

However, the power of the ruling party was visible in all elections coverage, with the ANC receiving the biggest share of coverage across all the election years analysed. Although the share does not equate its numbers in national parliament, it still dominated the media during the elections period.

The opposition, particularly new parties which were seen to be challenging the ruling party, received a lot of airtime from the media. In 2009 COPE and 2014 EFF received respectively 21% and 11% of media coverage even if they did not have a seat in parliament. This is enough reason to believe that political parties and politicians set the agenda, as it is the case with EFF receiving more coverage.

Overall elections are fundamental to democracy in South Africa. However, free, fair and credible elections require independent media and competent journalists. This study provided evidence that there is a need for competent, well-trained journalists to help develop high-level skills that are necessary for effective democratic elections, where every issue receives equal attention from the media and the majority of members in society have a chance to participate in fair, free and credible elections.